

## CIS expands into VCE

By Casey Mann

Communities in Schools (CIS) in Chatham County has expanded its school model services to Virginia Cross Elementary (VCE) in Siler City in November of last year.

According to Kim Caraganis, CIS executive director, the CIS model school places a Student Support Specialist in a high poverty school to provide school wide services to all students and individualized supports for identified students who are referred for services. The goal is to provide services that focus on interventions to improve attendance, behavior, coursework and increase parental involvement.

"This can take the form of many things: addressing basic needs, providing enrichment opportunities, addressing mental and physical health, and or behavioral interventions to name a few," Caraganis said.

According to Caraganis, the Student Support Specialist has a foot both outside and inside the school building, leveraging and coordinating community resources inside the school. One example would be working with the Fuel Up Back Pack program that supplies snacks on weekends for students.

Inside the school, the Student Support Specialist aligns services for students with the School Improvement Plan. Parents give their permission for student enrollment in program. Each student served has a Student Support Plan based on their individual needs. Students are tracked throughout the year and data entered into CIS Data Management System.

The Student Support Specialist for VCE is Jazmin Mendosa Sosa. Sosa moved to Siler City in 2003 as a child and attended Siler City Elementary, Chatham Middle, and Jordan Matthews graduating in of 2012.

"My family came from Mexico and they came to work at the poultry factory. I grew up with lack of role models in my life pursuing higher education. My parents are Spanish speaker with little education and often did not felt welcome in the school," Sosa said.

Sosa was part of the ESL program both SCE and Middle. She notes that in high school she participated in Scholars Latino Initiative and got involved in the Hispanic Liaison Youth Group.

"In Scholars Latino Initiative, I was partner with a sophomore mentor of UNC-Chapel Hill-Jakelin Bonilla who helped me go to college," Sosa said.

Sosa graduated from Meredith College with a Bachelor of Arts in Communication in 2015. After graduation, she began working at El Centro Hispano in their Center For Employment and Leadership-workers center for Day laborers in Siler City.

"When CIS position opened, I knew I wanted to apply for this position, because I want to contribute to the education of the children in this community. My personal mission is I want to be independent woman who through her actions, personal or professional, contributes to enhancing the lives of the people around her through education. My parents do not have education and they came to the United States to provide my siblings and me a better future," Sosa said.

As a Student Support Specialist, Sosa works closely with the principal, guidance counselor and social worker. Since beginning at VCE, Sosa has been assisting the guidance counselor with her existing small groups that teach social skills and improve social emotional learning.

According to Caraganis, in January, referred student's parents will be contacted for their permission for their child to be enrolled in program. Once they are rolled in the program, Sosa will develop a

Student Support Plan with each student, establishing metrics, and setting goals. Their grades, attendance, behavior and the services they receive will be entered into an on-line database.

Sosa notes she can already see an impact the program has had on students at VCE. She shared a story of a student where the engagement alone showed a dramatic change in the student's behavior.

"It has been great to see the faces of the students who do not have an adult or role model that show them how important they are. I have a student who did not make eye contact when I met her and she is really introverted. She does not have behavioral problems but she does not have many friends. When I told her I wanted her to be part of CIS program, her eyes lit up and it was the first time she had eye contact with me. Since I gave her the parent consent form, I can see how she changed-more eye contact and talked more," Sosa said.

Caraganis notes that parent engagement has been identified as a need so this will also be tracked. This will be done through home visits with parents of students on her caseload and hosting events at school or in the community to build relationships with parent. CIS will be partnering with Chatham Literacy Council by referring parents of students we are working with for their services if there is a need and desire there.

"This program means that struggling students will get the extra supports: basic needs, social emotional learning, social skills, and enrichment opportunities to help them succeed. Parent engagement is a big piece of this program. All of these types of activities address the non-academic barriers to learning. This frees up teachers to do what they do best-teach! Ultimately the success of these students helps the whole school and our whole community," Caraganis said.

"It has been a great opportunity for me to work at VCE,

because I strongly believe I can change the life of these students. Our community is low-income status and many students have parents that work too much, have little education and do not know how to provide the tools for their kids to necessary to succeed. My parents did not get the tools to help me until I was in high school; it feels great to give those tools to parent right now," Sosa said.

We are looking for volunteers to serve as lunch buddies or mentors. A mentor /lunch buddy training is scheduled for Saturday, January 21 from 9am-12 noon at the CIS CC offices in Siler City. For more information or to reserve a spot, contact Shirille Lee, Mentoring Coordinator at CIS Chatham County : Shirille@cischatham.org or by calling her at 919-663-0116 ext. 404

## **January is National Mentoring Month**

**By Casey Mann**

January is National Mentoring Month. It was established in 2002 and is spearheaded by the Harvard School of Public Health, the Corporation for National and Community Service, and MENTOR, a non-profit organization with a mission to fuel the quality and quantity of mentoring relationships for young people.

According to Shirille Lee, Mentoring Coordinator at CIS Chatham County, Communities in Schools (CIS) in Chatham County was founded on a mentoring program.

“The very foundation of our agency is mentoring. In 1989 when Chatham County Together! was founded, it was to provide mentoring services to youth in Chatham County. As CIS, the legacy continues with national notoriety and more agency support through the state and national CIS,” Lee said.

“The mission statement for CIS is surrounding students with a community of support empowering them to stay in school and achieve in life and that’s exactly what CIS strives to do,” Lee said.

Since June last year, CIS has served 39 youth through mentoring, according to Lee.

“Because mentoring compares to match making, we take in to account interest, location, personal preference, it’s not whose next on the list. We try to find the right adult for the right youth and that can take time,” Lee said.

Mentors engage in a variety of activities according to Lee. Mentors are asked to expose mentees to positive activities in the community. Examples include hiking around Jordan Lake, identifying birds and plants, riding bikes on the Tobacco Trails, a concert at the high school or a trip to the library.

“We tend to take a lot for granted, so trained mentors are

asked to include mentees in activities they are already doing, like grocery shopping, cooking a meal or sitting down together for dinner as a family,” Lee said.

Lee shared several success stories of the mentoring program. One example was that of a third grader who is now excelling academically. Lee credits the improvement to her mentor taking her to the Chatham County Community Library for discovery of a love of reading.

Another story Lee shared was that of a 10-year old boy that was learning techniques to manage his anger. His mentor takes him for long walks and bike rides.

“It’s during those times, things become clear and solutions are found,” Lee said.

Prior to being in the mentoring program, both the child’s school and family raised concerns about his behavior. Lee notes that since being paired with a mentor, the boy’s anger outbursts at school have dropped to zero and the family reports a changed child.

“The goal is to get mentees to thinking about possibilities and not limit themselves to what they see and know. The world is a big place and we all make choices everyday defining, establishing our contribution to it,” Lee said.

Lee notes the effects of the mentoring program can be felt not just by the mentees, but on the mentors and the community at large.

“For the youth, mentoring is having another caring adult in his/her life. It’s having a friend to talk to, do things with, learn with, process life’s challenges with. Mentoring is a chance to see the world and themselves through a different set of eyes. It’s empowering them to make the changes needed to reach the goals they set,” Lee said.

Lee notes that the mentors have an opportunity to make a difference in the life of a young person and share some wisdom on surviving those

bumps in the road that can derail a dream. In addition, Lee notes the program provides a structured, safe activity for the youth. According to Lee, statistics note that youth that have three or more caring adults are less likely to engage in dangerous or criminal behavior.

“It provides a support network for youth, a sense of being a part of something that will hopefully curtail destructive behavior,” Lee said.

According to Lee, CIS mentors logged almost 4000 hours last year. There are currently 4 volunteers waiting for a match with over 50 Chatham County youth on a waiting list for a mentor. Mentors are asked to spend a minimum of four hours per month with their mentee.

CIS is currently looking for volunteers to serve as mentees or lunch buddies. CIS will be conducting a Mentor Training and orientation on Saturday, January 21 from 9:00am – noon at the Siler City office. For more information on mentoring and requirements, please contact Shirille Lee at [Shirille@cischatham.org](mailto:Shirille@cischatham.org) or (919)663-0116.