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S.C. study offers promising blueprint for education

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Public education is a perennial topic of discussion, frustration and hope in South Carolina. But South Carolinians across the state largely agree about how to improve our schools.

Here are the three top strategies, according to a landmark study by Furman University:

- High-quality early childhood education programs should be made available in all public schools.
- Struggling students need more after-school, summer and tutoring programs.

Advertisement • The state needs to develop more incentives to recruit and retain the best teachers possible.

State lawmakers particularly should heed those priorities and the others identified by researchers with Furman's Riley Institute. There's every reason to believe the study is an accurate reflection of public sentiment. The Furman report is billed as the biggest and most comprehensive study ever of the S.C. public school system with more than 3,000 hours of interviews and involving almost 800 people from every school district in the state.

Researchers were surprised by the amount of consensus among the participants, which included most "stakeholders" with an interest in public education -- business leaders, parents, students, school board members, teachers, superintendents and principals.

The study, funded by a \$600,000 grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, found broad support for smaller class sizes, family literacy programs, stronger parental involvement, higher teacher salaries, better school facilities, dropout prevention programs beginning in the eighth grade and a curriculum that helps prepare students to thrive both in South Carolina and a global economy.

In addition to answering a 160-item questionnaire, stakeholders participated in small-group discussions about what's right and wrong with the state's schools and what should be done to fix the problems.

Recommendations in the report are specific to each of the grade levels. For instance, participants suggested that high schools offer earlier guidance to prepare students to take honors, Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses. They recommended that elementary schools have intensive reading enrichment programs for students with reading difficulties. Some suggestions -- such as smaller class sizes -- are aimed at all grade levels. In all, more than 120 ideas for improvement are offered.

The study is clear in underscoring the educational priorities of South Carolinians. But it's also comprehensive in spelling out ideas for reaching goals. For instance, strategies for "increasing learning opportunities" include expanding the curriculum to include more arts and music, foreign language, service learning and physical fitness as well as expanding school-to-work and vocational programs to provide skill-based training during school.

The report suggests some difference of opinion among those surveyed. Teachers, for instance, placed a higher priority on smaller class sizes than did business leaders. But business leaders, interestingly enough, put greater emphasis on higher teacher salaries than did the teachers themselves.

One thing missing from the report is support for vouchers or tax credits for private schools. Some politicians and interest groups have spent an enormous amount of time and effort in pushing for private school choice, but Riley researchers found little interest among the public at large for such initiatives.

Riley officials say South Carolinians are concerned about public education, well aware of the challenges young people face in a global economy and passionately interested in finding solutions to problems. The ideas in the report may not be strikingly innovative, but taken together, the recommendations and strategies form a blueprint on which the Legislature can build a solid educational agenda. Lawmakers would be wise to have this Riley study close at hand when they return to Columbia next year.
