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102 Founders Court • Orangeburg, SC 29118
Phone: (803) 534-5454

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Contact: Taylor R. Johnson
Communications and Multimedia Specialist
taylor.johnson@ocsdsc.org



Kailanya S. Brailey
November Alumni Spotlight of the Month Honoree

From North High School to Statewide Educational Leadership: Kailanya S. Brailey's Journey of Purpose, Representation, and Giving Back

Orangeburg, S.C. — Long before Kailanya S. Brailey became a school principal, children's book author, and statewide educational leader, she was a young girl growing up in North, South Carolina, surrounded by a community that believed in her potential. In the classrooms of the former Orangeburg School District Five, at home, in church, and throughout her hometown, she learned a lesson that would guide her for decades: where you come from does not determine how far you can go. Today, the North High School Class of 2000 graduate has transformed those early lessons into a career dedicated to education, family engagement, and ensuring that children from communities like her own recognize the possibilities within themselves.

Affectionately known as "Starr" to family and close friends, Brailey graduated with high honors from North High School before pursuing higher education and returning to Orangeburg County to begin her teaching career at Bethune-Bowman Middle High School. Her professional journey eventually led her to Chapin, South Carolina, where she spent five years teaching before transitioning into school administration at Meadow Glen Middle School in Lexington. After five years in administration there, she became principal of Pelion Middle School, where she had the opportunity to open the school's new facility. Each chapter of her career strengthened her commitment to creating educational environments where students feel supported, families remain engaged, and educators have the resources necessary to help children succeed.

Today, Brailey's influence extends beyond individual classrooms and school buildings. She currently serves as a Project Director for CEFAM & Senior Education Equity Specialist with Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium, Inc. (MAEC), a Maryland-based educational nonprofit organization focused on technical assistance and capacity building. She also serves as Project Director for a Statewide Family Engagement Center serving Maine. In this leadership role, Brailey works alongside state education agencies, including the Maine Department of Education, as well as school districts, educational leaders, and practitioners to strengthen the relationships between schools and families. Although her work is no longer primarily student-facing, her mission remains rooted in helping schools build the systems, partnerships, and opportunities that allow students and families to thrive.

For Brailey, the foundation of that mission can be traced directly to her childhood in Orangeburg County. When reflecting on how her educational experiences shaped her success, she credits the collective investment of the people who surrounded her long before she entered the professional world. "I tell people all the time that I am what happens," Brailey shared. "The success that I have achieved, and that I have been blessed to walk in, is because I am an example of what happens when schools and families and communities partner for the success of a child."

That same belief in the power of community would eventually inspire Brailey to expand her impact beyond educational leadership and into children's literature. While serving as principal at Pelion Middle School, she felt called to share stories that reflected the experiences, identities, and aspirations of children who too often struggle to see themselves represented in the books they read. She answered that calling by writing her first children's book, *Mia Learns to Soar*, followed by *Mia Finds Her Voice*. Together, the books form *The Mia Series*, which follows the educational journey of Mia, a young Black girl growing up in a small town surrounded by a village that nurtures her passions, celebrates her individuality, and encourages her to believe in her dreams. Written in rhyme, the books emphasize the importance of family support, strong relationships between educators and communities, creativity, confidence, and self-worth. Through Mia's experiences, Brailey introduces young readers to characters, teachers, and an author who reflect their own identities and lived experiences. For Brailey, representation in children's literature is not simply about the illustrations on a page. It is about helping children develop a sense of belonging and recognize that their stories deserve to be told. Today, copies of her books can be found in school libraries throughout Orangeburg County and across the United States.

Despite the distance her career has taken her from North, Brailey has remained intentional about investing in the community that helped shape her. Over the years, she has returned to serve as a guest speaker for National Honor Society events, participated as a guest evaluator for Senior Exit presentations, and contributed to the Cinderella Project, an initiative helping young women prepare for prom. More recently, she made financial contributions to North Middle High School's Day of Excellence Celebration and donated copies of *Mia Learns to Soar* to every classroom library at Dover Elementary School. These contributions reflect her belief that the opportunities she received as a student should continue to be available to the generations following her.

Her passion for representation is also deeply personal. Brailey often reflects on her earliest encounters with children's literature and the limited opportunities she had to see characters who resembled her. Those experiences helped inspire her determination to create stories in which young Black children could recognize themselves, their communities, and their possibilities. Through *The Mia Series*, she hopes children will develop a love for reading, an appreciation for their teachers and schools, and, most importantly, confidence in who they are. When asked what message she would share with today's students at North Middle High School, particularly those who may believe growing up in a small town limits their opportunities, Brailey turned to the words of Ms. Johnson, a character in her books whose name honors her mother's maiden name. "Though you may be from a small town, remember, there is talent spread all around," Brailey shared, recalling the message from her book. She emphasized that whether students find their talents on a stage, on a football field, in a classroom, or elsewhere, they should never abandon their dreams because of where they were raised.

For Brailey, those words represent more than encouragement. They are a reflection of a life shaped by the unwavering support of family, educators, faith, and community. From the hallways of North High School to leading a newly opened middle school and now supporting educational systems at the state level, her journey illustrates the lasting impact of a community that invests in its children. And through every school she has served, every family she has supported, and every page she has written, Brailey continues to carry the lessons of her hometown forward, reminding the next generation that even the smallest communities can nurture extraordinary dreams.

For additional information, please contact Taylor R. Johnson, Communications and Multi-Media Specialist, at taylor.johnson@ocsdsc.org or 839-253-2070.

Orangeburg County School District

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