Education to be key election issue -- again
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Publisher
SC Statehouse Report

JUNE 16, 2006 - - If you sit around a table with a bunch of business leaders and talk about public education in South Carolina, it's pretty clear pretty quickly they think more needs to be done.

They'll say it's not the problem of students, who show they can achieve if challenged. They'll discuss how it's not the problem of teachers, who show up for work motivated to help students despite relatively low pay. They'll even say it may not be the problem of administrators, who seem to be doing the best they can with what they've got.

They also highlight some great components the system has in place that seem to be moving it forward: tough, nationally-recognized teaching standards and a stringent assessment structure that is providing school leaders with the information they need to make schools and teaching better.

Just this week, Furman University had another series of small meetings with business leaders to learn about public education's strengths, weaknesses and possible solutions. It's part of an ongoing non-partisan project the school's Riley Institute is doing to get to the bottom about what South Carolinians really think about public education.

What we heard in the Institute's 88th meeting this week was the blanketing concerns that broad institutional challenges keep South Carolina's public education system mired at the bottom:

- **Low expectations.** Business leaders said a lot of parents and taxpayers seemed to have relatively low expectations for the public school system - that they don't really expect it to perform because it hasn't done that good a job overall. Along the same lines, they say they feel there's no public passion for a top-notch public school system.

- **Low parental involvement.** They're frustrated many South Carolina parents don't get integrally involved with their children's education, which illustrates to children that working hard to achieve in school isn't important.

- **Low commitment from politicians.** Despite politicians who say they're fixing public education, people don't see a lot of changes. Instead they see folks pandering empty rhetoric.

- **No plan.** If pressed, business leaders also will tell you they feel there's no overall plan for education - that every four or eight years, a governor changes and new ideas rise to the top. But while one or two new programs or tactics may be added, they don't believe there's a real long-term plan for education that addresses core
concerns. And without a plan, there's not much to rouse anybody to create real
zeal for making South Carolina's public
education system better.

With all of this being said, the recent primary elections show education again will rise to the top as a major
campaign issue.

On one side will be Democrats who criticize Gov. Mark
Sanford and his supporters for abandoning public
education with school voucher plans that would erode
public and financial support from the system. On the
other side will be proponents for radical change who say
the current system is failing and something major, such
as vouchers, needs to happen to make things work.

While the campaign season surely will be hot and heavy
on education, it's worrisome business leaders, parents,
voters and educators may see these political outcries as simply the same old politicking.

Yes, something needs to change in public education. At the Riley Institute meeting,
business leaders seemed to agree the best thing could be for someone in a state leadership
position to really grab the bull by the horns and develop a long-term consensus and
strategy for getting South Carolina public education out of the cellar. What's been done
so far to improve things has been encouraging, but the changes seem to have been at the
edges, not the core.

Bottom line: We may not need a new idea, such as school vouchers, to meddle with the
system. What we seem to need is a real plan. And yes (gasp), it may cost more money to
fix the system that's been plagued by a funding hangover for decades.

But one thing is for sure: When the Riley Institute issues its final report on the results of
all of these meetings with education stakeholders, legislators and those in education
leadership ought to stop, look and listen.