



OPINION EXTRA

Not your daddy's schools: How these innovators are transforming SC classrooms

BY RICHARD W. RILEY AND SPECIAL TO THE STATE'S EDITORIAL BOARD

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COLUMBIA, SC — All around South Carolina, remarkable things are happening in public schools.

At New Tech schools in the I-95 corridor and elsewhere, students are working in self-regulated teams, where they dive into real-world problems that bring together multiple academic areas and foster team work, critical thinking and communications skills.

In four middle schools in Greenville County's White Horse community, an innovative data dashboard flags students with early signs of trouble with academics, attendance or behavior. In response, a team of educators devises an intervention plan, guides the students toward appropriate supports and monitors progress.

At the state's 44 public Montessori schools, preschoolers and elementary schoolers in multi-age classes set their own learning agendas and activities, taking responsibility for their education and fostering cooperation and respect for others.

Nineteen schools in Charleston County, students learn at their own pace, working with teachers to choose learning experiences that connect to their individual interests and progressing forward only when they've proved mastery of each of the standards-based learning objectives.

Imagine if we built a brand-new school system for South Carolina

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Dick Riley

Across South Carolina, high school juniors and seniors are doing apprenticeships in clean manufacturing, nursing, pharmacy, IT and other fields. They will graduate with professional credentials, workplace skills and contacts — and a high school diploma that often includes college credits.

A lot of work is being done to spread these innovations. Education Superintendent Molly Spearman is committed to systems that help each student meet the “21st Century Profile of the South Carolina Graduate,” which spells out the knowledge, skills and life and career characteristics our high school graduates need. Furman University’s Riley Institute helps implement evidence-based programs and measure the results. CERRA promotes the recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers. And TransformSC helps schools and districts with the difficult work of transforming teaching and learning.

Public education in South Carolina has made a lot of progress since we passed the Education Improvement Act in 1984. Despite a steady rise in poverty in the state and the rapid changes brought about by the knowledge economy, our high school graduation rate has climbed steadily over the past decade to almost 83 percent. This year, our students scored above the national average on SAT and exceeded the nation on eight of the top 10 subjects of Advanced Placement exams, while the number of minority students participating in them grew by 12 percent.



EVEN AS WE STRIVE FOR MORE AND BETTER, WE SHOULD RECOGNIZE THE GREAT WORK THAT IS BEING DONE.

There still is much work to do. One particularly compelling need is to close the achievement gap between children from lower-income homes and middle-class homes. But even as we strive for more and better, we should recognize the great work that is being done and the many accomplishments of the students, families, teachers, principals, administrators and community members who are making it happen.

Today the Riley Institute, in conjunction with S.C. Future Minds, recognizes just a few of these programs and people. At the 7th annual Dick and Tunky Riley WhatWorksSC Award for Excellence luncheon, Reps. Rita Allison, R-Spartanburg, and James Smith, D-Richland, will discuss public education with S.C. ETV president and CEO Linda O’Byron, and the award finalists will be celebrated.

All of the 2017 finalists — Innovate! at A.J. Whittenberg, Camp iRock and Make Summer Count — happen to be school-community afterschool programs, but serve different constituencies and needs. Each illustrates the improvement that can result when families, schools and community partners work together.

Our public schools are the wellspring of hope and opportunity for us, our children and our children’s children. I invite you — family members, community organizations, businesses, civic and faith groups — to join in Tuesday’s celebration, and I urge you to take part in the lives and success of your community’s schools.

Volunteer to help with homework, serve as a career mentor, join the PTA, help beautify schools, sponsor field trips, support student community service projects, assist with fundraising, serve on the school board — the opportunities are endless, and the rewards are enormous.

Mr. Riley served two terms as S.C. governor and was U.S. education superintendent under President Bill Clinton; the Riley Institute at Furman University is named in his honor. Contact him at dick.riley@nelsonmullins.com.

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