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State pans 'worst schools' list

By Rob Novit

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State Department of Education staffers are questioning the validity of a website's list of the "100 Worst Schools in America," describing the list as only a marketing tool. The list includes 38 South Carolina schools, including Lloyd-Kennedy Charter School of Aiken at No. 2. The students, parents and faculty have rallied around each other, said the school's founder and director, Keisha Lloyd-Kennedy, who considers the methodology used by NeighborhoodScout as lacking credibility. The State Department officials agree. In a memo sent out to superintendents throughout the state Friday, an agency spokesman wrote, "It's significant that no serious research in the veritable army of experts studying No Child Left Behind data for the past seven years has stumbled over the simplistic calculation now being touted by 'NeighborhoodScout.'" The memo stated that the website "is primarily a marketing tool used to promote a service as a private business, as opposed to any serious ranking of educational performance using tried and true, verifiable research methods." On Friday morning, Lloyd-Kennedy and other administrators met with their students, who were upset by the report. Lloyd-Kennedy remains frustrated the report has been generated by an organization totally unknown to her. "Who are these people?" she said. "This is just sensationalism for their business. This is not a renowned college or university. Anybody can put anything on the Internet." Dr. Andrew Schiller, founder of Rhode Island-based Location Inc., created NeighborhoodScout, which provides a variety of consumer information. In a telephone interview Friday, he said he developed a patent-pending methodology to compare schools throughout the nation. Essentially, he collects NCLB data in conjunction with the nationally normed National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). This allows for corrections for differences in standardized tests on a state-by-state basis, Schiller said. He acknowledged that he

removed schools that are formally classified by the Center for Education Statistics as having specific purposes, such as special needs. However, he included Lloyd-Kennedy and other charter schools as "regular" schools. "I want it to be clear, we are reflecting how students performed," Schiller said. "It doesn't reflect whether the school or the teachers are good or bad." But her school is not "regular," in comparison with other schools, Lloyd-Kennedy said. Her 41 students include 10 with special needs who must test on grade level, although they don't perform on that level. "We're a Title I school," she said. "Many of our kids come in performing below grade level. One of our kids said at this time last year he was up for expulsion (at another school). This year he hasn't had one fight and his grades are better. He said the teachers care about the students. There are so many needs being met here. We are trying to educate the whole child, but none of that is reflected in that list." In their memo, State Department officials noted that NeighborhoodScout requires a subscription purchase to see details of the report. Further, Teri Siskind, a deputy superintendent at SDE, said the formula touted by the website could not be replicated by staffers at the state agency. NeighborhoodScout also seems to be using a variety of data from years ranging from 2005-07, Siskind said. Further, NAEP only tests a sampling of students in grades 4-8 every other year and only reports state performance, not individual schools or districts. "They're not matching student data, and that's a concern to me," said Siskind. The State Department also checks to make sure that NAEP's sampling includes a fairly representative demographic of low-income, special needs and other population groups. NeighborhoodScout didn't consider demographic information, and the Lloyd-Kennedy school has demographics that don't come close to many traditional public schools, Siskind said. All of the 25 schools highest on the list from South Carolina have extremely high poverty rates. Lloyd-Kennedy School and four other charter facilities in the highest 25 have small enrollments, and all specialize in working with struggling students, the memo stated. "We have no way of knowing whether 'NeighborhoodScout' included similar charter schools from other states, or whether other states test students in charter schools the same way they test students in traditional schools, as we do here in South Carolina," the memo stated. Lloyd-Kennedy said her teachers are working hard every day, but she feels bad for them. "We are a big family," he said, "and we'll get through this like everything else, because there's no truth or credibility to it." Contact Rob Novit at rnovit@aikenstandard.com.