

WhatWorksSC

case study

About WhatWorksSC

In 2005 and 2006, with a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Riley Institute at Furman conducted the largest ever study of public education in South Carolina. The study yielded key strategies for creating world-class schools in South Carolina, derived from 3000 focus group hours with more than 800 stakeholders.

WhatWorksSC ties those strategies to a number of initiatives to serve as a resource for educators, students, the community and policy makers in South Carolina. Products include case studies, which drill down on innovative initiatives from across the state; a series of expert papers that further explore the findings of the study; and an evolving clearinghouse of programs and initiatives that exemplify the study's essential key strategies for improving public schools.

"The monthly workshops have been very instrumental in the total improvement of our center and the staff. These workshops have been a learning experience for the teachers and me and we cannot wait to get back to the center and try out some of the activities with our children."

— Mildred Smokes,
Director/4-K Teacher

Improving Learning in the Early Years



Bedford's Stay 'N Play Childcare Center located in Barnwell, South Carolina

The child care center was in an older residential neighborhood in Barnwell County, a rural area located in the midlands of South Carolina, in a home that had been converted into classrooms. Primarily a center for African American children, while the environment was warm and nurturing, the center was in need of more materials, fresh paint, stimulating toys and books, and organized learning centers. Even though its staff was caring and welcoming, the center was still lacking the resources and materials it needed to provide its young students with the best possible learning environment.

This was before the implementation of the Clemson-Barnwell First Steps project in 2006. Now, the same warm and nurturing environment is found in the center, but an additional 4K state-funded classroom has been added, the facility has been upgraded with new stimulating learning centers, the staff has enrolled in and completed numerous hours of staff professional development, and the center has applied for and received new grants for continual improvement. One will now find brightly painted classrooms, developmentally appropriate pictures and posters on the walls, more items to stimulate cognitive, language, and physical development, and a new floor on which the toddlers can crawl and spread their wings.

Barnwell County is representative of the many poor, rural communities in South Carolina that have experienced generational poverty and high numbers of school dropouts and single-family households. There are many Head Start classrooms in Barnwell County because there are so many poor children and families who qualify for Head Start services. Additionally, there remains a sense of segregation, with some childcare centers serving almost entirely white families and others serving African American families.

The Clemson-Barnwell First Steps project, a collaborative project between Clemson University and Barnwell County's First Steps, strives to target these childcare centers that serve primarily poor families and to transform them into stimulating learning centers. The project includes components such as technical assistance and site visits, professional development for teachers, and certified training. The overarching goal of the project is to improve the learning environments in the area's preschools and to test a model that can be utilized to improve early learning in rural settings that serve primarily low-income children.



Week of the Young Child recognizes people, programs and policies helping to build better futures for children

Extensive evaluation has taken place, and convincing results have been found that speak to the effectiveness of the project and model. Over the past three years, the average Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) score has increased in a majority of classrooms that have been engaged in the project. Eleven of 14 classrooms (79%) studied demonstrated improvement in the overall measures of the ECERS. The ECERS is a validated and reliable environmental assessment tool developed at the University of North Carolina. It is used widely nationally and internationally to assess early learning environments for the purpose of self-study and improvement. The goal was to take baseline ECERS data from the participating centers and classrooms and to support their self-study, plans of study, and improvement over time. Thus, the ECERS has served as a helpful tool in this project and has provided annual evidence-based indicators from which individual plans for improvement were developed for each center and classroom.

"I love talking about the children and learning what to do to enhance each child...going to each workshop and learning new ways of doing things is a true meaning of helping the children...I love being there for the children, to assist, share, and love and to nurture them through their failures and their accomplishments."

— Cornelia Carter,
4-K Assistant Teacher



Mrs. Smokes helps the children tie-dye tshirts

In addition to the measurable outcomes, a sense of community has developed among the early childhood teachers and directors within the county, and a monthly directors' networking group has been established. State-approved professional development workshops are funded and implemented through this project, and at least ten are provided each year. Most of these workshops are at capacity when conducted, and the Barnwell Library provides space for many of the workshops.

In terms of resources needed, the annual cost is approximately \$70,000 per year. Funding sources include private donors, Clemson University, and the Barnwell Office of First Steps.

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