

SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES FOR RAISING THE Bar

Using Data, Staffing, and Instructional Programs for Student Gain

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Each year, public schools in the state of Mississippi receive an accountability rating from the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE). Beginning with the 2016-2017 school year, schools that earned a rating of F were engaged in an interview process led by the MDE Office of School Improvement (OSI) that provided schools with a platform to conduct a needs assessment. Using information from this assessment, schools developed improvement plans that addressed high-leverage areas of leadership, curriculum and instruction, professional development, climate and safety, and assessment.

This interview process and plan development is a proven strategy for improvement, according to the Council of Chief State School Officers, and it is an integral part to the overall guidance schools receive from the OSI. However, each school is different—therefore the plans developed are unique and targeted for individual needs.

But what does it take—really—to move the needle and raise a school's accountability ranking? We sat down with some of these schools who began the 2016-2017 school year with an accountability rating of F, but by the conclusion of the school year had demonstrated improvement that resulted in significantly moving the needle.

Identify, Track, Follow Through, and Follow Up

O'Bannon Elementary School, Greenville

First among the six values O'Bannon Elementary School touts on its website is “All children can and will learn,” followed by “Higher expectations result in higher achievement.” These student-centered values set a tone for the school that success is not only important but inevitable if the right expectations are set.

In 2016, O'Bannon Elementary, part of the Western Line School District in Greenville, was rated F on the statewide accountability system. Just one year later, the school

received an A rating—a dramatic improvement by any standard but not necessarily a shocking one to the district itself.

When asked about how O'Bannon Elementary moved from an F to an A rating in one school year, superintendent Larry Green pointed to three key areas: coaching, progress monitoring, and quality staff.

Like many elementary schools across the state, O'Bannon benefited from a concentrated, statewide effort to deploy literacy coaches into schools to support the goals of the Literacy Based Promotion Act, which mandates that students must be reading on grade level by the third grade in order to advance to fourth grade. This literacy coach was “instrumental” to O'Bannon's improved accountability rating, said Green.

Progress monitoring, a strategy with which many schools are familiar, was another tactic for moving the school up in the rankings. At O'Bannon, however,



simply monitoring was not enough. Rather, the monitoring was used to guide improvement strategies and remediation, particularly for students in the lowest quartile.

“One of the most helpful things was [progress monitoring] every nine weeks,” said Green. “If we find [students] in the lower 25%, we bring in the assistant teachers and others to help them. That is vital—identifying, tracking, follow-through, and follow-up.”

Finally, Green attributed quality staff as a major component to school improvement. This focus on teacher quality is common in improvement conversations; however, when Green describes quality he means more than teaching ability. Certainly, teaching matters, but Green explained other characteristics of teachers are important to school improvement as well.

“You can’t [make improvements] without good staff, and they were absolutely not going to take another F, and that shows a lot of pride in the staff and determination. It really did

make a difference with that school and the parents because they were really excited about [the improved letter rating.]”

Redefining Academic Excellence

*Viola E. Lake Elementary School,
Jackson*

Moving from an F in 2016 to a B in 2017, Viola E. Lake Elementary School of Jackson Public Schools also focused on data use in its improvement strategy, but using data strategically isn’t as easy as it sounds.

Clockwise from upper left (Lake Elementary School):

- English language arts teacher Tiffany Benson initiates instruction to a group of B-rated school scholars.
- Principal Lekeisha Sutton leads students on super-hero-themed parade in 2017 to celebrate achieving a “B” accountability score.
- Mathematics teacher Jannifer Frank gives personal attention to her students.

“We had a vision of academic excellence for all children, but we had to determine what academic excellence looks like,” said LaKeisha Sutton, principal of the school.

Often when educators and leaders discuss data-driven decision-making, they are referencing student performance on state tests or progress-monitoring testing platforms. Although these data were a part of Lake Elementary’s strategy, Sutton decided on a broader definition of data to drive a more well-rounded improvement plan. To tackle the difficult task of moving

up in school ranking, Sutton and her leadership team collected and analyzed a host of data, including teacher-evaluation ratings, academic areas of strength and deficit for individual students, percentages of students scoring at least Proficient on state tests, and more.

This holistic view of data led to more conversations among teachers and staff about how to truly drive improvement.

“When we looked at [the state] standards, and staff began to look at lesson plans, and we began discussing how we could do things differently—that’s how the change began. Then we began having regular conversations about data, regular conversations about children, regular conversations about specific needs of students and attacking those needs with differentiated instruction,” said Sutton.

She also decided students needed buy-in to their academic success, so teachers and students worked together to set individualized growth goals. At the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year, teachers met with students, and together they developed a plan for meeting or exceeding their goals, a process Sutton said gave students ownership of their performance and made them feel more involved in their improvement.

“We make a big deal when we see students moving forward. We know every child may not be proficient, but as long as they are showing significant growth, we are excited and celebrate those successes,” Sutton said.

To drive school improvement, Sutton, who became principal in 2016, also made substantial operational changes at Lake Elementary by extending the school day and reorganizing the staff.

Extending the school day to 5 p.m. allowed teachers and administrators to address individual needs more fully. Through this extended learning, over half of the school’s students received an additional two hours of education on a daily basis, which led to increased instructional time and allowed more individualized attention.

The staff reorganization better aligned teachers to their interests and areas of strength and developed a school leadership team as a decision-making body for the school.

Jannifer Frank, who teaches fourth- and fifth-grade math at the school, credits the staff reorganization as an integral part of the school’s improvement thus far: “It was exciting to see the new administrator come in and reorganize our staff and to be departmentalized based on our strengths, which impacted the children as well because the teachers were teaching the subjects they really loved.”

These organizational shifts, Sutton said, allowed her to capitalize on an existing, strong teaching force and help answer that initial question: What does academic excellence look like?

“When you see an F rating you have a certain perception. You think you have a group of teachers who are ineffective, you think about a culture of students who can’t learn, or that the school is out of control, or you

have a lack of community support, and none of that was evident at Lake,” she said. “When I came in...I saw a group of teachers who were invested in the school, who are committed to the school, and who are committed to the children at Lake, so doing the work wasn’t hard. We just had to redefine what the work looked like and make a few instructional shifts to get to where we are.”

Addressing the Whole Child

Earl Travillion Attendance Center, Hattiesburg

Earl Travillion Attendance Center of Forrest County School District in Hattiesburg serves students in prekindergarten through eighth grade, so the challenges and opportunities vary across the grades and ages of students.

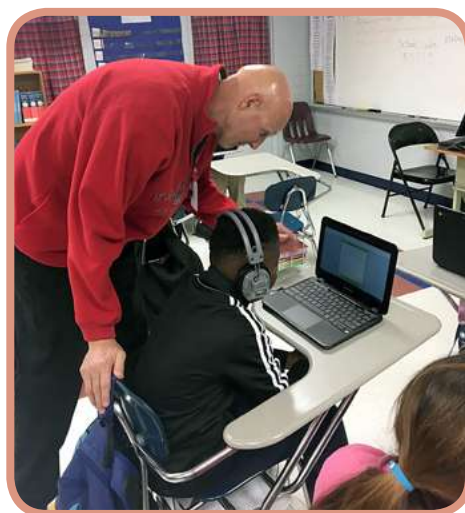
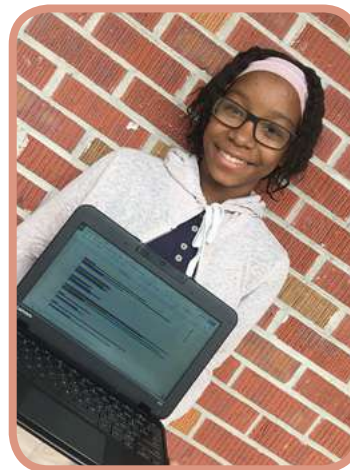
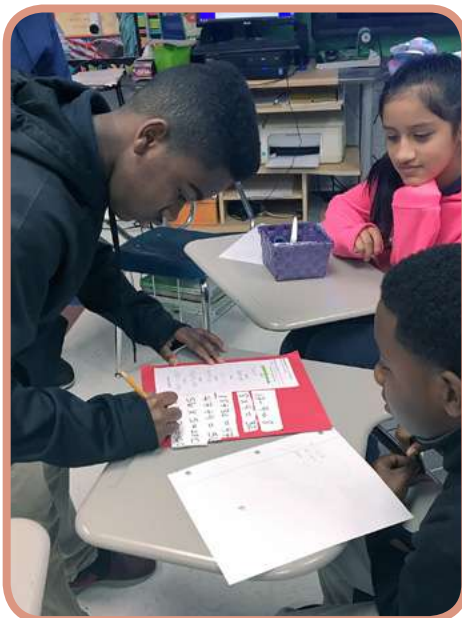
Despite this variance, principal Kristina Pollard can point to two major changes that have brought her school success: an extended-learning program and increased opportunity for collaboration for teachers.

In the 2015-2016 school year, Earl Travillion was one of the lowest F schools in the state, said Pollard, who quickly implemented a new program called Tiger Time, which allotted 30-45 minutes every day for individualized tutoring on deficit areas. The school then transitioned to a schoolwide extended-learning program that adds “two hours a day three times a week every week of the school year.” In total, students get about 300 additional instructional hours over the course of a school year.

You might expect a longer school day to result in restless students

Clockwise from upper left
(Forrest County):

- From left: Students Jeremiah Parks, Yeraldi Pio, and Omarion Reed collaborate on a math lesson.
- Student Keiwantha Thompson shows graphs developed in a science lesson during extended learning time.
- Teacher Hall Redfearn provides one-on-one instruction.



and increased discipline referrals, but Pollard and her staff have built in provisions, such as additional physical education time and a snack to divert unwanted behavior. They also implemented mindfulness, relaxation, art, and other activities to give the students a variety of ways to cope with a longer school day.

"If you want them to have that sharp attention, you've got to feed that brain with energy and keep that blood pumping," said Pollard.

As with any new program, buy-in was an initial challenge for Pollard and her team, so she planned an aggressive public relations campaign early on to convince faculty and parents of the benefits of an extended-learning program.

"In the beginning, it was scary for some, but once we kicked the program off, we had 100% participation from our staff," said Pollard.

To get this buy-in from teachers, Pollard provides them two hours every Wednesday to work in collaborative teams to discuss and address student and school needs—

and this time is paid. Pollard noted teachers are often asked to tutor after school or take their work home for no compensation, but with additional funds, she can pay them for the extra hours and added work. This additional time to focus on addressing school needs means teachers have a little extra money in their pockets and students receive benefits of a teaching staff that has more time to work together professionally and to collaboratively plan learning goals.

To convince parents, Pollard showed the monetary and peace-of-mind benefits they would reap from having their children at school longer.

"For one, [the program] saved parents money because they had decreased costs in after-school programs or for a babysitter; they were able to keep that money in their home. If they were concerned about their teenagers being out in the community and doing things they shouldn't be, they knew their

children were with us until at least 5:30 p.m., if you include the bus route home," said Pollard.

After implementing Tiger Time, the school moved up to a D rating, and Pollard expect it will improve even more this year with the full extended-learning program in place.

"School improvement does not occur in a vacuum. It is collaborative, strategic, data-informed work at every level of the educational system. It is about implementing effective practices that foster systems for teaching and learning that can be sustained over time. It's not easy work, but it is meaningful work," said Sonja Robertson, director of the OSI.

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