Column Recurring Title**: Rooted and Growing: The Southampton Story**
Column Author: Dr. Julie Thompson, SCPS Superintendent
Specific Article Title: "Celebrating the People and Partnerships That Help Our Students Grow"
Specific Article Due Date: November 16, 2026

There is something special about a community that shows up for its children. Whether it is a School Board member investing time in professional learning, a community partner making sure student-athletes have a nutritious meal, a teacher encouraging a student to reach a new goal, or a veteran sharing a story of service, these moments remind us that education is truly a community effort. This week, we had plenty of reasons to celebrate the people and partnerships that make Southampton County Public Schools special.

At our November School Board meeting, we began by recognizing several individuals whose contributions reflect our commitment to excellence. Four of our School Board members – Dr. Deborah Goodwyn, Cassandra Hobbs, Orris Lane, and Christopher Smith, Sr. – earned the Virginia School Boards Association (VSBA) Certificate of Recognition through participation in the VSBA Academy Program. This recognition represents 15 credits of professional learning annually. Their commitment to continuing education and strengthening their knowledge of school governance demonstrates an investment not only in their own leadership but also in the students, employees, and families they serve.

We also celebrated our October Superintendent's Students of the Month. Congratulations to Savannah Epps and Gabriel Barbour of Capron; Emmari Clore and Maximilian Lukianchenko of Meherrin; Ryan Manuel and Aubrey Jenkins of Nottoway; Dean Scott and Taleah Jordan of Riverdale; Chloe Byrd and Matthew Crawford of Southampton Middle; and Wayne Fetrow and Tyler Hamlin of Southampton High. These students exemplify positive character, responsibility, leadership, kindness, and a commitment to learning. Their accomplishments remind us that excellence is not measured by academic achievement alone, but also by the choices we make and how we treat others. We are proud of each of them!

One of the most meaningful recognitions of the evening was honoring Mr. Charlie Bazdanes of Family 4 Eternity for his extraordinary support of our student-athletes. Through his leadership, a meal program has been established to provide nutritious meals to students participating in JJV Football, JJV Cheerleading, JJV Girls Basketball, and Girls Volleyball. In just its first few weeks, the program has provided more than 1,000 meals! We are grateful to Southampton Motor Speedway, the program's primary sponsor, and No Child Goes Hungry for their partnership, as well as Mackenzie Lewis for her invaluable assistance with meal preparation. Mr. Bazdanes reminds us that supporting children extends far beyond the classroom. Sometimes, making a difference begins with something as simple – and as important – as making sure a child has a good meal.

Our November meeting also included important updates about the work happening throughout the division. We heard about expanded opportunities through the Appomattox Regional Governor's School and Governor's School for the Arts, career and technical education work-based learning, and dual enrollment. We reviewed progress on our local gifted education plan and discussed school-zone safety improvements, including the proposed replacement of all 18 flashing beacons serving our six schools. We also explored expanding GPS tracking to additional vehicles that transport students.

I shared an update on my first four months as superintendent, including progress toward our six organizational goals. We discussed instructional leadership, student achievement, facilities, staffing, community partnerships, and responsible resource management. Our facilities update highlighted ongoing HVAC and roof improvements, building repairs, and continued construction of the Southampton High School Student Health Center. We also reviewed enrollment, attendance, staffing vacancies, maintenance requests, and student performance data. These conversations are important because transparency requires more than sharing good news. It means being honest about where we are, recognizing where improvement is needed, and keeping our focus on the work ahead. We also celebrated a $52,990 state grant to strengthen computer science and STEM opportunities and an additional $91,185 in state security grant funding for our schools.

This week also marked the conclusion of our School Board Transparency Committee meetings. I want to extend a sincere thank-you to committee members Dever King, Cassandra Hobbs, C. Hamlin, Michelle Cleaton, Jawanda Newsome, Dr. Mark Barfield, LaQuita Wyche, Bill Hatch, and Rachel Boag for their time, thoughtful discussions, and outstanding ideas. Among the recommendations are developing a data dashboard on the SCPS website and making improvements to the livestreaming of School Board meetings. Their work reflects a shared belief that our community deserves access to information and an opportunity to stay connected to the work of its schools.

At Southampton High School, Thursday evening brought another celebration as we inducted new members into the National Honor Society, Beta Club, and National Technical Honor Society. These organizations recognize academic achievement, leadership, character, service, and dedication to future goals. Congratulations to our newest members!

We also saw wonderful examples of community support in our elementary schools. On Friday, November 13, Community Electric Cooperative visited Nottoway Elementary with equipment and its live-line trailer. Fourth- and fifth-grade students had the opportunity to learn about electricity, careers in the electrical industry, and the possibilities that come with understanding how electricity works. On Veterans Day, our elementary schools also held special assemblies to honor the men and women who have served our country. We are grateful to our veterans and to the community partners who continually find meaningful ways to enrich our students' learning

experiences. Many of our second graders and sixth graders also were able to attend the 38th Annual Cheroenhaka (Nottoway) Corn Harvest Powwow School Day Festivities on Friday. This annual celebration provided students with a meaningful opportunity to learn about the history, traditions, and cultural heritage of the Cheroenhaka people while experiencing firsthand the importance of preserving and honoring the rich history of our community.

Finally, our football season came to a close Friday night with a hard-fought contest against #3 King William. While the season has ended, our pride in these student-athletes and their coaches has not. Thank you for your hard work, determination, sportsmanship, and the way you represented Southampton County throughout the season.

As I reflect on this week, I am reminded that strong schools are built through strong relationships. They grow when people invest their time, share their talents, celebrate one another, and work together toward something bigger than themselves.

That is what it means to be rooted in excellence and growing together. Every child. Every classroom. Every school. Every day.

Together we grow!