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Darlington County First Steps, Parents Are First Project Director

Strengthening Families Program Graduates 21 Families

Hartsville, SC-- Funded by the Children’s Trust of South Carolina, grantee Darlington County First Steps (DCFS), partnered with Child and Family Resource Center and West Hartsville Elementary School which implemented the evidenced-based, Strengthening Families Program (SFP) which has been shown to protect against potential child abuse and neglect as well as adverse childhood experiences. The SFP serves families with children, ages 6 to 11, and is designed to help families develop positive discipline practices, stay resilient in tough times, reduce conflict, improve parenting skills, and assist children with social skills, relationships and school performance. All of these factors play an important role in keeping families strong and support the vision of DCFS, Strong Families in Healthy Communities.

Tracy Redfearn, owner/operator of Child and Family Resource Center, and the driving force behind the success of the SFP in Darlington County, served as the Site Coordinator along with Julie Mahn, Principal at West Hartsville Elementary and SFP Project Manager, worked tirelessly to implement two cycles of the 14-week program. Participants must complete a 14-session program to graduate. Each session begins with a family meal and typically last two hours. Participants who complete the 14-session program graduate in celebratory style. The SFP graduated a total of 21 families in 2018. Eleven, 11, families graduated in June, 2018 and graduated 10 new families on December 11, 2018.

The SFP December Graduation was a grand occasion with families being treated to steak dinners, music played by Hartsville Violinist, Te’Quan Coe, door prizes, food boxes, and an inspiring message on the importance of families by Dawn Barton, Director of Permanency Management for the Child Welfare Services Division at South Carolina Department of Social Services. The celebration concluded with a visit from Santa Claus who distributed many gifts to participating families. Special guests included Superintendent of Darlington County School District (DCSD), Dr. Tim Newman, DCSD Board Member, Mr. Connell Delaine, Child and Family Resource Foundation Board Members, Meredith Thomas Taylor and Matthew Ferguson, Lauren Szymonik, Pee Dee Strengthening Families Coordinator, Children’s Trust of South Carolina as well as grandparents and other extended family members of graduating families.

The SFP has been recognized as outstanding by the Children’s Trust of South Carolina and was recently featured on their website. Lauren Szymonik, states “In the 2 cycles that Tracy has lead SFP at West Hartsville Elementary School, she has gone above and beyond in every way. She has developed a passionate and caring team who build such strong bonds with families, that families don’t want the program to end after 14 weeks. The whole program is infused with intention: from the art kits for child’s game to recipe books gifted with crock pots, from the family place cards on the table to the welcoming flowers in parent session. They don’t just give incentives, but they have connected incentives to the skills they are learning and gifted families with things they can do together to create beautiful memories. This program is an incredible undertaking and it is evident that Tracy and her team pour not just their time and energy into their SFP families, but they pour their love and care into them and truly support them as a community. We are lucky to have this program lead by Tracy and her team and look forward to more SFP cycles in Darlington County.”