



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

## Opinions of S.C. School Board Members



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 46 of the state's school board members from all regions of the state. Below you will find the views from the school board member 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 school board member 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 School Board Member Sessions:

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

Issues relating to:

- Teacher dedication
- Quality and dedication of school administration
- Statewide curriculum standards
- Diversity of opportunities for students
- Commitment to improving education

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

Issues relating to:

- Funding methodology and equity
- Level of funding
- The role of politics in education
- Unfunded mandates
- Dropout rates

## 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 (98%)
- Intensive reading programs for students with reading difficulties (98%)
- The availability of full-day kindergarten programs for all children (94%)
- More strategies to help parents get involved in their children’s schooling (94%)
- Teachers specialized in reading in all classrooms in grades 1–3 (91%)



### Middle School & Transition Years

- Dropout prevention programs beginning in 8<sup>th</sup> grade (98%)
- More tutoring opportunities for struggling students (97.8%)
- More strategies to help parents become involved in their children’s schooling (96%)
- More rigorous curriculum to prepare students for high school (96%)
- Better coordination to help transition between middle and high school (93.5%)



### High School Years

- More links between high schools, technical colleges and post-secondary education (98%)
- Up-to-date laboratories in every high school (96%)
- More tutoring opportunities for struggling students (96%)
- A wider variety of vocational programs (94%)
- More opportunities for high school students to link classroom learning with service-learning projects to help their community (91%)
- Earlier guidance to prepare students to take Honors, AP, and IB courses (91%)

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### Teacher Training & Development

- Effective teachers in every classroom (100%)
- Strong, well-coordinated mentoring programs for beginning teachers (100%)
- Special training and assistance for teachers working with children with disabilities (98%)
- Greater incentives for retaining outstanding teachers (93%)
- Continued professional development for high school on how to deliver a more rigorous curriculum to students (91%)

### Leadership

- A multi-dimensional tool for evaluating teachers' performance in the classroom (98%)
- A more streamlined process to remove inadequate teachers from the classroom (98%)
- A multi-dimensional tool for evaluating administrators' performances (96%)
- More training for principals in schools with many at-risk students (91%)



### Resources, Technology & Infrastructure

- Integration of technology throughout the curriculum (98%)
- Training for all teachers and administrators on proper use of technology (98%)
- Facilitating ways for teachers and administrators to use technology to share information about effective methods, techniques and ideas (94%)
- Availability of textbooks and other learning resources (94%)
- Finding better ways to share information about what works with students by using knowledge-management technologies in schools and districts (91%)

## 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:

### Early Childhood & Elementary Years

#### Curriculum and Standards:

When asked how they would redesign public education in South Carolina, school board members most frequently cited issues related to curriculum and standards. Board members from across the state brought up the need for a focus on the basics; many others highlighted the importance of beginning foreign language instruction at an early age and emphasized the development of arts education and critical thinking skills within the curriculum.

#### Family Education and Involvement:

The need to offer more formal early childhood education programs for three and four-year olds was voiced by many school board members across the state, along with fully-funded, all-day kindergarten for 5-year-olds.

#### Parent/Family Education and Family Literacy:

Many school board members voiced support for parenting seminars and other programs focused on enhancing the family unit. Parental involvement also was seen as an issue that should be addressed as several school board members supported a legal requirement for parents to become involved in their child's education and home visitation programs.

#### Teacher Compensation, Recruitment and Training:

Many school board members reported that it was essential to increase compensation and incentives in order to recruit and retain quality teachers. In addition, many board members reported that elementary school teacher training and certification programs needed to be redesigned in order to more adequately prepare teachers for the classroom. The need for a greater number of quality, on-going professional development opportunities for teachers also was voiced by some board members, with some emphasizing the need to train teachers on different student learning styles.

#### Individualized Instruction:

Another issue that emerged prominently from discussions among board members was offering more individualized instruction to elementary school students and more closely examining individual student needs. Board members tended to support the "mastery-based" schedule of advancement, as well as an increased emphasis on the various learning styles of students. In addition, several board members also voiced support for single-gendered classes.

#### Governance:

Several school board members suggested that more local control over education issues should be allowed. Others brought up the need to better communicate with lawmakers to ensure fiscal autonomy and the need to ensure that all mandates are funded. According to one board member, "In order to encourage state government leaders to invest in and strengthen public education, we must find a way to educate and involve them."

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## Middle School & Transition Years

### Curriculum and Standards:

Board members from across the state brought up the need to update the curriculum to reflect the realities of the marketplace and to focus on the basics of mathematics and science. Many others highlighted the importance of a more rigorous curriculum and emphasized the development of arts education and critical thinking skills within the curriculum.

### Vocational Training and Career Exploration/ Education:

Many school board members voiced the need to fully-fund the Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA). Others supported increased exposure of students to different careers, more work-study opportunities, and a larger number of career tracks for non-college bound students. One board member stated the following: We need to “identify student interests and strengths in middle school and aid them in pursuing an educational program that refines those strengths.”

### Individualized Instruction:

As at the early childhood/elementary school level, many school board members supported more individualized instruction in middle school, providing examples such as assessing individual student strengths and weaknesses, mastery grouping, and gendered classes.

### Teacher Compensation, Recruitment, and Training:

Many school board members supported an increase in the base teacher salary and a greater number of incentives for teachers, as well as merit pay for teachers. Several board members thought that teacher recruitment and retention should be a top priority and that more males should be encouraged to enter the teaching profession.

### Governance:

Governance was the topic of many discussions among school board members, as several implored that statewide fiscal accountability should be demanded. Other board members brought up the need to ensure fiscal autonomy and to ensure that all mandates are funded.



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## In Their Own Words: Opinions of South Carolina School Board Members

### High School Years

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#### Curriculum and Standards:

Broadening curricular offerings and implementing majors in high school were suggested by several school board members, along with changing grade requirements and standards. An increased number of magnet programs also was seen as important by many board members, as was the need for the curriculum to emphasize skills that employers want and need. Several board members also suggested the need to emphasize the fine arts in the curriculum.

#### Vocational Training and Career Exploration/ Preparation:

A number of school board members emphasized the need to promote vocational and technical schools for students who are not college-bound and discussed the importance of fully funding and implementing the Education and Economic Development Act (EEDA).

#### Teacher Compensation, Recruitment, and Training:

Many school board members reported that it was essential to increase compensation and incentives in order to recruit and retain quality teachers. In addition, many reported the need to improve high school teacher training programs and offer a greater number of quality, on-going professional development opportunities for teachers.

#### Technology:

According to many school board members, the integration of technology into the high school curriculum and classroom was critical. Board members generally supported increased funding for technology, personal laptops for students, and the creation of virtual schools and distance learning opportunities. As one board member stated, "Technology negates the necessity of time or place."

#### Partnerships with Higher Education and the Business Community:

School board members from all over the state reported that partnerships and communication with higher education and the business community were vital. Many board members brought up the need for a greater number of student internship/apprenticeship opportunities and more school-to-work programs. Others suggested that schools more often bring in businesses as partners.

#### Governance:

As discussed in earlier sections, issues surrounding governance were discussed by respondents during school board member focus group meetings. Several board members brought up the need to increase funding flexibility and to ensure that all mandates are funded. Other suggested re-examining the structure of school boards and re-modeling after successful boards around the country.

#### Small Schools and Learning Communities:

Providing smaller schools and learning communities also were thought by school board members to be extremely effective at the high school level. Creating ninth-grade academies and "schools within schools" were seen as essential. Having smaller, neighborhood schools, as well as reducing class size, also were emphasized by school board members.