

The Perfect Storm: Mississippi's Momentum for Improving Reading Achievement

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The Perfect Storm:

Mississippi's Momentum for Improving Reading Achievement

by Kymyona Burk

A perfect storm is a “combination of events or circumstances creating an unusually bad situation” (“Perfect Storm,” 2020). High poverty, inequitable access to a high-quality education for poor families and students of color, and a well-known history of low student achievement all made for an unusually bad situation in Mississippi for a very long time. So, what do you do when you have been at the bottom of every educational achievement list for decades? Go big or go home.

Mississippi was once in the middle of a literacy crisis. In 2011, 78% of 4th graders scored below proficient in reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). One thing was certain. Combating this literacy crisis would require “political courage, creativity, and commitment on the part of educators, a deep belief that all children are capable of achievement, and an understanding of the science on how youngsters learn to read” (Cowen & Forte, 2019). In 2013, Mississippi’s governor, state lawmakers, state education department officials, literacy advocates, and other stakeholders decided it was time to “Go Big.” This meant introducing and passing legislation that would have a major impact on students, families, educators, pre-service teachers, and colleges of education at public and private institutions.

Literacy was held firmly at the center of the plan—plain and simple. The reform efforts included a state-funded commitment to a pre-kindergarten pilot program, a comprehensive reading policy featuring a promotion/retention component at third grade, and a required assessment of the knowledge and skills needed to teach the science of reading for aspiring elementary teachers. In addition to this legislation reform, the Common Core State Standards had been adopted as the Mississippi College and Career Readiness Standards in 2010. These were being phased in by grade with the expectation of statewide implementation during the 2015-2016 school year. Passing this legislation was the first

step, but implementing the standards simultaneously statewide required an unprecedented coordination of efforts among many groups. There was finally a sense of urgency surrounding education, and our students’ lives and livelihoods depended on it.

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Closing the Preparation Gap: The Early Learning Collaborative Act (2013)

Mississippi started by investing in 4-year-olds. Though surrounded by other southern states that were committed to early childhood education by offering universal Pre-K to most, if not all, 4-year-olds, Mississippi was one of few southern states not offering state-funded Pre-K. What role had the absence of quality early childhood opportunities played in the dismal student outcomes on the NAEP, particularly in 4th grade reading for many of the state’s most vulnerable children—those with disabilities, poor students, and students of color? A hard truth is that children who start out behind are less likely to catch up by third grade. To address this challenge, the Early Learning

Collaborative Act was passed in 2013. It introduced a pilot program to fund collaborations between school districts and public or private early childhood sites to provide access to quality early childhood education and development services. These Early Learning Collaboratives (ELCs) create a professional learning community among the teachers in the PreK program(s) and their school district, and also aid in the adoption of researched-based curriculum and assessments that align with their state's comprehensive early learning standards. The Early Learning Collaborative Act, coupled with the Literacy-Based Promotion Act, described below, laid the groundwork and confirmed the state's commitment to students learning to read by third grade. Currently, 18 Early Learning Collaboratives exist, impacting 5%, or 3,000, of the state's 4-year-olds.

A New Level of Accountability: The Literacy-Based Promotion Act (2013)

"Student achievement accelerated more rapidly since 2013, after the statewide implementation of the Literacy-Based Promotion Act (LBPA), higher academic standards with aligned assessments and a strong accountability system, and a significant investment in professional development for educators" (Mississippi Department of Education, 2019). The LBPA was a "game-changer" for Mississippi. This law prohibits social promotion, meaning that 3rd grade students now risk not being promoted to the next grade if they have not acquired the reading skills necessary to achieve a passing score on the 3rd grade assessment for promotion. Because of this, it is critical that preparation has to start before 3rd grade. The LBPA makes one thing clear—kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade educational experiences are vital to 3rd grade reading success, and accountability for student success can no longer begin in 3rd grade. The details of the LBPA include a focus on efforts to address and prevent reading deficiencies of kindergarten-3rd grade students through early identification, interventions, and progress monitoring.

The Literacy-Based Promotion Act features an important aspect that cannot be overlooked: targeted support for teachers to build their own knowledge and capacity for teaching reading. A key factor in allowing for the large-scale implementation of the LBPA is state funding, and in its first year, LBPA efforts were funded through a \$9.5 million legislative appropriation. Beginning in 2014-2015, the legislature began to appropriate \$15 million annually. Each year, the Mississippi Department of Education

(MDE) uses these funds to support the critically important building of educator knowledge by providing:

- salaries and travel for highly trained literacy coaches and other on-the-ground personnel who support teachers and literacy efforts;
- professional development training via Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS), which is grounded in the science of reading, to K-4 general education teachers, K-8 special education teachers, elementary school administrators, and Institutions of Higher Learning reading faculty;
- regional literacy trainings facilitated by the MDE for K-12 teachers and administrators;
- a suite of assessments, including the Kindergarten Readiness assessment, universal screeners, and alternative versions of the 3rd grade state assessment to be used for retests;
- Parent Read-at-Home Plans to parents and families; and,
- implementation of summer reading camps through grants to schools based on approved applications.

Making the commitment to partner with schools and districts through boots-on-the-ground efforts proved to be critical in building knowledge about the science of reading, building relationships, increasing capacity, and identifying more effective supports for children.

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Beginning with the End in Mind: Teacher Preparation

After Mississippi began investing millions of dollars to teach the science of reading to teachers who had already invested in a 4-year undergraduate teacher preparation program, it became clear that it was necessary to take a closer look at teacher preparation. The legislature agreed. Effective July 1, 2016, licensing requirements for elementary education majors changed. In addition to successfully completing coursework and two Praxis exams, candidates for licensing had to also pass a test to demonstrate their acquisition

of knowledge and skills related to the science of reading. With an already declining number of education majors, this new mandate required colleges of education to work together with the MDE and Barksdale Reading Institute to ensure that their pre-service students were learning the content and engaging in the pedagogical practices needed to pass the exam and, most importantly, to teach students to read. The Barksdale Reading Institute's Reading Universe Grid was created to illustrate how the skills required for proficient reading fit within a larger picture; notice the columns are portrayed along the framework of the Simple View of Reading (see Figure 1). To address the gap in preservice preparation, the Barksdale Reading Institute also partnered with the Mississippi Department of Education and colleges of education to train reading faculty in the science of reading.

The How: Implementation is Key

Being deliberate about implementing a law that has so many implications is key, and the on-the-ground supports provided by the MDE allowed for a safe space to collaborate, fill knowledge gaps, and determine solutions. The following are just a few of the steps taken to provide targeted support to 1) teachers and administrators, and 2) students and families.

1. Build knowledge of the science of reading, establishing it as the common language for literacy instruction.

"There's no way to know for sure what causes increases in test scores, but Mississippi has been doing something notable: making sure all of its teachers understand the science of reading" (Hanford, 2019). In 2014, the MDE began training the state's literacy coaches, K-3 teachers, and elementary administrators in LETRS, a knowledge-building professional development series for educators that introduces the fundamentals of reading instruction and is grounded in the science of reading.

2. Provide literacy coaches to support local implementation.

As we were building what would become our model for implementing a comprehensive Kindergarten-3rd grade reading policy, the Florida Center for Reading Research served as our thought partner on best practices for impactful coaching. MDE literacy coaches are placed into the lowest-performing schools that have the highest percentage of non-proficient readers based on a 2-year average of 3rd grade data. The coaches' roles include providing job-embedded professional development, modeling, co-teaching, co-planning, data analysis, and facilitating professional learning com-

munities (PLCs). A major responsibility of the coaches is also to support teachers in transferring the knowledge they learned in LETRS into classroom practice.

3. Focus on prevention and intervention, not retention.

Mississippi's 3rd grade promotion policy and the fear of retention initially caused anxiety among teachers, students, and families. Retention can be life changing. We often heard predictions about the countless numbers of 3rd graders who would fail at the end of each year, but it was important to communicate that we could easily identify the students who needed help. The promotion or retention component went into effect in 2015, and students were required to pass the 3rd grade assessment above the lowest achievement level—Level 2 or above. Third-grade retention decreased from 8% in 2015 to less than 5% in 2018. In 2019, an increased expectation for promotion to 4th grade went into effect. Third grade students have to pass the assessment above the two lowest achievement levels—Level 3 or above. As a result, 9.6% of 3rd graders were retained. The *Literacy-Based Promotion Act* requires that students in grades K-3 be screened 3 times per year—beginning, middle, and end—and that further information on specific reading difficulties for those who were identified as at risk for reading failure is collected through a diagnostic assessment. With this information, teachers can focus on prevention for students who are not considered at risk by providing evidence-based Tier I instruction to all students, as well as evidence-based interventions for those who require it.

4. Partner with schools to communicate with families.

We developed a plan to notify parents of their children's reading difficulties early and often via Communication Toolkits that provide uniformity in messaging to parents and other stakeholders. In addition to its Office of Communications, the MDE partnered with the Foundation for Excellence in Education to develop communication tools such as videos, Frequently Asked Questions documents, and a website dedicated to the *Literacy-Based Promotion Act* (see <http://strongreadersms.com>). In addition, the MDE hosted "Parents as Partners Parent Nights" to educate families on the law and ways in which they could assist their child with reading at home.



Conclusion

It has taken, and continues to take, everyone involved to accomplish this work. "Academic progress in Mississippi has been powerful and

Figure 1

Barksdale Reading Institute's Reading Universe Grid

From Barksdale Reading Universe (<https://www.readinguniverse.org/>). Reprinted with permission.

ONGOING ASSESSMENT: Universal Screening, Benchmark, Diagnostic, Progress Monitoring, Formative and Summative						
Simple View of Reading*	DECODING			LANGUAGE		READING COMPREHENSION
CONCEPTS of PRINT	PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS	PHONICS	FLUENCY	ORAL LANGUAGE	VOCABULARY	COMPREHENSION
Understanding that written language represents meaningful oral language and that books and print have structure.	Having the ability to recognize and manipulate the units of sound in language (without print).	Understanding the systematic, predictable relationship between written letters and spoken sounds.	Reading with accuracy, reasonable rate, and appropriate expression.	The ability to produce words, sentences, and meaningful discussion.	The ability to recognize and understand the meaning of oral and written words.	The active and purposeful pursuit of understanding a written text.
Basic Book Parts front and back cover, title, author, illustrator, spine, title page	Syllables blend, segment, isolate, manipulate (delete, add, substitute)	Alphabetic Principle letter name/letter sound association	Accuracy words read correctly	Receptive Language understand verbal, nonverbal, and written communication		Levels of Understanding literal, inferential, propositional
Directionality read top to bottom and left-to-right, identify the first/last word, tracking, return sweep	Onset and Rime identify, blend, segment, recognize and produce rhyming words	Regularly Spelled High Frequency Words Regularly spelled high frequency words are taught in the phonics scope and sequence.	Rate pace of words read	Expressive Language produce meaning through verbal, nonverbal and written communication		Strategies of Critical Thinking cognitive processes used to derive multiple dimensions of meaning from text
Print Structure identify letter, word, and sentence, spaces between words, capitalization and punctuation	Articulation accurate oral production of sounds including continuants, stops, affricatives, fricatives, nasals, liquids, and glides	Beginning Phonics vc and cvc words, consonant digraphs and trigraphs, double consonant endings, blends, 1-1-1 doubling rule, inflectional suffixes, change y to i, 2-syllable words with short vowels	Expression phrasing, intonation, acknowledgment of punctuation, and appropriate emphasis	Knowledge of Words access prior knowledge, develop word consciousness, and explicitly teach new words		Products of Comprehended Text ability to determine main idea and text's theme, sequence critical events, identify cause and effect, determine similarities and differences, etc. of comprehended text
Text Features page numbers, table of contents, illustrations/photos, chapter titles, headings, captions, labels, and diagrams	Phonemic Awareness isolate, identify, categorize, blend, segment, manipulate (delete, add, substitute)	Advanced Phonics schwa, long vowel spelling patterns, vowel-r, diphthongs, hard and soft c and g, consonant-le (C-le), silent consonant letters, dropping e to add vowel suffix, affixes, derivational endings	Irregularly Spelled High Frequency Words Irregularly spelled high frequency words are taught in a usage sequence. Both regularly and irregularly spelled words should become automatic to word recognition skills.	Morphology meanings and origins of base words, roots, and affixes		 BARNSDALE READING INSTITUTE  Reading Universe™
				Syntax system of rules governing word order in sentences		
				Pragmatics use of language in social context		
EARLY WRITING / ENCODING						
STRUCTURED LITERACY INSTRUCTION: Sequential, Systematic, Explicit, To Mastery, and Cumulative						

sustained, proving there is no limit to what our students can accomplish,” said Dr. Carey Wright, Mississippi’s Superintendent of Education. From 2009 to 2019, 4th grade proficiency has steadily climbed from 22% to 32% on NAEP, and in 2019 Mississippi was the only state in the nation to post significant gains on the fourth-grade reading test (NAEP, 2019). It must be noted that these increases in achievement have occurred despite the fact that Mississippi’s poverty level in 2019 was ranked 51st in the United States at 19.7% (United States Census, 2019). Critics have mistakenly assumed that Missis-

In 2019 Mississippi was the only state in the nation to post significant gains on the fourth-grade reading test (NAEP, 2019).

sippi’s NAEP improvements can be explained by the state’s retention rate. See the sidebar “Mississippi’s NAEP Results: Retention is the ‘Elephant in the Room’” that indicates this is not the case.

The science of reading may well be the “yellow brick road” that has led Mississippi to reading success. The “perfect storm” prompted our unprecedented education reform and has forced all of us to work together to survive it in order to create a better life and more opportunities for Mississippi’s students. The work is far from done, and there is no shortcut. What we do have, though, is momentum, and we have come too far to turn back now. Mississippi’s students deserve nothing less. ■

Mississippi’s NAEP Results: Retention is the ‘Elephant in the Room’

How do you tackle an elephant like retention? One trained teacher at a time.

In 2013, Mississippi’s 4th Grade Reading NAEP scale score was 209. A lot has changed since then. Mississippi first saw gains in 4th grade reading on NAEP in 2015, with a statistically significant increase of 5 scale score points. Scores increased from 209 (in 2013) to 214 (in 2015). What is important to realize about this increase is that it was made by a group of 4th graders who had just entered 2nd grade when Mississippi’s Literacy Based Promotion Act was enacted in 2013. These children were not required to pass an assessment for promotion to 4th grade. Components of the law and implementation of new state standards went into effect that year.

During the 2013-2014 school year, the Literacy Based Promotion Act that prohibited social promotion to the next grade was passed. In addition, Common Core State Standards were beginning to be taught in classrooms; LETRS training on the science of reading began for K-3 teachers and elementary administrators; and literacy coaches were deployed to the lowest performing elementary schools in the state to support teachers in transferring the science of reading into practice. Not only were K-3 teachers trained on the science of reading, they were trained on how to identify reading deficiencies and remedy them, in addition to how to teach the state’s standards for mastery using evidence-based resources.

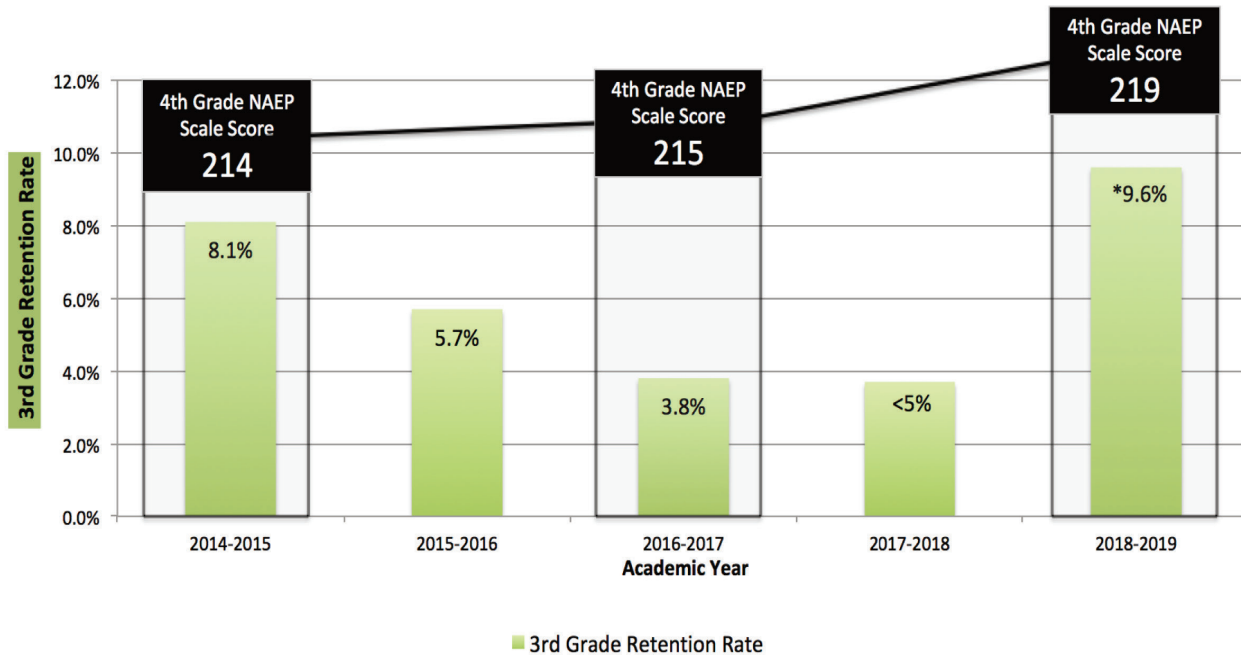
What happened in 2015 when the retention component of the Literacy Based Promotion Act went into effect for 3rd graders? As 3rd grade retention rates decreased, 4th Grade Reading NAEP scores increased. As can be seen in Figure 2, it cannot be said that retention rates are what led to improvements in 4th grade scores.

The Literacy Based Promotion Act law is clear: Retention should not be for retention’s sake. The goal is to provide more targeted support for improving reading outcomes that can be sustainable over time. In fact, third graders who do not meet promotion requirements are required to receive a minimum of 90-minutes in reading instruction based on the science of reading and intensive interventions with progress monitoring, among other supports.

Mississippi has continued to see growth. Most recently, Mississippi’s 4th Grade Reading NAEP results once again showed statistically significant gains, increasing from 215 (in 2017) to 219 (in 2019). Could it be that training teachers on the science of reading, providing job-embedded support from literacy coaches, placing accountability in grades K-3 to ensure 3rd graders were reading to learn by 4th grade, and administering an assessment aligned to rigorous standards serve as sustainable practices that positively impact student performance over time? The answer is clearly yes.

Figure 2

Mississippi's 3rd Grade Retention Rate & 4th Grade Reading NAEP Scale Scores 2015-2019



NOTE: Beginning in 2014-2015, 3rd grade students were required to score Level 2 or above on the state assessment for promotion to 4th grade. *In 2019 the requirement for promotion increased to level 3 or above. This change occurred a year too late to have affected the 2019 4th grade NAEP scores.

Showing Mississippi's Initiatives – Free Print Resources

2014-2015 Study of Mississippi Teacher Preparation for Early Instruction

<https://msreads.org/files/2016/03/31-Mar-2016-Release-STATEWIDE-REPORT-of-TEACHER-PREP.pdf>

2017 Educator Outcomes Associated with Implementation of Mississippi's K-3 Early Literacy Professional Development Initiative

https://www.mdek12.org/sites/default/files/Offices/MDE/OAE/OEER/Literacy/LBPA/REL_2017270_MSEarlyLiteracyPD.pdf

2019 Mississippi's Literacy Based Promotion Act: An Inside Look

<https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ExcelinEd.MSGatewaytoSuccess.March2019.pdf>

2019 NAEP – Mississippi State Snapshot Report NAEP

<https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/stt2019/pdf/2020014MS4.pdf>



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supports states pursuing a comprehensive approach to K-3 reading policy by assisting state leaders in building new or improving existing K-3 reading policies. Kymyona most recently served as the Executive Director for the Jackson Public School District's Office of Teaching and Learning, leading all aspects of the district's instructional programming. Prior to this role, Kymyona was the State Literacy Director at the Mississippi Department of Education where she led the implementation of Mississippi's Literacy-Based Promotion Act. She earned a Doctor of Education in Early Child Education from Jackson State University.

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