



The Palmetto



SCCEC Newsletter
March 2025

From the President

Thank You for a remarkable conference and an amazing year so far SC CEC members!

Thank you for another awesomely amazing conference. I want to extend a heartfelt thanks to each of you for your continued dedication, service, and commitment to children and youth with exceptionalities across South Carolina. Your work does not go unnoticed, and it is because of passionate educators, administrators, support staff, and related service providers like you that SC CEC continues to thrive.

A special thank you to everyone who attended the 2025 SC CEC Conference! Your engagement, insights, and enthusiasm brought this year's theme—"Currents of Change: Navigating the Future of Special Education"—to life. Together, we explored innovative practices, embraced new perspectives, and strengthened our collective ability to lead through change with confidence and compassion.

As we look ahead, we invite you to continue riding the waves of change with us. Let's remain steadfast in our mission to create inclusive, equitable, affirming, and forward-thinking educational environments for all learners. Whether through advocacy, professional learning, or collaboration, each of us has a role to play in shaping the future of special education.

One way to achieve this is to volunteer with SC CEC. Please see the attached volunteer needs below.



Awards Committee

- To provide for recognition of state level awards such as Outstanding Member, Outstanding Student Member, Teacher of the Year, Rookie Teacher of the Year, Advocate Award, Mini Grant, Betty Brown Training and Assistance Grant, Paraeducator Award, Laura Mohr Scholarship for Student Preparing to Teach Special Education, General Education Teacher of the Year, and General Administrator of the Year
- To promote nominations for national CEC awards such as Teacher of the Year, Wallin Award, CEC Leadership Award, and “Yes I Can” Awards.

Bylaws Committee

- To receive and review proposed amendments by petition and to refer such proposals to the Executive Board with recommendations.
- To make recommendations to the Executive Board for other changes, which may be needed in the Bylaws.
- To interpret the Bylaws to the Federation and to local chapters and subdivisions.
- To publicize proposed amendments to the Bylaws at least thirty (30) days prior to the Representative Assembly during the annual Conference or any specially called Representative Assembly.

Conference Committee

- To be responsible for the planning and implementation of the annual SCCEC Conference according to the Conference Planning Document to include financial, facilities, programming, and publicity.
- The Conference Committee will work in collaboration with the Research and Professional Development Committee in program planning.
- To coordinate Conference planning and implementation of the Conference Planning Document with the Executive Committee.
- To conduct planning for future Conference sites with an appointed Conference Liaison.

Finance Committee

- To monitor SCCEC finances with the Treasurer and review audited financial reports.
- To make recommendations to the Executive Committee to assist in the development of the SCCEC budget.
- To monitor the fundraising activities for SCCEC.
- To make recommendations related to fiscal management.

Membership Committee

- To maintain an active list of current CEC members in the state.
- To maintain an active program of recruitment for new members..
- To support CEC Headquarters staff in membership renewals.

Nominations Committee

- To prepare an annual slate of candidates for officer vacancies, which will occur at the end of the administrative year.
- To present this slate to the membership at least thirty (30) days prior to the Representative Assembly held at the annual Conference.

Communication and Publications Committee

- To review the publications structure of the Federation and recommend policies and procedures.
- To recommend to the Executive Board the publications to be issued.
- To publish a minimum of two (2) newsletters per year.
- To work with the Executive Board in promoting the activities of the organization through media and promotional tasks.
- To promote the purpose of the organization by working with chapters and subdivisions to encourage promotional activities.

Resolutions Committee

- To be responsible for giving expression to the basic issues with which the SCCEC may be concerned in order to carry out its purposes and ideals for the welfare of persons with exceptionalities.
- To extend such courtesies as seem appropriate for the occasion to all members of CEC and SCCEC in order that SCCEC may express its pride, interest, best wishes, or sympathy.
- To recognize persons by way of a resolution who have given exemplary service to SCCEC.
- To present all resolutions to the Representative Assembly for adoption.

Thank you for all you do to lead, advocate, and serve. We are honored to have you as part of the SC CEC community, and we look forward to continuing this important work together in the year ahead! Stay connected. Stay inspired. And stay ready to navigate the next wave of transformation—together.

**With gratitude and appreciation,
Tiffany Hollis, PhD President, South Carolina Council for
Exceptional Children (SC CEC)**

STUDENT NEWS

Students attending South Carolina CEC had a fantastic time this year! We had 16 students from five universities present 13 posters.

Undergraduate Poster Competition Winners

Samantha Pean (Winthrop) and Amani Townes (Winthrop) tied for 1st place

**Oliver Wren Danner (Lander) and Kylee Randall (Clemson) - Honorable
Mention**

**Nicoya Cox-Bradley and her co-presenter Ekemini Eshiett (Clemson) won at
the doctoral level.**



I would also like to congratulate all of our graduating members. Early career professional membership through CEC is only \$65/year-- well worth it!

-Amy Clausen, Student Coordinator



2025 SCCEC AWARDS WINNERS

Special Note: New Teacher of the Year Nomination Process
National CEC has recently changed their nomination process for the national teacher of the year, making it easier for state winners to be recognized at the national level. Teacher of the Year nominations are now due on September 1. Nominations open in July so be looking for more information!





Advocate of the Year

Dr. Tracy West

Dean of the Education Division
Columbia College



**SOUTH
CAROLINA**



Dr. Tracy West is Dean of the Education Division and Program Chair of Special Education at Columbia College. Her nominator stated, “she has been a tireless advocate for students with special needs and for those who teach and/or are preparing to teach students with special needs. Several of the most notable examples of her advocacy include her work with school districts to mediate contentious IEP meetings, nomination to and service on the SC State Board of Education, work to bring the CREATE program to train SC Special Educators to Columbia College, mentoring of teacher candidates, continued support and mentoring of alumni who are special educators, and the very unique Dr. West personal touch that she gives.” Another nominator stated, “For Dr. West, advocacy is personal and crucial work. Dr. West has a true gift for motivating others and for spreading the joy of teaching, an effort that has become continually more challenging as the role of educators has morphed over time. Dr. West’s enthusiasm for teaching has not waned, and instead, she has deepened her research and leveraged her connections to try to make our educational systems more inclusive and effective for all.”



Principal of the Year

Matt Schilit

Principal
Airport High School
Lexington School District Two



**SOUTH
CAROLINA**

Matt Schilit is Principal of Airport High School Lexington School District Two. He has implemented innovative strategies that have greatly enhanced student achievement and school culture. His nominator stated, “His leadership has fostered a positive shift by focusing on building relationships and addressing the individual needs of every student, ensuring they have the tools to succeed in college, the military, or the workforce. He has also expanded academic opportunities for students through Dual Enrollment and Advanced Placement programs, along with hosting Special Olympics in 2025, promoting a culture of excellence and access for all.” Another nominator stated, “Matt’s unwavering dedication to his students is truly inspiring. Above all, my favorite quality that he obtains is the passion to serve our students with disabilities. He consistently goes above and beyond to ensure that each one of our unique students feel valued and supported.”



Matthew Gregory is a teacher of students with autism at Cedar Grove Elementary School in Anderson School District One. His nominator stated, “Matt is hands-down the epitome of a dedicated and impactful special education teacher. Matt works extremely hard for his students in numerous ways - from advocating for their needs throughout the school and district, to individualized planning for everything from lessons to behavior strategies, to working to mainstream students as soon as they are ready. Matt is always working to brainstorm the best ways to reach students and their families in order to make the biggest impact.” Another nominator stated, “He demonstrates an acute awareness of the diverse factors influencing his students’ behaviors while maintaining high expectations. His understanding of his student’s capabilities encourages them to achieve impressive academic progress.” His principal stated, “In addition to his skills as an educator, Matt has become a leader on his team and the school as a whole. He regularly advocates for all teachers in general and special education.”



Daja Bennefield is a teacher at Lake Carolina Elementary School in Richland School District Two. Daja consistently demonstrates her dedication, compassion and outstanding ability to support students with diverse learning needs. In her interactions with students, she goes above and beyond to ensure each child feels valued, supported and understood. Her nominator stated, “Daja teaches preschoolers with developmental disabilities and brings a vibrant, positive energy to her classroom. Her creative and engaging lessons are thoughtfully designed to embed learning in ways that are both effective and enjoyable, so much so that her students often don’t realize they are learning—they are simply having fun.”



Bridget Bailey is a paraprofessional at Myrtle Beach Middle School in Horry County Schools. Her nominator stated, “Bridget operates on the pedagogy of the learning dangerous assumption. She believes all students are capable of learning. She is intellectually curious, always wanting to learn more about our students, their culture, and their developmental history. If I want to implement something new in the classroom, Bridget wants to learn about the strategy and will conduct research independently. She is creative, brining different ideas to the classroom.”



Oliver Wren Danner is a senior at Lander University, majoring in Special Education and earning certification in Primary Montessori. Oliver has been an involved member of Lander’s chapter of CEC since he was a freshman, serving as vice-president last year and president this year. His nominator stated, “he has assisted the Lander CEC in leading monthly membership meetings that have assisted his peers in their pre-service knowledge of educating students with disabilities. He also has assisted in coordinating fundraisers for the organization, with notable results. Just recently, Oliver spearheaded a fundraising effort to provide local disability-accessible playground equipment. This fundraiser actually raised a record-setting amount, and consequently, the playground equipment will soon be available for access by local individuals with disabilities. It is quite notable that Oliver has impacted the local community on this permanent and crucial level before even graduating. He has also remained quite active within the greater CEC organization, as well, attending and/or presenting at state and national level conferences.”



Laura Mohr Scholarship

Mackenzie Hamby

Senior

Columbia College



Council for
Exceptional
Children

**SOUTH
CAROLINA**

Mackenzie is a senior at Columbia College. She has consistently demonstrated outstanding academic achievement, leadership skills, and an unwavering dedication to the field of special education. Her nominator stated, "As the current President of the Columbia College Council for Exceptional Children and Co-President of the Palmetto State Teachers Association, Mackenzie has proven her leadership abilities and commitment to the education profession. Her active involvement in these organizations demonstrate her passion for fostering inclusion, supporting her peers, and advocating for the teaching community. Her peers and professors alike view her as a dependable leader who balances her many responsibilities with grace and humility. She consistently demonstrates the qualities of an educator who will make a meaningful difference in the lives of her students."

Conference Testimonial



SCCEC conventions are soul-rejuvenating. There is nowhere else in the state where I can go and be surrounded by hundreds of people who I know are on the same wavelength as I am. Living in a world that is increasingly divisive and working in a field that is seemingly decreasingly supported, it can be very easy to feel isolated, downtrodden, and demotivated. I definitely feel this way sometimes. However, once I am at the convention, talking with my colleagues who care just as deeply about special education, attending various panels and presentations, and exploring all the products and services offered by vendors, I feel those negative feelings totally evaporate and instead be replaced with warmth, validation, and gratitude. I truly hope that others who attended felt similar good vibes. As I tell my own pre-service teachers, these experiences are the fuel that drives the fire. I am beyond excited about what we achieved at this year's convention and our overall growth as an organization. I am already looking forward to next year's; I hope to see you there!

Matt Collier

Welcome New Officers!

It is with great pleasure that we introduce to some, and present to others, our newly elected Executive Committee:

President-Carla Clardy, Nevitt Forest Elementary School

President-Elect: Dr. Nicole Uphold, Coastal Carolina University

Vice President: Dr. Matthew Collier, Lander University

Congratulations to you all! We wish you the best as you serve in these positions!

Open Position

Corresponding Secretary

If interested, contact Jamia Richmond

jrichmon@coastal.edu

Are you passionate about shaping the future of special education in South Carolina? Do you want to make a tangible impact on policies affecting children and youth with exceptionalities? The South Carolina Council for Exceptional Children (SC CEC) invites you to volunteer for our **Exceptional Children Awareness and Advocacy Day** Event. Please plan to attend the SC CEC Leadership Training Institute in the summer to find out more and to be involved. Stay tuned for those dates and the location. If you would like to be involved with the planning, please also reach out to Mrs. Joanna Eichelberger, SC CEC Governmental Relations Committee Chair via email at joannaeichel@gmail.com.

SILENT AUCTION

By: Jamia Thomas Richmond, Past President

On behalf of the SCCEC Executive Committee and Executive Board, I would like to thank everyone who provided items for our Silent Auction this year (Vendors, Entrepreneurs, Chapters/Subdivisions and School Districts). With your support, there were 22 donated items of which 18 of them sold. The proceeds will go toward the Betty Brown Teacher Training and Assistance Grant. Because of your generous heart of giving, we raised \$925.00 . Your donations and the bidders are what made the Silent Auction a success! Thank you.

Financial Committee Members Needed!

The financial committee is looking for members! Please join us to assist in making important financial recommendations for CEC. This team will also conduct internal audits. We will meet at least twice per year and on an as needed basis. Please email treasurer Olivia Enders at oenders@coastal.edu to join.

NEWS FROM GOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS

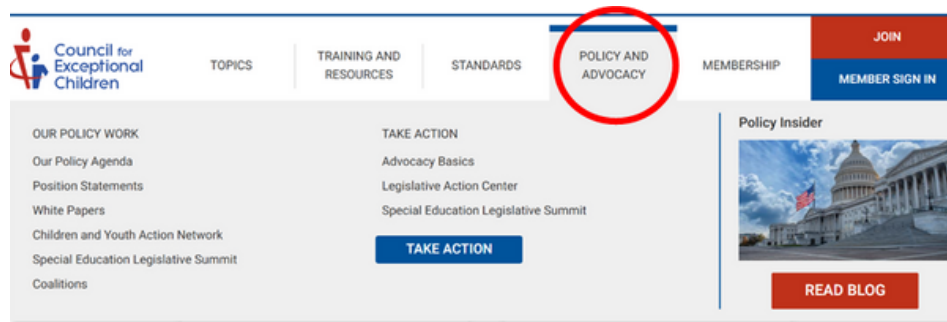
Interested in taking a more active role in advocating for students with disabilities? Consider joining national CEC at the **2025 Special Education Legislative Summit (SELS)**, taking place July 14–17 in Washington, DC. This is an incredible opportunity for educators, administrators, advocates, and families to come together, learn about the latest special education policy issues, and advocate directly with members of Congress.

SELS offers valuable training on how to be an effective advocate, updates on the most pressing legislation impacting our students, and the chance to share your experiences and expertise with lawmakers. Whether you're a seasoned advocate or new to legislative action, your voice is critical in shaping policies that support students with disabilities nationwide. Let's make a difference together!

Learn more and register at specialeducationlegislativesummit.org.

Advocacy Resources

The CEC website has great resources to support policy work and advocacy. Here are just a few resources to get you started at www.exceptionalchildren.org.



Take Action: Offers current advocacy topics and tools for contacting representatives, including fact sheets and social media toolkits, to engage in legislative efforts.

Advocacy Basics: Provides foundational information on how educators can become effective public policy advocates by educating and motivating lawmakers.

Legislative Action Center: Serves as a platform for participating in coordinated letter-writing campaigns and other advocacy initiatives to influence policymakers.

Policy Insider Blog: Features updates and analyses on policy issues affecting special education, keeping educators informed about legislative developments.

Protecting IDEA: The Fight to Preserve the U.S. Department of Education

The Administration is actively working to shrink or dismantle the U.S. Department of Education, with a recent executive order aimed at eliminating the agency altogether. This move threatens to undermine the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the cornerstone of educational rights for students with disabilities. A proposed alternative—shifting IDEA programs to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)—would strip the law of its core mission: ensuring a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for all students with disabilities.

If IDEA is moved to HHS, its emphasis on education could be weakened, putting at risk vital funding, personnel development, research, and technical assistance that support students, families, and educators. However, the Department of Education cannot fully close without an act of Congress. We must act now to protect the integrity of IDEA and the Department of Education's role in advancing special education.

How You Can Help:

- 🔊 Contact your legislators and urge them to keep IDEA under the Department of Education. Use the QR code to access the CEC Legislative Action Center to send a message to your representatives.



- 🔊 Follow SC CEC on social media and help share information with colleagues, families, and advocacy networks.

🔊 Stay up to date on policy news by visiting <https://exceptionalchildren.org/policy-insider>
Together, we can ensure that students with disabilities continue to receive the quality education and services they deserve!

Use Your Story to Advocate for Special Education

Do you want to do more to advocate for your students during these uncertain and challenging times? Stories are one of the most powerful tools we have to advocate for our students. They can move people to action and are up to 22 times more memorable than facts alone. Your personal story can show why special education services matter—and help persuade lawmakers to support the legislation our students need.

Every educator has a story worth telling. When you share yours, keep two things in mind:

- ◆ **The Ask** – Be clear about why you're there and what you want from the policymaker.
- ◆ **Know Your Audience** – Understand who you're speaking to and connect your story to values you share or issues that matter in their district.

Not sure where to start? Follow these six simple steps to build a powerful story:

Set the Stage – Introduce yourself and what's at stake.

Describe the Challenge – Use details and senses to paint a vivid picture.

Convey the Struggle – Explain the impact on you or others.

Highlight the Turning Point – What was the moment of realization?

Show the Resolution – What changed or improved?

Reach Closure – Bring it back to your ask and why it matters.

Let your voice be heard—your story can make a difference.

You can share your story directly to your legislative representative or record your message at the CEC "Take Action" page at <https://exceptionalchildren.org/takeaction>.

GOODBYE 2025 CONFERENCE!

Thank you everyone for your participation in SCCEC 2025! We are pleased to report that we had our largest conference attendance since COVID, with 441 attendees and 40 total vendors.

As we reflect on the conference and look towards the future, we welcome any feedback or suggestions you may have for improving future events. Your input is invaluable in shaping our efforts to better serve the needs of the special education community. Use the link below to share.

CONFERENCE SURVEY LINK

[HTTPS://DOCS.GOOGLE.CO
M/FORMS/D/E/1FAIPQLSFVK
XTMVZWWSGECYWNPY9UO
8HCHODMNSBVGMIUZ7oW
CPL8vFW/VIEWFORM?
USP=DIALOG](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIPQLSFVKXTMVZWWSGECYWNPY9UO8HCHODMNSBVGMIUZ7oWCPL8vFW/viewform?usp=dialog)

HELLO 2026 CONFERENCE!

Save the Date
February 25th-February 28th
Myrtle Beach Hilton Resort
Myrtle Beach, SC

**Stay tuned for the summer newsletter that will contain
an overview of the conference.**

