S.C. education stakeholders to participate in field study of public education in Finland
Twenty-three South Carolina education stakeholders will visit Finland's public schools this month to gain insight into critical challenges in public education in South Carolina.

The trip, which will be documented by South Carolina ETV, will take place Oct. 14-21. A complete list of the participants in the field study is available online.

Three of the stakeholders traveling to Finland will share takeaways from the field study at the Riley Institute's WhatWorksSC celebration on Tuesday, Oct. 30 at the Columbia Metropolitan Convention Center. They are Russell Booker, superintendent of Spartanburg School District Seven; Rep. Neal Collins (R-Pickens); and Susie Shannon, president and CEO of the S.C. Council on Competitiveness.

The WhatWorksSC event is open to the public. Tickets are $25 and can be purchased online at riley.furman.edu.

“As we face South Carolina's education challenges, such as our teacher shortage, we must learn from others who have worked to address similar challenges,” said Ansel Sanders, president and CEO of Public Education Partners. “Though Finland is different from South Carolina in that it is a relatively homogeneous country with little poverty, the Finnish approach to education, as well as how the Finns developed this system, offers some useful examples that are applicable in and transferrable to South Carolina.”
Michael Svec, professor of education at Furman, said Finland’s approach to teacher education is relevant in South Carolina, where public schools face a growing teacher shortage.

“Furman has offered a five-year program for teachers in training since 2000, an approach that significantly reduces the rate at which teachers leave the profession during their first five years in the classroom,” Svec said.

Svec said that Finnish teachers and schools have a lot of autonomy, and the national curriculum guidelines allow room for creativity. Every child has access to early childhood education, and children start first grade at age seven. There are far fewer standardized tests, and those that are administered are not tied to accountability. Schools have shorter school days and 90 minutes of recess each day.

Finland’s public education system consistently performs at the top of international rankings, with the great majority of students going on to either academic or vocational post-secondary education.

“The sharing of information will not be one-sided,” said Don Gordon, executive director of the Riley Institute at Furman. “South Carolina’s growing success in community schools that support rural communities will be of interest to Finnish educators. They’ll also be interested in our growing network of project-based learning schools because they are transitioning to similar methods of teaching.”

The field study will take place over seven days in Helsinki and Oulu. The group will meet with policymakers, university faculty responsible for teacher preparation, school leaders, teachers, students and family members.

Furman University’s Department of Education is committed to preparing educators who are scholars and leaders. The department’s comprehensive bachelor’s degree (with optional M.A.) teacher preparation programs equip students to be dynamic educators and leaders. Students receive unmatched experiences, starting freshman year, in local classrooms under the mentorship of Furman faculty members and veteran teachers.

Public Education Partners collaborates with the community, educators, and elected officials to support and strengthen public education and student achievement in Greenville County Schools. Through this collaboration, Public Education Partners fosters research-based innovative initiatives in public schools and serves as the bridge and broker between schools and the community to better ensure all students graduate ready for college, careers, and civic engagement.

Furman University’s Richard W. Riley Institute broadens student and community perspectives about issues critical to South Carolina’s progress. It builds and engages present and future leaders, creates and shares data-supported information about the state’s core challenges, and links the leadership body to sustainable solutions. It is committed to nonpartisanship in all it does and to a rhetoric-free, facts-based approach to change.

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