

Sanders Elementary School

502 W. Washington Street

Hollandale, MS 38748

Principal: Sarah Bailey

Highlights

- The superintendent is a member of the School Transformation Team and actively involved in decision making at the school.
- The new school principal was assigned a mentor, content-area consultants, and an implementation specialist, who guided her through the turnaround process.
- Teachers at Sanders Elementary School collaborate on assessment and instruction within and across grade levels through the School Transformation Team, professional learning communities, and grade-level teams.
- The principal identified teacher leaders for additional professional development. After their training is complete, they will replace the outside consultants in coaching the staff.
- The School Improvement Grant enables a shift toward using educational technology in all classrooms.
- State coaches and outside consultants provided customized training to the principal and school staff in assessment, use of student data for instructional decision making, and instructional practices.
- The school operates an extended learning day and summer school to provide additional time for learning.

Introduction

Sanders Elementary School is located in the Lower Mississippi Delta region, an area challenged by economic and geographic difficulties, including high poverty and declining enrollment of school-age children. The geographical distance of the school district from other towns has caused challenges similar to those faced by rural school districts, such as difficulty attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers. The school

operates within the Hollandale School District, which struggles with outdated and scarce technology and frequent teacher turnover. In 2008–09, based on the low percentage of students' achieving

- ◆ Grades PK–6
- ◆ 355 Students
- ◆ 99% Black
- ◆ 1% White
- ◆ 99% Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
- ◆ Town-Remote
- ◆ Schoolwide Title I

proficient and advanced scores on the state standardized tests and the low rate of student performance improvement over time (based on an expected growth value for the school), Sanders Elementary School received the lowest possible performance classification, *Failing*, from the state.

The turnaround process began with the appointment of a new district superintendent, James Johnson-Waldington, in 2009 and a new school principal, Sarah Bailey, in 2009. Beginning with the 2011–12 school year, the turnaround process began to accelerate after Sanders was awarded a \$3.89 million School Improvement Grant (SIG). As a result of the improvements made with SIG funds, the district received the Mississippi Department of Education’s (MDE) Champions of Change Award as well as the Mississippi School Boards Association’s Lighthouse Leader Torch Award. In 2012–13, Sanders Elementary received the performance classification, *Successful*, from the state.

Instructional Reform

The school transformed all key instructional areas identified as priorities through the needs assessment conducted for the SIG application. These areas included:

- Shifting from teacher-centered instruction to student-centered instruction.
- Integrating technology (e.g., interactive whiteboards and computers) into every classroom.
- Differentiating instruction using small groups and teacher aides in the classrooms.
- Emphasizing higher order thinking (rather than memorization of facts).
- Increasing the rigor of the curriculum and aligning it with the Common Core State Standards.

These instructional improvements were supported by multiple professional development opportunities for staff. The district paid for several staff members to obtain certifications and advanced degrees. Two of these staff members were in Sanders Elementary. As these teachers improved their job qualifications, the school secured their commitment to the school. The SIG paid for hired consultants to visit the school, observe instruction, and coach staff. The principal identified teacher leaders who may continue to coach staff after the end of the SIG performance period. Finally, through communities of practice, teachers collaborated on setting goals and identifying strategies to address the academic needs of students.

Principal Development as the Focus of Improvement

Consultation with the school principal proved to be a central component of the turnaround process. Since 2010–11, MDE provided Principal Bailey with a leadership mentor and a team of four former administrators, who gave her technical assistance, mentoring, and coaching. This team supported strategies such as supervising, coaching teachers, creating action plans, and offering job-embedded professional development. Vickie Parker, the SIG implementation specialist assigned by

MDE to support the Sanders turnaround process, visited the school frequently to monitor progress and share knowledge about promising practices. A team of consultants from the state visited the school about 10 times per year to observe, follow up on previous feedback, and provide new input.

Additionally, MDE connected the principal to the Mississippi Center on Education Innovation to learn about effective assessment practices and instructional planning. Finally, an external partner, Bailey Kirkland Education Group LLC, conducted workshops and coached staff. In the future, the school aims to gradually shift the responsibility for inservice workshops from outside consultants to internal teacher leaders.

A Team-Based Approach for Data-Driven Decision Making

Activities for school improvement were regularly discussed and vetted by the School Transformation Team, which included:

- The district superintendent
- The school principal
- A school improvement officer, who is responsible for ensuring full compliance with the expectations of the SIG
- A process manager, who is responsible for meeting agendas, minutes, completeness of documentations and reports, and alignment of transformation team activities with the indicators for school improvement set by MDE
- A teacher representing upper elementary-level English language arts
- A teacher representing the mathematics department
- A teacher representing the lower elementary grade levels

In 2012, Sanders Elementary began using the online system, Mississippi Schools Obtaining Results for Success (SOARS). It is a version of the Indistar web-based tool used in other states to help districts and schools manage the continuous improvement process. This system supported a team approach with clear distribution of responsibilities for data collection, meeting planning, and assessment of progress to date.

Enhancing Student Engagement

As described above, Sanders has implemented instructional changes focused on student-centered initiatives and higher academic standards. The school expanded the grades K–2 curriculum to add more social studies and science content, infuse literacy instruction across the curriculum, and promote use of technology in the classroom and inquiry-based learning.

Additional strategies to encourage student academic motivation and good behavior included awards for accomplishments (e.g., quarterly field trips), prizes donated by teachers, and announcements of

students' accomplishments in grade-level assemblies. Another integral strategy was improving parental involvement through frequent teacher-initiated in-person and phone conversations to discuss a student's progress, special events (e.g., "Pancakes for Parents"), and newsletters.

Partners for Success: The Superintendent, School Board, and Community

Mississippi's SIG experience demonstrates the critical role that the superintendent, school board, and community play. According to Ms. Parker, "If the district is not involved, the school is not going to make progress. [The superintendent] made sure he was involved in everything. He was on the leadership team at the school. He was at that school on a daily basis."

A second important partner for success is the school board. The superintendent created a long-term financial sustainability plan that will allow the school improvements in the Hollandale School District to continue beyond the SIG award. For that purpose, the superintendent needed to make difficult decisions and depended on the support of the school board, comprised of community members. For example, the superintendent identified the need to close a small middle school that served about 100 students. Reallocation of resources was important to every school in the district, according to the superintendent, as it enabled spending proportionally to the number and academic needs of students.

A third partner in the turnaround process was the community. The superintendent recognized the deep connection of the community to the schools, noting that "the community loves our schools." He recognized the need for frequent communication about the process and the reasons for the turnaround actions, especially in remote, small towns such as Hollandale: "Transparency was very important. People had to know what we were doing."

Summary

Teachers at Sanders report that they feel part of a work environment that is conducive to professional growth and collaboration. Through professional learning communities and grade-level team meetings, under the guidance of the School Transformation Team, Sanders teachers continue to explore ways to better teach their students. Collaboration with the prekindergarten class, which is located on the school campus, and the addition of afterschool extended learning and summer school programs added to the school's ability to meet students' learning needs. Above all, teachers felt that the change in pedagogical practices, which led to active participation of students and more rigorous instruction, is the most important reason for the school's turnaround success. As shown in Table 1, student proficiency rates have improved significantly since the turnaround began. Teachers feel that, though more remains to be done, they are on the right path to continuous growth.

**Table 1. Changes in Proficiency Rates: School Years 2009–10 to 2012–13
(Percentage Proficient and Advanced)**

Grade	The Mississippi Curriculum Test, 2nd Edition English Language Arts		The Mississippi Curriculum Test, 2nd Edition Mathematics	
	2009–10	2012–13	2009–10	2012–13
Third	23%	44%	30%	46%
Fourth	35%	61%	45%	70%
Fifth	13%	65%	13%	60%
Sixth	27%	43%	32%	59%

Source: Mississippi Department of Education, Accountability Data for 2009–10 and 2012–13 School Years (<http://reports.mde.k12.ms.us/data/>)