Redesigning schools

Furman study should provide guidance.

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Most people in South Carolina want our public schools to improve, but so far there's little consensus on what changes need to be made. A thoughtful, comprehensive study being conducted by the Riley Institute at Furman University could help guide improvements needed in this state's schools.

Backed by a $600,000 grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Riley Institute is conducting what project director Brooke Culcasure called "the largest and most comprehensive study of public education" ever done in South Carolina. The project team is conducting hundreds of hours of meetings with about 1,000 randomly selected people on topics such as early childhood education, middle school reform, high school curriculum and summer school. Those interviewed are primary stakeholders in the state's school system — businesspeople, teachers, students, principals, parents, superintendents and school board members.

Although the study won't be completed until early 2007, some of the results already are in. In meetings with 50 of the state's 86 superintendents, 98 percent said it was "essential" or "important" to have full-day kindergarten and early childhood education for 3- and 4-year-olds. Also, 98 percent favored providing reading enrichment programs for students with reading difficulties, 94 percent favored more tutoring opportunities for students who are struggling and 94 percent wanted a more rigorous curriculum to prepare students for middle school.

When completed, this thorough project should provide the information needed to guide those in South Carolina who make policy and write laws that will affect public education. This effort holds much promise.