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## S.C. national leader in public Montessori programs, new five-year study to look at effectiveness

Diette Courrage

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Montessori education has been around for more than a century, but it's only within the past decade that public schools have embraced the approach for teaching students.

South Carolina leads the country in its percentage of public Montessori schools, accounting for about 10 percent of the more than 440 nationwide.

One Greenwood, S.C.-based foundation wants to better understand the impact of Montessori education in the Palmetto State's public schools. It has launched the state's first comprehensive, five-year research study aimed at exploring that issue.

"There's a lot of anecdotal (evidence), but there's been no hard statistical analysis, and that's what we'll do," said Frank J. Wideman III, president of the Self Family Foundation, which is funding the \$370,000 study. "We are anxious to see the results."

The Self Family Foundation has been a big supporter of Montessori education. It has helped fund the state's largest public Montessori program in Laurens 55, as well as the state's only Montessori teacher education program at a public institution, Lander University in Greenwood.

The foundation sees Montessori as way of helping rural, high-poverty students become successful learners, Wideman said.

South Carolina has one of the most developed public Montessori programs in the country, and Wideman said it was time to see what kind of effect those programs are having on students.

"We want to demonstrate the efficacy of it ... and we would hope if it shows it's having a real impact on kids' learning, the state would fund more public school Montessori programs," he

said.

He is particularly interested in how Montessori options are working in the state's rural districts, because that's where the state's most impoverished and low-performing schools are, he said.

Montessori education was created by Maria Montessori, the first female in Italy to become a physician, after observing the way children learn. Montessori education encourages students to learn at their own pace and work independently, and teachers do more individual lessons rather than instructing an entire class.

Charleston has grown its Montessori public options during the past few years, and those include East Cooper Montessori Charter in Mount Pleasant, the Montessori Community School in West Ashley and programs at Hursey Elementary in North Charleston and downtown Mitchell Elementary. Berkeley County schools also started a Montessori program at Whitesville Elementary this past year.

The Riley Institute's Center for Education Policy and Leadership at Furman University will be doing the five-year study.

Researchers plan to report on their findings annually, with the first results slated for the fall of 2013. A final report will be compiled at the end of the project.

The study will have three parts: a statewide comparison of its roughly 4,500 public Montessori students to similar non-Montessori students in terms of test scores, discipline and grades; a survey of Montessori parents, teachers and school officials; and an in-depth analysis of a sample of Montessori students who are tracked for five years.