

In Their Own Words: Connecting Schools and Families



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 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 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 of 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.

Connecting Schools and Families: An Eight-Pronged Action Plan

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 they re-ranked them after hearing the rankings and reasoning of the other members. Below is the prioritization of the top eight strategies to connect schools and families:

1. To design schools as community learning centers to give students, adults, and families learning opportunities in their own communities;
2. To offer family literacy programs to provide parents and family members with the skills to help their children succeed;
3. To provide parent/family education programs beginning when children are in infancy and continuing throughout their schooling;
4. To require family/parental involvement and to hold parents more accountable for their children's actions and performance;
5. To provide more counseling services in the schools to help students and families deal with personal issues that could interfere with learning;
6. To create incentives for parents and families to become more involved in their children's education;
7. To support strong parent/teacher organizations in each school;
8. To implement home visitation programs in all schools to strengthen the link between home and school.

How To Do It: Strategies in Detail

The participants in each mixed meeting group then were asked to further discuss and explore the top-ranked strategies. What emerged is a roadmap of ideas and suggestions to better connect families and schools:

1. Design schools as community learning centers to give students, adults, and families more learning opportunities:

The strategy ranked in the study as most important to connect schools with families is to design and organize schools in ways that facilitate learning opportunities for family and community members. In group discussion the following main ideas emerged:

- To provide education for parents at the local schools in the following ways: offer parents courses on early childhood best practices, literacy and parenting skills; train parents how to play with children and provide them literacy "on the run"; offer parents opportunities to get a GED or to take other courses after work hours (particularly for young parents who dropped out of high school and who need financial aid help and advice to continue their education); offer classes on resume writing, financial management, career changes, household issues, math, and other languages; offer classes to teach parents how to help their children with their homework; offer courses that children and parents can take together, such as financial planning, how to plan for college and work, health and nutrition, cooking, and technology and computer skills; open schools to parents; provide courses on such issues as teen pregnancy and alcohol and drug abuse; provide a parent academy with babysitting; organize family nights with potluck dinners and babysitting for young children, and open schools to groups such as Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, local business leaders, and speakers;
- To offer at the local schools activities and classes that benefit and bring together the whole community, such as free cultural events, plays, bands, athletic events, workout programs, food fairs, and family entertainment; to involve the churches, local community groups and businesses for a range of diverse activities, perhaps even such government functions as renewing a driver's license or registering to vote;
- To offer parents and families more access to technology through the schools; to provide parents with computer literacy classes and make sure teachers are trained to help parents in need when they come to school;
- To open schools for longer and more flexible hours so they can function as community centers; to have open house times so the community can become familiar with the school;
- To solicit the involvement of a greater and more diverse range of businesses and other groups such as police officers, marital and social counselors, to help mentor, tutor and help families with wider social issues; businesses could conduct classes and seminars on banking, buying a home, taxes, etc.;
- To create a transportation network so the school is connected to all population groups in the community, and if possible, to relocate or renovate schools in areas that are more central to the heart of a community rather than on the outskirts of town;
- Evaluate the assets available in a community to bridge school-family gaps and connect the two; solicit business partnerships and financial aid to support needed programs; maximize the offerings and facilities of the school to make them beneficial to the entire community.

(continued on next page)

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

2. Offer family literacy programs to provide parents and family members with the skills to help their children succeed:

As referenced above, family learning emerged as an important component in plans to develop schools as community learning centers. But family literacy was also ranked separately as the second most important strategy to connect schools and families. In detailed discussions about how to provide literacy to families, the following ideas took center stage (proposals that are identical to those listed above are presented here in abbreviated form):

- That schools provide a parent resource room at school so parents can access the school at their convenience and interact with other parents; also, that schools provide books, tapes, DVDs, and other materials for parents to check out and use at home;
- That schools offer extended day hours for parenting classes and other programs to improve parental learning; also, that schools survey community and family members to best determine the need for programs and the best place and time to offer them;
- That schools provide regular family reading time for parents to read with their children.

3. Provide parent/family education programs beginning when children are in infancy and continuing throughout their schooling:

Under this strategy respondents again re-emphasized the need for early parenting training, particularly for young parents, on how to use the written and spoken word with infants, how to teach children socialization skills, how to encourage, help, and reward children. Respondents again specified the need for transportation and child care help to facilitate parents' schedules, work and family life, and the need to provide parents with books and other materials to develop the concept of literacy in children. In addition, the following ideas took shape under this plan:

- To provide young parents proper prenatal care and teaching on proper nutrition and health;
- To provide parents of students in middle and high school courses on how to plan for college and how to seek financial aid;
- To fully fund and expand programs such as First Steps and Early Start, and to provide home visitation programs for young parents;
- To provide after-school programs with activities for parents and children together;

- To provide early childhood programs beginning at the age of 3 or 4, with parallel parenting programs.

4. Require family/parental involvement and hold parents more accountable for their children's actions and performance:

Participants reiterated the need to facilitate parental involvement by providing free transportation and accommodating flexible hours. In addition, they proposed that schools:

- Provide enough personnel to gather information on family situations and be able to hone in on diverse needs and circumstances;
- Contact employers and persuade them of the importance of facilitating parental involvement at school;
- Find ways to help parents make the economic connection between the importance of education for their children and their ability to overcome circumstance through work and education;
- Use community centers, the media, churches and other community locations to publicize meetings between parents and teachers or other parental involvement activities;
- Have parental liaisons and intensify contacts made with parents via email, letters, and phone calls;
- Create parent/student/school compacts or agreements and hold parents accountable for their part in the child's education;
- Have report cards grading parental contribution to student success and achievement, and have parents sign them;
- At the beginning of the school year, offer parents a series of ways in which they can be involved, or things they can do, and get them to pledge to a certain number of them, with the agreement that they will be held accountable if they do not fulfill their pledge;
- Select a series of incentives and legal accountability measures to encourage parental involvement.

5. Provide more counseling services in the schools to help students and families deal with personal issues that could interfere with learning:

From teachers to superintendents and parents, participants across grade levels acknowledged throughout the study the severe impact that home and social issues such as poverty, homelessness, drugs, and strained family lives have on student performance and functioning. Participants suggest that schools can help, and in this

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

fifth-ranked strategy to connect families with schools they outlined a plan to help attenuate the effects of such problems:

- Hire more counselors per school so they have time to deal with personal student issues on an individual basis; make them available to parents as well as students so problems are dealt with as a network;
- Hire school/community liaisons or social service representatives to help parents with practical home issues that affect their children, such as the need for clothing, food, and shelter; help the liaisons establish a network of trust that will bond parents to the school;
- Hire mental health practitioners and school doctors to hold talks on issues affecting youth and their home lives; have the doctors available to parents for regular private conversations;
- Create more effective connections between social services, school counselors, and parents;
- Involve volunteers to train as counselors, or encourage institutions of higher learning to make counseling a larger component of teacher training and to train more counselors.

Each of the five strategies detailed acknowledged the need for funding to implement the plans.



FURMAN

CENTER FOR EDUCATION LEADERSHIP & POLICY
AN INITIATIVE OF THE RILEY INSTITUTE AT FURMAN