

Rankin County School District

Ready, Set, Grow:

The FAST and FURIOUS Implementation of Structured Literacy & the Science of Reading

SUPERINTENDENT PERSPECTIVE

Scott Rimes, Ph.D.

As the Superintendent of Education for the Rankin County School District, my primary objective is to ensure that every student in our district receives the highest quality education possible. We strive to provide our teachers with the necessary resources to help our students improve their reading, writing, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. I am optimistic that incorporating Structured Literacy and the Science of Reading principles into our district's educational framework will lead to positive growth and achievements for all our students. As we progress with this implementation, there are several crucial aspects that we cannot overlook:

1. **Professional Development:** It is essential for our teachers and administrators to be proficient in the principles and techniques of Structured Literacy and the Science of Reading. This includes a deep understanding of the various reading components such as phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, and the best methods to teach them.
2. **Curriculum:** We chose a curriculum based in Structured Literacy that aligns to the science of reading, supports our educational objectives, and caters to our students' needs. The curriculum should provide a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction, including explicit teaching, practice, and evaluation.
3. **Assessment:** We need to design an assessment system that is informed by the science of reading and addresses the tenets of Structured Literacy. This encompasses screening and progress monitoring tools that measure student growth in the different reading components.
4. **Intervention:** We need to examine our system of support for students who struggle with reading and provide appropriate assistance through additional instruction and support via small-group instruction and targeted interventions.
5. **Family Engagement:** We believe that parental involvement in the implementation of Structured Literacy and the Science of Reading is critical. We recognize that we cannot achieve this alone and must provide families with information about the approach, conduct workshops and training for families, and offer resources and support for reading at home.

Overall, the successful implementation of Structured Literacy and the Science of Reading principles in our district will require a comprehensive approach that involves professional development, curriculum, assessment, intervention, and family engagement. When executed effectively, these approaches can lead to better literacy outcomes for all our students. I am very excited to see the progress our students will make as we implement these approaches and strive toward improving literacy outcomes for all.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF ACADEMICS PERSPECTIVE

Angy Graham, M.Ed.

"The most important thing in life will always be the people in this room. Right here, right now" may be familiar to fans of a certain popular movie franchise, but it also applies to the mindset of dedicated educators across America who strive to overcome daily obstacles and do what's best for all their students. For the Rankin County School District in Mississippi, this meant embarking on a journey to implement Structured Literacy and the Science of Reading. Starting in July 2021 and kicking into high gear in June 2022, the district's efforts to improve literacy have been FAST and FURIOUS. Before diving into the details of this journey, it's important to understand the context of the district's previous success and the challenges it faced in achieving its goals. So get ready, buckle up, and enjoy the ride!

The Rankin County School District is an educational institution that serves over 18,500 students and employs over 3,000 people, making it the second-largest school district in Mississippi. Our location is in the central region of the state, and our dedication and hard work have enabled us to maintain a #traditionofexcellence for several years, as evidenced by our consistently highest rating among school districts in Mississippi. We take great pride in this achievement, which reflects the hard work of all our stakeholders. However, despite our accomplishments, there was a nagging feeling that something is amiss. We are charged by our leadership to continually ask ourselves two critical questions: "Is this doing what's right for our students?" and "Is this doing what's right for our teachers?" These questions guide our decision-making processes, as we strive to maintain our high standards of education and excellence.

Over the past nine years, I have been privileged to work in a support role for all 28 schools within our district. During this time, the question of whether we were doing what was best for our students weighed heavily on my mind. After examining our subgroup data, I realized that our answer to this question was "no." Although our district was producing 61% proficient readers on average each year, there was still a significant number of students who were falling behind. As the Director of Secondary Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development from 2014 to 2021, I was constantly faced with the same question from secondary teachers and administrators: "What should we do with students who arrive at our level without strong reading skills?" Unfortunately, I struggled with answers, and there seemed to be a lack of solutions to address this issue. It was clear that there were some missing pieces in our district's approach to literacy instruction.

I would like to share a personal journey that has played an instrumental role in shaping my current work. In 2015, my husband and I were blessed to adopt two baby boys. Our oldest son was born deaf due to Pendred syndrome, a genetic disorder causing hearing loss in young children. After considering all options, we opted for bilateral cochlear implant surgery for him to give him the best possible chance at hearing successfully. At nine months old, he received the implants, which were activated at 10 months, and we enrolled him in a specialized school for students with hearing and speech issues at two years old. To our surprise, the curriculum was heavily based on the Science of Reading. As the Director of Secondary Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development, at the time, I was not familiar with the body of knowledge that is the science of reading. However, it proved to be effective and allowed both of our sons to thrive academically.

Fast forward to the 2021-2022 academic year. In July 2021, I was promoted to the position of Executive Director of Academics for the Rankin County School District, giving me oversight of all

K-12 Curriculum and Instruction, Career and Technical Education, Response to Intervention, Dyslexia, ACT, Assessment/Accreditation/Accountability, and other relevant academic areas. This promotion was a blessing as it allowed me to address a concern that had been weighing on me for years. While our district had been successful, I couldn't help but wonder if we were truly meeting the needs of ALL our students. Finally, I was in a position to take action and make a difference for our students. It was time to go full throttle!

The Rankin County School District appointed Dr. Melissa McCray as the Director of Elementary Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development in July 2021. Dr. McCray initiated a transformation in the district's literacy approach by advocating for Structured Literacy, which had been her preferred method throughout her 30-year career. She familiarized her team with the Science of Reading research and passionately shared her knowledge of Structured Literacy with them while continuing to learn herself. Throughout the 2021-2022 academic year, Dr. McCray and her team introduced the concept of Structured Literacy to teachers and administrators, paving the way for future implementation.

The Rankin County School District underwent additional changes with the hiring of Mrs. Sheri Blankenship as the new Director of Secondary Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development. With over 26 years of experience in education, Mrs. Blankenship's background in English Language Arts and six years as the Rankin County School District Secondary Literacy Coach made her a valuable addition to the team. Her previous work included spearheading the implementation of the Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) in many of our secondary schools. Unfortunately, the pandemic disrupted the LDC implementation plan when it hit when work was being done with the last cohort of secondary schools. Despite the challenges, Mrs. Blankenship and her team were committed to maintaining momentum in the implementation process.

In June 2022, our successful implementation of Structured Literacy and the Science of Reading was driven by two key components. The first was the Mississippi Department of Education's invitation for K-3rd grade teachers to participate in the AIM Pathways to Proficient Reading and for elementary school administrators to participate in the AIM Pathways to Literacy Leadership. Over 100 teachers, administrators, and support staff joined and learned more about the Science of Reading and supporting research. The second component was the Mississippi Department of Education Sustaining Strong Readers: Summer Middle School Literacy Training for Content Area Teachers and Coaches. I asked Dr. McCray and Mrs. Blankenship and their departments to clear all schedules so we could attend the 5-day training as a united group. Though it was challenging for some, the impact of the training on individuals, as a team, and most importantly, our students and teachers, was invaluable.

Do you remember me telling you about my son who was born deaf and received cochlear implant surgery? As I shared, he attended a specialized school for students with hearing and speech issues. His school sent homework home every school night for us to complete with him. Despite not always understanding the methodology, curriculum, and instructional delivery, I witnessed my son, who did not hear the world around him until he was 10 months old, learn how to read. Fast forward to the Mississippi Department of Education Sustaining Strong Readers: Summer Middle School Literacy Training for Content Area Teachers and Coaches that our district attended. This training was engaging and interesting, and by day two, it became clear to me that our district was missing out on these crucial strategies. It reminded me of my son's specialized school and how this type of instruction can be incredibly effective.

I spoke with our presenter, Dr. Staci Bain who is the Founder and President of EDUCATE America, LLC, during the Mississippi Department of Education Sustaining Strong Readers: Summer Middle

School Literacy Training for Content Area Teachers and Coaches training and discussed the implementation of Structured Literacy and the Science of Reading in our district. I proposed starting with our 6th-grade teachers since they had been unintentionally overlooked due to their diverse housing across our attendance zones. Our 6th-grade teachers had limited opportunities to collaborate across all eight attendance zones, leading to confusion and being ignored as a group. I requested a meeting with our Superintendent, Dr. Scott Rimes, to seek approval. I also contacted our Federal Programs Director, Dr. Rico Buckhaultler, to ensure the availability of funding. The approval and funding were secured in record time by the morning of Day 4 of the training, allowing us to move forward with our plan.

After receiving approval and funding, a plan was developed to introduce Structured Literacy and the Science of Reading to the RCSD preK-12 head principals and over seventy-three 6th-grade general education teachers. Dr. Bain was scheduled to meet with the head principals and we began to plan the teacher workshops, which were split into 3 cohorts to accommodate scheduling difficulties. Follow-up days were also scheduled for modeling, observation, and feedback. To ensure participation and buy-in from all members of the Rankin County School District Elementary and Secondary Curriculum Departments, including directors and myself, all computers and phones were required to be put away during training days, and they were required to sit at tables with the teachers. The requirement was initially met with resistance, but by the end of the in-person training days, everyone understood the reasoning behind the requirement and saw the value of being an active participant. This approach also helped to earn the head principals' and teachers' trust and showed that the Rankin County School District support teams were invested in their success.

During the in-person training with Dr. Bain, some teachers in Cohort 1 began the day with apprehension and probably frustration due to being pulled from their classroom, but by the end of the day, many expressed gratitude and relief and even shed a few happy tears, saying things like, "Finally, this has been needed for a long time," "I have been doing some of these strategies quietly in my classroom because I thought it would be frowned upon," "This makes so much sense!" and "Thank you for bringing this to our district!" The majority of teachers were fully engaged and eager to begin implementing the strategies by the end of Day 2.

In our efforts to improve literacy instruction in our district, we implemented Structured Literacy-based practices and built knowledge in the science of reading with our 6th-grade teachers and administrators. To ensure proper coverage in the classroom with the shortage of substitute teachers, we grouped all seventy-three 6th-grade teachers into 3 cohorts. Dr. Bain conducted in-person training with Cohort 1, where teachers initially had some apprehension but became fully engaged, comforted, relieved, thankful, and eager to begin the implementation by the end of Day 2. In retrospect, despite initial resistance from some of the Curriculum team members who did not like me for making them close their computers, put down their cell phones, and sit with the teachers in attendance, I am glad to report that they were able to survive the training and their understanding of the material improved significantly. The same can be said for me, as my confidence in comprehending the intricacies of Structured Literacy and the Science of Reading grew during the in-person training days with Dr. Bain. Following the training, Dr. Bain dedicated time to meeting with both the Elementary and Secondary Curriculum Departments. In collaboration with Dr. McCray, the Elementary Curriculum Department devised a plan to involve Dr. Bain in modeling and debriefing 6th-grade teachers and administrators. Likewise, the Secondary Curriculum Department worked with Mrs. Blankenship to plan content-specific lessons for each of the six content specialists (2 ELA specialists, 2 math specialists, 1 science specialist, and 1 social studies specialist) to then model to selected 6th-grade classroom teachers and administrators, with Dr. Bain providing feedback at the end of each lesson. As these plans were implemented and the curriculum specialists visited and collaborated with 6th-grade teachers in various schools, we witnessed a significant improvement in

coherence, transparency, and confidence among teachers, administrators, and the curriculum specialists. These plans have become routine and continue to develop over time.

To broaden our implementation of Structured Literacy practices and instruction aligned with the science of reading while sustaining capacity and fostering growth, we planned the next steps for our 4th and 5th-grade teachers and administrators. By the middle of the 2nd nine weeks of this school year, we had contracted with Dr. Bain again to begin the transition to our 4th and 5th-grade teachers. We have successfully trained two-thirds of these teachers, providing modeling, co-teaching, observation, and debriefing experiences, with the feedback being just as exciting as it was with our 6th-grade teachers. Additionally, Dr. McCray secured an invitation from the Mississippi Department of Education for our Kindergarten - 2nd-grade teachers to participate in the Phonics First training, which began in early May and will continue through the summer. All teachers who participated or will participate in the training have received the necessary resources for successful implementation into their Tier I instruction. The last round of training is scheduled for September 2023.

Have we seen results from our implementation of Structured Literacy and the Science of Reading? Yes! Our district has administered three district-wide common elementary benchmark assessments to students in grades 3rd-6th and two district-wide common benchmark assessments to students in grades 7th-8th and high school state-tested courses. The results of these benchmark assessments have shown improvement, and our teachers have reported an increase in the number of students who are successful in reading and comprehension. As we approach the end of the year, we are eagerly awaiting the results of the state-administered assessments that will be sent in late June or early July. We have already received the results of the MS 3rd Grade MAAP ELA Assessment, which indicate that we are heading in the right direction. This year, we had an 87% pass rate, which is a 3% increase compared to last year's 84% pass rate. We are thrilled with this improvement and excited to continue our work.

Can we consider this body of work complete? The answer is NO. Despite the progress we have made so far, we are still on a journey to broaden our implementation of Structured Literacy practices and instruction aligned to the science of reading across all grade levels. Our plans for the upcoming 2023-2024 school year include accelerating our efforts and bringing all K-8th grade teachers on board. By the end of the 2024-2025 school year, we aim to have all of our 9th-12th-grade teachers trained and ready for implementation. Sustainability will then become our focus. This has been an exciting, continuous, FAST, and FURIOUS journey towards providing the best for ALL our students, and we are proud of the progress made so far.