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Mobile Engineers a Dynamic School System

Mobile County educators and their community partners are creating a process of continuous school improvement

By John Norton & Jennifer Pyron

Thousands of students in Mobile County Public Schools are busy learning the principles of the engineering design process these days: *Imagine, Plan, Create, Test, Improve.*

And little wonder. The Gulf Coast region is emerging as an economic power, and much of the prosperity can be traced to industries that rely heavily on engineering.

The news has been so good that natives who've wandered away can now visit a website called "Come Back Home to Mobile." "Here, you'll find good paying jobs for every skill level that provide endless avenues for skill improvement, training and advancement," the site promises.

Mobile needs workers proficient in math, science, engineering and technical trades to meet the demands of industries with billions in government and commercial contracts. In addition to its traditional paper and chemical industry core, Mobile has a rapidly growing aerospace/aviation business and has become a major medical center with over 20,000 health workers. The region is attracting foreign companies such as EADS North America (French; aircraft), Austal (Australian; ships), and ThyssenKrupp (German; steel), now erecting a $4 billion plant expected to provide nearly 3,000 permanent jobs.

"Globalization is a reality," Mobile Mayor Sam Jones told a British magazine last year. "You can sit around and wish that something else was taking place or you can take advantage of globalization—what we call 'insourcing.'"

Amid booming economic growth, the Mobile community has intensified efforts to make sure public schools meet burgeoning workforce demands.

"I can't overstress the importance of education to Mobile's future success," says Sheila Dean-Rosenbohm, vice president of planning and administration for the International Shipholding Corporation. "We're an energized community focused on economic development and growth, and our industries and businesses must have employees with the knowledge, skills and personal qualities that good schools can provide."

Strategic processes

You can be sure that Mobile school leaders hear the business message loud and clear. Indeed, they relish it. The system turned the first corner of school reform more than a decade ago, and it has made impressive strides ever since—embracing, through its own strategic planning, that same engineer's creed: *Imagine, Plan, Create, Test, Improve.*

"We're bold, we jump in and we do it," says Deputy Superintendent Martha Peek, now in her third decade in the 65,000-student district.

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More Stories on the Web!

Our Web Edition of *Mobile on the Move* has more stories, special features, photos and graphics. You'll also find the content of this print edition, with embedded links that lead to interesting sidebars, interviews and helpful resources. Don't miss it!

http://www.abpc21.org/motm

A more comprehensive version of this story will appear in our web edition.

Mobile on the Move

Mobile County's Education Journey

Relevance, rigor and risk-taking prepare Mobile schools for the global economy

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John Norton, *Editor*

By Cathy Gassenheimer
Executive Vice President
Alabama Best Practices Center

"Do you know of any school that is as good as our school?" the soft-spoken fifth grader asked a group of education reformers from Kentucky, Georgia, North Carolina and Mississippi who were visiting his inner-city Mobile classroom.

You could literally hear a pin drop when he ended his question. One visitor, the leader of a highly respected advocacy organization, replied: "There are a lot of really good schools in my state, but no, I've never seen one that is quite as good as this one." The student nodded at his teacher and said, "I thought so!"

This exchange took place at George Hall Elementary early last fall when members of the Columbia Group, representing business-education partnerships across the Southeast, met to learn more about Mobile County's school improvement journey.

George Hall is a U.S. Blue Ribbon School whose academic achievements have been recognized by national powerhouse groups like the Learning First Alliance and The Education Trust. George Hall's students live in poverty, and many enter kindergarten without basic vocabulary and other verbal skills. But a glance at their test scores demonstrates that Hall's students perform at very high academic levels.

It's a remarkable story. But what's more remarkable is that Hall is not an "outlier"—not the only high-needs elementary school in Mobile defying the "No We Can't" stereotype about educating children in poverty.

In a coastal community near the Mississippi border, students at Anna Booth Elementary speak many different languages. Most of them are first- or second-generation Americans whose parents have resettled from countries like Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. On the 2008 Alabama Reading and Math Tests, 73 percent of Anna Booth's fifth graders achieved the highest level of proficiency, topping the state average for *all* fifth graders by 20 percentage points.

And there are more. Each year the State Department of Education measures the performance of high-poverty schools against exacting standards, awarding the Torchbearer School designation only to those who meet the highest benchmarks. Across Alabama, seven schools earned the prestigious award in 2008. Six were in Mobile County.

In this issue of *Working Toward Excellence* you'll also read Torchbearer success stories about Calcedeaver Elementary, St. Elmo Elementary, Indian Springs Elementary, and Holloway Elementary. Each school is unique, but they all have something in common: Their teachers and administrators work hard and smart every day to ensure that each student has the skills and knowledge to succeed in an ever-more challenging world.

And Mobile's progress with its high-poverty elementary schools is, once again, only part of the story. Alabama's largest school district is advancing on many fronts, determined to transform its education system in ways that will meet the demands of a burgeoning local economy that is also increasingly global.

So why, in little more than a decade, has Mobile emerged nationally as a school system to watch? One answer is the strong and enduring partnership between Mobile's school system and the Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF), which you'll read about here. Another secret to success is the district's continuity of leadership. Harold Dodge led the district to significant reforms before retiring in early 2008. New superintendent Roy Nichols is keeping the district moving forward, opting to embrace and perfect a sound strategic plan.

Dedicated and effective leaders are dispersed throughout Mobile —including deputy superintendent Martha Peek, a trio of instruction-savvy assistant superintendents, and a group of dedicated, well-prepared and supported principals. As you read our stories, you'll learn more about many of these leaders, and their willingness to take the calculated risks that separate bureaucracies from organizations that continuously improve.

We hope this issue of WTE will inspire you to do more. Connect with a principal mentioned here and learn more about what they're doing. Find inspiration in fellow teachers who are always looking for better ways to engage and educate. Rededicate yourself to your community as you learn of Mobile's "Yes We Can" campaign.

Finally, like the fifth-grader at George Hall, we hope that when you think of your own schools, you'll be proud. ❖

EPIC Education through Engineering: Keeping an EYE on Mobile's Workforce

By John Norton

The essential question on Susan Pruet's mind these days is this: Will an EYE on Mobile's future workforce demands lead to an EPIC interest in engineering and technical careers?

More specifically, Pruet wonders, can a combination of challenging academic content and project-based learning (1) increase student engagement; (2) help reduce dropout rates; (3) lure more students into math, science and engineering careers; and (4) strengthen teaching and learning across one of Mobile County's diverse school feeder patterns.

Let's get some acronyms out of the way

Pruet works for **MAEF**—the Mobile Area Education Foundation—where she's best known for fostering the Mobile Math Initiative in a strong partnership with the Mobile County Public School System **(MCPSS)**.

EYE is a new K-8 initiative of the foundation and its partners, aimed at "Engaging Youth in Engineering" through elementary clubs and camps and through a dynamic "mini-curriculum" for middle schoolers that infuses real-world problems into state math and science standards.

EPIC, or the Engineering Pathways Integrated Curriculum, is a challenging four-year "theme" program at Mobile's Davidson High School—conceived, designed and implemented by a team of outstanding young teachers and offered as either a "major" or a "minor" to all students willing to accept the challenge.

Pruet's job—working closely with high school principal Lewis Copeland and his colleagues at the middle and elementary levels of Davidson's feeder pattern—is to nurture strong connections among these programs and help district leaders produce an uninterrupted stream of students eager to further explore science, technology, engineering and mathematics **(STEM)** as they move through the grades toward college and careers.

EPIC: Teacher innovation and principal leadership

Davidson High's EPIC program predates EYE by several years. The impetus, says longtime principal Copeland, came from several young teachers on his faculty, including math instructor Mike Fletcher, a 2003 recipient of the national Milken Educator Award (in only his fifth year of teaching).

Davidson "is a very active and vital high school" of 1,500 students, says MCPSS deputy superintendent Martha Peek. In addition to EPIC, Copeland has started an International Baccalaureate program and aggressively recruits (some say "steals") top content specialists from other faculties in and out of Mobile County. Once mostly white and suburban, Davidson is now a school in demographic transition, with a large number of international students and an African-American student population approaching 60 percent.

Peek says MCPSS is shifting toward the concept of developing "pocket programs" like the Davidson model, with a major theme (in this case, engineering) and the option for students to transfer from other attendance zones if they can arrange

The Engineering Design Process is a series of steps that engineers use to guide them as they solve problems.
(From the *Engineering Is Elementary* curriculum.)

transportation. EPIC is currently the most prominent of what she hopes will become many high-interest concentrations (from pre-medicine to coastal studies) spread across Mobile's 13 pubic high schools.

Planning for EPIC began in 2003, sparked by discussions among Copeland, DHS instructional leader Brenda Bolton, and interested teachers. The concept gained school board approval in 2004. The first year of the EPIC experiment was left mostly to Fletcher, who integrated engineering concepts and projects into his advanced math classes and offered special electives to the 20-odd students who agreed to participate. *[Read about one of Fletcher's lessons in our web edition.]*

Over the next several years, the program assumed its present shape. Students commit to either an EPIC major or minor at the beginning of ninth grade. In doing so, they agree to work their way thorough EPIC's rigorous engineering-augmented math curriculum. As the EPIC website explains:

Instead of taking Algebra 2 with Trig, EPIC students will take the EPIC version… As an example, students learn about direct and inverse variation by testing simple circuits and discovering how Ohm's Law relates voltage amperage and resistance. They learn the same concepts but with an application related to electrical engineering.

EPIC majors are expected to reach the math summit—Advanced Placement calculus, physics, and the like—while most minors complete at least pre-calculus. Depending on whether they're majoring or minoring, students select all or most of their

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electives from the EPIC slate of offerings. It all begins in ninth grade, when every EPIC student enrolls in an exciting, hands-on elective, *Engineering the Future*, developed by the Boston Museum of Science.

By offering a major and a minor, the EPIC program anticipates the "multiple pathways" approach to high school studies, now gaining traction across the district. Students may choose the minor because they don't want to give up all of their electives (e.g., music, art, journalism) to EPIC. Or they may not be sure they want to pursue a four-year degree—or concentrate on math and science in college—but they enjoy technical studies and feel the pull of EPIC's hands-on, problem-based learning methods.

Rapid growth and low overhead

Over a five-year period, EPIC enrollment has grown to 250 students, with more expected next year. Copeland likes to point out that EPIC is staffed by teachers "from our state allocation," not extra faculty. Even so, any time he's had an opening in math or science, Copeland has recruited aggressively with EPIC in mind.

As a result, he's assembled an impressive cadre of teachers, mostly in their 30s. Some felt called to teaching from first careers in STEM-related areas—including two engineers and a meteorologist. There's also an attorney with an undergrad degree in mathematics, a former scientific draftsman, and a selection of top teacher ed graduates from regional universities.

Teacher Hurd Finnegan, who introduces EPIC's ninth graders to engineering concepts, gives credit for the program's progress to the leadership skills of Copeland and Bolton.

"They create an environment that allows teachers to experiment and take risks," says Finnegan, noting that the leadership style attracts and holds talented teachers. "You hire good people and tell them what you want done. Then you let them go do it," he says. "If there's a mistake, you take the heat. If good results occur, you let your people take the credit."

The diverse backgrounds of EPIC's teaching team have inspired some atypical elective courses, including environmental and patent law, fluid dynamics, drafting, electrical engineering design processes, geoscience and meteorology, and technical writing and communications—taught by an English faculty member who recently joined the EPIC team.

"What's made EPIC go has been the enthusiasm of the teachers," says Copeland. "It's their program and they live and breathe it every day."

When we dropped by Jamie Duke's EPIC physics class, he was openly excited about a collision experiment the day before. The data seemed to defy the law of energy conservation. Duke was literally rubbing his hands together as his students drifted in, and he soon put them to work ferreting out the problem.

"There's nothing like a mystery to get the brains churning," he laughed. As the class progressed, students could be overheard saying, "It's not that… could it be this?" as they tried and re-tried the experiments. Not far away, a poster displayed the engineering design cycle: *Imagine, Plan, Create, Test, Improve.*

Brenda Bolton, whose official title is Assistant Principal for Curriculum and EPIC, says the teachers defy any stereotype about high school faculty who resist collaboration. "These teachers function as a team. They meet together both formally and informally. When some issue comes up about the program, we work together to resolve it. One teacher will find a grant and they'll all plan the proposal. They're constantly collaborating."

What does such a program cost? Copeland laughs. "We've pretty much operated it on a shoestring from the beginning," he says. EPIC teachers are regular faculty members, pulled in to teach non-EPIC courses as needed. Most other costs are covered within the normal school budget, supplemented by small grants and gifts of support from local industry.

"MAEF has really assisted us there," says Bolton. "They've helped us network with business and industries that have a strong interest in producing future engineers and math and science majors." Bolton also cites the tireless efforts of Robert Foley, assistant dean of engineering at the University of South Alabama, to raise the program's visibility.

There's one big exception to the "shoestring budget," Copeland admits. Several years into the program, an EPIC teacher who's a former chemical engineer came to his office and said, "You know, if we're really going to be an engineering program, we have to have a lab." Copeland says his commitment to EPIC "has always been to not say 'no.'" So he asked, how much? Perhaps $100,000, she said.

Ultimately, Copeland was able to secure a one-time special grant from the state legislature for $50,000. Other contributions would be forthcoming from private sources. But even with start-up money in hand, the big problem was space. Davidson outgrew its physical plant long ago—to the point that new teachers spend their first years "teaching from a cart" as they move to any available classroom during the day.

There was, however, a former girl's locker room now used for storage. And sure enough, the EPIC lab is today located in the sizeable space where female athletes once donned their workout gear. The robotics club assembles its digital marvels in the shower. The lab's most impressive fixture is a massive fluid flow apparatus donated by the USA College of Engineering. The device allows students to explore the science and math involved in fluid pressure, fluid flow, buoyancy and related topics. It's now being computerized to increase its teaching potential.

Can EPIC take its success to scale?

The humble EPIC lab may be creating some recruitment problems that a generous donor could solve. On a visit to a DHS feeder middle school, we overheard a student keen on robotics saying he didn't want to move from his school's cutting-edge lab "to a shower stall." Even so, the program's enrollment has grown each year, with Fletcher most often serving as the recruiter who lures promising eighth graders from across the system. EPIC teachers Amy Harper and Sara Martin handle many of the student management chores—getting students' schedules straight, making sure they earn all the necessary EPIC credits, and planning a week-long spring celebration of engineering.

EPIC and a similar program at the Birmingham-area's Hoover High School are also credited with helping spark the Alabama Engineering Academy Initiative, a partnership among the State Department of Education, Auburn University, and the University of Alabama System.

Indeed, EPIC has impressed almost everyone. Last February, the Mobile Area Council of Engineers took the unusual step of naming EPIC its Engineering Project of the Year. If there's any concern about EPIC, it's that the program currently draws its enrollment primarily from outside its own feeder pattern, relying mostly on students with traditional college aspirations. If Mobile expects to produce the large STEM workforce it needs, some supporters say, tapping into the traditional college-bound student pool will not be enough.

Enter EYE.

EYE: Early interest and inquiry learning

The long-range goal for EYE, explains MAEF's Pruet, "is really to provide a model that the district can use to produce STEM-ready graduates across the entire system." More immediately, EYE aims to grow a larger pool of potential EPIC students for Davidson from schools within its own feeder pattern—a mixed demographic set that includes two middles (Burns and Denton) and six elementaries (E.R. Dickson, Dodge, Fonde, Griggs, Meadowlake and Shepard).

At least 50% of the students at each of these feeder schools meet federal poverty guidelines—including those at Burns Middle, a newly designated Title I school that many Mobilians might still identify as "suburban." By promoting interest in STEM subjects at these schools, Pruet says EYE and EPIC will not only reach a non-traditional student audience but can profit from the school system's new reliance on feeder patterns to drive K-12 reforms.

"EYE is not just about producing engineers," Pruet says. "We're building awareness in the schools and the larger community of the need for ALL students to take more and higher levels of math and science. Engineering provides an engaging way to 'hook' youngsters around that idea."

The genesis of the EYE program can be traced back to a Chamber of Commerce trip several years ago, when a group of Mobile business and community leaders visited the Boston Museum of Science. There they learned of an innovative K-12 engineering curriculum designed to renew young people's interest in technical careers.

Among those who became excited by the Boston program were Gigi Armbrecht, regional manager for AT&T, and Chris Lee, executive director of the J.L. Bedsole Foundation. The pair sought out Carolyn Akers, Pruet's boss and the executive director of MAEF, and said emphatically, "We've got to do this."

The board of Bedsole (a family foundation serving Mobile, Baldwin, Clarke, Monroe and Washington Counties) would support the venture, Lee said, if they could find additional partners. Akers, whose organization was already involved in workforce development issues, agreed to raise a portion of the funds. A critical third partner—Mobile County Public Schools—embraced the idea and offered to provide a share of EYE's start-up costs.

The EYE curriculum

In its start-up phase, the Engaging Youth in Engineering program is targeting students in grades 4-8. "In our first two years of implementation," Pruet says, "we've invested most of our funds in raising awareness, securing reusable equipment and materials, and building teaching capacity and student excitement."

Fourth and fifth graders participate in EYE clubs after school, using Boston's *Engineering is Elementary* curriculum. The research-based activities integrate engineering and technology concepts and skills with elementary science topics, literacy and social studies.

Upper elementary kids can also sign on for an activity-filled week of summer camp, organized around science-math themes in collaboration with the Gulf Coast Exploreum. This year's "Camp AMPED" focused on electricity and the human body. Students also have a chance to make connections with participating EYE and EPIC teachers. *[Learn more about the clubs and camps in our web edition.]*

Pruet says EYE supporters realized early on that extra-curricular clubs and camps don't reach all students. "It's usually the youngsters with parents who have more schedule flexibility, carpools, and so forth. We miss many of our potential STEM stars by just focusing on the extra curricular."

Partly for that reason, the EYE middle grades program aims to engage all students during a school's regular daily schedule by blending hands-on engineering experiences into the science and math studies already mandated and assessed by the state. "Every sixth, seventh, and eigth grade student in our EYE middle schools is tackling problems using the engineering design process at least three times a year," explains Pruet. "Each challenge involves a five-hour mix of math and science lessons over a week's time."

This repetitive exposure, Pruet says, "helps develop in students the ability to apply the math and science they are already learning. They analyze and interpret data; identify, formulate and solve problems, and communicate effectively—which includes listening. They function as part of a multi-disciplinary team, using the techniques, skills and tools needed in the workforce today."

The decision to offer activities that complement (and keep pace with) Alabama's math and science objectives meant creating an EYE curriculum from the ground up, with several criteria in mind: the resulting modules needed to be challenging and engaging, easy for teachers to use, and doable in a week's time.

EYE advisor Suzanne McGill, former head of the University of South Alabama math department, authored the first engineering mini-units, which were piloted in 2007-08. Anne Jolly, a former science teacher at Burns and Alabama's 1994 teacher of the year, joined the writing team to add science perspectives.

"We told the Burns teachers upfront that we'd be creating this curriculum from scratch, and they'd be our review team," Pruet says. When a draft unit is ready for testing, teachers try it out during a hands-on PD session, teach it to students, and then brainstorm ways to improve it. *[Learn more about EYE's modules in our web edition.]*

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EYE Education

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This process is strengthened by the daily presence of EYE coordinator Judy Duke, a retired Burns math teacher and instructional coach. Duke makes sure the EYE modules fit seamlessly into the regular curriculum. "I also do all the grunt work," she says, including arranging for USA engineering students and volunteers from local companies like Alabama Power and Airbus to come and work with students.

Duke has a key role in helping teachers become more adept at student-centered teaching. "The teachers are trying to change their practice," she says, "going to a more inquiry-based approach with students in teams, doing messy things—where the students are producing something, where they are solving problems using technology."

EYE in the middle

This fall, all students at Burns Middle School and the Clark School of Mathematics, Science and Technology will experience the hands-on excitement of engineering design as they explore the science and math behind topics like wind energy, rocket propulsion, watershed management and lunar survival —and take charge of their own learning as they brainstorm, test and evaluate their products.

Clark students will be new to the EYE experience, but kids at Burns Middle have been willing guinea pigs for EYE's pilot curriculum since the program began two years ago. "We like it because we use hands-on instead of the teacher just writing it on the board and saying, 'this does this,'" one boy told us during a May chat with Burns eighth graders. "You want to focus a little more." A girl who plans to attend MIT added: "it's more about figuring things out for yourself."

Burns and Denton Middle are the middle grades feeder schools for Davidson High, and Denton expects to join the program after teachers complete training for AMSTI (the state math and science initiative) which Pruet says is "a perfect complement to EYE." In the meantime, Pruet needed a second pilot school and decided to invite Clark, which already sends many students to EPIC.

The Clark kids will love the program, says Burns principal John Adams. "And teachers learn to love it, too."

"The teachers don't have to change the curriculum objectives or whatever's on the pacing guide," Adams explains. "They're just enriching the science and math objectives that are already there."

Before EYE and its professional development, says Adams, "our science labs were not focused. Students didn't produce anything or collect data the way they should." In the EYE activities, and a companion engineering lab donated by Alabama Power, "our kids see the connection between math and science, which is so important in getting across the idea of relevance." *[Learn more about the engineering lab in our web edition.]*

Students also take charge of learning, says Burns math teacher Diana Nguyen. "Seventh graders aren't used to taking the responsibility for learning all that much, unless you give them something like EYE, and they get that feeling of ownership. I don't think they've ever felt this kind of responsibility before, and it's a good way to introduce it to them."

Science teacher Paige Till offers an example from the pilot Lunar Habitat module for seventh grade. "We had five roles and we only had four on a team, so one role—retrieving the data—had to rotate among the students. It was fun to do and sharing the job really provided a structure so that the kids kind of managed themselves. It gave them the responsibility and let them see that they could gather the results, do the process correctly, and be timely, too."

During our Burns visit, sixth-grade teacher Homer Roberts was piloting a new mini-unit about watersheds for the first time. *Don't Go with the Flow* involves students in studies about water sources, pollution and hydrology. When Roberts walked in the room carrying a large plastic model of a watershed (you can actually run water through it), some Robotics Club students working in a corner immediately dropped their 'bots and rushed to see it.

"That's a real statement," Roberts says. "Our students are really stimulated by something like this, where the scientific content knowledge is demonstrated by something tangible. They know we will take them through the whole design process—designing it, testing it, making changes as they go through the testing. They get a real hands-on experience and they love it."

EYE on Mobile's future

Back at EYE headquarters, Pruet and the Mobile Area Education Foundation are pursuing a pattern of program development they've followed for many years—"Start small, think big."

With several National Science Foundation grants in the works, MAEF hopes to secure the funds necessary to fully develop the EYE learning modules, research the effect of students "having a continuum of coordinated STEM experiences across the grades," and scale up the work.

"The EYE initiative has been driven from day one by Mobile's business and industry leaders," Pruet says. "They've kept their three-year bargain and provided generous support. Now the NSF grants are critically important for us to keep growing the idea."

Ultimately, MAEF would like to see other school systems in the Mobile region implement their own EYE programs with the foundation's guidance and support. As the region's demand for high-tech workers increases, Pruet says, more public schools are going to feel an urgency to move toward a STEM curriculum that shows the relevance of math and science and "grabs students' hands and minds" by integrating those subjects with technology and real-world engineering challenges.

Duke, the EYE curriculum coach, tells a great story about that. Volunteers from Alabama Power arrived at Burns Middle School, ready to assist students as they began to design and build their own wind-energy turbines.

As the folks from Alabama Power introduced themselves and told something about their own connections to engineering, one student turned to Duke and whispered: "They're not here to steal our ideas, are they?" ❖

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"We look for best practices, then we craft them to fit the needs of our schools, based on our data. If and when we need to make adjustments, we do that."

It hasn't always been that way. "This district used to be so political, so much about the 'good ole boy' system," recalls Joe Toomey, a 17-year veteran and principal of Denton Middle School. "We didn't worry too much about strategies and academics."

In a district where today about 65 percent of students meet federal poverty guidelines and more than half are children of color, Toomey says, "Our system has done so much to change the way teachers teach and to make sure our students are engaged."

Much can be learned from Mobile's odyssey, including the payoffs for high expectations, strategic investment in professional development, firm but collaborative leadership, and authentic community outreach that welcomes strong partners even when they challenge the status quo.

Most of all, it's a story about rejecting any hope of a "silver bullet" solution and creating and refining strategic processes that make continuous improvement habitual. In a landmark 2002 study of successful urban education, researcher Jason Snipes hypothesized that in large urban systems, significant school reform must begin at the central office, where leaders develop effective processes, apply them consistently in all schools, and sustain momentum over many years, through many leadership changes. (sn.im/snipes)

The success strategies identified by Snipes align remarkably with the steps Mobile has taken. They include practices that appear to be common sense, but are often missing in urban systems:

- focus on specific student achievement goals aligned with state standards;
- concrete accountability systems that exceed state requirements;
- an initial focus on lowest-performing schools;
- district-wide curricula with common objectives and assessments;
- consistent and effective teaching practices, promoted through professional development;
- decision-making based on varied data sources.

Successful urban districts, the researchers said, also targeted the early grades. Mobile began the same way, with reading and math initiatives in its most challenged elementary schools, augmented by well-designed state initiatives such as the Alabama Reading Initiative. In 2009, when the State Department of Education gave Torchbearer recognition to high-performing, high-poverty schools, six of the seven honored were in Mobile County.

Leadership within and without

The Mobile journey, many observers say, began with the emergence of the Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF) in the mid-1990s. It picked up speed during the 10-year superintendency of Harold Dodge, and reached full stride in 2008, with Superintendent Roy Nichols' arrival.

In 2001, a landmark school tax referendum passed with major support from MAEF. Over the next several years, school leaders listened as MAEF engaged "stakeholders" in frank community conversations about the district's future. Over time, the school board committed to partnering with MAEF and its Yes We Can reform coalition to develop the district's first performance-based strategic plan.

The foundation had been using public engagement since the early 1990s, but the Yes We Can conversations reached a new scope. Some 1,400 citizens participated in the first cycle of Yes We Can, and participation swelled to 3,500 for the next. Leaders around Alabama and the Southeast consult Mobile's experts for "how-to's" on building deep partnerships between schools and communities, alliances that can start or rev up changes in schools.

Over the past five years, core components of the strategic reform process have been created, tested and refined. Today, Martha Peek says with confidence, the district is "entirely data-driven" and increasingly committed to an educational mission that is equal parts *rigor* (high academic standards), *relevance* (engaging and meaningful to students) and *relationships* (attentive to each student's individual needs).

Gigi Armbrecht, a regional director for AT&T in Alabama, says the district's smart decisions about comprehensive reform earned respect from business leaders. "The progress our schools have made over the last five years has made public education a driver in our economic development efforts."

Business leaders see the evidence in the classrooms. Recently, representatives of ThyssenKrupp visited Burns Middle and commented how they cannot train their employees in teamwork, work ethic or taking initiative, recalls MAEF's Susan Pruet.

But as the visitors toured the engineering program (see p. 3), Pruet says, "They were seeing students exhibit all of those traits."

Mobile also has numbers to back up its community pride. Analysis from the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama (PARCA) shows that Mobile is making progress with ***ALL*** students. Even more impressive, in a select number of schools, black students meeting federal poverty guidelines outperform highly funded suburban systems. At the urban George Hall Elementary, 88 percent of third graders scored Level 4 in math, compared to 56 percent of Alabama's white students.

When PARCA looked at 2008 Alabama Reading and Mathematics Test results from the state's 12 largest systems, Mobile stood out.

- Mobile beat the state average for percentages of black students and poverty students scoring at the top level. (grades 3-8, reading and math)
- Most of the system's white students and nonpoverty students beat state averages for scoring at the top level.
- In many instances, achievement gaps are narrowing at the same time that both groups are outscoring their peers in the state.

In this analysis, Mobile is Alabama's best large urban school system. Only one large suburban system—Madison County—does better.

Armbrecht and Sheila Dean-Rosenbohm, MAEF board members, say it's difficult to overstate the nonprofit's impact on these results.

Dean-Rosenbohm believes "the recent success of our

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Mobile public school system results from a great partnership with the business and civic community, led by the Mobile Area Educational Foundation." MAEF, she says, has helped the community identify a common goal toward which it now continually works—"providing valued, quality education to students today for the growth of Mobile tomorrow."

From the state perspective, A+ Education Partnership President Caroline Novak sees two distinctive things about the MAEF that could be useful in other communities. "The Mobile Area Education Foundation achieves high impact for two reasons—persistence and a focus on what is possible for local schools. No one wastes time pointing fingers or playing the blame game. Instead their energy is focused like a laser on great schools and what it takes to create and sustain them."

MAEF's founding executive director, Carolyn Akers, says Mobilians once thought little about turning around their schools. But when *The Economist* magazine interviewed a cross-section of Mobilians last year about economic change, "they were fascinated to learn that we were all saying the same thing about our schools—we really are together."

Keeping momentum during transition

Superintendent Roy Nichols's 40-year career includes stints as an elementary educator, Birmingham assistant superintendent, and university professor with a special interest in systemic improvement.

He did not ride into Mobile on a white horse. A confident, soft-spoken man nearing his mid-60s, Nichols told the community the same story when he interviewed: He was not seeking the job to advance his career, and he would not throw out good ideas and programs simply because they were not his.

Instead, he promised to take his time and learn about the district's strategic plan, its existing designs for improvement, and its history of reform. In our interview 16 months after he went to work—amid general praise in the community for his performance thus far—he said he was impressed by most of what he found.

"Much of the school district's progress has nothing to do with me," he says. "It has to do with the direction it was heading prior to my arrival."

It was quite an arrival. Shortly before he came on board in January 2008, Nichols learned the district budget would be in the red before year's end. He was forced to trim $17 million from what remained of a $300-plus million budget for 2007-08. He also found the district's reserves were 80 percent below state minimums, requiring a $30 million cut (about 8 percent) in the proposed budget for 2008-09 and prompting 1,200 notices of mandatory transfer or dismissal.

The crisis "forced us to look at how we do things and try to come up with new, more efficient ways of performing the same functions," he says.

Nichols took care to preserve the momentum of a district "headed in the right direction" in raising academic achievement, where "They'd already begun to expect schools to include faculty in decision making, to use data points as the basis of their instruction decisions, and to help teachers learn how to function as teams of professional educators and take ownership for school success," he says. "What I had to do was keep that cart in the road—keep it out of the ditch."

In a district where financial resources and student achievement goals are particularly aligned, principals and teachers say the cuts were deep enough to hurt programs. Still, nobody blames Nichols. In fact, they praise his decisiveness at a time when state budget cuts and a growing recession demanded fiscal responsibility.

MAEF director Carolyn Akers agrees. "He was a good person to have in that situation. He did not hesitate to do what had to been done."

Nichols' grasp of instruction and data-driven improvement earned him a level of trust not often granted to new superintendents who slash budgets the first month in office.

Principal Terri Tomlinson, whose inner-city George Hall Elementary has won national acclaim, is a respected leader in her own right. Like many of Mobile's best principals, she benefited from the Principals Academy, a professional development project that was among MAEF's earliest initiatives. Speaking of Nichols, she echoed comments we heard many places. "He listens to people, but his decisions are his."

Some components of strategic improvement

Many gears are turning in the MCPSS school improvement apparatus. Here are several components mentioned most often as we visited a dozen schools and talked with teachers and principals.

Common local assessments— Mobile developed its own Criterion Referenced Tests built on state content standards for various subjects at all grade levels. Tests determine if students have learned specific content, and they do what state assessments don't do very well—provide feedback to act on in a timely way.

Torchbearer principal Iesha Williams says this information is critical to Holloway Elementary's success. "We know every nine weeks where our children are and what we have to work on. We're able to adjust instruction throughout the year to make sure our students master the skills."

Balanced Scorecard—Nichols brought this progress-monitoring tool with him. The Scorecard uses up to 100 indicators to track performance of individual schools and the whole district—from state test data, graduation rates and incidents of quality staff development to discipline, attendance, teacher turnover, fiscal management and stakeholder (including student) satisfaction.

Writing in *School Administrator* magazine, Nichols said "each school is required to develop goals and strategies aligned with system targets and the Balanced Scorecard serves as the centerpiece for supervisory discussions about school or departmental progress."

Schools are encouraged to share their Scorecard data with parents and the community using engaging charts and graphs. At George Hall Elementary, instructional specialist Liz Reints used a baseball metaphor to create a lively bulletin board in the entrance hall. "It's got all of the same information but it's broken down differently and it's pleasing to the eye," she says.

School Action for Excellence Plans—There's nothing new about school improvement plans, but Mobile's SAEs don't gather dust. They are used daily and revised quarterly by school and district staff. Annual revisions are done through a data-driven, goal-setting process among principals, teachers and community representatives, says Peek.

Feeder patterns as drivers of reform

For the 2008-09 school year, Mobile completely revamped its method of school supervision, abandoning the traditional oversight by school level (elementary, middle, etc.) in favor of a K-12 approach built around the district's 13 high school feeder patterns. Three assistant superintendents—women with strong elementary instructional backgrounds—work 4 or 5 feeder patterns apiece. Principals regularly meet one-on-one with their assistant superintendent to examine performance data, up and down the grade levels.

Elementary schools have shown the strongest student achievement, and now they are putting on the pressure. Nichols says with a smile, "The message is: 'We've done our job and we're handing them to you. We expect (the middle school) to hand them to the high school just as ready, and the high school to send them out into the world fully prepared.'"

Nichols admits that putting elementary experts in charge put secondary educators in some "disequilibrium." But he says, "They're not letting the high schools go back to talking about what they used to talk about—which was discipline and sports."

The new system is wildly popular among the elementary and middle school principals we interviewed. They offered many examples of how the new strategy promotes better instruction through idea-sharing and data discussions.

Aimee Rainey is principal at rural Calcedeaver Elementary, one of three elementaries that feed into Lott Middle School and Citronelle High. When the five principals found problems in math, Rainey says, "we brought in some of our lead math teachers, sat around the table together and looked at the data to see what the children really didn't know."

The elementary principals returned to their schools, shared the problem with teachers, and brainstormed solutions. "We decided we would start all the way down in kindergarten and build understanding all the way up through sixth grade," Rainey says.

That's a prime example of "vertical communication" and the impact that is possible when educators collaborate up and down the grade levels.

Dropouts: The elephant in the room

"Our school system has the potential to graduate 5,000 new workers every year," Roy Nichols says. "But we're not. We're only graduating 3,000. So we have 2,000 potential workers for our growing industrial and business base that are getting lost along the way every year."

Nichols notes that Mobile's 40 percent dropout rate was calculated through careful research carried out with a federal grant in a MAEF-led partnership. And he's certain that a frank analysis in other large school systems would produce similar data.

Supported by rigorous Gateway Standards that all students will be expected to meet, Mobile has begun to redesign its career-technical and college-prep programs to increase their relevance to today's student. Creating "multiple pathways" to graduation, college and careers is now a constant refrain.

To strengthen relationships with students, Mobile is starting ninth-grade academies that emphasize counseling, mentoring and individual monitoring of students who fit the dropout profile. Sixth-grade academies are also in the works.

Many students give up on high school when they become over-aged and under-credited. The district began a rigorous credit recovery program, says Peek, that assesses students who fail a course to determine what else they need to learn—then uses "teacher-assisted technology" to help students gain that knowledge and pass a proficiency exam.

To some extent, credit recovery is a stopgap measure. The bigger goal is that "from the moment a child first walks into one of our schools, we have a clear objective: for them to graduate fully prepared for success."

For MAEF director Carolyn Akers, raising the graduation rate is Mobile's top school-related workforce issue. Akers led efforts to secure federal funds for the Research Alliance for Multiple Pathways (RAMP) project, led by Jeremiah Newell. Under Newell's leadership, RAMP documented Mobile's true dropout rate and has been mobilizing the community around the issue.

"At some point we had to say to ourselves, 'We've got to wake up here,'" Akers explains. "At the same time we're attracting all this new industry and these new jobs, we have a real big issue in this community, and it's about all of our disconnected youth."

Akers promotes a transfer school based on a New York City model. It's not the "old alternative school model," she says, but a school with up-to-date technology and relevant classes. Students can attend at all hours so they can work, and young mothers have daycare and support services.

Because of workforce pressure, Akers says, "Our high school leaders now realize that there is no option, that we really do have to change things."

Akers agrees with Nichols and Peek that the ultimate goal has to be "quality rigorous highly engaging pathways for all students, whether they lean toward career-tech, four-year college and graduate school or whatever. They need to be prepared at a level where they can make these choices and not become stuck in a rut."

The hard part of redesigning high schools is bigger than any one program, Akers says. "It's about asking yourselves, as a school system and a community, how do you transform your high schools so that they engage and prepare *all* students to make the best choices for themselves now and in the future." ❖

WHY OUR CHARTS FOCUS ON TOP PERFORMANCE

The Alabama Reading and Mathematics Test is scored on Levels 1-4, with Level 4 the highest. Level 3 is considered "meeting standards" for purposes of the state's accountability system. However, Level 4 more closely matches proficiency as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the Stanford 10. For this reason, the Alabama Reading Initiative, the state's school-based rewards system, and analysis from the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama encourage schools to aim for Level 4.

TORCHBEARER SCHOOL

St. Elmo Elementary: "We teach the children we're blessed to have."

A tightly knit faculty blends data-driven instruction, inquiry-based learning and focused PD into a formula for success.

By Jennifer Pyron

St. Elmo Elementary in south Mobile County sits in relative seclusion along a rural highway—three red brick buildings connected by covered walkways draped with jasmine.

Most of St. Elmo's 463 students come from working-class families who make their livings in the shipyards and on fishing boats. Thirteen percent are Asian, 20% African American and 3% Hispanic. More than 80 percent qualify for free or reduced lunch.

St. Elmo may be labeled a "high-poverty" school, but the teachers, students and parents don't view it that way. "There's not a day here that anyone walks around and thinks about the fact that this is a high-poverty school," says Principal Deborah Fletcher.

"We think about the children, and we teach the children we're blessed to have," she says. "This faculty will do any and everything it takes to provide skilled instruction to help children."

AMSTI spurs teaching changes

St. Elmo is an Alabama Reading Initiative school and an Alabama Math Science and Technology Initiative (AMSTI) site. Since joining AMSTI three years ago, the school's faculty has embraced the initiative's hands-on, inquiry based teaching and learning methods and earned widespread attention for their successful implementation.

Fletcher is a key player in that success. She returned to college as an adult, earned her teaching degree, and taught 5th grade for 11 years at Dixon Elementary, where she became an expert in hands-on science. In 2003, she became science resource coordinator for the district, then interned at St. Elmo for two years while completing her administrative degree. After a year as assistant principal, Fletcher took the helm in 2007.

Her intensive background in science made Fletcher the perfect leader for an AMSTI school. She understood the type of ongoing, job-embedded professional development her faculty would need to teach differently, arranging two weeks of faculty-wide summer training before the first and second year of implementation.

An important first step, Fletcher says, was helping teachers become adept at aligning their inquiry-based lessons to the common assessments required by the school system. The inquiry approach "is more than just the activities on the table. You've really got to hone in on the questioning and make sure students are learning the concepts and objectives they need to learn."

"We have to determine as a faculty what inquiry-based lessons are going to fit into the pacing guide and how best to build the common assessments around the AMSTI tools," she explains. After students are tested, "we analyze our common assessment results, and we're able to see what pieces may be missing and where we need to re-teach."

2007-08 ARMT Top Level (4)*	3rd Grade Reading	3rd Grade Math
St. Elmo	**63.24%**	**55.88%**
Mobile Co.	53.04%	49.10%
Alabama	51.39%	46.94%

*Why use the top level? See page 9.

Sustaining new teacher practices

During the summer of 2007, Fletcher met with Shelly Rider, AMSTI director at the University of South Alabama, to formulate a plan to sustain the initiative.

"Sometimes with initiatives, you go to the training, and you use it, and then later the materials just go on a shelf," Fletcher says. "So we asked ourselves, 'How do we water this seed that we planted so that we can see great fruits over time?'"

Rider sent AMSTI coaches to St. Elmo for two weeks during the 2007-2008 school year. They modeled inquiry-based lessons for every math and science teacher in the school. After each lesson, the coaches would debrief with the teachers, asking such questions as, "What did you see, and what do you think?"

The coaches then began to work with teachers on a team lesson, modeling the instruction and allowing teachers to practice. Then it was time for St. Elmo's faculty to teach solo. Afterwards, each teacher debriefed with a coach, asking questions and receiving feedback about ways to improve their practices. "It was like (the AMSTI coaches) just became part of our school," says Fletcher.

To further sustain the work, the faculty chose coaches from their own ranks to serve at each grade

level. This year they also began to build grade-level resource teams by content areas. The school-based leaders will serve as in-house AMSTI resource teachers for the St. Elmo faculty, guiding development of the common assessments, helping select instructional strategies, and leading the analysis of results. *[Find out more about St. Elmo's assessment development process in our web edition.]*

"What we've done is empower the faculty to own this initiative," says Fletcher with satisfaction. "AMSTI has been working with us side-by-side, but now it's time for us to fly solo. They will be here for us if we hit a bump in the road."

The two-year PD process "has been one of the most positive experiences I've ever seen happen in a school," she says. "Everyone in the building now understands how important it is to align your instruction with your common assessments, know where you are going before you ever begin, and really be able to look at questions and the choices children are making to determine what they're missing and exactly what they need."

Hands-on learning excites kids

Davis, a St. Elmo 5th grader, says science is more fun at his school because "we do hands-on stuff instead of looking in textbooks and being bored."

"When we were learning about ecosystems," he explains, "instead of reading about them in a book we had to make one ourselves out of big Coke bottles. We made plastic columns out of the bottles and put different habitats in them for fish, crickets and snails. The snails lived in the bottom, and we had to put them together in the bottles, and then we actually planted stuff in the top."

Louis, a 4th grader, describes his favorite experiment. "In one experiment, we took thermometers and we checked materials like soil, soil and water, or sand, and we measured to see which one cooled the fastest. And our teacher usually lets us figure out the answers for ourselves. We figure it out, then she explains it more if she needs to."

Every year, the fourth graders take a trip to Dauphin Island to perform an AMSTI experiment in hydrology. For many students, it's their first visit to the ocean, even though they live in a coastal city.

"It's a wonderful hands-on activity where the students have to map the shoreline by plotting coordinates on grid paper," explains 4th grade teacher Tracy Delcambre. "I had been having trouble with one of my students, who I could tell was very smart, but he just wasn't connecting with the material in class. Well, he blossomed on that trip. He was actively engaged and helping his peers complete the assignment. That's what I love about AMSTI. When they're able to do those types of hands-on things—students soar."

Teachers see change in themselves

Over the last few years—thanks to ongoing professional development in both AMSTI and ARI strategies—the 32 teachers at St. Elmo have become very skillful at using data to drive instruction. Many of them are quite insightful about the changes they've seen in their own teaching and in the learning of their students.

"[Our data] meetings are really, really wonderful, because, you know, two heads are really better than one," says 18-year veteran Audrey Rivers, the reading intervention specialist for grades 2-5. "We share ideas, discuss challenges and come up with strategies to address any interferences. Everyone feels comfortable sharing what problems they may be having."

Jenny Munday, the ARI reading coach for grades K-3, says data meetings drive St. Elmo's instructional focus and professional development. "When we see needs that are occurring, we know what strategies we should focus on and what help we need to give ourselves and our students."

Rivers says the level of instruction and the rigor of the material presented to students has increased dramatically over the years. "It's more intensive now. We're sharply focused. When I first arrived, we had that textbook, and when children had difficulty, we'd try to pull them aside and work with them, but it wasn't as strategic and deliberate as it is now. Now we are really, really helping those kids."

In addition to the instructional strategies, daily data meetings and ongoing PD, teachers point to their culture of high expectations as having a major impact on student achievement. "We know that if you set that expectation high, then they will achieve at that level," explains reading intervention teacher Liz Van Cleave. "We just have to motivate them."

Delcambre says students expect teachers to demand a lot from them. "We have individual goals set for each student. Students know that their individual goal is different from the person sitting next to them, and that's all right. What they're working on is their goal. And they are so happy when they achieve it. It makes them feel so wonderful when they are successful."

District support strengthens success

AMSTI and ARI are not the sole reasons St. Elmo has been an Alabama Torchbearer School for six years running, says Fletcher. The support and strategic direction coming from Mobile County Public School System leaders is critical.

She says successful schools in Mobile County use a wide variety of instructional strategies, based on what works best for them. "The commonality is that we are all really using the data and individualizing the instruction."

"In Mobile County, it really gets back to research-based instruction that's proven to be effective, looking at our formative assessments so that we really understand where the children are, and finding the right set of tools to get students what they need."

The message from the top is clear, says Fletcher—"it's not just about providing instruction for a classroom of students. Everything we do at the school level is about working with each child. When they come to you in kindergarten, they're not all on the same playing field.

"It takes educators to get everybody on the same level," Fletcher says. "And that means meeting the children where they are, the minute they walk through your door." ❖

TORCHBEARER SCHOOL

Anna Booth Elementary: "We have found the keys to success."

The journey from bottom to top really began when teachers proved to themselves they could reach every child.

By Jennifer Pyron

Walking into Anna Booth Elementary early in the morning is like gulping a double shot of espresso. The new school building buzzes with energy. Every classroom is a hive of activity, and there's a palpable intensity in the air. The faculty and 530 students are ready to begin a jam-packed day of instruction, intervention and powerful learning.

The school has undergone important changes in recent years, including a name change from Peter F. Alba (19th century landowner) to Anna Booth (esteemed Bayou La Batre teacher and principal). Two years ago, the faculty and students moved from a worn-out facility with multiple portables in Bayou La Batre to a new brick building in Irvington, a 15-minute drive north. "It was a seamless change supported by the community with no negative impact," says veteran principal Lisa Williams.

The new building is great, but Anna Booth's actual metamorphosis began years before the move. The result has been a total shift in culture, from benevolent low expectations for struggling students to very high expectations and soaring achievement—in a school where one third of students are English Language Learners and 90% meet federal poverty guidelines.

The change has been so complete, in fact, that Anna Booth has been named an Alabama Torchbearer School four years in a row (2006-09), and was one of six schools to receive the National School Change Award in 2007.

So how did the faculty and staff move Anna Booth from academic under-performer to national award-winner? Williams, a reflective and experienced school leader, has identified several key factors that contribute to the school's success—factors she believes are easily replicated in schools with the resolve to do whatever it takes to improve teaching and learning.

2007-08 ARMT Top Level (4)*	3rd Grade Reading	3rd Grade Math
Anna Booth	**62.32%**	**63.77%**
Mobile Co.	53.04%	49.10%
Alabama	51.39%	46.94%

*Why use the top level? See page 9.

Implementing ARFI with fidelity

Williams gives the Alabama Reading First Initiative (ARFI) credit for most of Booth's progress. "We were told we would receive unprecedented funding and support, and that as a result of that, we should expect unprecedented results. We found that to be true."

For six years ARFI, a K-3 initiative, provided funds for a comprehensive reading program (Open Court in the first five years and Reading Street in 2008-09), plus ongoing professional development for teachers, two reading coaches in grades K-3, and one schoolwide Reading First coach. The school also had an ARI reading coach on staff and a Title I reading specialist.

The changes at the school have been phenomenal. On the 2007-08 state accountability tests, 95% of third, fourth and fifth graders scored proficient or higher in reading and math.

"Faithful grant implementation, determination, and relentless efforts have ensured that absolutely every child has progressed to the greatest extent possible during the last six years," says Williams. "The teachers implemented the grant with full fidelity, and they see the grant as a gift—a response to a national crisis."

Two key components of the school's implementation of ARFI have been the research-based comprehensive reading program and a strategic, effective schedule that allows for an intensive intervention plan with targeted small-group instruction. *[Learn more about Booth's daily schedule in our web edition.]*

Teachers received intensive training and job-embedded support for Open Court, which helped them implement it to the full benefit of their students. There was very little resistance—the faculty embraced the highly structured reading program as a powerful tool for boosting student achievement. When the system shifted to Reading Street, Booth's faculty and students had a learning routine in place and found the switch fairly easy.

"Implementing a program with fidelity doesn't mean that you're a robot, and that you don't consider other factors going on around you," says Julie Salmons, the reading coach for second and third grades.

"We see Open Court and now Reading Street as research-based tools. They work. We know that," Salmons says. "Good practices are good practices, and good teaching is good teaching. And that good teaching can still continue on without skipping a beat while implementing a program."

ARFI also introduced the practice of regular, formal data meetings. "We needed a process for analyzing student achievement data to drive instruction and plan for professional development," explains Williams. Monthly grade-level data meetings allow teachers to study data as a

group and discuss the strengths and challenges of every student in the grade. Where challenges are identified, instruction is tailored to fit the student's needs. "They are an integral part of our success," she says.

At the end of Booth's first ARFI year, it became apparent that the framework was going to have a tremendous impact on student success. The school expanded its comprehensive reading program to the fourth and fifth grades, implementing every aspect of ARFI that didn't require additional funding—the daily reading block, the intervention period, teacher collaboration, and grade-level data meetings. As a result, student achievement in the higher grades is keeping pace with K-3.

Maintaining constancy of focus

Every MCPSS school must create and carry out a School Action for Excellence (SAE) plan. One of Williams' favorite quotes is from basketball coach Steve Brennan: "Our goals can only be reached through a vehicle of a plan, in which we must fervently believe, and upon which we must vigorously act. There is no other route to success."

"Our SAE plan embodies that," she explains. "We fervently believe in it and we act vigorously on it every day. It's a very methodical course of action based on a comprehensive needs assessment. Our SAE plan articulates our direction while ensuring we maintain our vision and mission."

The faculty shares their leader's total commitment to the SAE plan, in part because they are all involved in creating it. "Our SAE is a working, living, breathing document," explains Salmons. "We are the SAE; it's not just some words on a piece of paper."

The staff meets quarterly to review the SAE and make sure they're on target. Then they conduct a comprehensive needs assessment based on student data during the summer, analyzing all of the standardized test scores, DIBELS and in-class assessments. The focus for the next year grows out of that analysis and becomes the new SAE framework.

Creating an engaging school

One of the biggest challenges for Williams six years ago was to change the culture of the school. "We had to have what I call 'courageous conversations' about our core beliefs. Do we believe every child can learn? Do we believe that poverty, race, and migrant status should not be used as excuses for poor academic performance?"

In a few short years, Williams says, she's watched the faculty completely change their outlook on student achievement. "They've moved from an attitude of 'It is impossible, it's out of our control,' to an attitude of 'It is a reality. By collaborating, we'll succeed.'"

In the first few years, some teachers chose to go elsewhere. "They just couldn't embrace the change and didn't want to work as hard as we needed them to work," she says. In the last four years, there's been very little faculty turnover. "They are not competitive, and there is no evidence of cliques or professional jealousy. They work in unison. Each grade level teacher accepts responsibility for every child in that grade."

First grade teacher Dayle Alidor has only been at Anna Booth for two years. She came from a large school with a completely different climate. She now drives 100 miles round trip to work. She says the professional learning community at Booth makes the trip worth it.

"I don't think any one of us has a child in our classroom for whom we don't have high expectations," she says. "And they know that. Their parents know that and we all know that. There are a lot of schools with all these excuses about why students can't achieve. But it doesn't matter where they live or who they live with—it's about their brain and what they're capable of doing."

Job-embedded professional learning

None of the significant improvements in teaching and learning at Anna Booth could have happened without focused, ongoing professional development. Student and teacher data help assure professional development is relevant and timely.

"We focus on the National Staff Development Council's results-driven vision," Williams explains. "We look at what our students need to know, what we need to know and be able to do to ensure their success, and what training we need to get us there." Workshops, book studies and other activities are always research-based. We make sure we know how to translate our learning into daily practice, and that our practice impacts student learning." *[See details in the web edition.]*

Peer coaching has been the most effective job-embedded professional development, says Williams. The reading coaches actively support teachers by providing demonstration lessons. This has helped dramatically with the implementation of both comprehensive reading programs.

"We were well prepared [for Reading Street]," says Donna Melton, a second-grade teacher. "But there were still times I started teaching a new unit and said to myself, 'Wait a minute, this isn't flowing right.' We were lucky to have our reading coaches available to come straight down the hall and model lessons or call Reading Street consultants to get answers for us."

Maintaining a sense of urgency

Every day at Anna Booth Elementary, there is an intensity and sense of urgency. It's the glue that holds everything together, Williams says.

"At every meeting, we engage in conversations about the challenges of preparing our students for today's global economy. We examine our role as elementary school teachers in ensuring that our students graduate from high school and can compete—not just with other kids in the district or in the state—but globally."

With national funding for Reading First eliminated for 2009-10, Alabama will have to discontinue most of the funding and support given to ARFI schools. As a result, Williams and her faculty face a real challenge—sustaining the momentum and intensity they've achieved.

Williams isn't worried. "Absolutely not. We have the keys to success, and we are going to sustain our success. It's too important to these students and to this community."

"I've learned a great lesson," she says. "Real success is accurate information sustained over time. It's sustainable when it's taken for granted. And that's what's happened here. Our culture, the intensity, it's all internalized now. We just do it." ❖

Calcedeaver Elementary: "We know what good instruction looks like."

TORCHBEARER SCHOOL

When it comes to "can do" attitudes, it's hard to top the faculty and staff at Calcedeaver Elementary. The school is a patchwork of small buildings and rusting portables, linked by covered concrete walkways in need of frequent patching. Some classrooms flood during the frequent heavy coastal rains and students have to be hustled to high ground.

"Our facilities aren't great but we don't worry about that," says principal Aimee Rainey. "We just do what we've got to do, and that's educate children."

The small pK-6 school is located in the remote northwest corner of Mobile County, about an hour's drive from the MCPSS central office. The area's rural character is undergoing a rapid transition with construction of the $4 billion ThyssenKrupp steel mill not many miles from the school. The German company will eventually employ 2,700 permanent workers, and Calcedeaver is sure to see enrollment growth.

Rainey brings her experiences as a speech pathologist and middle grades science teacher to her leadership role. She's not complacent about the meager facilities, just sharply focused on her primary mission—improving the prospects of 300 students, most of whom live in poverty.

More than 80% of Calcedeaver's kids are Native Americans associated with the local Choctaw tribe. Rainey's predecessor LaGaylis Harbuck—also a Choctaw—was determined that her mostly Indian students would compete with elementary children across Alabama. Harbuck led Calcedeaver to several #1 rankings on state assessments and set the stage for the school's 2006 designation as a National Blue Ribbon School.

Rainey served as Harbuck's assistant for two years before becoming principal in 2006. She has the same competitive drive to see Calcedeaver's children at the top of the performance charts. As visitors wait in the front office, they can browse a "wall of pride" and hear of recent accomplishments:

- Best elementary writing scores in Mobile County (2007)
- One of the first elementary schools in the state to join the Alabama Math, Science and Technology Initiative and provide AMSTI trainers.
- 75 percent of fifth graders at the highest level in math and reading on the 2008-09 state assessment.
- The recipient of several competitive grants that make it possible for all students to have regular one-to-one laptop experiences.
- Two Alabama Torchbearer Awards—most recently in 2008-09 when Calcedeaver was one of only seven high-poverty schools statewide to receive the high-performance award.

2007-08 ARMT Top Level (4)*	3rd Grade Reading	3rd Grade Math
Calcedeaver	**57.58%**	**54.55%**
Mobile Co.	53.04%	49.10%
Alabama	51.39%	46.94%

*Why use the top level? See page 9.

A focus on continuous improvement

In our 2005 profile of Calcedeaver (sn.im/wtefall05) we highlighted the school's rapid gains in literacy achievement after joining the Alabama Reading First Initiative. The school quickly became one of the state's top performers on the DIBELS assessments for early reading skills. In the past three years, Rainey says, the school has built on that progress by expanding its emphasis on comprehension skills and the core content areas tested by by the state in grades 3-6.

With support from a district expert, Rainey and her teachers learned to do five-year longitudinal studies of the school's ARMT and SAT-10 scores. "She taught us how to create charts and graphs that would show us where our recurring weaknesses were and how we could best use our time to improve student performance."

Now "that kind of analysis is just second nature to us. We look at our long-term trends and start narrowing our focus." For example, in the area of vocabulary, teachers might determine that students have been consistently weak in their use of synonyms. "So we ask some questions: How are we teaching it? When is it taught? How is it tested?"

Like other MCPSS schools, Calcedeaver follows the district seven-month pacing guide. "If we look at that plan and see synonyms were taught early in the year and state assessments aren't until the spring, then we know we need to embed synonym instruction throughout the period coming up to the test. Even if it's not that way in the guide, we know that's what our children need."

As a result of this persistent examination of trend data, Rainey says, "we've created the same intensity around the state assessments that we already had with DIBELS."

Moving to a new street

Like most of Mobile's Torchbearers, Calcedeaver is an ARFI school with a stable faculty well-trained in the Open Court structured reading program. This past school year, when the district asked ARFI schools to adopt the Scott Foresman series *Reading Street* used by other elementaries, "we had our little pity party, because we'd had such dramatic results with Open Court." Then teachers worked through the summer and early fall to prepare for the changeover.

"We created diagrams and looked at the similarities—and we all just reminded ourselves that we know what good reading instruction looks

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George Hall Elementary: "We push our kids. We feel the challenge."

TORCHBEARER SCHOOL

George Hall Elementary, located in the rundown heart of inner city Mobile, is fast becoming a national icon. A recent article by Learning First Alliance, a coalition of the nation's most influential education organizations, observed that

People looking for a public school Cinderella story need look no further than George Hall...The once struggling school, which serves mostly low-income children, now boasts state math and reading test scores most wealthy suburban schools would be proud of.

Closer to home, Jim Williams of the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama regularly analyzes state assessment data and compares the performance of public schools. In 2008-09, he says, "95% of Hall's students in 4th and 5th grade math scored at the very highest level on the state test, placing them on par with the most affluent schools in the state."

Hall principal Terri Tomlinson takes it all in stride. She appreciates the recognition her students receive, and the sweat equity her faculty has invested (earning the National Blue Ribbon School award in 2008). But she's a leader always looking for the next improvement.

"Our state assessment scores have just gone up and up," she says. "To me, it's a minimum standards assessment, and everybody in this school should be at 100%." Tomlinson wonders if less should be said about the achievement of Hall's largely African American population, and more about the performance of other elementary schools with significant advantages.

"When you think about it, there's no reason why Hall would out-perform so many of the white schools. We have to do a lot of footwork with our kids. In more advantaged schools, it would just be the challenge of taking the kids as far as they could go. But if you don't feel any challenge, nothing happens."

"Here at Hall," she says, "we could have a future Pulitzer Prize winner or surgeon general. So we push our kids. We feel the challenge. Right now this is the best elementary school education our children can get. If we can shape them here, their future will be very bright hopefully."

Five years of transformation

After years on Alabama's list of lowest performers, George Hall was chosen in 2004 by MCPSS leaders as one of two elementary schools to be "transformed." A new turn-around principal would hire her own faculty and staff, and teachers who agreed to work at Hall would receive sign-up bonuses and could earn performance incentives each year for five years.

Tomlinson, a successful leader at another inner-city school, brought a core group of teachers with her. "When we came here I was not concerned about the students' ability to achieve," she remembers. "And I think that's proved itself over and over again. It was lighting a fire under the kids—giving them quality instruction all day long and changing the environment of the building—that made the difference."

"And it wasn't something that could take place gradually," she says. "Our students needed to enter the school on the first day knowing it was something new – that the physical plant was different, the teachers were different, everything about the school was different. I think it set a tone and every year it's just been better than the last."

The vision, says Tomlinson, remains simple: "It's the belief that all children can learn—we just may have to change the way we teach them."

Five years of progress

Tomlinson and her team did not arrive at Hall with all the answers. "We've learned a lot," Tomlinson says. "It's been five years of real lessons in teaching and leadership." Here are some hightlights:

ARFI and ARI—"Both the Alabama Reading Initiative and the Reading First Initiative have been tremendous assets for us. We've had plenty of high quality staff development. We now have some of the best teachers of reading in the district, as far as diagnostics, understanding what children need, and providing intervention. As long as we sustain our focus on reading, we're going to see the gains in student achievement."

Inquiry and civic education—Hall's students also take field trips that provide opportunities to learn about the world beyond the inner city. To increase awareness of democratic values, Tomlinson orchestrated an ambitious Timeline project last spring that engaged all students (preK-5) in standards-based research projects. The end product: colorful and detailed American history displays covering 1607 to 2009 that ran down every hallway in the school. *(See our web edition.)*

Skills for a digital age—In a 2007 interview (sn.im/wte07), Tomlinson estimated that fewer than 15 percent of Hall's students had internet access at home. "If our kids are going to learn important 21st century skills," she said, "they are going to need to get it here in our building." Hall continues to prepare kids for the digital age, through participation in the 21st Century Learners initiative, student Web projects, and school broadcasting.

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2007-08 ARMT Top Level (4)*	3rd Grade Reading	3rd Grade Math
George Hall	**79.49%**	**88.46%**
Mobile Co.	53.04%	49.10%
Alabama	51.39%	46.94%

*Why use the top level? See page 9.

TORCHBEARER SCHOOL

Holloway Elementary: "We all are accountable for these students."

When teachers have a strong relationship with children, says Iesha Williams, "they will move mountains for you."

By Jennifer Pyron

Holloway Elementary is an urban school in the heart of Mobile, located in a tight-knit community that shares real ownership in the school. Many of the residents graduated from Holloway and are proud to send their children there. The 442 students, 97% of whom meet federal poverty guidelines, are predominately African American, as are the faculty and staff.

The school's long-time faculty and staff have always had high expectations for students, but until recently, they did not have all the resources and strategies in place to help students complete rigorous grade-level work. That began to change two years ago with the arrival of Iesha Williams, an energetic young principal who brought 13 years of experience, a deep knowledge of effective reading strategies, and a love for Holloway (her mother worked in the cafeteria when Williams was a young girl).

Williams also brought more than a dozen experienced teachers who understood what it takes to reach every child. They came as a team from the recently closed Martha Thomas Elementary. "Our data was high at Martha Thomas," Williams explains in a kind, enthusiastic voice. "That staff knew exactly what to do to help kids."

The teachers who made the transition "were able to share those strategies with those who were already here," Williams says, "from helping them use and understand pacing guides to implementing a comprehensive reading program."

In just two short years, Williams and her staff were able to put key things in place that boosted student achievement scores and drew the attention of the State Department of Education—which named Holloway Elementary as one of the state's seven Torchbearer Schools for 2008-09.

2007-08 ARMT Top Level (4)*	3rd Grade Reading	3rd Grade Math
Holloway	**62.12%**	**42.42%**
Mobile Co.	53.04%	49.10%
Alabama	51.39%	46.94%

*Why use the top level? See page 9.

Decisive action produced quick results

Iesha Williams spent nine years at Florence Howard Elementary School, an Alabama Reading First Initiative site. She was familiar with Open Court from her time in the classroom there, and she'd seen first hand the difference a structured reading approach can make for struggling students.

When Williams took the reins at Holloway in 2007, she immediately introduced Open Court. Teachers received intensive professional development in the program's methods and daily support from school-based coaches. Results came quickly.

Venetia Smith, Holloway's Title I coordinator, previously served as the ARI coach at Martha Thomas. She was ideally suited to help second and third grade teachers gain a deeper understanding of reading strategies and helped them implement Open Court with fidelity by modeling lessons and providing feedback.

"I was hesitant at first," says Danielle Smith, a third grade teacher who has been at Holloway for six years. "But Venetia, Mrs. Williams and the other reading coaches provided us with great support. I started to see progress by the second quarter, when the students were familiar with the program and I was more confident in the strategies."

Williams instituted weekly grade level data meetings and rearranged the daily schedule to include a two-hour reading block, "which our parents now know is sacred," she says. "We joke that it's like a church service…you can't interrupt that service! That first year we really made reading our top priority."

During two-hour block, teachers focus on reading, language, fluency, and comprehension. All adults help with reading. During the weekly data meetings, every grade level reviews the lastest DIBELS data and revisits results from the district's quarterly Criterion Referenced Tests (CRT). Teachers then group children according to their progess, moving them from one group to another as needed.

Williams points to the district-constructed CRTs as a critical component in Holloway's success. "Unlike other districts, we don't have to wait for the (annual) SAT 10 or the ARMT," she says. "We know every nine weeks where our children are and what we have to work on. We're able to adjust instruction throughout the year to make sure our students master the skills they need to be on grade level or higher."

"In our data meetings, we work on lesson plans, create common assessments and discuss individual student data," says first grade teacher Ashley McCall. "The collaboration helps us stay on track."

"It's easier to plan together," points out Tiffany Wiggins, who teaches fourth grade. "We play to

each other's strengths. For example, I'm strong in math, so I plan most of the math lessons for the fourth grade. Another teacher does the reading and another does science. It works really well."

Holloway also has a structured intervention program in which struggling students can get up to four "dips" a day. "That's where our instructional aides come in," explains Williams. "They work in small groups or one-on-one throughout the day."

Strong student relationships

The entire Holloway faculty meets together once a week to discuss progress and address any problems. Williams leads these sessions and participates in grade level meetings, impressing upon her faculty the importance of using data to drive instruction.

"We all are accountable for these students," she says. "It's not about me. It's about what we can do to help our children."

Williams also stresses the importance of building strong relationships with students and parents. In a recent book study, the staff read *Do You Know Enough About Me to Teach Me?* by Stephen Peters. "When you have a relationship with your students, they will move mountains for you," she says. "They will go above and beyond to succeed. They'll come to school on time, every day."

Holloway also values family-school relationships. Teachers send home daily behavior reports, a weekly newsletter, and a monthly gazette to ensure constant communication with parents and guardians. And they take it a step further—giving parents and students their home and cell phone numbers.

Says first-grade teacher Shantovi Howard, "I had a child whose mom worked late, and he needed help with his homework. He called me on my cell phone and we talked through it. You have to be accessible to them when they need you."

The new feeder pattern collaborations implemented by district leaders also help strengthen parent-community relationships. Principals at all levels in the feeder zone meet regularly to share results and align instructional goals. "We work with Leflore High and Booker T. Washington Middle, since those schools are where most of our students will go," explains Williams.

This steady communication helps as students move from the neighborhood elementary school to large secondary school campuses.

"Because we have a good relationship with those other schools, we can encourage our parents to trust their faculty and principals," she says. "And the community can see that we are a united front—that we're all working together to help their children."

A comfortable culture built on respect

Holloway teachers often describe themselves as part of a family. And the head of that family is Williams.

"I tell anyone that will listen—in a workshop or in Wal-Mart—I love my principal," says Rene Peasant, who teaches 5th grade. "She is my friend, and she is a great leader. She has really brought the staff together. She supports us. She backs us. And she's consistent."

Peasant says that Williams' positive, professional attitude "can be felt all over the school." And her own classroom models this respectful environment. "We address each other by Mr. and Ms. No one comes into the classroom without saying 'good morning' to me or to each other. And that's the way the entire school is."

When the talk turns to success stories, all the teachers laugh knowingly about a student named Thomas. "He is a very smart boy and you just have to love him," says Tiffany Wiggins. "He lacks a lot of attention at home and he seeks that attention with me and the other students. He's here, there, and everywhere. I ask him to help his peers with lessons and projects—we have to keep him very busy in order to keep him in line."

"And that's the way it is with a lot of these kids," offers second grade teacher Gloria Rand. "They try to act hard because they think they have an image to uphold in the neighborhood. But we see through that and we find ways to direct that attitude and energy in positive ways. You help them believe that they have a purpose and a destiny, and they can be whatever they want to be."

New challenges ahead

The staff at Holloway is excited and honored to be chosen as a Torchbearer School but know there are still challenges ahead.

Although math scores have improved some, they have not kept pace with reading. Williams confesses that the intensive focus on reading kept the school from fully engaging with the strategies of the Mobile Math Initiative, an innovative research-based program that relies heavily on intensive professional development for teachers.

"Our focus has been on getting our scores up. We had to be able to do basic math and teach them to be problem solvers. We're going to get back to (Mobile Math), though."

The school will also gain 250 new students from nearby Fonvielle Elementary, which closed this year. Williams will be hiring additional teachers to help serve the growing population—teachers who must learn Holloway's methods.

Her recruitment strategy is simple. "I look for people who are motivated to serve children. I want someone who thrives on collaboration, who is willing to work as part of a team. We don't go in our classrooms and shut the doors."

Holloway also offers "a lot of extracurricular activities for our students—a step team, a choir, a lyrical dance team, a cheerleading squad, piano lessons—so we look for people who have other talents besides teaching."

Many Fonvielle students will be performing below grade level, Williams knows, and Holloway will ramp up its assessments during the first two weeks of school to determine where the new students are and what they need to get to grade level. Thanks to the district's data warehouse system, teachers can also examine their students' performance from last year.

"We will really know those students before they walk in our door," says Williams. "We'll sit down with our reading coach and analyze that data. At the end of every year, teachers also create cards for each child, noting their academic and behavioral strengths and challenges."

Using all this information, Williams and her leadership team "will match student needs with teacher personalities as best we can to ensure successful teaching and learning."

"And then we'll do a lot of praying!" ❖

TORCHBEARER SCHOOL

Indian Springs EL: "You need funding to make your dreams come true."

Strategic staffing for intervention and a strong guidance program have helped this ARFI school make AYP every year since 2003.

By Jennifer Pyron

Indian Springs Elementary is located along one of the many rural highways that crisscross northern Mobile County, in territory marked by signs of poverty and under-development. There's no interesting history behind the name of the unincorporated community the school serves—Eight Mile is just the distance down U.S. 45 to the city.

The exterior of Indian Springs shows the wear and tear of a building that has housed students for many decades. The school comes alive only after you cross the threshold, where you find a physical space that is clearly well-loved by the faculty, staff and students.

Just inside the front doors, a small sitting area decorated with potted plants and flowers welcomes visitors. The walls are bright and the floors shine. Bulletin boards and student work cover every inch of the hallways. Teachers decorate the entrances to their classrooms with personal touches, like the kindergarten teacher whose door resembles a front porch with columns, shutters and an awning.

The school serves 451 students in grades pre K-5. It has a 50-50 ratio of white and African American students—87% of whom meet federal poverty guidelines. About 14 percent are classified as having special needs. The demographics offer few clues about the school's academic performance. But in fact, Indian Springs Elementary has made met state Adequate Yearly Progress benchmarks (AYP) every year since 2003.

Last year, 87% of fifth graders scored proficient or higher in Reading and Math on the ARMT. And in 2009, this Alabama Reading First Initiative school was recognized as a Torchbearer School by the State Department of Education for helping all of its students to meet high standards.

Leading a team of experienced and caring teachers is Principal Rosalie Howley, a 30-year veteran of MCPSS, who's been at Indian Springs for nine years. She greets visitors, parents and students with a warm smile and a genuine laugh. But she's all business when discussing progress, or lack of it, at her school or in the district. Her expectations for faculty and students are extremely high, and she's implemented several "out-of-the-box" programs and strategies to ensure a constant focus on rigor, relevance, and building strong relationships.

2007-08 ARMT Top Level (4)*	3rd Grade Reading	3rd Grade Math
Indian Sprgs	**60.56%**	**54.05%**
Mobile Co.	53.04%	49.10%
Alabama	51.39%	46.94%

*Why use the top level? See page 9.

Funding support and strategic staffing

Indian Springs became part of the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) in 2001, but Howley cites the implementation of the more intensive Reading First Initiative (ARFI), with its influx of federal support, as the point at which the school began to close its achievement gap and raise performance by all students.

"The ARI training was excellent, but there was limited follow up. When we received the ARFI grant in 2003, that's when we got a tremendous amount of professional development. We got our onsite reading coaches and the resources we needed. To be honest, you have to have that kind of funding to make your dreams come true."

"Six years ago, we were not patting ourselves on the back," says Leslie Jackson, who spent 20 years as an Indian Springs classroom teacher before taking on the role of ARFI reading coach six years ago.

"When we moved to the Open Court comprehensive reading program and really started looking at the data, we realized we had lots of problems," says Jackson. "It was a huge eye opener for those of us who were used to whole group instruction. Then we took the data and began addressing the needs of each individual child."

Howley has staffed the school strategically to ensure success. She has an ARI coach and an ARFI coach, and she uses Title I money to fund an intervention coach to focus on writing in the upper grades. "Having the two reading coaches makes such a big difference because they can go so much deeper and do more between the two of them," she says.

Janiece deLange serves as the intervention coach for grades 3–5. Her primary role is to focus on writing. "I think it's great that Mrs. Howley saw the need for this position, because in many other elementary schools the upper grades do not get the level of support that the lower grades get," she says.

Throughout the year, deLange works with teachers to develop mock ARMT and SAT 10 tests so that students develop the writing skills they need to be successful on the assessments. "Our ARMT and SAT 10 scores have certainly improved with the focus we've placed on writing across the curriculum," says Howley.

Retired teachers handle intervention

Howley's most innovative staffing decision was the hiring of highly qualified retired teachers to staff the intervention program. The five intervention teachers work Monday-Thursday, pulling students one at a time, or in small groups, throughout the day for instruction. "Many of [the retirees] have more than 30 years in the classroom," says Howley. "They love being back in the school setting and working with our struggling students."

Tanya Hazzard taught for 27 years at Indian Springs. She and other intervention teachers are fully integrated into the faculty. They provide support to students, but they also share in important daily conversations about teaching and learning. "I have 30 minutes of planning every day," says Hazzard. "And during that time, I'm in classrooms talking to teachers about students. We can't walk down the halls in this school without stopping to share, discuss, and problem solve. It's second nature to us now."

The procedure for instruction at Indian Springs is straightforward: assessment, grouping, intervention, and reassessment. All students are assessed monthly and placed in flexible reading groups based on their level of progress. Each grade level meets regularly to review data and to discuss every student. "It's basically a time to put our heads together, figure out how to solve problems, figure out how to make kids move," explains Howley. "The working relationships between our teachers and coaches are very close."

In addition to DIBELS and daily progress monitoring in the classroom, the school relies heavily on the quarterly Criterion Referenced Tests (CRT), assessments required by the district to measure proficiency. Mobile's CRTs are based on districtwide instructional objectives, which Howley greatly appreciates. "We have a revolving door of children coming in and out of this school, so it's great to know schools all over the county are covering the same things and testing the same objectives."

Students identified for intervention "can have up to four dips a day," explains Howley. Three take place during school and the fourth in an after-school program if bus schedules allow. Next year, Indian Springs will use stimulus money to strengthen its before- and after-school care. "We have a lot of students whose home lives are not conducive to getting help. Lots live with relatives or in foster homes. So we'll help them this way."

Investing in guidance

The school's guidance counselor is another example of Howley's strategic staffing. Last year's district budget cuts reduced funding for guidance counselors by half. Howley adjusted her budget priorities to keep her full-time counselor Jennifer Johnson, which she says is a critical position at her school.

Johnson creates behavior plans for students she identifies as "Chiefs." Every morning, they check in, receive a form and a pep talk, then go to their classrooms. At the end of the day, the teacher signs the form, makes any necessary notes, and gives the student a daily grade for behavior. If a student does well, Johnson gives them a feather. Parents sign the forms each night and students earn rewards when they accumulate enough feathers.

Johnson also holds weekly group sessions in classrooms. Her involvement in the students' lives has made a big difference in discipline referrals. "And it's great for teachers because we can focus on teaching," says Jasmine Bell, who teaches fourth grade math. "Sometimes students don't want to open up to their classroom teachers, but they need to talk to someone."

Doing what it takes

"Our school is the perfect example of teamwork," says deLange. "Our bookkeeper and registrar care about the children and do whatever they can to help them. Our custodian has students that she checks on daily to make sure they are doing well in the classroom. Our cafeteria workers are the same way. Every adult in the building is focused on student needs."

"When I drove up to this school, I knew this was where I wanted to teach," says Shelly Byrd, who teaches kindergarten. "I didn't know a lot about teaching this population of children. But I'm a fast learner and I had a lot of support."

This "can do" culture starts at the top with Howley. "She knows everything that goes on in this building, and she supports us 100%," says Jackson. "She'll fight all the way up to the school board to keep the resources and staffing we need to be successful."

"She's all about student success and she's extremely data-driven," says deLange. "If it's not about moving the students forward, then we don't do it. She protects our instruction time and makes sure we don't get caught up in things that might interfere with teaching and learning."

What lies ahead

Like all true learning communities, Howley and her staff know their work is not done. The school applied for AMSTI funding last year to strengthen math instruction, but state budget cuts intervened. "Our reading is up there but the math isn't. So we put our heads together and decided to extend the math block to 90 minutes, during which the teacher can pull strugglers into small groups."

Next year, the faculty also hopes to do more collaboration across grade levels. "We found that when the kindergarten students go to first grade, there is a huge gap in the curriculum," says Howley. "So we're going to try to address that next year, looking at all grade levels."

Howley believes Indian Springs has maintained its intensity and momentum because of its coaches and intervention program. With the elimination of federal support, she joins other Reading First principals who will lose their ARFI coaches. "It's such a crime. To me it's like throwing away diamonds because they are so well trained and can do so much good in schools."

Howley will use stimulus money wherever she can to supplement staffing, professional development, and programs. But it's going to be hard to do it all with much less. "We'll adjust to it, of course, because we're responsible for what kind of life these children will have.

"Teachers have got to do everything they can to make sure our children are learning. Otherwise, they leave here without the ability to read and do math, and those are the tools needed to break the cycle of poverty in this community." ❖

Calcedeaver Elementary
Continued from page 14.

like. We know that any reading series is just a tool, that the teacher is the professional."

Rainey says she and her teachers have been pleased with the results. "We've seen some real good things with Scott Foresman. It has a better focus on comprehension. And we bring all the knowledge and resources we gained from Open Court forward with us."

A history of never letting go

For the past decade, federal Indian Education grants have made it possible for two Calcedeaver staff members to visit regularly with former students now in middle and high school.

"We track our students all the way to graduation," Rainey explains. "We go to the middle school and check on their academics, whether they need tutoring and how they're fitting in." At the high school, graduating seniors get help applying for scholarships, and if any students struggle with the graduation exam, "we remediate them."

"Our Native American children are the majority here but the minority there. If they ever have trouble, we already have rapport with the kids and their families. Someone in our school knows every family in this community."

That's part of the little school's secret, says Rainey. "The Calcedeaver culture is a team culture. We're small and we're like a close-knit family. We take care of each other and all our children." ❖

George Hall Elementary
Continued from page 15.

Mental health services—One striking example of Hall's proactive support of students is its alliance with community mental health workers. Tomlinson, a former psychologist, says a subset of students have significant mental and emotional problems. After ferrying children for services for several years, Hall struck an agreement to have therapists come weekly to work with children at the school site. "It's been wonderful for our kids," she says, "and it's helped us begin to create some real partnership with parents."

During a chat, Hall fifth graders tell us about their college and career aspirations. One girl has her sights on Yale Law. Others want to be scientists, astronomers and engineers. Darnell will be a librarian. "At the Library of Congress," Tomlinson laughs.

Hall's teachers work to place rising 6th graders in magnet and other top middle schools and help parents make transfer requests. This year two-thirds will attend schools outside Hall's feeder pattern. "It's very hard for us," Tomlinson says, "to send a child from a structured environment where the expectations are very high to an environment where they don't feel as safe or supported."

In 2009-10, teachers will receive their last bonuses for reaching achievement goals, but their principal doesn't expect many to leave. "Most didn't come here for the money, and at this point they have a vested interest in the building and the children," she says. "I think they're proud of what we've accomplished so far." ❖

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