GREENVILLE, S.C. — When it comes to early childhood education, the state’s public school superintendents agree overwhelmingly about one thing. The sooner a student gets started in a structured education program, the more likely that student will stay in school and succeed.

A comprehensive study of public education (PreK-12) in South Carolina currently being conducted by Furman’s Riley Institute shows that 98 percent of the surveyed superintendents said it was either “essential” or “important” to have full-day kindergarten programs and early childhood education programs for 3- and 4-year-olds. A sizeable majority also recommended family literacy programs (92%) as well as smaller class sizes in the early grades (84%). The Riley Institute met with 50 of South Carolina’s 86 school superintendents.

“Those are some amazing statistics,” said Don Gordon, director of the Riley Institute at Furman. “The superintendents represent districts all across the state—from the smallest to the largest, from the poorest to the wealthiest, from the Lowcountry to the Midlands to the Upstate. It is quite compelling that they could all agree so completely about what it takes for children to succeed at the early and elementary school levels.”

The study also shows the superintendents favor opportunities to improve the early grades, such as providing intensive reading enrichment programs for students with reading difficulties (98%), creating more tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling (94%), integrating more foreign language into the curriculum of elementary schools (76%), and making the curriculum more rigorous to help prepare students for middle school (94%).
The survey findings are a small part of a massive statewide study of public education (PreK-12) in South Carolina being conducted by the Riley Institute’s Center for Education Policy and Leadership. The study is focusing on the primary stakeholders in the state’s public education system, including businesspeople, teachers, students, principals, parents, superintendents and members of school boards. A comprehensive set of reports pulling together the data from all stakeholder groups will be forthcoming in the next year.

In addition to answering a wide variety of survey questions, the stakeholders are participating in focus group discussions across the state. The topics of conversation include early childhood education, middle school reform, high school curriculum and rigor, summer school and after-school programs. By the study’s end, approximately 1,000 randomly selected people will have participated in more than 120 focus group meetings in 16 locations across South Carolina.

“This is the largest and most comprehensive study of public education ever undertaken in South Carolina,” said Brooke Culclasure, project director at the Riley Institute. “We want to know what the people are thinking at the grassroots level in our communities and schools. Once we have compiled all the information and analyzed the data, we will have an excellent idea about what is working, what is not working and what the state can do to address the problems.”

Culclasure said the Riley Institute will have collected all the necessary data by the end of the summer and the full report will be available in early 2007. Reports on various topics will be released periodically.

“We know there is a direct link between the quality of education and economic development, but what is the most effective way to create an educated populace?” Gordon said. “This study will let us know what the people in the trenches are thinking, and we can then provide that information to those who make policy decisions about public education in our state.”

For more information, contact Furman’s News and Media Relations office at 864-294-3107.

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