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'New tech' program has Colleton school looking to cast off low-performing past

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Colleton's new tech program is increasing test scores (6).jpg







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WALTERBORO, S.C. (WCIV) — High poverty and low graduation rates have led to the area along Interstate 95 in South Carolina being called the Corridor of Shame, but educators at one Lowcountry school are hoping a new program will be the turning point for a generation.

It's called New Tech and it's nestled inside a wing of Colleton County High School.

the hallways buzzing with 270 students. It's a new approach to learning in a county with a history of poorly performing schools.

Cougar New Tech, honoring the school's mascot, launched three years ago and is funded by grant money from the Department of Education and local matching funds.

Interim Director Joshua Cable was there from the beginning. He said the program is an investment in the future.

"Bring the community and the school together to help break that cycle that comes with being underfunded or having a small tax base," Cable said.

The program is designed to foster independent, critical thinking. Instead of rows of desks and lectures, students sit in groups and essentially teach themselves through projects. The teachers are just facilitators; students connect through a software program.

"They create a list of what they know, what they need to know to solve the problem, and then they come up with a game plan to attack the project," Cable said. "It's really a metacognition. What steps do I mentally need to take to get this problem going?"

It forces the students to combine subjects and apply academic skills to real-life scenarios.

"We have to find a place in Europe that our clients gave to us and we have to find out all the information for them," said freshman Cameryn Coursen.

The learning style involves interacting with real businesses and local leaders, Cable said.

"They're actually going to film a real estate commercial and locally realtors are going to help us choose a winner based on who has the best sales pitch," said Cable.

In a Google lab, students work on Algebra problems as they figure out how and why math matters in their daily lives. Cable says the program gets the students to think about college and careers.

"I didn't really think I wanted to, but looking at this project, it makes me think, 'Ooh

I can challenge myself more and maybe do abroad.' It gives me an open mind," Coursen said.

Based on end-of-course exams, Cable says new tech students' scores are substantially better than the county average. Last year, new tech biology students had a 90-percent pass rate, compared to a 57-percent pass rate for traditional Colleton High School students.

School officials would not release any other data for comparison.

"Cougar New Tech" started with just one freshman class, but now includes 9th, 10th, and 11th grade students. Cable says they hope to make it a four-year program soon.

"Anytime you try something new, try to be innovative, you're really afraid of, are we going to meet the mark? So, we've set a pretty high goal for ourselves and so far, our kids have met that mark," Cable said.

Any student eligible to attend Colleton County High School is eligible to attend the new tech program.

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