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*"Civic Engagement in Public Education"*

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Oconee County parent representatives named 2016 School Improvement Council Advocates of the Year**

COLUMBIA – Lorlei Swanson and Dora Leonard, School Improvement Council (SIC) parent representatives in the School District of Oconee County, have been named the 2016 SIC Advocates of the Year by the SC School Improvement Council Board of Trustees.

The award was announced Saturday, March 19, during the SC-SIC Annual Meeting at EdVenture Children's Museum in Columbia.

Ms. Swanson is the current Chair, and Ms. Leonard the Secretary, of the Walhalla High School Improvement Council.

The SIC Advocate of the Year Award recognizes exemplary efforts on behalf of School Improvement Councils and is presented annually to individuals who go above and beyond in supporting and promoting SICs in their particular spheres of influence.

"We are grateful for the exceptional leadership demonstrated by Ms. Swanson and Ms. Leonard and their commitment to strengthening SICs and parent engagement in their school district," said SC-SIC Executive Director Tom F. Hudson. "It is dedication such as that exemplified by these involved parents that assist local SICs to have the meaningful impact that they do on behalf of their school communities."

Prior to taking on leadership roles in the Walhalla High School SIC, Ms. Leonard served as Chair of the Walhalla Middle SIC and Ms. Swanson served as Secretary, as well as co-chair of that SIC's family engagement committee.

"At both schools, we found an incredible team of parents, teachers, administrators, and community representatives who were committed to utilizing their SIC to improve outcomes," said Ms. Leonard upon receiving the award. "But like many Councils, we were unsure how a small committee meeting 10 times a year could really improve our school.

"However, with the assistance of SC-SIC staff and by drawing on diverse knowledge and skills our members brought to the table, we found that we could successfully develop goals and objectives, track our progress, and achieve real results."

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“We both felt an obligation to ‘pay it forward’ by taking everything we learned from our valuable experiences at Walhalla Middle and sharing it with the Walhalla High SIC this year, said Ms. Swanson. “Working in partnership with our principal, we have been able to organize the many people who wanted to be involved but just needed help finding a place to start.”

Both were actively involved with the Walhalla Middle SIC’s participation in the SC-SIC “Engagement for Outcomes” project last year, which works directly with self-identified local SICs in capacity-building to assist them in becoming more effective.

Ms. Swanson currently has a 9th grader at Walhalla High School. She is a mental health counselor and family therapist for the School District of Oconee County. Ms. Leonard has a 9th and 10th grader enrolled in Walhalla High. She is a senior communications professional with more than 20 years of experience in public relations and crisis management.

Previous recipients of the SIC Advocate of the Year Award have included state legislators, school and district level staff, and principal-SIC Chair teams.

A core partner of the Center for Educational Partnerships at the University of South Carolina College of Education in Columbia, SC-SIC was established in state law nearly 40 years ago to provide the member training, technical assistance, statutory accountability, and operational resources vital to the continued success of the community-based School Improvement Councils in each of the state’s 1,100-plus K-12 public schools.

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