



In Their Own Words: A Public Vision for Educational Excellence in South Carolina

Opinions of South Carolina Business Leaders



A study by the Riley Institute's Center for Education Policy & Leadership underwritten by a grant from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.



Public Education in South Carolina

The people of South Carolina face decisions of unprecedented magnitude and importance as they work to improve public education for all students in the state. Multiple studies indicate that our young people today face a challenging future that will be heavily influenced by technology, information, and rapid change, and will require more and broader skills in the workplace.

It has been estimated that by the next decade most jobs will require an education beyond a high school diploma. Yet in many South Carolina communities, too few of our 18 and 19 year-olds both finish high school and enroll in post-high school training or higher education. This means that we must find new and better ways to help our students learn advanced skills. Economic progress will be closely tied to education and the effective preparation of our young people to compete for jobs in a world economy is critical.

The ability of South Carolina's public schools to adequately educate all children and prepare them for success in a global economy is in question. How, then, do we effectively redesign public schools to prepare a larger number of students to graduate, succeed in college or career training, and compete in the global marketplace? With the help of a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Center for Education Policy and Leadership of the Riley Institute sought answers to this question through a comprehensive non-partisan study involving residents throughout the state. The goal was to learn what South Carolinians at the grassroots level think about issues and problems in education. We also wanted their recommendations of strategies to move our schools and students forward at this crucial time.

The Study Design

The Riley Institute project team spent more than 3,000 hours meeting with nearly 800 South Carolinians to gather their opinions on public education. The team met with businessmen and women, teachers of all levels, superintendents, parents, school board members, principals and students from every county and school district in the state—large and small, rural and urban, wealthy and poor. Included in this were 121 of the state's business leaders from all regions of the state. Below you will find the views from the business leader group within the study.

For more information about the study design and research methodology, please visit the web site of the Center for Education Policy and Leadership: <www.rileyinstitute.org/cepl>.

This report represents the findings from all business leader focus groups. Later in the year, we will release reports detailing the areas of agreement among all nine stakeholder groups for developing world-class schools in South Carolina.

Results from Business Leader Sessions:

Top Strengths of South Carolina's Public Schools

Issues relating to:

- Teacher dedication
- Commitment to improving education
- Quality of early child education
- Teacher quality
- Partnerships with community and business community
- Facilities/Infrastructure

Top Weaknesses of South Carolina's Public Schools

Issues relating to:

- Funding methodology and equity
- Family involvement and accountability
- Dropout rate
- Discipline policies
- Partnerships with community and business community
- Curriculum content

Improving Public Education in South Carolina: Top recommendations

Items highlighted in these categories were part of a 160-question survey that all participants completed.

Items below are the top five items viewed as either “essential” or “important” in each category.

Early & Elementary Years

- More strategies to help parents get involved in their children’s schooling (93%)
- Intensive reading programs for students with reading difficulties (92%)
- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling (89%)
- A system to ensure that no child moves beyond 4th grade without reading and writing fluently (87%)
- Public early childhood programs for all 3- and 4-year-olds (84%)

Middle School & Transition Years

- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling (90%)
- Dropout prevention programs beginning in 8th grade (88%)
- More rigorous curriculum to help prepare students for high school (87%)
- More focus on active/engaged learning techniques in all middle school classes (86%)
- More strategies to help parents get involved in their children’s schooling (85%)

High School Years

- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling (93%)
- More links between high schools, technical colleges, and 2- and 4-year colleges and universities (89%)
- Up-to-date labs in every high school (88%)
- A wider variety of vocational programs (87%)
- A curriculum more aligned with college coursework and job requirements (86%)

Teacher Training & Development

- Effective teachers in every classroom (100%)
- Greater incentives for retaining outstanding teachers (92%)
- Teaching more problem-solving and teamwork skills (91%)
- Continued professional development for high school teachers on how to effectively deliver more rigorous content to students (88%)
- Support staff to free up teachers to teach (88%)

Leadership

- A more streamlined process to remove inadequate teachers from the classroom (95%)
- A multi-dimensional tool for evaluating teacher performance in the classroom (88%)
- A multi-dimensional tool for evaluating administrator performance (85%)
- More training for principals in schools with many at-risk students (85%)
- More on-site support for principals in schools with many at-risk students (84%)

Resources, Technology & Infrastructure

- Availability of textbooks and other learning resources (96%)
- Training of teachers and administrators on proper use of technology (87%)
- Integration of technology throughout the curriculum (87%)
- Technologically-advanced labs (85%)
- Modified structure of allocating resources (85%)

Re-designing Public Education in South Carolina: Discussion Data

All respondents were asked to share their thoughts about how they would redesign South Carolina's public schools in order to prepare a larger number of students to graduate and to succeed in college or career training. Highlights from these focus group discussions include the following:

Curriculum and Standards:

When asked how they would redesign education in South Carolina, business leaders overwhelmingly cited issues related to curriculum and standards. Many brought up the need for a focus on the basics; others highlighted the importance of beginning foreign language instruction at an early age and emphasizing physical education/nutrition/sex education in the curriculum. In addition, many business leaders emphasized the importance of connecting the curriculum to daily life and to the needs of the global economy. According to one business leader, "What's the relevance of what we teach to the life of the students? That's where we lose a lot of the students." Several business leaders also brought up the need to increase the number of gifted and talented programs and to emphasize the arts and critical thinking skills in the curriculum.

Culture/Commitment:

The issue of culture of/commitment to education also emerged prominently in business leader focus group discussions. Many voiced the need for the state as a whole to become more involved in understanding and improving education. Furthermore, many reported that the public needed to recognize the responsibility that accompanies the right to public education. Discussions also occurred where some respondents emphasized that a sense of urgency must be promoted but time needs to be allowed for change to occur. The quotations below capture the variety of thoughts and feelings of a number of the respondents:

"Acknowledge that current results are unacceptable and that inadequate education is the greatest challenge facing the state, its economy, its future."

"Public education is an essential component of a healthy community."

"Education and economic development are inextricably linked."

"There has to be a fundamental belief that education is absolutely critical."

"Schools need to be light and nimble and ready for change, as opposed to giant juggernaut bureaucracies that move like slugs."

"Stop the continual negative public criticism of education, and begin a more positive dialogue."

Funding:

Issues relating to funding also emerged prominently in discussions among business leaders. According to one respondent, the "money issue" is causing us to continue to "churn out mediocrity." Some respondents stated that the amount of money spent per student should be increased and that all mandates must be fully funded, while others emphasized that we must develop means for distributing funds more equitably and that the money spent on education must be spent more efficiently. Below are some quotations that display some of the feelings expressed by business people:

"Throwing money at it (the system) is not the answer."

"School funding must be made equitable, but equitable at the level of excellence."

"Get state and federal money out of the 'Grant of the Month' club and to a grassroots level where competent administrators can use it as they need to, impacting their local area and addressing local concerns."

"The only thing that's required is more money. The mechanism to distribute it equitably is there."

Re-designing Public Education in South Carolina: Discussion Data (Continuation from previous page)

Early Childhood Education Programs:

The importance of early childhood education programs was brought up by numerous business leaders during discussions on how to redesign South Carolina's public schools. Many believed strongly that more funding should be provided to early childhood education and that early childhood education programs should be expanded in schools. Below illustrated the feelings of some of the respondents:

"We've got one chance, and that's from 0-6."

"Every child in South Carolina must have the opportunity for high-quality early care and education-- this is the single most important predictor of later success."

"South Carolina needs to commit appropriate resources to early childhood education in order that every student is given equal opportunity to begin becoming all that he/she can be."

Community and Higher Education:

Another issue that emerged as important in conversations about redesigning education related to community and higher education partnerships. Ideas provided by business people included encouraging dual-credit opportunities, offering more extensive internships, creating incentives to encourage businesses to get more involved with schools, and helping entrepreneurs to understand that a sub-par public education system is economically detrimental.

Other Issues:

Other issues that were discussed at length during business leader focus groups include issues related to parental involvement/ accountability, vocational/ career preparation, teacher compensation/ recruitment/ training, individual instruction/ classroom organization, and governance.



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