

For Immediate Release

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Media Release

CCSD honors Rookie Teachers of the Year

Office of Communications

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Charleston, SC — Charleston County School District (CCSD) recognized four first-year teachers Thursday, May 8, 2024, by surprising them with Rookie Teacher of the Year awards.

Denicsha Bennamon (Morningside Middle School), Philip O'Reilly (Septima P. Clark Academy), Tara Pucetas (Oakland Elementary School), and Paige Van Orden (Belle Hall Elementary School) were all honored with a visit from Superintendent Anita Huggins and district staff.

Bennamon is a seventh grade social studies and world geography teacher. She made it her mission to create a culturally inclusive classroom where all students, despite their English proficiency, felt included and supported in their academic learning journey.

"I worked to gain cultural awareness of all scholars and their diverse backgrounds," Bennamon explained. "I created a project that allowed scholars to illustrate their cultural values, as some created posters, showcased culturally-related foods, songs, etc. Everyone became educated on one another's cultural backgrounds, and all projects were displayed around the classroom. This created friendships, a high tolerance, and a respectful, comfortable, nonjudgmental, and welcoming environment."

O'Reilly, a Career and Technical Education teacher, strives to be a trustworthy and predictable adult who neither tries to be identified as a peer nor patronizes his students.

"I have used this rapport to engage them about their lives, their fears and their private aspirations," O'Reilly explained. "Success for me is to partner with them to describe an individual path out."

Pucetas is a third grade English language arts and social studies teacher. She believes every child needs a champion whether that be for the micro or the macro things.

"One way I encourage students to learn from their mistakes is to make mistakes myself," said Pucetas. "It's crucial to remember that the kids in my class were humans before they were a student. So how do they learn from mistakes? I model

it. I often make a mistake on worksheets, on quizzes, and tests, but I always make sure that I voice 'I'm human, I make mistakes, but I'll know how to fix it the next time.' My students are so acclimated to this that any time I make an error, they automatically say, 'It's okay, we all make mistakes.' When we've built that narrative, there's never a chance for students to think that mistakes are not okay."

Van Orden is a K-2 Resource teacher. She believes that building trust with students and families is critical to a child's success.

"Trust, in return, builds strong relationships between myself and my students," said Van Orden. "When students have a strong relationship, respect and trust their teacher, it motivates students to be able to focus on learning and want to do well with their learning."

The CCSD 2024 Rookie Teachers of the Year represent the top first-year teachers at the lower and upper elementary, middle, and high school levels. Each teacher was nominated by their principal for embracing the district's vision for teachers who truly exemplify the best in their school.

After being selected by the schools, the rookies wrote essays in which they described the ways that they meet the needs of their students and their families. These applications were rated by a team of veteran educators who had the difficult job of finding the top Rookie Teachers of the Year.

"It is a privilege to recognize and honor the CCSD Rookie Teachers of the Year," said Associate Superintendent Terri Nichols. "These amazing teachers, first recognized by their schools and then chosen by a district selection committee, have demonstrated a level of commitment and expertise far beyond their years of experience. They have already had a tremendous impact on the students they serve as well as their school communities. We are delighted to honor them in this small way for their dedication to the children of Charleston County School District."

"We are honored to recognize these outstanding educators who have not only shown growth in their profession but are seeing gains among their scholars," said Gayle Morris, Director of Leadership Pipeline. "They deserve to be celebrated every day for their tireless work."

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 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 50,000 students in 88 schools and specialized programs.

CCSD offers a diverse portfolio of educational options and specialized programs delivered to the students of CCSD through neighborhood, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), Montessori, and charter schools and programs. Rich educational opportunities for students include programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; military; dual credit; and many more.