

In Their Own Words: The Middle School and Transition Years in South Carolina's Public Schools



A project by the Riley Institute's Center for Education Policy & Leadership funded by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

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 for strategies to move our schools and students forward at this crucial time.

The following paper is one of many that will be published in an effort to convey the study's overall results. This particular paper will focus on the middle school and transition years since great concerns about the quality of the middle school and transition years, from both the family and the school perspective, were widespread among educators, parents, and business and community leaders, regardless of location and demographics.

The Study Design and Top-Rated Strategies

Between May 2005 and November 2006, 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.

In late 2006, the Riley Institute invited all to take part in a second phase

of research focusing on key themes that emerged from the research during Phase I and asked participants to delve deeper into possible solutions. Participants reassembled in mixed groups featuring one representative from each stakeholder group—an elementary school teacher, a middle school teacher, a high school teacher, a principal, a superintendent, a parent, a school board member, a student, and a business leader. More than 200 people participated during the two days. Participants in the mixed reconstituted

sessions were asked to reflect upon, discuss, and prioritize strategies that emerged most often and with most agreement during the first year of research. They were then asked to devise practical action plans for South Carolina related to the top-rated strategies.

One area of high priority that emerged was the need to improve learning in the middle school and transition grades. The table below shows the top-rated strategies that emerged from the research regarding the middle school and transition

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Top-Rated Strategies for The Middle School and Transition Years

- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling
- Dropout prevention programs beginning in eighth grade
- More focus on active/engaged learning techniques in all middle school classes
- Smaller class size
- Up-to-date laboratories in every middle school
- More strategies to help parents get involved in their child's schooling
- More rigorous curriculum to prepare students for high school
- More counseling in middle school to deal with personal and family issues

The Study Design and Top-Rated Strategies

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years. The strategies were the highest rated among all the stakeholder groups; it is clear from the cumulative list that a solid agenda emerged for the improvement of the middle school and transition years.

Background Information: The Middle and Transition Years: A Critical Time

Concerns about middle school and the transition years in the educational continuum of youth have been loudly voiced in education circles for several years. Educators and the public at large have become better informed and more sensitized to the critical nature of educational choices during a youth's adolescent years, particularly in view of the indisputably essential role that the middle years play in preparing students for high school and forging pathways to college and work. The middle grades are pivotal in helping students eschew the dangers of dropping out, and in helping them conquer and master skills they will require for all future academic work. Because of that, the middle years require focused and diversified teaching techniques that mold to individual student learning, and a rigorous curriculum that will prepare students for high school and beyond.

Throughout this study, stakeholder groups across South Carolina expressed an understanding of these issues, as shown by an analysis of both the quantitative survey data and the qualitative discussion data. Clearly, concerns about the quality of the middle grades from both the family and the school perspective were widespread among educators, students, parents and business leaders regardless of location and demographics.

Results of the Study: Framework for an Action Plan for South Carolina

More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling:

As many as 98 percent of participants in some of the stakeholder groups voiced support for more tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling in the middle grades. After all, students who fail in middle school have little chance of making it out of ninth grade and through high school. Participants encouraged better training for teachers to be able to identify and address problems early in the middle school career, and to be able to tailor teaching to students' individual ways of learning. They also suggested more widespread use of summer school, after-school, and year-round school to ensure that all students receive the help they need in middle school.

Dropout prevention programs beginning in eighth grade:

Ninth grade is the pitfall for many students because of difficulty transitioning to high school and poor academic preparation. Educators and parents recognized that to ensure that students made it through ninth grade, their preparation and emotional well-being must be bolstered before they move to high school. That means not just academic tutoring, but also counseling, social support, and individualized attention and care. One superintendent suggested that middle school students must be nurtured and that individualized relationships must be developed with the

students. Also, some participants, particularly high school teachers, recommended closer ties and communications between middle and high school leaders and teachers so that students had a greater support network when they move from school to school.

More focus on active/engaged learning techniques in all middle school classes:

Nearly all stakeholder groups expressed recognition of the importance of actively engaging middle school students in learning through hands-on activities and individualized learning techniques. Superintendents were particularly vocal about offering mastery grouping, gendered classes, multi-age grouping, and other less traditional settings to promote interest in learning among middle grade students. Also participants encouraged such things as community-based research projects, team projects, presentations and portfolios that allow middle school students to explore and evidence their skills and interests in more creative and individualized ways.

Smaller class size:

As many as 94 percent of high school teachers surveyed in this study listed small class size as essential or important in middle schools. Indeed, smaller class size and small classroom communities were recognized by nearly all participants as fundamental tools to facilitate individualized learning in the middle grades.

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Results of the Study: Framework for an Action Plan for South Carolina

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Some participants voiced support for smaller schools as well, and in some cases team teaching, thus enabling a group of teachers to follow a small group of students and monitor their learning more closely.

Up-to-date laboratories in every middle school:

Laboratories were among the staples participants said were necessary for middle schools to be able to properly prepare students for high school and post-secondary education or career training. Many also recommended more technology and the availability of computers for all middle school students.

More rigorous curriculum to prepare students for high school:

Participants throughout stakeholder groups recognized the importance of ensuring that students leave middle school prepared to do high school work. To stakeholders, this meant making sure that students were mastering the basics, but also ensuring that they had access to courses that properly prepare them to take the courses that will get them into post-secondary education of some kind. Also, many participants recommended designing the curriculum to be more reflective of today's marketplace and economy and supported career exploration at the middle school level to acquaint students with potential career paths.

More counseling in middle school to deal with personal and family issues:

Again, many participants acknowledged the critical nature of the middle and transition years both in terms of academic preparation and social and emotional development. Participants recommended more counseling, a greater number of counselors, and more contacts between families, schools, and communities to create a better support network for middle school students.

Conclusion

Promoting student success and growth in the middle school and transition years is essential to ensure that students will succeed in high school and, then, post-secondary education or career training. It is an unavoidable and critical stepping stone to future growth – not only for the individual student, but for society and the economy as well. Indeed, the quality and outcome of the middle grades can fundamentally determine whether a student will move on to high school with the right tools and in the right gear, or will lack the tools and, thus, quickly falter and fail.

The data from this grassroots research strongly indicate that South Carolinians have a clear understanding of the urgency to reform and improve education in the middle school and transition years to ensure a greater future success for all students and future citizens.



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