Furman study identifies strategies for improving education

Early childhood programs, help for struggling students among top priorities

BY CINDY LANDRUM

Teachers, parents, students, school administrators and business leaders have different stances in the state’s public school system, but they all have similar ideas on what should be done to improve it.

A study of the state’s public education system by Furman University’s Riley Institute showed that all groups agreed that high-quality early childhood education programs should be available in all public schools. They study also found accord on increasing after-school and summer programs for struggling students and developing incentives to recruit and retain effective teachers for every classroom.

The study, conducted by the institute’s Center for Education Policy and Leadership, is the largest and most comprehensive public school study undertaken in the state, said Brooke Callesca, project director at the Riley Institute.

Researchers conducted thousands of hours of meetings with nearly 800 South Carolinians about strengths and weaknesses in the state’s public schools and recommendations on how to improve education.

In addition to answering 160 survey questions, the stakeholders participated in focus group discussions on early childhood education; middle school reform; high school curriculum and rigor; summer school; and after-school programs.

The study began in May 2005, a time when it appeared there was little consensus on public education in the state, said Don Gordon, executive director of the Riley Institute.

“No matter whether they were from a poor or wealthy district, whether they were in business or an educator, everybody wanted their kids to get the best education possible,” he said. “And there’s a great passion and huge interest in creating the conditions that allows public education to do that.”

There’s a consensus across every stakeholder group for initiatives such as small class size; family literacy programs and parent involvement; dropout prevention programs beginning in the eighth grade; and a curriculum more reflective of the state’s economy.

“We believe it is highly important for policymakers and all of us to know what people at the grassroots level are thinking about public education in South Carolina, at the place where the work is being done,” Gordon said. “This is information policymakers need to make common-sense decisions.”

Cady Showers, the associate project director, said many of the participants felt that politicians weren’t listening to them when it came to how to improve public education.

“They felt that it’s a political football...” she said.

Researchers are sharing the study’s findings with key policymakers, said Gordon.

The study was paid for with a $600,000 grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

Gordon said that the Riley Institute expects to receive an $800,000 grant from the same foundation to conduct a second study that will focus on the best ways to implement the identified strategies in South Carolina schools.

“The first study says, ‘Here’s what people want,’ The second study would be ‘Here’s the best way to do it,’ if you decide to,” Gordon said.

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