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MNPS Music Educator Wins National Award

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A veteran MNPS music educator has won a national award for her inspiring work in the classroom and beyond.

Dee Hammonds, Dean of Fine Arts at Warner Arts Magnet Elementary School, received the Queen Smith Award for Commitment to Urban Public Education from the Council of the Great City Schools and McGraw-Hill Education at the Council's fall conference in Philadelphia this week. She received $5,000 and a plaque in recognition of the honor.

"Few embody the art of teaching like Dee Hammonds," said Franklin Willis, MNPS's Director of Visual and Performing Arts. "She teaches with heart, leads with vision, and inspires through excellence. Her love for students and her passion for music shine in everything she does. The legacy she's building reaches far beyond the classroom, and it's a true joy to see her remarkable work celebrated by the Council of the Great City Schools."

The award is named in memory of Queen Smith, a vice president of urban programs at Macmillan/McGraw-Hill Publishing Co. whose life "represented honor, excellence, and commitment to urban public education," the Council said.

Hammonds, who grew up in Chattanooga, was already singing and playing piano by ear before she turned 5. She began leading the youth and adult choirs at her church when she was 11 and graduated as the valedictorian of Chattanooga's Center for Creative Arts, a magnet high school that introduced her to musical theater and other genres.

"My teachers had the most profound impact on my life. They are the reason I became a music teacher," she said. "Their influence extended far beyond the classroom – they modeled compassion, excellence, and the joy of helping students find their voices."

The first-generation college graduate, who earned a bachelor's degree from Fisk University and a master's in education from Lipscomb University, started teaching in MNPS in 2007 as the music specialist at Hattie Cotton Elementary School. She has seven children, including six who are currently MNPS students and one who is a graduate of the district.

On top of her work during the school year, Hammonds brought her energy and expertise to help MNPS students at the summer songwriting camps that led to the recording of the

district's MidSouth Emmy-winning anthem, "Every Student Known," in 2024 and the "I Believe I Belong" song collection that was released this year.

"I believe the arts are essential – divine gifts meant to be discovered, nurtured, and shared," she said. "My teaching is rooted in the conviction that creativity is one of the most powerful ways we reflect the image of the Creator and connect deeply with one another. Those who know me well understand that my greatest passions are my faith, people, and the arts – and all three intersect beautifully in education."

Hammonds also has been named one of 25 semifinalists from across the nation for the 2026 Music Educator Award, which will be presented by the Recording Academy and the GRAMMY Museum during GRAMMY Week next year.