Education study seeks ideas for change
Furman hopes comprehensive look at system will help guide lawmakers

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By Ron Barnett
STAFF WRITER
rbarnett@greenvillenews.com

Furman University has embarked on what it calls the most expansive survey of South Carolina's public education system ever attempted, with hopes of providing information to the General Assembly that could map a plan for improvement.

"I think what we'll have here is a great, comprehensive picture of what South Carolinians who are both impacted by and involved in the school system want the school system to look like," said John Simpkins of Furman's Riley Institute of Government, Politics and Public Leadership.

The study, funded by a $800,000 grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, involves hundreds of hours of meetings with about 1,000 educators, businesspeople and parents, according to Brooke Culclasure, project director at the Riley Institute's Center for Education Policy and Leadership.

"Really it's trying to garner data from the grass-roots level, people who are in the trenches right now," she said.

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The first wave of information from the study, released Friday, shows that superintendents across the state overwhelmingly agree in the value of early childhood education programs.

In meetings across the state with 50 of South
Carolina's 88 superintendents, 98 percent said programs for all 3- and 4-year-olds and full-day kindergarten programs are either "essential" or "important," the survey showed.

Also, 94 percent rated a more rigorous curriculum in the early grades and more tutoring for students who are struggling in the top two categories of importance.

"For me, the most surprising thing is the level of agreement on any of these things, given where superintendents fit into the educational system," Simpkins said.

In about 70 focus-group meetings with business leaders, teachers, students, principals, parents, superintendents and members of school boards, a number of "common threads" have emerged, said Cathy Stevens, assistant project director.

Details on those findings will be released later, as the information is analyzed, she said.

Up to 120 meetings, each lasting four hours or more, will be held before the project is completed, she said.

Participants were randomly selected.

The groups discussed three open-ended issues and completed a survey of more than 150 questions that asked them to rank items according to their importance.

The open-ended questions involved discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the public education system and what should be done to solve the problems they identified.

Topics discussed include early childhood education, middle school reform, high school curriculum and rigor, summer school and after-school programs.

Information from the study will be released as it is analyzed, with the full report expected to be completed by early 2007.

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