

Shaw High School

A Case Study in
Rural High School Improvement



Prepared by
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The Rural School and Community Trust
Capacity Building Program
for the Southern Governors' Association

July 2004

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Rural High School Improvement



The Rural School and Community Trust
Capacity Building Program

July 2004

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■ An Introduction to Shaw School District

By Greg Flippins

The setting for this educational institution, the Shaw School District, is the Delta of Mississippi, an area of rich and fertile soil as formed by the Mississippi River.

The transformation of this locality from a forest to its present state started in the 1850s when Thomas Shannon, a white farmer and slave owner from Pontotoc, Mississippi, came to this area with his slaves. It is said that the slaves “walked the greater part of the distance...most of them barefoot,” which by highway miles today is approximately 150. A tour through Downtown Shaw will undoubtedly carry you along Peeler Avenue. Slaves cleared this street, initially a part of the forest, to form the first trail through Shaw.

The first of three school buildings to be built for white children in Shaw was constructed in 1890. Shaw High School, which was constructed in 1923, is recognized as being in existence due to the effort and contribution of Mr. L.G. Dean, who moved to the Shaw area in 1889. It has been written that “it was through his efforts, primarily, that the beautiful modern...School was built,” indicating that “he gave the land...on which the school stands and served on its board for twenty years.” However, no mention is made of the fact that the deed included the statement that it was given “for the education of white children and white children only.”

Out from under bondage and the law that said it was a crime for a Black person to know how to read, Blacks accomplished their early education in churches throughout the area, where one teacher taught students of all ages.

In the 1920s a Black businessman by the name of Thomas McEvans II, a person concerned about the education being provided for Black children of Shaw, raised

thousands of dollars for use in conjunction with Rosenwald funds to construct the magnificent two-story facility known as the Shaw Colored School.

The Shaw Colored School was completely destroyed by fire in the late 1950s. This was about the same time that the State of Mississippi was putting forth an effort to construct red brick school buildings in every municipality throughout the Delta for Black children to attend. Both events occurred within a few years after the *Brown v Board of Education* decision that separate but equal was no longer the law of the land and that states should desegregate their Whites only schools “...with all deliberate speed.”

The Black churches of Shaw opened their doors for the continuous education of Black children until a new building was ready for occupancy. When the new school opened in the early 1960s, the school for the Black children of Shaw had a new name, McEvans High School, in honor of Thomas McEvans II, due to his aforementioned contribution in the educational arena.

McEvans was a beautiful structure with a mechanical shop without adequate equipment and a science room with desks equipped with inoperative fixtures.

In later years, it was also discovered that the school building contained **asbestos**, as did all of the new red-brick facilities built for Black children in the State of Mississippi following the *Brown v Board* decision and prior to the effort by the State to desegregate its white public school systems.

During the mid-1960s, under the leadership of Mr. Andrew Hawkins, in particular, and several other Black families in Shaw, the children of these families integrated Shaw High School, setting off a chain of events that resulted in the immediate creation of segregated academies by some of the same whites who were in public leadership positions.

Under the guidance of the Citizens Council, Bayou Academy and other private schools for White children and White children only, were established. In Shaw, Bayou Academy held its classes in buildings originally constructed with public dollars, one of which was purchased from the Shaw Public School Board for a dollar.

It was during this same period that Mr. Andrew Hawkins, in particular, and several other Black families in Shaw, led the fight for the equalization of municipal services throughout Shaw. The landmark court decision of *Hawkins, et al v The Town of Shaw* required the Town's Governing Authorities to make improvements in the Black neighborhoods to the same extent that they had existed for years in the White neighborhoods—improvements such as sewer systems, street lights, fire hydrants, a drainage system and paved streets.

The 1960s also resulted in major changes to the public social structure that existed in Shaw. The effort by Blacks to utilize public accommodations in the same manner that they had been provided for Whites resulted in the closure of the public swimming pools by the Mayor and Board of Aldermen. The movie theater, which had segregated seating, cushioned seats for Whites at the lower level and wooden bench seats for Blacks in the balcony, was destroyed by fire. The Shady Nook Restaurant, located in downtown Shaw, was re-organized as the Shady Nook Restaurant Key Club and members had to use a key to enter; only Whites were members.

Although the State had adopted an economic development policy entitled Balance Agriculture with Industry, this approach, especially in the Mississippi Delta, meant agriculture for Blacks and industry for Whites. The evidence of the determination by the public leadership to keep Blacks linked to the plantation was the use of split session scheduling; children were required to attend school when not needed on the plantation and were out of school when labor was needed on the plantation.

The first decision rendered by Judge Keady in the lawsuit of *Hawkins v Town of Shaw*, which was appealed by the plaintiffs, stated that, in effect, Blacks comprised a majority of the voting age population and that Blacks should use the ballot box to elect officials that would address the concerns being raised by the plaintiff.

The effort to accomplish this task initially occurred at the city government level in 1977 and then at the educational level in 1982. When the School Board of the Shaw School District was seated for the first time in January 1983, its president, vice president, and secretary, three of the five members, were Black.

In May of that same year, the superintendent of education, Mr. R.L. Thorn, who had ruled the Shaw School District and especially McEvans, for more than twenty years, sent a letter to the President of the Board which simply said, “I quit my job as Superintendent.” The aforementioned Board determined that the superintendent had been performing the administrative duties of the school district subjectively, no policy, just precedent, if that was what he wanted to use.

The Board proceeded to appoint the first Black superintendent for the Shaw School District, Mr. Reuben Watson, who ensured the placement of a staff that had the educational success of the Shaw School District student body as their ultimate goal.

During the 1983–1987 term, the Board researched, developed, refined, and adopted a Policy for the Administration of the Shaw School District that, although it [has been] twenty-plus years since its adoption, undoubtedly, in some way, with revisions and amendments throughout the years, is a contributor to the educational success that the children of Shaw School District are enjoying today after 150 years of existence in the Delta of Mississippi.

Greg Flippins is a graduate of McEvans School and a former mayor of Shaw, Mississippi.

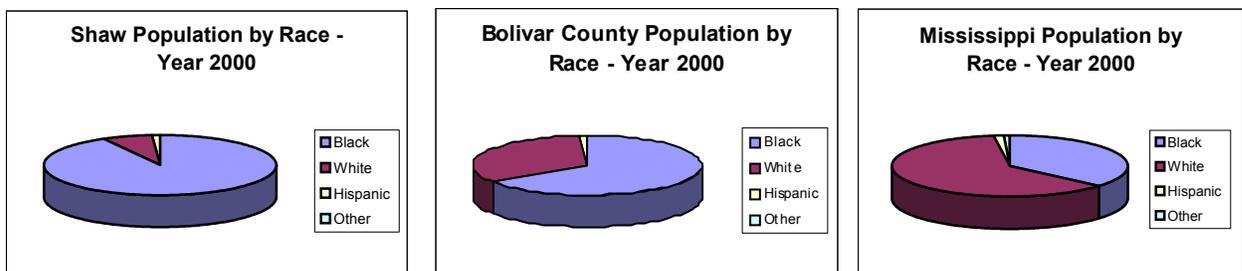
■ The Setting

Shaw, Mississippi

It would be a grievous oversight to talk about Shaw, Mississippi, without defining the context of its existence. The town of Shaw sits just off Route 61 in the heart of the Mississippi Delta. “Historically, the region has seen its share of ups and downs, justice and injustice, progress and setbacks. As an agricultural sweet spot, Delta planters brought large numbers of enslaved Africans to work the fertile land, transforming the region into a viable economy. The arduous work of clearing land, planting, and harvesting was accompanied by the slaves’ field hollers and shouts. The expressions became the musical foundation of the blues. And like the blues, the Mississippi Delta’s rich beauty is filled with contradictions, double entendres, and a painful legacy of oppression.” (King 2003)

Even today, miles and miles of cotton fields and plantation-style homes encircle the small town. Some of the homes are in reasonably good condition; others are in ruins. A canal bisects the town’s 1.1 square miles and the main street is mostly boarded up. An estimated 2,312 people call Shaw home. More than 92% of them are African American (compared to 65.1% in the county and 53% in the state); 7.1% are non-Hispanic White (33.2% in the county and 45% in the state); and 1.0% are Hispanic, (1.2% in the county and <1% in the state). See Figure 1.

Figure 1. Population by Race: Shaw, Bolivar County, and Mississippi Year 2000

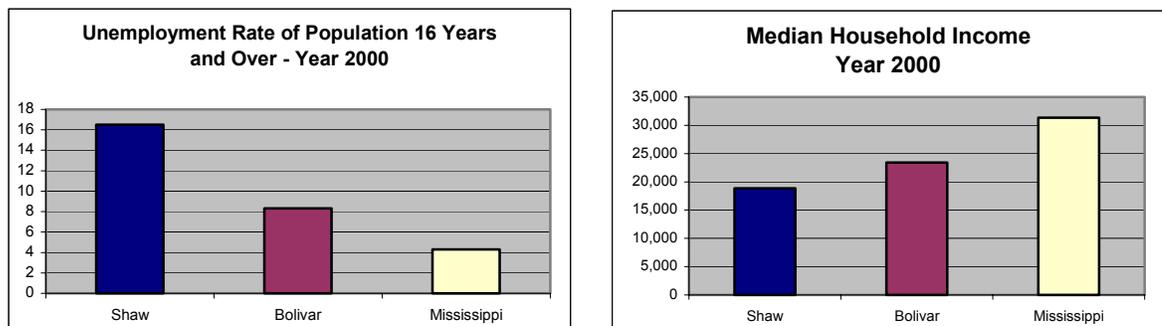


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000.

Shaw is located in Bolivar County, population 40,633. Bolivar was formed in 1836 from the Choctaw Cession and named for South American patriot General Simon Bolivar. It is bounded on the north by Coahoma County, on the south by Washington County, on the east by Sunflower County, and on the west by the Mississippi River. Covering an area of 879 square miles, Bolivar is divided into two judicial districts, each with its own county seat. Rosedale is the county seat of the western district, and Cleveland is the county seat of the eastern district. Shaw is in the east, 10 miles from Cleveland.

The U.S. Census 2000 reported an unemployment rate of 16.5% for Shaw, doubling the county rate of 8.3% and nearly quadrupling the state rate of 4.3%. Median household income (\$18,878) was 80% of the county median (\$23,428) and only 60% of the state median (\$31,330). See Figure 2.

Figure 2. Employment and Household Income, Shaw, Bolivar, and Mississippi Year 2000

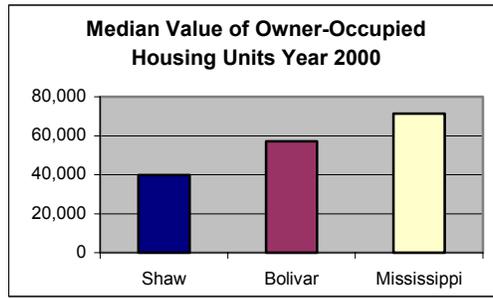


Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000.

From 1999 to 2003, officials issued only 15 single-family new home construction permits for Shaw, an average of three per year. Average cost of these homes ranged from \$17,900 in 2001 to \$73,200 in 2002. No permits were issued in 2003. (City-Data.Com) The median value of homes in Shaw was \$39,800 in 2000, compared to \$57,200 in Bolivar County and \$71,400 in Mississippi. (Figure 3) Low home value, coupled with small

size, severely limits Shaw’s ability to raise local funds to support its schools.

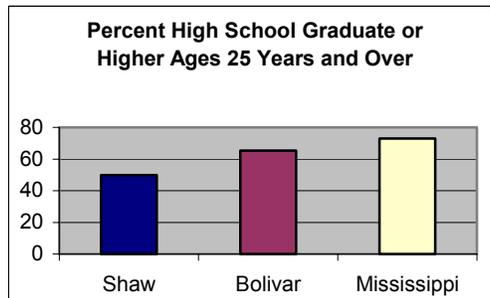
Figure 3. Value of Owner-Occupied Houses, Shaw, Bolivar, and Mississippi Year 2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000.

Fewer than half (49.8%) of Shaw adults aged 25 or older have earned a high school diploma. This compares to 65.3% for Bolivar County and 72.9% for the state of Mississippi. (Figure 4)

Figure 4. Percent High School Graduate or Higher Ages 25 Years and Over, Shaw, Bolivar, and Mississippi Year 2000



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000

The median age of Shaw residents, according to the 2000 Census, was 28.7 years, significantly lower than the state median age of 33.8 years and lower than the county’s median of 29.8 years.

Shaw High School

Shaw School District is one of five school districts in Bolivar County. Shaw High School is one of two schools making up the Shaw School District. The school is located in an old and once majestic building whose large concrete pillars still stand at the entrance. A small white house across the street holds the district administrative office. Several buildings, detached from the main building, house the cafeteria, media center, and other operations.

Money is scarce at Shaw. The school board managed to put a new roof on the high school's main building several years ago, but there have been few other improvements in many years. The few physical improvements that have been made include a computer room and a Family Resource Center made possible by grant funds. The school now has three computer labs and each classroom has a computer with Internet access, primarily for teacher use. Because there are no doors on the bathrooms, males and females are asked to use separate doors when entering the main building. Barbara Poore, a Rural Trust staff member who worked with the school in a grants program, commented:

On a first visit to Shaw, it's hard to get past the feeling of poverty that permeates this building but once you do, you see pride. It shows in polished old floors and neat hallways. It is apparent when you talk to students who are usually subdued but always polite.

Shaw's no-frills curriculum offers no advanced placement, dual enrollment or early college courses. However, plans are underway to offer one advanced placement course in physics beginning in Fall 2004. With two exceptions, graduation requirements mirror those of the State of Mississippi. Shaw students must successfully complete 22 credits,

including chemistry or Biology II in order to graduate. The State currently requires only 20 credits, including Biology I.

Table 1. Mississippi Graduation Requirements to 2007-2008

CURRICULUM AREA	CARNEGIE UNITS	REQUIRED SUBJECTS
English	4	
Mathematics	3	Algebra 1
Science	3	Biology 1
Social Studies	4	1 US History 1 World History ½ US Government ½ Mississippi Studies
Health	½	Comprehensive Health or Family and Individual Health
Business & Technology	1	½ Keyboarding ½ Computer Applications
The Arts	1	
Electives	4 ½	
Total Units Required	20	

Source: Mississippi Department of Education

Remedial and compensatory courses may not be included in the English and mathematics requirements. The State will require students graduating in 2009 and beyond to take one additional mathematics course for a total of 21 units.

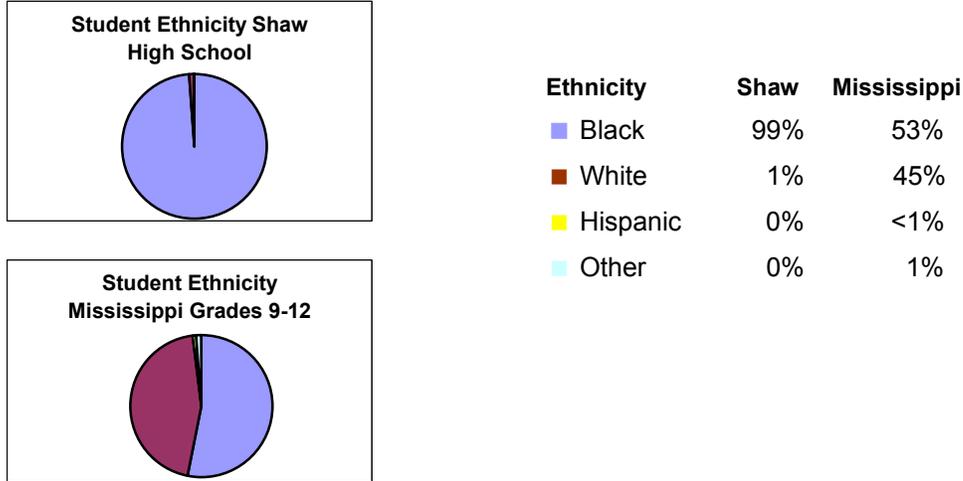
Extra-curricular activities include basketball, football, baseball, slow-pitch softball, track and field, and band. Students may also participate in several clubs, including Future Educators of America, Student Council, and National Honor Society. Juniors and seniors have limited job shadowing opportunities, mostly in the neighboring county seat, Cleveland.

Shaw Students

In the 2003-2004 school year, Shaw High School enrolled 292 students in grades 8-12 and had a 9th grade cohort enrollment of 59. Average daily attendance was around 93%, slightly lower than the state's 95.5% rate. The student population was 98.97% Black, compared to 53% for the state as a whole. (Figure 5) Some 96.92% of Shaw students and 63% of

students statewide were eligible for free or reduced-priced meals.
 (Mississippi School Report Card for 2002-2003 and CCD 2001-2002)

Figure 5. Student Ethnicity, Shaw and Mississippi Year 2003-2004



Source: Mississippi Department of Education

Shaw Teachers

Historically, new teachers have seldom named Shaw School District as their first choice of places to live and work. As a result, the district has had difficulty attracting and retaining teachers and the Mississippi Department of Education has designated it a critical teacher shortage area. This designation provides the district with a pool of new teacher applicants who receive critical shortage scholarships to complete their undergraduate education and who are obligated to teach in a designated critical shortage area for three years. Delta State University and Mississippi Valley State University provide many of those teachers.

Mario Kirksey, principal of Shaw High School, points out that once they are there, teachers tend to stay. Consequently, in 2002-2003, a “highly qualified” teacher taught in 97.7% of the 44 *No Child Left Behind* defined core academic classes. There were 17.5 secondary teachers in the school and the full-time equivalent of 16 core academic teachers. Almost all of

them (97.9%) were “highly qualified.” (Mississippi School Report Card 2002-2003)

Pupil/teacher ratio at Shaw is 18.52:1, compared to 15.85:1 for the state. Average secondary teacher salary in 2003-2004 was \$33,890, \$2,663 less than the state average of \$36,553. (Mississippi School Report Card 2002-2003)

Shaw Revenue

Shaw district’s revenue for 2002-2003 totaled \$5,145,006, ranking it 143rd among the state’s 152 school districts. Local sources accounted for 19.73% of it, state sources accounted for 58.87%, and federal sources 21.4%. The maximum yield of one mill at a tax levy of 44.85 was \$22.37 per student. Statewide, local sources accounted for 29.95% of districts’ revenue, state sources accounted for 54.5%, and federal sources 15.53%. Reportedly, 6.11% of the system’s revenue (4.6% for the state) was spent on administration. Current expenditure per pupil in average daily attendance (ADA) was \$7,324.06 (\$6,401.60 statewide); average current expenditure per pupil for instructional cost in ADA was \$4,137.07 (\$3,758.52 statewide); and average current expenditure in ADA less transportation was \$7,189.48 (\$6,089.83 statewide).

While Shaw has higher per student instructional and current expenditure costs than the state average, the difference is easily offset by its higher than state average graduation rate and the multiple roles that teachers and administrators play as counselors, mentors, tutors, and intercessors. The librarian assists with federal programs and grants, leads SACS accreditation efforts, and serves as the media specialist. The assistant superintendent serves as curriculum coordinator and federal programs manager and the principal operates without an assistant principal.

■ The Long Road to Improvement

In 1998, Shaw Superintendent Charles Barron joined with the superintendents of Hollandale, Leland, South Delta and Western Line to form the Delta Five Cluster. These districts, covering 2,441 square miles, are all located within a 40-mile radius west, north and south of Greenville, Mississippi, the heart and soul of the Delta. Together, they were home to some 11,706 people. Their 19 schools employed 484 teachers and enrolled 7,367 students. Eighty-two percent of the students were non-White and 89.7% qualified for free and reduced lunches. Sisters indeed, these school districts were, and remain, an endangered species—small, rural, poor. In addition, they were “low performing.”

Superintendent Barron provided leadership in the formation of The Delta Five Cluster in recognition of the need for an association that might impact the districts’ common interests and concerns—low test scores, high poverty rates, inadequate funding. Superintendents wanted a way both to improve teaching and learning and to infuse Delta culture into the education process. In 2000, they obtained funding from the Rural Trust, then the Annenberg Rural Challenge, to implement the principles and practices of place-based learning.

The Rural Trust defines place-based learning as “learning that is rooted in what is local – the unique history, environment, culture and economy of a particular place. The community provides the context for learning, student work focuses on community needs and interests, and community members serve as resources and partners in every aspect of teaching and learning.... Place-based learning has the power to engage students academically, pairing real-world relevance with intellectual rigor while promoting genuine citizenship and preparing people to respect and live well in any community they choose.”

The Delta Five Cluster organized its reform efforts around four goals:

1. Involve students in learning about their culture and ways to preserve the area's rich heritage, thereby instilling in them a sense of pride for their cultural legacy.
2. Involve the school and community as partners in student learning and utilize teaching and community partnerships to promote place-based learning and cultural pride.
3. Infuse a sense of pride for the area's local agricultural history and recognition of the potential that agriculture has for providing area employment.
4. Assist administrators and teachers in recognizing and developing opportunities for place-based learning that is aligned with Mississippi's curricular standards.

With Rural Challenge funding and implementation support, the Delta Five Cluster sought to use their local place and place-related content to create learning experiences that would engage K-12 students at a deeper level and raise achievement as measured by state-mandated tests. While deeply committed to providing the best education possible for Delta children, these superintendents were driven to urgency by the high-stakes testing and accountability measures that were being imposed on public education. They *had* to raise test scores to remain in business.

With the focus on improving writing skills in particular, the Cluster used Rural Challenge funding to engage the services of the Mississippi Writing and Thinking Institute, an independent organization modeled after the National Writing Project's university-school partnerships. The Institute provided professional development workshops, classroom demonstrations, teacher and student leadership meetings, summer institutes, and assistance with curriculum alignment. Young people collected oral histories from

elders in the community and teachers used student writings as the basis for improving writing skills.

In another place-based learning initiative, Shaw School District became a part of the Southern Initiative of the Algebra Project (SIAP), also funded by the Rural Challenge. SIAP trained mathematics and other content area teachers to teach algebra concepts starting in the elementary grades and algebra beginning in the middle grades, using the place-based strategies developed by mathematician and Civil Rights leader, Bob Moses¹. Several teachers went beyond initial training to become implementation specialists, lead teachers and trainers throughout their schools and the South. The community identified and SIAP trained “community development specialists” to strengthen the ties between the school and community, amplify the community’s voice in school affairs and increase community demand for a more rigorous mathematics curriculum. Youth-led summer camps trained students as mathematics literacy workers and community facilitators. Students then became tutors for after-school programs, designers and operators of summer algebra and leadership camps, and facilitators for community and school algebra rallies held throughout the academic year.

Concurrent with Rural Challenge funding, each of the Delta Five school districts received funding from the Walton Foundation to establish school-based community learning resource centers. The grants provided some support for facility renovations, equipment acquisition and a staff person for each center. The staff person was to coordinate educational activities and events involving parents, students and other community members.

¹ Moses, R. and Cobb, C. (2001). *Radical Equations: Math Literacy and Civil Rights*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

In 2002-2003, subsequent to their efforts to implement place-based learning in writing and mathematics, Shaw School District adopted the First Things First comprehensive school reform model. Shaw saw in First Things First some points of intersection and compatibility with its ongoing improvement and reform efforts. The model called for small learning communities, extended instructional time for literacy and mathematics, family advocacy, active engagement of students, alignment of teaching with standards and high stakes assessments and rigor. An on-site coach assists with implementation.

On the long and winding road to improvement, Shaw High School teachers and leaders have drawn from the various initiatives in which they have engaged over the years, and are successfully integrating selected aspects of each into a blended comprehensive school and community improvement effort.

■ The Improvement Payoff

Good test scores in themselves are an insufficient indicator of the quality of education a school provides. The Rural Trust looked beyond test scores and examined Shaw's improvement efforts through the lenses of its Principles and Indicators for Good High Schools: Curriculum and Instruction, Community Connectedness, Democratic Practice, Supporting Structures, Staffing, Facilities and Leadership. (See Attachment) While inputs in these areas are important, the true evidence of effectiveness is in the outcomes and the changed lives of students and their community.

Principle One: Curriculum and Instruction

Students do sustained academic work that draws upon and contributes to the place in which they live. Content and strategies are rigorous, authentic, and expansive, engaging every student in a personalized learning environment at the highest level of his or her capabilities and preparing each child well for college, work, and citizenship.

Shaw expects every student to achieve to high levels. This expectation is reflected in the high school's motto: **Every Child Can Will Learn**, and in virtually every conversation with every staff member in the school. It is also expressed in conversations with community members who, like the staff, seem to have a special zeal for helping every child succeed.

The curriculum is fully aligned with state curricular frameworks, but resources are meager so there are virtually no frills in the academic program. There are no advanced placement, dual credit or early college programs although there are plans to offer one advanced placement course beginning in Fall 2004. School and district leaders have had to build partnerships and acquire outside funding to provide even a relatively high quality core curriculum. Students enrolled in vocational programs, for example, are bussed to a neighboring school district for instruction in

traditional “shop” courses. Grants have been used to support teacher professional development in place-based learning, the Algebra Project, writing instruction and other areas. Federal funds support a GEAR UP Program that emphasizes early awareness of and readiness for college opportunities and that provides college tours for juniors and seniors. A federal 21st Century grant provides after-school and summer tutoring services.

Technology is recognized as an important tool in teaching and learning. Students have in-school access to TI-83 or higher model graphing calculators that are used extensively in mathematics classes. The school has I-TV capability and is planning to use it to expand curricular and professional development offerings.

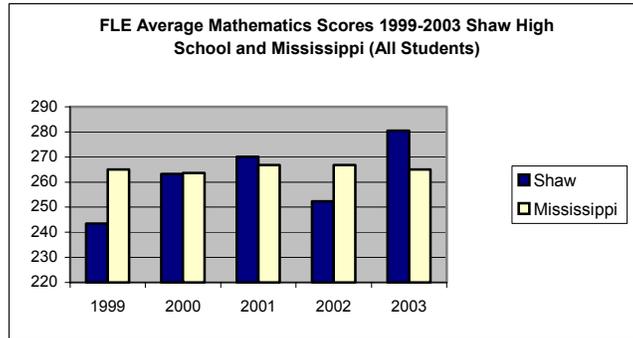
Shaw teachers are open to change and administrators support them in implementing engaging strategies.

Mathematics

Shaw students in grades 8-10 spend 100 minutes a day studying mathematics. They have made considerable gains. In 1999, Shaw students’ mathematics performance on the state’s Functional Literacy Examination (FLE) trailed overall student performance by 21.5 points. In 2003, Shaw students’ average FLE mathematics score (281) exceeded the average for students statewide (267) by 14 points. (Figure 6)

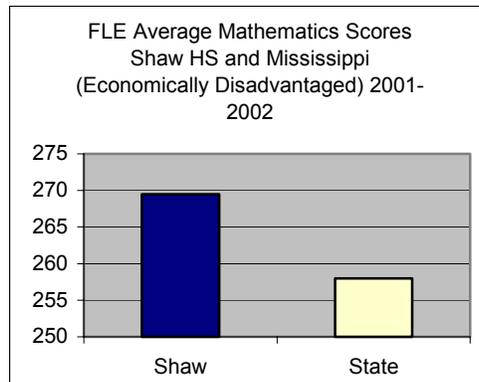
Perhaps the better indicators of Shaw’s progress are its scores for economically disadvantaged students, since nearly 97% of Shaw High School students are eligible for free or reduced-priced lunches. In 2001-2002, the most recent year for which state and local comparisons are available, economically disadvantaged students at Shaw posted an average FLE mathematics score of 269.5. That was 11.5 points higher than the average score for economically disadvantaged students statewide. (Figure 7)

Figure 6. FLE Average Mathematics Scores, Shaw High School and Mississippi 1999-2003 (All Students)



Source: Mississippi Department of Education

Figure 7. FLE Mathematics Scores, Economically Disadvantaged Students, Shaw High School and Mississippi 2001-2002



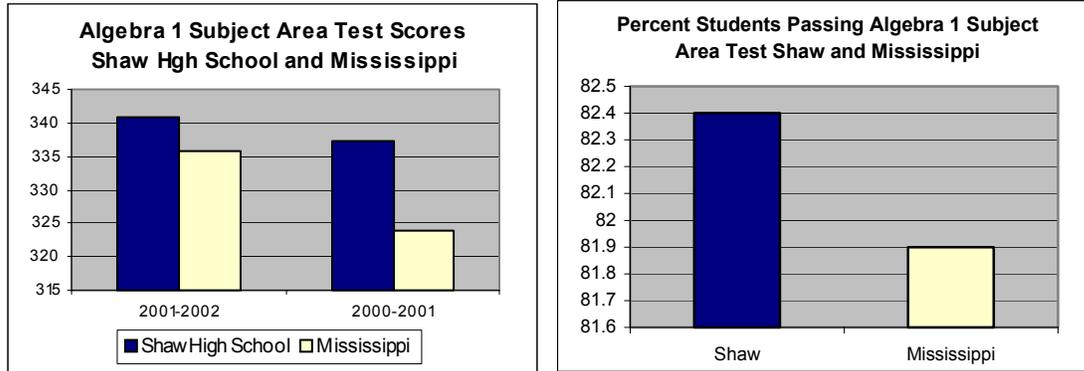
Source: Mississippi Department of Education

Strikingly, the average mathematics score for economically disadvantaged students at Shaw exceeded by 2.7 points the average for *all* students statewide (266.8). The average score for all students at Shaw (270.1) exceeded the state average for all students by 3.4 point.

Algebra 1 Subject Area Test scores reflect similar success. In 2001-2002, Shaw students scored an average 340.9 points, compared to 335.9 for

students statewide. In that same year, 82.4% of Shaw students and 81.9% of students statewide passed the Algebra 1 Subject Area Test. (See Figure 8)

Figure 8. Algebra 1 Mathematics Scores, Shaw and Mississippi 2001-2002



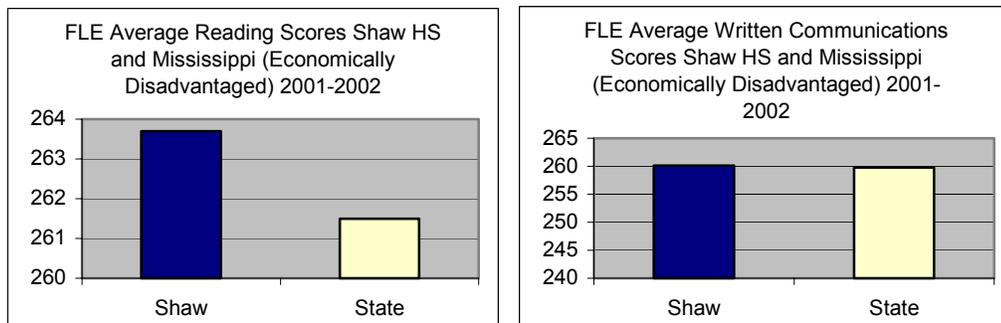
Source: Mississippi Department of Education

Literacy

Literacy, like mathematics, is a major instructional focus at Shaw.

Consequently, in 2001-2002, economically disadvantaged students posted an average FLE reading score of 263.7; that was 2.2 points higher than the 261.5 average score for economically disadvantaged students in the State overall. (Figure 9)

Figure 9. FLE Reading and Written Communications Scores, Shaw and Mississippi Disadvantaged Students 2001- 2002



Source: Mississippi Department of Education

In English II MC, 68.8% of Shaw students and 78.4% of students in the state passed the subject area test while 94.2% of Shaw students and 94.1% of students statewide passed the English II N/I test.

In other subject areas, Shaw students are also showing gains. All students passed the US History Subject Area Test in 2001-2002 compared to 94.3% statewide. More than 90% of Shaw students and 86.5% of students statewide passed the Biology Subject Area Test.

While there is spotty evidence of the curriculum's direct tie to place, Shaw clearly makes the effort to provide rigor, focus, and engaging strategies with the aim of preparing every child to succeed in his or her post-secondary ventures. The school had a Level 4-Exemplary performance classification for 2002-2003 and exceeded expected growth.

Small Learning Communities and Responsive Pedagogy

Already a small school, Shaw uses small learning communities to ensure the success and active engagement of all of its students. Grades 8-10 form the lower division and one learning community, and grades 11-12 form the upper division and a second learning community.

Consistent with the school's emphasis on mathematics and literacy improvement, students in grades 8-10 spend 100 minutes a day in mathematics and 100 minutes in literacy. Teachers routinely use constructivist and cooperative learning strategies that engage all students in learning important concepts without stigmatizing the weaker ones or alienating the stronger ones. One mathematics teacher, for example, was observed using a simple repetitive individual and group exercise to introduce and demonstrate the concepts of frequency and probability. The technology included a cardboard with multiple colors, a paper clip, a pen or pencil and a graphing calculator. Students spun the paper clip around

the cardboard, recorded the frequencies with which it landed on various colors, analyzed the “data” they gathered from the spins, and were able to determine the frequency and probability of a particular outcome with relative ease. Unlike the typical classroom lecture, this strategy excites and engages students of all ability levels. Not surprisingly, Superintendent Charles Barron noted that one group of eighth grade students who entered this class with a 16% pass rate on the State’s mathematics exam ended the ninth grade with a 60% pass rate.

Shaw has four nine-week grading periods. Eighth-graders are benchmarked to identify their weaknesses relative to the State curricular framework. Instruction at the high school level is then geared towards those weaknesses. At nearly weekly intervals, students are tested using teacher-made assessments comprised of items from the Mississippi and Texas test item banks. Assessment data are then used to inform instructional emphasis in upcoming days. This approach to data-driven decision-making results in a tremendous amount of flexibility in what gets taught and when.

Principle Two: Community Connectedness

The school is situated and structured so it is connected to the community on multiple levels. The school and community actively collaborate to make the local place a good one in which to learn, work, live, and play.

Shaw High School is unmistakably a center of activity for the Shaw community. It is situated in the heart of the community, its presence rivaled only by religion and the many denominational churches there. Transcending both denominational and racial lines, the school has reached out to churches and other elements of the community to provide needed supports for student achievement and to heighten students’ knowledge of their ethnic and community heritages. For example, one faith-based after-school tutoring program chose to combine with the school-run after-school program. The church pastor, Reverend Leroy Woods, notes that sharing resources and

space has resulted in stronger opportunities for students. And although African Americans make up more than 98% of Shaw's student body, the school clearly and deliberately reaches out to acknowledge and include the community's Italian heritage.

The Family Resource Center that sits in the middle of Shaw High School's main building is an extension of Coahoma Community College. The Center places special emphasis on building parents' skills to initiate and sustain the academic achievement of their students. Parents use the center during the school day for meetings, computer and Internet access, and other activities. In the evenings, they take adult literacy, high school completion, and other courses designed to improve their educational status and options.

The school provides the only summer-long recreation programs available to children in the Shaw community—girls' and boys' baseball and basketball leagues. Until it was lost in a fire, a school-owned property housed the Head Start program. Friday night algebra showcases, a carryover from the Algebra Project model, bring large numbers of adults and young people together in ways that generate excitement about and demand for rigorous mathematics instruction. This is also a time when young people become teachers of adults as they explain key algebra concepts and the use of the graphing calculator.

Shaw School plainly sees itself as responsible in many ways for the community and its people. However, there is little evidence of direct involvement of a broad base of community people in decision-making around curriculum and other key aspects of schooling. This may be attributable in part to the low education levels of adults in the community. Fewer than half of adults ages 25 and over have high school diplomas. On the other hand, it may also be a reflection of the community's enduring respect for the school as a teaching institution.

Principle Three: Democratic Practice

Schools mirror the democratic values they seek to instill. All stakeholders' voices are heard, validated, and honored in the decision-making processes affecting them.

There is a sense of urgency around Shaw High School that, in effect, limits democratic practice and keeps a rather narrow academic focus on improving test scores. Consequently, beyond the staff level, there is little evidence of what the Rural Trust has identified as the three key indicators of democratic practice—shared decision-making, shared leadership, and student voice.

Within the school improvement framework, however, teachers have a great deal of say in the selection of professional development activities and in implementing strategies for change. As Superintendent Barron puts it, “If they [the teachers] want it, we find a way to get it for them.” One can observe a strong sense of camaraderie and a spirit of collaboration among teachers and also between teachers and school leaders.

While it appears that school staff has a great deal of input in the decision-making processes of the school, it is not apparent that students and parents have the same kind of input. Perhaps the greatest outlet for student voice over the past few years has been in Algebra Project activities, including community meetings and Algebra Nights. Again, this absence of input may well be a cultural phenomenon.

Principle Four: Supporting Structures

School policies, calendars, and resources are arranged to maximize community involvement, ensure student academic success, and provide teachers the means to succeed.

We examined supporting structures in three areas: policy and practice, human and financial resources, and student support. Shaw's policies and practices clearly reflect strong support for student learning and community connectedness. Supporting structures for community involvement are

evidenced, among other places, in the activities of its Family Resource Center and the housing of a Coahoma Community College extension. The school is therefore easily seen as a place that “belongs to” the community. Although there is evidence in policy and past practices of a commitment to place-based learning and an understanding of the importance of place in educating a child, current practice seems more designed to bring community people into the school than to connect student work to community needs and interests. This again, is attributable in large part to the drive to improve test scores.

The adjustment of class schedules to concentrate instruction on demonstrated areas of need is an obvious attempt to provide academic supports for students to achieve. So, too, are the after-school tutoring programs, the small learning communities, and the school climate that pushes everyone to be “better than good.” An advisor/advisee system ensures that every child and his or her particular circumstance are known well by at least one adult; no one is likely to fall through the cracks unknown to a caring adult.

Strong student support at Shaw has resulted in a higher than state average high school graduation rate (88.1% compared to 80.2%) and a college-going rate of between 70% and 80%. Students are rarely expelled. Principal Kirksey can recall only “two or three” expulsions during his five-year tenure at the school. Other disciplinary measures include in-school, overnight and extended suspensions and after-school detention.

Shaw is obviously financially challenged, a situation reflected in the age and condition of its buildings and the absence of on-site vocational education facilities and equipment.

School staffing resources are adequate; staff is competent, caring, and aligned to meet stated goals.

Perhaps the greatest strength of Shaw School is its staff. Principal Kirksey indicates that, at present, he has no problem getting teachers and that they tend to stay once they are there. He attributes Shaw's unusual success in this regard to several factors. First, although average pay is about \$1,500 less than state average, it is offset by the critical shortage scholarship. Second, the school's academic success over the past few years makes it a more attractive place for new and veteran teachers. Third, new teachers are mentored and quickly inducted into a culture that expects every child to succeed. In addition, the majority of the teachers are from Shaw or nearby communities. Finally, and possibly most importantly, Kirksey notes, teachers are empowered at Shaw. They exercise a great deal of autonomy as a unit, communication is open, and the school is small. There is a sense of community. Teachers seem to agree with Kirksey's observation.

Consequently, only two of Shaw's 17.5 teachers are leaving this school year—a veteran is retiring and a novice is changing careers. Five other teachers have enough years in the system to retire at any time. Kirksey worries that unless the district can pay more competitive salaries, he will have more difficulty filling vacancies and retaining teachers in the future. For younger teachers in particular, there is little incentive to remain at Shaw other than a commitment to such a place and its people.

Staff resources have been aligned with what the district and school have identified as critical needs areas, mainly mathematics and literacy. Teachers team to maximize their individual and collective strengths and content knowledge, "trading off" with others to teach selected concepts that they feel less prepared to teach. In hiring teachers, Superintendent Barron indicates a preference for those with strong content knowledge over those with weaker knowledge and strong pedagogical skills.

Teaching schedules are arranged to give common planning time within disciplines and to allow teachers to collaborate and reflect on their own teaching through examination of student and teacher work samples, peer observation, and team teaching.

Shaw's non-certified staff also demonstrates a commitment to and high expectations for Shaw students. In this manner, both certified and non-certified staffs contribute to positive student outcomes. Again in the words of Barbara Poore, "the dedication of the staff of this school is impressive. They do good work every day in spite of sparse resources."

Principle Six: Facilities

Facilities are clean, safe, orderly and well equipped to support rigorous academic goals, co-curricular activities, and community connectedness.

The first and most obvious shortcoming that one sees at Shaw High School is the absence of modern facilities. As they are, though, the facilities are a tribute to the skill and pride of the maintenance staff; the buildings are clean and well kept. The third floor of the main building is not in use and precautions have been taken to ensure that it is sealed off. Classrooms are spacious but ill equipped. Most classrooms have only one computer, no electronic white board, and little or no audio-visual equipment.

As old and ill equipped as it is, Shaw School is the center of community activity with multiple inter-generational uses both during and outside of the regular instructional day. Without it, the community would have no common meeting ground and virtually no facilities for summer youth programs and other kinds of educational, recreational, and social activities.

Principle Seven: Leadership

School leaders provide competent and knowledgeable management that supports teaching and learning at high levels and encourages community connections.

Everyone in and around Shaw School knows that the district and school are passionate about improving teaching and learning. District and school leaders work as a team and communicate common goals and high expectations for student achievement. Good is never good enough; they and everyone around them must be better than good.

Visionary, skilled, and committed leadership makes the critical difference between Shaw School and similarly situated schools in the Mississippi Delta. Leadership roles are shared among the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and school principal. Instructional decisions are data driven and involve both teachers and school leaders. Data are collected at intervals throughout the school year and are used to inform instructional emphasis to ensure success on culminating, high-stakes State tests.

As resources are limited, district leaders aggressively seek out financial resources to support the innovations they believe will increase student learning (e.g., First Things First, Algebra Project, GEAR UP, Mississippi Writing Project). These outside dollars, together with thoughtfully realigned local and state dollars, support an array of professional development activities for teachers and administrators.

Time is treated as a valuable resource at Shaw, and everyone is expected to be on task at all times. To the leadership's credit, "on task" not only means teaching, but also reflecting, collaborating, sharing, examining student work, and improving practice. New teachers enter a culture of collaboration, team teaching, peer observation and other supporting practices. The collaboration processes help teachers communicate with colleagues around the critical issues of teaching and learning and develop

strategies and action plans to create new and exciting experiences to raise student achievement.

Teachers have common planning periods within departments, engage in subject-area seminars, and are given time to observe other teachers. Instructional coaches, often teachers themselves, do unannounced walk-throughs and provide structured feedback to improve teaching and learning. These important aspects of teaching are integrated into the regular school day and not treated as tangential to the teaching process. This kind of support is important to improving teaching and learning, to ensuring professional success, and to inducting new teachers into a professional learning community.

The district superintendent and many of the other school leaders and teachers live outside of the Shaw school district. Remarkably, though, and to their credit, they have connected well to the community on multiple levels. Leaders are adept at identifying formal and non-formal leaders in the community, many of whom are graduates of Shaw or the former McEvans High School. There is a strong emphasis on improving student success by learning from one another and by building bridges among staff and between the school and the community.

■ The Ongoing Challenges and Opportunities

How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord? for ever? How long wilt thou hide thy face from me?--Psalm 13:1 (KJV)

Despite missionary-like zeal, visionary leadership, pride and commitment to excellence, Shaw faces daunting challenges in the days ahead. The spirit of the place and people gives reason to believe that they will not succumb under the weight of the challenge; they will use it to spawn new zeal, new creativity, and new commitment. Still, one cannot help but wonder how long the creative juices can flow through the mire of near abject poverty and neglect. How long can the Shaw staff, community and young people hold onto this symbol of hope, this vehicle for change?

And what do you do when you have done all you can do? The Shaw staff and community would be the last to say they have done all they can do to improve teaching and learning. Yet, they have done virtually all of those things that researchers and practitioners agree lead to increased academic achievement—data-driven decision-making; high quality professional development aligned with academic goals; research-based reform initiatives; small learning communities; strong teacher and student support systems; high expectations for student and staff performance; strong linkages with community. What remains to be done is what Shaw cannot do for itself—obtain adequate funding to provide the quality education that its young people need and deserve, and improve the conditions that would make the town of Shaw a good place in which to live, work, and play.

Challenge One: Keeping School

Shaw is small, rural, and poor. Per pupil costs are higher than the State average and administration consumes a larger percentage of revenue than

the statewide average. At the same time, Mississippi school districts are being asked to absorb \$160 million dollars in reduced funding. Given present mindsets and trends in state legislatures around the country, Shaw may well be forced to consolidate with neighboring districts at some time in the future.

Challenge Two: Keeping Teachers

Shaw leaders credit the State's Critical Shortage initiative for its ability to recruit qualified teachers. However, as veterans retire and new teachers satisfy their scholarship service requirement, recruitment and retention will become more difficult. The community will continue to face major challenges to provide the amenities and basic services to make the place attractive for professionals to live and raise their children. In addition, there is a continuing challenge to raise teacher salaries to competitive levels.

Challenge Three: Enhancing Curriculum

Shaw students are at a disadvantage when entering higher education and the job market. There are no advanced placement, dual enrollment, or early college programs. A key challenge is to enhance the curriculum and strengthen connections with a global learning community. This can be accomplished through better use of available technology, including I-TV, and through authentic learning experiences via stronger linkages between the instructional program and real community needs and interests.

Challenge Four: Keeping Facilities

Shaw's buildings are old and in need of repair. The State is unlikely to provide dollars for needed renovations or replacement. Locally, the tax base cannot support new construction. If the school is to continue in existence, it must renew its facilities.

Challenge Five: Improving and Sustaining Community

In rural places like Shaw, schools are often the last remaining public institution, the central storehouse of intellectual capital, and the overseer of the largest pool of public wealth. Consequently, they hold the greatest potential for improving and sustaining rural communities. The school, then, must see itself as an agent of change, not only for the students who attend it, but for the larger community as well. Student work, while addressing state standards and curricular frameworks, must be linked to community needs and interests, having a public purpose that contributes to growth and development. Public policy must sanction and support this kind of school and community connection, allowing for meaningful partnerships at the state and local levels in order to maximize the impact of limited and scattered resources by involving schools and young people in community development work that improves and sustains community.

■ The Policy Implications

The State of Mississippi has enacted several pieces of legislation that will assist the Shaw School District and others like it in recruiting and retaining teachers. Among them are the following:

1. Mississippi Teacher Shortage Act of 1998
Forty-three districts, including Shaw, are designated critical teacher shortage areas. The State pays the full cost of undergraduate tuition, fees, and books, and the average cost of room and meals for four full-time and six part-time pre-service teachers each year. Eligible candidates must have a 2.5 high school grade point average (GPA) and an ACT score of 18 or an equivalent SAT score. They must maintain a 2.5 college GPA to remain eligible for renewal. In exchange, candidates must teach for three years in a critical shortage area or repay the funds. Students who receive less than four years of support are committed on a year for year basis.
2. Mississippi School Administrator Sabbatical Program
All districts are eligible for this award. Participants are paid teacher salary plus benefits and must have three years of teaching experience and a district recommendation. They are then obligated to work in an administrative capacity in the sponsoring district for five years.
3. Mississippi Teacher Fellowship Program (MTFP)
Teachers in critical service areas who are accepted in an approved Master of Education or Education Specialist Program can receive up to three years of support covering the cost of tuition, books, materials, and fees. In exchange, they must teach for three years in a critical shortage area.

4. Moving Expense Reimbursement

Teachers in critical shortage areas can receive up to \$1,000 in moving expenses with district approval.

5. Housing Assistance for Teachers (HAT)

A partnership between Fannie Mae and the Mississippi Home Corporation provides up to \$6,000 in loans to cover closing costs for teachers in critical shortage areas who build within the district. One-third of the loan is forgiven for each of three years of service to the district.

In legislative actions already approved by the Governor and effective July 1, 2004, the State passed House Bill 657, giving local school boards additional authority to:

- Use available funds not appropriated for other purposes to reimburse state-licensed employees for actual costs of moving expenses up to \$1,000. Individuals receiving relocation assistance through the Critical Teacher Shortage Act are excluded from this provision.
- Establish, in conjunction with the higher education board, a dual enrollment program for high school students to take college courses. Participating students must have completed 14 core high school units and have a 2.5 grade point average and an unconditional recommendation from the high school principal or guidance counselor. Students with less than 14 units may be considered if they have a minimum ACT score of 30 or an equivalent SAT score, a 2.5 grade point average and an unconditional recommendation.

Still, much remains to be done as reflected in the following Mississippi Board of Education's 2004 Legislative Recommendations:

- Teacher Pay – The Board supports full state funding of a competitive teacher salary plan. According to the State Board, at present, Mississippi’s average teacher pay is \$34,555, compared to \$38,138 in contiguous states, \$40,687 in the Southeast, and \$45,822 in the nation as a whole.
- School Funding – The Board recommends full and early funding of the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP) to provide adequate funding in a timely manner that enables schools sufficient time for planning.
- School Facilities – The Board recommends a restructuring of the state’s school construction and renovation funding program. Currently, the program provides \$10 million a year in tax deferment and \$10 million from the Education Enhance Fund for facilities. In each of the past two years, those funds have been diverted to fund MAEP. Local bonds require a 60% majority vote, making it virtually impossible for small, low-wealth districts to fund construction and renovation.
- Early Childhood Education – Mississippi is the only state in the nation that does not use state dollars to support early childhood education. The State Board recommends state funding of early childhood education programs, or, at a minimum, of a pilot program.

The Board’s funding request for 2004-2005 included \$144 million over the FY 2004 appropriated level. The request included \$372 million for MAEP; \$2.6 million for National Board teacher salary supplement increases (\$6,000 per Board certified teacher); and a quarter million dollars for expected increased participation in the Critical Teacher Shortage Scholarship programs.

To its credit the State of Mississippi has invested heavily in public education over the past 10 years. Teacher pay increases between the 1992-1993 and the 2002-2003 school years have cost the state some \$1.8 billion and teachers can expect an eight percent pay increase in the 2004-2005 fiscal year. Impressive as it might be to some, this investment pales in light of the investment the State has made in its penal institutions.

In 1992, the state's total prison population was 8,893; by 2002, that population had increased by 224% to 19,923. During the same time, the cost in state dollars alone went from \$82,807,764 to \$260,272,849, an increase of 314%. In FY 2003, incarceration at the Parchman State Penitentiary cost \$15,162 a year per inmate. By contrast, the state's contribution to K-12 public education was approximately \$3,476 per student. The state of Mississippi spends nearly 450% more to house prisoners than to educate its children in grades K-12. (Mississippi Board of Education)