



For Immediate Release

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Media Release

Morningside works to address chronic absences

Morningside Middle School

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Charleston, SC – Morningside Middle School's Principal Michael White and a dozen volunteers from the school and the district office hit the streets a few weekends ago to knock on doors and talk to parents and students. The purpose of the outreach effort was to reach the school's chronically absent scholars. They knocked on the doors of 90 students.

Volunteers didn't reach everyone, but the event did allow them the opportunity to interact with families and provide scholars with mobile devices, MiFis, or simply encouragement. In addition, representatives from the Department of Alternative Programs and Services (DAP) attended so that information on Project Prevent could be distributed to families in need. The [Project Prevent](#) (School Mental Health) Grant provides resources to students exposed to pervasive violence with the hope of increased student engagement, sense of safety at school, parental involvement, collaboration between school-based staff and mental health clinicians, and decreased disciplinary referrals and student absences.

Tasha Joyner, Project Prevent Program Officer with DAP, said that genuine effort and thought was put into the event so that wrap-around services could be offered to these scholars and their families.

"We met with students who are not just struggling with absenteeism but ones who we could direct to resources that could serve their needs," said Joyner. "We want to ensure that families and students are logged in and engaged. We wanted to make sure they knew how to access their virtual classes, understood their schedules, and had all the materials they needed to participate."

Volunteers were split into teams and went in different neighborhoods. Dennis Muhammad, CCSD Family and Community Engagement Officer (FACE) was paired with Principal White.

Muhammad explained that the collaborative effort was not only about White getting out in the community, but about sharing his vision and goals for the

school, distributing Project Prevent Grant information, and increasing parental and community engagement.

Muhammad's role at the district is to facilitate resources to families. This outreach was an extension of what FACE officers do.

"I've always been a big supporter of the home visit aspect because if anything, it is going to build empathy," said Muhammad. "It is important that our principals and district staff be on our front lines and out in the community for the parents to see."

Principal White and Muhammad visited one home where a brother and sister had not been signing on to their Zoom classes at all. It turned out their mother worked from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. and was not home to supervise. The pair had a serious talk with both children about the importance of completing their school work.

"It just showed that children are going to be children," said Muhammad. "Many of these parents are in a tough position because they have to go to work and leave these teenagers to be responsible for themselves. We have to find some way to close that gap. To expect a child at that age to just sign on and focus all day with no parental guidance is almost unrealistic."

"The students were fascinated and smiling when they saw me come to their front door," said White. The ones we were able to talk to were excited to talk to us. Parents and guardians were better able to paint the picture for us as to what was going on at home so we could intervene with encouragement or resources."

Ethan Hoffman, a teacher at Morningside also described the children's excitement when they saw him and other staff.

"It was truly amazing being able to go and be in the community that our kids live in," said Hoffman. "We ran into students not on our list to contact and stopped and chatted with them. The virtual students were especially interested in meeting us in person."

In one instance, a student confessed that he wasn't always able to log into his Zoom classes because he had to babysit a younger sibling. Hoffman now emails him daily to check on him and promised to advocate for him to his teacher

"I might not be able to fix things for him overnight, but he will feel more comfortable to reach out to me if he needs something now that we've made a connection," said Hoffman.

White said follow up procedures are in place to gauge the success of the effort. He hopes to conduct the outreach quarterly not just to address absenteeism, but to identify and provide wrap around services to families in need.

"It is important that we be intentional in all we do as educators and administrators at Morningside," said White. "It is important for schools like ours to be intentional and more than just lip service."

Joyner made contact with just two parents, but spoke with several students. In each case, she said the responses were positive and the guardians were appreciative.

Morningside will always hold a special place in Joyner's heart. She was a teacher there for eight years and the effort Principal White is making aligns with the goals in Joyner's department around being visible and active in the community.

"A lot of times we hold events at schools, but we have to be mindful that it is not always convenient to come to the building," said Joyner. "It's just as rewarding to get out and connect through conversations with students. For those who were not home, we left handouts with support resources."

Principal White wanted the team to appear as a united front. He supplied each volunteer with a school sweatshirt, featuring the school's new logo. In addition, students received a cup with the new logo etched onto it.

Volunteers were patient in their approach, leading with nothing but positive conversations. It was stressed that the visit was not to insinuate that a student had done anything wrong.

"My biggest take away is that when we send emails or call-outs to parents, we can't just assume that everyone understands what is being instructed," said Hoffman. "We have to reach out to these students and families as much as possible and do follow ups to ensure they've received our emails or understand what is being communicated."

Hoffman added that in some cases they learned that students weren't signed in because their devices were malfunctioning. With some adjustments, the team had them back up and running.

"We are continuously working on ways to connect, engage, and offer resources; including food, housing, healthcare, and clothing," said Joyner. "If we can remove barriers to basic needs, it can tremendously improve the lives of these scholars."

White, Muhammad, and Joyner all agree that going to these homes allowed them to see the bigger needs of these families.

Muhammad said White has plans to work with teachers to be more flexible in cases where it is necessary and more understanding about attendance.

"Principal White talked to these students on their level," said Muhammad. "He was very engaging and I got to see first-hand the impact his visit had on these students."

The cup that White handed out to each student had the words, "We believe in you" printed on it. According to Muhammad, White had each student read the phrase aloud and then kept reemphasizing the notion throughout the entire conversation.

White is just as much an inspiration to his staff as he is his students. He said when he put out a call for volunteers, he received responses from several dozen team members.

"Those that turned out were all spirited and enthusiastic about participating," Muhammad explained. "I have much respect for his staff and I am positive he will continue to get great support from his staff."

For Hoffman, it is extremely important to get involved with the students outside of the classroom.

"It is hard to teach students you don't know," said Hoffman. "Last year I started a baseball program, and we had no funding. We were driving kids around and taking them home or out to dinner. We got to know their parents. Two of those kids are in my class this year and they are my highest performing scholars. There is a bond that is built when you get involved in their lives."

To contact the FACE Office with questions or support requests, call (843) 937-6575.

For more information about the school, contact Principal Michael White at (843) 745-200.

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About the Charleston County School District

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is a nationally-accredited school district that is committed to providing equitable and quality educational opportunities for all of its students. CCSD is the second-largest school system in South Carolina and represents a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools spanning 1,300 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves more than 50,000 students in 87 schools and specialized programs.

CCSD offers a diverse, expanding portfolio of options and specialized programs, delivered through neighborhood, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), Montessori, and charter schools. Options include programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; and military.