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Media Release

Students at Academic Magnet and Wando immerse themselves in AP African American studies

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Charleston, SC – Charleston County School District (CCSD) annually celebrates Black History Month each February, recognizing the contributions and sacrifices of African Americans who have helped shape the nation. CCSD believes in celebrating Black History and the contributions of African Americans, including the rich cultural heritage, triumphs, and adversities that are an indelible part of our country's history all year, especially during Black History Month.

Through a pilot curriculum program for students interested in studying the diversity of Black communities in the United States, students can immerse themselves in a broader context of Africa through an AP African American Studies course at Academic Magnet High School and Wando High School. This is the first time the AP course has been offered in CCSD, and only the second year it has been offered in South Carolina.

The AP African American Studies course is an interdisciplinary course that examines the diversity of African American experiences through direct encounters with authentic and varied sources. Students explore key topics that extend from early African kingdoms to the ongoing challenges and achievements of the contemporary moment.

Jason Williams, a social science teacher at Academic Magnet, and Arriyanna Whitaker, a social studies teacher at Wando, both applied to the College Board to be a part of the pilot program. Once selected, the pair went through a summer training and certification program to qualify to teach the class. Both agreed that the process and the delivery have been a great experience.

Williams was thrilled to see the diverse makeup of the students who enrolled in the elective class.

"This interdisciplinary course requires collaboration, discussion, group work, and much more," said Williams. "This results in increased engagement and enthusiasm in what we're learning as we move through each unit."

"Every student wants to be here…"

Whitaker minored in African American Studies in college and feels that teaching this class is the right fit for her.

"I love these kids," said Whitaker. "Every student wants to be here so they're attentive and tuned in to what we're learning. It is a space where they are encouraged to formulate their own opinions based on the facts and the history that they're learning. That induces conversations, which I encourage. Teaching this class is the highlight of my day."

Presley Robinson is a tenth grader at Wando. He was a student in another class that Whitaker taught and when he learned of this new opportunity, he pursued it because she was going to be the teacher, and the topic of African American Studies was of great interest to him. Robinson shared the information with classmate Amani Gordon, also in 10th grade, who excitedly joined the class as well.

"I loved Mrs. Whitaker when I was in her other class, and I just knew this would be something I would enjoy," said Robinson. "I like this class because we are going deeper into the history of Africa and the importance of the continent and the people."

Gordon agreed with the idea that the curriculum went deeper into explaining the journey of Africans.

"I always knew about the spirituality of Africans, but this class has taught me so much more," said Gordon. "The passions Africans have shown about their freedom and their rights has been generational and continues today."

Gordon described Whitaker's classroom as a safe learning environment.

"I am glad to see the diversity in this class and happy to join my classmates in showing everyone respect and kindness," said Gordon. "There is no racism in here."

Keren Collins, a senior at Academic Magnet, was surprised to see the diversity in her class, but that was considered a win.

"It shows that people of other ethnicities do care and want to take a step forward in creating equality," said Collins. "The first step in doing that is through learning and awareness."

Sunny Holstead is a senior at Academic Magnet and chose to take the class because she was genuinely fascinated by African American history and culture.

"I like to learn about different perspectives, and I enjoy studying history," said Holstead. "

Multiple lenses

Throughout this course, students will learn to apply lenses from multiple disciplines to evaluate key concepts, historical developments, and processes that have shaped Black experiences and debates within the field of African American Studies.

"The sources used in the curriculum and the content outline critical historical aspects not taught in other courses," said Williams. "While this is a stand-alone AP course, it does build upon AP U.S. History and AP European History. It is a nice component to our global history lessons."

The curriculum drills down on the creations and contributions of African Americans rather than using a broad brush to "paint the picture," Whitaker explained.

"We study the grandeur of what Africa was prior to the trans-Atlantic slave trade," said Whitaker. "I also try to create an understanding of the diversity and complexity of African societies and their global connections before the emergence of slavery."

Liam Anderson, a senior at Academic Magnet, is enjoying how all of the things he has learned in other history classes connect to the things he is learning in AP African American Studies.

"This class is very important because we are learning about the bigger picture and the full extent of how horrific the slave trade really was," said Anderson. "It is also just as important to acknowledge the contributions Africans made to the Americas."

Collins is an African American and said that having grown up in a Black household immersed in the Black culture, she is acutely aware of how her culture is underrepresented in traditional course materials.

"Before this class was offered, there was no option to learn about authentic African American culture," said Collins. "My culture isn't found in the history books. In this class, I am learning about my own history. That's remarkable to me."

Students in the class are tasked with identifying connections between Black communities in the United States and the broader African diaspora in the past and present. To do that, they conduct source analysis.

"Students compare and analyze a range of perspectives about the movements, approaches, organizations, and key figures involved in freedom movements, as expressed in text-based, data, and visual sources," explained Williams.

Both Whitaker and Williams find value in the interdisciplinary aspect of the curriculum because it allows students to not only study the literary and artistic traditions of the African diaspora but also use their own creativity on their assignments.

In Whitaker's class, students have written poetry and even written and performed their own rap songs.

"This curriculum requires students to evaluate the political, historical, aesthetic, and transnational contexts of major social movements, but they are having fun doing it," said Whitaker.

A course to be modeled

Having taught AP African American Studies for an entire semester, both teachers have had the opportunity to reflect on the content and the benefits of the course. Without hesitation, Whitaker and Williams agree that the course content should be offered to more students to include all interested students, not just AP students, similar to the locally board-approved course offered previously at North Charleston High School.

"I would love to see this incorporated into the regular curriculum," said Williams. "It is a really good component to any history class and can easily be scaled to non-AP students and modeled to any high school."

AP courses are fast-paced and extremely comprehensive so students must be adequately prepared for the rigor. Whitaker said her students have banded together to help each other through some of the more cumbersome parts.

"Some of my students are new to the AP program, and it is nice to see the veteran students helping along the way," said Whitaker. "I do wish there were more opportunities for students to take this class or a version of it so that we can make continued efforts to change perceptions and correct misconceptions and African American communities."

Holstead said from a student perspective that it is very important this class is modeled at schools across the district.

"The curriculum offers an entirely new context of the African American experience that you don't get in other history classes," said Holstead. "It is symbolic and meaningful that this is being piloted in the South."

Collins said she felt like, traditionally, African American history and culture are minimized.

"In AP African American Studies it is celebrated," said Collins. "We are given first-hand accounts of the horrors, but we are also given first-hand accounts of the

accomplishments of poets, artists, and activists. We are getting the full story, and it is an opportunity to celebrate Black pride. There are things worth celebrating in our culture."

Robinson is hopeful that more Black students will consider taking this course.

"There are a bunch of positive things that those before us created and contributed to that benefit society as a whole," said Robinson. "Every single black student in this school should be learning about that and celebrating it."

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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.