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Media Release

Mental wellness important to being effective educators

Northwoods Middle School

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North Charleston, SC – “Healthy Bodies; Healthy Minds; Healthy futures” is not just a motto at Northwoods Middle School – it’s becoming a school culture. Administrators there are trying new things every day to benefit not just their students, but their teachers and staff as well.

In an effort to support staff at the middle school, a relaxation room has been established so teachers can get away for a few minutes from the hustle and bustle of the workday.

Principal Colleen Knauer said that from October to January, teachers (especially first-year educators) are under an inordinate amount of stress. Ensuring mental wellness is important to Knauer because it results in a positive learning atmosphere for both teachers and students.

In addition, data shows that investments in a teacher’s well-being results in greater teacher retention.

“When you have a place to go, even if for just a few minutes, you can center yourself and relax,” said Knauer. “Acknowledging the importance of our staff’s mental wellness has been beneficial and it is reflective in our teacher retention.”

This large space, which was turned into a relaxation room in September, was previously being used for storage. Coach Megan Reilly, school nurse Marcie Freeman, and guidance counselor Monica Vallejo came up with the idea of redoing the room to create a space for teachers.

“We realized some other schools in the district were providing similar areas,” said Freeman. “It is important to allow teachers to take a health and wellness break – away from the craziness of the day – in a quiet and relaxing atmosphere.”

A private lactation room features a comfortable lounge chair and mini-fridge for storage. Adjacent is another room for individuals to participate in silent meditation. Both rooms open to a larger room featuring lounge chairs, couches, a hammock, and yoga mats.

"Teachers often arrive at school early to relax and start the day with a mindful approach," said Reilly. "They are also encouraged to come during the day whenever their schedule allows."

Like dozens of other schools in Charleston County School District (CCSD), Northwoods participates in the MUSC Boeing Center for Children's Wellness initiative (BCCW) which was developed as a partnership between MUSC and CCSD to improve the district's wellness culture. Schools follow a checklist and are awarded grant funding to implement wellness initiatives each year.

"We were motivated by the checklist because we realized we didn't do well with adult wellness and sustainability," said Reilly.

Knauer is the administrator in charge of the school's wellness committee and has been a champion of all ideas surrounding student and staff's health and wellness. She was more than happy to give the project her blessing.

"I've been at Northwoods for ten years and teacher retention has been a significant hurdle," said Reilly. "Under Knauer's leadership that has improved. She hired the least amount of teachers in the last four years while adding 160 more students [due to a rezoning that recently took place]. Investing in your teachers, even with small gestures like this relaxation room, can make all the difference in the world."

Feedback has been positive, Reilly said.

"I am super excited to come here every day," said Reilly. "But every-so-often things [that are not school-related] happen. Stuff comes up and derails your life just a tad. This room offers a place to let that go or work that through so that we can be at our mental best."

Much of the furnishings used to outfit the rooms were donated and \$600 from the Wellness Grant was used for cushions, lighting, and paint. Reilly, Vallejo and Reilly's father donated their time to paint the room and Coach Liz Whiteman painted murals on the wall.

Once a month local chiropractors and massage therapists come to the school and offer 10-minute chair massages during the school day for teachers to get pampered on their planning period, which Reilly said is huge for morale.

In addition, Sara Newer is teaching yoga there every Wednesday after school.

"The students we serve demand a lot of us," said Reilly. "They need us to be at our best. If we can take a few minutes every day to better ourselves we can better serve as encouraging adults and bring mindfulness to the school day."

"Sometimes educators need a place to gather that doesn't feel like school," said Knauer. "This room is even more special because they're not prone to treat it like a

teacher's lounge. If you're centered, you can educate students better. If you take care of yourself, you can take care of your students better."

Melody Chabala is a language arts teacher that utilizes the room most mornings before the start of school. She started taking yoga classes five years ago but never really bought into the notion of meditation. Chabala now uses the relaxation room two to three times a week before school to clear her mind and start the day off on the right foot.

"Myself and another teacher use a meditation application and put a timer on for five minutes," said Chabala. "It is hard to make time for yourself, but it is so very important."

For more information, contact the Office of Strategy and Communications at (843) 937-6303.

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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 span 1,000 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves more than 50,000 students in 86 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.