

Blueprint for Public Education

A comprehensive grassroots study of South Carolina schools could serve as the catalyst for change and improvement.

By Cathy Stevens

Public education in South Carolina is at a crossroads, with no general agreement as to what constitutes an adequate education in the state's schools. This is especially relevant for students in rural or low-income districts, as school systems of limited means are constantly challenged to provide the kinds of educational experiences that will permit students to maximize their potential.

How, then, does the state effectively redesign its schools to adequately prepare all students to graduate, succeed in college or career training, and compete in the expanding global marketplace? With the help of a grant from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Center for Education Policy and Leadership of the Richard W. Riley Institute at Furman sought the answers.

During an 18-month study, members of the project team elicited opinions at the grassroots level, spending more than 3,000 hours in focus groups with individuals representing every county and school district in the state. The information gathered will be used to suggest potential courses of action to help ensure that all South Carolina students are properly educated for future success.

Cathy Stevens '01, an associate project director at the Center for Education Policy and Leadership, summarizes the study's procedures, provides her perspective on the ongoing project, and lists nine key areas targeted for future action.

From May 2005 to November 2006, I had the opportunity to meet nearly 1,000 South Carolinians.

Through my job with the Riley Institute's Center for Education Policy and Leadership, I was involved in a massive grassroots study of public education in South Carolina — the largest and most comprehensive study of public education ever undertaken in the state. Under the direction of Brooke Culclasure, our project took us from Greenville to Conway, Rock Hill, Hampton, and locations beyond and between, and our research teams conducted more than 100 four-hour focus group sessions. Along the way, we spoke with the stakeholders in the educational process — superintendents, business and community leaders, principals, parents, teachers of all grade levels, school board members and students.

In large cities and small communities, we met people who believe in public education and are determined to improve it. There's the principal in Greenville who works 10 to 12 hours a day and has made literacy her mantra; the parent in Columbia who decided to make a difference by running for school board; the business leader on the coast who is an advocate for a program that allows high school students to take classes for college credit; the people who cried while talking about children in their neighborhoods whose parents are not interested in education.

Their stories, ideas and opinions served as the building blocks for our work.

When one conducts a grassroots study, the goal is to determine what the people in the trenches think about the issues. We designed a study that was unbiased and provided participants with ample time to express their thoughts.

Early on, I learned that one cannot predict others' opinions. I began the project expecting to hear stereotypical, party-line responses related to such issues as No Child Left Behind, testing,

and accountability, but they never really materialized. Nuances, not stock answers, emerged from our conversations.

We began each session by asking the participants to discuss the strengths of public education in South Carolina. We then addressed weaknesses and areas that need significant improvement. While we heard hundreds of different responses, several ideas kept recurring.

Participants often cited the dedication and commitment of teachers and principals as one of the system's major strengths, along with the diversity of the student population and the willingness among educators and other stakeholders to embrace change.

As for weaknesses, a key area of concern was the political nature of education. On many occasions we heard the comment, "Public education is a political football." Other weaknesses mentioned repeatedly included the difficulty of recruiting and retaining an adequate number of high quality teachers, and worries about using standardized testing as the primary means of accountability.

We then asked the members of each focus group how they would redesign schools to address the weaknesses. We were pleased and a bit surprised to discover a tremendous amount of consensus, considering how little agreement has emerged in recent years from political debates about "how to fix the system." We heard many creative ideas, including suggestions that South Carolina develop a statewide vision for education, work to gain more public support for schools, and embrace the concept of individualized education based on each student's needs. The final piece of the discussion was a 160-question survey asking participants to rank opportunities, programs and support structures within the system.

On occasion, the discussions spurred our participants to take immediate action.

An example: During one session, a group of students discussed the number of Advanced Placement classes offered in their high schools. One student listed 11 classes. Another, from a less affluent district, counted fewer than five.

A few days later, the student from the wealthier district e-mailed me, saying he had no idea that opportunities were not equal across school district lines. He thanked me for the chance to be part of the study — and then proceeded to write his college application essay about the need to improve public education opportunities in poorer districts.

Representatives of the corporate world brought to the table their concerns about global competition and access to an adequate workforce. They emphasized that they were ready to work with schools to develop better vocational training and skills in such areas as entrepreneurship and critical thinking. As one person said, "There has to be a fundamental belief that education is absolutely critical." Over and over, we heard that for today's students to compete both globally and locally, education will have to be a priority.

Across the board, educators surprised me. Before we began the study, I had heard stories of teachers so inundated with administrative duties and required paperwork that they were unable to prepare properly for class. While this did emerge as a concern, it was rarely the first thing teachers mentioned. Instead, they focused on such issues as curriculum standards and how they were supposed to teach, in one year, all that students need to learn.

I was impressed by their energy and strong desire to reach students of all abilities. They are overwhelmed with work, yet few complained. Instead, they worried more about how to make an impact and help students achieve measurable improvement.

Parents worried about such issues as achievement and school excellence. They consistently expressed the hope and belief that, with help, schools and teachers can do a better job of challenging children at all levels and preparing them for lives of leadership and service.

The study took our research team to places we had never been in South Carolina and brought us in contact with people we likely would not otherwise have met. And as our work progressed, we detected a distinctly positive outlook about the state's schools.

Granted, people did vent their frustrations. They would raise their voices or try to steal my marker and take over the white board. Occasionally everyone would speak at once. At other times silence would fill the room as the group became lost in thought.

But instead of moderating discussions dominated by criticism and negativity, I found myself in awe of the abundance of ideas and desire for constructive change that confronted me every time I stepped into a meeting. Few people, I learned, are willing to write off their schools as failures.

The stakeholders do not want to give up on the system. In communities large and small across South Carolina, hundreds of citizens truly care about public education — and are willing to make the effort to ensure that their schools succeed.

It is also apparent that although hot button issues such as school choice, evolution, No Child Left Behind and prayer in schools tend to dominate media coverage of education in the state (and nation, for that matter), these aren't the issues people seem to care about most. They're more concerned with academic rigor, curriculum, best practices, workforce development, teacher quality, critical thinking skills, literacy, and family and community support — issues that, in their minds, need to play a more central role in the discussion.

We realize that this study will not magically transform education in South Carolina overnight. But as we share our findings and discuss our plans with political and educational leaders in the state, news of (and interest in) the project are spreading.

It is our hope that, as we develop recommendations based on our surveys and analyses, our work will serve as a catalyst for positive, comprehensive change in the state's public education system.

The Starting Point

After compiling and analyzing data gathered during 18 months of focus group work, the Riley Institute's Center for Education Policy and Leadership was able to determine nine "key action areas" which South Carolina stakeholders consider to be essential components of public education. These nine areas are just the tip of the iceberg in regard to the project's findings. In the coming months, the institute will develop strategies and recommendations for public education in the state based on these key action areas. More information is available on-line at www.rileyinstitute.org/cepl.

- **Building Strong Leadership**

The focus is on ideas to develop and support the efforts of administrators, including improving communication and collaboration among parties in the school system.

- **Connecting Schools and Families**

Emphasis is on increasing family involvement in the schools, providing families with expanded educational opportunities, and assisting parents in developing the skills they need to help their children succeed.

- **Creating and Maintaining Outstanding Facilities**

Strategies center on providing up-to-date facilities, appropriate technological and learning resources, and adequate transportation options.

- **Ensuring High-Performing Teachers**

Recommendations focus on ways to recruit and retain the highest quality teachers and to support them with effective professional development and time for collaboration.

- **Helping Students Overcome Academic Challenges**

At-risk students often lack a strong support system. How can we reach out to these students, anticipate their needs and help them improve?

- **Increasing Opportunities for Learning**

Recommendations touch on ways to expand learning options outside the school day, develop internships for students and broaden curricular offerings.

- **Individualizing Education for All Students**

Suggestions focus on how to determine each individual student's needs and develop more "personalized" educational plans.

- **Preparing Students for Success in a Global Economy**

Given the increasingly competitive nature of the workplace and the globalization of the marketplace, ideas focus on improving career preparation options and developing technological dexterity.

- **Promoting Support for Public Education**

How do we better educate communities about the specifics of the state system, so that they can more effectively respond to their schools' and districts' needs?