Education victories tallied

By Diette Courrégé
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Until now, South Carolina has lacked a comprehensive resource that detailed the state's best K-12 education initiatives.

The Riley Institute at Furman University has researched and compiled this information for the last 2 1/2 years, and WhatWorksSC is available to the public as part of the second phase of the institute's public education project.

Riley Institute officials hope this will give decision-makers access to critical information to improving education. They'd like to see it used by lawmakers to shape public policy, by businesses and nonprofits to help schools, and by educators to replicate the most successful practices statewide.

"We don't know of anything like this out there," said Donald Gordon, director of the Riley Institute.

WhatWorksSC is an outgrowth of the institute's 2007 study on what educators, parents, school board members, business leaders and students felt the state needed to improve its quality of public education. Researchers found considerable consensus around certain ideas, and WhatWorksSC takes those initiatives and describes how to put them into action.

For the next eight months, the institute will release an expert series of policy papers and case studies and provide a clearinghouse of information on seven areas:

--Transforming public schools into community learning centers.

--Improving learning in the early years.

--Incentives to recruit, retain and support effective teachers;

--Successful dropout prevention strategies.

--Building strong school leadership.

--Individualizing education for students.

--Helping students overcome academic challenges.

Gordon hopes educators statewide will get involved in this project by evaluating their districts'
programs and letting the institute know about the effective ones.

Many districts rely on word-of-mouth recommendations on new programs, and WhatWorksSC will give them access to more research and information, said Paula Egelson, director of the College of Charleston's Center for Partnerships to Improve Education.

"You change the conversation in terms of how you make a decision," she said.

The two-part project has been paid for with $1 million in grants from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

The first issue tackled by WhatWorksSC is transforming schools into community learning centers, or helping them to offer academic, extracurricular, medical and financial services for students and their families before, during, and after school.

Egelson wrote the accompanying policy paper that describes why this issue is vital, and he cites areas in the state where the concept already is working.

The Riley Institute is leading a statewide coalition on community learning centers, and that group plans to develop a guide for those interested in creating these centers.

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