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South Carolinians agree on how to improve education

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After driving I-26 from Columbia to Greenville for the 40th time, we should have been exhausted. And we probably were. But our minds were still whirling from the focus group we had just facilitated with a group of parents in Florence.

Over the course of four-and-a-half hours, we had discussed the importance of community, business and parental involvement in public education. We talked about the need to elevate the teaching profession. We discussed our children, our students and our collective future as a state without a progressive education system. The parents had been incredibly excited about improving public education, and we left the meeting feeling as if we had just embarked on yet another road to change.

It's no secret than many people think South Carolina's public schools need to be improved. The question is how, and our meeting in Florence was part of a comprehensive, state-wide effort by the Riley Institute at Furman University to produce some meaningful answers.

With a grant from the Hewlett Foundation, we conducted 106 similar meetings in 16 locations around the state, from Conway to Anderson, from Rock Hill to Yemasee. We visited every school district in the state, both rich and poor, large and small. Our project team focused on getting answers from people involved in and affected by public education, including businessmen and women, parents, teachers of all levels, students, school board members, principals and superintendents. In total, more than 3,000 hours of data were collected during the two-year study.

Advertisement Our goal was to determine what the people in South Carolina's communities and schools believe comprises a world-class education. And once we knew that, we could make that information available to the state's decision makers, policy makers and local leaders so they would no longer have to wonder what South Carolina citizens wanted the state's public education system to look like.

Since we have finished compiling the research, the questions are often the same. What stood out? What surprised us? Without a doubt, we were surprised by the sheer enthusiasm of the nearly 800 participants who were excited about having a chance to offer their perspective and who were ready to be included in the dialogue about improving education.

Yes, some frustration was expressed, and people listed weaknesses within the system. But it is clear they have not given up on creating a quality education system, with seven of 10 people in each focus group expressing a real fervor for change and improvement.

We also were surprised to find such a high level of agreement among all stakeholder groups on how to improve public education, which included making available high-quality early childhood education programs and developing incentives to recruit and retain effective teachers. This was extremely interesting in light of the fact that nobody believed there could be any consensus on issues of education in the state, especially when such divisive issues as evolution, tax credits, vouchers and the No Child Left Behind Act tend to dominate discussions.

It is the Riley Institute's hope that the findings of this study will allow the public and the state's decision makers at all levels to hear the collective voices of South Carolinians --about what they want for our public schools and

what they think it will take to ensure that our students can compete with those from other states and around the world. And, as we heard from our participants, it's not just the future of our kids that is at stake but the future of the state as a whole. Without an outstanding public education system in South Carolina -- and not just adequate public education -- we will no doubt fall behind, and our children and the state as a whole will pay the price.

There is always a window of opportunity to improve our schools and address the growing education gap between our country and the rest of the world. The people of South Carolina are requesting change and action, and there is no better time than now to follow through on that.
