

South Hialeah at 100 with 1st Black at Helm

By S. Florida Times Staff
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Hialeah, Fla. – South Hialeah Elementary School in 2024 has reached a milestone: 100 years. Teachers, students, faculty staff, parents, school district officials and Miami-Dade County commissioners celebrated the school's centennial on Feb. 14, the date it opened its doors in 1925.

South Hialeah Elementary, 265 East 5th St., was the first school in Hialeah and the second oldest public school in Miami-Dade.

Now, Dr. Dillion Williams made history by becoming the first African American principal of the predominantly Hispanic school where 97.5 percent of the 938-student population is Hispanic, 2 percent African American and 0.5 percent white.

Williams, who previously served as principal at Olinda Elementary in Model City, said it was phenomenal being part of the history-making celebration at the Pre K-5 grade school, that has produced some talented alumni who went on to become public servants, attorneys, accountants and actors.

"It was a monumental task with a year of planning in 2023," said Williams, who's been principal for two years. "We discussed plans going forward, having my team, the community, Hialeah Mayor Esteban Bovo and Schools Superintendent Dr. Jose Dotres on board to support this endeavor was truly amazing."

Dotres said South Hialeah has had many generations of students from all walks of life grace its hallways and many have secured successful careers in many fields.

"I salute this amazing school and the wonderful work of the staff and all they have done for their students and the community as a whole," Dotres said.

Miami-Dade County Commissioner Kevin Cabrera, whose district covers the school, said the 100th celebration was incredible and praised Williams for a job well done during his brief tenure.



DR. DILLION WILLIAMS: Made history by becoming first African American principal of the predominantly Hispanic school. PHOTO COURTESY OF DILLION WILLIAMS

"Congratulations to Principal Dr. Williams and the entire faculty for making it a memorable day," he said during the event. "Here's to another century of excellence."

Williams, a Miami native who was an assistant principal at his alma mater Miami Central High and Liberty City Elementary, for the first your skin," he said. "They care about how you treat

their children and what you can do for the community. That's rewarding."

Williams said when the regional superintendent assigned him to the Hialeah school, he knew he was capable of doing the job at a high level despite the cultural differences. "Regional superintendent places you where you are most effective to serve and uplift children," Williams said. "As an adult, you help them achieve their goals and that's what drives me to do what I do."

Williams said education was his second career choice.

After earning a bachelor's degree from Florida A&M University and an MBA from St. Thomas University, he was an auditor with an accounting firm but was bored and sought a more challenging career. He chose teaching.

Williams said principals discovered he had potential and leadership abilities to head a school and encouraged him to earn another master's degree in education leadership which is a requirement to be a principal.

Williams later earned his doctorate degree in education.

Olinda Elementary was his first principal job and it was ironic that he landed at South Hialeah Elementary because his former professor at St. Thomas University was once the principal at the school and spoke highly of the institution.

"He was one of my professors and we hit it off," said Williams. "And to become principal was truly amazing."

School principals face challenges to keep their schools afloat including students earning top marks, increasing student enrollment and the teacher shortage.

South Hialeah started the 2023-2024 as an B school which was a downgrade from an A the previous year.

The school ranks in the top 50 percent of all schools in Florida with a Math proficiency at 49 percent and reading at 51 percent.

Williams said the slight decline was based on the Florida Department of Education's new grade assessment for reading and math which impacted his school that has one of highest ESOL populations in Miami-Dade County.

"We are still performing at a high level and once again we plan on being a top school again."

Anita Martin, who was a teacher at the school for 42 years before she retired two years ago, was honored for her four decades of service during the historic celebration.

Martin, 64, said she was a student at the school and her two daughters and six grandkids also graduated from South Hialeah Elementary.

Martin said she mostly taught low-performing students and developed a penchant for building their self-esteem where they feel they can achieve their academic goals despite setbacks.

"I love to make children feel like they are the best," she said. "I see my children making progress and that's the most rewarding part of the job."

Martin said she always listens to her students' stories whether they are funny or a serious personal matter.

She said she's always sympathetic to kids' problems at home and never chastised them for not doing their homework.

Martin said some students were distracted because of family turmoil such as their parents' divorce or death in the family and she tries her best to offer solace.

While other teachers appeared upset over their students' failure to do their homework, their approach was the antithesis of Martin.

"Why would I get upset at my kids for not having their homework," she said. "The kids are probably going through family issues. I give them time to do their homework and encourage them to continue to do well in the classroom."