

## Easley High School Wins 2020 Pacesetter Award

*School honored for its systems of support and commitment to continuous improvement*

June 30, 2020 — Easley High School in Easley, South Carolina, is the winner of a 2020 Gene Bottoms Pacesetter School Award from the Southern Regional Educational Board. The school will be honored on July 6, 2021, at SREB's Making Schools Work Conference in Nashville, Tennessee, due to the cancellation of the 2021 conference in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Pacesetter School Awards recognize schools that are implementing one of SREB's Making Schools Work school improvement frameworks and are achieving success in meeting bold goals related to increases in student graduation rates, readiness for college and careers, and credential attainment.

Easley High School implements [High Schools That Work](#), SREB's school improvement design for high schools. While the school's overall mission is to empower students through high-quality, relevant and authentic learning experiences, it is also fighting a battle that may supersede an instructional focus: a mental health crisis in the community and the school.

Principal Gary Culler says many students face trauma: "We have sadly witnessed more than our share of suicides, drug overdoses and mental health crises leading to hospitalization." Culler maintains, "If we do not address the mental health needs of our students now, we won't have anyone left to teach."

In 2019, the school formed a Mental Health First Aid group as a system of support for students — 250 students, faculty and community members were trained to identify, understand and respond to signs of mental illness and substance abuse.

Group members are taught to understand the difference between a mental health crisis and someone having a bad day, to know what to do and say to help someone going through a crisis, and to know what resources are available for assistance. Teachers, administrators and support staff are mandated to inform guidance staff about students who may be displaying signs of mental trauma.

In the first three quarters of implementation of the program, Culler says out-of-school suspensions dramatically decreased, in-school suspensions declined, student referrals dropped and club sponsorships and participation rose. Anecdotally, individuals in the community report Easley High School students are helping others in need.

SREB's [Making Schools Work Conference](#) is held annually and provides educators with opportunities to participate in professional development, network with colleagues from across the country and build school and district leadership capacity.

*The Southern Regional Education Board works with states and educators to improve education at every level, from early childhood through postsecondary education. Learn more about SREB at [sreb.org](http://sreb.org).*

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