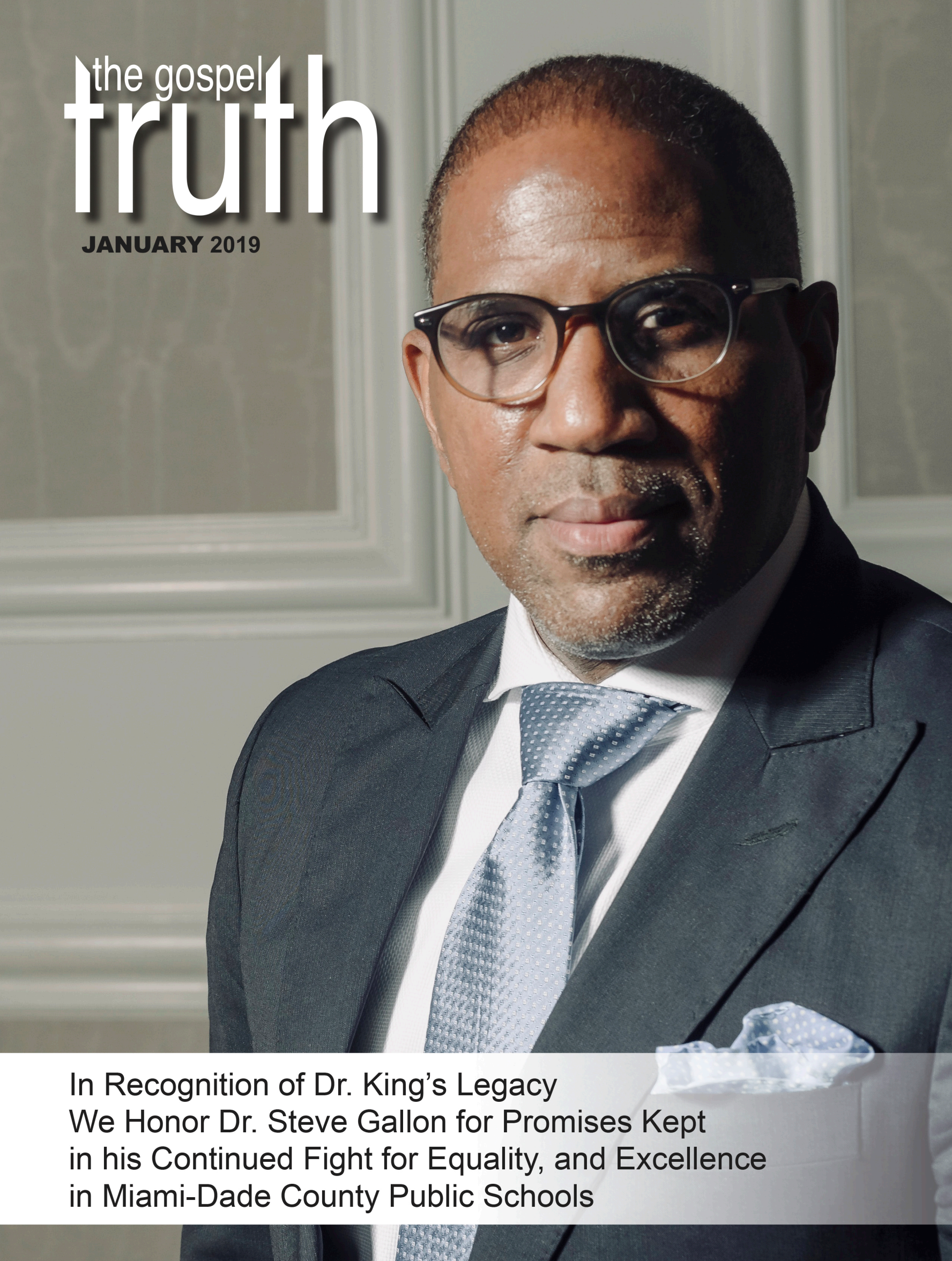


the gospel truth

JANUARY 2019



In Recognition of Dr. King's Legacy
We Honor Dr. Steve Gallon for Promises Kept
in his Continued Fight for Equality, and Excellence
in Miami-Dade County Public Schools

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By: Sommer Davis

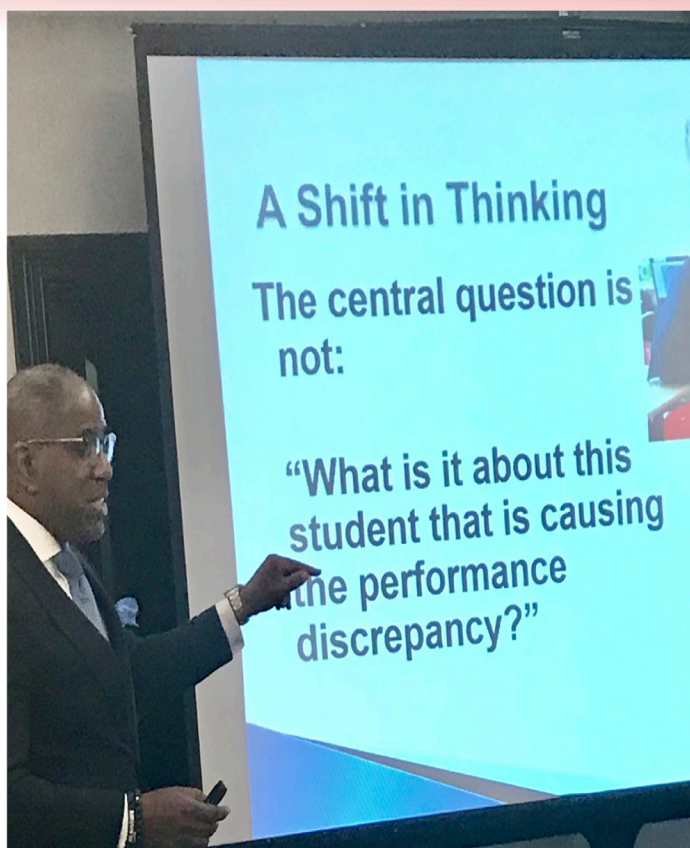
The smile on Jalen James paled in comparison to the shouts of pride from his mother who accompanied him to the December District 1 Student of the Month Ceremony. The eighth grader from Thomas Jefferson Middle School proudly leaned over as he accepted his recognition medal from District 1 School Board Member, Dr. Steve Gallon III, for his help and support of special needs students at his school -- students who often struggle with performing many basic functions that many take for granted. Donning neatly groomed dreadlocks and a black shirt and slacks, in a different setting, Jalen would have likely been stereotyped as another young, Black male looking for trouble. But not this evening. He, along with students from over 50 schools in District 1, was being applauded for achievement, kindness, and generosity by Gallon, an initiative he promised to do during his campaign and has implemented since being elected. Gallon himself defied the odds that too

often ensnared legions of young Black males in the inner city. A product of Miami's renowned Liberty City, Gallon would go on to serve as a teacher, principal, Superintendent, and now elected District 1 School Board member in the nation's fourth largest school system. For nearly 30 years, he has used his personal journey and life's work to improve the education of children in urban settings. In Miami-Dade County, with the highest number of failing schools and highest levels of poverty, District 1 was considered ground zero. Since being elected in November 2016, Gallon has helped change the way students are recognized in District 1. His monthly recognition ceremonies do not limit students' recognition to academics alone -- schools have the flexibility of determining each month how students will be selected. Last year, one student was recognized for shaving her hair and donating it to cancer patients. "Education is not a 'one size fits all' phenomenon," Gallon

declared. "We have to define and measure student success through multiple means and innovative, personalized measures."

In 2016, Gallon ran on a platform as an educator in the district with the most "F" schools in the county. After one year of bold, assertive, and what some have described as audacious and unapologetic policy positions and approaches, District 1 remediated all "F" schools in the district -- including Carol City Middle, who received a "C" after a string of five consecutive 'F' ratings for poor academic performance. With three remaining schools rated "D," Thomas Jefferson Middle among them, Gallon's celebration was short-lived. "We still have more to do," Gallon said.

By 2017, all schools in the district rated a "C" or above for the first time in over a decade. Dr. Gallon credits the School Board, superintendent, admin-



istrators, teachers, parents, partners, and the students themselves for the marked improvements. He asserts that there still remains more work to do both within the district and across the population of Miami-Dade County Public Schools. “From the County Line to Florida City,” has become a Gallon mantra that is often echoed by other Board Members. The statement speaks to the fact that although elected by voting districts, every school board member has an obligation to all students, schools, teachers, and employees.

Gallon has noted the irony that despite having schools that have languished in academic failure for nearly a decade, Miami-Dade County Public Schools has received numerous accolades and awards – most notably the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education in 2012. “That’s the dichotomy,” Gallon noted. “The District was being awarded the Broad Prize, while Carol City Middle was earning its first of five straight grades of F. The achievement gap was widening between poor, Black and Hispanic students. And that wasn’t the headline, it wasn’t being included

in the narrative. Around the issues of systemic failure in some schools and communities, there was a deafening silence. You can’t change or improve things without speaking up, without first talking about them.”

This is an example of Gallon’s audacious and unapologetic language which has made supporters of the status quo uncomfortable. Gallon shrugs off such critics. “Uncomfortable? What do you think is the level of discomfort a student who can’t read, families struggling to live and be safe in their own communities, businesses feeling disenfranchised from a multi-billion dollar entity, and teachers and employees struggling to make ends meet that too frequently ‘don’t meet’? As elected officials, these are the people we work for,” Gallon states, his voice inflecting to emphasize each point.

Although not endorsed by the teachers’ union, UTD, in their initial campaign, Gallon and fellow School Board newcomer, Mari Tere Rojas, have been among those most vocal about issues involving teacher salaries. They have also both been vocal about issues of

transparency and accountability for the \$1.2 Billion General Obligation Bond. Gallon filed an item requiring auditing, reporting and public transparency of bond expenditures – it passed unanimously. Rojas also proposed an item calling for an outside, independent audit, which was awarded to a local minority firm. The audit is presently being conducted. Rojas, a Cuban-American and registered Republican, was re-elected without opposition in August 2017.

“Why wouldn’t we fight for teachers and improved working conditions? When you’re elected, there should be no permanent friends or enemies. There should a focus on issues. Mari and I are educators who ran on educational platforms. How can you run on an educational platform and not value teachers upon whose backs and shoulders this District has prospered? I say you can’t,” Gallon asserted. “That being said, the heads and hearts and actions of my colleagues have further demonstrated a shared commitment to these issues.”

In January 2017, Gallon, without any

notice or discussion, was the first School Board Member to file an item which led to a historic victory for teacher compensation in Miami-Dade County Public Schools. The item called for the “exploration” of local sources to improve teacher salaries. A similar item was filed by another colleague, Ms. Lubby Navarro. Gallon’s item was viewed as a pragmatic, comprehensive and inclusive approach to a difficult and potentially divisive position---especially when increased taxes were involved in a non-partisan School Board environment. His item included a Task Force which would examine the issue and come back with recommendations to the School Board.

“I am not a supporter of raising taxes. But Gallon’s approach was politically and strategically ingenious,” said Willis Howard, a well-known political strategist. “The Task Force gave the School Board political ‘cover’ from their diverse constituent groups. The School Board simply had to vote to let the voters decide. In a democracy, who can vote against letting the voice of the people be heard?” he continued.

In November 2018, the measure passed, with over 70 percent voter approval, and brought in an additional \$232 million dollars for teacher salaries and security---\$200 million of which will be used for teacher salaries. Although recognized by Superintendent Alberto Carvalho at the Watch Party for the critical role his item played in the \$232 million referendum, Gallon was conspicuously absent. He was on the other side of town, at Miami Soul Café, where a community Watch Party was being held. The event was also a celebration of candidates he supported in Miami Gardens and Opa-locka, who had run for office on platforms of change – something Gallon had done two years earlier. He would leave the part to join his longtime colleague and

friend, District 2 School Board Member, Dorothy Bendross-Mindingall, at her Victory Party celebrating a decisive reelection.

Dr. Steve Gallon III has championed many causes during 2018. He successfully proposed items that addressed issues ranging from educational services for immigrant students, disciplinary procedures for student athletes and student walkouts, to evaluation of positions reporting to the Board, municipal partnerships, and placing limits on expenditures that can be made without School Board notice or approval. After several employees reportedly got sick after a carbon monoxide leak, he filed an item to have the entire school district review its systems and procedures.

Entering his third year in elected office, Gallon has impressed many at the local, state, and national level with his uniquely consistent advocacy and policy work to improve the education of students in District 1 and throughout Miami-Dade County. He was the Council of Urban Boards of Education 2017 Benjamin Elijah Mays Award Winner for Urban Education--the first to ever win in Miami-Dade County Public Schools. In 2017, he was elected to the Council’s National Board to represent the Southeastern United States on policy issues governing equity in urban education.

In December 2018, Gallon would arrive in Orlando to join Northwestern, his Alma Mater and school he served as principal for 7 years to watch them win their consecutive Class 6A High School Football State Championship. The day before the game, Gallon filed an item for the December School Board Meeting which would send shockwaves throughout Florida’s high school athletic community as he called for the reclassification of high school

athletic programs in Miami-Dade County. This move would almost guarantee that at least three schools from Miami would compete for and win state titles. The item passed unanimously.

Within a week, the Florida High School Athletic Association “reclassified” high school football programs throughout the state. The schools in Miami-Dade were classified as Gallon called for and predicted---which sent Facebook and social media into a frenzy.

Community activist Valencia Gunder took to Facebook and posted, “Dear City of Orlando you can thank Dr. Steve Gallon III for this mayhem you will have next December, lol” referring to the likelihood that three schools and their communities from Miami will be traveling to compete in state titles next year with Carol City, Central, and Northwestern being favored to win three different classification titles under the reclassification called for by Gallon.

Constituent Ron St. Paul was more direct on his thoughts about politicians, but had a different view on Gallon. “I am hard on politicians, but I must admit Miami Dade is lucky to have this guy on our side fighting for our kids. From day one he hasn’t skipped a beat. We should all be thankful for his work.” “I believe that elections are about promises. I work every day to keep the promises that I made to the people when I asked for their vote and support,” Gallon said. “I believe in change--or should I say positive change. In 2016 District 1 voted for change. I say to those who recently won elected office, be the change you seek. And keep your promise, keep your word. Your word is your bond. I gave my word in 2016. I have a charge to keep.”