Schools are the subject

BY ANNA B. MITCHELL | STAFF

SOUTH CAROLINA educators now have a one-stop shop of information on the best practices in public schools.

Furman University’s Riley Institute has launched a Web site – www.riley-institute.org/education – that examines seven strategies for making public education better in this state. In an initiative called WhatWorksSC, the Institute’s education policy center has taken what South Carolina citizens want and expect in K-12 public education and dug up examples of communities doing it exceptionally well.

The site this month is spotlighting the use of public schools as community learning centers – with expert reports, in-depth case studies and a clearinghouse of examples from across the state posted at the site.

The center’s project director, Courtenay Williams, said she is counting on educators to nominate programs for the clearinghouse.

Furman Web site will serve as resource for what works

Next month, the site will feature early-childhood education followed by building school leadership in June, dropout prevention in September, teacher recruiting and retention in October, individualizing student education in November and overcoming academic challenges in December.

These strategies came from a sweeping study of public education in South Carolina conducted in 2005 and 2006.

Researchers combed through 3,000 hours of discussion forums with students, teachers, parents and community members at sites all over the state and picked up on common themes everywhere they went, Williams said. WhatWorksSC ties

> those strategies to existing initiatives and explains how they developed, who was involved and what they cost.

The community learning centers piece this month features two schools – Anderson’s Nevitt Forest Elementary and Forts Pond Elementary in Lexington. Both schools have high poverty rates and the social, medical and academic problems that go with it.

Nevitt Forest has created a school day that starts at 7:15 a.m. and doesn’t wrap up until late afternoon. Teachers there have flexible schedules, and the school hosts regular community meetings in the evening. Forts Pond is preparing to house a nurse practitioner and dental hygienist on campus for students and their families because of the dearth of such medical services in the largely rural area.

Other schools mentioned in the community schools clearinghouse include Spartanburg High (which is sharing a baseball field and park with the city), Spartanburg’s Pine Street Elementary (where walking and biking to school increased to 9 percent after sidewalk improvements and crossing guards were added) and the community of Johnsonville (where a nurse practitioner provides primary care out of a high-school gym).

Several Greenville area schools have ongoing community outreach programs and shared facilities that fit the bill for such learning centers to a greater or lesser degree, said Brook Culcasure, research director for the WhatWorksSC project.

The A.J. Whittemberg school downtown will partner starting in the fall with the Salvation Army on a shared campus to provide after-school care and wellness programs for parents; Stone Academy on North Main Street shares and helps maintain a park with the city of Greenville that students use during the day; Simpsonville Elementary’s P.E. teacher has recruited scores of parents heretofore waiting on kids in their idling cars to walk around the school’s track.

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