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Furman study: Three steps would help education
Researchers find support for reform among parents, educators, businesspeople

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In what is being billed as the biggest, most comprehensive study of South Carolina's public school system ever done, Furman University researchers found broad consensus among educators, parents and business leaders on what they believe are the keys to improving K-12 education.

The top three areas identified after more than 3,000 hours of interviews with nearly 800 people from across the state are:

- Making high-quality early childhood education available in all schools.
- Increasing after-school and summer programs for struggling students.

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- Developing incentives to recruit and retain effective teachers, and providing support to help them be successful.

Researchers were surprised not only at the high degree of agreement on what should be done but also at the passion for education reform expressed by the superintendents, principals, teachers, school board members, students, parents and business leaders who participated.

"When we started asking questions, a dam broke," said Don Gordon, director of the Richard W. Riley Institute of Government, Politics, and Public Leadership at Furman, which undertook the two-year study with a \$600,000 grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

State Superintendent of Education Jim Rex said he wasn't surprised by what he saw in the report but that he thinks it will strengthen the case for moving ahead with initiatives that some legislators have resisted.

"Maybe this will give me some additional leverage in terms of letting them (legislators) know that there is a general belief that it's time, or maybe past time, to address some of these issues," he said.

To gather input from a cross-section of people who have a stake in public education, the researchers randomly selected the participants. They answered a 160-item questionnaire and took part in in-depth small-group discussions about what's right and what's wrong with the state's schools and what should be done to fix the problems.

The result was a list of about 120 strategies for specific improvements in early childhood and elementary education, middle and high school, teacher training and development, leadership, and resources, technology and infrastructure.

Rex said it was interesting to him that vouchers for private school choice was not on the list.

"It seems sometimes as if we've gotten so caught up these last four years or so in this back-and-forth argument about vouchers and tax credits vs. public education," he said. "It made me feel good to see that the general public has not taken its eye off the ball, which is the substantive reforms that need to take place."

While there was general consensus in many areas, there was a marked difference between the emphasis various groups placed on some of the items.

For example, 99 percent of elementary school teachers said small class size was either essential or important. Only 78 percent of business leaders felt that way.

Business leaders felt more strongly that starting pay for teachers should be higher than teachers did.

"I think it is a wealth of very important information that will drive the agenda of lots of organizations," said Grier Mullins, executive director of the Alliance for Quality Education, a public education advocacy and support group in Greenville.

"One of the things that I think we've lacked as a state is information about people's attitudes about public education.

"My hope is it'll get more conversation started."
