



# In Their Own Words: Ensuring High-Performing Teachers in All Classrooms



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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 ensure the presence of high-performing teachers in every classroom in the state.

## Ensuring High-Performing Teachers in All Classrooms: 13 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 the top strategies that emerged to address the overarching goal of ensuring high-performing teachers in every classroom:

1. Maintain small class size;
2. Increase teacher compensation;
3. Offer strong and well-coordinated mentoring programs for beginning teachers;
4. Offer continuous professional development and support for teachers to deal with the challenges of helping students achieve and graduate;
5. Allow for more time for teachers to meet, coordinate, and share information about effective methods, techniques, and ideas;
6. Provide greater incentives to encourage individuals to enter into and remain in the teaching profession;
7. Provide teachers adequate technology, supplies, and materials;
8. Eliminate many of the duties teachers are required to perform outside of the classroom, thus allowing teachers more time to focus on teaching;
- 9.. Create alternative certification programs to bring qualified individuals into the teaching profession;
10. Provide teachers the tools to better assess individual student progress;
11. Create vertical teams of teachers to strengthen the links between school levels;
12. Institute leadership training for teachers to show them how to become advocates for themselves and their profession;
13. Institute more stringent certification/education requirements for teachers.

### How To Do It: Strategies in Detail

In the second phase of the research, participants were asked to further explore the highest-rated strategies and offer practical plans. Below are the findings for the highest-rated strategies for the greatest number of the groups. What emerged is a roadmap of detailed ideas and suggestions to ensure that every classroom has a high-performing teacher:

#### 1. Maintain small class size:

Participants throughout the study highlighted the need for small class size. In more detail this means:

- Hiring more teachers per school;
- Building more classrooms;
- Setting class size upper and lower limits according to the needs of the students involved (smaller class size for high-poverty children, for example);
- Reworking school schedules to maximize opportunities for smaller class size;
- Concentrating small class sizes in the lower grades.

#### 2. Increase teacher compensation:

Teacher salaries have long been at the crux of the debate regarding our ability to attract and retain good teachers in every classroom. In their discussions, participants recommended the following:

- Raising state salaries to the national average;
- Creating a statewide teacher pay scale;
- Using proceeds from the lottery to raise teachers' salaries;
- Creating a public information campaign on teachers' duties and work so the public will understand the need for higher salaries;
- Paying veteran teachers more to mentor new teachers;
- Considering use of a merit increase scale;
- Carefully analyzing the state budget to determine how to raise salaries for all teachers.

#### 3. Offer strong and well-coordinated mentoring programs for beginning teachers:

To ensure that all teachers are high-performing, participants suggested help for beginning teachers. Some recommendations include:

- Special training for veteran teachers to become effective mentors to new teachers;
- Careful selection of teachers to serve as mentors;
- Salary supplements for mentors;
- Time for veteran teachers to observe and coach beginning teachers;
- Careful and effective partnering of beginning and veteran teachers;
- Frequent, detailed, honest review of beginning teacher's performance with mentor;
- Fostering a culture of mentoring throughout a school so mentors take their responsibility seriously and have support in their work;
- Assigning beginning teachers to one fewer class to allow time daily to meet with mentors for coaching;
- Not assigning beginning teachers any extra duties their first year of teaching;
- Placing experienced, effective teachers in neediest, low-income schools, and beginning teachers in high-performing, wealthier schools;
- Making the beginner teacher's job more manageable by offering mentoring, stress relief, yoga, etc.

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

### 4. Ensure more time for teachers to meet, coordinate, and share information about effective methods, techniques, and ideas:

Time and teamwork are regularly voiced needs to help ensure quality teaching. Participants suggested the following:

- Providing all teachers coordinated time to discuss their work and ideas;
- Paid time or overtime for teacher planning and discussion sessions;
- Hiring paraprofessionals or others to cover classes while teachers collaborate;
- Choosing a topic related to the teachers' work or school, and focusing the entire faculty on it for a period of time, fostering conversation and sharing of ideas;
- Short mini in-service sessions over lunch for teachers to learn about one strategy or idea;
- Coordinating sessions between a district's elementary, middle, and high schools for teachers to share their difficulties and challenges;
- Creating vertical teams of teachers to work together through the grades;
- More professional development days per teacher;
- Longer school year with more time for teachers to collaborate and plan;
- Eliminate duties not related to teaching or teacher collaboration and learning.

### 5. Provide greater incentives to encourage individuals to enter into and remain in the teaching profession:

Ensuring a constant supply of people who want to teach and who will stay in teaching more than a few years is at the heart of the difficulty of providing consistent quality teaching in every classroom.

To change that, participants recommended:

- Higher teacher salaries;
- Salary increases for effective teachers;
- Salary bonuses for teachers in high-poverty, low-performing areas;
- Forgiving student loans for education majors;
- Scholarships for students entering education;
- Fostering greater positivism and professionalism in the teaching profession;
- Mentors for beginning teachers;
- Year-round school so teachers are not discouraged by summer loss;
- A study of education courses to see if they need to be redesigned to make education more attractive as a field;
- Leadership training for teachers to show them how to become advocates for themselves and their profession.

In each of the above action plans, participants stressed the need for funding to pay for extra personnel, extra time, longer school year, and professional development work.



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