

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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From left to right: Lakeshia Steverson, Agriculture Technology Magnet Academy 4th Grade AgTech Teacher; Yolanda Felder, Agriculture Technology Magnet Academy 5th Grade AgTech Teacher; Dr. Louis Whitesides, Executive Director of South Carolina State University 1890 Research and Extension; and Dr. Shawn D. Foster, Superintendent of Orangeburg County School District.

SC State University's 1890 Research and Extension Partners with Edisto Elementary AgTech Magnet Program

Orangeburg, SC – Edisto Elementary School hosted a special ceremony celebrating an expanded collaboration between Orangeburg County School District (OCS D) and South Carolina State University's 1890 Research and Extension Program, strengthening agricultural education and STEM learning opportunities for students. The event marked the formal signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between SC State University Public Service and Agriculture (PSA) and OCS D's Edisto Elementary Agriculture and Technology Magnet Academy. The agreement builds upon an existing district relationship and reinforces a shared commitment to advancing AgTech education, innovation, and workforce development beginning at the elementary level.

Christopher Greene, Extension Director for the Midlands Region at South Carolina State University PSA, welcomed guests and acknowledged community and district leaders, including Orangeburg County School District Superintendent Dr. Shawn D. Foster, SC State PSA staff, Bamberg Mayor Corey Ramsey, and local partners. Greene emphasized that the collaboration aligns with SC State's five extension core service areas: 4-H Youth Development; Community and Economic Development; Education, Innovation, and Support; Family Nutrition and Health; and Sustainable Agriculture and Natural Resources. "This MOU represents more than a signing. It strengthens an existing partnership and

reflects a long-term commitment to expanding agriculture education and STEM opportunities for students in Orangeburg County,” Greene said.

Dr. Lewis Whitesides, Vice President for Public Service and Agriculture at South Carolina State University and Executive Director of 1890 Research and Extension, highlighted the economic impact of agriculture in South Carolina, noting it is a \$51.8 billion industry supporting more than 259,000 jobs statewide. “One of the biggest challenges we face is workforce sustainability. There are currently more farmers in South Carolina over the age of 70 than under the age of 35. That makes early exposure through programs like this essential for the future of our state,” Whitesides expressed.

Dr. Whitesides also outlined how the Edisto Elementary AgTech program will integrate modern technology, including sensors, dashboards, and data-driven tools, allowing students to monitor plant health, irrigation, fertilization, and pest management in real time.

Orangeburg County School District Superintendent Dr. Shawn D. Foster spoke on the district’s vision of shifting education from a product focused system to a solution focused model. He credited Edisto Elementary’s leadership and staff for their vision and commitment to student centered learning and emphasized the importance of collaboration. “Our goal is not only for students to graduate, but to leave our schools equipped with skills and exposure that prepare them to meet workforce needs. You can never start too early in giving students opportunities to explore future careers. Schools cannot do this work alone and partnerships like this allow us to lift our students higher together,” Foster said.

As part of the collaboration, SC State University PSA donated more than \$4,200 in agricultural materials and supplies. The donation included nearly eight tons of soil, compost, and mulch; materials to fill 10 raised beds; four galvanized raised beds; 21 shrubs and plants; gardening tools; student friendly supplies; and an official drone to support AgTech instruction. The enhanced outdoor space will now serve as an interactive learning laboratory where STEM exploration begins at an early age.

AgTech Program Coordinator Yolanda Felder thanked SC State University for its support, stating, “These supplies will be used to strengthen our Edisto Elementary students’ agricultural experience. Learning will no longer be limited to textbooks. Because of this partnership, our AgTech program will continue to strive and thrive.”

Edisto Elementary Principal Dr. Patricia Hampton also emphasized the impact of the collaboration. “Today’s expanded collaboration with South Carolina State University 1890 Research and Extension represents a shared vision and a long-term investment in our students. Our students are the heart of this work. We plant. We grow. We believe. Thank you for helping us cultivate opportunities for our students here at Edisto Elementary School,” she said.

The ceremony concluded with the formal signing of the MOU by Dr. Whitesides and Dr. Foster, joined by students from the Edisto Elementary AgTech Magnet Program. Orangeburg County School District was named an official Farm Partner of the South Carolina State University 1890 Extension Program and presented with an official drone to support continued AgTech learning.

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