The State Education and Environment Roundtable (SEER) is a cooperative effort, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. There are 16 state education agencies that seek to improve student’s academic achievement in all core disciplines using the Environment as an Integrating Context for Learning (EIC) model. This model has shown success in every state where it has been implemented. Visit the SEER website at www.seer.org for information and the report: Closing the Achievement Gap: Using the Environment as an Integrating Context for Learning.

The EIC Model is a nationally recognized approach to improving student achievement, reducing classroom discipline problems, increasing student enthusiasm for learning and community involvement while improving teacher practices and confidence. The development of South Carolina’s Using the EIC Demonstration School Network is a joint endeavor of the South Carolina Department of Education and SEER.

Ten middle schools representing diverse academic, geographic and demographic backgrounds are piloting the program for a minimum of two years starting the 2003-04 school year. A core team of four teachers work to integrate English, mathematics, social studies, and science through hands-on, minds-on methods to teach students to think and reason in a different way—using students’ cognitive, kinesthetic, affective, and sensory abilities. Each school is partnered with external community mentors who assist the schools in making vital contacts and finding the expertise in the environmental project chosen by the school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Confirmed Middle Schools</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Target Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Palmetto</td>
<td>Anderson 1</td>
<td>6th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady’s Island</td>
<td>Beaufort</td>
<td>6th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long</td>
<td>Chesterfield</td>
<td>7th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rawlinson Road</td>
<td>York 3</td>
<td>7th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pickens</td>
<td>Pickens</td>
<td>7th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleton</td>
<td>Colleton</td>
<td>7th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forest Circle</td>
<td>Colleton</td>
<td>7th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conway</td>
<td>Horry</td>
<td>7th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Waccamaw</td>
<td>Georgetown</td>
<td>7th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilbert</td>
<td>Lexington 1</td>
<td>8th</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The approach focuses on using real-world, community-centered, standards-based and student-driven environmental investigative projects as the “hook” to connect students to core subjects and core subjects to each other.

The EIC model differs significantly from traditional Environmental Education. While the differences are subtle, they are significant. Environmental Education focuses on environmental “literacy”: learning about and caring for the total environment, understanding how humans interact with and are dependent on natural ecosystems and developing critical thinking skills to resolve environmental issues. Environment-based Education focuses on educational results: using the environment (integrating throughout all disciplines) to engage students in their education and enrich their learning process through “real-world” experiences, with the goals of helping them

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achieve higher levels of academic success, and understanding and appreciation for the environment.

The EIC Model employs natural and socio-cultural environments as the context for learning while taking into account the “best practices” of successful educators. Each school designs an EIC program unique to them but successful EIC programs share the following fundamental strategies:

➢ Integrated, interdisciplinary instruction;
➢ Collaborative teaching methods;
➢ Community-based investigations;
➢ Learner-centered, constructivist approaches (students asking-teachers guiding);
➢ Cooperative and individual learning strategies;
➢ Performance and self-reporting assessment; and
➢ Local community and natural settings as the context for learning and instruction.

The EIC model is based on national research conducted over the past five years by SEER. Data collected in 48 schools, since 1996, indicate that EIC has significant positive effects on academic achievement, classroom behavior and instructional practices. EIC students exhibit:

➢ Better performance on standardized tests of English, math, science and social studies – in 92% of the schools, students in EIC programs academically outperformed their peers in traditional programs (e.g. Stanford 9, ITBS, KRIS state assessment results);
➢ Reduced discipline and classroom management problems—in some cases by 95%;
➢ Increased engagement and enthusiasm for learning (improved attendance); and,
➢ Contributions to their communities through effective service-learning projects.

The South Carolina Department of Education (SDE) is working with SEER to implement the EIC School Network in the 2003-04 academic year. Preliminary results from the first interim report (November 2003) indicate widespread improvements in student behavior, attendance, academic performance and interest in learning. Teacher interest and confidence is also increasing. Middle schools were chosen due to the low academic performance exhibited historically by this age group, increased concern about ninth grade drop-out and high school graduation rates, and more rigorous end-of-course and tenth grade exit exams. Research indicates that a successful academic program for these students emphasizes personal attention, an environment promoting the sense “of belonging”, and motivated student engagement in school learning and other activities. SDE will also look closely at African American and female student response to this initiative. The SEER program addresses these needs of students since it

♦ gives them occasions to use skills to solve real-life problems,
♦ provides hands-on and active learning experiences,
♦ has varied situations for exploration and extension of their knowledge,
♦ offers caring adult models who will gain their trust through personal relationships, and
♦ gives opportunities for recognition of successes.

Strong community/school partnerships are essential to long-term success. To date, the EIC network boasts 10 South Carolina environmental education organizations, two federal agencies, four state agencies, and one university as partners.

Currently, five foundations are working with the SDE to facilitate and maintain the EIC program. The Pew Charitable Trusts sponsors visits by the SEER staff members to each of the schools. In June 2003, the core team of teachers from each school, along with the principals and mentors, completed SEER’s EIC training institute. The V. Kann Rasmussen Foundation has provided funding for an environmental education coordinator to work with the EIC schools for the

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next three years. The Donnelley Foundation, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the Captain Planet Foundation are assisting in the planning, funding and implementation of the South Carolina EIC School Network.

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