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# Innovative Public Engagement Practices and Partnerships: Lifting Stakeholder Voices in Education Accountability Policy

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**Abstract**

In 2008, due to increasing stakeholder dissatisfaction with assessment results and school report cards, South Carolina revised its 1998 Educational Accountability Act and required public engagement with stakeholders including parents/guardians, educators, business and community leaders, and taxpayers. The legislation created partnerships between SC's Education Oversight Committee (EOC) and Clemson University. The project also brought together within the university the fields of Applied Sociology, Computer Science, and Educational Leadership. The project involved mixed methods using phone/web surveys with focus groups eliciting perceptions from key stakeholders and under-represented voices in the surveys.

*Key words:* accountability, assessment, interdisciplinary research, public engagement, stakeholders

## Innovative Public Engagement Practices and Partnerships: Lifting Stakeholder Voices in Education Accountability Policy

Public engagement in educational policy remains as much of a challenge as the imperative to educate all children. This project combined interdisciplinary expertise in higher education to meet legislated requirements to revise school report cards based on stakeholder input. The interdisciplinary expertise included professors in educational leadership, sociology and computer science. The selected stakeholders included parents, educators, business leaders, and taxpayers, particularly those without students in public schools. The purpose of this paper is to describe the partnership in a university-based research project fulfilling the needs of an office of the state legislature and the resulting methods to generate public engagement in the setting of school rankings.

### **Background**

In 2008, the South Carolina Legislature responded to increasing stakeholder dissatisfaction with its assessment and accountability system in light of effects from the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The General Assembly passed Act 282 which revised the Education Accountability Act (EAA) of 1998.

Among the vocal critics of EAA 1998, educators complained about the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test, South Carolina's assessments from third through eighth grades. These tests included English Language Arts (ELA), Mathematics, Science and Social Studies tests and in 2001, the ELA and Math tests were applied to requirements of No Child Left Behind. Parents were increasingly mystified by the SC Report Cards and school rankings for a dual system- the state's and the federal government's.

In the 2008 Act, the revisions required changes in student assessment and the means by

which schools and districts were accredited. Accreditation revisions to the law required the recalibration of levels of school performance to define five ranks: Excellent, Good, Average, Below Average, and At-Risk (SC Code of Laws Section 59-18-900 (B)). The law stressed the importance of reporting to the citizenry on the progress of public schools in South Carolina. Act 282 tasked the South Carolina Education Oversight Committee (EOC) along with the State Department of Education to create a “comprehensive annual report card” to include a performance indicator system that is “logical, fair, reasonable, challenging, and technically defensible” (SC Code of Laws Section 59-18-110(2)). This annual report card must be designed, according to law, in a way that provides clear and accurate information about school and district progress on both academic and other performance measures.

Of particular interest to this study is the requirement in Act 282 for public engagement in the process of establishing school performance designations. The law states: “The State Department of Education shall provide recommendations regarding the state's accreditation system to the State Board of Education. The recommendations must be derived from input received from broad-based stakeholder groups” (SC Code of Laws Section 59-18-710). Beyond naming state executives in the input process, the law defined stakeholders: “The other stakeholders include, but are not limited to, parents, business and industry persons, community leaders, and educators” (SC Code of Laws Section 59-18-910).

The Act’s requirement for public engagement created the partnership and processes which form the thesis of this paper. This particular requirement fell for execution to the EOC, an arm of the SC General Assembly created in the 1998 version of the EAA. The EOC sought expertise for maximizing this requirement for stakeholder engagement from a public university, Clemson, one of the state’s two land-grant institutions. The project brought together within the

university the fields of Applied Sociology, Computer Science, and Educational Leadership.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Two frameworks inform the purpose of this paper. One of the frameworks, interdisciplinary collaboration, represents an emergent process for research projects among agents studying public policies. The other framework, public engagement, provided the foundation for the design and methods of the project.

#### *Interdisciplinary Collaboration*

An unprecedented collaboration among three Colleges, Business and Behavioral Sciences, Engineering Sciences, and Health, Education and Human Development developed in response to the legislative mandate in Act 282 of 2008. Faculty, from Applied Sociology, Computer Sciences, and Educational Leadership, Counseling Education, and Human & Organizational Development, developed electronic phone and web surveys and held 11 focus groups across the state. The interdisciplinary work of the faculty forms the primary focus of the following literature review.

Research collaboration is the process of researchers working together to achieve the common goal of coordinating efforts of producing new knowledge (Austin & Baldwin, 1992; Katz & Martin, 1997). The collaborators involved share responsibility and credit for the research outcomes (Austin & Baldwin, 1992). Typically, faculty collaborative efforts have been historically viewed as competitive and isolated. However, faculty that strive to establish trust, provide sufficient planning and organizing, identify political dynamics, establish good communication, and a establish mutual benefit are key factors necessary for a productive and effective collaboration process (Ament, 1987; Gatliff & Wendel, 1998).

These traits are necessary for interdisciplinary research. Research is truly interdisciplinary when it is not just pasting two disciplines together to create one product but rather is an integration and synthesis of ideas and methods (Carey et al., 2005). Accommodations are needed for the myriad of methodological and epistemic differences across disciplines (Corley et al., 2006). The differences in disciplines often define the parameters that are used to deal with a variety of work collaboration goals (Corley et al., 2006). Collaboration goals are important to the success of an interdisciplinary partnership because they are clearly linked with how the collaboration will be structured, mitigating the different cultures that exist within faculty/discipline culture, and how measures of success will be defined (Corley et al., 2006).

**Reflexivity in qualitative collaborative research.** The entire research process was derived from a larger group of research collaborators (and state agencies through public engagement). However, the team that conducted the focus groups from one of the colleges in the university served as contributors for this section concerning research reflexivity. The norms of qualitative reflexivity ensure a level of rigor, and in this case, opened a window on the team's collaborative process. Reflexivity is invoked in almost every qualitative research book or article and has been posited and accepted as a method qualitative researchers can and should use to both explore and expose the politics of representation, represent difference better (Pillow, 2003). The reflection of qualitative multidisciplinary research teams (faculty, students, and researchers) can be challenging and enriching for all participants. Reflexivity exposes researchers' previous experiences and cultural influences as they engage in interpreting the data generated in their work (Pillow, 2003).

To illustrate the interactive means in which collaboration was accomplished, each member of the focus groups' research team offered their own considerations of how



collaboration affected them and how they affected the process. The team included three faculty members and a PhD candidate. Among the team were two women and two men, one African American, two members in their 30s and one each in their 40s and 50s. All members grew up in the southern US, but among them only one was from South Carolina, the rest were from four other southern states. The faculty members ranged in experience from less than one year to over 20 years as tenure-track university-based researchers. These reflexive statements on the collaborative processes are ordered from the least experienced to the most experienced team member's considerations.

*Collaborator 1.* As a doctoral student who has attained candidacy status, I am reflecting on my role as an emerging researcher. My role in this particular collaboration was to record the responses solicited from the focus groups. I attended all of the focus groups and was able to note group similarities and differences. The demographic nature of the research groups awarded me an opportunity to note how people respond to a myriad of questions/information. It also awarded me an opportunity to reflect on their responses by asking if I could relate to the context of their responses or if my personal biases prevented a fair analysis. As a result, I am concerned to find a research agenda which I find constructive if I research topics that feel natural to me. I am questioning what makes good reflection. In searching for my researcher identity, should I approach it utilizing selected models? The models of identity development range from traditional psychological notions of identity as a singular and stable cognitive construct to other orientations that emphasize the social and cultural influences on identity development (Hall & Burns, 2009). As I reflect I will respond to upcoming research projects by being critically conscious. I take a personal accounting of how my self-identification across for example, gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, position, and interests influence all stages of my research

process. Reflexivity then “becomes a continuing mode of self-analysis and political awareness” (Callaway, 1992, p. 33). The collaborative process enables freedom in developing my identity because we emulate what we admire. Working with experienced to novice researchers provided a myriad of styles to observe. As I advance in my future career of research, my innate curiosity and personality traits will allow future research agendas and collaborations to emerge.

*Collaborator 2.* This project took place my first year as a faculty member and I was immediately included in a collaborative project. This greatly enhanced my first year because it made me aware of all the resources that resided in the various departments and faculty members across campus. Although I was new, I took part in the crafting of research instruments, the facilitation of focus groups with the citizens of South Carolina and the analysis of the data. Each of these experiences allowed me to apprentice with more experienced faculty members from across the university and with state agency personnel. This experience whetted my appetite for taking part in future collaborative research projects with more experienced faculty members across the campus with the explicit goal of learning other perspectives on data collection and analysis. While, I did not have much of a role in arranging the collaboration, I felt like my contributions did add a different perspective to the development of the research instruments and the analysis. The heated discussions around specific phrasing of interview questions were a testament to the commitment to a true collaborative effort, one that was focused on the hashing out of ideas rather than solely competition of egos. A regret I have is that the collaboration around the definition of the ideas, the ones that ended up shaping our instruments and analysis, did not extend to include more community members from across the state.

*Collaborator 3.* The collaborative project for me was a great experience. I am extremely interested in the intersection between education policy and education finance. When thinking

about the equity/adequacy of a finance system, the conceptualization of equity/adequacy begins with an understanding of the educational system. Because the accountability systems provides the basis for what schools are trying to accomplish, being a part of the process that set standards was amazing for me. It allowed me to better understand past South Carolina policy and to watch the new policy emerge. In addition, it allowed me to meet the policy agents in the process so that I would have future contacts when I wanted to ask more questions. I'm not sure that this project changed my research agenda, but it gave me the data that allowed me to reflect on how this could be used for my agenda. I would like for us to continue to reflect on these data and to find outlets for our work. I actually saw the process as a way to exponentially increase our research productivity as a group by submitting to national conferences and then turning that work in to manuscripts that could be published. This has not yet happened, but I'm hopeful that we will be able to go back to the research plans that we crafted back in August to start sending these ideas to conferences. As a result of my participation in this process, I have submitted (first author or co-author) six conference paper proposals. To date two have been accepted and I'm hopeful for acceptances for the others. I think that my role in helping to plan the collaboration was to bring information on the accountability policy in South Carolina. My strength is not so much in the sensemaking or crafting the story, but in getting some background information. My other contribution was to crunch the data and to present that to the group. The team used a preliminary run of data from the phone interviews to craft the focus groups questions and structure the focus group meetings (Krueger & Casey, 2000). I think that (hope that) my participation helped us to find the themes that we were going to present in our final report.

*Collaborator 4.* Research funding rarely targets theories, research agenda, or projects in the applied, and multidisciplinary field of educational leadership. As a result, to sustain my

scholarship throughout my 22 years as a professor, I have depended on collaborative investigations across institutions (higher education as well as schools and districts), state agencies (executive and legislative branches) and disciplines within higher education. For example, my earliest research efforts depended on philanthropic private foundation funding that applied data monitoring structures to an innovative program of governmental social services delivered within public schools. For the most part, my work on educational leadership overlaps the academic disciplines of political science and applied fields of social work. While I use multiple and complementary research designs for my work, the dominant method has been survey research. Overall, this particular project extended my ongoing research agenda, but in a jurisdiction, institution, and collaborators in a new context. By associating with faculty whose foci were different, sociology, historical analysis of policy, and educational finance, the project was enriched. To a degree the multiple stakeholders who participated in this study, also reflected the different perspectives of social services, economic interests, and education. I believe that the teams combination of race, ethnicity, sex, and age were critical to the focus group processes. The parallels in diverse research agenda as well as diverse participant interests were important to the design of this research. That diversity led to passionate exchanges about methods and interpretations, and enriched the data generation and analysis of the various participants' views. Finally, I also served in the roll of mentor to junior faculty and graduate students from the field of educational leadership. This collaborative project was a model for inducting junior faculty and graduate students into the kinds of funded projects requiring a collaborative effort that dominate our field in terms of accessibility and availability.

Interdisciplinary collaboration is not a new concept in the academy. In applied fields, the multi-disciplinary nature of social policy provides ripe opportunities for constructive analysis

using multiple perspectives. This project benefitted from a variety of research perspectives necessary to optimize public engagement strategies.

### *Public Engagement*

Public engagement is an effort to involve all sectors of a community in ongoing deliberation to build common ground and collaboration with the intent to reach across lines of interest and backgrounds and work out solutions that all stakeholders can contribute (Friedman, Gutnick, & Danzberger, 1999). Unlike other forms of engagement, the process of public engagement permits participants time to consider and discuss an issue in depth before they converge on a final process (Warburton, Colbourne, Gavelin, Wilson, & Noun, 2008). This process facilitates a two-way communication process in which the public draws information from experts and policy makers garner the different views and perspectives to create policy coherency (Broun & Puriefoy, 2008).

Public engagement in the policy process represents a goal as well as an obstacle in policy development, implementation, and evaluation because it reflects the difficulties inherent in producing collective decisions (Kingdon, 2003; Sabatier, 1999). In an era of divisiveness on various policy issues, public deliberation has emerged as a valuable way of eradicating deadlock (Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004). Public engagement awards an opportunity for the public to become knowledgeable; it can assist the public in fulfilling civic obligations of demanding quality public education (Broun & Puriefoy, 2008). Making decisions without public support is liable to lead the public to make inaccurate assumptions, practical difficulties, and create public distrust which compromises the perceived legitimacy of governance in some areas of policy development (Rowe & Frewer, 2005). The public at large is especially important for educational

advocates to engage because these stakeholders are seen as an underutilized resource (Broun & Puriefoy, 2008).

Effective deliberative public engagement utilizes the following principles to focus on process (Warburton et al., 2008). The process is transparent in the information provided to participants; has integrity; is tailored to circumstances; involves the right number and representation of groups; treats participants with respect; gives priority to participants' discussions; and is reviewed and evaluated to improve practice. Representatives can tap into the experiences and expertise of the public and citizens can come to understand the complexities and dilemmas of policy-making (Coleman & Gotze, 2001).

The Public Education Network (PEN) (2004) produced one model of public engagement termed *theory of action*. PEN posited that public engagement linked to specific school reform goals would lead to sustained changes in policy and practice, and would generate public responsibility for public education. PEN tested its theory of action in a complex policy environment. PEN's model covered many factors that may affect education when attributing any changes to the role of public engagement (Russell & Turnbull, 2004). While the process is essential, the content of the public engagement also matters (Public Education Network, 2004).

Depending on perspectives about schooling, community involvement, and policy expertise, schools form a highly contested arena for public engagement initiatives (Fowler, 2004; Spring, 1993; Wirt & Kirst, 1992). The use of public engagement in education is evolving as a result of the increasing demands for school improvement (Wilinsky, 2001; Rowe & Frewer, 2005). A 2001 poll found that a majority of Americans ranked education as their highest public priority and that there is a commitment to be supportive of public education (Public Education Network, 2004). However, poll respondents also indicated that better information is needed in

order to give schools meaningful support. Public engagement provides a forum for policymakers to respond to stakeholders concerns to become more aware and take an active role in the policy changes that impact school/educational improvement and accountability.

At least some progressive and emerging traditions, call for deliberative and collaborative efforts focused on school improvement policies (Shields, 2004; Stout, Tallerico & Scribner, 1995). This dialectical approach occurred in two ways for this project: (a) shared and diverse expertise in perspectives on public engagement and (b) mixed methods derived from the collaborative synergy of university, state agency and legislative mandate.

For the purpose of this study, four groups were selected by the policy group to deliberate in the public engagement process. The four groups, parents, business leaders, taxpayers, and educators, traditionally volunteer to shape political processes in education. For example, parent groups have often been involved with education policy and litigation due to a need to protect their children's' rights (Spring, 1993; Yell, Katsiyannis, & Hazelkorn, 2007). Business groups historically have been interested in purposing education for the production of a work force , more recently with an eye toward how this can be measured as a return on investment (ROI) (Cuban, 2004). Organized taxpayer groups have usually entered the political arena to argue for a more efficient educational system or relief of tax burdens (Edsall & Edsall 1992; Spring, 1993). Educators have had the most stable representation through the action of unions and professional organizations that represent the aggregate interests of educators (Fowler, 2004).

More recently, however, the new focus on data use has created parent groups, business leaders, taxpayers who crave “meaningful opportunities for the public to gather and share information on school quality” (Rogers, 2004, p. 2187). Public engagement of this type that is focused on the *quality of education* is meant to generate spaces that are more deliberative rather

than adversarial (Fischer, 2003). Public engagement not only helps the community to understand the policy or the judicial remedy sought; it also informs policy makers about what the public demands (Broun & Puriefoy, 2008).

### **Methods**

The following methods describe how the interdisciplinary collaborative project implemented public engagements. The research project lasted from November 2008 through May 2009. Without question, global economic conditions as well as ongoing deliberations in the media, General Assembly, Governors Office, and US Congress influenced the project. The results showed that South Carolinians expressed concern about their schools, the future of public school students, and hold high expectations for both.

#### *Processes*

The project proceeded in three phases: (a) survey development, (b) survey administration and (c) survey analysis and interpretation. Two kinds of surveys provided the data collection vehicles; phone interviews and web surveys (Babbie, 1990, Dillman et al., 2007; Stern & Dillman, 2006). Focus groups served to validate the surveys at the development and analysis phases (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1996).

#### *Survey Development*

Under the provisions of Act 282 of 2008, the EOC formed a National Advisory Council (NAC) to address its multiple responsibilities. For the purposes of this project, the NAC was consulted concerning item development for the phone and web surveys. The NAC responded to an item pool developed from several national polls of public awareness and concerns regarding public schools. The NAC suggested wording for additional items and promoted strategies for



engaging typically difficult to reach stakeholders, especially parents of color, in rural areas, and in poverty. NAC members were interested in gathering opinions of community leaders in religious and minority sectors also. The NAC also expressed concern about engaging the state's increasing retiree population due to their role as taxpayers, typically without school-aged students in schools.

Simultaneous testing of the item pool included pilot focus groups and pilot phone interviews. Four focus groups included stakeholders named in Act 282 and divided as groups of parents, educators, business leaders, and community leaders/retiree taxpayers. The university held these focus groups in various public locations including a municipal building, a public library, a school, and a community education campus. Potential participants were randomly selected from phone and mailing lists provided by EOC, business listings on the web and some participation was obtained through nominations. A total of 34 educators, parents, community leaders/retiree taxpayers, and business leaders participated in the fall focus groups, and the results were used to reduce the item pool as well as validate pilot phone interview findings.

#### *Survey Administration*

The finalized phone interview surveys ran from November 2008 through February 2009. Phone interviews, aided by electronic random selection and calling of SC landline phones statewide, yielded 1250 responses.

In February through mid-April, the public accessed web surveys through a variety of links on SC school district and other associations' web sites. The other associations included SCAARP, SC Christian Action Council, Commission on Minority Affairs, SC School Boards Association, and of course, EOC's web site. The business survey was distributed through websites hosted by the SC Chamber of Commerce and local chambers: Kershaw, Lexington,

The university, Beaufort, Anderson, Columbia, Florence, Spartanburg, Greenville, and Charleston. Also SC Child Care Association and SC Realtors Association distributed the business survey. EOC personnel issued invitations to participate in the web surveys through media releases, announcements on radio programs, and contacts with organizations encouraging their members to participate. These web surveys yielded over 5200 responses.

Simultaneous to the web surveys, from March through May, the university conducted seven focus groups in various regions of the state with 61 participants. The purpose of these groups was to augment the phone survey responses in two ways. First, following the definition of stakeholders in Act 282, and the concerns of the NAC in reaching the typically underrepresented groups, the focus groups reached out to minorities, rural and urban populations in poverty, and those adults ages 18 to 34, who typically do not own/rent/use landline phones. Second, the focus groups provided insights into the phone results allowing representatives of the stakeholders to expand on their interpretations of what the responses meant to them.

### **Analysis**

The surveys made use of Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI). CATI is a software package that enables the research team to tailor their questionnaires, randomly select a sample, contact respondents, enter the responses, and conduct rudimentary statistical analyses [[http://business.clemson.edu/departments/sociology/soc\\_lab.htm](http://business.clemson.edu/departments/sociology/soc_lab.htm)]. The web surveys were analyzed with the Predictive Analytics Software (PASW) the latest version of what was once known as the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) (“Product Naming Guide”, 2009).

The qualitative analysis of the focus group transcripts was initiated through the development of emergent themes. These themes were developed through an iterative process of

narrative development. Research team members were asked to generate field notes immediately after their participation in each focus group and submit those notes to the rest of the team members. After the final focus group, team members read all transcripts from the focus groups and each other's field notes. They met to draft a set of preliminary findings moving through the transcripts and notes within the focus groups and across all groups. After the meeting, each member completed a common protocol of findings by inserting salient quotations from the transcripts. A research team member then compiled these protocols to draw distinctions among the perspectives of the participants and to connect these focus group results to the themes derived from the survey data and associated comments.

### **Findings**

The findings are presented in two sets of results: (a) quantitative and (b) qualitative. The survey results are primarily quantitative, but respondents had opportunities to comment. Focus group responses provide the majority of qualitative data, and those responses were triangulated to the summary data and comments from the surveys. The project's findings offer at least four specific themes from its 6500 participants in phone interviews, two web-based surveys (one for business and one for the general public and educators), and selected focus groups held across South Carolina. For the purposes of this paper, the following two themes are developed through both the quantitative and qualitative responses of South Carolinians' perceptions of their public schools:

1. High expectations for student success in school and beyond
2. High standards for schools

### **Quantitative Results**

For the work of the policy makers, data were compiled across surveys from the various stakeholders. The responses were reported in descriptive summaries, but not subjected to

parametric comparisons. Survey responses were analyzed with frequencies and cross tabulations using PASW<sup>i</sup> Statistics, 17.0. Phone interviews yield many of the responses from taxpayers as did the web surveys. However, because web surveys were posted on public schools' web sites, most of the data from the web surveys were dominated by educator responses. The business web survey yielded a relatively select group of responses. Figure 1 displays the distribution of stakeholder participation and was a strategic reporting strategy for the funding agency.

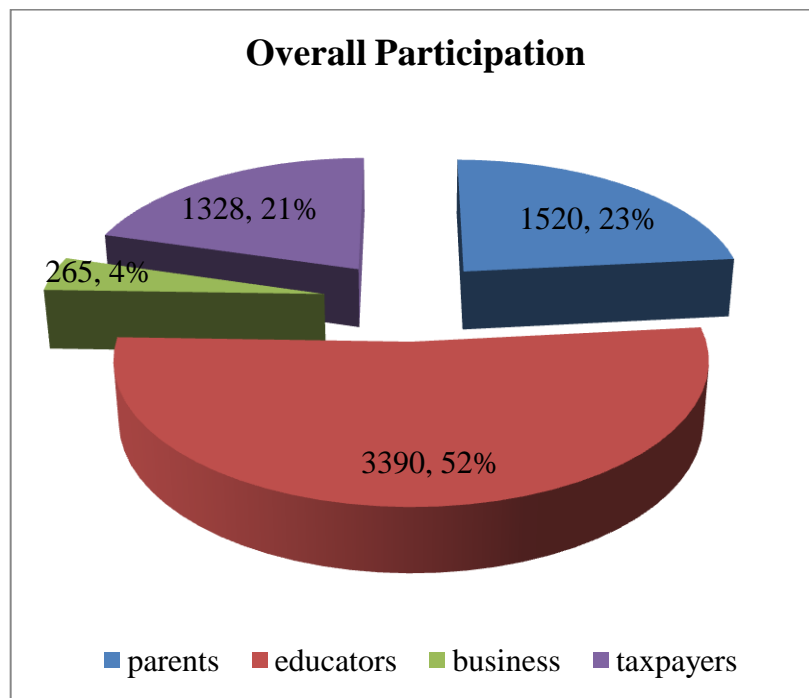


Figure 1. Distribution of stakeholder participation from all data instruments

The agency needed to demonstrate the degree of engagement among stakeholders in the project. The total participation, over 6500 South Carolinians, was reported by stakeholder group. The participation report, contrary to common research reporting conventions, crossed data instrumentation. Typically, research-based reports carefully confine participation rates to each data source since doing otherwise can raise questions about analysis; yet, as an accounting of participation, this project's reporting style for participation information was valued by policy makers.

One limitation of the analyses using descriptive cross-tabulations on stakeholder groups is that the definitions of stakeholders are not mutually exclusive. The analyses reported here focused on four groups roughly outlined by Act282: (a) parents, (b) educators, (c), business and community leaders and (d) taxpayers. But even these groupings pose challenges in analyses. For example, a SC business leader is also a taxpayer, and as well, may be a parent. The distribution of parents within the other three stakeholder designations included 50.9% of business/community leaders, 42.5% of educators and 44.8% of taxpayers. Given that the web surveys obtained the greatest number of self-selecting participants in the project, the representation of parents among the other three stakeholder groups may be greater than the general population, but such a result is typical among self-selecting responses to a particular polling interest such as education.

**Theme 1: High expectations for students.** Preliminary results suggest that stakeholders believe that reading (92.2%), use of technology(82.1%), math (82%), and writing skills (79%) were either very important or critically important skills for children to learn. In addition, 78.4% of respondents rated workplace skills as very important or critically important which suggests the need to rate schools based on items other than academic content.

South Carolinians responded to questions concerning what skills students should possess upon graduation. These responses showed agreement on the fundamental importance of Reading, Math and Writing, as well as a strong desire that young people exit public schools ready to be productive citizens.

All Stakeholders				
I'm going to list a set of skills that may be important for young people leaving school in the 21st century ...				
		Critical	Very Important	Important
Reading	82.4%	15.0%	2.4%	
Math	68.2%	24.7%	6.8%	
Writing	64.6%	26.6%	8.3%	
Skills to Succeed in the Workplace	68.3%	23.8%	7.0%	
Knowledgeable Citizen	59.0%	30.1%	10.0%	
Science	38.5%	36.4%	21.9%	

Note: Remaining response options included *Not very important*, *Not at all important* and *Don't know*, which yielded <1% of all responses.

The following charts illustrate the differences among stakeholders in attaching any importance (*Critical*, *Very* or *Important*) to the six skills. Business attaches more importance to math, writing and work readiness than other groups. The importance of math-based technical and scientific industries to SC's economy also may have been an influence on business responses. Parents place more importance on citizenship than other groups. Educators and taxpayers show allegiance to the traditional 3 Rs of reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Business		Parents		Educators		Taxpayers	
Math	100.0%	Writing	99.7%	Reading	99.9%	Reading	99.7%
Writing	99.6%	Reading	99.5%	Math	99.8%	Math	99.5%
Work	99.1%	Citizen	99.3%	Writing	99.7%	Writing	99.4%
Citizen	98.3%	Work	99.0%	Work	99.5%	Citizen	98.8%
Science	93.6%	Math	97.9%	Citizen	99.4%	Work	98.7%
Reading	89.8%	Science	93.0%	Science	97.6%	Science	96.9%

Note: These tables show the totals of the combined selection of the three importance options: *Critical*, *Very Important*, and *Important*. Remaining response options ≤ 3.2%.

Comments from the surveys offered some insight into different stakeholders' concerns. Among the discussions of adhering to the traditional 3Rs, disagreement arose among groups as to the wisdom of that allegiance.

I'm not sure schools should be too concerned with workforce development beyond the basic skills of critical thinking, teamwork, and accepting responsibility. [African American taxpayer, 45-54 years old, Masters degree, survey comment]

My belief is that if we teach the basics every day, we can cull minds and assist them in growing into successful adults. [White taxpayer, 45-54 years old, no degree, survey comment]

**Theme 2: High standards for schools.** In considering how to rank schools, 18.2% of respondents stated that a school could only be rated as excellent if all children were performing on grade level while an additional 42.8% of respondents stated that a school could be rated as excellent with less than 10% of students performing on grade level. EAA requires that schools be given a growth rating to measure learning over time. 22.3% of respondents reported that excellent schools should continue to assist in the growth of all children each year. An additional 38% of respondents reported that a school could still be rated as excellent if fewer than 10% of students failed to make progress from year to year.

Another portion of the surveys concerned expectations for determining the quality of public schools. Survey participants rated six potential measures of school performance.

Parent, Educator, and Taxpayer Stakeholders			
I'm interested in how you determine if a school is doing well. I'm going to list some measures. How important is...	Critical	Very Important	Important
Control of Student Behavior	57.4%	30.4%	11.2%
High School Graduation Rates	45.3%	36.2%	15.8%
Offering Advanced Coursework (AP / IB)	31.6%	38.7%	24.0%
Scores for College Admissions Tests (ACT/SAT)	18.7%	37.8%	32.9%
Rate of Promotion	17.9%	31.5%	35.0%
Annual Standardized Tests	6.4%	16.6%	44.0%

Note 1: The business survey did not include this question set.

On these measures, there were few differences among stakeholder groups. The following charts show three stakeholders' overall responses as to the *importance* (*Critical, Very or Important*) of the six potential measures of a good school.

Parents		Educators		Taxpayers	
Behavior	98.8%	Behavior	99.4%	Behavior	98.3%
Graduation	94.4%	Graduation	97.9%	Graduation	96.6%
AP/IB	93.9%	AP/IB	94.8%	AP/IB	93.5%
ACT/SAT	91.2%	ACT/SAT	88.7%	ACT/SAT	90.0%
Promotion	83.9%	Promotion	85.2%	Promotion	83.2%
Ann. Test	72.6%	Ann. Test	65.0%	Ann. Test	68.7%

Note 1: The business survey did not include this question set.

Note 2: These tables show the totals of the combined selection of the three *importance* options: *Critical, Very Important, and Important*, and the range for the remaining options was ≤ .6% to 35%.

Participants used survey comments options to express concern about student discipline and many students' lack of motivation to learn.

Discipline is the # 1 issue we need to address. When one or two students constantly disrupt the learning environment in a classroom ... all students in the classroom suffer ... all students are denied the day's learning opportunity by the disruption of one or two. [White educator, 55-64 years old Masters degree, survey comment]



The amount of time a teacher has to spend on basic classroom control and handling the few problem children is unbelievable. Parents need to be held accountable to prepare their children with basic skills and manners to be able to function in the school system. I have seen cases where one child disrupted an entire class for the school year and though they tried different things for this child it always came to what this child needed, not what the other 21 children in the class needed. I think teachers need more discipline options and the families need to support the teacher and school. Could parents be given a grade that reflects the effort they put into the school, or require a certain amount of volunteer hours at the school? [White taxpayer, 35-44 years old, Bachelors degree, survey comment]

High school graduation rates were a priority for all the participants. The following table was generated from a question that guided people to think about today’s First Graders who will be graduating in 2020.

What would be an acceptable graduation rate for students graduating in 2020?	Parent	Educator	Taxpayer
70% or below	7.0%	7.5%	8.0%
75%	3.9%	8.1%	5.7%
80%	15.9%	16.8%	13.1%
85%	21.9%	20.7%	17.6%
90%	27.2%	25.8%	25.8%
95%	13.3%	14.7%	19.5%
100%	10.7%	6.3%	10.2%

Note: The business survey did not include this question.

The majority of parents (51.2%) and taxpayers (55.5%) selected 85% or higher for the goal graduation rate in 2020. Only 46.8% of educators set the rate that high. Some of their comments explain their concerns.

The graduation rate should not be based on the number of students who receive a diploma in exactly 4 years. The graduation rate should not exclude the students who complete their IEP requirements but are not on a diploma track. No Child Left Behind is not realistic nor is it a possibility. I work at a high school where 25% of our population has an IEP (roughly 400 students, many on a diploma track). Each year there are between 10 - 20 students who complete the goals of their IEP and participate in the graduation ceremony. These students are mentally, physically, and emotionally challenged and are not capable of earning a high school diploma. If they earn a certificate of completion by meeting the goals of their INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN, shouldn't they be considered successful? [White educator, 35-44 years old, Masters degree, survey comment]

On-time graduation rates do not matter if the child does not know the material! There are too many people already with a high school diploma that are barely reading on a 5th or 6th grade reading level. What good does it do a child to be promoted or even graduate when they do not have the skills needed to succeed in the next grade or even in the real world. [White educator, 25-34 years old, Masters degree, survey comment]

It's not the graduation rate. You can give anyone a diploma. It's what's behind the diploma that counts. [Educator, survey comment]

Chi-squares were calculated on selected stakeholder responses within the phone interviews to discern differences in mean scores between groups of parents, teachers, business leaders and citizens with no differences found between groups in responses regarding skills and school ratings. In order to confirm the findings from the surveys, focus groups were conducted around the state to aid in the interpretation of the results.

#### Focus Group Findings

The focus groups' findings augment and extrapolate the survey information by providing insights into the survey results and uncovering the voices that may be less noticeable in the survey responses. Focus groups were held from March through May 2009. Focus groups were held in seven locations across the three regions of SC known as the Upstate, Midlands and Low Country or Coastal area. The sites averaged about eight participants per site. The Midlands representation was large due to extraordinary participation at the site for 18-34 year olds. Without that site, the Midlands would be more proportional with about 14 participants.

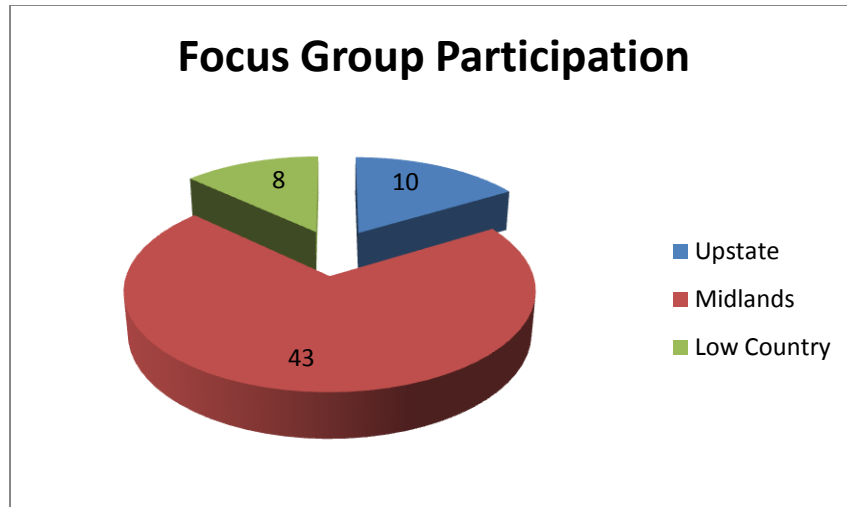


Figure 2. Distribution by region of focus group participation

Representatives of stakeholders identified in Act 282 were specifically invited to the focus groups in their regions. In addition, given the under-representations of 18-34 year olds, who typically do not have land-line phones, and specific ethnic groups (African American and Hispanic), efforts were made to solicit participation for the focus groups.

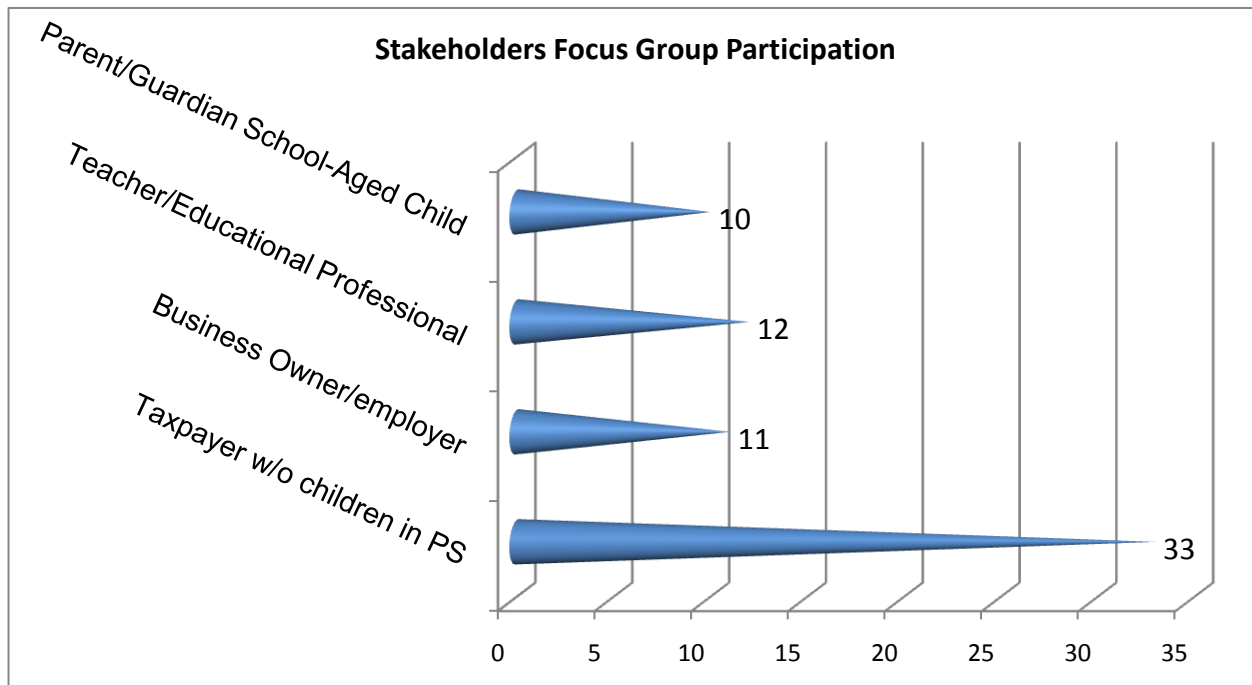


Figure 3. Distribution of stakeholder representation in focus groups

The taxpayer without school-aged children is composed of two groups: (a) retirees and (b) young adults (aged 18-34). It should be noted that none of the identities among these stakeholders were mutually exclusive. Taxpayers and many parents with children in SC public schools also identified among the teacher stakeholders. The business and community leaders groups included taxpayers and parents. African American and Hispanic participants participated as any of the four stakeholders groups: parents, teachers, business owners and taxpayers.

As the purpose of the focus groups was to expand on the survey data with insights from invited representatives for target public stakeholders among South Carolinians, the reports here include results focused on the same two themes as reported in the quantitative results:

1. High expectations for student success in school and beyond
2. High standards for schools

**Theme 1: High expectations for students.** The focus group participants were very concerned that the focus on testing did not necessarily lead to skills needed for successful adult life. Many saw the survey responses as reflecting job basics: Reading, Math, Technology, and Writing. They discussed the implications of writing sinking on the list. Many others were concerned about the low rankings of creativity and critical thinking.

I agree that the top three [Reading, Math and Writing], definitely are very important. I see that technology has pretty much replaced writing, the three Rs, as we know it. And you know, technology is a part of the workplace, so they definitely need to have or be knowledgeable of the computer and software, hardware. [urban African American focus group, Upstate]

I think we need to place more emphasis on Science. I'm surprised that Science is [listed] so low. I thought that Science is, at least from my standpoint, should be emphasized more ... when you look at Science and Engineering and those types of things, that's where this job [market]'s gonna be in the future, then we need to elevate that discussion around that. [business focus group, Midlands]

I think you need creative skills to be important and flexible in the workforce. I think that kind of ties in with workplace skills. I was kind of glad to see that's pretty high, 'cause

you need to be transferable, or able to move with the economy and the changing demographic groups that are coming up. [urban Hispanic focus group, Upstate]

The concern about students' transition to adult life was evident in remarks about students' sense of connection to both schoolwork and the commitment of the educators. The concern cut across all the stakeholder groups. Everyone had a story about making sure that each student's potential was recognized and encouraged.

I've been in Title One schools and they said, "I'll call the parent," and they say, "Why bother? They're not going to pass anyway." For a teacher to say that. And I say, "How do you think she's teaching those kids? Or how do you think he's teaching those kids?" If they're already saying, "They're not going to pass anyway, why bother?" Do you think they're teaching? So you know, again, it's a balance between the student, the family, and then the system itself. [urban Hispanic focus group, Upstate]

Like she was saying about her son – what's it going to take for him to catch on? The school may be there, but something is not clicking. My son that's in eighth grade, high IQ, intelligent. But he does not like to be challenged. And the challenge doesn't have to be just verbal, it's the way he's presented. ... And the teacher in class, he would tell him that everything was wrong. So [he] shut down. And he knows how I feel about grades, and he shut down. And it took another teacher, ... that engaged him. And he went from a C to an A in two weeks. ... it's drawing the children in, that even if there's a struggle, they're going to want to participate. And I think that's where ... it's beyond the academics. You want to teach them, but you have to engage them. [urban Hispanic focus group, Upstate]

I work with a non-profit group, and some of our kids told us that they asked, when they went to the guidance counselor, said, "I want to go to college," they said, "Well, why do you want to go to college? You can just go to a trade school or you could just get a job," and you know, they were not encouraged to go to school, they were not told about scholarships, they were not encouraged to take the SAT. And thankfully, though, they had sense enough to ask somebody else, besides just the counselors at school. [urban African American focus group, Upstate]

But one of the things that, until we all address it, is racism. And it's big and it's growing. And you know, you have administrators that been the good ol' boys and they're not gonna change their way. And like when I say racism is not gonna die 'til the all of them die. [urban African American focus group, Upstate]

Now ... back at one of the schools I worked with where a young man, a boy that was 15 years old and they were just going to pass him through ... But when he got to the fifth grade they hired a good teacher in the fifth grade and that new teacher looked at him and started to work with him. Discovered this kid had tremendous artistic ability but he didn't want to do anything else. So she gave

him assignments to paint murals on the board, special pictures but he had to read the history book. He had to read the math book and he took books home and he read it and he painted pictures. [taxpayer retiree focus group, Coastal/Low Country]

While the focus group participants universally recognized the importance of enriching school experiences, they also noted the lack of state investment in public education.

Maybe given that there's so many cuts, that those [art and music] are one of the programs that kind of go out the door. [urban Hispanic focus group, Upstate]

I think also advanced placement should be lower.... Because of funding and some schools don't [offer AP] based on state budgets to accommodate the teachers to offer classes. Like my high school, we didn't have [AP], but we were still a successful school. [young adult focus group, Midlands]

The state has cut the budget enormously. They almost have sliced the [early childhood] program out. And yet we have shown at least since I have been part of that board, that standardized testing has gone up every year since we have invested in preschool education. That is where the whole ball game is more and more played is preschool. A lot of their thinking is shaped and their habits are shaped when they are four and five. In fact, they really get shaped earlier than that as we've found out. So that I will tell ... the Legislature that I think they have made a great mistake in slicing First Steps across the state. [rural taxpayers focus group, Midlands]

Three themes emerged across all groups when we asked them to think about their expectations for schools and ratings of school performance. We put them through an exercise asking them how many students had to succeed/fail in schools that were rated as Excellent, Above Average, Good, Below Average, or At-Risk. They discussed these ratings and all groups came to consensus on these three points: (a) resistance to simplistic rating, (b) recognition of social conditions, and (c) expectations for closing achievement gaps.

Loyalty to local schools was part of the groups' resistance to what they saw as simplistic rating systems established distally at the state capital. They wanted us to convey this resistance to the policy makers. Our transcripts showed a lot of crosstalk, some bewilderment, and at least some appreciation for the difficulty that EOC must face.

*Female 1:* If they're not going to the next grade, then how's that a successful school? ... *Female 2:* I agree with 0% [failing to grow in an Excellent School] this

time. I think – even if I'm not as good as you, I think I should at least move up one step in a year. *Male:* It's just not realistic – everybody's not going to continually improve every year – it's not realistic it would happen. [young adults focus group, Midlands]

I'd say they should all [succeed]. If you're gonna move from one grade to another ... say they're gonna continue to be [learning] [taxpayer retirees focus group, Coastal/Low Country]

This [growth rating] is the part of the report card that I have never understood... I never could understand the growth because you make some improvement. Surely you make some improvement but you don't on the report card. I can understand that part but I could never understand the growth. [rural taxpayers focus group, Upstate]

... this is state law, it's not parents law [urban African American focus group, Upstate]

We've said it before. How do you mix the small communities and the large communities and come up with one standard for the state. I think it is the real concern being from a small community. But that being said, I know we have to have some guidelines to go by. I am sure that they will do the best job they can. [rural taxpayers focus group, Upstate]

South Carolina has pockets of poverty at a notorious rate even before the 2008 presidential election or the economic meltdown. In the spring of 2009, the focus group participants spoke of poverty and associated social conditions as the biggest barrier for student and school success.

.. to me it's not just the kid that's failing, the school is failing too. I mean the parents are failing too. Quite honestly, I believe the entire community is failing. I think we have to get back to the days when the community understood that they have a stake to play, not just parents who have kids in the schools, not just the teachers that go to the schools, but the business and everybody else, because we're either gonna create people who are taxpayers or drain on the tax system. And what I mean either they're going to be functional and get jobs and contribute to the tax base or they're gonna be in jail, and they're gonna be a drain on the tax base. And so I believe that we've got to begin to look at what kind of strategies can we do to improve these numbers [urban African American focus group, Upstate]

We displayed EOC's most recent information on the Achievement Gaps in ELA and Math. While some educators and community leaders had seen this information before, many parents and taxpayers had not. This was an emotional part of the groups; emotions ranged from outrage to weariness.

Why are there such gaps, you know? That's what I'm thinking, like geez? [urban African American focus group, Upstate]

What does all this stuff [Palmetto awards] mean? And that's why when you talk about state recognition, we're saying, to me, that the state – I mean I would be looking at stuff like red ribbons and all those kind of things. And a school at 28% [failure rate], to me – it's not red ribbon. And so I would wonder what kind of message, when you're talking about the state recognizing the school. Whenever I think of state recognition, I'm thinking about schools that are exceeding the standards. I do agree, though, that you have to celebrate improvement, too. [urban African American focus group, Upstate]

I don't believe that a school should be excellent if a particular population of its school is not performing well, because I believe what it would do is it would allow the school not to serve those kids. [urban African American focus group, Upstate]

I think it is sad that family income reflects people's performance. [rural taxpayers focus group, Upstate]

The focus groups added depth and confirmation to the validity of survey responses regarding South Carolinians' expectations for students and schools. Despite or because of the current economy, South Carolinians expect students to learn and to graduate. They want the problems of poverty and social conditions confronted in improving public schools. They also resist overly simplistic ratings of their schools, given the community and social conditions many families and students face.

### **Conclusions**

This project utilized a collaborative research strategy and mixed methods to elicit public engagement in re-setting educational accountability policy. The collaborative research process parallel the engagement strategies for soliciting diverse perspectives among four overlapping groups of stakeholders: (a) educators, (b) parents, (c) business and community leaders, and (d) taxpayers. The mixed methods included survey research in phone and web-formats with focus groups used to design survey questions and enhance understanding of survey responses. The collaborative research team used diverse perspectives in the analysis of both survey and focus group responses.



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## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Predictive Analytics Software (PASW), formerly known as SPSS, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences [Retrieved May 29, 2009 from *Product Naming Guide FAQ*, <http://www.spss.com/software/product-name-guide/>].