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New award to recognize innovation in SC schools

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A new award in South Carolina aims to spark innovation in the state's public schools.

The WhatWorksSC Award for Excellence is meant to recognize effective education programs in hopes they'll be copied or expanded statewide, organizers told The Associated Press this week.

The first winner of the annual award will be announced next Wednesday. The three finalists are a reading program at Clinton Elementary in Lancaster, a Clemson University program that trains elementary teachers in helping struggling readers and a state scholarship program meant to attract the state's brightest to the classroom.

The award stems from discussions earlier this year between members of the state Board of Education, state Chamber of Commerce, Furman University's Riley Institute and South Carolina Future Minds.

The winner will receive \$10,000 cash from BB&T, to be used to enhance the program.

It's about the larger community coming together and saying we can help, said Trip DuBard, executive director of South Carolina Future Minds. While people can disagree on specific education issues, "we can all agree innovation in schools is needed," he said.

He hopes his nonprofit, whose mission is to get private businesses involved in public education, can eventually offer grants for expanding the winning ideas. The winning prize may also increase.

"I'm bound and determined to get change to remove barriers to innovation," said South Carolina BB&T president Mike Brenan, also a member of the state education board.

The award evolved from a study the Riley Institute released in 2007, after 3,000 hours of focus group interviews involving more than 800 residents statewide who were asked their ideas for improving education. It was funded by a \$600,000 grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

The foundation provided a follow-up grant of \$400,000 to research programs that effectively improve teaching and learning in South Carolina public schools, and distribute the findings. The award helps do that, said Riley Institute project director Courtenay Williams.

The Riley Institute chose 10 of the roughly 45 data-proven programs in its files that really stood out as semifinalists, and a committee of education and business leaders narrowed that to three, Williams said.

The finalists of the first prize:

-Clemson University's Reading Recovery Training Center certifies teachers in an early intervention program that provides one-on-one help to first-graders struggling to read and write. The center provides intensive, yearlong training to master's degree teachers in the primary grades. Those teachers can then train teachers in their local or surrounding districts.

Last year, there were 250 Reading Recovery-certified teachers working with students in 24 of the state's 86 districts. Beyond the one-on-one help of that specific program for first-graders, the intervention teachers also use their training to help students in small groups and other grades. But their numbers have dwindled amid the economic crisis, as cash-strapped districts cut positions of teachers who work with students outside the regular classroom, said center director C.C. Bates.

The center is working to expand the training to regular classroom teachers and spread training through technology.

"When readers are struggling they have very individual needs," Bates said. "The strategies one child needs may vary greatly from what another child needs. It's a much-needed safety net. The cost savings comes in getting these children back on grade level. We feel the training is invaluable."

-Clinton Elementary in Lancaster, an all-minority school where nearly every student qualifies for free- or reduced-price meals and nearly one-third have special needs, has seen a 23-percentage-point increase on end-of-year reading tests over the last few years. The principal attributes that to an innovative program that lets students pick what they want to read.

The American Reading Company program involves students reading at least 30 minutes at school and 30 minutes at home daily by themselves. Students pick books from 300-book libraries that rotate among classrooms to keep selections fresh. Books are arranged by difficulty in colored buckets, and students are constantly evaluated to know their level and which bucket to reach into.

Students take the books home with them, and parents are asked to sign off that they have read.

"The books are supposed to be fast, fun and easy. If not, then kids are not into reading them. Kids get to choose their own books," said Principal Rachel Ray.

She said the start-up cost of \$50,000 three years ago, which paid for the pre-sorted books and training, was well worth it.

Students receive medals for reading milestones, which Ray says many proudly wear for weeks.

"Students can tell me their favorite author, their favorite genre. ... It's really and truly changed our whole culture," Ray said. "More parents are involved in their children's lives than ever before. Never before did we ever have parents to call and ask questions about homework."

-South Carolina Teaching Fellows is administered by the state Center for Educator, Recruitment, Retention and Advancement.

The Legislature launched the rigorous program in 1999 to address teacher shortfalls. It calls for up to 175 students to be chosen annually for scholarships of up to \$6,000 a year for four years, involving them in intensive training and required community service projects beyond that of other education majors. Only 11 public and private colleges in the state participate.

To ensure South Carolina's children benefit, fellows must teach in a public school for at least as many years as they received the scholarship, or pay back the money. Legislators and educators praise the program as encouraging the state's brightest high school students to not only become a teacher, but to stay in South Carolina.

Budget cuts have led to smaller scholarship amounts for fewer students. In 2010, 122 students were selected to receive \$5,000 a year. This year, 159 students were chosen for the scholarships, also at \$5,000 a year.

According to a report released by the center earlier this year, students in the program are more likely than other education majors to graduate and stay in the classroom. It reports that 85 percent of all loan-satisfied fellows were still teaching.