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Mary Ford Early Learning & Family Center

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Media Release



Mary Ford's Bilsback named Top Five 2023 Teacher of the Year Finalist

North Charleston, SC – [Katie Bilsback of Mary Ford Early Learning & Family Center](#) is in her third year of teaching in the Head Start program for Charleston County School District (CCSD) and works hard to create a classroom where her students receive structured learning coupled with fun. Bilsback holds high expectations to prepare her students for the rest of their schooling, but also for the rest of their lives.

"If high expectations become the norm, then they will begin to exceed even those," said Bilsback. "By creating a positive classroom culture, my students have flourished and will continue to do so as the year progresses."

Trish Anderson, a program specialist at Mary Ford, agrees.

"Ms. Bilsback sets the bar high for students and for herself," said Anderson. "She understands the importance of early childhood education and her role in setting the foundation for the future success of her young scholars. Katie creates a culture where students learn through play, build strong relationships, and develop core social/emotional skills."

A change maker

Bilsback was adopted at a very young age, and her parents instilled in her the belief that she was destined to make change. She lives by that philosophy and has been a change-maker since she was a young teenager.

"I was first drawn to teaching when I took my first job at a school's summer camp," said Bilsback. "I was one of two counselors for the three-year-old group. One little girl did not want to play with the other children and cried, and cried for her mommy. I decided to approach her. She did not talk to me on that first day of camp, but she grabbed my hand and did not let go. I was her comfort person for the first few weeks of camp until she grew in her confidence and began to play with her peers without needing me to be there."

Those comforting moments created a special bond between the two for several years as they reunited each year at summer camp.

"My relationship with the camper created a passion for building relationships and helping children build their confidence," said Bilsback.

The next year she interned at a local elementary school in a Child Development classroom. Most of those children were Multilingual Learners and Bilsback was shocked at how fast they were picking up English, as well as counting, letter names, and number identification.

"I saw how beautiful it was to see a child learn a new skill and be proud of themselves," said Bilsback. "At this age, children are like sponges. They are excited to learn and we make learning fun with play."

While at the College of Charleston, Bilsback applied to be a teaching fellow, and in her junior and senior years, she was placed at W.B. Goodwin Elementary School and said she absolutely loved it. Within the next year, excitement began to spread among early childhood educators about the planned Mary Ford Early Learning & Family Center. A CCSD recruiter convinced her she would love it, and Bilsback made the move to Mary Ford for the 2021-2022 school year, her first official year of teaching.

"That recruiter was right," said Bilsback. "Being a part of something this amazing was never in my wildest dreams. The collaboration is unmatched and it has allowed me to learn so much. Thanks to my colleagues and the environment here at Mary Ford, I am becoming the type of educator and person I want to be."

Principal Loretta Hart is grateful to have Bilsback on her team.

"Ms. Bilsback's energy and smile illuminate any room she enters," said Hart. "She is passionate about her pedagogy and always seeks feedback as she monitors and adjusts her lesson activities to accommodate each of her little scholars' learning

styles. Katie is an outstanding early childhood educator at Mary Ford, and our school family is lucky to have her.”

Shaping the future

In Head Start children are learning social expectations, shaping their fine motor skills, numbers, letters, and more. It is rigorous instruction, but necessary, Bilsback explained.

“Once they get to kindergarten, it is go-time,” said Bilsback. “They need to have already mastered the basics.”

Bilsback said that has been easily achieved among her students.

“As each academic year progresses, I enjoy seeing compassion and confidence grow in the students,” said Bilsback. “They leave my classroom meeting their academic goals, but also understand empathy and what it means to be a kind, helpful person in the world.”

Bilsback is also proud to work at a facility that is not a family center in name only.

“We provide for the whole family, helping with basic needs when necessary,” said Bilsback. “We also host community events like cookouts or family nights. We have a Dad’s Committee that works in support of our students. All of those involved here at Mary Ford are like-minded individuals that only want the best for our students.”

Bilsback said that she makes sure each student feels welcomed and important at school.

“Oftentimes, our students come to school with more troubles than they should at their age,” said Bilsback. “It is important that the first face they see is a smiling one when they arrive. A child often can’t verbalize an issue with trauma or a lack of sleep so I work to get to know the kids well and adjust my expectations if I suspect they need extra support.”

Getting to know her students’ families is also important to Bilsback.

“Creating better partnerships between parents and the teacher is crucial,” said Bilsback. “We have to see each other as people, and not just a role, so we can work together in the interest of the children. When we’re partners, a lot more gets done.”

Bilsback has committed to a lifelong journey of learning in order to be the best teacher she can be. She is currently earning a master’s and plans to earn another in order to learn more about the profession.

"I credit my mother for pushing me to take that summer camp position," said Bilsback. "I didn't want that job, but I am grateful for it because I love coming to my classroom every day."

Bilsback also credits her high school science teacher who was there for her during her teenage years.

"I hope to be that person she was for me," said Bilsback. "I make sure my students know they are crucial to my classroom and that they are family. I want them to know that they have a place here and that they are loved and wanted. That takes some of the baggage off of them."

Bilsback is honored and humbled to have been chosen as not only the Mary Ford Teacher of the Year but a Top Five Teacher of the Year Finalist.

"I am looking forward to using this opportunity to showcase the work that early childhood educators do in our classrooms and the leg up that we give our young learners in CCSD," explained Bilsback.

Bilsback's colleagues at Mary Ford are proud to work alongside her, due to the example she sets for others.

"She is always willing to lead, learn new information, and share her experience with her teammates," added Anderson. "Feedback is applied immediately, once received, as she spends time reflecting on her lessons and the impact on her students. Katie is personable, fun, and high-spirited. She represents Mary Ford as a true leader."

For more information, contact Loretta Hart at (843) 745-7131 or the District's Office of Communications at (843) 937-6303.

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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 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 approximately 49,000 students in 88 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.