

**For Immediate Release**

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## Media Release

### **Ambassador Program Fosters Inclusion and Peer-to-Peer Learning**

**Charleston, SC** – Bilingual students at St. John’s High School (SJHS) are setting the example for what a successful high school student looks like. They are taking ownership of their education by participating in the new Ambassador Program that pairs non-English speaking students with a Heritage speaking student. It counts as a course credit and is designed to support and foster the inclusion of non-English speaking students. (Watch the YouTube video [here](#)).

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These bilingual students are transported to nearby Angel Oak Elementary School (AOES) to assist students in the classroom and help staff and administrators where needed. Thirty percent of the school’s student population is Hispanic, but nearly 10 percent receive English for Speakers of Other Language (ESOL) instruction.

The Ambassador program is the brainchild of Sam Duncan, a Spanish teacher and Director of Student Activities at SJHS.

Last year he noticed bi-lingual students helping their non-English speaking classmates.

“Out of the kindness of their hearts they pitched in to help because they had the ability to do so when their classmates did not,” said Duncan. “Since the district is willing to support creative ways to promote career readiness I came up with this initiative to provide a Work/Service Learning Credit.”

Ambassadors are chosen based on several requirements. For example, students must be in good academic standing and show proficiency in both English and the native language of their assigned students.

Ambassadors must keep records and create progress reports to provide Ambassador Program Faculty Coordinators with documentation of goals, progress in English comprehension by their student, and overall academic achievement.

Stephanie Becks is the Lead Teacher at AOES. She said the program has fostered a sense of community at the school between the teachers, students, and parents.

"It is amazing to see these high school students take a leadership role in being responsible for helping to support younger students," said Becks. "They're helping these kids and motivating them to be successful."

The success stories are numerous, but one, in particular, is of a 5-year-old non-English speaking student who had never been to school before.

"He was scared," she said. "But after working with his Ambassador, he felt understood. It also allowed us to learn that he understood far more about the concepts he was being taught than we thought. Teachers want students to have a voice. In most cases the students 'get it,' they just can't speak the words."

Becks said that Duncan's idea is already paying dividends and bearing fruit in this first semester.

"The Hispanic community is very influential on Johns Island, and they make up a large part of our school," said Becks. "The Ambassador Program has helped the Hispanic Community feel like their kids are being supported in our school."

Earning a service hour credit, world language credit, and limited ESOL certification/credit is incentive enough according to the participating students, but gaining the leadership experience, cultural exchange opportunities, and becoming invested in the success of their classmates and the generation that will follow them to SJHS is the real prize.

Duncan explained that he's trying to demonstrate to students that being bilingual can be a game-changer when it comes to securing a lucrative career.

Josue Gonzalez, a 10<sup>th</sup> grader at SJHS, described the program as a creative way to work with high school students to ready them for the workforce.

"Being bilingual will be beneficial to me when I go to apply for a job and perhaps allow me to earn better wages," Gonzalez said.

Gonzalez said he wanted to participate in the program because when he was younger, he was fortunate enough to be able to speak English. But many of his peers could not.

"Being able to speak both languages gives you confidence, and I want to encourage these young students to speak both because it will offer them better chances in life," Gonzalez said.

Gonzalez has done everything from working with the students to answering the phones in the front office. He's put many parents at ease by translating for them.

"I am a graduate of Angel Oak Elementary School, so I am appreciative of the opportunity and honored to help," he said.

Britney Gonzalez is an 11<sup>th</sup> grader at SJHS. She's always wanted to work with children, and as the oldest of five siblings, she's been doing that most of her life.

She hopes to be a pediatrician one day and being bi-lingual will be a useful job skill. For now, being able to help these young students is her focus.

"I was working with a first grader who couldn't learn his numbers and after a week of me helping to translate he was beginning to learn them," Gonzalez said. "It makes me feel good because when you're only Spanish speaking, it makes you feel closed in and judged. When I am working with the students, they open up to me and show me what they know. As they begin to learn English, their education gets easier, and they're better able to interact with others and make friends."

According to Duncan, this real-life experience is showing his students that they have value if they are bilingual.

"They feel empowered and are motivated because they're representatives of not only the school but the community," said Duncan.

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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.