



For Immediate Release

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Media Release

Pepperhill Elementary School

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Pulse of CCSD – Paul Hart nurtures students through nutrition

Charleston, S.C. – Pepperhill Elementary School Cafeteria Manager Paul Hart sprang into action recently when he learned there was a student who was unhoused. He provided the child non-perishable food items to share with her family.

“My job is to feed our students nutritional meals and snacks,” said Hart. “It doesn’t matter to me if that meal is enjoyed here at school or outside of our building. I can’t imagine someone not being able to eat dinner. I couldn’t image trying to sleep with nothing in my tummy.”

Hart’s servant leadership is what makes him stand out at Pepperhill, according to Principal Lara McElwee.

“He is loved and respected by everyone here from the students to the staff,” said McElwee.

Hart initially wanted to become a teacher. During college he found a lucrative full time job that took priority over his studies. He immersed himself in various industries to include banking and telecommunications, but didn’t feel fulfilled.

“I was making money for big corporations and not giving back to my community in any real way,” said Hart. “I was looking for a career change where I wouldn’t have to work holidays and weekends.”

Hart came across an advertisement seeking a “lunch lady.” It seemed to be a job with great benefits.

Hart worked in school lunchrooms in and around North Carolina for many years. He worked his way up from being a substitute on the food service line to a manager. He said it is an intensive process to become a manager but with mentors like Libby Post (his former director at Rowan Salisbury School System) supporting and mentoring him, he powered through and earned the top spot. His first supervisor, Lisa Altmann was also a mentor that inspired and encouraged Hart to excel in the industry.

Relatives that lived in the area brought Hart to the Lowcountry and he applied for various positions across the area. It didn't take long for hiring officials to take notice. They were all very familiar with Post, who trained Hart. She is a well-respected professional in the industry and is considered the best of the best.

"I think the Nutrition Services directors knew I had been trained and managed by the industry's top talent," said Hart. "They were right."

Hart worked at Cane Bay Middle School and Boulder Bluff Middle School before being hired to work in the district office in 2015.

"I enjoyed it very much," said Hart. "I was able to make policy changes and roll out those efforts to our schools and watch it in action."

A change in priorities

Hart worked through the COVID-19 pandemic and like everyone, had to pivot to accommodate a new way of doing things.

"COVID-19 changed everyone's priorities," said Hart. "It caused me to look inward and I realized that I wanted to fulfill a bucket-list item. So I applied to Trident Technical College and re-enrolled in school."

Hart also made the move to Charleston County School District (CCSD).

"I wanted to be back at the school level," said Hart. "That's where the fun is. It is the meat and potatoes of Nutrition Services. "I felt like I needed to get back in the trenches to recharge myself."

After completing training at West Ashley High School and James Island Charter High School, Hart is running the show at Pepperhill, and loving it.

"These types of managerial positions in Nutrition Services are coveted and often people stay in them until retirement," said Hart. "I am lucky there was a slot for me. It is not uncommon for someone to stay in their position for 40 years."

Nutrition Services has changed and evolved through the years but some things are worth going back to.

"We're back to scratch-made food whereas in the late 1980s and 1990s a lot of heat and serve, processed foods were popular," said Hart. "The country has made a turnaround to hot, home-cooked meals."

While there is a specific menu site managers must stick to, individual schools are allowed to be creative. Using the harvest of the month, managers can take that

local produce and use a recipe of their own. At Pepperhill, the kids love garlic-roasted broccoli.

"I was a little nervous about introducing it but was pleasantly surprised that our students are open to trying new vegetables," said Hart. "Another favorite is kale chips which we started incorporating into a meal every other Tuesday, paired with Italian pasta."

McElwee said that Hart brings life to the cafeteria.

"It is commonplace to walk into the cafeteria and hear music playing, lively chatter, and laughter coming from the kitchen," said McElwee. "It is evident how much he loves his job, which he's really good at doing. I love his tastings, which have made me a kale and roasted broccoli fan. His employees seem genuinely happy to be at work and the fact that they dress the same each day with a different outfit demonstrates the comradery he has built. He is an absolute treasure and we are lucky to have him here with us."

Impacting student success

Hart said his personality is suited towards the elementary school ages because he finds great joy in dressing up in costumes that represent a holiday or monthly theme.

"The kids love it," said Hart. "My staff and I love getting involved and making their day."

While in the day-to-day hustle, it is easy to forget that nutrition plays a large role in student success.

"We take for granted and become numb to the fact that we're impacting student success," said Hart. "The nutrition aspect is crucial because a hungry child can't learn. The bonds we make with each student are just as important because each hug or high five are moments in which the students know they are loved and are safe. We all want to be heard, loved, and appreciated so the importance of those connections goes both ways."

Pepperhill is a true neighborhood school, nestled in the back of the Pepperhill community. Everyone knows everyone and that is a breath of fresh air for Hart. Hart said the community environment that is embedded within the schools makes the children excited to come to school

All these years later, Hart is still in love with the work but admits at first he didn't realize how hard he would be working for those benefits.

"It has all been worth it," Hart said. "Child nutrition services is a career that you love or you don't. I fell in love with it the first day I ever did it. I've been afforded

a great opportunity and work with a great staff. I couldn't do it without them. It's hard to find a job that you just love and you get paid for 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 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.