



What Would Happen If We All Started Caring About Every Student?

by Debbie Jones, Membership Relations Manager with Florence County Economic Development Partnership

In my more than 20 years of volunteering and working in public education in our state, I have never seen anything like what we experienced starting in the 2020 - 2021 school year. Teachers and students have always struggled, but we are at a critical crossroads. We were experiencing a teacher shortage pre-COVID with *thousands of teachers not returning to teaching positions in their districts* and teacher preparation programs not producing enough new graduates to fill vacancies. That was in addition to teacher burnout and ongoing COVID stress concerning the social and emotional wellbeing of students and concerns about teachers' own health and safety. The survey "*Teaching in South Carolina in the Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic*," conducted by the University of South Carolina, found that 80% of teachers surveyed are concerned about their students wellbeing. Here we are at the beginning of another year where COVID is profoundly impacting schools and schooling.

As I recall my days volunteering in the front office and in the classrooms at local middle and elementary schools, I witnessed firsthand some of the stressors that all teachers and support staff experienced on a daily basis. I also witnessed the passion and love they have for their students. Our teachers, administrators, and support staff truly care about the wellbeing of all students, and I could share countless examples showing how they have gone above and beyond for my own children. From attending baseball games to Ms. Pam in the cafeteria who always made sure my son had enough to eat for lunch (because she knew he was coming back for seconds). Our schools had a village vibe, and everyone looked out for one another.



Debbie Jones, a native of Virginia, has lived in Florence, SC for over twenty years. After volunteering with The School Foundation, a local education foundation in Florence, she began working with South Carolina Future Minds where she was a founding staff member.

Ms. Jones is a graduate of Meredith College and served in a variety of leadership roles at the local and state levels, including the SC PTA, YMCA Florence, and Emerging Leaders Florence. She is a 2020 Riley Fellow, 2020 Public Education Policy Fellow, and graduate of the Non-profit Leadership Institute at Francis Marion. She currently serves on the board of SC First Steps of Florence.

Her advocacy journey for public education started twenty years ago when her children walked through the doors of Carver Elementary School in Florence. Since then she has been honored to work with teachers, principals, superintendents, community leaders, and a Board of Directors that were dedicated and invested in the success of students across our great state. She is currently working with Florence County Economic Development Partnership where she is eager to take the knowledge she gained on a statewide level back to her home county of Florence.



The survey “Teaching in South Carolina in the Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic,” also showed that teachers have a deep commitment to students and their profession. They found new ways to collaborate with colleagues. The challenges COVID brought about spurred innovations in parent and family engagement, student centered learning, curriculum, and teacher leadership. So, while COVID amplified significant challenges in our state, it also gave our teachers and administrators the opportunity to think outside the box and reach out to colleagues for help.

Helping our teachers and our schools means helping our students. When our teachers feel supported, listened to, and respected these feelings flow to students. Just like many of our students, teachers often feel isolated and hopeless. In many parts of the state, they simply do not have the resources and the support systems in place for their own wellbeing, much less that of their students.

So, what can we do as parents and advocates?

Get involved.

To take an even more active role in the life of your child’s school, consider serving on the local School Improvement Council.

I realize that many parents and caregivers are just trying to survive day to day (I’ve been there, too). But there is always a way we can be involved. From simply attending the parent/teacher conferences to making sure your student is showing up in-person and online. Communication between parents/caregivers and teachers is a critical component to student success. If teachers aren’t aware of obstacles prohibiting student success they can’t proactively support solutions. Teachers want students to succeed, and they are willing to work with us; they just don’t always know what outside stressors or issues we are dealing with at home.

If you have more time on your hands, find a way to volunteer. Whether learning is happening in-person, online, or in hybrid environments, teachers and schools will always need our help and often times they won’t ask for it. Don’t be afraid to send an email offering to help and asking what you can do. I am fairly certain that they will have a task or two for you! If not, consider helping via your local *SCPTA* or other parent organization. Many of these organizations also offer numerous support systems for parents and caregivers. To take an even more active role in the life of your child’s school, consider serving on the local School Improvement Council. The SIC is made up of all constituency groups in a school – including parents – and works specifically to strengthen school and student outcomes.



Stay up to date on what is going on in the district through local board of education meetings. Sometimes we get so focused on what is going on with our own student(s) that we forget that decisions made at a district level have a huge impact on *all* students. The South Carolina School Boards Association *has a list* of all 79 districts with the names of their board members. They also have an advocacy section where you can find legislative priorities and a current list of local legislators.

Ask questions.

It can be challenging to decipher the educational lingo that often comes home with students, so don't be afraid to ask questions. Chances are if you don't understand it, there are others having the same issues.

The more we ask questions and the more involved we become, the more we start making decisions that will not only have an impact on our students but *every* student.

Francis Kepple, former U.S. Commissioner of Education for Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, put it this way: "Education is too important to be left solely to educators." This can serve as a call to parents and advocates to do what they can – individually and collectively – to support their schools, teachers, students, and communities.

It doesn't take a huge leap to go from caring about your child to caring about all students; even the smallest of steps can make a huge difference.

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