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Long Beach man Stamps' family: Publicity 'very uplifting'

The literacy crisis: Searching for solutions in Mississippi

Published: March 9, 2013



JACKIE MADER/THE HECHINGER REPORT Students at Gaston Point Elementary in Gulfport receive certificates for reading and math achievement. The school has seen its scores rise after focusing on struggling readers and providing more tutoring.

By JACKIE MADER — The Hechinger Report

GULFPORT -- On a recent Friday morning in the gym at Gaston Point Elementary School, Tracy Jackson was growing impatient.

It was the monthly awards assembly, a morning dedicated to recognizing students who were excelling in school, but several students were hesitant to get up and accept their awards. Jackson knew exactly why.

"They don't want to be different," said the principal, who has worked in local schools for nearly a dozen years.

It's a cultural problem, Jackson says, that only compounds the other issues facing many schools in southern Mississippi -- like poverty, unstable home lives and high mobility rates, as families move in and out

of assignments at the local Air Force base.

Despite the obstacles, Gaston Point Elementary is by all accounts a success story.

Nearly 85 percent of its students live in poverty, which is 20 percentage points above the district average. Four years ago, the school's test scores were typical of a low-income school: Just 52 percent of fourth-graders were testing at grade level. But the school has since adopted a focus on literacy, and the results are promising. Nearly 70 percent of fourth-graders tested at grade level for reading on the 2010-11 state tests, despite that grade having more economically disadvantaged students than any other grade at the school.

The school's focus on literacy comes at a time when Mississippi lawmakers are considering legislation that would require third-graders to repeat the year if they're not reading at grade level. Ohio, Tennessee and at least a dozen other states have already enacted such legislation. The measure is one of the more controversial in a series of education reforms by Gov. Phil Bryant, a Republican, who in November asked the state for \$15 million to help solve what he calls Mississippi's "literacy crisis."

Mississippi has long struggled to develop a strong education system, posting some of the nation's lowest test scores and highest rates of child poverty. Extensive research has found that low-income children tend to start school behind their more affluent peers. Children living in poverty hear fewer words and typically have less access to books and educational experiences. This means they're less likely to enter school with basic math, language and literacy skills, such as the ability to recognize letters in the alphabet or know how to hold a book.

"You have kids who come into school in kindergarten and don't even know their name. They start out with this tremendous gap," said Angela Rutherford, director of the Center for Excellence in Literacy Instruction at the University of Mississippi. "That third grade is such a pivotal year. If you're not on grade level at that point, then the likelihood that you ever catch up to your peers is extremely low."

The need for improvement is urgent in Mississippi, where only about 52 percent of third-graders, and 50 percent of eighth-graders tested at or above grade-level in reading assessments during the 2010-11 school year. National test results reveal an even bleaker reality: 78 percent of Mississippi's fourth-graders are below proficient in reading, which is 10 percentage points higher than the national average.

Research shows that students who are not reading proficiently by the end of third grade are less likely to graduate from high school, which could have major implications in this state with one of the nation's lowest graduation rates. Nearly 40 percent of Mississippi's high-school students do not graduate in four years; about 30 percent never graduate at all. Fourteen percent of adults in the state are illiterate, but in some of the poorest and most rural counties the percentage climbs to almost 30.

These numbers have left lawmakers with no choice but to focus on education in this year's legislative session, considering a series of proposals inspired by policies that Florida has enacted. Gov. Bryant has touted a third grade "gate" as key to improving schools.

"We only hurt our students when we shuffle them through the system before they are ready," Bryant said in his January State of the State speech.

Looking to Florida

Florida has had some success with a series of school reforms implemented since 1999, including a third-grade reading level requirement and

a new school rating system. Between 1998 and 2007, the state moved from the fifth-lowest in reading scores for fourth-graders to the eighth-highest, making especially large gains with Hispanic students. Some critics have suggested that Florida's scores have risen because children who would struggle on the exams are being held back so that only proficient readers are being tested. One study found last August that

Florida students who are held back perform at higher levels than their peers in the years after repeating third grade.

"We were very close (academically) with Florida, then all of a sudden, there's this wide divergence," said state Sen. Gray Tollison, chairman of the Senate Education Committee. "We've given lots of money and yet the results are flat-lining," he said. "We have limited resources. But we, more than any other state with limited resources, need to target that money where we'll get the most effective use."

Opponents of the third-grade legislation doubt that Mississippi can fully adopt Florida's reforms, considering how much the two states differ in history, demographics and funding. Florida relied on local taxes to fund a 19 percent increase in per-pupil spending, which could prove nearly impossible in Mississippi, considering the state has only fully funded its school system twice since 2002. Florida also put literacy coaches in every elementary school and trained all K-3 teachers in literacy strategies.

Others are pointing to research that shows mixed results when students are held back, including lower graduation rates, a higher likelihood that retained students will experience bullying and negative self-esteem.

Skeptics also point to another hurdle to reform: Mississippi's poor track record of following through with new policies. In the late 1970s, George McLean, then publisher of the Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal in Tupelo, gave more than \$1 million to bring reading aides into first- and second-grade classrooms in Lee County.

The rest of the state adopted the program with the 1982 Education Reform Act, led by then-Gov. William Winter, which also established mandatory schooling and made kindergarten available at every elementary school. But under the state's reading improvement program, reading aides were only required to have high-school diplomas.

"Immediately, two problems arose," wrote Andy Mullins, former special assistant to Gov. Winter, in an article for *The Journal of Mississippi History*. "The pay rate for the reading assistants was barely above the minimum wage, and increasingly the districts began to use reading assistants as teaching assistants." By 1996, the measure was rewritten and the assistants were allowed to be used for more than just reading, effectively dismantling the reading aide program.

Lessons from Water Valley

Despite a lack of state support for reading reforms in the past, schools across the state have found ways to overhaul their reading programs. Some of the best results can be seen in schools that serve the poorest students with the lowest test scores.

Walking into Charla Stark's colorful kindergarten classroom at Davidson Elementary School in the rural town of Water Valley, an hour outside of Oxford, there's a frenetic energy from the cluster of children on the carpet in the middle of the room. But the excitement stems from an unlikely source -- the morning sentence correction lesson.

"I would have never dreamed that they would have been able to pick out the noun, the adjective and the verb," Stark said, as children eagerly raised their hands, desperate for the chance to add a capital letter at the start of the sentence on the white board.

Stark watched carefully as one child after another walked up to the board and meticulously made changes to the sentence. First, a period was added at the end; next, the noun was circled and the adjective was underlined.

"We're going to start on adverbs later," Stark said.

It is an unexpected scene, district superintendent Kim Chrestman acknowledges, in a town that has long

struggled with poverty and poor academics. Fifteen percent of the town's adults are unemployed, and nearly 60 percent of children live in poverty. But Chrestman says the school's culture has dramatically improved after it switched to a research-based curriculum, aligned to new nationwide core standards. He also credits the addition of a reading specialist, whom he hired to work with teachers and tutor struggling students in small groups.

Chrestman took over the district a year ago, at a time when 35 percent of third-graders were testing at proficient or advanced on state tests.

"We actually have seventh- and eighth-graders that cannot really do what these children are able to do," Chrestman said, as he watched the kindergarteners in Starks' classroom clamor for the next turn. "We've just been teaching where we thought they could get it, instead of teaching up there and having them reach."

Despite working with a small budget, Chrestman has written grant proposals and shuffled funds to pay for the new curriculum and materials. And he encourages his reading specialist, Patricia Treloar, and her team of assistant teachers to test kids frequently to ensure they're making progress.

"We're trying to get rid of the ineffective stuff that we've done for so long," said Treloar, as she examined print-outs of student test scores to identify students in need of tutoring. Treloar, who has more than 20 years of experience and has trained the teaching assistants, says that since starting daily tutoring, more students are reading at grade level.

Nearly 140 kids needed intervention time each day at the start of the year. Now, only halfway through the year, that number has decreased to 40.

Same reforms, success

In Gulfport, both Gaston Point Elementary and the nearby 28th Street Elementary, have adopted reading reforms similar to Water Valley, including funding a reading coach position with federal money, and creating a new 30-minute class that struggling readers attend four days a week.

At Gaston Point Elementary, students in this class have averaged two years of reading growth in less than a year. At 28th Street Elementary, Principal Lea Bellon says the class has helped to build skills that many of her students, 84 percent of whom live in poverty, enter school without.

"You've got to close those gaps somehow," Bellon said on a recent weekday afternoon, as she met with Samantha Benson, the school's reading specialist. "If you can't do it in reading, they're going to struggle."

Scores have soared in the three years since 28th Street Elementary started its reading class.

In the 2009-10 school year, only 19 percent of third-graders tested proficient on the state reading exam. One year later, nearly 42 percent of third-graders tested at or above grade level. Halfway through this year, students in all grade-levels are testing at or above the national average, according to a national fluency test.

"Data drives every decision that we make," Benson said. Every Friday, she gathers the school's five teaching assistants, and they assess every child in kindergarten, first and second grade, ensuring that they're able to catch children before they fall further behind.

Despite the success these schools have seen in implementing reforms similar to Gov. Bryant's proposals, skeptics wonder if programs can be successfully scaled up -- or even whether they are missing the point.

"There are counties in Mississippi where poverty is just the norm," said Rutherford, of the University of Mississippi. "It's hard to attract good teachers there, and good principals. As a result, it just continues, this vicious cycle," she added. "It never gets any better."

Rutherford says that these issues must be addressed for literacy to improve, starting with training teachers to teach reading more effectively. It is a reform that both Alabama and Florida have invested in, and while Gov. Bryant has expressed a desire to do the same, only one of the three literacy bills moving through the legislature includes a measure that would train teachers.

It is a need -- and a challenge -- that lawmakers are aware of as they move forward with legislation.

"The hardest part of this is implementation, and getting people out in the field," said Tollison. "We want to have an education revival, and say this is a top priority for our state. I want people to know in the rest of the country, we're focused on this and trying to make meaningful moves in moving Mississippi forward academically."

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