By JAMIE SELF — jself@thestate.com

SUMMERTON — Ninth-graders at Scott’s Branch High School here began the challenge of designing a poetry cafe Wednesday by doing something expected in the business world but not so much in the classroom.

They signed a contract obligating team members to complete certain tasks and established the team’s process for agreeing on the project’s details, including decorations for the cafe and what food to serve.
"How are you going to end up coming to a consensus?" teacher Detrice Brown asked one group, when they said they would require unanimous agreement for all decisions.

Brown asked them to consider "majority rule" instead, especially since disagreements already were brewing. "I don't think we should have collard greens because I don't even like collard greens," one team member said.

The contract is just one component of a new approach to teaching and learning that the Clarendon 1 high school is rolling out this year.

Called the New Tech model, the approach is based on three principles: project-based learning, a pervasive use of technology and a culture of trust, respect and responsibility among students and teachers.

Two S.C. schools — Scott's Branch and Colleton County High School's Cougar New Tech Entrepreneurial Academy in Walterboro — have joined 130 schools nationwide that have adopted the New Tech education model.

The New Tech programs were made possible by a $2.9 million federal education grant that went to the KnowledgeWorks Foundation, in partnership with the Riley Institute at Furman University.

KnowledgeWorks' New Tech Network is a nonprofit that contracts with school districts to create New Tech schools. The network provides training to teachers and administrators, and links schools through an online network where they can share project ideas.

Students in New Tech schools are graded on knowledge and thinking, oral and written communication skills, collaboration and what Lydia Dobyns, executive director of the New Tech Network, calls "agency — the ability to be your own advocate, know how to respond in unknown situations."

Classroom projects are designed to teach academic standards while also exposing students to real-world problems they have to work together to solve, she said.

"Everything that we do ... is focused on understanding what a high-school graduate needs to know and needs to know how to do," Dobyns said.

'You've got to engage kids'

The two S.C. schools are making the transition to the New Tech education model as state business and education leaders talk increasingly about the need to better prepare students for the challenges they will face after graduation.

Donald Gordon, director of the Riley Institute, said New Tech, developed with input from businesses in Napa, Calif., increases the rate of students graduating from high school and going to college.

"A lot of programs out there have begun to understand that if you're going to keep kids in schools and knock down the dropout rate, you've got to engage kids," Gordon said.

Starting that effort with schools along the Interstate 95 corridor, called the "Corridor of Shame" for its high poverty and low-performing schools, was a priority, Gordon said. Serving districts that met federal poverty definitions also was a requirement of the grant.

The "Corridor of Shame" reputation is one Scott's Branch principal Gwen Harris said is difficult to shake, but one she wants to put to rest. The school has improved, she said. "It's a shame that people don't come to see what's happening in the schools."

U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan and U.S. Rep. Jim Clyburn, D-S.C., paid a visit to the school early last year to announce the coming transition to the New Tech model — one they said would help the area become a "Corridor of Innovation."

Seven or eight more schools around the state are moving toward the New Tech model or will be considering it over the next two years, Gordon said.
Mixed reviews

While Colleton County is providing a New Tech option to ninth-graders this year, all Scott’s Branch students eventually will be learning through the project-based approach.

Only a couple of weeks into school, not all the ninth-graders at Scott’s Branch are sold on the new model.

Skylar Harvin said she prefers a lecture format. A member of the Junior ROTC and an aspiring biomedical engineer, Harvin said she learns better reading on her own and listening to teachers.

Under the new learning format, students have “too many projects,” she said.

Classmate Joseph Dingle sees pros and cons to the new system.

While the projects are labor-intensive, he said he likes being able to submit assignments online. He also likes being connected to his classmates and teachers online, so he can ask questions and get answers without having to wait until the next school day.

Algebra teacher Lottie Fleming said she was skeptical at first about whether the approach would work in conveying what, for example, an algebraic expression is without including a lecture and going through numerous examples with students.

But she said she has seen students learn the concept through applying it by solving a real-world problem.

Students in her class recently completed a project planning a celebration, including catering and invitations. They had to use algebra to determine cost.

The project-based learning challenged students to take on responsibilities they had never had in seeking price quotes from caterers and presenting information to their peers, Fleming said.

When students get confused, they look for help online or to each other, she said. For students who need additional help, teachers hold workshops to review concepts, she said.

‘More responsibility’

Some students are pushing back against the New Tech system, which requires them to get online, read their assignments and get to work, before receiving any verbal direction from instructors, teachers say.

“A lot of it is giving them more responsibility, and they don’t like that,” said Harold Ehnhuus, who teaches science at Scott’s Branch. “But by the time they’re seniors, they’ll be ready for the world,” he added.

While teachers and students are undergoing a transition to the very different approach to teaching and learning, Principal Harris said she is confident the new approach will work.

Some graduates of Scott’s Branch go onto college or get jobs, but many right now are “not able to make that leap,” Harris said. “I know for a fact that in four years, this class is going to be ready for the world of college and the world of work.”

Harris said the students will graduate prepared to “go into Continental Tires, go into Boeing, and get those higher paying salaries.”

Reach Self at (803) 771-8658.