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Contact:

Andy Pruitt, 843-937-6583

Media Release

CCSD's Black Educators Affinity Group celebrates successful two years

Office of Communications

Donald R. Kennedy, Sr.
Superintendent of Schools

Anita Huggins
Deputy Superintendent

Vanessa L. Denney, M.Ed.
Interim Executive Director of
Communications

Charleston, SC - Charleston County School District's (CCSD) Black Educators Affinity Group (BEAG) kicked off in Spring 2021. BEAG has been instrumental in connecting CCSD's Black educators in a space where they can be celebrated and provided the support they need. As CCSD commemorates Black History Month this year, the district celebrates the growth of its BEAG.

An affinity group is a collection of individuals with a common identity characteristic. The unifying characteristic is traditionally underrepresented, which makes convening that much more important. At its core, an affinity group exists to build community between people with shared identities and interests.

The BEAG was established at the request of Superintendent Don Kennedy in an effort to represent and advocate for the 2,000 black staff members within CCSD.

Tasha Joyner, CCSD's Project Prevent Program Officer, led the initial charge in 2021, along with colleagues Jameshia Coleman, Dr. Kala Goodwine, Farrakhan James, and Ricardo Robinson.

The initial focus areas of the affinity group were leadership development, advocacy and policy, and student voice. As the BEAG evolved and leaders gathered feedback, mental health and wellness became a focus area, and student voices became embedded into all aspects of their work.

"The affinity group's purpose is to connect, support, and celebrate," said Brandi Blake, CCSD's Executive Director for Intercultural Development. "The BEAG also exists as a critical leveraging tool for the retention of educators in our district."

Connect

Leader Tasha Joyner wanted the group to be inclusive of all educators.

"As we built this group, we thought of all CCSD staff, not just classroom teachers or school-based staff," said Joyner. "This included our facilities and finance departments. An educator is anyone in the business of educating children. The BEAG is about true wrap-around support of our scholars and each other."

According to Blake, in just a few short years, the BEAG has made lasting impacts on CCSD's Black educators which she says can be attributed to the resiliency of those who came before them.

"This group is standing on the shoulders of giants," said Blake. "CCSD's historical Black educators were all about advocacy and positive change, not only regarding leadership opportunities but progress towards equity for all children."

Nikki Wilson is a CCSD school climate coach and a member of CCSD's BEAG.

During Wilson's time at Laing Middle School, there were options for students where they were paired with students of similar attributes. She said the students were nurtured in what was considered a safe space and encouraged to take what they learned out into the real world.

"The concept was a success so I was excited to do that with adults," said Wilson. "There has been a core group that has participated in all of the offerings of the BEAG. From Zooms to book clubs to participating with student groups, our members are showing up in various forms to support the group as a whole and each other."

Jameshia Coleman, a school psychologist at North Charleston Creative Arts Elementary School, has been a member of the BEAG core team from the beginning.

"I have been colleagues and friends with Tasha Joyner for years," said Coleman. "We both have a common passion for supporting Black educators and the retention of Black educators. It was a no-brainer for me to be involved when Tasha reached out."

Coleman said research proves that all students benefit from having a Black teacher.

"Especially in a large district such as CCSD, where there is a great disparity rate, retention of Black educators is crucial," said Coleman. "One piece of that is providing a place where we can connect to other Black educators and feel supported and celebrated. The BEAG provides a place where you can be yourself."

The group is still growing and evolving so large-scale quantifying measurables is a work in progress. However, the core team sends a survey to all members at the end of the year requesting feedback. Last year, the majority of BEAG survey takers noted the purpose of the group was clear and participants enjoyed the in-person meetups and events the most.

The communication loop that has been created by the BEAG is a point of pride for Joyner.

Any CCSD employee who identifies as Black is considered a member and receives a monthly newsletter, and access to the padlet (an interactive electronic bulletin board) was created to promote community engagement, encourage feedback, and provide a way for members to stay connected despite being spread across the district.

BEAG members are invited and encouraged to participate in events monthly such as an annual kickoff, Mental Health and Wellness sessions with licensed therapists, HBCU college fairs, book clubs, SC Alliance of Black School Educators Winter Conference and Leadership Institute, various meet-ups, social hours, and the end of the year Juneteenth celebrations.

The most important offerings to Joyner are those that feed the body, mind, and soul.

Support

"We support our members by providing presentations on things that matter and things they need to know," said Joyner. "For example, employee rights are a matter of great interest. Mental health and self-care sessions are held featuring renowned guest speakers. Black leaders are often brought in to present. Everything we do is to ensure our members stay informed and connected."

The BEAG is important to CCSD as a whole as well. Blake explained that school districts across the country are struggling to recruit and retain employees of color.

"There is an even greater crisis to recruit and retain Black educators," said Blake. The BEAG is unique because you traditionally see affinity groups in large corporations. This affinity group at CCSD is the only one for staff in the state. That's a selling point for our district when recruiting. Connecting existing black employees with the group and using it as a recruiting tool is very important."

Students' voices are vital to Joyner, and she is proud to see students forming Black Student Unions and similar groups that allow them to connect with their peers.

"Connection was part of the mission and the vision behind starting this affinity group," said Joyner. "It started for adults and staff, and now we are seeing a reflection of it in our scholars."

Joyner knows the need, at the student level, first-hand. Her own child feels isolated because she is one of the very few Black students in the Advanced Placement courses she is taking.

"Opportunities to connect with her Black peers, through affinity-type organizations, are just as important to her as it is to the adults," explained Joyner.

"Representation matters. Students want to see teachers that look like them," said Joyner. "We hope the presence of the BEAG will attract Black educators, whether

just graduating or veterans of the industry. We hope the existence of the BEAG is an attraction to applicants.”

Celebrate

Those individuals who had a profound effect on CCSD include:

- **Liz Alston** -former Chairwoman of the Charleston County School District, a former Principal of St. John's High School and a lifetime educator and historian for Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church.
- **Septima P. Clark** - A pioneer in grassroots citizenship education, Septima Clark was called the “Mother of the Movement.” The daughter of a laundry woman and a former slave, Clark was born May 3, 1898 in Charleston. In 1916 she graduated from secondary school and, after passing her teacher’s exam, taught at a black school on Johns Island. For more than 30 years, she taught throughout South Carolina, including 18 years in Columbia and nine in Charleston.
- **Dr. Millicent Brown** - On August 23, 1963, Judge Martin handed down the decision that Charleston County schools must desegregate. Dr. Brown was one the first Black children to integrate SC schools and “Millicent Brown, et al v. School District 20” (Charleston, SC, 1963) was the landmark case for school desegregation in the state. Her personal experiences afford her the perspective of “activist-historian” for her “Somebody Had to Do It” research project.
- **Dr. Barbara Dilligard** - a retired CCSD Deputy Superintendent. She began her career in education as a mathematics and computer science teacher in 1968. She served as Ombudsman, Deputy Superintendent for Personnel, Interim Superintendent, Deputy Superintendent for Personnel and Administration, and Deputy Superintendent.
- **Harvey Gantt** was born in Charleston, South Carolina to Wilhelminia and Christopher C. Gantt, a shipyard worker. He participated in civil rights activism at Burke High School. In 1963, he was the first African American to be admitted to Clemson University in South Carolina. He received a degree in architecture with Honors from Clemson and a Master's degree in City Planning from MIT.
- **Mamie Garvin Fields** - He was one of the first African American teachers to be hired in a Charleston County public school. She was a persistent advocate for the education of African American students in the face of a two-tiered system of education in Charleston. During the 1920s and 1930s, she strove to help economically impoverished African American families on James Island to change their futures through education. During those years she was the administrator, a teacher, and counselor at Society Corner, a rural Black school on James Island that like most Black schools in South Carolina, lacked basic instructional equipment and supplies.

- **Dr. Maria Goodloe-Johnson** (1957-2012) was the first African American and first female superintendent of Charleston County School District. She served as superintendent from 2003 to 2007. A trailblazer from the start, she began her career as a special education teacher in Colorado and quickly became the youngest African American female principal in the state. Under her leadership in CCSD, the district saw improved SAT scores and created and implemented the Charleston Plan for Excellence strategic plan which increased academic achievement in our schools.

"To see this go from being a thought to an initiative has been exciting and emotional," added Coleman. "A beautiful side effect of all of this passionate work is that students have taken notice and are creating groups among themselves to support each other. We were the first and we did a lot of work to lay the groundwork and it was all well worth it because now we're watching everyone's progress."

"There is a lot of talent in the district and we all serve in a variety of roles," said Wilson. "Our members can and need to be role models for the students they are serving. Supporting black and brown students in all that they are doing is crucial to making a lasting impression. We believe that the Black Educators Affinity Group provides that and more for our students."

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.