

**For Immediate Release**

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## Media Release

### **Pulse of CCSD – Teamwork makes the dream work for Deer Park school counselors**

Deer Park Middle School

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Interim Superintendent of Schools

**Karolyn Belcher**  
Chief Academic Officer

**Joseph Williams, Ph.D.**  
Associate Superintendent of Middle  
School Learning Community

**Shanitra Deas**  
Principal

**North Charleston** – The impact that school counselors Laganna Lawrence and Jessica Smith have on Deer Park Middle School students are monumental. As individuals, they move mountains every day in support of their students. As a team, they are a force to be reckoned with.

“Dr. Lawrence and Mrs. Smith are the heartbeats of our school,” said Principal Shanitra Deas. “They define what teamwork and collaboration look like. As an administrator, I lean on them because their perceptions and insights on various situations are invaluable.”

Smith was the only school counselor when she first joined Deer Park in 2015. She began building the counseling program by identifying resources and opportunities for every student. In 2019, Lawrence was hired, and in tandem, they have turned their guidance department into a school hub.

“Leadership sets the tone for everything we do here at Deer Park,” Smith said. “Our principal leads with a passionate heart for children and sets us up to do what we have to do to serve students, day in and day out. Mrs. Deas is CCSD’s best-kept secret, and we, as a team, continue to get better because of her.”

According to the students at Deer Park, the team of Lawrence and Smith may be a best-kept secret, too. Students and staff created a booklet honoring the pair. In it are heartfelt messages from students thanking them, praising them, and complimenting them.

Student Nick Banegas describes them as trustworthy, hopeful, awesome, nice, kid-friendly, and social.

Jaiyla Thomas appreciates the time they spend helping students.

The booklet is filled with poems of appreciation and thanks – something Lawrence and Smith feel every day in their interactions with their scholars.

"The relationships they have with our scholars are priceless," added Deas. "Our scholars know that they have two people in the building that they can lean on who will not judge them, but they also know Dr. Lawrence and Ms. Smith will keep it real."

### **Becoming counselors**

Both Lawrence and Smith are first-generation college graduates. They navigated the journey alone with very little assistance from family or school officials. Their passion for helping others drove them to go into counseling, and a desire to have a more significant impact led them to obtain multiple higher education degrees.

Along the way, Smith worked in social services and as a mental health therapist, and Lawrence in rehabilitation counseling and later mental health. Their experiences led them to understand what support they did not get from their school counselors while in school. Their individual goals were to break that cycle for the children that came after them. Little did they know that they would one day be working together, often mistaken for being sisters.

Today, the two complete each other's sentences. They have each other's backs. They have a common goal of putting students front and center. They align to form the Deer Park Dream Team.

"Aside from the scholars, our teachers, parents, and community members find working with Dr. Lawrence and Ms. Smith easy," said Deas. "We are truly the village behind each other's success, and the counselors are quick to remind everyone that we all have the same goal."

Students are assigned to Smith or Lawrence alphabetically but sometimes gravitate to the other counselor because they click better.

"We balance it all out because we serve all students," said Smith.

"The kids say Mrs. Smith is calm and I am extra," joked Lawrence. "That's okay because it is true. We want these kids to feel comfortable with the person they click best with."

"The kids pretty much sum it up," said Deas. "Ms. Smith is the calm one, and Dr. Lawrence is extra. They both share a love for their jobs, our scholars, and our school community. They are committed to finding ways to provide resources and opportunities for scholars to learn, grow, communicate, and advocate for themselves. Their efforts are tireless."

"We are so lucky to have each other," said Lawrence. "We're an amazing team with different strengths, and we thrive off of each other's energy to do the best we can for these kids. It also helps that our principal and her administration team are top-tier and give us the room to do our job."

## **Being counselors**

According to Smith, students today juggle the same social and emotional issues that other generations have, but the issues are exacerbated by access to the internet and social media.

Lawrence said that in addition to anxiety and low self-esteem, there are families where the parents are not present because they are working multiple jobs.

"Ms. Smith and I are there to provide necessities, nurturing, and empathy to every student, particularly those who need it most," Lawrence said.

No day is the same for Lawrence and Smith. The duo deals with truancy issues, facilitates small groups, defuses altercations, hosts student one-on-one meetings, provide various resources, and addresses emergencies.

"I don't feel like this is work," said Smith. "We love what we do. We both have the same energy and spirit about kids. The school and our colleagues feel like a family. It's natural and organic."

Lawrence and Smith are counselors to all three grades, so they get to watch the students grow and succeed from sixth grade to eighth grade.

"When they came in as sixth graders, they were still really young," said Lawrence. "Each year, they mature and excel, and it is rewarding to watch and know you may have had a hand in it."

There are days when students don't have an appointment with Smith or Lawrence but still pop in to chat or get something off their chest. Students feel comfortable emailing the ladies as well, searching for confidential guidance.

"We've built a great rapport with everyone in this building, and everyone knows they can come to us with anything," said Lawrence. "We provide what our students need when they need it."

The pair also has a passion for guiding scholars to look toward their future and all the opportunities awaiting them.

"College may seem far off for a sixth grader, but it is never too early to start learning and thinking about what they might do when they grow up," said Smith. "We have some special kids and they deserve the brightest futures."

These approaches and techniques are different from what Lawrence and Smith were used to in the mental health careers they held previously.

"Here we can witness first-hand how we've helped a student, whether it is big or small," said Lawrence. "If I can help one person a day, I have done my job."

When there are bigger issues, Smith sometimes finds it hard to turn off when she's not physically in the office.

"We worry," said Smith. "Sometimes we worry so much that we call parents after dinner to check in. Parents appreciate that level of concern."

### **Leadership sets the tone for success**

"When Mrs. Deas was first hired at Deer Park, the pandemic hit," said Smith. "She was in uncharted waters, but the way she handled it made it look like it was something she had done before."

Lawrence explained that the culture at Deer Park is special, and while students and staff had to learn and work remotely, Principal Deas stayed true to "putting the future in focus."

"She pushes students and staff to get to the next level," said Smith. "We did it during those tough times, and we will continue to do it. You can't do that without a consistent communicator who is open to feedback. We are lucky to have Mrs. Deas."

Smith is also appreciative of the many professional development opportunities they receive.

"Students truly are the heart of our work," said Smith. "To honor them, we have to continue to grow in our profession."

There have been situations in which the pair have worked miracles for students who needed help navigating certain obstacles. For example, when one student and his family moved to a different residence, he automatically assumed he would have to change schools. Because of his circumstances, Lawrence and Smith helped him obtain a waiver to stay at Deer Park.

"We treat these students like they are our kids, and we react just like we would if they were," added Smith.

Lawrence and Smith both believe that the co-counselor model works and that they would not be as effective without each other there to play back up.

"We work as a unit, and we couldn't work any better than we do now," said Lawrence.

As this school year comes to a close, it will be bittersweet for Lawrence, who will bid farewell to the graduating eighth graders who were new sixth graders when

she started at Deer Park. She's sad to see them move on but proud of how far they've come.

Lawrence and Smith do not remember their middle school guidance counselors, but the students at Deer Park will have a hard time forgetting theirs. Those bonds are likely forged for a lifetime.

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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.