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Study: Residents want high teacher quality

Priorities include modern facilities, reduced class size

By Seanna Adcox

The Associated Press

Increasing teacher salaries and creating other incentives to recruit high-quality teachers to every classroom are among suggestions from S.C. residents for improving education, according to a Furman University study released Friday.

The study found residents across the state are passionate about public education and want politicians to work together to improve it.

"They'd like it taken out of the political arena. They feel politics gets in the way of practical solutions," said Donald Gordon, director of Furman's Richard Riley Institute of Government, Politics and Public Leadership.

The study involved 3,000 hours worth of interviews with more than 800 people - business leaders, parents, students, superintendents, principals, teachers and school board members - from each county and school district. The institute is calling it the largest education study ever done from the grass-roots level.

The study did not address funding or whether interviewees supported increased taxes to make changes.

Residents know the state's education system must improve.

But they also believe the education system is better than politicians portray, and they applaud the state for setting high education standards, Gordon said.

While private school vouchers has been hotly debated at the Statehouse for several years and divided the state's Republican Party, the issue barely came up in interviews, said Cathy Stevens, the institute's assistant director.

People across the state want up-to-date buildings, 3-year-old and 4-year-old kindergarten available for all, reduced class sizes, dropout prevention programs starting in eighth grade, and more after-school and summer programs for struggling students, according to the study.

"We really were surprised by the massive level of consensus," Gordon said.

State Education Superintendent Jim Rex said the results are reassuring.

"They confirm what we've been saying all along," said Rex, the only Democrat elected to statewide office in November. "Business leaders, community members, parents and educators are all on the same page. The general public has not taken its eye off the ball."

The study was conducted between May 2005 and November 2006. It was funded by a \$600,000 grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.