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PRESS RELEASE

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Rotarians join Mayor and Superintendent to Celebrate Students Working to Turn Their Lives Around

*With a 20 point rise in graduation rates since state intervention,
Camden City School District celebrates Back on Track scholars*

Monday, February 11, 2019 – Office of the Superintendent, Camden, NJ – Today Acting State Superintendent Katrina T. McCombs joined Mayor Francisco “Frank” Moran, Camden City Rotary President Susan Kupersmith, Camden basketball legend Nailah Green (nee Wallace), and Best Sports CEO Michael Harris at Rutgers University-Camden to celebrate 31 of the City’s most improved students. *The Back on Track Student Luncheon*, sponsored by the Camden City Rotary Club, is an annual opportunity to highlight students who had fallen behind in school, but through self-determination and support from caring adults, have now re-committed to achieve their high school diploma. Lunch for the celebration was provided by Cherry Hill-based PDQ Restaurants.

The students being honored today have overcome challenges such as homelessness, the death of a parent, and illness. With the support of their high schools and their families, they made a decision to turn around their attendance, grades, or behavior in an effort to earn their diploma. Since state intervention began in 2013, the District’s graduation rate has risen by 20 points (from 49 percent to 69 percent), while the dropout rate has been cut in half. In addition, the number of suspensions has fallen by more than half, and even more rapidly in the District’s high schools.

These gains, while significant, are not enough. That is why the District has invested in a data-driven early-warning system in all schools to identify and provide targeted support to students whose attendance, grades, or behavior put them at high risk of falling behind. The identified students receive extra coaching and support from their school leaders, dropout prevention officers, and Climate and Culture staff, who use restorative discipline approaches and preventative behavior supports to keep students on track to graduation and reduce out-of-school suspensions. The students being honored on Monday were identified through the early warning system, and have already shown strong progress in turning around their academic prospects.

“As a graduate of Camden High School, and a 25 year veteran educator in this District, I have an unrelenting belief in our students’ abilities and the power of great educators to change lives,” said Acting State Superintendent Katrina McCombs. “Today we are celebrating 31 extraordinary students, as well as a positive progress we are seeing across our District. More students are graduating, fewer are dropping out, and we are seeing steady rises in academic achievement. We have a long way to go, but if we continue working alongside parents, educators, and our young people, Camden City School District will close the achievement gap.”

“It gives me great pride to highlight these students who have battle through adversity,” said Camden Mayor Francisco “Frank” Moran. “I am a strong advocate for initiatives aimed at uplifting our Camden youth. It’s important to remember that these young people are the future leaders of our City. We must nurture them, encourage them to excel academically and engage with them socially. These children have truly shown great maturity and fortitude by putting their education first and focusing on building a great future for themselves.”

The 31 Back on Track students being honored are:

Camden High School

Alajia Turlington is a parent and has to take two buses to get her baby to daycare before coming to school each morning. She has been able to convey clearly her need for assistance to staff at the school. Alajia manages to make it to school daily, only missing if her daughter is sick. She makes sure she brings notes to cover her attendance. Student has maintained her grades and is on track now to graduate.

Liscio Ragin struggled acclimating to high school at the beginning of school year. Student started the year off homeless, living in hotels while his family worked to find more permanent housing. Student had difficulties in getting to school every day due to transportation not being set up or consistent, so he started the year behind and missing a lot of days. Throughout these issues, Liscio made up all his work when he came to school. He continues to communicate issues he has with transportation, never complains about being behind, and has maintained his grades and holds high expectations for himself academically.

Mya Matthews has worked diligently to increase her attendance rate at school. She reached out to the teachers whose classes she was in danger of failing, and worked with them to come up with an action plan so that she could improve her grades. Thanks to her maturity and collaborative nature, Mya is now back on track.

Christopher Levy transferred to Camden High two years ago. He struggled to acclimate to a new school environment, and started to involve himself with the wrong crowd. He was involved in multiple fights, which negatively affected his grades. Since then, Chris has improved tremendously. He left negative influences behind him, and joined the Camden High football team. His work ethic and determination have made him a successful student athlete, and one of the best defensive units in south jersey. Chris has also come a long way academically. He learned how to avoid negative confrontations, and is currently looking forward to attending Lincoln University next fall.

Shawn Patterson has worked diligently to increase his attendance during the course of the year. Shawn uses his positive energy to encourage his fellow classmates and underclassmen to become leaders and role models. By showing up for class on time, Shawn is making big strides academically.

Darnell Moore has worked diligently to bring up his grades. He has worked closely with his teachers to ensure that he was back on track. Today he not only improved his own grades but also assists his fellow classmates with becoming productive students.

Woodrow Wilson High School

Terronda Gibson, a senior has made a tremendous turn around to refocus her dedication to academic achievement, and has made major improvements to her in school behavior. Terronda was frequently suspended from school during her first few years of High school, she was constantly cutting class, getting into drama and fights. Toward the end of her junior year Terronda had distanced herself from making poor choices, and hanging with the wrong crowds and found her way making improvements to her behavior and academics. She continued the transition into this school year in

which she has been on the honor roll, and has already been accepted into at least two colleges or universities. She is a fine example to be a recipient of this back on track award.

Ivy Mercado, a senior, has made some of the largest gains in personal achievement a student can make in their High school tenure. During her earlier years she was very explosive causing multiple campus disturbances, and using vulgar language towards staff and students within the building. Ivy has demonstrated much restraint throughout this school year, she attends groups and individual counseling sessions with The School Based Youth Services team, she is active in after school programs and she is on pace to graduate on time this school year. Ivy has not has any discipline infractions this entire school year so far which is a true testament to how hard she has worked to maintain positive school behaviors.

Sincere Howard, a junior, has had some small run-ins with the Juvenile Justice system. He has demonstrated a knack for community service, and has been an active participant in the policing project for three years. Sincere had a rough sophomore year in which he quit the basketball team, he started getting into frequent fights at school and in the neighborhood. Sincere has rededicated himself to school this year, and is an active member of the basketball team. He is achieving promising grades in class, has not been suspended, and is still dedicated to community service.

Anthony Bautista, a senior student was the definition of a habitual hall walker, he would frequently be suspended for leaving the building unauthorized. He struggled with his English early on during his HS career. He was extremely defiant to anyone who did not speak Spanish fluently and he was constantly repeating these behaviors. However through maturity and hard work in the ELL program he has made vast improvements. He does not leave the building anymore, he is hard working in class because he attends regularly. He is constantly improving his English and he has aspirations of attempting college once he graduates in June.

Jonathan Romero-Melendez, a senior was the epitome of oppositional-defiance. He would purposely wear the wrong uniform every day. Some days he would carry the correct uniform in his book bag just to see if someone from administration would make him change clothes. Jonathan was always fighting. This year Jonathan has improved his behavior, attends school regularly, and does not leave the building early any longer. He is on pace to graduate and hopefully attend college.

Greysi Solano-Perez, a senior was always screaming and yelling in the hallways. She skipped class and was rude to anyone she encountered. Greysi was not very strong in her English when she entered WWHS, so she did not like to speak to anyone who was not fluent in Spanish. She could not stand her Dean either, because he was always catching her leaving the building out of the side door exits. However, in her senior year Greysi has been near perfect, receiving no discipline infractions, maintaining her grades, and securing a successful work placement. She conducts herself in a first class manner in school and in the community.

Janaya "ya-ya" Vazquez, a senior has put the golden gloves down and discontinued leading fights and physical altercations at school. Now she is becoming a very productive role model to her classmates. She is very active in the School Based Youth Services' Students Against Violence Everywhere (S.A.V.E.) program. She participated in the LION KING production last year, was a part of the winter concert, and is an active member of the Tigerettes Drama Drill team club. YA-YA has made a major turnaround and is on pace to graduate. She has done all of this while maintaining a job outside of school.

Nasir Lightfoot, a senior, use to display moments of anger and frustration when he first attended WWHS. He was in a few fights, and did not value his education; only put forth minimum efforts. Since then, Nasir has not been in any

trouble. He has been working as member of the student council, he participates in the School Based Youth Services' Students Against Violence Everywhere (S.A.V.E.) program, and is a member of the JROTC as well.

Kendra Tineo, an 11th grade student, was a walking hall pass for two years. There were not enough lunch detentions and Saturday detentions to keep up with the number of fake passes she wrote or classes she cut. Kendra had more parent conferences in one school year than most would have in school life span. She was frequently leaving school early without permission and she constantly was hanging with the wrong groups of students. This school year Kendra is on the rise and doing some really great things. She has not been written up for skipping classes, she has not left the building early, and she is not failing any classes. She is well deserving of this honor.

Tayla Alford, a senior, should probably become a lawyer because she has never shied away from arguing with anyone at any time, regardless of their position. Tayla was a habitual hall walker and when confronted she would flip out on adults. Tayla has now redirected her talents into advocacy for the school. She is still very open and outspoken, but she has found a way to use her voice in a more positive manner. She requests meetings with her advisors and administrators to discuss school issues instead of blasting the school on social media. She is a member of the School Based Youth Services' Students Against Violence Everywhere (S.A.V.E.) program, and part of the student leadership council. Most importantly, Tayla will go to college after graduation. She has been accepted into three colleges and universities thus far.

Pride Academy

Jah'sir James, c/o 2019, transferred from a neighboring school district with a low GPA. He had trouble adjusting to life in a new place, and was getting in fights. Today, Jah'sir is an honor roll student, a diplomatic de-descalator, a goal setter, and a respectful young man who is always willing to help. Very mature and a critical thinker, Jah'sir attributes his turn around to his mother.

Terrell Edwards, c/o 2019, has demonstrated major behavioral and academic improvement this year. Where he used to be known as a negative attention seeker, today he is positive, self-motivated, and a role model for underclassmen.

Dajour Evans was not reaching his academic potential, and had trouble with self-control and behavior management. He has improved academically and with his self management.

After a life changing trauma, **Nygene Smith** lashed out, resulting in poor attendance and cutting classes. After transferring to Pride, his attendance improved and he began participating in sports. As a Basketball Captain, he takes responsibility for his teammates and serves as a positive role model.

Aijanae Love is being honored for both academic and behavioral growth.

SOAR Academy

Jess Gonzalez is our model student. Despite fighting various battles with her health, Jess works hard to earn her education. Jess maintains good grades despite having to miss school due to poor health. She is a very responsible and hardworking young lady who always represents herself in a positive way. Through it all, she comes to school with a smile on her face and remains focused throughout. She has made the Principals list (achieving straight As), and will do great in her future endeavors.

Nehemiah Daniels endured hardship after losing his father. During this time he was placed in state care, and displayed behaviors that got him removed from his former school. He is now very academically motivated with positive behaviors. He earned honor roll this year, and is a joy to teach. He is blessed with positive energy, charisma, and motivation.

Zyionna King has made a big shift in behaviors and attitude. She has showed improvement in every way possible. She has learned to handle crises with maturity, and is now a role model to her peers. She went from not smiling to making staff laugh and smile with just her presence. She is very mature and will do great in her future endeavor. She stays motivated and has positive self-courage. We are glad to have her in Soar Academy.

Eddie Mejia has been going through different battles throughout his life. Due to different issues and crises he has had to endure, Eddie had a shift in academics and behaviors. Though circumstances have not been perfect, he has shown such a positive shift that he became back on track and now will be graduating from Soar Academy.

Anthony Cartagena has overcome many challenges that resulted in poor academic performance. Although it is clear that Anthony is very intelligent, negative things began to get in the way. When Anthony began at SOAR, his teachers saw something positive in him. He is always very respectful and greets staff every morning with his smile. Anthony has turned his life around and is focused and determined to graduate.

Big Picture Learning Academy

Ja'Lynn Torres has been making an effort to improve both her academics and her behavior. Ja'Lynn has shown great improvement from September 6th to date. She came in as a 9th grader, she was very loud, disruptive in class, did work but not to her best potential, and would find her way to the principal's office. Then a teacher at her school took her under her wing; offering encouragement, a positive attitude, and a mentor. She has made extreme changes in her educational pathway. Ja'Lynn has worked on getting to school on time, remaining focused in class, working on not disrupting class lesson, and being sent out. She is taking her education and grades very serious and has learned being out of the classroom is not helping her gain the knowledge she needs to be a successful person.

Devontae Burns has made great strides to improve his academics. The most admirable quality about Devontae is that he never misses an opportunity to try something new. Whether it's a field trip, a guest speaker, a mentoring group, a different sport he wants to try, he will always sign-up to experience something new. Over the past year, these opportunities have helped shape him as a student as well as a young man who cares about his future and his community.

Stanza Terry had excessive absences for the last two years. She has made great efforts to improve her attendance. Last year, Stanza struggled to stay on top of her assignments, she was frequently absent, and her grades suffered because of it. At the end of her sophomore year, Stanza made the conscious decision to get better. With the support of her family, she has blossomed into a role model student, who is organized, spends time and effort producing high-quality work, stays after school, and always tries her best both in class and as a member of our school community.

Marcus Furman is becoming a leader in his amongst his peers. Marcus is a strong advocate for himself. Over the past year, he has realized just how important school is in regards to reaching his goal of owning his own business after graduation and his focus and maturity have really soared. He has blocked out all distractions during class, has greatly improved his attendance, and is dedicated only to what will make him a better student.

Devonta Leavy has had to endure several obstacles to get where he is today. Between family loss and his own personal challenges, he has managed to maintain 2.9 and is on his way to graduating high school with the hopes of attending a four-year university. He is a well-mannered, determined and hard-working young man, who will be successful in whatever he decides to do.

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