

South Carolinians Support Increased Spending for Education: Self Portrait Perspectives

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Education Consistently Second To The Economy As The Most Important Issue

As we start out the new year, unemployment rates are declining and the economic outlook appears more optimistic. Still, remnants of a depressed economy continue to loom over much of the state's population. Over the last five years of Self Portrait Surveys, this concern and fear has been reinforced with the economy coming in as the most important issue that the state will face over the next decade. In 7 out of the last 10 surveys, education comes in second as the most pressing issue that the state will face over the next 10 years. What seems more significant are the consistent citizen responses supporting increased K-12 education spending during this time of financial distress. This interest in educational improvement is not surprising but it is interesting that given foreclosures, service cutbacks and the demands for fiscal restraint, *Self Portrait Survey* participants consistently favor this increase *even if it means increasing taxes*.

There seems to be little question about the inherent value of learning the education basics. Reading, writing, math and other similar subjects are important no matter what career path a person takes. The business world, however, is moving in a more complex direction that affects everyone whether they work or only interact within a business realm. For this reason, communication, collaboration and even analytical skills are important to survival in today's global economy. In the past, these skills generally were not a focus in K-12 education. Instead, they were honed in higher education settings. Today, the expectations on K-12 teachers are increasing beyond the scope of even five years ago.

It is unfortunate that even as expectations on teachers and education are increasing, financial resources for K-12 education are shrinking. Some of the funding issues are due to the general economic situation that affects the entire country. Where South Carolina differs, however, is in the decades old struggle to overcome underinvestment in education, particularly in the rural districts. Like most of the United States, state and local funds make up the largest share of school district funding. State funding allocations to South Carolina's school districts vary depending on the district's property tax base. The Education Finance Act (EFA), passed in 1977,

has been used to level the playing field between districts with large tax bases and those with low tax bases. The EFA covers around 22% of the combined local and state funding and does little to equalize per student funding. But in the past five years, EFA funding has been cut, reducing equalization between richer and poorer districts. Other funds, including lottery dollars, grants and Education Improvement Act (EIA) funds, are earmarked for specific purposes outside of basic expenses and are distributed in ways that do not give more per pupil to poorer districts. Federal funds currently cover approximately 10% of education funding in South Carolina and generally these funds are allocated for services targeted to disadvantaged students.

Legislation passed in 1994 and 2006 relieved some South Carolina homeowners from paying taxes for school operations, although there still are school debt service taxes on owner occupied properties. The tax relief for homeowners was partly funded by a sales tax increase, but some of the cost falls on the General Fund, reducing funds available for funding EFA and other public services. Today, South Carolina's school districts continue to face substantial resource disparities. Since the implementation of Act 388, the tax burden for schools has been shifted to the sales tax and to other (non-homeowner) classes of property. Much of the state funding is now being directed to property tax relief and goes disproportionately to the wealthier districts rather than the poorer districts.¹

Self Survey Results

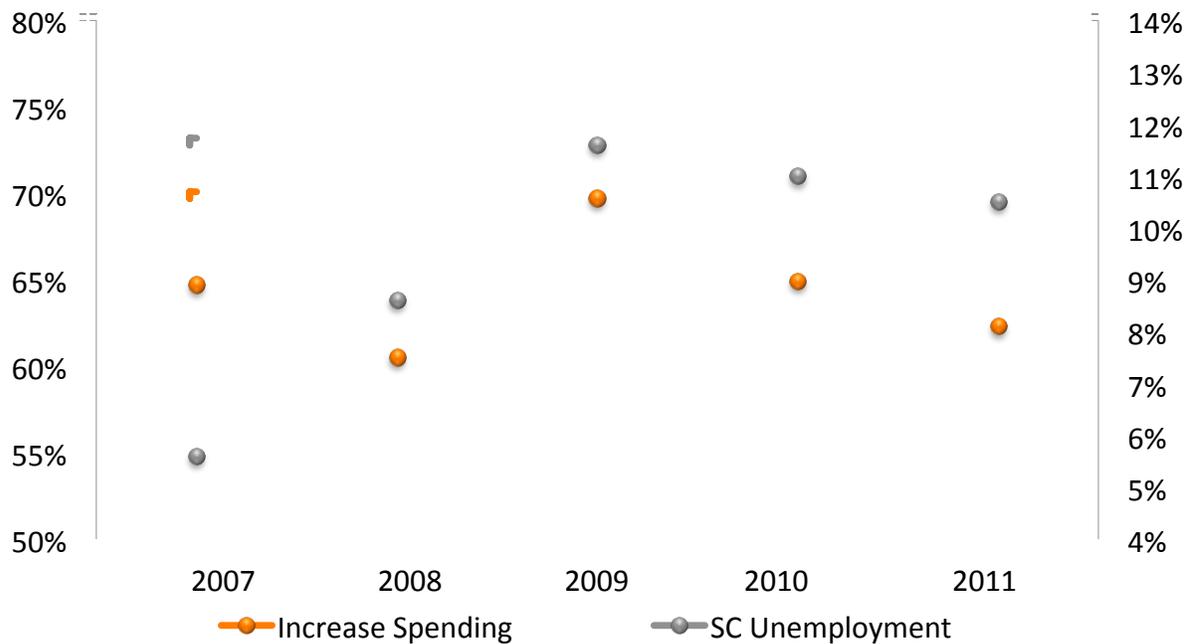
From 2007 to 2011, *Self Portrait Survey* participants were asked if they thought spending on K-12 education should be kept the same, decreased, or increased even if it meant raising taxes.² Respondents consistently answered by a majority (60.5% to 69.7% over a five year period) that they supported increased spending on education, *even if it means raising taxes*. This response remained strong from the 2007 survey when the unemployment rate was 5.6 % until late 2011, when the unemployment rate was 10.5%.³ In fact, in mid-2009, when the unemployment was at its highest, the desire to increase funding for education also was at its highest, perhaps indicating the belief that education is the route out of unemployment.

¹ Ulbrich, H., and E.Saltzman (2009) *Financing Education in South Carolina: A Citizen's Guide*, Jim Self Center on the Future, Strom Thurmond Institute of Government and Public Affairs, Clemson University.

² *The Self Portrait: How Are We Doing In South Carolina?* Is a telephone survey of South Carolina residents. The survey of 800+ South Carolinians over the age of 18 has been conducted twice a year since 2006 as a collaborative effort between the Jim Self Center on the Future at Clemson University and the Survey Research Laboratory at the University of South Carolina. The surveys are used to evaluate how South Carolinians are faring over time in terms of their quality of life, outlook for the future, perceptions about government, the environment, education, public infrastructure funding and issues of civil liberty. For more information, visit <http://selfcenter.clemson.edu>.

³ US Bureau of Labor Statistics. www.bis.gov retrieved on 12/6/2011.

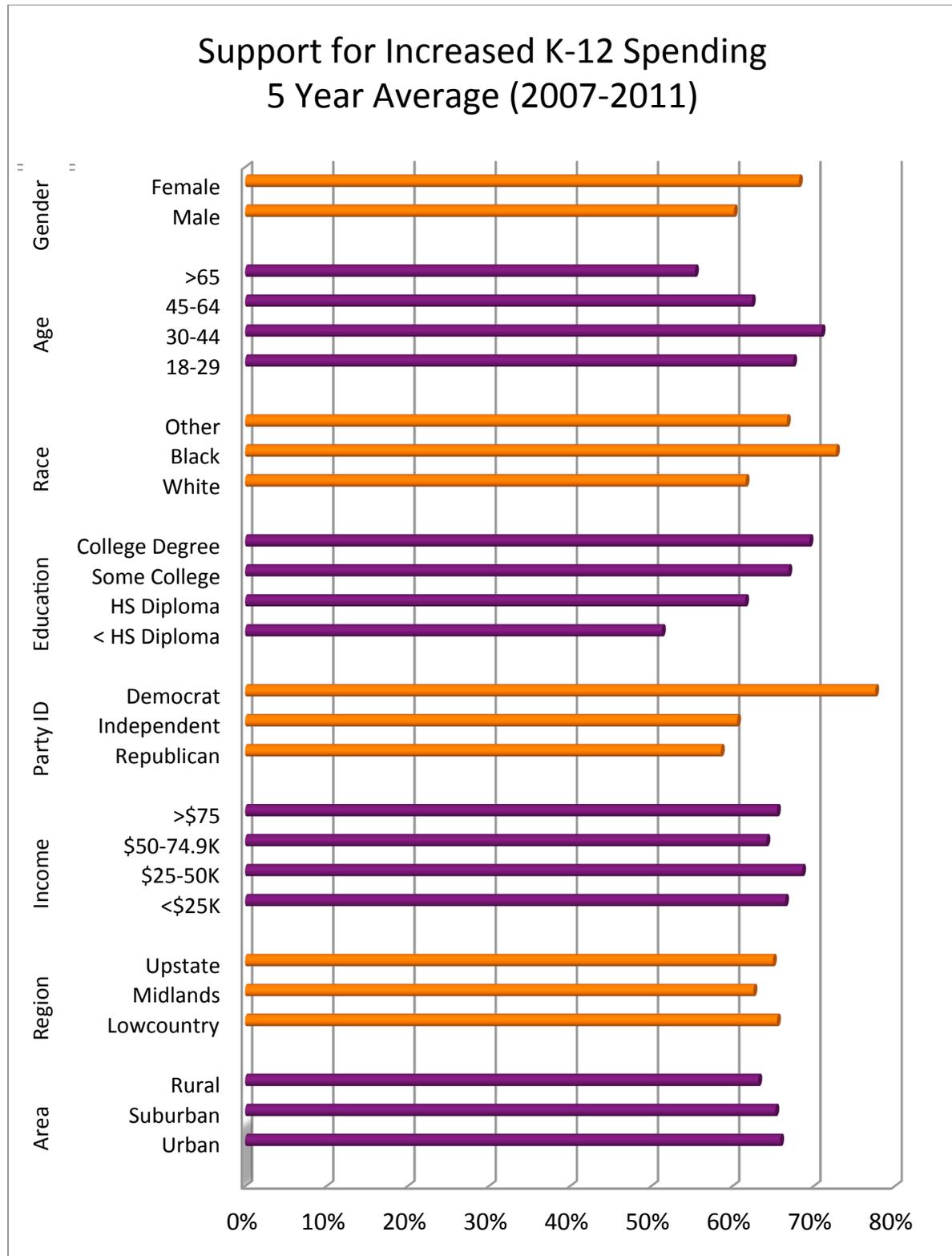
Support for Increased Spending on K-12 Education and SC Unemployment Rates



Responses Across Demographics

A review of the responses by demographic sector often provides insight into differing sentiments among population segments. For this question, when the responses were averaged over a five year period, all population segments support increased funding at a 50% or higher rate and the majority of the responses average in the 60% or higher range.

Within some of the demographic categories, responses show little variation among participants. For respondents who did not graduate from high school or who were over 65 years of age, there is notable variation. In both of these cases, the lower levels of support for increased funding may be based on personal financial concerns since potential for increased earnings is limited to a greater extent than the remainder of the 18 and older population. Some of the respondents who did not graduate from high school may not see the relevance of schooling to future work life or the “it was good enough for me, it is good enough for everyone” attitude might prevail. It is likely that most respondents over 65 probably no longer have children in K-12 and they may feel that they have already paid the dues for their children and that funding for health care and social security is more important to them personally. In terms of the respondents with the highest level of support for increased K-12 funding (over 70%), the 30-44 age group is likely to have the majority of children entering or in the K-12 years. Averaging the responses over the last ten surveys, black respondents at 72.8% and Democrats at 77.6% are supportive of increasing funding for education even if it means paying higher taxes. Still, as indicated in the chart above, all of the responses indicate a relatively high level of support for increased funding.



Commentary

Currently, business recruitment and job increases are the commonly discussed state priorities. At the same time, these common sense efforts do not come without long term, strategic actions. Sustainable tax systems, workforce development, and supportive infrastructure are instrumental elements of a healthy economy and a strong business environment. The other critical component is a world class education system that allows our students and our state to compete in the global economy. In 2010, when the Gallup poll asked Americans to rank their satisfaction with K-12 education, over 88% were less than completely satisfied with the quality of education. These responses likely refer to many of the varied components of a first class education system including student knowledge, teacher quality, adequate facilities and materials, and funding. In general, most of the US education court cases have focused on funding as the test of the level of opportunity provided within the educational system. Obviously, throwing money at schools is not the answer. At the same time, not providing the basic funding to build the educational foundation for the children who will eventually run our state and its economic engines, will keep the state on the lower rungs of the educational rankings and away from achieving its full potential.

The Self Portrait's high response rates for increasing education funding even if it means raising taxes obviously are calling for a change in the level of commitment to South Carolina's K-12 education. Funding to back the state's level of commitment is only one of the necessary components but funding paired with a well managed and holistic strategy can go a long way in reaching priority education goals. Guiding principles that embrace community and institutional commitment and institutional reform and that encourage creativity, productivity and sustainability should steer the strategy. In this same vein, policies and programs that are ineffective should be discarded and funding and other resources should be evaluated to determine if they are being used effectively to meet curriculum goals.

In addition to the important mechanics of a solid education, emphasis on critical thinking and exploration of the student's individual talents will assist our students in efforts to participate in the global economy. Numerous studies highlight the importance of educational quality to economic outputs. Education connects the dots between K-12 education and state and personal well being and prosperity.

South Carolina citizens who have participated in the Self Portrait seem well aware of the education funding needs and are willing to do their share to respond to the issue if monies are used to effect positive change. Even in the recent economic strife, this sentiment is strong. The citizens' are speaking and they are willing to reach into their own pockets to build a K-12 education system that allows South Carolinians to compete in the new economy. The longer we put off commitment to a world class education backed by sustainable resources, the harder it will be for South Carolina to prosper in the global marketplace.