

US education secretary at Scott's Branch School

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U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan and top state officials visited a rural South Carolina high school Friday to tout a multimillion dollar science and technology grant, and took questions from students concerned about the high cost of college education and the competition they face in a high-tech world.

Duncan, U.S. Rep. James Clyburn, former South Carolina Gov. and U.S. Education Secretary Richard Riley visited with about 75 juniors and seniors from Scott's Branch High School in a community that spawned a key legal case in the fight for school desegregation a half-century ago.

The men came to talk up a nearly \$3 million grant that is going to Scott's Branch and another high school in Walterboro, S.C. It is designed to help teachers and students use computers, technology and group programs to study science, technology, math and engineering. Teachers have already begun training this year in the new curriculum and it will be introduced to students at Scott's Branch next year, school officials said.

The grant from the U.S. Department of Education was awarded to the educational nonprofit known as KnowledgeWorks, which is helping the schools introduce the new approach. Students are supposed to be better prepared for college and work environments and get college credit before leaving high school, Duncan said.

"We want to turn this into the 'Corridor of Innovation,'" Duncan said. It was a play on the term "Corridor of Shame," which has been applied to the schools along the I-95 corridor in South Carolina. The region picked up the nickname from an hour-long documentary about poor school districts where some schools were in derelict condition.

The students had more immediate concerns.

"What tips do you have for us, to help us be one step ahead of our competition?" asked 17-year-old senior Courtney Manning, who said she wants to be a neonatal nurse and plans to attend the University of South Carolina-Upstate.

"What about the cost of college tuition? Do you ever see it decreasing?" queried Hope Junious, 17, another senior who said she intends to study biology at Clemson University.

The men urged the students to seek as much financial aid as possible, to stick with any kind of post-high school education they can find - whether in four-year, two-year, or technical and trade schools - and to keep their dreams alive.

"It's important for you to believe in yourself," said Riley, who has been backing efforts to reform education in the state through the Riley Foundation at Furman University.

"Don't let anybody tell you, you can't do it," added Clyburn. "Remember the South Carolina state motto: 'While I breathe, I hope.' Live by it."

Duncan told the students that economic need shouldn't be a bar to them getting an education, saying that over the next 10 years there will be \$40 billion in federal grants available to those in financial need.

"That's right. "B" as in billion," Duncan said. "If you are concerned about money for college, don't let anyone tell you that you can't take that next step." He said his department was trying to work with universities to keep tuition in check and to make sure schools offer accurate information so students know what their costs will be over several years, and what the graduation rates truly are.

Manning said afterward she was pleased the officials made the visit, and stressed the importance of science education. "My sister has cerebral palsy, so that's why I want to become a nurse and help people."

Junious said she hopes to use her science education to become a nurse, or surgeon.

"I have family members who had cancer, and diabetes. I want to be able to find a cure," she said. "But I am concerned about how much it will cost. I hope they are able to keep that tuition down."

The U.S. Supreme Court's landmark 1954 decision declaring segregation unconstitutional is rooted in Scott's Branch.

It began in 1947 with black parents in Summerton wanting a school bus for their children, who walked for miles as a white bus rode past. Briggs v. Elliott was filed in 1950 challenging segregation and became the first of five lawsuits combined before the nation's high court.