



In Their Own Words: A Public Vision for Educational Excellence in South Carolina

Opinions of South Carolina's Elementary School Teachers



A study by the Riley Institute's Center for Education Policy & Leadership underwritten by a grant from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.



Public Education in South Carolina

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

Results from Elementary School Teacher Sessions:

Top Weaknesses of South Carolina's Public Schools

- Issues relating to:
- Teacher responsibilities
 - Statewide curriculum standards
 - Parental/family involvement/accountability
 - State's response to *No Child Left Behind*
 - Level of funding
 - Emphasis on testing

Top Strengths of South Carolina's Public Schools

- Issues relating to:
- Statewide curriculum standards
 - Professional development for educators
 - Teacher quality/dedicated and committed teachers
 - Quality of early childhood education
 - Curriculum content

The Study Design

The Riley Institute project team spent more than 3,000 hours meeting with nearly 800 South Carolinians to gather their opinions on public education. The team met with businessmen and women, teachers of all levels, superintendents, parents, school board members, principals and students from every county and school district in the state—large and small, rural and urban, wealthy and poor. Included in this were 69 elementary school teachers from all regions of the state. Below you will find the views from the elementary school teacher group within the study.

For more information about the study design and research methodology, please visit the Center for Education Policy and Leadership web site, www.rileyinstitute.org/cepl.

*This report represents the findings from all elementary school teacher research sessions. Later in the year, we will release reports detailing the areas of agreement among all nine stakeholder groups for developing world-class schools in South Carolina.

Improving Public Education in South Carolina: Top recommendations

Items highlighted in these categories were part of a 160-question survey that all participants completed.

Items below were viewed as either “essential” or “important” by 90% or more of all participants.

Early & Elementary Years

- Smaller class size (99%)
- More strategies to help parents get involved in their children’s schooling (97%)
- Intensive reading programs for students with reading difficulties (96%)
- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling (94%)
- The availability of full-day kindergarten programs for all children (93%)
- Family literacy programs (93%)
- Counseling to deal with personal and family issues (93%)

Teacher Training & Development

- Effective teachers in every classroom (100%)
- More time for teachers to meet, coordinate, share and plan together (96%)
- Special training and assistance for teachers working with children with disabilities (94%),
- Better pay for all teachers (94%)
- Strong, well-coordinated mentoring programs for beginning teachers (93%)
- More specialized training for teachers working with students with disabilities (93%)
- Support staff to free teachers up for teaching (93%)

Middle School & Transition Years

- More focus on active/engaged learning techniques in all middle school classes (97%)
- More tutoring opportunities for struggling students (96%)
- Smaller class size (94%)
- More counseling to deal with personal and family issues (94%)
- Dropout prevention programs beginning in 8th grade (94%)
- Opportunities to connect students with positive community role models (94%)
- More strategies to help parents become involved in their child’s schooling (91%)
- Physical fitness programs for all middle school students (90%)

Leadership

- More on-site support for principals in schools with many at-risk students (93%)
- The time and expectation for teachers and administrators to collaborate to better meet student needs (93%)



High School Years

- More counseling to deal with personal and family issues (94%)
- More tutoring opportunities for struggling students (93%)
- Up-to-date laboratories in every high school (91%)
- More links between high schools, technical colleges, and 2- and 4-year colleges and universities (90%)
- A wider variety of vocational programs (90%)

Resources, Technology & Infrastructure

- Up-to-date school buildings and facilities (96%)
- Availability of textbooks and other learning resources (96%)

Re-designing Public Education in South Carolina: Discussion Data

All respondents were asked to share their thoughts about how they would redesign South Carolina's public schools in order to prepare a larger number of students to graduate and to succeed in college or career training. Highlights from these focus group discussions include the following:

Class Size:

Almost all elementary school teachers raised the issue of class size, with many recommending class size reductions across the board, both at the preschool and elementary levels. Some teachers also suggested providing classroom assistants if the number of students was not at or below 20.



Early Childhood Education Programs:

Nearly all elementary teachers voiced the need for more early childhood education programs and many agreed that rigorous early childhood programs were the best way to ensure that students would be prepared to enter elementary school. Many respondents also reported that four year-old kindergarten programs should be available in every school.

Teacher Compensation, Recruitment, and Training:

Teachers in almost every research session expressed the need for higher compensation and more professional development opportunities for teachers, as well as the restructuring of teacher education programs. Substitute teacher programs also were among the concerns of elementary teachers.

Curriculum Standards and Instruction:

Many teachers suggested reducing and/or revising the state standards; others encouraged a push toward national standards. In addition, the need for the state to provide high but realistic standards was discussed, and concerns were voiced about the effect standardized testing had on the curriculum. Regarding content, many teachers voiced their belief that the curriculum should include a more intense focus on the basics.

Parent Involvement, Accountability, and Education:

Several teachers discussed the need to hold parents more accountable for their children's behavior and performance. Others discussed the necessity of providing more parent education programs for parents and families. In addition, teachers suggested mandating parent conferences as way to get parents more involved and instituting home visits to help build a relationship between parents and the school.

Support and Resources:

Numerous teachers suggested that assistants should be hired to help with "non-teaching" duties, since many teachers were overwhelmed by paperwork and other administrative duties. In addition, many respondents voiced the need for a more professional and respectful view of the teaching profession.

Standardized Testing and School Report Cards:

Many teachers called for the elimination of excessive standardized testing in elementary school, with one teacher stating, "The kids are tested to death." Most teachers suggested using MAP testing exclusively because of MAP's immediate results and ability to show individual progress. In addition, some teachers suggested eliminating the PACT and others suggested eliminating the use of school report cards.

Classroom Instructional Methods:

During research discussions, several teachers suggested grouping students by ability and mastery. Many believed that students should not be allowed to advance until they had mastered material, thus eliminating issues related to social promotion. Several teachers also supported classes divided by gender.



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