Richland School District Two is on the right path and ahead of the curve when it comes to rethinking discipline in our schools. Recently, there has been some criticism and speculation about our district regarding discipline and race. As superintendent, I take tremendous exception to the notion that our district and site-level administrators discriminate against students based on their race.

A recent article in *The State* newspaper captured statewide statistics on disparities in expulsion and suspension rates, and I want to take a few moments to address the steps we’ve taken which indicate our commitment to *all* of our students in their journey to graduation.

While there are certain acts that require swift and punitive action, the district recognizes that discipline shouldn’t automatically equal punishment. Rather, discipline can and should be an opportunity for students to take ownership of their behavior and grow. We know that if students are not in school, we cannot prepare them for success through challenging and engaging learning experiences. I am happy to report that our suspension and expulsion numbers are trending downward (746 fewer suspensions and 52 fewer expulsions between 2013-2014 and 2014-2015) while our on-time graduation rate continues to climb. Since 2009 our graduation rate has increased 14 percent points to a current rate of 86 percent. The numbers, however, are not the real story. Our focus is on fundamentally changing students’ lives for the better.

Richland Two is coming at this multi-faceted issue from just as many angles. This is not simply about updating policies. We have, and continue to, seek out voices and ideas from the community. The district has created programs and initiatives to support our students and their families on the journey to academic success.

The Richland Two Discipline Task Force, formed in 2014, brings together community stakeholders to rethink student discipline. Within a year, the Task Force drafted a comprehensive set of recommendations for developing a Discipline Matrix and Tiered Discipline Model. We continue to participate in the White House Convening to Rethink School Discipline and Executive Director of Administrative Services Cleveland Smith was a member of the South Carolina Safe Schools Taskforce.

The Richland Two Discipline Task Force recommended hiring a District Lead Behavior Interventionist Specialist, a position filled in 2015. Kimberly Hutcherson is leading the implementation of the Behavioral Education Supports and Training program in four pilot schools. Among other things, students are encouraged to set goals for themselves, reflect on their performance and practice mindfulness. Faculty and staff have received training on de-escalation, restorative practices and positive classroom management. As the program’s first year closes, educators report improvements in academic performance, decreases in negative behaviors and increases in the sense of community within classrooms.

It’s hard work, and it’s paying off. Recently a group of high school aged young men led an event called “In It To Win It” for 300 elementary and middle school students. The student-leaders talked about respect, responsibility and leadership and led a service learning activity. The event was a follow up to “Bowties and Brunch,” where over 270 students spent time with educators and community leaders kicking-off the district’s mentoring framework. Across the district,
students also benefit from programs such as Character Education, “The Leader in Me” and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.

The district just wrapped up a series of Community Conversations on the topic of diversity in our district hosted by Dr. Helen Grant, our Chief Diversity and Multicultural Inclusion Officer. Grant joined the district in August 2015 as a direct result of the work of the Diversity Task Force, formed more than two years ago. We look forward to a thoughtful and continued dialogue with our community as we learn from these conversations.

Our work is deliberate. Our “Four Squares” to success-Learning, Character, Community and Joy- provide focus. Students need to be engaged in Learning and experience the Joy of success. We’re teaching students Character, so they will grow into responsible adults who contribute to their Community. For more on the initiatives we have in place to promote achievement for every student, please visit Richland School District Two: A Pipeline to Success page at www.Richland2.org.