

Michelle Cottrell-Williams



Michelle Cottrell-Williams, the Region 4 Virginia Teacher of the Year, teaches social studies at Wakefield High School in Arlington County Public Schools. Ms. Cottrell-

Williams has 11 years of teaching experience, all of which have been in Arlington County. After earning a Bachelor of Science with a major in history from Utah State University in 2003, Ms. Cottrell-Williams received a Master of Education degree from George Washington University in 2006. She is seeking a second master's degree in curriculum and instruction in the Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse and Exceptional Learners Program at George Mason University.

As a teacher leader, Ms. Cottrell-Williams has assumed a wide range of roles at Wakefield High School to support the teaching profession. She has served as an instructional lead teacher, a member of the Project LEAD team, a member of the Wakefield Internal Modifications Committee for Design and Construction, a Blackboard Course Mentor for Secondary T-Scale New Hires, and chair of the Social Studies Department. She has completed many professional development activities, stating that she believes that "instructional excellence is a journey, rather than a destination." She explained that her professional development over the past five years has shifted from building content knowledge to developing the skills necessary to support struggling students. She has reached out beyond her school by assuming many roles, such as a Virginia Department of Education Standards of Learning Trainer for Regions 4 and 5; a planner and organizer for the *We Are All Arlington! Daytime Student Event*; and a presenter at the Social Studies Countywide Meeting, the Global Village Summit about Korea, and the Festival of the Minds.

Growing up, Michelle explained, she never thought about becoming a teacher. She was a good student and loved learning, but she did not feel the call to teach. She began college with plans to become an accountant like her father, but after her freshman year, she realized this was not the right path for her. She switched her major to history since this was a subject she really enjoyed. The change led Michelle to another university, and she explored history, political science, and psychology to fascinating depths. As she neared graduation, she thought about her options; however, teaching was not one she considered. She decided to work for a while and then pursue politics or law. In her last semester, she received a pamphlet inviting her to learn more about teaching English overseas in Russia or China. Since she knew she wanted to travel, she saw this as a perfect opportunity to see the world. She applied for the program and was accepted to teach in Moscow, Russia, for a semester. When she arrived in Moscow, Michelle was assigned to a small group of sixth-grade students at a private performing arts school in the middle of the city. During her time there, she said she learned far more about herself than she did about the country.

Michelle said that during her time teaching in Russia, she grew to love the children she worked with every day. While their "antics and boundless energy" often left her exhausted at the end of the day, the students endeared themselves to her with their genuine interest in learning and their joy in living. They showed her how to see the world through new eyes. When her semester abroad ended, Michelle moved back to the United States and relocated to Washington, D.C., "staying true" to her original plan to pursue a career in politics or law. In her first year, she worked at a small, political think-tank and roomed with two law school students. Both experiences led her to once again question her plans. Her roommates always seemed stressed. Her own job often required that she work 10 to 12 hours a day and provided her with little satisfaction. During that time, her thoughts often returned to that small class of

students in Russia, where she felt that each day actually meant something. She was clear that she wanted to wake up every day and make a difference. She went all in, applied to graduate school, and spent the next 14 months preparing for a career she had spent the previous 24 years avoiding. She says she "has never regretted the choice for even a second."

Her principal at Wakefield High School, Dr. Chris Willmore, said, "Ms. Cottrell-Williams is a dynamic educator who focuses on student learning. When you enter her class, you will find students actively involved in the lesson – for example, engaging in guided discussions, participating in simulations, or analyzing reading texts. ...Ms. Cottrell-Williams is an exemplary educator..."

A former student, a graduate of James Madison University and now a law student, Timothy P. Ryan wrote the following about his World History and Government teacher, Ms. Cottrell-Williams: "...Ms. Cottrell provides the Wakefield community with a sense of comfort; if anyone needs help she is always there to lend a hand or an ear. Her passion and dedication radiate to everyone around her. She imbued in me a desire to do more, to always take the extra step. She's an award-winning teacher because she doesn't go that extra mile looking for recognition – rather, she does it because she cares about her students and wants to see them thrive. She inspires her students to do great things, to help those in need, and to never doubt that a single person can make a meaningful impact. Simply put, Wakefield wouldn't have been as extraordinary for me and many of my peers without Ms. Cottrell. As a teacher, mentor, and role model, she has given me lessons and insights that I still use every day. And for that I will be eternally grateful."