



Groundbreaking study shows path to better S.C. schools

By John L.S. Simpkins
Thursday, October 4, 2007

For some time now, South Carolinians have recognized that our public school system is in dire need of reform. But what exactly should we change, and how should we do it? A groundbreaking study of our state's schools finally provides guidance on these persistent questions.

Through a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Furman University's Richard W. Riley Institute for Government, Politics and Public Leadership convened a cross-section of South Carolinians in a two-year project to discuss the state of our public schools.

Parents, teachers, students, school board members, principals, superintendents, and business leaders throughout South Carolina have provided a blueprint for creating the quality schools our children deserve.

A refreshing and illuminating consensus emerges in the study's findings. Randomly selected participants from across the political, socioeconomic, and geographic spectrum asserted that we cannot continue to send our students into a 21st century economy equipped with 19th century tools.

All agreed that students in South Carolina need and deserve public schools that will prepare them for the challenges and opportunities of an increasingly global society. This is critical if our state is to thrive in the knowledge economy.

To be sure, there are pockets of excellence in our public school system. Academic Magnet High School has been recognized as one of the best schools in the country. High schools such as Summerville, Riverside and Spring Valley annually send graduates to America's most competitive colleges and universities. But equity demands that we do better.

As parents of a two-year-old, my wife and I constantly worry about the state that our son will inherit. Will he be part of an enlightened community that values education and those who commit their lives to providing it? Will he benefit from a first-class public education on Daniel Island while students in Cainhoy struggle to learn in third-world conditions? What sort of South Carolina can he hope to live in, surrounded by peers who never had the chance to leave the Third World, educationally speaking?

Equity reaches beyond simply making sure that every school has their fair share of the funding pie. Equity demands that we give every child the same opportunity to realize the

dreams my son will have on Daniel Island. The participants in the study conducted by the Riley Institute and funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation have done more than weigh in on the education debate, they have articulated a vision for the future of our state.

Now that we have a vision, we need state and local leaders to put aside their fights over changes at the margins of the school system. Incremental change in response to a problem of this magnitude is worse than no change at all — it distracts us with an illusion of activity. Instead, we need to come together to provide essential educational opportunities around which there is broad consensus.

The list begins, but does not end, with full-day kindergarten, drop-out prevention programs beginning in the eighth grade, a high school curriculum that is more aligned with college coursework and job requirements, and purpose-built school buildings and facilities that function as centers of communities.

Given the sweeping scope of participants' agreement, the temptation among lawmakers will be to cherry-pick the most politically palatable items from the study. Adopting the politics-as-usual approach, however, only ensures that we will revisit this issue again and at even greater cost.

We cannot continue to ignore the consequences of our mounting skills and education gap. The findings are clear. Now they need to be translated into policies that will create effective learning environments in each and every school throughout the state. The people have spoken. Their elected officials would be wise to listen.

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