



Northwoods Middle School

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## Media Release

### **Nathalie Bennett named Top Five Teacher of the Year Finalist**

**North Charleston, SC** – When [Nathalie Bennett](#) was in the third grade, she was assigned to tutor a fellow student. Those sessions lit a spark. From that day forward she realized she liked helping people learn and she dreamed of becoming an educator.

Bennett’s childhood was another driving force. Her father is a professor who spent the early part of his career filling in for instructors on sabbatical, which meant the entire family was relocating every year or two to a different town or city.

“I have attended schools in a wide array of places, from the inner city of Cincinnati to rural towns in Indiana,” said Bennett. “As a young child, I witnessed the inequities in education and was determined to rectify them.”

During her 13 years as an educator, Bennett has made it her mission to ensure that all children have a chance to learn. The sixth grade Northwoods Middle School math teacher has held various positions in North and South Carolina. What sets her apart from her colleagues is her commitment to create a welcoming environment where her students feel safe to learn and grow. Accomplishing this means participating in activities and organizations inside and outside of the classroom.

“I love my sixth graders,” said Bennett. “They are old enough to understand sarcasm and be silly with me – they are on their way to becoming adults. At the same time, they are still kids learning to manage their feelings and grow into independence. I enjoy building relationships with the kids and their parents as they navigate this transition.”

Her colleagues at Northwoods recognized the love she has for her students and voted her the school’s Teacher of the Year. As if that wasn’t special enough, Bennett has been named a Top Five Teacher of the Year finalist for Charleston County School District (CCSD).

Northwoods is the third CCSD school in which Bennett has taught. At W.B. Goodwin Elementary and Pinehurst Elementary School, she was a member of the PTO/PTA, was grade level chair at Goodwin, and is currently in that role at

Northwoods. Throughout her career, Bennett has served as a professional development leader on various topics.

Bennett's recognitions are numerous and include being named a "Tireless Teacher" at Northwoods, a Personalized Learning Leader Cohort, a Teacher of the Year nominee at Pinehurst, SC Science P.L.U.S. Institute participant, and a Wake Forest University 2005 Hall Award Winner (presented for excellence in student teaching to one graduating elementary teacher each year).

"Nathalie Bennett is a determined problem-solver and an innovative and dynamic teacher at Northwoods," said Principal Keturah Gadson. "Mrs. Bennett has been at Northwoods since the fall of 2019 and has demonstrated outstanding teaching and leadership qualities since she arrived. Nathalie does not work for accolades, but simply to inspire and impact all those she comes in contact with each day."

"It is important to me that my students see me advocating for them outside of the classroom as well," said Bennett. "I have always desired to participate in their lives beyond the school day. This is why I strive to attend as many of their events and functions as I can."

Bennett looks back on the one or two times when she almost doubted her career choice.

"I knew I wanted to be an educator in my heart, but it is not the most attractive career when you consider the stress and the salary that goes along with it," said Bennett. "I wanted a career where I could support my family. My childhood showed me what it was like to not have a lot of money. When I got to Wake Forest University I was determined to pursue a career that would comfortably provide for my family; but, by the end of my sophomore year, I had realized no other profession offered the same sense of purpose."

Bennett feels blessed to have begun her career in the same elementary school where she was a student-teacher. Her beginning years were spent teaching in lower grade classrooms, and even though her preference is upper elementary and middle school age groups, she said the experience was eye-opening.

"It was beneficial getting to know the primary curriculum more in-depth," said Bennett. "It helped me, and still does even now, to understand how kids develop and the building blocks they use to prepare them for middle school."

She specifically chose the subject of math after experiencing a high school algebra teacher whose teaching style was one where she read the textbook to students each day.

"We ended up having to help each other figure it out and teach ourselves," said Bennett. "I started tutoring math in high school, carrying that on through college and into my teaching career."

The Bennett family came to Charleston by way of North Carolina. Bennett's husband was accepted into a College of Charleston graduate program. Bennett applied with CCSD and was hired by then principal, Mary Reynolds, at Goodwin for the 2007-2008 school year.

"That was such a formative time in my early teaching career," said Bennett. "It's where I learned the value of diving into student data to help identify solutions. I have always taught in Title 1 schools. I prefer to do so because that is where there is the greatest need and where my passion can do the most good."

### **Her passion**

Bennett hopes to collaborate with her colleagues on ways to support and advocate for rookie teachers.

"What I am most passionate about is twofold: retaining teachers and helping students reach their full potential," said Bennett. "I hope to use this platform as a Top Five Finalist to emphasize the importance of teacher retention, especially in Title 1 schools. I am a senior teacher and most people I work with are younger teachers. What I have unfortunately witnessed is so many first, second, and third-year teachers experiencing burnout. We need to find a way to better support these teachers in their first five years and beyond."

Bennett hopes this will let teachers around the district know that they are seen and recognized for the great job they are doing.

"There are so many educators out there that are doing their absolute best every day," said Bennett. "We cheer each other on here at Northwoods and we have to do a better job of doing it district-wide."

Bennett also emphasized that students need a multitude of support as well.

"This takes out-of-the-box thinking and persistence," said Bennett. "We are fortunate at Northwoods that our focus is not just on helping students become academically successful, but also on helping them strengthen their social interactions and emotional learning. It is so important to educate the whole child and improve their soft skills too."

Bennett said she loves her colleagues at Northwoods.

"We really are a family and work as a team," said Bennett. "We worked hard to close student learning gaps before COVID-19 but now the gaps are even larger. Luckily, the Northwoods staff is up to this job. It also helps that my principal is passionate and has been a terrific cheerleader for me."

Bennett is honored to have been selected as a Top Five Teacher of the Year finalist.

"It is so nice to have someone say you are doing an awesome job," said Bennett. "There is always more to do. This recognition, though, is an indication that I am doing a good job and a call-to-action of sorts, to continue the hard work."

"Since she has been named one of the Top Five Teachers of the Year Finalists, her mission has been to use this opportunity to recognize and celebrate all who are making a difference in scholars' lives," added Gasdon. "She teaches her students to always strive for excellence, to endeavor to be lifelong learners, and to have respect for all people. She freely shares her love, acceptance, and grace with her students by creating a positive and open environment in her classroom where students quickly learn that they are free to learn and explore."

Bennett said that without the support of her husband, she could have never been the crusader that she is today.

"He is my fiercest supporter," said Bennett. "Anyone married to an educator knows it comes with sacrifices to the family. My husband is a true partner who does so much in our home and with our children so that I can focus on what students need. I am very blessed."

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

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is a nationally accredited school district 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 approximately 49,000 students in 88 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.