

The Post and Courier

What Works in S.C. schools

Wednesday, April 21, 2010

With state test scores rising only slightly and district budgets shrinking dramatically, South Carolina's public schools can clearly benefit from the timely research of Riley Institute at Furman University.

The institute, named for former South Carolina Gov. and former U.S. Education Secretary Dick Riley, is compiling information about educational programs that have proven successful in the state's schools and producing a guide on how to replicate them.

The effort builds on the institute's 2007 study, which found wide public agreement on public education's importance to the state's future. This new phase, called WhatWorksSC, will be issued in increments, documenting what works (and what doesn't). It should save districts money and time.

For instance, the Charleston County School District recently announced early results of special new initiatives to address troubling rates of illiteracy among students. The program's goal is to improve students' reading by at least two grade levels in one year. The initial outcomes show nearly a third of the students in the program making gains of more than one grade in reading from fall to winter. District Chief Academic Officer Doug Gepford said he is pleased in some respects but will make adjustments in others. The Charleston district's experience can help instruct similar initiatives across the state.

And WhatWorksSC can help lawmakers maximize the positive impact of education funding — a particularly critical challenge with continuing shortfalls in state revenues forcing painful cuts in education funding.

The research also can show businesses and non-profits the way toward more effective private-sector support for public education. School partners should be more willing to lend a financial hand if they are more confident their dollars will make a difference.

Over the next eight months, the institute will release policy papers and case studies in seven areas, including early education, transforming public schools into community learning centers, recruiting and retaining effective teachers and dropout prevention.

Every car manufacturer says it has the best car for you. But you wouldn't buy one without a test drive and some more research.

Education decisions deserve at least that same scrutiny. The Riley Institute is to be commended for

4/26/2010

The Post and Courier - What Works in ...

providing a resource to help school officials learn what works to improve public education in our state.

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