

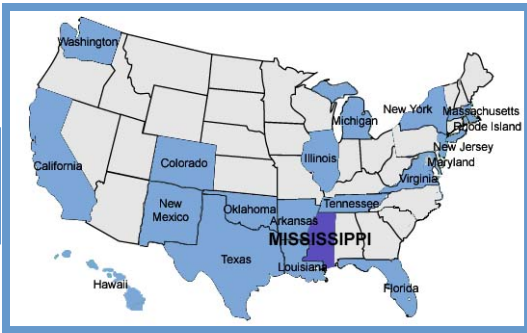
**National Center for  
Educational  
Accountability**

national sponsor of Just  for the Kids

# **Just for the Kids, Mississippi Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2005**

Arthur W. Watson Jr. Elementary School, Claiborne County Public Schools  
Columbia Primary School, Columbia School District  
East Corinth Elementary School, Corinth School District  
Kosciusko Middle Elementary School, Kosciusko School District  
Waynesboro Elementary School, Wayne County School District

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## Just for the Kids, Mississippi

### Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2005

#### The Institute

The Mississippi Best Practice Institute was part of a larger national research study to investigate the practices of schools that consistently outperform their peers. Research teams studied schools in 20 states to identify key practices of consistently higher performing schools in a variety of policy contexts.

In Mississippi, a research team studied five consistently higher performing elementary schools to learn how they had attained and sustained their level of higher performance. Schools were identified through an in-depth analysis of academic achievement developed by the National Center for Educational Accountability (NCEA) using data publicly available from the state.

The 2005 Mississippi Best Practice Institute was sponsored by the National Center for Educational Accountability and received funding from The Broad Foundation.

#### The Summary

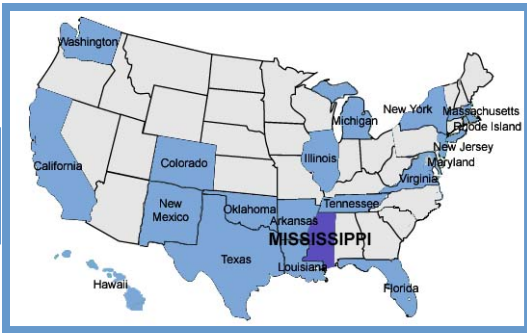
Researchers conducted a day-long series of focus groups with teachers, principals, and district administrators to study the classroom-, school-, and district-level practices contributing to each school's success. NCEA's Best Practice Framework provided the structure for each focus group. NCEA analyzed transcripts of the focus group discussions to prepare this summary report. The report presents a brief description of each higher performing school, followed by the Best Practice Findings in Mississippi.

#### The School Identification Process

NCEA used publicly available student achievement data from the Mississippi Department of Education to identify schools that consistently outperformed other schools with similar demographics in language, reading, and mathematics in the 2001-02, 2002-03, and 2003-04 school years. The analysis included data from the second- through sixth-grade Mississippi Curriculum Test (MCT).

To identify the schools, NCEA conducted a separate analysis for each subject (language, reading, and mathematics) and year (2002, 2003, and 2004) to learn which schools outperformed their demographic peers on the percentage of students meeting the "Proficient" standard in 2002 and 2003 and the "Advanced" standard in 2004 on the state exam. NCEA used a Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analysis to compare each school's percent of students meeting the standard with the percent that was "predicted" or "typical" for a school in the state with the same demographics. The demographic and other variables used in this analysis were each school's percentage of low-income, African American, and Asian students, and the size of the school. Normally, NCEA also prefers to take students' prior year test scores and length of enrollment in the same school into account, but that longitudinal information was not available in Mississippi.

NCEA ranked each school against the elementary schools in the rest of the state based on the extent to which it outperformed its "predicted" percent of students meeting the "Proficient" (2002 and 2003) or the "Advanced" (2004) standard. For example, a school that outperformed 99% of the schools in "performance relative to predicted" in fifth-grade mathematics in 2004 received a percentile rank of 99



## Just for the Kids, Mississippi

### Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2005

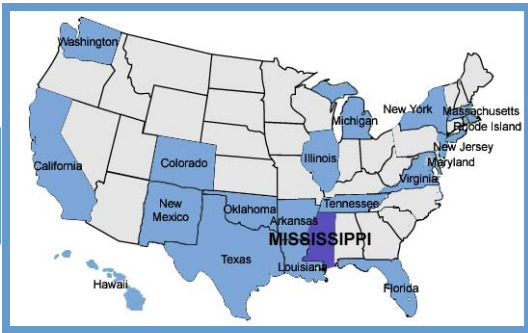
for that subject and year. These ranks were averaged separately for each subject across the three years to produce an overall average performance rank by subject. To be selected as higher performing for the purposes of this study, schools had to have overall average percentile ranks above 70<sup>1</sup> in language, reading, and mathematics and meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements.

### The Higher Performing Schools Studied

School	District	2004 Enrollment		2004 School-Wide Demographics						
		Grade Span	No. of Students	African American	Hispanic	White	Asian	Other	Low Income	ELL
Arthur W. Watson Jr. Elementary School	Claiborne County Public Schools	K-5	685	99.3%	0.0%	0.6%	0.2%	0.0%	100.0%	N/A
Columbia Primary School	Columbia School District	PK-3	640	45.3%	0.9%	52.5%	1.1%	0.2%	73.3%	N/A
East Corinth Elementary School	Corinth School District	2-4	445	44.0%	1.4%	52.8%	1.6%	0.2%	62.5%	N/A
Kosciusko Middle Elementary School	Kosciusko School District	2-3	322	49.1%	1.6%	49.1%	0.3%	0.0%	64.6%	N/A
Waynesboro Elementary School	Wayne County School District	K-4	784	73.0%	0.3%	26.0%	0.5%	0.2%	87.6%	N/A

Student enrollment and demographic data are taken from the Just for the Kids-MS 2004 website. The Institute was conducted in Summer 2005.

<sup>1</sup> The overall percentile rank requirements actually ranged from 70 to 90, depending on the number of grades tested in the school. In a state like Mississippi, where second through sixth grades are tested, a K-3 school has only two tested grades, whereas a K-6 school has five tested grades. Our research indicates that in such states it was considerably easier for the K-3 schools to appear higher performing, so we scaled the required overall percentile ranks based on the number of grades involved in the analysis.



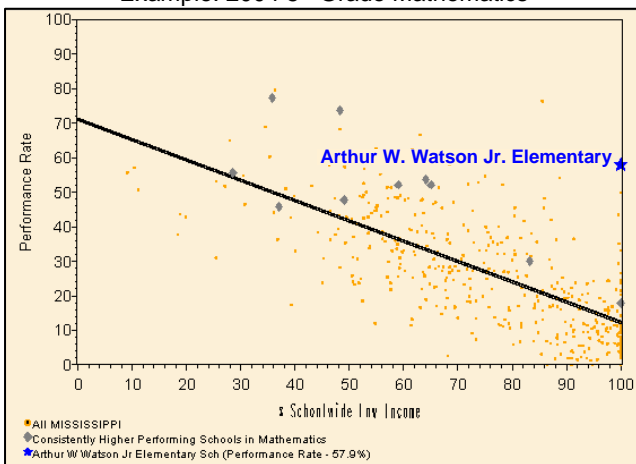
# Arthur W. Watson Jr. Elementary School Claiborne County Public Schools

## Just for the Kids, Mississippi NCEA Executive Summary

### The School

Arthur W. Watson Jr. Elementary School, which serves 685 kindergarten through fifth-grade students, is the only elementary school in Claiborne County Public Schools (1,600 students). Watson's population is 99.3% African American, 0.6% White, and 0.2% Asian. Within this student population, 100% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2004 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Mathematics



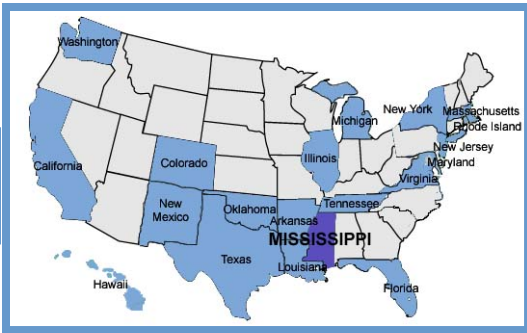
### Consistent Higher Performance

Arthur W. Watson Jr. Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in mathematics, reading, and language in an analysis that included all second- through fifth-grade achievement data from 2002 to 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each grade and year, Arthur W. Watson Jr. Elementary School demonstrated overall performance ranks of 97.7 in mathematics, 97.5 in reading, and 97.1 in language.

Schools were identified for study based on 2002-2004 data, with the Institute occurring during the summer of 2005. Differences between the demographics reported in this report and the values shown on the scatter plot reveal demographic changes in the school between 2002 and 2005.

Subject	2002 Percentile Rank				2003 Percentile Rank				2004 Percentile Rank				Overall Avg. Rank* 2002-2004
	2	3	4	5	2	3	4	5	2	3	4	5	
Mathematics	93	99	99	99	99	90	99	99	99	99	99	99	97.7
Reading	96	99	99	99	98	86	99	99	99	99	99	99	97.5
Language	97	99	99	99	99	79	99	99	99	99	99	99	97.1

\*The overall average rank is a weighted average of the separate percentile ranks shown, using the number of tested students in the grade as weights for the 2004 ranks and the total number of students in the grade as weights for the 2002 and 2003 ranks. For detailed information on individual and overall average performance ranks for Arthur W. Watson Jr. Elementary School, please visit [www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org).



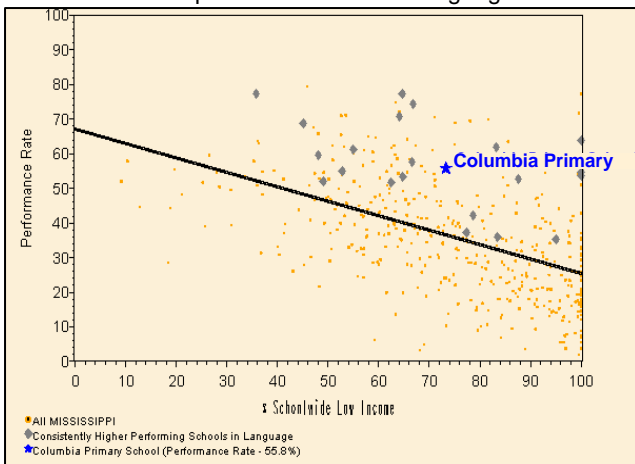
# Columbia Primary School Columbia School District

## Just for the Kids, Mississippi NCEA Executive Summary

### The School

Columbia Primary School, which serves 640 pre-kindergarten through third-grade students, is one of two elementary schools in Columbia School District (1,873 students). Columbia Primary's population is 52.5% White, 45.3% African American, 1.1% Asian, 0.9% Hispanic, and 0.2% other. Within this student population, 73.3% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2004 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Language



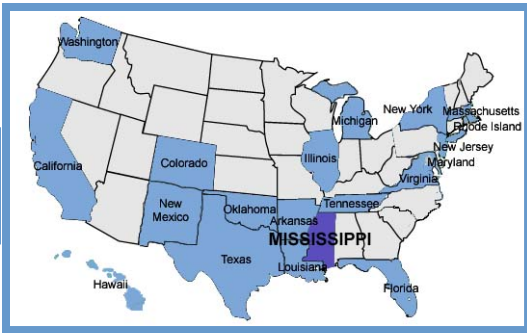
### Consistent Higher Performance

Columbia Primary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in mathematics, reading, and language in an analysis that included all second- and third-grade achievement data from 2002 to 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each grade and year, Columbia Primary School demonstrated overall performance ranks of 90.7 in mathematics, 93.7 in reading, and 94.0 in language.

Schools were identified for study based on 2002-2004 data, with the Institute occurring during the summer of 2005. Differences between the demographics reported in this report and the values shown on the scatter plot reveal demographic changes in the school between 2002 and 2005.

Subject	2002 Percentile Rank		2003 Percentile Rank		2004 Percentile Rank		Overall Avg. Rank* 2002-2004
	2	3	2	3	2	3	
Grade	2	3	2	3	2	3	
Mathematics	98	96	94	93	76	88	90.7
Reading	98	97	96	91	86	95	93.7
Language	98	96	93	97	87	93	94.0

\*The overall average rank is a weighted average of the separate percentile ranks shown, using the number of tested students in the grade as weights for the 2004 ranks and the total number of students in the grade as weights for the 2002 and 2003 ranks. For detailed information on individual and overall average performance ranks for Columbia Primary School, please visit [www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org).



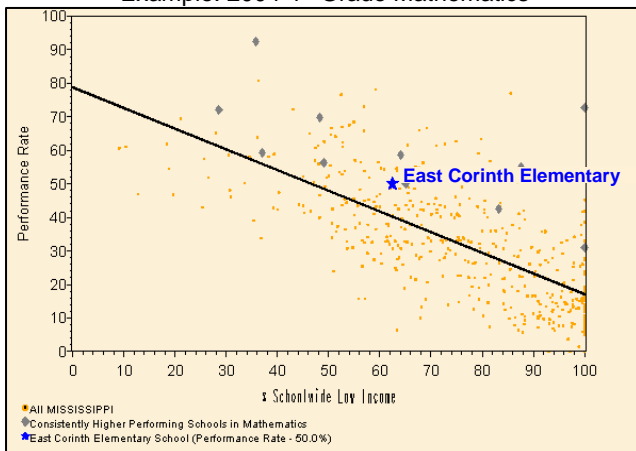
# East Corinth Elementary School Corinth School District

## Just for the Kids, Mississippi NCEA Executive Summary

### The School

East Corinth Elementary School, which serves 445 second- through fourth-grade students, is one of three elementary schools in Corinth School District (1,808 students). East Corinth's population is 52.8% White, 44.0% African American, 1.6% Asian, 1.4% Hispanic, and 0.2% other. Within this student population, 62.5% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2004 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Mathematics



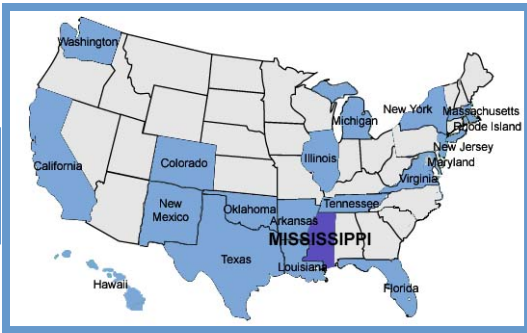
### Consistent Higher Performance

East Corinth Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in mathematics, reading, and language in an analysis that included all second-through fourth-grade achievement data from 2002 to 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each grade and year, East Corinth Elementary School demonstrated overall performance ranks of 83.7 in mathematics, 87.0 in reading, and 92.3 in language.

Schools were identified for study based on 2002-2004 data, with the Institute occurring during the summer of 2005. Differences between the demographics reported in this report and the values shown on the scatter plot reveal demographic changes in the school between 2002 and 2005.

Subject	2002 Percentile Rank			2003 Percentile Rank			2004 Percentile Rank			Overall Avg. Rank* 2002-2004
	2	3	4	2	3	4	2	3	4	
Grade										
Mathematics	87	78	85	91	89	94	65	78	87	83.7
Reading	84	88	93	85	80	93	91	66	99	87.0
Language	94	93	97	88	95	98	83	85	97	92.3

\*The overall average rank is a weighted average of the separate percentile ranks shown, using the number of tested students in the grade as weights for the 2004 ranks and the total number of students in the grade as weights for the 2002 and 2003 ranks. For detailed information on individual and overall average performance ranks for East Corinth Elementary School, please visit [www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org).



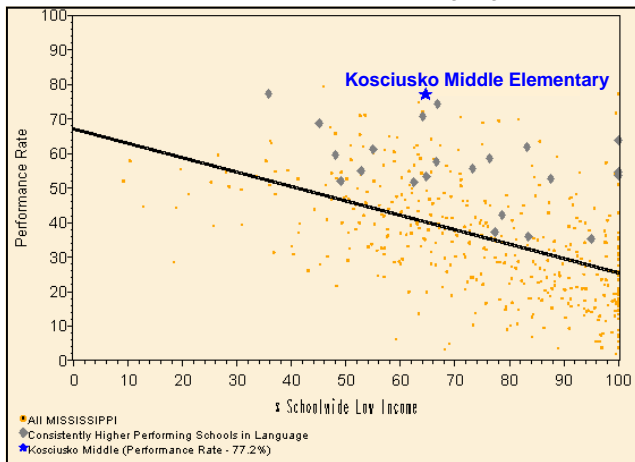
# Kosciusko Middle Elementary School Kosciusko School District

## Just for the Kids, Mississippi NCEA Executive Summary

### The School

Kosciusko Middle Elementary School, which serves 322 second- and third-grade students, is one of three elementary schools in Kosciusko School District (2,085 students). Kosciusko Middle's population is 49.1% African American, 49.1% White, 1.6% Hispanic, and 0.3% Asian. Within this student population, 64.6% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2004 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Language



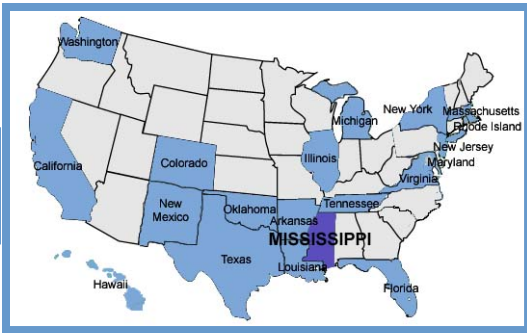
### Consistent Higher Performance

Kosciusko Middle Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in mathematics, reading, and language in an analysis that included all second- and third-grade achievement data from 2002 to 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each grade and year, Kosciusko Middle Elementary School demonstrated overall performance ranks of 92.9 in mathematics, 98.0 in reading, and 96.7 in language.

Schools were identified for study based on 2002-2004 data, with the Institute occurring during the summer of 2005. Differences between the demographics reported in this report and the values shown on the scatter plot reveal demographic changes in the school between 2002 and 2005.

Subject	2002 Percentile Rank		2003 Percentile Rank		2004 Percentile Rank		Overall Avg. Rank* 2002-2004
	2	3	2	3	2	3	
Grade							
Mathematics	97	95	94	96	78	99	92.9
Reading	99	99	97	99	95	99	98.0
Language	99	99	97	99	88	99	96.7

\*The overall average rank is a weighted average of the separate percentile ranks shown, using the number of tested students in the grade as weights for the 2004 ranks and the total number of students in the grade as weights for the 2002 and 2003 ranks. For detailed information on individual and overall average performance ranks for Kosciusko Middle Elementary School, please visit [www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org).



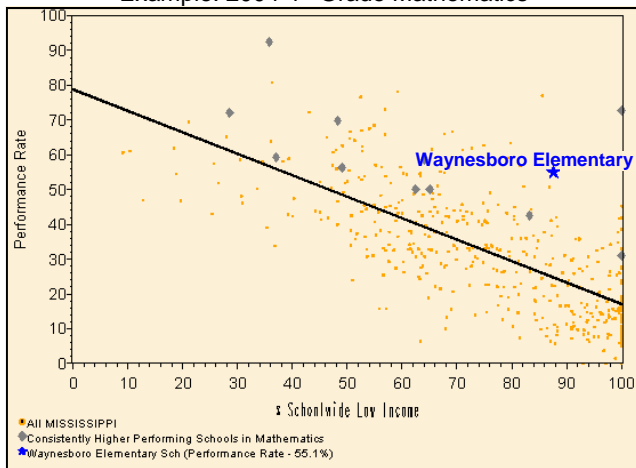
# Waynesboro Elementary School Wayne County School District

## Just for the Kids, Mississippi NCEA Executive Summary

### The School

Waynesboro Elementary School, which serves 784 kindergarten through fourth-grade students, is one of four elementary schools in Wayne County School District (3,969 students). Waynesboro's population is 73.0% African American, 26.0% White, 0.5% Asian, 0.3% Hispanic, and 0.2% other. Within this student population, 87.6% receive free or reduced lunch services.

Example: 2004 4<sup>th</sup> Grade Mathematics



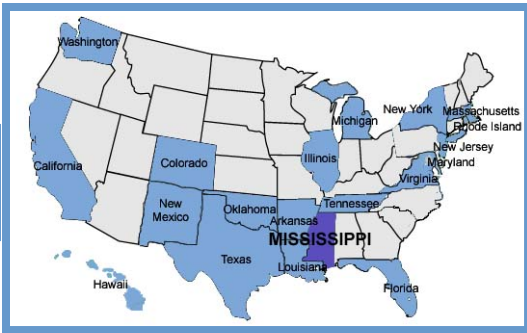
### Consistent Higher Performance

Waynesboro Elementary School is higher performing than demographically similar schools in mathematics, reading, and language in an analysis that included all second-through fourth-grade achievement data from 2002 to 2004. According to Weighted Least Squares (WLS) regression analyses for each grade and year, Waynesboro Elementary School demonstrated overall performance ranks of 92.3 in mathematics, 93.9 in reading, and 93.9 in language.

Schools were identified for study based on 2002-2004 data, with the Institute occurring during the summer of 2005. Differences between the demographics reported in this report and the values shown on the scatter plot reveal demographic changes in the school between 2002 and 2005.

Subject	2002 Percentile Rank			2003 Percentile Rank			2004 Percentile Rank			Overall Avg. Rank* 2002-2004
	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	
Mathematics	98	63	97	95	94	96	97	95	98	92.3
Reading	98	82	87	95	98	93	99	97	98	93.9
Language	97	82	87	97	98	95	98	95	98	93.9

\*The overall average rank is a weighted average of the separate percentile ranks shown, using the number of tested students in the grade as weights for the 2004 ranks and the total number of students in the grade as weights for the 2002 and 2003 ranks. For detailed information on individual and overall average performance ranks for Waynesboro Elementary School, please visit [www.just4kids.org](http://www.just4kids.org).



# Mississippi Elementary Best Practice Institute: Findings

*Based on the Themes of The JFTK Framework*

Five organizing themes provided the structure for studying the practices of consistently higher performing schools. The themes are listed below.

1. Curriculum and Academic Goals
2. Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building
3. Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements
4. Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data
5. Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

These themes are used below to summarize the findings of this study. The themes represent the broad topics that connect best practices across different school system levels—district, school, and classroom. Together, these themes capture the primary instructional activities undertaken by school systems.

The first theme described in The JFTK Best Practice Framework forms the foundation of The Framework. Each of the other four themes rests upon the assumption that there is absolute clarity about what is to be taught and learned by grade level—pre-K-12. Therefore, Curriculum and Academic Goals forms the base of The Framework. Building upon that base, higher performing schools are deliberate about selecting and developing their human resources (Theme Two: Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building) and equipping all staff with evidence-based tools and strategies to deliver the curriculum (Theme Three: Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements). With people, tools, and strategies in place, higher performing schools regularly monitor student progress (Theme Four: Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data). Finally, higher performing schools are quick to respond to student achievement data—recognizing success and intervening or adjusting whenever necessary to ensure all students reach the stated standards (Theme Five: Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment).



## Theme One: Curriculum and Academic Goals

*"What is Taught and Learned"*

This theme focuses on the learning target. What is it that we expect all students to know and be able to do by grade and subject? Consistently higher performing school systems have clear academic targets from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Principals and teachers understand the learning goals and understand that these goals are for all students and are non-negotiable.

### Specific Mississippi Findings: Curriculum and Academic Goals

- **District curriculum materials provide additional detail to the state standards. Curriculum maps, pacing guides, instructional calendars, and model lesson plans further clarify the district curriculum.**
  - Curriculum development for the higher performing schools begins at the district level, using the state standards as the foundation. However, interviewees at all levels reported that they consider the state benchmarks to be the minimum goals; they seek other sources for

higher curricular standards to supplement those provided by the state. For ideas, some districts and schools look to national standards-setting organizations like the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics and high-performing districts and schools in Mississippi and other states. A teacher explained, “We have the flexibility to add to [the state standards], but we certainly don’t take anything away from what has already been provided.”

- District leaders typically initiate the curriculum development process by bringing together principals, teachers, curriculum experts, support staff, and sometimes parents to examine the state standards and the district’s student performance data. After the district-level development process, schools may fine-tune the standards to meet the unique needs of their students.
  - All of the higher performing schools have pacing guides, curriculum maps, or instructional calendars. Representative teachers usually develop the documents under the guidance of district leaders and specialists. In addition to pacing guides, some grade-level teams use lesson plans that they develop together. The lesson plans always reference the applicable benchmarks.
- **Teachers share a common understanding of the curriculum and ensure that all lessons are tied to the district curriculum.**
    - Educators document in their lesson plans when particular curricular benchmarks are taught during the year. At one school, the principal monitors the implementation of the curriculum through weekly classroom observations during which she checks off the key objectives being taught. The principal reviews her checklists with teachers in December and April. The system ensures that the benchmarks are not only included in lesson plans but are also actually taught. One teacher noted, “We do show that we have taught each benchmark at least four times by April. Sometimes there is a long list, but it is well-tracked.”
    - According to a teacher, “We go through and make sure the benchmarks are included in each lesson. We also code our lesson plan books with our benchmark numbers and the skills we are teaching. We also did a pacing guide within the district, within each grade level, and it is not set in stone but gives us a guideline. It helps with new teachers. When new teachers come in, we go back through this training with them to make sure they are informed and on the same page with us.”
    - At the classroom level, principals and teachers keep their benchmarks foremost in their minds. Some teachers post the entire year’s benchmarks on the classroom wall. Some principals require teachers to have the benchmark they are working on written on the chalkboard. These practices help teachers focus on the curriculum and keep their instruction aligned with the school’s plan. A district leader explained, “We give [teachers] individual flexibility to some degree as to how they are going to cover it within their classroom, but they have to be at the same [benchmark].” Teachers agreed that alignment is crucial. A few teachers admitted that they were initially skeptical about such tight alignment, but they “now realize how helpful it is.”
  - **Teachers and leaders review and refine the district curriculum based on student performance data and teacher feedback.**
    - All interviewees viewed curriculum development and revision as an ongoing process. An administrator explained, “[The curriculum] is not something that is just going to be a body of knowledge that we are going to use over the next six years. ... It needs to evolve.”
    - Educators examine various documents and ideas as they revise the curriculum each year. They review the state standards and analyze their student performance data first. Then they adjust general curriculum goals based on that. For more specific revision, district and school leaders rely on teacher input. One district administrator explained that the district asks teachers to keep notes throughout the year to use during the revision process: “One thing we do as the teachers are teaching during the school year, if they find they need to

use more manipulatives for anything, ... we require that they write in the margin [of the pacing guide] that they should have used manipulatives initially, so that when we come back and revise the curriculum, they will already have that [information noted].”

- Teachers discuss needed revisions throughout the year as they use the curriculum and get to know their students. As one teacher said, “Groups of children vary year after year. Some are weak in some areas, and others are stronger in other areas. Because of that, we meet those few times a year to try to align our curriculum throughout the grades, regarding what needs to be stressed more than others. So, we are aware of the changing groups [of students] as they move on.”
- Teachers track their use of the curriculum and note areas for revision. A teacher explained, “Something else that helps, too, is to do a curriculum analysis of how well the implementation of the curriculum worked at the end of the year, to kind of reflect back on where your weaknesses were in implementing that curriculum and make some changes and revamp things for the upcoming year.”



## Theme Two: Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

### *“Selecting and Developing Leaders and Teachers”*

This second theme focuses on the selection and development of a school system's most precious commodity—people. Once the academic goals of the system are clear, the leaders and teachers are selected and given professional development opportunities to make these goals a reality for every learner in the system.

### Specific Mississippi Findings: Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building

- **Districts supplement the state’s program for new principals by providing mentors and instructionally focused professional development.**
  - New principals in Mississippi must attend Orientation for School Leaders (OSL) training. Among other things, OSL trains new principals on state education mandates and in school leadership skills. In addition, each principal must complete several specific projects in his or her school, preferably within the first two years of employment as a principal.
  - Small districts reported that they take advantage of regional service centers like the North Mississippi Education Consortium, which employs retired principals and superintendents to travel to districts in the region and meet with new principals regularly. A district administrator said that the regional service centers “provide a lot of support, particularly for those of us who are [in] smaller districts that can’t have a specific staff member to do some of those responsibilities.”
  - Other districts employ their own mentors to help principals, and they, too, are usually retired educators. As one district administrator reported, in these cases, the mentor “... goes into the building and just kind of observes and monitors and sits with the new principal, or goes into a classroom and observes with the new principal and has the new principal write up what he sees, and then they discuss it.”
  - A few districts reported that new principals also receive informal support from other principals in the district. The more experienced principals call or visit “just to check in and see if the new principal has questions.”
  - District administrators have regular leadership team meetings that focus on teaching and learning issues such as data analysis, supervision and instruction, curriculum development, teaching strategies, and teacher observations. Leadership team meetings also include discussions of books and research articles about teaching and learning.

- The focus of principal capacity-building efforts is on improving instructional leadership. A district administrator said, “We like to send principals to things where they can have an instructional focus, where it is something they can bring back to their school and apply, rather than [a meeting] just being kind of where we pass out memos or we pass out information that is more of a compliance-type thing.”
- District leaders encourage principals to visit other schools and districts. They also invite principals from other districts to visit them, to share information and instructional support strategies.
- **Collaboration among faculty is a key component of capacity building.**
  - To a large extent, educators at higher performing schools build capacity by educating and supporting each other. Principals, teachers, and superintendents model lessons in the classroom. Some schools have regular (usually weekly) peer-coaching meetings. A principal described these meetings: “One teacher may come into a peer-coaching meeting and may be experiencing difficulty with a discipline problem in their classroom, and they will ask another teacher for input on how to reach the student. They will go back and try the strategy and come back the next week and discuss whether it worked or not and, if need be, come up with other interventions.”
  - Schools have common planning times for teachers, which one teacher described as “very, very critical” to improving student achievement. The school often institutes the common planning time for grade-level meetings; however, one district mandates at least two grade-level meetings a week for all teachers. In most cases, teachers get time for grade-level meetings while their students are in special classes, like technology, music, or physical education. In their regular grade-level meetings, teachers plan lessons, discuss teaching strategies and curriculum, and confer about interventions for struggling students.
  - Schools make time for teachers to meet in vertical teams as well. Principals often attend these meetings to ensure that practices and materials remain aligned with the overall curriculum goals.
  - One district has a system of disseminating information through different levels of meetings. The superintendent meets regularly with principals to discuss teaching and learning concerns, as well as potential solutions to any identified problems. At the school level, principals hold meetings with the full faculty to pass on the information shared in the meetings with the superintendent.
  - A few principals said that they dislike the idea of having regular meetings if there is nothing new to discuss, so they make sure that school-wide meetings are always useful. One principal explained, “I think what I try not to do in [my meetings] is make it something that you could put out in your memo. You try not to make it basic housekeeping; you try to make it good, well-spent time. If you are going to take that teacher out of the classroom for any period of time, make it worthwhile for them.”
  - In an effort to prevent meetings that seem to waste time, one principal administers a needs assessment asking teachers to identify pressing issues. Meetings focus at least partly on an instructional issue that teachers identify.
  - In one school, teachers make demonstration videos for each other, showing how they teach a particularly successful lesson. They also allow struggling teachers to tape themselves so they can see what they may need to change. These tapes are not viewed by all the other teachers, but, according to one teacher, the struggling teacher “may choose somebody to critique the videotape for them and give them constructive feedback. And that is the whole point of it. It is not to tear you down and say, ‘This was wrong; that was wrong.’”
  - Overall, teachers seem to get their greatest support from each other. One teacher said, “I think our biggest support would be teachers supporting teachers ... because if you don’t

have your fellow teachers supporting you, you just cannot make it through the year. You have to create an environment similar to that of a close-knit family. When something happens to one, it happens to everybody, and we have to work together.”



### Theme Three: Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

#### *“The Right Stuff—Time and Tools”*

This theme focuses on the “things” that higher performing school systems use—the arrangement of time, the instructional resources and materials, technology, etc. Strong instructional leaders and highly qualified teachers need evidence-based tools and resources to reach high standards with every learner.

#### Specific Mississippi Findings: Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements

- **District and school personnel research potential instructional programs before adoption. Educators view the fidelity of program implementation as critical to its effectiveness.**
  - District leaders research and identify programs that meet certain criteria—such as that a program must be research-based. One district administrator said that the district requires only that all the schools agree to use the same program series for the same subject, in order to support a vertically aligned curriculum: “Everybody K–6 will use the same series. We are not going to let people pick and choose. I have been in districts where people use [one program] in second grade, and then fifth grade [teachers] liked [another] better. We want to make sure, because of a spiraling effect, that we do have a coordinated series.”
  - While researching programs, district and school personnel travel to other districts that have adopted the programs. A district administrator said that it is important for principals and teachers to view the programs [in practice] because “... we can sit here at the central office and go out somewhere and have a workshop and see a program that we think might work, but they’re the ones that are out there that have to make it work. So that is why we will bring in the principal and department chair and lead teacher, to have them observe the program.”
  - Most interviewees use at least a few packaged programs to supplement their instructional practices. Some programs they mentioned were *Accelerated Reader*, *Accelerated Math*, *Saxon Math*, *Saxon Phonics*, *Success for All*, *SRA*, *Shurley English*, *Spectrum Reading*, *Soar to Success*, and the *Barksdale Reading Institute*, which is a research-based program focused on improving reading skills of Mississippi students in pre-kindergarten through third grade.
  - Many interviewees were enthusiastic about the programs they find successful, but they acknowledged consistent implementation to be one of the most important factors in success, regardless of which program they use.
  - Some principals and district administrators said that they try to use the fewest packaged programs they can, partly because the programs cost so much, but also because they prefer to develop and gather their own materials based on research, best practices, and their own students’ needs.
- **Higher performing schools maximize instructional time by integrating content and minimizing class transitions.**
  - To get the most out of all their programs, district and school leaders carefully plan how to best use instructional time every day. The state requires 330 minutes of instructional time each school day, and some of the higher performing schools exceed that minimum by scheduling a longer school day or using the hours of the day more efficiently.

- Instead of having students use potential instructional time changing classes, most schools keep students with the same teacher all day, except for library visits or for special classes, like music or art.
- Several school and district leaders mentioned their own requirements that teachers begin teaching on the first day of school instead of making that day an introduction and play day.
- Interviewees reported that they focus instruction on mathematics, reading, and language arts and teach science and social studies content in the course of teaching those focus skills. Teachers from some schools mentioned that they are required to teach the subjects in a certain order: “Reading is done in the morning. Science and social studies are done in the afternoon.”



## Theme Four: Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

### *"Knowing the Learners and the Numbers"*

After clearly identifying what is to be taught and learned by grade and subject and ensuring that the schools are equipped with the staff and the tools to successfully deliver the curriculum, the school system then asks and answers an important question: "How are we going to know if students learned what we said they would learn?"

### Specific Mississippi Findings: Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data

- **Educators administer benchmark tests to monitor student progress toward key benchmark standards throughout the year. Computerized testing and data management systems make benchmark data more readily accessible.**
  - A few districts use or are planning to use a relatively new assessment system provided by the state, the Student Progress Monitoring System. It allows schools to give computerized benchmark tests throughout the year to check student progress.
  - Some districts use web-based testing resources like *Edusoft* or *Compass Learning* to create benchmark assessments and monitor progress. Wanting additional information than that supplied by the state, district leaders further disaggregate annual testing data themselves or hire data analysis companies to do it for them.
  - Some districts administer district-wide benchmark assessments throughout the year, whereas others do so only a few times a year; schools may develop and administer more frequent assessments as needed.
  - One district administers a practice version of the Mississippi Curriculum Test (MCT) at the beginning of the year. According to a district leader, "If you are in the second grade, you are going to take a second-grade MCT practice test. We know that it is going to have material on it that you probably won't know, but we want to see where you are."
  - One district developed assessments that teachers administer when they approach key benchmarks in the year. Those assessments are scored immediately, so teachers are always aware of what progress their students are making.
  - In some districts, teachers and curriculum specialists collaborate to set up their own computerized benchmark assessments keyed to their instructional calendars. In a few cases, teachers learn how to administer these computerized assessments themselves. In others, a trained facilitator administers the tests and gives teachers reports on student progress.

- **Educators use regular assessment data and other performance measures to guide their instruction.**
  - Teachers reported that they assess student progress in their classrooms “all the time”—usually weekly. The tests are given to check progress, but teachers believe that they are also good for students. One teacher explained, “Those skills have to become embedded in your daily instruction. It used to be that testing was an event that happened in May, and it is no longer that way—which is good, because you are spending all year preparing a student for that end. In doing so, the whole objective is to raise student achievement. But I think that the format of asking those questions—how they are presented, and that daily drill, and them becoming embedded—plays a key role.”
  - A teacher said, “We believe in frequent assessments, and then the information we get from that [testing guides] our instruction. It’s what we are all about.” Another agreed, “Our superintendent has a lot of sayings, and one of his favorite sayings is ‘Monitor and adjust.’ I am thinking: ‘That is what we do all day long, every day.’”
  - Schools use annual testing data to develop their curriculum and build instructional calendars. They adjust those instructional calendars as they collect data and monitor performance from classroom assessments throughout the year. Teachers reported sitting down together and closely examining each student’s performance. One teacher described the results of that process: “We get it down to basically an instructional prescription. You go in, and you diagnose. You break it down to that area of need, and then you do your instructional interventions; and that is how you help.”
  - Teachers in some schools keep student portfolios to pass on to the student’s next teacher. Those portfolios include a range of the year’s data and other information, such as interventions tried with the student. A teacher said, “It helps the receiving teacher the next year to ... help that student’s academic performance along.”
- **Schools establish systems for keeping parents well-informed of curricular expectations and student progress.**
  - Teachers also emphasized the importance of helping parents understand the curriculum and aligning parents’ expectations with it. They invite parents to school at the beginning of the school year and explain what will be expected of students. A teacher described one such orientation: “We have parent orientation before school starts, and what we do is, the state provides us with expectation booklets for each grade level—skills that are expected—and we have a general session, and then we break up and go to the classrooms, and each parent goes to their child’s classroom.”
  - Parents and students can use most of the web-based testing resources—whether they are provided through the state or through private companies—at home. School leaders and teachers ensure that parents and students are aware of the resources.
  - All of the teachers reported that they work hard to keep parents involved in their children’s education. Besides inviting parents to orientation at the beginning of the school year, teachers set up homework assignments so that parents can easily understand and help students with their work.
- **District and school administrators regularly monitor principal and teacher performance.**
  - At the district level, administrators examine school-level data every year and discuss the data with principals; most district leaders are aware of what is taking place in their district’s schools almost on a daily basis. One teacher said, “Our administrators are always in the know. Our superintendent is on the ball and knows what we need to be doing in the classroom.”
  - At the school level, principals examine and discuss MCT data with each teacher. One district prepares data books at the beginning of each school year. The books include the district’s demographic data and scores on the MCT broken down by school and by

teacher—though the teachers’ names are not used. The district’s central office produces these data books and distributes them to everyone, from the school board to the teachers. Principals also receive the data with their teachers’ names attached, and teachers receive their own students’ data.

- All schools have both formal and informal teacher evaluations. In one school, principals annually videotape one lesson per teacher, watch the tape with the teacher, and discuss successes and areas for improvement. The principal does not tell teachers ahead of time which lesson will be taped.
- Principals informally visit classrooms often; one district requires that principals spend two hours a day in classrooms. Principals usually fill out a checklist or a form or leave a note for the teacher commenting on what was going on in class. One principal spends a lot of time with students during classroom visits, asking students to explain the material being covered that day.



## Theme Five: Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

### *"Ensuring All Children Learn"*

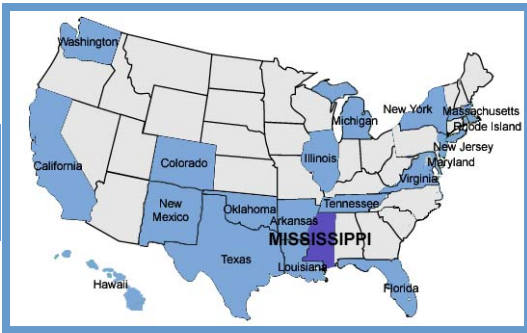
The most important question of all follows the monitoring of student performance: "What are we going to do if students do not learn the knowledge and skills we said they would learn?" Higher performing school systems have *pyramids of intervention* that provide immediate and intense intervention at multiple levels when learning is interrupted.

### Specific Mississippi Findings: Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment

- **Teachers differentiate regular classroom instruction as the first strategy for addressing students’ learning needs.**
  - Teachers said that the increased focus on accountability requires them to be much more attentive to the needs of individual students. They noted that they now know more about addressing the needs of struggling students and continuing to challenge accelerated students. Schools modify their practices to make sure they meet the needs of all their students, including providing in-school and after-school tutoring and extended-day programs.
  - Since teachers regularly assess student progress and principals often visit classrooms, struggling students are usually identified quickly. Teachers support struggling students in various ways—by providing one-on-one instruction, having students work in teams, assigning students to tutors, and providing learning centers for hands-on instruction. One school has a manual for teachers to consult for intervention strategies.
  - Schools have extended-day and extended-year programs for struggling students, but principals agreed that keeping students in school longer is not the key to helping them succeed. One principal explained, "Their classroom teacher has to change the way they are presenting the information. They have to change the way they are teaching to try to reach this child." Another principal agreed, "Summer school and after school ... cannot be the only thing. The main things that you are doing must be within the regular school hours and the regular classroom, and it has to be done by that regular classroom teacher."

- Interviewees repeatedly emphasized the importance of finding some way to reach every student. A principal gave an example: “A child may do best if he reads out loud, so we may put him in the back of the room, or we may put him right outside the door so he can read to himself out loud.” Teachers from a few schools said that sometimes they give students a double dose of the subject in which they are struggling.
- Another support for struggling students comes from Teacher Support Teams (TSTs). Mississippi mandates that every school have a TST, which usually includes at least the principal, an instructional specialist, one or more experienced teachers, and sometimes a school counselor. When a student is identified as being in need of an intervention, the identifying teacher attends a TST meeting and asks for ideas about how to help the student. Often, parents also will be invited to the meeting. After trying the recommended interventions, the teacher reports back to the TST, and if the interventions do not work, the team will recommend additional interventions.
- **Higher performing schools use additional support staff to provide further support for struggling students.**
  - To address the needs of more students more effectively, one school uses assistant teachers—who are not certified teachers—as aides in second- and third-grade classrooms. The school partially funds these positions with Title I money. Assistant teachers attend faculty and grade-level meetings, are given professional development opportunities, and are treated as part of the school’s instructional team. Assistant teachers do not grade papers or run errands. They are expected to be active in the classroom, moving among the students and helping them understand the skills being taught. The principal of that school said that the assistant teachers are invaluable for day-to-day instruction, and if the teacher has to be absent for a day, the assistant teacher can substitute and know exactly what to teach and how to teach those students. The principal added, “I wish that all districts and superintendents could realize how important assistants are, especially with the small children.”
  - Several of the districts rely on community groups to provide tutors. In one district, a community group had funded a program called Leap Center, where teachers and tutors volunteer to work with students after school. Schools and districts also rely on tutors from Boys and Girls Clubs, AmeriCorps programs, and church groups.
  - One principal appreciated the role of each assistant, saying, “That is an additional person in that classroom working directly with those children; and I need it desperately at my school because I have many children who have come to us two and three grade levels behind when we get them.”
  - According to one principal, “We have a great volunteer program. They sign in, they pull children out to read. They go to the teachers and ask them what they can help with ... and it is supposed to be with children. We’ve gotten some extra little rooms that we have pulled out and little closet spaces that we have made into tutorial rooms.”
- **Struggling teachers are supported by formal and informal means to improve their instruction.**
  - Teachers mentioned that they get the greatest support and best ideas for improvement from each other. Struggling teachers are officially or unofficially mentored by stronger teachers. Some teachers said that they tend to help each other before a problem gets bad enough to require an intervention by the principal.
  - Teachers sometimes need targeted help. Principals help teachers develop professional intervention plans. Districts and schools provide funds for professional development and time out of the classroom to go to workshops or to visit other teachers’ classrooms.

- One district administrator said, “Our goal is not to get rid of the teacher.” The goal is to help struggling teachers recognize teaching and learning problems and to find ways to address them. An administrator described how some interventions were just a matter of pointing out a problem: “When I was principal and had a teacher look at her own videotape, she said, ‘Did that happen?’ Many times it is just a matter of bringing the deficiency to the teacher’s attention.”
- A principal described a similar strategy: “Video is just not designed to get a teacher released or get a teacher fired or anything like that, but it is just designed to show that teacher if she has weak areas that she can improve in. ... It’s just another form of evaluation. They could see themselves, and most people don’t want to see themselves. Lord knows, I don’t. But it did help to watch it.”



## Mississippi Elementary Best Practice Institute: Conclusion

*Based on the Themes of The JFTK Framework*

The NCEA analysis identified five consistently higher performing elementary schools in Mississippi. District, school, and classroom representatives from each school participated in a series of five focus groups organized by the themes of The JFTK Best Practice Framework. Summaries of the findings of those focus groups are presented below by theme.

### The Findings

#### **Curriculum and Academic Goals**

*Curriculum maps, pacing guides, instructional calendars, and model lessons provided additional detail to clarify the state standards. Those standards were augmented to ensure higher curricular standards for all students. All lesson plans and instructional materials were aligned with the written curriculum. Teachers provided a continuous feedback loop for the revision and adjustment of curriculum.*

#### **Staff Selection, Leadership, and Capacity Building**

*Retired educators played an active role in mentoring both principals and teachers. Regional service centers were also tapped as a means to provide support for leaders. The focus of principal and teacher capacity-building efforts was on improving instruction in every classroom. Collaboration with other teachers was mentioned as a primary strategy for building teacher capacity.*

#### **Instructional Programs, Practices, and Arrangements**

*District leaders, school leaders, and teachers carefully planned the best use of instructional time throughout the school day. Two strategies used to maximize instructional time were integrating content and minimizing classroom transitions. The careful study and selection of instructional programs was followed by appropriate staff training to use the programs effectively in each classroom. Educators considered fidelity of program implementation to be essential to the effectiveness of any program.*

#### **Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, and Use of Data**

*Educators administered benchmark tests to monitor student progress toward key standards throughout the year. Computerized testing and data management systems made benchmark data more readily accessible, even to parents. District and school leaders monitored the performance of principals and teachers closely—particularly relative to student achievement.*

#### **Recognition, Intervention, and Adjustment**

*Educators stressed the importance of finding “some way” to meet all students’ learning needs. All of the higher performing schools used instructional differentiation, one-on-one tutoring, and extended learning time to meet students’ needs. Additional staff supported classroom instruction. Community and church groups provided volunteers for remedial tutoring.*

## Next Steps

NCEA's state-study protocol assumes that the state framework of best practices will be built based on a three-year study of consistently higher and average-performing schools at the elementary-school level (Year One), middle-school level (Year Two), and high-school level (Year Three). Based on this protocol, NCEA's next step will be to leverage the results of this Elementary Best Practice Institute to conduct a full study of higher performing elementary schools in Mississippi, including a comparison with average-performing schools, in order to distinguish unique practices of the higher performing schools.

*One of the dangers of studying consistently higher performing schools is drawing conclusions based on a single school example. To avoid this danger, the conclusions for the JFTK-Mississippi Elementary Best Practice Institute, 2005, focus on a description of the practices that are most consistent across the higher performing schools in this study. Without a comparison group of average-performing schools, we cannot highlight only those practices that were found to be systemically different in the higher performing schools as a group. Therefore, the conclusions from the JFTK-Mississippi Elementary Best Practice Institute have also been informed by the findings from a much larger body of schools studied (300+ across five years and twenty states), which included average-performing comparison schools, to help determine meaning in the context of Mississippi.*