

ALL MEANS ALL

a four-part editorial series featuring Aiken County Public School District Superintendent Dr. Sean Alford

As we move closer each day to our goal of being the state’s premier school district and providing a high-quality education for all Aiken County Public School District students, we realize that our journey together will not be without its challenges and hurdles. Our students come to us from diverse socio-economic backgrounds and unique family circumstances. We find strength in this diversity, and work continually to fuse the talents and gifts of each individual student with our common beliefs to produce a more confident, capable South Carolinian who will be needed in the greater future of our community, state and nation.

Just how diverse Aiken County has become may surprise you.

Of our 24,829 students in the Aiken County Public School District, 1,940 do not speak English as a first language. A total of 32 different languages are spoken by students in Aiken County Public Schools. These students represent peoples and communities from all over the globe – from Europe to North Africa, Central and Eastern Asia and beyond. That we rise to the challenge of helping all students overcome their specific language barriers while also serving to enhance their abilities in other areas is essential to our success. All means all.

In many ways though, while they come to us from vastly different backgrounds, these students are no different than students who are natives of Aiken County. No two students learn in the exact same way, or possess the same set of tools and skills. We find that this holds true whether a student hails from an island found in the far reaches of the Pacific Ocean, or an “island” much closer to home (in Beech Island). These young people display tremendous courage in overcoming many obstacles, while also navigating massive change as it relates to their introduction to an entirely new culture. It should also be noted that many of these same students who learn English as a second language come to us as high achievers, and even more of these students come from strong family units.

Our goal upon entering into an educational partnership with English Speakers of other Languages (ESOL) students is no different than what our goal would be for any other Aiken County Public School District student – we encourage each individual student to reach their greatest possible potential regardless of challenges they may face. This is accomplished through our ESOL program and the diligent application of our fundamental values regarding ESOL students. These program values are displayed through the continued advocacy for ESOL students and their families on the part of the Aiken County Public School District, the formation of collaborative relationships between ESOL students and teachers, the encouragement and fostering of active involvement on the part of parents of our English language learners, and the recruitment of highly qualified educators who can facilitate exceptional learning outcomes.

Through our ESOL instruction, students develop proficiency in four key areas – Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. This effort is managed over time through annual ACCESS state assessments and the utilization of five progression levels – Entering, Emerging, Developing, Expanding and Bridging – which serve as improvement benchmarks for educators and students. These levels provide a basic framework for all ESOL students, but individuals may progress more quickly and not pass through each specific level. Once an ESOL student is able to display adequate proficiency on the ACCESS exam with a score of 5.0 overall and competency in all four key learning areas, they are then able to transition out of the program (though an ESOL teacher will continue monitoring their progress for an additional two years).

Whether these students arrive in greater numbers speaking Spanish (1,673 students), or in smaller groups speaking Chinese (58 students), French (23), Arabic (11 students), Japanese (10 students), Russian (nine students), or even Hindi, Ethiopian, Amharic, Micronesian, Persian, Laotian and Pohnpeian (one student each), each of them deserves our very best, and our promise to them remains steadfast. In Aiken County Public Schools, it will not matter where a student comes from, or what language they speak when they are first welcomed into our schools.

Of greater import is where these students are able go from here and who they become. Ours is a singular mission – to nurture all children regardless of the diversity of their backgrounds, or the language specific to their heritage or that of their parents. All means all.

