

# In Their Own Words: Promoting Support for Public Education



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 promote support for public education.

## Promoting Support for Public Education

The issue of promoting support for public education in South Carolina resurfaced time and time again throughout discussions on all topics related to public education in this study. Here are the main actions recommended by participants to meet that goal:

- Design schools as community centers and create a more open perception of education;
- Revise the accountability system so that the process of promoting change is more positive and less punitive;
- Create an accountability system that provides useful feedback to parents and teachers regarding student performance and areas needing improvement;
- Share data with parents and community more effectively;
- De-emphasize district lines; create stronger affiliations between schools and communities as a whole;
- Promote a more global, statewide way of thinking about education that is less parochial and less district-oriented;
- Forge alliances with businesses, faith-based leaders, and the growing population of retirees;
- Use leadership of state legislature, state board of education, and the state education department to create a statewide vision for public education with which people can identify and support;
- Reinforce the community's sense of responsibility to public education;
- Create and promote school and school-related programs that provide services in the community and bond schools with the people (for example, day care programs in schools and parent education centers);
- Create home visitation programs that take teachers into homes and allow them to get to know people in the community;
- Promote literacy efforts that involve the whole community;
- Build smaller schools and locate them in the community, which helps them better bond with the community;
- Promote and publicize stories about good things happening in schools;
- Create advocacy groups for public education.

As was the case with most other themes, participants stressed the need for sufficient funding to support initiatives in a consistent manner throughout the state.