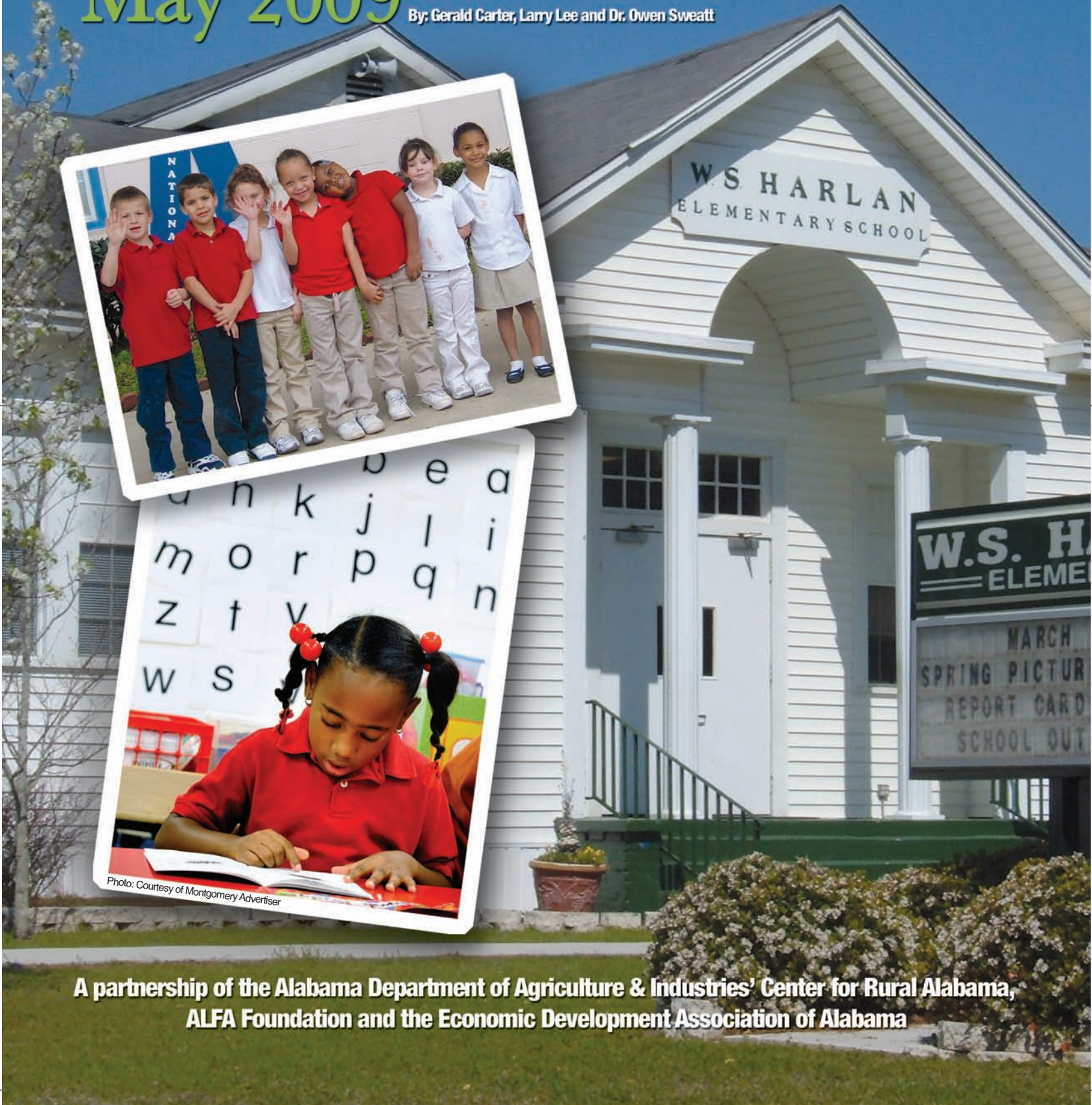


Lessons Learned From Rural Schools May 2009

By: Gerald Carter, Larry Lee and Dr. Owen Sweatt



Photo: Courtesy of Montgomery Advertiser



A partnership of the Alabama Department of Agriculture & Industries' Center for Rural Alabama, ALFA Foundation and the Economic Development Association of Alabama

Study Leaders

Gerald Carter

Gerald Carter & Associates • 256-496-3590

A graduate of Troy University and George Washington University, he is a former special agent with the U.S. Treasury Department and an assistant professor at Troy University. An expert in the use of the Myers Briggs Type Indicator assessment, Carter works extensively with clients conducting investigative interviews and setting up hiring systems utilizing personality profiles.

He has worked with a variety of organizations including Alcohol, Tobacco & Firearms, Community Bankers Association of Alabama, Pennsylvania State Police, Texas Rangers and U.S. Secret Service.

Carter conducted the personality assessment portion of the project, interviewing teachers and administrators.

Larry Lee

Director, The Center for Rural Alabama • 334-240-7272

Lee has worked with rural development for many years. He is the co-author of two publications, *Beyond the Interstate*, the Crisis in Rural Alabama and *Crossroads and Connections, Strategies for Rural Alabama*, with Dr. Joe Summers of Auburn University.

A graduate of Auburn University, he is the former Executive Director of the Southeast Alabama Regional Planning & Development Commission. He frequently writes about rural issues for state newspapers.

Lee did the community assessments and was primary author of this report.

Dr. Owen Sweatt

Adjunct Professor, Culverhouse College of Commerce, University of Alabama • 205-932-3505

He spent 25 years as a public school educator in Alabama and is a former principal of Fayette Elementary in Fayette County. His specialty is educational leadership and organizational behavior.

He has consulted with school systems in Randolph, Bibb, Crenshaw, Marion, Limestone, Lauderdale, Autauga and Fayette counties as well as the University of Alabama and Auburn University. His Ph.D. was in the field of educational leadership and education research. He has published in the *Journal of School Leadership*.

Sweatt is a retired Colonel in the Alabama National Guard and was a Senior Fellow of the Army War College while attending Tufts University and the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He is a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. He received his Ph.D. at the University of Alabama.

Sweatt was the primary evaluator of school leadership and teacher and student performance.

Partners



“This study of high-performing Alabama schools in high-poverty areas is such an important task and the results will be incredibly useful to educators and parents. There are teachers who are making a tremendous difference in these communities, in spite of the obstacles they may face. These schools, their principals, teachers, students and communities, show us just what is possible throughout rural Alabama.”

“These are difficult times for all of Alabama, and especially for our rural areas. If we’re going to turn things around we absolutely must do a better job of educating our young people. And these ten schools, located from the Tennessee Valley to the Black Belt to the Coastal Plain, leave no doubt that we can do better.”

Ron Sparks, Commissioner

Alabama Department of Agriculture & Industries



“In keeping with the Alabama Farmers Federation’s commitment to quality education, we were pleased to support the Center for Rural Alabama as it set about to conduct a comprehensive study of some of our top rural schools. While today’s teachers face a variety of challenges, these schools are proof that students can succeed when parents, teachers and community work together.”

“Today’s world puts a premium on quality education. If our rural students are to compete in the global marketplace, we must set high expectations for learning and provide the tools necessary for them to achieve these goals. It is our hope that this study will reveal keys to success that can be duplicated throughout the state.”

Jerry Newby, President

Alabama Farmers Federation/ALFA Insurance



“In my 25 years of working in economic development in rural Alabama, there has never been a more urgent need for a well-trained workforce. Every time I work with a prospect for Talladega County, workforce is one of the first things they want to talk about. That’s why the Economic Development Association of Alabama is delighted to be a partner in this study of high-performing rural schools.

“While we have made great progress throughout Alabama in education, we still have a long way to go. This study gives us a clear picture of ‘the possible’ when passionate teachers and dedicated communities make a commitment to quality education in rural areas.”

Calvin Miller, President

*Economic Development Association of Alabama
Executive Director, Talladega County Economic Development Authority*

Thoughts & Thanks

From time to time over the months that went into this project someone would ask how the “research” was going. While we saw ourselves doing “research,” we did not see it in quite the same light as an academic might.

Instead, we were a lot like investigative reporters on the trail of a good story. We were poking into the corners of ten far-above-average schools in ten rural communities trying to undercover the secrets of their success.

We were diligent in our labor. What you will read in the following pages is the result of more than 10,000 miles of travel on Alabama’s back roads, more than 300 interviews and dozens upon dozens of phone calls and hundreds of emails.

We were in Phil Campbell on a bitterly cold day when the sky spit snowflakes. We were in north Mobile County when a chill wind blew across a playground as dozens of students in Native American regalia danced to the steady pounding of Indian drums. We were at PTO meetings and Fall Festivals and awards programs.

We talked to mamas and daddies, to teachers, principals and superintendents. And at every turn we happened upon people who represent the heart and soul of rural Alabama.

Like Brenda Carnley who helped her husband Jimmy, the PE teacher at W. S. Harlan in Lockhart, raise \$60,000 to build a new ball field and walking track. Like Dianne Romans, the city clerk of Dutton, who prepares more than 200 backpacks filled with supplies for kids at Dutton School each August. Like city councilman Webb Nall in Atmore who cooks 240 Boston butts each spring to help Huxford Elementary raise money.

We did not expect to find Lake Wobegon where Garrison Keillor tells us “all the women are strong, all the men are good looking and all the children are above average.” And we didn’t.

Instead, we found communities where resources are limited. Communities where the last census says the collective average median household income was only 78 percent of the Alabama average and only 63 percent of the U.S. average. Of the ten communities, only one has a smaller percentage of families below the poverty level than the state average; and only one has a higher percentage of high school graduates than the state average.

So these are not bucolic little hamlets safe from the perils of today’s society. At every school the principal told us that at least 50 percent of all students come from single-parent homes.

In a gym full of parents one night, the principal confided, “probably 25 percent of them have a drug issue.” On a playground one Friday afternoon a principal wished a fifth-grader a “good weekend” and then turned to the visitor and said, “He may never make it because of the home he goes to every day.”

Not only are resources for the communities limited, the same is true of the schools. Of the 131 school systems in the state, figures from the Alabama Department of Education show that five of the 10 systems studied are in the bottom 25 percent when it comes to funding from local sources.

Yet in spite of the obstacles, each of the schools studied are examples of what is possible when principals have high expectations, teachers are highly motivated and communities, limited though they may be, rally to support their school when asked to do so.

No, we didn’t find Lake Wobegon. Nor did we find any deep dark secrets, silver bullets or magic potions. Instead, we found a lot of common sense, mixed with a lot of passion, love and caring.

We found ten schools that show with certainty what our potential is in rural Alabama. We also re-discovered why rural communities are such special places.

Of course, any undertaking of this magnitude requires the support of many people. Ron Sparks, Commissioner of Agriculture & Industries, was enthusiastic about this project from the beginning and offered his support at each step along the way. Jerry Newby, President of the Alabama Farmers Federation, championed the cause and played a key role in getting a grant from the ALFA Foundation to fund the study. Ron Scott, Executive Director of the Economic Development Association of Alabama, volunteered to handle all the bookkeeping duties that go with timely disbursement of funds. Dr. Joe Morton, State Superintendent of Education, readily lent his support and opened doors with local education leaders.

And without doubt, this project would’ve never gotten off the ground without the unqualified support of the principals of the schools we examined. They set up meetings, looked up phone numbers, took us on tours, called mayors, answered our phone calls and responded to our emails without fail and without complaint.

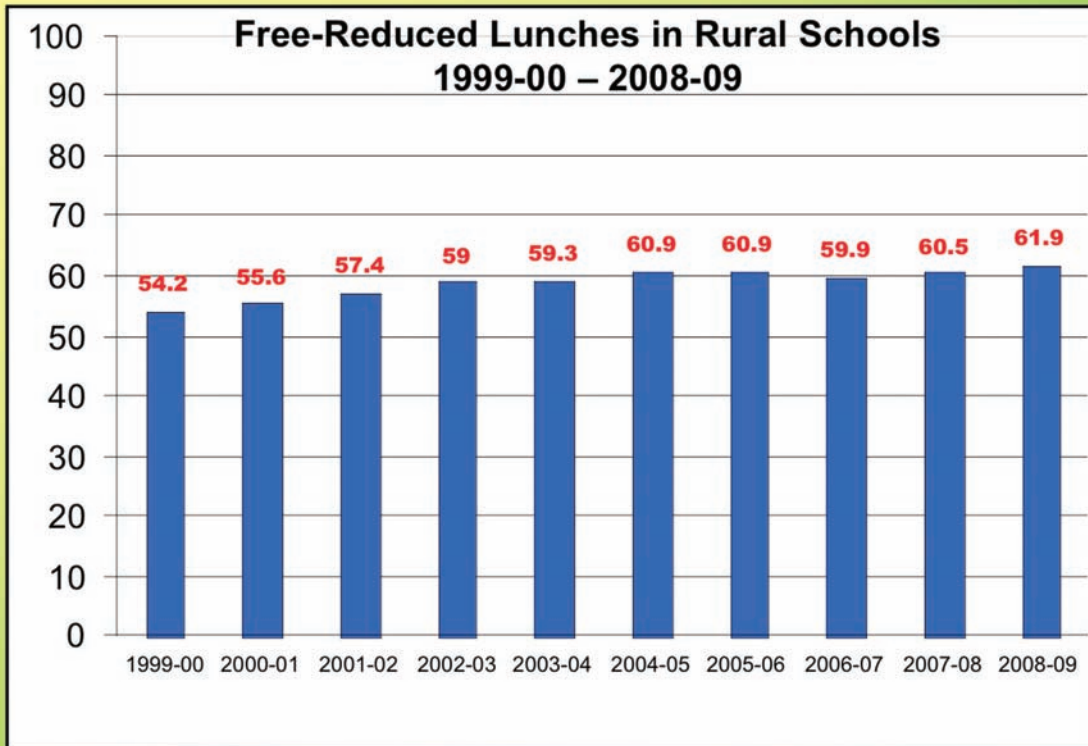
They also became our friends. And for this reason, we are grateful to Richard Bryant, Buddy Dial, Jackie Ergel, Christy Hiatt, Amy Hiller, Jacqui James, John Kirby, Aimee Rainey, Donna Silcox and Brent Zessin.

Gerald Carter

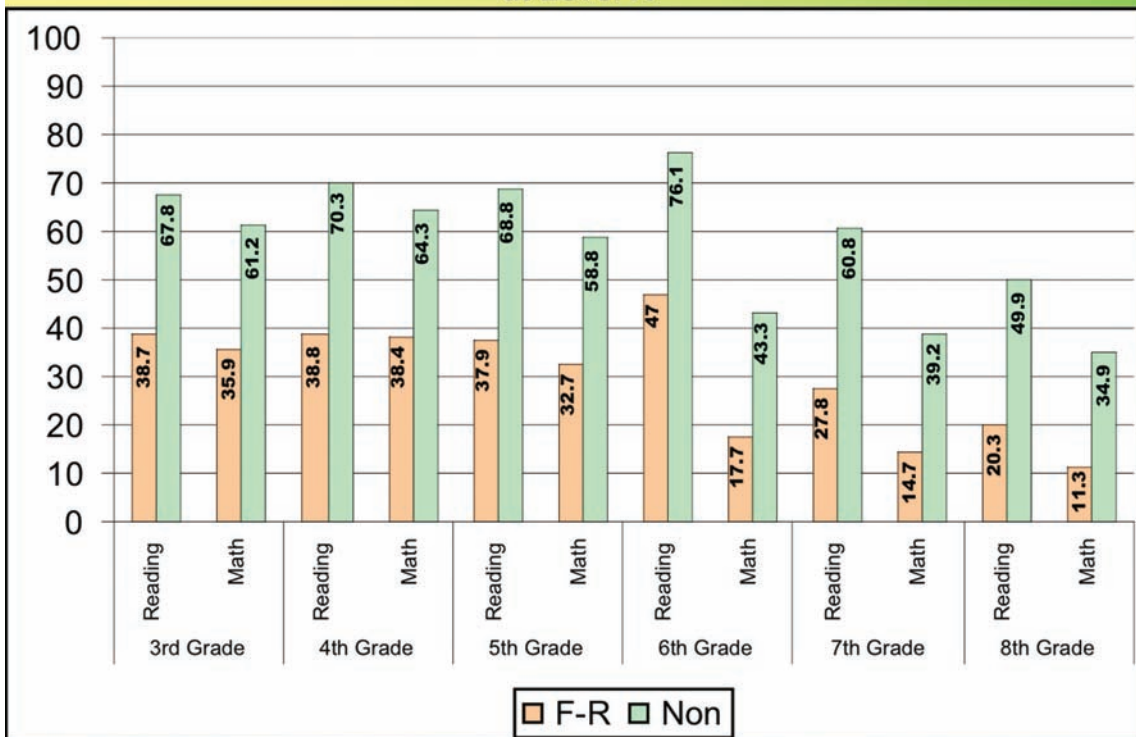
Larry Lee

Dr. Owen Sweatt

A Picture is Worth A Thousand Words



**2007-2008 Alabama Reading and Math Scores for
free-reduced lunch students and non-free-reduced lunch students
at Level IV**



Where Tomorrows Begin



A perfect storm—fueled by the out migration of young adults and rising poverty and strengthened by a declining economy and loss of jobs—swirls across rural Alabama.

In its wake lie communities struggling not only to maintain a certain standard of living, but just to exist. And the most notable victims are the smallest among us, the children.

Nowhere does this show up as starkly as visiting a school lunchroom. Here you find that six out of ten students in Alabama's rural public schools are receiving either free or reduced meals. And for these six, school is often a challenge as data from the Alabama Department of Education shows that they trail non-poverty students significantly in reading and math scores.

Too often these students are not on a path to a cap and gown, but to never going to school after their 16th birthday. The fact that rural schools have only 30 percent of the students in Alabama, but 36 percent of the dropouts, is testimony to this.

Rural Alabama didn't get to this juncture overnight; it's been on this road for years. Ten years ago 54.2 percent of rural students were free-reduced lunch, now 61.9 percent are. Ten years ago there were 60 rural schools with 90 percent or more of their students on free-reduced meals, now there are 78. There are 31 schools in Alabama where less than 10 percent of the students are on free-reduced lunches, none of them in rural communities.

But we often fail to pay adequate attention to the big picture. Instead, we form commissions and study groups and hold meetings. And too often, rather than looking for where the blood is coming from, we look for band-aids.

Truth is; the blood is coming from a lot of places; from lack of decent jobs, from lack of a diversified economy, from lack of a qualified workforce, from lack of infrastructure.

But most of all, it is coming from our children, from the circumstances that hobble their education in both the home and school.

And if we're to weather this storm, all of us concerned about the future of rural Alabama, every legislator, every mayor, every county commissioner, every bank president, every mama and daddy, every business owner, must begin where every tomorrow begins—with our children.

Lessons Learned from County Schools is an honest attempt to shed light on one of Alabama's most pressing needs—how do we better prepare the 30 percent of the state's children who go to public school in rural communities for a future

where a quality education will be the rule and not the exception?

The remaining pages of this publication explain what was learned about 10 outstanding rural schools and 10 communities that are sprinkled across rural Alabama from near the Gulf Coast to the Tennessee Valley. They offer glimpses of what is possible when expectations, teamwork, collaboration and pride become a way of life.

But to fully understand these schools and communities, it is first necessary to understand the challenges they face. The section, **The Reality of Being Rural**, provides the backdrop and context of why rural schools face a different set of circumstances than schools in either suburban or inner city locations.

In **Education is more than pencils and paper** we look at the “external environment” of these schools. What are the intangibles that both community and school administration and teachers bring to the education process?

- We learned there is a culture of expectations on each school campus. Whether it is by having a parade, a Pride Assembly or celebrating your Native American heritage, schools work hard to make students feel special and instill a willingness to achieve.
- Schools build trust with the community and parents. As former principal Betty Warren says, “...the parents must know you love their babies. If they know this, they will support you.” Schools also work hard to interact with their communities.
- Each of these schools is a clean, neat and attractive facility. None of these schools are new, but they are all bright, cheerful and welcoming. In case after case, principals told stories of going the extra mile to paint, clean windows and landscape buildings and grounds.
- There is definitely a sense of family on all 10 campuses. Principals go out of their way to make everyone from teachers to custodians to bus drivers to lunchroom workers feel appreciated and a key part of the educational process.

In the section, **What happens when the bell rings?** we examine the “internal environment” dealing with how administrators manage and motivate, how students are motivated and school culture.

- One of the key findings was that nine out of 10 princi-



pals use a leadership style that emphasizes relationship building with faculty and staff. They stress giving support, active listening, giving feedback, two-way communications and facilitating interactions.

Other notable conclusions are:

- There is not a magic formula for success or a consensus of leadership styles of principals.
- While state and Federal policies give structure and accountability standards that have produced positive results, these also limit some teachers involvement in child development and can impede some of the progress of high performing schools.
- Bigger is not always better when it comes to school size.
- School cultures are quite different, but reflect community values and in some cases, schools influence community values. These cultures are supported in a variety of ways, including school slogans and celebrating achievement.

This section also notes that the ever-increasing emphasis on accountability is raising real concerns about the possibility that we have reached a point where schools are being over managed, but under led.

Finally, **We may all be created equal, but we're all wired differently** looks at the Myers-Briggs personality preferences for 103 teachers at the 10 schools. The intent was to see if successful teachers have commonalities in personality traits.

The results were surprising in some instances.

- While the population as a whole is 50-50 between **Introverts** and **Extraverts**, 63 percent of the teachers in these schools are **Introverts**. This could have implications when teachers are hired, especially considering that a number of principals stated that they look for “passion” or “spark” when hiring.
- Those with a **Sensing** preference are people who resist change that does not fall within their experiences. Some 98 percent of teachers were in this category. This means administrators need to make a convincing case when change is advocated.

- Only 40 percent of the general population falls under the **Thinking** preference, but 58 percent of teachers studied did. Since this personality allows teachers to deal with students logically and non-emotionally, this helps account for why school have been successful in creating and sustaining expectations.

- A **Perceiving** personality helps teachers individualize interaction with students. For example, they will do lesson plans, but will deviate when needed. Some 62 percent of the teachers were perceiving, while the general population is 45 percent.

- Teachers who are able to relate to a rural culture appear to be critical to a school's success. As one principal stated, “I see myself in my students.” This relationship serves as a strong motivator for teachers to move their personality preferences as needed.

Looking For Needles in a Haystack



There are 22 counties in Alabama where more than 30 percent of all children live in poverty, 21 are rural counties.

The link between poverty and low educational achievement is well established. Data from the Alabama Department of Education bears this out. Students who struggle in school, especially in the early years, have a rocky road ahead of them. In fact, many have a dead-end street.

The National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University says there are 15 effective strategies that have the most impact on dropout rates.

One of these is *Early Childhood Education*. According to NDPC, “The most effective way to reduce the number of children who will ultimately drop out is to provide the best possible classroom instruction from the beginning of their school experience through the primary grades.”

Another is *Early Literacy Development* which “helps low-achieving students improve their reading and writing skills to establish the necessary foundation for effective learning in all other subjects.”

Both of these interventions point out how critical a child’s elementary school years are.

The Center for Rural Alabama looked intently at information such as this, plus the fact that from 2003-2007, 10,941 students dropped out of school in rural Alabama; at the fact that poverty continues to rise alarmingly in rural counties; at the fact that there are more than 220,000 students in rural schools and asked these questions:

If the deck is stacked against the majority of the students in rural schools, how will rural Alabama survive? Where will a qualified workforce come from? Where will our future leaders come from?

They then made a leap of faith by assuming that there must be high-performing schools in rural Alabama, where in spite of the challenges of poverty and lack of resources, dedicated superintendents, principals and teachers have raised expectations. Places where concerned parents and community leaders understand that a good education means more than just what happens in the classroom.

So they went looking for needles in a haystack. The first step was to look at every math and reading score for every school in a rural location where 65 percent or more of the students receive free-reduced lunch. More than 200 schools met this criteria.

The Alabama Reading and Math Test is scored on four levels: I) does not meet standards, II) partially meets standards, III) meets standards, IV) exceeds standards. Only results for Level IV were considered.

Each school was scored against the state average. For ex-

ample, if 49 percent of third-graders scored Level IV on reading and the state average was 39 percent, the school received a +10 for third grade reading. If only 29 percent were Level IV, then the score was -10. A school average was determined from these results.

Schools were then ranked from highest to lowest.

In addition, other factors such as geography and demographics were considered. The Center wanted to make sure that the 10 schools selected were representative of rural Alabama as a whole. Schools that had more grades scored than others (for instance, some schools only had test results for third and fourth grades) were given more weight.

Ten schools were selected.

Are they the 10 best elementary schools in rural Alabama? While the authors of this report will not go so far as to say that, they will say that if there are others that are better, they are few and far between.

And one thing is for certain, Calcedaver Elementary in Mobile County, Dutton Elementary in Jackson County, F. S. Ervin in Wilcox County, Fruithurst Elementary in Cleburne County, W. S. Harlan in Covington County, Huxford Elementary in Escambia County, Meek Elementary in Winston County, Phil Campbell Elementary in Franklin County, Southern Choctaw Elementary in Choctaw County and Albert Turner, Sr. Elementary in Perry County are all outstanding.

The Reality of Being Rural



In 1986 the Commission on the Future of the South published a much-acclaimed report, *Halfway Home & a Long Way to Go* which stated: “The sunshine on the Sunbelt has proved to be a narrow beam of light, brightening futures along the Atlantic Seaboard, and in large cities, but skipping over many small towns and rural areas.”

This statement rings as true for rural Alabama in 2009 as it did for the South 23 years ago because the majority of economic progress Alabama experienced the past two decades was largely “skipping over many small towns and rural areas.”

The facts are undeniable.

- In February 2009 there were 37 counties in Alabama with double-digit unemployment, 34 of them rural.
- Figures from the Alabama Department of Industrial Relations show that from 1998 to 2008, 31 rural counties lost employment.
- The last census showed that fewer than 10 percent of all people over 25 years of age in 26 Alabama counties had finished college. (The state average is 19 percent.) Of these, 23 were rural counties.
- The most productive and active adults are between the ages of 25 and 44, yet when you look at this segment of the population, 29 rural counties rank in the bottom one-half of the state in percent of adults in this age range.

Against this backdrop, it’s not hard to understand why enrollment in public schools declined in 37 rural counties from 1997-98 to 2007-08. Or why of the 494 schools in rural Alabama, **none** of them have less than 10 percent free-reduced lunch students while 78 have 90 percent or more.

Information such as this provides the context that must be understood in looking at rural education and the circumstances facing education professionals in such areas. This is especially true as you look at community impact on rural education.

Lewis Terman joined the faculty at Stanford University in 1910 and later chaired the psychology department for 20 years. Terman was fascinated by the concept of measuring human intelligence. In fact, he coined the term “intelligence quotient” and some of his work lives on today

embodied in the Stanford Aptitude Test which every high school student knows as the SAT.

In the 1920s Terman and his assistants identified 643 elementary students in California with IQs of 135 or higher. The professor then set about collecting mountains of data on each child, looking at such things as physical health, interests, ancestry, reading habits, home life, household income and parental occupations. But his initial work was just the beginning as Terman followed these subjects until his death in 1956.

As Malcolm Gladwell points out in his book, *Outliers*, when the subjects were into their adulthood, Terman reviewed their accomplishments and divided them into three groups.

The “A” group was the cream of the crop, the lawyers, physicians, engineers and academics. Ninety percent of them graduated from college. The “B” group was those Terman deemed as doing “satisfactorily.” And the “C” group was made up of those the professor felt had done the least with their superior mental ability. One-third of them dropped out of college and 25 percent only had a high school education.

After exhaustive research Terman concluded that the only meaningful difference in all three groups was their family background.

“The As overwhelmingly came from the middle and upper class,” Gladwell says. “Their homes were filled with books. Half the fathers had a college degree or beyond.”

By comparison, almost one-third of the Cs had a parent who had dropped out of school before the eighth grade.

“What did the Cs lack?” asks Gladwell. “They lacked something that could have been given to them if we’d only known they needed it: a community around them that prepared them properly for the world.”

Within the last decade sociologist Annette Lareau conducted a study of third-graders that dovetails with the findings of Terman. She studied 88 families that included black and white, middle-class, working class and poor.

After countless hours observing each family, Lareau concluded that middle-class families use a parenting strategy she calls “concerted cultivation,” while working-class and poor families use a very different strategy she calls “the accomplishment of natural growth.”

The former involves intensive verbal interactions, lots of scheduled activities such as sports and music lessons, as well as parental intervention with schools to get them to accommodate children’s individual needs and preferences.



On the other hand, the latter strategy means parents respond less quickly to learning difficulties and are less aggressive with school officials. They are less likely to verbally interact with their children and are less involved with homework.

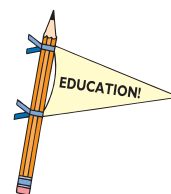
Lareau's work is detailed in her book, *Unequal Childhoods*.

Life has never been easy in rural Alabama, whether someone was on one end of a crosscut saw deep in the woods of Clarke County, chopping cotton in Cherokee County or sewing collars on shirts in Geneva County. And while we no longer use crosscut saws, chop cotton or sew

very few collars, as the numbers above show vividly, life can still be difficult in rural communities.

Understanding this in its totality is **critical** to how we approach the education of the children of rural Alabama. And nowhere is the phrase, "one size does not fit all" more appropriate than when education policymakers convene.

Education is More Than Paper & Pencils



By Larry Lee

It's easy to understand why the city of Auburn has an excellent school system. After all, education is the economy there. For example, while 21 percent of all the people 25 years or older in the state have a college degree, 56 percent of those in Auburn do.

In other words, the Auburn community has a strong *education foundation* where staying in school and going to college is not an option--it is expected. It's no wonder that only seven other school systems provide more local funding per student that Auburn does.

But Arley ain't Auburn.

Nor is it Dutton, Phil Campbell, Fruithurst, Marion, Pine Hill, Lockhart, Huxford, Gilbertown or Mount Vernon.

Which makes the success of their schools all the more impressive.

In the opinion of many education leaders, what happens outside the classroom in the form of "community involvement" may be as important as what goes on in the classroom.

But "involvement" is greatly impacted by "community." Or maybe we should say the circumstances surrounding the community. Wrights Mill Road Elementary in Auburn has had 100 percent participation in PTA for the last 21 years. This is a school of 421 students. By comparison, the PTO of one of the schools in this study (with a few students more than Wrights Mill Road) has only 12 members.

But if it's commonplace for someone in a rural community to drive an hour to work each day, then the time left over to go to PTO meetings--or to work with a child on homework--is limited.

So what might be considered community involvement in one place might be something far different in another place. It's all about understanding that resources in rural communities are much scarcer than in larger communities.

It has nothing to do with the desire of parents to see that their children succeed or the hope of a local

mayor that their school will provide an excellent education. In fact, it's rather remarkable that some of these communities provide as much support as they do.

At Huxford Elementary, the PTO pays the monthly rent on office equipment, buys office supplies and raised \$34,000 for playground equipment. The Dutton School PTO bought a \$4,000 laminator and lockers for the middle school. In Phil Campbell, a PTO with only a handful of members raises about \$10,000 annually. They have bought chairs for classrooms, put in heating and air conditioning and built a snack area.

And while getting your arms around something as intangible as "community involvement" is like trying to grasp a handful of morning mist, it is obvious that all of these schools work to encourage support from both the community at-large and the parents of students.

"One thing is certain," says Jacqui James, principal at Southern Choctaw Elementary in Gilbertown, "we need community support."

Here are some of the guiding principles these ten schools focus on in building support:

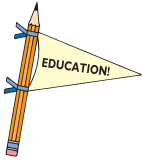
Create a culture of expectations

Visit one of these schools and it doesn't take long to realize that "there is something in the air" at each of them. You discover this in many ways, from how clean bathrooms are, to colorful posters lining the hallways, to a cheery greeting from office staff, to smiles on the faces of first-graders lined up to go to lunch.

Then you come to understand that central to all of these outward signs is a culture of expectations for both students and staff.

"Our mission," says one principal, "is to teach our students--and not just math or reading or science. We also teach discipline, responsibility, how to treat one another, right from wrong and to do the best that you can."

This is explained to some degree by the findings of Gerald Carter that the majority of teachers in



these outstanding schools are “thinkers” rather than “feelers.”

As he explains, those with a thinking personality preference believe that every child, regardless the circumstances they must deal with every day, has the capacity to learn. And they expect no less.

On the other hand, feelers tend to empathize more with the circumstances of a child and therefore, be less expectant of them in the classroom.

Schools create this culture in a number of ways. Instilling a sense of pride in students is one of them.

At Fruithurst Elementary you will find T-shirts that say, “We believe that high expectations and hard work will make us successful.” At F. S. Ervin Elementary, principal Richard Bryant emphasizes the school’s motto, “Welcome to Success.”

Nowhere is pride more evident than at Calcedaever Elementary where 80 percent of the students are Native American. Aimee Rainey was assistant principal here for two years and has been principal for three years.

“The Native American culture is honored and celebrated,” says Rainey. “But the Calcedaever culture of acceptance, love and high expectations for everyone—students and staff—is our treasure.”

Nicole Williams, the school’s Native American interpreter, recalls when kids from Calcedaever were flagged as potential problems when they went to middle school. This is no longer the case.

Now the school has a culture festival each November when students don Native American regalia and perform various dances. This attracts students from many other schools throughout the area, as well as local dignitaries.

You can also find pride on display one Saturday morning each October in tiny Pine Hill, AL when F. S. Ervin Elementary puts on a parade. “We started six years ago,” says principal Richard Bryant, “because our kids rarely get to see a parade. It is 20 miles to go to a parade at Wilcox Central High School in Camden and most of our students don’t get to go.”

So Bryant started rounding up high school bands, cowboys, volunteer fire departments, churches and anyone else who wanted to be in a parade. The 2008 event had six bands and endless trucks carrying Little Misses throwing candy to gleeful F. S. Ervin students.

Setting the bar of expectations is more than pride though, it’s about attitude and it’s about elevating students and celebrating their successes.

At Phil Campbell Elementary there is a “Pride Assembly” at the end of each nine-week grading period where A-B Honor Roll students get T-shirts. There are also “100 Percent” awards that go to students who don’t make the honor roll but are deemed by their teachers as giving 100 percent effort.

The Phil Campbell Civitan Club recognizes the 100 percent students with a certificate and serves pizza to them the next week.

“Our goal is the celebrate achievement for as many students as possible,” says Jackie Ergle, Phil Campbell principal.

Build trust with the community and parents

Trust is not something either a mama or a mayor automatically gives a school; it is something that has to be earned.

Betty Warren, former principal at Huxford Elementary puts it simply, “Students must know you truly love them and the parents must know you love their babies. If the parents know this, they will support you.”

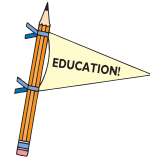
“Our community knows this is a good place to send kids,” says Jacqui James of Southern Choctaw. “Parents know their children are safe with us. This is why we need the fall festivals, Christmas programs and music recitals. We need to welcome the community into this school in a variety of ways.

“Education has to be a partnership between the school and the community. We all have a stake in teaching these kids. They are our future.”

Others echo her remarks. Donna Silcox is principal at Huxford Elementary. She states, “Education goes beyond the walls of instruction and much of our school success is determined by the community’s ownership.”

Building trust means that school leaders often take on roles that have little to do with education. It means that at the end of another long day, a principal may need to attend a civic club meeting or some local function.

Brent Zessin is principal at W. S. Harlan Elemen-



tary. On Friday nights in the fall he takes up money at Florala High School football games because it gives him a chance to see parents of his students.

It also means that some schools, such as Meek Elementary in Winston County, try to be as supportive of the community as possible. Former principal Deb Thompson says that if the parent of a student needs to use a copier for example, they're welcome to drop by the school.

Leaders at these schools also understand that their local newspaper can be a great ally in building community trust.

Buddy Dial is principal at Albert Turner Sr. Elementary in Marion. "We work with the local newspaper any time we can," he says. Scott Coefield, former principal at Fruithurst recalls that one of his goals was to have a picture from the school in the Cleburne County News each week.

Dee Ann Campbell is editor of the Choctaw Sun-Advocate in Gilberttown and a great believer in the partnership of newspapers and schools. "I'm probably in a school two or three times a week," she says. "We think it's extremely important that our readers know what is happening with our students. What activities they're involved in, what honors they've gotten and what projects they're working on. We're always welcomed when we go to Southern Choctaw."

There is ample evidence that each of these schools have been successful in building trust. It is easily measured.

Dutton mayor Bryan Stewart says his little town of 310 people in Jackson County looks for ways to not only get involved with their school, but to do what they can to assist education throughout the community. "We now have a Pre-K program at our library," he points out.

The 2008 Fall Festival at Fruithurst Elementary, which sits square in the middle of this community of 270, raised \$11,000.

Aldersgate United Methodist Church is next door to Calcedaever Elementary and lets the school use their gym for plays, pageants and PTO meetings. In Arley, population 290, about 20 volunteers work one-on-one with students needing extra help with reading.

Harry Mason has lived in Pine Hill all of his 83 years. He has been mayor for many years and served

on the Wilcox County school board before that. "A town can't grow without a school," he says, "and we probably have the best relationship between F. S. Ervin and the town we've ever had."

Building trust with parents is vital to having a successful school. "You simply have to have the trust of the parents," says F. S. Ervin's Richard Bryant. "And you can not betray that trust."

Educators talk a lot about "parental involvement." In fact, since each of these 10 schools are Title I schools, they have to have a parental involvement plan. This deals with involving parents more fully in their child's education. (Parental involvement also means parents volunteering to assist with everyday school functions such as running copies of material, being a reading mentor, etc.)

But again, community circumstances play a big role. Census data by zip code for these schools show that only 64.4 percent of people over 25 years of age in these locations graduated from high school. By comparison, the state average is 75.3 percent. It goes back to the Auburn example of **education foundation** which has nothing to do with desire, but a lot to do with capacity.

One principal recalled that their school had a dinner for parents before the school did writing assessments to familiarize them with the assessment and what is expected of students. Of 78 students, only five parents showed up.

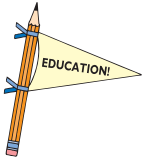
However, building trust has far more to do with "parental support" than "parental involvement."

"If the parent trusts the school and understands that you are truly doing all you can to help their child, then they are far more likely to support you when there is a discipline issue," says John Kirby, principal at Dutton School.

Have a clean, neat and attractive facility

None of these schools are new. In fact, the newest was built in 1994 and the oldest in 1924. But they are all clean, neat and well kept.

Southern Choctaw's Jacqui James says that in addition to being clean and neat, a school building should be a cheerful as possible and send the message to stu-



dents that it is a pleasant place to be. In fact, James has turned one hallway into an art gallery with reproductions of famous paintings she has gotten from places like Atlanta's High Museum of Art, the Birmingham Museum of Art and the Mobile Museum of Art.

When Dale Hancock interviewed for the principal's job at Dutton School a number of years ago, one thing that struck him was how drab the facilities were. "An important part of the learning experience is the surroundings for both students and faculty," he says.

Hancock began the transformation by cleaning windows. His first summer as principal was spent painting. Then he was able to get all floors tiled. Along the way he got an artist to paint murals and turned the school into a community within a community.

For instance, classrooms carry the name of someone's home. Non-classrooms are businesses. In the elementary wing, the entrance to the boy's bathroom is painted to resemble a barbershop; the girl's is a beauty shop.

"This did a lot to boost community support," remembers Hancock. "The mayor wanted to know how the town could help and our first open house after the painting was completed was packed with both parents of students and townspeople."

Richard Bryant gets F. S. Ervin painted every two-three years. And he laughs as he explains, "We get it done without asking the central office for a penny."

Communicate with parents

All principals stress the importance of communicating with parents as much as possible. "After all, they are our customers," says Jacqui James. "And getting them as much information as possible about what we're doing and what is expected of our students is a big part of creating the perception that this is a good place to send their kids."

At Phil Campbell Elementary, parents get a newsletter each Monday telling them what their child will study that week. There is also a monthly newsletter for parents.

"Tremendous Tuesdays" is just one of the ways W. S. Harlan lets parents know what is going on. One Tuesday each month, parents and grandparents of

students in certain grade students are invited to school to have lunch. "Probably 75 percent of the kids will have someone here eating with them," says principal Brent Zessin.

At Albert Turner Sr. Elementary, a special day is set aside for grandparents to visit. There is also a Dad's Day.

Develop a sense of family

OK. So it sounds trite to say that there is a sense of family among faculty at each of these schools. Just don't tell any of their teachers or principals that.

David Lewis has been a coach and P. E. teacher for 33 years, the last 12 at Southern Choctaw in Gilbertown. "I'm sure you can go to any school in the country and someone will tell you that they are just like family," he says, "but I've been in education a long time and it is truer here than anywhere else I've ever seen."

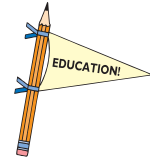
But getting to this point doesn't just happen, it takes work. For Southern Choctaw principal Jacqui James, that means every person at the school—not just teachers—are important. "You need to pat everyone on the back, whether they teach, work in the lunchroom or drive a bus, because once they walk in the door of the school, they are a teacher regardless of their job title," she says. "Tell them they are appreciated, give them all cookies at Christmas and go out of your way to make them feel special because they are."

Amy Hiller, principal at Meek Elementary, notes that it is not uncommon for all of their teachers to go eat together on special occasions. "I don't know of another school where this is the case," she says.

At Huxford Elementary a longtime teacher had breast cancer and underwent surgery and follow up treatments. According to principal Donna Silcox, the teacher rarely missed a day. "This kind of commitment is contagious," says Silcox.

Administrators at Fruithurst Elementary noticed several years ago that math scores in a certain grade were unusually good. "We just kept asking that teacher what she was doing and what we could learn from her," says principal Christy Hiatt. "She was happy to share and because of this, we rethought how we teach math throughout the school," she adds.

The fact that math scores at Fruithurst are now



some of the best for any school in the state is evidence that a true sense of family and a willingness to work together are keys to continuing success.

Further evidence of this is the fact that 132 teachers at these schools have never taught at another school. Even more remarkable is that combined, the staffs have 2,711 years of teaching experience in these 10 schools.

Look for help anywhere you can find it

While none of these schools are awash in funds, either from their local school system or community deep pockets, they don't sit around wishing things were different. Instead, they look for help at each and every opportunity. "We work with any outside source available," says Amy Hiller of Meek Elementary. "This may be the Department of Human Resources, a local center that helps families and troubled children, Head Start, and local churches and organizations."

When F. S. Ervin's Richard Bryant looks for support, he has one thing in mind. "I don't think of it as much as asking for help as I do asking for local ownership," he says. "For instance, I may ask a parent if they can help us mow grass Saturday morning. If they have other plans, then I ask them for a gallon of gas for a lawnmower. It's not much, but it's a way to get them invested in their school."

Bryant also works hard to maintain a good relationship with the nearby International Paper mill according to Anita Smith, training manager and chair of the local International Paper Foundation.

This has paid off in many ways. IP has helped with reading projects, science fairs, Dr. Seuss Day and has awarded F. S. Ervin more than \$17,000 in grants over the last four years. "We're glad to help," says Smith, "especially when the school let's you know how much you're appreciated."

Calcedaever has long benefited from its relationship with the DuPont Chemical plant down US Highway 43. Beth Basham, plant manager, says the company works hard to be a part of the community and their work with Calcedaever goes back more than two decades.

"We've helped in a number of ways," says Basham. This includes sending one or two employees to the school routinely to work with second and third graders on reading, having maintenance and construction employees build ramps and birdhouses, providing workbooks for science education, sponsoring essay contests and recognizing both students and teachers.

"Students even put information on the company's bulletin board telling about their activities," says Basham.

In Perry County, Superintendent John Heard leaves no stone unturned in an effort to find grant funds to help meet needs. "Someone is going to get some of this money, it might as well be us," he says.

In the last six years the Perry County School System has received more than \$2.5 million in grants to be used for dropout prevention, a virtual health science classroom, distance learning, arts education, HIPPPY (Home Instruction for the Parents of Pre-School Youngsters) and other projects.

Buddy Dial, principal at Albert Turner Sr. Elementary, works for Heard. "I've found that you may have more response asking for services than for money," he says.

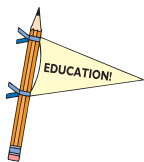
The staff at Fruithurst Elementary understands this concept well. Principal Christy Hiatt has called on her father many times to handle repairs at the school. The kindergarten classroom at Fruithurst has a great tree house in it, thanks to the work of the teacher's husband who builds log homes. Another husband is a cabinet maker and has built a number of cabinets at the school.

Jacqui James was listening to National Public Radio one day when she heard about Judge David Bell of New Orleans who was a special education student and did not learn to read until the third grade.

She got in touch with Judge Bell and asked him to come to Choctaw County and talk to her students. He accepted her invitation and his only request was for a home-cooked southern meal.

"Two of our retired teachers volunteered to cook lunch and as we say in this part of the world, 'they put on the dog,'" she recalls with a laugh.

Each of these schools also understands that excellence has its rewards. Most have received financial



support from the state for meeting outstanding student progress goals.

In addition to being creative when looking for help, faculty and staff at these schools know how to make the most of what they have.

A great example is Huxford Elementary where during the day the gym is used to house the library, computer lab, copy room and offices for the reading coach, two teacher's aides, school nurse, counselor and special education instructor.

However, partitions for most of these offices are on rollers and at times when the gym is needed for a meeting such as PTO, everything is pushed back to the walls and chairs set up where offices are during the day.

Get all hands on deck

You don't have to spend much time in one of these schools before you'll hear someone say they were "called to teach." It happens time after time and this passion for working with children is evident in many ways.

One is the fact that teachers and principals are willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done. And this may go far beyond anything they learned about being a teacher while in college.

"I don't remember having a course in how to mop a bathroom floor," laughs Aimee Rainey of Calcedoever. "But if you don't have a custodian and the bathroom needs cleaning, you just do it."

Drop by Southern Choctaw on the weekend and there's a good chance you may find coach David Lewis working on the school grounds spreading wood chips under playground equipment, mulching or picking up trash. And during the week he makes sure flags look good and are flown appropriately.

Dale Hancock, the former principal at Dutton, remembers when he had one staff member who was one-half librarian, one-half kindergarten teacher. "The only problem was that we had two kindergarten classes, which meant that for part of the day, we had 32 kids in one kindergarten class," says Hancock. "That's just too many."

So he left the principal's office and took over one of the kindergarten classes until they were able to hire another teacher. "You just do what has to be done," he says. "This may be anything from mowing grass to carrying out garbage, working in the lunchroom, changing light bulbs or painting a wall."

What Happens When The Bell Rings?



By Owen Sweatt, Ph.D.

Do you remember your first grade classroom? What color was the floor? What did your desk look like? How big was the blackboard? What was your teacher's name?

My guess is that far more of us can remember who taught us in the first grade than can remember our physical surroundings. Which is why any serious look at how a school performs as it does must look carefully at how teachers work with their students, how administrators interact with staff and how both students and staff are motivated.

We studied these schools by using interviews, observations, and questionnaires to obtain information. Each school assembled a group of parents and a group of teachers to be interviewed separately to share information and perceptions about why they felt their schools were successful. Each principal was interviewed and completed a situational questionnaire to determine his or her leadership style. Patterns were identified from the data, categorized and used to display the results shared in this section.

This section examines the reasons for success as they related to leadership and motivation of the students, teachers and principal. Since only one of the three researchers has worked in education, this study examined schools with different perspectives than most "educational research." With these thoughts in mind, we share our findings.

Assumptions

1. Focus groups of teachers and parents were representative of the general population of teachers and parents.
2. Participants were truthful and open regarding their perceptions and experiences.
3. The assignment of motivational and leadership theory by the author to the behavior described by the participants is accurate.

Limitations

1. This was not an attempt to measure and assess all aspects of the educational process because of the scope, expertise, and time.
2. Information was gathered from limited observation and question/answer sessions.
3. Only elementary schools (one K-8 school) were assessed.

What we did not find

- a magic formula for success
- a consensus of leadership styles of principals
- a consensus of what motivates principals or how they use motivation
- a consistent community profile
- a consistent uniform policy (4 out of 10 have uniforms)
- similar school construction and size
- consistent level of parental involvement

What we did find

- A lot of qualified and dedicated school personnel
- **"Family"** and **"Team"** used to describe faculty relationships at school
- High expectations for success, both spoken and written
- State and Federal policies give structure and accountability standards that have produced positive results. However, these policies and procedures also limit some teacher's involvement in child development and can impede some of the progress of high performing schools.
- Discipline in schools was, as one person noted, "an issue, but not a problem."
- Not all children were motivated by the same things, but most children can be motivated to accomplish individual and school goals.
- All faculty were not motivated by the same things, however, all staff and faculty that were interviewed expressed a love for teaching and for the children entrusted in their care.
- Bigger is not always bigger--the size of the schools (seven of the ten schools have fewer than 400 students) seemed to facilitate building relationships. Other benefits from the small schools and rural areas included high salary in their communities (to attract and keep teachers), status, and affiliation.
- Schools used multiple avenues of communication with parents and the community.
- Schools were the hub of their communities and were a safe, secure environment for students.
- The cultures among the schools were quite different, but reflected values of their respective communities. The really strong cultures in some schools were influencing the values in their communities.
- The perceptions of why the schools were successful were not always the same between the faculty and administration.



Motivation

Motivation is a critical component of the education process. As Gerald Carter points out later in *We may all be created equal, but we're all wired differently*, if a person is highly motivated, he/she may actually switch their desired personality preference to one that is more effective for the task at hand.

Motivation can be defined as anything that affects behavior in pursuing an outcome (effort). The needs and wants that motivate our behavior can be very complex and cannot be seen, but we can observe a behavior and conclude what the motive was that caused the behavior. However, it is still difficult to know why people behave the way they do because people may do the same things for different reasons or they may be satisfying several needs at one time.

Several prominent motivational theories will be used as a basis for explaining behavior and are used in this study to encourage readers to think about why we do the things we do in school and to examine how we affect behavior in an educational setting. The theories mentioned are by no means an exhaustive list, but are the basis for much of what we do in schools. (1) (2) (3)

- Needs—people do things based on needs such as belonging and affiliation, esteem, achievement, fear of failure, and power.
- Equity—people want to be treated fairly. They want their *perceived* inputs (effort, intelligence, experience, hard work, etc.) to equal their outcomes (praise, status, recognition).
- Expectancy—people are motivated when they think they can get something promised, they desire it, and they think by doing the task, they will get it.
- Goal setting—specific and challenging goals with feedback provided will motivate people.
- Reinforcement—people will be motivated based on consequences for their behavior; you get what you reinforce.
- Self-efficacy—people are motivated when they think they are capable and trained to accomplish a task.

Based on the interviews, a framework was developed to reflect the motives of students, teachers, and principals in these 10 schools. Under the students list, methodology came from what parents, teachers and principals shared as effective techniques and the motivation was inferred from those items or was shared directly. On the teachers list, motivation items were mentioned by the teachers and/or the principals, while methodology came from suggestions

by teachers or techniques used by principals.

The motivation items on the principals list were either inferred from their comments or things they shared. The leadership column was developed from their comments about how they led. The methodology list was developed from their beliefs and application of motivational principles.

Here is how these schools motivate students, teachers and principals and the methods used to do so.

STUDENTS

Motivation

- Goal setting is important/feedback/reward
- Affiliation—feel accepted, nurture
- Achievement—provide opportunities to achieve and create desire to excel
- Needs—psychological, security, belonging, etc.
- Expectancy—do what you promise
- Equity—be fair and listen a lot

Methodology

- Children—first priority.
- Set goals and high standards, expect success, measure progress, celebrate wins, give them dreams.
- Give them lots of encouragement and success signs.
- Model vision (lead by example)—nothing undermines vision more than inconsistent behavior (remember AIG bonuses, GM and Ford CEOs and their jets)
- Communicate with parents via multiple forums.
- Love children; invest in children; respect children and each other.
- “Double and triple dip” child if needed; monitor/intervention.
- Protect instructional time; stress academics
- Remove obstacles for learning
- Provide for individual needs of children (from clothes to love).
- Build community—FAMILY.
- Don't feel sorry for your children, a good education is their ticket to a better life.
- Be data driven/ make mandated programs work together with the rest of the curriculum.
- Instill pride in work and school.
- Utilize peer teaching
- Use innovative discipline programs



TEACHERS

Motivation

- Competitive; desire to excel
- Fear of failure—publicized scores; can provide stress
- Intrinsic—always wanted to be a teacher; see the light bulb come on; I made a difference
- Self-Efficacy—more knowledgeable, better equipped
- Needs—supported, recognized, appreciated, gives us what we need.
- Achievement—accomplish task, finish on top, want others to see our scores
- Autonomy—freedom
- Affiliation—FAMILY, good relationships, connected, community of learners
- Equity—fairness, principal is good to us, I scratch your back, you scratch mine
- Expectancy—we know what to expect (teachers must desire it also)
- Satisfaction—I love my job, I am called to be here, I drive by other schools to come here

Methodology

- Have a proud school, publicize accomplishments, get the right people.
- Designed professional development to produce self-efficacy.
- “Hire highly motivated (find out what motivates them), qualified teachers;” “hire teachers that love children;” “hire teachers that have a vested interest in the school (this is home).”
- “Collaborate in and across grade levels”(produces trust and community).
- “Do things the right way;” “do what’s right”(these are not the same).
- Instructional leaders allow for freedom and creativity and protect instructional time.
- Be fair and consistent (especially the administrator).
- Inspire and challenge; “praise me and I’ll do anything!”
- Develop collaborative goals; “those that create tend to support.”
- Lead by example; “ultra professional, creates loyalty and trust.”
- “Structure can help, especially for young teachers.”
- Communicate; that includes listening.
- “Technology is a tool, it is also a great equalizer.”
- “Must believe kids can do it.”
- “Give teachers responsibility; let them make decisions.”
- “Research based programs let teachers know how to teach.”

PRINCIPALS

Motivation

- Achievement (scores)—“highly competitive,” “I like to win.”
- Intrinsic—“I’m responsible to the kids,” “The best thing I can give them is an education,” values, job done right. Determined to be a decision maker and make it better (vision).
- Satisfaction—Feel good at the end of the day. Can sleep when I go to bed.
- Goal setting—results, proud of accomplishments.
- Fear of failure—“I am from here, we have a high standard.”
- Self—efficacy—“don’t teach you to be a principal, learned by OJT.”
- Needs—I want to be a problem-solver; support and encouragement is important; want people to have confidence in me; doing things right.

Methodology

- Build respect among stakeholders; genuineness is important.
- Nothing undermines vision more than inconsistent leader behavior.
- Support teachers, staff
- Hire, develop, and support leaders/teachers
- Set high expectations (Goal setting); “no free passes.”
- Celebrate wins
- Communicate goals, vision
- Give teachers opportunity for input.
- Provide money for subs for professional development
- “Happy teacher is a good teacher”
- “Our school”
- Learned a lot from a mentor
- “Action is in the classroom, not the office.”
- “Should put a person from the community as instructional leader.”
- Support new teachers, pay mentors.

Leadership

- Allow teachers to use own strategies
- Pick teachers: high test scores, passion, enthusiasm, confidence, love teaching, and willing to go above the call of duty.
- Walk throughs in classroom
- Open, safe, secure school
- Data driven
- Develop community relationships—FAMILY, TEAM
- Let teachers lead (grade level, lead teacher)



- Trust teacher judgment
- Recognize good work; pat on the back
- Give teachers time; few faculty meetings (that's an outcome)
- Treat teachers like I want to be treated
- Be fair
- "Principal controls the halls." (parent)
- Enforce high standards
- Must believe; "Can do attitude"

Motivating with Needs and Intrinsic motivation

Administrators should:

- determine the needs of stakeholders.
- expect people's needs to change.
- satisfy high order needs through Intrinsic rewards

Motivating with Equity

Administrators should:

- look for and correct major inequities.
- reduce employees' inputs (overtime, Stress, etc.)
- make sure decision-making processes are fair.
- listen and work with perceptions.

Motivating with Expectancy

Administrators should:

- gather information to find out what employees want and expect from their jobs.
- link rewards to individual performance that is clear to employees.
- empower employees to make Decisions

Motivating with Reinforcement

Administrators should:

- identify, analyze, and evaluate critical performance-related behaviors.
- correctly administer punishment.
- don't reinforce the wrong behaviors.

Motivating with Goal-setting

Administrators should:

- assign specific, challenging goals.
- make sure stakeholders accept organizational goals
- provide specific, frequent, performance-related feedback

Motivating with Self-efficacy

Administrators should:

- provide training to assist teachers in delivering high quality educational activities
- assess the training needs of the teachers.

From: *Effective Management*, (1)

Of course, whether it's in a business or a school, motivation is very important. As pointed out in *Effective Management*, "Studies conducted over the last three decades have consistently found that employees are twice as likely to indicate that 'important and meaningful work' matters more to them than what they are paid."

"On average, there is a 90 percent chance that employees whose behavior is reinforced with a combination of financial, nonfinancial, and social rewards will outperform employees whose behavior is not reinforced."

There is substantial research that shows that work itself can motivate workers and lead to positive outcomes. It is called job characteristics model (JCM) and states that internal motivation can result from work when there is skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy and feedback in work. If work is going to be motivational, educators must view their job as important, they must feel personally responsible for the work being done and must be aware they are performing their jobs effectively. (1) Some of the comments from teachers and principals reinforced this concept, but we did not use JCM as a category of motivation.

This study also lead to thought about organizational authority and standardization. Standardization is the process of solving problems by applying the same set of rules and regulations. If standardization is important in an organization, then centralization of authority (locating most of the authority in upper levels of an organization) is important. If standardization is not as important, then decentralization (significant authority in lower levels of an organization) is a common rule of thumb. In a decentralized organization, workers closest to the problems are given the authority to be decision makers in solving problems. (1) In this context, No Child Left Behind was mentioned frequently as leading to standardization.

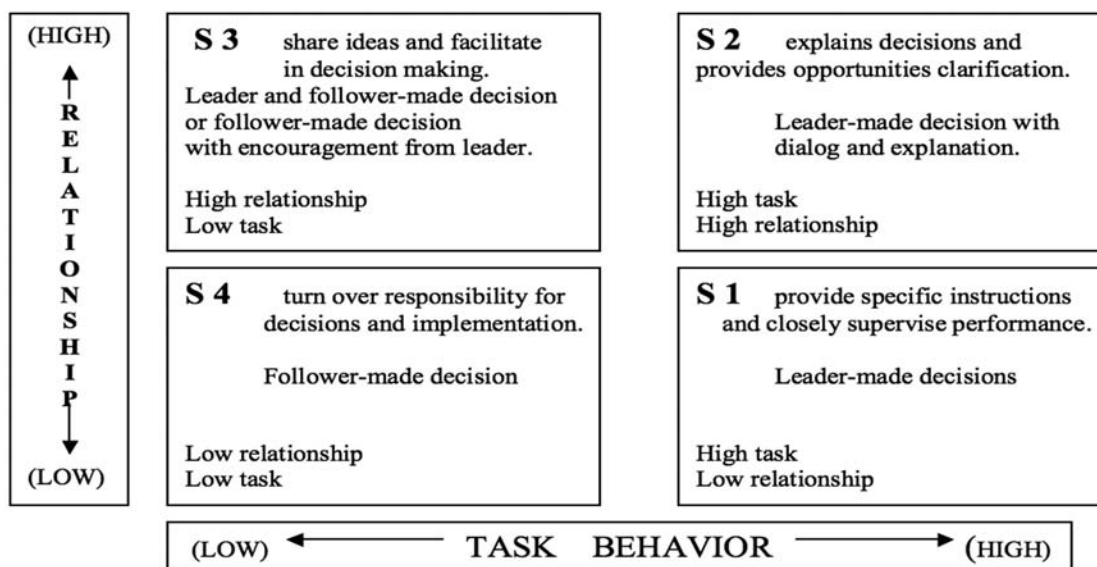
Principals and Situational Leadership

Effective principals must have a bit of chameleon in them. That is, they must be adaptable to some degree. As we sought information on leadership styles we ran across instances where a principal adopted one style early in their career before switching to another in later year. For example, when Richard Bryant first became principal at F. S. Ervin his first challenge was turning the school's buildings and grounds into a place that was created an appealing learning environment. There is little doubt that Bryant was initially a S 1 style leader, someone more focused on completing a task than in building employee relationships. This is not his leadership style nine years later.



Summary information of Principals in the Study											
Gender		Years as principal				Style			Age		
M	F	0-5	6-10	11-15	Over 15	S1	S2	S3	30-40	41-50	Over 50
4	6	6	3	0	1	1	4	5	3	3	4

One of the most widely used models of leadership is Hershey and Blanchard's Situational Leadership Theory. They propose that a leader should base his or her leadership style on the readiness level of the followers and that *will increase the probability* that the leader actions will lead to success. Their model reflects four basic leader styles based on a combination of task behavior (importance of doing a task) and relationship behavior (importance of the relationship with the followers).



This model is adapted from the model presented in the 7th edition of *Management of Organizational Behavior*. (5)

Task behavior is the extent to which the leader determines who, what, where, when, and how in goal setting, planning, organizing, controlling, and directing. Relationship behavior is the extent to which the leader engages in giving support, active listening, giving feedback, two-way communication, and facilitating interactions.

Most researchers, and/or practitioners, would admit there is no one best way to lead or influence people all the time. The Situational Leadership model proposes that the leader is more effective when they match their style with the readiness of the followers, and thus it is the follower who determines the appropriate leadership style. That bears repeating. It is the *follower* who determines the best leadership style or behavior according to Situational Leadership.

Each principal from these high performing schools was asked to complete a questionnaire designed to assess the way leaders would solve problems or deal with certain situations. Each situation had four choices which described different styles of leadership and they were asked to pick the choice that best described "their" solution.

Based on the leader inventory given to the ten principals, five were S 3 leaders, four were S 2 leaders, and one was an S 1 leader style. Two of the male principals were S 2 leaders and two were S 3 leaders, while one female was an S 1, two were S 2, and three were S 3.

It is difficult to draw too many conclusions from these results, but almost all of the principals from high performing schools displayed high relationship behavior. There was little difference in the leader styles of men and women.



According to Hersey and Blanchard (5), an S 2 leader would exhibit:

- seek buy-in through persuasion
- discuss details
- check understanding of the task
- give followers incremental steps of the task

Effective behaviors S 2 leaders exhibit include: explain decisions and clarify, providing the “why” of the tasks, explaining follower roles, leader made decisions, and reinforcement of small improvements.

Effective approaches

Selling
Explaining
Clarifying
Persuading

Ineffective approaches

Manipulating
Preaching
Defending
Rationalizing

An S 3 leader would:

- share responsibility for decision making with followers
- give followers “need to know information”
- focus on results
- involve follower in consequences of task (reinforcement) to increase commitment and motivation

Actual behaviors of S 3 leaders: active listening, compliment work, major follower involvement in decisions, two-way communication, and support risk taking.

Effective approaches

Participating
Encouraging
Supporting
Empowering

Ineffective approaches

Patronizing
Placating
Condescending
Pacifying

S 1 leaders would lead through a strong directing approach based on the fact that completion of a task would be much more important than developing a relationship with employees while the S 4 leader would provide little direction in the completion of tasks and would generally take a hands-off approach when dealing with employees. There are times when S 1 or S 4 leadership can be effective, but we have limited our discussion to the S 2 and S 3 styles.

Situational Leadership suggests that leaders should help followers grow in terms of willingness and readiness, and then based on the readiness of the followers choose the leader style which will yield the highest probability of success. People with high readiness levels (highly qualified and motivated teachers) may not need emotional support as much as they need greater autonomy (freedom).

At first glance, these approaches seem very much the same, but there are differences in the S 2 and S 3 leader, and some of them are very subtle. Style 2 leaders thrive on the task part of their job. By having structure at school it allows them to feel secure and when achieving desired goals, it makes them feel good about their performance. Having high test scores may be more of a function of completing their number one task than trying to help kids reach their full potential.

On the other hand, Style 3 leaders may feel it is their “duty” to cut off distracting dialogue or tasks from their supervisors instead of “passing it on.” They may also do the same thing with parents or the public, and are often willing to do whatever necessary to complete tasks without distracting their followers or imposing on them. They are more likely to tell teachers, “you are the expert; you do what needs to be done.”

So what? Leaders must recognize that their followers’ motivational needs are different and may require some flexibility in choosing their leadership style. They should also be able to reflect on their experiences and adapt what they are doing to increase the probability of success with their style of leadership.

Culture and Climate

Climate and Culture are words that describe conditions in and around an organizational work area. The words are often used interchangeably, but are quite different.

Climate refers to conditions that can be readily seen in a school and is often described by terms like, clean, wholesome, open, cold, dark, friendly, safe, great learning atmosphere, and such like.

Culture, on the other hand, describes the values and behaviors that are held and/or exhibited by members in an organization. Often members participate in that culture without fully being aware of its impact. Stakeholders in schools learn how to behave and develop values primarily by observing people and participating in events that take place at school.

Ask 10 people what they think of when they hear “The University of Alabama” and probably nine of them will say, “football.” That is a good example of culture.

Schein (3) proposed that culture is developed and identified through four major avenues:

- a. Stories and myths—stories about people in the organization that have a made major impact (good or bad) on the school, or stories about important events at school.
- b. Symbols and artifacts—items that can be seen or noticed that describe importance in that organization.
- c. Rituals and ceremonies—recurring events or activities that reflect importance or priority in that school.



d. Language and slogans—the use of terms or metaphors that depict what people in that organization value and how they view things.

Most of the schools studied have strong cultures in that most stakeholders hold many of the same values and beliefs, and display the adopted behaviors. Many cultural items were observed during visits and many items were mentioned during interviews. Some were:

- Many signs about success were posted throughout the schools, and many comments about high expectations were given. “Welcome to success—Failure is not an option.” “We give them dreams.” “We expect success.”
- Information about rituals and ceremonies were shared by parents and school personnel. Pep rallies and motivational speeches for testing, parties celebrating wins, schools celebrating diversity, bulletin boards celebrating excellence, news articles sharing these items with the community, trips for reaching goals, and so forth, were done to further the mission or vision of the school.
- Many stories were shared by parents and teachers regarding the impact of school activities on the community and vice-versa. Stories of teacher, principal, parent and student effort were noted. “The parents of a child might be in jail, but they want their kids to do better.” “We have country kids, good kids, they are disciplined, their values are different from city kids.” Some communities referred to family values as important in their schools. Others felt that religion was an important part of their community and had an impact on discipline and motivation of their children.

So What? Every school should have an articulated vision that is reinforced through stories, symbols, ceremonies, and slogans. Examine values and behaviors and employ the best motivational strategies for all stakeholders.

Leadership versus Management

Some comments from teachers and principals raised questions regarding the leadership vs. management issue. Is there a difference between leadership and management? Can a person be a manager and a leader at the same time? Are we developing over managed and under led schools?

Accountability in education has done some great things, and there are reasons it was needed. But is it a possibility that it is causing us to select, train, and develop a generation of managers instead of leaders?

The following are representative of comments that indicated that some schools are over managed and under led.

Teachers

“Don’t have time to teach”

“They (State Department of Education) doesn’t know what my children need”

Principals

“Too busy filling out paperwork”

“Don’t have time...to plan”, “to do what needs doing”

Many business writers and researchers see a difference in leadership and management functions. Most would not see them as mutually exclusive or one as superior to the other. Most recognize the importance of both in successful organizations. The following is a short list to describe some of the differences in function between the two. The list is intended for thought and debate in the context of improving the performance and effectiveness of schools.

Managers:

Maintain status quo
Do things right
Develop a policy to follow
Plan and budget
Organize and staff
Control and problem solve

Produces a degree of predictability and order and has the potential to produce extremely short term results expected by stakeholders. (3)

Leaders:

Provide new direction
Do right things
Develop a better solution
Establish a vision
Align people
Motivate and inspire

Produces change, often to a dramatic degree and has the potential to produce useful change

Management philosophy

Do the status quo thing—conclude report, manage details, put structure to report, pat ourselves on back, maintain test scores and momentum, and so forth.

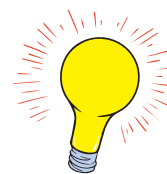
Leader philosophy

Think beyond report, rethink vision, inspire and challenge all of us to get better, wake up in middle of night because you can’t get it off your mind, write down your thoughts, spend time in reflection, make things happen, and so forth.

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We May All Be Created Equal, But We're All Wired Differently



By Gerald Carter

Does fate cut successful teachers from the same mold? Have the stars aligned so that some schools are simply fortunate enough to get more than their fair share of teachers with a personality especially suited for teaching?

These were questions the study team tried to answer by using data based on the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) system of personality preferences to determine if there are common characteristics among successful teachers and administrators. A minimum of 10 teachers in each school, who were employed at that school for three or more years, were selected by the principal to be interviewed. The interviewer was given no information on the background of the participants. In addition, all principals were profiled.

Myers Briggs regards personality as similar to left or right handedness: individuals are either born with, or develop, certain preferred ways of thinking and acting. No preference or total type is considered “better” or “worse” than another. In addition, Myers Briggs is a measure of preference, not ability; nor does it indicate the strength of ability.

METHODOLOGY

Each participant was instructed that the study was interested in how they perceived their personality outside of the classroom. They were given descriptions of each of the eight personality preferences as defined by the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (Extravert, Introvert, Sensing, Intuitive, Thinking, Feeling, Judging, Perceiving) and told to choose which type they preferred. In situations where the participant was not able to choose, a real life situation was given for clarification. At the end of the interview, the participant was given a profile sheet of the personality type they selected for confirmation.

PROFILE RESULTS

TOTAL TEACHER INTERVIEWS: 103	NATIONAL AVERAGE
EXTRAVERTS: 38 (37%)	Extraverts: 50%
INTROVERTS: 65 (63%)	Introverts: 50%
SENSING: 101 (98%)	Sensing: 75%
INTUITIVE: 2 (2%)	Intuitive: 25%
THINKING: 60 (58%)	Thinking: 40%
FEELING: 43 (42%)	Feeling: 60%
JUDGING: 39 (38%)	Judging: 55%
PERCEIVING: 64 (62%)	Perceiving: 45%

EFFECTS OF PREFERENCES IN WORK SITUATIONS

Extraverted Types

- Like variety and action
- Are often good at greeting people
- Are sometimes impatient with long, slow jobs
- Are interested in how others do their jobs
- Often enjoy talking on the phone
- Often act quickly, sometimes without thinking
- Like to have people around in the working environment
- May prefer to communicate by talking rather than by writing
- Like to learn a new task by talking it through with someone

Introverted Types

- Like quiet for concentration
- Have trouble remembering names and faces
- Can work on one project for a long time without interruption
- Are interested in the idea behind the job
- Dislike telephone interruptions
- Think before they act, sometimes without acting
- Work alone contentedly
- May prefer communications to be in writing
- May prefer to learn by reading rather than talking or experiencing



Sensing Type

- Are aware of the uniqueness of each event
- Focus on what works now
- Like an established way of doing things
- Enjoy applying what they have already learned
- Work steadily, with a realistic idea of how long it will take
- Usually reach a conclusion step by step
- Are not often inspired, and may not trust the inspiration when they are
- Are careful about the facts
- May be good at precise work
- Can oversimplify a task
- Accept current reality as a given to work with

Intuitive Types

- Are aware of the new challenges and possibilities
- Focus on how things could be improved
- Dislike doing the same thing repeatedly
- Enjoy learning new skills
- Work in burst of energy powered by enthusiasm with slack periods in between
- May leap to a conclusion quickly
- Follow their inspirations and hunches
- May get their facts a bit wrong
- Dislike taking time for precision
- Can overcomplexify a task
- Ask why things are as they are

Thinking Types

- Are good at putting things in logical order
- Respond more to people's ideas than their feelings
- Anticipate or predict logical outcomes of choices
- Need to be treated fairly
- Tend to be firm & tough-minded
- Are able to reprimand or fire people when necessary
- May hurt people's feelings without knowing
- Have a talent for analyzing a problem or situation

Feeling Types

- Like harmony & will work to make it happen
- Respond to people's values as much as to their thoughts
- Are good at seeing the effects of choices on people
- Need occasional praise
- Tend to be sympathetic
- Dislike telling people unpleasant things
- Enjoy pleasing people
- Take an interest in the person behind the job or idea

Judging Types

- Work best when they can plan their work & follow the plan
- Like to get things settled & finished
- May decide things too quickly
- May dislike to interrupt the project they are on for a more urgent one
- Tend to be satisfied once they reach a judgment on a thing, situation, or person
- Want only the essentials needed to begin their work
- Schedule projects so that each step gets done on time
- Use lists as agendas for action

Perceiving Types

- Do not mind leaving things open for last-minute changes
- Adapt well to changing situations
- May have trouble making decisions, feeling they never have enough information
- May start too many projects and have difficulty in finishing them
- May postpone unpleasant jobs
- Want to know all about a new job
- Get a lot accomplished at the last minute under pressure of a deadline
- Use lists as reminders of all the things they have to do someday

ANALYSIS

1. All of the teachers in the study who perceived themselves as Introverts were able to move their preference to that of an Extravert when they entered the classroom. A characteristic of the Introvert is that they think before they act.
2. The vast majority (98%) of the teachers interviewed perceived themselves as using the Sensing preference. The implications of this suggest that they resist change that does not fall under the parameter of their experiences.
3. The Thinking preference allows the teachers to deal with the student logically and non-emotionally. Even though they "feel" for the students, they do not allow excuses for failure.
4. The Perceiving preference allows the teacher to individualize their interaction with the students. They complete lesson plans but will deviate as the situation demands.



IMPLICATIONS

1. **Hiring:** The hiring process should take into account an Introvert will often not show non verbal expressions. They are often overlooked because they might not be perceived as listening when they actually are listening and thinking. High energy applicants (Extraverts) should not be selected on that criteria alone. The ability to move personality preferences is a critical ingredient of teaching success.

2. **Change:** When a new teaching concept is being initiated, it is critical that it be explained in a way that connects the sensing preference to the change. It is not always possible to do this but an attempt to successful integration of the concept will foster the groundwork for implementation.

CONCLUSION

It appears that a critical factor in the success of these 10 schools is that a majority of teachers grew up in the area in which they teach or one very similar, and understand the local culture. They are motivated to move their personality preferences as needed to help their students. "I've been there; done that" mentality appears to be critical in

their success. This is not to imply that one has to have grown up in the respective area but they at least must have an understanding of the area's culture and be able to relate to the students and their parents.

It is also worthwhile to note that good reading coaches appear to be more structured than classroom teachers.

And successful principals are those who work hard to provide a good operational structure in which their teachers can best succeed.

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Implications



Where will the teachers come from?

One of the messages that came through loud and clear is that in many cases—though not all—the best teachers in rural schools have a visceral understanding of what it's like to live in a rural community. While they may not live in the immediate community in which they teach, they are probably the product of a rural school themselves and can definitely relate to the lives their students live.

Figures from the Alabama Department of Education show that in 2006-07 there were 1,143 teachers in rural schools with less than one year of experience. In other words, there were more than 1,100 teachers who were right out of college or who had just transferred to that school district. Chances are the majority were brand new teachers.

In the spring of 2009, there are 1,595 senior education students in 14 of the state's schools of education. (27 colleges and universities in Alabama award education degrees.) Of these, 542 are from rural Alabama counties.

Assuming these 14 schools have one-half of the total number of students studying education and that all students from rural counties return home, we still don't have enough to fill the need.

In the 10 schools in this study, there are more than 35 teachers who could retire today. Couple this with the fact that every principal repeatedly talked about the stress of teaching in a world where we now worship at the altar of accountability and you expect the problem of finding quality teachers for rural schools to only worsen.

Country ain't city in another suit of clothes

Some first-graders at Fruithurst catch the school bus at 6 a.m. and don't get back home until after 4 p.m. Their school day runs from 7:05 a.m. until 3 p.m. This is because their bus also picks up students who go to high school in Heflin and for them, the stop at Fruithurst means they are only halfway to class.

This is a vivid illustration of how education in rural locations differs from education in more populated areas.

There are 131 school systems in the state. Of the 50 with the lowest amount of local funding, 36 are rural.

In 2006 there were 29 counties where more than 40 percent of births were to unwed mothers. Of these, 26 were rural counties.

Policymakers at the state level should keep this kind of information in mind as they develop education policy, rules and regulations.

For example, there is now a determined push from Montgomery to increase funding for Pre-K programs. The value of early childhood education is unquestioned. But for many rural communities where both transportation and lack of family income are major issues, Pre-K may not be as feasible as programs such as HIPPY (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters) or BEE (Begin Education Early), designed by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

So rural Alabama must therefore question the merit of suggested state education budgets that boost Pre-K funding while eliminating funding for HIPPY.

Can we do a better job of helping principals and teachers?

This study leaves no doubt that there is a difference in the management style of principals and that how teachers interact with both students and administrators is in large part because of their personality preferences.

But is knowledge such as this being used to help principals and teachers be more effective and to create improved learning environments?

Today's schools use mountains of student data to "tailor" instruction as much as possible. Shouldn't we also use data such as leadership styles and personality preferences to maximize faculty effectiveness?

Gerald Carter points out that 98 percent of the teachers profiled use the "sensing" preference. These are personalities that do not readily accept change. But with change being inevitable, doesn't it make sense that a principal understand how to effectively work with such personalities?

Dr. Owen Sweatt found that nine of the 10 principals are "high relationship" in their style of leadership. Isn't it logical that they learn more about how such leadership is perceived and accepted by their faculty?



It really is all about the intangibles

Dr. Ronald Lindahl, Professor, Educational Leadership at Alabama State University, did an extensive review of data from the Take20 Alabama Teaching and Learning Conditions Survey in 2008.

He studied faculty responses to a variety of questions for 19 schools designated as Torchbearer Schools and for 27 schools with comparable student populations but that failed to meet Adequate Yearly Progress standards.

His findings strongly support what this study learned; that climate and culture play a significant role in how well a school and its students perform.

When asked about the following issues:

- School leadership encourages the faculty to meet high performance standards
- The faculty are committed to helping every student learn
- Overall, my school is a good place to work and learn

At least 74 percent or more of the teachers in high performing schools strongly agreed, which was significantly higher than those in low performing schools.

With this in mind, it is important that the successes of high performing schools and their stakeholders be publicized.

Boards of Education should not become overly dependent on managers to “run” their schools and should employ instructional leaders to lead their schools. They should be careful not to let accountability standards drive their schools.

We should organize special teams from high performing schools to consult and mentor low performing schools.

Are good rural school principals made or born?

Over time, any entity, be it a school, business, state agency or non-profit will take on the image of its leader. None of these 10 schools would be where they are today without strong leadership somewhere along the way. Someone drew the line in the sand and began to raise expectations among faculty and students. Someone picked up a paint brush, cranked a lawn mower or mopped a floor.

Certainly dedicated, well-trained and tireless teachers are critical to a child’s education. But human nature being what it is, these teachers will not continue to perform at that level if they are not lead by a principal with the same value system and devotion to the job at hand.

It is time we understand that if we’re to turn the tide of rural education across Alabama, it is imperative that we have strong leaders in each and every school. It is time we consider offering training designed especially to benefit rural principals. It is time we recognize the reality of being rural, the reality of working with limited resources and the reality of dealing with communities with high unemployment.

Calcedeaver Elementary

Mount Vernon, AL • 251-221-1092

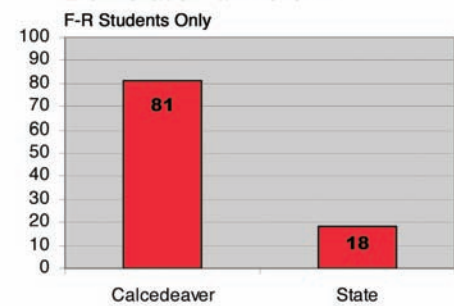
249 Students

81.5% Free-Reduced

Aimee Rainey, Principal

Calcedeaver Elementary

■ 6th Grade Math Level IV



Black Jack Oak thrives where other trees don't, the sandy knolls of north Mobile County for instance. And when you turn south at the caution light on County Road 96 headed for Calcedeaver Elementary, you notice the gnarled Black Jack scattered among the pines on both sides of the blacktop.

The oaks and the school have something in common. They both thrive in the most unlikely of places.

How much? Calcedeaver is one of only 12 Alabama schools to be designated a Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education and has received Torchbearer status from the Alabama Department of education four times.

To really understand the significance of what is being accomplished you have to go back nearly 200 years when a band of Choctaw Indians fled to south Alabama after the Creek War of 1813-14. Twenty years later more Choctaws, who were trying to avoid being forcibly relocated to Indian Territory, came to the area that is today north Mobile and south Washington counties.

Over time, they became known as the MOWA Band of Choctaw Indians. At best, life was harsh. Women sold firewood on the streets of Mobile and men hunted and sold game and deerskins. With the promise of \$50, clothes, supplies and rifles, many Choctaw joined the Confederate Army. As northern timber companies moved into the area in the late 1800's, many men worked on logging crews.

Formal education was practically non-existent, prompting the Southern Baptist Convention to send missionary teachers into the communities in 1918. It wasn't until the 1940's that Indian schools began getting limited state and county funding for a separate school system. Even then MOWA children had to leave the state to get a high school education.

In 1946, schools in Calvert, Cedar Creek and Weaver were consolidated to form Calcedeaver, which included a high school until 1969.

Today 80 percent of the students at Calcedeaver are Native American. And it may well be that something locked deep within their DNA has helped them and their school blossom like honeysuckle on a May morning.

Aimee Rainey is in her third year as principal at Calcedeaver. She was assistant principal for two years. "One of the real turning points for this school was probably when we really began to understand

how the culture of most of our students could be used to create a different outlook on learning," she says. "Certainly LaGaylis Harbuck, who was principal at Calcedeaver from 2001-06 and is a MOWA Choctaw and the principal before her from 1991-2000, Lemural Byrd, who is also MOWA Choctaw, saw this potential."

Today, the Native American culture is a major part of the Calcedeaver learning experience.

The school has a Native American exhibit with six authentic dwellings. Tours are available to schools throughout the year. A guide describes each structure, answers questions and shares Native stories. Then tour participants go to the dance arena and watch the Calcedeaver dance team perform.

Each November the school has its Native American Culture Festival. Busloads of students come from all over south Alabama to watch Calcedeaver youngsters dance in authentic regalia sewn by Laretta Weaver, LaGaylis Harbuck's mother.

The school started a dance team in 2001 with five dancers. Today there are more than 100 in the team. Any time a student group visits Calcedeaver, the dance demonstration is always the highlight of the day.

Students on the team must maintain a 3.0 average in all subjects and must have excellent conduct. The team is often invited to take part in events throughout the area.

Though Aimee Rainey is not Native American, she is not a stranger to the culture as she was a speech pathologist at schools in McIntosh before coming to Calcedeaver. Her two children attend school at Calcedeaver.

Nicole Williams is the Native American interpreter for the Mobile County School System. She spends four days a week at Calcedeaver where two of her boys are students. She went to school at Calcedeaver.

"So much of what happens in a school comes down to pride and expectations," she says. "By stressing our heritage, we instill pride, not only in our students, but in our parents," she says. "Parents become supportive when they completely understand that the school wants what is best for their children.

"I've been told there was a time when teachers at other schools considered students from Calcedeaver as potential problems, she says. "But because I also work in some of these schools, I know this is no longer the case."

Dutton School

Dutton, AL • 256-229-4265

244 Students

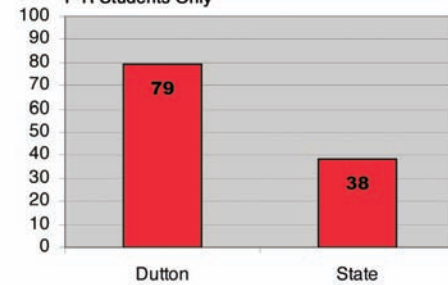
68% Free-Reduced

John Kirby, Principal

Dutton School

■ 4th Grade Math Level IV

F-R Students Only



Chances are good that Dutton is the only school in Alabama where a first-grade boy can go to the “barber shop” or a second-grade girl can go to the “beauty shop.” Well, kinda sorta.

Actually, the “barber shop” is the name given to the boy’s restroom in the elementary wing of this K-8 facility while “beauty shop” is the girl’s counterpart.

In addition, youngsters can go to the “Dutton Diner” (lunchroom), the U.S. Post Office (teacher’s mailroom) or walk along “Fitness Lane” on their way to the gym.

When Dale Hancock took over as principal at Dutton School in 1998, he recognized the building needed a first-rate face lift. “A school needs to be a cheerful place, especially for elementary school kids,” says Hancock, now principal at Scottsboro High School. So he decided to create a community within the school where all classrooms were houses, non-classrooms were businesses and all halls named.

He also got an artist to paint murals on many of the walls. John Kirby is in his second year as principal at Dutton. “Truth is,” he says, “we need to do some more painting, but the teachers really hate to see the murals and the signs go.”

In addition, Hancock began cleaning windows and getting tile on floors. “Seems like I spent most of my first summer as principal painting and cleaning,” remembers Hancock.

This effort did not go unnoticed by the community. “You could just sense the community taking more interest in the school,” Hancock says. “The mayor wanted to know how the town could help. The first open house we held was packed.”

Though Dutton only had 310 residents in the last census, size has not prevented this Sand Mountain community from doing whatever it can to support the school. Mayor Bryan Stewart points with pride to the town’s “Night Out” program started five years ago. The effort promotes drug and crime prevention and for a town with no police department, that’s important.

More than 500 people showed up for the event last August. One of the highlights is presenting backpacks filled with school supplies for deserving youngsters. Town Clerk Dianne Romans plays a major role in making this happen. She asks teachers to furnish a list of needed supplies for the upcoming school year. “The Target department store in Huntsville has been a really big help with this,” says Ro-

mans. Last year the town gave away 204 backpacks.

Dutton has received state and national recognition for their work in putting on this event. They are the only community in Jackson County that has one.

“There’s no doubt this program has helped both the school and the community,” says Mayor Stewart. “I think more people here understand that everyone has a role they can play in educating our young people.”

The mayor points out that Dutton opened a library in 2008 that not only has computer stations for both children and townspeople to use, but a Pre-K program as well.

“Success breeds success,” says the mayor, “which is one reason we have parents doing their best to enroll their children in our school.”

Phillip Anderson has lived in Dutton since 1986. He is retired and served as mayor for four years. “If we need something from a community stand point, Phillip is the person we turn to,” says principal John Kirby.

“I’m sometimes shocked at how well some of our kids do,” says Anderson, who was a longtime board member of the Jackson County Education foundation. “This is a generous community, but it’s small with just a handful of businesses so the school doesn’t have many places to turn to for support. That’s why I try to help as much as I can.”

As an example of local generosity, Anderson talks about the school’s canned food drive each year. Classes compete to see which can collect the most food, which goes back into the community. The town gives the winning class a pizza party.

Obviously this combination of a dedicated group of teachers and a concerned community works as Dutton has been named a Torch-bearer School three times.

But probably the greatest testimony to the school’s effectiveness is found on the “GreatSchools” website, a national school evaluation site. The site says, “It is among the few public schools in Alabama to receive a distinguished GreatSchools rating of eight out of 10. Parents have reviewed this school and given it an average rating of five out of five stars.”

Apparently Phillip Anderson is right on target when he says, “We have an excellent school.”

F. S. Ervin Elementary

Pine Hill, AL • 334-963-4702

360 Students

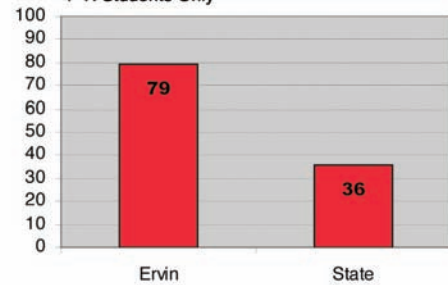
100% Free-Reduced

Richard Bryant, Principal

F.S. Ervin Elementary

■ 3rd Grade Math Level IV

F-R Students Only



When Richard Bryant got his diploma from Camden Academy High School in 1971, he had one thing on his mind. Heading to Arizona. But there was one problem. “I didn’t have any money,” he laughs.

So that fall he began working as a teacher’s aide and in 1973 became both an aide and a bus driver at F. S. Ervin in Pine Hill. Little did he know that 36 years later he would still be at Ervin, where he has been principal for nine years.

With assistance from a Federal program, Bryant graduated from Alabama State University in 1975. He commuted to Montgomery from Wilcox County every Monday and Wednesday nights. “I would get off my school bus route and head for Montgomery, getting home about midnight,” he remembers.

Harry Mason has been mayor of Pine Hill for 16 years. Before that he served 18 years on the Wilcox County Board of Education. His life and Bryant’s have been intertwined for decades as he was on the board when Bryant was first hired. Today Mason is one of the small town’s biggest supporters of the school and does anything he can to help.

“There’s no doubt that the mayor and his wife (who taught school for 23 years) are our true community champions,” says Bryant.

“It’s real easy to figure out that without a good school, a town doesn’t have much future,” says Mason, who has lived in Pine Hill his entire life. “We’ve got the best school we’ve ever had, thanks in large part to Richard’s leadership.”

Like Bryant, the great majority of Ervin faculty members are from the local area. “It’s important that faculty can relate to students, to the homes they come from, to the churches they go to, to the way children are raised in this region,” says Bryant.

To back up his point, the principal points out that he not only has teachers who live in Pine Hill, but in Arlington, Snow Hill, Marion Junction, Boykin, Camden, Thomasville, Dixons Mill, Sunny South, Coy, Magnolia, Annemaine and Packers Bend. “You could say we are all peas in the same pod,” adds Bryant.

Like the rest of the Black Belt, Wilcox County’s economy was built on cotton in antebellum Alabama. The county had a population of 17,352 in 1850. Only nine other counties had greater farm income. There were 50 boat landings along the Alabama

River where paddle wheel boats loaded cotton to ship to Mobile.

But timber—not cotton—has always dominated the economy around Pine Hill on the western side of the county. The International Paper mill eight miles away is the area’s largest employer.

Today, the forest products industry is being impacted with the rest of the economy. Weyerhaeuser’s sawmill and veneer mill at Yellow Bluff recently closed leaving 300 people without jobs. Unemployment in Wilcox County in February 2009 was 21.5 percent, the highest in Alabama.

However, Bryant is used to coping with tough times. “Sometimes I think that’s about all we’ve ever had around here,” he says, “which means you have got to look for help anywhere you think you can find it.”

For example, if Bryant plans to cut grass at the school on Saturday, he may ask a parent what they are doing that day. If they say they are busy, then he is likely to ask them for a gallon of gas to put in a lawn mower. “We’ll probably get the gas, but more importantly, we get another person in the community to take ownership of what happens at the school,” he says.

One resource he turns to is International Paper’s local foundation. In the last four years Ervin has received \$17,346 in grant funds from the company, most directed at programs involving reading. “Ervin is a great school and they maintain good relations with our company,” says Anita Smith of IP. The company also helps with science fairs and reading projects such as Dr. Seuss Day.

It’s unlikely you will find a cleaner, better-kept school than F. S. Ervin. Bryant tries to paint the facility every two-three years. It is up to him to cover the cost of painting. The principal estimates that the school raises \$15,000 or more each year to supplement funding.

Ervin was designated a Torchbearer school for the 2008-09 school year. They received \$33,000 because of this recognition.

After 38 years in education, Bryant says retirement is not far down the road. What will he do then? “Well,” he laughs, “I still haven’t made it to Arizona.”

Fruithurst Elementary

Fruithurst, AL • 256-579-2232

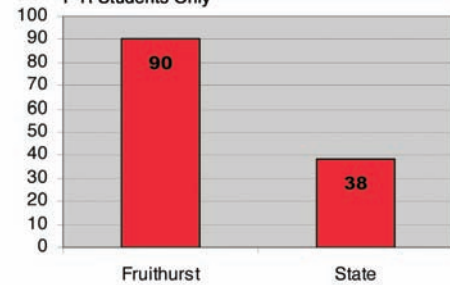
242 Students

73.5% Free-Reduced

Christy Hiett, Principal

Fruithurst Elementary

■ 5th Grade Math Level IV
F-R Students Only



None of the schools in this study are a better example of faculty collaboration and developing a “sense of family” than Fruithurst Elementary in Cleburne County. In all probability this stems from the fact that three-fourths of the staff have never taught at another school.

Principal Christy Hiett is a case in point. Now in her second year as principal, she got a degree at Auburn University and returned home to Fruithurst 13 years ago to teach in the school she went to. She’s not alone. Three of her teachers were also students here.

“While I obviously never played football,” she laughs, “I’ve heard coaches talk about how important it is for their offensive line to have ‘chemistry.’ In other words, they work together well. I think we have the same thing at our school among not only teachers, but everyone else too,” she says.

Students here do extremely well in math. In the 2007-08 school year, third-grade free-reduced lunch students scored 59 points above the state average at Level 4 (exceeds standards), fourth-graders were 40 points above and fifth-graders were 59 points better.

There are five elementary schools in the Auburn City school system and 10 in the Hoover City school system. Fruithurst has higher math scores for all students (not just free-reduced lunch students) at Level 4 than these schools. In FY 2008, Hoover ranked No. 3 in the state in amount of local funding, Auburn ranked No. 8 and Cleburne County ranked No. 130 (out of 131).

So obviously, Fruithurst is doing something right. Hiett credits the willingness of teachers, parents and students to collaborate and help one another as a reason for success with math scores. “Several years ago we saw great consecutive test scores from one teacher,” she says. “We kept asking what she was doing and what we could learn from her. She was happy to share her simple secret and it has made all the difference in all grades.”

Former principal Scott Coefield recalls when he went to Fruithurst in 1996. He was the fourth principal in five years. “The custodian wanted to know how long I would be there,” he remembers.

“I knew we had to change the perception of the school,” says Coefield. “I wore a coat and tie each day. I asked teachers to pay attention to how they dressed. We tried to get a picture in the Cleburne

County News each week about something going on at the school.”

Fruithurst got funded for the Alabama Reading Initiative in the program’s third year. This was a major step in improving learning. Coefield also studied data carefully and used this to drive decisions about instruction.

“One of the real keys to school improvement is changing the conversation from can’t to can,” says Coefield. “Fruithurst has done this.”

Like most rural counties, Cleburne has seen its up and downs. The biggest boom was when gold was discovered near Arbacoochee, about 10 miles southeast of Heflin, in the 1830s. By 1845 the town claimed nearly 5,000 people, a school, two churches, two hotels, two mining supply stores, five saloons, 20 general mercantile stores, a fire department and a race track.

But shortly after, gold was discovered in California and most of the folks in Arbacoochee headed west.

And by 1950, only one county in the state was smaller than Cleburne. The county grew 21 percent growth from then to 2006 and is now larger than 10 other counties and the never-ending march of Atlanta westward along I-20 now has Cleburne County squarely in its sights. In fact, the last census showed more residents commuting to jobs in Georgia than to surrounding Alabama counties.

“We’re already seeing this growth,” says Hiett. Enrollment went from 206 last year to 242 this year. The recent addition of four classrooms, a computer lab, a media center and two offices was none too soon. “We are at capacity again and expecting more growth,” Hiett adds.

James Owens wears two hats in Fruithurst. He’s the pastor of Fruithurst Baptist Church as well as the mayor. He’s lived in the community since 1959. His three children attended Fruithurst Elementary. His church is just a stone’s throw from the school’s front door.

He’s proud of the fact that the school was one of only two Alabama schools selected as a National Title I Distinguished school last year and that it has been a Torchbearer School twice.

“It’s a close knit community,” says Owens. “We’ve got one small company with about eight employees, plus a beauty shop, café, general store, post office and two churches. It’s fair to say that the school is Fruithurst.”

W.S. Harlan Elementary

Lockhart, AL • 334-858-3294

286 Students

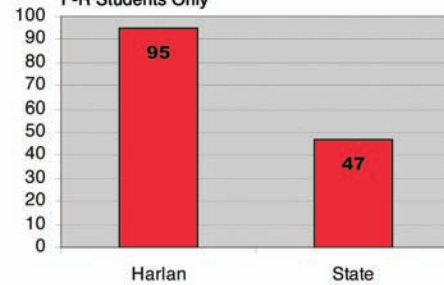
68.1% Free-Reduced

Brent Zessin, Principal

W.S. Harlan Elementary

■ 6th Grade Reading Level IV

F-R Students Only



W.S. Harlan Elementary sits at the west end of a wide boulevard covered by a canopy of live oaks filtering the south Alabama sun. It's easy for a visitor to almost hear the creaking of harness as teams of mules pull wagons and catch the sweet smell of fresh cut pine hanging in the air.

It's hardly a surprise that students in the halls of this tidy school, built in 1924, still walk the original wooden floors and pass tongue and groove walls because the tiny community of Lockhart, and adjoining Florala, owe their existence to wood, lumbermen and sawmills.

Jackson Lumber Company opened a sawmill here at the turn of the 20th century and within 10 years, more than 1,000 workers kept the mill running seven days a week, 24 hours a day. Flooring for New York's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel came from Lockhart.

The mill was shipping 400 railcar loads of lumber per week in 1907 and Florala was home to a number of businesses, several hotels, an opera house and even a Chinese laundry.

W.S. Harlan became manager of Jackson Lumber Company in 1902.

Today the lumber mill is gone, along with the opera house and the Chinese laundry, but the mission of the school is the same as it's always been—to provide the best education possible. And test scores show that it does this about as well as any rural school in Alabama.

Principal Brent Zessin knows W.S. Harlan well. It is where he started to school in the first grade and where he has been principal for four years. Both of his children attend the school. His ties to the area are not unusual as 18 of his 26 faculty members graduated from Covington County high schools. Eleven of them have never taught at another school and combined, the staff has 213 years at W.S. Harlan.

Eugene Birge has been mayor of Lockhart since 1978. Like Zessin, he went to W.S. Harlan and today lives next door to the school. A retired educator himself, Birge is very familiar with the school.

"My daddy went there, I went there and so did my son and daughter," he says. "My son is a chemical engineer and my daughter is working on her doctorate so apparently they got a

good education in elementary school."

"This is not a rich community by any stretch of the imagination," says Birge, "but the school is such a big part of who we are that folks will do whatever they can to support it."

Testimony to this is the brand new "Jimmy Carnley Field" adjacent to the school. Carnley has been the P.E. teacher at Harlan for 20 years. "It won't be long before I retire and I wanted to do something for these kids before I left," he says.

So he approached Zessin with the idea of building a ball field and walking track. "I told him this sounded like a great project—if he could come up with the money," recalls the principal.

Luckily for Carnley, he had an "ace in the hole," his wife Belinda. "Jimmy loves those kids," says Belinda, "He calls them his babies. So when he told me what he wanted to do, I was all for it."

The two of them led the way in coming up with \$60,000 in both in-kind and monetary contributions from local businesses, the Solon and Martha Dixon Foundation, Speaker of the House Seth Hammett and State Senator Jimmy Holley, to make the new facility possible.

Zessin believes, as do many of the principals in this study group, that those called to teach have a very special mission. "The bottom line is that, as teachers, we have the opportunity to change lives, and literally in some cases, to save lives," he says.

What are the keys to the school's success?

"We try to do three things," says Zessin. "Number one, we love our kids genuinely; number two, we have consistent discipline; and number three, we just teach."

The fact that W.S. Harlan is one of only five Alabama schools nominated for a No Child Left Behind Blue Ribbon School Award in 2009, has been a Torchbearer School and has received more than \$60,000 in state incentives for outstanding performance since 2006 says, without doubt, that they are succeeding.

Huxford Elementary

Huxford, AL • 251-294-5475

275 Students

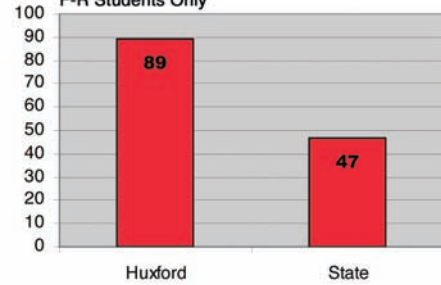
76.3% Free-Reduced

Donna Silcox, Principal

Huxford Elementary

■ 6th Grade Reading Level IV

F-R Students Only



With a peanut patch on one side and a cotton field on the other, Huxford Elementary could never be considered anything but a “rural” school. In fact, the school has been anchoring this tiny community in north Escambia County for decades.

“It feels like stepping back in time here,” says Donna Silcox, now in her second year as principal. “We have students who are the fourth and fifth generations at Huxford.”

Betty Warren saw a lot of them come and go during her 12 years as principal at the school which has been recognized as a Torchbearer School three times. It’s obvious that she poured her heart and soul into the community and its young people (45 percent of whom are Native American).

Warren, who is out-going to the point of calling almost everyone “baby”, feels strongly that being an educator is akin to being in the ministry. “You must have faculty and staff who are ‘called’ into education,” she says. “These are the people who truly want to make a difference in the lives of children. They will do everything in their power to see that a child gets a sound education—not only mentally, but emotionally, socially and spiritually.

“At Huxford,” she continues, “the faculty really know their students and in most cases, their families as well. They have high expectations and will not accept excuses for poor performance.

“The principal must have high expectations as well and make sure they and the teachers are on the same page. The principal must also trust the faculty in knowing what is best, as well as making sure faculty knows how much they are loved and respected.”

Silcox, who has been in education 27 years, agrees with Warren. “This is one of the most caring schools and communities I’ve ever seen,” she says, “and that played a big role in my decision to come here as principal.”

Others feel the same way. A member of the central office staff for the Escambia County school system says Huxford probably has the best teacher and parental involvement in the system. “The staff is always positive and everyone, including support staff, makes you feel welcome,” they say.

Danna James has two daughters. One is in the second grade at Huxford, the other will go to kindergarten there this coming school year. She is active as a school volunteer: “Huxford truly has

teachers who enjoy their jobs,” she says.

Like each of the schools in this study, Huxford has its “Home-town Heroes.” One is Webb Nall, who has worked for Pepsi Cola for 41 years and serves on the Atmore City Council. He has a reputation for cooking the best Boston butts in the county and just before Labor Day each year fires up his cooker and prepares 240 of them as a fund-raiser for the school.

“Our company does all we can to support local education,” he says, “and it’s a pleasure to work with the folks at Huxford. I’m in and out of the school a good bit and it’s easy to see that their teachers work well together.”

The prevailing attitude of “family” and “teamwork” probably has a great deal to do with the fact that out of 21 faculty and staff members, 12 have never worked at another school and nine of them have been there 10 or more years.

Huxford recently received a 21st Century grant to add an after-school program. Students stay from 3:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Mondays through Fridays. They receive homework assistance and snacks. They are also provided transportation home. The school will also have a summer program in 2009.

Silcox was raised a few miles up Highway 21 across the county line in Goodway, which she says is a suburb of Uriah. She now lives in Uriah. “I’ve known about Huxford school all my life,” she says. “Once upon a time this was a bustling little community back when farmers and their families went to town on Saturday afternoons. Today the bustle has been replaced by Wal-Mart, and the school is about all that gives Huxford its identity.

“But we’re still making a difference in the lives of young people and mamas and daddies know that,” says Silcox. “And at the end of the day, that’s all that really matters.”

Meek Elementary

Arley, AL • 205-221-9425

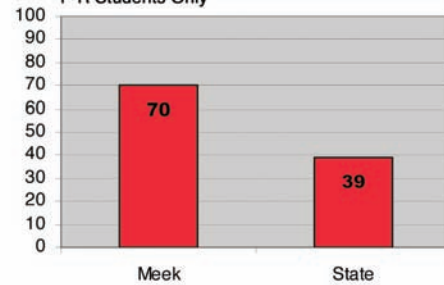
307 Students

65.1% Free-Reduced

Amy Hiller, Principal

Meek Elementary

■ 4th Grade Reading Level IV
F-R Students Only



When Blythe Welton was growing up in Miami, it's unlikely she ever pictured spending her retirement years dressed up like a big game hunter and telling stories to youngsters in a small Alabama town.

How she and her husband, a retired commercial airline pilot, ended up in Arley is an interesting story. Actually, it was 21,000 acre Smith Lake that brought them from San Clemente, CA to Winston County seven years ago. "We first saw the lake from the air," says Welton. "Then we explored it by car and here we are."

As the mother of two, Welton was not a stranger to schools. She had been both a volunteer and teacher so when she came to the shores of Smith Lake, she brought her interest in helping young people with her. She found a number of willing partners at the Arley Women's Club. Though not big in numbers, the group is very active and dedicated to community improvement.

For example, they led the effort to build a library in town. "It's the only building in town with an elevator," says Welton proudly.

But back to the safari outfit.

A number of years ago Welton went to hear a storyteller and decided that she could be one too. Today she memorizes children's books and folk tales and tells stories about them to kindergartners and first-graders at both Meek Elementary and the local Head Start. She makes sure her stories relate to the classroom activities of students. "The students either have finger puppets, masks or costumes so the stories are more alive to them," she says.

"This is a small community and an excellent school," says Welton. Amy Hiller has been at Meek for 19 years and is in her second year as principal. Welton is a big fan of hers.

"Amy is tuned into just about everything available that will help the school. People know that, and because she is a serious educator and works well with many types of people, most folks want to help the school however they can," says Welton.

This verifies what former principal Deb Thompson means when she says, "The principal is the conductor who keeps everyone on the same sheet of music."

The school is working hard to utilize community volunteers like Welton. They now have about 20, some of whom are retired teach-

ers, while other have retired to Smith Lake and want to stay active.

They come during the day and work either one-on-one with students or in reading groups. One volunteer, Peggy Norris, teaches dulcimer and other folk instruments.

"This is a very small community and there are not many businesses," says Hiller. "So we're limited in our capacity to raise money. The businesses do what they can and the two banks, Traders and Farmers of Arley and Traditions Bank go above and beyond. People are generous with their time and talents. The Women's Club, Civitans, Elks Lodge and churches are especially helpful. The volunteer fire department comes out each year to do a fire prevention program."

The school recently began an after-school program. Dr. Shelia Wallace, who works in the central office of the Winston County School System, was successful in getting a grant funded to run the program for five years. Superintendent Dr. Sue Reed, her staff, and the school board work hard to find ways to help all county schools.

The grant funds one employee, as well as two high school and one college student, to work with kids from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. each school day. The Winston County Arts Council has been working with these students. Holly and Jill Rice have brought drama and laughs to the after school students.

Unfortunately, this is limited to 15 students at present. Others are on a waiting list. Students get help with homework and also have enrichment programs. They also receive a snack. There is a \$10 registration fee and cost is \$1 per day.

One of the beliefs listed in Meek's vision statement says that Learning is fostered when students take an active role in the education process, with the support and guidance of faculty, parents, and community.

To Amy Hiller, Blythe Welton, and many other members of this Winston County community, these are not just nice-sounding words. This is a belief they are totally committed to.

The fact that all members of the staff at Meek spend considerable time communicating with families and finding ways to impress upon students the importance of their role in taking responsibility for their own education is indication that others do as well.

Phil Campbell Elementary

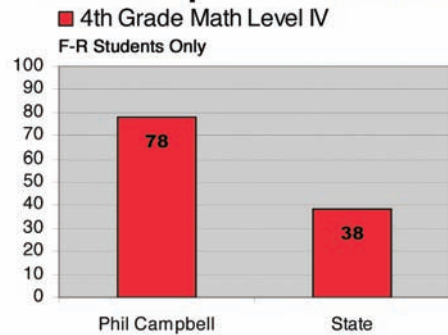
Phil Campbell, AL • 256-331-2170

458 Students

72.4% Free-Reduced

Jackie Ergle, Principal

Phil Campbell Elementary



Ask school kids in 66 of Alabama's 67 counties what a "dismalite" is and you'll probably get a funny look. But ask kids at Phil Campbell Elementary and some of them will excitedly tell you that they are tiny flying insects that glow in the dark and the only place you find them in the state is at nearby Dismals Canyon.

Older natives may also tell you that Vice-President Aaron Burr once hid out at Dismals Canyon, though it's not clear if this was after he killed Alexander Hamilton in a duel or after President Thomas Jefferson wanted to try him for treason.

"There is really a lot of history in this area," says Jackie Ergle, who has been principal at Phil Campbell Elementary for nine years. "Truth is, I've seen a good bit of it myself," she says with a laugh, referring to her 35 years in education.

What changes has she seen?

She believes the home environment of students has changed dramatically. "The social changes the country has experienced since 1974 have not bypassed places like this," she says. "For instance, we have many more of our students being raised in single-parent homes today than back then."

Likewise, instruction of students has changed. Today data plays a huge role in what goes on in the classroom. "We work daily to implement research-based strategies and teach the state course of study," says Ergle, whose father was also a principal.

Certainly there is more accountability than ever before. "The demands on educators have definitely soared since I've been in education," she says.

"And the community is different today in many ways than it used to be. There used to be a lot more industry here. Now we have double-digit unemployment and people are traveling a lot farther to find work," she adds. "This impacts how involved they can be, for instance, with PTO or with helping their child with homework."

So how does Phil Campbell Elementary cope with these changes?

Ergle is a great believer in professional development for staff. She does all she can to provide learning opportunities for teachers, such as attending workshops offered at the University of North Alabama. She also encourages teachers to collaborate as much as possible.

"You've got to empower your teachers by showing you care for them as a leader. One way to do this is to give them all the training you can," she says. "After all, it's not money or facilities that matters as much as what happens with classroom instruction every day."

Ergle believes effective teaching is driven by the strengths and weaknesses of each student. This is where data plays an important role. "Every child in the classroom is different. We have to realize that and individualize instruction as much as we can," she adds.

The school has a state-approved Pre-K program. However, Ergle wishes they were able to accommodate more than 18 kids. Students are chosen by a lottery. Pre-K costs \$100 per month. There is also an after-school program where children can stay until 6 p.m. Those who receive free-reduced lunches pay \$10 per week.

Ergle is also a great believer in the power of positive thinking. That's why the school takes special efforts to recognize success and to celebrate achievement. For example, after each nine-week grading period the school has a "Pride Assembly" where A and B honor roll students are recognized and presented T-shirts.

There is also special recognition for "100 percent" students. These are kids who did not make the honor roll, but who are chosen by their teachers for doing the best they can. The local Civitan Club presents each of these students with a certificate and serves them pizza the following week in the lunchroom.

All of this effort has not gone unnoticed, either at the community or state level. Phil Campbell Elementary received \$5,000 in 2006 and \$20,000 in 2007 in state incentives for outstanding student progress.

Standing in the school parking lot looking wistfully at downtown where the Chat & Chew, a local hamburger stand, is now closed, Ergle says, "Yes, the world has changed since I came out of college in 1974, but school is still all about the kids and how much they know you love them and want the best for them."

Southern Choctaw Elementary

Gilbertown, AL • 251-843-2461

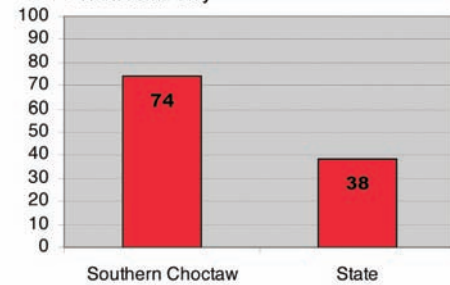
472 Students

70.3% Free-Reduced

Jacqui James, Principal

Southern Choctaw Elementary

■ 4th Grade Math Level IV
F-R Students Only



If you're looking for the biggest biscuit in Alabama, you need to stop at King Chick in Gilbertown. But if you're looking for one of the best elementary schools in the state, then go south on Highway 17 a few more miles to Southern Choctaw Elementary where Jacqui James is principal and expectations are high.

James is in her third year as principal. She was the school's special education coordinator for five years.

Her path to the front office was a bit different than the one taken by most educators. "I guess you could say I was a late bloomer," she laughs, "because I didn't decide to go to college until I was 30 years old." James was the office manager for a construction company when she decided she wanted to make a difference and decided education would give her that chance.

It doesn't take one long to glimpse the passion James brings to her job, nor can you ignore the fact that she brings a workman-like approach—plus a refreshing candor—to school each day. "My years in the business world probably help me see some education things in a different perspective," she says.

Interestingly enough, Sue Moore, the former principal at Southern Choctaw and now Choctaw County Superintendent, didn't go from high school straight to college either. Instead, she got married when she was 17 and didn't begin college until age 26. Her first job in education was as a teacher's aide.

Both James and Moore agree that having a successful school is about having expectations. "Water seeks its own level," says James. "I believe that you live up to what's expected of you and I expect nothing but the very best from both staff and students."

So how do you raise expectations of students? For James, it's a four-letter word: LOVE.

"Coming from a special education background I believe in the power of love," she says. "That's all some of our kids need; to feel loved and that's one thing we can give them. If a child wants to give me a hug, they get a hug. Sometimes it takes me so long to get down a hall I forget where I'm going; but those kids have been smiled at and heard a kind word and for some of them, it may be the only smile they see that day."

James also talks a lot about other character issues such as respect, integrity, fairness. "Some of our students come from dif-

ficult circumstances, but when they walk in the doors of the school they know they are no better or no worse than anyone else here," says James. "They are all equal and treated with respect. No child will be mistreated or disrespected."

What does it take to be a good principal?

According to James it's all about: loving children, being fair, having integrity, treating people like you want to be treated, being organized and being a peacemaker.

Tommy and Dee Ann Campbell are publisher and editor of the Choctaw Sun-Advocate in Gilbertown. Dee Ann spends a lot of time at schools around the county gathering information for the newspaper.

"When you walk into Southern Choctaw Elementary you always feel welcome," she says. "Sue Moore deserves a lot of credit for helping to build school pride while she was principal. And the school does an excellent job of publicizing their activities."

Then there is Fred Kimbrough.

A native of Choctaw County, Fred went to New York City in search of Broadway many years ago. And he found it. Before long he was putting his talents at acting, dancing and singing to good use. He also found a Russian ballerina who he talked into marrying him. By the 1970s Fred was also head of the Dance Department at the Cape Cod Conservatory.

But he could never escape the tug of southwest Alabama and the thoughts of raising his children in its wide open spaces and moved home where he built a studio/theatre in 1980 in the middle of what had been his grandfather's cotton patch.

Today the Ballet & Theater Arts Performing Companies are going strong in Gilbertown (pop. 187) and Fred combines his love of dance and music with his love for children by teaching dance and voice to students in the public schools—without pay.

"There are some exceptionally talented kids in rural areas," he says, "We just don't reach nearly enough of them."

Albert Turner Elementary

Marion, AL • 334-683-6622

553 Students

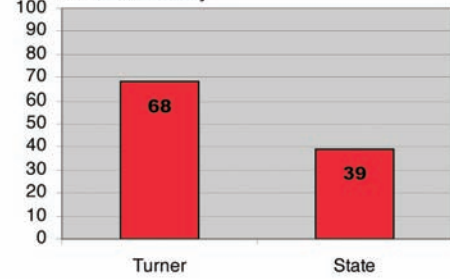
99.4% Free-Reduced

Buddy Dial, Principal

Albert Turner Sr. Elementary

■ 3rd Grade Reading Level IV

F-R Students Only



No other small community in Alabama has been as closely linked to education as Marion. Though never larger than 5,567 (1980 census), this Perry County community gave birth to what is now Samford University in Birmingham and Alabama State University in Montgomery and has been home to Judson College since 1838 and Marion Military Institute since 1887.

It was also home to the Lincoln Normal School for more than 100 years. Coretta Scott King attended Lincoln Normal.

According to historian Wayne Flynt, the emphasis on education came from New England Baptists who moved to the Black Belt region in the early 1800s to establish cotton plantations. “They were well-educated and therefore, valued education,” he says.

“In fact, Marion has been called The Athens of the South,” adds Flynt.

Against this backdrop, it’s easy to understand why students at Albert Turner Sr. Elementary School do well.

Principal Buddy Dial has been an educator for 42 years and a principal for 37, the last 10 at Turner. A native of Sumter County, Dial believes strongly that having roots in the area is important. “When you have ties to a location, you want to give back because you remember those who did the same for you,” he says. “I look at these students and see myself many years ago.”

A glance at the hometowns of his faculty drives home Dial’s point. The majority live in places like Uniontown, Marion, Newbern, Greensboro, Akron, Sprott, Selma and Sawyerville. Collectively they have 525 years experience at Turner Elementary.

But it takes more than just some country in your soul to have a good school.

“It starts with expectations and attitude,” says Dial. “I have expectations of our teachers and they have expectations of our students.”

Dial believes you have to be open to new ideas and always be on the lookout for ones you can borrow. “I still don’t know all there is to know about educating youngsters,” he says, “if I see another school doing something that might work at Turner, I’ll give it a try.”

One new idea Dial thinks is working well is school uniforms. This is the first year for them at his school. He feels that uniforms levels the playing field for students.

Everyone at Turner, which has been a Torchbearer School, works hard to recognize and reward students. There is a monthly assembly for the entire school. One class is responsible for the program at each. Each student in the class participates.

As a Title I school, Turner stresses parental involvement. But Dial admits this can be a challenge. “Probably 60 percent of our students come from single parent homes,” say Dial. “Many are being raised by their grandparents. Circumstances make it difficult for some parents to be as active with their children as perhaps they should be.”

The school actively works to get people to the school with events such as Grandparents Day, Dad’s Day, etc. Dial goes out of his way to work with local media to let the community know what is going on at the school. “The community needs to feel that they’re welcome at our school,” says Dial.

John Heard is the superintendent for the Perry County school system. He’s had this job for six years and has been in education since 1981.

He spends a lot of his time looking for grant funds that can be used to supplement local and state funding for all of the county’s schools. And if numbers tell the story, he and his staff do an excellent job.

The system has landed more than \$2.5 million in grant funding in the last four years. Grants funded such things as a Virtual Health Science Classroom, video conferencing equipment, Reading First, Black Belt Arts initiative, HIPPIY and 21st Century extended day programs.

Turner Elementary is benefiting from one of the extended day programs which run from 3:16 p.m. to 5:16 p.m. four days a week. Students get a snack, plus a bus ride home. There is a \$15 one-time cost per student. Teachers recommend students to participate in this program. Dial believes extended day is very helpful in a community like his school serves.

The year Buddy Dial started teaching, Lyndon Johnson was President, the Rolling Stones were on the Ed Sullivan show and Otis Redding recorded “Sitting on the Dock of the Bay.”

“Gosh, it’s been a long time,” he laughs. “But it’s still all about loving students. And when they come back years later and thank you, you can’t help but feel successful.”

