Press Release

May 1st 2020

Responding to the COVID-19 outbreak in Dorchester County, several local non-profits recently established a collaborative body called the Dorchester Academic Support Coalition (DASC). DASC, consisting of the Empowerment Center, Harvesting Hope Youth and Family Wellness, and New Beginnings Youth and Family Services, was formed to better communicate information and share resources while supporting disadvantaged out-of-school students. All three organizations have a long history of working with youth in the community by offering robust after-school and summer programming to over 100 kids every year in the Cambridge area, as well as partnering with the Dorchester County Public School system. Dr. Theresa Stafford, Executive Director of New Beginnings Youth and Family Services, explains “DASC expands opportunities to more children than we were able to do as individual organizations. With this partnership we are sharing not only resources but ideas for better program development and program implementation.” Similarly, Julia Barker, board member of the Pine Street Committee that manages the Empowerment Center, said “the Empowerment Center has always had an all-volunteer led after-school program. Therefore, we were limited in our ability to expand. With the help of the DASC, we will be able to do that and help more children reach their potential.”

Because the after-school sites have been closed for weeks as a result of the virus, DASC has been creatively working to find alternative ways to reinforce academic learning and to help prevent further achievement gaps from forming. The group recently established two pilot initiatives. The first is a telephonic tutoring program that will look to reach families with students most in need. Beginning this week, DASC will oversee a cadre of paid tutors that will reach out to students and assist them with their take-home materials to help the school system ensure the kids both complete the work and better understand the content. The coalition has secured over 17 tutors and is working with over 110 children through June 4th. "We want to support the students educationally but also emotionally. To check in to see how they are doing and, if they are in need of support, to recommend they contact a local behavioral health agency for teletherapy services. DASC is giving our agencies the ability to expand services and support to our participants and the community,” said Omeaka Jackson, CEO of Harvesting Hope. In addition to supporting the children, the program has the added benefit of getting qualified and experienced community members back to work. The second initiative is a Chromebook outreach effort where 10 elementary school children are being provided brand-new, donated devices, along with a powerful IXL online curriculum that allows monitoring and evaluation, with instruction to help bolster their virtual learning. Based on the progress reporting, if the cohort performs well, this program may then look to later expand into the after-school and summer activities when back online. For the next 90 days, IXL is free and thus the coalition is also providing the software program for other children that already own a device and have access to the Internet.

Providing the backbone to the Coalition is the John & Janice Wyatt Foundation, or the J2W Foundation. J2W is a private, family grantmaking foundation with ties to Dorchester County. The foundation’s mission is to improve equity in the education system by leveling the playing field for disadvantaged youth. Establishing a collective impact effort that builds bridges between Dorchester County Public Schools, local non-profits, government and business is a central strategy for the group. The ability to work with multiple organizations to quickly respond to the novel coronavirus outbreak is critical to finding real solutions to complex challenges. While the foundation has a regional geographic service area, Mr. Jymil Thompson will serve as the Dorchester programs community outreach manager. Mr. Jymil Thompson is the current principal at Mace’s Lane Middle School. He will take on this role after fulfilling his DCPS contract.

Efforts being taken by the Empowerment Center, Harvesting Hope, and New Beginnings are designed to work with, and in support of, the school district. The goal is to strengthen and enlarge existing relationships to ultimately help reinforce learning that occurred prior to the corona virus outbreak. Simply put, success would be defined as these students being able to maintain skills that were being taught prior to the outbreak.

To support the Empowerment Center, Harvesting Hope, or New Beginnings, please consider making a donation to these critical community organizations in order to assist these programs moving forward. Mindful of the impacts of COVID-19 on the students this year and the concerns for significant learning loss, DASC will soon focus on developing an even larger, more extensive summer program to augment the school system’s efforts to develop students’ skills prior to the opening of school next fall.