Searching for scholastic solutions

Tim Hicks/Managing Editor

A crowd of about 50 people came to dream—realistically—for a better tomorrow—not for themselves, but for today's children, tomorrow's leaders.

The crowd was a cross section of community, school and civic leaders continuing what was begun the week before with a Nov. 3 presentation and forum by the Riley Institute of Furman University. The presentation outlined a study of the conditions of education in Barnwell County and South Carolina by the educational research group.

The Barnwell County United Way has been the coordinator for the agency for the Riley Institute forum and the strategizing session held in the Barnwell public library.

The movement to improve the educational preparedness of children in Barnwell County came from a group of people who went to Texas to see faith-based education initiatives and whether they could be applied here.

A third meeting will be Nov. 17 where the ideas from the Nov. 10 meeting will be pared down into viable, feasible plans.

"On the 17th, we take down what we dream and see what we can do with it," said the Rev. Steve Burnette, who helped moderate the second meeting.

"It's Monday night and you have a lot you could be doing, but because you love the children of Barnwell County, you are here," Burnette said. "What we are doing is beginning a time of strategic planning."

That strategic planning meant the crowd could NOD off—not sleep, but devise a list of NODs: Needs, Opportunities and Dreams. The crowd divided into about 10 tables of five people each at the end of the session. Each table listed as many NODs as they could, then reduced the list to their top 15. Each table then shared their findings with the crowd as a whole.

However, before doing this, the crowd heard reports from Robbie Eubanks, the principal at Barnwell Primary School; Terry Richardson, local attorney and one of the driving forces behind the improvement campaign and Ethel Faust, the director of First Steps child and parent education group. Lastly Lee Clamp, the youth minister at First Baptist Church, Barnwell, talked about the experiences he had mentoring a young man and getting him to raise his life's expectations.

Eubanks presented data on the problems he sees as an educator with children in his school.

Evaluation testing this fall showed that 72 percent of the children entering kindergarten had no basic early literacy skills and that 43 percent of first grade students did not reach the beginning literacy benchmarks for their grade, he said.

When school started this year, Eubanks had 40 first graders who tested as being “at-risk” in reading. Of these, 65 percent were males; 58 percent were African-Americans and 60 percent came from single parent households.

“What do you do with them? How do you serve them?” he said.

Eubanks pointed out what the other speakers would echo later: the earlier children are prepared for first grade, the more successful they are likely to be.
Educational studies of intelligence in children under the age of one year old show no differences due to racial or socioeconomic reasons. However, by the time a child enters kindergarten, achievement gaps based on these factors are evident. Early educational intervention efforts will help narrow those gaps, he said.

"From zero to one year old, every child is virtually on the same playing field. What happens between one and five?" Eubanks said.

Likewise, Terry Richardson had some sobering statistics.

Lexington County has one of the best school districts in the state, yet it has a 20 percent student dropout rate while Barnwell 45 has a dropout rate of 35 percent and Allendale has one of 70 percent, Richardson said.

"Are we going to accept a 30 to 35 percent dropout rate? Here in Barnwell, I know there is a lot of darkness in people's lives," he said.

According to statistics from the S.C. Policy Council, one of the state's largest public policy groups, South Carolina had in 2007 a graduation rate of slightly more than 50 percent, the worst in the nation. Each new dropout costs the state $3,193 or $98 million annually due to lost revenues from taxes and increased costs from Medicaid and jail expenses.

Richardson said he doesn't want to see dropout students become wards of the state.

"The unskilled person doesn't have the opportunity in our technological world," Richardson said.

Of the dropouts, 80 percent get involved in crime, he said.

If intervention is not done for students by the time they reach third grade, then their educational prospects darken, he said.

By raising the academic achievement levels of third graders in the county to their current grade level expectations, it raises their chances of graduating, Richardson said.

Children need to be reached from the time they are newborns until they are four years old when their brains are growing the most, he said.

"Human beings are our greatest capital assets. The greatest assets in Barnwell County are human assets," Richardson said. "You can see the macro effects on our society."

"You say, 'Where are the parents?' I say they are the children we were indifferent to 20 years ago. I don't blame the underprivileged parents. I want to help the underprivileged parents," he said. "I think our goal is to have these children ready by third grade," Richardson said.

Ethel Faust said Barnwell County must bring communities together to combat the county's educational challenges because policymakers see the county as one demographic.

"In Columbia, they don't look at Barnwell or Blackville but all as one unit," she said. "We are too small to look at just one school district but need to be working with our parenting programs in all three school districts. We are trying to impact the parents, especially with those with children from birth to four years old."

Faust advocates a comprehensive approach to reach families and educate the parents as well as the children, she said.
“I think what we are doing tonight is a great thing. Once we get the data back, we will know what to do,” she said.