



Ready to Read

Mississippi district uses professional development, data analytics, and rewards to create an effective, fun literacy culture

BY BELINDA DAMMEN AND JESSICA COLEMAN

Reading has always been a priority at Pascagoula-Gautier School District in Pascagoula, Mississippi. But when the Mississippi Department of Education raised the bar for third-graders taking the Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP), we needed to go a step further to do everything possible to support students at Gautier Elementary.

Offering educators effective, ongoing professional development has been foundational to our success. As part of PD, the principal conducts multiple in-class observations. After each, a feedback meeting to discuss strengths and areas of potential improvement with the teacher takes place. A subsequent observation follows up to see whether the teacher implemented the strategies discussed or needs extra support.

Effective teachers lead professional development sessions during professional learning community (PLC) and faculty meetings. During observations and twice-monthly individual data meetings (IDMs), the lead teacher seeks out other teachers who are performing exceptionally well in

specific areas. After a PD session covering vocabulary instruction, instructional rigor, and instruction planning for EL students, for example, the lead teacher selects three other teachers to head the session based on informal observations and the outcomes of their IDMs.

Each elementary teacher is required to attend an additional professional development session outside of their usual grade-level, school, and other trainings. Teachers can pick the session based on what they think will benefit them most. Three elementary-level curriculum specialists also work with teachers in classrooms by modeling lessons, assisting with lesson planning, and providing training.

Delving Into the Data

The administrative team meets monthly with principals to discuss student data. During these meetings, we review common assessment data from district-assigned tests, diagnostic data from the i-Ready online program, and any other data that might be available. Creating a culture rooted in data-driven practices helps us pinpoint where and how we can improve as educators and better support our students.

We also discuss data frequently with students. Formal data chats are conducted a minimum of three times per year, and teachers informally meet with students more often to go over their data collaboratively. The one-on-one chats cover a student's performance on diagnostic assessments, fluency performance and goals, attendance, time on task, performance in digital instruction programs, behavior, and more, discussing areas of strength and potential improvement.

Data chats help students take ownership of their learning and stay engaged, which research says results

in better outcomes. After a chat reviewing her standing in reading, for example, a fourth-grade student issued a friendly challenge to another student whose placement score was close in range to “compete” toward the next diagnostic. The winner would pick a Fortnite dance for the opponent to perform. This year, our goal is to have third- and fourth-grade students lead their own parent-teacher conferences based on their data.

Helping Struggling Readers

For students who need extra support, Gautier Elementary has a designated intervention block called W.I.N. (What I Need) Gator Time, in which every teacher has another instructional coach, paraprofessional, or activity teacher with them to assist students in decreasing achievement gaps and identifying and addressing learning deficits. Our school’s tutors—both retired elementary teachers—provide additional instructional interventions to third- and fourth-grade students.

The tutors work with students on reading areas identified as requiring intervention through diagnostic assessments, district assessments, student exit slips, and teacher observation. The supports they provide vary based on the needs of the individual student. The tutors and instructional coaches track students’ data, share the data with students and teachers, and plan next steps to help ensure continuous improvement.

Our educators also support students using a multisensory and modality approach to help build foundational reading skills. This includes hands-on learning, interactive digital instruction, and connection between content and real-world experiences through presentation formats including videos, magazine articles, audio texts, and storyboards. Tried-and-true strategies such

as choral readings, partner readings, and Orton Gillingham readings provide opportunities to respond authentically. Gasps, laughter, and thinking aloud are modeled and encouraged.

Reading is—and should be—fun for students. To encourage this, students are able to choose the activities, text and genre, and/or the way in which their work is presented based on their interests and preferences, while still meeting reading standards.

We also reward students for growth and performance, recognizing students who pass 100 percent of their digital instructional lessons for the week in morning announcements. The student with the highest score in each grade level is named a Gator Super Hero, receives a prize, and gets to wear our superhero cape for the day. Other rewards include a field trip for high achievers and an assembly for students who meet growth goals.

Sustained Success

Great strides have been made throughout the district in part because of these instructional strategies and our focus on reading achievement. Last school year, Gautier moved from an overall C rating as a school to an A rating.

One of the most inspiring testimonials of this success is of a third-grade EL student who moved to the district from Puerto Rico in 2017 and transferred to Gautier in 2019. She scored at the kindergarten placement level in reading initially, but she absolutely adored her teacher and possessed an unyielding will to improve her reading achievement scores.

She asked her teacher to review her data outside of data chats, and they set and revised her goals and interventions frequently. This spirited young scholar

increased her reading diagnostic score from a kindergarten to second-grade level with 104 points in growth that year, and she passed her MAAP assessment with a Level 3 score.

To continue to support remarkable stories like this, educators at the school and district levels will use student data to make informed decisions, provide quality feedback, and follow up to ensure that interventions are improving achievement. We’ll facilitate teacher-to-student, teacher-to-teacher, and teacher-to-administrator data chats, and set goals for students, classes, and schools.

Furthermore, our educators will continue to build positive teacher-student relationships, set high expectations, identify and address deficits, schedule protected instructional time, engage in small-group instruction, and foster quality student engagement—all of which helped the Pascagoula-Gautier School District get to the point where we are today. And, of course, we will continue to celebrate our successes with students, parents, and faculty—making reading fun for everyone involved. ●

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