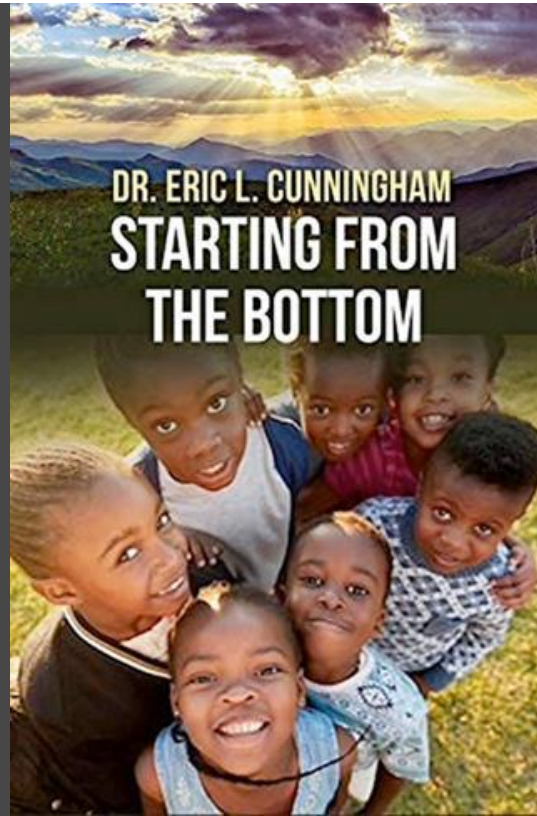




Submitted Everetts Elementary School Kindergarten Teacher Assistant Falcia Whidbee, left, Nayeli Johnson, Amira Carter, Superintendent Eric Cunningham, Michael Bizzell, Hilmer Vazquez, Aaliyah Jordan, Zi'yona Boone, Olivia Richardson, Selena Estrada, and Kindergarten Teacher Christi Pittard celebrate Black History Month.



A book defines a superintendent's journey

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By Richard Holm

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Halifax County Schools Superintendent Eric Cunningham said his new book, released in February, encompasses his experiences growing up.

Cunningham said he always wanted to be a published author and to share his vision for success in the academic world.

“This book is the beginning of many ideas and thoughts that I wish to impart and help others realize that it is important to dream, to have a vision and to plan for the future,” he said.

His book “Starting from the Bottom” demonstrates how to learn to re-define oneself into thinking differently and committing to being a better person, Cunningham said.

“I want readers of this book to see the champion within and use their life experiences and challenges to build a 'five-star life,'" he said. “Sometimes the journey will be difficult, filled with many roadblocks, dangerous curves and detours, but with hard work, determination and commitment, the opportunities are endless.”

Growing up, Cunningham said he had many mentors; some still present.

“I have always valued the advice of parents, teachers and coaches," he said. "I believe my character was shaped by all the advice and support of people who saw in me what I could not see in myself. The one experience that I will never forget is one of my teachers helping me to get organized. She told me I needed to get a desk to prepare myself each day, and secondly, she told me to buy a watch so that I could always be on time. These two material items turned my life around, and I started getting better grades which built self-confidence. I started believing in my abilities.”

Long-time childhood friend Doug Robbins of Chester, Virginia, said Cunningham has always been a dedicated person.

“I have known Dr. Cunningham since ninth grade and first met him during basketball,” he said. “When I first met him he had a lot of energy. From the moment I met him, I always believed that there was something special about him.”

Robbins said whatever hand Cunningham was dealt; he was going to make the best of it. He said he believes Cunningham gets most of his character from God, but also because of his strong family unit.

“I think there is something about him — that gift God gives us all — which is to be a good person, work hard and shrug things off,” Robbins said. “I think he believes that no matter what is going on, everything is going to work itself out, and I think it's through faith.”

Cunningham said he sees himself in the children of Halifax County Schools every day.

“I want to inspire them to dream big because they matter,” he said. “I want them to know that there are educators in their lives who care about them and will walk beside them every step of the way. There are so many opportunities available now that I did not have when I was growing up. I want to motivate students to learn and how to develop innovative strategies to create a successful life.”

A quote that appears in the summary of his book on Amazon.com reads, “Many times, people believe they have a patent on pain because ‘my pain is worse than your pain.’”

In response to the meaning of this quote, Cunningham said, “Sometimes when there is pain, whether it is emotional or physical, people will say, ‘I know how you feel.’ You may have experienced the same type of pain, but your pain is different from mine because of relationships and circumstances.”

He went on to say that pain was unique and recalled understanding what his father went through.

“I can only imagine the pain my father experienced, when after serving two tours in Vietnam with honors the only job he could get as an African-American upon his return was a custodian,” Cunningham said. “He did his job and never complained, but did I know his pain? The answer is, 'No.' Even though my Dad lived through pain, he always encouraged me to get a good education, which was key to never having to experience painful situations and to focus on the journey of moving forward.”

With a dream of inspiring and helping young children, Cunningham reflected on his mission.

“My Dad always taught me that education was vital and was necessary to take you from the bottom up, and this is exactly what I did,” he said. “I moved from being a poor student to receiving a doctorate in education and incrementally moving to the school superintendent. I have two biological children, but as superintendent of the Halifax County School District, I have 2,300 children, and I love them as if they were my own. I want to teach all of my children how to 'write their own script.' I want to show them pathways to winning and being the best of the best.”

Finally, Cunningham said the book shares lessons learned in his life.

“Many of our children don't have champions in their lives to share their story and to support them,” he said. “There are so many lessons, that if shared, will inspire, motivate and prepare our students for success.”