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Blueprint for Public Education

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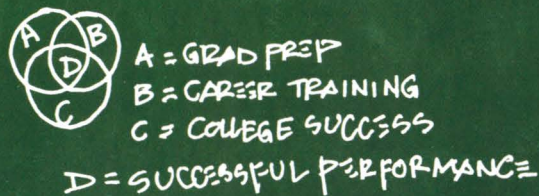
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THE CHALLENGE:



Blueprint for Public Education

A = GRADUATION PREP
B = CAREER TRAINING
C = COLLEGE SUCCESS



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.

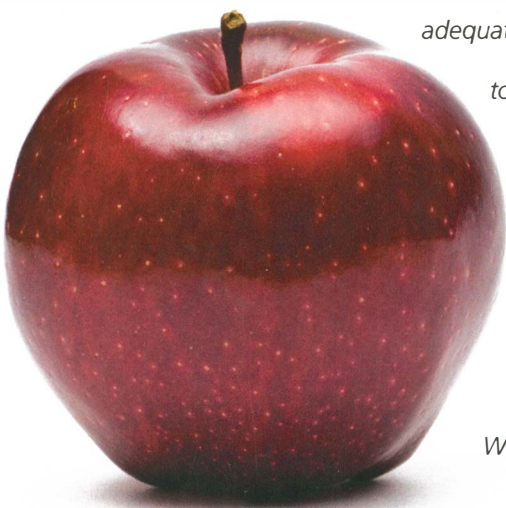
How, then, does the state effectively redesign its schools to adequately prepare all students

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.

On the following pages, 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. Other members of the research team offer their impressions of their work (page 12), and the package ends with a profile of an alumna working to improve school readiness among the state's preschool population.



A COMPREHENSIVE GRASSROOTS STUDY OF SOUTH CAROLINA SCHOOLS COULD SERVE AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE AND IMPROVEMENT.

BY CATHY STEVENS

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 willing-

ness 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.

FOR MORE INFORMATION,
VISIT THE WEB AT
WWW.RILEYINSTITUTE.ORG/CEPL.

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.

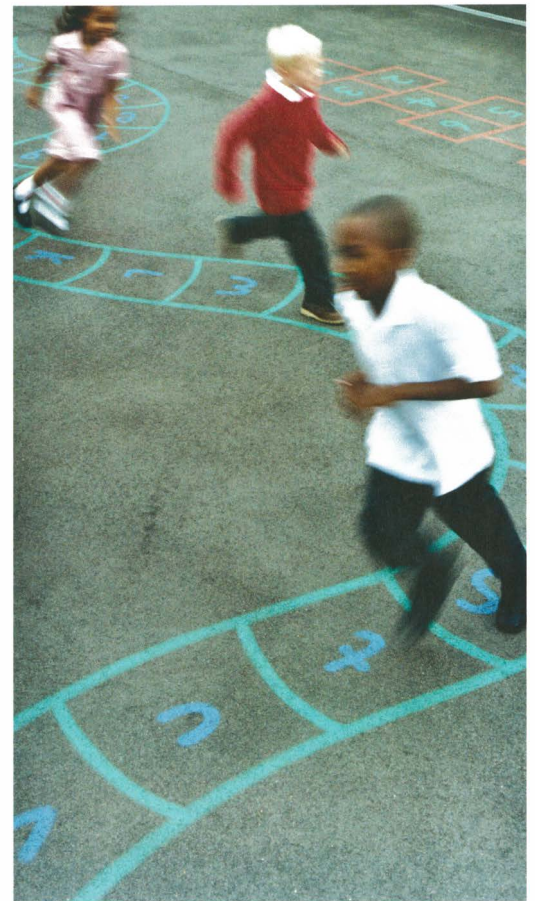
The study took our research team to places we had never been in South Carolina and brought us in contact with people we likely would not otherwise have met. And as our work progressed, we detected a distinctly positive outlook about the state’s schools.

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. [F]

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.

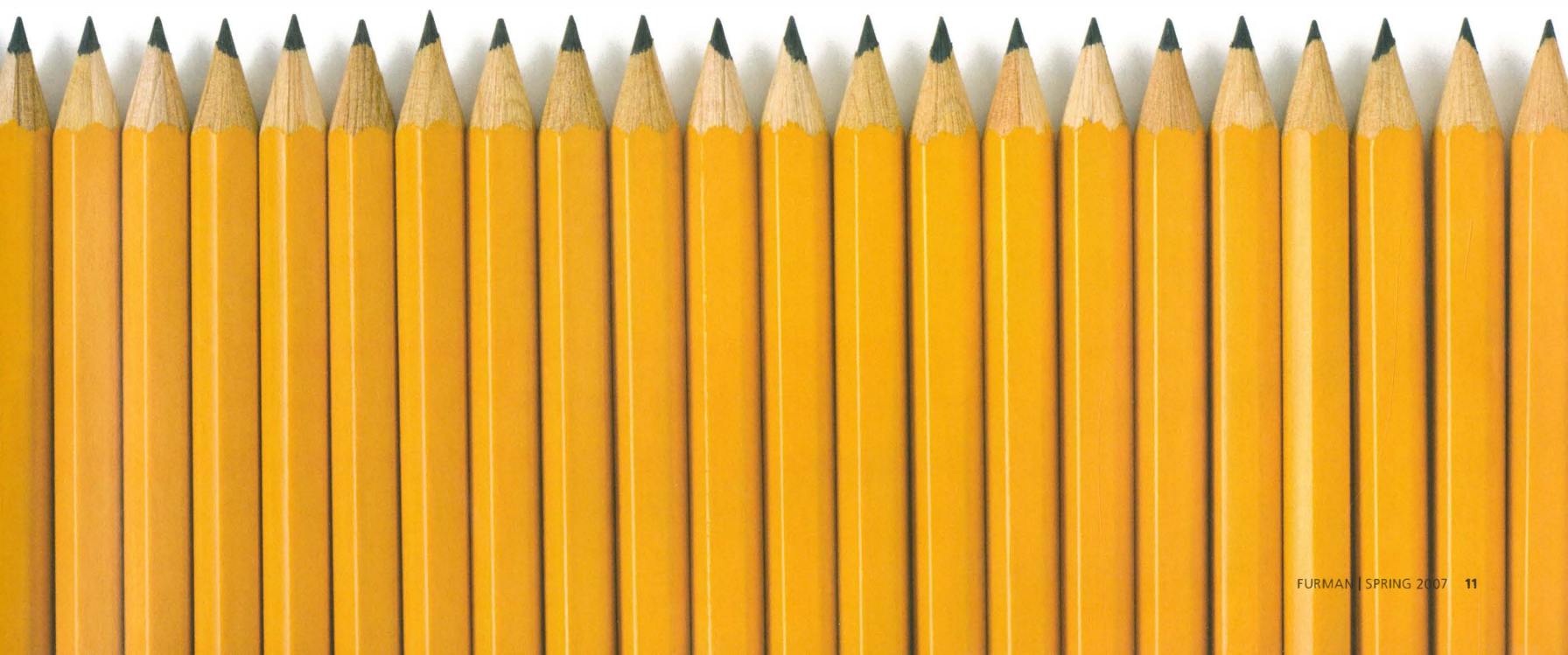
> Preparing Students for Success in a Global Economy

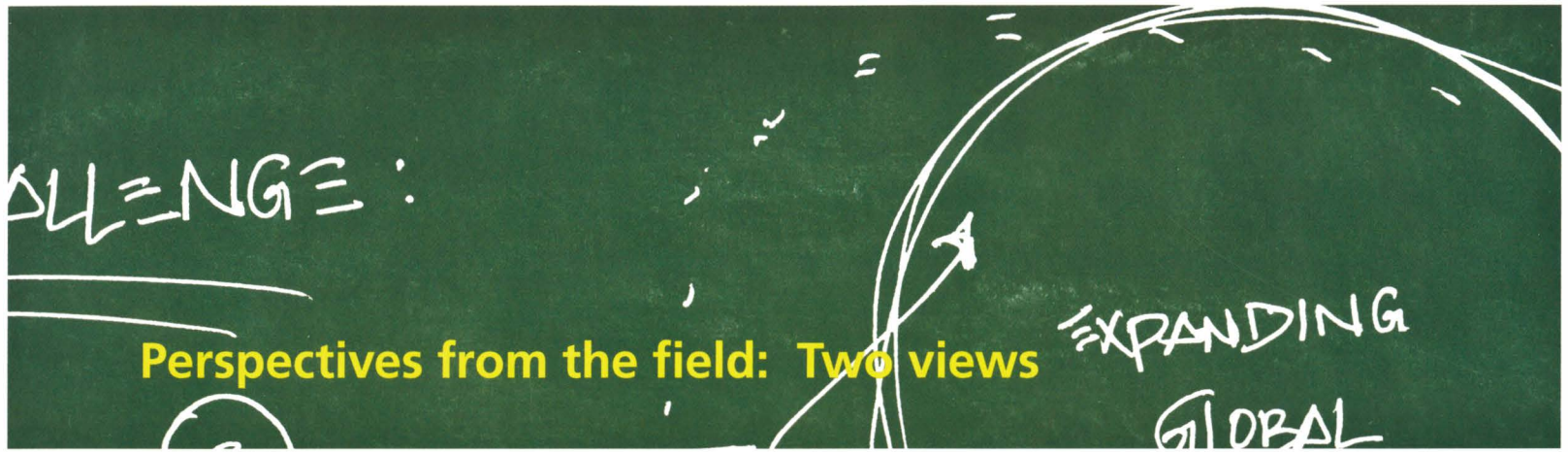
Given the increasingly competitive nature of the workplace and the globalization of the marketplace, ideas focus on improving career preparation options and developing technological dexterity.

> 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?

For more on the education project, turn the page.





SMALL-TOWN PASSIONS

My most telling moment during my time with the Riley Institute/Hewlett education study came at a stakeholder meeting Cathy Stevens and I conducted with teachers at the Hampton Inn in Yemassee, S.C.

Usually, when people conceptualize the actual process of a stakeholder meeting on public education, they conjure scenes reminiscent of “Twelve Angry Men” or the PTA meeting in “Field of Dreams.” However, those kinds of fiery moments never came to pass.

Although on occasion we did have to contend with moments of barely checked contempt from our stakeholders, what struck me most was that even in the tiny, rural Hampton County town of Yemassee, a place that might easily be forgotten or overlooked, passion for public education shone through.

The teachers loved their jobs, and they were thunderstruck and moved (but not intimidated) that someone was interested in their opinion about public education in South Carolina. They seemed thrilled to have the opportunity to offer their thoughts on what could be done to improve public education in the state.

In another session in Yemassee, parents were equally passionate about their suggestions and opinions. At the end of the day, I took great pride in knowing that I was part of a process that ensured that the voices of the people of Yemassee were included in our dialogue on education.

Just because a child does not live in the “big cities” of Greenville, Columbia or Charleston does not mean that we as a state and as a society should treat them any differently. Discovering that so many parents and educators felt the way I did, regardless of their political affiliation or past experiences, was an inspiring experience.

— SCOTT McPHERSON '05

The author attends graduate school at the University of Florida.

INTEGRAL VOICES

My role in the Riley Institute/Hewlett project was to record the comments by teachers and students at stakeholder meetings. Although I was impressed by the dedication and commitment to public education that the teachers exhibited, it is one student meeting I attended that was the most memorable.

The idea of having student meetings was inherently risky. We were inviting a diverse group of 17- and 18-year-olds to reflect on their experiences in South Carolina’s public schools, with only slightly older Furman graduates organizing and running the meeting. We were dependent on the collective efforts of the students, their parents, hotel staff and caterers to ensure the meeting’s success.

At this particular meeting, Murphy’s Law hit hard, as we encountered obstacles we didn’t anticipate. Somehow, our list of 10 participants grew to 15. We ran out of name placards, chairs, and the typed consent forms that made it possible for the students to receive their small stipend for participating.

We sheepishly scribbled out placards and consent forms on the spot. We reshuffled our lists to keep the students anonymous in our records, then packed the students at tables with barely enough elbow room to write. Fortunately, most were already used to overcrowded classrooms.

Given the extra participants, we didn’t have enough catered lunches. Who could sit through the four hours without eating? In the end, one student, the meeting moderator and I volunteered to go without lunch.

It is said, however, that when you perform, you’re the only one that notices your mistakes. True enough in this case.

The students could have cared less about handwritten name cards or cramped quarters. They were more impressed with our efforts to learn their names and make room for all the unexpected arrivals. As for the lunches, they shared with the boy who’d declined one and even ate late because their discussion was so stimulating.

They weren’t there for the food or the money. They were visibly grateful that others wanted to listen to, record and discuss their comments about South Carolina’s public schools. And although one might expect that, given the chance to comment on their school years, graduating seniors would tend to complain or simply to reminisce, these students took their roles seriously. They were constructive, insightful and thoughtful.

Our bumpy student meeting made it evident how integral the student voice was to the project — and illustrated the strength and value of collective, grassroots discussion.

— LAUREN WOOD '05

The author has done graduate work at McGill University in Montreal.

First Steps

DEVENNY A VOCAL ADVOCATE
FOR STATE'S PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

According to Susan Williamson DeVenny '84, it's never too early to start thinking about your child's education. In fact, she says, parents should do so as soon as their child is out of the womb.

They couldn't have a better role model than DeVenny. As director of South Carolina First Steps, a program that promotes school readiness in children ages 0 to 5, she is on a mission for the state's children.

"Most of our potential for academic achievement is formed in the first 36 months of life," she says. "If we fail to provide for their needs before they can make conscious choices for themselves, the damage could be irreversible."

First Steps was founded in 1999 in response to studies indicating that a child's potential for academic success is closely tied to preschool preparation. More recently the agency has shifted its emphasis toward ensuring adequate childcare for families who cannot afford it and trying to eradicate inequities that children born into poverty may face.

DeVenny's interest in education blossomed at Furman, where she earned her degree in elementary education. After marrying classmate Alston DeVenny and receiving a master's in education from the University of Georgia, she moved back to South Carolina and began doing corporate education programs for business professionals in Columbia.

As she watched her four children grow and develop, however, she came to realize that more attention should be focused on the plight of those who do not receive adequate educational preparation. After becoming involved through PTA and other volunteer work in her children's schools, she was inspired to abandon her efforts in corporate education in favor of work in early development.

When Gov. Mark Sanford '83 took office in 2002, he asked DeVenny, then a member of



Susan DeVenny says, "With commitment first to our youngest children in poverty, we may at last break the cycle of educational failure."

MEGHAN MCCUIRE

the First Steps board and a founder of Parents for Public Schools in South Carolina, to become the agency's executive director. Since then, she's pushed for a more aggressive approach to helping the state's at-risk children.

"A lot of the work that we do attempts to reach families," she says. "We believe very strongly that parents are the first and best teachers, so the best opportunity to reach families is through parent education."

**MOST OF THE POTENTIAL FOR
ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT IS FORMED
IN THE FIRST 36 MONTHS OF LIFE.**

First Steps has really moved forward since the 2005 *Abbeville v. South Carolina* ruling, in which the S.C. Supreme Court said that students in some districts suffer from a "lack of effective and adequately funded early childhood intervention programs designed to address the impact of poverty on their educational abilities and achievements." The court ordered the state to address this issue through interventions and other programs, "at least through grade three."

Says DeVenny, "It's helped us to redouble our efforts." Today each county in South Carolina has a First Steps partnership consisting of community leaders, educators, parents and faith-based agencies.

Much of her job involves convincing skeptical legislators that First Steps is vital to the future of South Carolina. "Often the addition of more resources is the answer," she says. "It's an issue of looking at how to better coordinate what's there for families. We must make access

to services easier, but we have to be honest about the gaps we face."

Among the biggest challenges, she says, is "finding the children who truly have need of services, and providing an appropriate level of service that meets those needs." Another challenge: recruiting qualified teachers to the First Steps program and encouraging them to focus on early childhood education.

Of equal importance are childcare providers. To attract better qualified workers, DeVenny says, pay needs to be more competitive, along with other incentives. "We should provide scholarships for those who currently work in the childcare industry, giving them an opportunity to go back to school and keep their education current."

DeVenny says that Furman instilled in her the drive to succeed and a heart for the marginalized. A native of Connecticut, she says she was drawn to Furman because of its emphasis on both teaching and service.

"The Furman experience points us toward a need to give back to those who are less fortunate," says DeVenny, citing such programs as Heller Service Corps. "My work in early childhood was born out of that desire."

Based on her clear sense of commitment, DeVenny seems determined to fulfill her dream of equal educational opportunity for all South Carolina children.

"We have a lot of work yet ahead of us, because we're clearly not reaching all the children that we need to," she says. "But I think we've done some groundbreaking work."

— JESSICA TAYLOR '07

For more on First Steps, visit the Web at www.scfirststeps.org.