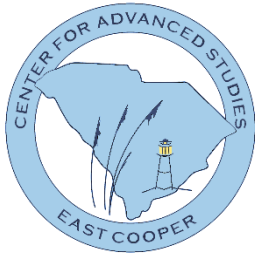


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East Cooper Center for
Advanced Studies

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Media Release

Katie Johnston named Top-5 Teacher of the Year Finalist

Mount Pleasant, SC – What started out as an annual volunteer opportunity for Katie Johnston turned into an 11-year teaching position at Wando High School and now the East Cooper Center for Advanced Studies (CAS). It also earned her the chance to compete for the Charleston County School District (CCSD) Teacher of the Year. Johnston was named the school's first-ever teacher of the year and is a [2021 CCSD Top-5 Teacher of the Year Finalist](#).

The Auburn University graduate moved to the Lowcountry with her husband Jeff in 2004 to take a position at a local architecture firm. During her fifth year with the company, she volunteered to critique the work of Wando's civil engineering students where she first realized her passion for teaching.

About that time, the American economy was suffering as was the architectural industry. Just as she learned her position was being eliminated at the firm, the teacher Johnston volunteered for at Wando was moving on to another career path. On a whim, Johnston sent in her resume.

"Principal Lucy Beckham called me that day and a few months later I started my teaching career with no background in education," said Johnston.

Johnston received her career and technical education (CTE) work-based certification, which enables individuals with industry work experience in certain career and technical fields to teach grades 9-12.

"I was so nervous, I thought maybe I was going crazy," said Johnston. "I didn't think I would teach for a long time, but I loved every minute and here I am 11 years later. Teaching is a joy-filled job and it is a privilege to have an impact on students' lives. I couldn't think of anything I'd rather do."

Johnston said it takes energy and effort to recruit females to the program but she is seeing growth in their interest. Her own experience is a success story and she often shares that with her students. There are eight total engineering and architectural courses available to East Cooper students and Johnston is certified to teach four of them.

"I am teaching all interested East Cooper students and for me that is amazing," said Johnston. "It has been a true delight."

This program at the East Cooper CAS offers an opportunity for students to apply what they are learning in their core courses to the work they are doing in Johnston's classroom. For example, they are using general math to solve what size concrete square they will need for the footing of a building.

"To see it be applied is powerful and to have an opportunity like that in education makes a student invest a lot into what they are learning," said Johnston. "When you have that, so much more happens."

Through the years, Johnston has grown the engineering program so that real, hands-on work is being done by the students – for actual clients. Last year, students designed the Laing Alumni Association's Memorial Court on the site of the old school building. They had to present to the client, finalize the design. This year students are working on condo facades for a neighborhood in the area.

"These students are impacting their community, in a big way and they're only in high school," said Johnston. "I love design and design work and I am constantly looking for opportunities that will provide them some level of design. Being their teacher and helping students navigate projects is so gratifying. You get those moments when kids are enthusiastic and it is so interesting to watch."

Johnston believes she is helping her community by helping her students learn and grow. She does this not with just the curriculum and various projects but through professional mentorships, guest speakers, and field trips (pre-COVID).

Johnston is grateful to the previous leadership of the late Lucy Beckham, current Wando Principal Dr. Sherry Eppelsheimer, and East Cooper CAS Principal Jeff Blankenship.

"Ms. Beckham was the most dynamic leader I have ever seen," said Johnston. "She had such passion for getting people in the right places."

Johnston explained that Beckham started the program with three professionals straight from the industry. The program continued to grow under Wando's Math, Science, and Engineering Academy, and now under the East Cooper CAS Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Academy.

"Ms. Johnston has been an integral part of the development of our four Academies in our CAS," Blankenship stated when asked about Johnston's impact on the school. "She has brought a wealth of experience working with business and community partners and her willingness to go the extra mile with her students before and after class is inspiring."

Johnston's passion is to find peace and joy and that comes in a variety of ways. The most important to her is to serve others.

"As a teacher, I hope I serve them well," said Johnston. "I hope I am teaching to the best of my ability."

Johnston said her life has always been about serving her family, community and church. She always wanted to be a star architect and maybe become famous one day. She explained that with her career shift, she discovered, "that as long as I care about other people and show that, that's what makes something a success."

Johnston keeps in touch with her former students and loves to hear their success stories. One went on to marry a girl he met in her class years ago. Another landed an internship which turned into an annual summer job and then a job upon graduation. This particular student also constructed and presented the model of the Mount Pleasant Town Hall before it was rebuilt.

"I have come across all levels of students and sometimes you never know the impact you're going to have on them," said Johnston. "Sometimes you just hope they took something away with them."

For more information, contact Principal Jeff Blankenship at (843) 856-5800.

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About the Charleston County School District

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is a nationally-accredited school district that is committed to providing equitable and quality educational opportunities for all of its students. CCSD is the second-largest school system in South Carolina and represents a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools spanning 1,300 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves more than 50,000 students in 87 schools and specialized programs.

CCSD offers a diverse, expanding portfolio of options and specialized programs, delivered through neighborhood, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), Montessori, and charter schools. Options include programs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM); music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; and military.