

# SHAKER LIFE

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## No Hurdle Too High

Meet the  
Shaker Schools' new  
superintendent



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**Meet the Shaker Schools’  
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on the fast track since kindergarten.**

**By Jennifer Proe**  
Photography by Kevin Reeves

**Gregory Hutchings, Jr. is a man on a mission:**

He aims to visit every classroom in every building of the Shaker Schools during his first 90 days as superintendent. He got a pretty good head start when he visited the District last May, his socks a red blur as he zipped up and down stairs, popping into classrooms and chatting with students and faculty.





Hutchings explains, "I always feel like a suit is so boring, you have to accessorize it with some flashy socks or a bow tie."

Hutchings' sartorial choices could be seen as a reflection of his personality, given that he has a history of standing out from the crowd. "I'm the kind of person that if you tell me things are not possible, I will say that they are," he says.

A case in point: When he was in 10th grade, Hutchings' counselor denied his request to sign up for an honors English class, saying he did not meet the academic requirements.

"The general classes were not meeting my needs, and I felt that I was not going to be prepared to go to college," says Hutchings. He drafted a petition for his cause, collected more than 100 signatures from students, and presented it to his high school principal – who signed him up for the course on the spot.

**Above: Hearing from students is a priority. Hutchings intends to establish a student advisory group.**

**Right: Hutchings credits much success to life-changing teachers, starting with kindergarten teacher Dorothy Murphy McKenzie.**



"I think that moment changed the entire trajectory of my life. I felt that I had a voice, and that if I stood up for myself, anything was possible," he reflects. After that, he enrolled in honors classes across the board, despite the fact that he struggled with his grades and was typically the only African-American male in those classes. "It's often a lonely place, and you have to be a very strong person to endure that," he observes.

Hutchings traces the courage of his convictions to his days as an impressionable kindergartner in Alexandria. "My kindergarten teacher, Miss Murphy, told me that I could be the first black president of the United States, that the sky was the limit, that

anything was possible. That's why I believe I have accomplished as much as I have, because she planted that seed in me," says Hutchings.

Statistically speaking, Hutchings' early years were not the best predictor of academic success. Raised by a single mother who juggled two jobs to make ends meet, the Hutchings family moved three times during his elementary years. "I was a transient student, I was on reduced lunch, and my mother was a single parent working in an entry level job. But my mother was involved in our lives and encouraged us to be good people," he says.

While college was not discouraged, neither was it a given. But once Hutchings decided he wanted

to pursue higher education, he had the full backing of his mother and grandmother, and became the only one of his siblings to earn a degree. He credits much of his success to several life-changing teachers who he says “made deposits along the way,” beginning with Dorothy Murphy (now Mrs. McKenzie). Athletic coaches also provided a dose of much-needed encouragement.

“I joined the track team and became a hurdler because someone dared me,” says Hutchings. “I’m short for a hurdler, so I kept banging my knees, but I kept at it. I also joined the dive team on a dare, which I did until I broke my nose. At one point, I thought I was too cool to keep doing sports, but my coaches kept encouraging me to come back. I still keep in touch with some of them.”

Education was not the obvious career choice for Hutchings. During college at Old Dominion University in Virginia, he toyed with engineering, medicine, and marketing before finally settling on a degree in education so that he could graduate on time. While he was working as a recruiter for his alma mater, a chance encounter with a school principal provided him with his “aha! moment” that he really was meant to be a teacher. He applied at her school in Woodbridge, Virginia, and was hired to teach fifth grade, though the school year had already begun.

His first classroom was a storage room with no windows. As the newest hire, he received students the other fifth-grade teachers did not want, including many with behavioral problems. Says Hutchings, “I remember this moment, standing in front of these kids as a brand-new teacher, without much classroom experience, and I thought: ‘This is huge. I am responsible for making them successful.’ I really took it to



**Cheryl Hutchings joined her husband at the Ice Cream Social & Band Concert on the High School front lawn in May. The family moved to Shaker Heights over the summer.**

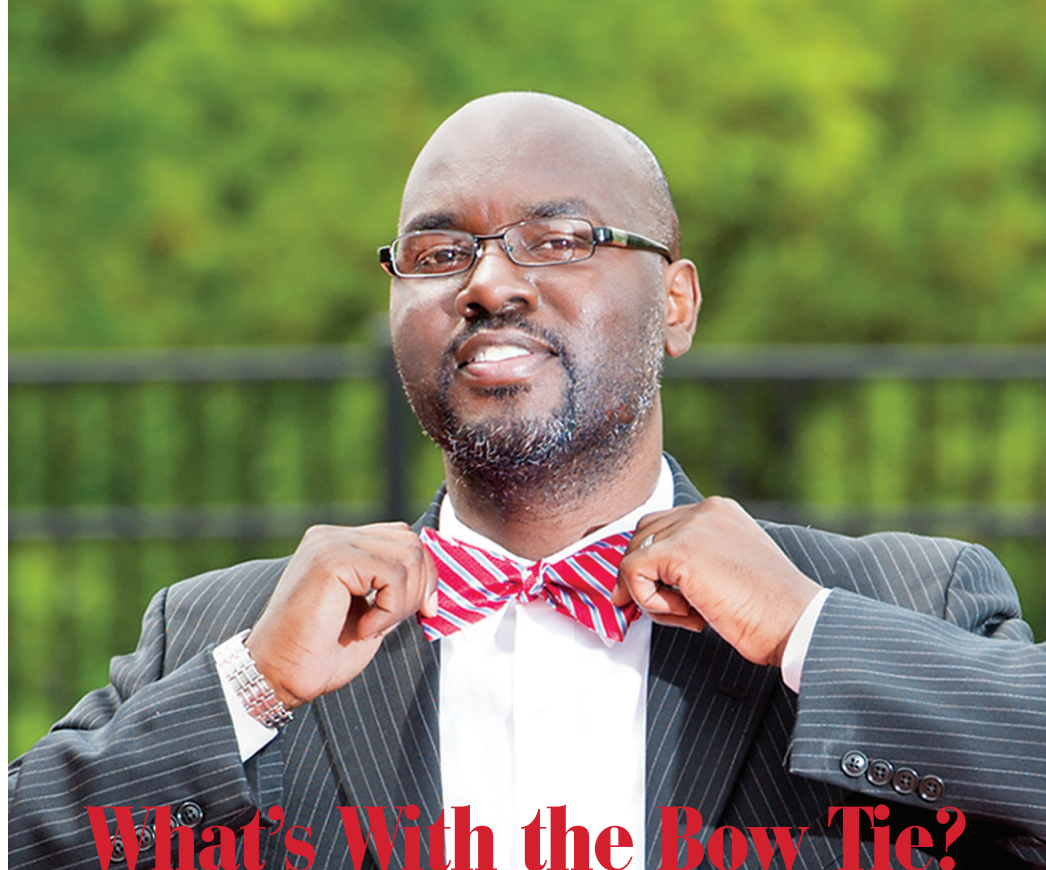
heart, and built relationships with them. Every one of my kids passed the state assessment that year.”

Over the next several years, Hutchings accepted a variety of positions at other schools, primarily teaching middle school science. Aspiring to an administrative role, he enrolled at George Mason University to complete his master’s degree in education, and later moved to Richmond to start work on a doctorate at the nearby College of William and Mary. He then moved to Nashville, Tennessee, where he earned the distinction of Middle School Principal of the Year in recognition of the transformative changes he effected at West End Middle School.

In 2010, Hutchings was recruited back to his old stomping grounds as a director for the Alexandria schools, where he had a joyous reunion with his former kindergarten teacher. “I didn’t recognize her at first,” says Hutchings. “She seemed much taller when I was her student!”

It was through a friend from graduate school – the Rev. Dr. Todd Davidson, who had recently moved to Shaker upon becoming pastor at Antioch Baptist Church – that Hutchings learned about the impending vacancy in Shaker. Davidson alerted Hutchings’ aunt and uncle, who live in Cleveland Heights. They in turn told him they thought he would be perfect for the job. He promised them he would look into it and give it some thought.

“The moment I read the leadership profile for this position,” says Hutchings, “I knew this was the right place. That this community embraces diversity and has a longstanding history of supporting education made this the type of environment my wife and I wanted for our kids, and it was a good match for my experience.” Given that Hutchings wrote his dissertation on effective teaching practices in the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program, “the fact that Shaker has the IB program was the icing on the cake,” he says.



## What’s With the Bow Tie?

**About that omnipresent bow tie: Like many things in Hutchings’ life, it came about as the result of a dare. “A school board member in my former district of Alexandria (Virginia) wears bow ties all the time. I once asked him if he would pass one of my agenda items if I wore a bow tie. He said, ‘Go ahead – I dare you!’ I bought one and wore it all day, and I got so many compliments, I decided to wear them all the time. I had no idea how to tie one. I had to practice with a YouTube video every day for a month.”**

Before making the leap, however, Hutchings’ wife Cheryl, a CPA, had a few things to say on the matter. She wanted to visit Shaker Heights to make sure it would be the right place for them to put down roots and raise their daughter Micah, who is eight, and son Gregory, who is three. Tops on Cheryl’s list were good schools, followed by good neighborhoods with tree-lined streets, family-friendly activities, and access to arts and culture.

After their visit, “My wife was hooked,” says Hutchings. With her blessing, he submitted his application materials that very night. “Her only concern was dealing with the snowy winters.” But any hopes students might have about a superintendent from Virginia declaring more snow days were dashed during a Skype interview with the *The Shakerite*. “I can’t use the judgments I have in Alexandria,”

he told the student newspaper. “As long as the roads are clear and people are able to drive and buses are able to get to school safely, we’re going to have school.”

Hutchings does value students’ views in other matters, however, and intends to establish a student advisory council that would provide students’ perspectives on such issues as technology and instructional needs.

Hutchings is also looking forward to becoming involved with the Minority Achievement (MAC) Scholars and Sisters programs, given that he can identify with many of the challenges students in those programs may be facing. “It would be an honor for me to act as a mentor for our students,” he says. “I would not be here if not for the mentors I have had along the way.”

Based on his initial classroom

visits, Hutchings likes what he sees so far. "I was able to see really good instruction taking place, students who seem genuinely happy about being in school, and teachers who appear committed to serving our students," he says. "I could definitely see that the arts are valued, and I saw remarkable work displayed in our schools."

His immediate priorities include "ensuring that we continue to provide opportunities that accelerate learning, even for our students who are already performing at a very high level," he says. He also sees obtaining authorization for the International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program as a key element in student achievement. He firmly believes that "IB gives us the framework we need to serve all students. It elevates the type of teaching and learning that occurs in the classroom."

As for his long-term priorities, they are nothing short of lofty. "My goal, and I should say our goal, is to be the premier district with no achievement gap," he says. "I am hopeful that we can be the exemplar for school districts across the country on how to serve all students regardless of their ethnicity or socioeconomic status. If anyone has a shot at doing it, it's Shaker Heights, where we have an entire community – the City, its residents, teachers, administrators – all willing to stand behind that initiative."

Hutchings knows that an undertaking of this magnitude will take time, and he hopes to stay as long as it takes to see it through. Although he has made no secret of his goal to become the U.S. Secretary of Education one day, he insists that he is in no hurry to get there. "I plan to see my kids graduate from Shaker Heights High School," he says. "It would be an honor for me to watch them walk across that stage. I want people to know that this is my commitment; this is where I want to be." 🌿

