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Welcome to this month's edition of PEP TALK, a column from Public Education Partners (PEP) honoring the creativity, innovation, and dedication of Aiken County's public school teachers. This month we highlight Ms. Samantha Newcomb, Director of Orchestras at North Augusta High School (NAHS), and celebrate the success of the 21<sup>st</sup> annual Garcia Orchestra Festival, sponsored by Public Education Partners.

A gifted French horn player who continues to perform locally, Ms. Newcomb began her teaching career in 2019 at NAHS. In just seven years Ms. Newcomb has grown the strings program from 15 to over 80 students in two ensembles. Thanks to strings teachers Karen Geigle and Meghan Barrett, more students are coming up from Paul Knox and North Augusta Middle Schools.

What does it take to develop and sustain a music program in our public schools? Ms. Newcomb identified several critical ingredients: a **principal** like Mr. Casey Rogers who encourages and provides financial support, **community musical organizations** who offer master classes and performance opportunities, **students** with the necessary desire and commitment, and **parents** who support their children's participation. We would add another key component for success: a teacher like Ms. Newcomb with vision, energy, and dedication to work hard for her students.

Decades of national research clearly show improvements in student attendance, discipline, engagement, graduation rates and test scores for students who participate in school arts programs. Dedication and commitment to excel were evident on the faces of the 185 middle and high school students at the recent Garcia Orchestra Festival at USC Aiken. Few will become professional musicians, but they all will bring creativity, teamwork, and a vision of excellence wherever they go. As Ms. Newcomb says, "They will always be musicians."

Congratulations to Gabrielle Alaniz, cello, for winning the Festival's Garcia Scholarship, and to Karisa Weeks, winner of the Public Education Partners Scholarship. Ms. Weeks said, "My favorite thing about Garcia [Festival] is that it's an opportunity to bring people from all over our community together to play music and strengthen friendships. Receiving the PEP scholarship was a very meaningful way to end my experience with the Garcia Orchestra Festival."

Next year the Garcia Orchestra Festival will grow even larger; 240 students will spend a day of rehearsal and performance led by regionally recognized music educators. The auditorium will again be packed with enthusiastic friends and families. The Festival is sponsored each year by Public Education Partners, thanks to the long-time support of Mr. and Mrs. Carlos Garcia, former residents of Aiken.

Strong arts programs do not happen by accident. With support from their community and school administrators, gifted teachers can change the lives of our young people for the better. For 31 years, PEP has facilitated the growth of music programs throughout Aiken County's

public schools. PEP is harnessing the power of our community to enhance student learning and support educators in the Aiken County Public School District. We encourage anyone interested to join us in this important mission to reach out through our website [pepaiken.org](http://pepaiken.org) or contact us at [Communications@pepaiken.org](mailto:Communications@pepaiken.org).