

Joan Hammonds, longtime Baltimore City educator, dies

By [Colin Campbell](#)

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Joan Hammonds, a 43-year employee with Baltimore City Public Schools and a longtime Baltimore educator, died Monday. She was 65. (Handout photo / Baltimore Sun)

Joan Hammonds, a longtime Baltimore teacher who served as executive assistant to the school district's interim CEO, died last week of unknown causes at Good Samaritan Hospital, her son said. She was 65.

In her 43-year teaching career, Mrs. Hammonds was as an educator, mentor, confidant and friend to many throughout the school system — from the district's top officials to its students, colleagues said.

She was an executive assistant to Tisha Edwards, chief of staff to former school's CEO Andrés Alonso, and she continued in that role when Ms. Edwards succeeded Mr. Alonso as interim CEO in 2013.

"She represented the district in a very positive way that really put students first," Ms. Edwards said, calling her "the best of Baltimore City."

An English teacher to her core, Mrs. Hammonds had high expectations for everyone she knew. Misspellings or bad grammar in school system documents didn't go unremarked, and tardiness was inexcusable, colleagues said.

"She held me to a very high standard," Ms. Edwards said. "She was one of those people who was always challenging me to give more, to commit at the deepest level, to understand why we were all here."

Mrs. Hammonds was also a greeter and taught vacation Bible school at Brown's Memorial Baptist Church in Park Heights, and she was a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc., her son, Louis Hammonds Jr., said.

Mr. Hammonds said his mother was interpersonal and easy to talk to, always willing to listen to problems and offer advice.

"I couldn't have asked for a better mother, I really couldn't have," he said. "She was an angel here on earth."

Joan Melvina Tate was born on Nov. 6, 1950, in Northwest Baltimore to William Melvin Tate and Ludokrine Hill.

One of three daughters, she graduated from Frederick Douglass High School in 1968 and Coppin State College, as it was then known, in 1972.

She began her career as an English teacher the following year at Hamilton Middle School, eventually taking on the role of department chair.

She married Louis Hammonds Sr. in 1976.

In 1987, she moved to West Baltimore Middle School, where she would lead the English department until transferring to the district's North Avenue headquarters in the mid-1990s.

Mrs. Hammonds later got her master's degree from Morgan State University and became an adjunct professor at Goucher College in 2002.

LaJerne Cornish, Goucher's associate provost for undergraduate studies, said she was a student-teacher under Mrs. Hammonds in 1982, and the two became close friends.

"Joan Hammonds made her students young and old believe they could accomplish anything," she said. "She brought her A-game to her job every day and expected her students to do the same. While she is gone physically, she will live on in the years to come as those of us whose lives she touched strive to do things 'The Hammonds Way' each and every day."

Any aspiring English teachers at Goucher were taught by Mrs. Hammonds, Professor Cornish said, and Coppin State, Morgan State and Towson universities would refer their education students who wanted to teach in Baltimore City to her first.

"We don't talk enough about those African-American, homegrown teachers from Baltimore City who devote their life to teaching," Ms. Edwards said. "She represented what a lifelong teacher from the community should be. I loved that about her."

Tina Hike-Hubbard, the vice chairwoman of the Baltimore school board who taught at West Baltimore Middle, said Mrs. Hammonds organized a group of mentors and mentees, nicknamed "M&M's," for young teachers at the school of 1,500 students.

"It was really great to have that small community of folks she pulled together," Mrs. Hike-Hubbard said. "It was amazing to have that support as a brand-new teacher."

Colleagues described Mrs. Hammonds as a tireless proponent of the city's students who challenged them — and the teachers and administrators who served them — to succeed, despite the myriad issues they faced.

"She was really, really kind and really cared about our children," Mrs. Hike-Hubbard said. "That stood out for me. She felt a personal responsibility to make sure we did the best for our kids."

"Everyone should have that philosophy," she added. "She was really outstanding in that capacity."

As an administrator, Mrs. Hammonds' relationships across the district and her deep understanding of how the school system worked allowed her to deftly navigate the bureaucracy.

She led system-wide United Way fundraising campaigns and a drive to buy school uniforms for low-income families.

When Gregory E. Thornton took over as CEO in 2014, she was an "orchestra leader" of his transition team, he said.

"She would bring a challenge to me, and she would tell me how to fix it," Mr. Thornton said. "Most of the time she could already solve the problem."

Mrs. Hammonds retired from the school district in 2015.

Cody Dorsey, a former student commissioner on the school board and mayor's youth commissioner, said Mrs. Hammonds was "the heart of city schools."

He said Mrs. Hammonds was the first person he met when he became a school board member, and she quickly became a friend and confidant — as she was to many in the school system.

"I would take my writing assignments and I took my college essay to her," he said. "She would give you her honest opinion. I really respected Ms. Joan for that. She did not care if you were custodian or CEO of the system. Everyone was treated the same and with the same respect."

A service will be held at 11 a.m. Saturday at Brown's Memorial Baptist, 3215 W. Belvedere Ave. She will be buried at King's Memorial Park following the service.

She is survived by her son, Louis of Parkville, a niece, and four grandchildren. Her husband died in 2001.

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