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## Duval Student Mentor Helping Kids Step to Success

### Teaching Kids Respect, Discipline and Life Skills Through the Art of Step Dance

JACKSONVILLE, FLA. – Jerel Williams has found a way to effectively reach the at-risk students he mentors through a unique percussive form of step dance practiced by historically African American fraternities and sororities.

Williams, a mentor with Communities In Schools of Jacksonville, is teaching students at Ramona Boulevard Elementary and Stilwell Middle School how to succeed in the classroom -- and in life -- through the fast-paced art of stepping. His students include boys with some of the worst behavioral problems. Participating on his step team called The Gentlemen of Perfection becomes a way of helping the boys grow and succeed both in and out of school.

Using step to reach out to the students did not happen right away, Williams said. It took time for him to develop the idea. "As I got attached to the kids and understood them better, I wanted to do more to reach them," he said. "That's when I took the initiative to bring step into my mentoring work, and it has made a huge difference in the kids' lives."

There are expectations to participate on the step team, which meets Thursdays and Fridays at Ramona Boulevard and after school at Stilwell. Students must maintain their grades, which in Williams' eyes means an A-B average. They must be respectful at school and have a good behavior report every day. Williams says many of his students' behavioral problems have completely turned around because they do not want to miss out on step practice that week.

Practice is really about much more than learning a step routine, though. The students are also learning important life lessons from Williams during practice time. Williams tries to instill confidence in his students and build them up so they know they can succeed, despite their circumstances. He also teaches them to be respectful of women and elders, to value brotherhood and to present themselves well through their appearance and speech.

Williams, a Jacksonville native who graduated from Raines High School, draws on his own experiences to help the boys on his step team. He learned to step in eighth grade, and it helped him keep his life on track.

"It's about teaching them that they can make it and they can be somebody, despite their issues at home," Williams said. "I share my stories of success with the hopes it will help them succeed."

*Communities In Schools operates America's most successful dropout prevention program. Established in 1989, the Jacksonville affiliate serves more than 6,600 students in 45 schools annually with nationally-recognized mentoring, scholarship, literacy, enrichment and after-school programs.*

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