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## Will New Tech save education in South Carolina?

Doug Pardue

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(L to R) Couger New Tech freshman Tezej Rhodes, Brittany Rischer, Brendon Beach and Kaleb Gibson discuss a class project in BioLit class. The BioLit class combines Biology and English 2 together. (Brad Nettles/postandcourier.com) 9/5/13 [Buy this photo](#)

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**WALTERBORO** - Two of South Carolina's poorest school districts have teamed-up with Furman University to offer high school students a new way to master their three R's.

And as they do, Furman educators plan to use the schools as models to finally turn around the state's bottom-dwelling public education system, ranked 47th worst in the nation in high school graduations and, according to one national survey, dead last in student performance.

Don Gordon, executive director of Furman's Riley Institute, said the state must improve education if it is ever going to lift itself off the bottom rung of every ladder of success.

"It starts with education. ... Education is it. That's the key to everything," Gordon said.

It's time for the state to invest in its biggest and most neglected resource — its children, he said.

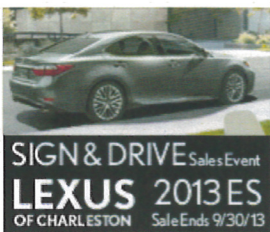
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And that investment won't even cost all that much, because the new teaching method is just that, a method, not concrete and steel.

Many schools likely could absorb much of the approximately \$90,000 annual cost by shifting priorities in existing budgets, Gordon said. "And once the method is fully implemented in any school, the cost would essentially disappear."



(L to R) Couger New Tech students Dipali Petal and Ty-Shon George work together to solve a problem in International Enterprise class at Colleton County High School. (Brad Nettles/postandcourier.com) 9/5/13

The Riley Institute already is working to expand the method to three additional school districts, which may convert some schools in 2014 or 2015.

## What is it?

At Colleton County High School in Walterboro and Clarendon County's Scott's Branch High School in Summerton, the most obvious thing about the new teaching method is the appearance and sound of the classrooms.

Students no longer sit in parallel rows of desks as their teacher lectures. Instead, they gather in small, often noisy groups. Teachers wander among them, answering questions and offering suggestions.

The purpose is to encourage students to work together to produce projects.

Tackling projects makes students use multiple academic skills and encourages them to develop new skills to accomplish the goal. It helps them understand the purpose of math, literacy and other academic skills, and teaches them how to use them in the real world.

It's called New Tech, and it's spreading across the nation as educators struggle with pervasive low achievement, high dropout rates and graduates who lack the skills necessary in today's workplace. The New Tech teaching method has been shown to produce substantially better rates of graduation and college admission than the national average, even in previously low-performing schools.

More than 120 schools in 19 states now operate on the new tech method. Thirty-nine of those schools are in seven Southern states, including the two new ones in South Carolina.

## How it works

At Colleton County High School, a class of ninth grade New Tech students recently tackled a project: Find out what happened historically on your birth date and do a report.

Three 14-year-olds working as one of several teams in the class jumped into the assignment on their computers.

Kwasi Kirkland announced to his teammates that the first successful boat passage through the Grand Canyon happened on his birthday 144 years ago.

Dipali Petal discovered that Barack Obama was re-elected President on hers.

And Ty-Shon George shook his head over the death of innocent Pakistanis in a suicide bombing on his birthday.

The teacher gave the students the seemingly simple birthday assignment shortly after classes began last month, to help get them into the flow of New Tech. But it illustrates the "project-based" New Tech teaching method.

To accomplish the project, the students had to research their birth date on computers, learn some history, and organize, produce and present a report.

In addition, the team members had to take responsibility for their individual roles in the effort, much like players in a team sport: If you don't perform your position well, you'll not only let down yourself, you'll let down your team.



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Instead of lecturing, teachers work as facilitators and coaches.

In short, the method is designed to help students compete in the future in college, business and life. They don't just learn the three R's, they learn how to think, how to work with others and how to learn new skills so they can accomplish a goal.

Ninth-grader Kirkland likes the new system because he doesn't have to just sit and listen. He gets to work on something with other kids. Best of all, he said, "I've got a computer." New Tech requires one for each student.

## 'Corridor of Shame'

The Riley Institute teamed up with the Walterboro and Summerton high schools because it wanted to show that the New Tech method can work even in high-poverty schools with limited financial resources.

The institute purposefully selected the two schools because they are in the state's notorious "Corridor of Shame," an area along Interstate 95 dominated by underfunded, poorly performing school districts.

The idea is to prove that something can be done, relatively cheaply, to improve the students' ability to achieve and be prepared for higher education or careers, Gordon said.

The two selected schools also are in districts that were among the 40 rural and poor school systems that sued the state 20 years ago to obtain equitable funding with the state's richer schools. The long-awaited final ruling on that case is still under debate by the state Supreme Court.

Almost two generations of children have passed through those school districts since the suit was filed, a time during which the state took no real steps to improve their education.

In an effort to do something about that, the Riley Institute worked with New Tech's parent organization, KnowledgeWorks, to obtain a \$2.9 million, five-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education to convert two high schools to the teaching method and begin spreading it to other districts.

The money goes mainly for the extensive training and coaching for the school's teachers, Gordon said.

The grant also covers five years of extensive, federally required evaluations conducted by independent observers from the University of Texas. In addition, the grant provides The Riley Institute with money to staff efforts to implement New Tech at the two high schools, spread it to other schools and establish New Tech-style curriculum for state colleges so that future teachers will understand the method.

The effort already has generated interest among South Carolina educators, and at least three other school districts are working with the Riley Institute and KnowledgeWorks to open New Tech high schools in 2014 or 2015.

## Why New Tech?

The institute picked the New Tech Network method because of its success record, especially with schools in rural and urban poverty areas.

The network boasts of producing schools with a graduation rate 6 percent higher than the national average, and a 9 percent greater rate of college enrollment.

The nonprofit contracts with schools to implement its teaching method, and tries to limit school size to 500 or fewer students.

It began in one high school in California in 1997 with a collaboration of educators and business and civic leaders working to enable high school students to graduate with the knowledge, skills and attributes needed to thrive in the real world in careers, advanced education and civic life.

Gordon said the Riley Institute is not wed to New Tech, but wants to see it or models similar to it

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adopted across the state, especially in struggling districts.

Two factors give Gordon and the institute hope that the "project-based-learning" method will take hold and finally begin improving the state's public education system: It works, and "this is really cheap."

## Will it work here?

In recent years, the public schools in Colleton County and Clarendon County District 1 have been showing improved student performance. Colleton High School went from "at risk" to "average" on the state's School Report Card. And Scott's Branch did even better, going from "at risk" to "excellent." The State Department of Education ranks the Clarendon District 1, where Scott's Branch is the only high school, as the second-best-performing high poverty district in the state.

Despite those improvements, administrators at both school districts said they expect to do even better with the New Tech approach.

Melissa Crosby is a former math teacher who now heads up Colleton's New Tech effort as dean of the "Cougar New Tech Entrepreneurial Academy." She said the New Tech method teaches students the way they learn best, not by rote repetition and lecture, but by tackling projects hands-on using multiple educational disciplines.

Students learn how things interconnect and that many skills are required to solve real-world problems. They see why education is important and learn to think and apply what they know.

The concept also attempts to involve the community in the educational efforts by tapping local business and other talent to show students how things operate in the real world.

For example, Crosby said, one project will be for students to map the area's natural resources. Forests make up a big part of that, and a timber buyer could be brought in to help the students understand how the resource is managed and used.

At Scott's Branch High School, Superintendent Rose Wilder said New Tech adds to her district's efforts to produce graduates who are prepared for whatever they want out of life.

"I believe that the students are actually being prepared for jobs that do not exist at this point," she said.

Some 80 freshmen at Colleton High School, a few with parental prodding, volunteered for the inaugural New Tech class at Cougar Entrepreneurial Academy, a name taken from the mascot of Colleton High's athletic teams.

The academy operates as a separate school in one wing of the high school. The plan is for it to become a full, four-year, New Tech high school by adding one new 9th grade each year as the initial class moves up to be seniors.

At the beginning of the school year in late August, Scott's Branch was not as far along as Colleton in implementing the New Tech method. The computers and special team desks had not yet arrived.

Nevertheless, physical sciences teacher Harold Ehnhuus assigned his students a New-Tech-style project.

The students selected the names of scientists, then broke up into teams to research the scientist and make a movie about the person.

"What do we know? What do we need to know?" Ehnhuus asked the students.

Many of the kids knew little about the scientist they picked; others expressed concern over how to make a movie.

"They will be learning a lot," Ehnhuus said.

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