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 By [KATRENA McCALL](#)

editor@lowcountry.com



Photo by [BARRY MOORE](#)

CONGRATULATIONS.

CCSD Superintendent Franklin Foster gives New Tech biology teacher Holly Hughes a hug at last week's school board meeting. Twenty-six of Hughes' students made 100 on the state achievement tests.



In the dark skies that overshadowed Colleton's recent state test scores, 26 shining stars shine brightly. And all of them are students in Holly Hughes' freshman biology class.

Of the 86 students in her class last year, 26 scored perfect 100s on the state biology test ... something that's never happened in Colleton School District before. And the average score for her three classes was 91, with 45 scores of 90 or better.

"I'm still astonished," said Hughes, who has been teaching at Colleton County High School since 2012. Of her 86 New Tech students last year, only four didn't pass: two who have learning disabilities and two who had been absent for long periods of time. Even then, the lowest score was in the 60s (passing is 78.)

So how did she accomplish something so extraordinary? A combination of several different things.

First, she loves her students and the science she teaches. "I don't think I do anything magical. I think I've got good kids and that we had a good year," she said. But she makes it her mission to reach every student in her class, which runs the gamut from honors to learning disabled. (A requirement of the New Tech program is that the classes represent a true cross-section of the school's demographics.)

"I try to differentiate as much as I can to hit every type of learning style," Hughes said. And she involves the students in her teaching. "When they get the problem statement, they tell me what they need to get the project completed. I say, 'OK, how do yall want to learn this?' and they tell me what they want. And I do my best to give it to them in that format." One student requested the class go outside and do interactive games. Another wanted video games. So Hughes invented an outdoor game and found a video about zombies that enabled the students to learn



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about viruses while having fun.

"Sometimes they are just a little burnt out and say, 'Can you just teach us?' But you create that culture of we're a group – it's not I'm your teacher and you're my student. It's we're all here to get that job of learning done," she said.

Being a former cheerleading coach doesn't hurt either. Hughes pulls on that experience to create chants, songs and motions to help students remember what they're learning. "Everything has a motion to it. Having them put a body motion with a vocabulary term and tying the two together really helps," she said.

The project-based learning system used in New Tech also helps because it teaches the real-world application of what they are learning. "They can see how this ties into their everyday lives and they can see how the science plays out," she said. It's also been a plus that Hughes worked in the science field before becoming a teacher. "I have lived and have seen where this biology comes into play. And when you explain that this is where you can go and really do this, I think they buy into what they're learning because they can relate to how it can be applied in the real world."

And she tries to make the learning fun.

"A lot of times when they get to high school, they've lost that energy for school, that passion and that excitement," Hughes said. "I don't think we let them have enough fun. It needs to be structured, but it doesn't need to be so structured that it's not fun. They need to be able to do things they want to do."

"My kids always say that they know that I love science. And when they see that you love what you're teaching, then it's easier for them to love learning it. They don't need to love science, but they need to love learning, because they need to be able to learn for the rest of their lives. And that's more important than whether they remember osmosis. They can remember that they had a good time learning and learning is still fun, even in high school."

But the single, most important, thing Hughes believes is that a teacher must genuinely care about the students, both as students and as individuals.

With some students, however, breaking through and getting them to learn to have fun, to trust, is hard. "A lot of these kids are leading very difficult lives and a lot of them have a lot of stuff going on at home that I couldn't deal with," she said. One former student was the mother of two kids and worked a full-time job at night. Another was a gang member who lived alone with an elderly grandparent in a bad neighborhood. Another was autistic and didn't speak. But Hughes didn't give up. She kept trying and caring and tutoring, talking and helping until she whittled down the walls. They are now among the students of whom she is most proud. "They were at a point in their lives where it could have gone really, really, really badly or they could turn it around and become something," she said. "And a lot of them are at that line. But if you show them you care about them, not just as a student, but as a person, that makes all the difference."

"Some students are really high-flyers and some really struggle and then there are the ones in between. You have to find out what works for each of these groups and find a way to merge that so that every group gets hit at some point. And then they all get it. But that very first step is that they have to know you care," she said. "If they know you care about them, they really care about you and they want to do it, if for no other reason than for you."

"It's the little victories that you have to relish in. It's a flawed system, people are flawed, the world is flawed. But if you can take what you've got and attempt to do the best you can with it, that's when miraculous things happen."

"It's the energy and the environment. It's really positive. Before they leave every day, I ask them what is the most important thing to bring in — and they have to say it — bring a positive attitude. Because if you bring a positive attitude, everything will work itself out. If you've got a positive attitude, you're going to do your work. If you have a positive attitude, you're going to pay attention. If you bring that positive mental outlook, it'll be fine. You're going to work yourself through it."

"They don't have to love me or even like science. I just want them to remember or learn for the first time what it's like to love learning and more importantly, what it's like to succeed. Once they get a taste of that success, and know they have someone who cares about them and their success, the rest will take care of itself. They laugh because I say it every day, but if they bring a positive attitude the classroom becomes a magical place. I love it when I look around and they are all engaged in what they are doing, because that is the real live magic that occurs in the classroom. Those are the days I teach for and I don't think any other job I could have would be that rewarding and exciting."

The motto she recites to her students, stolen from her former principal Cliff Warren, is "Make today a great day. The choice is yours."

From the students

My past science teacher Mrs. Hughes (Holly Hughes) is an amazing teacher. What it is like to have her as a teacher is an out-of-world-experience. Last year in her class, my classmates and I learned all about Biology I in various ways. Mrs. Hughes had motions, songs, and rhymes for a lot of vocabulary terms that really helped out on the EOC. She made class a joy to be in with her energetic style of teaching. For the most part, Mrs. Hughes cared intensely for each one of her students and found the time to listen to each one, including me. If I had any problems, I knew that I could talk to her about the issue. I believe that I made an perfect score on the end of course exam because Mrs. Hughes had fun ways of getting what needed to be done done. She made sure that we learned and understood the information that was being handed to us. Most of the time in her class was fun with knowledge-based fun activities like Kahoot, building a cell with people, Quizlet games and watching fun videos. Mrs. Hughes' classroom environment was a kind but amusing time. She is a person who deeply thinks about what would be best for her students. To have Mrs. Hughes as a biology teacher was one of the best experiences in my high school term.

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A student that was taught by a teacher that loved to teach, Sinclair Brown II

Hello, my name is Hunter Polk and I am one of the students that received a perfect score on the biology EOC last year. I attended Ms. Hughes' class which allowed me to learn more than I ever have in a single science class. Some of the activities she did with our class included singing, hand motions, and what she called "Doodle Definitions." Singing in Ms. Hughes' class was one of the most helpful things we did in class because the songs were catchy and my class and I would never stop singing along — we sang all the way home. Hand motions were just as important as singing; we did hand motions to go along with our definitions. (i.e. making a circle with our arms to represent a cell). Ms. Hughes even found a study that said hand motions help with students' remembering terms on a test. The last important thing she did with our class were Doodle Definitions. To create these, we wrote down the definition of a term like "vacuole" and then beside that we would doodle something that reminded us of vacuoles. These helped with the test because we remembered our doodles and remembered which term and definition went with that doodle. Ms. Hughes class helped me achieve the highest grades I've ever had and it helped me to make a perfect score of the biology EOC, and that's why I will never forget her class.

Hunter Polk

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Mainly sunny

Tomorrow



High 68°/Low 50°
Plenty of sun

Sunday



High 57°/Low 34°
A few morning showers

Monday



High 55°/Low 33°
Sunshine

