

**For Immediate Release**

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## Media Release

### **North Charleston and Garrett Academy Football Teams Leading the Way for Unity in the Community**

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**North Charleston, SC** — The North Charleston High School (NCHS) and Garrett Academy of Technology football teams were supposed to play each other on Friday, October 28, 2016. Unfortunately, deadly violence in the community, and threats of more violence, lead to a tough decision for school and Charleston County School District (CCSD) administrators: cancel the game for the 2016 season.

Due to weather-related schedule changes from earlier in the season, and the playoffs starting in a few weeks, the rivalry game could not be made up. That ended a stretch of six straight years of the Cougars and Falcons facing each other on the football field.

"We were all disappointed that the game had to be canceled," remembered Garrett Principal Charity Summers. "Our hearts were breaking for our children. Our student-athletes, parents, and coaches were very disappointed. The parents and coaches understood and were grateful that we did not jeopardize the safety of students, however the students didn't think it was fair for community issues to result in the cancelation of their game."

#### **Unity Day Game idea**

Remembering what happened last year, and in light of incidents involving students bringing guns to CCSD campuses this school year, the idea of the first Unity Day Game between the two programs was born. Leaders at both North Charleston and Garrett wanted to inspire and unite their students and the communities that support them.

"With the canceling of last year's game due to security concerns, and some of the perceptions the public has had this year with school safety, I felt that we needed to do something," said Garrett Assistant Principal Dale Metzger. "[If we could] create a family-friendly event, the parents in our community,

and the teachers and staff at our schools, would feel good about bringing their children to [the game with North Charleston] and to be able to enjoy it as a family."

"Irrespective of location or locale, it is a community affair," thought North Charleston Principal Henry Darby. "It evinces a message to the community, and beyond, whereby a competition takes place that at the end of the game, win, lose, or draw, everyone can behave in a respectful manner."

Earlier this month, Metzger, along with Principal Summers, and Athletic Director Michael De Jong spoke with North Charleston leaders, Principal Darby and Athletic Director Raymond Knauer, about moving the regular season finale on Friday, October 27, 2017 to the following morning at 11:00 a.m. at Hibbie Ayoub Stadium, so the game could be a focal point of a day-long celebration in the city of North Charleston.

"Many of players and coaches had questions at first," said Garrett Athletic Director, Michael De Jong. "Now they are starting to see the event as an opportunity, and are excited about playing on a Saturday, just like colleges."

"When I was approached with the idea, I refused to allow NCHS to be the obstacle that would prevent this from moving forward," explained North Charleston Athletic Director Ray Knauer. "Some of our coaches already have prior commitments, but we'll work around that. The community is bigger than the individual."

Once school leaders made the decision official, and informed the South Carolina High School League, they began reaching out to community partners to involve them in the event. CCSD's afterschool program, Kaleidoscope, local ministry "Take it to the Streets," and Harvest Point Church have already signed on to support the cause.

"We are reminding our community that we all have to provide a safe and healthy environment for our children to thrive and grow," Summers said. "We are asking our community to support our efforts to unify in doing what is in the best interest of our children."

### **Why the game is being played**

Leaders from both schools pointed out the emphasis from this event should be about promoting unity in all the neighborhoods of North Charleston, and what is possible when schools and community members come together to work towards common goals. They added sports, and athletes, can play a big role in leading the way.

"They (student-athletes) are looked up to by those most in need of a positive role model," Knauer explained. "Sports [also serve as] a refuge for some students. For

others, sports are a ticket out of a bad situation; an opportunity for bettering one's future."

Everyone involved with the planning of the Unity Day Game also stressed there are no issues between the players and teams from both schools. They are simply trying to be a part of the solution, even if it means giving up an opportunity to play under the lights.

"This was never about conflict between the schools," commented De Jong. "Student-athletes, coaches, and athletic directors have always been in good standing with each other; many of our players are neighbors or actually related to each other. Social media and threats made by other individuals are where the issues [come from]."

"These men have worked hard and get 10 opportunities to enjoy playing the game," explained North Charleston head coach Sam Lesky. "The NCHS and Garrett players know one another and look forward to playing each other. The problems are not on the field."

"Coach Lesky and I have known each other for eight years and talk on a regular basis," added Garrett's head coach, Nick Hopp. "His grandson plays on the same North Charleston Recreation football team as my son. We talk about our families, our football teams, and we get along great. [Many of our players] grew up playing against each other, so it's a great atmosphere; they all know each other's strengths and weaknesses."

### **What to expect**

The event will actually start at 10:00 a.m. for community members with games, jump castles, and face painting in the parking lots next to Hibbie Ayoub Stadium.

The North Charleston Athletics Department will host a tailgate party as well, preparing free food for every North Charleston and Garrett student who attends with their school ID.

Garrett is also providing free admission to every elementary and middle school student from CCSD that attends with a paying adult chaperone; children six years old and under already receive free admission at the Falcons' home games.

"I would like to see a lot of families enjoying the festivities before the game," Metzger commented. "I hope to have an energetic crowd, [that is] encouraging their players and coaches, and demonstrating good sportsmanship throughout the game."

By creating a special time and date for the contest, the game will add extra meaning for the players and coaches as well. Especially for Garrett's seniors, who will be playing in the final home game of their high school football careers.

"It should be good for the community to play Saturday," said Hopp. "We talk about community and family all the time. It will be a great atmosphere with a lot on the line in terms of playoff and region positions up for grabs. It should be an awesome show for everyone interested in high school football."

According to [scfootballhistory.com](http://scfootballhistory.com), North Charleston leads the all-time series with Garrett, 17-13, but the Falcons have won the last two meetings. More importantly, the hope is that the Unity Day Game will become a tradition.

"It could become a yearly affair whereby local businesses, civic leaders, and other stakeholders can build upon to build a greater relationship among all community stakeholders," Darby said.

"The game of football is known to influence lives in all areas, so helping to take the lead in promoting unity and peace in the community is another great opportunity to serve!" exclaimed Lesky. "We want what's best for the community."

"I would love to see this become an annual event that would include games played by all the high schools in North Charleston," added Summers. "I sincerely hope that as a community, we learn that division and strife among us prohibits the potential for growth and success. Through unity, we can solve a multitude of problems."

To learn more about the Unity Day Game, please contact Garrett Assistant Principal Dale Metzger at [dmetzger@charleston.k12.sc.us](mailto:dmetzger@charleston.k12.sc.us). The two schools will hold a joint press conference on Tuesday, October 24, 2017 at 2:30 p.m. at Hibbie Ayoub Stadium on the Garrett campus to promote the event.

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#### **About the Charleston County School District**

Charleston County School District (CCSD) is the second largest school system in South Carolina representing a unique blend of urban, suburban, and rural schools that span 1,000 square miles along the coast. CCSD serves more than 50,000 students in 86 schools and several specialized programs. With approximately 6,100 employees district-wide, CCSD is the fourth largest employer in the region.

CCSD offers a diverse, expanding portfolio of options and specialized programs, delivered through neighborhood, charter, magnet, IB (international baccalaureate), and Montessori schools, and is divided into three Learning Communities led by associate superintendents. Options include specialized programs in science, engineering and mathematics; liberal arts; music and other creative and performing arts; career and technical preparation programs; and military and other public service enterprises.