

In Their Own Words: Overcoming Academic Challenges



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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 help students overcome academic challenges.

Overcoming Academic Challenges: Fourteen 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 helping students overcome academic challenges:

1. Implement quality early childhood education programs in all public schools;
2. Provide teachers specialized in reading to all classes in grades 1-3 and intensive reading enrichment programs for students with reading difficulties;
3. Create a system to ensure that children do not move beyond third grade without reading and writing fluently;
4. Enforce student discipline measures;
5. Provide adequate education and support to parents and families of all students;
6. Provide incentives, training, and on-site support to teachers and administrators who take on more difficult assignments;
7. Provide students with tutoring and other assistance during the summer months and after school;
8. Offer health screenings, counseling services, full-time nurses, and other social services within the schools;
9. Offer more and better options for remediation;
10. Institute dropout prevention programs;
11. Require more specialized training and support for teachers working with students with disabilities;
12. Offer more thorough screenings and services for children with disabilities;
13. Create opportunities to connect students to positive community role models;
14. Make adjustments to the school calendar to offer diverse options to students.

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 practical plans. Below are the action plans for the strategies that were the top priorities for the greatest number of the groups. What emerged is a roadmap of detailed ideas and suggestions to help students overcome academic challenges:

1. Implement quality early childhood education programs in all public schools:

Participants in the study recognized that student learning begins in early childhood, with programs that foster readiness to learn and early reading and writing fluency. To accomplish this, participants recommended the following:

- Careful identification of students in need of programs;
- Aggressive outreach services to get children into programs;
- Creation of early childhood programs for children as young as infants;
- Redefinition of certification requirements to provide effective teachers in early childhood programs, ensuring that all teachers are properly trained, particularly to teach reading;
- Early childhood programs that reach into the home and partner with parents;
- Working with parents to tailor programs so that they are accessible to families; providing workshops to keep parents informed about curriculum and children's learning progress; offering parenting education programs/classes;
- Ensuring that early childhood programs are aligned with learning requirements for first grade;
- Small class size;
- Providing the programs with the needed reading and play materials;
- Using research-based data to campaign throughout the state for creation and funding of full-day, universal early childhood programs in all schools;
- State-provided training for all early childhood teachers;
- Providing individualized learning strategies to reach all children.

2. Provide teachers specialized in reading to all classes in grades 1–3 and intensive reading enrichment programs for students with reading difficulties:

Participants agreed that helping students learn to read successfully at an early age is a way of helping them overcome academic challenges. In more detail they recommended:

- Provision of early literacy training and home visitations for parents to help them prepare children for early childhood programs;
- Training of all teachers in grades 1-3 to be specialized in teaching reading;
- Specialization certification in teaching reading;
- Training of teachers in the early identification of students with reading problems and to use many literacy methods through proven reading programs;
- Testing for the early assessment of reading difficulties, including eye and other health screenings;
- Bolstering teacher education programs to teach teachers how to teach reading and utilize individualized strategies;
- Incentives for teachers to specialize in teaching reading; professional development courses in teaching reading;
- Reading specialists and volunteers to help students read;

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

- Targeting instructional levels based on reading proficiency rather than age;
- Incentives for teachers with reading specializations to teach in high-poverty schools;
- Intensive tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling with reading, including year-round reading intensive programs, dropping other requirements in other subjects, offering tutors, coaches, and reading concentration programs such as Reading Recovery;
- After-school and summer school programs geared towards reading.

3. Create a system to ensure that children don't move beyond third grade without reading and writing fluently:

Research shows that students who do not read and write fluently by third grade are likely to encounter academic difficulties. Thus, participants agreed that school systems must ensure that children do not progress beyond third grade unless they can read and write. They recommended:

- Stronger training programs for teachers to learn to teach reading, including better diagnostic and preventative skills;
- Use of a greater variety of reading strategies and programs – one model does not ensure success for all;
- Reading coaches in all elementary schools;
- Full-day pre-K for all 4-year olds;
- Small group instruction and individualized learning plans;
- Smaller classes;
- More after-school and summer school programs to create more opportunity and time for reading, and year-round school;
- Frequent and consistent testing of reading and writing abilities from the earliest grades to ensure awareness of potential problems and proper tutoring for students in need. Any demonstrated lack of mastery by the end of second grade should be met with aggressive intervention, tutoring, and coaching;
- Strong remedial tutoring programs for all students whose early performance suggests they will not have reading and writing fluency by the end of third grade;
- Ensuring that referrals and testing for special services such as learning disabilities are accurate; exclusion of children with disabilities from this requirement;

- Ensuring that student health, nutritional, and emotional needs are met;
- Stronger remediation programs for children who, due to a lack of reading skills, are not ready to leave third grade.

4. Enforce student discipline measures:

Participants linked students' ability to overcome academic challenges to the control of discipline issues. They recommended:

- More effective discipline procedures;
- Development of action plans to deal with infractions in a progressive way (deal with minor infractions severely to avoid more serious ones later on);
- More alternative schools for disruptive students;
- Better teacher training on how to control student behavior;
- Placing discipline management in the hands of administrators;
- Creation of behavioral pacts or agreements with students and parents;
- Creation of separate classrooms or places for the students with discipline problems to be secluded.

5. Provide adequate education and support to parents and families of all students:

Throughout the study, participants stressed the connection between families and student success. To reinforce that link to help students overcome academic challenges, here they suggested the following:

- Home visitation and family literacy programs;
- Health and other social services supports for families in need;
- Family nights and open schools to families;
- Provide culturally diverse resources to honor and reach parents;
- Offer GED, English as a Second Language, and parenting classes at the school;
- Bolster communication with families;
- Provide all families with computers for home use;
- Create flexible scheduling and accommodations for working parents;
- Offer community events at the school to make parents more comfortable.

As with many of the key action areas, when discussing the strategies, participants stressed the need for funding so that programs may be implemented statewide for all children in need.



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