



North Charleston Creative Arts
Elementary School

Anita Huggins
Superintendent of Schools

Jennifer Swearingen, Ph.D.
Interim Associate Superintendent of
the Elementary Learning Community

LaToya Smith
Interim Principal

For Immediate Release
May 6, 2024

Contact:
LaToya Smith, 843-529-2831

Media Release



Top Five Teacher of the Year Finalist – North Charleston Creative Arts Elementary's McKenna Hakanson

North Charleston, SC – McKenna Hakanson, a K-2 resource teacher at North Charleston Creative Arts Elementary School (NCCAES) said she has been training her entire life to be a teacher. That training paid off, and she is now a Top Five Finalist for Charleston County School District's (CCSD) 2023-2024 Teacher of the Year.

"I was meant to teach," said Hakanson. "I have three younger brothers and was often called upon to pitch in and look after them. It always felt natural to be in a caretaking and leadership role. From a young age, I knew the value and importance of teachers. I saw how they impacted my life and the lives of the students around me throughout my education."

Not only was Hakanson meant to teach - she was meant to lead. She is the Exceptional Children team leader, Ron Clark Academy House leader, a Multi-Tiered Systems of Support team member, and serves on the Title 1 school-wide planning team.

As a child, school was an anchor for Hakanson. Her family moved around a lot, resulting in her attending seven schools during her K-12 years.

"Each time we started at a different school, often in a new state, it was the teachers who made me feel welcomed and a part of the community," said Hakanson. "I knew I wanted to give that same gift of belonging to my own students one day. I always appreciated that education was something no one

could take from you. I saw how it unlocked opportunities and gave people more autonomy in their lives. I believed that education was a gift you could use to gain a sense of control through action from a young age."

Teaching Exceptional children is special

"I love the aspect of being a cheerleader and mentor for my students," said Hakanson. "The skills they are learning in my classroom can be taken back into their general education classrooms and translated there."

Hakanson considers herself a bridge between special education and general education. She supports all aspects of her students' academic endeavors as well as their social and emotional learning.

"They are learning strategies to meet goals and help them to find success and confidence in the general education classroom," said Hakanson. "Additionally, I am teaching my students to advocate for themselves and create action plans."

An example of that was when an Asian-American student was feeling a bit left out. With some coaxing and reassurance, the young student came up with an idea to celebrate Asian-American Heritage Month.

"The student created and ran the whole project," said Hakanson. "He took ownership of the initiative and, through his efforts, saw the impact it had on the school. I want all of my students to feel a sense of independence through education, just like he did."

According to Principal LaToya Smith, Hakanson is driven by the same pillars of success of the district, whose mission is educating and supporting every child in achieving college, career, and citizenship readiness.

"Ms. Hakanson provides engaging rigorous instruction for all her students based on their goals," said Smith. "She uses data effectively to inform her instructional practices and assess students' progress in order to make informed decisions that enhance teaching and learning outcomes."

Hakanson's position allows her to work with all age groups and across the school with all staff. She also gets to know each family as they work together to navigate each individual student's journey.

"It's a rewarding position to be in," said Hakanson. "My role is to find strategies and accommodations to encourage success for each of my students, and to do that, I get to collaborate with all of the educators in my building and other systems of support which ensure a solid path forward for each student."

Smith said Hakanson goes above and beyond to ensure the academic, social, and emotional growth of students.

"She brings positive energy and inspiration to everything she does," added Smith. "She's always professional and is a reflective practitioner who strives to learn new ways to support her students and colleagues. She consistently demonstrates a willingness to learn from experiences, embrace challenges, and accept change, which encourages her peers to also have the same growth mindset."

A growth mindset

Hakanson considers herself a lifelong learner with a growth mindset. She pays close attention to what her colleagues are doing and learns from their successes. She hopes to use her position as a Top Five Finalist to learn from her peers and district leadership, so she can continue to evolve in the profession.

"I am grateful for the opportunity," said Hakanson. "I love this school and the colleagues and administration that pour so much into me. It will be amazing to shine a spotlight on North Charleston Creative and the City of North Charleston as well. I am looking forward to lifting up this school and the Department of Exception Children."

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About the Charleston County School District

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is a nationally accredited school district committed to providing equitable and quality educational opportunities for all 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 approximately 50,000 students in 88 schools and specialized programs.

CCSD offers a diverse portfolio of educational options and specialized programs delivered to the students of CCSD through neighborhood, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), Montessori, and charter schools and programs. Rich educational opportunities for students include programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; military; dual credit; and many more.