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## **Floyd, Stevens: A roadmap for making schools more useful**

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Guest Columnists

South Carolina, like many Southern states, is faced with substantial challenges in education. Our dropout rates are too high, our SAT scores are below the middle of the pack, and there's that ever-present achievement gap between wealthy and poor students.

Yet despite the difficulties faced in educating virtually all of South Carolina's children, many of whom come from low-resource backgrounds, public education continues to have widespread support in South Carolina. While some have argued that the schools are in shambles, two recent research studies reveal broad support for education and provide us with the information we need to create 21st century schools that educate all our students. To understand how to improve our schools and implement policies and programs that lead to greater success among all types of students, it's important to look to these bodies of research.

The S.C. Oversight Committee recently released the results of a sizable study, conducted in part with Clemson University, that reveals broad agreement on high expectations for all students. In other words, participants - from parents to taxpayers to educators - support the challenging nature of South Carolina's standards. The study also highlights the skills employers see as critical for students' success in the workplace and helps the state set education goals for the next decade.

The findings reveal that business people overwhelmingly believe our students need a broad set of skills and good work habits. Our students need to learn how to communicate better, to read and to write at an advanced level and to take more initiative in the workplace. They need to understand the value of hard work in order to compete in the global economy. Emphatically, respondents stress that they have high expectations for our students and want South Carolina to provide a high-quality education for students no matter where they live - rural or urban, wealthy or poor.

So how do we translate these high expectations into world-class education?

For that answer, we can turn to an 18-month research project completed in 2007 by the Riley Institute at Furman, which revealed the essential steps for developing schools where many more students graduate and succeed in college, career training or the workforce. The study, funded by the Hewlett Foundation, found that business leaders, parents and educators emphasized the need for more access to early childhood education, high-quality, well-supported teachers in every school and the development of schools as community learning centers. Study participants also encouraged the state to keep its standards high, develop strong school leadership, personalize education to the individual student and begin dropout prevention strategies early in a child's schooling.

Since the initial study, the Riley Institute has received a second grant from the Hewlett Foundation to engage parents, community, business and education leaders and to share effective, research-based programs that are working to increase graduation rates among traditionally underserved students. Seven reports are being developed that will offer specific recommendations for improving early childhood education, recruiting, retaining and supporting highly effective teachers, developing schools as community learning centers and so on. These reports will be released during the upcoming school year.

Since these two studies provide such essential information about how to further improve our schools and make our state competitive, it is critical that policymakers make use of them to set education policy. It's also important for everyone to understand which strategies can best improve our schools - and to advocate for those changes at the local level.

We can and must use these research projects to set high expectations and goals that will help all students to be ready for life after high school. For our students and state, "readiness" must mean being ready for college, ready for the workplace, ready to communicate and ready to be an active, involved citizen. These are essential ingredients for success for our children and for our state. The stakeholders in education have spoken twice in two independent, comprehensive, research-based studies, expressing their expectations and support for schools and outlining what

we need to do to get there. The time to act is now.

Dr. Floyd has served as superintendent in Berkeley, Lexington, and Florence counties, on the executive committee of the American Association of School Administrators and as president of the S.C. Association of School Administrators. Ms. Stevens, associate director of Furman's Riley Institute and coordinator of the Center for Education Policy and Leadership, was principal investigator for the Riley Institute study.

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