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Kindergarten Inclusion Teacher Brings Hands-
On Learning and Support to Students
The start of a new year is a time to reflect on the successes of the past year and look forward to how we can continue helping students succeed.

In this issue, we look at how educators are affecting students at all grade levels. Literacy education has been a big focus for us at the Mississippi Department of Education, and we are proud of the teachers at nine elementary schools who improved their students’ literacy test scores with data-driven observations, personalized instruction, and other high-impact methods (p. 14-18). At the elementary level, districts are starting to prepare students for the workforce through computer science initiatives (p. 20-22) and by integrating technology, socialization, and innovation into the traditional library model (p. 24-27).

Our Mississippi State Board of Education spotlight (p. 19) focuses on Toyota President Sean Suggs, who brings a different perspective to the board and, like all of us in education, has a passion for helping students be workforce ready.

This issue also looks at how one school district implemented a new counseling model that helps build relationships with students over a long period of time (p. 6-9). Our student spotlight (p. 28) showcases an exceptional Natchez senior whose passion for math and science has her considering a career as an anesthesiologist.

We also spotlight a third-grade teacher in Oktibbeha County who is showing students they can be successful and accomplish their goals (p. 29) and detail what’s inside the desk of a veteran special education inclusion teacher (p. 30-31).

Our goal at the MDE is to provide quality education for all students, and that’s why we developed the Access for All Guide (p. 12-13), a manual that provides modifications and accommodations for teachers to instruct both general and special education students.

We also seek to equip teachers and students with the resources to succeed, and we are excited to have great leadership that includes veteran educators Wendy Clemons, Tenette Smith, and Tom Wallace in new roles here in the department (p. 10-11).

I hope that after reading this issue, you will see the many ways our schools, teachers, administrators, and business leaders are working together to help students succeed and that you will share this issue with others to promote how we are working to improve the quality of public education in Mississippi.

Nathan Oakley
Chief Academic Officer
Mississippi Department of Education
Vicksburg-Warren Teacher Selected as National Exemplary Educator

Vicksburg-Warren School District Biomedical I and II teacher Lesley Magee was recently honored as a Project Lead the Way (PLTW) Outstanding Teacher at the group’s national conference.

Award recipients are selected through a competitive nomination and selection process for their focus on empowering students to thrive in our evolving world. They have demonstrated a strong record of delivering inspiring and empowering experiences in the classroom, implemented high-quality PLTW programs that move students to apply learning beyond the classroom, expanded access to career learning for students in the school and community, and shown leadership within the classroom, school, or district through innovative methods that engage students in activity-, project-, and problem-based learning.

Magee, a Vicksburg High School graduate, played an important part in implementing PLTW across three districts in two states. She is an avid PLTW supporter and believes the curriculum provides students with the necessary skills and knowledge to be successful in a biomedical career after high school. She has taught for 10 years.

“We are grateful to our teachers for their commitment to inspiring and empowering their students with the knowledge and transportable skills needed to thrive in our ever-changing world,” said David Greer, PLTW senior vice president and chief programs officer. “PLTW Outstanding Teachers are leaders in their classrooms and are inspiring the next generation of innovators. Lesley Magee is a model PLTW teacher.”

PLTW is a nonprofit organization that provides a transformative learning experience for pre-K-12 students and teachers across the U.S. It empowers students to develop in-demand, transportable knowledge and skills through pathways in computer science, engineering, and biomedical science. PLTW training and resources support teachers as they engage their students in real-world learning. Approximately 11,500 elementary, middle, and high schools in all 50 states and the District of Columbia offer PLTW programs. For more information on PLTW, visit pltw.org.

National Assessment Governing Board Releases Report on Mississippi’s NAEP Progress

According to a report from the National Assessment Governing Board, Mississippi students have made consistent gains in reading over the past dozen years on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), also known as the nation’s report card, making the state one of the leaders in score improvement in fourth-grade reading between 2005 and 2017.

The report, NAEP Gains Follow State’s Efforts to Improve Student Achievement, takes a close look at what has changed to improve academic performance in Mississippi, where scores are increasing faster than the national average.

“Because of the hard work of teachers and leaders, Mississippi students have made substantial gains in academic achievement, and I am thrilled to see the National Governing Board’s interest in what we are doing in the state to improve education,” said Carey Wright, state superintendent of education.

While Mississippi students still score below the national average on the NAEP, the report notes that student achievement in the state has been improving across grades and subject areas for years. The report includes comments from education, policy, and business leaders in Mississippi who attribute the student achievement gains to higher academic standards, a coordinated statewide focus on improving literacy, and greater professional support for teachers.
MORE COUNSELING, STRONGER Guidance

Building Student-Counselor Relationships in Gulfport

Gulfport High School Counselor Cecilia Zahedi (right) reviews a college website with student Amanda Monticue (center).

Gulfport High School Counselor Cecilia Zahedi (right) reviews a college website with student Amanda Monticue (center).
Cecilia Zahedi, a counselor at Gulfport High School with more than two decades of experience in education, remembers clearly when she realized the ways in which she and her colleagues interacted with students could be improved.

“About 10 years ago, when I was a senior counselor, I had a student who needed to pass a state test and get a credit or two to graduate,” she said. “So that year, I was really on him. I got him to remediation. I offered him rides if he missed the bus to school. I wanted him to graduate because I knew he could.”

Zahedi counseled the student, shepherding him through classes and, eventually, across the stage. She soon realized, however, that more needed to be done.

“The day after graduation, seniors don’t have to show up to class,” she said. “They’re done, but faculty and staff still come to school. Well, he came back the next morning; he showed up at my office door just like he had almost every day of his senior year. And he was like, ‘Hey, so, what do I do now?’”

The questioned surprised Zahedi, and she didn’t know how to answer it.

“I was stunned,” she said. “I realized how little I knew about him. I asked, ‘Do you want to go to college? What do you want to do when you grow up?’”

“I had been so focused on getting him through those state tests and getting him checked off so he could walk across that stage, and I didn’t know anything about him,” Zahedi added. “I didn’t know if he’d qualify for financial aid, what he’d need... all I cared about was getting him his diploma. I helped him, of course, and he’s fine now. But that night, I just went home and cried.”

That is when she resolved to really get to know the students with whom she worked—not just academically, and not just for a year, Zahedi said. She wanted to learn about their lives, families, and ambitions. That kind of relationship, though, takes time to develop.

So Zahedi and Gulfport School District staff began to rethink the way they administer counseling. Zahedi, other counselors, and a supportive administration hatched a plan to build strong connections between students and counselors lasting longer than two semesters. Instead of assigning students by grade level, Zahedi and Gulfport staff members began splitting up students alphabetically. This way, the counselor a student has as a freshman is the same one they’ll have as they prepare for college and careers as seniors.

“Now I know my kids,” Zahedi said. “I know where they go to church, where they live, if they have jobs, where they work, where their parents work, if they have siblings—I know their whole story.”

The success has been tremendous, but implementing the new scheme was not easy.

“Assigning by grade level was the best situation for adults,” Zahedi said, because it’s easier to break up duties...
by grade level because counselors have the same tasks each year. "But what’s best for kids is to have a constant adult in their high school lives who they know they can go to. They don't have to retell their story every time something tragic happens; they have somebody who can call home and talk to whoever answers the phone because we’ve been calling home for years."

Zahedi credits Gulfport’s administration for facilitating the transition through the hiring of additional staff.

"I’m not kidding, I would venture to say that Gulfport High School has the best setup for counseling staff in the nation," she said. "We have five counselors and a testing coordinator who also has an administrative assistant. Our counselors have administrative assistants. I have two records clerks—one ninth- and 10th-grade clerk, another 11th- and 12th-grade clerk. I have a social worker and...a certified counselor-therapist who works through a mental health agency, but her office is located on campus."

These hires make sure counselors do not get bogged down in doing the clerical and housekeeping work that limits their time with students.

"We started spending every waking moment at our schools with kids, and everything got better," Zahedi said. "Behavior got better. Attendance got better. Their grades got better. Involvement got better. Everything got better because there was a person caring constantly about the kids."

The successes of having closer and more frequent interactions with students also inspired educators to look for other ways to provide support through increased familiarity with counselors.

"In recent years, students dropping out was a problem," Zahedi said. "It wasn’t a crazy, off-the-charts problem, but we could do better. Our superintendent, Glen East, started to look at the issue and ask, ‘Who are they? Where are they?’ As counselors, we didn’t know. So our superintendent started examining the data, and he realized that we were having a dip, or a drop, in grades and attendance with ninth graders and sixth graders."

Those grades correspond to periods of significant change in students' lives as they move from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school. East realized this, and he wondered if more stability might help students.

"We felt like if they had a familiar face that transitioned them in from one school to another, then they’d have someone they knew to go to for help in any form or fashion—socially, academically, emotionally," East said.

Two years ago, Gulfport’s administration put that theory to the test when they instituted transition counselors who would follow the students to their new school for the first semester. Elementary school counselors spend the fall with their students on the middle school campus, and middle school counselors do the same at the high school. Then the counselors loop back around, spending the spring with the students who are about to graduate elementary or middle school.

"We’ve seen an increase in attendance, and we’ve seen a decrease in disciplinary referrals," East said. "We saw a slight increase in grades initially, but as they became even more comfortable, those grades really began to go up, especially at the..."
end of their first semesters and the beginning of their second. That means the comfort level has come to them much quicker than it had in the past, academically. And that’s what creating that comfort zone does for students: better attendance, less discipline, and a quicker increase in performance.”

Zahedi said these improvements have been most noticeable with ninth graders.

“Because they have a person they can go to who knows them and their ins-and-outs, I can go to those counselors with questions about a student,” she said. “They know their entire story. It’s phenomenal. The kids love it.

“Parents love it, too,” she added. “Sometimes they think we call them too much, but they feel a part of it. We meet with our parents every summer, starting with eighth-grade parents who get a 30-minute meeting with their child’s counselor. In the meetings, we go over test scores, we go over grades we go over future plans—we go over everything so the parents are involved with everything their students are doing.”

And the counselors enjoy the work, too.

“We’ve had the same counseling staff here for years. No one’s leaving, because the work is so rewarding,” Zahedi said. “We are working with kids every day, all day. There’s no burnout; every day is different.

“Some days are emotional, but we’re changing lives,” she added. “We take kids whose parents have never been to college, and we get them there. That’s changing the family tree. That’s changing the community. That’s changing our city.”

Gulfport High School student Chris Redmond (left) shakes hands with Principal Oswago Harper.

Lauderdale County Cadet Hits Perfect Mark on ACT

A Lauderdale County School District Navy JROTC cadet scored a perfect 36 on the ACT and received a full scholarship to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to study computer science.

Cadet Prince Kelly, from Northeast Lauderdale High School, was recognized at a sanctioned December meeting at Neshoba Central High School in Philadelphia. In a letter from State Superintendent of Education Carey Wright, the Mississippi Department of Education leader praised Kelly’s accomplishments and said his time in the Navy JROTC “aided [his] leadership skills and instilled in [him] the perseverance required to reach such a high goal.”

“What you accomplished is, indeed, exceptional and worthy of recognition,” Wright said in her letter.

Left to right: Master Chief Dexter Deen, Cadet Prince Kelly, and Senior Chief Kent Malone.
Nathan Oakley, the Mississippi Department of Education’s (MDE’s) new chief academic officer, has a vision of building on the department’s mission of serving and equipping students, teachers, and administrators to improve education in Mississippi.

To help accomplish that mission, Oakley, who joined the department in 2012 and moved to his current role last year, will rely on the leadership of three other veteran educators also serving in new roles.

Wendy Clemons accepted the position of executive director of secondary education in July, and October saw Tenette Smith tabbed executive director of elementary education and reading and Tom Wallace named director of career and technical education (CTE). Together, they aim to demonstrate that Mississippi’s approach to preparing students to meet the demands of tomorrow is forward thinking, innovative, and, most importantly, successful.

“That is simply no longer where we are,” Oakley said in reference to the misconception that educational initiatives in the state lag behind those in other states. “We have put stronger standards in place and have a more accurate representation of student performance. We’re seeing student proficiency, graduation rates, career-technical participation and completion, and Advanced Placement participation and outcomes among all student subgroups improve year after year.

“It’s because of the hard work that’s taking place in classrooms,” he added. “There’s no other explanation than the work of teachers, students, and parents across the state and the support from the legislature and the department.”

Clemons, who brings three decades of experience in education to her new role, has seen that progress firsthand. Her career includes stints as a lead teacher, secondary curriculum director, and K-12 building administrator in Rankin County. Clemons came to the MDE in 2015 when she joined the department as director of secondary education. She will continue to oversee professional development in her new role. Clemons draws upon her educational experiences as she crafts a plan for growth that focuses on areas such as teacher retention and tailoring education toward students’ strengths and areas of interest.

“We have talked about working very closely with our teaching and leading department—the ones out there trying to acquire good teachers and get them in the field,” Clemons said. “We’re asking ourselves, ‘What do we need to do to make sure teachers have the resources and abilities they need to be in the classroom with students every day providing the rigorous instruction?’ A lot has to do with administration. Studies show that 75% of all teachers will leave the classroom and claim it’s because of leadership, so we have to educate our administrators on how to retain quality teachers.

“As far as secondary education on the career and technical and academic sides—when we talk about college and career readiness—that looks different for every child. It’s really about helping teachers and administrators provide a customized, personalized education for our kids,” she added. “When we study graduation rates, we see the students who don’t graduate don’t see the value in what they are doing and can’t make the association between what they’re doing on a daily basis in the classroom with what they will do when they grow up. I think CTE does a fantastic job with this, and on the academic side, we can learn a lot from [CTE educators]
in personalizing and making education relevant for students.”

That personalization is what Wallace, a 21-year veteran educator and administrator who directed CTE in both Jones and Greene counties, aims to continue developing in hopes of maintaining the growth of those programs across the state.

“Mississippi sees the importance of growing our workforce and doing so as soon as possible, starting at the middle and high school levels. You can see that by our increased participation in CTE programs in the last four years,” Wallace said. “I think it has become more popular because we’ve done some things recently to change the stereotype that has so often surrounded career and technical education.”

To further chip away at the mistaken belief that CTE is for underperforming students, Wallace plans to showcase the growth of CTE through the successes of its participants.

“I am going to be a strong advocate for student organizations because that’s a spotlight we need to shine to maximize career and technical education for the state.”

The key to successful secondary and CTE programs is a strong elementary education, said Smith.

“Elementary lays the foundation that everything else is built upon,” she said. “If a child doesn’t acquire the phonemic awareness in kindergarten or pre-K, it becomes very hard to learn by the time they exit third grade. If they are missing that key component when they get to middle school and high school, and start taking science courses with multi-syllable words, it becomes difficult. Missing those key components anywhere in elementary school can impact students as they progress through grade levels.”

For Smith, literacy and elementary education have always held special places in her heart during a 23-year career that includes teaching, directing an early-childhood center, being an instruction specialist, and serving as a field coordinator at the Delta Rural Systemic Initiative. She joined the MDE in 2013 as an assistant literacy coordinator and began seeing the department’s shift in focus to service with the implementation of the Literacy-Based Promotion Act.

“We wanted to make sure teachers, administrators, and the public knew that our goal was not to retain students. Our goal was to build up teachers in developing their knowledge and skill set around the implementation of literacy,” Smith said. “To be honest, people were leery of having literacy coaches and the MDE in their building, but we wanted them to understand that our role was not an evaluative one but one of support. By putting out all of these wonderful resources and developing a menu of services that is continuing to grow, I think we have changed how people perceive the MDE.”

Under Oakley’s guidance, the new leadership wants to continue developing those resources while keeping students, teachers, and administrators at the forefront.

“This is a service-minded organization,” he said. “That’s the heart the team has here and that’s the mantra we try to bring forward. How can we best serve boys and girls? What’s at the center of our work and how is it going to positively impact students going forward?”

Left to right: Nathan Oakley, Wendy Clemons, Tenette Smith, and Tom Wallace
The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) recently released the Access for All Guide, a manual aimed at helping teachers provide quality classroom instruction through accommodations and modifications for both general education students and students with disabilities who receive instruction in general education settings.

For almost two years, MDE officials have collaborated with Mississippi State University’s Research and Curriculum Unit staff members, professional development coordinators, principals, and teachers from the elementary, middle, and high school levels to develop a guide to best help teachers serve all students.

“Because teachers will be using the guide, we wanted as many classroom teachers as possible involved in the development of the Access for All Guide,” said Bobby Richardson, office director for the MDE Office of Special Education. “It is not about changing the content. It is keeping the intent of the standard but changing the delivery.”

The guide allows teachers to turn to a specific deficit area, answer a selection of questions to address potential areas of difficulty, and then find possible strategies to assist with planning instruction.

“The deficit areas...are very helpful because we did not just focus on academics or limit [them] to students with disabilities,” said Margaret Ellmer, interim state director for Special Education for Mississippi. “We also included emotional, behavioral, and physical issues so the document could assist teachers in helping all of their students.”

Teachers were first introduced to the guide via webinar, and
they can also attend face-to-face regional trainings in eight locations across the state this spring. These sessions will be highly interactive and engaging for both elementary and secondary educators. They will be as realistic as possible, involving scenarios and role-playing so teachers can experience what it will be like to utilize the document in the classroom and leave training sessions with the confidence to use the Access for All Guide.

“We also want to do a follow-up piece eventually so that we can hear from teachers and adjust the document so it is even more helpful,” said Ashley Kazery, office director and English language arts content specialist for the Office of Secondary Education. “The document and training will be a good starting point for teachers. It’s important to remember that all students learn differently. The guide will help teachers to modify their lesson plans and accommodate students in the way they learn.”

As a fluid document, MDE officials say they hope the Access for All Guide will be adapted in the future to better help teachers and students. The guide will move from a paper document to an online resource guide in the future.

MDE officials discuss the Access For All Guide webinars. Clockwise from upper right: Bobby Richardson, Office of Special Education office director; Ashley Kazery, English-language arts specialist; Jacqueline Thweatt-Burton, professional development coordinator and behavior specialist; Amy Shelly, professional development coordinator; Teresa Laney, speech-language instructional specialist

Graduation Rate Update

The graduation rate for students with disabilities increased for the fifth consecutive year to 38.4%, up from 23.2% in 2014.

Mississippi’s high school graduation rates hit an all-time high of 84% in the 2017-2018 school year, near the national graduation rate of 84.6%.

The state’s dropout rate fell to an historic low of 10.1%, a decrease from 13.9% in 2014.
Third graders at A.W. James Elementary School promote literacy in a schoolwide reading parade.
Educators at nine Mississippi elementary schools improved their literacy instruction and boosted students’ English-language arts (ELA) scores enough in 2018 to have their respective campuses released from literacy coaching support provided by the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE).

Full release from the list of schools receiving literacy coaching is based on four criteria: decreased percentage of third graders scoring within the first or second levels of the third-grade Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) ELA Assessment, increased teacher capacity to deliver evidence-based literacy instruction, evidence of non-negotiables, and evidence of growth in areas such as teacher knowledge and student outcomes.

Administrators at those schools said it took a number of different strategies to improve literacy education outcomes—from assessments and observation to data-driven instruction and student-focused learning—and their teachers should be recognized for their hard work.

“There’s no substitute for a highly motivated, highly trained teacher in the classroom,” Dexter Attendance Center Principal Allen Dyess said.

Background

In 2013, Gov. Phil Bryant signed the Literacy-Based Promotion Act, a piece of legislation that eliminated the practice of social promotion—the promotion of students to the next grade once they reach a certain age regardless of their academic attainment.

This law raised the stakes for early elementary students and presented unique challenges for low-performing schools: All students must pass the third-grade MAAP ELA Assessment to be promoted to fourth grade.

The MDE responded to this legislation by providing support to those low-performing schools through professional development for teachers. In addition, the MDE placed literacy coaches in schools to address 11 non-negotiables, or expectations, which include the development of a school literacy plan, alignment with the Mississippi College- and Career-Readiness Standards, word walls, professional learning communities (PLCs), data walls, uninterrupted blocks of reading instruction, interactive anchor charts, writing connected to text, individual reading plans, literacy coach data access, and “learning walks” in which district and school leaders are invited to observe snapshots of classroom instruction.

“As literacy-support schools begin to show growth in our areas, we use our gradual release model,” said Kymyona Burk, the MDE’s state literacy director, in a promotional video. “So we now have schools that are receiving full support, limited support, and those schools that have now made it off our literacy support school list because of the growth and the gains that we’ve seen, not just in data but also in the culture and climate at the school.”

A.W. James Elementary School

In 2015, Barbara Akon became the principal of Sunflower County Consolidated School District’s A.W. James Elementary School in Drew right as educators began making strides toward literacy improvement.

Problematic staffing placement was one of the first obstacles she addressed, she said.

“Teachers were not where they needed to be,” Akon said. “We had a lot of long-term [substitute] teachers. That was a problem, because most of them were placed in subject areas that were being tested. So a lot of teachers were in the wrong place, so that was the first thing that I had to deal with and get people in place.”

Having a Head Start program housed at the school helped Akon recognize the need for change at the earliest levels of education. She worked with the district and the MDE to implement a more rigorous preschool curriculum.

“More active teaching was taking place, and therefore our children were learning more. As the students matriculated, they were able to—by the time they got to third grade—be in a better place as far as their
academic support and what they knew,” she explained.

Keeping parents informed and adjusting their mindsets, Akon said, also contributed to the school’s success. Parents of students as young as preschool were involved so they could learn about the new requirements and curriculum changes, and second-grade parents were encouraged to attend meetings with third-grade parents to prepare them for the future.

Literacy coaches helped guide the changes at A.W. James, and their aid was welcomed. One of the coaches who worked with the school, Ashanti Barnes, said the staff’s openness to receiving help and instruction made the coaching process very easy for her.

“Working at A.W. James was delightful because the teachers wanted the professional development,” she said. “They thrived because they were always willing to try the strategies or use the recommendations that took place. They were always ready to implement the best practices and even the non-negotiables. They were always ready because they had the mindset of doing what was best for children.”

Part of a literacy coach’s job is to access student data and help educators analyze and plan instruction around it. Data transparency with teachers, parents, and students became a high priority at A.W. James.

“We take our data—we want to make sure that our students know where they are and how many points they need to be on the next level—and we share it with them,” explained Tramainia Cooper, a current fourth-grade and former third-grade ELA teacher at A.W. James. “We’re always reminding them—they see it in the class, in the hallway, and on the wall in the data room, so they’re used to seeing their data everywhere. They know exactly where they are and where they need to be.”

The hard work of A.W. James’ educators, literacy coaches, students, and parents paid off: The school showed growth not only in literacy but across the board, going from a D rating in 2015 to a B for the 2016-2017 academic year.

Akon has no plans to stop there.

“This is our second year of being a B-rated school, so we’re working very,
very hard this year. We want to move from the B level to the A level,” she said.

**Dexter Attendance Center**

Dexter Attendance Center, a Tylertown school in the Walthall County School District currently housing kindergarten through seventh grade, also tackled staffing woes.

After experiencing some teacher turnover at the beginning of the literacy accountability process, Dyess prioritized filling those positions with experienced teachers.

Teachers at Dexter also added more instructional time for ELA in their schedules and devoted 90-minute blocks of time every morning for students to focus on reading, spelling, and writing.

Second- and third-grade teacher Amanda Porter sought technology to help students achieve objectives, bringing a variety of curricular resources—Phonics First, Open Court, Heggerty, and Journeys, for example—into the classroom to address individual student needs.

“We all worked extremely hard trying to meet the needs of each student,” Porter said. “It is essential to reach out to every child in order for all of them to learn and understand the concepts being taught.”

Casey Sullivan, the MDE’s assistant state literacy coordinator, is a former literacy coach who aided Dexter’s educators. Like A.W. James’ coaches, Sullivan said she felt Dexter’s educators’ receptiveness was paramount to their success. She was also impressed with what they accomplished as a very small-population community school in which some teachers teach two different grade levels in one classroom. These combinations include those grades affected most by the Literacy-Based Promotion Act, kindergarten and first grade, which are merged into one classroom.

“They have to be innovative in how they choose to group students in classes. Those teachers have to be really intentional about differentiating instruction for all of the students at both grade levels within the classroom,” she said. “I think a real strength among those teachers has been their planning to be able to differentiate for the different individual students, as well as the different grade levels in their classroom, and making a conscious
Incentives for students played a role in Dexter’s improvements as well. Each month, a high-performing “student of the month” was featured in the local newspaper, an honor that came with a free T-shirt. Students who were not necessarily high performers but did show growth in math or ELA were also honored as “growth kings and queens.” Additionally, students who scored in the efficient or advanced range on their MAAP ELA assessment were rewarded with pizza and a trip to the movie theater.

Communication was also a key factor in improving outcomes. In addition to the PLCs mandated in the non-negotiables, educators at Dexter and elsewhere in the district formed teams to keep up with accountability measures coming down the pipeline and monitor progress. A member of each PLC reports to a school leadership team consisting of the principal and lead teachers, after which the principal reports to the district leadership team.

The work of Dyess, Porter, and other Dexter educators is paying off, too; the school’s accountability rating went from an F to a C.

Aberdeen Elementary School

Aberdeen Elementary School Principal Kristen Fondren credits her school’s use of focused, small-group instruction, along with technology and high-quality materials, for its release from the literacy support program.

“We have just really focused on intense instruction, as far as not wasting a minute in the classroom,” she explained. “The teachers are very efficient at doing all their morning business very quickly, then they hit instruction at 8 a.m. They have an uninterrupted, 90-minute reading block in all rooms throughout the building. They are in small groups. So normally the teacher is going to see each of their students in a small group of no more than three to four every single day in reading and in math.”

AES prioritizes meeting individual student needs by increasing the student-teacher ratio during these critical learning times. In addition to teaching assistants, special-area teachers also provide one-on-one aid as needed.

AES’s use of data complements educators’ personalized teaching approach. Fondren explained how each year, summative assessment data from August is compared with mid-point screening results from December.

“We take a look at that, and we devise a plan,” said Fondren. “Each year, the plan has been different, because we want to cater to the needs of the students. The tests may remain the same from year to year, but students may not—the needs of the students will change.”

Their approach has paid off—Fondren and AES have celebrated a 100% pass rate on the third-grade MAAP ELA assessment for the past few years.

The Literacy-Based Promotion Act prioritizes the crucial skill of reading in student attainment and challenges educators and students who have struggled in this area. Nine schools and their literacy coaches put in the work to not only overcome these obstacles, but also to put into place new cultures, instructional practices, and schoolwide habits to ensure growth continues and more students enter fourth grade ready for reading success.
MISSISSIPPI STATE BOARD OF EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

Suggs Brings Business Perspective to State School Board

Will Graves

Mississippi State Board of Education (SBE) members play a vital role in ensuring students have the tools they need to succeed in Mississippi. One board member brings a wealth of industry experience to the table after almost 21 years at Toyota.

Sean Suggs, president of Toyota Motor Manufacturing Mississippi, brings a business perspective to the SBE and has a passion for making sure students are college and career ready.

One way he has contributed to this mission is through the Imagine the Possibilities Career Fair. Since its launch in 2015, more than 20,000 eighth graders and 100 companies have participated in the expo. The objective behind the career fair is to get students acclimated to a manufacturing career or a career of their choice so they will be motivated after high school.

Suggs emphasizes the importance of workforce development because of the number of good jobs available in the state.

“We are not only trying to produce students who will graduate high school,” he said. “We’re also trying to make sure they are workforce ready. A little over 30% of Mississippi high school graduates don’t go to college. I want to have them ready for employment with some of the great companies in the state.

“It’s a big need in Mississippi to make sure we have viable and reliable talent in young folks who will come and work at our companies,” he added. “That’s why I think about how to tap into the talent that’s here and give these students some opportunities to make a good living for their families.”

A major influence in Suggs’ professional life is his family. He is happily married with six children, all of whom have encouraged him as he worked his way up throughout the years. In some way, this is reflected in his service to Mississippi’s students—he’s simply trying to help them make it in a good career so they can support their own families.

On any given day, Suggs wears many different hats. He says working with State Superintendent of Education Carey Wright and other members of the SBE helps him get out of his element and provide real solutions for Mississippians.

“I think having all these different synergies on the board will help propel our state forward,” Suggs said. “Take me, for example. I’m not an educator, but I can bring a different perspective on how the board operates. For me, I’m excited about it because it gets me out of my comfort zone and stretches me out so I can learn about some of the things that really matter in the state. I want to help Mississippi be the best state in the country, and that is just a small contribution to make that happen.”
If you believe computer science can’t make you move, think again.

Students in three Mississippi school districts got out of their seats and danced along with digital avatars they created during Hour of Code events facilitated by the Research and Curriculum Unit’s (RCU’s) Center for Cyber Education (CCE) last year and in January.

The Hour of Code, held each December during Computer Science Education Week, is a one-hour event launched by Mississippi State University partner Code.org as a way to introduce computer science to students, boost participation in the growing field, and show coding is much more than a string of zeroes and ones on a screen.

“So many people think of coding as just a logic- and math-based activity. Coding can be a creative outlet, and this activity helps students see how the creative side comes into play,” said Shelly Hollis, the assistant director of the CCE.

“Students learn something about coding while being creative and putting their personal touches on their very own dance. Being able to try some of
the moves themselves adds another level to the activity,” she added. “We really want to help students who are drawn to artistic kinds of things see how they can use coding to express those ideas. Computer science is going to be impacting so many fields, and [the Hour of Code] is a way to make connections.”

State educators are hopeful a new pilot program will increase those connections and drum up students’ interest in the expanding field.

The Mississippi Department of Education, in partnership with the RCU, launched the Computer Science for Mississippi initiative—also known as CS4MS—four years ago with the aim of establishing a pipeline of curricula and professionally developed instructors for all schools by the 2023-2024 academic year. More than 75 districts have participated in the program since its inception.

The need for increased computer science education in Mississippi’s classrooms is apparent: Although approximately 1,300 computer science-related jobs are currently available in the state, only about 155 students in the state’s institutions of higher learning earn a degree in computer science each year.

“With the right teachers and the right curricula in place, we believe we can close that gap,” Hollis said. “Little things, like the Hour of Code, can make a difference and possibly motivate students to continue on in the field.”

‘It was a really cool day’

As Franklin County Middle School (FCMS) eighth graders laughed and danced along with their digital creations in December, Technology Foundations instructor Kathy Pollard said she recognized the best educational strategy for teaching students was occurring right in front of her: Let them have fun.

“The great thing about activities like this is that the students are learning while playing a game, and they enjoy that,” she said. “My kids have already been exposed to coding and computer science before this class—some have even made apps. They were talking about how much fun they have playing games like that.”

Hollis’ December visit to the Meadville campus involved two groups of eighth graders and a session with district teachers and administrators. Additional CCE-facilitated Hour of Code events in Leland and Columbus also featured sessions with community stakeholders as a way to highlight the importance of computer science education to local residents.

“We are so inundated with making sure we teach to the standards and have high test scores, so it’s refreshing having someone like Shelly, who knows her stuff about computer science, come in so we don’t have to stress about being experts in something that’s so new to us,” said FCMS Principal Lisa Storey. “Shelly showed us lesson plans, what students could do, and what teachers can do. She spent the whole day basically laying it out there for us and showing us this world is out there. It was a really cool day to learn things.”

Hollis said she enjoys seeing both students and teachers embrace the activities and catch on to coding and computer science.

“We need to make sure that our students are involved in the workforce, so it’s refreshing having someone like Shelly come in and teach you how to teach it,” Hollis said. “It’s great to see the interest in those students, because Hour of Code normally doesn’t focus on that age group.

“Also during the session for administrators in Leland, the district’s superintendent was there. He was struggling a bit, but then there was a piece that clicked and he got it,” Hollis added. “There was a person seated behind him still struggling, so he gets up and announces to the room, ‘Let me go help her.’ It was good to see that anyone can tackle this and pick it up.”

Removing Barriers

In addition to hosting Hour of Code events and serving as the RCU’s and CCE’s point person for CS4MS, Hollis will turn her attention this year to a new project aimed at understanding

A Code.org-sponsored study with Broward County, Florida students in grades 3-5 revealed students who participated in additional coding activities scored significantly higher on state tests in reading, math, science, and English.

Visit medium.com/@codeorg/code-org-resourceful-teachers-higher-student-achievement-8be1efdec06e for more information.
why many Mississippi Delta schools are not embracing computer science education.

Begun in 2018, Identifying Barriers to Participation in Computer Science Education in Rural Mississippi has two primary goals: gain a better understanding of how people there perceive computer science and identify obstacles preventing more widespread interest in the field.

The two-year program is funded by a $300,000 National Science Foundation grant and is conducted in partnership with Mississippi Valley State University and Mississippi Delta Community College.

Stereotypes about what computer science is or who can be successful in the field could stymie the interest of students wanting to learn more about the subject, Hollis said.

“Because we can all get caught up in making sure our students are proficient in the basics—reading, writing, and mathematics—we sometimes don’t recognize the value that learning something new like computer science can bring to those basic skills while also equipping them for the emerging careers of tomorrow,” she said.

“We think we know what some of those barriers are already. But sometimes, these preconceived notions keep us from really getting to the root causes and getting a true understanding of what is happening in the area,” Hollis added. “We might already know some of the issues, but there might be more. There may be things there we don’t truly understand.”

To gain a realistic perspective of computer science perspectives in the Delta, individual focus groups comprised of students, teachers, parents, counselors, administrators, and community members will be formed and surveyed in individual school districts. As barriers are identified, Hollis said, teachers will be asked to go back into their classrooms and hold computer science-related activities to expose students to the subject.

“We’re facilitating these meetings to identify actual barriers and develop workable solutions because the people impacted are a valued, integral part of the process,” she said. “We aren’t just coming in, pointing fingers, and offering ways to fix everything.”

Additionally, computer science camps will be held for students, teachers, administrators, and counselors in the summer, and researchers will resurvey focus groups in the fall to see if perceptions have changed. A future grant, Hollis said, could help fund localized teacher trainings and professional development.

“Nationally, getting computer science into rural areas is a challenge. If we can take what we learn here and show some successes, we may be able to help others in the future.”
A new social studies curriculum will be implemented in Mississippi’s public schools this fall after the Mississippi State Board of Education (SBE) approved updated standards last year.

The curriculum writing process takes time, thoughtful organization, and detailed planning. One key leader in the process was Jennifer Nance, the current office director for career and technical education and social studies curriculum director at the Mississippi Department of Education. From the start, Nance said she knew she needed a strong team to help facilitate the process of updating the social studies curriculum and get approval from the SBE for implementation into classrooms.

“To build this team, I had a map of Mississippi,” Nance said. “With each teacher application that came in, I put them in a congressional district. I wanted to visualize a cross section of Mississippi and the quality of applicants from across the state. After looking at each application, I had my team built at about 44 people by June of 2016.”

Nance and her team began meeting during the fall semester of 2016 to start laying the framework for the new standards. The first step was going through the 2011 curriculum with a fine-tooth comb to ensure every team member had a grasp of what was already in the document. Teachers then collaborated and made decisions that helped move the process forward. Nance and her team evaluated national trends and trends from other states, observed states that were in the process of a social studies curriculum update, and looked for guidance from organizations that rate curriculum standards.

Teaching social studies is based on the expanding horizons theory, meaning each grade level builds upon content learned from previous courses. Once Nance and her team had a plan, they started looking at each individual course to update the curriculum. Part of their task involved reaching out to other teachers and collecting feedback on how to make the curriculum better for students and teachers alike. Nance says a common request by teachers was specificity.

“The original standards, or frameworks as we called them, were very broad,” Nance said. “It was very difficult for a new teacher or a teacher who was being moved into a new course to know exactly what the curriculum required them to teach. Collectively, teachers wanted specificity added to the new document so they can pick up the document and know what to teach and how to teach it.”

The drafting process was difficult because teachers were spread out across the state, but the team was still able to meet via webinars. Team members were given assignments to complete ahead of big meetings, so all documents were prepared when they convened.

In total, the process of completing a draft of the new curriculum, sending it to the board of education for comments, and updating the final document for consideration took a year and a half. Nance said she looks forward to the upcoming fall semester when the new curriculum will be launched in classrooms across the state. She is also helping teachers prepare by offering professional development opportunities, and educators will be able to access an online webinar on the new curriculum.

Nance said the overall outcome she hopes to see when the updated curriculum standards are fully implemented is teachers invested in teaching the material to their students.

“I hope to see the hook where teachers are engaged in what they do,” Nance said. “When they have hooked those students into history and tell the story of greats from the past, they can become lifelong learners. I’m hoping teachers take what is in their curriculum and engage their students in it.”
Florence Middle School eighth grader Angel Evans uses a Raspberry Pi to create Python code commands that will instruct devices to collect weather data during 2018’s Summer Tech Camp.
A group of students uses remote controls to direct robots in front of a green screen while their classmates film the action. Across the room, a pupil waves her arms while wearing a virtual reality device, grasping at another environment thousands of miles away, or perhaps hundreds of years in the past. A 3-D printer hums in the corner, churning out parts students will soon assemble into a robot they will program themselves. Computers and high-definition monitors line the walls.

Today’s school libraries bear little resemblance to the austere “Shhh” factories of the past. They’re integrating technology, encouraging socialization, and serving as hubs of innovation, and they’re doing so with evidence-based strategies that contribute to student growth.

The key behind these transformations is reimagining the library as a place where students and faculty collaborate on projects, get real-world training, and think creatively about their classwork. The foundation for these innovations is the makerspace concept, which holds that the process of creation—actively designing and constructing anything from a robot to a screenplay—engages and challenges students in ways that promote intellectual development.

Librarians Debbie Martin, of Florence Middle School, and Rachel Kiepe, who works at Neshoba Central High School, are two of the minds behind these new libraries that aim to serve students more effectively by appealing to their interests. Central to that mission, they say, is being willing to adapt.

“Librarians have to keep evolving,” said Martin. “We have to keep staying ahead of the trends.”

Kiepe added, “We’re constantly looking at new ways to do things and figuring out the best way for kids to use the libraries. Our big thing is to get kids engaged and then loving it.”

Martin said she was initially skeptical when the makerspace concept was first incorporated, but seeing it work in other libraries erased her hesitations.

“I thought, ‘Is this just the flavor of the month?’ But when I started exploring how other librarians were doing it, though, I found that it was so much more than just Legos,” she said.

Kiepe shares Martin’s viewpoint about the makerspace concept and jokingly compared the new concept to “learning centers on steroids.”

The difference between a typical library and one that embraces makerspace pedagogy is striking.

“You walk into our library, and it looks different than others,” said Neshoba County School District Superintendent Lundy Brantley. “We keep the library as up to date as we possibly can, and we use technology...
to help our staff grow and get better every day.”

**Linking the Library to the Classroom**

Though the technology is new, the ultimate goal is the same: to increase students’ reading and language skills by offering an array of resources. Central to that mission is linking their library work with the lessons they’re learning in their other courses.

“We help bridge the gap between technology and media and traditional classes. The next big thing is going to be coding and 3-D printing, and if we can be ahead of the trend with that, then we can help the teachers adapt to the change. And to get kids to change over and make that change, we have to make these changes throughout the school,” Martin said. “Kids become knowledgeable about new technology when they get it in every single class, in every single subject area. The role of the librarian is to be that bridge.”

The implementation of technology in curricula can take a number of forms. For example, Florence students wrote a story and then coded Sphero robots—round little bots that look like a cousin of Star Wars’ BB8—to act out the narrative for an English class. The students filmed and edited the story, too, and in so doing learned about plot, narrative structure, and storytelling.

Also, Kiepe’s library received a grant from the Community Foundation of East Mississippi that helped purchase e-readers.

“We’re really trying to get kids familiar with e-books,” she explained. “So many of the textbooks in college are going to e-books, and they have to learn how to work with those. The future of reading is computer-based.”

Martin’s library received two virtual reality glasses, the Oculus Rift and Oculus Go, this year. Although they initially were used more for gaming, the glasses also provide students with new learning experiences, including the ability to explore the virtual worlds of female scholars they are studying in science courses.

“You can pick up a picture of Marie Curie that’s on her desk, and it takes them through a memory that she had, such as seeing that she worked in a mud lab. And they see Jane Goodall out in the jungle—they see that both didn’t work in ideal conditions. I think that helps [students] see that you can’t operate in an optimal environment and they weren’t perfect when they started either.”

**Creation and Engagement**

These libraries aren’t just incorporating technology for technology’s sake. Though there’s a lot of flash in the library, students still create in more traditional ways. In Neshoba, Kiepe’s students are conducting research on the area’s indigenous population through a grant from the Choctaw Heritage Project, a program that sponsors investigations into the culture, legacy, and future of the region’s band of Choctaw Native Americans.

“It’s Choctaw cultural education,” Kiepe explained. “We study Choctaw cooking and their oral traditions. It’s a social-emotional learning program. We want students to appreciate diverse cultures, so we ask students to consider what our community would be like if they’d never been here.”

That’s not the only research her students are doing. Kiepe said her students are also studying oral histories of the Choctaw, as well as the Neshoba County Fair and the Civil Rights Movement in the area.

“We’re doing it in a way that’s respectful for everybody, but we look at it honestly to see where we were and where we’ve come to now,” Kiepe said. “We just want to make sure that these stories aren’t lost.”

In addition to developing an appreciation of diversity through research projects, Kiepe also makes inclusion a central goal of the programs at Neshoba.

“We’re trying to be global without library services,” Kiepe said. “We want everyone included.”

**“Intelligence is not fixed; it grows, and makerspace does that. Most of us fail, and we try and try again until we succeed.”**

Rachel Kiepe, Neshoba Central High School Librarian
Being inclusive and learning new skills is what these libraries are all about. Martin said the makerspace is able to replace students’ fixed mindsets with growth mindsets.

“Intelligence is not fixed; it grows, and makerspace does that,” she said. “Most of us fail, and we try and try again until we succeed.”

Kiepe agreed, adding that only through engagement do students grow. “We want to be a level 1 school,” she said. “And this is one of the biggest keys: getting kids to read, to use tools, to do research, to do project-based, hands-on learning to where they’re not just engaged but loving it.”

**Mississippi Educator Named St. Jude Math-A-Thon Coordinator of the Year**

Former Oak Grove Central Elementary School teacher Sherry Anderson was selected as the 2018 Coordinator of the Year for the St. Jude Math-A-Thon, America’s largest education-based fundraising program.

Last year was the first time the DeSoto County School District participated in St. Jude’s Math-A-Thon, a fundraiser that develops students’ math skills while emphasizing the value of service. In only two weeks, students raised more than $25,000.

Anderson, who is now the principal at Lewisburg Elementary School, said sharing the stories of patients and emphasizing the purpose of the St. Jude mission—finding cures and saving children—encouraged students and community members to contribute.

“I shared stories about St. Jude and their patients every morning with students,” Anderson said. “I showed them statistics about the cure rates and how every penny they donate goes to help save a child. No donation is too small. From there, the money just started coming.”

When the fundraiser began, Anderson said she was overjoyed to see students bringing in their own money, gifts from the tooth fairy, and allowance. It was then Anderson said she knew students understood small contributions add up and make a real difference.

The reward of participating in the Math-A-Thon was seeing students get excited about coming together to support St. Jude’s patients. Anderson said she wanted to teach students the importance of giving back to others.

“I believe it is important to involve students in fundraisers to support others,” she said. “It builds character and shows students how good it feels to give back to others. It teaches others that no matter how much or how little you have, you can make a difference and possibly change a life. If we continue to promote and encourage students to help one another, the world could be such a better place.”
STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Kaitlyn Green

Senior at Natchez High School, Natchez-Adams School District

What is your favorite subject?

My favorite subject is math because of the inquiry-based, problem-solving strategies and techniques that are implemented to arrive at a concrete answer. I've always been interested in the way numbers and letters work together. That may be hard for some, but I love a good challenge.

Who is your favorite teacher or school employee? Why?

Ms. Dawson, my dual-credit composition instructor, is my favorite teacher because of her assistive feedback on my strengths and weaknesses in composition and her supportive advice as to how I should handle any situation. Although English has never been my favorite subject, her refusal to let me settle, insistence on improvement, and mother-like conduct of tough love showed helped me maximize my potential.

What accomplishments as a student are you most proud of?

I am most proud of my current ranking of valedictorian of my graduating class. Throughout my life, I’ve aspired to be at the top of my class. It’s a goal I have worked tirelessly to attain, as so many in my family have done before me. I’ve also had the honor of holding membership in multiple organizations, including: 4-H, Health Occupation Students of America (HOSA-Future Health Professionals), Key Club International (president), Mayor’s Youth Council, National Beta Club, Natchez High School cheer and softball teams, and the National Honor Society. I have maintained a 4.0 GPA as a member of these wonderful organizations.

What club, organization, or sport do you enjoy participating in the most? Why is it important to you?

My passion for giving and volunteering is best demonstrated through my participation in the Natchez Mayor’s Youth Council. Through the organization, I am an active voice for my peers and also an influence in policy and decision-making for the youth of my community. It is important for young people to have a voice in our community and local government. We are the future, and knowing that you have a chance to influence the future is a great feeling.

What jobs or careers interest you the most? Why?

Anesthesia interests me the most because it will allow me to unite my passion for math and my scientific inquisitiveness to assist others before, during, and after medical procedures. In addition to becoming an anesthesiologist, I would also like to research and find cures to different deficiencies and illnesses. A career in which I do what I love, all while helping to improve others’ health and lifestyles, is what I am most interested in pursuing.
TEACHER SPOTLIGHT

Stella Turman

Eight-year educator currently teaching third grade at Henderson Ward Stewart Elementary School, Starkville-Oktibbeha Consolidated School District

Why did you become a teacher?
I love children! They are so much more fun than adults. Seriously, though, I wanted to help make a difference by influencing children and being a support system for them. They need to know they can accomplish their goals, and they need to have people who support them and help them reach those goals. I want to be that person!

How do you motivate your students?
It is so important to build relationships with students. They know if you truly care or not, and when you care about them, they want to be at school. I think it is also so important to focus on the positive things. People need positive reinforcement. When you are recognized for doing good things, it makes you want to do even better.

What advice would you give first-year teachers?
There will be some tough days, but keep going and reach out for help. Teachers need other teachers as a support system. Remember that if teaching was easy, everyone would do it.

What has been your greatest success as a teacher?
A student once told his mom, “I used to hate school, but I love school now. I am so glad I get to go. I used to be dumb, but you know what, I’m actually really smart.” Hearing this from a student in my room—knowing I am helping students find success within themselves and knowing that they feel loved and respected—brings me all the joy I could ask for.
As a kindergarten special education inclusion teacher at Fair Elementary School in Louisville, 19-year teaching veteran Robin Thompson has her hands in both the traditional and special education worlds. Like other inclusion teachers, Thompson spends part of her day working with small groups of special education students in her own classroom and with other teachers in their classrooms by assisting both general and special education students alike with written work and other needs. Whether in her own classroom or another’s, she has a variety of tools to make learning fun and support her students’ individual needs.

**Spelling Card Games and Rhyming Puzzles**

Some of Thompson’s favorite items are games and puzzles designed to bring a fun, tactile experience to reading simple words. One of those is a card game in which students use cards with letters to spell three-letter words that match a picture on another card.

“In kindergarten, we focus on CVC words—consonant, vowel, consonant. So we look at a picture—’bat’—and depending on their ability, they may just have two cards to choose from, [or] they may have three or more cards to choose from,” she said. “They have to look at each letter, say the letter and the sound, and decide which one makes the sound.”

Her students are also fans of a rhyming word puzzle. Each puzzle piece has one CVC word on it, and students must pair two pieces together.

“The puzzle pieces only fit together if the words rhyme,” she said.

**Weighted Blankets**

Thompson also provides small, weighted blankets to students with attention or fidgeting problems. Students lay the blankets over their laps while doing classwork.

“Sometimes it’ll help them to just settle down and be able to focus on what they’re doing,” she explained. “And I have a couple of students that I have an extra one to put in their classroom for them to use when they need it in there, too.”

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Left: Picture magnets  
Right: Reading highlighter
Reading Highlighter

A special bookmark with a thin, transparent strip that isolates one line of text on a page is another tool Thompson gives students to help them focus when reading.

“It’s a reading highlighter, and you only highlight the exact part you’re reading,” she said. “It helps a lot of them to stay focused on just what they’re doing.”

Sand Writing Tray

A shallow box with a layer of sand turns letter-writing practice into a pleasant sensory experience for Thompson’s students.

“The kids write a letter in the sand [with their fingers],” she said. “They love anything that they can get messy, that they can doodle with, and get their hands in. So that really motivated them to try to do their letters, and they tend to remember it better when they do something like that.”

Picture Magnets

Magnets depicting objects provide Thompson’s students with helpful visual elements when learning to read CVC words. She writes a list of words on a whiteboard for students to match with their respective magnets.

“They find the picture, and they have to find the correct word and match the picture to the word,” she explained. “They’ve done really well with it.”
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