

**For Immediate Release**

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# Media Release

## **CCSD announces graduation of 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Aspire cohorts**

Office of Communications

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**Charleston, SC** – For the last nine years, 111 employees from Charleston County School District (CCSD), in partnership with The Citadel, have gone through the Aspire cohort which is a two years master’s program for those seeking an education leadership degree.

The Citadel offers a 25 percent discount and waives the registration fee and CCSD provides a 25 percent match, allowing candidates to receive their master’s degree for half the price.

The 12th cohort will graduate in June and the 13th cohort will graduate in August. Information sessions are being planned for the 15th cohort of students which will begin in the fall.

This opportunity is yet another effort to align with CCSD’s Pillar Two (**high-quality teachers and leaders**) which is one of the three Pillars that uphold the district’s mission of educating and supporting every child in achieving college, career, and citizenship readiness.

According to Gayle Morris, the Interim Director of Leadership Pipeline, the district is committed to providing high-quality, rigorous instruction to staff so that they may better serve students.

“The benefit is that they go through the courses with their CCSD colleagues,” said Morris. “The networking and the bonds they create with one another is also a benefit. They move through the cohort together and can lean on each other for help and guidance.”

The cohort is made up of CCSD employees from all grade levels across the district. Upon graduation they can test to receive certification as a principal.

The application process is extensive and competitive. Candidates must interview and provide recommendations from principals and other district leaders.

Terri H. Nichols, Interim Executive Associate Superintendent, said that it is a very selective process.

"The candidates that get selected are really ambitious, organized, excited educators that want to continue to give to the profession and are willing to take on new challenges and responsibilities," said Nichols. "They are still doing their full-time job teaching, all while juggling graduate courses, and while others are enjoying summer break, and they're taking two courses because the program is year-round. It is not easy."

The cohort has evolved through the years but the mission is the same, according to Morris.

"It is building the pipeline," said Morris. "This is helping to grow our own and give our own staff opportunities for advancement. The reduced cost is a huge driver but we also have a very great partnership with The Citadel. When they graduate, they are ready to step into the positions they aspire to."

According to Evan Ortlieb, Ph.D., Dean of the Zucker Family School of Education, partnerships permit possibilities.

"From examining districtwide leadership needs to aligning the curriculum to address those facets in CCSD, the Aspire cohorts represent raising the bar on school leadership development," said Ortlieb.

Some cohort members decide to stay in the classroom, and that is beneficial to CCSD as well.

"That puts great leaders in the classroom, where leaders are needed just as much," said Nichols.

Lakevia Mills, CCSD's 2020 Teacher of the Year started the cohort in August 2022 and will graduate next summer. She was an honors science teacher at St. John's High School before becoming a Teacher Effectiveness Specialist at the district level.

Mills is earning her second master's degree and said the cohort model is what attracted her to the idea.

"For me, it was the opportunity to grow in my practices and expand into other avenues of education," said Mills. "I always thought I would be in the classroom and once I was given the opportunity to see various aspects of education administration, it became of great interest to me."

Sheldon Bloomfield is the Assistant Principal at Mamie P. Whitesides Elementary School and said the opportunity was one of the best things to happen to his professional career.

"I never thought I would be an administrator, but when the opportunity arose I wasn't going to pass it up."

Mills and Bloomfield agree that time management is a must if you are going to participate in the Aspire Cohort.

"Outside of my regular work with CCSD, I had to prioritize my free time to get my school work complete, all while balancing being a wife and mother," said Mills. "I am learning to manage what I can do and what I can't do and I am using the village of colleagues around me to assist in the process."

Bloomfield said it will be all worthwhile in the end.

"It takes commitment and planning," said Bloomfield. "I put time away every evening and more so on the weekends to focus on assignments and studying. Our professors were very generous, too, with the amount of time they gave us to complete assignments because they knew we all had full-time jobs."

Mills said the classwork is about experiences, conversations, and seeing administration in action.

"Our assignments are intensive and require a lot of analysis of performances and data," said Mills. "We're learning how to implement best practices for student achievement. I have to be very thorough in a way I would be if I were an actual administrator."

Bloomfield is grateful that CCSD and The Citadel afforded him the opportunity. He is now back at The Citadel in the Specialist in Educational Leadership Cohort earning his Ed.S.

"CCSD and The Citadel made sure we learned everything we would need to know to successfully complete the courses and go into the workforce," said Bloomfield. "It is wonderful to see such partnerships with higher education institutions. Employees of CCSD who truly believe that learning is a lifelong endeavor will greatly benefit from this opportunity."

Mills said the cohort model allowed for collaborating, troubleshooting, and brainstorming.

"The cohort is the great aspect of the experience because I am not in a silo," said Mills. "I am in a class with my colleagues that have the same aspirations and goals as me. We're in it together and all have the same goal of graduating and becoming an administrator in some realm. I am appreciative that CCSD sees the potential in us enough to finance some of the cost. That has been beneficial as well."

Bloomfield said he can't say enough about the opportunity.

"CCSD hit the nail on the head with this partnership, and others, making higher education degrees attainable at an affordable cost," Bloomfield added.

For more information, contact the 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.