

## **Expanding Youth Engagement Advocates Across Middle Schools**

I am here this evening to thank the members of the Board of Charles County Commissioners for their continued support of public education. I also want to highlight an important area of the Charles County Public Schools Fiscal Year 2025 budget request – the addition of Youth Engagement Advocates to our middle schools.

Charles County Public Schools launched its Youth Engagement Advocate program earlier this school year to provide an additional support role for high school students. All seven Charles County public high schools have a Youth Engagement Advocate, who is considered a member of the school administrative team. From mentoring students and building relationships to supporting administrators with student behavior and personal needs, the advocates support students, staff and families. Youth Engagement Advocates strive daily to support a safe, positive and welcome learning and working environment for students and staff.

Many of our Youth Engagement Advocates are sought out by students who need someone to talk to, need help with an assignment or have a personal need and want a trusted adult to turn to. They are examples of professionals working in education and in schools who go above and beyond to build positive relationships with students. Several Youth Engagement Advocates have established mentoring programs, spend time after school coaching or supervising extracurricular activities, and/or work within their school communities to improve school to community partnerships.

Youth Engagement Advocates also support school safety. So far this school year, Youth Engagement Advocates have supported school administrators with situations such as students skipping class or disrupting the school environment. They have also collectively across our seven high schools referred nearly 1,000 students for additional support and resources, held more than 120 formal (and successful) mediations between students, and supported more than 1,000 parents and guardians as they worked through a possibly challenging time with their child. The staff in these roles truly serve as youth advocates.

The fiscal year 2025 budget request includes the expansion of the Youth Engagement Advocate role to our nine middle schools and to the Robert D. Stethem Educational Center. The vision of the Youth Engagement Program is to improve the learning experience for all students and staff. This role aids in supporting positive school culture and climate, which is one of the focal areas of the Charles County Public Schools strategic plan. Students and staff deserve to come to school and work each day in a safe learning and working environment.

Middle school years are arguably some of the most difficult for students. If we increase the number of adults in our schools who work to support school culture and climate, the higher the chances of increased positive and successful outcomes for students. The unique job responsibilities of our Youth Engagement Advocates provide a necessary bridge that supports the school experience for students. Not only are these staff members trained in safety and security procedures, crisis and emergency management and education law, they learn about restorative practices, safe conflict resolution and how to support families when their child is having a hard time at school.

Youth Engagement Advocates also heavily support school administrators by helping to handle incidents or investigations so administrators can provide more dedicated support to instruction, classrooms and teachers. We have a program in place in which we have data to support the positive impact the Youth Engagement Advocates have had on our high school students.

By supporting this ask in the fiscal year 2025 budget request, you are helping to provide more resources for students and families as they navigate the initial years of secondary education. On behalf of the Board of Education of Charles County and Charles County Public Schools, I urge the Board of Charles County Commissioners to fully fund our fiscal year 2025 budget request so that we can continue to support all children in Charles County. Thank you.

