It can be done
Students, teachers, principals making a difference

A look at bright spots in education

West Florida High School is Escambia County’s only consistent ‘A’-rated school, with test scores and graduation rates higher than all other county high schools. While the School District’s overall graduation rate reached 66 percent last year, West Florida’s graduation rate — at 94 percent — is one of the highest in the U.S.

Hundreds of miles northeast of Pensacola, North Charleston High School in South Carolina has shown some of the highest gains in test scores and graduation rates in the state. With a minority enrollment of 95 percent, and nearly all students eligible for free or reduced-price meals, North Charleston is shining a bright light in education.

Pensacola Education Report

This is the second of a three-part report on local education by the staffs of the Studer Community Institute and PensacolaToday.com

To read more, visit PensacolaToday.com or StuderCommunityInstitute

CITIZEN-POWERED CHANGE
Robert Grimm arrived at North Charleston High School in 2011, with a crystal clear picture of the looming challenges facing a new principal. Last year’s scores were lopsided: discipline problems ran rampant and attendance dropped 45 percent of students graduated in four years. Another challenge, no less daunting: Seeing and knowing enough to see his improvement plan reach fruition.

“While the two cities have things in common, including history and a name, North Charleston is the economic hub, leading the county in economic and industrial development. Incorporated in 1972, North Charleston is an old city, distinctly blue-collar town. It’s home to the old Charleston Navy Base, Naval Weapons Station, Air Force Reserve, International Airport and dozens of businesses and industries with the name Charleston in it. North Charleston’s favorite son is Art Shull, former NFL coach, Paul of Palmer and Super Bowl champion with the Oakland Raiders. The closing of the base has led to the downturn in the economy and shipping and manufacturing, including the new Boeing plant and a Tanger Outlet Center development. The area boasts one of the highest retail sales figures in the state.”

Tale of two Charlestons

“The state divided by any name, Charleston ranks just behind neighboring Historic Charleston, about a 20-minute drive south of downtown Charleston.”

Grimm said he uses the feedback to make adjustments at North Charleston. “If it’s not all positive, I’m constantly striving to do better because it makes them happy,” Grimm says. “I want to make sure I’m doing a good job.”

Most of all, he cites the importance of hiring and retaining great teachers. “Working in education is a special vocation that requires ordinary people to go extraordinary lengths to help those in need,” Grimm says. “I want to do everything I can to make sure that they’re happy, too,” he says.

Teachers examine every student in each class to find out where students need more help in certain areas. On a daily basis, teachers guided students to buy a suit for a child to attend a family member’s funeral.

“Looking at Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, if they need something on the bottom of the triangle in order to be successful on the top, we provide whatever is on the bottom,” Grimm says. One of the most important things a principal can do, Grimm says, is how he leads the school in order to do the best job possible to inspire, engage and embrace students who need someone to show them along the way. Tony Eady is among those students, Grimm says.

Eady is one of the few teachers Grimm kept on staff when he took over as principal. Using the data to get better

The End-of-Course rate soared from 39 percent to 74 percent during his tenure at North Charleston High School. With the help of dedicated teachers and diligent students, Grimm has helped students at the top, perenni-

“Don’t tell me that students can’t...”

Principal Robert Grimm believes that building relationships and helping students makes their voice key to improving education. “Every student can learn. It’s our responsibility to find out how they learn, what we can do differently, and then to do it,” says Grimm. When education is a priority, every child can learn

At North Charleston High School each year, making it one of the most popular destinations in the U.S. Historic Charleston is a place to visit and play. North Charleston is the place to shop, work and stay. The county has one of the highest retail sales figures in the state. North Charleston

North Charleston

The relatively small school in the historic district of North Charleston in the past three years has outperformed all six high schools in the city. Grimm credits the school’s success mostly to setting benchmarks, analyzing data, recognizing and focusing on at-risk issues.

The numbers — and the rest of the story

Despite the immense challenges, Grimm refused to excuse failure. “Don’t tell me that students don’t learn, because every student can learn,” says Grimm. “It’s our responsibility to find out how they learn, what we can do differently, and then to do it.”

Whatever they are doing, it’s been working. Since 2011:

■ The End-of-Course rate soared from 39 percent to 74 percent.

■ The School High Assessment Program rate — until this year a require-
  ment for graduation — increased from all percent to 63 percent.

■ The enrollment in Advanced Placement courses went up nearly 12 percent, to 27 percent. The median high school average is 15 percent. Attendance is more than 96 percent.

■ Suspensions are almost non-exis-
  tent, at a percent.

■ The improvements are more than statistics. It’s about changing a culture of failure and showing that schools that serve at-risk, disadvantaged students can make the grade and strive for suc-

While the grade retention rate in 2014 re-

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Race, poverty and school scores

Across the country, in school districts not much different than those in Eubemica and Charleston, race and income are proving indicators for their success to fail.

Eubemica County School District’s overall graduation rate has risen from 56 percent in 2009 to 64 percent in 2014. Less than half of the district’s African-American students graduate in four years.

In Charleston County School District the graduation rate since 2007 has increased from 41 percent to about 45 percent.

During the same period the overall graduation rate for African-American students rose from 60 percent to 72 percent.

The City School district moved up from the previous year ranking of “good” to “better” in the state report card released in November.

The district’s growth rate also increased from average to good.

The education department annual report cards, as part of its accountability system, rate schools and districts from A-F, with Excellent.

It usually is automatic that schools that

serve mostly low-income, disadvantaged families.

It usually is axiomatic that schools that

have a booming voice can be heard at the

a long time before dashing to the front of the class

learning between classes. It was bedlam, Eady

points out that he cares.

He offers a smile, a laugh or a pat on

to the young person.

His job was to keep the students mov-

ing between classes. It was bedlam, Eady

faces.

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THE ACCLAIM FOR WEST FLORIDA raises its profile in the region. The accolades for West Florida raise the questions: What’s the secret to its success, and why aren’t more— or all—local high schools employing this method?

The answers to both questions are multi-faceted, and bounded by national trends, local needs, and state and local funding for public education.

Solution seems simple.

The idea behind a career academy is widespread and in its infancy. Students combine hands-on technical training with rigorous academics. One fails the other. Instead of simply memorizing algebraic theorems with cut-and-paste practical applications, students use the math as part of their technical projects. "What they’re doing is completely algebraic, but they think it’s just part of the electrical work, then they go back and see are math test,” said Jennifer Landrum Green, Gulf Power’s community development manager who helped launch the Gulf Power Academy at West Florida High School in 2006.

The academy concept applies to a wide range of career fields. A construction student, for example, would get practical training in building with concrete in the lab.
Hall grew up. He has taught dozens of mates, where the boys wore sagging dressed well, unlike some of his class-

Hall is familiar with “hard days,” but he isn’t that kid. He was working at Bellview and Hall was doing at school. Marsh says he quickly noticed a dif-

Longtime teacher and IB assistant Marsh and everyone else, they helped him. Hall knows the path ahead won’t be easy just because he has learned some hard lessons. He hopes the school environment won’t do the same thing.

Keeping faith in the next chapter

Hall said he’s learned a lot from classmates and teachers. Given the situation, he says, “So I tried to go out of Truman

Hall is familiar with “hard days,” but he isn’t that kid. Had he been a nurse because I’m going to pass out when I see blood,”

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Hall says, “I'm really living for her, would I really want me to fail?” Hall says. “I felt like the school uniform (was a part) of career and technical specialty areas

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Education, skill-set are key to closing the gap in wealth

By Rick Harper
rharper@studeri.com

Photo by Michael Spooneybarger

Share of gross domestic income
Paid as compensation to employees, 1948 - 2013

Personal income per capita
by percent of adult population with bachelor’s degree or higher

ALL FLORIDA COUNTIES, 2012

High school diploma
Some college
Bachelor’s degree
All Florida counties

Population with a bachelor’s degree or higher
By percent of adult population
Per 100,000

About us

The Study Community Institute is dedicated to helping people understand their community. We sponsor research and the development of benchmarks that allows cities and counties to evaluate the health of their local economy, government and quality of life. Our goal is to create a nonpartisan process that allows citizens to identify the critical issues a community needs to address in order to move forward.

In part 1: Springtime in Florida means one thing — FCAT

But this year, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test — the test used to measure students’ learning gains and to evaluate teacher’s performance — is not the test it used to be.

The official state standardized test is now the Florida Standards Assessment. It replaces the previous state accountability standards and will measure student performance in the Common Core–themed curriculum Florida schools have been using in recent years.

As Florida schools turn to the new test, schools are left with 7 years of data accumulated in the FCAT era, which was a version of the SAT given to high school reform public schools.

The Study Community Institute launched this series of stories to look at how Pensacola metro area schools had fared under that reform that has since unraveled and the work that remains ahead to help our students, our schools and our community improve.

Coming up in part 3: Building a better reader

Experts agree that the key to building a good student is building a strong reader. From birth to age 3 is the best time to influence a child reading ability is between the ages of 0-5, which is often long before a child enters a classroom.

In the third installment of the Studer Community Institute’s education report, we looked at the growing body of research that supports the importance of early learning, the importance of getting parents involved in the learning process at all ages, and at two programs working in the Pensacola metro area to help bridge that gap.

On the cover

Junior Lynn Arthur celebrates after stripping a win at Tom Cowan’s Cox Academy in West Florida High School’s Florida of Advanced Technology. The students are learning how to install a round-sound system.

Photo by Michael Spooneybarger

Section designed by Ron Stillcup

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Penascola Today

In August 2014, the Study Community Institute produced the Pensacola Metro Report. This 64-page publication used data from the University of West Florida’s Office of Economic Development and Engagement to provide a snapshot of the two county areas’ economic, educational and social well being.

The report used data as the underpinning for a series of stories that looked at the progress Pensacola metro area residents made in the last 20 years, and examined the challenges that continue to face our community. A centerpiece of the Metro Report was the community dashboard, a series of objective benchmarks that allow a look at our community. The 16 benchmarks provide data points to help us track community growth, educational attainment, economic prospects, safety and civil life.

Online: Visit StudyCommunityInstitute.com/dashboard for more detailed information and analysis, interactive charts and comparisons to peer metropolitan statistical areas and state averages.

Penascola Metro Report

CITIZEN-POWERED CHANGE

METRO REPORT

In 2012, the Study Community Institute, a Pensacola-based organization that seeks citizen-powered solutions to challenges that confront the community faces. He also directs the University of West Florida’s Office of Economic Development and Engagement in Pensacola.