



**NO EXCUSES:
RAISING EXPECTATIONS, PROMOTING ACCOUNTABILITY,
FOSTERING SUCCESS**

A STRATEGIC PLAN FOR MERIDIAN PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Strategic plans are essentially about a better future. *No Excuses: Raising Expectations, Promoting Accountability, Fostering Success* is designed to provide a clear direction for the Meridian Public School District (MPSD) as it seeks to ensure that all of its students follow a pathway to success. In 2010, success in school means that every student is fully prepared for post-secondary study or for entry into a meaningful job, one that enables a worker to support a family and to advance in his or her career.

The plan deals with five critical areas:

- Teacher and principal effectiveness
- School climate, including safety and discipline
- MPSD's central office's role in designing, leading and supporting school-level reforms
- Implementing small learning communities (SLCs) at Meridian High School
- Aligning the SLCs with reform efforts in the elementary and middle schools and the 9th Grade.

The plan also focuses on MPSD's need to develop capacity to collect, analyze and use data; this is central to the effective implementation of the plan. The goals and strategies presented in the plan align with and support the district goals developed by MPSD's Board of Trustees (the school board) as it began a search for a new superintendent.

The plan was developed beginning in late 2009. It relied on interviews, focus groups, surveys, and reviews and analysis of literature and quantitative data. Several interim documents including school profiles and interim findings and recommendations were prepared as planning progressed. These were presented to and discussed with district leaders and the board.

While strategic plans look to the future, they are grounded in present realities and informed by the past. Current conditions in Meridian's schools are not good. At a time when education is regarded as increasingly critical to economic success and better quality of life, Meridian's schools continue to underperform. 2008-09 data reveal that only one school is considered "successful" by the state while six are "at risk of failing." Only 60 percent of MPSD schools make Adequate Yearly Progress in Reading and Language Arts, and only 50 percent in Mathematics. Significant gaps remain among black and white students in academic achievement. School climate and discipline are prominent concerns; expulsions and out-of-school suspensions of more than ten days are at 12 percent in MPSD, significantly higher than the four percent state average. The district, like many others, is suffering the effects of a severe financial crisis as it searches for a permanent superintendent.

Meridian has faced adversity before and has rallied to overcome it. For many years, the city was recognized for its commitment to education and renowned for its thriving economy and vibrant culture. Today, strong businesses, a leading health industry, a gleaming performing arts center and loyal citizens reflect this history.

Yet Meridian has experienced the effects of structural changes in the world's economy. This has caused significant hardship for many of its citizens, and the city lags the state in indicators of economic well-being. Many of those who have been left behind are black citizens, who make up more than 60 percent of Meridian's population.

Demographic and economic changes affected education; performance and community support for the schools declined. Meridian's schools often became the place where the community's unresolved and often unspoken racial issues surfaced. These conditions characterized education in Meridian for many years.

A new superintendent was appointed in 2003. Supported by an active and committed board, she worked to reform education in the community. Schools appeared to be more stable, and community support increased.

Encouraged, the superintendent and board resolved to do more. A community-wide exploration led a comprehensive strategy to reform Meridian High School by creating small learning communities (SLCs) and using the SLCs to drive reform throughout the district. Significant planning followed and, in 2007, Meridian passed a major bond issue to support education. Efforts to implement SLCs accelerated, and support for education remained generally high.

Momentum continued until mid-2008 when the superintendent retired. By most accounts her successor was not a good fit for the district. SLC progress, along with communication with stakeholders, slowed. These developments intersected with declines in student performance and budget cuts. Support for education plummeted.

The collective impact of the last two years on public education in Meridian has been deep and dispiriting. While there is hope that new board members and new leadership will turn things around, there is widespread uncertainty that, at a time of disruptive change and constricted finances, there is sufficient vision and capacity to undertake the deep transformation that Meridian requires.

One response to the justifiable disappointment that many feel has been recrimination. Meridian is developing a culture of blame for the educational problems that confront it. In this culture, individuals and groups see a low performing school system and assume that someone else is responsible for it. Teachers blame principals, principals blame teachers, both groups blame administrators, who criticize teachers and principals. All decry the lack of

effective family involvement in the schools and blame the community for not understanding the depth of their problems or providing them with sufficient support. Families and community members find fault with educators while some segments of the community blame others and many adults blame students for not appreciating learning and not having sufficient respect for others.

This plan calls for a different culture – one of accountability that is based on high and clear expectations. In emphasizing accountability, it speaks to the responsibilities of everyone to make the schools work better. It asks for specific contributions from all stakeholders. The plan highlights what has emerged in interviews, surveys and focus groups about the current status of education in MPSD. These findings are the foundation for the goals and strategies in the five selected priority areas:

- 1** ***Effective Teachers, Strong Leaders*** – Ensuring that MPSD has highly effective teachers in every classroom and highly effective leaders in every school.
- 2** ***Positive, Supportive and Respectful Learning Climate*** – Creating an environment in every school that encourages learning, collaboration and trust between and among students, teachers and leaders.
- 3** ***Informed and Responsive Central Office*** – Improving the capacity of MPSD’s central office’s to design, direct and efficiently support reform in schools.
- 4** ***Dynamic Family and Community Connections*** – Leveraging the assets of MPSD, families and the community and cultivating strong connections between and among them.
- 5** ***Innovative and Aligned System of High-Performing Schools*** – Fully implementing small learning communities (SLCs) at Meridian High School and developing strategies that link the SLCs with aligned reforms at elementary and, middle schools as well as the 9th Grade.

The plan’s goals and strategies are interconnected and detailed by design. MPSD requires a clear path toward educational success, one that is lighted by best practices. In Meridian, the path has too often been cluttered, with best practices not always visible. In providing greater detail, the plan seeks to provide insight into research-based best practices and to enable educators to avoid distraction.

Implementing a comprehensive plan is a challenge for a district that is cash-strapped, short-staffed and searching for permanent leadership. Not everything can be implemented at once, but it is imperative that the district and the

community together take the first steps to improving education and to a more positive future.

To do so, two things must occur. The first involves immediate action – the board, the interim superintendent and school leaders must seize the initiative and establish clear priorities. These must be acted upon immediately and results must be reported regularly, transparently and completely to all stakeholders.

This is the only the first step. The second builds on the first. It, too, involves immediate action, but it requires an abiding commitment to long-term transformation on the part of everyone. The culture of blame must be replaced by one of accountability based on expectations, where candor and responsibility replace recrimination and avoidance. This culture will be propelled by a shared vision of student success and community betterment. Excellent education is the key to this vision and all must embrace it.

SUMMARY OF GOALS AND STRATEGIES

Effective Teachers, Strong Leaders

Teacher Effectiveness

1. **By the end of the 2012-13 school year every teacher in MPSD will have mastered and can demonstrate the skills and knowledge required to be highly effective, particularly in responding to the needs of disadvantaged students.**
 - Develop a human capital framework that addresses teacher recruitment, induction, support, evaluation and recognition as tightly connected elements of a systemic human resources approach; initial emphasis will be on support and evaluation.
 - During the 2010-11 school year ensure that SLCs at MHS will implement professional learning communities (PLCs), for which they have already planned and prepared. SLC leaders will facilitate the PLCs. To ensure the success of the PLCs, MHS and MPSD leadership will:

Leader Effectiveness

2. **By end of the 2012-12 school year every principal in MPSD will have mastered and can demonstrate the skills and knowledge required to create a positive school climate and provide effective guidance on and support for instructional improvement to teachers.**
 - By July 2011 determine and make clear the expectations for principals and assistant principals in all Meridian schools. These expectations are district and community standards for school leaders in Meridian and complement the formal qualifications set by the state. They should include enthusiasm and demonstrated capacity to create a vision for low-performing schools, ability to delegate to teams, an understanding of instructional strategies and best practices to spur improvement in low-performing schools with substantial non-white and low-income populations and a commitment and clear strategies for involving students' families and the community in the school. The expectations should also reflect the Educational Leadership Policy Standards, which were adopted by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration in December 2007.
 - By the end of the 2011-12 school year ensure that the foregoing expectations are part of a comprehensive and transparent system of principal and assistant principal selection.
 - During the 2011-12 school year institute Principal Learning Collaborative, a monthly gathering of all principals that will focus exclusively on instructional issues and will utilize walk-throughs as a primary learning experience for participants.
 - Beginning in the 2010-11 school year provide high-quality professional development to principals that aligns with student learning goals and, when implemented, reflects performance-based evaluation results; early priority topics include teacher evaluation and school climate.
 - During the 2011-12 school year establish a team of school leaders, teachers and outside experts to develop a transparent performance-based evaluation system; results will be used to guide professional development and retention decisions about school leaders.

- By the end of the 2011-12 school year ensure that evaluation is meaningful; school leaders with poor evaluations and those who have not met the expectations described above should not be removed from one school only to be appointed to lead another one.

2 Positive, Supportive and Respectful Learning Environment

School Safety

- 1. Beginning with the 2010-11 school year every school in MPSD will provide an environment that is safe and orderly.**

By the beginning of the next school year:

- Revise student handbooks and codes of conduct to make clear the distinction between serious and less serious infractions and the sanctions for all violations. Disseminate student handbooks and codes of conduct through multiple means (booklet, website, community forums) so that all stakeholders are aware.
- Ensure consistency among and within schools in enforcing codes of conduct and in discipline by clarifying principals' responsibilities in addressing disciplinary and classroom management issues and provide training to ensure that building leaders offer effective guidance and support to faculty and staff.
- Clarify and consistently enforce the dress code: be clear about what is acceptable dress and what the sanctions are for dress deemed inappropriate; determine who is responsible for dress code enforcement; monitor incidents and enforcement to ensure consistency among and within schools; widely disseminate reports about dress code violations and how they were sanctioned; develop and enforce policies and sanction school leaders and teachers for not consistently enforcing the dress code.
- Review policies governing when and under what conditions Meridian police and other law enforcement personnel are to intervene at a school. Ensure that these policies are understood and widely disseminated and provide monthly reports to the community summarizing this activity.
- Provide immediate and full reports to the community when significant incidents affecting safety and order occur. (See Dynamic Family and Community Connections)

School Climate

- 2. Beginning with the 2010-11 school year every school in MPSD will provide a positive climate characterized by respect, caring and collaboration and by supportive relationships between educators and students.**

- By September 2010 identify and select at least three student behavior intervention approaches that are research-based and have demonstrated success in promoting positive and respectful student behavior (e.g. School-wide Positive Behavior Supports).
- By September 2010 select school climate assessment tool and disseminate to schools. The assessment tool should probe four areas: safety, personal relationships, teaching and learning, and institutional environment. Effective assessment tools also give voice to students and families, not only educators.
- By September 2010 establish a teacher-led climate team in each school.

- By December 2010 institute a peer mediation program in all schools to reduce student conflict; monitor implementation and results.
- During the 2010-11 school year develop a plan to institute student advisories in all MPSD schools by the 2011-12 school year.
- By August 2010 incorporate indicators of school climate in principals' evaluations.

Informed and Responsive Central Office

Guiding Instructional Reform

1. Beginning immediately, MPSD's central office's primary role will be to guide and facilitate instructional improvement.

- By January 2011 hire a deputy superintendent for instruction.
- By June 2011 establish an Instructional Improvement Support team, comprised of at least three central office staff with demonstrated effectiveness in leading and supporting school reform.
- Beginning immediately, provide high quality professional development to central office staff. Areas of focus should align with school-level reforms and district goals. Initial priorities should be SLC implementation, performance-based evaluation, data-driven instruction, and school climate
- Beginning immediately, institute a weekly meeting of all senior administrators to monitor progress to interim student achievement goals, ensure day-to-day activities are aligned and reflect student learning goals, identify and develop responses to emerging problems and coordinate inter-departmental planning.

Student Data System

2. By August 2011 MPSD will develop and implement a clear and comprehensive student data system that supports effective instruction.

- By June 2011 conduct an assessment of what student data is collected and how it is analyzed and used, including what professional development and tools are provided to support the use of data in the classroom.
- By June 2011 identify gaps and implement interim enhancements to existing data collection and utilization practices (e.g. timely reports, accessible presentation of data, increased guidance in using data to inform instruction, etc.)
- By October 2011 develop a long-term plan to design, implement, support the adoption and use of, and fund an effective student data system.

Teacher Data System

3. By the end of the 2011-12 school year MPSD will have a teacher information system that is linked to its student data system, aligned with a human capital framework.

- By June 2011 conduct an assessment of what data on teachers is collected and how it is analyzed and used.

- By June 2011 identify gaps and implement interim enhancements to existing data collection and utilization practices including tracking and maintaining core data from year to year
- By October 2011 develop a long-term plan to design, implement, support the adoption and use of, and fund an effective teacher data system.

Internal Communications System

4. By August 2011 MPSD will have an effective internal communications system that ensures all employees have accurate and timely information and that they have routine opportunities and tools to communicate with central office.

- By January 2011 prioritize internal communications by including the new director of communications in the superintendent's core leadership team/cabinet so that he/she knows and can speak to how MPSD is moving toward meeting its goals. (See Dynamic Family and Community Connections)
- By January 2011 conduct an assessment of existing internal communications practices and tools.
- By March 2011 develop an internal communications plan.

Central Office Reorganization

5. By the end of the 2010-11 school year MPSD's central office will be reorganized and re-structured to effectively support instruction and learning and ensure accountability in the context of district needs and available resources.

- Effective immediately, the interim superintendent will address the most urgent issues regarding teaching and learning: authority for and management of teaching and learning functions, SLC implementation, generating and using actionable data, and communication with key stakeholders inside and outside MPSD.
- Within 90 days following the selection of a new superintendent, design and implement a new organizational structure for the central office.



4 Dynamic Family and Community Connections

Communications

1. Effective immediately, MPSD will make effective communication a priority, with the superintendent responsible for overseeing and participating regularly in widespread outreach activities.
2. By June 2011 MPSD will be recognized for effectively communicating with all key stakeholders in the community, including parents and families, business and civic leaders, and faith-based and nonprofit organizations.
 - Hire a director of communications and outreach by January 2011. The communications director should be skilled in public outreach strategies and technically proficient in both print and electronic media, including television, radio and Internet communications.

- By January 2011 establish a communications advisory committee comprised of local experts (e.g. local media representatives, communications faculty from MSU-Meridian and MCC, etc.)
- By September 2010 review existing communications policies regarding significant school incidents that threaten student or teacher safety and revise as needed to ensure that information is communicated quickly to all media outlets and key community leaders and that there is appropriate follow-up with parents and other constituencies. Disseminate information to all school leaders.
- Effective at his/her hiring, develop and institute superintendent-led communications activities
- During the 2010-11 school year incorporate measures of community engagement in the superintendent's evaluation.
- By the start of 2011-12 school year develop an annual "State of Education in Meridian" report to be distributed each August. The report will contain data on school and district quality.

Local Education Fund

3. **By September 2011 Meridian will explore the establishment of a local education fund (LEF), which supports improving teacher quality, facilitates community involvement and helps hold MPSD accountable for improving student outcomes.**

- By December 2010 establish a community task force to consider the viability of and, if appropriate, develop a plan to establish an LEF.
- By June 2011 the task force will report on the feasibility of creating a local education fund, its structure, responsibility and funding.

Parent, Family and Community Involvement

4. **By September 2011 structured volunteer opportunities will be available, communicated and coordinated through the central office to allow community members – parents, families, business and civic leaders, higher education faculty – to contribute their knowledge and expertise on school campuses.**
5. **By June 2012 the majority of MPSD families, including low-income and minority families, will be actively involved in their children's education and participate in school-based activities.**

- Effective at his/her hiring, the superintendent will host a series of community roundtables, held at community locations, on safety and discipline.
- By December 2010 begin to provide professional development to all school leaders on strategies to effectively engage low-income and minority parents.
- By December 2010 require all schools to develop and implement a plan to engage parents and family members, with particular focus on those who are currently most disconnected (low-income and minority populations). The plan should include an assessment of current levels of parent involvement, which will serve as a benchmark, and goals for future involvement.
- By December 2010 create and communicate a clear and structured way for community members to visit and volunteer in the schools. Designate a volunteer coordinator at each

school who will communicate with the central office about needs and opportunities for community members to help in the classrooms.

5 Innovative and Aligned System of High-Performing Schools

School Readiness

1. Every student, regardless of socioeconomic background, enters MPSD ready to learn.

- Assess school readiness needs and establish district-wide priorities
- Develop and launch a community-wide initiative to enhance school readiness among disadvantaged children.

Improving the Graduation Rate

2. 100% of Meridian High School students graduate.

- By June 2011 conduct a segment analysis to identify specific characteristics of students who drop out in Meridian; data reviewed should include but not be limited to attendance, discipline, course selection and grades, achievement as measured by the MCT2 and the SATP and socioeconomic background.
- Establish a team of teachers from each level (elementary, middle, 9th Grade and MHS) to review and revise the dropout prevention plan developed in 2007 in conjunction with the state's dropout prevention plan. Relying on the results of the segment analysis, the plan should draw on emerging practices that leading districts have utilized successfully to reduce their dropout rates. The plan should build on the traits of the SLCs and should go beyond a compilation of existing programs. When existing programs are utilized, they should be reviewed and, as necessary and appropriate, re-oriented to focus on graduation.
- By the end of the 2011-12 school year hire a dropout prevention coordinator.
- Prepare and disseminate an annual report on progress in improving the graduation rate; while information on the graduation rate should be included in the annual "State of Education in Meridian" report, it should also be reported to the community in a separate document.
- Include progress in improving the graduation rate in the evaluation of the superintendent and of school leaders.

Driving Down SLC Attributes

3. Every school in MPSD shares the attributes of SLCs.

- Provide professional development to principals and other key school leaders in core areas (e.g. personalized instruction) improvement and leading change.
- Establish Redesign Teams in every school; the Redesign Teams will develop a framework – structures and practices – for each school to incorporate the attributes of the SLCs. The teams will link the framework to instructional improvement strategies and student learning goals and propose implementation strategies. They will present their plans for approval to the Redesign Oversight Committee (see below), and provide the Committee with reports on interim progress and annual progress.

- Establish a Redesign Oversight Committee comprised of district leaders, one to two school board members, experts (e.g. faculty from MSU-Meridian), and consultants. The Committee will review each school's plan and approve it, with revisions if necessary, and monitor progress.

SLC Implementation

4. SLCs are fully implemented at Meridian High School and aligned with lower levels.

- Provide clear, consistent and continuous leadership for SLC implementation at the highest levels of MPSD.
- Organize the high school so that it can effectively implement SLCs.
- Make the SLCs the locus of all academic planning, supplanting departments.
- Ensure that every student is an active participant in an SLC.
- Connect instruction, learning, counseling and extracurricular activities in the 9th Grade to SLCs in the high school.

INTRODUCTION: MERIDIAN AT A CROSSROADS

No Excuses: Raising Expectations, Promoting Accountability, Fostering Success is designed to provide a clear direction for the Meridian Public School District (MPSD) as it seeks to ensure that all of its students follow a pathway to success. In 2010, success in school means that every student is fully prepared for post-secondary study or for entry into a meaningful job, one that enables a worker to support a family and to advance in his or her career.

The plan is addressed to educators – school board members, the superintendent, principals, teachers and administrators who are on the front line in providing quality education. It is directed equally to all Meridianites. They are critical partners in MPSD’s efforts to improve public education and foster a better quality of life. This plan aims to provoke candid discussion about the significant challenges confronting MPSD, and to spur involvement by all stakeholders across Meridian – educators, parents and families, civic and institutional leaders, the business sector, the faith community, social service agencies and nonprofits, and others – in a comprehensive effort to make schools function effectively for all students.

This plan responds to a request by the former superintendent in Meridian. Its scope, which is limited by design, was approved by MPSD’s Board of Trustees (hereinafter the board). The plan addresses the following areas:

- Teacher and principal effectiveness
- School climate, including safety and discipline
- MPSD’s central office’s role in designing, leading and supporting school-level reforms
- Implementing small learning communities (SLCs) at Meridian High School
- Aligning the SLCs with reform efforts in the elementary and middle schools and the 9th Grade.¹

Developing the plan surfaced another critical area that is central to MPSD’s success: the district must have and make effective use of accurate, timely and relevant data. Data is vital to identifying problems, understanding causes, developing solutions, and monitoring progress. Efforts to move forward in any of the other areas will be hindered without data.

In laying out a series of coordinated strategies in each of these areas, the plan seeks to move the district toward the clear and overarching goal of student success that is mentioned above:

¹ Among other things, this plan does not deal with finances and budget, nor does it consider certain other functions including facilities, athletics, food services and transportation.

MPSD students must graduate ready for post-secondary education or a meaningful career that:

- **Is valued by the marketplace**
- **Requires ongoing training that may often be equivalent to formal post-secondary study**
- **Earns sufficient money to enable a worker to meet a family's needs**

This goal of student success is intertwined with and supports the board's vision of district success. During plan development, the board, in considering requirements for a new superintendent, promulgated a set of short-term outcomes for the district:

- Immediately increase safety, security and discipline in all schools
- All schools will be rated successful according to the Mississippi Department of Education assessment system by 2013
- Increase the graduation rate to 80 – 85 percent by 2013
- Maintain and improve the district's financial stability

Meeting the interim goals that the board has issued for the new superintendent is essential to fulfilling the overarching goal of post-graduation success in post-secondary education or the workplace. This plan provides strategies to accomplish all of them.

Goals exist because of MPSD's needs, which are comprehensive and substantial. At a time when district and school performance is drawing increased demands for accountability, not enough Meridian students are able to demonstrate sufficient competence. Too few can read and write clearly, grasp and apply basic concepts of mathematics, think critically, and gather and assess information from multiple sources. These attributes predict whether students will succeed in post-secondary education and function well and responsibly in the workplace.

Too many Meridian students have fallen behind their peers in Mississippi and around the country, and their future is bleak. Taken as a whole, the performance of Meridian's students and its schools casts shadows on more than individual futures – chronic underperformance threatens the economic viability of the city and the region and limits the quality of life for every citizen.

The goals also reflect the context in which students learn, teachers teach and schools function. Meridian has much to be proud of – a history of educational quality and success, cultural attractions like the Riley Center, vibrant institutions of higher education, a leading health industry, significant philanthropic institutions and many thriving businesses. In addition, Meridian also boasts a group of citizens who are devoted to it and prepared to work ceaselessly for its success.

Meridian also faces many challenges. Twenty-nine percent of Meridian’s families live in poverty, well above the state’s rate of 16.7 percent. Families with children are particularly likely to live in poverty – 42.2 percent of them do.² Although they can excel with effective instruction and the right support, low-income children often begin school behind and never catch up.

Meridian’s population is slowly but steadily shrinking and is increasingly black. In 1990 the total population was 41,036 of whom 45.4 percent were black.³ According to estimates by the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2008, Meridian had 36,153 residents, of whom 60.6 percent were black.⁴

Anecdotal reports of “white flight” capture how changes in racial make-up affect education. Residents describe white families often moving outside the city limits because they do not want their children in Meridian’s schools, preferring to send them to public schools in Lauderdale County or to private schools. Though it is not generally the subject of public discussion, “white flight” is a sign of the persistent racial separation that characterizes Meridian. There is no place where blacks and whites routinely come together, where differences in perspectives are shared and common ground is sought. Race relations in Meridian are characterized by distance. There is little organized effort to bridge racial gaps and promote dialogue and understanding.⁵ Racial divides are not caused by the schools, but the schools soon become the place where racial issues are acted out.

Demographic changes in income and race have affected the school district. As MPSD served increasing numbers of disadvantaged students, achievement slipped. Between the 1990s and the early 2000s, there were also a series of leadership changes. The combination of unstable leadership, declining performance and the departure of white families eroded public confidence in the district. Support for it among business leadership and middle-class families waned.

That began to change in 2003 when a new superintendent was selected. A long-time educator who had spent her career in Meridian she was well respected by teachers, administrators and many in the community. She was also committed to improving student achievement, and began to do so by focusing first on strengthening literacy in early grades, which began to show promising results.

² U.S. Census Bureau. *ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates: 2006-2008. Meridian City, Mississippi.* <http://factfinder.census.gov>

³ U.S. Census Bureau. 1990 Summary Tape. P007. Detailed Race – Universe: Persons. <http://factfinder.census.gov>.

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau. *ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates: 2006-2008. Meridian City, Mississippi.* <http://factfinder.census.gov>

⁵ For further discussion see *Framing the Future*. Although prepared four years ago, the racial context that the report describes remains unchanged. (Kronley, Robert A., Claire Handley [2005]. *Framing the Future: Emerging Opportunities for the Meridian Public School District*. Kronley & Associates, Atlanta GA.)

The superintendent's commitment to thoughtful reform was supported by an active school board. Effective collaboration between the board and the superintendent along with some improvement in student performance led to a perception on the part of the community that Meridian's schools were more stable places, and more able to promote learning. As a result, district leadership was encouraged to build on these achievements and embrace more significant reform.

The need for extensive transformation in Meridian's schools was also underscored by the No Child Left Behind Act, new federal policy that focused on student achievement. With the law's requirement for extensive data on student performance and new expectations of academic success for all students, districts were no longer able to hide or excuse student failure.

Against this backdrop, the superintendent and the board turned their attention to Meridian High School (MHS). It was clear that, while the high school served some students well, too many were simply not succeeding. The high school was not preparing sufficient numbers of its graduates to participate in an economy that demanded a well-prepared, highly-skilled and motivated work force.

The superintendent and the board launched a community-wide effort to look closely at education. This led to an examination of MHS and the development of a comprehensive strategy to reform it. The district embarked upon an effort to create and implement small learning communities (SLCs) at MHS. The process reached out to and involved a significant number of residents from multiple sectors of the community. The process and the vision it surfaced inspired renewed community interest in and reinvigorated support for the public schools.

As a result, in 2007, a bond issue won approval from voters. It was the first time a bond had passed in over 20 years; moreover, passage of the 2007 bond issue marked the first time in four decades that the community had approved anything more than minor capital improvements to the schools. The funds generated were dedicated to renovating several schools including MHS, building a new facility for the 9th Grade,⁶ and supporting the implementation of the SLCs. Teacher-led teams were established at MHS to begin designing and implementing the SLCs, and district leaders began thinking about how to drive down the core elements of the SLCs – rigorous and engaging curriculum, personalized instruction, and deep community connections – into the 9th Grade and middle and elementary schools. District leaders and educators understood that change would take time and that there would be hurdles along the way, but there was real enthusiasm for the work ahead, and SLC implementation proceeded as planned.

⁶ As part of a reconfiguration of middle grades, the 9th Grade was established as a single-grade school on the campus of MHS. Kate Griffin Junior High, which had been labeled as failing by the Mississippi Department of Education, was closed, and Northwest Junior High became a middle school serving 6th, 7th and 8th graders.

Momentum continued until mid-2008, when the superintendent retired. By most accounts, her successor was not a good fit for the district. Progress in SLC implementation, along with that in other areas, slowed greatly. Communication with significant community stakeholders, including business representatives and civic leaders, was ineffective. Leadership at the building and administrative levels was widely viewed as uneven and, in some key positions, ineffective. These developments intersected with declines in student achievement and a state financial crisis that necessitated substantial budgetary cuts. Morale throughout the district plummeted as both educators and community members became disheartened and frustrated.

During this period, Meridian also held a mayoral election. The new mayor, who had made change in the schools a priority in her campaign, appointed new school board members. In early 2010 the board removed the superintendent.⁷ An acting interim superintendent was appointed from within the district. Other leadership changes soon followed: most of the administrative cabinet responsible for overseeing academic areas have been replaced or seen their jobs eliminated. Several school principals have been replaced. Budget cuts have eliminated other positions (including the director of high school redesign, who was responsible for coordinating SLC implementation) and programs.

⁷ Pursuant to a negotiated settlement, the then-superintendent was later allowed to resign.

Small Learning Communities

The small learning communities (SLCs) at Meridian High School are designed to offer Meridian's students a unique learning opportunity, one that:

- is founded on academic excellence
- fosters students' success in postsecondary education and the workforce
- anticipates the community's future needs

In communities around the country, SLCs have helped spur **improved student achievement, higher graduation rates, increased enrollment in postsecondary institutions and training programs, and fewer disciplinary problems**. SLCs are built upon the following key elements:

- A rigorous curriculum
- Personalized instruction
- Experiential learning
- Community partnerships
- Strategic support to ensure graduation

MHS has four SLCs, each offering a specific course of study:

1. *BizTech* – focusing on the business and technology sectors
2. *Health* – focusing on the medical and healthcare sector
3. *Visual and Performing Arts* – focusing on visual, literary, and performing arts
4. *Exploratory Studies* – providing a traditional curriculum

In addition, a fifth group, Advanced Studies, offers intensive studies, including AP classes and dual enrollment at Meridian Community College; all students are able to enroll in Advanced Studies classes. SLC themes were recommended by community task forces, following a thorough assessment of student and community needs.

Students select an SLC based on their interests, needs, and goals. The theme-based curriculum offered by each SLC enables students to explore those fields in greater depth. This exploration is further enhanced through instructional strategies including internships, mentoring and community service projects, which connect students' classroom work to the real world. Though the themes differ, all of the SLCs' curricula are based on and incorporate rigorous core courses, including English, math, and science.

The board has been conducting a search for a new, permanent superintendent. In June, it interviewed three finalists in public sessions. Later in the month, the board determined that none of the finalists would be engaged as the new superintendent. Shortly thereafter, the board announced the appointment of retired superintendent of schools in Tupelo as acting superintendent.⁸

The collective impact of the last two years on public education in Meridian has been deep and dispiriting. While there is expressed hope that leadership changes in the central office and at some schools will turn things around, there is widespread uncertainty about the future. Although there have been broad statements about general goals in certain areas, educators and the community are unsure of MPSD's direction and have limited faith in the district's capacity, at a time of disruptive change and constricted finances, to undertake the deep transformation that Meridian requires.

Wariness may not be the greatest challenge facing Meridian. Stakeholders have watched as years of slow and hard-won progress in gaining community support for education has slipped away in a matter of months. Profound – and justified – disappointment has surfaced and threatens to undermine MPSD's chance for positive change.

One immediate and prominent response to disappointment is recrimination. Meridian is developing a culture of blame for the educational problems that confront it. In this culture, individuals and groups see a low performing school system and assume someone else is responsible for it. Teachers blame principals, principals blame teachers, both groups blame administrators, who criticize teachers and principals. All decry the lack of effective family involvement in the schools and blame the community for not understanding the depth of their problems or providing them with sufficient support. Families and members of the community find fault with educators while some segments of the community blame others and many adults blame students for not appreciating learning and for not sufficiently respecting others.

This culture of blame is ultimately defeating. It creates and perpetuates an environment where expectations dwindle and do not govern performance. With no clear expectations, accountability is avoided or shifted to others.

MPSD and the citizens of Meridian are at a crossroads. The easiest but most destructive path is to accept the current situation, and to acknowledge the diminished opportunities for students, their families and the community that will inevitably follow. Conversely, MPSD and the community can look upon the recent changes in leadership as an opportunity to bring new energy to the schools, to

⁸ See the Meridian Public School Districts website, www.mpsd.k12.ms.us. *School Board's Response for Community Concerns*, for a more detailed description of the search process and some community reaction.

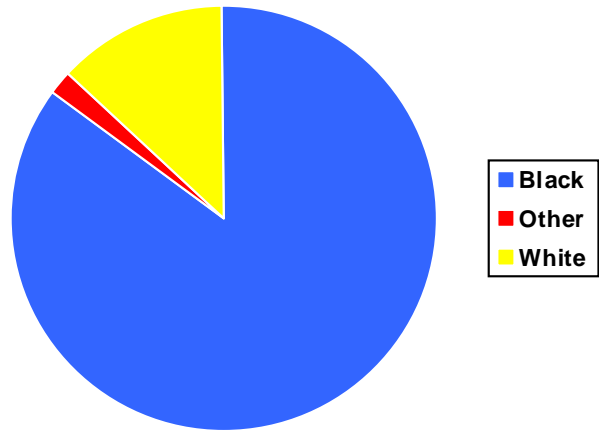
push through implementation of the SLCs and to link them to real improvements in teaching and learning throughout the district. Doing so will be challenging – it will require a clear and shared vision, measurable goals and collective accountability and responsibility – but it is achievable. It is achievable if everyone embraces responsibility for improving teaching and learning and accepts responsibility for doing so. Meridian’s history is filled with examples of the community coming together to produce positive results for the common good; if it is to thrive it must do so again.

The strategic plan outlined in this document emphasizes accountability. It speaks to the responsibilities of everyone in Meridian – inside MPSD and outside of it – for making schools work more effectively for children. No one is exempt, and no one should blame others or excuse poor performance – not parents, teachers, administrators, the board, business and civic leaders, and especially not the students themselves.

WHERE MERIDIAN STANDS: A SNAPSHOT⁹

Demographics

Total enrollment	6,559	100%
Asian	50	1%
Black	5,557	85%
Hispanic	78	1%
Native American	4	<1%
White	870	13%



MPSD Facts and Figures

81%

Percentage of low-income students

1

Number of schools that have had the same principal for 4 years

1 vs. 6

Number of “successful” schools versus “at risk of failing” schools

60%

Schools making Adequate Yearly Progress in Reading/Language

50%

Schools making Adequate Yearly Progress in Mathematics

72%

Graduation rate

96%

Courses taught by a highly qualified teacher in low poverty schools

84%

Courses taught by a highly qualified teacher in high poverty schools

12% vs. 4%

MPSD students versus Mississippi students expelled or with out-of school suspensions of 10+ days

95%

Increase in Advanced Placement enrollment, 2006-2009

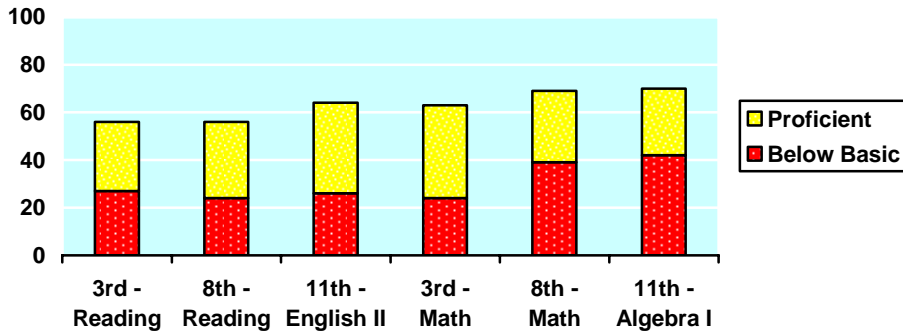
143%

Increase in dual enrollment, 2006-2009

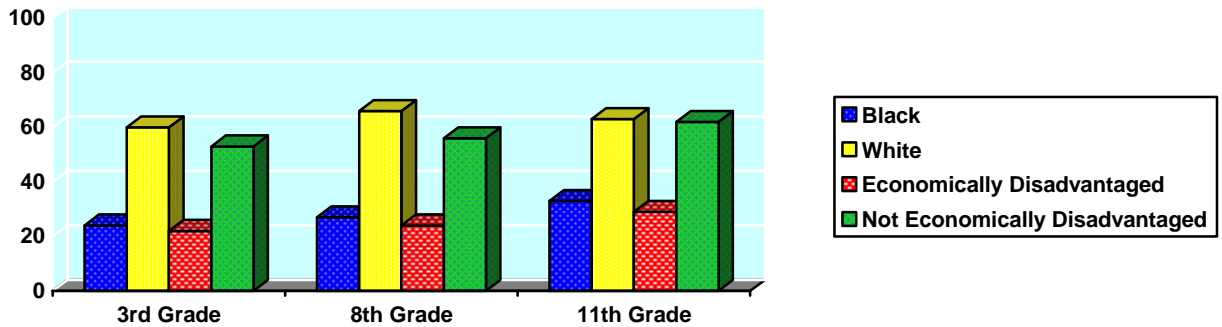
⁹ Data are from the 2008-09 school year. Ten schools were included: Crestwood, Oakland Heights, Parkview, Poplar Springs, Harris, West Hills Elementary Schools, Magnolia and Carver Middle Schools; Northwest Junior High and Meridian High School.

Performance and Proficiency

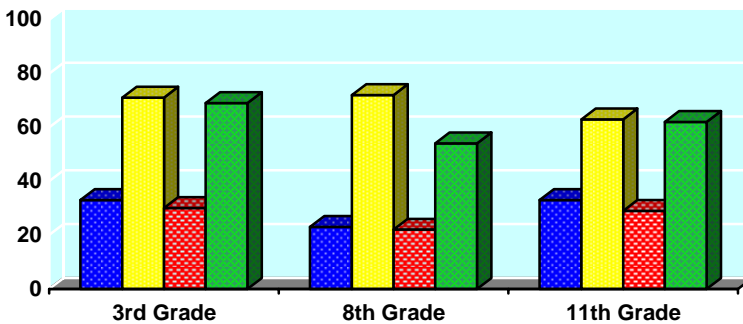
Percent Proficient and Above by Grade and Subject



Percent Proficient and Above: Language Arts



Percent Proficient and Above: Mathematics



Why It Matters

2% Unemployment rate for a person with a professional or graduate degree in 2008

9% Unemployment rate for a person with less than a high school degree in 2008

19 of 30 Number of fastest growing jobs through 2018 that require an associate degree or more

TRANSFORMING THE DISTRICT: MEETING THE CHALLENGES

Moving from a culture of blame to one of accountability and trust requires new expectations of everyone. These expectations must be:

- *High*. Students, parents and educators must hold high expectations for others and for themselves. Improving student outcomes requires a new level of expertise and excellence. All must examine what they do, how they do it, why they do it and what happens as a result, and they must commit to learning and adopting best practices. It is not enough to “get by” or to rely on long-standing practices.
- *Clear*. MPSD students, teachers, leaders and staff, as well as parents and families must understand what is required of them. Expectations at every level must be fully articulated and broadly discussed; uncertainty will lead to confusion, resentment and inaction.
- *Shared*. Changing what happens in classrooms is a collective responsibility. New expectations of teachers must be supported by new expectations of guidance and meaningful help from principals. Principals, in turn, must have appropriate assistance and training from central office, which involves a new series of expectations of staff there. No single group can make and sustain change on its own.
- *Tied to performance*. Accountability for fulfilling these expectations requires the work of adults in classrooms, school and central office to be measured. Fair and transparent evaluations, informed by multiple types of qualitative and quantitative data, are required to understand what is working well and what is not and to craft appropriate responses

EXPECTATIONS

- *High*
- *Clear*
- *Shared*
- *Tied to performance*

Establishing expectations that are *high, clear, shared and tied to performance* creates a framework for carrying out the strategies outlined in this plan. Implementation of these strategies should also be guided by principles, which shape reform strategies throughout the district, from pre-kindergarten to the community. They include:

- *Rigor*. What MPSD teaches students to know and be able to do must reflect the requirements for competitiveness in the 21st century workforce and for post-secondary study. This demands a new level of rigor in curriculum and in performance. MPSD’s graduates should leave fully prepared to compete with the ablest students in New York, Frankfurt, London, Beijing and New Delhi.
- *Innovation*. In pursuing SLCs, MPSD and the community revealed a willingness to innovate, to take considered risks based on sound evidence that the risks would lead to better student outcomes. Inside the classroom and throughout MPSD, faculty and staff must continue to explore and implement innovations for it is clear that traditional practices are not meeting students’ needs and will not result in the significant improvements.

- *Personalization.* Each student has strengths and weaknesses, each brings unique challenges and different strengths to the classroom, each develops in different ways and at different times, and each responds better to some instructional approaches than to others. Effective instruction, particularly for children already behind, is personalized instruction. It takes differences into account and ensures that every child is known by and has a close relationship with an adult in the school.
- *Communication.* Information is essential for any organization to function well. In MPSD, information must flow from those in leadership positions who are making policy decisions to those implementing the decisions and, as critically, back again. The absence of accurate and timely information creates confusion, hinders efforts to adopt new practices and gives rise to rumors that can sap enthusiasm and derail any change effort.
- *Transparency.* Closely tied to communication, transparency is equally essential. MPSD school and district leaders are confronting hard decisions about policy, practice and personnel. These decisions must be made openly, with the underlying rationale and expected outcomes clearly articulated to stakeholders as well as, where possible, with input from them. Failure to do so undermines shared ownership of reform and can generate considerable resistance to it.
- *Leadership.* Meridian’s own experience highlights the importance of effective, stable leadership. Effective leadership skills must be cultivated in all educators deliberately and consistently and through strategies that conform to recognized best practices.
- *Accountability.* All stakeholders are responsible for and must contribute to turning MPSD around. This entails taking responsibility for improving one’s own practice and ensuring that it contributes to the district’s goals.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- *Rigor*
- *Innovation*
- *Personalization*
- *Communication*
- *Transparency*
- *Leadership*
- *Accountability*

BUILDING THE FUTURE: A RENEWED VISION

This plan seeks to restore the vision and reignite the hope that infused MPSD and the community three years ago after the passage of the bond issue. The vision put forth by district leaders then and embraced by students, teachers, families and the community was powerful, and it remains so today. In this vision:

- Every student is engaged in active and enriching learning experiences at every level and graduates from MPSD prepared for the demands of post-secondary study and a competitive workforce.
- Every educator is highly effective, committed to continued professional growth and valued within the district and by the community.
- Every school is student-centered and provides a challenging curriculum, personalized learning experiences and a nurturing environment.

- MPSD is a high-performing, dynamic organization whose structure and activities are driven by a relentless focus on student learning, a willingness to pursue thoughtful innovations and an inclusive approach to its work.
- The community, invigorated by shared expectations across its diverse membership, is supportive of and collaborates with schools and the district in substantive efforts to foster student learning.

The journey to fulfill this vision has stalled, but it has not stopped. New leadership provides new opportunity for a renewed commitment to improving teaching and learning. This plan is designed to do so. It seeks to enrich Meridian’s future, not remedy its past. There is much hope among educators and in the community for productive change in the schools. This hope, as opposed to the acrimony and disappointment of recent years, can and should shape the experiences that children and young people have in Meridian’s schools.

VISION

- *Active, engaged students*
- *Highly effective educators*
- *Student-centered schools*
- *MPSD focused on student learning, innovation and inclusiveness*
- *Invigorated community*

METHODOLOGY

The development of this strategic plan was driven by extensive data collection, review synthesis and analysis. The planning process was initiated in late 2009. The plan’s scope embraces selected areas:

- Teacher and principal effectiveness
- School climate
- The role and organization of MPSD’s central office
- Implementing SLCs at Meridian High School
- Aligning the SLCs with district-wide school improvement efforts

Kronley & Associates developed a blueprint for MPSD’s future, the first step in the planning process. The blueprint affirmed the overarching goal of the planning process – ensuring that all MPSD students graduate ready for post-secondary education or a meaningful career – and the planning focus areas. The superintendent and board approved the blueprint.

The firm then initiated a data collection and analysis phase. Activities included:

- **Interviews.** A diverse group of 23 people from across the community and within MPSD was interviewed over several months. The interviews, guided by tailored interview protocols, surfaced individual perceptions and concerns about MPSD and its future. (A list of interviewees is provided in Appendix B)

- **Focus Groups.** Informed by preliminary interview findings, six focus groups were held for principals, teachers, central office staff, and SLC leaders. The focus groups generated shared perceptions of the concerns and issues confronting MPSD.
- **Surveys.** Two surveys were conducted, one a district-wide survey of teachers and the second of SLC leaders. Both were intended to solicit feedback on critical issues from as many educators as possible as well as to test preliminary findings that emerged from the interviews and focus groups.
- **Quantitative Data Review.** Extensive data on student achievement and discipline were collected and analyzed. Data on teacher quality was also reviewed.
- **Literature Review.** Literature on key issue areas – including human capital, professional development, professional learning communities, central office organization, data systems and use – was reviewed to ensure that plan strategies incorporated recognized best and promising practices.

Throughout the planning process, Kronley & Associates staff prepared interim reports and other materials containing preliminary findings. These findings were presented to district leadership and to the board for feedback.¹⁰ Input from the board guided the development of goals and strategies.

SHARED ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Various strategies presented throughout this plan recommend the creation of committees, teams or other groups to address a range of issues. Establishing such groups has several purposes.

- *Fostering shared responsibility.* Over the last several years, responsibility for making decisions has become concentrated among a few people, which diminishes a sense of collective authority and accountability.
- *Broadening input.* Because decision-making authority has been concentrated among a small number, many people, including teachers who have to implement policies and practices, have little opportunity to shape them. This can lead to narrowly considered decisions and resistance from teachers and other stakeholders.
- *Maximizing available resources.* There are talented individuals throughout MPSD and the community. Their knowledge, skills and experience should be tapped whenever possible.

¹⁰ Several of the interim reports – school profiles, a look at discipline and survey findings – have been provided to MPSD and can be requested from the district.

Most of these committees are temporary. They are to function for one year (with the possibility of reconvening occasionally as needed in subsequent years) and are designed to carry out specific tasks. Other groups, however, are long-term; they speak to creating and maintaining new habits of practice and require new structures. Appendix C provides a list of recommended committees and groups.

FINDINGS, GOALS AND STRATEGIES

Findings, goals and strategies have been developed in each of five areas:

- 1** ***Effective Teachers, Strong Leaders*** – Ensuring that MPSD has highly effective teachers in every classroom and highly effective leaders in every school.
- 2** ***Positive, Supportive and Respectful Learning Climate*** – Creating an environment in every school that encourages learning, collaboration and trust between and among students, teachers and leaders.
- 3** ***Informed and Responsive Central Office*** – Improving the capacity of MPSD’s central office’s to design, direct and efficiently support reform in schools.
- 4** ***Dynamic Family and Community Connections*** – Leveraging the assets of MPSD, families and the community and cultivating strong connections between and among them.
- 5** ***Innovative and Aligned System of High-Performing Schools*** – Fully implementing small learning communities (SLCs) at Meridian High School and developing strategies that link the SLCs with aligned reforms at elementary and, middle schools as well as the 9th Grade.

The findings presented below are drawn from extensive data collection, review and analysis, and they define issues confronting MPSD today. Goals are presented for each area. Each goal is ambitious yet achievable over time, given focus, will and commitment by students and their families, educators, business, and civic and community leaders. The strategies outlined to achieve those goals rely on research-based approaches that have demonstrated success in other areas and are applicable to the context in which MPSD operates.

Effective Teachers, Strong Leaders

Teachers have a greater impact on student learning and success than any other factor, including family involvement and class size. Research has shown that the most effective teachers produce student gains almost four times greater than the least effective teachers.^{11, 12} The impact of school leaders – specifically principals – is almost as significant. Studies have concluded that school leadership is second only to classroom instruction among the factors that shape what and how students learn at school.¹³ MPSD must ensure that all teachers and principals are highly effective and are responsive to the distinctive needs of and challenges presented by significant numbers of disadvantaged students; if they are not prepared and willing to meet these challenges, student outcomes will not change.

Findings

- Teachers are widely regarded as the district's greatest asset; losing them is often cited as a concern by many community members.
- Many teachers believe that they have mastered the skills and knowledge required to teach disadvantaged students effectively; student test scores, attendance, and graduation rates, however, indicate that many have not yet done so.
- Current professional development practices frequently do not follow recognized best practices. Many teachers report that they have little input into the focus and selection of professional development, that insufficient time is devoted to learning new information and skills, and that there is little follow-up to assist them in adopting new strategies or to hold them accountable for doing so.
- Instructional leadership in schools is uneven. While about two-thirds of elementary and 9th Grade teachers report receiving useful guidance on instructional practice from their principals, fewer than half of middle and high school teachers report the same.
- Teachers often have limited or no input into decisions made by principals.
- Across the district, principal turnover is very high; this lack of stability undermines efforts to improve instruction and establish positive school climates.

¹¹ Haycock, Katie (1998). *Good Teaching Matters...A Lot*. Education Trust. Washington, D.C.

¹² Similar findings on the impact of the most effective teachers as compared to the least effective teachers have been reported in other studies. (Miller, Kirsten [2003]. *School, Teacher and Leadership Impacts on Student Achievement*. Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning. Denver, CO)

¹³ Leithwood, Kenneth, Karen Seashore Louis, Stephen Anderson and Kyla Wahlstrom. (2004). *How Leadership Influences Student Learning*. Wallace Foundation. New York, NY

Goals

1. By the end of the 2012-13 school year every teacher in MPSD will have mastered and can demonstrate the skills and knowledge required to be highly effective, particularly in responding to the needs of disadvantaged students.¹⁴
2. By end of the 2012-12 school year every principal in MPSD will have mastered and can demonstrate the skills and knowledge required to create a positive school climate and provide effective guidance on and support for instructional improvement to teachers.

Strategies

Teacher Effectiveness

1. Develop a human capital framework that addresses teacher recruitment, induction, support, evaluation and recognition as tightly connected elements of a systemic human resources approach; initial emphasis will be on support and evaluation.¹⁵
 - a. Immediately define human capital and its meaning for MPSD and ensure that all educators in the district understand the term and its implications for their work
 - b. During the 2010-11 school year establish a team of teachers, school leaders and outside experts (e.g. experts from MSU-Meridian) to develop a transparent and fair performance-based evaluation system and outline a timeline for its implementation¹⁶; the new system will be used to identify both individual and school-wide professional development needs.
 - c. During the 2010-11 school year establish a Professional Learning Oversight team, comprised of teachers and school leaders who will work with the deputy superintendent for instruction (see Informed and

¹⁴ Effective teachers and principals possess a high level of mastery of effective instructional strategies but are also committed to constantly deepening their knowledge and improving their practice.

¹⁵ Human capital refers to the “people” side of education, what teachers know and are able to do. (Sigler, David and Marla Ucelli Kashyap. “Human Capital Management: A New Approach for Districts,” *VUE*. Providence, RI: Annenberg Institute for School Reform. Summer 2008.) Human capital management refers to the policies and activities that shape teachers’ knowledge and skills throughout their careers – preparation, recruitment, selection, hiring, induction, placement, training and development, tenure, evaluation and performance management – in a context shaped by culture and compensation. A human capital framework considers each of these elements as interconnected and promotes individual and system capacity by aligning them. Human capital frameworks are replacing piecemeal efforts to foster teacher capacity.

¹⁶ As appropriate and feasible, refine and adopt an existing performance-based evaluation system such as the North Carolina Teacher Evaluation System available on the website of the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards Commission, <http://www.ncptsc.org/>

- Responsive Central Office) to review and revise the current professional development system. The revisions will address:
- i. Assessment of individual and school-wide learning needs through use of data
 - ii. Alignment with annual and long-term student learning goals
 - iii. Criteria for selecting professional development experiences/offerings
 - iv. Expectations of providers if applicable
 - v. Incorporation of recognized best practices including classroom support for adoption, monitoring and feedback
 - vi. Accountability mechanisms to monitor success in implementation.
- d. Develop and implement a plan to train and deploy full-time literacy and math coaches, each serving no more than two schools, by the 2012-13 school year.
2. During the 2010-11 school year ensure that SLCs at MHS implement professional learning communities (PLCs), for which they have already planned and prepared. SLC leaders will facilitate the PLCs. To ensure the success of the PLCs, MHS and MPSD leadership will:
- a. Ensure adequate time every week for PLCs to meet
 - b. Sanction teachers who do not attend PLC sessions or are persistently late
 - c. Provide access to and support in using data to make decisions regarding curriculum and instruction.
 - d. Provide professional development as necessary to support PLC practice
3. During the 2010-11 school year require all other MPSD schools to develop a plan to institute PLCs in the 2011-12 school year. The plans will address:
- a. The role of school leaders in leading and supporting PLCs
 - b. The constitution and facilitation of PLC teams (including teacher-led planning for and management of PLCs)
 - c. Professional development to support PLC practice
 - d. The structural supports required (e.g. collaborative planning time, facilitation, protocols for team learning, access to research and data)

Professional Learning Communities

A professional learning community (PLC) is group of educators that meet frequently to work and learn together to resolve instructional challenges.ⁱ According to one definition, PLCs provide a space where “participants can interact, test their ideas, challenge their inferences and interpretations and process new information with one another.”ⁱⁱ Specific activities often include examining content standards, critiquing student work, developing lesson plans and conducting action research. When fully instituted, PLCs are embedded in the structure and operation of a school and shape how teachers and administrators interact with each other. They generate and reinforce shared vision and values, nurture a positive professional climate, and cultivate and support an expectation of continuous reflection on and improvement in instructional practice.

ⁱ While PLCs can be of varying sizes, they are often small, comprised of four to eight teachers. (National Staff Development Council. “Learning Communities: The Rationale.”

ⁱⁱ Melanie S. Morrissey, *Professional Learning Communities: An Ongoing Exploration*, SEDL cited by Cathy Berlinger-Gustafson, in her presentation “Building Professional Learning Communities” May 4, 2004

- e. Alignment with school and district goals and responsiveness to school-specific student learning needs

Leader Effectiveness

1. By July 2011 determine and make clear the expectations for principals and assistant principals in all Meridian schools. These expectations are district and community standards for school leaders in Meridian and complement the formal qualifications set by the state. They should include enthusiasm and demonstrated capacity to create a vision for low-performing schools, ability to delegate to teams, an understanding of instructional strategies and best practices to spur improvement in low-performing schools with substantial non-white and low-income populations, and a commitment and clear strategies for involving students' families and the community in the school. The expectations should also reflect the Educational Leadership Policy Standards, which were adopted by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration in December 2007.¹⁷
2. By the end of the 2011-12 school year ensure that the foregoing expectations are part of a comprehensive and transparent system of principal and assistant principal selection.
3. During the 2011-12 school year institute Principal Learning Collaborative, a monthly gathering of all principals that will focus exclusively on instructional issues and will utilize walk-throughs as a primary learning experience for participants.¹⁸
4. Beginning in the 2010-11 school year provide high-quality professional development to principals that aligns with student learning goals and, when implemented, reflects performance-based evaluation results; early priority topics include teacher evaluation and school climate.
5. During the 2011-12 school year establish a team of school leaders, teachers and outside experts to develop a transparent performance-based evaluation

¹⁷ According to these standards, an educational leader promotes the success of every student by: 1) facilitating the development, articulation, implementation and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders; 2) advocating, nurturing and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth; 3) ensuring management of the organization, operation and resources for a safe, efficient and effective learning environment; 4) collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources; 5) acting with integrity, fairness and in an ethical manner; and, 6) understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, economic, legal and cultural context. (Council of Chief State School Officers, *Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008*) See Educational Leadership Policy Standards for more information about the functions aligned with each standards.

¹⁸ See the New Jersey Superintendents Network for a model of the walk-through being used to examine and seek resolution to problems of instructional practice.

system¹⁹; results will be used to guide professional development and retention decisions about school leaders.

6. By the end of the 2011-12 school year ensure that evaluation is meaningful; school leaders with poor evaluations and those who have not met the expectations described above should not be removed from one school only to be appointed to lead another one.

2 Positive, Supportive and Respectful Learning Environment

School climate²⁰ is vitally important to fostering student success. Research has consistently shown that it has significant influence on student achievement. Students learn more and teachers are more effective in positive school climates while both fare poorly in negative ones. An essential element of a positive school climate is an environment that is safe and orderly. Improved discipline and order by themselves, however, will *not* lead to increased learning. The second essential element of a positive school climate is an environment that is caring and encourages close relationships between and among students and educators. MPSD must ensure that every school cultivates a positive environment for students and teachers alike.

Findings

- Discipline statistics suggest that student behavior is a persistent problem in MPSD, perhaps more than in other districts. In the 2007-08 school year, 12.2 percent of all non-special education students in MPSD were expelled or received suspensions of 10 or more days; across the state, only 3.8 percent of students did so.²¹
- School-level data on discipline also signal that student behavior is cause for concern. One indicator of this is the proportion of students who receive two or more disciplinary referrals, which, at most schools across the district, is significant.

¹⁹ If feasible, refine and adopt an existing performance-based evaluation system such as the North Carolina School Executive: Principal Evaluation Process available on the website of the North Carolina Professional Teaching Standards Commission, <http://www.ncptsc.org/>

²⁰ School climate refers to the physical organization and context of a school as well as interactions that take place between and among adults in the school and students. Elements of school climate include: appearance and physical plant; faculty relations; student interactions; leadership/decision-making; disciplined environment; learning environment; attitude and culture; and, school-community relations. (Tableman, Betty. *Best Practice Briefs: School Climate and Learning*. East Lansing: Michigan State University. No. 31. December 2004.)

²¹ Mississippi Department of Education. *The Children First Annual Report: Meridian Public School District*. www.msreportcard.com.

School	Percent of Students Referred 2 or More Times		
	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09
Crestwood	30	27	9
Harris	31	33	27
Oakland Heights	13	11	14
Parkview	25	23	31
Poplar Springs	14	12	15
West Hills	NA	NA	NA
Carver Middle	45	NA	39
Magnolia Middle	51	52	43
Northwest Junior High	60	50	37
Meridian High	33	43	45

- Despite these numbers, there is some evidence of positive change. Although there was variation among schools, the total number of incidents in MPSD declined between 2006 and 2009.

School	# of Incidents 2006-07	# of Incidents 2007-08	# of Incidents 2008-09	Percent Change
Crestwood	633	568	178	-71.9%
Harris	1,411	1,184	895	-36.6%
Oakland Heights	1,087	342	409	-62.4%
Parkview	638	438	736	15.4%
Poplar Springs	415	368	434	4.6%
West Hills	1,332	872	872	-34.5%
Carver Middle	1,295	1,263	1,129	-12.8%
Magnolia Middle	2,256	2,549	1,996	-11.5%
Northwest Middle	2,879	2,181	2,573	-10.6%
Meridian High	2,740	3,940	3,953	44.3%
MPSD	16,714	16,193	16,337	-2.3%

- While infrequent, incidents of violence that threaten students and teachers' safety do occur. Between 2006 and 2009, 19 students were expelled from Meridian High School for serious offenses including fighting and possession of a weapon.
- The efficacy of district- and school-level responses to behavioral problems is uncertain. The impact of suspensions, for example, is unclear. Available data suggest that suspensions do not deter disciplinary incidents, at least among older students.

School	2006 – 2009 Overall Change	
	Change in use of suspensions	Change in # of incidents
Crestwood	+	-
Harris	+	-
Oakland Heights	+	-
Parkview	same	+
Poplar Springs	-	+
West Hills	-	-
Carver Middle	-	-
Magnolia Middle	-	-
Kate Griffin Junior High	same	+
Northwest Junior High	same	-
Meridian High	same	+

- A thorough examination of the nature and scope of MPSD’s disciplinary problems as well as its response to them is difficult as disciplinary data do not distinguish between infractions that are relatively minor and those that are more serious (e.g. suspensions for three tardies or for an altercation with another student).
- Student safety is significant concern for the community; many believe that schools are not safe places.
- School climate is also an issue of considerable concern; many in the community believe that students have little regard for their peers and for those who teach them. They describe interactions between students and teachers as disrespectful.
- There are reports that low-income parents, unlike more affluent parents, are more worried about their children’s safety on school buses than in school and that district leaders have been unresponsive to this concern.
- Students’ families and community members perceive efforts to enforce codes of conduct and disciplinary policies as often inconsistent, sometimes arbitrary and seemingly unfair.
- Some in the community view the relatively new policy that requires students involved in an altercation to be referred to the juvenile justice system as inappropriately harsh and targeted primarily to black male students.
- The negative perception community members have of school safety and climate reflects in part the lack of information they receive from district officials, particularly when there are significant incidents. This suggests to community members that school and district officials are concealing something or lack control.
- Teachers also have significant concerns about school climate and safety. Most teachers, including elementary school teachers, indicate that their students do not respect each other or teachers.
- According to many teachers, expectations of student behavior are not clearly understood or communicated. Teachers also report that there are few if any

consequences when students do not meet the expectations that have been communicated.

- Many teachers – including more than half of middle school teachers and about one-third of elementary and high school teachers – report that they do not receive guidance and support from their principals in responding to behavior and classroom management problems.
- A significant amount of time and effort is spent on the dress code and its enforcement. This has led to a good deal of uncertainty and frustration among school leaders, teachers, families and students about how the dress code is interpreted, who enforces it, what are appropriate sanctions for violating it, its relationship to academic success and how fairly it is applied.

Goals

- 1. Beginning with the 2010-11 school year every school in MPSD will provide an environment that is safe and orderly.**
- 2. Beginning with the 2010-11 school year every school in MPSD will provide a positive climate characterized by respect, caring and collaboration and by supportive relationships between educators and students.**

Strategies

School Safety

By the beginning of the next school year:

1. Revise student handbooks and codes of conduct to make clear the distinction between serious and less serious infractions and the sanctions for all violations. Disseminate student handbooks and codes of conduct through multiple means (booklet, website, community forums) so that all stakeholders are aware.
2. Ensure consistency among and within schools in enforcing codes of conduct and in discipline by clarifying principals' responsibilities in addressing disciplinary and classroom management issues and provide training to ensure that building leaders offer effective guidance and support to faculty and staff.
3. Clarify and consistently enforce the dress code: be clear about what is acceptable dress and what the sanctions are for dress deemed inappropriate; determine who is responsible for dress code enforcement; monitor incidents and enforcement to ensure consistency among and within schools; widely disseminate reports about dress code violations and how they were sanctioned; develop and enforce policies and sanction school leaders and teachers for not consistently enforcing the dress code.
4. Review policies governing when and under what conditions Meridian police and other law enforcement personnel are to intervene at a school. Ensure

that these policies are understood and widely disseminated and provide monthly reports to the community summarizing this activity.

5. Provide immediate and full reports to the community when significant incidents affecting safety and order occur. (See Dynamic Family and Community Connections).

School Climate

1. By September 2010 identify and select at least three student behavior intervention approaches that are research-based and have demonstrated success in promoting positive and respectful student behavior (e.g. School-wide Positive Behavior Supports).
2. By September 2010 select school climate assessment tool and disseminate to schools.²² The assessment tool should probe four areas: safety, personal relationships, teaching and learning, and institutional environment. Effective assessment tools also give voice to students and families, not only educators.²³
3. By September 2010 establish a teacher-led climate team in each school; teams will:
 - a. Administer school climate assessment and review results
 - b. Set annual goals for student behavior (e.g. reduce referrals by X percent)
 - c. Select one of the district-identified student behavior intervention approaches
 - d. Make additional recommendations as needed for improving student behavior and fostering a positive school environment for students and teachers
 - e. Oversee implementation of the selected approach, monitor its impact, and report to families and the community about results.
4. By December 2010 institute a peer mediation program in all schools to reduce student conflict; monitor implementation and results.
5. During the 2010-11 school year develop a plan to institute student advisories in all MPSD schools by the 2011-12 school year. At a minimum, the advisories will:
 - a. Meet in small groups
 - b. Meet weekly
 - c. Be led by teachers who have been trained in facilitating advisories
 - d. Incorporate at least one community-based service project annually
 - e. Utilize family and community members as secondary advisors
6. By August 2011 incorporate indicators of school climate in principals' evaluations.

²² Extensive research has been done on school climate and, as a result, there are high quality assessments, typically surveys, readily available from various organizations including the Center for Social and Emotional Education and the Alliance for the Study of School Climate.

²³ Cohen, Jonathon, Terry Pickeral, Molly McCloskey. "The Challenge of Assessing School Climate," *Educational Leadership*. December 2008/January 2009.

3 Informed and Responsive Central Office

Improving student achievement in Meridian requires significant changes at the school level – in interactions between students and teachers and between teachers and principals. It also requires significant changes at the district level. In districts that have made and sustained improvement in student learning, central office staff avoid the traditional role of ensuring compliance with regulations and instead focus on leading and supporting instructional innovation and excellence in schools. At a minimum, effective districts interact with instruction and learning by:

- Setting clear, rigorous and transparent expectations for schools while allowing them flexibility in determining how to meet those expectations
- Supporting schools with time and resources required to meet expectations
- Aligning curriculum, instruction and assessment
- Building teacher knowledge and skills
- Using data to identify needs, develop responses, monitor progress, foster accountability
- Establishing transparent accountability mechanisms
- Ensuring that all activities are tied to and further progress toward student learning goals.²⁴

If school-level reforms to improve teaching and learning are to succeed and be sustained, MPSD's central office must embrace this new role and new responsibilities.

Findings

- MPSD's central office focuses primarily on compliance with state and federal regulations rather than on facilitating and supporting instruction and learning or promoting reform.
- Central office functions to support teaching and learning are not integrated with each other nor are they integrated with non-academic departments.
- The central office staff does not yet have the skills and knowledge necessary to guide and support change in the schools.
- Following budget cuts and subsequent personnel changes in the central office, the district does not have adequate staffing to support school-level reforms.
- The district's data system is limited and does not enable educators to make data-driven instructional decisions.
- The data system does not provide the information necessary to hold educators – teachers, principals, central office staff – accountable for utilizing recognized best instructional practices and improving student achievement.

²⁴ Muller, Robert B. *The Role of the District in Driving School Reform: A Review for the Denver Commission on Secondary School Reform*. Chevy Chase, MD: Practical Strategy. November 2004.

- Data on indicators of teacher quality is limited, and at least some of them are apparently available only for the current year; they are not retained from previous years.
- The lack of permanent superintendent, vacancies in key central office positions and a reduced budget present significant though temporary constraints on efforts to reorganization central office.

Goals

- 1. Beginning immediately, MPSD's central office's primary role will be to guide and facilitate instructional improvement.**
- 2. By August 2011 MPSD will develop and implement a clear and comprehensive student data system that supports effective instruction; the data system will provide, at a minimum:**
 - a. Student performance data to measure academic growth²⁵**
 - b. Student-level enrollment, demographic and program participation information²⁶**
 - c. Student-level graduation, post-graduation and drop-out data**
 - d. Indicators of college readiness**
 - e. Linkages (student performance to specific teachers, teacher characteristics, instructional programs)**
- 3. By the end of the 2011-12 school year MPSD will have a teacher information system that is linked to its student data system, aligned with a human capital framework, and contains, at a minimum:**
 - a. Qualifications**
 - b. Information/characteristics**
 - c. Professional development**
 - d. Retention and intra-district mobility**
- 4. By August 2011 MPSD will have an effective internal communications system that ensures all employees have accurate and timely information and that they have routine opportunities and tools to communicate with central office.**
- 5. By the end of the 2010-11 school year MPSD's central office will be reorganized and re-structured to effectively support instruction and learning and ensure accountability in the context of district needs and**

²⁵ Student performance data include: student test scores on statewide assessments, student test scores on district-administered assessments, drill-down capability, individual student assessment performance over time.

²⁶ Student-level enrollment, demographic and program participation information includes: grades, course enrollment histories, prior school(s) attended in district, demographics, attendance, behavior, special education information, individual student history over time.

available resources. The new structure will emphasize the district role in:

- a. promoting effective teaching and deep learning
- b. supporting students and their families
- c. monitoring school performance
- d. outreach and communications to the community.

Strategies

Guiding Instructional Reform

1. By January 2011 hire a deputy superintendent for instruction; his/her responsibilities will include:
 - a. Managing school-based instructional improvement efforts
 - b. Collaborating with the Professional Learning Oversight Team
 - c. Ensuring that SLCs are implemented fully and effectively
 - d. Ensuring curriculum, assessments and instruction across all schools are aligned and driven by student achievement goals
 - e. Leading the Instructional Improvement Support team (see below)
2. By June 2011 establish an Instructional Improvement Support team, comprised of at least three central office staff with demonstrated effectiveness in leading and supporting school reform. The team's exclusive focus is to provide assistance to struggling schools; their responsibilities will include:
 - a. Collaborating with school leaders to identify instructional problems and develop solutions to them
 - b. Serving as a liaison to central office for schools
 - c. Identifying barriers to reform and developing policies and practices that respond to them
 - d. Holding school leaders accountable for implementing the agreed-upon strategies
3. Beginning immediately, provide high quality professional development to central office staff. Areas of focus should align with school-level reforms and district goals. Initial priorities should be SLC implementation, performance-based evaluation, data-driven instruction, and school climate
4. Beginning immediately, institute a weekly meeting of all senior administrators to monitor progress to interim student achievement goals, ensure day-to-day activities are aligned and reflect student learning goals, identify and develop responses to emerging problems and coordinate inter-departmental planning.

Student Data System

1. By June 2011 conduct an assessment of what student data is collected and how it is analyzed and used, including what professional development and tools are provided to support the use of data in the classroom.
2. By June 2011 identify gaps and implement interim enhancements to existing data collection and utilization practices (e.g. timely reports, accessible

presentation of data, increased guidance in using data to inform instruction, etc.)

3. By October 2011 develop a long-term plan to design, implement, support the adoption and use of, and fund an effective student data system.

Teacher Data System

1. By June 2011 conduct an assessment of what data on teachers is collected and how it is analyzed and used.
2. By June 2011 identify gaps and implement interim enhancements to existing data collection and utilization practices including tracking and maintaining core data from year to year
3. By October 2011 develop a long-term plan to design, implement, support the adoption and use of, and fund an effective teacher data system.

Internal Communications System

1. By January 2011 prioritize internal communications by including the new director of communications in the superintendent's core leadership team/cabinet so that he/she knows and can speak to how MPSD is moving toward meeting its goals. (See Dynamic Family and Community Connections)
2. By January 2011 conduct an assessment of existing internal communications practices and tools.
3. By March 2011 develop an internal communications plan that will, at a minimum:²⁷
 - a. Define the role of district and school leaders in disseminating information to faculty and staff and provide a framework, tools and support (communications toolkits and training) for them to do so
 - b. Establish practices and policies to ensure that all employees with routine and regular contact with parents and the public are courteous and prompt in their interactions with them.
 - c. Provide mechanisms for teachers and other staff to provide feedback to central office
 - d. Ensure that there is a mechanism for establishing key messages MPSD wishes to convey and disseminating them to school-level faculty and staff

Central Office Reorganization

1. Effective immediately, the interim superintendent will address the most urgent issues regarding teaching and learning: authority for and management of teaching and learning functions, SLC implementation, generating and using actionable data, and communication with key stakeholders inside and outside MPSD.

²⁷ See *Building Public Confidence in Urban Schools: It Begins Inside the District* by the Council of Great City Schools for additional information on and examples of an effective internal communications plan.

- a. Designate one person to oversee all matters related to instruction and learning and to whom all school leaders and senior administrators working on instruction will report directly. This individual will report to the interim superintendent.
- b. Facilitate the implementation of SLCs at MHS pursuant to the strategies outlined in Innovative and Aligned Schools, below.
- c. Initiate an assessment of the current data system and its use and identify and implement enhancements to existing data collection and utilization practices. (See Student Data System, above)
- d. In collaboration with the board and, where appropriate, other senior administrators, undertake outreach activities to key internal and external stakeholders including, for example:
 - i. Listening sessions with teachers and principals
 - ii. Small group meetings with civic, faith-based, business and other community leaders
 - iii. Roundtable discussions with families

These and similar activities will provide an opportunity for stakeholders to surface problems and express concerns, which can be shared with the permanent superintendent. More importantly they will also convey a sense of responsiveness by district leadership, which has been missing, to stakeholders.

2. Within 90 days following the selection of a new superintendent, design and implement a new organizational structure for the central office. The new organizational structure will:
 - a. Link all academic functions structurally and functionally
 - b. Integrate academic and non-academic functions so that non-academic functions align with and support student learning goals
 - c. Ensure that all academic units report to one person
 - d. Establish policies and practices that incorporate data collection and analysis into decision-making
 - e. Utilize a human capital framework to align functions that support teacher and principal effectiveness (recruitment, induction, support, evaluation and recognition)
 - f. Embed internal and external communications in district practice



4 Dynamic Family and Community Connections

The active involvement of families and the community in students' lives and in schools is essential to significantly improving student achievement in Meridian. When parents and other family members are involved in students' education – particularly when they set high expectations and regularly read and talk with their children – all students, regardless of their background, do better.^{28,29} At the same

²⁸ Michigan Department of Education. *What Research Says About Parent Involvement in Children's Education in Relation to Academic Achievement*. 2001

time, the community has an important role in school reform: it can both support education and demand performance from its schools.

Findings

- There is widespread recognition across the community that it has an important role in reforming public education and improving student outcomes. There is as well as a genuine desire among community members to contribute to schools.
- Despite this, community involvement is not robust, and many in Meridian view MPSD with distrust. Poor outreach and inconsistent performance is a significant reason for this.
- Community engagement has not always been a priority for MPSD. Ongoing efforts to inform and engage various stakeholders, including business leaders, civic leaders, families and other sectors of the community peaked during the vote on the bond issue in 2007, declined over the past two years and has only recently become important again for the district.
- The district communicates very little information, even about critical issues such as school safety and discipline; this has enabled rumor to take the place of fact and allowed stories of district successes to go untold.
- There is little in-depth understanding at either the district or school level of how best to engage parents and families, particularly low-income and minority families, which have traditionally been and continue to be disconnected from the school system. As a result, although all schools have sought to do so, they have had little success in engaging these families. Many parents, particularly those who are low-income, have reported feeling unwelcome in schools.
- Similarly MPSD and schools have not been adept at engaging and sustaining the engagement of other community members, including local businesses. Even those who have volunteered at schools in the past note that their visits are no longer welcome or even accepted when offered.
- The lack of robust community participation in schools also reflects community conditions. There is a significant lack of understanding about the importance of effective education and the connection between education and economic vitality of the region and quality of life for Meridian's citizens.
- Apathy about education remains generally high in the community and among a significant segment of educators.
- Despite these challenges, many in the community want the district to succeed and believe that, if it can show progress, Meridian's citizens will rally around the schools.

²⁹ Jeynes, William H. "Parental Involvement and Student Achievement: A Meta-Analysis," *Family Involvement Research Digests*. Harvard Graduate School of Education. Boston, MA 2005.

Goals

- 1. Effective immediately, MPSD will make effective communication a priority, with the superintendent responsible for overseeing and participating regularly in widespread outreach activities.**
- 2. By June 2011 MPSD will be recognized for effectively communicating with all key stakeholders in the community, including parents and families, business and civic leaders, and faith-based and nonprofit organizations.**
- 3. By September 2011 Meridian will explore the establishment of a local education fund, which supports improving teacher quality, facilitates community involvement and helps hold MPSD accountable for improving student outcomes.**
- 4. By September 2011 structured volunteer opportunities will be available, communicated and coordinated through the central office to allow community members – parents, families, business and civic leaders, higher education faculty – to contribute their knowledge and expertise on school campuses.**
- 5. By June 2012 the majority of MPSD families, including low-income and minority families, will be actively involved in their children’s education and participate in school-based activities.**

Strategies

Communications

1. By January 2011 hire a director of communications and outreach by January 2011. The communications director should be skilled in public outreach strategies and technically proficient in both print and electronic media, including television, radio and Internet communications.
2. By January 2011 establish a communications advisory committee comprised of local experts (e.g. local media representatives, communications faculty from MSU-Meridian and MCC, etc.); the committee will:
 - a. Review MPSD’s existing communications plan and tools
 - b. Develop a communications plan that:
 - i. targets all key stakeholder groups, including low-income and minority parents
 - ii. offers differentiated strategies, including enhancements to and increased interactivity on the website, to effectively communicate with each group

- iii. includes multiple mechanisms for stakeholders to offer feedback, raise concerns, and access information
 - iv. provides indicators of effectiveness
 - v. outlines a timeline for full implementation of the plan.
- 3. By September 2010 review existing communications policies regarding significant school incidents that threaten student or teacher safety and revise as needed to ensure that information is communicated quickly to all media outlets and key community leaders and that there is appropriate follow-up with parents and other constituencies. Disseminate information to all school leaders.
- 4. Effective at his/her hiring, develop and institute superintendent-led communications activities including, for example:
 - a. A monthly superintendent's forum held in on school campuses. "Table Talk with the Superintendent" – casual, small group meetings with representatives of diverse groups and organizations; where possible meetings should be held off-site at organizations' locations
 - b. Community Cabinet – quarterly meetings with key leaders within the community (e.g. presidents of MCC, MSU-Meridian, business representatives, mayor, etc.) to apprise them of issues within MPSD, progress in reform and opportunities for citizens' involvement and assistance.
 - c. A monthly column in the Meridian Star
 - d. Regular appearances on television and radio
- 5. During the 2010-11 school year incorporate measures of community engagement in the superintendent's evaluation.
- 6. By the start of 2011-12 school year develop an annual "State of Education in Meridian" report to be distributed each August. The report will contain data on school and district quality including:
 - a. Student achievement
 - b. Student behavior (safety and discipline, retention and attendance rate)
 - c. Graduation rate and post-secondary enrollment
 - d. Teacher quality (retention and attendance rate)
 - e. Parent/family involvement
 - f. Goals for the next school year
 - g. Key instructional improvement strategies

Local Education Fund

1. By December 2010 establish a community task force to consider the viability of and, if appropriate, to develop a plan to establish a local education fund (LEF).³⁰ The task force, comprised of local stakeholders (business and civic leaders, funder representatives, school board members, etc.), will consider:

³⁰ The Public Education Network describes LEFs as "community-based advocacy organizations that engage local citizens in public education reform. Though independent of their local school districts, LEFs work closely with public school administrators, teachers, and boards. Their partners are parents, community leaders, businesses, and students."

- a. Community interest in an LEF
 - b. Community capacity to support an LEF, including financial
 - c. LEF role and leadership
 - d. LEF models and areas of activities (e.g. teacher grants, coordinating school-based volunteer activities, advocacy, district accountability, etc.)
2. By June 2011 the task force will report on the feasibility of creating a local education fund, its structure, responsibility and funding.

Parent, Family and Community Involvement

1. Effective at his/her hiring, the superintendent will host a series of community roundtables, held at community locations, on safety and discipline that will:
 - a. Surface families' and community members' key concerns
 - b. Facilitate discussion of school and district needs that inform safety and discipline policies
 - c. Solicit feedback on policy of referral to the juvenile justice system
2. By December 2010 begin to provide professional development to all school leaders on strategies to effectively engage low-income and minority parents.
3. By December 2010 require all schools to develop and implement a plan to engage parents and family members, with particular focus on those who are currently most disconnected (low-income and minority populations). The plan should include an assessment of current levels of parent involvement, which will serve as a benchmark, and goals for future involvement.
4. By December 2010 create and communicate a clear and structured way for community members to visit and volunteer in the schools. Designate a volunteer coordinator at each school who will communicate with the central office about needs and opportunities for community members to help in the classrooms.

5 Innovative and Aligned System of High-Performing Schools

In 2007, with extensive input from the community, MPSD designed and began the challenging task of implementing small learning communities (SLCs) as a means to transform teaching and learning at MHS. The SLCs were seen as a powerful mechanism to:

- set higher expectations of students and faculty alike
- infuse innovation and best practices into instruction
- increase rigor in curriculum and link its application to the workplace

(<http://www.publiceducation.org/lefs.asp>) Among other things, LEFs advocate for reform, serve as a public voice for accountability by the school district, generate resources for schools and districts, support improvement in teacher quality, and coordinate community activities to support instructional improvement.

- cultivate closer relationships between teachers and students, allowing for far greater personalization.

To the frustration of many, progress in implementing the SLCs has slowed and must now be pursued with new vigor and with clear benchmarks. At the same time, MPSD must also begin driving reform down into the 9th Grade and the middle and elementary schools. Doing so does not mean that middle and elementary schools will be reconfigured as SLCs; rather, it requires these schools to set higher expectations, improve instruction through innovation and best practices, increase rigor in curriculum and enhance student-teacher relationships to foster greater personalization. Aligning the SLCs at MHS with reforms at lower levels will ensure that students at each level are receiving a high quality education and will be fully prepared to transition to and meet the demands of each successive level. At the same time, it is critical that students enter MPSD ready to learn; too many children are not – they enter school behind and often never catch up to their peers.

Findings

- Research on SLCs continues to validate their effectiveness when well-implemented in providing a greater degree of personalization for students, and in fostering the teaching methods and curriculum content that promote rigor and greater student interest in learning.³¹
- There is strong support for SLCs across the district and in the community, including business and civic leaders; SLCs are viewed as a means to better prepare students for postsecondary study and the workplace.
- There is significant disappointment in and frustration with the pace of SLC implementation and little understanding of why implementation has faltered.
- Many in the community – even those who were involved in their initial design – report receiving little information from the district about the progress in implementing the SLCs.
- Slow implementation of SLCs is directly connected to intensity of district and building leaders' commitment to the reform; the design elements are in place and meet recognized best practices for SLCs.
- SLC leaders are discouraged by the lack of support they have received, the lack of interest and resistance from some of their colleagues, and the uncertainty they face about current district commitment to SLC implementation.
- Little progress has been made in driving down the core elements of SLCs into elementary and middle schools as well as the 9th Grade.
- Outside of MHS, most teachers understand the elements of the SLCs but do not understand how the SLCs connect to their work.

³¹ Evan, A., Huberman, M., Means, B., Mitchell, K., Shear, L., Shkolnik, J., Smerdon, B., et al. (2006) *Evaluation of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's High School Grants Initiative: 2001-2005 Final Report*. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research and SRI International.

- Recent leadership changes at the high school and in the district have heightened uncertainty about the future of the SLCs and brought implementation, already slowed, to a halt.

SLC Implementation: Inconsistent Leadership, Uneven Progress, Unrealized Potential

SLCs were widely embraced by a diverse cross-section of Meridianites and led to the passage in 2007 of the community's first major school bond issue in decades. SLC design teams were established at MHS and a director of high school redesign was named at central office. They made steady progress and SLC implementation was ahead of schedule through the summer of 2008. Their accomplishments include developing planning documents and protocols to support the adoption of the SLCs, which were reviewed and adopted by district leaders and the board. Beginning in the fall of 2008, however, implementation of core instructional and outreach elements of the SLCs (team teaching, course development, common planning, internships and community advisory committees) began to lag while collateral elements (community service, student trips and advisories) were undertaken. Interviews, focus groups, and surveys suggest multiple reasons why this occurred:

1. A lack of understanding by MPSD leadership of the centrality of SLCs to Meridian and concomitant lack of commitment to SLC implementation
2. A lack of commitment by high school leadership to SLCs and concomitant unwillingness to make the SLCs the locus of instructional planning, professional development and student work
3. A lack of budget dedicated to the development of SLCs
4. Unclear direction to the director of high school redesign from district leadership
5. Resistance and lack of participation from some high school teachers
6. A lack of understanding and buy-in by key central office staff of the centrality of the SLCs to educational change in MPSD
7. A lack of authority on the part of the director of high school redesign and the SLC leaders to promote SLC implementation
8. Changes to the high school schedule so that the schedule no longer effectively supports SLC implementation

Today, SLC implementation is further threatened by the district's financial situation and the resulting elimination of key central office positions, including the director of high school redesign and the director of curriculum and professional development. Despite these challenges, the MPSD Board of Trustees has signaled that SLC implementation remains a priority and has charged the new MHS principal with responsibility for it.

Getting the implementation of the SLCs back on track will require ongoing, focused commitment at the board, district, and building levels. It will require the active participation of teachers – not just at Meridian High School but at every school in MPSD. It will require community demand for the district to deliver on SLCs and support for the district do so. These requirements are challenging but, with a shared vision of the future, defined expectations that shape activities and inform accountability, and the collective will to do so, Meridian can fulfill them and bring the SLCs into full fruition.

Goals

The following goals and strategies deal with student success from pre-kindergarten to high school. They consider school readiness and conditions in elementary and middle schools and focus on ensuring full SLC implementation. They recognize the critical importance of SLCs to the reforming the high school and to driving the reform down to middle and elementary schools. They further recognize SLCs as a means to promote effective community involvement and stronger connections to business. The recommendations are detailed and also reflect the fiscal realities the district faces. Finally, these recommendations are not new – they are design principles tested by research and experience and were provided to district leadership and others in Meridian as SLC planning took place. They require commitment, focus and will to implement.

- 1. Every student, regardless of socioeconomic background, enters MPSD ready to learn.**
- 2. 100% of Meridian High School students graduate.**
- 3. Every school in MPSD shares the attributes of SLCs:**
 - a. holds and defines high expectations of student success,**
 - b. offers supportive relationships with adults**
 - c. provides personalized, effective instruction.**
- 4. SLCs are fully implemented at Meridian High School and aligned with lower levels.**

Strategies

School Readiness

1. Assess school readiness needs and establish district-wide priorities
2. Develop and launch a community-wide initiative to enhance school readiness among disadvantaged children.
 - a. Engage the United Way of East Mississippi and explore the possibility of initiating Success by 6, a national United Way effort that provides a framework for communities to raise awareness of the importance of early childhood development, improve access to and quality of services, advocate for supportive policies and reform systems – budgets, laws and supports.³²
 - b. If Success by 6 is not feasible, convene a community task force on school readiness. Task force will examine and make recommendations on:

³² Additional information about Success by 6 (SB6) is available at <http://www.national.unitedway.org/> Information about local strategies and impact is available on the websites of local United Way affiliates and can be accessed by searching the national website.

- i. Need for early childhood programs (are there enough?)
- ii. Awareness of existing early childhood programs, particularly among disadvantaged families.
- iii. Communicating attributes of school readiness to parents and early childhood/daycare providers
- iv. Strengthening the quality of early childhood programs

Improving the Graduation Rate

1. By June 2011 conduct a segment analysis³³ to identify specific characteristics of students who drop out in Meridian; data reviewed should include but not be limited to attendance, discipline, course selection and grades, achievement as measured by the MCT2 and the SATP and socioeconomic background.
2. Establish a team of teachers from each level (elementary, middle, 9th Grade and MHS) to review and revise the dropout prevention plan developed in 2007 in conjunction with the state's dropout prevention plan. Relying on the results of the segment analysis, the plan should draw on emerging practices that leading districts have utilized successfully to reduce their dropout rates. These districts include Chicago, New York, Milwaukee, Minneapolis and Fall River (MA); a commonality across these districts is use of data to identify specific students at risk for dropping out. The plan should build on the traits of the SLCs and should go beyond a compilation of existing programs. When existing programs are utilized, they should be reviewed and, as necessary and appropriate, re-oriented to focus on graduation.
3. By the end of the 2011-12 school year, hire a dropout prevention coordinator, who will:
 - a. Lead the dropout prevention team and coordinate its work
 - b. Conduct research on and serve as a resource in developing effective dropout prevention strategies
 - c. Provide technical assistance to school leaders and faculty in implementing dropout prevention strategies
 - d. Serve as the liaison to community-based programs that provide support to at-risk students and, where feasible, align their programs with school-based programs
 - e. Monitor school-level progress and strategies
 - f. Report progress bi-weekly to the superintendent and district leadership team
4. Prepare and disseminate an annual report on progress in improving the graduation rate; while information on the graduation rate should be included

³³ A segment analysis identifies a group of individuals who have something in common – a segment of a given population – and examines how this segment differs from others. In this instance, a segment analysis will enable MPSD to move beyond general descriptions and assumptions about students who drop out – e.g. students who have been retained, are not reading at grade level in the 6th grade, are pregnant or parents – to specific indicators such as, for example, students who are not reading at grade level in the 6th grade and are absent 10 or more times a year. It may be that absenteeism is a greater risk factor for dropping out than reading proficiency; segment analysis will shed light on this.

in the annual “State of Education in Meridian” report, it should also be reported to the community in a separate document.

5. Include progress in improving the graduation rate in the evaluation of the superintendent and of school leaders.

Driving Down SLC Attributes

1. Provide professional development to principals and other key school leaders in core areas (e.g. personalized instruction) improvement and leading change.
2. Establish Redesign Teams in every school; the Redesign Teams will develop a framework – structures and practices – for each school to incorporate the attributes of the SLCs. The teams will link the framework to instructional improvement strategies and student learning goals and propose implementation strategies. They will present their plans for approval to the Redesign Oversight Committee (see below), and provide the Committee with reports on interim progress and annual progress.
3. Establish a Redesign Oversight Committee comprised of district leaders, one to two school board members, experts (e.g. faculty from MSU-Meridian), and consultants. The Committee will review each school’s plan and approve it, with revisions if necessary, and monitor progress.

SLC Implementation

The recommendations that follow are a distillation of earlier plans. They surface priorities for the 2010-11 school year, and are the minimum that must be done to ensure that SLCs are implemented effectively.

1. Provide clear, consistent and continuous leadership for SLC implementation at the highest levels of MPSD.
 - a. By August 2010 establish a committee of the board that will:
 - i. Review these recommendations and communicate SLC 2010-11 priorities to the central office, high school leadership, other building leaders and every teacher and administrator at MPSD
 - ii. Review by October 1, 2010 previous SLC documents, including but not limited to the SLC Documentation Guide, the June 27, 2008 PowerPoint entitled *Framing the Future: A Community’s Journey to Educational Excellence*, the April 23, 2009 PowerPoint entitled *Blueprint for the Future* and the Working Outcomes: 2008-2011 SLC Planning Guide.
 - iii. Develop two-year priorities for final SLC implementation.
 - iv. Meet as needed with the SLC implementation committee (see below)
 - b. Ensure that the central office is actively and continuously engaged in supporting and monitoring SLC implementation. Central office staff will:
 - i. By August 2010 create an SLC implementation committee, headed by the superintendent that will include the high school principal and assistant principal, and individuals responsible for human resources,

student services and community outreach, along with any other administrators deemed necessary. The implementation committee will:

1. Ensure that the priorities in this plan are implemented pursuant to schedule.
 2. Meet monthly with SLC leaders to discuss progress, emerging issues, strategies and possible challenges to effective and timely implementation
 3. Convene weekly to review and monitor progress
 4. Recommend mid-course corrections in implementation
 5. Develop monthly reports and quarterly presentations for the Board regarding progress
 6. Develop and implement comprehensive communications tools, including a website that is updated regularly, media presentations and written reports
 7. Report regularly to the community
2. Organize the high school so that it can effectively implement SLCs.
 - a. Immediately designate the principal as responsible for SLC implementation and charge the principal with appointing one assistant principal whose primary responsibility will be managing and supporting day-to-day implementation and who will report directly to the principal.
 - b. By August 15, 2010 review and revise the high school schedule to ensure that future schedules most effectively support SLC implementation by requiring an eight-period day and a modified block.
 - c. By August 15, 2010 assign a counselor to each SLC and require they meet regularly with the teachers in that SLC
 - d. Beginning in August 2010 provide sufficient time for teachers to meet within their SLCs – at least once a week for an hour
 - e. Beginning in August 2010 provide sufficient time for SLC leaders to meet as a group – at least once a week for an hour
 - f. Beginning in August 2010 provide sufficient time for students to meet in their SLCs – twice a month for an hour each time
 - g. Beginning in August 2010 ensure that advisories meet weekly
 - h. Beginning immediately, refer to MHS as an “SLC school” in all communications
 3. Make the SLCs the locus of all academic planning, supplanting departments. The high school principal and designated assistant principal, with approval from the implementation committee and the board, will:
 - a. Ensure that SLC discussions incorporate prescribed topics including:
 - i. Best practices
 - ii. Collective practice
 - iii. Cooperative learning
 - iv. Teaching strategies and techniques that go beyond lecturing and focus on quality and variation in the delivery of instruction
 - v. Experiential learning
 - vi. Data collection, analysis and use
 - b. Develop and align professional development with 3.a. above.

- c. Require each SLC to create its own action plan supporting these priorities by October 1, 2010. The action plan should include:
 - i. Peer learning and professional development
 - ii. Personalized student relationships
 - iii. Discipline
 - iv. Curriculum development
 - v. Testing
 - vi. Family involvement
 - vii. Responsible parties
 - viii. Evaluation
- d. By August 30, 2010 define the SLC leader role. Make clear that the SLC leader has an authority to:
 - i. Promote best practices
 - ii. Develop and enforce a system to monitor teacher attendance and participation at SLC meetings and report those who are absent, obstructive or otherwise noncompliant
- e. By September 15, 2010 provide each teacher in the high school with written expectations about their role in SLC implementation, including a requirement for developing more personalized relationships with students
- 4. Ensure that every student is an active participant in an SLC. The principal, assistant principal and SLC leaders will:
 - a. By September 30, 2010 schedule twice-monthly student meetings with prepared agendas
 - b. By October 2010 solicit contributions and support for distinctive t-shirts that incorporate the logos for each SLC
 - c. Ensure that each student, depending on grade level:
 - i. Regularly participates in advisory, receives timely and regular counseling about the future
 - ii. Participates in joint and individual learning efforts (i.e. senior projects) connected to the SLC
 - iii. Participates in community service
 - iv. Has at least one outside learning experience each year (including but not limited to mentoring, field trips, working experience, college visits)
- 5. Connect instruction, learning, counseling and extracurricular activities in the 9th Grade to SLCs in the high school. The implementation committee and the assistant principal in charge of the 9th grade will:
 - a. By October 2010 develop material for 9th grade students that describes SLCs and their role in preparing students for postsecondary education or meaningful work.
 - b. By November 2010 administer an interest inventory to all 9th graders and provide time for individual discussions with individual students regarding the inventory results and SLCs.
 - c. By February 2011 implement an “advisory course” in the 9th grade based on material previously developed that will ensure that every 9th grade student is exposed to postsecondary possibilities.

- d. By December 2011 provide families of 9th grade students with multiple opportunities to learn about SLCs and the choices students will have
- e. Create professional development opportunities for 9th grade teachers that expose them to SLCs and enable them to consider subjects discussed in 3.a. above

NEXT STEPS

The plan's goals and strategies are interconnected and detailed. They are detailed by design. MPSD requires a clear path toward educational success, one that is lighted by best practices. In Meridian, the path has too often been cluttered, with best practices not always visible. In providing greater detail, the plan seeks to provide insight into research-based best practice and to enable educators to avoid distraction.

Implementing a comprehensive plan is a challenge for a district that is cash-strapped, short-staffed and searching for permanent leadership. Not everything can be implemented at once, but it is imperative that the district and the community together take the first steps to improving education and to a more positive future.

To do so, two things must occur. The first involves immediate action – the board, the interim superintendent and school leaders must seize the initiative and establish clear priorities. These must be acted upon immediately and results must be reported regularly, transparently and completely to all stakeholders.

This is the only the first step. The second builds on the first. It, too, involves immediate action, but it requires an abiding commitment to long-term transformation on the part of everyone. The culture of blame must be replaced by one of accountability based on expectations, where candor and responsibility replace recrimination and avoidance. This culture will be propelled by a shared vision of student success and community betterment. Excellent education is the key to this vision and all must embrace it.

KRONLEY & ASSOCIATES: AN OVERVIEW

Kronley & Associates has over 30 years of experience in working with a wide variety of clients that are anticipating or undergoing significant change. The firm's work, undertaken in close collaboration with its clients, includes strategic planning, evaluation, program and policy analysis, facilitation, and the provision of targeted advice on capacity and organization. A more detailed description of the firm, our staff, and related projects is provided at www.kronley.com.

APPENDIX A: STRATEGIC PLANNING ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Debra Brewer
Jennifer DuPont
Becky Glover
Brad Huff
Wade Jones
Jerome Kittrell
A.D. Lewis
Edward Lynch
Jim McGinnis
Judith Miller
Walter Patton
Lee Shelbourn
Wallace Strickland
Ron Turner
Sherry White

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEWEES

Rebecca Combs
Phil Hardin Foundation

Elaine Maust
Jubilee Mennonite Church

Bill Crawford
Montgomery Institute

Jim McGinnis
The McGinnis Lumber Company

Don Evans
MPSD Board of Trustees³⁴

William McNeil
Quality Logistics Systems

Becky Farley
Riley Foundation

Judith Miller
MPSD Board of Trustees

Becky Glover
Parents for Public Schools

Shannon Miller
MPSD

H. Wingfield Glover III
Glover, Young, Walton & Simmons

William F. Scaggs
Montgomery Institute

Bubba Hampton
Community Bank

Perry Wallace
Riley Hospital

Teresa Hodges
MPSD Board of Trustees

Fred Wile
Southern Cast Products
MPSD Board of Trustees (Former)

Brad Huff
Specialty Roll Products

Lee Shelbourn
Chief of Police, Meridian

Wade Jones
East Mississippi Business
Development Corporation

Jeff Lewis
Assistant Chief of Police, Meridian

Jerome Kittrell
Winstead Realty

Terry Larabee
MPSD

Edward Lynch
The Art Connection
MPSD Board of Trustees (Former)

³⁴ All current MPSD board members were contacted and asked to be interviewed; those listed here responded.

APPENDIX C: SHARED ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES SUMMARY

The committees, teams or other groups referenced in this plan, categorized by the type of work that they do and whether they are temporary (task-specific) or long-term, are summarized described below.

Task-Specific Groups			
Group	Membership	Purpose	Timeframe
Communications Advisory Committee	Comprised of local communications experts; led by the director of communications and outreach	Preparing a comprehensive communications plan that will enable MPSD to effectively engage all stakeholders groups	Will dissolve when its task is complete
Community LEF Task Force	Comprised of leading community stakeholders; led by a representative of the business community or a local funder.	Assess the feasibility of establishing an LEF in Meridian and, if appropriate, make recommendations for doing so	Will dissolve when its task is complete
Principal Evaluation Team	Comprised of school leaders, teachers and outside experts; led by the superintendent.	Developing a fair and transparent performance-based evaluation system for principals.	2011-12 school year. Superintendent should reconvene the team in subsequent years to monitor implementation and make recommendations to the evaluation system as needed
Professional Learning Oversight Team	Comprised of teachers and school leaders; led by the deputy superintendent for instruction.	Reviewing and revising the current system of professional development.	2010-11 school year. As needed, the deputy superintendent should reconvene the team in subsequent years to monitor professional development practices, ensure that they are effective and make recommendations on changes as necessary.
Redesign Oversight Committee	Comprised of district leaders, 1 to 2 school board members, experts and consultants; led by the superintendent.	Reviewing each school's Redesign Team plan, approving it with revisions as necessary.	2010-11 school year. Ongoing monitoring of progress as needed.
Redesign Team	Comprised of teachers in each school; led by the principal.	Creating a plan to drive down attributes of the SLCs, presenting plans for approval to the Oversight Committee (below).	2010-11 school year. Ongoing reporting to the Oversight Committee on interim and annual progress.

School-based Climate Teams	Comprised of teachers and led by one; at the middle schools, 9 th Grade and MHS, students will also serve on the teams.	Leading efforts to foster a positive school climate, including administering a school climate assessment, setting annual goals for student behavior, selecting strategies to improve student behavior, monitoring and reporting results.	Established in every school during the 2010-11 school year. Continuation of the teams beyond the 2010-11 school year is dependent on efficacy of climate improvement efforts; membership should change as appropriate and necessary.
SLC Implementation Committee	Comprised of the MHS principal and assistant principal, individuals responsible for human resources, student services and community outreach, along with other administrators as necessary; led by the superintendent	Ensuring strategic plan implementation on schedule, meeting with SLC leaders, monitoring progress, recommending mid-course corrections, reporting to the board regarding progress, developing and implementing communications tools, reporting regularly to the community.	2010-11 school year, lasting at least two years, and re-convened in subsequent years or re-constituted as an instructional cabinet.
Teacher Evaluation Team	Comprised of teachers, school leaders and outside experts; led by the superintendent.	Developing a fair and transparent performance-based evaluation system for teachers.	2010-11 school year. As needed, the superintendent should reconvene the team in subsequent years to monitor implementation and make recommendations on changes to the evaluation system.

New Structural Groups		
Group	Membership	Purpose
Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)	Comprised of SLC members and facilitated by the SLC leaders at MHS. The specific number and configuration of the PLCs will vary at other schools, based on each school's specific needs and context; each learning community, however, will be guided by a teacher trained as a facilitator.	Established within each SLC at MHS in the 2010-11 school year and at all other schools during the 2011-12 school year. PLCs will focus on instructional issues specific to the students served. PLC members will work together to examine curriculum standards, critique student work, surface and resolve common instructional problems, and develop more effective lessons.
Principal Learning Collaborative	Comprised of principals. Led by the superintendent	Will function largely as a PLC for principals and will focus exclusively on instructional issues. Will be a core element of professional development for principals and its administration and oversight will be incorporated into MPSD's new organizational structure.
Instructional Support Team	Comprised of at least three central office staff persons with demonstrated success in leading efforts to improve instruction; led by the deputy superintendent for instruction.	The team, which should be part of the central office's new organizational structure, is responsible for supporting school-level instructional improvement initiatives.