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Media Release

Pulse of CCSD – Christina Vivas walks beside English Language Learners as they grow and integrate into Charleston Community

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Charleston, SC – Christina Vivas, a Charleston County School District (CCSD) ESOL Parent Advocate & Title III Project Specialist serves students and families in the district’s North Charleston schools.

Vivas is a social worker of sorts, helping families navigate our education system and connect them to resources in the community.

“CCSD has over 5,500 students that are identified as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and within that, over 85 percent speak Spanish or come from a Spanish speaking home,” said Vivas. “That is about 10 percent of the entire CCSD student body population. The majority of our ESOL students are in Title I schools and are living in poverty or come from an impoverished background.”

Vivas helps families obtain wrap around services. For example, if they do not qualify for state and federal programs, she is able to help them tap into local community resources.

One student, whose family was uninsured, needed financial assistance to receive a much needed surgery to reset his hips so he could have the chance to walk one day. Thanks to the Shriners Hospital and Nurse Charlene Barbot it was made possible.

Magaly Torres and Lindsay Paredes serve alongside Vivas as ESOL Parent Advocates. “We are like the other parent advocates that serve CCSD, but have a specialty in following immigration patterns, immigration laws, and the political environment that could affect certain families,” said Vivas. “Some ESOL families don’t qualify for food stamps or Medicaid. Recently our office collaborated with CCSD Nursing Services and the MUSC Cares Clinic to offer free, quarterly vaccinations for uninsured students. Just this past October 139 kids were served at the free vaccination clinic. Strong partnerships with

churches, healthcare providers, local attorneys, etc. in the community is critical to serving the basic needs of our ESOL community.”

Chris Hagy, ESOL Coordinator said that like no other, Vivas has her finger on the pulse of the immigrant community in Charleston.

“For the last 10 years, she has worked tirelessly as an advocate for the CCSD immigrant population,” said Hagy. “Christina is often the first person in CCSD that a family will contact to assist with their needs. Be it related to health, housing, medical, or legal, Christina connects families with the needed community resources and helps them find the right people within the district to get the support they need, all in a different language!”

A call to serve

Vivas was born and raised in Myrtle Beach and always found herself being the person who welcomed the new kids at school. Vivas left the Grand Strand to attend the College of Charleston where she studied sociology. As graduation approached she began toying with the idea of taking a gap year.

She was able to find missionary work in Nicaragua where she lived and worked for one year. The church organization she worked for provided religious services, schooling, served as a feeding center, ran an orphanage, a dental clinic, and more. Her job was to serve wherever needed, formed lasting relationships with the families in the area, and served as the connection between US church groups and the church organization in Nicaragua.

Vivas and her husband now have two daughters, 14 and 11 years old, and both children attend Charleston County School of the Arts.

When Vivas returned to the United States from Nicaragua, she secured a job at Mount Zion Elementary School in the 21 Century after school program. Vivas rose through the ranks the first year on the job, starting as a Spanish teacher and eventually becoming a site coordinator.

After two years, Principal Deborah Fordham hired Vivas as a Title I Bilingual Teacher Assistant. She helped students in the classroom, conducted parenting programs, and acted as an interpreter and translator.

In 2008 Vivas was hired as an ESOL Parent Advocate where she has served ever since.

In her current position, she is able to advocate for the very students she worked with at Mount Zion Elementary and across the district. She has joyously watch many of the students grow, and graduate from high school, and even college.

One example is a student named Yulma Lopez. She graduated from School of the Arts (SOA), and received the United States Dream Scholarship, which gave her a full ride to Delaware State University. Lopez is now working as a STEM teacher at North Charleston Elementary and pays it forward by volunteering with Vivas at various events throughout the year.

The ESOL office has grown to meet the growing population of non-English speaking students in the district. Originally Vivas served all of the schools in the district that had a need. Several years later additional funds were available through the Title III annual grant to allow funding for a second position, and eventually a third position starting this school year.

"Not only do we help families navigate the schools and connect families to resources in the community, we also help register new families, and have coordinated a newcomer summer camp for the past two years," said Vivas. "Additionally, we support schools by offering parenting programs such as the Latino Literacy Project and the Crazy 8 math program for the kids in order to help bridge cultural and linguistic barriers."

Vivas explained that her duties are three fold. They consist of outreach, creating community connections, and helping families navigate the school system.

"I love my job," said Vivas. "Year after year the partnerships that have been formed have provided our ESOL families with things they otherwise would not have access to. Our partners go above and beyond with their generosity as they sponsor families during the holiday season and organize special events/special efforts such as delivering meals to families during the pandemic and sponsoring a laundry day at the local laundromat. It is amazing to be able to connect our partners with the families we serve, and make them feel welcomed into this country. Our local community is amazing! Through our partnered efforts we can ensure ESOL families are not isolated in silos, rather they are integrated and woven into the greater Charleston community."

Vivas said she loves seeing when people are able to progress, and get the help they need.

"I love seeing that direct connection, in that what I am advocating for is actually working," said Vivas. "It serves a purpose to make the lives of those around me better. I feel like sometimes the real changes that you make in this world are when you can impact the lives of people around you. I am committed to investing in them to improve their quality of life. That's the change that I can see and I strive for."

"The sheer number of CCSD family members who have Christina's cell phone number is astounding," added Hagy. "Christina's phone never stops ringing. Her work ethic, passion, and enthusiasm for her work are inspiring and embody what I want for our department and the families we serve. CCSD is lucky to have her!"

Vivas said there is always room to improve the quantity and quality of services to ESOL families, but the district is leading the way in providing the necessary resources, interpretation and translation services. The district has dramatically increased their bilingual staff since she began, and Christina is thrilled to be a part of that growth.

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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.