Superintendents back early education; Most favor spending what's necessary

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A study conducted by Furman University's Richard W. Riley Institute of Government, Politics and Public Leadership found that 98 percent of superintendents surveyed think it is either "essential" or "important" for the state to spend the resources necessary to beef up early childhood education. Riley Institute officials interviewed 50 of South Carolina's 86 school superintendents as part of a broader statewide study aimed at improving public education.

Dorchester District 4 Superintendent Renee Mathews said the results show that leaders from districts of all sizes recognize the importance of early childhood education. Both elementary schools in the upper Dorchester County district, which has fewer than 2,500 students enrolled, offer programs for 4-year-olds; however, a lack of funding forces many families to settle for half-day options rather than full-day programs, said Mathews, who also participated in the survey.

The superintendents' views on early childhood education represent the first set of data released from a comprehensive study conducted by the Richard W. Riley Institute of Government, Politics and Public Leadership at Furman University. As part of the study, more than 1,000 people across the state, including superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, school board members, business leaders and students, participated in more than 100 focus group meetings and shared their thoughts on the state of public education in South Carolina. A $600,000 grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation funded the study.

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