



Accepting the Challenge

Stakeholder Stories

2019-2022



Contents

02

Introduction

03

Sharon P.
Williams

04

Christopher
Fleming

06

Reading Guide

07

Barbara Tiller

09

Elizabeth Ann
Geddings

10

Jessica Morton

12

Laurann Patel

14

Ranina Outing

For SIC members, involvement is everything

By Aida Rogers



A great school needs more than a great faculty and great students. It needs a committed community, one that recognizes everyone in town can help their youngest citizens succeed. Enter the School Improvement Council (SIC). Whether members are concerned primary caretakers, employees of local businesses and non-profits, or educators themselves, these volunteer advisory groups are often the quiet engine humming in the background, making sure schools meet their goals.

Here are just a few SIC members in South Carolina who have accepted the challenge.

Sharon P. Williams, MPA

Member and Chair, Manning Early Childhood Center SIC, Clarendon County

For Sharon P. Williams, executive director of Clarendon County First Steps to School Readiness, it makes good sense for Clarendon County's early care and education professionals to meet regularly. "We can learn from each other," she says. "Given that all of us have limited resources with which to do the important work that we do – prepare our youngest and most vulnerable citizens for success in school – our collective work enables us to pool our resources so that we can expand our reach throughout our community."



Thanks to attending the Manning Early Childhood Center's SIC meetings, Williams has learned more about Title I and other funding sources allocated to help with early education. That and other SIC knowledge has helped her and her board members "make more informed decisions" about their own programs and services.

"In discussing some recent data about attendance and assessment scores, we learned we clearly need to focus more on early literacy development and engaging families earlier to understand that the early years really matter," she said. "CCFS and our partners do a great job, but given our limited funding, our impact is minimized.

'That is why we focus a great deal of attention on cultivating partnerships with others in our community who work with preschool children. Wherever possible, some of our board members and I join various committees and work groups, like our Community Coalition, that work with the demographics of families we serve."

CCFS's partnership with the Dolly Parton Imagination Library has done a lot to foster a love of books and reading in local children, Williams says, but there's still plenty of work to be done. "I believe families are so overwhelmed with so many things – especially single-parent households – to really think about and address getting their children ready for school. I think back to a number of our families in which the mothers worked more than one job to provide for their families."

“We all have something to give to the important work that we do. With all of us pulling together we can accomplish more, especially given that we have limited resources with which to work.”

As an SIC member, Williams was impressed by how hard Rosa Stokes, principal of Manning Early Childhood Center, worked to ensure the children who participated in Clarendon County First Steps’ Countdown to Kindergarten program were assigned to their CTK teacher’s class. Williams is the center’s SIC chair-elect.

She’s actively pushing for more investment in early care and education. “I would like us to flood the county with easy-to-read, easily accessible information on school readiness,” she says. “We need to help everyone understand how important early childhood education is.”

Christopher Fleming Member, Eau Claire High SIC, Columbia

Christopher Fleming was working in the library, studying state and national literacy rates, when he came to understand that not being able to read well led to many other problems.

“Literacy is more than just being able to read and write, but also the ability to perceive and process,” says the customer service supervisor at Richland North Main in Columbia. “If a youngster doesn’t have the vocabulary to express themselves, they will more easily rely on violence to get their frustration across. Then I saw the numbers between those incarcerated and the literacy rates and wondered, ‘How many of these brothers and sisters just needed a shoulder to cry on?’ Or just needed to say, ‘This hurt my feelings.’”



“When I saw the correlation between literacy and violence, poverty, teen pregnancy, and other societal ills, I knew I had to do something.”

Spurred to help, Fleming joined the Eau Claire High School Improvement Council in Columbia, where he met in person his Facebook friend Barbara Tiller, a fellow member and local educator. His goal is to use his library skills to help the school and students in a hands-on way.



He specifically wants Black children to learn about the heroes of their race. They need to know their own stories.

“We must dig into the annals of history to discover lesser-known figures who have made major strides, not only in entertainment and sports, but also in STEAM fields,” says Fleming, a new father. “When children see images and hear stories beyond what is expected of them, they aspire to wider ambitions. There is a saying in the Bhagavad Gita that says, ‘Whatever action a great man performs, common men follow.’ As educators and leaders, we must challenge what is only seen as great by society and display greatness in a larger capacity so our children have more role models.”

An Irmo native and graduate of Francis Marion University, Fleming has published three books about philosophy and spirituality under the name Mowa Olodumare. He also lectures on philosophy. He believes SIC work benefits everyone. “Any child left behind is a potential victim or victimizer of another child,” he says. “Once the importance of education – especially critical thinking and self-love/awareness – is realized by all parties, there will be a trickle-down effect on societal ills that cripple our communities.”

Want to read about outstanding African Americans? Here's a place to start

Christopher Fleming was 11 when his father died, and he holds his last words close. "Be someone who will make me proud and study," he was told. And young Christopher obeyed, reading the works of different philosophers and writers.

Here's a list of just a few Black heroes he'd like to see young people study:

Inventors

Charles Drew, physician and hematologist, did groundbreaking work with blood plasma
Lewis Latimer, created the evaporative air conditioner
Garrett Morgan, invented an improved sewing machine and traffic signal, a hair-straightening product, and a respiratory device that provided the blueprint for WWI gas masks

Scholars

Dr. John Hendrick Clark, historian, professor, pioneer in Pan-African and Africana studies
Ivan Van Sertima, professor of Africana Studies; author of *They Came Before Columbus*
Nguigi wa Thiong'o, Kenyan writer, academic, editor
Dr. Cornel West, philosopher, social activist, public intellectual
Yosef Ben Yochannan, Afrocentric historian, writer

Poets

Maya Angelou
Okot P'Bitek
Nikki Giovanni
Patricia Smith

Writers

Aime Cesaire
Frantz Fanon
Zora Neale Hurston
Toni Morrison

Fleming credits his family for his need to keep learning. "My father always encouraged critical thinking and being able to articulate myself," he said. "In seventh grade, I was reading philosophy books for my summer reading (*Ruminations* by KRS-One)." KRS-One is one of his biggest influences. "He is not only an Emcee (rapper) but also a philosopher who dropped out of school in eighth grade and taught himself everything he knows at the Brooklyn Public Library," Fleming said. "His name is an acronym meaning Knowledge Reigns Supreme Over Nearly Everyone. I came across him around the time my father died. Without his influence at that pivotal time, I know my life would have been different."

Barbara Tiller

Member and Chair, Heyward Gibbes Middle SIC; Member and Co-Chair, Arden Elementary and Eau Claire High SIC: Columbia

Joining the SICs for three schools at each level in Columbia was eye-opening for Barbara Tiller, a teacher and reading interventionist for grades 3–5 at Hyatt Park Elementary School. As a parent, she wanted to be involved with making her children’s schools better, and to help plan events and activities that would help every member of the school improve. She wishes more parents were involved.

“It allows you to stay informed about what is going on in the school as well as some of their challenges,” she says. “It also gives you the opportunity to work with educators and administrators to improve the school.”

As a teacher, Tiller thought she was doing a good job keeping the parents of her students informed. But as a mother, she felt otherwise. Some of her questions would go unanswered; some issues weren’t acknowledged.

“I would tend to ask teachers how I could support my children as learners,” she said.



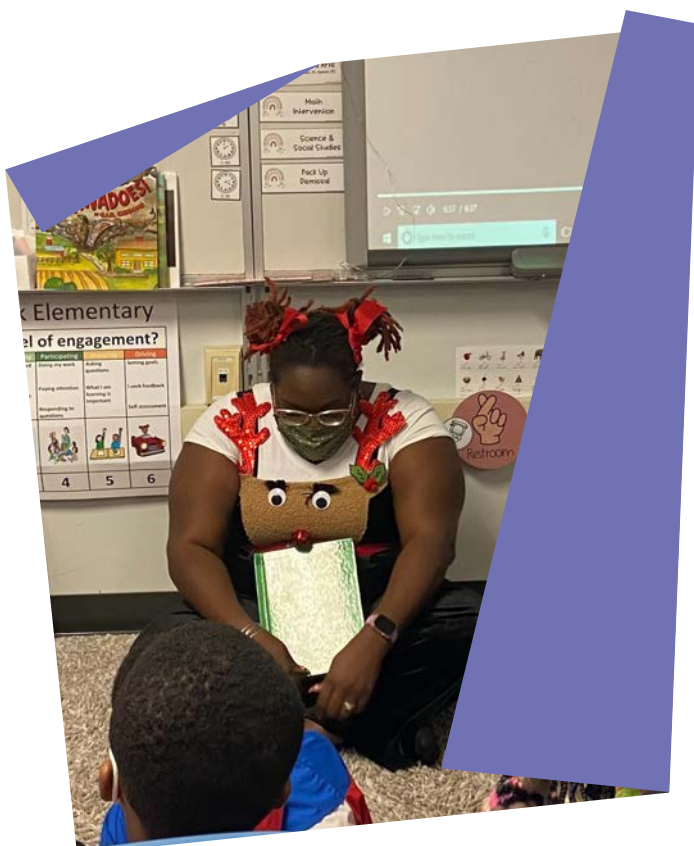
“Whether they were struggling or doing extremely well, I’d ask about how I could help with their weaknesses or make their strengths even better.

“Many times, teachers would give generic answers, like ‘read more’ or ‘spend more time on a certain website,’ instead of telling you specifically what your child needs.”

Positive relationships between parents and teachers make schools better and should be cultivated, she believes. Teachers and staffers can initiate those relationships.

"Reach out in positive circumstances before anything negative takes place," Tiller advises. "Don't wait until interims and/or report cards to communicate with parents. Teachers can make a phone call or send a message saying, 'Hey, your child is being an awesome helper,' or 'They are really putting forth their best effort.'"

Positive relationships between parents and teachers make schools better and should be cultivated



Flexible attitudes about schedules also would nurture family engagement. Not all parents can meet when teachers can. Daytime and evening options for meetings – whether parent-teacher conferences, PTO or SIC meetings – would be appreciated by parents with other responsibilities.

"Many times, at meetings, there is a lot of the school telling parents what is already in place and what they plan to do, with little to no input from parents," Tiller said.

"Sometimes their input is not valued as equal stakeholders. As parents feel more welcomed and included in school decisions, they would be more likely to participate."

Elizabeth Ann Geddings

Member and Vice Chair, Manning Primary SIC,
Clarendon County



Elizabeth Ann Geddings wanted to have input in ways to improve the school one of her children attends. Even though she's a new member of its SIC, she's learning a lot about how Manning Primary educates its students.

"I have learned some of the expectations the schools have for current second-graders," she said. "I have learned of the different resources that my child uses in the classroom that help in his education. I have also met other people in my community who care about our school and improving it. I have learned of the many outside organizations that help our children who are in need."

Though she works with second and third graders as a teacher assistant at Clarendon Christian Learning Center, Geddings makes time to be involved with her SIC. When her school expressed a need for SIC members, she responded. "Being a member will keep me informed of what is going on in the school community, and also give me a platform to express concerns or ideas."

"I think that the only way to make a change is to be a part of the change."

More parent involvement is one thing she'd like to see. More money for important educational needs is another. "If there is a way of raising money for our teachers throughout the school to be able to get educational tools needed, I think that would be great."

Both of Geddings' children are on the autism spectrum. Serving on the SIC of the school one of them attends is her way of making sure he receives a good education. "I want to be part of the change that will help our children be the best they can be."

Jessica Morton

Member, Ebinport Elementary SIC, York County

Teacher and mother of nine, Jessica Morton goes to school every day. Though she no longer teaches middle school and special needs students as she did in Richmond, Virginia, she's fully engaged with her children's schools in York County. These days she's a Building Level Substitute, which means she helps teachers in one building only, Ebinport Elementary School, where three of her children attend. Two of her children attend Sullivan Middle School and one at Rock Hill High. Her older three children have graduated from high school and are in college or working.

One thing she's learned from her years as parent and teacher is that compromise is critical when educating children. "Each person needs to bring an open heart, open mind, and understand they need to bring something to compromise," she said. To her, flexibility and realistic expectations on the part of both parent and teacher only makes sense.

"Parents and teachers need to come to the table with the common understanding that the goal is to help the child be successful. That's what we're partnering on. Both partners have to give each other some compromise."

"The teachers I see who are successful in their parental relationships are genuine in trying to communicate with parents. They bring themselves as human beings and not just the title of 'teacher' to the conversations."

One example of a parent and teacher not compromising? Punishing children for something teachers already know their parents know about too. Morton recalled a previous experience of a teacher restricting her son from recess because he didn't turn in a signed paper. He had lost the paper or it had been thrown away, after Morton had seen it with its disappointing grade. Though parent and teacher had a conversation about the paper, the teacher still kept the child from recess and put zeroes in her grade book.

"Teachers have their ideal, that every child needs to turn in an assigned piece of paper, and I understand a teacher wants their paperwork together," she said.

“The teachers I see who are successful in their parental relationships are genuine in trying to communicate with parents. They bring themselves as human beings and not just the title of ‘teacher’ to the conversations. I don’t see that from the ones who aren’t as successful – I’m not seeing them understand things from a parent’s perspective.”

Morton would like to see teachers be more understanding of parents’ schedules. Many can’t meet on the teachers’ schedules. She’d also like to see teachers use more old-fashioned ways of communicating with parents, not just email, cell phones, and ClassDojo.

“You may have to write a letter and send it home with a child, and sometimes you may have to go to a child’s or parent’s home,” she said. “I do not know the laws in South Carolina about that, but I do know that was acceptable in Virginia. I have done that myself.”

Similarly, Morton would like to see more parents take active roles with their children’s education. “I need parents who want to be more involved in their children’s lives, period,” she said. “It goes both ways.”

She does her part to keep them involved. Because COVID-19 restricts parents from entering Ebinport Elementary, Morton takes photos of the classrooms, hallways and cafeteria to give them a sense of their children’s daily landscapes.

In her almost three years of working at Ebinport and serving on its SIC, Morton has enjoyed creating *The Eagle’s Nest*, the newsletter (in Spanish and English) that keeps parents informed about the school and community resources available to them. She also loves working in the school’s garden and taking children there. “I call it our breathing space,” she said. “Some students need to get out of the classroom for a reset.”

For her, being engaged with her children’s schools and working in one is a matter of supreme importance. “I love my children,” she said. “I understand they are my legacy. I want to do my part so they have an example in front of them, so they’ll know what to do for themselves and their children.”



Laurann Gallitto Patel, MMFT

CFEC Regional Liaison, Midlands

Laurann Gallitto Patel was participating in Eau Claire High School's annual Waffles with Ms. Walters program when two unforgettable things happened. The first was based on a question she asked everyone there – students, parents and family members, community members and school staff.

"I asked everyone to share a story about someone who supported them when they were a student, or made an impact on their education," she said. "You could draw a line from the career and passion of every adult back to that person of influence. I felt so much closer to everyone in the room after listening to those stories."

The stories were as powerful as they were connective. Besides Patel's own memories of reading with her mother, a newly arrived immigrant from Italy, others described grandparents who preached the importance of education, aunts who helped with homework, fathers who instilled an appreciation for books and culture. The storytelling, Patel says, broke the ice for a conversation that followed, about student challenges and goals.

"A student quietly, yet courageously, shared that many students were facing mental and emotional health challenges," Patel said. "To hear her voice bring attention to this fact helped me put a face and name to something I had only previously seen and read about as a removed and distant national trend. Our students are struggling, and it's going to take support, listening, and understanding from the whole community to help."

or Patel, a resident of North Columbia, serving on the Eau Claire High School SIC provides a sense of community.



“As a recent first-time parent, I have gained a new perspective on the interconnectedness of the community that surrounds and cares for your child with you,” she said. “Working alongside schools and families has kept me engaged in a time that has been marked by isolation and distance, so I feel so inspired by those who have exemplified compassionate leadership and offered the gift of service to their families and communities.”

“Our students are struggling, and it’s going to take support, listening, and understanding from the whole community to help.”

In her three years with the Eau Claire SIC, Patel has come to admire those with whom she serves.

“I have been so encouraged by the deep commitment of school administrators, Parent and Family Engagement Specialists, teachers, support staff, parents, family members, students and community partners as they navigate these rough waters and am happy to celebrate the small victories together,” she said. “My involvement has taught me just how hard everyone works for the good of the students, and that everyone is just trying their best to stay hopeful through an impossibly difficult period in our collective lives.” Because of the broad makeup of their members, SICs can do specific good and important things, Patel maintains.

“They have the capacity to come to helpful and realistic solutions based on intimate knowledge and understanding of the unique strengths and resources available within the community. With the common goal of supporting student learning and development, it’s so exciting to be witness to the village that fosters this growth.”

Ranina Outing, MHA, MPH

CFEC Regional Liaison, Pee Dee

Ranina Outing is a big believer in the power of families.

“They often are underutilized but critical stakeholders in school climate improvements and the development of systems to support students' academic achievement and development,” she said. “By creating systems and structures with families and community members through SICs, an ongoing opportunity to get feedback and ideas from stakeholders with diverse perspectives is provided.”

In her three years of service to Clarendon School District Two SICs, Outing has been impressed by the willingness of family members to take responsibility.



“Jessica Cheek, a parent from Clarendon School District Two, has managed to balance her time to chair not one but two SICs in CSD2,” she said. “I have learned that families and communities are more willing to get involved in the success of students than given credit. Oftentimes they are unaware of opportunities to get involved and the role they can play.”

Outing’s SIC experiences also have taught her that families have needs. She’d like to see SICs –and all segments of a community – meet them.

“We need to support families wherever the need, from transportation, food, childcare and work opportunities,” she said. “Oftentimes attendance issues and poor grades are the result of concerns outside of school, which affect education.”

“Oftentimes attendance issues and poor grades are the result of concerns outside of school, which affect education.”

For successful learning to occur, schools should be safe and stress-free, with all members in good health, Outing maintains. And those conditions don’t happen in a vacuum.

“It is essential for schools, families, and community members to build bridges and lay foundations to work together,” she said. “Adults must recognize the common goals for the betterment of our children, society, and the future. Genuine partnerships are based on shared respect. Teachers respect and value parents’ knowledge and experiences about their children. Parents respect and value teachers’ knowledge and assessments about the learning process and understanding children’s educational needs along with help from the community.”



Equity, Opportunity & Excellence in Education



CFEC would like to thank all the parents, community members, and school staff that make the work of SICs possible.

If you are interested in learning more about SICs and how you can get involved, please visit <https://sic.sc.gov/> for more information!

SC-SIC, University of South Carolina College of Education

820 Main Street, Suite 001

Columbia, SC, 29208

1-800-868-2232

1-803-777-7658



/SCSchoolImprovementCouncil/



@SCSIC

Carolina Family Engagement Center

c/o SC-SIC, University of South Carolina College of Education

820 Main Street, Suite 001

Columbia, SC, 29208

1-800-868-2232

1-803-777-7658

CFEC is housed in the College of Education at the University of South Carolina

and is funded through grant U310A180058 from the U.S. Department of Education



/CFECatUofSC/



@CarolinaFamily2



@uofscfec