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Inaugural Kids First Conference Salutes Charter School and State Leaders, Set To Increase National Presence

COLUMBIA, S.C. (Oct. 1, 2021) – The Charter Institute at Erskine and the South Carolina Public Charter School District partnered to host the inaugural Kids First Conference on September 28 and 29, 2021, in Columbia. The joint effort between the two largest statewide charter school authorizers was born out of a commitment to always put the education of South Carolina’s students above all else.

The two-day conference, held at the Columbia Convention Center, was attended by over 400 charter school leaders and board members. More than two-dozen organizations and nonprofits sponsored the event and provided raffle gifts to the attendees. State leaders, education policy advocates, and corporate partners hosted panel discussions during the conference. The conference had 21 breakout sessions conducted by successful school leaders, business partners, and education professionals. These breakouts are designed to provide tools and resources for school leaders to go back to their schools and impact teachers and students in their building as they strive to close the learning loss from COVID-19. John Foley, a former U.S. Navy Blue Angel Lead Pilot, and founder of the Glad To Be Here Foundation, delivered the keynote address and touched on the conference theme of “Soaring To New Heights.”

“It was incredible to see our school leaders and Board members from around the state come together in this great learning environment while committing to always put Kids First across South Carolina,” said Charter Institute at Erskine Superintendent Cameron Runyan.

On September 29, S.C. Governor Henry McMaster received the Kids First Hall of Fame “Charter Champion” award presented by Superintendents Cameron Runyan and Chris Neeley. Governor McMaster received this award in honor of his longstanding commitment and dedication to school choice and public charter schools. “Our steadfast support of our state’s charter schools is directly related to the invaluable service they provide South Carolina’s parents and students,” said Gov. Henry McMaster. “With more South Carolinians choosing to send their children to these innovative schools seemingly every year, we must continue to support them in any way that we can. I’m grateful to have had the opportunity to express my gratitude to the leaders of these schools.” The Governor includes funding for charter schools in his annual Executive Budget and worked with the S.C. General Assembly to provide \$9 million in shortfall dollars to ensure

charter schools can continue to serve a diverse array of students across South Carolina. Students from Clear Dot Charter School welcomed the Governor to the Convention Center, waving South Carolina flags as he made his way to the stage to receive the award.

“Last year when the two statewide charter districts experienced a \$9 million shortfall in state funding due to exponential student growth in public charter schools during the pandemic, the first person we went to for help was Governor Henry McMaster,” said Chris Neeley, superintendent of the S.C. Public Charter School District. “His initial response to us was concise: ‘Let's go get it.’ and that's precisely what he did. Governor McMaster's advocacy and support enabled us to serve more children in charter schools than ever before. And for that, he is most deserving of the first-ever "Kids First Hall of Fame Charter Champion Award."

The Kids First Conference is unlike any charter school leadership conference in the southeastern United States. The Charter Institute at Erskine and the S.C. Public Charter School District are committed to growing the national foothold of the event in 2022 and 2023 by opening the conference to attendees from national charter school authorizers, advocates, and corporate partners. To learn more about the conference, visit <https://erskinecharters.org/kidsfirst-conference/>.

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