

**For Immediate Release**

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## Media Release

### **New Group Giving CCSD Students a Voice, and a Place to Belong**

Office of Strategy and  
Communications

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**North Charleston, SC** — Everyone's experience in high school is different; some have it easier than others. Regardless of the situation, everyone experiences adversity and struggles during those years. So imagine how much harder those four years can be if you have to overcome certain challenges through no fault of your own.

To equip students in Charleston County School District on how to handle those challenges, and to provide them with support, district leaders and staff members created the Charleston Leadership Youth Academy for the 2017-18 school year.

Over the course of two days in early August, seven students from several CCSD high schools met with district staff members and volunteers to begin the process of supporting each other, and those who face similar challenges in schools throughout the county.

"I wanted to do it [to] improve myself, and help those coming up in life, and help others around me; [the] same age and maybe some older people," said Charles Bridge, a senior at West Ashley High School.

The students who participated were invited by a committee comprised of staff members from CCSD's Department of Exceptional Children, district teachers, and representatives of AccessAbility (a non-profit in North Charleston). The committee also ran the two-day kick-off event, leading the students in activities that were designed build leadership skills and enhance the students' desire and ability to advocate for themselves and other students dealing with experiences like their own.

"This idea originated from Madeline Jacobs (CCSD's Assistant Executive Director of Exceptional Children)," said John Bracy, a transition specialist with CCSD. "We were in one of our team meetings; she threw it out there, and we started bouncing ideas back and forth, did some research [on] other

states implementing youth leadership programs, and decided to get the ball rolling this summer."

Activities for this program ranged from thoughtful discussion about problems these students face to games that encourage teamwork and leadership.

"One of the things we were using was a rope, and making a star out of that rope," explained Bridge. "We were discussing many ideas, like maybe 'move this way, do this to form this star.' We had all these different ideas, and just working it out and putting it together, and eventually we got to make a star out of it."

"What we want the students to get out of this are many things, from self-esteem, to the friendships they are building, [to] leadership skills," added Bracy. "This is the first year, so we are just really, really excited."

While the students enjoyed the physical activities, they also appreciated the opportunity to speak about issues that affect them at school, how to address the issues, and who needs to be aware.

"The theme that kept coming up was bullying," commented Bracy. "So some of the adults, after the workshop on day one, got together and started thinking about ideas that we might try to implement throughout the year in that area. We are going to do some more talking with the students about that and see if we can list some ideas of some things that we might be able to do there."

Bridge made sure to say he receives plenty of support at West Ashley, especially from the teachers and administrators there. However, he believes more work can be done when it comes to how students like himself are treated.

"I'm thinking about [reaching out to] groups, because I am the president of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (at West Ashley High School)," Bridge detailed. "I am involved with DECA and student government. [I would also like to speak with] teachers this next school year and explain to them about some of the stuff I've learned, and hopefully [talk to them about how to work with students]. More ideas [on how] to be more patient, more accepting."

While this group is about giving these students a voice, it is also encouraging them to act, through service to the community. So there were brainstorming sessions on how they make a change in their community as well.

"We are also asking them to come up with a service learning project that they will agree together what that project is going to be, with some guidance," Bracy said. "That should be really fun to see how that comes together, and the tangible part that will bring. That [project] is yet to be determined. They might choose to do something with food and the homeless. They might choose to do shoes, coats, or anything along those lines."

After this Charleston Youth Leadership Academy kickoff event ended on August 3, both the students and adult mentors left the gathering feeling really good about what took place; many of them are inspired to act, as well to engage and support others. The plan is for the group to expand to 10-12 students, and to meet up to eight more times during the school year.

The students are confident this will work. They know they have the support from this group, and from classmates and teachers at their schools.

"This is actually my second year at West Ashley," Bridge explained. "They really encourage you; they really care about you as an individual. That includes the teachers as well as the students. They've really both helped in many different ways."

"They genuinely seem to be excited to be a part of this group," Bracy commented. "I told someone yesterday that one of the students even mentioned something along the lines of how he thinks they are all going to become really great friends when this process is over. I thought that was very, very, very cool."

To learn more about the Charleston Youth Leadership Academy, contact Mary Stahl in CCSD's Department of Exceptional Children at (843) 937-6500.

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#### **About the Charleston County School District**

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is the second largest school system in South Carolina representing a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools that span 1,000 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves more than 50,000 students in 86 schools and specialized programs. With approximately 6,100 employees district-wide, CCSD is the fourth largest employer in the region.

CCSD offers a diverse, expanding portfolio of options and specialized programs, delivered through neighborhood, charter, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), and Montessori schools, and is divided into three Learning Communities. Options include specialized programs in science, engineering and mathematics; liberal arts; music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; and military and other public service enterprises.