



VOICES

Real People Speak Out on the State of Education in South Carolina

It was a journey of information and inspiration, discussion and discovery.

Between September 2003 and April 2004, Education Oversight Committee (EOC) members and staff traveled to each of South Carolina's 46 counties to hear firsthand how residents viewed their schools. What are their accomplishments and challenges? How well are they meeting the needs of the community? What do we need for continuous improvement?

We learned about programs and strategies that work well and the barriers to all children succeeding. Overwhelmingly, we heard that South Carolinians depend upon their schools to lay the foundation for a strong economy.

The conversations centered around four questions:

- What does educational achievement mean to our community?
- What is needed in our community so that all students can succeed?
- What programs and partnerships work well to support all students succeeding in our community?
- What can we do in our homes and neighborhoods to strengthen our schools?

What we heard ran the gamut – from frustrations to solutions, from heart-rending pleas to heartfelt ideas. But from the Upstate to the Lowcountry, in the Midlands and the mountains, for each of our four primary topics, certain key issues rose consistently to the top.

(803) 734-6148
www.sceoc.org

September 2004

What does educational achievement mean to our community?

Jobs. Citizens in every county clearly understand the critical relationship between the education students acquire in our schools and their ability to live and work independently. Most are shocked to find that South Carolina's per capita income is 81.5 percent of the national average, but acknowledge that the local industry base has changed dramatically with the closing of textile mills and manufacturing plants. Some communities have drawn technology-focused industries, but many of those new industrial operations have recruited workers from other states.

Quality of life. There is a unanimous statewide belief that education and a community's quality of life are closely inter-related. From reduced crime rates or appreciation of the arts to something as simple as having your grandchildren live down the street, education is essential for a community to excel. When the residents of a community are educated, they are more likely to support programs and services that benefit the community as a whole. Most participants in our conversations were disturbed to learn of the state's low high school graduation rate, and they saw that low rate as a serious deterrent to building the kind of community they desire.

What is needed in our community so that all students can succeed?

Education as a community goal. We heard repeatedly about changes in South Carolina's population. In a number of communities, the general population is growing rapidly as retirees move into South Carolina, but the number of students in school is declining, both in real numbers and as a portion of the general population. Residents worry that communities are not focused on the general good that comes from educating our young people. On the other hand, we discovered the sense that schools are not always open to community involvement and that there can be times when schools and the communities they serve are at odds with one another.

Healthy lives for all young people. We consistently heard concerns that too many young people are either alone after school and during vacations or engaged in activities that are neither healthy nor productive. In many communities, faith-based and youth organizations are reaching out to young people. Unfortunately, these programs often are funded sporadically or inadequately to the extent that program leaders are unable to accomplish the goals. We did not hear that the young people were not capable or deserving. We heard strong messages on the importance of community-wide, not school-dependent, efforts to educate young people.

Emphasis on every child. In three South Carolina counties, Hispanic students compose ten percent or more of the student population. Schools often do not employ individuals who speak Spanish or have the training to work with families new to this country. In virtually every community, students from poverty are not achieving at the level of their more advantaged peers. Residents understand their responsibility to educate all children but acknowledge the struggle to overcome historical barriers. Often, valuable community services are available, but only during hours that are inconvenient to the students and their families who need them most. And, in far too many cases, parents have not succeeded in school and do not have a good idea how to help their children. But it is absolutely critical that we understand: "not knowing how" does not mean "not wanting to help."

What programs and partnerships work well in your community to support all students succeeding?

Parents. Over and over we heard that parents who support students in school are a central element in success. In communities where parent involvement is highest, we discovered many non-traditional efforts. For example, some schools schedule meetings with parents in the student's home, at parents' workplaces or even in shopping centers and find that participation skyrockets. We learned that informal relationships between parents and teachers are equal in value to participation in the parent-teacher organization (PTO) or school council. We heard about ministers who use their influence to teach young parents how to balance the demands of work and home. We also heard about the times in which community members must rise to the challenge and do what the parent cannot.

Youth organizations. A number of organizations are reaching out to address the after-school and vacation experiences students need – Boys and Girls Clubs, Communities in Schools, the National Guard, Twenty-First Century Learning Communities, churches, etc. Often efforts are targeted to areas in our communities that have the least resources. But too often they are grant-dependent and struggle to continue after the initial funding has ended.

What can we do in our homes and neighborhoods to strengthen our schools?

Students in families. Residents recognize that schools cannot do all the work and they recognize the enormous impact of families. In many communities, after reviewing data on the percentage of adults who have earned a high school diploma, it was suggested that the best way to help young people is to help their families; i.e., to support workplace literacy and high school completion programs for parents; to create opportunities for families and educators to interact outside of the school day; and to work through the faith communities to partner every student with a caring adult.

Neighborhood engagement. The conversations often led to a sense of responsibility. Many residents expressed awareness of the challenges, yet did not know how to become involved. Small efforts through youth organizations, faith groups or civic clubs often are not aware of one another or connected. Virtually everyone agreed that more students needed to be engaged in activities that reinforce the skills, knowledge and values taught in schools. Overwhelmingly, participants advocated a shared responsibility among family, school and community for the present and future success of South Carolina students.





South Carolina Education Oversight Committee
P.O. Box 11867
Room 227, Blatt Building
Columbia, SC 29211



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How will the EOC use this information?

EOC members studied the reports of the conversations and identified areas of strong consensus:

1. The success of students depends upon activities that reinforce and extend learning acquired in school.
2. South Carolina has a significant resource in people and groups that want to be involved, but are not certain how to get started.
3. There is a synergistic impact when these individuals and groups work together.

The EOC also examined academic areas in which South Carolina's progress needs to be accelerated and we discovered that reading – through all grades and across all content areas – represents the state's most dramatic challenge. As a result, the EOC plans to launch a community involvement initiative in mid-fall that will draw heavily upon these community conversations and directly address the need for sustained, dramatic improvement in reading performance.

Look for details soon. And please, keep looking for ways to get involved, stay involved and make a positive change for the future!

Help us update our mail list.

Please contact Shellie Allen at (803) 734-5036 to correct your name and/or address, provide us your email address or comments on this report by emailing us at comments@eoc.state.sc.us.

Thank you.

A large, light-colored watermark of the EOC logo is visible in the background of the bottom right section. It features a graduation cap and a palm tree above the large letters 'EOC'.