



MEDIA RELEASE

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Charter Institute at Erskine leading the way in innovation for virtual special education learning

COLUMBIA – As schools have been left scrambling to create distance learning plans for students during closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it has been an even bigger challenge for the special education population.

The Charter Institute at Erskine, South Carolina’s only higher education charter school authorizer, has been ahead of the curve by utilizing their virtual school expertise. Cyber Academy of South Carolina, Odyssey Online Learning, and South Carolina Virtual Charter School are all virtual schools under the Institute’s oversight. South Carolina Connections Academy, the largest virtual school in the state serving nearly 5,500 students, will join the Institute for the 2020-2021 school year.

“Districts across the state have been trying to figure out ways they can best assist their students while schools are closed for the foreseeable future,” said Celina Patton, the Institute’s Chief of Student Services. “The Institute has been a leader for our schools during this time. By having virtual schools in our portfolio, we are able to implement their best practices and share their strategies to help train and assist our brick-and-mortar schools.”

Institute schools have had access to several virtual setting topics including how to monitor progress, how documentation is handled, parent orientation for special education students, and even how to conduct Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings virtually. Some webinars even include support targeted for school specific issues.

Jennifer Matthews, a Special Programs Manager with Cyber Academy of South Carolina, and Sarah Love, a Special Education Coordinator with South Carolina Virtual Charter School, have worked directly with the Institute’s Special Education department to develop webinars for students and teachers that are transitioning to the virtual setting.

“I admire special education teachers who teach in virtual schools every day,” said Rebecca Crawford, special education teacher at Virtus Academy of South Carolina in Florence. “I never really knew what their virtual classrooms were like, until a pandemic occurred globally, and traditional school building teachers and coordinators like myself had no choice but to leave their classrooms and begin to learn how to navigate online in a virtual setting in which most of us had never done before.”

Within its school population, the Institute serves approximately 1,200 students with disabilities, roughly 13% of its entire enrollment. All 13 disability categories are also represented. Many of the families impacted by the transition to the virtual setting were faced with uncertainty.

“My grandson has an IEP and I had no idea how I was going to handle working with him and handle the virtual learning during this pandemic,” said Caroline Smith, grandmother of a fourth grade student with disabilities at Thornwell Charter School in Clinton. “Thornwell has helped so much and provided the sped services through this virtual learning. The teachers continue to focus on helping him reach his goals through Zoom and the use of instructional materials that have been developed to meet him where he is and to help him be successful during this time.”

Oceanside Collegiate Academy (Mount Pleasant) special education coordinator Allen Holmes added, “The transition to virtual instruction has been alleviated by the support provided from the Institute. The weekly special education webinars and mini sessions with new online teaching techniques have been extremely helpful as we implement new platforms to continue special education services. The Edmodo page created by Laura Merrick (Institute Director of Special Education) provides new ideas and suggestions daily and allows teachers to interact and ask questions for support as needed. I feel that we have made a successful transition with the support and resources provided by the Institute.”

“The Charter Institute is committed to ensuring that students with disabilities are served regardless of the challenges that the world throws at us,” said Cameron Runyan, Institute CEO and Superintendent. “Given the unique challenges of the current pandemic, the Institute Special Education team, school Special Education coordinators, and teachers have stepped up and are working around the clock to ensure that our student’s needs are met.”

180-year-old Erskine College established the Charter Institute at Erskine in 2017 to improve public education across the state of South Carolina. The Institute currently authorizes 17 charter schools comprised of nearly 11,000 students. For more information, please visit www.erskinecharters.org.

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