

Using modern-day safety protocols and tending to students' socioemotional development while setting high academic expectations, Virginia Dale Thompson was an educator ahead of her time.

Ms. Thompson spent the majority of her 42-year career with Henderson County Public Schools (HCPS) at Hillandale Elementary, after teaching at Balfour Elementary and serving as a Unit Wide Counselor for the district. A teacher during her first year at Hillandale (1968), she rose to queen bee in 1969, and served as the Hillandale Honeybees' principal for the next 25 years.

In the late sixties, Ms. Thompson was one of the first female principals in the county, and for the first two-and-a-half years of her principalship, she also taught the upper grades of the school. At the time, Hillandale taught kindergarten through 3rd grade, while neighboring East Flat Rock Elementary taught 4th through 6th grades.

Former East Flat Rock principal Alan V. Collins credits Ms. Thompson with establishing positive relationships with parents that carried over into his school, and with providing students a framework for success that continued serving them at East Flat Rock.

"These days, teachers are being told to prepare their students with 21st century skills. Ms. Thompson was doing that 30 years ago," says Joanne Legg, a Hillandale parent and teacher.

Former Hillandale teacher Toby Linder adds, "She made a constant effort not only to encourage academic progress but to instill a sense of moral growth, patriotism, and 'doing the right thing.'"

These lessons were epitomized in "Ms. T's Time," a weekly gathering of the entire student body around their principal – who would teach adages like, "Be kind, be helpful, be loving," and, "I am an American and I am free." Legg recalls watching her son sing, "the Carolina song," during "Ms. T's Time," and remarks, "Ms. Virginia Thompson set the tone of respect at that school."

Ms. Thompson's staff remembers being treated with the same respect she required of her students, holding herself to Hillandale's high standard. Linder recalls the tact and consideration with which Thompson coordinated the accommodations Linder required for the Jewish holidays she couldn't work.

"At times, I was the only Jewish teacher in the entire school system," Linder explains. "When I came to work for Virginia, she greeted me with respect," she says. "She did her job sensitively and always supported my needs."

Former Hillandale teacher Doris Marlowe says Ms. Thompson provided a "home away from home" for her staff, which she cultivated carefully for the benefit of her students. "Virginia worked relentlessly to build a caring and competent staff," writes Dr. Dan Lunsford, former HCPS superintendent.

Ms. Thompson was also “ahead of the curve” in enforcing strict school safety protocols and best practices used today: locking all doors, requiring all visitors to check into the front office, and training office personnel to monitor custody issues that would determine which family members could take students home from school.

Legg says, “We knew that when we dropped our children off in the morning, they would be safe, they would be loved, and they would be respected.”

During her HCPS career, Ms. Thompson also served as the North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE) secretary, vice president, and president (1969), and received an award in 1994 for outstanding service from the Henderson County NCAE.