

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

Opinions of South Carolina Principals



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 70 of the state's principals from all regions of the state. Below you will find the views from the principal 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 principal research sessions. 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 Principal Sessions:

Top Strengths of South Carolina's Public Schools

Issues relating to:

- Statewide curriculum standards
- Commitment to improving education
- Teacher quality
- Professional development for educators
- Accountability

Top Weaknesses of South Carolina's Public Schools

Issues relating to:

- Funding methodology and equity
- Level of funding
- Politics' role in education
- PACT data and its usefulness
- Teacher recruitment/retention

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

- The availability of full-day kindergarten programs for all children (97%)
- Teachers specialized in reading in all classrooms in grades 1-3 (97%)
- Intensive reading programs for students with reading difficulties (96%)
- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling (93%)
- Full-time nurses in all elementary schools (93%)
- Public early childhood programs for all 3- and 4-year-olds (91%)
- Smaller class size (90%)



Middle School & Transition Years

- More focus on active/engaged learning techniques for middle school students (97%)
- More tutoring opportunities for struggling students (96%)
- Full-time nurses in all middle schools (93%)
- Physical fitness programs (91%)
- Dropout prevention programs beginning in 8th grade (91%)
- More counseling to deal with personal and family issues (90%)
- Up-to-date laboratories in every middle school (90%)



High School Years

- More links between high schools, technical colleges and post-secondary education (97%)
- Up-to-date laboratories in every high school (96%)
- More tutoring opportunities for struggling students (94%)
- After-school and summer school programs to help students stay on track for graduation (93%)
- A curriculum more aligned with college coursework and job requirements (93%)
- More counseling to deal with family and personal issues (93%)
- A wider variety of vocational programs (91%)
- Small learning communities in high schools (90%)
- Distance learning and opportunities to take courses at local colleges or universities (90%)

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Teacher Training & Development

- Effective teachers in every classroom (100%)
- More time for teachers to meet, coordinate, share and plan together (97%)
- More teachers in the transition grades to reduce class size and give more individualized attention (96%)
- Continuous professional development for teachers regarding their everyday challenge of helping students achieve and graduate (94%)
- Special training and assistance for teachers working with children with academic difficulties (94%)
- Better pay for all teachers (94%)
- Strong, well-coordinated mentoring programs for beginning teachers (93%)
- Greater incentives for retaining outstanding teachers (93%)
- Continued professional development for teachers to create more personalized learning approaches for all students (90%)



Resources, Technology & Infrastructure

- Availability of textbooks and other learning resources (99%)
- Technologically-advanced labs (97%)
- Safe and efficient transportation for all students to and from all school programs (96%)
- Up-to-date school buildings and facilities (96%)
- Integration of technology throughout the curriculum (94%)
- Training for all teachers and administrators on proper use of technology (94%)
- Develop ways to better manage knowledge so teachers and administrators can quickly and readily share knowledge of methods, techniques and creative ideas (93%)

Leadership

- A more streamlined process to remove inadequate teachers from the classroom (100%)
- More on-site support for principals in schools with many at-risk students (96%)
- More training for principals in schools with many at-risk students (90%)

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 & Elementary Years

Early Childhood Education:

When asked how they would improve the early childhood years, almost all principals cited the need for more early childhood programs. Several principals voiced support for full-day programs for 3K and 4K, as well as for more early intervention programs.

Curriculum:

Many principals voiced the need for a more rigorous curriculum, as well as a curriculum that better meets the needs of all students. Some principals also voiced support for a curriculum that was better aligned and sequenced across all grades. Other principals discussed the need for more foreign language and arts education, as well as a more concentrated focus on the core subjects of reading, writing, and math.

Parent/Family Involvement, Education & Literacy:

Parent/family education and family literacy also emerged as important issues, with many principals voicing support for parenting seminars and adult education/GED programs. Parental involvement also was seen by many principals as an issue that should be addressed and several principals supported a legal requirement for parents to become involved in their child's education.

Teacher Compensation, Recruitment and Training:

Teacher compensation, recruitment and training were issues addressed by many principals in focus group discussions. Several principals stated that hiring highly qualified teachers should be a top priority and that more attention needed to be paid to properly training teachers. In addition, several principals voiced the need to provide increased pay and incentives to teachers.

Programs for At-risk Students:

Tutorial and other programs for at-risk and under-performing students were commonly-voiced needs among principals from all over the state. Some principals stated that at-risk students needed to be identified by 4th grade, at the latest, while others stated that more alternative programs should be available for underperforming students.

Class size:

Lower pupil-teacher ratios in the elementary grades were also among the needs expressed by many principals. Some principals suggested a maximum student/teacher ratio of 15:1 in the early elementary grades and 20:1 in the fourth and fifth grades.

Innovative Teaching and Individualized Instruction:

Many principals also voiced support for new and innovative teaching and instructional methods, with much of the focus being on group work and "real world" learning situations. Individualized instruction also emerged as an issue among principals as several expressed support for homogeneous grouping of students, as well as a mastery-based learning system.

Middle School & Transition Years

Curriculum:

When asked how they would improve the middle years, ideas surrounding curriculum emerged most prominently among principals. Many principals voiced a need for a more rigorous curriculum and an increased emphasis on the basics of reading, writing, and math. Some principals also supported more exploratory courses for middle school students, more emphasis on the arts, and more character education and life skills training.

Career Exploration and Education:

Many principals reported that career exploration/education must begin at the middle school level. Some principals indicated the need for more choices in courses for middle school students, as well as more career-driven tracks for non-college bound students. Others believed that it was important for students to receive career counseling beginning in middle school.

Teacher Compensation, Recruitment, and Training:

Principals from all over the state discussed issues relating to teacher compensation, recruitment, and training in focus group discussions. Increasing teacher pay and incentives, as well as improving certification requirements for middle school teachers, emerged as essential courses of action among principals.

Parent and Family Involvement and Education:

Parent involvement, accountability, and education were other issues that emerged among principals during focus group discussions. Several principals supported the development of more adult education programs, as well as a strengthening of parent/teacher organizations in middle schools. Some principals also voiced support for mandatory parent involvement.

Counseling and Social Services:

Many principals voiced the need for more counseling and social services in middle schools. Several principals reported that it was essential to provide mentoring programs for students, and that counselors should be more available to students experiencing difficulties.

Technology:

Principals from all over the state reported that the integration of technology into the middle school curriculum and classroom was vital. They also 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.

Support for Underperforming Students:

The importance of providing support for underperforming students was discussed by many principals. Examples included the creation of alternative schools and extended-day programs and the elimination of special education as the sole means of addressing the needs of struggling students. Several principals also voiced the need for a change in the school calendar, such as a longer school day for many students and year-round school.

Individualized Instruction:

Another issue that emerged prominently from discussions among principals was offering more individualized instruction to middle school students. Several principals supported the "mastery-based" schedule of advancement, as well as an increased emphasis on the various learning styles of students. In addition, some principals also suggested providing single-gendered classes.

High School Years

Curriculum:

When asked how they would improve the high school years, ideas surrounding curriculum emerged most prominently among principals. Many principals voiced support for a revision of the curriculum to make it more rigorous and applicable to the needs of students. Some principals also emphasized the need to focus on arts education, as well as to better prepare college-bound students through SAT/ACT prep courses.

Career Exploration and Preparation:

Principals from all over the state emphasized the need to focus on career exploration/ preparation in high school. Many principals stated that students should be allowed to choose career paths early on and should be offered courses related to those career choices. Some principals also voiced support for the placement of career specialists in high schools, while others principals reported that the negative/perception stigma of vocational education must be eliminated.

Teacher Compensation, Recruitment, and Training:

As at the elementary and middle school levels, principals from all over the state discussed issues relating to teacher compensation, recruitment, and training in focus group discussions. Most principals voiced support for an increase in the base teacher salary, as well as an increase in the number of professional development opportunities available to teachers. Almost all principals reported that teacher recruitment and retention should be a top priority.

Partnerships with Higher Education and the Business Community:

Many principals believed strongly that the entire community must become more involved with the education system. Ideas relating to improving communication and providing more outside shadowing and internship opportunities for students were provided.

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High School Years

Individualized Instruction:

Another issue that emerged prominently from discussion among principals was offering more individualized instruction to high school students. Several principals favored the elimination of grades in high school, in favor of allowing students to advance at an individual pace. Some principals voiced support for an increased flexibility in the number of years required to complete high school (e.g. 3–5 years).

Smaller Schools and Communities:

Providing smaller schools and learning communities also were thought by principals to be extremely effective at the high school level. Creating ninth-grade academies and “schools within schools” were seen as essential. Several principals supported the creation of theme-based schools, some stating that the maximum number of students in a school should be between 600 and 900.

School Calendar:

During focus group discussions, re-designing the school calendar emerged as a critical issue among principals. Many principals supported lengthening the school day, while several also supported the move to year-round school.

Support for Underperforming Students:

Support for underperforming students was another issue that emerged among principals during focus group discussions. Many principals cited the need for alternative routes for struggling students and more programs for adult students. Other principals stated that struggling students should be placed in smaller classes and that these students should be required to remain after school or attend school year-round. In addition, several principals voiced support for more developed credit recovery programs.

Technology:

Principals from all over the state reported that the integration of technology into the high school curriculum and classroom was vital. Principals generally indicated that funding for technology should be increased and some voiced support for providing each student with his/her own laptop and the creation of more virtual schools and classrooms.



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