



Strong consensus for better schools

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Continuing debate over how to improve South Carolina's public education system is a necessary process. But the rising intensity of that debate in recent years has often obscured the vast public agreement on practical principles that must be followed to advance this mission. New research from Furman University's Riley Institute offers fresh evidence of that consensus — and fresh grounds for encouragement.

That study, "In Their Own Words: A Public Vision for Educational Excellence in South Carolina," was conducted through an extensive written survey and more than 3,000 hours of focus group interviews with nearly 800 people, including district superintendents, school board members, principals, teachers, parents and business leaders. Every school district in the state was represented.

The overarching conclusion of the research, funded by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation: South Carolinians, regardless of their incomes, backgrounds or locations, strongly support taking proven steps to raise academic achievement in public schools.

Recurring themes: 1) Increasing early-childhood education programs; 2) Strengthening after-school and summer initiatives for students at risk of falling behind, and developing schools as learning centers for entire communities; 3) Boosting teacher quality with enhanced recruiting, retention and training.

Riley Institute executive director Donald Gordon visited this newspaper last week to discuss the study, telling us that "accountability and high standards" also drew high marks across the wide range of respondents. He said "hot-button issues" such as vouchers didn't generate nearly as much heat in the study as they do in the political realm. He explained: "Those partisan considerations just didn't come up. We were surprised in a such a positive way that education was such a common-sense issue."

Cathy Stevens, assistant director of the Riley Institute, hailed "the excitement and the energy and the enthusiasm" exhibited in the focus-group discussions, adding: "I sense a real commitment to change."

Such change is clearly needed. For instance, despite national rises in math and reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress scores released Tuesday, South Carolina's scores on that "national report card" for fourth- and eighth-graders remained stagnant.

Of course, it's much easier to say you want better public schools than to deliver them. And the study didn't deal with the ever-thorny issue of how to fund needed education progress. Perhaps a future study that Furman officials said they hope to conduct will shed more light.

Meanwhile, S.C. Education Superintendent Jim Rex rightly took the Riley Institute research as a welcome sign, telling our reporter last week: "There's intense, broad-based support for our public schools, and there's interest in improving them and reforming them."

As the Furman study shows, that support crosses political and economic lines.

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