



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

## Opinions of S.C. High 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.

### 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 50 high school teachers from all regions of the state. Below you will find the views from the high school teacher group within the study.

For more information about the study design and research methodology, please visit the web site of the Center for Education Policy and Leadership: [www.rileyinstitute.org/cepl](http://www.rileyinstitute.org/cepl).

\*This report represents the findings from all high 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.\*

### Results from High School Teacher Sessions:

#### Top Strengths of South Carolina's Public Schools

- Issues relating to:
- Statewide curriculum standards
  - Curriculum content
  - Professional development for educators
  - Climate/tone/culture/commitment of and to public education
  - Vocational/tech-prep/school-to-career programs.

#### Top Weaknesses of South Carolina's Public Schools

- Issues relating to:
- Emphasis on testing
  - Parental/family involvement/accountability
  - Compensation for teachers
  - Teacher morale and advocacy for teachers
  - Level of funding

## 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

- Intensive reading programs for students with reading difficulties (96%)
- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling (94%)
- Smaller class size (90%)



### Middle School & Transition Years

- Smaller class size (94%)
- Dropout prevention programs beginning in 8th grade (92%)
- Better coordination to help transition between middle and high school (92%)



### High School Years

- Up-to-date labs in every high school (98%)
- More tutoring opportunities for struggling students (96%)
- More links between high schools, technical colleges, and 2- and 4-year colleges and universities (94%)
- Smaller class size (94%)
- A curriculum more aligned with college coursework and job requirements (94%)
- A wider variety of vocational programs (92%)

### Teacher Training & Development

- Effective teachers in every classroom (100%)
- Strong, well-coordinated mentoring programs for beginning teachers (98%)
- Better pay for all teachers (94%)
- Greater incentives to retain outstanding teachers (90%)
- Special training and assistance for teachers working with students with academic difficulties (90%)

### Leadership

- More on-site support for principals in schools with many at-risk students (90%)

### Resources, Technology & Infrastructure

- Technologically-advanced labs (96%)
- Safe and efficient transportation for all students to and from all school programs (94%)
- Availability of textbooks and other learning resources (94%)
- Up-to-date school buildings and facilities (90%)
- Training of teachers and administrators on proper use of technology (90%)

## 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. The conversations lasted for an hour and many items were discussed during this time. Highlights from these focus group discussions include the following:

### Technology and Classroom Resources:

Numerous teachers reported the need for schools to have greater technological resources. Suggestions provided by teachers included supplying laptops to students and providing up-to-date software for teacher and student use. In addition, many teachers supported an increase in distance learning opportunities.

### Curriculum and Standards:

In almost all of the research meetings, teachers discussed the need to re-examine course content and standards, with an increased focus on the basics. Many teachers also voiced support for a change in seat time/credit recovery time requirements and an increase in the number of credits required for graduation. In terms of content, several teachers discussed mandating a senior project, teaching more study skills, and implementing public speaking classes into the curriculum.

### Parental Involvement and Accountability:

In a number of research meetings, teachers discussed the need to increase parent involvement and accountability. Mandating a basic parenting course and increasing the amount of parent and family education programs offered in the schools were among the suggestions.

### Social Support for Students:

Ideas suggested by high school teachers included providing childcare services to high school mothers, redefining guidance roles and increasing guidance counselor accessibility, and implementing advisor/advisee systems in high schools.

### Teacher Compensation, Recruitment & Training:

The need to increase teacher compensation was discussed by and supported by almost all high school teachers participating in the study. In addition, increasing the number and quality of professional development programs, reexamining teacher requirements, and changing the PACE program requirements were all suggestions made by teachers during research meetings.

### Standardized Testing:

Many teachers suggested de-emphasizing testing and eliminating unnecessary testing. In addition, a number of teachers also supported eliminating school report cards and making testing uniform throughout the country.

### Vocational, Career, and Tech Prep:

Numerous teachers suggested hiring career counselors, as well as reorganizing schools into small learning communities based on career clusters. Teachers also tended to support more career training in high school, and several teachers suggested targeting 9th grade students for career planning and instituting career pathways.

### Discipline Issues:

Many teachers voiced support for immediate alternatives for the removal of disruptive students and the implementation of consistent discipline policies among schools.

### Individualized Instruction:

During research meetings, teachers discussed the need to utilize differentiated tracks based on ability level and interests. Several high school teachers suggested the elimination of social promotion, combined with the implementation of mastery-based advancement.



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