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## **The opportunities of afterschool**

BY TRACI YOUNG COOPER AND ZELDA WAYMER

Guest columnists

The nation is in the midst of restructuring its education system, and South Carolina is no exception. Parents, educators, business leaders and others are concerned that children aren't learning enough, or not learning what they need to compete in an ever-more-competitive global workforce.

We worry about high dropout rates that leave millions of students unprepared to keep good jobs and to contribute to their communities. We don't know if our teachers can train students to master emerging technologies. We wonder if the school day is long enough to give students what they need. And we worry about the safety of our young people after the school day ends.

As policy makers determine priorities for reform, one of the most comprehensive studies ever conducted about public education here in South Carolina finds considerable consensus about where the best answers lie. "In Their Own Words: A Public Vision for Educational Excellence in South Carolina," from the Riley Institute at Furman University, offers some valuable direction.

Through more than 100 in-depth discussions with parents, teachers, principals, school board members, superintendents, students and business leaders across the state, this 18-month study examined more than 150 strategies for education reform. It found broad consensus on a small group of strategies that stakeholders of all kinds believe can improve education in the state. The consensus strategies include after-school programs, tutoring and making our schools into community learning centers.

This is no surprise to those of us who work in afterschool, because we see each day what a difference quality after-school programs make for students — whether they need extra academic support, connections to caring adults who can help them resist bad choices, physical activity to help stave off childhood obesity and the lifelong health problems it can bring, or an activity such as caring for exotic animals at Riverbanks Zoo that inspires some to stay in school. We've seen small miracles, including students on the brink of dropping out whose lives were turned around by these programs.

That's why after-school programs in South Carolina have such strong support, from the state Chamber of Commerce and the S.C. Methodist Conference to the Richland County Sheriff's Department. But until now that support hasn't been sufficient to convince lawmakers, corporations, foundations and other funders to provide enough resources to make after-school programs available to all children and families that need them.

A 2004 study from the national Afterschool Alliance found that just 13 percent of the state's K-12 youth are in after-school programs. Nearly twice as many (24 percent) take care of themselves in the afternoons. Meanwhile, 85 percent of parents with children in after-school programs are satisfied with the program their child attends.

But we now know that a wide cross-section of South Carolinians see after-school programs and community learning centers as critical to helping our students catch up, keep up and get ahead. We know that schools and community-based organizations statewide are eager to work together to expand the availability of after-school programs and community learning centers. It's time to give them the financial support and resources they need to do the job.

We need state legislators to develop a stable source of funding so we can create and sustain after-school programs in every school that needs them, if school officials are willing to work with community partners to make them effective, efficient and comprehensive.

We need city and county governments to develop a shared financial support mechanism with their local schools to provide quality after-school and summer learning and enrichment programs right there in their neighborhoods, and help transform schools into community learning centers.

We spend so much time disagreeing about how to improve our education system, and which reform should come first. Now, with new direction from the Riley Institute, we should implement the strategies we know will work that have broad support.

This new study can make a real difference for our children, youth, families, schools and communities, but only if we act on its recommendations. Let's invest in our kids and our future by funding quality after-school programs in every

community in South Carolina now.

Ms. Cooper is director of the office of extended day programs at Richland District 1. Ms. Waymer is executive director of the S.C. Afterschool Alliance, [ww.scafterschool.com](http://www.scafterschool.com).

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