

EDUCATION WEEK

American Education's Newspaper of Record | Volume XXII, Number 59 • October 13, 2004 | © 2004 Editorial Projects in Education

OCTOBER 13, 2004

At State's Urging, Mississippi Schools Use Reform Model

By Alan Richard
Jackson, Miss.

In a forgotten corner of Mississippi's state capital, test scores are going up at a middle school for struggling students, thanks to a program imported with the state's guidance.

The Morrison Academic Advancement Center, housed in an old elementary school, saw considerable gains in just one year. The progress for the 7th and 8th graders—all of whom were considered at risk of dropping out—stems from the adoption of the America's Choice model of whole-school reform, says Principal Sherry Sterling.

[Caption: See a related story, "States' Roles Prove Tough on Big Scale."]

State officials turned to America's Choice, developed seven years ago by the National Center on Education and the Economy, a Washington research group, as a way to help dozens of schools that had failed to make adequate academic progress under the No Child Left Behind Act.

Experts predict that an increasing number of states will turn to private and nonprofit groups for help as the pressure to address low-performing schools mounts. Few state education departments or school districts,

they say, have the expertise or the capacity to help large numbers of low-performing schools, as required by the federal law. (See related story, this page.)

That was certainly the case here in Mississippi, said Washington Cole, the director of student achievement and growth for the state department of education.

"We knew that with a very limited state budget and limited federal funds coming into our state, that providing technical assistance to schools that didn't meet adequate yearly progress was going to be quite a feat for us," he said. "Therefore, we made the decision that we needed to partner with a research-based program."

About 50 schools across Mississippi are using America's Choice. The program was voluntary for schools and districts, but recommended and endorsed by the state. Ms. Sterling and leaders in the 32,000-student Jackson system decided her school would spend roughly \$75,000 a year on America's Choice.

"It's almost as if they've taken it and made it into a formula," she said, referring to



AMERICA'S
CHOICE®

the developers of the reform model. Ms. Sterling, who has been the principal of her 175-student campus for struggling students for four years, continued: “This has to be something you do all day, every day.” ‘Rituals and Routines’

‘Rituals and Routines’

America’s Choice trains teachers and administrators in instructional methods that stress teamwork, student research, and the use of everyday examples that many students can understand. Academic coaches in the schools assist teachers, and the coaches and district leaders consult with regional America’s Choice staff members who provide further guidance. (“Studies Find Benefits From ‘America’s Choice’ Design,” April 21, 2004.)

The design requires heavy doses of instructional time for mathematics and reading. It also provides a structure and tools, including the coaches, that many better-performing schools take for granted. The model’s “rituals and routines” become habits, educators here said.

Mississippi became the first state to contract with America’s Choice specifically to help large numbers of schools meet the requirements of the federal law when the state board of education approved the plan in April of last year.

Other states, including Georgia and New Jersey, have used America’s Choice to help

in their general school improvement efforts. More than 500 schools in 15 states have implemented America’s Choice since 1998.

“What we attempt to do is build the capacity of the existing staff” at schools, said Donald G. Connell, the project manager for Mississippi’s Choice, as the program is known here.

Many schools adopting the model in Mississippi are using federal Title I money to pay the \$70,000 to \$75,000 annual fees, said Susan Rucker, the state’s associate superintendent for innovation and school improvement.

Test scores for students in Mississippi’s Choice schools improved at a significantly higher rate last school year than did scores for students in all of the state’s schools, although the results show that Mississippi’s Choice students still have far to go. The results were released in August.

Statewide, 80 percent of the 4th graders tested were proficient in math, a 6-percentage-point increase, while 63 percent of the 4th graders in Mississippi’s Choice schools were rated proficient, a rise of 15 percentage points.

State officials said the gains were especially significant because about nine of 10 students in Mississippi’s Choice schools come from low-income minority families. “With a nine-month implementation, and you see the kind



of gains we've seen in our schools, there's no doubt that it works," said Mr. Cole, who helps oversee the model for the state.

Even with its early success, however, state officials say schools must constantly improve their implementation of America's Choice. Without devotion to its practices, schools can flounder.

"The leadership in some of the schools hasn't taken that on as a focus," Ms. Rucker said, "and in those schools, we are not seeing success."

Difficult Transition

Here at Morrison Academic Advancement Center, literacy coach Alfred Boyd sits at a fold-out, rectangular table with several teachers. Taking his cues from America's Choice, he encourages teachers to create "reading conference" areas in their classrooms and guides them through training documents on the practice.

The conferences are designed to help teachers talk with students about their strengths and weaknesses in reading, subjects they like to read about, and types of instruction they enjoy.

"It's just an organized way of doing what good teachers do anyway," said Ms. Sterling, the principal.

Even though they're still low, test scores at Morrison are moving up. In 8th grade

language, for example, last year 69 percent of the students scored at the "basic" level, compared with 48 percent the year before.

Thirty miles north of her school, the middle school in the small town of Canton, Miss., is still grappling with the model, although the principal and senior teachers at Nichols Middle School say it looks promising.

"Initially, I was a little skeptical, because I'm an old educator and I've seen programs come and go," said Willie A. Dale, the principal of the 1,270-student school. He credits America's Choice with strong early improvements in teaching that helped the school get off a list of the state's worst schools two years ago to earn an average rating on the most recent test scores.

"We're more comfortable with it than last year," said Mary S. Blackmon, the literacy coach and lead teacher at Nichols, which is part of the 3,480-student Canton school district. "We need to wait and see what it's going to do for Mississippi."

"I'd like to see it [work]," Ms. Blackmon said. "We'd like to retire and be proud."

From the Archives

"Studies Find Benefits From 'America's Choice' Design," April 21, 2004.

"States Unable to Help All Struggling Schools," January 7, 2004.



“Model for Redesigning Middle Schools Found To Boost Scores,” January 22, 2003.

“Experts Debate Effect Of Whole-School Reform,” January 30, 2002.

“Whole-School Projects Show Mixed Results,” November 7, 2001.

See other stories on education issues in Mississippi.

For background, previous stories, and Web links, read Comprehensive School Reform.

Resources on the Web

Learn more about the America’s Choice School Design, from the National Center on Education and the Economy.

The Mississippi Department of Education posts information on its Statewide Accountability System.

The Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory maintains a database of whole school reform models.

