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**United Community Ministries Launches Community Schools in Fairfax County:
New Partnership Focused on Strengthening our Children's Future Together at
Walt Whitman Middle and Mount Vernon Woods Elementary Schools**



CAPTION: Celebrating the launch of the first Community Schools in Fairfax County are (from left): Timothy Johnson, Vice President of Community Impact at United Way of the National Capital Area; Craig Herring, Principal at Walt Whitman Middle School; Dr. Clint Mitchell, Principal at Mount Vernon Woods Elementary School; Dr. Scott Braband, Superintendent, Fairfax County Public Schools; Alison DeCoursey, Executive Director, United Community Ministries; and Sarah Allen, Deputy Director, Fairfax County Neighborhood and Community Services.

Alexandria, VA (November 6, 2018) – United Community Ministries, Inc. (UCM) is pleased to announce the launch of the first Community Schools in Fairfax County, VA, in partnership with Fairfax County Government Neighborhood and Community Services (NCS), Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS), and United Way of the National Capital Area. UCM was selected as the lead partner for the implementation of a Community Schools pilot at Walt Whitman Middle School and Mount Vernon Woods Elementary School. The schools were identified by Fairfax County Schools leadership, based on student needs.

A Community School is a public school with an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement, leading to improved student learning, strong families, and healthier communities. Community Schools become centers of the community and are open to all, even outside of standard school hours. UCM will provide each school with a full-time Community School Coordinator to assist school staff in building out and coordinating these efforts with community partners.

“I think of Community Schools as akin to smart phones with customized apps,” said Alison DeCoursey, Executive Director at United Community Ministries. “Community Schools are ‘smart schools’ with a host of

customized opportunities and supports that give students and their families the tools that they need to learn and grow. Community Schools are a primary vehicle for increasing access to opportunity for student success and strengthening families and community, exactly what UCM is all about.”

In November 2017, the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors and School Board adopted One Fairfax, a joint racial and social equity policy, committing the county and schools to intentionally consider equity in decision-making and in the development and delivery of future policies, programs, and services. One Fairfax helps county and school leaders to look intentionally, comprehensively, and systematically at barriers that may be creating gaps in opportunity.

Through the Community School initiative’s partnerships, including Opportunity Neighborhood Mount Vernon, the goal is to improve equitable outcomes for students and families and to begin to make changes to systems that perpetuate inequities.

"Across the country, Community Schools have proven to be effective vehicles for bringing a full range of opportunities and supports to students and their families using schools as the hub of communities," said Karla Bruce, Fairfax County Chief Equity Officer. "The opening of Fairfax County’s first Community Schools is an exciting milestone and demonstrates the shared commitment of the county, FCPS, and our partners at UCM and United Way, to achieving the vision of One Fairfax: a community where all residents have the opportunity to reach their fullest potential."

“This initiative represents the excellent collaboration of Fairfax County Public Schools and the Board of Supervisors in the Successful Children and Youth Policy Team (SCYPT) with our community partners in Mount Vernon,” said Karen Corbett Sanders, Chair of the Fairfax County School Board and Mount Vernon District Representative. “This is a win-win for the county and for the school system. We look forward to learning from this experience and building on it to support our students at other schools.”

Each Community School looks different depending on the strengths and needs of its community. Both new Community Schools will focus on increasing family engagement, reducing chronic absences, and improving academic performance. Walt Whitman Middle School’s first year efforts will include engaging local businesses and community members to support a mentoring program. “What I love about this program is that it allows us, in ways that are very unique, to reach the community and businesses, taking different groups that are working separately to bring them to work together,” said Craig Herring, Principal at Walt Whitman. Mount Vernon Woods Elementary plans to build on community support to provide much needed afterschool programming for students.

“The absolute and best thing that we do as a county is in partnership,” said Sharon Bulova, Chair, Fairfax County Board of Supervisors. “When you have that recipe, you get great results.”

About United Community Ministries

United Community Ministries envisions a community where everyone thrives. UCM empowers our neighbors in need to transform their lives through wrap-around programs and services that support children, youth, and families in southeastern Fairfax County. For nearly 50 years, UCM has been advocating for, supporting, and serving low-income residents in Northern Virginia. Learn more at ucmagency.org.

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