



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

Opinions of South Carolina's Students



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 85 of the state's students from all regions of the state. Below you will find the views from the student 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>.

This report represents the findings from all student 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 Student Sessions:

Top Strengths of South Carolina's Public Schools

- Issues relating to:
- Curriculum Content
 - Extracurricular activities
 - Dedicated teachers
 - Diversity of student population
 - Technology availability

Top Weaknesses of South Carolina's Public Schools

- Issues relating to:
- Curriculum content
 - Class size
 - Assistance for at-risk students
 - Discipline policies
 - Teacher quality
 - Level of funding/funding methodology

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

- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling (99%)
- Intensive reading programs for students with reading difficulties (93%)
- A system to ensure that no child moves beyond 3rd grade without reading and writing fluently (92%)
- More strategies to help parents get involved in their children’s schooling (90%)



Middle School & Transition Years

- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling (93%)
- More rigorous curriculum to help prepare students for high school (91%)
- Dropout prevention programs beginning in 8th grade (90%)



High School Years

- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling (94%)
- Beginning in 9th grade, more guidance to help students and parents get information about the college application process (93%)
- Earlier guidance to prepare students to take Honors, AP and IB courses (93%)
- More links between high school, technical colleges, and 2- and 4-year colleges and universities (93%)
- Study trips to visit colleges and learn about college entrance requirements (90%)
- Distance-learning opportunities and opportunities at local colleges to take courses (90%)
- A curriculum more aligned with college coursework and job requirements (90%)

Teacher Training & Development

- Effective teachers in every classroom (99%)
- More specialized training for teachers working with students with disabilities (96%)
- Better stocked supplies and materials for teachers (94%)

Resources, Technology & Infrastructure

- Up-to-date school buildings and facilities (98%)
- Availability of textbooks and other learning resources (97%)
- Training of teachers and administrators on proper use of technology (97%)
- Technologically-advanced labs (91%)
- Safe and efficient transportation for all students to and from all school programs (91%)

Leadership

- A more streamlined process to remove inadequate teachers from the classroom (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. Highlights from these focus group discussions include the following:

Curriculum and Standards:

When asked how they would improve education in South Carolina, ideas surrounding curriculum and standards emerged most prominently among students. Several students suggested including in the curriculum topics such as public speaking and character education. Other ideas discussed included integrating volunteer work into the curriculum and requiring college planning courses. The intense focus on curriculum standards also was discussed during student meetings. One student said that schools should "move focus from statistics to achievement." Another student agreed, stating: "Standards stifle progress. We need to focus on learning."

Vocational and Career Exploration/Preparation in High School:

A number of students emphasized the need for more career-related courses and more job/career fairs. Other students brought up the need to better promote career awareness through exploratory courses and the necessity of ensuring the availability of vocational schools and JROTC.

Partnerships and Communication with Higher Education and the Business Community:

During focus group discussions, many students suggested the need for a greater number of student internship and apprenticeship opportunities, school-to-work programs, and earlier access to courses at technical schools.

Teacher Compensation, Recruitment, and Training:

A large number of students reported that it was essential to increase compensation and incentives in order to recruit and retain quality teachers. Several students also voiced support for an increase in professional development opportunities for teachers and for higher quality substitute teachers.

Teaching and Instructional Methods:

During focus group discussions, ideas were suggested such as implementing more group work and hands-on work opportunities, utilizing real-world examples in teaching, and focusing on the development of critical thinking skills.

Assistance to Students Transitioning Between Grade Levels:

Numerous students suggested increasing the number of guidance counselors, as well as mandating a greater number of student meetings with guidance counselors. In addition, students reported that more mentoring for students was needed. One student stated, "We need help making lifelong decisions, and we're not getting that help."

Technology and Classroom Resources:

Ideas that emerged from discussions included utilizing laptops more in the classroom and using class websites for more teacher/student contact.



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