December 18, 2018

I am writing to you on behalf of the Spartanburg Academic Movement (SAM).

As you likely recall, given your previous financial commitment to SAM, we are a non-profit initiative committed to improving educational outcomes for Spartanburg County’s children.

Launched in 2014, SAM’s leaders envisioned the importance of a “cradle-to-career” approach to building academic achievement. SAM is now a leading member of the StriveTogether National Cradle-to-Career Network with partnerships in major cities and communities across 30 states – together aligning the efforts of ten thousand organizations to affect the lives of ten million students across the nation. But what is most important, is what SAM is doing right here in Spartanburg County. SAM is one of ten among these seventy partnerships certified at the highest level of achievement.

In October of this year, SAM and the work of Spartanburg County was highlighted in a New York Times editorial written by nationally syndicated columnist David Brooks. Entitled, “A Really Good Thing Happening in America,” the piece highlights SAM’s work as a national best practice for local impact – because of your support, and the support of other partners. I am enclosing a copy of this article, along with our most recent annual report, Systems Change.

SAM’s work is indeed changing community systems, demonstrated by improvements in student achievement, the reduction of disparity gaps, and increased collaborative action. Recently ...

✓ SAM has built a “data bridge” that spans every child in Spartanburg County, pre-K to post-secondary completion. This gives SAM tremendous analytical capacity to identify challenges, and to test and pursue interventions that work (Systems Change, pp. 16-7).

✓ We are among the first in the nation to have a county-wide system in place to assess the vulnerabilities of children entering five-year old kindergarten. Called the “Early Development Instrument,” the County’s 5K teachers partner with a team at UCLA to generate key information about where, by county census tracts, children are exhibiting developmental gaps. We then work with partners to fill the needs in these communities. No child or family name is ever shared, but necessary resources can be brought to the census tracts where they are needed to help children be ready for success in school.

✓ Our “data bridge has illustrated a reading gap as early as the summer after first grade. In one of our school districts in the summer of 2017, we launched a pilot project providing funding for summer reading camps for rising second grade children in poverty. Reading
gains nearly matched those of kids not in poverty. In 2018, all seven school districts have adopted reading camps for rising second graders in poverty. These children most likely will be “reading to learn” by third grade, rather than “learning to read,” a distinction of pivotal importance to their future achievement.

✓ Shortly after the first of the new year, we will announce the launch of SAM’s “Continuous Improvement in Education Institute.” Building on the expertise of two of our staff trained by BMW’s continuous improvement (CI) team as “six sigma black belts,” and joined recently by a third SAM staff member with career-long experience in engineering research and development, we are building the capacity to support our schools not only with data and research, but through training in “rapid cycle continuous improvement,” so important in building and testing interventions that will improve student achievement.

✓ The first work of the “Institute” is underway across our four highest poverty schools. In each, a full-time CI coach is in place with the work supported by school principals. Coalitions of teachers and staff are working with in-school CI coaches, SAM’s staff, and national consultants on the implementation of “plan/do/study/act” CI cycles. Our ambition is to expand this work county-wide. Over the past year, the Spartanburg Herald Journal has written seventeen articles addressing the work of “The Four Schools Project” (see www.learnwithsam.org/blog/2018/7/5/partner-highlight-the-spartanburg-herald-journal).

Much of the work of our small SAM team is done behind the scenes. We don’t run programs. We work with schools and non-profit providers having programs already in place... using our data as a flashlight, not a hammer... never criticizing ... rather, working with partners to continuously improve their positive impact.

Launched with a major grant from the Spartanburg County Foundation, matched by corporate and individual donors, SAM is built upon deep partnerships with our seven school districts, together with the United Way of the Piedmont, the Spartanburg Area Chamber of Commerce, area colleges, and dozens of nonprofits and agencies working throughout the County. Over the past two years, SAM has brought nearly two million dollars in state and national grant funds to Spartanburg County in support of initiatives in our local educational system ... not to fund SAM’s operating costs, but to launch pilot projects and best practices in our schools.

As 2018 closes and you consider year-end financial gifts eligible for tax deductions, I ask you to consider supporting SAM’s operating costs.

I also ask you to consider us for next year and beyond; and consider how you can engage colleagues and neighbors in sharing the work of SAM and efforts underway to ensure our children are successful – cradle to career. I invite you to review our website, www.learnwithsam.org where you can sign up for our quarterly newsletters, learn even more about our work and resources, and how you may fit into this exciting effort.

You can make a year-end online donation securely through our website. Or, for giving next year and beyond, use the website or the “partnership agreement” enclosed in Systems Change.

Thank you very much for your thoughtful consideration.

Very best regards,

John C. Stockwell