



Charleston County School District
Office of Communications
75 Calhoun St.,
Charleston, SC 29401
(843) 937-6300

Media Release

Charleston County School District Launches **Innovative School-Based Dental Hygiene** **Program to Expand Student Access to Oral** **Health Care**

CHARLESTON, S.C. (August 11, 2026) – According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, tooth decay is the most common chronic disease in childhood and is directly responsible for children missing millions of school hours each year. As a proactive measure to improve student health and academic success, Charleston County School District (CCSD) is launching an innovative school-based dental hygiene program designed to increase access to preventive oral health services for students and remove barriers that often prevent children from receiving routine dental care.

The initiative is supported by a grant from the BlueCross® BlueShield® of South Carolina Foundation and establishes a full-time School Hygienist position that will expand school-based oral health services across the district, beginning with Title I schools and Head Start programs. Through partnerships with local healthcare providers and educational institutions, the program will connect students and families with preventive dental services, screenings, care coordination, and oral health education.

Funding also supports portable dental equipment, clinical supplies, professional development, and program oversight, creating the infrastructure needed to provide preventive dental care directly within Charleston County schools while establishing a sustainable model for future expansion.

"Healthy students are better learners, and this initiative reflects our unwavering commitment to supporting the whole child," said Superintendent Anita Huggins. "Every child deserves the opportunity to come to school healthy, confident, and ready to learn."

"By collaborating with the MUSC Dental Program, led by Dr. Amy Martin, and the BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina Foundation, we are creating innovative solutions that improve both student health and academic success. This is exactly what strong partnerships should accomplish."

Serving more than 50,000 students, CCSD is one of the largest school districts in South Carolina. District leaders recognized the need to strengthen access to oral health services after experiencing limited availability of school-based dental providers in recent years.



Charleston County
SCHOOL DISTRICT

Anita W. Huggins, M.Ed., Superintendent of Schools
Sully Witte, Public Information Officer

The initiative reflects a growing collaboration between the Charleston County School District and the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC), inspired by the advocacy of Miss Clemson Jenna Huggins and her statewide *More Than a Smile* initiative. Through school outreach, legislative advocacy, and partnerships with healthcare providers, Huggins has helped elevate awareness of the connection between oral health, overall wellness, and academic achievement. Those conversations helped strengthen the District's vision for expanding school-based oral healthcare and ultimately contributed to the collaborative efforts that made this pilot program possible.

"At Charleston County School District, we understand that healthy students are better equipped to learn and thrive," said Ellen Nitz, Executive Director of Nursing Services. "This innovative program helps remove barriers to essential healthcare by bringing preventive dental services directly to our students. Conversations sparked by Jenna Huggins' *More Than a Smile* initiative helped elevate the importance of expanding school-based oral healthcare, and this grant allows us to turn that shared vision into action. By investing in our students' health, we are also investing in their academic success and overall well-being."

The School Hygienist will work under the direction of Nitz and in collaboration with Dr. Janice Key, CCSD Medical Consultant, who helped orchestrate this new partnership. The position builds upon the district's successful model for delivering school-based health services and leverages existing healthcare partnerships to expand access to preventive dental care. The initiative also integrates dental screenings alongside the District's successful Vision to Learn program, allowing students to receive both vision and oral health screenings during the same school visit.

"This program demonstrates how innovation happens when great partners come together around a shared mission," said Jeff Borowy, Chief Operating Officer for Charleston County School District. "By aligning dental screenings with our Vision to Learn program, we are increasing efficiency, reducing barriers for families, and ensuring more students receive the preventive healthcare they need to succeed in school. We look forward to building a model that can ultimately serve students throughout Charleston County."

During the pilot phase, the School Hygienist will provide services in 10 to 12 Title I schools and Head Start programs, including:

- North Charleston Elementary School
- Hunley Park Elementary School
- Springfield Elementary School
- Pepperhill Elementary School
- St. James-Santee Elementary School
- Midland Park Primary School
- A.C. Corcoran Elementary School
- Meeting Street at Burns
- Matilda F. Dunston Elementary School
- Stono Park Elementary School
- Jane Edwards Elementary School
- Mary Ford Early Learning & Family Center

The School Hygienist will conduct oral health screenings, provide preventive dental services under public health supervision when other providers are unavailable, connect students and

families with school-based dental providers, and coordinate care for students with complex dental needs.

The initiative is supported through partnerships with the James B. Edwards College of Dental Medicine, Fetter Health, the North Charleston Dental Outreach Clinic, and other community organizations committed to improving children's oral health. Dr. Deirdre Williams, Chief of Pediatric Dentistry at the College of Dental Medicine, will serve as the district's Dental Director, providing clinical oversight for the program.

Leaders believe the partnership has the potential to become a model for school-based oral healthcare across South Carolina.

"This partnership represents the future of pediatric oral healthcare," said Amy B. Martin, DrPH, MSPH, Senior Associate Dean of the James B. Edwards College of Dental Medicine at the Medical University of South Carolina. "By bringing preventive dental services directly into schools, we are meeting children where they are, reducing barriers to care, and creating a sustainable model that connects education, healthcare, and community partners around a shared goal of helping every child thrive."

"This program represents an important step toward ensuring every child has access to preventive oral healthcare," said Nitz. "By identifying dental concerns early, connecting families with services, and expanding partnerships throughout our community, we can improve health outcomes while helping students stay focused on learning."

The district's goals include increasing the number of students receiving school-based oral health services, improving oral health outcomes, strengthening partnerships with community providers, and establishing a sustainable model to serve students throughout Charleston County for years to come. The grant period runs through June 30, 2028.

The BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina Foundation is an independent licensee of the Blue Cross Blue Shield Association.

###

About the Charleston County School District

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is a nationally accredited school district dedicated to ensuring every student has access to a high-quality education and the support needed to thrive. As South Carolina's second-largest school system, CCSD serves more than 50,000 students across 91 schools and specialized programs throughout 1,300 square miles of coastal communities, representing a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools.

Under the leadership of Superintendent Anita Huggins, CCSD is focused on accelerating student achievement, expanding opportunities, and preparing every student for success in college, career, and life. Recent district accomplishments include record-high academic performance on state assessments, increasing graduation rates, and significant gains in college and career readiness, reflecting the district's commitment to continuous improvement and educational excellence. Through the Peninsula Promise, CCSD is also expanding access to early learning, college and career pathways, arts, and family support services to create seamless opportunities for students living on the historic Charleston Peninsula.

CCSD offers a diverse and expanding portfolio of educational choices, including neighborhood, magnet, charter, Montessori, and International Baccalaureate (IB) schools and programs. Students have access to rich learning experiences in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); visual and performing arts; world languages; military and leadership programs; career and technical education; dual enrollment and early college opportunities; and other innovative pathways designed to meet a wide range of interests and aspirations.

Working in partnership with families, community organizations, higher education institutions, and industry leaders, CCSD remains committed to creating equitable opportunities, fostering student success, and ensuring that every graduate is prepared to contribute and compete in an increasingly complex and interconnected world.

