



Education study finds consensus

800 respondents agree: Creating best classroom conditions is vital

By Mindy B. Hagen
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To learn more about the project from the Riley Institute at Furman University, and to read more detailed information on the results gathered, go to cepl.furman.edu/

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The most comprehensive study ever completed on public education in South Carolina found a massive amount of consensus among superintendents, principals, teachers, school board members, parents and business leaders regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the state's schools.

Nearly 800 people representing every school district in the state participated in more than 3,000 hours of interviews conducted by the Riley Institute at Furman University between May 2005 and November 2006. In addition to attending forum sessions lasting four hours or longer, participants also answered an 160-question survey about the state's education needs.

The study, released today, showed that people from wealthy, poor, rural, suburban and urban districts all want to play a part in improving South Carolina's public schools, said Don Gordon, director of the Riley Institute.

Community members are more concerned with creating classroom conditions to best position their children to compete for jobs in a global economy, rather than focusing on divisive political issues, he said. "There's a perception that we previously weren't paying attention to the things that people were most interested in," Gordon said.

Funding for the study came from a \$600,000 grant from the California-based William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, which focuses its resources on helping social and environmental problems.

Three main strategies to boost South Carolina's schools were identified:

- Adding high-quality early childhood education programs to public schools.
- Increasing after-school and summer programs for struggling students and developing schools as community learning centers.
- Developing incentives to recruit and retain effective teachers in every classroom and giving

support so they are successful.

Some controversial topics, such as program funding and tax increases for school improvements, were avoided, though questions were asked about vouchers and school choice. Results didn't show unified support for those issues, officials said.

State Superintendent of Education Jim Rex said the results reinforce what he's heard while traveling across the state. Community members are focused on issues that are "substantive and matter," such as the need for qualified teachers, smaller class sizes and up-to-date school facilities, Rex said.

"There's intense, broad-based support for our public schools, and there's interest in improving them and reforming them," Rex said. "We've been so caught up in this back-and-forth argument of vouchers and private schools versus public education. It makes me feel good that the general public hasn't taken their eye off the ball."

Riley Institute officials said they hope the widespread support seen in their findings for many of the education issues presented can further the case for such programs in some of the state's poorer and more rural areas.

Rex said he hopes the results will provide additional leverage when education proposals come before lawmakers next year.

Berkeley schools Superintendent Chester Floyd, who participated in the study, said everyone participating in his session understood the importance of a quality education and wanted to take steps to improve it.

Although Riley Institute officials will not use the data to make any specific policy recommendations, they plan to brief lawmakers and representatives from Gov. Mark Sanford's office in the coming weeks and months.

Officials also soon will apply for another Hewlett Foundation grant for a second study, which would identify specific programs to help schools address the issues raised in the first study, said Cathy Stevens, the project's associate director.

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