With Community Support Aiken County Public Schools’ ONE TEAM Prepares, Distributes Close to One Million Meals During Covid-19 School Closures

Aiken County, along with all schools in South Carolina, closed on Monday, March 16, 2020, to help control the spread of Covid-19 and protect the health of students, staff and the community.

In Aiken County, the nutritional needs of students were met almost immediately, beginning Tuesday, March 17, 2020, with Grab-and-Go meals available at every school and its fleet of buses distributing meals to students along their regular bus routes. By the end of the school year, Aiken County Public Schools and its essential staff had provided 924,860 meals to students during this mandated closure of schools.

With support from Golden Harvest Food Bank, Aiken County Public Schools distributed 74,510 meals to students on Friday, April 3 alone to help ensure students’ nutritional needs were met over Spring Break.

“We are incredibly grateful to The United Way of Aiken County and Golden Harvest Food Bank for stepping in to help,” District Superintendent King Laurence commented.

“This team, our ONE TEAM, includes the entire community, and we are committed to meeting the needs of our Aiken County’s children,” he added.

District Celebrates Over 1,400 Class of 2020 Graduates During In-Person Ceremonies Held in School Stadiums

Graduates of Aiken County Public School District’s Class of 2020 will always be remembered for the character and determination they displayed in the face of unprecedented adversity and a myriad of challenges related to the historic Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite many hardships created by the pandemic, on Thursday, June 4, 2020, and Friday, June 5, 2020, the District joined together with families across Aiken County in celebrating the achievements of one thousand four hundred and fifty-seven (1,457) seniors as they graduated on the football fields of their respective campuses and alongside their classmates.

“There is a poem which reads in part, ‘We did not ask for this room or this music. We were invited in ... but because we are here, let us dance’. Your senior year did not take place in the room you had envisioned. The soundtrack was not the playlist you would have created. Still, you danced,’” stated Aiken County Superintendent King Laurence in his address to students.

“You lives will be filled with countless victories, but you will also know disappointment,” he added. “When that happens, if you approach your challenges with the same courage, dignity, and grace with which you have conquered this one, the future is bright not only for all of you but for those of us whose shoes you will one day fill.”

Aiken County Board of Education Chairman Keith Liner reminded Class of 2020 graduates that even though they would wear many different hats in life, there is one they will always share.

“Tomorrow morning you start the next chapter of your life and your life’s journey may lead you to wear many different hats,” commented Liner. “We wish you congratulations, good luck, and Godspeed.”

As a testament to their hard work in and outside of the classroom, Aiken County graduates of the Class of 2020 earned a total of $56,093,363 in scholarship dollars during the 2019-20 school year.

The District also recognized 45 percent of this year’s 1,457 graduates, or 655 students, as ACPSD Honor Graduates.
Jennifer Hart Taking on Expanded New Leadership Role

Having served as Director of Human Resources for Aiken County Public Schools over the past two years, Jennifer Hart is taking on a new leadership role as Chief Officer of Human Resources and Administration, a position formerly held by Superintendent King Laurence.

In her role as human resources director for Aiken County Public Schools, Hart has overseen the administration of all facets of human resources including recruitment and retention, employee relations, professional development, and benefits; developed a 3-year HR specific strategic plan and annual supportive objectives in support of the organization’s mission, vision, and strategic plan; and realigned people, processes, and systems to establish departmental value, improve internal customer service, and ensure legal compliance.

School Board Names King Laurence as the District’s Permanent Leader

Five months after taking on the role of interim superintendent for Aiken County Public Schools, veteran administrator King Laurence was named as the school district’s permanent leader in February of 2020.

“This is an extremely humbling honor for me and I am very grateful to have been given the opportunity to lead and support such a wonderful team of talented educators and professionals in a more permanent capacity,” Laurence stated. “I very much look forward to working with the members of our board, our leadership team, administrators and teachers to chart a path of uninterrupted success for all Aiken County students.”

Laurence has an educational career which spans three decades, with 22 years of service in Aiken County Public Schools. Prior to his position as the Superintendent and Interim Superintendent, he served as the District’s Chief Officer of Administration and Human Resources, a role he had held since 2016.

Experienced Education Administrator Named Chief Officer of Operations & Student Services

Following three years of service as chief of staff for Williamsburg-James City-County Public Schools in Virginia, South Carolina native Dr. Corey Murphy returned to the Palmetto State in a new leadership role as the Chief Officer of Operations and Student Services.

Murphy has also served in a number of important roles in the United States Army Reserves, including that of a military police officer, Systems Integration Officer, Company Commanding Officer, Battalion Human Resources Officer, and his current leadership role as a Battalion Executive Officer at Fort Jackson. He was deployed to Bagram, Afghanistan, from 2010 to 2011.

Prior to his time in Virginia, Murphy served as a building principal for 10 years at Beaufort High School and Great Falls High School, respectively. During his time at Beaufort High, Murphy led instruction at the largest school in an award-winning district and designed an overhaul of the academic program, which led to the highest number of career completers in district history.
**NEW LEADERSHIP FOR THE DISTRICT & SCHOOLS**

**Dr. Sal Minolfo Appointed Director of Administration**

Over the last four years as principal of Belvedere Elementary School, Dr. Sal Minolfo says he has been blessed to serve students while surrounded by some of the very best educators in Aiken County. In his new role as Director of Administration for the school district, Minolfo will have the opportunity to provide support and guidance to many more educators.

“I am really excited about this new opportunity,” Minolfo stated. “It’s a new challenge and something I am looking forward to. I will be working on a wide variety of things such as helping schools build their respective renewal plans, school improvement councils and allocations, while also working with the District’s strategic plan, updating policies and procedures, updating the administrative handbook, and some aspects of human resources.”

Another area of Minolfo’s new responsibilities will include further development of a leadership pipeline across the school district. Minolfo recently co-led the school district’s Aspiring Principals Program, an initiative that will help ensure access to talented building leaders for many years.

**Veteran Educator, Literacy Specialist Named Director of Early Learning Program**

Veteran educator and literacy specialist Paige Leopard, who has served twenty-six years in the Aiken County community, will lead the Early Learning program as its new director.

Over the past three years, Leopard has served as Early Learning Content Interventionist at the Freedman Early Learning Center in Graniteville. During this time, she provided support to Early Learning teachers, facilitated Department of Social Services training for Early Learning teachers and assistants, while providing professional development for Early Learning teachers. She also analyzed important 4K student data, conducted classroom observations, and served as a member of the Instructional Services Division Team.

“I am thrilled to have been provided with this opportunity to serve Aiken County students and families in yet another capacity,” Leopard stated. “I feel like my entire career, and most especially the last several years, have been preparing me for this new role. I am very excited about the opportunities it will present.”

**Experienced Administrator Appointed Director of Student Services**

Over the last decade as principal at Midland Valley High School, Carl White has utilized his leadership skills to help young people achieve the very best versions of themselves. He has successfully accomplished those goals while actively supporting new student growth opportunities such as the Early College Program that has produced two cohorts of graduates from Aiken Technical College in just two years. Under his leadership, Midland Valley High School earned prestigious Palmetto Gold recognition in consecutive school years for its Overall Performance and Closing the Achievement Gap.

White will continue that leadership in supporting students and staff in an expanded role during the 2020-21 school year as the school district’s new Director of Student Services.

“I am very excited about this new opportunity to work with so many more students and different people from across the District,” White stated. “Being able to come in and support even more students and staff at different levels is a great opportunity, so these are very exciting times for me.”

**Experienced Educator Named Director of New Tier 3 Elementary Therapeutic Program**

Special Programs administrator Beth Taylor has been named the XSEL program’s first director.

“I look forward to working directly with elementary administrators, teachers, and other agencies to support both students and educators as we implement a program rooted in Social-Emotional Learning, evidence-based behavioral interventions, and strong home-school relationships,” Taylor said.

Taylor has served in Aiken County Public Schools in a number of capacities, beginning as a Special Education teacher in 2002, continuing as Autism Program Coordinator in 2004 and culminating in her most recent position with the school district as Coordinator of Instructional Programming for the ACPSD Special Programs Department which she began in 2014.
“I’m looking forward to using my instructional coaching background and my Title I experience along with my recent experience as an assistant principal. I think taking all of those things together will be a good fit for Belvedere Elementary. While serving as an assistant principal I’ve found the priority has to be on building those trusting relationships and having clear and open communication with everyone involved.”

Allyson Long
BELVEDERE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

“I like a collaborative approach in educational leadership. I want to gather the opinions of others and build the capacity of others in the school who wish to be a part of the decision-making process. Some teachers may not wish to pursue a position in administration, but they would like to participate in school leadership and I want to give them that opportunity.”

Rasheem Neloms
WAGENER-SALLEY HIGH SCHOOL

“I am just excited to continue being a part of the LBC Middle School family and serving the community in a new capacity. Being here has given me the opportunity each step of the way to build those relationships and trust with students, parents, the faculty and other stakeholders. It has been neat to see parents become even more engaged in their student’s education.”

Casey Rogers
LBC MIDDLE SCHOOL

“I am excited to be continuing our work with the community, our scholars, our teachers and parents. They got to know me as an administrator and as an interim principal so the community was able to see how I would operate as a principal. It gives the community and me some consistency that will prove to be very beneficial. We have already worked together to put some programs in place and now we can just continue that work as well as address some of the concerns that were expressed that we had already begun to work on.”

Michelle Kennedy
A.L. CORBETT MIDDLE SCHOOL

“I am very excited about what the future holds. Having the opportunity to participate in the Aspiring Principals Program allowed me to learn from two of the best principals in our District. I have been able to see innovative new ways to serve our students, grow as a communicator with all stakeholders, and push myself to take on new challenges and experiences. I am a better leader today because of the experience, and the investment Mrs. Enlow, Mrs. Padgett and the school district have made in me.”

Sara-Beth Brown
CHUKKER CREEK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

“It’s really overwhelming to think that I am back here at Midland Valley High School in this role as principal because this is home for me. I am a community guy. I enjoy meeting people and being with people and I want to get them excited about this place. I want them to feel the same way I did when I was 15 years-old and I first walked into the building and thought this was the greatest place I had ever been.”

Sheldon Higgenbottom
MIDLAND VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL
District Hosts Dedication, Groundbreaking Ceremonies For Ridge Spring-Monetta High School and Ridge Spring-Monetta Elementary School

Aiken County Public School District leaders, school board members, school administrators, teachers, students, and community members gathered on The Ridge on Monday, February 24, 2020, for the dedication of the new Ridge Spring-Monetta High School and groundbreaking of construction on the new Ridge Spring-Monetta Elementary School.

Featured speakers included Aiken County District 1 Board of Education Member Sandra Shealey, Ridge Spring-Monetta Elementary Principal Callie Herlong, and Ridge Spring-Monetta High School Principal Dr. KaRon Webb.

“The new school is going to offer more technology and more room, and I’m looking forward to watching one of the baseball games under the lights,” Sandra Shealey told The Aiken Standard following the ceremonies. “The community’s support for the school has always been strong. I’m excited to see what this new addition can do for the area.”

The new high school, with a cost of around $40 million dollars, replaced a facility that was built during the 1950s.

Meanwhile, the new elementary school, with an expected cost of around $24 million dollars, is expected to reach substantial completion in April 2021. Most of the entire structure for each area has been topped out and roofing is installed on half of the addition.

District Announces Name, Logo for New Tier 3 Elementary Therapeutic Program

During a virtual school board meeting held Tuesday, April 21, 2020, the Aiken County Board of Education received an update on the school district’s new Tier 3 Elementary Therapeutic Program from its newly-hired director, Beth Taylor.

“It’s exciting to finally unveil the new name, logo and brand for the program to the board of trustees,” Taylor commented. “The planning committee felt a name and logo that identified the unique mission as well as the method of social emotional learning that we will implement with this program were important to the brand.”

Ultimately, the planning committee selected the name XSEL (pronounced “exsel”) and a whimsical look incorporating a directional arrow off the “X” in the name and a hot air balloon rising above the clouds.

“The name in and of itself is just so positive and we definitely want XSEL to be a very uplifting experience for the student, as well as his or her family,” Taylor stated.

“SEL,” the abbreviation for Social Emotional Learning, is also embedded in the name of the new program.

“This is about helping the student identify his or her social and emotional triggers, teaching the child to self-regulate, and learning to overcome behavioral challenges,” Taylor continued.

“I’m so excited that our brand visually represents the goals of the program,” Taylor added.
Aiken High School celebrated a Class of 2020 that numbered 320 graduates, a total of 137, or 43 percent of graduates, were recognized as ACPSD Honor Graduates. The Hornets earned a combined total of $13,000,287 in academic awards and qualifying scholarship offers. Aiken High’s Valedictorian was Rebekah Kendal Moss, and Hannah Nicole Wheeland was the Salutatorian. Aiken High has 14 students who are entering the military, the highest number of any school in the District. One hundred forty-seven graduates plan to attend a 4-year college, and 87 say they plan to attend 2-year colleges, meaning 73 percent of the Class of 2020 plan to attend a post-secondary institution. Eighteen graduates were honored as Senior Scholars, and eight earned a S.C. Seal of Biliteracy. Eighty-three Aiken High graduates plan to immediately enter the workforce following graduation.

Silver Bluff High School celebrated 138 graduates in its Class of 2020, with 60 graduates, or 44 percent of the senior class, earning special recognition as ACPSD Honor Graduates. The school recognized Matthew Thomas Ketucky as Valedictorian, and Courtney Nashay Young as Salutatorian. The amount of qualifying scholarship offers awarded to the Bulldogs was close to $4 million dollars. Fifty-four graduates plan to attend two-year colleges, and 62 say they plan to attend four-year colleges and universities, meaning 84 percent of the Class of 2020 plan to attend a post-secondary institution. Three Bulldog graduates plan to serve in the military. They include Dalton Gregory Johnson, Hannah Alyssa Sankey, and Evan Lamar Williams. The school recognized five Senior Scholars. Nineteen Bulldogs say they plan to enter the workforce immediately after high school, and one graduate completed an apprenticeship.

Midland Valley High School’s 40th Commencement Exercises honored 258 graduates of the Class of 2020 who earned $15,138,080 in qualifying scholarship offers. This was the highest total in the District for the 2019-20 school year. The school also recognized 16 Early College graduates who each earned either an Associate of Arts or an Associate of Science degree, or both, from Aiken Technical College in May. Among its graduates, 117 Mustangs, or 46 percent of the Class of 2020 were celebrated as ACPSD Honor Graduates. The school recognized Parker Alexander Welsh as its Valedictorian, and Mary Denise Swygert as its Salutatorian. Eighty-eight percent of the Class of 2020, or two hundred and twenty-seven graduates which is the highest percentage of graduates in the District, plan to attend a college or university, and 11 said they planned to join the United States military following graduation.

North Augusta High School’s graduating Class of 2020 consisted of 334 graduates, making it the largest graduating class in the District. One hundred eighty-nine, or 57 percent, of North Augusta’s graduates were celebrated as ACPSD Honor Graduates. The Jackets’ Valedictorian was Brayden Jacob Pooorvin, and Barret Lee Smoker was the Salutatorian. Two hundred sixty of North Augusta’s graduates, or 78 percent of the Class of 2020, say they plan to attend a 2- or 4-year college or university following graduation, and seven graduates say they plan to serve in the military. Jacket graduate Eddie Burch accepted an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. Thirty-three graduates will enter the workforce, and two graduates completed apprenticeships while in high school. The Jackets received over $11 million dollars in qualifying scholarship offers during the 2019-20 year.

Ridge Spring-Monetta High School celebrated 54 seniors as members of the Class of 2020 during the school’s 64th Commencement Exercises, with 12 seniors being recognized as ACPSD Honor Graduates. The Valedictorian was Morgan Rene’ Berry, and the Salutation was Conner Derek Goss. Total qualifying scholarship offers for the Trojans amounted to $1,648,100. Forty-two graduates, or 78 percent of the Class of 2020, plan to attend a four-year college or university, or a two-year college. Graduate Coleen Elisabeth Harmon accepted an appointment to the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. Three Thoroughbreds are choosing service in the military, while 32 said they planned to immediately enter the workforce after graduation. A District-high 13 South Aiken graduates completed an apprenticeship during high school. South Aiken honored 20 Senior Scholars, and six Thoroughbreds earned a S.C. Seal of Biliteracy.

South Aiken High School recognized Kendall June Leigh as its Valedictorian, and Holland Avigail Rasmusson as its Salutatorian. South Aiken’s Class of 2020 featured 301 Thoroughbred graduates, 122 of whom were celebrated as ACPSD Honor Graduates. The class earned over seven million dollars in qualifying scholarship offers. Two hundred fifty-nine graduates, or over 86 percent of the Class of 2020 plan to attend a four-year college or university, or a two-year college. Graduate Coleen Elisabeth Harmon accepted an appointment to the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. Three Thoroughbreds are choosing service in the military, while 32 said they planned to immediately enter the workforce after graduation. A District-high 13 South Aiken graduates completed an apprenticeship during high school. South Aiken honored 20 Senior Scholars, and six Thoroughbreds earned a S.C. Seal of Biliteracy.

Wagener-Salley High School’s graduating Class of 2020 featured 52 graduates, among whom were 18 ACPSD Honor Graduates. The school’s Valedictorian was Jennifer Mallory Sampson and the Salutatorian was Taunija Tanae Swedenburg, and both graduates were recognized as Senior Scholars. Twenty graduates are planning to attend a four-year college, while an additional 24 graduates are planning to attend a 2-year college, meaning 81 percent of the Class of 2020 will attend a post-secondary institution. Three War Eagles have chosen to serve in the United States military. The amount of qualifying scholarship offers earned by the War Eagles during the 2019-20 school year was close to $4 million dollars.
Aiken County’s top spellers gathered on the Langley-Bath-Clearwater Middle School auditorium stage in February with a trip to Washington, D.C. for the Scripps National Spelling Bee on the line.

The winning student would be Lucy Heath of Langley-Bath-Clearwater Middle School (LBC), with Rena Humes of Kennedy Middle School finishing in second place. Heath correctly spelled the word “duress” to win the spelling bee title.

“I was hoping to win. I’ve been studying for it for a long time,” Lucy told The Aiken Standard.

The twelve competitors in this year’s Aiken County Spelling Bee represented students from fifth grade to eighth grade. Each student advanced to the competition after winning first place or finishing in second place in six group semifinal competitions.

Alongside Lucy Heath of LBC Middle and Rena Humes of Kennedy Middle, this year’s competitors included Jayden Avancena (Leavelle McCampbell Middle School); Colton Banks (Jefferson Elementary School); Sienna Canup (Hammond Hill Elementary School); Jaq-Leyah Council (J.D. Lever Elementary School); Luke Erskine (North Augusta Middle School); Payton Key (Chukker Creek Elementary School); Peyton Owenby (Leavelle McCampbell Middle School); Bradley Peterson (Kennedy Middle School); Zaiid Stroman (New Ellenton Middle STEAM Magnet School); and Liahona Velez (Aiken Intermediate School).

Amentum, Savannah River Remediation, and The Aiken Standard are proud sponsors of the 2020 Aiken County Spelling Bee.

Aiken County Public School District had one student from the Class of 2020 earn the honor of graduating with perfect attendance records, an extremely hard-to-reach achievement that takes dedication and determination.

Congratulations to Zeke Proctor, a Midland Valley High School graduate, for being the sole achiever of this award!

Zeke is the son of Gene and Ginger Proctor, and has not missed a single day of school from kindergarten through 12th grade.

Kennedy Middle School students Alex Trippi, Cody Goldschmidt, and Aaron Arnold felt pretty confident in both their model and their preparation heading into the Saturday, January 25, 2020, S.C. Regional Future City Competition held on campus at the University of South Carolina Aiken. The theme for the 2020 competition was “Clean Water: Tap into Tomorrow.” In fierce competition, they ended the day standing on the main stage with a second-place finish.

“It was just good teamwork and encouragement as we worked on everything,” stated Kiln Wara team member Cody Goldschmidt. “Also, we incorporated a fusion reactor in our design and no one else had that.”

In addition to Team Kiln Wara’s second-place finish, the school’s Team Ganjing Tuklimpia placed fifth overall and earned an Honorable Mention Award during the 2020 competition. Kennedy Middle’s third Future City team, Team Karoda, also won a pair of Future City awards.

Additional 2020 competition winners included “Best Water Treatment Process” (Kennedy Middle Team - Ganjing Tuklimpia); “Best Energy System” (Kennedy Middle - Team Karoda); “Best Use of Nuclear Technology” (Kennedy Middle - Team Kiln Wara); Judges’ Award for “Unique Concept for Protection of Water Sources” (Kennedy Middle - Team Karoda); “Excellence Through Quality” (Schofield Middle - Team Hydro-Town); “Best Land Surveying Practices Award” (Leavelle McCampbell Middle - Team Rockville); and “Best Essay” (Kennedy Middle - Team Kiln Wara).

Pictured, from left, are Kennedy Middle School Future City teacher Margo Gore, Kiln Wara team member Aaron Arnold, Kiln Wara team member Cody Goldschmidt, Kiln Wara mentor Fred Beranek, and Kiln Wara team member Alex Trippi.
One More Makes Four: North Augusta High School Lady Jackets Capture Fourth Consecutive Championship

The Lady Jackets defeated the South Pointe Lady Stallions 70-57 at Colonial Life Arena in Columbia. Senior Tyliah Burns led all scorers with a game-high 33 points.

Led by a pair of seniors, Tyliah Burns and J'Mani Ingram, the North Augusta High School Lady Jackets girls' basketball team captured its fourth consecutive Class AAAA state championship on Saturday, March 7, 2020, with a 70-57 victory.

"They stepped up on the biggest stage of their career so far and they were able to bring the championship home for us," stated North Augusta Lady Jackets Head Coach Al Young, Sr. "We came to win and South Pointe was trying to take that away from us so we had to step it up. We had to finish."

The Lady Jackets (28-2) dominated Crestwood High in a 58-33 final in the Lower State title game to advance to the Class 4-A title game yet again. Their state-title opponent was a familiar one in the Lady Stallions, a team the Lady Jackets defeated by 11 points in the 2019 state championship game.

Offensively, senior Tyliah Burns led all scorers with a game-high 33 points, including several key baskets at critical moments in the ball game. The Lady Jackets jumped out to an early lead, but South Pointe surged back in the second half and the game was tied at the end of the third quarter.

"We didn’t get down on ourselves," Tyliah commented. "We knew we worked hard for this and we were in better shape so we just did what we had to do to win. This means everything."

Senior J'Mani Ingram added 14 points for North Augusta, while Kiana Lee had a double-double in scoring and rebounding with 11 points and 13 rebounds. Defensively, the Lady Jackets only allowed one South Point player to reach double-figures in scoring.

"We worked hard and put in the work so this is a blessing," J'Mani added. "We wanted it and they wanted it too. We knew they were going to come back stronger so we just had to finish it off."

Congratulations to the Lady Jackets on this historic achievement!
TEACHER OF THE YEAR HONOR COURT

Our 2020 Teacher of the Year Honor Court members include Rachel Creasy of Oakwood-Windsor Elementary School, John Kucula of North Augusta High School, Heather Logan of Paul Knox Middle School, Misty McConnell of Redcliffe Elementary School, and Nicole Stansell of Kennedy Middle School.

Rachel Creasy is an ESOL (English as a Second Language) teacher who began her educational career very early in her life by “teaching” dolls as a young girl. She teaches because children deserve a safe place to learn, grow and feel valued, and to help all students gain confidence to find their voices and use them to make our world a better place.

John Kucela is a special education teacher who always wanted to be a teacher and a coach. His high school teachers and coaches instilled in him the love of education and learning, and to this day, he still feels that he is in the greatest profession that one could be in.

Heather Logan teaches seventh grade English Language Arts and is an eighth grade PRO TEAM teacher. In second grade, her teacher took an interest in her and helped her come out of her shell. She never forgot the kindness, patience, and compassion her teacher bestowed, and the impact her second grade teacher had on her led in part to her decision later in life to become a teacher.

Misty McConnell is a third grade teacher who appreciated school very early in life as a safe haven. As a student, school was a place where she could blend in with her classmates and conform to the everyday expectations and structure. As a teacher, she gives every child a safe-haven to come to every day. She lets every child know they have a place to come to that is their home, where they are loved, accepted and can grow as a learner.

Nicole Stansell teaches eighth grade mathematics and geometry. She promotes fun, growth, and security in her classroom. Inspired to pursue teaching by her high school math teacher, she works hard to implement the same loving atmosphere where students are welcomed, safe, and supported to grow socially, academically, and emotionally.

FIRST-YEAR TEACHER OF THE YEAR HONOR COURT

Our 2020 First-Year Teacher of the Year Honor Court members include Natalie Hornsby of South Aiken High School, Carina McGee of Aiken High School, and Briante Perkins of Kennedy Middle School.

Natalie Hornsby teaches Algebra I and Geometry. She believes students need not only guided practice, but independent practice as well. She feels students need to be able to apply skills they learn throughout the year to tasks and real-world situations. She believes that because the world we live in is more social, teachers need to help their students become well-rounded individuals. This includes helping build communication skills and the ability to work with others.

Carina McGee teaches advanced English I and English II, and her personal philosophy is no matter how many negative things we may see and experience, it is our duty to work to make sure we make the world a little bit brighter than it was before we arrived here. While research, informative writing, critical reading, discussion, analysis, and persuasive speech all ensure students are pushed to mastery for state standards and the critical thinking skills necessary beyond school, she feels they also remind students that they are not powerless to invoke change. She believes this is truly what teaching is meant to do: mold the next generation of leaders into individuals that, no matter how bleak things become, will work to keep moving forward.

Briante Perkins teaches English and Social Studies. Choosing to educate is one of the only decisions she feels passionate about choosing even on her worst days. Rarely does she refer to herself as a teacher, and the reason for this is simple: she is far more than a teacher. Her passion to educate bypasses the standards and the curriculum taught; it reaches her students as individuals and permits her to develop students as young adults.
GEM OF THE YEAR HONOR COURT

Our 2020 Giving Even More (GEM) of the Year Honor Court members include Jamie Busbee of Millbrook Elementary School, Brook Byers of Busbee Elementary School, Nicci Cabiness of Mossy Creek Elementary School, Kimberly Estep of Warrenville Elementary, and Rhonda Norris of North Augusta High School.

Jamie Busbee is a Secretary who says she loves that her coworkers also share a mindset of making their students feel loved. She witnesses teachers on a daily basis taking the time to have personal connections with their students, giving them that extra attention that some students need and desire. She knows families in the community have struggles we may never know about, and believes sometimes all they need is to feel welcome and know that someone cares.

Brook Byers is a Parent Involvement Aide who finds it hard to put into words how much enjoyment and satisfaction she gets from working at her school. When she transferred schools, she was fearful of the change, but her fears were quickly put to rest, as her school and coworkers have become like family. Walking through the school doors each day fulfills her because she knows she is home.

Nicci Cabiness is a Bookkeeper who says her school is a happy place for both her and many of the students that may have struggles in their home life. She knows students can come to school and know the entire time they are there they are supported, loved and they can forget any worries they carry with them daily. That's one of the many reasons she says she loves her school.

Kimberly Estep is an Instructional Aide who says it is such a blessing to work with, and learn from, some of the most caring, dedicated administrators, teachers, and staff she has ever known. She says it is a joy to come to work knowing she will be among family. Nothing warms her heart more than when a child stops her in the hallway for a hug, and to let her know they haven't been in any trouble and are making better choices. Sometimes it is simply when a student says “thank you” for listening to their problem or hands her a heartfelt note or drawing. In moments like these, she knows she is where she is supposed to be.

Rhonda Norris is a Guidance Secretary who feels being a part of such an awesome, cohesive team is so rewarding. Some of the greatest joy she experiences comes from helping students interact with the community. Whether it's visiting the elementary and middle schools to participate in parades or Relay for Life, we are able to share valuable experiences that bring the community together. She believes school employees have the privilege of being stewards of children's futures and the responsibility to nurture, teach and help our students grow as individuals and leaders.

Congratulations to our 2020 Stars of Public Education Honor Court members and all of our school-level nominees for all you do to ensure Aiken County Public Schools is the family-and-student-centered learning institution our community deserves.

ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL OF THE YEAR HONOR COURT

Our 2020 Assistant Principal of the Year Honor Court members include Jamie Byrne of Aiken Intermediate School, Lindsey Hager of North Augusta Elementary School, and Tami Shaffer of South Aiken High School.

Jamie Byrne believes as an educator it is a vital part of the success of a school’s culture that all students, faculty and staff are known and valued. Whether coaching teachers to improve and strengthen their instructional practices in order to provide high-quality education to all our students, or greeting students in the carline, she feels strongly about ensuring that all students and staff feel valued.

Lindsey Hager feels a school leader is instrumental to shaping school culture by fostering well-being and safety, so students and adults learn and interact productively. Her success in creating a high-quality culture comes from a belief that school culture depends more than anything else on the quality of relationships. She believes when students and teachers feel like they are respected and valued they will have more success in the school, academically and behaviorally.

Tami Shaffer believes traditional school structure may sometimes lead to a learning institution becoming student-centered instead of student-centered. A student-centered school culture embraces instructional methods with a mindset focused on facilitating learning for students. Student-centered learning cultures shift the responsibility for learning from teacher to student and empower students to take ownership of their success and growth while defining values that help inform organizational decision-making and school goals.

PRINCIPAL OF THE YEAR HONOR COURT

Our 2020 Principal of the Year Honor Court members include Shunte Dugar of New Ellenton Middle STEAM Magnet School, Dr. Jason Holt of Aiken High School, and Patricia Wilson of North Augusta Elementary School.

According to her nomination for Principal of the Year, Shunte Dugar’s enthusiasm and love for educational excellence has allowed her school to become successful and exceed academic expectations. She knows every child by name and serves as an advocate for students, teachers, and parents. She encourages teachers to use data to drive instruction and small group practices to address remedial concerns. Her success is marked by student performance and growth over time.

Dr. Jason Holt’s nomination for Principal of the Year states that his number one leadership quality is a willingness and desire to communicate. He listens to his staff and students to determine what is best for everyone, and he demonstrates true leadership and a willingness to listen and communicate. He listens and talks with all stakeholders, bringing the entire school family together.

According to her nomination for Principal of the Year, Patricia Wilson is happy and proud of each child and knows personal facts about them to let them know she cares for them. She encourages her faculty and staff to work as a team and grow as a team so you feel like you are part of the team. She utilizes data and works with the teachers to develop plans to support any students in need.
Titan Farms Supplies Fresh Produce for Farms to Families Program

In partnership with Titan Farms of Ridge Spring, students and families had access to fresh produce over the summer, through a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) program called Farms to Families.

Three dates in July and three dates in August dedicated to the program where several schools receive boxes of produce, each weighing around 20 pounds, were delivered by Titan Farms. The boxes were given out on a first-come-first-served basis in the morning until all produce boxes were distributed.

Belvedere Elementary, Busbee Elementary, Graniteville Elementary, Greendale Elementary, Jackson STEM Magnet Middle, Mossy Creek Elementary, North Aiken Elementary, Oakwood-Windsor Elementary, Ridge Spring Elementary and Warrenville Elementary schools all served as host sites for the Farms to Families Program.

Thank you, Titan Farms, for your generous partnership and help feeding our families!