In Their Own Words: A Public Vision for Educational Excellence in South Carolina
The Opinions of South Carolina Parents

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 118 of the state's parents from all regions of the state. On the following pages, you will find the views from the parent 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 parent focus groups. 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 Parent Sessions:

Top Strengths of South Carolina's Public Schools (according to parents)

Issues relating to:
- Teacher quality
- Teacher dedication
- Commitment to improving education
- Curriculum content
- Technology availability

Top Weaknesses of South Carolina's Public Schools (according to parents)

Issues relating to:
- Family involvement and accountability
- Level of funding
- Curriculum content
- Discipline policies
- PACT data and its usefulness

Improving Public Education in South Carolina:
Top recommendations by category from SC's parents

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 (95%)
- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling (94%)
- More strategies to help parents get involved in their children's schooling (91%)
- Physical fitness programs for all elementary school students (91%)

Middle School & Transition Years

- Drop-out prevention programs beginning in 8th grade (95%)
- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling (94%)
- More focus on active/engaged learning techniques in all middle school classes (92%)
- Up-to-date labs in every middle school (90%)
- Smaller class size (90%)

High School

- Up-to-date labs in every high school (94%)
- More links between high schools, technical colleges, and 2- and 4-year colleges and universities (94%)
- More tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling (91%)
- Earlier guidance to prepare students to take Honors, AP, and IB courses (90%)

Teacher Training & Development

- Effective teachers in every classroom (100%)
- Greater incentives for retaining outstanding teachers (91%)
- Strong, well-coordinated mentoring programs for beginning teachers (91%)
- Continuous professional development for teachers regarding their everyday challenges of helping students achieve and graduate (91%)
- Special training and assistance for teachers working with students with academic difficulties (90%)

Leadership

- A more streamlined process to remove inadequate teachers from the classroom (95%)
- A multi-dimensional tool for evaluating teachers' performances in the classroom (94%)
- A multi-dimensional tool for evaluating administrators' performance (94%)

Resources, Technology & Infrastrucure

- Availability of textbooks and other learning resources (98%)
- Technologically-advanced labs (94%)
- Designing schools as community centers to give students, adults, and families learning opportunities in their own communities (90%)
- Facilitating ways for teachers and administrators to use technology to share information about effective methods, techniques, and ideas (90%)
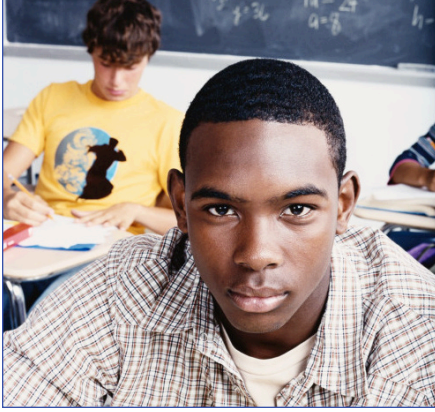
Re-designing Public Education in South Carolina: Discussion Data from Parents

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, succeed in college or career training. Highlights from these focus group discussions include the following:

Top recommendations from SC's parents

Other items of note from the survey

- Integration of technology throughout the curriculum (89%)
- More counseling in middle school to deal with personal and family issues (88%)
- Better pay for all teachers (88%)
- More on-site support for principals in schools with many at-risk students (88%)
- Safe and efficient transportation for all students to and from all school programs (87%)
- Higher salaries for teachers who take on more difficult assignments (85%)
- Integrating more foreign language into the curriculum of all high schools (85%) and elementary schools (77%)
- A system to ensure that no child moves beyond 3rd grade without reading and writing fluently (85%)
- Distance-learning opportunities and opportunities at local colleges to take courses (84%)
- Greater incentives for recruitment of teachers into the field (83%)

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Curriculum and standards:

Many parents suggested focusing on real-world skills in the curriculum and on the basics of mathematics and English. According to one parent: "Stop teaching for PACT scores. Return to teaching the basics." Parents also discussed the need for a greater focus on foreign language and family-life skills, requiring a certain number of community service hours for graduation, and offering multiple paths to graduation.

Parent involvement/accountability and parent education:

Parents suggested offering a greater number of adult education programs and parent education/ parenting classes, in addition to holding parents more accountable for their child's education. As stated by one parent: "It's so easy these days for parents to shirk their responsibilities. We need to find ways to hold them accountable." Effective communication between parents and schools and providing parents with more of a voice also were discussed.

Individualized instruction for students:

Discussions included the elimination of social promotion and seat-time requirements, tracking students more effectively, utilizing mastery-based advancement, gendered classes, and individualized education plans for students. Also discussed was the need to assess the strengths and interests of students and subsequently place them in an appropriate course of study. One parent reported the following: "We have a cookie-cutter image mentality that every child can and will perform like every other. Respect the differences and capitalize on them."

Forging partnerships with higher education/business community:

Some parents suggested linking businesses to students through work-study programs and increasing the number of internship and apprenticeship opportunities. Also discussed by parents was the idea of incorporating vocational schools into high schools instead of keeping them on separate campuses.

Technology:

The need to utilize technology and integrate technology into the curriculum and classroom was discussed by numerous parents. Topics of discussion included using technology to provide distance learning opportunities, increasing funding for technology, and creating virtual schools and classrooms.

Teacher compensation, recruitment, and training:

Many parents reported that it was essential to increase compensation and incentives in order to recruit and retain high-quality teachers. In addition, parents reported that teacher training and certification programs needed to be redesigned and that recertification should be mandated more frequently.