



Grassroots plan for improving S.C. education

ISSUE: Education study

OUR VIEW: Grassroots understanding, support needed to change education system

Orangeburg County Chamber of Commerce President David Coleman can be expected to be a voice for the positive in the community. But don't mistake him as someone who runs from realism -- particularly when it comes to a discussion of education.

Coleman has a unique perspective on education, being the retired superintendent of Orangeburg Consolidated School District 4. It is from his time and experience there that Coleman embarked on a special research project upon leaving the post.

Having been accustomed to the refrain about South Carolina public schools being "the worst," Coleman set about compiling numbers on everything from SAT scores to attendance in Orangeburg County. His findings surprise a number of people in showing that South Carolina ranks often in the middle when making comparisons by state.

At the same time, Coleman acknowledges there is much room for improvement. He simply wants to make the point that analysis of what needs to be done should come from accurate assessment of the present situation.

As if hearing Coleman's refrain, the Riley Institute at Furman University has completed a major assessment of public education in the state, conducting more than 3,000 hours of interviews with nearly 800 people.

The non-partisan study was conducted between May 2005 and November 2006. The goal was to learn what the primary stakeholders in the state's education system had to say about the strengths and weaknesses of South Carolina's public schools and to gather their recommendations for improving education at all levels: early childhood/elementary, middle school and high school.

Those participating included businessmen and women, parents, students, school board members, teachers of all levels, superintendents and principals from every county and school district. In addition to answering a 160-item questionnaire, the stakeholders participated in lengthy focus group discussions.

The study found a great deal of consensus across groups for a large number of initiatives, such as small class size, family literacy programs and parent involvement, dropout-prevention programs beginning in eighth grade and a curriculum more reflective of the needs of the state's economy.

According to Riley Institute officials, the findings showed a very high level of agreement among three key strategies:

- * Making available high-quality early childhood education programs in all public schools.
- * Increasing after-school, summer and tutoring programs for struggling students and developing public schools as community learning centers to serve students and families.
- * Developing incentives to recruit and retain effective teachers in every South Carolina classroom and support them to be successful.

"We believe it is highly important for policymakers and all of us to know what people at the grassroots level are thinking about public education in South Carolina, at the place where the work is being done," said Don Gordon, director of the Riley Institute. "And to ensure we heard a geographically and intellectually diverse number of

opinions, we talked to a broad sample of people in every school district in the state, from the smallest to the largest, the wealthiest to the poorest.

"We also didn't want the participants to simply answer a few perfunctory questions and be on their way. We conducted lengthy discussions with each group and got into a great amount of detail. What we discovered is that folks are passionate about public education in South Carolina and they want to make our schools as strong and efficient as possible."

Gordon said that Riley Institute officials are in the process of meeting with key South Carolina legislators and providing them with results of the study. "It was our goal to compile as much sound and useful information as possible and then provide that information to those who make policy decisions about public education in our state," he said. "This is especially important for our students who in today's global world are competing for jobs with those from other states and also from other countries, such as China and India."

And the good news: According to project director Brooke Culclasure, there is a broad consensus on a significant number of important educational strategies or opportunities and the vast majority of participants in all categories expressed intense interest in improving education in the state. "There appears to be a real hunger to be an active participant from the grassroots working up, addressing issues that they really see as important on the ground every day.