

**MISSISSIPPI EDUCATION REFORM COLLABORATIVE**

**SHARING SUCCESS**

PREPARED FOR THE  
**EDUCATION LEADER'S BRIEFING**

**WEDNESDAY, MARCH 26, 2013**  
**MARRIOTT HOTEL-DOWNTOWN JACKSON**

# **MISSISSIPPI EDUCATION REFORM COLLABORATIVE**

## **SHARING SUCCESS**

THE MISSISSIPPI EDUCATION REFORM COLLABORATIVE (MERC) is made up of seven school districts with distinct qualities of excellence that bring strength to the whole.

Each MERC district serves a separate community with different makeups, needs and challenges. Yet, the leaders of the districts – superintendents, principals, teachers, school board members, parents and community supporters – share common overall goals and expectations of academic achievement and success for their children.

Superintendents of the seven MERC districts have come together in an effort to develop and implement strategies to help achieve those overall goals by sharing the best of what they do. They are working in a coordinated effort to help achieve key objectives and build capacity to bring about real and sustainable reform that benefits all of the districts involved.

While MERC leaders recognize the challenges of their respective districts, they also are keenly aware of their strengths and understand that focusing on those strengths with increasing expectations is as much a part of improvement as developing effective strategies to address the challenges.

The seven MERC districts – Cleveland School District, East Jasper School District, Hattiesburg Public Schools, Hazlehurst City School District, Jackson Public Schools, Shaw School District and Tunica County School District– have much to celebrate, much to share and much upon which to build.

Here is a brief look at the MERC districts:

## Cleveland School District

***“Improving the academic performance of all students in the Cleveland School District is the goal of the district and the community as a whole.”***

**— Dr. Jacquelyn Thigpen, superintendent**

The Cleveland School District was the first district in Mississippi to receive district-wide accreditation through SACS/CASI. It has five magnet schools – three art-themed, one math and science-themed and one math, science and health education-themed. Cleveland also has four authorized International Baccalaureate programs. Cleveland is an “Excel by 5 Certified Community” and has a STAR School rated elementary school.

Cleveland especially excels in developing community partnerships, which are formed to provide wrap-around services to students. Partners include: Delta State University; Delta Health Center; Bolivar Medical Center; North Sunflower Medical Center; Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.; Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.; Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.; Blue Cross Blue Shield of MS, KABOOM; Cleveland Park Commission; Clarksdale Speech & Hearing Clinic; Ruleville Mobile Dental Clinic; Coahoma Community College; Walgreen’s; Cleveland Police Department; Baxter Healthcare; Quality Steel Corporation; Kroger; Delta Community Mental Health; Community Development Center and; Bolivar County Community Action Agency/Head Start.

Recent awards include: the Lindy Callahan Scholarship award from the Mississippi High School Activities Association; a Choir Superior Rating at the World Heritage Music Festival; the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congressional District Teacher of the Year; the PREPS Value Added Award for Pearman Elementary, Hayes Cooper Center and Margaret Green Junior High.

Some of Cleveland’s highly effective teachers include:

- Adrienne Cannon, who earned a Bachelor of Science degree with a major in Mass Media Communications and a minor in English and Journalism from Oral Roberts University, is a secondary English teacher at East Side High School with a high percentage of students passing the English II exam. She also serves as an assistant girls basketball coach.
- Elizabeth Belenchia, who earned a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education from Delta State University, has taught in Cleveland her entire career and currently teaches Algebra I at Margaret Green Junior. She has a 100 percent pass rate each year on the state Algebra test.
- Wendy Norwood, who earned a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education, is an outstanding teacher who teaches from bell to bell while demanding her students perform to their highest ability. She shows growth on her classroom state assessments and maintains a very high QDI.

Cleveland’s International Baccalaureate program is preparing its students for college, helping them achieve higher ACT scores that bring more scholarships.

## East Jasper School District

***“The East Jasper School District is committed to providing a quality education in a safe, nurturing, engaging, productive, and wholesome learning environment. In the spirit of academic excellence, East Jasper School District believes in holistically addressing the needs of the child by focusing on student achievement, providing effective quality classroom instruction, demonstrating strong administrative leadership, and advocating positive collaborative community and parental relationships.”***

**—Dr. Gwendolyn Page, superintendent**

The East Jasper School District creates a learning environment where every child has high value and emphasis is placed on the whole child. This includes meeting educational, physical, and social emotional needs. East Jasper School District constantly endeavors to augment student achievement to ensure the success of all students. Teachers, administrators, and support staff work diligently to ensure that each child is provided a quality education that incorporates empirically sound, research-based pedagogy with the impetus of meeting the students where they are academically and socially.

Some of the awards for East Jasper School District include: the Mississippi School Boards Association *Award of Merit for Overcoming the Odds* to achieve an accountability rating of “Successful” in 2010. The Mississippi School Boards Association also presented Heidelberg Jr. High School the *Torch Award* for attaining **High Performing** in 2011.

Some of East Jasper School District’s highly effective teachers include:

- **Ashley Smith**, a 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade language arts teacher. She is one of the most self-motivated, highly effective, dynamic instructors within the East Jasper School District. While she currently serves as a teacher, she is concurrently pursuing her administrative certification. She possesses an undeniable passion for her students and her subject area.
- **Kendra Hatten**, a 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade mathematics teacher. She strives to provide students with instruction that ensures high academic success. In her class students are vigorous participants and are constantly engaged. Her students’ math MCT2 scores are the highest in the elementary school.
- **Jeyakumar Jeyaraj**, a high school mathematics teacher. He made a perfect score on the *Math Proofs Models Problems Part 1* of the Praxis™ Test and is equipping his students to do the same. He has unparalleled acumen to explain complicated mathematical concepts in an easily comprehensible and logical manner.

One of East Jasper School District’s outstanding students is Rafael Plummer. He has an ACT score of 29. He is a member of the National Beta Club and Heidelberg High School’s math team. He currently reigns as Mr. Heidelberg High School and is also a class representative. His community service includes feeding the elderly, peer tutoring, and working in the Graduation Advancement Program. He has been accepted at Louisiana State University and plans to matriculate in the fall of 2013 and major in petroleum engineering.

East Jasper School District’s mathematics program excels because our teachers do not accept mediocrity and abhor academic complacency. It is for this very reason our students consistently transcend district and state scholastic expectations. Athletic coaches also encourage and motivate students to perform well on the playing field, as well as in the classroom.

## Hattiesburg Public School District

***“At Hattiesburg Public Schools we work to help today’s learners become tomorrow’s leaders. Everything that we do, each and every decision, is based around supporting children. When we are all working toward that common goal, it helps make our path and priorities clear.”***

**— James Bacchus, superintendent**

Hattiesburg Public School District is a district with high student engagement both in and out of the classroom. Hattiesburg offers a premier strings program, a nationally-recognized forensics program and athletic programs that offer a wide-variety of traditional and non-traditional individual and team sports. The district also supports students in exciting and innovative enterprises and initiatives, such as Reading Fair, Science Fair, and our many Career and Technical Education programs.

The HHS Polymer Science Program was featured in “Tech & Learning Magazine” for its project to improve football helmet design. The Hattiesburg High Forensics Team has compiled an impressive record and is ranked best in the state. The HHS Forensics students also compete nationally reaching final rounds and championships across the country! HHS Forensics is ranked in the top 10% of schools in the National Forensics League (NFL) and won the National School of Excellence Award in Speech, marking the first time in the history of state forensics that a Mississippi school earned this award. HHS Forensics Director Scott Waldrop has also seen numerous accolades and awards, including two (2) NFL Diamond Awards, and serving on the state High School activities association, as well as the Speech Committee of the National Federation of State High School Associations.

One of our high school students, Sarah Kavanagh, started a petition to remove a harmful chemical from Gatorade and got over 200,000 signatures and the attention of the New York Times, Dr. Oz and the Today Show! Her petition eventually convinced Gatorade to change its product nation-wide.

Another of Hattiesburg’s outstanding students is De’Andre Stafford-May, who worked on a project to improve the durability and performance of Kevlar (a material used in body armor by law enforcement and the military). His project won multiple awards in the state, regional and international science fairs, and he was the featured guest for many national science conferences around the country.

Some of our highly effective teachers include Cynthia Williams, who teaches 3rd grade math, and promotes student growth regardless of their initial status when they reach her class. Her students are 94 percent proficient and advanced.

Another outstanding teacher is Angeliqne Mason, an alternate route 3<sup>rd</sup> year teacher of 7th grade math, who works diligently to help promote success in all students. She comes early and stays late to tutor and provide assistance for not only the students she teaches, but also for any who need her. Middle school teacher Jason Harr has promotes success with students in his Algebra I class. His students are 100 percent proficient and advanced consistently for the past three years.

In HPSD our motto is “Today’s Learners, Tomorrow’s Leaders!” We believe that our work is to support our students in every way that we can and to allow their talents and abilities to flourish in an engaging educational setting.

## Hazlehurst City School District

***“Hazlehurst City School District is committed to providing all children with the appropriate opportunities that will help them to become productive citizens in their communities. Following through with that commitment, all our decisions are based upon what we believe to be the best practices we can use to develop every child in order that he/she may realize his or her dreams and may be able to make positive contributions.”***

**— Jimmy Hopkins, conservator**

Hazlehurst City School District has been moving forward on several fronts, but none as dramatic as its efforts on parental and community engagement. As a result its Pre-K through 8<sup>th</sup> grade PTA has grown more than than 100 percent. On the high school level, Hazlehurst High School has opened its own Parent-Community center. Hazlehurst City School District does an excellent job of identifying at-risk students and addressing their needs.

Recent awards for Hazlehurst include student recognition for reading. Three elementary students received 100 accelerated reader points, a Gold award, for reading up to 100 books. The high school varsity football team earned 3A South State Championships in 2011 and 2012. The team is the 3A state varsity football champion for 2012. The high school boys varsity basketball team is District 7, 3A champion for 2012 and the high school varsity girls softball team is the District 7, 3A softball champion for 2012.

Top Hazlehurst teachers include:

- Jacqueline Sanders, a 1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher, has one year of experience, but already has been voted teacher of the year by her peers. She is a 1<sup>st</sup> grade team leader.
- Michaela Henley, a 7<sup>th</sup> grade English Language Arts teacher, develops lesson plans that are data driven and student-centered. She received the highest incentive pay in 2011-2012 based on student outcomes. In addition, she created a mentoring program for at-risk students and is the middle school track coach.
- Shelia Mann, a U.S. history teacher with 15 years of experience, was selected by peers as the Teacher of the Year for 2013. She communicates high expectations for her students, which translates into higher self-expectations and success.

Hazlehurst High School student Thaddeus Edwards is one of the outstanding graduates of 2012. He maintained a high grade point average (3.30) and achieved an ACT score of 27 while being a well-rounded student involved in extra-curricula activities and community service. He was a member of the Beta Club, student council, the varsity basketball team and varsity gold team. He now is attending Alcorn State University.

Hazlehurst is especially proud of its Instructional Intervention/Enrichment Program. The program is part of an extended-day model that allows every teacher an additional instructional block each day to provide academic skill building for students in need of interventions and also enrichment experiences for students who excel academically.

## Jackson Public Schools

***“Jackson Public Schools is an innovative, urban district committed to excellence and engaging all stakeholders in building stronger schools together. We provide every student a quality education in partnership with parents and the community.”***

**—Dr. Cedrick Gray, superintendent**

Jackson Public Schools is the second largest school district in Mississippi, serving more than 30,000 students. JPS is the only school district in the state to offer an International Baccalaureate program from elementary through high school. JPS offers a whole-school arts program at Casey Elementary School and Open Doors for the Intellectually Gifted Program at all elementary and middle schools, grades 2-6. JPS offers a Montessori program for Pre-K and elementary students at McWillie Elementary School. It partners with the University of Mississippi Medical Center to offer Health Related Professions Programs at Murrah High School. An Academics and Performing Arts Complex (APAC) is offered to students at Power APAC Elementary, Bailey APAC Middle School and Murrah High School. JPS offers pre-kindergarten at 25 elementary schools.

Recent awards include Bates Elementary being named a National Title I Distinguished School. Bates received the recognition for implementing successful programs that have resulted in exceptional student academic achievement for at least two consecutive years. In 2012, only 67 schools across the country were selected by their states for this honor. Wingfield Head Boys' Basketball Coach Herman Sanders was among the 2012 class of the Southwestern Athletic Conference Hall of Fame inductees. Davis Magnet Elementary Principal Dr. Jane Everly was named a 2012 Administrator of the Year.

An example of a highly effective JPS teacher would include Jim Hill High School teacher Tracee Thompson, who was recognized as the 2013 Jackson Public Schools Teacher of the Year. Fellow Jim Hill teachers and administrators described her as a “great leader, enthusiastic teacher, outstanding scholar, and an advocate for children.”

A top JPS student is Zachary Bird, a 2012 graduate of Murrah High School. Bird has signed to play in the major leagues with the Los Angeles Dodgers. A right-handed pitcher, Bird completed the season with a 5-4 record and a 3.14 ERA. He is credited with helping to lead the Murrah team to their first playoff spot in six years. Bird graduated as a top 10 scholar from Murrah with a 4.08 GPA and an ACT score of 27. He was also a National Achievement Semifinalist.

JPS has many wonderful and successful programs, but is particularly proud of its Junior Reserve Officers Training Corp because JROTC programs support a population of our community who, without the programs, would be underserved in our district. 95.2 percent of JROTC 2012 seniors were formally accepted to college and were offered more than \$3.9 million in scholarships. Every JPS JROTC unit currently has the highest possible ratings.

## Shaw School District

***“The Shaw School District fully embraces the belief that everything is possible with teamwork, dedication and commitment. Therefore, on a daily basis, we give our ALL to compete with ALL and realize that teamwork makes the dream works.”***

**– Dr. Cederick Ellis, superintendent**

The Shaw School District is a small district, but it has a level of instruction that is very competitive to larger school districts in the state. Shaw has a large-scale, district-wide implementation of technology that correlates with increased performance on standardized tests. Shaw schools lay a foundation in students that supports later learning, creating the desire and the will to learn more. The district has a broad-based and realistic curriculum with subject matter chosen not only for its relevance to higher education and jobs, but also for family and community membership and personal enrichment.

Recent awards include a “Successful” rating for Shaw High School. Shaw High was awarded the Title I Distinguished Schools Award by Mississippi Department of Education for showing a sustained level of high academic achievement and success in closing the achievement gap between student and subgroups on the state academic assessments. For the 2011-2012 academic year, Shaw High School received an accountability label of “High Performing,” the only high performing high school in its geographical region.

Highly effective teachers include:

- Brittany O’Brien, a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher in her second year of teaching. She has a vision in that all students can and will achieve in her classroom, and she never gives up on underachievers. She consistently uses data to increase student achievement.
- Takisha Causey, a Social Studies teacher with six years at Shaw High School, exhibits expertise in her teacher content area and spends time gaining new knowledge in her field. For six consecutive years, Mrs. Causey has had the highest passing rate on the U. S. History state assessments.

An outstanding high school graduate would include Shalisa Jackson, the Class of 2012 Valedictorian with a 3.97 GPA. She graduated with 15 college credits and received a full academic scholarship to Delta State University where she is majoring in Biology and Pre-Med. She lettered in track and basketball, was voted Miss Shaw High and was student body president. She currently volunteers as a tutor and initiated a basketball program for 6<sup>th</sup> grade female students to teach basketball skills and promote positive lifestyles.

The best academic program is located at both Shaw High School and McEvans School, which have incorporated “Power Periods” in the daily schedule. Power periods focus on remediation, enrichment, test-taking strategies, ACT Prep, character building, healthy living, job-related skills, conflict resolution and team building. With power periods, there has been an increase in student success and a decrease in discipline and absences.

## Tunica County School District

***“Tunica County School District is committed to preparing students for global leadership.”***

**— Bernard Stephen Chandler, superintendent**

The Tunica County School District has identified barriers to success and has developed daily practices to systematically improve and meet district goals. Those goals include reaching an “A” status within the next three years. Tunica has transitioned to a culture of high expectations and accountability to reach that goal of “A” status by 2016.

As a district, Tunica is organized and well-planned, utilizing systematic protocols and practices to achieve goals district-wide. The organizational plan manifests into great teaching and learning throughout the entire school district rather than small silos of success. We are leading the initiative with professional Learning Communities (PLCs) being led by our exemplar teachers.

Top awards for Tunica County School District within the last year include:

- A Mississippi teacher of the year finalist
- Three students playing Division I football at University of Texas, University of Southern Mississippi and Mississippi State University with the Mississippi State student earning freshman All-American honors this year
- Dundee Elementary was a STAR school last school year and currently holds the rating of a "B" for this school year and boasts the greatest language arts scores in the state.

Highly effective teachers in the Tunica district include:

- Celeste Maugh, a 5th grade math teacher, was the district teacher of the year last year and went on to be one of the six finalists for Mississippi teacher of the year. Mrs. Maugh has led her class to a 96% proficiency rating.
- Angela Bass teaches math at the middle school, showing outstanding instructional skills and student achievement on monthly STAR assessments. Bass is a graduate of Spelman with a Masters from Harvard in Ed Policy.
- Harold Billings also teaches math at the middle school level, getting results from his instructional approach. Billings is a Delta native, who attended MVSU. Under Billings’ leadership students have experienced the equivalent of 2 years and 5 months of growth from August to February. His performance is nothing short of amazing.
- Tammy Turner decided to leave the central office as an accounting clerk to pursue a bachelor’s in education to teach the 10th grade. Her first year saw proficiency scores in the subject go from 27 percent to 41. Her performance the initial year and her move to receive more accountability and less pay, gives testimony to her passion for student achievement.

An outstanding Tunica graduate is Benardrick McKinney, who now attends Mississippi State University. His extracurricular activities included all sports. He is maintaining an admirable GPA at State and earned Freshman All American honors as a freshman starter at middle linebacker.

Tunica’s best academic program is mathematics where students have excelled on the ACT and state exams.

## **MISSISSIPPI EDUCATION REFORM COLLABORATIVE**

It is the mission of the Mississippi Education Reform Collaborative (MERC) to identify, develop and implement transformative education policy and program reforms that advance student and school performance for member districts.

MERC shares best practices, pools resources, coordinates activities, monitors legislative and regulatory proposals, and advocates for its constituents.

As seasoned practitioners we recognize that reform in public education is multi-dimensional, complicated and dependent upon the embrace of all constituents. There are no silver bullets for improving student and school achievement. Indeed, in the school districts where we toil, the pathway to preparing career- and college-ready graduates is more complicated than recent reform debates would suggest. Equally important to the justification for MERC is the recurring assault on public education that threatens its coherence and continuity. We accept the responsibility to protect the best of the legacy and tradition of public education while pursuing its transformation.

We have come together to do what needs to be done for children and their communities.

### **Superintendents and Conservator**

Dr. Jacquelyn Thigpen  
Dr. Gwen Page  
Mr. James Bacchus  
Mr. Jimmy Hopkins  
Dr. Cedrick Gray  
Dr. Cederick Ellis  
Mr. Bernard Stephen Chandler

Cleveland School District  
East Jasper School District  
Hattiesburg Public Schools  
Hazlehurst City School District  
Jackson Public Schools  
Shaw School District  
Tunica County Public Schools

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