



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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Rethinking Homework to Focus on Fluency

Data reveals that eliminating traditional assignments supports educational equity

BY DENISE R. FUHRMAN

Do a quick search of “homework at the elementary level,” and Google will present up to 75 million articles either denouncing it or listing its potential benefits. I, too, have been of many minds on the topic; during 25 years in education, my opinion regarding homework’s value has changed at least 25 times.

There was only one way for me to find out if my school could maintain academic excellence without homework. During the 2019–2020 school year, I challenged the school staff and families to complete some action research with me by implementing a “No-Homework November and December.”

This was a scary concept for some members of the school community. Our district has a long and storied tradition of academic excellence. My argument? What made us successful in the past won’t necessarily make us successful in the future.

The first step of this adventure was to educate parents and students on what I meant by “no homework.” While the staff and I question the value of spelling lists and worksheets completed at home, we wholeheartedly believe in the value of practicing math facts regularly, as well as reading to and with children. We continued to communicate that fluency is key to academic performance.

Fluency refers to a student’s ability to read and recall accurately, quickly, and effortlessly. We sent the message that reading and math fact fluency are the building blocks of comprehension and high-level thought. Families were encouraged to practice math facts and read daily for 15 minutes. The hope was that families would use the extra no-homework time to start new, fun routines with their children.

Participation Spikes

After the two-month no-homework trial, we surveyed parents and teachers. The surveys had some of the highest participation rates compared to previous surveys, and the feedback was mostly favorable. Accountability and communication were the main concerns of teachers and families.

We analyzed December benchmark data, comparing the results to those of previous years. Quantitative data proved

tricky to review due to a districtwide change in benchmarking companies from the previous year. From September to December, fourth- and fifth-graders showed greater growth in math than in reading on districtwide benchmark assessments—growth comparable to that of our sister school.

I ultimately made the decision to move forward with the shift from traditional homework toward practices focused on fluency. I made several modifications to how the school implemented the change. We changed our vocabulary; we stopped saying “no homework” and instead talked about “fluency practice.” Teachers were given the option of assigning fluency practice logs, which parents appreciated because it made practice and accountability into requirements.

We learned that parents value homework because they feel it helps them understand the skills and concepts students are studying and learning. The staff and I used a January faculty meeting to brainstorm ways other than homework to improve our communication with families.

Five Months Later

I enjoy analyzing data; it’s what helps me help my staff make their “good” better and their “better” best. But due to COVID-19’s school closings, I didn’t have year-end school benchmark or state achievement data to analyze. I wouldn’t be able to compare and contrast the academic data from the days when we assigned traditional homework against that of our fluency-focused student cohort.

The data I did have available is school discipline data. And what I uncovered is astonishing!

From Nov. 1, 2019, through our final in-person day on March 12, 2020, there were 79 days of school. I narrowed the 2018–2019 data to a comparable 79 days of school. As I expected, there were fewer disciplinary infractions for failing to complete homework. But even though there were 26 more students in the building in 2019–2020, there were 64 fewer discipline infractions reported to the office than in 2018–2019.

Things became even more interesting when I looked at discipline through the lens of race and ethnicity. See Figure 1 at right.

I had never seen anything like this. On March 12, 2020, the racial and ethnic breakdown of the student body at East York Elementary School was 67 percent white and 33 percent minority. So 65 percent of the discipline assigned while performing fluency-focused action research went to white students, and 35 percent to minority students—roughly matching our school makeup for the first time.

Is it possible that when we make homework attainable for all students, regardless of their home supports, we improve the school environment? Is it possible that when we remove homework variables that are beyond our students' control, they feel more confident at school? Is it possible that when we make bold choices in instruction, we make all learners feel like valued members of our school community?

These things are possible. At the very least, East York Elementary seems to have uncovered a truth about traditional homework: It favors nonminority students. Concentrating on fluency instead improved the school climate. ●

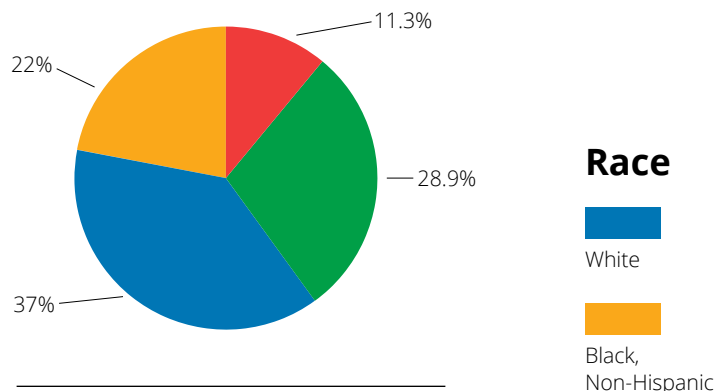
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Figure 1: Two-Year Comparison of East York Disciplinary Data

79-Day Period	Nov. 1, 2018– March 18, 2019	Nov. 1, 2019– March 12, 2020
Student Enrollment, Day 79	333	359
No. of Discipline Infractions	215	151
No. of Different Students	73	74

Disciplinary Actions by Race

2018–2019



2019–2020

