DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 405 148 RC 020 861

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TITLE Culture, Community, and Schooling in Delta County: State Assistance and School Change in Schools That Would Never Change.
PUB DATE Nov 96
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Studies Association (Montreal, Quebec, Canada, November 6-10, 1996).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Black Education; *Change Strategies; Consultants; Curriculum Development; *Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; *Resistance to Change; Rural Education; *Rural Schools; School Districts; *School Restructuring; *State School District Relationship; Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Mississippi; *Mississippi Delta

ABSTRACT

This paper describes efforts to improve education in a poor rural Mississippi school district that failed to meet minimum state educational standards. Part of the Mississippi Delta, the county school district is rural and agricultural, contains no large towns or cities, and is characterized by declining population and pervasive poverty. African Americans make up 60 percent of the population but virtually all of the public school enrollment. In 1995 the district was placed on probation due to low standardized test scores, and state education officials and educational consultants came to the district to assist with a 15-month improvement period. Strategies included narrowing the focus of the curriculum and aligning it with the state mandated test, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills; repairing and cleaning badly deteriorated school buildings; providing principal workshops on assessment practices and building maintenance; providing teachers with professional development on implementation of new curricula and instructional techniques and development of instructional units; aligning activities in the computer lab with curriculum objectives; and training a cadre of teachers in reading skills. Obstacles to change included buildings in very bad condition, lack of air conditioning in the oppressive delta heat, endless delays in repairs and equipment installation, hiring of ill-qualified teachers due to the shortage of applicants, and negative attitudes. Although a few teachers and administrators desired to move mountains, many teachers exhibited a tolerance for lack of order, harshness toward children, and acceptance of poor student achievement. (SV)

CULTURE, COMMUNITY, AND SCHOOLING IN DELTA COUNTY: STATE ASSISTANCE AND SCHOOL CHANGE IN SCHOOLS THAT WOULD NEVER CHANGE

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Presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Studies Association
November 6-10
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Keating (1982) states many authors (ie, William Faulkner, David Cohn) have stated the Mississippi Delta begins in the Peabody Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg, Mississippi. This is contradictory to the geographic delta of the Mississippi River lying in south Louisiana many kids have learned about in school. Keating calls the Mississippi Delta a deltoid shape, 160 miles long and some 50 miles wide "half moon of lowland" (p. 133), stretching from Memphis to Vicksburg. The area is farm land rich in minerals deposited by the melting ice caps of thousands of years ago and by the resulting flooding waters of the Mississippi River.

Keating (1982) also notes the Delta, like most of Mississippi, was inhabited by Native Americans. The mounds and elevated banks of the Delta reveal temple sites and colonies of ancient cultures of the region. The Delta was originally skipped by early white settlers as it was "still too new and wet a geological development of farming, a morass fit only for snakes and alligators" (p. 134). Drainage efforts saw the first white planters entering the region in the early nineteenth century.

The cotton boom following the invention of the gin lasted until the end of the Civil War, but the boom times came with the high cost of health (swamp fevers, malaria, Yellow Jack) and slave labor. These boom times lasted scarcely a generation and is a reason for the very limited number of antebellum homes of the area. The plantation families came from the established societies of Kentucky and the tidewater of Virginia and North Carolina, bringing their slaves with them. As Keating (1982) states the "whites moved from colonnaded mansions to log cabins, the blacks from brick hutches to wattle and daub shanties of unspeakable squalor" (p. 135). Plantation families surviving the land and the diseases, the War and the aftermath, eventually built homes modeled on the "prim Victorian structures of older regions" (p. 135).

The people of the Delta are a resulting complex mixture of plantation and slave culture and mentality. The foods of the Delta, for example, reveal well this blending. As Keating (1982) writes that whites:

> taught black servants how to prepare the victuals the field and forests provided: black women subtly Africanized the cuisine. Soon, the most aristocratic Southern whites thought that the ultimate in refined dining was the same pork chops, turnip greens greasy with fatback drippings, and corn bread that their field hands ate in their cabins. (p. 139)

Keating (1982) notes that many changes in the Delta are more apparent than real. After Prohibition, for example, illegal liquor dealers became legal liquor merchants. As in the sale of liquor, "the law has always been a joke in the Delta" (p. 139). Business in the Delta is not a joke, but it has unique local approach. Planters, for example, have long told merchants and bankers they will be paid after crops are harvested ('when the gin whistle blows'), but the sound of the

whistle is the sound of money to be spent, not repaid; "having fun is more important than keeping the creditor happy" (p. 139). Keating states the

> Delta landscape offers little excitement; ergo, the folk who inhabit the insipid country have to provide the spice that makes life worth living. Which they do by bing light-hearted, improvident. feckless. leisure-obsessed, and generous. They are superb farmers and terrible businessmen. You couldn't stand them if they weren't so likable. (p. 133)

The population of the farming Delta has been declining for many years. The agricultural base that used to be labor intensive has replaced low-waged, low-skilled workers first with mechanized farm equipment and more recently with technology. The area is marked with the poverty that made the Delta a poster child for the Great Society. Today, some Delta counties on the Mississippi River are witnessing the benefits the gaming industry brings. The northern most counties are the fastest growing areas in Mississippi as they have become bedroom communities for Memphis. In many areas of the Delta, however, little has changed.

One such county is Delta County. (Delta County, of course, is a pseudonym. Many of the references used contain the names of Delta towns or the actual name of Delta County, and will not be listed in the references.) Delta is an inland county, a part of the Mississippi Delta, but not on the Mississippi River.

The 1990 population of Delta County was some 10,000, down 20% from some 12,000 in 1980. In 1960, there were about 21,000 and in 1940 there were about 27,00. This continues a trend from the early part of this century with a loss of nearly 2% per year. The population is about 60% African-American and 40% white. There are about 25 people per square mile in Delta County, less than half the Mississippi average of 56. There are some 87 males per 100 females, less than the Mississippi average of 92. The largest town has less than 2,300 and then next largest has about 1,600. About 90% of Delta County residents were born in Mississippi. Less than half the married couples have children under 18, while over half of the households with female head of household with no male present have children under 18. About 45% of the population over 25 are high school graduates; less than 10% have college degrees. Per capita income in 1989 dollars was about $6,500. One-third of all families had incomes below the poverty level. While African-Americans are 60% of the population, they occupy about 50% of the households. That is, there are about 2.5 whites per white housing unit, and about 3.5 blacks per black housing unit. The median 1989 dollar value of white owned homes was about $33,00 and about $20,000 for a black owned home.

The Delta County Public Schools have been virtually 100% African-American for many years. Whites began attending a local academy during integration in the 1960s-1970s, and still do so. Second and third generations of whites are now attending academies. Some white students attend the public schools, but there are very few. In 1994-1995, about 4% of the students were white, as compared to a state average of 48%.

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In 1994-1995, there were fewer than 1,900 students enrolled in the schools. The schools do not offer Advanced Placement courses and do not have a program for gifted students. Delta County has a graduation rate of 49%, compared to a state average of 75%. The system ranked second in the state with nearly 30% of funding coming from federal sources. Over 90% of the students are eligible for Chapter 1. About 25% of the Delta County teachers have an advanced degree as compared to 40% average for Mississippi districts.

Two factors of interest mark Mississippi public education: elected superintendents and accreditation levels of school systems. The Delta County superintendent is elected and the school system is on probation for failing to meet minimum educational standards. While Mississippi has in effect a law allowing the state to take over a district on probation for longer than 18 months, the state has preferred to work with districts rather than take control of them.

Late in the school year in 1995, state education officials visited Delta County Schools. They reported "vintage cobwebs" in the high school library, wiring hanging from ceilings, students who were in school but not in class, stacks of discarded furniture, uncleaned restrooms, and uncut grass. Dedicated sales taxes were spent on "basketball team jerseys, band uniforms, cassette recorders and tapes, and gardening equipment such as seeds."

State education officials were assigned to work with school administrators and teachers, and with the school board and parents in Delta County. Additionally, educational consultants were employed by the district to work with school personnel and the community in efforts to improved educational opportunities in Delta County. What follows are the impressions and descriptions of the efforts of educational professionals employed by the county schools. This paper is a first effort in presenting a description of these efforts.

Description of educational consulting with Delta County

If one looks at a map of Mississippi, there is a delta region in the northwestern section of the state. Right in the middle of this region is a tiny town in which the efforts of this group have been focused. Driving into the delta one is struck by the fact that there are areas and areas of flat land, neatly divided into field of soybeans and cotton, with occasional square ponds of catfish farms. The farms have small nests of houses, with perhaps one or two run down buildings that provide gathering places for workers.. Driving along the highway, one never sees the large houses in which the owners of all this land live. Those houses are located in cloistered areas far from traffic. Trailers and small houses are clustered close to the road so that those who work on the land are in the most convenient place to get to work.

Occasionally one sees an aging school much the worse for wear. Occasionally a few flowers planted in the yard tell a story of caring and effort on the part of the educators in those buildings.

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Each morning during the school year, 10 to 20 school buses arrive to deposit children who have been gathered from the surrounding area. Late in the afternoon, traffic is stopped as those same buses stop and children scatter back to their houses.

This is what we saw when we first came to this isolated region to help construct a curriculum for Delta County. After meeting with the principals and the superintendent, work began on what has turned out to be a three year long process. A call from the superintendent, who had been prompted by the associate state superintendent, with a request to help revise their curriculum started our work.. The associate superintendent saw a match between our skills and the needs of this district.

Curriculums are built by the people that will use them. Our role would be an organizer and director of their curriculum. Our work began with a collection of educators who made themselves available to work on a curriculum in the summer of 1994. We soon discovered that the people collected in the library of the high school were not only teachers, but aides who wanted to work for one or two weeks during the summer. That first effort was directed toward a curriculum design that outlined objectives by disciplines. Guided by the State Curriculum Structure, those first objectives were grouped under the traditional strands in a discipline and placed in a scope and sequence. Several teachers at each grade level gave a great deal of effort to selecting objectives and writing a examples to use in teaching.

After two weeks, we left with the understanding that the outlined material would be typed and would be placed back in the hands of the teacher during the next year. The structure was in place for continued work on the curriculum to be directed by the instructional leader in the district. Plans were even made for using the test bank that had been previously constructed. Happy with our efforts, we returned home and experienced a year long silence, hearing nothing from the district until June of 1995.

An urgent call from the instructional leader alerted me to a need to continue what had been started. I also found that the district had been placed on probation by the State Department of Education. They had 15 months to show improvement.

It is important to note that the accreditation process which grew out of the Education Reform Act of 1982, sets standards for state school districts. The standards are performance based and provide a means of ranking school districts as level one through five. Level one schools are those found to be deficient in several standards. Level two schools ranked barely above the minimum while level three schools were regarded as average. Rankings were given after site visits and examination of financial, personnel and student academic test data. Audits of compliance with financial legislation is made by state examiners. Personnel records, examined annually, are perused for compliance with certification and accreditation requirements. Cut off scores are set based on three sections of the Functional Literacy Test, a test given to all eleventh

graders and required for graduation, and the Mississippi Performance test, which includes the ITBS plus a performance based assessment. A level three school district must pass 90% of the tests and have no more than 25% of the students in the lower quartile in 5 of 7 tests in the total battery. A level one school district is so ranked because they have more than 30% of the students in the bottom quartile in 5 of 7 tests taken in the total battery and the scores meet less that 70% of the level three performance standards. Level one ranking places a school district on probation. Schools on probation must prepare a Corrective Action Plan (CAP) and have 15 months to make improvements.

Officials from the State Department Office of Conservership were assigned to the district. In fact, the district appeared eager to have us assist them in the improvement process. The CAP included not only the curriculum, but all of the elements associated with making a good district a viable entity. Suggestions given the district by a visiting team comprised of experts from other districts and State Department personnel were included in the plan.

One of the recommended courses of action was to narrow the focus of the curriculum and exactly align the curriculum to the state mandated test, the Iowa Test of Basic skills. State Department officials recommending following the model developed by Fenwick English. English explained his alignment technique to SDE personnel, Level one school district instructional directors, and several others who were involved in assisting school districts at a workshop. While in session at this workshop, an arrangement was made with the Associate State Superintendent for us to provide leadership in the development of the elementary schools of Delta County.

Using the information gained in the English workshop, and the decision by the district and State Department, the focus of the curriculum took on a different meaning. Using objectives found in the ITBS, coupled with the new State Curriculum Structure, teachers in the district revised the listing of objectives in the various disciplines. Once completed, the teachers set about to align the text materials with the objectives. The summer of 1995 proved to be most productive.

The collection of educators, willing to take on this assignment included many of the same people who had been originally involved. As work progressed, it became increasingly clear that the teachers did not really understand why the focus had changed; however, they did see the reason for determining if their text materials matched the objectives that would be used in testing. Those teachers were often amazed to find that the Mississippi Assessment did not match their texts in very many areas. They realized that the test would be one of the major criteria used to remove them from probation. The activity during this summer was much more energetic with far greater results than the previous summer.

As we left after two weeks, all of the objectives in every discipline in K-8 had been listed, almost all of the objectives had been aligned with the text materials, and typing was underway to

produce a copy of this outline for every teacher in the district. The teachers involved in the project were very upbeat about the work that had been accomplished.

While the curriculum was being developed, other work proceeded throughout the district. With the guidance of the State Department Personnel, student handbooks were prepared, principals were retrained in the use of the Mississippi Teacher Assessment Instrument, buildings were cleaned, and repainting begun in many school locations. A major objectives was to have teachers return to clean and attractive buildings, with principals organized to provide a better climate for instruction.

With the curriculum underway, we joined the State Department personnel for tours of the buildings. With dismay, we found deteriorated buildings. One elementary building was located in a field with a gravel road leading up to it. Driving over a bridge with gang graffiti, we were overwhelmed with the desire to renege on this commitment. The other two buildings, even though they were located in small towns, did not provide any better feelings. We found paint peeling or rubbed off the walls, bathrooms in a state of disrepair, broken windows, heating systems that were inoperable, and roofs that leaked. The ground surrounding the buildings needed mowing and bushwhacking, and debris littered the campuses. Providing clean and attractive building would be a monumental effort.

It seemed that each small task had so many barriers to completion that work in the hot delta sapped the energy of everyone. Floors had to be stripped and re-stripped of wax. Baseboards needed to be scrubbed. Windows were cleaned only to gather dust again. It seemed that paint was administered by the gallons. The task of mowing the school yards involved putting the one bushog on a trailer and moving it from school to school. When lawnmowers were needed, principals brought them from home. One would think that with all of this effort, the buildings would gleam, but the years of deterioration were hard to cover.

Since it was so difficult to clean and refurbish the buildings, the team from State Department developed a routine evaluation checklist to help the principals grasp the concept of constantly emphasizing to the custodians to maintain the building. Leadership workshops were held to guide the principals in getting school ready for students. Emphasis was placed on having a vision for the school and striving to achieve that vision in everything that is done. Although the principals appear to support and understand the concepts, this way of preparing for the opening of school was foreign. The work involved was overwhelming. Preparations moved slowly.

Finding teachers to come to such an isolated area is a task not easy to accomplish. People do not move into the area because they got a job teaching there. The pay and quality of life is not a drawing card. Teachers are home grown. The money for college training is often impossible to find. Many very capable young women often have several children and cannot find child care. Even with financial assistance, they must work full time to provide for the children. Retired

teachers can work only half of a year because of the limits placed on them by the retirement system. The Teacher Corps (operated through the University of Mississippi) could find no teachers willing to teach in Delta County. In desperation, principals hired teachers with poor recommendations. Before the end of the year, they wished they had not.

When school began, teachers reported they could tell a difference although all painting and restructuring had not been completed. Out of curiosity, many of the teachers had poked their heads in the doors early and decided to come to the schools and help by painting their own rooms. Even though they tried, the attempts at painting were far from professional. A few parents came to assist but their efforts were not professional, either. Despite the awkward efforts of everyone concerned, the new year promised a new beginning.

State Department Officials were eager to preserve this momentum. An opening day was planned for all of the school staff. Since the school district had no central gathering place, the coliseum at a near-by community college (in an adjoining county) was scheduled for the opening session. A well known teacher who had grown up in the delta, but was now teaching in a large Midwestern city, was invited to give a motivational speech. What a day it was! All went as planned and the teachers left that auditorium with the full realization that everyone involved truly cared about them and their school district. They knew that the support team could, and would, help them get the job done.

Using a new schedule that provided more time and smaller teaching groups, especially for fourth and fifth grade classes, the teachers set to work. As in any school system, problems began to emerge. Teachers did not have the books they needed. The temperature reached 108°. Children were hot and restless. Even though teachers were frequently evaluated with a spot check, they began to slide back into the familiar patterns. What had appeared to be a new beginning soon took on an air of resignation to the reality of non-air-conditioned buildings and inadequate materials.

The new curriculum list was in place at the opening of school. Teachers knew that they were to teach to the objectives; however, the familiar pattern of teaching straight from the text was reinstated. Despite frequent interventions by Title I personnel, teachers who had never used manipulatives to teach math, resisted the requests to use those materials. Kindergarten teachers settled tiny children in chairs and had them sit still for long periods of time. No centers were in evidence. Students soon resisted sitting in hot buildings and discipline became a problem.. Only a few teachers continued to use the curriculum listing and teach children with a methodology that complemented their learning styles.

Casting about for a solution to the inertia, we decided ask expert teachers to model for the local teachers. The specialists in each discipline at the State Department were requested to come into

the classrooms and teach the children. Workshops to emphasize the methodology being used were set for professional development session. University professors came, too.

However, the teachers used the presence of these outsiders to take a break from teaching. Although they did not leave the room, they did not involve themselves with learning any new ways of working with children. Rather, the modeling visits were regarded as a pleasant diversion for the children.

Interestingly enough, the specialists and professors were most complementary of the children. We frequently heard how bright and enthusiastic the students were. Many felt that the children were thirsting for knowledge. In contrast, we also heard negative comments about student behavior made by the teachers. The visitors found that the teachers did not perceive the children as bright and capable of learning. Instead, the Delta County teachers complained about the behavior of students, the lack of materials, and provided excuses for not using any new innovative methods proposed.

Again, we tried to inject some vision of good instruction into the minds of teachers. Through writing a grant, money was obtained to take teachers to see other classroom in the region. Several preliminary trips were made to locate exemplary classrooms. Three different sites were chosen. Personnel from those districts graciously welcomed the Delta County teachers into their classrooms and into their wealth of knowledge about how to teach children with the same backgrounds as those in the Delta County school district. Approximately 25 teachers out of 80 Delta County teachers made the trips.

Few of the 25 teachers returned to use any of the strategies observed on the trips. Out of the six kindergartens, two of the teachers began to create a true center-oriented room. English teachers tried teaching English by using novels. At least two science teachers utilized hands-on science. Several teachers began to use literature as a basics for reading motivation. Even though the principals were provided the opportunity to go with the group, only one principal was consistently present.

During the month of October 1995, the state testing was held. In anticipation of this evaluation measure, teachers had been shown how to examine the data resulting from the tests. The testing coordinator reviewed with teachers what each area meant. A request was made for teachers to list the objectives in which the students partially mastered or did not master. Once listed, these objectives were to be turned in. Some teachers did not see value in this exercise. They neglected to turn in the objectives and had to be confronted with a directive to get the work done. The practice tests were distributed for at least 10 hours of practice in test-wiseness. Those tests were frequently turned back in in perfect condition, showing no use. Needless to say, the results from this testing did not permit the district to exit probation status and move to Level 1 or Level 2. It was also apparent that one school's scores were virtually pulling everyone else's scores.

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The knowledge that one school had scored so low that they pulled the rest down, caused the officials at the State Department and the outside consultants to focus on this school. Teachers were assisted on an individual basis. The principal shadowed consultants as they worked to demonstrate viable teaching strategies.

In an effort to gain insight into student achievement, a computer test bank with test items based on the ITBS objectives was purchased. The program would be capable of tracking student mastery of objectives and would provide a reliable and valid test for each objective. We envisioned individually tutoring students with specific weaknesses.

Once again, the very simple became very difficult. A new computer with more memory had to be purchased. Then the scanner did not work and weeks went by before a company official could come to fix the problem. The instructional leader was the only individual with the expertise to load the program and place each student in the data base. Remember, purchases in school districts have to be bid and then money must be approved by the local school board. Purchase of each item took from two to three months. By late spring, the one school finally had the tests in a usable fashion. An entire year's use of a very promising system had been lost. The only result obtained from the bank during the 1995-96 school year was an end of year test.

After the fall 1995 Mississippi assessment, teachers were asked to take the second step in the development of the curriculum listing. During professional development time, teachers were requested to align the computer objectives to the curriculum objectives. It was believed that students attending classes in computer labs every day would profit by drilling on lessons exactly the same as the lessons in the classroom. Once again, this effort met with resistance. Some teachers did as requested and turned in their listings on time. Others had to be confronted with the specific request to get the task accomplished. The system for programming students to the objectives on the computer was implemented in fragments. The aides who thoroughly understood their material, made sure that students were drilling on the lesson taught in the classrooms. One particular aide never did anything except to keep the students in the lab during the allotted time.

After the winter holiday of 1995, teachers were trained in the development of instructional units. As a follow up, they were to develop at least one unit that would be used in the spring of 1996. Once again, this attempt was met with resistance. Teachers, even though the logic behind such a request had been explained, questioned the need to use anything but the text. Perusal of those units that were finished revealed that there was a lack of knowledge about alignment of objectives with instructional methods. The kind of materials chosen for instruction often did not provide practice that would help ensure mastery of the objective. Instruction was envisioned as drill and practice with little or no emphasis on writing or thinking skills necessary for students of today. Each unit had to be augmented by us and placed into correct form. We did this so that at least one good example would be available as a model.

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Each time we visited the district, we anticipated having the principal would shadow us. We sat in classrooms to observe lessons and then adjourned to the office for a debriefing. We later shared our findings with the teachers. My goal was to build with the principal a capacity to assist in improving teacher performance. As the year progresses, principals became extremely busy with discipline problems, meetings, and the routines of school. Working with two of the principals never brought appreciable improvements.

By mid - February of 1996, the superintendent, State Department personnel, and the consultants had decided that the teachers needed a good review in how children learn and current methodology for instructing them. A plan for the 1996-97 school year was developed to include two "class" sessions per month as the professional development for the year. The plan included not only the two hour sessions, but supervision by the consultants doing the instruction. Each day while school was in session, the consultants were to revisit the school and look to see that the teachers were implementing the methodologies that had been the subject of the previous lesson. Conferences in which critiques of the teachers became a part of the plan. Summer classes were designed in teaching reading and math strategies with teachers who attended receiving a stipend.

Just recently, in September of 1996, the Department of Agriculture contacted the superintendent and some of the involved consultants to offer support by training a cadre' of teachers in reading skills. After considering a design, the proposal is being made to select 10 to 12 teachers for intensive instruction during the year and for two weeks during the summer of 1997. During the year, the consultants would go into the classroom and work beside the teachers, demonstrating methods and instructing students. Planning sessions and debriefing sessions would enlighten teachers about how to plan and make instructional adjustments to meet the need of students. It is hoped that this intensive assistance would provide a stark contrast in achievement with those teams who only receive the two hour workshop every other week. It is our goal to build the capacity of the district teachers to teach each other by example and through conducting their of professional development sessions.

During February 1996, a survey was developed that asked teachers to answer questions about how they thought "the district is doing". The findings revealed that at least 25% of the respondents do not believe that the school where they work believes that all students can master basic skills, or they were undecided; 40% felt that students were not proud of their school and another 29% were undecided; 35% felt that outside interruptions interfered with instruction; 59% do not agree that the staff was being recognized for successful teaching practices; and 34% did not believe that they had the resources required to successfully educate their students; 61% felt that discipline is an issue. The staff was encouraged to use the survey to determine where problems existed and to work on the perceptions of all involved, by making changes that appeared to be indicated.

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At the request of one of the principals and the superintendent, we wrote a grant for an afternoon tutorial program. Two hour sessions after school would include provision of individualized tutorials, art and music activities and a physical education time. Instruction in parenting skills by a parent coordinator was also built into the design. The grant was submitted with the full knowledge that implementation could not begin until January of 1997, since construction and renovation would render the buildings unusable during the fall. Whether the grant is funded remains in the hands of the grantor.

In the State of Mississippi, roughly one/half of the school districts elect both the school board and the superintendents. Having served eight years, the superintendent decided in 1995 to retire and did not run for re-election. One of the principals and the instructional leader were the candidates for election. In August 1995, the principal was elected to the post of superintendent. He took office in January of 1996. The transition was not traumatic since this individual was well versed in the needs of the district.

At once, the new superintendent set about to find enough money to provide new roofs for the buildings and to meet the mandate of the law to air-condition the buildings. After probing several alternatives, the decision was made to close one of the K-8 schools and move the seventh and eighth graders to the high school campus. This left two elementary schools, with one designated as a K-3 grade school and one as a 4-6 grade school. The savings by closing a building that was badly in need of repair would allow the school district to not only meet the goal of air-conditioning classrooms, but to also attempt some minor renovations.

Naturally, this move required a readjustment of faculty and leadership positions. About this same time, the Title I regulations mandated whole school implementation, not just classrooms. For Delta County, this proved to be a blessing. In the K-3 building, Title I would provide three additional aids; coupled with those aides in K-2 provided by state funding, every teacher would have an assistant. In the 4-6 grade building, Title I teachers could be used to reduce the student/teacher ratio to about 21 to 23 students per teacher.

The plan outlined the grouping of students into teams with three teachers per team. In Kindergarten and first grade, teachers were to stay self-contained; in second and third grades, teachers were to be paired; and in grades four through six; the three teachers would function as a team. A lead teacher, whose role would be to assist with teaching methodology and curriculum, would be placed at each building. Since one of the principals had been elected to the superintendency, a new principal was chosen from among the staff at the building where he would serve. The principal at the closed building was asked to be director of the vocational program, leaving the position of K-3 principal to be occupied by a young woman from that schools faculty, but who had just been certified. The arrangement appeared to be ideal.

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Once again the summer of 1996 was hot as only the delta can be. The process of moving everything from the closed building was envisioned as rather easily accomplished, but, as usual, even the simplest tasks seem to get very involved and the job was strung out across the summer. The air conditioning contractors took much longer than had been promised. The roofing work had to wait until they had installed the air conditioning vents, etc. School was initially delayed for three weeks, and then until after Labor Day. On the day that teachers arrived at school, the roofers arrived. What was a clean building soon became covered in the fine dust that accumulates when the flat roof was cleaned before the new roof could be installed. Disaster!

Part of the planned staffing has already been changed. Due to the lack of student numbers in the fifth and sixth grades, the district personnel, without the knowledge of the state department personnel or consultants, regrouped the teachers so that the two teams of three teachers was lost. Instead, the teachers are once again in a departmentalized setting, teaching the subject they have always taught in the way they have always taught it. Only the fourth grade remains in the designed teams.

Now the teachers are once again working to make sure that they students can pass the ITBS with an acceptable score. How the lead teachers and the principals have endured the hardship of cleaning the building, only they know. They do tell of the days that end at 6:00 p.m. after teaching children all day, the weekends of labor, and the physical tiredness that seems to be pervasive. Yet, they smile and express hope that all will not have been in vain.

As we have written this narrative, we are well aware of the great needs of this school district, not only in the physical surroundings, but in the attitudes of the teachers, in the scholarship of the discipline of knowledge being taught, and in the knowledge and use of pedagogy being used. Most importantly, we are keenly aware of a tolerance for a lack of order, a harshness toward children, and an acceptance of a lack of achievement by children. In a few teachers and administrators, we find a desire to move mountains. But the great effort that is required seems to exhaust even the strongest willed among them.

Change in Delta County

These findings are consistent with the literature on rural and small schools research. Rural teachers want to teach back home or a place like back home. In our experiences and in our research, teachers from rural areas often attend local, smaller colleges, return home on the weekends, and marry someone back home or from a place like back home. It is often difficult to get outsiders to come into a rural area to teach (note the Teacher Corps in Delta County) even if the local board would hire them. These findings also support the education literature that many rural systems which have yet to solve problems of an adequate supply of teachers are now expected to employ teachers of high quality (Hare, 1991).

Delta County

Much as we have faced the problem of where to begin when there is so much to be done and so few resources upon which to draw, national calls for improving schools will face conditions which will exacerbate the best of plans. For example, we can understand the call by Darling-Hammond, Wise and Kleig (1995) for an internship for teacher licensure. We can support that "all prospective teachers will be required to spend one full school year working as interns under the supervision and guidance of experienced professional before being licensed to practice independently" (p. 126). We can support that an internship "will offer prospective teachers the opportunity to put theory into practice and to exercise complete decision making under the supervision of experienced expert practitioners" (p. 126). We must ask, however, where will teachers for Delta County find the experienced expert practitioner under whom they will learn? Where are the expert teachers and educational professional in Delta County now?

We must ask, too, for understanding as we make our attempts at restructuring. We can agree with Elmore, Peterson, and McCarthy (1996) when they note that school "restructuring tends to focus on changing (1) how students are grouped, (2) how teachers relate to groups of students and to each other, and (3) how content is allocated time over the school day" (p. 4). We do ask, too, that you understand the effect of 108 degrees on grouping students.

What we will not settle for, however, is an acceptance of the conditions of the schools in Delta County or of the education of many student in Mississippi. This is a tradition we cannot tolerate and we hope others will not, either. Cobb (1988) noted that

> "Traditions," the most overworked term in the vocabulary of many Mississippians, is also the most misused. Traditions are inherited patterns of behavior passed from one generation to the next. Many a culture has successfully protected its traditions from invaders or colonial intruders, but no society can save its traditions from significant internal opposition. Proponents of change are often depicted as outsiders, because once a society's traditions become the focus of an ongoing internal struggle, they cease to be traditions at all. Instead, they become disputed symbols linking the present to the past, symbols that reveal who still rules, who still gives, who still gets, and whose preferences are still respected. (p. 6).

We are the outsiders and we may introduce change, but the opposition to existing conditions will come from the inside. We can only support, we cannot actively lead.

But there is one front on which we can actively fight, what Alotta (1988) calls

> Mississippi's State of Mind, that archaic approach to life in general: an inability to confront issues, research the causes, and try to find positive solutions. (p. 21).

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