New education model could revolutionize classrooms statewide, experts say

It doesn't take long to notice there's something different in the ninth-grade classrooms at Scott's Branch High School – a school located in the Interstate 95 corridor that earned the moniker "Corridor of Shame" for its high poverty and low-performing schools.

The desks are not in parallel rows. Rather than sit silently, students work in small, often noisy groups. Teachers do not lecture; instead, they wander the room and offer guidance as students work to solve problems.

"For those who don't know what's going on, it looks like cacophony," said Don Gordon, executive director of Furman...
University’s Riley Institute.

Instead, it’s a sign of a new trend in education nationwide – project-based learning – as educators and business and industry leaders try to address low academic achievement, dropouts and graduates who lack the skills necessary to make it in the 21st-century workplace.

Greenville is right in the middle of the change.

The New Tech method

Scott’s Branch High in Summerton and Colleton High in Walterboro are the state’s first two New Tech schools. Furman and the Riley Institute worked with KnowledgeWorks, New Tech’s nonprofit parent organization, to win a $2.9 million, five-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education to bring New Tech to South Carolina.

The New Tech method emphasizes project-based learning, one-to-one computing and a culture of trust, respect and responsibility, said Courtenay Nantz, South Carolina i3 Project Coordinator for the Riley Institute.

Greenville County’s J.L. Mann High School will begin a New Tech “school within a school” in the fall.

NEXT High, a charter school expected to open on the old Hollingsworth on Wheels campus in fall 2015, is not associated with the New Tech network, but will also have a project-based, technology-focused curriculum.

“Public education is not broken, it’s outdated,” said Zach Eikenberry, the school’s planning coordinator. “We want to prepare students for life after school.”

Mann Principal Charles Mayfield noted that in addition to academic skills, today’s employers and higher education institutions are looking for high school graduates who can work in teams, solve problems, think creatively and get along with others.

“Education is the slowest to change,” he said. “We’re still working in a model that was developed 100 years ago in the industrial revolution. Students need basic skills, but that’s more than just knowing the subject. There are very few jobs where people just work by themselves.”

Both New Tech and NEXT have similar goals, Nantz said.

“They both teach kids in a way that makes the most sense to kids,” she said. “And they both involve the community.”

New Tech is used in 131 schools in 23 states and Australia.

“If we’re going to keep kids in school, we’ve got to engage them,” Gordon said. “If you get kids engaged, they’ll learn the subject matter. With the New Tech method, they can see how to apply what they’re learning. They won’t have to ask, ‘Why do I have to learn this?’ and even if they do ask, we’ll have a better answer for them than ‘Because.’”

Real-world applications

New Tech’s method changes the way teachers work, requiring that they receive a year of professional development training before the first New Tech students arrive. Teachers get a total of 600 hours of professional development over the first 4 1/2 to five years, Nantz said. A network allows participating schools to share lesson plans.

“Project-based learning changes the answers to questions,” said DeeDee Washington, Greenville County Schools’ associate superintendent for academics. “Students have the opportunity for a voice. Students have the opportunity for choice. It requires a lot of planning and integration across content areas. Teachers become facilitators rather than dispensers of knowledge.”

Projects require students to use multiple disciplines. For instance, one project could have students designing an amusement park in an earthquake zone in Japan and then writing a book about it and selling it, Gordon said. Students would have to use research skills, physics, math and English.
Another might require students to put together a fantasy sports team on a budget, a project that would incorporate physical education, economics and math.

Nantz said a New Tech school in Bloomington, Ind., worked with the health system there to improve the hospital’s angioplasty procedure. Some of those improvements have been implemented at the hospital.

“Almost all of the projects students work on can be applied in the real world,” she said.

To combat the problem of some students slacking off while others do all the work, students sign social contracts outlining what parts of the project they’ll be responsible for doing, Mayfield said.

If somebody is not pulling his weight, the other team members let him know. If that student continues to shirk his role, he can be fired from the team and he must do the project on his own without the benefit of the work already done by the group.

“It’s just like in business. If you get fired from a job, you don’t get to take the work you’ve done with you. It stays with that company,” Mayfield said. “Often times in some group project, you’ll have a person who is not pulling their weight. They’re responsible for that. But so are the others because they’re allowing that person to be slack.”

Proven success

Gordon said one of the reasons the Riley Institute chose New Tech is because it has a proven track record.

New Tech schools have a 97 percent graduation rate and 98 percent of their students are accepted into two- or four-year colleges.

“The Riley Institute does not do anything that is not data-based,” Gordon said. “This program has data to prove it works. In every case, schools are cutting the number of students dropping out and increasing the number of those going to college. Those students who do go to college are more likely to graduate from college. New Tech has produced proven results over time.”

Mayfield said Mann’s New Tech program would start with 150 freshmen in the fall. The school will add students each year until it has 600 students in the program, 150 in each grade. If the school gets more applicants for the program than it has spots, a lottery will likely be held, he said.

Mayfield said while many schools were struggling academically before the change, Mann is not.

“We think we’re a high-performing school, but this can help us get even higher,” he said. “We are looking at what kind of student we ultimately want to produce and how we can get there.”

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