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Media Release



C.E. Williams Middle School

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Principal

Stephanie Ganacoplos named Top 5 Teacher of the Year Finalist

Charleston, SC – Inclusion and ‘teaching to the whole child’ is what Stephanie Ganacoplos found when she joined the teaching community at C.E. Williams Middle School. She’s passionate about the two and it shows in her work and her love for her students there. Her colleagues recognized that and honored her with the title of Teacher of the Year. District officials recognized her abilities as well and named her a Top 5 Finalist for Charleston County School District’s (CCSD) 2020 [Teacher of the Year](#).

Ganacoplos is a special education teacher at C.E. Williams where she works with small groups as well as in the inclusion classrooms. It’s a team approach.

A graduate of James Madison University, Ganacoplos majored in theatre and went on to work in theatre performance, administration and teaching. During that time she had the opportunity to go into the public school system to teach theatre to students with disabilities.

"Drama therapy is basically using drama toward a therapeutic goal. The practice is experiential-based," said Ganacoplos. "After that experience, I made the decision to go back to school to receive my master's in special education from the University of Illinois at Chicago. I grew up in a community with people of varying abilities. My older sister has Downs Syndrome. We graduated high school together, which was special and I have just always been comfortable in the special needs community."

After teaching for seven years in Chicago, Ganacopolis and her husband Mark moved to Charleston to be closer to their families.

"I believe that one of the most important responsibilities of any leader, especially school leaders, is selecting the members of your team," said Principal Kevin Smith. "When I reached out to Ms. Ganacoplos via phone, I was with my administration team and she was in her car in Chicago, IL. After a few minutes of discussing a time to set up a formal interview I realized how special of a teacher she would be. I asked her, 'Would you like to interview now?' She said she needed to park her car. As they say, the rest is history."

Ganacoplos is in her second year teaching with CCSD and absolutely loves the C.E. Williams family.

"The school has such a variety of personalities, cultures, backgrounds, and ethnicities," said Ganacoplos. "I just love our kids. I also connected with our principal, Kevin Smith, right away. He is approachable and he is enlightened. His calm and open demeanor is what really attracted me to the school."

The small groups Ganacoplos teaches work on academic, organizational and functional needs as well as social, emotional, and coping skills.

"The scholars are learning how to regulate their emotions using restorative practices," said Ganacoplos. "The teachers in their inclusion classrooms are always open to making it 'our' classroom. That helps build relationships and is a continuation of 'teaching to the whole child' which includes our special education children."

Ganacoplos' passion is driven by the success of her students, and the idea that all students deserve an equitable playing field regardless of zip code, achievement level, or background. This idea of inclusion spans beyond special education. "Watching their confidence improve is amazing," said Ganacopolis. "I try to expose them to different curricula that might inspire their futures. We inventory and explore careers and I teach them to advocate for themselves in the classroom and how to do it appropriately."

What that means is Ganacoplos' students are gaining confidence and a sense of identity knowing they have a place in this community.

"Inclusive practices for all people is absolutely key for a confident, prosperous person to be a contributing member of society," said Ganacoplos.

"I am honored to be nominated as a Top 5 Finalist," added Ganacoplos. "I am very humbled and hope I can represent the district and move CCSD into a direction of inclusiveness by training others in restorative practices and alternatives to punitive measures. The mentality is restoring relationships and realizing nothing is final and those relationships can be restored. In other words, there is always a solution and way to move forward."

"Ms. Ganacoplos goes above and beyond for her learners," said Smith. "She is caring and innovative and C.E. Williams, CCSD, and the profession of education, are all fortunate to count her in our numbers."

One of Ganacoplos' favorite quotes is by Ralph Waldo Emerson. "To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded."

The quote resonates with Ganacoplos because she believes and lives by the notion that each moment and interaction can and does make a difference. Ganacoplos is making a difference at C.E. Williams and district-wide.

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About the Charleston County School District

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is the second largest school system in South Carolina representing a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools that spanning 1,300 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves more than 50,000 students in 87 schools and specialized programs. With approximately 6,100 employees district-wide, CCSD is the fourth largest employer in the region.

CCSD offers a diverse, expanding portfolio of options and specialized programs, delivered through neighborhood, charter, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), and Montessori schools, and is divided into three Learning Communities. Options include specialized programs in science, engineering and mathematics; liberal arts; music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; and military and other public service enterprises.