



Harford County Public Schools

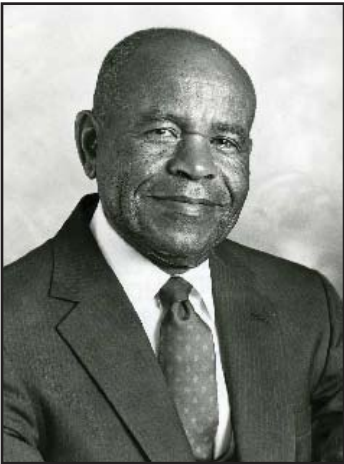
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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HCPS remembers Former Board President Dr. Percy V. Williams

The legendary pioneer of Harford County school desegregation passes away at the age of 95



Dr. Percy Vandella Williams was a true giant in the field of public education, not only in Harford County, but also in the state and nation. Born in rural Perryman, Dr. Williams spent an entire lifetime proving that education is the key to equality for all. Dr. Williams, a long-time Havre de Grace resident, passed away on Saturday, November 14th, at Harford Memorial Hospital.

A teacher, supervisor, principal, and state assistant superintendent of schools, Dr. Williams also spent ten years as a member and two years as president of the Harford County Board of Education. He was also president of the Maryland Association of Boards of Education for one year.

“Dr. Williams brought about necessary change to Harford County with respect to cultural equality,” said Board President Mark M. Wolkow. “His legacy will outlive all of us as each student that graduates from Harford County Public Schools takes advantage of opportunities set forth by his leadership and actions.”

The second of Vandella and Hattie Williams’ ten children and the eldest son, Dr. Williams endured a childhood where segregation and limited educational opportunities for all black youth in Harford County was a reality. While acting as his father’s right hand man on the family farm, as a teenager, Percy Williams caught the train every day to and from Elkton in Cecil County where he attended high school since there was no education beyond the eighth grade available to black children in Harford County.

Dr. Williams went to Bowie Normal School (now Bowie State University) for what was then a two-year program to become a teacher. While teaching at the old Havre de Grace “Colored” Elementary School, he spent five summers attending Virginia State College, taking 12 to 16 credits each year to earn his bachelor’s degree.

The elder Mr. Williams’ dream of seeing each of his children not only receive a high school diploma, but obtain post-high school credits, was realized when three of his four boys eventually earned doctoral degrees either in medicine or education; and all his children gained some type of college degree.

Dr. Williams taught ten years at Havre de Grace Elementary School before being drafted into wartime service in 1943. He went to Officers Candidate School and was commissioned a second lieutenant before being sent to Europe and then the Pacific theaters of combat. He returned to Harford County in 1946 and was named a supervisor of “colored” elementary schools, a position he held until 1950 when he was named principal of the newly constructed Central Consolidated School (now Hickory Elementary). He led that grade one through 12 school until 1962 when he was named an assistant state superintendent of schools, handling compensatory education, urban and supplemental programs, and the state’s gifted and talented programs.

At the time of his retirement in 1982, Dr. Williams was the highest-ranking state education department official in the history of Harford County. He was named by the Governor to be a member of the Harford Board of



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Education in 1984, twice serving as vice president and twice as president.

While on the Board, Dr. Williams worked diligently to eliminate any vestiges of racial or sexual discrimination in hiring/promotion practices, and was a leading proponent of the school system's setting goals for the future. He continued his lifelong support for the disadvantaged and was a leader in the establishment of early childhood education as "the best dropout prevention program there is."

During his 20 years of official "retirement," Dr. Williams established several tutorial programs to aid at-risk students. He was a lay leader at the Union United Methodist Church in Havre de Grace for more than 65 years. Dr. Williams, who retired to the family's farm near Aberdeen, was a widower, having been married to former teacher, the late Bernice Williams, for more than 50 years. Mrs. Williams taught in both segregated and integrated schools from 1931 until her retirement in 1969.

"Dr. Williams began a movement in Harford County to bring about equality for all students," said Superintendent Robert M. Tomback. "We are committed to honoring his legacy by continuing to focus our efforts on becoming a culturally proficient school system."

Former County Executive Eileen Rehrmann and the Harford County Board of Education combined with the community to sponsor a tribute to Dr. Williams on April 25, 1994, raising money to endow a yearly scholarship to be awarded to a deserving Harford County Public School student who expressed an interest in entering the field of education. There have since been ten recipients of the scholarship who have been appointed to carry the torch which Dr. Williams bore for so long and so well, including: Edgewood High School graduate John E. H. Osborne; Joppatowne High School graduates Frank Alderman and Monique Washington; Havre de Grace High School graduate Marsha Sawyer; Jessica Johann of C. Milton Wright High School; Patricia L. French of Bel Air High School; Rebekah D. Shahan of North Harford High School; Emily Lynn Winfield of Edgewood High School; Hope Greenleaf of Aberdeen High School; and the 2008 recipient, Michelle Hickey of C. Milton Wright High School.

"He was a pioneer for Harford County schools and social issues in the area in the late 1920s and 30s," reflected former HCPS student Leticia Madry. "Dr. Williams was a godsend for African-American students like me who received my first scholarships from the Percy V. Williams Scholarship Fund when I attended Harford Community College in 1992."

In 2001, both Dr. Williams and his sister, Gladys Williams, were named to the Harford County Public School Educator Hall of Fame as charter members. In addition to his sister, Dr. Williams is survived by his brother, Irving Williams of Rockville; and four other sisters, Mildred Batte of Sykesville, Catherine Burks, Mary Williams and Eva Williams, all residing in Aberdeen; and many nieces and nephews.

Funeral arrangements have not yet been announced.

The Board of Education of Harford County will honor the life and legacy of Dr. Percy V. Williams at its regularly scheduled Board Business Meeting on Monday, November 23rd, at 6:30 p.m. at the A.A. Roberty Building in Bel Air.

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