SC EDUCATION
OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE

VOICES

STANDING ON COMMON GROUND:
AN OVERVIEW OF THE EDUCATION OVERSIGHT COMMITTEE'S 2006-07 TOUR OF SOUTH CAROLINA COUNTIES

South Carolina is experiencing unprecedented economic and demographic changes. Schools are facing many of the challenges that accompany these changes. The current growth in some South Carolina counties is exceeding available resources while other counties are preparing for a decline in population. Schools, communities, and individuals need a common voice – a set of principles to guide them through these changes and challenges.

The search for Common Ground, a place where individuals agree, began in September 2005. Fifty people from diverse backgrounds worked through a wide range of issues affecting the education system and our citizens. In January 2006, Common Ground was reached and a commitment was made.

Common Ground "hit the road" in February 2006, beginning an eight-month tour of South Carolina's 46 counties. The Education Oversight Committee asked questions and participated in the conversations. How can we continue the improvements we have made in South Carolina amid challenges such as increasing family poverty and teacher/administrator shortages?

What are the long-term implications of rapid growth in some school districts and declining enrollments in others? The conversations were informative and enlightening. Key issues (e.g., teacher recruitment/retention, innovation, public focus) often rose to the top as individuals and communities discussed how Common Ground was working in their communities and also how it could be at work on a local level.

The Common Ground Commitment

We commit to use our influence and energies to create and sustain an aligned educational system that achieves the common mission of South Carolina's young people obtaining the knowledge and skills to be successful members of families and community, participatory citizens in a democratic society, and productive contributors to the state's economy.

The full text of the Common Ground commitment and responsibilities can be found online at **http://eoc.sc.gov**

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Common Ground: On a Local Level

What the Education Oversight Committee heard

The two-hour conversations held in each county concluded with group discussion centered on three topics:

1. What is occurring in your communities which addresses these responsibilities and areas for action?
2. What are the critical barriers to fulfilling the commitment in your community?
3. List the most important things your community can do to address the responsibilities of Common Ground and list the most important things you as an individual can do to address the responsibilities of Common Ground.

The key issues consistently identified are summarized below:

What is occurring in your communities which addresses these responsibilities and areas for action?

Alternatives to traditional school models. Participants agreed that expanding alternatives to traditional schooling for students was critical and the committee found many communities already embracing specific models. There was consensus that a high school diploma for every student can be achieved when communities provide multiple paths.

The Achievement Academy in Union County concentrates on delivering services to students who are struggling academically.

Partnerships. The Education Oversight Committee heard numerous examples of partnerships between schools and the community.

In Lexington County, Brookland Baptist Church has an Academic Ministry that encourages, promotes, and rewards excellence in education.

Innovation. The conversations often focused on innovation in schools. There is a strong commitment to technology in schools and ensuring that each student has access to current technology. Affirming the Common Ground responsibility that schools serve the entire community and are the cornerstone of a community's strength, participants shared examples of schools offering more options to the community.

The Orangeburg-Calhoun Education and Business Alliance Virtual Academy offers online high school courses for initial credit and credit recovery.

Change. It is not business-as-usual in many South Carolina schools. Schools are recognizing that as populations change, services must change. The Education Oversight Committee listened to examples of schools in which instruction is changing to meet the needs of individual students. Recognizing cultural diversity, schools are strengthening the ways they value culture, experience, and potential. Numerous school districts also are actively using alternative ways of recruiting and retaining teachers.

The Charleston Plan for Excellence, 2004-2010, focuses on the implementation of turnaround models for struggling schools and the development of instruction and system coherence for the whole district.

What are the critical barriers to fulfilling the commitment in your community?

A community framework. While participants recognized that a number of organizations are reaching out to address the needs of students and families, disconnect between individuals and groups exists. A lack of communication was often cited as a barrier to success. Civic, faith, and business groups are often unaware of one another's activities. Recognizing the enormous impact of the faith community, participants expressed a desire to tap into and coordinate the faith-based efforts in a community with a shared goal of increasing student achievement.

Lack of public focus. The Education Oversight Committee heard repeatedly about a lack of focus on the positive aspects of educating our children (e.g., lack of engagement, learning not valued).

Changes in the student bodies. Some South Carolina counties are growing rapidly and others are declining in population. York County's growth is exceeding current resources but in nearby Union County, the resident population is anticipated to decline over the next fifteen years. By 2018, 20 percent of South Carolina's graduation class is expected to be Hispanic. Some county participants stated that the language and cultural barriers are contributing to the lack of public focus in some areas of the state.

Teacher recruitment and retention. In many communities, participants expressed concern and frustration about recruiting and retaining quality educators, seeing this as a serious deterrent to school and community success. Many community members cited a lack of housing, services, entertainment and geographic isolation as major deterrents to recruitment and retention of teachers.

List the most important things you and your community can *do* to address the responsibilities of Common Ground.

Communicate, coordinate, and collaborate. Strong consensus emerged on the importance of existing programs and organizations gaining strength from the knowledge of others. Collectively, groups and individuals can draw off of the strengths of each other, fill in gaps in service, and coordinate the use of resources.

Commitment to shared responsibility. Overwhelmingly, participants advocated for high expectations for students and the shared responsibility that parents, educators and community members have in ensuring the success of South Carolina students. Students need to be engaged in activities that reinforce the knowledge and values taught in schools.

Quality extended learning time programs and parental participation are necessary to ensure every student succeeds.

Focus on the student. Individual students need to be placed at the center of the education system with decisions focused on the needs of students and their overall achievement.

What Now?

Education Oversight Committee members studied the reports of the community meetings and identified areas of strong consensus:

1. As South Carolina is becoming more diverse, schools are embracing change and innovation to ensure every student succeeds.

2. The success of all students depends on a community commitment to education and shared responsibilities among families, educators, and community members.

3. Collectively, groups and individuals should rise to the challenge of educating and impacting each student in South Carolina. A community framework consisting of communication, coordination, and collaboration is necessary so that all of South Carolina succeeds.

The results of the meetings yielded numerous examples of innovative programs and partnerships working across South Carolina. To assist in building a community framework, the Education Oversight Committee is establishing an online "Community Resource Hub." To make it work, we need you to tell us what you and your community are doing.

Log on to **http://eoc.sc.gov**. Click on the "Community Resource Hub" link on the right side of the page. Your work will be available to others working to establish community initiatives, ensuring each child in South Carolina achieves.

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