Here's how to support Charleston County schools, students

BY ANITA HUGGINS

I delivered my first State of the Schools address as superintendent of the Charleston County School District last month. I remember the people in the room almost as much as I recall the points of progress I was there to share. They understood that the future of Charleston would be determined by the children in our schools. Staff and school board members who were in attendance each played a role in our accomplishments. The board deserved credit for approving our budget recommendations, which allowed us to make $8,000 raises for teachers and the weighted student funding model a reality.

I was honored to see that several elected leaders also took time from their busy schedules to attend. Even though the school district works directly for the public and the children it serves, the mayors and Charleston County Council members clearly see education as an important quality-of-life issue for our region. Even more importantly, they genuinely care about kids. Many of the agencies and services these local officials control have a direct impact on students and families. As government leaders, they shape and influence life in our county; they oversee police and fire, public parks, libraries, public housing, recreation centers, shelters, parking, sanitation, business development, roads, livability and building codes. With their intentional support, the school district can form new partnerships and collaborations that will help students overcome barriers to achievement.

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Managing daily operations and planning for the future of our large, diverse county is complex work. Our daily challenge is to effectively educate more than 51,000 children in nearly 90 schools and programs that are spread across 1,000 square miles. Meeting the academic and learning needs of children once they arrive at school is our mission.

We have thousands of highly qualified teachers and principals who are experienced in delivering effective instruction and learning supports. Within our increasingly diverse student population, we meet children who bring advanced academic skills from the day they start school and others who enroll in kindergarten without any prior learning experiences. Every school serves students of varying abilities, and some schools have a preponderance of children with serious learning and living challenges.

We accept the responsibility for creating and delivering challenging and vibrant instruction. However, we need strong partnerships to address some of the "living challenges" that can impede academic progress but should not determine a child's potential. Within a community that cares about every learner, we have to work together to provide solutions to common problems that some children face but cannot solve alone.

While our schools provide consistent, high-quality classroom instruction and deliver targeted extra-help strategies to students who are below grade level or face specific hurdles, children must attend school regularly. Frequent absences are serious disruptions to learning and are a much more common occurrence in families that face difficult economic circumstances.

For far too many children in Charleston, there is an urgent need for improved health screenings, vision care, dental care, a healthy diet and safe housing. Overcoming the obstacles that impede academic success for some of our students is not easy. However, our community has an abundance of entrepreneurs, problem solvers and people who care.

In 2025, I will invite local leaders to form stronger partnerships and cross-sector efforts with the school district to scale up plans to tackle some of the non-academic hurdles that have a negative impact on school achievement. We need more seamless collaborations with public housing, public libraries, museums, recreation centers, public safety agencies and health care providers. Simply put, we need help in finding new approaches for resolving long-standing problems that hurt children.

We also need community support to retain our highly qualified workforce. The pay increase was a direct, significant incentive for teachers to come to work in Charleston. Now, we want them to stay and provide long-term stability in our schools. For that reason, I will soon launch a strategy that has been used successfully elsewhere to establish an "Adopt A School/Classroom" initiative. Under this program, a public or private agency will partner with the district and invite employees to adopt or sponsor classrooms and teachers. The premise is simple: Each month, the sponsor does two things — provide support (a book, learning experience, treat, etc.) for the students and provide support (personal outreach, lunch, lifeline) to the teacher. The goal is to let teachers and students know they are valued, that someone cares and that our greater community is here to provide support.

I look forward to more collaborations and joint projects emerging during the next 12 months. Because of our esprit de corps, I believe that the Charleston County School District can move the needle in elevating achievement overall and closing the opportunity gap between groups of students.

We are not tasked with solving a puzzle that comes with pre-designed, interlocking sections that fit together easily. Our challenge is more complex and authentic. We are designing a mosaic of a community that cares about its children. It is a Charleston original.

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