



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

Opinions of South Carolina's Middle 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 group were 81 middle school teachers from all regions of the state. Below you will find the views from the middle 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 Middle 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 Middle School Teacher Sessions:

Top Weaknesses of South Carolina's Public Schools
<p>Issues relating to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Parental/family involvement/accountability ■ Discipline problems ■ Compensation for teachers ■ Education climate ■ Use of test data (PACT) to help students improve ■ Funding methodology and equity

Top Strengths of South Carolina's Public Schools
<p>Issues relating to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Statewide curriculum standards ■ Teacher quality ■ Technology availability ■ Climate/tone/culture/commitment of/to public education ■ Professional development for educators ■ Curriculum content

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 enrichment programs for students with reading difficulties (96%)
- Teachers specialized in reading in all classrooms in grades 1–3 (96%)
- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling (94%)
- More strategies to help parents get involved in their child’s schooling (94%)
- Smaller class size (93%)
- A system to ensure that no child moves beyond 3rd grade without reading and writing fluently (91%)
- Physical fitness programs for all elementary school students (90%)

Middle School & Transition Years

- More focus on active/engaged learning techniques in all middle school classes (96%)
- Smaller class size (95%)
- Up-to-date labs in every middle school (94%)
- More counseling in middle school to deal with personal and family issues (93%)
- More strategies to help parents get involved in their child’s schooling (93%)
- Dropout prevention programs beginning in 8th grade (91%)
- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling (91%)
- Physical fitness programs for all middle school students (90%)

High School Years

- Up-to-date labs in every high school (99%)
- More links between high schools, technical colleges, and 2- and 4-year colleges and universities (98%)
- A wider variety of vocational programs (98%)
- A curriculum more aligned with college coursework and job requirements (91%)
- Smaller class size (90%)

Leadership ^{*}

- Effective training for school board members (89%)
- The time and expectation for teachers and administrators to collaborate to better meet student needs (89%)
- More on-site support for principals in schools with many at-risk students (89%)
- More training for principals in schools with many at-risk students (88%)
- A multi-dimensional tool for evaluating administrator performance (85%)

Resources, Technology & Infrastructure

- Up-to-date school buildings and facilities (98%)
- Designing schools as community centers to give students, adults and families learning opportunities in their own communities (96%)
- Technologically advanced labs (93%)
- Availability of textbooks and other learning resources (93%)

Teacher Training & Development

- Effective teachers in every classroom (98%)
- Greater incentives for retaining outstanding teachers (96%)
- More teachers in the transition grades to reduce class size and give more individualized attention (95%)
- Better pay for all teachers (94%)
- Support staff to free up teachers to teach (94%)
- Strong, well-coordinated mentoring programs for beginning teachers (93%)
- Special training and assistance for teachers working with students with academic difficulties (91%)
- More time for teachers to meet, coordinate, share and plan together (91%)

** None were 90% or above, thus the top five strategies instead were included above.*

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:



Curriculum and Standards:

Many teachers voiced the need to decrease the number of standards and to focus content on reading mastery, vocabulary, writing skills and math. In addition to these core subjects, teachers suggested paying attention to other subjects such as foreign language, study skills, home economics, career education and life skills courses.

Parental Involvement and Accountability:

A number of teachers reported that schools should require parents to attend conferences in K-12. Teachers also recommended home visits as a way to bridge the gap between the school and the home.



Discipline:

Many teachers stated that discipline programs and policies should be strengthened and that schools should ensure that the administration backs teaching staff on discipline issues and decisions. Other suggestions for improvement included making "in-school suspension" more productive and allowing schools to expel from school repeat offenders.

Individualized Instruction:

Several teachers suggested utilizing gendered classes in middle school and focusing more on the needs of advanced students. In addition, the issue of social promotion was discussed and several teachers agreed that students should be promoted based on mastery.



Support for Underperforming Students:

Many teachers indicated that schools should provide tutors/mentors for struggling students and that these students should get more remediation, such as after-school and summer programs. Small-group instruction for these students was also outlined as a need and several teachers mentioned the need for early identification of students with reading problems.



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FURMAN UNIVERSITY
THE RILEY INSTITUTE®
3300 Poinsett Highway
Greenville, S.C. 29613