

South Carolina 'tour d'education' draws crowds

I didn't plan it this way, but the last four weeks turned into a personal "tour d'education," running from the continuing efforts around the state to pull public education up by its bootstraps to exciting developments in higher education.



Bill
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My first "gig" came as a media participant in a Charleston County School Board candidates' forum held a week before Election Day. This one was a two-hour forum organized by the League of Women Voters, hosted by Burke High School and televised by WCIV Channel 4.

My role was limited to asking a few questions intermixed with those from the audience and an editor from *The Post and Courier*. I chose to focus on the Education and Economic Development Act and the issue of parental involvement in K-12 education.

In the days that followed, I heard a good bit of feedback about the broadcast. The candidates' comments were described by one viewer as "a real eye-opener," and others made it clear that the forum really helped them make informed decisions about the candidates.

After the election results were in, most voters I spoke with thought the outcome was a good one overall, and they were hopeful that the board will be less contentious and more productive than in the recent past.

My view is that this particular school board election really stood out in the degree to which voters paid close attention to the candidates and their qualifications. They took advantage of the various sources of information about the candidates available prior to the election and made their choices carefully.

A big "thank you" is due those who organized and presented the various candidate forums as well as those in the media who made the effort to get the word out about the qualifications and positions of the candidates. Democracy works better when people are engaged, and this was one election when apathy took a holiday.

The view from Innovista

The following week, I paid a visit to the

University of South Carolina and had the opportunity to meet with USC president Andrew Sorenson. I left vowing to spend more time in Columbia and on the USC campus soaking up the excitement of new developments there, including the ambitious "Innovista" plan to transform 500 hundred acres of downtown Columbia into "a mixture of world-class, high-density, high tech workplaces, medium-density housing, waterfront recreational opportunities and abundant green space, all combined with retail and commerce...."

The Innovista project has a real "WOW!" factor going for it, blending bricks and mortar with a plan that is both ambitious and visionary. To find out more, visit innovista.sc.edu on the Web.

How to really put parents in charge

That same week I made a return trip to Columbia in response to an invitation to participate in an event hosted by New Carolina, South Carolina's Council on Competitiveness. The topic was "Getting Parents Involved in Education." A crowd of around 300 from 40 counties around the state attended the event.

Speakers from business, government and education didn't pull any punches about the challenges we face with K-12 education in our state, but they also shared many inspiring true stories about how people on the front lines of education are taking innovative steps to engage parents whose own limited education and economic status makes them uneasy about coming to school and interacting with teachers and administrators.

The big takeaway for me from the event was that tens of thousands of truly dedicated people across our state are doing the hard "down in the trenches" work to improve public education through parental involvement, and they are sharing best practices and nationally recognized models in pursuit of that goal.

My one disappointment was that few people attended from the Charleston region. I think it's important to build more communication links and personal ties between business and education leaders in our region and the rest of the state, and that's something we need to work on.

The Lowcountry Graduate Center turns five

The next stop on my tour was the celebra-

tion of the fifth anniversary of the Lowcountry Graduate Center, an innovative South Carolina success story in higher education. The LGC was created to ensure that high-tech knowledge workers in our region could further their education without leaving the area. This great collaborative effort draws on the academic resources of the Medical University of South Carolina, College of Charleston, The Citadel, USC and Clemson.

There were many hands at work building the LGC, starting with the efforts of two of the region's most venerable political warhorses: Harry Hallman and Arthur Ravenel Jr. They were able to garner the support needed to get things started, and many other players came on the field after they fired the starting gun. Most noteworthy, perhaps, is LGC executive director Rew "Skip" Godow, who took the helm and stayed there through the early and sometime difficult startup period. Skip probably earned a few purple hearts along the way, but it's great to see how far the program has come in five years.

Building a foundation

The last stop on my whirlwind "tour d'education" was the Charleston Education Foundation's annual summit held at Trident Technical College. Interest was high—the event was sold out!

Keynote speakers included Don Herriott, the Roche Carolina pharmaceutical executive from Florence. Herriott was one of the movers and shakers who pushed for passage of the Education and Economic Development Act, one of many business leaders in our state who've made a commitment to public education and stayed with it year after year.

Dr. Karen Woodward, superintendent of the Lexington County School District, was the other keynote speaker. She reported on the success of her district's career clusters initiative. After four years in operation, they are about to graduate the first group of students who've been through the entire four-year program.

The message is clear: People in South Carolina *do* care about public education, and they're willing to continue to fight the good fight to educate all of our state's children, no matter how difficult the task.

At every level, many thousands of us across the state have rolled up our sleeves and pledged to continue the hard work of putting education first. That's the only way to put our children, and our future, first. ■