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"Civic Engagement in Public Education"

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Blythewood High SIC named winner of 2015 Riley Award for School Improvement Council Excellence

COLUMBIA – The School Improvement Council (SIC) of Blythewood High School in Richland School District Two has been named the recipient of the 2015 Dick and Tunky Riley Award for School Improvement Council Excellence.

The award was presented Saturday afternoon during the SC School Improvement Council (SC-SIC) Annual Meeting at River Bluff High School in Lexington.

The annual Riley Award for SIC Excellence was created in 2002 to recognize the significant contributions made to public education by the nearly 15,000 School Improvement Council members who volunteer in every public school in the state. The award is named in honor of the former SC Governor and US Education Secretary and his late wife, and recognizes the couple's longstanding commitment to quality public education.

"The Blythewood High School SIC has done some outstanding work that is well-deserving of this statewide recognition," said SC-SIC Board of Trustees Chair Michael Guarino. "When parents, educators, students, and community members come together as a School Improvement Council, identify the needs of their school, and take effective steps to meet them, it has a lasting and meaningful impact for all concerned."

Presented with Honorable Mentions for their work last school year were: J.L. Mann High SIC (Greenville County Schools); Myrtle Beach Cluster SIC (Horry County Schools); North Augusta High SIC (Aiken County Public School District); and Rudolph Gordon Elementary SIC (Greenville County Schools).

Brief descriptions of the work of this year's Riley Award winner and Honorable Mention SICs are included with this release.

A core partner of the Center for Educational Partnerships at the University of South Carolina College of Education, SC-SIC was established in state law over 35 years ago to provide the member training, technical assistance, statutory accountability, and operational resources vital to the continued success of the community-based School Improvement Councils in each of the state's 1,100-plus K-12 public schools.

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2015 Finalists Dick and Tunky Riley Award for SIC Excellence

Blythewood High SIC, Blythewood – Richland School District Two

This SIC utilized a SWOT analysis, a school community survey, and input of administrators and teachers to prioritize SAT/ACT preparation, individualized guidance, and career planning as major areas of focus. This strategic planning process ensured that all stakeholders had input into a final action plan composed of a variety of initiatives. Based on this plan, specialized Naviance software was implemented providing staff, students, and parents comprehensive web-based access to student information and college/career information, and a special student guide, "Bengals and Beyond," was developed for students and parents with complete information and checklists for graduation requirements, college preparation, application tips, financial aid, etc. Additional opportunities were created for students to explore post-graduation options through trips to colleges, college rep visits to campus, more frequent SAT/ACT preparation workshops, career exploration trips, and more work-based learning options. Varied and ongoing communication tools with students and parents were put in place to assist these efforts. From the collaborative work of the SIC, administration, and school community, the school saw an increased graduation rate among seniors who completed high school (361 out of 371 seniors); increased college acceptance rate (66.9% to 91%); and increased scholarship monies awarded (\$10 million to \$15 million); as well as multiple SAT/ACT prep workshops, workshops for parents, college visits, and over three dozen student internships.

J.L. Mann High SIC, Greenville – Greenville County Schools

Like many others in South Carolina, this high school struggled with student retention and graduation rates. Understanding this, the SIC has worked in recent years with the school's administration to address these issues with a number of initiatives. "The Power of M" initiative has involved freshmen taking CP level courses and scoring less than 77 on any test so that they remediate with their teachers. "Extra Mann Power," working with a late bus transportation program, was instituted to provide those students with little or no academic assistance at home with tutoring opportunities as well as the chance to participate in other after school activities. Building on these efforts, the SIC partnered with the local YMCA Teen Achievers program and Clemson University's Call Me MISTER program to engage identified at-risk students in activities focused on raising academic achievement, providing role models, fostering overall excellence, and mentorship. In addition to classroom instruction provided through these two programs, a new after school club, "Achievers," was created, leading to better student behavior, improved class participation, and enhanced overall interest. Through the contributions of these collaborative efforts, graduation rates have increased (75.7% in 2012; 80% in 2013; 86.2% in 2014).

Myrtle Beach Cluster SIC, Myrtle Beach – Horry County Schools

The Myrtle Beach Cluster SIC is rather unique in the state, being made up of members from three Councils representing separate schools: Myrtle Beach Primary, Myrtle Beach Elementary, and Myrtle Beach Intermediate. These schools are located adjacent to one another serving different grade levels, but desired to have an SIC to assist in providing a seamless transition from child development through fifth grade. A commonly shared issue identified by the Cluster SIC was the need for improved traffic routing around the schools. The SIC worked with the district and local authorities and proposed ideas to alleviate these issues, leading to increased law enforcement presence during busier hours. The SIC also took steps to address the lack of male volunteers within the schools, implementing the Watch D.O.G.S program to recruit strong male role models for students. The Cluster SIC also desired to increase communication with families in order to better assist them. It reached out to the faith-based community by hosting a Minister's Outreach Breakfast, sharing information about the schools, their philosophies and programs, as well as information on student assessment. In addition, the Cluster SIC assisted the three schools in developing a comprehensive annual calendar of events and holding common activities.

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2015 Riley Award Finalists, continued

North Augusta High SIC, North Augusta – Aiken County Public School District

This SIC promoted parent and community involvement in 2013-14 to improve all aspects of the educational experience at the school. It was a strong supporter of the school's initiatives to achieve academic excellence, including the Honors Academy and the Freshman Academy, which had its second year of success in decreasing discipline issues and increasing student achievement and advancement to the sophomore year. The SIC took an active role in growing the school's mentoring program for students needing additional support, recruiting community leaders, business owners, educators, parents, and others to positively impact at-risk students. It also focused on student safety at the school, providing valuable input on vehicle and pedestrian traffic and parking security. In collaboration with the school administration and local authorities, additional paved entrances and exits were constructed, along with curbing and grassy areas to aid traffic flow. The SIC also focused on providing education to the school and greater communities on proposed legislation regarding a one-cent local sales tax for school facility improvement initiatives. It hosted a well-attended meeting with elected officials on facility needs, and it also reached out to other SICs across the district on the issue. The SC General Assembly passed the sales tax option, which will put the matter before the county's voters in an upcoming election.

Rudolph Gordon Elementary SIC, Simpsonville – Greenville County Schools

The SIC of this rural elementary school undertook efforts to bring free books to students to support a focus on reading and literacy. With studies showing that the availability of reading material in the home is a greater predictor of academic achievement than socioeconomic status, the SIC worked with the school to create the "Book Buddies" program to help close a 20% gap in PASS "Not Met" scores between students receiving free/reduced lunch and those not needing these subsidies. "Book Buddies" operates Thursdays and Fridays from 7:30 to 7:50 a.m. in the school cafeteria, when most free/reduced lunch students are likely to ride the bus and eat breakfast at school. The SIC focused on providing all types of reading materials due to the connection between leisure reading activities and reading achievement, and books for the program were either donated or purchased through funds provided for the program by the school's PTA. The SIC estimates the program has reached about 80 students each week. "Book Buddies" has also contributed to an increase in "Met" or "Exemplary" PASS scores (82.5% in 2011-12; 89.5% in 2013-14), and has helped close the PASS "Not Met" score gap between full pay and free/reduced lunch students (down nearly 3%).

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