



AIKEN COUNTY
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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DISTRICT ANNOUNCES PLANS TO ACCELERATE LEARNING THROUGH THEMATIC PROGRAMS AT ALL HIGH SCHOOLS

To enhance the preparedness of Aiken County Public School students to exceed standards of college and career readiness and meet the needs of an increasingly technical and highly-skilled future workforce, the District announced plans in May of 2016 to raise expectations and increase access to rigorous coursework and technical fields of study through Accelerated Learning Initiatives beginning with three high schools for the 2016-17 academic year. At tonight's school board meeting, thematic programs for the remaining four schools were unanimously approved.

The Thematic Program proposals Aiken, Wagener-Salley, Ridge Spring-Monetta and Silver Bluff high schools brought forward were the result of months of research, school site visits and planning. The high schools assembled their own mix of grade-level chairs, administration, counselors, parents, community members and students to serve on a committee and identify strengths both inside and outside of their school to build upon in the creation of a unique high-quality academic focus.

"Each plan is uniquely representative of the strengths of the school and the surrounding community," Chief Officer of Instruction Dr. DeeDee Washington commented, "and all involve connecting to the middle schools in a very deliberate way."

AIKEN HIGH SCHOOL

Aiken High School has a history of international involvement. Once the home to an International Baccalaureate (IB) program, the school has continued a global

focus with an active international exchange program and renowned world language offerings.

IB programs at Aiken and North Augusta high schools were suspended in 2009 due to the high expense and small number of student participants (only eight Aiken High students and three North Augusta High students received IB diplomas in the program's final year).

Aiken High's Thematic Program Committee of parents, faculty members, department chairs and long-time senior counselor Linda Strojan (now retired) reviewed reinstating IB, while exploring similar programs.

Linda Strojan readily admits that when asked to serve, she had an ulterior motive—getting the IB program back in Aiken County!

The committee ultimately selected the **Cambridge International Program (CIE)**. Cambridge, a non-profit accelerated program, is taught in more than 10,000 schools worldwide and prepares students to become global citizens. Aiken High will be the first Cambridge Diploma Program in the state of South Carolina.

"I am now a convert," Strojan explained. "This program respects individuality of the student, brings an international component to our high school and is not as expensive as IB."

Cambridge will encompass a whole-school model and offer students a wide variety of courses, including 30 foreign languages. All students will be required to study world events through a Global Studies course and encouraged to enroll in at least one Cambridge Course during their high school experience.

Students interested in continuing college-level coursework and research through Cambridge can do so in their individual interest area and have the opportunity to earn a nationally and internationally recognized Advanced International Certificate of Education (AICE diploma), in addition to a high school diploma.

Within the United States, more than 500 colleges, including all Ivy League institutions, recognize the Cambridge program in awarding college credit for Cambridge Courses. A growing number of colleges in South Carolina, including Clemson University, the University of South Carolina, College of Charleston, Lander, Furman, Presbyterian and Wofford Colleges, award credits for successful completion of Cambridge coursework and qualifying scores on Cambridge exams.

The school plans to apply for the Cambridge Program in spring 2017. Following a site visit and anticipated approval by Cambridge, teacher training and curriculum development will follow beginning in fall 2017. The first cohort of

Cambridge Program students will begin with the freshman class of 2018-19; an additional class will be added in subsequent years, with school-wide implementation planned for the 2020-21 school year.

"I'm 100% sure that this is right for Aiken High," Principal Garen Cofer commented. "This is not an elitist program; all students, regardless of their background can participate. That's ideal for our diverse population. Our teachers are overly-excited about this. There are no arms to twist there!"

WAGENER-SALLEY HIGH SCHOOL

Wagener-Salley's selected thematic focus is based on a long tradition of leadership training through the school's Junior Reserve Officer Training Program (JROTC), Agricultural Education Program and a strong desire to help students identify their individual strengths and career goals.

The school will administer Clifton Strength Finder assessments to ninth grade students in an overt effort to help students assess their strengths and weaknesses and realize their potential for leadership opportunities within the school's thematic focus of a **Leadership & Military Science Academy** and beyond in their individual careers.

Wagener-Salley's JROTC program began in 2005 and is already robust with 70 of the school's total student count of 287 currently participating. The school plans to more than double participation in JROTC over the next three years as a deliberate pathway to helping students attain leadership skills and develop citizenship through service learning. The program will be expanded through active recruitment and partnership with their feeder elementary/middle school Busbee-Corbett, as well as enhanced community service, leadership, and co-curricular activities, including the JROTC Leadership Challenge and Academic Bowl, STEM Camps, Air Rifle and Drill Competitions, Color Guard performances in the community, Raider Challenge Athletic Competition, and the Summer Leadership Camp at Fort Jackson. With the understanding that JROTC will meet the interests of only some students, ultimately, Wagener-Salley will provide enhanced leadership opportunities, in addition to JROTC, for each student.

In addition, Wagener-Salley will increase opportunities for Agricultural Education by expanding the existing program of Agricultural Mechanics and Technology with the addition of the Natural Resources Management Career Cluster, and with that an additional agricultural studies teacher.

Principal Ute Aadland believes the school's focus as an Academy of Leadership & Military Science will also have a direct impact on the community. "Developing leadership skills in our students will empower them to give back to their community and help it thrive," she stated.

RIDGE SPRING-MONETTA HIGH SCHOOL

Ridge Spring-Monetta Middle High School (RSMMH) will build upon its core competencies of Health Science, Business and Agricultural Programs to maximize student career and post-secondary educational experiences and opportunities through the creation of a self-sustaining farm to table school, partnered with the health science program for healthy living and business education program for entrepreneurship skill development.

Farm to table/school connects schools (K-12) and local farms with the objectives of serving healthy meals in school cafeterias, improving student nutrition, providing agricultural experiences and health and nutrition educational opportunities, and supporting local and regional farmers. In addition to growing and serving local produce, RSMMH's farm to school program will provide hands-on agricultural opportunities, nutrition and health science education that emphasizes STEM-enriched learning, community engagement through local field trips, and the development of business, finance and entrepreneurship skills.

As the District's "**Farm to Table Healthy Living School**," and a result of an on-campus Career & Technology Education (CATE) partnership, Ridge Spring-Monetta Middle High School will serve the local community, as well as Aiken County Public Schools' breakfast and lunch programs through the growing and selling of school-based produce. Additionally, they will provide health and nutrition awareness to students and families throughout Aiken County.

The school's agriculture education teacher Mr. Michael Crim also serves as President of the South Carolina Association of Agriculture Educators and leads the school's award-winning Future Farmers of America Program. Crim says he's excited about the school's **Health Science & Agriculture Enterprise** thematic focus. "This is not only an amazing opportunity for our community that is very agriculturally-based," he commented, "but also for the hands-on nutrition and science experiences this program will mean for our students."

SILVER BLUFF HIGH SCHOOL

Centrally located between the Savannah River Site and the Cyber Command Center at Fort Gordon, Silver Bluff High School will fittingly become an **Academy of Technology, Engineering and Arts** (ATEA) through a thematic focus and relevant curriculum for 21st century education.

As South Carolina's newest high school-level ATEA school and the only arts-focused high school in the county, Silver Bluff will offer a school of excellence with instruction that will excite and interest students, particularly those rising from Jackson Middle STEM School and New Ellenton STEAM School, both of which feed into Silver Bluff High School. Additionally, both middle schools recently earned national AdvancED accreditation in STEM education.

"We recognize the importance and value that technology, engineering and the arts play in our lives," the school's principal Collette Johnson commented. "We look forward to expanding our curriculum and student opportunities in these areas."

New course offerings are largely part of Project Lead the Way (PLTW), a reinvented classroom experience characterized by engaging hands-on activities which empower students to solve real-world challenges. PLTW Engineering courses began this year and will be further complemented by PLTW Introduction to Computer Science and PLTW Courses 4 and 5. Other new course offerings will include Advanced Placement Chemistry, Physics, World History and Spanish, as well as Cybersecurity, Coding, Graphic Communication, Digital Design and Strings.

The school plans to further develop College and Career Ready agreements with local and national arts groups, business leaders, and manufacturing to continue to increase community involvement and showcase students to prospective employers. Silver Bluff will continue to foster partnerships with stakeholders at the Savannah River Site and Fort Gordon by offering student internships, work study employment opportunities, and job shadowing experiences.

RAISING RIGOR FOR ALL

Tonight's announcement illustrates Superintendent Dr. Sean Alford's promise to provide solution-driven pathways to ensure students at all high schools develop sound academic behaviors and an employable skill set.

South Aiken and North Augusta High Schools, in partnership with the National Math + Science Initiative (NMSI) and generous local support, including a lead

gift from Department of Energy Contractor AECOM, the Department of Defense, and a contribution announced last month, the largest to date for our local installation of the national model, from Savannah River Nuclear Solutions, were established this school year (2016-17) as **Advanced Placement Academies**.

South Aiken and North Augusta are experiencing a marked change in Advanced Placement (AP) from an opportunity that was previously encouraged for some to an opportunity that is encouraged for all. Through an inclusive approach, financial incentives (\$100/qualifying score on an AP exam for the student and teacher), and an evolving culture, shifting with events like Saturday Study Sessions and Academic Pep Rallies, where high-achieving students and their teachers are celebrated, the number of students accepting the AP challenge at South Aiken and North Augusta high schools has drastically increased, with numbers up by 481 and 347 course enrollments, respectively.

“With interest in AP coursework that strong,” District Superintendent Dr. Sean Alford commented, “we are excited to experience the impact our partnership with NMSI and with our community to make this initiative possible will have on the number of qualifying scores (for college credit) and on the overall preparedness of these students for their future.”

The **Early College at Midland Valley High School** began in June 2016 with a cohort of 18 exceptionally driven and bright rising sophomores who began their college journey this summer with two courses on Aiken Technical College’s (ATC) campus.

Students enrolled in the Early College Thematic Program will continue with two courses each semester, including summers, through the spring semester of their senior year; most courses will be taught on their own high school campus. The program was the first of its kind in our county and will provide students the opportunity to earn an Associate in Arts degree from ATC at the same time they are earning their high school diploma. Upon high school graduation, the students can then transfer the Associate in Arts degree to four-year colleges and universities as college juniors.

In addition to serving students officially part of the Early College, those outside of the highly rigorous program can also enroll in college-level courses taught by ATC faculty at Midland Valley and start earning college credit, without cost to students or their families, before graduating from high school.

“I’m pleased to see the work our high schools and their school communities have done to plan for an academic stretch for all students,” Dr. Alford continued. “While also providing a high-quality traditional educational

experience, their unique thematic focuses extend our classrooms into the communities they serve, creating graduates that are sure to be authentic solutions to workforce needs.

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