



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

## Opinions of South Carolina Superintendents



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 50 of the state's superintendents from all regions of the state. On the following pages, you will find the views from the superintendent group within the study.

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

\*This report represents the findings from all superintendent 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 Superintendent Sessions:

### Top Weaknesses of South Carolina's Public Schools

Issues relating to:

- Funding methodology and equity
- Level of funding
- Teacher recruitment/retention
- Political advocacy for public education

### Top Strengths of South Carolina's Public Schools

Issues relating to:

- Statewide curriculum standards
- Diversity of opportunities for students
- Diversity of student population
- Commitment to improving education

## 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 were viewed as either “essential” or “important” by 90% or more of all participants.



### Early & Elementary Years

- Intensive reading programs for students with reading difficulties (98%)
- The availability of full-day kindergarten (98%)
- Public early childhood education programs for all 3- and 4-year-olds (98%)
- Teachers specialized in reading in all classrooms in grades 1-3 (96%)
- More rigorous curriculum to prepare children for middle school (94%)
- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling (94%)
- Family literacy programs (92%)



### Middle School & Transition Years

- More rigorous curriculum to prepare students for high school (100%)
- More focus on active/engaged learning techniques in all middle school classes (100%)
- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling (98%)
- Better coordination to help transition between middle and high school (96%)
- More counseling in middle school to deal with personal and family issues (94%), tied with
- Up-to-date labs in every middle school (94%)
- Vertical teams of teachers to strengthen the links between middle school, high school, and post-secondary education (92%)
- Intensive summer programs for students not performing at the proficient level before entering high school (92%)



### High School Years

- A curriculum more aligned with college coursework and job requirements (96%)
- Distance-learning opportunities and opportunities at local colleges to take courses (96%)
- Development of small learning communities (96%)
- Up-to-date labs in every high school (96%)
- More tutoring opportunities for struggling students (94%)
- More links between high schools, technical colleges, and 2- and 4-year colleges and universities (94%)
- Programs after school and during the summer to keep high school students on track for graduation (94%)
- More opportunities for lab work in high school in all subjects (92%)
- Earlier guidance to prepare students to take Honor, AP, and IB courses (92%)
- A wider variety of vocational programs (90%)

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## Teacher Training & Development

- Effective teachers in every classroom (100%)
- Greater incentives for recruitment into the teaching field (98%)
- Opportunities for teams of teachers to learn to use technology to access the latest information for classroom lessons (98%)
- Special training and assistance for teachers working with students with academic difficulties (98%)
- Continued professional development for high school teachers on how to effectively deliver more rigorous content to students (98%)
- Teaching more problem-solving and teamwork skills (96%)
- More teachers in the transition grades to reduce class size and give more individualized attention (96%)
- Continued professional development of teachers to create more personalized learning approaches for all students (94%)
- More time for teachers to meet, coordinate, share, and plan together (94%)
- Strong, well-coordinated mentoring programs for beginning teachers (94%)
- Continued professional development for teachers regarding the everyday challenges of helping students achieve and graduate (92%)
- Better pay for all teachers (92%)
- Greater incentives to retain outstanding teachers (92%)
- Tools for teachers to better assess individual student progress (92%)

## Leadership

- More on-site support for principals in schools with many at-risk students (96%)
- A more streamlined process to remove inadequate teachers from the classroom (92%)
- More training for principals in schools with many at-risk students (90%)

## Resources, Technology & Infrastructure

- Facilitating ways for teachers and administrators to use technology to share information about effective methods, techniques and ideas (100%)
- Training of teachers and administrators on proper use of technology (100%)
- Availability of textbooks and other learning resources (98%)
- Finding better ways to share information about what works with students by using knowledge-management technologies in schools and districts (98%)
- Developing ways to better manage knowledge so teachers and administrators can quickly and readily share knowledge of methods, techniques and creative ideas (96%)
- Safe and efficient transportation for all students to and from all school programs (94%)
- Integration of technology throughout the curriculum (94%)
- Technologically-advanced labs (94%)
- Up-to-date school buildings and facilities (94%)
- Designing schools as community centers to give students, adults, and families learning opportunities in their own communities (92%)
- Modified structure of allocating state resources (92%).

## 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, succeed in college or career training. Highlights from these focus group discussions include the following:

### Early Childhood & Elementary Years

#### Early Childhood Education and Kindergarten:

Nearly all superintendents cited the need for more public school early childhood education programs throughout the state. In addition, superintendents from a variety of districts voiced the need for fully-funded, all-day kindergarten for 5-year-olds everywhere in the state.

#### Family education and involvement:

Parent/family education and family literacy also emerged as important issues among superintendents, with many voicing support for home visitations, workshops, and educational materials for parents.

#### Literacy:

Many superintendents also indicated a need for more rigorous literacy/reading programs in schools, a greater number of literacy specialists in all elementary schools, and more professional development for teachers in this area.

#### At-Risk Students:

The need for tutorial and other programs for at-risk and underperforming students frequently were voiced as needs among superintendents. In addition, some superintendents suggested more extended-day and summer programs in schools as well as providing a greater number of after-school specialists.

#### Curriculum and standards:

Several superintendents expressed the need for a more rigorous curriculum—and a better aligned curriculum—in the early years, as well as the need to increase academic expectations. Additionally, some superintendents expressed a need for more foreign language offerings in elementary schools and several others expressed support for more arts and music in the curriculum.

#### Class Size:

Lower pupil-teacher ratios in the early elementary grades were among the needs expressed in nearly all meetings. Several reported that low class sizes—with a maximum pupil-teacher ratio of 15:1—were essential, particularly for at-risk populations.

#### Social Services:

Several superintendents emphasized the need for educators to better understand poverty and reflect that understanding in their teaching. Also discussed was the need for early identification of students who need medical and psychological services in school.

#### Teacher compensation, recruitment and training:

Many superintendents reported that it was essential to increase compensation and incentives in order to recruit and retain quality teachers. In addition, many superintendents reported that elementary school teacher training and certification programs needed to be redesigned in order to more adequately prepare teachers for the classroom. The need for a greater number of quality ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers also was voiced repeatedly.

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## Middle School & Transition Years

### Middle Years Curriculum and Standards:

Superintendents from all over the state expressed the need for a more rigorous middle school curriculum and the need to increase academic expectations at this level. Additionally, many superintendents emphasized the need to focus on the basics of mathematics and English, on teaching more foreign language in middle schools, and on including more arts and music in the curriculum.

### Teacher compensation, recruitment, and training:

As at the elementary school level, many superintendents reported that it was essential to increase compensation and incentives in order to recruit and retain quality teachers. In addition, many superintendents reported that middle school teacher training and certification programs needed to be redesigned in order to more adequately prepare teachers for the classroom. The need for a greater number of quality ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers also was voiced.

### Individualized Instruction:

Many superintendents emphasized the need for individualized instruction for middle school students. Some examples provided by superintendents included tracking, assessing individual student strengths and

weaknesses, mastery grouping, gendered classes, and multi-age grouping. Also discussed was the need to utilize different instructional methods such as group work, engaged learning, and hands-on and research-based learning to help meet the diverse learning needs of students.

### Career exploration/education:

Superintendents from all over the state districts reported that more career exploration/education must occur in middle school. Many emphasized that students should be exposed to different career paths and should have career counselors to assist them during middle school. Some superintendents also believed that career clustering should be continued and expanded.

### Counseling and social services:

Several superintendents voiced the need for more counseling and social services in middle schools. They emphasized that having greater access to counseling services was necessary for students' personal and social development. One superintendent said that middle school students must be nurtured and that "individualized relationships" must be developed with the students. Another superintendent stated that the guidance counselor to student ratio must be a minimum of 300:1 in order that students are individually and adequately served.

### Technology:

Superintendents from a variety of districts also reported that the integration of technology into the middle school curriculum and classroom was vital. They highlighted the need for proper technology training for students and teachers, as well as the need for technologically-advanced equipment and laboratories in all schools.

### Class size:

Lower pupil-teacher ratios in middle school were also among the needs expressed in nearly all meetings. One superintendent said that class size should be reduced, with a maximum pupil-teacher ratio of 24:1. Another superintendent reported that even lower class sizes – with a maximum pupil-teacher ratio of 15:1 - were essential. Along similar lines, smaller schools and learning communities also were thought to be extremely effective in middle school.

### Support for underperforming students:

The importance of providing support for underperforming students also was discussed by superintendents. An example provided by a number of superintendents was the need for more year-round schools. Additional examples provided by superintendents included providing for underperforming students more extended day programs, alternative schools, and summer programs.

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## High School Years

### Curriculum and Standards:

Superintendents from a variety of districts expressed the need for a more rigorous high school curriculum and the need to increase academic expectations. According to many superintendents, the number of Advanced Placement courses offered to students must be increased and the Carnegie unit system must be reexamined. Additionally, many superintendents emphasized the need to focus on the basics of mathematics and English and also to make coursework more career-oriented and tied to the needs of the economy. Some also brought up the importance of alternative routes to graduation, thus allowing students more curricular options.

### Technology:

Many superintendents also reported that the integration of technology into the high school curriculum and classroom was vital. They highlighted the need for proper technology training for students and teachers, as well as the need for technologically advanced equipment and laboratories in all schools. The importance of access for all students to computers and advanced technology also was stressed. In addition, some superintendents brought up the importance of more virtual classrooms and distance learning opportunities in order to increase access and choices for students. One superintendent stated that having a “statewide, virtual school” was vital.

### Choice within the public system:

One issue that consistently emerged among superintendents was the need to provide a broad range of alternatives, or choices, within the public system. These alternatives would include more vocational options, magnet schools, and schools with a focus. Many superintendents voiced the need for choice within the public school system in order to meet the unique learning needs of each individual student, whether wealthy or poor, urban or rural.

### Individualized instruction:

Many superintendents suggested offering more individualized instruction to high school students. The primary examples provided by superintendents were to eliminate seat-time requirements and provide more individualized requirements for graduation. Other examples included assessing student strengths and weaknesses, mastery grouping, gendered classes, and multi-age grouping.

### Partnerships:

Several superintendents stated that partnerships and communication with higher education and the business community were vital. One superintendent suggested creating a better “communication link” between high school and higher education. Others brought up the need for a greater number of student

internship and apprenticeship opportunities, school-to-work programs, and earlier access to courses at technical schools.

### Career exploration/ preparation and EEDA:

Superintendents from all over the state voiced the need to focus on career exploration/preparation in high school. A number of superintendents emphasized the importance of fully funding and implementing the Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA). Several superintendents also reported that real-life counseling should be provided to all students and students should be exposed to a variety of career paths. Many believed that career clustering should be continued and expanded in high school.



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### Other items of note from the discussion

#### Teacher compensation, recruitment and training:

As at the elementary and middle school levels, superintendents from all over the state discussed issues relating to teacher compensation, recruitment, and training. Many superintendents reported that it was essential to increase compensation and incentives in order to recruit and retain quality teachers. In addition, many superintendents reported that high school teacher training and certification programs needed to be redesigned in order to more adequately prepare teachers for the classroom. The need for a greater number of ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers also was voiced by some superintendents.

#### Smaller schools:

Providing smaller schools and learning communities also were thought by superintendents to be extremely effective at the high school level. Creating ninth-grade academies and “schools within schools” were seen as essential, particularly in high-poverty areas. Having smaller, neighborhood schools, as well as instituting the school as the center of the community, also were discussed by numerous superintendents.



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