

Partnering for PROGRESS

By Aida Rogers

Layout By Jennifer Dever

From middle school immunizations to technology for senior adults, the Liaisons of the Carolina Family Engagement Center are working to **eliminate barriers to family and community engagement.**

When Ranina Outing got wind that some parents and grandparents in Clarendon County couldn't communicate with their children's teachers online, she knew what was up. She had had to face down the same challenges those parents and grandparents were experiencing -- poverty, rural isolation, and a fear of speaking up. But somehow, Outing survived an abusive marriage and earned two master's degrees. She'd learned to speak up for her two sons, and eventually herself. No longer intimidated, she spoke up for those parents and grandparents in Clarendon County. As a result, many of them are logging on to PowerSchool and communicating with their children's schools thanks to an expanded evening seminar organized by Clarendon County School District.

"I used my voice," she says simply.

Outing is one of four regional Liaisons working with the Carolina Family Engagement Center (CFEC), a federal grant project housed in the University of South Carolina's College of Education. Its mission is as ambitious as it is complex: to increase family and community engagement in all South Carolina schools. Through its School Partner Program, CFEC targets ongoing, longer-term assistance to schools serving high numbers of families experiencing poverty, multilingual learners (MLLs), students with disabilities, foster families, migrant families, families who are experiencing homelessness, and families from historically marginalized communities.

The CFEC Liaisons, with their diverse backgrounds, varied educations, and specialized skills, have proven themselves equipped for the challenges. Over a four-year period, these Liaisons worked side-by-side with 19 of CFEC's first cohort of partner schools. Having learned what the partner schools in their districts needed, they got to work. Advocating. Organizing. Participating. Collaborating. Brainstorming. Their efforts helped schools experience improved attendance and academic scores as well as stronger ties to their communities. They accomplished these goals despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

There's seemingly no end to the variety of good things that the Liaisons have done. They've provided books to fill backpacks, brought webinars to families on how to help their children apply for college and financial aid, and enlisted parents as allies using flyers that explain – in English and Spanish – why attendance matters. Shabby teacher work and break rooms have been refurbished with their help, and families have been connected to community resources for health insurance, medical care, healthy food, and addiction recovery. They've established over 15 Community Family Resource Centers in places families regularly go – barbershops, community centers, libraries, and laundromats – all filled with free materials that parents can take to help encourage their child's learning and healthy development. Church fans with school information have been printed and distributed. An "Authors on Tour" program featuring South Carolina writers reading their books to students and families visited locations across the state.

To help schools achieve their goals, the Liaisons attended School Improvement Council (SIC) meetings, becoming familiar

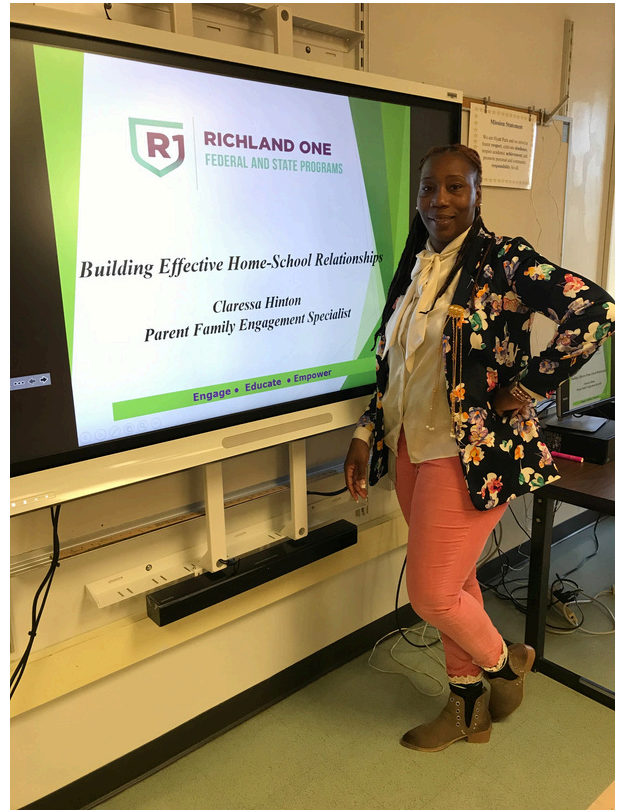
“While our Liaisons work side-by-side with each of our partner schools and families to build their capacities in the five core strategies of the SC Family Engagement K-12 Framework (relationships, communication, linking to learning, collaboration, and community partnerships), the work looks different at each school because it is driven by their unique needs and priorities.”

-Karen Utter, Project Director,
Carolina Family Engagement Center.

with each school's personnel and unique strengths and challenges. Although every school is required to convene an SIC that meets regularly, many of CFEC's partner schools were struggling to fulfill this mandate. Mary Boarts, a new principal at Belton-Honea Path High School (BHPHS) in SY 2019-20, inherited a poorly resourced SIC that only met once a year. The impact of the pandemic in the spring of 2020 compounded this, leading to an increase in student absenteeism. With her Ph.D in educational leadership and years of experience as a marriage and family counselor, CFEC Upstate Liaison Lorilei Swanson, knew how to build the SIC's capacity to serve in a leadership role within the school. Using the evidence-based Getting to Outcomes® method of strategic planning she'd learned at the Wandersman Center, which helps organizations make changes for social good, Swanson guided the SIC in brainstorming student incentives to reduce unexcused absenteeism. It worked! Unexcused absenteeism dropped from 37.8% to 30%.



Liaison Lorelei Swanson with community partners in the Upstate



Liaison Claressa Hinton Thompson delivering training at Richland School District One



Liaison Ranina Outing (second from right), at CFRC Ribbon Cutting Ceremony in Manning, SC with CFEC Director, Karen Utter; Dr. Jacqueline Inabinette, Director of Safety and Special Projects, Clarendon County Schools; and Former SC-SIC Director, Tom Hudson (left to right)

“That’s something I’m extremely proud of,” Principal Mary Boarts reports.

Swanson also worked with the Wright Elementary School SIC to improve the transition experience for rising sixth graders. These efforts included targeted lessons for fifth graders with the school counselor to help them become familiar with new academic tools they would be using in middle school and a parent survey asking fifth-grade parents what they

needed to assist in the transition. The parents asked for an in-person orientation at the middle school, and principal Kimberly Whitt advocated for this with middle school principals. Like Outing, Swanson supported efforts to teach parents how to use PowerSchool. At Wright Elementary’s Literacy Night, 168 out of 200 parents enrolled. At Honea Path Elementary, the number of parents enrolled in PowerSchool jumped from 200 to 579.

Reading parties & health vans

Midlands Liaison Laurann Gallitto Patel was in an SIC meeting at Heyward Gibbes Middle School in Columbia when she learned one reason why attendance was down: Many students weren’t current in their immunizations. For low-income families without reliable transportation, that’s not unusual. Working parents often can’t get their children to medical appointments. Remembering a talk she’d attended by a community organizer trying to build trust between the police and neighborhood families, Gallitto Patel began working her contacts. She recruited that community organizer to join the Heyward Gibbes SIC, and then she recruited the treasurer of a local health cooperative. Before long, the cooperative’s mobile health van was parked on the school

grounds and other locations convenient to those absent students. Result: About 30 students are now safe from tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis, and attendance improved at Heyward Gibbes.

Gallitto Patel, who grew up in an immigrant family and for years worked with refugees in New York and Columbia, SC, knows the fears many CFEC children face. Their school behavior often reflects the trauma of war, displacement, and famine they’ve experienced. Knowing many of those students and their parents aren’t skilled in English, Gallitto Patel is a passionate and effective advocate for language access. She’s participated in ESOL Family Nights, explaining the American public school system.

Like Swanson, Gallitto Patel's academic education is in family counseling. Having learned to read English alongside her Italian mother, she helped organize a Family Reading Party at Burton-Pack Elementary School in Columbia. Designed to prepare third graders for the SC Ready English Language Arts assessment, the party included goodies for parents and children. Students received stuffed puppies, or "Reading Buddies," along with books to read to their new pets. A "Relaxation Station" offered information on how to soothe the nerves of test-takers using breathing exercises; and an adult station gave parents practice tests that

they could use to help their children prepare. Winners of an essay contest were announced – the school's way of helping third graders improve their writing. An ice cream truck added festivity, and parents,

"NOT ONLY WERE THE STUDENTS JOYFUL, BUT THE TEACHERS, ADMINISTRATORS, AND FAMILIES HAD FUN TOO."

having given up their lunch hour to attend were given gift cards for meals.

"Not only were the students joyful, but the teachers, administrators, and families had fun too," Principal Ashton Jones recalls.



Liaison Lorelei Swanson (top, center), with teachers at CFEC School Partner, James M Brown Elementary School

The value of tutoring

Students succeed when **parents are involved** in their children's schools.

At Cayce and Congaree elementary schools in Lexington District Two, Claessa Hinton Thompson created several helpful programs, some based on her own experiences as a foster child who struggled to read. Thanks to a dedicated teacher who tutored her, Hinton Thompson graduated from high school and earned her bachelor's and master's degrees. Her "Lunch Buddies" tutoring program at Cayce Elementary involved South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice employees tutoring students. She also was the catalyst for establishing Family Nights at both schools, during which relevant topics were discussed: homework help, bullying, time management and problem solving. "Spotlight Night," another Hinton Thompson initiative, allowed Cayce students to demonstrate non-academic skills they mastered – such as tying their shoes, skipping, art projects, and in one case, the writing and production of a book that the student later signed for teachers and classmates.

"Mrs. Hinton Thompson has been a wealth of information, a great contributor to our School Improvement Council and PTO," says Andrew Drozdak, principal of Cayce Elementary. "She has been a valued member of our school leadership team since we began our partnership."

The CFEC Liaisons are parents, and they understand a basic CFEC tenant: Students succeed when parents are involved in their children's schools. Knowing parents would volunteer if they knew how to go about it, Hinton Thompson surveyed those of students at Cayce Elementary. The resulting database provided a list of parents and their talents, hobbies, and schedules – allowing them to participate in school activities and help with programs. The school's annual Spring Fling featured parents doing what they do best: a farmer driving hayrides, a baker creating cakes for a cakewalk, an artist painting faces. At Congaree Elementary, where attendance was a challenge, Hinton Thompson organized a team to improve it. Workshops drove home the need for parents to get their students to school *before* school start times, and to schedule medical appointments after school. She also helped establish the school's Career Day with community professionals talking to the students about their work.

An "expert in so many areas," is how Congaree Elementary Principal Chris Dickey describes Hinton Thompson. "She has assisted with many projects and contributed 100 percent in every project throughout our partnership."



CFEC Liaisons at Grant I Celebration: Ranina Outing, Claressa Hinton Thompson, Laurann Gallitto Patel, and Lorelei Swanson (left to right)



Liaison Laurann Gallitto Patel, at work in Richland One Partner school



Liaison Claressa Hinton Thompson (far right), at Lexington 2 School District board meeting, honoring CFEC partner schools Cayce Elementary and Congaree Elementary School

Working with, not for

Because the Liaisons straddle an invisible line of belonging and not belonging to their partner schools, they can help in unexpected ways. In Manning, Outing found herself in a mediator position, coaching a principal on how to mend a strained relationship on her SIC. That improved relationship paved the way for the SIC's highly successful "Reality Check" expo in which students could learn valuable budgeting and other life skills from community professionals. In Columbia, Gallitto Patel started a series of well-attended virtual educational sessions in which various professionals helped school families learn how to communicate better and resolve conflicts. In Lexington Two, Hinton Thompson guided a committee grappling with a controversial mascot name.

Swanson helped BPHS principal Boarts see the value in community partnerships by deepening her understanding of the critical role the community plays in school success. BPHS partnered with the Belton Area Museum Association, and students led local ghost tours and displayed their artwork at the museum. Boarts also made gains in finding resources in the community beyond the typical. Swanson brought staffers from the Upstate Children's Museum to demonstrate coding at a Wright Elementary STEM Family Night.

Supporting the development of dual capacity building practices that prepare both schools and parents to partner more deeply and effectively with each other to support student learning and development.

At Marshall Primary, Swanson worked with School Counselor, Courtney Grimes, to foster the social and emotional development of children by building the capacity of both teachers and families to support student learning. And she helped get Marshall one of 20 School Gardening for SC Educators grants, ushering in a very successful – and popular – gardening program for the school and community.

"We are a better school today than we were three years ago," affirms Shelly Blalock, Marshall Primary's principal. "Our students

"WE ARE A BETTER SCHOOL TODAY THAN WE WERE THREE YEARS AGO"

will only be successful when the school, the community, and families work together as one team to reach the same purpose of providing high levels of learning for all students, so they are college and career ready."



Liaisons Laurann Gallitto Patel (left) and Ranina Outing (right), at Family Connections SC Conference

In October 2023, the U.S. Department of Education renewed the Carolina Family Engagement Center’s grant to serve as South Carolina’s Statewide Family

Engagement Center (SFEC) under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). This new five-year, \$5 million grant has allowed CFEC to launch its second cohort of 17 school partners in August 2024. In addition to working with school stakeholder teams, CFEC Liaisons will also be providing ongoing, intensive support in family engagement to a classroom teacher or team of teachers at each partner school. At the same time, they will be assisting in establishing a CFEC Parent Leadership Partner (PLP) program at each partner school. This combination of initiatives will allow the CFEC Liaisons to support the development of dual capacity building practices that prepare both schools and parents to partner more deeply and effectively with each other to support student learning and development.

The principals from the CFEC Liaisons’ former schools have nothing but praise for their practical and academic know-how.

“We would not be where we are without our partnership with CFEC,” says Katie King, principal of Belton Middle School.



CFEC is the Statewide Family Engagement Center for South Carolina. It is housed in the SC School Improvement Council at the College of Education at the University of South Carolina. The contents of this publication were developed under grants U310A180058 and S320A230032 from the U.S. Department of Education (Department). The Department does not mandate or prescribe practices, models, or other activities described or discussed in this document. The contents of this publication may contain examples of, adaptations of, and links to resources created and maintained by another public or private organization. The Department does not control or guarantee the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, or completeness of this outside information. The content of this publication does not necessarily represent the policy of the Department. This publication is not intended to represent the views or policy of, or be an endorsement of any views expressed or materials provided by, any Federal agency.