



# In Their Own Words: Building Strong Leadership in Every Public School



A paper presented 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 wider-ranging 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 finish

high school and enroll in post-secondary training or higher education. This means that we must find new and better ways to help our students learn advanced skills. Economic progress is 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 at Furman University sought answers to this question through a comprehensive, non-partisan study involving residents throughout the state. The goal was to learn what South Carolinians think about the issues and problems in education. We also wanted their recommendations on strategies to improve our schools and students at this crucial time.

## The Study Design

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 various issues involving public education. The team met with groups of businessmen and women, teachers at the elementary, middle, and high school levels, school district superintendents, parents, school board members, school principals, and students from every county in the state – large and small, urban and rural, poor and wealthy.

In each meeting the same format was followed. Four questions were asked: three open-ended discussion questions and one in-depth survey. The first and second questions asked participants to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of South Carolina's public schools. The third question asked participants to share ideas about how they would redesign public schools to address areas in need of improvement. The final question consisted of a 160-question survey, which asked respondents to weigh a list opportunities, programs, and support structures needed in the public schools to help all students succeed.

Using random sampling techniques, the project team worked with local Chambers of Commerce, the office of the State School Improvement Council, school district offices, local school boards, and schools themselves in order to gather lists of potential participants. Individuals were invited to attend a meeting with others from the same stakeholder group.

In late 2006, the Riley Institute invited all participants to take part in a second phase of research focusing on key themes that emerged from the research during Phase I and asked them 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 two hundred 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 phase of research. They were then asked to devise practical action plans for South Carolina related to the top-rated strategies.

## Key Action Areas

From each of the stakeholder groups emerged a series of strategies to build world-class elementary, middle, and high schools; those grade-level strategies have been presented in summary papers by the Institute over the past several months. But from those meetings also emerged nine overarching themes or action areas that span across grades and across stakeholder groups. They are:

- Connecting Schools and Families
  - Preparing Students for a Global Economy
  - Increasing Learning Opportunities
  - Overcoming Academic Challenges
  - Ensuring High-Performing Teachers
  - Building Strong Leadership in Every School
  - Promoting Support for Public Education
  - Maintaining Outstanding Facilities and Infrastructure
  - Individualizing Education for Students
- This paper addresses the suggested action plan to connect school with families.

## Building Strong School Leadership: Thirteen Paths to Action

Participants in the mixed stakeholder meetings were asked to prioritize, according to their opinions, the set of strategies that emerged during the first set of stakeholder meetings. To accomplish this they used a two-part system: first, each participant ranked the strategies individually; then, after hearing the rankings and reasoning of the other members, they re-ranked them. Below are, in order of priority, the top strategies that emerged to address the task of building strong leadership in every public school:

1. Create the time and expectation for teachers and administrators to collaborate to better meet student needs;
2. Require more training and provide on-site support for principals in schools with a greater number of at-risk children;
3. Facilitate better coordination and communication among all levels of education and among schools, districts, and state agencies/government;
4. Create a system that enables administrators to fire ineffective teachers;
5. Increase salaries and create incentives for principals who take on more difficult assignments;
6. Create incentives for parents and families to become more involved in their children's education;
7. Find better ways to share information through effective use of technology about what works within schools and districts;
8. Create alternative preparation programs for potential school leaders;
9. Work to change the negative public image of South Carolina's schools;
10. Utilize a multi-dimensional tool for better evaluation of administrators' performance;
11. Utilize an evaluative tool that allows administrators to better assess individual school performance;
12. Institute effective training for school board members;
13. Require more stringent education requirements for administrators.

## How To Do It: Strategies in Detail

The participants in each reconstituted mixed meeting group were asked to further explore the top-ranked strategies and offer specific practical plans. Listed below are the recommendations for the top priorities of the greatest number of the groups. What emerged is a roadmap of detailed ideas and suggestions to build strong leadership for every public school:

### 1. Create the time and expectation for teachers and administrators to collaborate to better meet student needs:

Participants recommended:

- Ensuring that schools have sufficient staff to allow for collaborative planning time without increasing the duties or workload of staff members;
- Ensuring that collaborative planning sessions are held regularly and are used for the proper purpose;
- School-level training so teachers know how to effectively use their collaborative and planning time;
- Vertical teaching teams that can collaborate;
- Occasional late arrival/early dismissal times to create opportunities for teachers, staff, guidance personnel, and administrators to discuss student difficulties and other matters;
- Developing grade-level learning communities within the school so that all teachers get to know all students and can help in their areas of need;
- Teacher advocates for all students;
- More time for administrators to spend time in classrooms getting to know teachers and students.

### 2. Facilitate better coordination and communication among all levels of education and among schools, districts, and state agencies/government:

One of the problems recognized by participants throughout the study is the lack of collaboration between grade levels, schools, districts, and state agencies. To remedy this, participants suggested:

- Laptop computer/email capabilities for all teachers, school personnel, and administration, as well as families and parents;
- State-wide or district-wide committees of education stakeholders to discuss area school concerns;
- Leadership committees at the school level to communicate with district, state, and federal government.

### 3. Create a system that allows administrators the ability to fire ineffective teachers:

- Revise current teacher dismissal policies while concurrently raising teacher salaries;
- Establish an appropriate teacher evaluation instrument that produces specific evaluation parameters, and ensure that it is properly implemented;
- Establish a teacher evaluation system that is frank, focused, and

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## How To Do It: Strategies in Detail *(continued)*

frequently implemented, and ensure that it is carried out by competent professionals;

- Establish a documentation procedure that allows for the necessary proof of teacher incompetence;
- Provide a staff development coach in every content area in every school;
- Provide frequent observation and feedback;
- Create a step-by-step plan by which a poor teacher can be remediated and, if that fails, fired;
- Create an appeals process before out-of-district educators;
- Prevent teachers fired by one district from being hired to teach in another;
- Extend evaluation systems to principals and superintendents;
- Convince legislature of the need to change the current dismissal laws.

### **4. Increase salaries and create incentives for principals who take on more difficult assignments:**

One of the problems recognized in education in South Carolina is the difficulty of attracting strong leadership to poor, rural school districts. To address that issue, participants recommended:

- Increased salaries;
- Bonuses for successful principals in rural, high-poverty areas;
- Incentives to recruit people into leadership roles early in their education careers;
- Free administration education and training.

### **5. Create alternative preparation programs for potential school leaders:**

- Create a program to recruit business leaders into school administration;
- Create incentives for business leaders to be interested in the program;
- Develop a rigorous school administrator education program;
- Develop an apprentice-type program for new school leaders to train with successful school leaders, and a mentor program to give new leaders support, guidance, and help;
- Develop an "effective school leader" list of qualifications and a test for certification and renewal.

### **6. Work to change the negative public image of South Carolina's schools:**

- Implement an accountability system that rewards improvement and gives schools and students real and helpful feedback;
- Celebrate successes of schools and teachers;
- Set realistic standards that students can meet;
- Publicize good news;
- Address the problems that make the public image negative.

### **7. Institute effective training for school board members:**

School board qualifications have long been at the heart of discussions regarding the hiring and firing of teachers and superintendents, mismanagement in school districts, and the general educational tenor throughout the state. Participants in the study recommended the following:

- Requiring board training, ongoing self-assessment, and assessment by local administration and teachers;
- Passing laws to remove school board members from the daily operations and personnel matters of the school district;
- Limiting school board member terms;
- Requiring state-level training for all entering board members (some participants advised recurring annual training for all) with lawyers, accountants, and educators, so they can learn about the matters of the district;
- Requiring that board members spend a certain amount of time each month visiting the schools and writing about their observations/conclusions;
- Developing an accountability system for school board members;
- Implementing exchange programs between members of different school boards to learn about other's experiences and ways of solving problems.

Most of the strategies suggested to build leadership in every school, participants recognized, require considerable money. Participants stressed the need to lobby state legislators to appropriate the needed funding