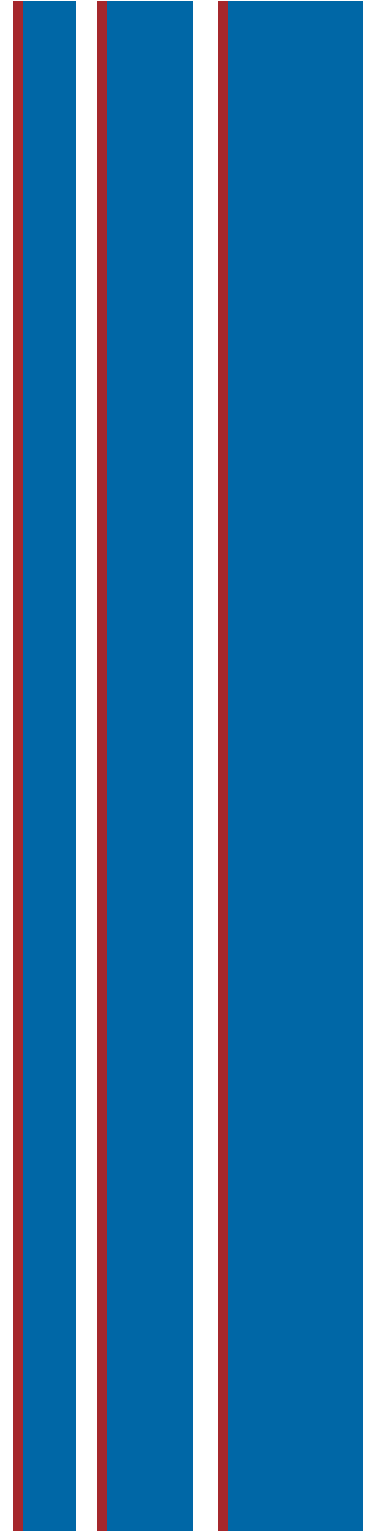


# **Transforming Teaching and Learning in Mobile**

***Understanding Reform  
in MCPSS Five  
Transformation Schools***

**April 2006**



The Center for Teaching Quality improves student learning through developing teacher leadership, conducting practical research and engaging various communities. To accomplish this mission, the Center for Teaching Quality strives to shape policies that ensure:

- **Students**, no matter what their background or where they go to school, are ready to learn; with
- **Teachers** who are caring, qualified, and competent with vast content knowledge and the ability, through quality preparation and ongoing development and support, to ensure that all children can learn; in
- **Classrooms** that have adequate resources and provide environments conducive to student learning; in
- **Schools** that are designed to provide teachers with sufficient time to learn and work together in collaboration with a principal who respects and understands teaching; in
- **Districts** that have policies and programs that support the recruitment, retention and development of high quality teachers in every school; in
- **States** that have well-funded systems that include rigorous preparation and licensing with evaluation tools that ensure performance based standards are met; in a
- **Region** that works collaboratively, using common teaching quality definitions, sharing data, and working across state lines to recruit, retain and support high quality teachers; in a
- **Nation** that views teaching as a true profession and values teachers as one of its most important resources.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments .....	iv
Executive Summary .....	v
Introduction .....	1
Overview of the Transformation Plan .....	1
About the Study .....	2
Finding 1. A Dedicated Faculty Is Central to Success .....	3
Schools Need Effective Leaders to Succeed .....	3
Students Learn from Engaged and Empowered Teachers .....	5
Finding 2. A Plan Matters, but the Follow-Through Matters Most .....	6
Process and Results Both Matter for School Reconstitution .....	6
Innovative Curriculum and Instruction Supports Reform .....	8
Professional Development Contributes to Teachers' Success .....	9
Data-Driven Culture Changes Schools .....	11
Resource Personnel Can Help Schools Succeed—If Utilized Well .....	12
Potential for Central Office to Do More for Schools .....	13
Finding 3. Transforming Schools Takes a Village .....	14
School Surroundings Influence Learning .....	14
Parents and Community Embrace Change .....	15
Engaged Students Learn More .....	16
Recommendations .....	17
1. Stay the Course .....	17
2. Refine the Plan .....	17
3. Proceed with Care on Plan Expansion .....	17

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# Executive Summary

Not unlike other large districts across the nation, MCPSS has a subset of underachieving schools, which suffer from high teacher turnover, inadequate funding, under-qualified and ineffective faculty, and low student achievement. Rather than wait for underachieving schools and students to “catch-up” with current reform initiatives, Mobile County proved its commitment to innovation and achievement by its adoption of the Transformation Plan. The plan outlined massive overhauls in its five lowest-achieving schools that include school reconstitution, monetary incentives to principals and teachers, school-wide professional development, and enhanced resources and support.

With the generous support of the Goldman Sachs Foundation, the Center for Teaching Quality worked with the Mobile Area Education Foundation, MCPSS and consultant Dr. Cheryl Wilhoyte to document the implementation of the Mobile Transformation Plan during the initial 2004-2005 school year and its impact on teachers and teaching quality.

Interviews with teachers and principals at each of the five schools, central office administrators, and school board members revealed three major findings:

- **A Dedicated Faculty is Central to Success:** MCPSS recognized that school-based and district-wide leadership was critical to the transformation process. The system first heavily recruited principals to lead the five transformation schools and then empowered them to bring about the necessary changes at their sites via the implementation plan. These school leaders actively sought out applicants for open positions, worked tirelessly to revamp the instructional program, and developed a vision for student success. The administrators’ commitment to student success was reflected in their teachers as well. Teachers invested a great deal of energy in ensuring student success, and many worked extra hours to get the job done.
- **A Plan Matters, but Follow-Through Matters Most:** Administrators at the five schools approached hiring differently and with mixed results. Overall, the task of re-staffing proved challenging, as the incentives were not enough to fill the vacant positions at all schools. Resource personnel, such as achievement specialists, content coaches, and counselors helped teachers to better address student needs, but confusion over their roles sometimes limited their effectiveness.

Curriculum and instruction initiatives resulted in changes in instructional styles, particularly the increased use of differentiation. An intensive summer program and continued professional development throughout the school year positively affected teachers’ approaches to instruction and student learning. Despite many positive developments pertaining to curriculum and instruction, many teachers and principals wanted greater involvement at the district level to create more consistent implementation of the curriculum and instruction aspects of the plan.

Data-driven decision-making was an integral component of the Transformation Plan. Each school posted test scores in the lobby and thereby raised the collective consciousness of the improvement that was needed. While recognizing the importance of tracking student progress, some teachers and administrators found the process of data collection and analysis

cumbersome. They requested more stream-lined data reports and assistance using the data effectively.

- **Transforming Schools Takes a Village:** Community support was critical to the development and implementation of the Transformation Plan. At several of the transformation schools, teachers, administrators, and community members worked diligently to change the overall culture of the school by enhancing the physical environment. Teachers at transformation schools saw increased parental involvement and taught parents strategies for helping their children learn. Business leaders, politicians, and other community members have expressed excitement over the transformation and have become involved with the schools to show their support. This collective involvement has resulted in increased student attendance, school pride, and student achievement.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

While the findings of this study reveal a number of promising developments, they also suggest that certain strategic changes should be made to enable the transformation schools to achieve their goals.

- **Stay the Course:** The five transformation schools experienced great success in their first year of transformation. Achieving the full goals of the plan, however, will take three to five years of sustained dedication to change. To ensure continued success, the district should revisit and reflect on the transformation plan, determining what aspects worked well and what aspects need more attention and resources to bring them into effect.
- **Refine the Plan:** Based on the successes and challenges during the first year of implementation, the district should fine-tune its approach to transformation in these schools. For example, the district should assess the role of signing and performance bonuses. At their current levels, the bonuses may be insufficient to attract quality teachers and principals or affect student achievement. The district needs to reassess the amount and structure of the bonus system so that financial incentives act as a catalyst for continuing the transformation.
- **Proceed with Care on Plan Expansion:** If Mobile County responds too quickly by increasing the number of transformation schools, it could have negative effects on all schools and the community's morale. Successful expansion will require a strategic plan responding to the increased challenges of transforming a larger number of schools and a sustained capacity-building effort. Once there is a firm understanding of *what* is essential and *how* schools put those changes into practice, then the district should focus on building capacity in those areas.

# Introduction

*Students returning to their neighborhood school were awestruck by the transformation they encountered last August. The once dilapidated wooden sign was replaced with a new marquee that proudly announced “George Hall Elementary School.” The parking lot was freshly paved, and the grounds newly landscaped. Inside, the formerly dull, blue-grey walls were brightly painted, and students were welcomed by a new principal and a core of dedicated teachers.*

*The transformation went far beyond physical appearances and new school faculty. The expectations, the school curriculum and instruction, and the commitment to the success of every child at George Hall Elementary School were radically transformed as well.*

*At first, members of this established but run-down neighborhood were suspicious of the “take-over.” But the impact on the children’s self esteem and learning soon spoke volumes about the positive changes that were taking place at their school. Chaotic halls had transformed to places of order. The well-stocked media center was open for business, lending books to students for the first time. Children who once vandalized the property on school lots and local businesses had a new sense of being cared for and attended to as they were escorted home by teachers at the end of the day. As one student wrote in an essay on how my school is different:*

*“[One] thing that is different is students make good grades. Last year, I made some C’s on my report card and my mommy wasn’t happy at all. Most students are passing this year. We have great teachers now. We understand how to do our assignments better than last year.”*

*In just one year, George Hall Elementary School had moved from being one of the five lowest performing schools in the district to a showcase of the success of the Mobile County Public School System’s Transformation Plan.*

In August 2004, Mobile County Public School System (MCPSS) in Alabama launched a bold new effort to transform its lowest achieving schools. The changes at George Hall Elementary testify to how the commitment of a district to aggressively address issues of systemic educational inequity can turn schools around. This report tells the story of the Mobile County Public Schools Transformation Plan—what was proposed, how it was implemented, results and lessons learned, and recommendations to continue building on the success of this effort.

## OVERVIEW OF THE TRANSFORMATION PLAN

Not unlike other large districts across the nation, MCPSS has a subset of underachieving schools, which suffer from high teacher turnover, inadequate funding, under-qualified and ineffective faculty, and low student achievement. Rather than wait for underachieving schools and students to “catch-up” with current reform initiatives, Mobile County proved its commitment to innovation and achievement by its adoption of the Transformation Plan.

MCPSS decided to reconstitute its five lowest performing schools, as determined by test scores on the Stanford Achievement Test. The plan outlined massive overhauls in two elementary and three middle schools and was designed to “attract quality teachers committed to using new and dramatically different approaches in turning around underachieving schools, thus improving

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*Principals were empowered to handpick their faculty and could therefore choose teachers with a skill set that was most beneficial to their student population.*

*Professional development was provided to enhance the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment.*

student learning and test scores.”<sup>1</sup> Although the initial implementation involved only the schools with the greatest need, the MCPSS’ vision is to eventually transform the entire district into a system that is capable of preparing each child to be an engaged citizen of the world.

The Transformation Plan included the following components that address many of the fundamental problems plaguing underachieving schools:

- ***School Reconstitution***

Principals were empowered to handpick their faculty and could therefore choose teachers with a skill set that was most beneficial to their student population. School faculty and staff were asked to commit to five years of service at these transformation schools to reduce the risk of turnover. If students do not show Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), the superintendent can transfer individual teachers, principals, and other professional staff to different schools in the system.

- ***Monetary Incentives to Principals and Teachers***

Monetary incentives not only recognize the challenges of teaching in a hard-to-staff school but also reward teachers for their students’ academic progress. Teachers received a \$4,000 signing bonus and the potential for a \$4,000 performance incentive at the end of each year based on student achievement and a performance evaluation. Similarly, principals and their assistant administrators were eligible for a total of \$12,000 and \$9,000, respectively.

- ***School-Wide Professional Development***

Professional development was provided to enhance the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. In addition to site-based professional development throughout the year, all school staff attended an intensive summer program that focused on understanding the students’ background, creating a positive school climate and culture, implementing differentiated and standards-based instruction, and utilizing data-driven decision-making.

- ***Enhanced Resources and Support***

Schools received a variety of additional resources through the transformation plan. Each school hired an achievement specialist and an academic coach to provide support to classroom teachers in content, student motivation, and classroom management. Social workers, counselors, and school nurses were hired to enhance mental health support for students, and efforts were made to reduce class size. Additionally, plans were in place to build a data warehouse to enhance accessibility and use of data.

## **ABOUT THE STUDY**

With the generous support of the Goldman Sachs Foundation, the Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) worked with the Mobile Area Education Foundation, MCPSS and consultant Dr. Cheryl Wilhoyte to document the implementation of the Mobile Transformation Plan during the initial 2004-2005 school year and its impact on teachers and teaching quality. CTQ personnel conducted interviews with teachers and principals at each of the five schools, central office administrators, and school board members to gain insight into progress made, lessons learned, and remaining needs. Ultimately, CTQ’s work will help in understanding and communicating to the district and community what it takes to ensure a caring, qualified, well-supported, and effective teacher for every student in Mobile.

1. *MCPSS Transformed School Plan—Background*, [www.mcpss.com](http://www.mcpss.com)



## Finding 1

# A Dedicated Faculty Is Central to Success

“Leadership got the right people on the bus.”

—Assistant superintendent

MCPSS recognized that school-based and district-wide leadership was critical to the transformation process. The system first heavily recruited principals to lead the five transformation schools and then empowered them to bring about the necessary changes at their sites via the implementation plan. These school leaders actively sought out applicants for open positions, worked tirelessly to revamp the instructional program, and developed a vision for student success.

### SCHOOLS NEED EFFECTIVE LEADERS TO SUCCEED

“Good principals make good schools.”

— School board member

The first step in the staffing process was selecting effective administrators for the two elementary schools and three middle schools. Superintendent Harold Dodge solicited recommendations for potential candidates from a committee of parents, business leaders, and school officials. Of particular interest were the administrators’ leadership philosophy and views toward reconstitution. Dr. Dodge wanted educators who believed that quality teaching was the most important factor in a child’s future. In the “Superintendent’s Call to Teachers,” he lamented, “You know as well as I do that education is the key to a child’s success. You know, as I do, that for many students—particularly those who have fallen through the cracks—getting a high-quality education is the best hope they have of going to college, earning a livable wage in a changing economy, and contributing to their family and to the Mobile community” (MCPSS website). Dr. Dodge selected five principals who supported this vision, two of which already held administrative positions at the transformation schools and three new ones to lead at the remaining schools.

Interview data clearly indicated that principals played key roles in the transformation process. For example, both new hires and returning teachers expressed how much the presence of a strong administrator affected their decision to teach at one of the five targeted schools. “When I was asked to come here, I wasn’t sure at first ... but I knew what kind of person and leader [the principal] was, so I didn’t feel uncomfortable anymore,” remarked one teacher. A returning teacher emphasized the importance of strong leadership, “I felt there were a lot of positive things about this school that could happen ... we just needed someone to steer it in the right direction.” Her colleague added, “It wasn’t that the teachers here before weren’t doing their job ... the students were being educated. This school just needed new direction, a new vision. Our leader helped us to come up with that new vision.”

School administrators’ daily responsibilities included hiring, budgeting, discipline, facilities, scheduling, and strategic planning, yet most teachers did not mention these tasks when they talked about the effectiveness of their leaders. Instead, they focused on how their principals cultivated positive learning environments.

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*One teacher identified the promotion of high expectations as an effective leadership tool at the school: “[My principal] has the same expectations for every teacher on the faculty. She has high expectations of us, and we have high expectations of our students. Everyone meets or exceeds those expectations or they don’t stay around.”*

For instance, one teacher identified the promotion of high expectations as an effective leadership tool at the school: “[My principal] has the same expectations for every teacher on the faculty. She has high expectations of us, and we have high expectations of our students. Everyone meets or exceeds those expectations or they don’t stay around.” The faculty accepted this challenge because of the example set by school leadership. As another teacher from the same school explained, “[The school leader] wants 100 percent but she gives 150 percent.” Several of their colleagues added that the administrative team revealed their commitment to high expectations through their willingness to “chip in” when needed. “You’ll see the principal picking up trash,” noted one teacher. “The [assistant principal] and I were tightening up table legs all over the school,” remarked another. Upholding high expectations filtered down to the teachers’ interactions with one another as well. “We [teammates] push each other ... and work to reach each other’s expectations. Hopefully in the future, we’ll have to meet the children’s expectations [because] they will outgrow us and we’ll have to run to keep up with them,” described one teacher.

Developing school community was mentioned by the staff at this school as a key to their success. “During last year’s in-service,” remarked the administrator, “we began working as a school to build community. When everyone else left for lunch, we stayed and ate as a group with potluck meals. Everybody was invited to work together, even the custodial staff ... now the school staff values and respects each other.” Building common goals and a collective vision proved particularly critical at this school since nearly all of the faculty members were new.

Another transformation school, which retained a large number of staff members from previous years, including the lead administrator, approached community-building in a different way. The principal asked the old faculty to serve as leaders and help familiarize the new teachers with the student population and the surrounding neighborhood. “We always worked together in unity before we were a transformation school,” remarked one of the existing faculty members. “Now the collaboration is phenomenal. Everybody is trying to do the right thing.” The school’s leader also used modeling to transform the school environment. “The only way you’re going to improve student learning is via teachers ... you must model for them because the principal sets the tone,” remarked this administrator. Pursuing professional development opportunities as an administrator is one way to set an example. “You must model that you are a lifelong learner and practice what you preach,” the principal concluded.

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One principal used a business approach to effect change. “The role of the teacher and administrator has changed so much,” the leader commented. “You must operate from a business perspective now in order to succeed.” The leadership team at the school aimed to begin “managing the knowledge,” a term used by CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, in the coming school year. In particular, the staff members wanted to start assessing what made some individuals more efficient or effective than others. The skills and abilities unique to this exemplary group could then be catalogued for others to learn from and build on for future success. In addition, the principal hoped to work towards utilizing systems thinking to expand ideas and examine the interconnectedness of strategies in place. As the district expected, the leader was in classrooms approximately 90 percent of the day. Being aware of what was happening in classrooms and what programs were established helped the administrator to see the big picture.

Leadership also created a greater focus on teaching and learning at the transformation schools. One teacher remarked that prior to the implementation of the transformation plan, “It was not uncommon to go in the hall and see a deluge of children as well as faculty walking around because there was no order or management.” Routine and consistency replaced the chaos, and now everyone remains in class, concentrated on the tasks at hand. The administrators played a crucial role in making this a reality. “I acted like the school was the patient and I was the doctor,

going in with a microscope to pinpoint where the problem lies and to create an intervention plan that was consistent,” added a principal. “Then, we built a support system so that strategies could be prescribed to assist teachers in certain areas and help motivate them to change their teaching practices.” A similar change in teaching strategies was noted at another school. “You have to be willing to change,” explained one teacher. “You cannot be set in your own ways. For example, let’s say someone teaching for 35 years is a strong believer in teacher lecture. Working at a transformation school, you wouldn’t make it if you just lectured.” School leaders at transformation schools pushed teachers to adopt instructional strategies that would most effectively improve student learning.

Two principals discussed their schools’ commitment to ensuring quality instruction throughout the entire school day. For example, one of the school leaders made attempts to memorize every child’s name at the start of the year and maintain familiarity with their progress. While walking around the building to observe classrooms each day, the principal focused brief interactions with the students on their areas of need and/or success, using a clipboard to refer back to their most recent test results (if necessary). “I am effectively visible in and out of the classrooms all day,” the administrator noted. “No one will respect someone who is simply ‘visible’ and does not have any sense about the data, about the children’s backgrounds, or about collaborating to work toward success ... You have to inspect if you expect!”

## STUDENTS LEARN FROM ENGAGED AND EMPOWERED TEACHERS

“When I went into [the school], I felt in my heart that I needed to be there—I was called.”

— 6th grade teacher

These administrators’ commitment to student success was reflected in their teachers as well. Two school leaders described their buildings as the “stepchildren of the district” when they first accepted their positions. The Transformation Plan empowered them, however, to “refuse to take no for an answer” and “make waves to make things happen for the children.” They sought out additional resources, created time for collaboration, and encouraged their teachers to do what was best for the students.

In turn, the teachers that worked at these schools invested a great deal of their time and energy in ensuring student success. “Ninety-eight percent of the faculty is here because they want to be. If we didn’t care, we wouldn’t give up our planning time for tutoring and parent conferences,” affirmed one teacher. Her colleague added, “These kids are looking for somebody to care about them. That’s what we do here. I got several cards last year from students thanking me for being there and caring and listening to them.” As one pupil at a transformed elementary school stated, “This year the teachers come to teach. They do not sit around and let the children do anything they want. The teachers do not sleep during class and make the students do everything. Now teachers do what’s right and they want the students to pass and do right.”

Putting in extra effort to demonstrate kindness and commitment was widespread throughout the five targeted schools. Many of the teachers worked extra hours to get the job done. “You can’t limit your time restraints because some of what we deal with goes beyond the bell. You will miss opportunities for students and parents if you are not willing to give of yourself and your personal time,” relayed one teacher. Early mornings and late evenings seemed to go along with working at transformation schools and most educators didn’t appear to mind. As one explained, “Whatever it takes ... I think that all of us are willing to do that and that is what has made a difference.”

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## Finding 2

# A Plan Matters, but the Follow-Through Matters Most

“Any plan is only as good as the implementation.”

—Assistant superintendent

Staffing, curriculum and instruction, professional development, data use, and resource personnel were all targeted for reform during the first year of implementation. This initial year provided rich information about which aspects of the plan worked well, which components needed modification, and constraints and barriers that would need to be addressed in future years.

### PROCESS AND RESULTS BOTH MATTER FOR SCHOOL RECONSTITUTION

“We need excellent teachers willing to step up to the challenge. Will it be easy? Probably not!”

—Superintendent Dr. Harold Dodge, Superintendent’s Call to Teachers

*The autonomy given to the administrators in the hiring process was appreciated by all of the principals. “If you hire your own group, you can get the best of the best,” stated one principal.*

The autonomy given to the administrators in the hiring process was appreciated by all of the principals. “If you hire your own group, you can get the best of the best,” stated one principal. The administrators approached hiring in different ways. Two school leaders retained a large percentage of the staff members that were currently in place at their respective schools (as much as 60 percent of the faculty). One of these administrators would have kept even more, but the teachers opted to move to another school because they had been through similar reform initiatives in the past and did not believe that transformation would make a difference. The other three principals kept a smaller number of employees with mixed success. One of these principals, for example, expressed regrets about some staff members who were retained. This principal explained, “They had negative attitudes about the changes being made and the need to work together. They also went back to the community and talked poorly about the school and the staff.”

*In one transformation school, the administrator listened carefully during interviews to see if the teachers mentioned the performance-based bonuses, as the principal felt that bonuses should not be a primary reason for applying to work at the school.*

A second difference among the principals in their approach to reconstitution was the set of desired characteristics for the teachers at their transformation schools. One administrator looked for teachers who were concerned with children’s holistic growth, not just academic progress. This principal felt student success should be considered a daily evaluation tool and wanted teachers who taught as though they were being evaluated each day. Another school administrator looked for applicants who talked about using specific instructional strategies that worked well with many of the students at the school and who were successful teachers of at-risk children. In a different transformation school, the administrator listened carefully during interviews to see if the teachers mentioned the performance-based bonuses, as the principal felt that bonuses should not be a primary reason for applying to work at the school.

Although district administrators initially believed performance-based bonuses would be the strongest incentive in attracting applicants, teacher feedback indicated that this was not the case. The monetary supplements were appreciated as recognition of the difficult job of teaching at a transformation school, but many faculty members explained that the bonuses weighed very little in their decisions to teach there. They cited their desire to make a difference in their

students' lives and to help them achieve success as the main reasons for working at one of the targeted schools. "They couldn't pay me enough to work here unless I truly wanted to," said one teacher. Another added, "It is not about the money at all ... it doesn't matter if I get the other \$4,000 as long as I have made someone's child a success." System administrators discovered that the bonus was not "the carrot that [they] thought it was ... money was not the issue."

A few teachers clarified that the limited influence of bonuses was a direct result of their own doubts about whether the district would actually deliver on the promise of performance-based pay. One teacher explained, "When they [district administrators] first started talking bonus, I don't know if it was totally solidified into an on-paper thing. We don't know what we're getting. We do know we got a sign-on bonus but the performance part, we don't know. Even with the sign-on bonus and how the program was supposed to work, they were trying to figure it out as they went." The perceived lack of firm plans in place by the district made these teachers uncertain that the financial incentives would ever materialize. Other teachers described the bonuses as positively influencing their decision to teach in a transformation school. Two teachers cited the importance of the extra funds when considering retirement and paying for their children's college education. A third teacher valued the bonus because it helped her to purchase school supplies for her classroom and her students.

Dr. Dodge accurately predicted that the task of restaffing would not be easy. In a district already struggling to place a highly qualified teacher in every classroom, staffing transformation schools proved no simple feat. The incentives (both monetary and non-financial) were not enough to entice a large candidate pool to fill the vacant positions at several schools, and the lack of qualified applicants imposed significant barriers to fully implementing the Mobile Transformation Plan. The shortage led to lowering standards for eligibility to teach at the schools. Initially, the district required three years of teaching experience for all candidates. When the applicant pool remained low, the threshold was decreased to one year of experience. Eventually, outstanding student teachers who had just graduated and had no experience with independent instruction were hired. One principal noted the need to "take what was available," regardless of whether an individual might be best suited to work with the student population at the transformation school. Despite these constraints, the administrator remained optimistic about the selections that were made: "With the choices that were available, I felt that I did a good job [with hiring]."

Transformation schools also struggled to prevent teacher attrition. A district administrator explained, "The word has gotten around that they (the faculty members) are good people to hire." As a result, two achievement specialists were recruited as principals in other counties. Resignations were a problem in other schools. Several teachers reportedly could not handle the pressures of teaching such high-needs populations so they looked for other positions. Others had medical issues or spouse transfers. This "revolving door" of teachers is typical of inner city schools. However, the policies of the transformation plan helped administrators retain their teachers. As one principal explained, "Some teachers wanted to leave for lateral positions at other schools in the district after just one year, but they committed to teaching five years at this school so I'm holding them to that promise."

The issue of reconstitution received mixed reactions from stakeholders. According to many teachers, the process of relocating and rehiring was mishandled. As one commented, "[The replacement of teachers] was handled very poorly. I know that some of the teachers from here had a very difficult time with it and I'm sorry for them." Another teacher added, "Teachers that were let go got talked about [and they] probably had a hard time getting a job because of [the school] where they were coming from ... [they] didn't get the benefit of 'maybe this one did her

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job.” District personnel viewed reconstitution as a definite strength of the plan. In fact, one assistant superintendent suggested placing a cap on the percent of staff members that could be rehired by principals at that same school. This system administrator worried that too many previous staff members would result in an “old guard, this too shall pass” attitude that would hinder success. The assistant superintendent suggested building leadership capacity by identifying a team of teacher and district leaders to help the principal select new staff members.

## INNOVATIVE CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION SUPPORTS REFORM

“We got rid of fluff and down to the important stuff—teaching children how to read and be successful.”

—2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher

*Curriculum and instruction initiatives at the transformation schools primarily focused on literacy and mathematics, the two major areas tested at the local, state, and national levels. An estimated \$805,000 was allocated from local funds to support activities, such as K-2 literacy interventions and adoptions in math, writing, science, and social studies.*

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Changes in instructional style, especially the increased use of differentiation, were noted by teachers at numerous transformation schools. An eighth grade science teacher described how she used music to help students focus and learn about the subject: When a student in her class kept tapping on the tables, she redirected his energy to a creative learning experience, asking him to write a song that combined the content of the lesson and the rhythm of the beats. According to one administrator, this type of teaching was minimal when the school year began. Only about 13 percent of the faculty members knew how to differentiate in their classrooms. After one year of transformation, approximately half of the staff understood the concept and could better meet the individual needs of their pupils.

Other educators changed their teaching styles by focusing on essentials. As one explained, “Teachers come with a lot of baggage ... especially after 25 years of teaching, you’ve been around the gamut. We come with this stuff and we feel as though we have to teach everything we’ve been exposed to. We don’t have to do that. We just have to plan enough time for our children to practice what we’re teaching in the course of the day.” The educators “got rid of the fluff” and focused on the basics.

*One teacher described engaging students more in problem solving activities and using technology as a part of instruction: “What I have done [in the past] was usually teacher led ... I did everything and now I let them [the students] do most of the work.”*

One teacher described engaging students more in problem solving activities and using technology as a part of instruction: “What I have done [in the past] was usually teacher led ... I did everything and now I let them [the students] do most of the work. I let them discover the formulas. My students do what needs to be done and they participate in computer interventions while at the computer lab, which they did not have the opportunity to do before transformation. We have computers in the classrooms, so once we have gone over a concept, students can reinforce the concept with accelerated math on the computer.”

The transformation schools employed innovative strategies to ensure student success. The creation of gender-specific classes was a strategy implemented by two of the middle schools to boost student learning. By dividing 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade boys and girls, one principal discovered that conflicts were reduced and teachers could better accommodate different learning styles. Girls focused better, and shy boys participated more often in class discussions. Separating classes by gender helped create a cooperative environment at another transformation school, where teachers found that the students worked hard to help one another complete assignments and perform well on tests.

Another principal made a commitment to ensure that students receive math and reading instruction from a licensed educator each day, even they had a substitute teacher. This principal developed “split lists” at the beginning of the year to temporarily assign students to another teacher’s classroom on their grade level if their regular teacher was out of the classroom. The substitute worked with students in science and social studies, but students split up and went to other classes for math and reading instruction.

One school overhauled their media center as a part of their curriculum and instruction initiatives. Before transformation, the library had been poorly stocked, and no student had ever been allowed to check out books. School administrators and teachers renovated the space, buying thousands of new books and other resource materials for student and teacher use. In October 2004, circulation began for the first time, and students were thrilled to have the opportunity to bring books home to read. “That was a turning point,” said the principal. “The children realized that we trusted them to take care of the books ... it was amazing to see.” Since circulation started, over 25,000 books have been processed in and out of the media center, with only 35 lost or never returned. The library use has been so successful that the school decided to open it once a week during the summer for students to check out books.

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONTRIBUTES TO TEACHERS’ SUCCESS

“I’ve been teaching awhile [and] this past year ... I felt more prepared than I have in my whole career.”

—3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher

Teachers and administrators at the transformation schools participated in a number of professional development programs over the course of the 2004-05 school year. During the summer of 2004, school staffs attended an intensive, three-week series of workshops entitled, “Raising the Bar: Closing the Gap.” Research-based best practices for data-driven decision-making, school climate and culture, differentiation of instruction, and standards-based instruction were all introduced during this summer session.

Teachers repeatedly expressed the positive impact that the summer professional development opportunities had on their teaching. One teacher explained, “I now feel overqualified ... I could teach in any place. After twenty five years, I truly feel equipped to put practices into place.” Another teacher appreciated the professionalism of the summer training, remarking “I like the way things seem to be a lot more businesslike—the way things are done in the real world. IBM would give you definite training and now we have it too.”

One school viewed the Ruby Payne workshops that focused on teaching children of poverty as the most beneficial professional development offered. A teacher stated, “We started off with the Ruby Payne training, and it was awesome because it opened my eyes. I was so proud [that Ruby Payne] ... had the guts to put into writing things I knew as a minority ... everybody [in the system] should have participated.” Other teachers explained how the training helped them in their classrooms. One commented, “Something that stands out to me with Ruby Payne, especially in the lower grade levels, [is that] you want quiet, listening, and order ... Then when you put the children in a group to work together, they talk so loud and usually that will get the hairs up on a teacher’s neck. But now I know why he or she is talking loud ... it’s because he or she is in a home with six other kids and when they try to get mom’s attention, they’ve got to scream. Ruby Payne helped me to understand my children’s lives better.”

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*“Together, they [the teachers] are now a community of learners ... everyone takes responsibility for all kids’ learning.”*

Administrators also recognized the impact of staff development, particularly exposure to research-based best practices. One principal noted, “The Alabama Reading Initiative professional development was excellent ... it caused paradigm shifts in teachers. I would like to host the state training next year because students are served during the summer as teachers are trained.” Another school leader explained how workshop participation affected the teachers at the transformation school. “Together, they [the teachers] are now a community of learners ... everyone takes responsibility for all kids’ learning. Through our book studies on DuFour’s *Failure is Not an Option* and Marzano’s work, we have transformed our school.”

One principal encouraged continuous professional development through collaboration. Last year, the school allotted 45 minutes daily for grade levels to work together. That time was increased to 75 minutes for the second year of transformation. If two teachers want to work together outside of the planning period, a substitute is hired. With coverage in his or her classroom, a “master” teacher could then go into a less experienced teacher’s room to observe, co-teach, and/or model lessons.

Although most faculty members at the transformation schools believed that the professional development opportunities were beneficial, they identified several ways that the workshops could be improved. The district has already implemented some of their recommendations, including restructuring the summer intensive training. During the second year of implementation, the professional development was shortened from four to three weeks and the daily schedule was reduced. One teacher praised the school system for these changes, “What they presented [last year] was excellent, but [we were] just worn out by the time school started. This year, it [the summer training] was different and it is a lot better.” One principal suggested that better coordination of workshop dates is needed because teachers were being asked to attend sessions that occurred simultaneously. School-based activities were organized to bolster areas of needs identified on the School Action for Excellence (SAE) plan; however, teachers were then instructed by district personnel to attend workshops for the Transformation Plan. The school leader felt that this lack of coordination sent the wrong message to teachers: “One [professional development program] should not be viewed as any more important than the other.”

*Teachers and administrators felt that the professional development could be more powerful if it were tailored to the needs of the audience.*

Teachers and administrators also felt that the professional development could be more powerful if it were tailored to the needs of the audience. Teachers at several transformation schools talked about the difficulties of working with special education students in inclusion classrooms, yet no workshops were offered in this area. Almost all teachers suggested that they should be asked about what kind of training they need and have the option to accept or decline participation in certain sessions. As one teacher stated, “COMP [the classroom discipline program] does not benefit me ... I’ve been teaching for four years and that training is for first year teachers. A teacher can always go back and see what they can improve on, but a three-day workshop is too much if you have already participated in it.” One principal proposed that the district gather information about teacher needs and interests through surveys. Another school leader recommended that the system craft workshops for administrators. “I understand that it is important to attend the teachers’ workshops so I can be aware of what my faculty is expected to implement in their classrooms but I have needs too,” explained the principal. Assistance with the use of technology, financial planning and budgeting, dealing with teachers who do not understand the transformation philosophy, and working with coaches and specialists to understand their roles are areas of professional development that this administrator would find helpful.



## DATA-DRIVEN CULTURE CHANGES SCHOOLS

“We’re data-driven. We gave a pre-test at the beginning of school to see how much the children know. At the end of the year, we gave the same children the same test and were able to see tremendous growth.”

—6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher

Data-driven decision-making was an integral component of the Transformation Plan in Mobile. At each school, an achievement specialist helped the faculty understand the data and thereby use it to inform decisions. School administrators designated at least one day per week, commonly referred to as “Data Mondays” or “Data Fridays,” to discuss results of the most recent standardized tests. The achievement specialists facilitated these conversations and worked with individual teachers and grade level teams to disaggregate the data and examine areas of strength and weakness. Students in need of remediation were also identified at these meetings. “Weekly assessments were helpful,” one teacher pointed out. “If children didn’t score well, we would go back and re-teach.”

Test scores were posted in the lobby at each transformation school. While some questioned the harshness of this practice, several teachers and their principals noted the positive impact that it had on the school community. Both friendly competition and collaboration among colleagues occurred as teachers helped their teammates to improve their scores and pushed themselves harder to be the best. According to one participant, posting scores and conducting data meetings raised the collective consciousness of the improvement that was needed. It also made parents aware of the progress that the school had made.

While recognizing the importance of tracking student progress, some teachers and administrators found the process of data collection and analysis cumbersome. Many teachers expressed frustration about the amount of time required to analyze the data. As one teacher stated, “The testing data isn’t bad ... it is when you’re asked to interpret it so many different ways that takes up time.” Other teachers struggled to understand how to analyze the reports they received. One teacher observed, “I’m a math teacher and am used to analyzing tests, but some teachers don’t have a clue. All the meetings helped me to understand how to use the data; however, some teachers just put it back on the shelf.” A teacher from the same school offered a solution to this dilemma: “System-wide documents would help ... so whatever data you are looking for is on one sheet.” This sentiment was echoed by principals and district administrators who reiterated that the complexity of the data was misunderstood and therefore, data was generally not used well.

Some teachers and administrators expressed concerns about students growing tired of test-taking. Regrettably, student fatigue resulted in the tests not being taken seriously, particularly at the end of the year when multiple assessments were given. Yet several teachers at one school commented positively about pupils becoming aware of their progress (as evidenced by the data) and wanting to help their peers reach their academic goals. One teacher elaborated, “I loved that the kids knew their test scores and knew what they had to gain ... eventually that idea became intrinsic. Their mindset was different. They took ownership and that motivated them to do better.”

Many teachers shared the concern that standardized testing did not reflect all student growth, and they encouraged ways to acknowledge student gains, even if the proficiency goal was not met. As one teacher said, “My children didn’t achieve the goal of 70 percent, but each quarter their scores did go up. I could tell in class that they understood what we were doing and could

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*One district stakeholder supported the notion of growth recognition: “We’re not doing the same thing we always did and people need to know that. You can’t turn the Queen Elizabeth II around in ten minutes and a tenth of a mile ... to expect all of them to improve dramatically may be unrealistic.”*

rationalize and think.” Another teacher relayed a similar story, “I teach struggling readers ... we’re talking about kids reading on 2<sup>nd</sup> grade level and the test is on a 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade level. Proficiency is considered to be 70 percent, but for them to show any kind of improvement ... 60, 65, or 68 ... for me that is a miracle. Some kids missed by one point and I consider it a success but the school board may not.” One district stakeholder supported the notion of growth recognition: “We’re not doing the same thing we always did and people need to know that. You can’t turn the Queen Elizabeth II around in ten minutes and a tenth of a mile ... to expect all of them to improve dramatically may be unrealistic. We need to celebrate the continuous improvement and not be condemning that we didn’t go from X to Z.”

Teachers also wondered how their professional reputations and future employment options would be affected if their students did not meet proficiency. A teacher explained, “[Working here] is not really all about money because your name is tied to the kids meeting proficiency ... that follows you and principals see that. If Johnny has problems with sequencing, [they think] this teacher can’t teach sequencing. How does that affect us as professionals if you want to move on somewhere else?” Another teacher at the same school expressed similar concerns, “If you’re not doing well it will hurt you as a professional. I saw improvement and growth in my children but they are not looking at that. You’re looked at as not being a good teacher if you don’t meet AYP.”

## RESOURCE PERSONNEL CAN HELP SCHOOLS SUCCEED—IF UTILIZED WELL

“If you meet the basic needs of my physical body as well as my emotional needs, you can embrace me and I feel like I’ve got a reason to succeed.”

—1<sup>st</sup> grade teacher (talking about her students)

MCPSS’ Transformation Plan included hiring non-classroom professionals such as achievement specialists, content (reading, writing, and math) coaches, attendance officers, counselors, social workers, and nurses. Resource personnel were responsible for a variety of duties, ranging from providing clean uniforms to securing glasses or dental work. “Identifying special services and extending them to families was my job. There were times when children came to school with dirty uniforms ... if teachers saw that and told me, the social worker or I would investigate. Often, we learned that the family didn’t have water or electricity so we found solutions to those problems,” explained one counselor. Several teachers described the positive correlation between the fulfillment of physical needs and students’ academic growth.

Not all schools experienced the same level of success with the resource personnel. In some cases, administrators and support workers alike were confused about their roles. One school counselor, for instance, could not properly counsel students because she was forced to devote a large portion of her day to testing. She explained, “As a counselor, we don’t have time to work with kids and their problems in or out of schools. They’re being left behind because of things that may happen outside of school. They’re having problems but they can’t come and talk with me because everything is about testing and academics ... which we want ... but if I spend all day at a machine running scantrons and preparing for the next test, I don’t have time with kids.”

While this individual wanted more time to be engaged with students, others were not so motivated. The attendance officer at one school waited until students reached ten unexcused absences before making any contact with the parent or guardian. According to the principal, it was too late then because the child had already missed a significant amount of school. In addition, the social worker and mental health nurse were also very reactive, waiting for problems to occur instead of predicting areas of need and building programs or services to curtail

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them. The coaches at this school presented yet another dilemma for the administration. They were not trained on how to do their jobs, nor was the principal trained on how to use them, so their effectiveness was lost. In hindsight, the school leader would have preferred to use the Title I money to hire more teachers to reduce class size, rather than pay for two additional coaches.

## POTENTIAL FOR CENTRAL OFFICE TO DO MORE FOR SCHOOLS

“[The district] did an excellent job in implementing the program. It could have been a fire bomb, but it wasn’t, it didn’t happen that way.”

—School Board Member

District administrators worked diligently to develop a comprehensive plan for transformation. The progress made in just one year speaks to the commitment and dedication found at every level of the school system. In particular, strong leadership from district office administrators was essential in organizing and implementing such a complex endeavor.

Yet interviews with stakeholders across the district indicated that some district administrators were more eager and adept at embracing those changes than others. Some teachers and administrators described shortcomings in the leadership of certain central office administrators. Teachers at one school criticized the system for their lack of organization. “Central office could not handle the first two weeks of school,” noted one teacher. Her colleague described a disconnect between district administrators and the day-to-day operations of the transformation school. She explained, “It’s easy to get to a level where you don’t have student contact ... and you’re trying to tell *us* how to teach these children that you haven’t had contact with for twenty-five years.” The principal of the school agreed that there were “many downtown who are not ‘on board’ [with the plan].” This administrator perceived a lack of support from the district, aside from an insistence that “you better succeed.” Fellow administrators at this school were frustrated by the bureaucratic “hoop jumping” that many in central office required of the staff and noted, “if the principal was asked to be here, let [that individual] do the job and lead.”

Many in the district questioned the level of involvement of the curriculum and instruction department. “They are not on board with the plan and can’t deploy. It’s not that they are resistant,” explained one stakeholder. “They just don’t quite know how to get on board. There are a lot of weary people who do not have the energy to do the work and won’t give feedback to those in the field.” One teacher suggested including district personnel in the professional development workshops to remedy the situation. “The training stops with the teachers but it needs to start with the central office,” this teacher added. District administrators agreed that transformation required close coordination with many departments, including curriculum and instruction, in order to ensure success. “Our role [central office staff] is as ‘grease mechanic’ ... you can’t manage the school from a distance and do what we’re doing. You must go in with teams, work from transportation to human resources to student services to parenting and make sure everything is together,” elucidated one executive director. Another central office leader recommended that the district work closely with principals on instructional leadership and help them to work collaboratively with their administrative team to create more consistent implementation of the Transformation Plan.

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## Finding 3

# Transforming Schools Takes a Village

“The community realized that they had a role in this process [of transformation]. Everybody had to get out of complacency ... the kids, the school, and the community.”

— *Pre-K teacher*

Community support was critical to the development and implementation of the Transformation Plan in Mobile. System administrators solicited feedback from stakeholders representing a variety of perspectives, including parents, churches, politicians, and the business community. The collective voice of these constituents reminded the district that in order to truly transform the schools, the overall culture had to be transformed as well.

### SCHOOL SURROUNDINGS INFLUENCE LEARNING

“Look good, feel good, do good.”

— *3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher*

At several of the transformation schools, teachers, administrators, and community members worked diligently to change the overall culture of the school by enhancing the physical environment. From fresh coats of paint to landscaped shrubbery and trees, staff members renovated the school property to make it look cheerful and inviting. They believed that aesthetic changes would increase school morale and student achievement. As one teacher observed, “Before, all of the classrooms were light blue and prison gray. Can you imagine passing from each grade and the only change is your teacher’s face? When you look good, you feel good and when you feel good, you strive to do better.” Lockers were removed, hallways were painted, and classrooms were decorated at one site, all in hopes of the school family taking pride in their surroundings. The plan seemed to work. “The effort of the children increased tremendously due to the attention being paid to them and the school. They worked harder than they had before and felt better about being at this school,” noted the principal.

Starting the school year with renovated buildings was a high priority for the faculty and community alike. Faculty members at one school worked feverishly during the summer months to get their building ready. They put in long hours of their own time and solicited volunteers from the community in order to make the necessary alterations. This school also received assistance from their business partners in education to supplement their renovation projects. One company, for example, landscaped the entire front of their building. At another site, a community group repaved the school’s parking lot. Teachers and administrators expressed frustration with getting assistance from central office personnel, including maintenance crews and groundskeepers. “They were going to renovate this place for us but they were going to do it in their time,” remarked one teacher. “We wanted folks to see the change from the beginning when they first walked in.” The principal at another school agreed. “The complete school transformation had occurred when we first opened the doors last August ... But we were the ones who had to clean and gut the building ourselves ... they would not paint or landscape. The school is now the bright spot in the community. It was important to us that the transformation be complete when school first started.”

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Just as the building improvements lead to positive changes in many of the schools, one school without such renovations felt that the physical environment hindered the students' progress. "Make sure to put in the report that we need a bigger, better school," noted one teacher. "This school has been here for a long time with no renovations." Many teachers pointed out that the building was overflowing with children, in some cases with 48 students per class. "Next year, they predict that we'll get over 1,000 students," stated a colleague, "and we have only one bathroom on the entire hall." The dilapidated conditions not only make the school feel uncomfortable; they also lead to increased discipline problems and loss of class time. As one teacher explained, "For example, my ceiling ... God knows I hope that it doesn't cave in on me ... but you can hear rats running and that will start a whole conversation that takes away from instruction ... then, everyone is off-task because they are talking about a personal incident with rats, instead of their assignment." Improving the physical environment, with assistance from central office personnel and district funding, is essential to this transformation school's success.

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## PARENTS AND COMMUNITY EMBRACE CHANGE

"We know that school, community, family, and church are all involved in the learning of the child."

— 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher

To the surprise of many in the district, staff members found that the majority of caregivers that they talked to were highly committed to the success of their children. "Contrary to rumor," one teacher said, "the parents were very interested in their kid's education ... just a lot of time, they didn't know how to help or what to do." As a result, several of the transformation schools reached out to these individuals to teach them strategies for increased involvement in their children's lives. They invited them to conferences, consistently updated them on test scores, and offered classes on how to help with homework. A school board member shared her delight over the increase in parent involvement: "Higher expectations for the schools have lead to higher expectations from parents and changed community interest in those schools."

Although initially hesitant about the changes, older members of the community grew excited to see the rejuvenation of the transformation schools. "To have the school transformed into what it once was years and years ago was remarkable," concluded one teacher. "The grandparents remember the way it was before it started going down. The community is happy we transformed the place physically. Local churches gave us support and helped to make that happen." Community members visited the schools often last year and even took pictures of the bulletin boards and displays to express their admiration.

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Business partners and politicians in the area were also impressed by the transformation. Local companies have provided incentives for the children and treats for the staff to show their appreciation. One principal also noticed how much easier it was to network within political circles, since the transformation schools had received so much attention. "I've got good rapport now with city council members, county commissioners, state representatives, and senators," the leader announced. "They have visited and made donations to our school. This never happened before." The administrator hoped to build on this enhanced community involvement in future years by developing a pyramid of interventions for the school's students, using alumni, ministers, and other local citizens as the primary means for extra support.

## ENGAGED STUDENTS LEARN MORE

“Students are now energized about learning and really believe in themselves, which is evidenced by the twinkle in their eyes. They are excited about success.”

— *Middle school principal*

*As several principals explained, daily attendance has risen, school pride has increased, and behavior has improved because of the massive reform initiatives put in place. “I have earned the trust of the students,” commented one administrator.*

Students at the two elementary and three middle schools have been greatly affected by the Transformation Plan. New teachers, strong leaders, innovative curriculum, and the renewed physical environment have resulted in excitement from the students about school and learning. As several principals explained, daily attendance has risen, school pride has increased, and behavior has improved because of the massive reform initiatives put in place. “I have earned the trust of the students,” commented one administrator. “Now, they feel comfortable in communicating with me and are overjoyed to share their academic progress. They have a vested interest in school now.” Teachers at another school observed similar changes in their students. They explained, “The plan expected just academic solutions but when you teach in a school, it’s much more than that ... the children come in smiling and happy. They actually want to be here.” This was not always the case at that school, remarked the principal. “Now, the children are beating down the door, trying to come here during the summer.”

*The faculty and staff at Brazier Elementary School began the year “with the end in mind”—increasing student achievement. They knew that the road ahead was tough but they vowed to stick together and work collaboratively to improve instruction. Grade level teams regularly examined the “brutal facts” outlined by the testing data and identified their areas of strength and weakness. The administration supported their efforts for improvement by providing coverage so that upper grade teachers could observe their colleagues in younger grades and vice versa. More experienced teachers helped novices by modeling best practices, sharing lesson plan ideas, and developing suggestions for classroom management. Newer teachers offered a fresh perspective and ignited a spirit of constant learning and growth.*

*Students and caregivers alike began to believe again in Brazier Elementary. Kids shared their test scores with their parents and knew how to describe their progress. Parents, in turn, began calling regularly to check in with teachers and ask questions about testing. Grandparents and other long-time community members recognized the renaissance at the school and took pride in its restoration to the ways of old. The transformation was so powerful that one caregiver decided to re-enroll her granddaughter, after pulling her out to send her to a private school across town. It was time to come home again.*

# Recommendations

During the 2004-2005 school year, MCPSS and the dedicated staff of the five transformation schools made significant progress toward ensuring student success. While the findings of this study reveal a number of promising developments, they also suggest that certain strategic changes should be made to enable the transformation schools to achieve their goals.

## RECOMMENDATION 1: STAY THE COURSE

The five transformation schools experienced great success in their first year of transformation. Achieving the full goals of the plan, however, will take three to five years of sustained dedication to change. To ensure continued success, the district should revisit and reflect on the transformation plan, determining what aspects worked well and what aspects need more attention and resources to bring them into effect.

For example, while the district made great strides in implementing the widespread data-drive instruction strategy, more work still needs to be done to make sure that school data informs the changes that take place within schools. Streamlined data reports and an enhanced data warehouse will allow teachers, counselors, and support personal to use the data more efficiently, and as a result, spend more time addressing student needs.

## RECOMMENDATION 2: REFINE THE PLAN

Based on the successes and challenges during the first year of implementation, the district should fine-tune its approach to transformation in these schools. Allowing principals a degree of flexibility in implementation enables principals to respond to the unique needs of their individual schools and can help improve the plan overall. For example, one school deviated from the plan's tenet of common scheduling to provide staff time for collaboration. Despite initial concerns, the district ultimately embraced the idea of using collaboration to foster professional growth and improve teaching quality. Although flexibility can be beneficial, the district needs to firmly establish which aspects of the plan are essential to its success and are therefore non-negotiable. Additionally, flexibility will depend on strong principals who are committed to the goals of transformation.

In evaluating the effectiveness of the transformation plan, the district should assess the role of signing and performance bonuses. Financial incentives make up a large part of the plan's expenses and have received considerable publicity, yet findings from the initial year of implementation show that they were not a critical element in recruiting quality faculty or increasing student achievement. At their current levels, the bonuses may be insufficient to attract quality teachers and principals or affect student achievement. The district needs to reassess the amount and structure of the bonus system so that financial incentives act as a catalyst for continuing the transformation.

## RECOMMENDATION 3: PROCEED WITH CARE ON PLAN EXPANSION

Parents, teachers, and principals alike recognize the need for transformation throughout the district. Yet if Mobile County responds too quickly by increasing the number of transformation schools, it could have negative effects on all schools and the community's morale. Successful

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expansion will require a strategic plan responding to the increased challenges of transforming a larger number of schools and a sustained capacity-building effort.

Before the district brings the transformation plan to other schools, administrators should determine which aspects of the plan are most central to its success. As suggested in the previous recommendations, the district should refine the implementation of those aspects to ensure that they effectively increase student achievement.

Once there is a firm understanding of *what* is essential and *how* schools put those changes into practice, then the district should focus on building capacity in those areas. For example, the district will need considerable financial resources to bring data-driven change to more schools, both to synthesize the data and to train teachers and principals to use it effectively. Additionally, the district will need a much larger pool of high quality teachers if more schools undergo reconstitution. Rather than look for those teachers elsewhere, it makes sense to invest in professional development to increase the quality of teachers currently within Mobile County.