Hope for Struggling School Districts

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HOPE FOR STRUGGLING SCHOOL DISTRICTS

by

Mary Donise Travis

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School,
the College of Arts and Sciences
and the School of Biological, Environmental, and Earth Sciences
at The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Science

Approved by:

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Dr. David Cochran, Committee Member
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ABSTRACT

Education improves the opportunities and life-chance outcomes of our children, and is a key factory in both economic and community development. Although high school graduation rates have shown improvement nationwide in recent years, public education is suffering from increasing inequality between different school districts and within the same school districts. Such inequalities widen academic outcome gaps and can result in entire school districts being branded as academic failures. However, there is also encouraging evidence of struggling schools and school districts moving toward improvement. Innovative leaders who are committed to inclusive and rigorous academics, shared leadership, and an in-depth understanding of the diversity of their student population are moving their schools toward improved academic performance. Initiatives that involve broad-based community leadership are also producing positive changes in student outcomes, consistent with Collective Impact theory. Using Grounded Theory methodology and mixed research methods, this research has identified two struggling Mississippi school districts that saw F ratings become C ratings, and leadership as the critical key to this change. There is hope for struggling school districts. Although adequate funding and change in the education system is needed, inclusive leaders committed to the whole student can lead a struggling school district into academic success. Ability is inherent in every child; it is the job of administrators, educators, parents, politicians and community members to create a school environment for it to blossom and grow.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my grandson Michael. Our special morning hugs reminded me daily why this research is important. Thank you my family your support throughout this journey.
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CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

My interest in struggling schools districts began in 2016 while I was conducting undergraduate research in the Mississippi Delta. My case study on Delta Hands for Hope’s approach to community development in Shaw, Mississippi, revealed a community with failing schools and little economic opportunity. Shaw’s children were not receiving the education they needed to qualify for jobs that could move them beyond generational poverty. The community could not attract well-paying jobs because it did not have the capacity to create an educated workforce. It was painfully apparent that the under-resourced schools serving predominantly African American and low-wealth communities were perpetuating the deep poverty and inequalities in the Delta.

Parents, for example, in Shaw, Mississippi – a rural community located in the heart of the Delta – believe that quality education is critical for their children. Like parents in any other community, they want their children to be able to successfully compete for economic opportunities, to move beyond the poverty of the Delta. I talked with many Shaw residents while conducting research there in 2015-2016 and heard not only their hopes for Shaw’s children, but also how inequality in education works against those hopes.

Children in Shaw do not experience the same school environment or academic quality that students in the prosperous town of Cleveland, only 12 miles north, experience. Shaw is a low-wealth, predominately African American community where maintaining town infrastructure is exceptionally difficult. Prior to 2015, the community was under a “boil water” notice for over a year. Faced with the challenge of providing
students with safe drinking water at school, teachers distributed two 16-ounce bottles of water to every student each day.

For Shaw high school students this was an additional reminder that their educational experience was shaped by the economic status of their community and school district. Due to mold, the second floor of the high school had been condemned for years, forcing all classes to be held on the first floor. Unable to afford remediation, the school district condemned the entire building in 2015 and combined the high school with the elementary school. Approximately 450 students, elementary and high school, now attend school in a building built to serve only 300 students. Shaw’s current school district was created by the merging of three districts. Instead of combining the budgets of all three, funding was cut leaving the district with the same number of schools and inadequate funding. The academic performance of Shaw schools has fallen along with their funding. Residents described their schools in the 1980’s as academically demanding, now they are in danger of academic failure (Travis 2016). Failing or academically struggling schools have a far-reaching negative impact on communities, and our state as a whole.
Although condemned, Shaw High School has been designated a Mississippi Landmark by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Photo by Delta Daily News. https://deltadailynews.com/new-garden-for-elementary-students-in-shaw/

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Education is a key factor in both economic and community development. Education improves the opportunities and life-chance outcomes of our children, and it provides for a healthy democracy. Although high school graduation rates have shown improvement nationwide in recent years, public education is suffering from increasing inequality between different school districts and within the same school districts. Such inequalities widen academic outcome gaps and can result in entire school districts being branded as academic failures (Logan, Minca, and Adar 2012; Rose 2015; Simms 2012, Chetty et.al. 2011). Education policy has not adapted to the reality that in addition to setting standards, it must also ensure that schools have the necessary funding to meet
those standards. The failure of education policy to provide the resources needed to ensure all children receive an academically rigorous education has contributed to educational inequality (Darling-Hammond 2007; Dittmer 2004). However, there is also encouraging evidence of struggling schools and school districts moving toward improvement. Innovative leaders who are committed to inclusive and rigorous academics, shared leadership, and armed with an in-depth understanding of the diversity of their student population are moving their schools toward improved academic performance (Grady et.al. 2007; Leithwood et.al.2008; Theoharis 2009). Initiatives that involve broad-based community leadership are also producing positive changes in student outcomes, consistent with Collective Impact theory (Kania and Kramer 2011; Biggar, Ardoin, and Morris 2017).

Quality public education, in turn, drives successful economic development (Kalafsky 2008; Kruss et al. 2015; Miller 2017; Neamtu 2015; Sauer and Zagler 2014). Manufacturing jobs, and agriculture are utilizing advanced technologies which require an educated workforce that can only be produced by public school districts that offer a solid and rigorous academic curriculum that develops not only math and science skills, but also skills in communication, critical thinking. States and communities compete to attract new industry, seeking to entice potential employers and investors with incentive packages and promises of trainable workers to meet industry needs. However, financial incentives do not outweigh the emphasis companies place on locating in an area with well-performing school districts, not only for an ongoing source of educated workers, but also retaining and attracting employees who want their children to have access to good schools (Travis 2016).
An academically strong school district is an integral part of overall community development, which can be thought of as the process of creating economic and social progress for the entire community through direct participation of community members (Gines 2015). District schools are responsible not only for educating students, but also for providing a source of community pride and identity through school sports and other extracurricular activities. In many low-income communities, public schools also serve as the sole links to family resource centers ranging from adult education opportunities to after-school tutoring for students (Dupper and Poertner 1997). Parents recognize that education is crucial to increasing economic opportunities and social mobility, especially in today’s technology-driven economy. Children who receive a quality education find better paying jobs, are typically healthier, and experience better life-outcome chances than those who do not (Bockerman and Maczulskij 2016; Chetty et al. 2011).

Butler and Hamnett (2007) have identified geography as the major factor in the inequality in educational outcomes that we see in public education. Because school funding is closely linked to community wealth, where a child lives partly determines whether they attend a well-funded and academically excellent public school or one that is underfunded and failing. While recognizing the complex interaction between race, social class, ethnicity, and family influence on academic outcome, they point to geographic patterns of education as the most significant cause of education inequality. The relocation of middle-class parents to communities with the best schools for their children is also a significant cause of educational inequality. Butler and Hamnett note that this pattern of movement is increasing the disadvantage and social exclusion for those students left behind in schools with inadequate educational resources. Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Dewey,
and Crowley (2006) also present the important connection between place and educational success, noting that rural and inner-city students are disadvantaged by attending schools with inadequate resources. Cobb (2004) finds that even within a school district, geographic location determines a child’s education experience.

The growing inequity of wealth among different communities lies at the root of differing education outcomes. Mangino and Silver (Winter 2010-11) look at the economic and social determinants of educational outcomes and find a correlation between the affluence of a school and its capacity to meet its obligation to provide its students with a high quality, learning environment. They define affluence as the economic vitality of the community in which a school is embedded. This affluence is comprised of a community’s tax base, property values, and the aggregate wealth of its residents. They also identify obstacles that affect school capabilities including concentrated poverty, segregation, or high numbers of English-language learners. Mangino and Silver (Winter 2010-11) find a direct connection between obstacles and level of affluence with greater affluence resulting in reduced obstacles. After analyzing 659 New York schools, the authors find that there is a vast gap between academic performance of resource-strapped districts and those with more affluence. They conclude that present educational policy has the potential of reproducing the patterns of educational inequality and injustice they were designed to eliminate in the absence of broader social focus on addressing the root causes.

Addressing the unequal and often segregated educational experiences of African American and other minority students, Darling-Hammond (2000) points to the discrepancy between the common standards that all students are required to meet and the
disparities in access to quality teachers, as well as advanced curricula, that these students experience. She discusses the link between education and not only economic success but basic survival, as well as the link between lack of education and crime and welfare dependency. The researcher finds that a teacher experience and quality of education are the most important factors in children’s academic outcome. To ensure equality in education, she concludes that resource equalization (enabling the hiring of qualified teachers), recruitment of new teachers, improvement of teacher’s educational preparation, and using clinical training and support for new teachers to improve teacher retention and effectiveness are crucial to improving the educational outcome for children.

1.3 Research Question

Can struggling school districts be saved, such as the district that serves Shaw, as well as comparable schools across Mississippi, the South, and beyond? This thesis breaks this general appeal for hope into two specific research questions, with methodologies designed to answer those questions. First, is it possible to identify school districts in Mississippi that have reversed the general downward trend in educational outcomes over the past two decades? Is this true of any low-income communities in the state, or any communities that have reversed failing or near-failing school districts? Quantitative analysis, based on data from the U.S. Census, U.S. and Mississippi State Departments of Education, non-governmental organizations, and other available sources, will help guide this search for relative “success stories” among the struggling communities and school districts of our state.

Second, if it is possible to identify such educational success stories, is it possible to identify some of the causes of that success? Qualitative research – in particular, in-
depth interviews with community and school district leaders – will seek to identify some of those potential keys to success, and perhaps some commonalities among those school districts that have met with some success.

1.4 Purpose

The ultimate purpose of this research is to help identify and suggest some answers – and some hope – for the many other communities across Mississippi, the South, and other struggling school districts of the U.S. These are important and even urgent questions to answer for parents who understand that a quality education is essential for their child’s success, communities seeking to develop, for state governments competing for new industry to increase job opportunities, for our country as it seeks to maintain a competitive edge in innovation and science. Quality schools educate our future workforce, socialize future citizens, and provide added quality of life and a sense of unity to communities. Failing schools contribute to an ever-widening gap in educational outcome that falls along socio-economic and racial lines, with far-reaching social and economic consequences (Logan, Minca, and Adar 2012; Rose 2015). Although adequate funding is crucial, it is not enough by itself to turn public education around. Collaboration between communities and their schools, strong school and community leadership, and a commitment to educating all children are essential.

1.5 Methodology

My overarching research model will be Grounded Theory which allows data to develop theory, avoiding research being driven by a potentially flawed theory (Glaser 2014). Data will be analyzed through coding, and ongoing comparison of new data with previous data, a distinctive component of Grounded Theory. Coding is the labeling of
concepts that allows categories to be defined, developed, and compared. This allows identification of commonalities, differences, themes, and ensures that unexpected developments are quickly noted and further investigated (Charmaz 2015). Within the framework of Grounded Theory, I will use the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach to conduct in-depth interviews. The appreciative and open-ended questions of AI have been demonstrated to give deeper understanding into the nuances of both positive and negative aspects of an organization, result in longer interviews with better information in greater quantities than traditional questions, and a focus on successes rather than deficits (Cooperrider et al. 2008; Michael 2005; Preskill et al. 2006).

1.6 Sources of Data

Quantitative data for this research from an extensive review of the Mississippi Department of Education’s school district and school reports for academic years 2012-2013 through 2017-2018, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress’ Nations’ Report Card for Mississippi School Districts. The Parents’ Campaign, and Southern Echo, both non-profit organizations based in Jackson, Mississippi, provided additional quantitative data.

Qualitative data were collected using in-depth open-ended interviews with school district administrators, non-profit public education organizations, the director of a non-profit community development organization, private citizens involved in an improving school district, a school board representative, and a Head Start Site Director.

1.7 Location and Study Site

The research for this thesis identified and focused on two particular school districts in Mississippi. Jefferson County School District (JCSD), Fayette, Mississippi
was selected as a district case study. JCSD was chosen as representative of school
districts embedded in a high-poverty, rural county with a predominately African
American student body. It has shown significant improvement in its academic rating
(going from an F in 2015-2016 to a C in 2016-17) although it declined to an F in 2017-
2018. This gain and loss, and the districts assessment of its cause, provided an
opportunity of specifically identifying leadership traits and organizational changes that
produce success. Since the local Head Start program partners with the school district,
particularly with a new kindergarten program, it was also included.

The Hattiesburg Public School District (HPSD) was selected as representative of
struggling school districts with larger student populations of majority African-American,
and that are embedded in a growing urban community. HPSD also provided an in-depth
view of academic progress at the school level within a struggling school district. This
district has shown significant improvement at the elementary school level, particularly
Hawkins Elementary and Rowan Elementary each of which improved their ratings from
F’s to C’s (two points away from B’s).

1.8 Organization of Thesis

The remaining chapters of the thesis will be organized as follows:

Chapter II – Literature Review

This chapter includes a review of the literature regarding
geographic divisions along race and socioeconomic lines and the resulting
differences in educational opportunities and outcomes. It also looks at the
role of education policy and inequalities in and students’ schooling
experience.
Chapter III – Methodology

In this chapter, I present my reasons for using Grounded Theory as a research methodology, and both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect data. I discuss the impact of the Mississippi Department of Education’s frequent changes in its rating criteria, cut-rate scores, and its use of percentile ranking on data comparison. The chapter concludes with how quantitative and qualitative data was collected and analyzed using Grounded Theory methodology.

Chapter IV – The Context and Challenges of Public Education in Mississippi Today

Our history of legalized segregation is part of the context of inequities in funding and education experiences in Mississippi’s public school today, as is the growing geographic segregation of our neighborhoods by race and class. I discuss the political challenges faced by public education including, misperceptions of its performance, budget cuts, and MAEP not being fully funded. Legislative interest in privatizing education continues despite the great progress public school are making and that Mississippians overwhelmingly support their public schools.

Chapter V – Struggling Mississippi School Districts are Improving

Through in-depth interviews, this chapter tells the story of two struggling Mississippi school districts that have made significant progress, Jefferson County School District, and Hattiesburg Public School District. It provides insight into administration, teachers, and students.
Chapter VI – Finding Hope

In this chapter the educational system and its impact on change is discussed and how key leadership can circumvent systemic challenges. A summary of this research is presented.
CHAPTER II  LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Topic Overview

Education is key to both economic and community development, improving the opportunities and life-chance outcomes of our children, as well as providing a foundation for a healthy democracy. Although high school graduation rates have shown improvement nationwide in recent years, public education is suffering from increasing inequality between and within school districts, widening academic outcome gaps, and entire school districts being rated as academic failures (Logan, Minca, and Adar 2012; Rose 2015; Simms 2012, Chetty et.al. 2011). Educational policy has lacked the agility, or perhaps policy makers have lacked the will, to ensure that all children receive an academically rigorous education and often has unintentionally contributed to the academic outcome gap (Darling-Hammond 2007; Dittmer 2004). The result has been a growing gap in academic outcomes among young people within communities as well as between communities. Encouragingly, there is evidence that innovative leaders committed to inclusive and rigorous academics, shared leadership, and armed with an in-depth understanding of the diversity of their student population can move struggling schools toward improved academic performance (Grady et.al. 2007; Leithwood et.al.2008; Theoharis 2009).

The belief that every child has equal access to economic opportunity and life-chance outcomes, largely through access to education, is part of our fundamental values as Americans. The present harsh reality of public education in the United States is that a distance of 12 blocks between neighborhoods can be the dividing line between students who graduate from high school academically prepared for a quality university and those
who graduate with a third-grade reading level and who are unable to score high enough on the ACT to be admitted to any college (Duncan 2018). We think of our country as a meritocracy, a place where hard work and ability allows anyone to succeed, and that equal opportunity is there for those who work hard. The evidence reveals meritocracy as a myth, disjunct from the reality that where a child lives determines the quality of education he or she receives, which in turn largely frames what opportunities and even life-chance outcomes he or she will have (Butler and Hamnett 2007; McNamee and Miller 2004). (See Fig. 2.1)

Figure 2.1 Mobility Probability Map

![Map showing how location affects social mobility and life-chance outcomes.](https://www.vox.com/2015/5/27/8618261/america-maps-truths)

An academically strong school district is an integral part of community development, which can be thought of as the process of creating economic and social
progress for the entire community through direct participation of community members (Gines 2015). District schools are responsible not only for educating students, but also for providing a source of community pride and identity through school sports and other extracurricular activities. In many low-income communities, public schools also serve as the sole links to family resource centers ranging from adult education opportunities to after-school tutoring for students (Dupper and Poertner 1997). In our technology-driven economy, it is apparent access to economic opportunities and social mobility is reliant on education. Children who receive a quality education find better paying jobs, are typically healthier, and experience better life-outcome chances than those who do not (Bockerman and Maczulskij 2016; Chetty et al. 2011).

The literature reveals geographic divisions along race and socio-economic lines that demarcate educational opportunities and outcomes. Geographic location affects funding, curriculum, quality of teachers, condition of school facilities, student demographics, and student academic performance, as well as educational policy and politics within school districts (Condron and Roscigno 2003). The performance and wealth gaps between well-funded and under-funded school districts reflect how profound an effect geographic location has on educational outcomes and life-chance opportunities (Rank 2005). Educational policy directed at educational reform and funding reform has largely been unsuccessful at reducing inequality because it has separated those issues from their geographic context. That geographic analysis reveals the growing re-segregation of our public schools along racial and socioeconomic lines (Logan et al. 2012).
2.2 Geography and Inequality

Geography has been identified as the major factor in the inequality of educational outcomes in public education (Butler and Hamnett 2007). Where a child lives determines whether they attend a well-funded, academically excellent public school or one that is underfunded and failing. School funding, in short, is closely linked to community wealth. Even taking into consideration the complex interaction between race, social class, ethnicity, and family influence on a child’s academic outcome, Butler and Hamnett (2007) found that geographic patterns are the most significant cause of education inequality. The ongoing relocation of middle-class parents to communities with the best schools for their children is also a significant contributor to educational inequality. The pattern of movement by parents able to seek the best schools for their children is resulting in increased disadvantage and social exclusion for those students left behind in underfunded and under-resourced schools. The correlation between place and educational success is also identified by Roscigno, Tomaskovic-Dewey, and Crowley (2006) who find that attending inadequately resourced schools, places rural and inner-city students at an educational disadvantage when compared to suburban students attending schools with adequate or better resources. Educational policies that emphasize teacher competency, mandatory student testing, and alternative choices to public schools to improve a student’s education opportunity fail to take into consideration that schools are embedded within communities (see Table 2.1).

Inequity in education outcomes reflects the growing inequity of wealth among different communities. Mangino and Silver (Winter 2010-11) find a correlation between a school’s affluence and its capacity to meet its obligation to provide its students with a high quality, learning environment. The economic vitality of a community, which determines its affluence, is based on the local community tax base, property values, and the aggregate wealth of its residents. Communities with concentrated poverty, segregation, or high numbers of English-language learners struggle to provide the capacity to provide a high quality, learning environment for all their students. In their analysis of 659 New York schools, Mangino and Silver (Winter 2010-11) revealed a vast academic performance gap between resource-strapped school districts and those with
healthy funding: a direct connection between level of community affluence and school capacity to educate its students. Without a broader social focus on addressing the root causes of educational inequity, Mangino and Silver conclude that present educational policy has the potential to reproduce patterns of educational inequality and injustice. Policy makers have largely sidestepped confronting root causes because of the political expediency of maintaining separation between the educational outcomes of suburban and urban students.

2.2.2 Suburban vs. Urban

During his term in office, President Nixon had the opportunity to address the issue of educational inequity by requiring new educational policies that linked suburban and urban school resources and academic outcomes, a political volatile topic. Nixon’s decision to compromise by leaving suburban schools untouched and to provide some federal assistance to urban schools has been, according to Ryan (2010), the dominant theme in education policy and law for over 50 years.

The Common School movement of the mid 1800’s recognized the importance of educating both rich and poor equally in an effort to prepare everyone to be responsible and productive citizens. Modern education has experienced a shift away from the socialization of students, our future citizens, to an emphasis on standardized test performance and the dismissal of the importance of preparing students to live in a diverse society. Ryan (2010) notes that segregation by race, ethnicity, or class cannot provide equal opportunities of education. The concentration of poor, minority students in schools that are under-resourced and have poor academic performance means those students have a lack of access to quality education and quality teachers. Policy makers and courts have
bowed to middle-class suburban demands to not be linked to urban schools. Suburban communities do not want to see any of their resources used to fund high-poverty schools. There cannot be true education reform without linking the outcome of suburban students with that of urban students.

Education is at the center of policies that encourage increased social integration and mobility, national competitiveness, and reducing social marginalization and exclusion. Butler and Hamnett (2007) also note that in the U.S., there is a strong racial dimension to the inequalities between white and African American students with regard to educational opportunities. Because middle class growth has been linked to the importance of educational achievement leading to a college degree and a good job, the importance of education has grown beyond producing social mobility to include reproducing existing social class position. Education has political importance in that lack of quality education can result in exclusion from opportunities and polarization, and can work against social cohesion. They point out that fear of falling out of the middle class drives parents to seek the best schools. In seeking to maximize opportunities for their children, those better schools typically exclude non-white, non-middle-class children. Middle-class parents fear that their children will be held back by attending schools with large minority and poor student populations (Butler and Hamnet 2007).

Americans typically believe that socially upward mobility is the result of meritocracy, or an individual’s hard work, correct attitude, integrity, and natural ability, coupled with education. McNamee and Miller (2004) find that educational attainment is more a matter of family economic standing than individual merit. Where a person lives is determined by family economic resources and race. Discrepancies between school
districts in educational quality results in the ongoing efforts of parents, that are financial able, to locate in neighborhoods with access to quality schools. Educational attainment is largely a reflection of family income. In short, individual achievement happens in the context of unequal educational opportunity rather than a meritocracy. Geography matters in education and the resulting movement of parents seeking to ensure that their children have every possible advantage is creating geographic re-segregation through discrepancies in educational funding, educational access, concentrated disadvantages and classroom composition.

2.2.3 Race and Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status, or an individual’s social standing or class, is strongly linked to inequality in access to rigorous curriculum, experienced teachers, adequately resourced schools, and education outcomes. Class and race are intertwined with each other and each can only be fully understood in relation to one another. Belief that democracy is served by educating children from diverse groups together fueled efforts to end racial segregation in our public schools but court challenges in the 2000’s marked a shift away from addressing racially based stratification within education. Robert Crosnoe (2009) notes that those promoting student diversity responded by promoting socioeconomic desegregation to increase student diversity.

School districts and their schools are embedded in communities with no control over the level of the community’s affluence, which reflects the level of economic vitality and therefore available resources for education. Mangino and Silver (Winter 2010-11) define obstacles to learning as factors that make learning more difficult for students and in turn make it more difficult for schools to meet their educational goals. These obstacles
include poverty, minimal English proficiency, and racial segregation. A school district or a local school’s capacity to meet educational goals is shaped by obstacles and the level of affluence (including social and human capital) of the community in which it is embedded. Mangino and Silver connect greater affluence to reduced obstacles, while schools with minimal resources face the greatest obstacles. While all public schools are expected to meet certain academic standards, due to location, not all schools have the capacity to meet those standards. Educational policy assumes all school districts have equal capacity to educate their students, ignoring discrepancies in available resources or student demographics. Schools with the greatest need for qualified teachers, textbooks, rigorous academics and staff support find themselves in danger of losing federal funds because they are unable to demonstrate adequate annual progress toward proficiency and reduced educational outcome gaps. Mangino and Silver (Winter 2010-11) note that schools have no control over poverty, yet poverty may be the most significant factor in a child’s academic performance. The lack of adequate nutrition, adult supervision, family support networks, and increased health problems associated with poverty all impact a student’s academic performance and educational outcomes. Segregation by socioeconomic class (e.g. middle-class suburbs compared to lower-class, inner-city) produces schools districts in affluent communities with excess capacity while needier districts embedded in lower-income, typically high-minority communities are left with a starvation-type diet of resources and insufficient capacity.

Class strongly influences the type of education children receive, even within the same school. Annette Lareau (2011) finds differences in the parenting styles of middle-class families compared to working class families that had bearing on children’s
educational experience. Middle-class children are encouraged to express their opinions and preferences and to ask questions, and they are exposed to enriching experiences. Their parents are adept at navigating institutions, confronting teachers, advocating for their child’s best educational experience, and training their children to do the same. By contrast, working class parents are often distrustful of the educational institution. Instead of advocating for better education for their children, they either are resigned to the status quo or feel they have no place to question the teacher. Unlike working-class parents, the parenting style of middle-class parents meld well with the structure and systems of educational institutions, ensuring a better educational experience and outcome for their children.

The impact of socioeconomic or class segregation on who receives what kind of education has life-long consequences for students. Comparing two high schools in Orange County, California, Robert Putnam (2015) found educational inequality even though each school had comparable spending per pupil, teacher-student rations, number of school counselors, and quality of teacher. The student population of Troy High School was diverse and economically upscale while Santa Ana’s student population was predominately Latino, Spanish-speaking, and poor. Santa Ana offered fewer advanced placement classes, fewer team sports, fewer extracurricular activities, and had four times the dropout rate, ten times the truancy rate, and more disciplinary problems than Troy. Only one third of Santa Ana’s student were likely to take the SAT exam and those who did averaged around the bottom quartile while Troy students would score in the top 10-15 percent. Poor students begin school with burdens that only increase in time, ranging from neighborhood and community influences, the schools they attend, rising college tuition
costs and student loans. In contrast to the American ideal of equality of opportunity, Putnam (2015) notes that only 29 percent of high-scoring poor kids receive a college degree while 30 percent of low-scoring rich kids do.

The gap between low and high-income families tripled between 1954, when the U.S. Supreme Court declared separate schools were not equal in Brown vs Board of Education, and 2004. George Palardy (2013) finds that socioeconomic class is a significant factor in increasingly segregated neighborhoods and schools with segregation affecting high school graduation rates and college enrollment. Students attending a school with a higher socio-economic population are 68% more likely to enroll in a four-year college than students attending a majority low socioeconomic school. Because educational attainment is directly connected to life outcomes, access to higher salaried paying careers, home ownership, and better health outcomes, attending a low socioeconomic school can have lifelong negative consequences. Palardy (2013) recommends determining the location of new schools based on maximizing socioeconomic class diversity, placing magnet schools in large urban districts to foster that diversity, and promoting academics and higher teacher morale. He acknowledges that there are structural barriers to ensuring socioeconomic diversity in student populations including neighborhood segregation along class and race lines, and school district boundaries. Additional barriers are resistance from middle and upper-class communities, political opposition, and legal challenges to attempts to redraw school district boundaries to ensure diversity as well as inter-district programs. His findings imply that the only way to fully address the negative consequences of attending low-socioeconomic majority schools is ensuring diversity.
Socioeconomic status also plays an important role in shaping the educational and employment goals of students. While the aspiration to pursue higher-education is broadly shared among all high school students, Marginson (2016) found that a student’s capacity to enter and graduate from college is socially differentiated. Students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds tended to underestimate their academic potential, view their cultural capital as inadequate, prioritize job security and high income over risk taking, seek a predictable pathway from education to employment, and have less familiarity with performance and application strategies than their peers with higher SES backgrounds. Although selective colleges frequently offer them lower tuition prices than non-selective institutions, Marginson (2016) notes that high achieving low SES students, unlike their wealthier counterparts, did not apply to selective colleges.

Educational success relies on families, schools, and communities but the socioeconomic status of parents is key in shaping a child’s educational achievement (Israel and Beaulieu 2004). Children with well-educated parents, typically high-socioeconomic status, are more likely to excel academically and stay in school than students from lower-income families. Significantly, Israel and Beaulieu (2004) find that irrespective of their family’s low-socioeconomic status, children given a nurturing environment and guidance regarding acceptable behavior make significant educational progress and are more likely to stay in school. Extensive interactive social capital can offset low resource levels.

Race and socioeconomic class are closely related in the United States with minorities, especially African Americans, experiencing a higher rate of poverty than the white majority. Milner (2015) defines social class as practices of living, not traits or
categories of people, but which also influence a student’s opportunities to learn. While acknowledging the importance of class, he notes that race may be one of the most important issues to be considered in education with non-white students being grossly underserved. Because race is a human construction used to privilege some groups of people over others based on physical, social, legal, and historical characteristics, it is deeply entwined in education. Milner (2015) finds this reflected in student assignment policy, property taxes and education, the resistance of teachers to discussing race and a preference for training in teaching strategies. The foundation of teaching are educational experiences that, according to Milner (2015), build on students’ assets, encourage their curiosity and interest in learning, and cultivate life-views and practices that improve community. This is neglected with the current myopic focus on student achievement on standardized testing. Teachers both unconsciously, and consciously, group and stratify children based on their ingrained conceptions of who needs what time of support, often reflective of implicit racial and class bias such as poverty defining a student. Milner (2015) reminds us that white is also a race, in that discussion of race in education is not solely focused on students of color.

Even within the same socioeconomic class, the educational experiences of students of color differ from white students. Lewis and Diamond’s (2015) case study of Riverview, a well-resourced suburban school district finds that race plays a key role in educational achievement differentials, and that the mechanisms producing contemporary racial inequality are different than those in the past. Racial dynamics shape how we think about and interact with others and determine resource availability, and how schools allocate those resources to their students. Although school policies were designed to be
racially neutral, Lewis and Diamond (2015) find that the hourly and daily practices occurring within the school were subtly varied based on race. Unintentionally, even with the best of intentions, policy interaction with daily practice, racial ideology and structural inequalities are replicating and reinforcing power hierarchies that favor whites over people of color. Teacher perceptions of which student needs discipline and the appropriate punishment are influenced by the student’s race. African American students represented over 70 percent of all in-school suspensions and 60 percent of out-of-school suspensions in their study, even though they were only approximately 35 percent of the total student population (Lewis and Diamond 2015). Equally concerning, they find that black students show greater receptivity to school effects (contrary to common assumptions), but their family resources do not pay off in accessing academic resources in the same way experienced by white families. Although stating a desire for diversity in school and many choosing Riverview specifically for its high-quality diverse schools, white parents responded to obvious inequitable distributions of school resources with efforts to further increased access to resources for their children. Because racially neutral rhetoric cloaks practices that maintain and reproduce racial inequality in education, Lewis and Diamond (2015) advocate shifting focus from the low end of academic hierarchies to reforming the daily practices occurring in our schools.

Suburban schools with their resources and high percentage of experienced and qualified teachers appear to promise academic success for all children. Lewis-McCoy (2014), like Lewis and Diamond (2015), finds implicit teacher bias replicates educational outcome inequalities. Teachers make numerous daily decisions at multiple levels that are shaped by their perceptions of student family background and their relationships with
parents. Children whose parents are perceived to be uncooperative or uninvolved are disciplined more often with greater severity than students whose parents were described as involved and supportive. Family background is often used by teachers to justify differential treatment in the classroom ranging from accepting reasons for incomplete homework, teacher support and encouragement, and student labeling. Lewis-McCoy (2014) finds this to be true for both white and black teachers. Teachers of both races have a tendency to view students, and parents, in a binary fashion, even when presented with clear evidence that their perceptions are wrong. Inequality is entangled in classroom relationships, reflective of the complex linkage between structure and culture, both at the personal and institutional or systemic level, with biases leading to accumulated consequences (Lewis-McCoy 2014).

Inwood and Yarbrough (2010) contribute to our understanding of inequality in education by connecting the racialization of bodies with that of place. Racialization of place is used to reinforce social hierarchies thereby facilitating domination and exploitation. They find that race as a social construction means that racial ideology is historically created and contemporarily recreated, enforced, and manifest through everyday actions and interactions. Inwood identifies the system of racial oppression developed in the United States as a racial project and that the system links race to structure and contributes to a culture of silence where the truth of racial inequality is ignored. A racial project allows us to maintain the paradox of outlawing segregation while tolerating systems and structures that perpetuate racial inequalities (Inwood 2011). The lack of understanding that white is a race, coupled with the fact that 90 percent of
America’s teachers are white while over 40 percent of U.S. students are non-white, underscores the need for training in multicultural teaching (Howard 2006; Milner 2015).

Poverty does have a high correlation with school failure, but Howard (2006) points to the educational achievement gap between middle and upper-class students of color and their white and Asian peers. He finds a connection between an increasingly diverse American student population with a predominately white teaching profession and a continuing achievement gap between races. The poor choices we are making to address discrepancies in educational outcomes weaken any assertions that the education of all children matters. Teachers continue to be inadequately prepared to effectively teach in diverse classrooms and curriculum remains Euro-centric and monocultural. Politicians rely on ethnic and racial fears while communities and school boards resist facing changing populations. White teachers are culturally isolated, according to Howard (2006), and although they conceptualize their role as helping minorities, they have not been assisted in looking deeply and critically at the changes and personal growth required to effectively work with issues of race, equity, and social justice in the school setting. In the 1990’s, President Clinton initiated racial dialog between educators, students and parents which continues to this day, as does inequity in educational experiences and outcome for students of color. Howard (2006) encourages us to consider that the missing element in closing educational outcome gaps is white educators doing the required inner work to understand their deepest assumptions and perceptions about race, particularly whiteness. There is no other way for teachers to confront their implicit bias and develop into culturally competent professional educators. There is no other way to help students overcome the negative consequences of past and present racial stratification. To be
effective, the inner transformation of teachers, must be couched within the vision of multicultural education as part of the process of social change and transformation (Howard 2006).

Warren (2014) also ties the transformation of public education to the need for transformation, an educational justice movement. He ties the failure of various attempts to address inequality in education for low-income students of color to reform confined to the school system. Our education system is itself only a part of broader structures of poverty and stratification along racial and socioeconomic lines. The technological or organizational approaches of education reformers are doomed because education is embedded in the broader social context. Inequalities in education reflect the dysfunctionality of institutional education which cannot be addressed through increased funding alone. Acknowledging that it is easier to discuss poverty’s effects on education than the effects of race, Warren (2014) agrees with other researchers that race is intertwined with education (Howard 2006; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Lewis-McCoy 2014).

The school-to-prison pipeline is an example of structural racism’s interlocking systems of oppression. Although perhaps not intentional, the low expectations white teachers have for their African American and Latino students directly affects their teaching and discipline, and the performance of those students. Warren (2014) concludes that our educational system reproduces inequality because it maintains and perpetuates deep racial and class inequalities. Further, because those privileged by a system rarely recognize or admit systemic oppression, he prescribes an education justice movement as the only way to reform education to ensure all children receive a quality education.
2.2.4 Policy

American education policy has often been shaped by political considerations and culture wars instead of answering the question of how best to educate all its children. Even well intentioned policy, if it does not consider the reality that schools are embedded in communities and the culture at large, can inadvertently contribute to the replication of inequality in education.

Educational philosophies have changed, reflecting the evolving needs of our country according to Shelley (1999). The traditional Common School method of the 1800’s that focused on mental discipline in the form of memorization and recitation of information to develop disciplined minds and character, reflected a society where hard physical labor provided income for most of society. With the rise of industrialization in the early 1900’s, education entered its Progressive Era where learning how things work and applying that information accurately and efficiently replaced rote memorization with efficiency. Students and curriculum were also sorted into grade levels with knowledge organized into units matched to a student’s age, background, and skill level. Shelley (1999) identifies the 1990’s a time of transition into a communicative based education as American society became information-oriented, and globalization demanded an educated workforce with the capacity to compete globally.

Racial segregation and inequality have shaped education policy throughout the history of our country. Jim Crow laws that denied African American children access to quality education were overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1954 ruling in Brown v. Board that state-imposed school segregation was unconstitutional resulted in increased politicization of education according to Brown (2004). In hopes of replacing a democratic
majority in the U.S. Congress, the Republican Party, under President Nixon, sought to
win southern votes by slowing down the desegregation process, creating school-choice as
an option to public school desegregation and by appointing conservatives to the federal
judiciary. Brown describes the Democratic Party’s response as seeking an orderly process
of implementing desegregation, financially supporting local school districts seeking to
desegregate, and providing legal remedies in partnership with the U.S. Attorney General.
Over a period of fifty years, conservative whites won the battle against court-ordered
desegregation (Brown 2004). According to Anderson (2006), the required integration of
Southern public schools in the 1960-70’s was resisted through the establishment of white
private academies, with white politicians and voters seeking freedom of choice in place
of forced bussing.

The resistance of conservative whites to court rulings reflective of the liberal
civil-rights movement of the 1960’s delayed implementation until it coincided with the
conservative restoration ideology of the 1980’s and 1990’s. According to Bradford
(2000), characteristics of the conservative restoration ideology included anti-government
intervention (particularly anti-welfarism often with anti-black sentiments) and anti-
affirmative action. The publication of The Bell Curve by Herrnstein and Murray which
tied academic achievement gaps to genetic factors rather than differing educational
experience, added impetus to conservative determination to reclaim control over
educational policy. Bradford also found that the fundamentalist Christian right play a key
role in the restoration movement, including concerted efforts to take over local school
boards. Pastors that supported the court orders found themselves verbally attacked by
their congregations (Bradford 2000).
Brown (2004) points out that the phrase *educational reform* is a label often used for other agendas such as deregulation, family values, and democratic values, all of which are actually focused on protecting the majority racial group and not designed to ensure that poor African American children have access to quality of education. White flight from public schools has produced a concentration of majority-minority students in under-funded schools and is facilitated by policy designed to protect racial and socioeconomic segregation that is promoted as education reform (Brown 2004; Cobb 2004).

Ryan (2010) found that true educational reform required linking the education outcomes of suburban students to those of students in urban schools. While formulating federal educational policy, President Nixon had the opportunity to link suburban and urban resources, a politically risky move. Instead, he acquiesced to the political clout of middle-class whites and signed into law policy that provided some financial assistance to urban schools while leaving suburban schools untouched. The dominant theme in education policy and law continues to be the continued separation of urban and suburban student educational outcomes (Ryan 2010).

Neoliberalism uses the market exchange to interpret and guide human action, holding humans accountable for their predicaments or circumstances while resolutely refusing any consideration of the faults in larger structural or institutional forces such as racism and economic inequality. Wilson (2007) also finds that the policy and economic objectives of neoliberalism have had the effect of negating *social* in issues of justice, shifting the responsibility for social risk (poverty, inadequate education, etc.) from the public realm to the individual. Racism and economic inequality are not considered as casual factors in social justice issues, rather neoliberalism declares racism ended and
social ills a deserved result of individual conduct. Wilson notes that throughout the South public and private systems have been created that encourage accumulation of wealth and privilege in majority white communities. The degree of separation by race is underscored poverty statistics: only 15 percent of segregated white schools are schools of concentrated poverty while 88 percent of majority-minority schools are schools of concentrated poverty. Neoliberalism frames the plight of minority students as a personal issue, while promoting a new political and social order where social justice is not secured by addressing institutional and structural injustices, but by addressing the failure of the individual (Wilson 2007).

Rhodes (2011) finds neoconservative policy, like neoliberalism, promotes marketizing reforms that privatize social services, require deregulation, reduce social programs and taxes, and feature disciplining policies with strict behavioral requirements of beneficiaries, the use of testing and monitoring of recipients, and the imposition of sanctions for non-compliance. The standards-directed education movement was defining educational reform initiatives by 2001 and included assessments and review along with alignment of financial resources with both the standards and student performance on state tests (Marran 2001). The dominance of neoliberal and neoconservative educational reform discourse over social democratic policy dialogue is reflected in the 2002 federal government’s No Child Left Behind Act, as well as other educational policies based on standardized testing, accountability (including disciplining policies introduced by the standards-directed reform movement), competition, school choice, and privatization (Rhodes 2011).
The purpose of the federal government’s No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 was to raise the educational achievement of American students, close racial and ethnic achievement gaps by mandating better qualified teachers, raising standardized test scores, and offering a school-choice option, but Darling-Hammond (2007) finds that its legal complexities and requirements have unintended negative consequences for the students it was intended to help. The enormous resource inequality in America (the wealthiest schools spend ten times more per pupil than the poorest schools) was not addressed by NCLB. Instead all schools were required to meet the same academic standards without having equal capacity. The underfunding of the act, a shortage of well-prepared teachers in high-needs schools, coupled with unattainable test score targets that disproportionately penalize schools serving the neediest students, threatens to undermine, or potentially destroy public education. School curriculum was narrowed to focus on low-level skills required to perform well on standardized testing and instructionally rich, improvement-oriented systems were replaced with more rote and punishment driven approaches. Darling-Hammond (2007) also found that NCLB regulations resulted in inappropriate assessment of English language learners and special needs students and produced strong incentives to exclude low-scoring students from school to improve test results. Additionally, it would label the majority of public schools as failing, even though they were actually high performing and improving, because a single student group (i.e. disabled learners) fell short of a target goal. NCLB require all students to have highly qualified teachers without ensuring the funds to make it possible, mistakes measuring schools for fixing them, and requires the largest gains from lower-performing schools while ignoring their lack of resources and high-need student population. The labeling
system penalizes school by making it harder for struggling schools to attract good teachers and can result in the loss of federal funding (Darling-Hammond 2007).

School choice was first mandated by federal law in the No Child Left Behind Act (Zhang and Cowen 2009). It requires that public schools receiving federal Title I funding (which provides financial assistance to schools with a high percentage of students from low-income families) that fail to meet the criteria for adequate yearly progress for two consecutive years must offer school choice or supplemental services. Failing schools are also required to provide school choice or supplemental services. Zhang and Cowen (2009) find that while public school choice is required by NCLB, geographical inequalities exist in the distribution of alternative schools, and rural schools were found to be uniquely disadvantaged under NCLB. Surprisingly, they also found that one third of failing schools were located in suburbs, reflecting increasing diversity in suburban populations.

While thousands of innovative, and successful schools, do exist, the United States lacks the policies and resources to support the spread of their techniques and to facilitate similar transformation throughout the nation’s school system according to Darling-Hammond (2000). She finds that the potential benefits of school choice plans are dependent upon increasing the supply of good schools and that minority students were unlikely to be helped by charter schools and vouchers. Simms (2012) also finds that school vouchers may not be effective in reducing achievement gap between black and white students. She evaluated the standardized test scores of black and white third graders attending private schools, in the areas of reading, math, and science and found their scores did not differ significantly from those of public schools. In order to protect their
children from being alienated and excluded from advantages, she finds that African American parents have to advocate for their children in both public and private schools and are often at a disadvantage when compared to white parents who are typically more familiar with navigating school systems (Simms 2012).

Educational policy reflects cultural struggles over social reproduction, and conflicting educational goals. Reflecting the rise of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, Labaree (1997) identifies the conflicting goals of education as a public good or as a commodity. Educational goals of liberals and those of conservatives. Liberals saw quality public education for all children as a common good that prepared all children to be competent citizens, essential for democracy. Conservatives saw education as a means of producing social efficiency and favored guiding students into tracks for existing jobs. Liberals concerned with social mobility saw the conservative approach as guaranteeing the replication of socioeconomic status. Labaree finds the growing domination of education as a social mobility goal over education for democratic equality or social efficiency, endangers public education by turning it into a private good. Education as a commodity results in privatization of education, loss of public control, stratification along racial and socioeconomic lines, continuation and growth of education inequality and discrimination, and increased marginalization of students of color from mainstream economic, political, and social opportunities (Labaree 1997).

Because schools are institutions of socialization and social reproduction, educational policy reflects America’s culture wars (Merrett 1999). The introduction of national education standards by President Clinton in 2000 for K-12 in core subjects was justified by the need for national workforce preparedness required by global competition,
but Merrett (1999) finds that parents and conservative groups opposed it citing concerns that state and local school boards would lose autonomy and decision-making power, thereby becoming puppets of federal bureaucracy. He also finds that the scale at which social processes occur is always contested and hypothesizes that conservatives sought congressional support for local school choice and school prayer to subvert national educational standards. The competition for control and social regulation of our educational system is accomplished through processes where contending sides, that are deeply intertwined, use politics of scale to determine the appropriate scale for social reproduction (Merrett 1999).

Funding policy in America is tied to property taxes and is a major factor in the pattern of inequality in school funding. Between 1970 and 2003, forty-four states filed over 140 cases arguing that the unacceptable funding disparities between school districts violated constitutionally protected rights in an attempt to equalize funding (Drennon 2006). An attempt was made in the early 1970’s to uncouple the funding of education from property tax revenue by asserting that educational funding based primarily on property taxes violated the 14th Amendment’s equal protection clause on the basis that education is a fundamental right, but the U.S. Supreme Court ruled against education as a basic right (Rose 2015). There is also a level of public opposition to equal funding of schools. Reed (2001) finds that education politics are shaped by local issues, needs, and organizations with attitudes toward education equality, taxes, and school performance reflecting both self-interest and symbolic opposition to equal education.

Quality teachers have a significant impact on student rates of college attendance, lifetime earnings, and the probability of giving birth as a teenager according to Chetty et.
Al. (2014). They find that replacing a poor teacher with an average one can increase the value of students’ lifetime earnings by approximately $250,000 per classroom. It is imperative that funding policy address the current funding inequalities widespread throughout our country.

Our educational system needs change. Reformers have pursued change by formulating a pre-determined solution targeting a specific issue. This approach has not been successful in creating long term change due to the complex interaction among the education system, politics, race, and socioeconomic status. The Collective Impact (CI) model of collaboration is offering school districts and education reformers a way to achieve long term positive change (Cooper 2017; Kania and Kramer 2011). Kania and Kramer (2011) find that Strive, a collective impact initiative, focused the entire education community in Cincinnati, Ohio on one set of goals that addressed all facets of the city’s student achievement crisis. Social change has traditionally been understood as the work of individual organizations focused on different facets of a problem which often placed them in competition with each other (Linderman 2016; Kania and Kramer 2011, 2013; Dubow, Serafini, and Litzler 2018). In contrast, the CI process builds trust and respect among participants thereby enabling adaptive and collective problem solving (Linderman 2016). Thompson (2017) finds that CI is quickly becoming a major element in school reform and leading to improved student outcomes.

Collective Impact is a systematic framework that intentionally and strategically involves diverse sectors in pursuing a long-term common goal (Walzer, Weaver, and McGuire 2016). CI does not begin with pre-determined solutions, instead emergent solutions occur during the process as participants learn from seeing the issue from a
common perspective and contribute their unique skills (Walzer, Weaver, and McGuire 2016; Kania and Kramer 2013; Dubow, Serafini, and Litzler 2018). The framework of CI has five conditions: a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a separate organization that acts as the backbone support coordinating all participating organizations and agencies (Kania and Kramer 2011). Biggar, Ardoin, and Morris (2017) find those five conditions were instrumental in enhancing, strengthening and supporting the success of ChangeScale, a collaboration of environmental educators. CI is especially useful in addressing broad complex issues, for community driven social change, and for addressing deep-rooted, complex and seemingly intractable issues (Walzer, Weaver, and McGuire 2016; Dubow, Serafini, and Litzler 2018). Instead of short-term solutions, CI leads to sustained improvements and systemic change with new ways of seeing, learning, and doing (Kania and Kramer 2013; Walzer, Weaver, and McGuire 2016; Dubow, Serafini, and Litzler 2018).
CHAPTER III – METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction to Methodology

Public education, race, and socioeconomic status are intertwined in ways that quantitative data alone cannot fully illuminate. Statistics at the federal, state, and district level reveal gaps in educational outcomes, inequities in resources and funding, and an over-all improvement in Mississippi graduation rates and reading proficiency, but not causality regarding struggling or improving school districts. To decipher whether a struggling district is actually improving, how such improvement is being achieved, and the complex interactions among race, socioeconomic status, and education, a more flexible approach like Grounded Theory, in which both quantitative and qualitative can be integrated, is more appropriate.

A primary advantage of qualitative research is that it allows the researcher to focus on process, meaning, and understanding while providing a vigorous and inclusive system of exploring the complex challenges that school districts face as well as inequities in students’ educational outcomes (Cooley 2013; Merriam 1998; Maxwell 1996). Maxwell (1996) underscores the strength of qualitative research in identifying the processes leading to an outcome, developing causal explanation, and understanding the context in which people are responding and making decisions. He describes qualitative methods as keeping the unique perspective and experience of each participant intact during analysis thus contributing to developing understanding the way unique circumstances influence events, actions, and meanings. Additionally, with its focus on process, qualitative research aids in understanding what led to certain outcomes and developing an explanation of the actual events and their context. Cooley (2013) points
out that qualitative research allows the observation and analysis of the minor day-to-day events that shape context but are often overlooked by survey or studies of loosely connected events. As a method, it has been embraced by ever-growing numbers of educational researchers and has increased the understanding of complex social interactions and daily predicaments faced daily in educational settings. Cooley contrasts the typical inclination of politicians to want simple answers to complex problems, such as those drawn from purely quantitative data, to the complex insights offered through qualitative research.

In-depth and open-ended interviews were used to collect qualitative data for this research. Interview questions were developed using the interview technique of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) which is based on defining, locating, and promoting examples of good practices (Bellinger and Elliott 2011). AI approaches problems by emphasizing inquiry into strengths, rather than weaknesses, creating opportunity for story-telling and producing better interview results than focusing primarily on problems (Cooperrider and Whitney 2005). The appreciative questions of AI become a tool for discovering, and understanding, innovations in organizational structure and processes while revealing the factor that give vitality to the organization (Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros 2008). Michael (2005) finds the use of AI as a stand-alone interview technique to be effective in engaging interviewees to talk candidly and spontaneously, producing a large quantity of quality data in a short amount of time. The AI method was effective in a variety of cultural contexts, reduced interviewee’s hesitancy of discussing sensitive issues and through its linking of past, present, and future created a positive energy producing longer than expected interviews (Michael 2005). The tone of interview questions makes a
difference in the quality and quantity of data collected (Whitney et.al. 2014). With AI, interviewees are invited to share distinctive competencies, wisdom, insights, innovations, and their vision for the future (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros 2008). Such data is essential in understanding how struggling but improving school districts are addressing student needs.

Grounded Theory methodology is especially well suited to conducting combined quantitative and qualitative research of complex issues where previously accepted theories may not be applicable. Merriam (1998) finds Grounded Theory (GT) is distinctive in its inductive stance that produces theory grounded in reality and that is useful in addressing practice in a particular area. GT’s constant comparison of data, used to determine similarities and differences, data coding, and data analysis reveal patterns and relationships that can directly influence policy, practice, and future research (Merriam 1998). GT is extensively used in diverse disciplines including urban geography, urban economics, psychology, education, nursing, and social sciences, and is an innovative and robust research methodology for complex, dynamic, and fluid research needed to understand phenomena and respond to complex issues (Mills, Bonner, and Francis 2006; Allen and Davey 2017). It is a conceptualizing methodology that focuses on context, processes, and interpretation of key players and its clear guidelines contribute to building explanatory frameworks (Allen and Davey 2017).

Grounded Theory moves qualitative research from purely descriptive studies into explanatory theoretical frameworks, including a concept of human agency, emergent processes, social and subjective meanings, and problem solving practices. The coding of
data required by GT prompts analytical questions of data revealing nuances in the language and meaning of interviewees contributing to making patterns visible and understandable (Charmaz 2014). Constant comparison of data is the cornerstone of GT with open research questions, explanatory power, and a focus on constructing knowledge about phenomena, linking theoretical propositions to core data categories as distinguishing core principles (Matteucci and Gnoth 2017). It is particularly valuable in providing an overview of what is actually occurring with studied phenomena and is rigorous and tightly procedural throughout every step of its methodology (Glaser 2014). Grounded theory keeps the presence of participants close to the researcher by an analysis process that keeps their words intact and contributes to GT’s explanatory power (Mills, Bonner, and Francis 2006).

The search for relative success stories among Mississippi’s struggling school districts, and understanding how that improvement was achieved, was conducted using the research methodology of Grounded Theory and the collection of quantitative and qualitative data. Out of the districts that had shown improvement, I chose two case studies to better identify the key factors and change agents: Jefferson County School District, Jefferson County, Mississippi; and Hawkins Elementary School in the Hattiesburg Public School District, Hattiesburg, Mississippi. The quantitative data I collected at the state level accurately reflected the continuous changes the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) makes in the criteria and guidelines it uses to assign academic ratings but created fuzzy and often misleading impressions of district or school progress by itself. The data collected through qualitative research conducted by in-depth interviews provided insight into the complex issues affecting Mississippi school districts,
the actual progress being made, and the agents of change and their methods in improving districts and schools.

Given the context of the Mississippi Department of Education’s (MDE) frequent adjustment to the cut-rate scores and accountability model used to determine the ratings of schools and districts, quantitative data alone cannot give an accurate or complete picture of district academic progress and growth. Districts and schools are often informed of changes in criterion late in the year when model changes have substantially negative effects. An example occurred in 2014 when MDE informed school districts that instead of using the Common Core Objectives they were instructed to teach, the Mississippi Curriculum Test, Second Edition (MCT2) tests would be used with a dramatically increased cut score. High performing districts, such as Grenada School District, found themselves preparing parents for a significantly lower rating and gains in graduation rates being lost through MDE’s change in its definition of a high school graduate (Grenada School District 2014). Had MDE not issued waivers to Mississippi school districts allowing them to carry their 2012-2013 grade over into 2013-2014, Grenada Public School District would have received a D instead of a B and many of its students counted as graduates would have been redefined as dropouts belying its actual 26% increase in graduation rates (Grenada School District 2014).

In 2015, the Joint Legislative Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review (PEER) issued its report “A Review of the Accountability Standards of the Mississippi Department of Education” finding that MDE’s method of calculating accountability standards did not provide a clear picture of the performance of Mississippi schools and districts nor did it make it possible to compare districts or schools to each
other, or even themselves over time. The committee recommended the use of standardized tests alone to provide the criterion and standard for measuring school performance (Joint Legislative Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review 2015).

Adjustments in cut-rate scores, rating criterion, and the use of a Bell curve (which arbitrarily requires ten percent receive F’s and ten percent A’s regardless of actual grades), continue to be used by MDE in determining accountability grades. On October 11, 2018, MDE announced that a grading scale change (not district scores) for 2017-2018 increased the number of districts earning an F from nine in 2016-2017 to 21 districts in 2017-2018 while increasing those with an A from 15 to 18 (Mississippi Department of Education 2018).

3.2 Quantitative Research

Quantitative research was conducted through extensive review of the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) school district and school reports for the academic years 2012-2013 through 2017-2018, including demographics, number of certified and experienced teachers, and percentage of students rated as basic, proficient, or advanced. MDE scores were compared to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) the Nation’s Report Card’s comparison of each Mississippi school district to the national average to aid in assessing academic improvement and any educational outcome gap growth or reduction between African American and white students. Additional data on Mississippi’s public education, educational funding, and educational outcome gaps were gathered from The Parents’ Campaign, and Southern Echo, both non-profit organizations.
located in Jackson, Mississippi and involved in public education legislation as well as working with parents and schools.

3.3 Qualitative Research

Public education in Mississippi, and the South, is intricately intertwined with race and class differences. Qualitative research provided insight into that interaction by the collection of data through in-depth and open-ended interviews. Interview questions were developed using Appreciative Inquiry which focuses on process, and meaning. This approach provided insight and understanding into how school districts worked for and achieve improved educational outcomes while navigating complex issues of inequity in funding and other challenges paralleling Mississippi’s increasing racial and socioeconomic segregation.

In-depth interviews of a school board member, three school district administrators, a Head Start Site Director, the former director of Neighbors at Hawkins, the director of Parents’ Campaign, the educational director of Southern Echo, a school district superintendent, and a school principal were conducted.

3.4 Grounded Theory

Following Grounded Theory (GT) methodology, each interview was analyzed, coded, and then compared with other interviews, quantitative data, and data gathered from the literature. This ongoing and constant practice of coding and comparison was followed throughout the research with emerging patterns noted and compared. Any anomaly was noted and immediately followed up. In analyzing and coding in-depth interviews, particular attention was given to the participant’s context and nuances of
experience in that context to gain insight into the interplay between policy, leadership, race, socioeconomic status, and their view of students and public education.
CHAPTER IV – THE CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN MISSISSIPPI TODAY

4.1 Race. Class, and Education

Throughout the history of our nation, American society has been stratified along lines of race and class or socioeconomic status. This has been especially true in the South, and particularly in the Mississippi Delta, where social institutions and societal norms were shaped by plantation system economics requiring an uneducated, subordinate, and free source of labor. When slavery was abolished, Jim Crow laws, sharecropping, and denying equal education and economic opportunities to African Americans were used to ensure the survival of plantation economics. This backdrop, our national history and Mississippi’s, continues to impact the educational experiences of our children even as progress was made during the Civil Rights Movement and following the Supreme Court’s ruling in Brown vs Board that separate schools are inherently unequal.

In response to a federal court ruling in 1971 requiring school integration, Mississippi saw a rapid increase in white private schools, or academies, leaving public schools largely still segregated. The educational inequalities shaped by the state’s history are being continued through continued racial and socioeconomic segregation, personal choices, politics, educational policies, the Mississippi Department of Education, and through an inaccurate perception of Mississippi public education and its actual successes.

Through in-depth interviews, two case studies, and a review of recent reporting from newspapers, independent news sources, federal and state level government reports, and reputable magazines, a complex picture has emerged. It is a picture of politics, power struggles, growing geographical segregation, and systems that maintain the status quo
and most importantly, one of hope. Individuals and organizations are actively working to improve the quality of education for all Mississippi school children by political involvement and developing grassroots leadership in disadvantaged communities. Most importantly, there are struggling school districts where positive and significant change is happening. Public education, as any other area of life, has complex causal factors, and can appear very differently when viewed at the macro or structural level compared to individual schools within districts but both vantage points are necessary to identify progress.

I interviewed an anonymous school board member (ASBM) who had represented his majority African American community for over 19 years. His town had been economically vibrant, vying with the county seat for economic power. Like the other three main communities (majority white populations) in the county, his had its own elementary and high school. The schools differed in that majority white schools were well maintained according to state requirements while his community school was allowed to fall into disrepair. When asbestos was found in all county schools, the school board elected to close his citing lacks of funds to remediate them and bring them up to state standards. All white schools were remediated, and despite a lawsuit, his community’s schoolchildren were bused to schools in the county seat, often a two hour bus ride one way. With the loss of its school, the town’s economy slowed, businesses left, downtown became increasingly vacant, and the county seat became the economic power in the county (Anonymous School Board Member. Interview by Mary Travis. April 2, 2018).

After years of the ASBM leading community activism and petitioning the school superintendent and board, funds to re-establish an elementary school in his community
were included in the district budget. With full support of a new Superintendent, the site was prepared and temporary trailers to house grades K-1st were scheduled to be in place fall of 2017, when loans for recent expansion and remodeling of the other schools were paid off. Instead of re-opening ASBM’s school, at the last minute the board and Superintendent voted to borrow money to renovate a building they had previously voted to condemn to create a central location for district administrative offices. Additionally a $10,000 raise that year for the Superintendent was approved, and the Superintendent supported a vote to postpone re-establishing the school due to new loan obligations. The following year the Superintendent received another $10,000 raise that was not accurately reflected on the books. For several years ASBM has requested the school board to approve outside audits but the board has repeatedly declined. The business manager is now actively seeking to have the board remove funding for school board member education, of which ASBM is the only board member that has utilized it to stay apprised of state policy and education laws.

In 2018, the school district started the process to establish public pre-K classes in the three majority white communities, but needed to increase participation. The school board moved to close down the Head Start in ASBM’s community, claiming (incorrectly) inadequate participation, and bus those children to the white pre-K programs to ensure required enrollment numbers were met. Community parents pulled their children out of Head Start and retired teachers started a temporary pre-school while the community has fought the action through legal channels. At the time of the interview, the district had said it would return the Head Start program, but residents were wary viewing it as a stall tactic while the district finds another way to bus the community’s pre-school children out.
When I asked ASBM about the board’s reversal on opening a K-1st grade in his community in 2017, he expressed great distress that during his nineteen years on the board, he had seen power, politics, and competitive economics take precedence over educating children, both white and black. He was deeply concerned over the refusal of other board members to taking the training necessary to insure the actions of the Board are legal. He identified the groups antagonistic to his community: those who want all things centered in the county seat, families who have been in power for generations and intend to keep it. He noted that a recent board member was elected because someone in his family has always been on the board. School politics in ASBM’s county have historically functioned for the benefit of the majority white schools with black children from his community being used to provide numbers to further that agenda (Anonymous School Board Member. Interview by Mary Travis. April 2, 2018). Although race and socioeconomic status intersect, when educational data is broken down demographically, race is a significant factor in shaping a child’s educational experience.

In 2016 the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights released its 2013-14 Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC). It surveyed 16,758 school districts and 95,507 schools or 99.2 percent of all school districts and 99.5 percent of all public schools, serving 50,035,744 students. The CRDC found that African American children were disproportionately represented in school discipline beginning in pre-school where they were 19 percent of pre-school enrollment but 47 percent of preschool out-of-school suspensions. This pattern continued through high school with African American students 2.3 times more likely to be referred to police or experience a school-related arrest than their white counterparts. Inequities in access to experienced or certified teachers,
accelerated and advanced placement courses, enrollment rates in higher math and science, also fell along racial lines. Socioeconomic status also contributed to inequities particularly in higher chronic absenteeism in disadvantaged communities and areas of poverty (U.S. DOE Office of Civil Rights 2016). Public education reflects the stratification of our county, and Mississippi, by race and socioeconomic status that often overlap.

Mississippi’s public education has been shaped by a history of racial separation and limited economic and educational opportunities for African American children as dictated by plantation system economics (Anderson 2006; Brown 2004; Cobb 1994; Travis 2017). Racial and socioeconomic segregation has also been a major factor in creating the wealth gap between majority white communities and majority African American communities, directly impacting the educational resources of school districts serving their children (Butler and Hamnett 2007; Mangino and Silver Winter 2010-11; Ryan 2010; Putnam 2015; Marginson 2016).

The Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) scores for the 2017-18 school year, showed over-all growth in the number of students meeting or exceeding grade level proficiency requirements but also revealed achievement gaps by race. African American students increased their proficiency rate by 3.4 percent to an over-all 27.9 percent proficiency while white students improved 5.3 percent to a total of 58 percent proficiency gap of 30.1 percentage points (Skinner 2018d). This academic gap parallels differences in access to quality education in the state. Half of the state’s African American students attend school districts rated D or F and make of 95 percent of Mississippi students attending an F rated district (Mannie 2017).
The Delta, steeped in the plantation system social structure and deep, intergenerational poverty, continues to have extremely segregated under-resourced schools while academic excellence is only in reach of those with resources (Copperman 2016). Poverty has a profound effect on a child’s educational experience. A child with outstanding ability but growing up in poverty will have little to no access to books or other educational resources between birth and beginning school or during summer time and will spend their school years struggling to catch up with more advantaged students in under-resourced schools (Davis 2018).

4.2 Personal Choice

Parents are acutely aware that in today’s technology-driven economy, education is key to increasing the economic opportunities, social mobility, and life-chance outcomes of their children (Bockerman and Maczulskij 2016; Chetty et. al. 2011) and want to provide a quality education for them. The desire to give your child what he or she needs to reach their potential is common across racial and socioeconomic lines. But only parents with the resources to move into a better school district or pay for private school tuition, or to move into a better school district can ensure a quality education for their child. Choosing to leave an under-performing school, unintentionally, contributes to the concentration of high-needs students in under-resourced schools (see Fig. 4.1).
Figure 4.1 Map of White Majority Schools


In segregated cities or school districts where affluent and white parents have a louder voice in school policy and district decisions, parents committed to diversity and quality education for every child face a tough decision (Hannah-Jones 2016). Although research such as that by Angioloni and Ames (2015) indicate direct benefits from diversity in schools, there is a growing trend of mainly white and affluent communities seeking to form their own school districts leaving behind predominately black or less affluent county districts (Camp-Flores 2017), such as the community of Petal, Mississippi.
Petal School District in Forrest County, Mississippi, states on its history page that it was created in 1976 when community members decided to withdraw from the county school district (Petal Schools 2019). The Petal School District student population for school year 2018-19 is 72.69 percent white and 17.36 percent black while Forrest County School District is 43.12 percent African American and 59 percent white. Petal is also a more affluent school district with a Mississippi Department of Education rating of A while Forrest County is rated a C (Mississippi Department of Education Reports 2019).

Because our neighborhoods are highly segregated along race and socioeconomic lines, so are our neighborhood schools. Like most communities in the Delta, the city of Cleveland had racially segregated neighborhoods and neighborhood schools. When a lawsuit was brought against the city in 1965 seeking an end to completely segregated schools, the city developed a policy of extremely slow integration. Because of this policy, in 2015 the white high school, Cleveland High School, had a student body almost equally divided between white and black and served the more affluent residents while East Clarksdale High School, the historically black school, remained segregated and largely served those with lower socioeconomic status. This same pattern was repeated in both the white and traditionally black middle schools.

In 2016, U.S. District Judge Debra Brown ruled that Cleveland was in violation of requirements to desegregate its schools and ordered that the city merge the two high schools, and its two middle schools. The order has concerned African Americans who have pride in “their” East Cleveland High School, whites that point out Cleveland High School is the most integrated school in the Delta, and others who believe that ultimately separate is still not equal (Dallas 2017). Should neighborhood schools be protected when
their location on opposite sides of the railroad tracks ensure the segregation of most African American students from white students? Issues of race and class exist are not isolated to Mississippi or the South, but the segregated schools of the Delta reflect the pervasive segregation between whites and African Americans at every level of social class, its institutions, and social interactions (Copperman 2016). Pervasive segregation is most often invisible to those it benefits but painfully obvious to those it disadvantages.

Southern Echo, Inc. was founded by civil rights activist Hollis Watkins in 1989. It is a leadership development, education and training organization focused on developing grassroots leadership throughout Mississippi and the South to enable communities to hold political, economic, environmental and educational systems accountable to their community needs. Its stated goal is to improve quality of life for African Americans, poor and low-wealth children and communities in a region where oppression and suppression of minorities is ingrained in the culture and institutional and systemic racism continue barriers to realizing their full potential (Southern Echo 2019).

Marilyn Young is the Education Director for Southern Echo and has been with the organization since it was founded in 1989. During our interview she discussed the how politics have reflected racial divisions in the state. Around 1990-1991 there was a balance of power in the state legislature between the Democratic and Republican parties and in 1997, the Black Caucus helped pass the first education bill, the Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP). The balance was ended in 2010 when the last redistricting plan was voted into law. The white political power structure was able to redraw district lines creating a super majority of black voters in a few packed districts while dilution African American votes in the other districts. The redistricting resulted in white
democrats losing seats and gave Republicans control over both houses. It is important to equip African Americans, other minorities, and poor and low-wealth Mississippians as leaders who can advocate for their communities in the political area and for equity in education (Young, Marilyn. Interview by Mary Travis. January 16, 2019).

The Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) has filed a lawsuit in federal court seeking a ruling that Mississippi has violated the Readmission Act and that the education requirements of its 1869 constitution written explicitly to withhold education from African Americans in order to disenfranchise them are still in effect. Central to the lawsuit are students in the kindergarten and first grade in the Jackson Public School District and the Yazoo City Municipal Schools Districts. Both districts have predominately African American student populations, both have been rated as F schools by the Mississippi Department of Education. Students in both districts lack textbooks, basic supplies (including toilet paper), experienced teachers, sport and other extracurricular activities. SPLC describes building with paint peeling off the walls, leaking roofs, with students sometimes being served curdled milk and rotten fruit with their school lunch. In one elementary school only 10 percent of the students are proficient in reading and 4 percent in math. In contrast, neighboring majority white districts have all the necessary educational resources and are rated A by MDE. One of the majority white elementary schools has approximately 73 percent of its students proficient in reading and 71 percent proficient in math. The SPLC also notes that of the state’s nineteen schools rated F, thirteen of them are more than 95 percent African-American, with the rest ranging from 81 percent to 91 percent African-American. In contrast, five predominantly white districts are the top performing districts in the state. Disparities between districts in
resources and students’ educational experience are based on whether its student population is predominantly African American, or predominantly white (Southern Poverty Law Center 2019).

4.3 Politics and Policy

Research, such as that by the Upjohn Institute (Bartik 2018), indicates that quality public pre-K programs have large and positive effects on math and reading scores in majority African American school districts and is gaining traction in ever more states. Jefferson County School District and Hattiesburg Public School District have both sought grants to implement a public pre-K pilot program, as have other Mississippi school districts. Instead of creating policy informed by evidence-based practice, the educational policy produced by the state legislature is more reflective of the struggle between special interest groups favoring the privatization of education in Mississippi and those seeking to improve public education to ensure all students have access to good schools, regardless of their resources.

4.3.1 Funding

The Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP) was passed by the state legislature in 1997 to reduce the educational gap between Mississippi students and those in other states, and to reduce inequity in funding among the state’s school districts. It has only been fully funded by the legislature twice in the past 22 years, yet in 2017 Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves and Speaker of the House Phillip Gunn stated that the state needs a new funding formula, one that will ensure funds reach students in the classroom. In 2016, the State hired EdBuild, a New Jersey non-profit, to develop and propose a new funding formula (Royals 2017). Rather than fully fund MAEP, in 2018 a new Republican funding
formula was proposed, the Mississippi Uniform Per Student Funding Formula, which if it had been accepted and fully funded would have been $200 million less for education than what MAEP requires (Dreher 2018b). We have school districts working under a system that makes certain they can’t succeed because of inequity in funding; such as MDE criteria requiring advanced classes to achieve higher ratings which is unfair to under-resourced districts and students ((Young, Marilyn. Interview by Mary Travis. January 16, 2019).

Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant enacted a $56.8 million budget cut in September 2016 citing the need to offset an accounting error. Four months later in January 2017, low tax revenue projects forced him to cut an additional $50.9 million from the budget. With the continuation of low tax revenue projections he made a third budget cut in February 2017 of $43 million which included the MAEP followed by a last cut of $20.5 million in April 2017. The 2017 budget cuts took approximately $20 million away from MAEP, resources required by school districts to education Mississippi children. In May 2017 a lawsuit was filed on behalf of Representative Bryant Clark of Pickens, and Senator John Horne of Jackson arguing that his slashing of the MAEP budget hurt Mississippi’s public school funding formula and was an overstep of his authority as governor (Skinner 2018b).

As the legislature continues to debate what appropriate school funding levels are, analysis of U.S. Department of Education data from 2003 through the 2015-16 school year shows that a Mississippi high school senior will receive $33,355 less in state funding over their years in public education compared to the national average (see Table 4.1). Even with that analysis and 2018 polls showing a majority of Mississippians willing to
pay higher taxes to invest in public education, Lt. Gov. Reeves, and Speaker Gunn promoted and supported HB 957, (developed from EdBuild recommendations) which was supporters calculated would add $108 million to public education funding although the source of funding was not clear. Opponents of the bill compared district funding if MAEP were fully funded to funding in 2025 when HB957 would be fully implemented and found that every district would lose money with a total loss of $292 million education dollars statewide (Skinner 2018a).

Although Mississippi chronically underfunds public education, in 2017 its Superintendent of Education, Carey Wright, received the highest pay in the nation for that position, partially because on an unofficial precedence established by a former state law requiring her to be paid 90 percent of the salary of the state’s commissioner of higher education. Her salary is greater than what any Mississippi school district superintendent makes (Harris 2017).
Mississippi spends $33,355 less than the national average per pupil over twelve years, and less than its neighbors. Chart from Mississippi Today. https://mississippitoday.org/2018/04/16/analysis-shows-state-spends-33000-less-than-national-average-on-each-public-school-student/.

Discussing funding, Marilyn Young, Southern Echo, describes the backlash against Initiative 42 (full funding for MAEP) as vicious. During that time when her organization and others were collecting voter signatures, the legislature reduced the number of clerks working in the Circuit Clerk’s Office to validate signatures. Meetings were also held with legislators from small rural districts sharing data with them regarding how much money is mandated per pupil by MAEP compared to the proposed Ed Bill. Southern Echo requested a public hearing for legislators but it was scheduled on Martin Luther King Day when some legislators would be away from the capital participating in programs at home. A pro-voucher group held a news conference at the capital, bused in students and had a large group present. After that news conference, the state senate passed legislation that news conferences held at the capital can only have 12 people...
present. Southern Echo’s news conference was affected by that legislation giving the impression that pro-public education had less public support than the pro-voucher group. The day of the final vote for Ed Bill, she and others arrived at the capital thirty to forty minutes early to find a very heavy police presence. During the session, she stepped out to go to the restroom and when she tried to return a police officer informed her that once she left she would not be allowed back in. Southern Echo is currently in discussions with the ACLU and SPLC about suing over tactics favoring voucher groups (Young, Marilyn. Interview by Mary Travis. January 16, 2019).

In conjunction with underfunding of MAEP, funds for public education have been diverted away from public schools in the form of vouchers for students with special needs to attend a private schools offering speech-language therapy through the Mississippi Education Savings Account (ESA), which is a voucher-like scholarship. In the struggle to shape national education, voucher or school-choice legislation has become the opening salvo of those seeking to move from public education to privatization of education.

4.3.2 Private or Public

Southern Echo’s Director of Education described the movement of educational policy in Mississippi toward privatization as first embracing charter schools, then a focus on achievement, ending with forced school consolidation. When asked about the Education Savings Account (ESA) she challenged its description as a ‘scholarship’ since it is actually functioning as a voucher. ESA offers $6400 per student which is an insufficient amount, public school districts spend more than that per special needs students. Although private schools are not held to the same accountability standards as
public schools, many opt out of the ESA program because it requires them to show their financial books to receive funds (Southern Echo Interview 2019).

The Joint Legislative Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review (PEER) released the highlights of its Statutory Review of Mississippi’s Education Scholarship Account (ESA) Program on December 11, 2018. It found that the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) disbursed only 70 percent of ESA funds available with unused lapsed funds returned to the Treasury Department, indicating the ESA is sufficiently funded. PEER also found that the ESA program lacks the necessary accountability structure to ensure that nonpublic schools enrolling ESA students meet statutory requirements, and that special needs students are receiving needed services but noted that the state is currently prohibited by law from imposing regulations on these schools. Additional, the report states that MDE has not administered the ESA program as effectively as possible (Joint Legislative Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review 2018). Parents’ Campaign noted that of the 33 private voucher schools that responded to PEERs requested for information, 22 relied on public schools to provide special education services to their private school students (Parents’ Campaign 2018b).

Parents’ Campaign is a grassroots organization that was founded by public school parents in 2006 to keep parents informed about education legislation and to give parents, educators, community and business leaders, and anyone else supportive of public schools a way to politically participate in decisions that affect public schools (Parents’ Campaign). Nancy Loome, Director of Parent’s Campaign, noted a shift in who is lobbying the State Legislature. Instead of principals and educators from previous years,
lobbyists now represent the interests for privatizing, or corporatizing, education. These lobbyists are backed by a lot of out-of-state money that has also funded a few in-state organizations pushing for vouchers. Privatizers have a two-prong approach: using pro-vouchers pushing to cut funding for public education (starve it to death) and a campaign of misinformation to convince people that public education is failing. The truth is that Mississippi students are getting more advanced academics earlier by grade and age than previously. Interests against public education also fund candidates that will support their agenda to gain control over state legislatures. Unlike in other states, they have not been as successful in Mississippi because the public is very vocal on behalf of public schools.

The Parents’ Campaign was up and running strong before the privatization groups began to push their agenda through pro-vouchers in Mississippi (Loome, Nancy. Interview by Mary Travis. April 10, 2018).

Pro-privatization groups will also find a pro-privatization candidate to back in running for the local school board. Once elected, they vote to move money to voucher programs, charter schools (privatization), and away from public education. This occurred in Jefferson County, Colorado and the parents revolted voting to recall and remove those school board members from their positions. Americans for Prosperity (a Koch brothers advocacy group), the American Federation of Children (a conservative “dark money” group promoting school privatization agenda that is also the arm of the Alliance for School Choice founded by the family of the U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos) are the primary forces against public education in Mississippi and are focused on shaping the legislature. Nancy also pointed out that on an annual basis, 40-50 percent of the money diverted from public education to fund the ESA program, a voucher for special
needs students, is not spent. Private schools are not required to provide special education service unlike public schools. Private schools accept the vouchers and the public schools provide the special education teacher that serves those students in the private school at no cost because the law requires it (Loome, Nancy. Interview by Mary Travis. April 10, 2018).

Like Marilyn Young with Southern Echo, Nancy described the backlash against Initiative 42 as hostile, overtly so toward school superintendents who had openly supported the initiative. Lt. Governor Reeves and House Speaker Gunn retaliated against the school superintendents by inserting into the appropriations bill for education a single sentence stating that the Superintendent Association could not receive any public funds for training, education, etc. The bill was delayed until time to debate so no one had time to study it and it passed without legislators caching that sentence. Legislators did correct and reverse it the following year but it effectively silenced all but two superintendents, one of which is retiring. The retaliation also included an attempt to pass a bill making it illegal for teachers to call legislators during school hours, which although it did not pass many teachers were misinformed that it is now law. A third bill attempted to take funding away from the School Board Association and redirecting it to another recipient who was unaware of the proposed change. I asked Nancy why none of the retaliation was every in the newspapers. She explained that Mississippi editors, unlike the Time or Washington Post, will not print an article that does not cite sources which deters people from talking. There is an atmosphere of intimidation from the top levels of government such that legislators are told projects beneficial to their district or a bill they proposed would be killed if they did not vote pro-voucher. It is less about national anti-public organizations
making direct contributions to legislators campaigns than it is about using legislative leaders to control through intimidation (Loome, Nancy. Interview by Mary Travis. April 10, 2018).

One of the most prominent lobbyists in our state capitol is Grant Callen, the founder of Empower Mississippi, a non-profit school choice organization. Mississippi is one of the last states to offer public kindergarten, has one of the lowest spending per pupil in the nation, and approached education reform as giving state aid to private schools. Callen says he supports good public schools and sees choice as a way to promote that through competition, but Empower Mississippi was against a ballot initiative seeking to force the Legislature to fully fund MAEP as required by law. Callen has been invited to speak at the Mississippi chapter of the Koch brothers backed Americans for Prosperity and the largest donations to the political extension of Empower Mississippi, Empower, have come from the American Federation for Children founded by the current U.S. Secretary of Education, Betsy Devos. Callen believes the state should support families that choose private schools and Empower’s goal is to have 10 percent of the state’s public school population enrolled in a school choice program by 2015, viewed by opponents as siphoning funds away from an already underfunded public school system (Harris 2018).

Vouchers were the brainchild of Milton Friedman who argued in 1955 that the government should not be involved in running schools, but rather give parents educational stipends. Instead of seeing public schools as a source of local resources and key to social mobility, he viewed them as examples of government overreach. Because of the important role education plays in a democracy, he felt the government should require a minimum level of education, and pay for children to go to school through vouchers to
be used at approved educational services. His view was that placing education in a free- 
market context would force mediocre schools to improve or perish since consumers 
(parents) would choose only the best schools for their children. Although research has 
produced mixed educational results from the voucher programs used by approximately 
500,000 American children, a national voucher program is at the centerpiece of the 
current U.S. Secretary of Education, Betsy Devos (Tyre 2017).

The first voucher program adopted by Mississippi is the Education Scholarship 
Account (ESA) which was found by the Joint Legislative Committee on Performance 
Evaluation and Expenditure Review (PEER) to only have utilized 70 percent of its 
funding and to be lacking in oversight and accountability. During the four years ESA has 
been in effect providing vouchers that special needs students can use to attend private 
schools, special education in public schools has been underfunded by $102 million, 
including approximately $30 million in 2019 alone. Pro-voucher lobbyists are for more 
money for the program with Lt. Governor Reeves supporting increased funding (Parents’ 
Campaign 2019a).

Mississippi’s January 2019 legislative session saw a total of three bills in the 
House and six in the Senate for vouchers for private school tuition through expansion of 
the ESA voucher program. There were also three bills in the Senate and one in the House 
introduced to provide tax credits and deductions for Private School tuition and home 
school expense. By February most of the bills had died in committee with the exception 
of the tax credit and deduction bills, and Senate bill 2675 authored by Senator Tollison 
(the Chair of the Senate Education Committee) proposing ESA vouchers for all (Parents’ 
Campaign 2019b). The state legislature and Lt. Governor Reeves continue to underfund
MAEP and promote diverting public education funds toward vouchers even though the majority of Mississippians are willing to pay higher taxes to strengthen their public schools (Skinner 2018a).

4.4 Mississippi Department of Education

The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) was charged by the state Legislature in 2013 with implementing an A-F grading scale for schools consisting of five performance categories (“A”, “B”, “C”, “D”, and “F”) based on the criteria of student achievement and individual student growth. The grading scale was intended to assist parents and the public in understanding how well school districts and schools are performing and to inform discussions on educational improvement. MDE stresses the grades given do not reflect how well an individual student or teach is doing, nor how well students are performing in subjects other than math, English language, U.S. History, or science. Grades also do not reflect how well a school meets students’ emotional, social or health needs, or in additional subjects. Additionally criteria MDE considers in assigning a grade includes whether high school students are graduating on time, their participation and performance in Advance Placement and International Baccalaureate courses as well as dual credit college courses. The presence of large gaps between student achievement levels (especially those receiving extra educational services), and whether a school is performing above expectations are also looked at in assigning school and school district grades. The new system was implemented in 2014 but school districts implemented it at different rates so MDE allowed schools whose scores did not improve to maintain their ratings from the previous year (Mississippi Department of Education; Parents’ Campaign Research and Education Fund 2014).
In 2015, the Joint Legislative Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review (PEER) issued its Review of the Accountability Standards of the Mississippi Department of Education with negative findings. PEER determined that how MDE measured performance using achievement categories obscured student score data, the combining of proficiency and growth to determine accountability may potentially be less accurate, its emphasis on growth does not demonstrate actual performance, and that MDE appeared to be arbitrarily assignment weights to growth multiplies. PEER’s report found issues with the level of clarity and accuracy of how MDE accountability standards presented performance and that its method of creating assessment benchmarks and cut-points for calculating accountability grades was not criterion-based (Joint Legislative Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review 2015).

Since the PEER’s report on MDE’s accountability standards, MDE has continued to reset accountability cut scores every year. Cut scores are tied to student improvement. As students improve more as a whole, the cut scores are set higher making it increasingly difficult for schools and school districts to attain a higher accountability grade. When cut scores are changed, MDE then uses a percentile ranking to determine school and district ratings. The use of percentile rankings, regardless of how students perform, predetermines that 10 percent receive A’s, 27 percent B’s, 25 percent C’s, 24 percent D’s and 14 percent F’s. This is disheartening to schools that have actually improved to a higher rating only to see themselves given a lower grade because of the percentile rankings. It also means that higher grades are not accurately reflecting school and district performance. The accuracy of accountability grades are also affected by changes in the criterion, such as in 2017-18 when MDE raised the score considered proficient on the
high school English II exam. MDE is required to accept public comments on any proposed changes in the accountability systems and to share those with the State Board of Education which actually determines whether cut scores are reset. The State Board of Education is limited to only consider recommendations made by MDE, it cannot generate its own recommendation and turn it into a motion (Parents’ Campaign 2018a).

In addition to changes in cut scores, MDE has also made changes in how it assesses growth. In 2015 MDE switched from using Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) to the Mississippi Academic Assessment Program (MAAP) to align its assessment with Mississippi’s college and career ready standards. Because PARCC questions were extreme rigorous compared to MAAP, the change resulted in artificially inflated growth scores for both schools and districts in 2016. Districts expressed concern that the inflated growth scores created an inflated baseline that would not reflect actual proficiency rate growth achieved in the following year. The inflated baseline would also make it harder to move above an F and easier for schools to move to an A from a B. In response, MDE agreed the inflated baseline resulted in high cut scores that it would reset lower. When cut score changes were announced, the majority of them had actually been raised although the cut scores for A were lowered by 4 points. If all cut scores had been lowered by four points, five C rated districts would have moved to a B, two D rated districts would have been rated C, and four districts given F’s would have actually received D’s (Parents’ Campaign Research and Education Fund 2017).

Again in 2018, MDE reset baseline scores lowering grades for districts from D to F, C to D, B to C, yet raised three B districts to A. This removed improved grades, except
for three districts that were rated B’s before the reset and A’s after the reset (Parents’ Campaign Research and Education Fund 2018). The 2017-18 school year high school test scores showed improvement that was not fully reflected in the preliminary accountability ratings set to be announced in September 2018. This discrepancy resulted from tweaking the system in 2017 because the state actually had results from using the same test two years in a row, a first. It was projected that without a baseline change as advised by the Commission on School Accreditation, the number of A-rated high schools would drop from 50 to seven, and F-rated high schools would jump from 4 to 60. Mississippi School Board member Johnny Franklin was adamant that constant changes were unfair to districts and the State should finalize an unchanging definition of excellent that districts could be consistently held to (Skinner 2018c). MDE changes in criteria and cut scores place school districts that have improved their ratings in the unenviable position of having to explain to students, their parents, and the community that a drop in grade is due to those changes, not slipping academic achievement. Teachers already under pressure to prepare their students for state tests experience heightened distress with the uncertainty that what they are using to guide their instruction may turn out to be no longer correct (Skinner 2019; Mannie 2016; Wade 2017).

School district administrators, principals, and other staff use the raw score data available on MDE test score reports, particularly regarding subgroups of students, to identify and target areas in need of improvement, and to determine whether proficiency gaps are closing or increasing. Raw Score data also enables them to determine actual district or school progress in growth and proficiency that may not be accurately reflected in the rating they receive from MDE. State Representative Jay Hughes, 12th district,
maintains a Facebook page to keep concerned Mississippians aware of public education bills and other issues affecting schools. On February 20, 2019 he alerted constituents that it was announced that day at a district test coordinator training that Dr. Carey Wright, State Superintendent of Education, had decided that MDE would no longer include raw score data on test score reports, only scale scores will be provided. Representative Hughes also commented on the resource gaps between schools even though all schools are held to the same standardized test and time limit (Jay Hughes Facebook page. Accessed 20 February, 2019. https://facebook.com/RepJayHughes).

While Nancy Loome, Director of Parents’ Campaign sees validity in testing to know how Mississippi schools are progressing, she also feels testing has become overboard with the results used for punitive purposes rather than identifying progress. The media debate about testing is not fully honest, the major problem with testing is that all testing must be done online and schools do not have enough computers to test every child at the same time. Tests are only to take three days but may take up to three weeks if students have to be tested in rotation due to a lack of computers. Schools are in lock down until all testing is completed. Teachers are not allowed to coach students, so students unfamiliar with computer testing and unsure how to click on answers cannot be helped. At that point, how much do test results reflect proficiency with computers, or lack of, over subject proficiency? The policy of all online testing contributes to education inequity. She also expressed concern over MDE’s shifting points among subjects since that changes what the scoring is saying. It would be beneficial to field test a test for a year during which there is a hold harmless clause for the schools to make sure the ranking method is correct without penalizing schools. She noted that this is the first
administration at the State Department of Education where new standards and accountability rating systems were being initiated without a no harm year. Another concern to Loome is that Mississippi has punitive and fear-based measures at the state level that are not required by the Federal government such as the state taking over a school (Loome, Nancy. Interview by Mary Travis. April 10, 2018).

Southern Echo’s Director of Education Marilyn Young also feels that the punitive A-F grading contributes to the misinformation campaign against public education. MDE criteria makes it very hard, especially for districts and schools in the Mississippi Delta, particularly for majority African American schools. She was hopeful that Representative Jay Hughes broadband measure would pass the house because schools need it to meet MDE rating criteria, an example of policy induced inequity. Every two to three years Southern Echo sees things moving in the right direction with then the legislature changes direction and MDE reflects those changes and gains made for public education are often lost. She sees that the yearly changes by MDE in criteria, cut scores are leading people who work in the educational system to question the integrity of MDE (Young, Marilyn. Interview by Mary Travis. January 16, 2019).

In discussing the punitive measure of State takeover of a school district (conservatorship), Young explained the state typically only takes over districts with resources. (This is why it has not taken over the failing Yazoo County School District). The State selects and hires an interim superintendent for the conservatorship, but the school district has to pay their salary as set by the state. The current salary of an interim superintendent hired by the State is $200,000 every six months or $400,000 annually. [Mississippi school superintendent annual salaries ranged from $208,820 to $13,194]
Conservatorships don’t work. While they say they work with the community, they instead employ a dictator style of leadership. Any employee that is outspoken or questioning is moved to another school or fired, atmosphere of intimidation (Young, Marilyn. Interview by Mary Travis. January 16, 2019). Contrary to the perception that public education is failing, and that privatization offers better choices, the facts demonstrate that Mississippi’s schools are making impressive progress.

4.5 Facts vs. Perception

We hear from Washington down to the state level that public education reform has not worked, but former U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, wants people to know the facts. Since 1971, fourth-grade reading scores have risen 13 points and math scores by 25 points. This is in spite of the fact that the student population today is relatively poorer, more diverse, and has more learning challenges. High school graduation rates are at an all-time high of 84 percent. The number of Americans with a four-year college degree has increased 13 percentage points since 1980 to 36 percent and the total number of students in college has grown from 8 million in 1993 to 12.5 million in 2018. States have raised their educational standards. In light of positive changes, Duncan points to politics as the source of the negative portrayal of education reform, and a lack of discussion about setting high national goals around pre-school education, or college readiness and completion. Where reform has been very successful, he gives credit to courageous leaders (Duncan 2018).

Education reform is bearing fruit in Mississippi also. Instead of being at the lower end of ranking, our state is now close to the national average in graduation rates. The
seven-point difference between graduation rates for white high school students (86 percent) and black high school students (79 percent) is one of the lowest in the country, and the state’s overall graduation rate is 82 percent, only two points below the national average. Mississippi’s graduation rate for Hispanics is one of the lowest in the nation at only 4 percentage points lower that graduation rates for whites (Mader 2018). In 2018 we ranked 12th in the nation in fourth grade math, 13th in fourth grade reading, 25th in eighth grade math and 29th in eighth grade reading. A comparison of our students to those of other states shows that Mississippi teachers are doing a better job leading students into improved achievement than teachers in other states (Parents’ Campaign 2018d). According to state testing data from 2017-18 school year, more Mississippi students are meeting, or exceeding grade level expectations, a significant 4.9 percentage point increase from the previous year. In 2017 only 22 districts had more than 45 percent of their students scoring proficient or advanced in English-Language Arts and just 32 districts had that rating in math. The 2018 test scores revealed that 40 districts now had over 45 percent of their students proficient or advanced in English-Language Arts and 52 districts achieved over 45 percent of their students scoring proficient or advanced in math. (Skinner 2018d; Parents’ Campaign 2018c).
CHAPTER V – STRUGGLING SCHOOL DISTRICTS ARE IMPROVING

Using MDE district score reports, I identified two school districts that have made significant improvements in their academic ratings: Jefferson County School District, and the Hattiesburg Public School District. Through in-depth interview with administrators, a principal, district superintendent, and an involved community member, I was able to identify key factors of change common to both districts.

5.1 Jefferson County School District

Jefferson County School District (JCSD) and its schools are in Fayette, Mississippi. The district has a lower and an upper elementary school, a junior high, high school, alternative school, and a vocational center. Its student population is 98.53 percent African American with a total enrollment in 2018 of 1,224 students (Mississippi Department of Education 2018). Fayette had a population of 1,499 in 2017 with 54.1 percent of its residents living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau). The town has a declining population reflecting the loss of employment and economic opportunities as evidenced by vacant downtown buildings. In 2010, 97.7 percent of its population was African American (City-Data 2019). The District moved from an F rating for the 2015-16 school year to a C in 2016-17.
Table 5.1 Chart of JCSD Ratings

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<tr>
<th>SCHOOL DISTRICT</th>
<th>SCHOOL TERMS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Jefferson County Schools (JCSD)</td>
<td>D</td>
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New Base-line *


Figure 5.1 Main Street Fayette, Mississippi

[Photo from the Town of Fayettem website.](http://www.fayettems.com/news-residents)
5.1.1 Dr. Adrian Hammitte, Dr. Jacqueline Fosselman, and Mrs. Sandra Oliver

When I arrived in Fayette, Mississippi for my interview with Dr. Hammitte, I first drove through the town. Turning on to Main Street from the highway I noticed a community center with a well-kept fenced playground off to my right. Slightly up the hill from the community center was a new building, Jefferson Comprehensive Health Center. Further on Main Street I found the Fayette head Start Center, an attractive seemingly newer building and then the Jefferson County School District offices. The feel of the town changed as I actually entered Fayette’s small downtown area. Vacant buildings were in various stages of disrepair, with very view business visible except a gas station, perhaps a small store. The streets I saw in passing appeared clean but Fayette’s high poverty rate was obvious as was its economic decline. Just as the contrast in buildings, Fayette is a mixture of poverty, lack of economic opportunity, and community leaders that believe change is possible. The school district is playing an important role in building collaboration between those leaders.

I had set up an appointment with Dr. Adrian Hammitte, Director of Student Assessment, for an interview. He greeted me with a warm smile and guided me to the District’s conference room. There I discovered he had also arranged for Dr. Jacqueline Fosselman, Instructional Coach, and Mrs. Sandra Oliver, Curriculum Director to be there for the interview. I found this typical of Dr. Hammitte. He is a builder of shared vision, collaboration, and relationships that foster pursuit of one goal – ensuring JCSD students receive the education they need to participate in economic opportunities and have improved life-chance outcomes.
He created the positions of Dr. Fosselman and Mrs. Oliver recently to create a team to facilitate teacher training in understanding the data, curriculum, and to ensure district students were academically prepared to meet state standards. Dr. Hammitte worked for the district as a high school counselor for eight years prior to becoming Director of Student Assessment. Mrs. Oliver brings 17 years teaching experience with the district to her new position as Curriculum Director. Dr. Fosselman had been with the district for two years as a literacy prior to becoming the districts’ Instructional Coach.

In listening to these three administrators, their passion for the students was evident in their facial expressions, animated conversation, and their references to meeting the needs of the whole student. Relationships, teamwork, inclusive collaboration were repeated themes. The parents’ own negative school experiences left them feeling out of place, lacking, and unwelcome in the schools. Dr. Hammitte and his team consider parents as part of the team that students need for success. He has created a new policy of including community members in serving to enforce policies, assist in parent meetings, and to participate in developing new ideas. He excitedly described two new programs that were about to be rolled out designed to engage the community and parents. One is a mentoring program pairing twenty-five community men with high-risk male students and the other is an after-school parents and student tutoring program. The tutoring will help students and equip parents to help their children a home. Dr. Hammitte designed these programs in response to the district’s needs assessment that revealed an issue of parental disengagement. They discussed other programs designed to address that issue including a parent-liaison in school who schedules “Cocoa and Cookie Night,” “Doughnuts for Dad,” and “Grandparents Day”. It has been a gradual process to build trust with the parents, but
there is a growing level of community involvement and support. Mrs. Oliver has focused on ways to communicate with parents about academics without the technical language, to create a sense that they are not only welcome, but also have things to offer that the district needs.

All three participants stressed the importance of using data correctly to identify and address areas of weakness, particularly in subgroups. Dr. Hammitte’s focus is on working with the administration and teachers to educate them on the impact of home life, poverty, and hunger on student behavior and academic performance. He is seeing a growing response to that focus, including the recent hiring of a behavior specialist. JCSD has an 87 percent graduation rate, higher than both the state and national average. He credits this to students seeing what they can do, what they can accomplish, their excitement, believing they can, and wanting to succeed in school. In listening to Dr. Hammitte, Dr. Fosselman, and Mrs. Oliver, it became clear that Dr. Hammitte has been working tirelessly to create a new culture in the district, one in which student potential is acknowledged, what they bring in to the classroom is addressed but not conflated with their ability, and new vision of potential.

Dr. Hammitte, Dr. Fosselman, and Mrs. Oliver all credited the students of JCSD and their enthusiasm and hard work for the districts’ dramatic improvement from an F rating to a C the previous year. As we talked about the district’s recent return to an F rating, Dr. Hammitte placed accountability at the top and described district leadership as a work in progress. Although MDE changes and cut scores did impact their rating, he felt their F reflected divisions in the district that occurred that year. The district had lost teachers and there was not a Curriculum Director at the time so there was a lack of unity
and common vision. A review of the data clearly showed the rating drop was not the fault of students or parents, but a trickling down of division from the top. A new school board is now in place and after a district wide shuffling two years ago all principals have now been in their schools for two years; a sense of team work is being rebuilt. Teamwork, accountability beginning at the top, reflecting on past practices, focusing on finding solutions and an emphasis on relationships were reoccurring themes throughout the interview.

Inadequate funding hinders the ability of JCSD to offer competitive salaries to its teachers. Dr. Hammitte discussed losing experienced teacher to neighboring districts with more resources and higher salaries. This is the first year the district has had all certified teachers, but a high percentage are new teachers. State cuts to education funding, make it more difficult to finds the resources necessary to meet many MDE criteria such as percentage of experienced teachers, and accelerated classes. Rather than a focus on deficiencies, Dr. Hammitte uses a strength-based approach which creates an empowering culture for both teachers and students.

Throughout the interview, it was obvious that Dr. Hammitte’s insightful and compassionate understanding of JCSD’s students, the “whole student” was key in his program development, and his work in educating those in administration as well as teachers in recognizing how poverty and trauma affects classroom performance. His view of students, as well as Dr. Fosselman and Mrs. Oliver’s, was inclusive and allowed him to see their potential and help them believe in it also. Dr. Hammitte’s leadership style is one that empowers others to do their job well, builds unity, and common vision.

Although under-resourced and in a high poverty community and county, JCSD
demonstrates how caring and committed leadership and instruction coupled with belief in
students’ ability to succeed can move an F rated school district to a C (Hammitte, Adrian,
Jacqueline Fosselman, and Sandra Oliver. Interview by Mary Travis. Jefferson County

5.1.2 Ms. Alex Washington

Because JCSD is beginning a new pre-school kindergarten program in partnership
with the Fayette Head Start, I interviewed Ms. Alex Washington, the Site Director for the
Fayette Head Start. In addition to assisting with the District’s preschool program, she
works closely with JCSD to ensure that Head Start students are ready to transition into
public kindergarten. In turn, JCSD provides the services of a speech therapist to Head
Start students. Ms. Washington’s program also focuses on the whole child including
parents and building relationships in the community. Like the district administrators I
interviewed, Ms. Washington sees a great capacity to learn in her students, no matter
what their home life is like. She described them as loving and enthusiastically eager and
willing to learn. As I found at the school district office, teamwork, shared vision, a deep
love for the children of Jefferson County and an awareness of their daily lives shapes
programs directed at improving economic opportunity through education. A constant
theme throughout my interviews in Fayette was that helping children succeed requires the
involvement of everyone (Washington, Alexa. Interview by Mary Travis. Fayette,
This vibrant and hopeful mural in the foyer of Fayette’s Head Start Center was hand painted by a local resident. Photo by author.

5.2 Hattiesburg Public School District

Hattiesburg, Mississippi is one of Mississippi’s larger cities with a population of approximately 47,000 with a slight African American majority. It is a designated Mississippi Main Street city and was selected as a top place in which to retire in 2015.
The city is experiencing positive economic development with a new Mid-Town development project and is home to the University of Southern Mississippi. Hattiesburg also has a poverty rate of 34.7 percent and a struggling school district whose schools serve some of the poorest children in the area.

The Hattiesburg Public School District (HPSD) consists of five elementary schools, a middle school, a STEAM Academy, an alternative center, and a high school. In 2018 it had a student enrollment of 3,953 which was 90.34 percent African American, 4.68 percent Hispanic, and 2.86 percent white (Mississippi Department of Education 2018). Although HPSD had a rating of C in 2013-14 and 2014-15, it has had a D rating since the 2015-16 school term (Mississippi Department of Education).

Table 5.2 Chart of HPSD Ratings

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL DISTRICT AND SCHOOLS</th>
<th>SCHOOL TERMS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Hattiesburg Public Schools</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawkins Elementary</td>
<td>No data</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rowan Elementary</td>
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Hattiesburg Public School District (HPSD) has faced stringent budget cuts since an annual audit performed for the fiscal year 2014-15 revealed a drop in the district’s fund balance of $3.3 million from the previous year leaving the district with only
$768,796 in funds. Expenditures exceeded revenue by more than $2.69 million during that fiscal year leading to the resignation of Superintendent James Bacchus and business manager Terry Stennis (Ciurczak 2016). The district went through different superintendents until hiring its interim superintendent, Dr. Robert Williams, as superintendent in 2016.

Figure 5.3 District Office of HPSD

The historic Camp School Building now houses the Administrative Office of the Hattiesburg Public School District. Photo by author.

5.2.2 Dr. Robert Williams

My advisor, Dr. Mark Miller was acquainted with Dr. Williams and was instrumental in setting up the appointment for my interview. As Dr. Miller and I waited in the attractive waiting room for our appointment, I reflected on the difference in resources between Fayette and Hattiesburg and how that impacts the two school districts.

My first impression of Dr. Williams was that he was comfortable with leadership, a thoughtfully reserved person initially. As the interview progressed, I was impressed
Dr. Williams has been involved in education as a student teacher, teacher, coach, assistant principal, principal, HPSD Interim Superintendent (Dec 2015-October 2016), and has been Superintendent since October 2016.

Dr. Williams discussed his four primary goals as superintendent. The first is rebuilding collaborative relationships among the Board of Education, the community, and the school district. During the frequent superintendent turnover from 2015 through 2016 these relationships had suffered. In response to the loss of district funds in 2015, Dr. Williams is using fiscal accountability to address financial instability. He carefully considers both internal and external stakeholders so that both human capital and physical infrastructure are protected while making necessary cuts. This fiscal accountability includes developing a master plan that addresses infrastructure needs by including infrastructure funding in the district budget. He is putting systems in place to develop the unified voice of strategic partners (elected and appointed officials, religious leaders, the PTO, parents, staff, and community), seeking their input and building trust through the process. His fourth goal is to establish a plan for academic practices, academic framework, and resources for all students and community partnership all shaped and driven by the goal of improving student outcome.

Hattiesburg Public School District is similar to other districts in that much of the positive programs, progress, and improvement in student outcomes are not being adequately conveyed to the community. Dr. Williams noted that Woodley Elementary is rated as a B high-performing school and has a student body largely drawn from some of
the poorest neighborhoods in Hattiesburg. The majority of the white children in Woodley’s neighborhoods attend private school so the district buses in children from a very low-wealth part of Hattiesburg. MDE’s F rating of Hattiesburg High does not accurately reflect what is happening in the school. Dr. Williams spoke about students accepted into the Mississippi School of Math and Science, and a program funded by the district that allows a student to graduate with a high school diploma and an A. A. degree simultaneously. The district also provides the opportunity to develop vocational skills such as electrical work, carpentry, and nursing. Dr. Williams’s approach to programs is guided by asking what is best for the students and remembering that Hattiesburg is the nucleus of what the district is trying to do. The district is there to serve the people of Hattiesburg.

Building collaborative relationships internally and externally is critical to the work of HPSD. Dr. Williams described the current mayor Toby Barker as a major supporter of the school district. William Carey University also supports and partners with the district. Dr. Williams is currently rebuilding a relationship with the University of Southern Mississippi. The district has also received fair coverage from the media and he noted that transparency with parent about what the district is doing is resulting in a more positive view of the district in the community.

In explaining to parents the contrast between MDE results and what HPSD is actually doing to parents, Dr. Williams stresses the importance of making sure similar groups of students are being compared to each other. As an example, he shared that, when compared with similar students, the top fifty students in HPSD actually outperformed comparably to the top fifty in other districts and the same results were true
for the lowest fifty. Charter school students also did not outperform Hattiesburg students. In the face of frequent MDE changes in criteria and cut scores, Dr. Williams’s motivation to keep going is his relationship with the students and to leave the district better for them than he found it.

Addressing the whole student is critical to Dr. Williams. Although kindergarten is the building block of education, Dr. Williams told us that only 24 percent of Hattiesburg children are prepared for kindergarten, which is lower than the statewide average of 30 percent. Students from disadvantaged homes are starting school already behind which impacts their future education. The district has approved new changes for the district summer programs which Dr. Williams sees as a critically important decision. Public Pre-K to kindergarten will become a year-round program with students attending school from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. The city will then offer supervised recreation from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Access to public preschool means all children can attend, so this important building block will no longer only be available to students whose parents can afford it.

Dr. Williams demonstrates a creative flexibility in the district programs he creates as well as his use of present resources. He is planning a feasibility study for repurposing a current building for a children’s museum, one with a computer lab, hands on activities, and a focus on how many books a child reads. Dr. Williams’ vision for the Hattiesburg Public School District is shaped by a grounded belief in educating all children, equipping them for life, building relationships of trust and collaboration within the district and the community, and moving the district, and the community forward (Williams, Robert. Interview by Mary Travis. Hattiesburg Public School District. February 13, 2019).
5.2.3 Ms. Sharon Miles

Ms. Miles worked closely for ten years with the principals, teachers, staff and parents of Hawkins Elementary School in the Hattiesburg Public School District (HPSD) in her role as Director of Neighbors at Hawkins, a program Ekklesia, a local church, established to support and assist the school and teachers in educating community children. I asked to interview her because she was at Hawkins on a daily basis during its journey from a struggling F rated school to gaining a high C rating under the leadership of Dr. Donna Scott.

Her time at Hawkins had a deep impact on Ms. Miles that transformed her understanding of the students, their parents, and what students typically considered disadvantaged and underperforming can do. She shared her experiences very eloquently and openly with me, sometimes bringing us both to tears as she described the transformation she witnessed in the students’ self-view and expectations.

One of the first lessons she learned was that parents who were unengaged with their child’s school and teachers should not be characterized as negligent parents. She was invited to participate in an administrative intervention with a parent whose child was chronically late. Instead of uncaring, the parent was working night shifts to provide for his child and was unaware that his girlfriend was not ensuring the child was fed, dressed, and at school on time. She saw the whole child and how context affects education for both student and parent. Her goal as Director became to find ways to walk with parents and students, to help them carry the heavy load with the life circumstances they had been dealt.
While at Hawkins, Ms. Miles attended a Ruby Payne Poverty Workshop and learned that those living in poverty have three priorities: survival, relationships, and entertainment. Those priorities shaped her programs including a musical that she wrote and 23 students performed for Black History Month. Relationships were built between teachers, students, parents, district officials, and community members through that performance. She said teachers and parents alike were amazed to see students singing, dancing, speaking lines – all things they did not expect the children to be able to do. Teachers and parents saw the abilities and potential of the students in a new light. For Ms. Miles, she gained a key understanding that students respond when someone pours something they love into them.

Since she had seen Hawkins go from an F to a C, I asked Ms. Miles to what she accredited the change. She emphatically tied the academic progress to the leadership and attitude of the school principal. Hawkins went from a C to an F under the leadership of an ineffective principal. Dr. Sharon Scott became the next principal and Ms. Miles noted that she turned the school around in a short time.

Ms. Miles described Dr. Scott as an outstanding leader who understood the neighborhood and the students, empowered parents and teachers, and lived out on a daily basis what she believed. Dr. Scott was transparent with students and teachers regarding academic progress but in a way that was empowering, not shaming. Ms. Miles describes a new school culture where every positive gain was celebrated, and the daily morning announcement was always “if you believe you can, you can.” Dr. Scott created in-school structure to address student issues such as poverty and trauma. During this time, Ms. Miles discovered Hawkins students were some of the most vulnerable children in the
district. She saw that the best thing the school could do for them was to inspire them to learn and love learning.

In discussing the Hattiesburg School District, Ms. Miles observed that currently the progress students experience in elementary school does not continue through middle-school and high school, which have D and F ratings respectively. She also suggested that HPSD has a narrative problem. The district needs to improve its public relations and make sure it’s positive accomplishments and continuing progress are known (Miles, Sharon. Interview by Mary Travis. Hattiesburg Public Library. January 14, 2019)

5.2.4 Dr. Donna Scott

Dr. Donna Scott, Principal at Rowan Elementary, graciously agreed to allow me to interview her one afternoon at the end of the school day. I arrived early and had the opportunity to observe some interaction between teachers, staff, and students. There was an underlying sense of camaraderie as teachers attended to last minute items before leaving and office staff ensured students still waiting were going to be picked up. Dr. Scott came in and invited me into her office. I was surprised at her level of enthusiastic energy on a Monday afternoon, but realized as we talked that is typical Dr. Scott.

She has the distinction of receiving the HPSD Administrator of the Year Award twice, in 2013 and 2016. Before coming to Rowan as Principal, Dr. Scott was principal at Hawkins Elementary School which she guided from an F to a high C rating, which she has also accomplished at Rowan. She was a middle-school and high school teacher before becoming a school administrator and has worked in both majority white and majority African American schools.
For Dr. Scott, school culture is a critical factor in student achievement. It is essential that teachers believe in themselves and their students. In response to my question about Hawkins, she described it as the school with the highest discipline problems and lowest test scores in the district. Successful teachers transferred in from other schools by the district did not want to be there, while teachers already there felt inadequate. When she took over as principal, she reviewed the school’s discipline records and discovered the teachers had a negative view of their students as ghetto children. She made changes in teacher assignments and began building a culture of speaking positively about what the students, teachers, and school were going to accomplish. She noted that some teachers chose to leave but also that not every teacher is equipped to teach at all schools. Simply by changing the culture at Hawkins, student performance improved by 13 points her first year there. She pointed out that the student population was not what changed, it was the school culture.

Dr. Scott focuses on the whole student and in building relationships. She shared with me that she grew up in the neighborhood around Hawkins. Her father was an alcoholic, her mother was an invalid, and she described her family as dysfunctional and living in poverty. Education provided a way out for her and she makes clear to her teachers that students should never be written off as incapable based on home life and background. She reminds teachers that unengaged parents are often working two and three jobs. Dr. Scott uses a collaborative method to shape programs and academic strategy. Instead of hiring outside consultants, she meets with her teachers to identify student academic deficiencies and determine the best approach. She trains her teachers in best practices for engaging with parents whose socioeconomic status is very different
from the teacher’s. It is also critical to her that teachers know how to address the whole student and not simply focus on academics. Dr. Scott shared with me that there had been five shootings in the neighborhood around Rowan since the first of the year. These shootings involved family, neighbors and friends of many Rowan students.

A common theme throughout my interview with Dr. Scott was building relationships. She does not feel that there is a single strategy for academic success that will work for every struggling school, but building relationships is always applicable. Dr. Scott leads by example. Instead of shopping near her home, she told me she shops at the Wal-Mart on Highway 49 because her students’ parents of her students shop there and it helps build relationships. On weekends, she said she frequently drives through students’ neighborhoods and sees them outside playing. Students are surprised to see her there; Dr. Scott knows it’s hard for them to imagine her or their teachers as people. Dr. Scott is a relational, servant-leader who focuses on empowering her teachers and students, building a collaborative team with a common focus on teaching the whole student.

I found Dr. Scott to be a passionate champion the students of struggling schools. The recent mid-year changes MDE made were particularly harmful to struggling schools, according to Dr. Scott. She, like Dr. Williams, talked about the need to compare groups of students to similar groups. She noted that struggling schools show greater improvement in growth than high-rated schools which score higher in areas of proficiency. Dr. Scott felt that high-performing schools were in danger of having their ratings drop because of MDE growth criteria which motivated MDE to make mid-year changes emphasizing proficiency. In her opinion, it was easier to increase the number of
failing schools than to lower the ratings of high-performing schools. Dr. Scott pointed out those criteria changes took Hattiesburg High School from a C to an F rating.

Dr. Scott has led two HPSD elementary schools to significant improvement in their academic ratings. Through my interview of Dr. Scott, I found three common keys to change that she used in each school. Dr. Scott focuses on teaching the whole student and creates a positive school culture to achieve that goal. She uses affirmation and empowerment to enable teachers and students to see their own ability and potential. Building relationships undergirds everything else she does. Dr. Scott’s belief in her students enabled them to believe in themselves, and to succeed (Scott, Donna. Interview by Mary Travis. Rowan Elementary School. February 18, 2019).
6.1 The Interviews

In addition to talking with administrators in school districts that improved, I also sought interviews for this research that would give me insight into the complex challenges that struggling Mississippi school districts must overcome to improve. Does the education system help or hinder their efforts? How important are politics, race, and socioeconomic class in determining the context in which these school districts are rated? My interview with an anonymous school board member was selected to gain a county-level view of the interplay among politics, race, class and education and produced findings the literature describes nationally. Parents’ Campaign and Southern Echo, two non-profit grassroots organizations were selected based on their longevity, differing approaches to contributing to public education, their lack of affiliation with any political party or education association, and their work with school districts and education policy. My interview findings paralleled my literature review findings.

Parents’ Campaign is based in Jackson, Mississippi, was founded in 2006 by public school parents and, as stated on their website, is a grassroots network that includes parents, educators, and other supporters of public education. The organization informs parents and interested parties about legislative initiatives concerning public education and provides a way for supporters of public education to participate in legislative decisions affecting education. The goal of Parents’ Campaign is to ensure every Mississippi child has access to an excellent school (Parents’ Campaign “About Us”).

Nancy Loome has been Executive Director of the organization since its beginning. She is an articulate proponent for high quality public education, works closely
with schools, parents, legislators, and other organizations working to strengthen public education. Because she has been involved in working to improve public education for 13 years, including as a parent, she is very knowledgeable of the political climate and able to identify shifts in the focus of education legislature. During our interview, I found Ms. Loome to be very open about achievements and challenges as well as her concerns with the current pro-privatization push in the state legislature. She is deeply proud of the progress Mississippi public education has made, progress that would not be so widely known without her organization. It was very obvious during our talk that Ms. Loome’s love for Mississippi’s children is what fuels her passion to ensure that they all have access to high-quality public schools.

Southern Echo is based in Jackson, Mississippi and was founded in 1989 as a leadership development, education, and training organization. The vision of Southern Echo includes ending institutional, structural, and systemic racism, and to creating a public education system that provides every student a high-quality education (Southern Echo “About Southern Echo”). My interview with Marilyn Young, Southern Echo’s Education Director, provided valuable insight into the interaction among politics, education, and race in Mississippi from an African American perspective. Ms. Young has been with Southern Echo since its beginning in 1989 and is experienced in developing community grassroots leadership. I found Ms. Young to have a wealth of knowledge regarding the history of politics and education in the state including legislation designed to restrict the access of African American students to quality education. She freely discussed her work assisting failing school districts in implementing programs to facilitate improvement in student academic growth and proficiency. In 2011, Southern
Echo was certified as a P-16 (a Community Engagement Council for student achievement and health) training provider; the organization also co-wrote MDE’s P-16 Guidelines in 2009. Ms. Young works closely with communities, helping them establish the counsels and training council members. She explained to me the role of P-16 Councils as a public voice, representing all sectors of a community, established by MDE and state law in 2009 to recommend best practice policy ideas to support student achievement and health. Ms. Young openly shared her experiences as an African American in navigating state politics while advocating for quality public education including close working relationships with supportive legislators.

Through an examination of MDE school rankings, I identified four school districts that showed significant improvement and that reflected different regions of the state: Greenwood Public School District, West Jasper Consolidated School District, Hattiesburg Public School District, and Jefferson County School District. Through phone calls and emails, I attempted to set up interviews with administrators in the Greenwood Public School District and West Jasper Consolidated School District. There were no responses to my emails, and phone calls simply resulted in my being referred to someone else for permission to interview. I sensed a self-protective reluctance in allowing me to interview administrators or district staff. MDE ratings are extremely important to school districts and their communities. A negative rating reverberates throughout all levels of community life including economic development, and I can understand their possible reluctance in allowing an outsider to conduct interviews. I was successful in setting up interviews in Hattiesburg School District and Jefferson County District which resulted in
my case studies having a greater depth than they would have given my research time-line constraints.

Jefferson County School District was a particularly valuable resource because of its significant improvement in going from an F to a C and its rapid slide back to an F. The success was clearly tied to leadership and unity of vision which was further emphasized when divided leadership and splintered vision resulted in a return to an F. The student population was the same throughout this time which placed primary accountability on administrative issues even with concurrent changes in MDE. I was delighted to discover recently that Dr. Hammitte had been appointed as Acting Superintendent of the district. It became clear to me during my interviews with Dr. Hammitte, Dr. Fosselman, and Mrs. Oliver, that his quiet, thoughtful leadership and use of data in his position of Director of Student Assessment had been a critical factor in the district’s achieving a C rating. The programs he has initiated within the school and with the community have built trust and collaboration among diverse stakeholders around a common goal and exemplify the effectiveness of a Collective Impact-type strategy in promoting change. The sharing of ideas, perspectives, and needs between administrators, teachers, parents, and community leaders that Dr. Hammitte facilitated led to changes in participants’ understanding of what the students could do and how to help them do it.

Hattiesburg Public School District’s student population is over three times larger than Jefferson County School District. This allowed me to better identify and separate common change factors from differences in resources and funding. Hattiesburg Public School District experienced high administrative turnover and a loss of significant cash reserves prior 2016, when Dr. Williams became District Superintendent. Yet, during this
time two of its elementary schools, Hawkins, and Rowan) went from an F rating to a high C. My interview with Dr. Williams provided insight into the progress of the district and the district environment that facilitates improvement at the school level. I also interviewed Dr. Scott to understand how she led improvements in academic performance at Hawkins Elementary and then at Rowan Elementary where she is currently Principal. Both elementary schools serve students from the poorest neighborhoods in Hattiesburg and are also predominately African American. Ms. Sharon Miles, the former Director of Neighbors at Hawkins (a program of Ekklesia Church to support Hawkins Elementary) worked closely with Dr. Scott during her time as Principal at Hawkins which gave me an outsider’s perspective of Dr. Scott’s leadership style and the school’s student population.

Although it was a longer process scheduling an interview with Dr. Williams, reflective of a larger school district, he was very open and transparent about the challenges facing Hattiesburg Public School District, its progress, and his vision for its students. My impression of Dr. Williams was of someone motivated by who he was serving and well qualified for his position. As a former teacher and principal, he had deep insight into his students as whole people and was attuned to the needs of the community as well. It was apparent throughout the interview that he thought deeply about the impact of administrative policy, used creative approaches to solving problems and using available resources, and his top priority is ensuring that his students are given what they need in an education. Given the past history of HPSD, Dr. Williams is working to build and maintain strong, trusting relationships with the school board, city government, community leaders, within the district, and with students and their families. He is
working collaboratively with the City of Hattiesburg to meet the need for quality preschool and after-school care for all children.

Even after a long day, Dr. Scott’s energy was infectious when I interviewed her. She speaks her mind as someone who is comfortable with herself and likes transparency in conversations and decision-making processes. I could see the connection between her intuitive understanding of her student’s and her own childhood growing up in a neighborhood near Hawkins. She has lived through similar things, and through education achieved an outcome different from her parents. This fuels her drive to develop in her students the belief that their circumstances do not define their abilities and to instill in her teachers a high expectation for each student. Building trusting and caring relationships is the foundation of Dr. Scott’s approach to creating a school culture conducive to student success. This was very apparent in the interactions I observed between Dr. Scott, her staff, students, and the interaction among staff and toward students.

Each administrator I interviewed displayed a creative flexibility in using data and available resources to create a culture conducive to empowering teachers to teach and giving students the tools to learn and succeed. Research on Collective Impact initiatives is not widely known and none of those I interviewed mentioned it. Yet these administrators that have shown success in initiating change in the face of broad and complex challenges were using strategies that reflect Collective Impact strategy. They build trust and working relationship among diverse stakeholders through a process of shared input, collaboration, shared goals, working together rather than competing.
6.2 Evaluating the System

A review of the literature on struggling school districts, and the current education issues in Mississippi, reveals an education system that holds all districts equally accountable to meet the same standards of instruction, proficiency, and growth yet does not ensure that all have the capacity to meet those standards. It is also apparent that the gaps in educational experience and outcome fall along racial and socioeconomic lines which the current system of education perpetuates and contributes to. There is comparative agreement in what the issues are but the complex interplay among politics, race, and class in education, and teacher and student interactions within the system has prevented the development of a comprehensive strategy. Could more struggling school districts be successful if the education system did not add to their disadvantages? Yes. It is also likely that if the system were to move from its punitive stance and a myopic focus on test scores to improving district capacity to meet standards, that more administrators would shift from a deficiency mindset to developing student potential and empowering their teachers to teach students how to learn.

We need to address the system - that cannot be minimized - but there is hope for change even before better policy and practices are put in place. It is not the system that is achieving improvement in the test scores of Mississippi students, nor is it diminishing gaps in proficiency and educational experience that is common for minority and low-wealth students. Informed servant leaders with vision for their students are initiating change now.

Struggling districts are improving because of administrators, principals, and teachers that see their students as individuals with potential. These leaders are the ones
changing education for Mississippi children, improving their economic opportunities and life-chance outcomes. Grassroots organizations such as Parents’ Campaign and Southern Echo are also contributing to this change by supporting public education funding, sound policy, and ensuring parents, teachers, administrators, and communities have the resources to use their voices on behalf of all children.

6.3 Keys to Change

The school district administrators I interviewed were not using predetermined solutions to improve the academic performance of their students. Their school districts saw dramatic improvement in academic performance because they created collaboration among a diverse group of stakeholders (parents, students, teachers, local government, community groups and businesses, and other education related organizations) and allowed the process to reveal solutions. Although their solutions reflected the context of their individual districts, their approaches to change are those of Collective Impact. Rather than settling for short-term results by using pre-determined solutions, they built collaborative relationships among diverse stakeholders and allowed the process of shared input to reveal solutions based on resources already present. These successful administrators maintained regular and open communication among all stakeholders and utilized their position as a backbone organization, coordinating activities to meet the common goal of improving student outcomes. This method facilitated changes in the perceptions and mindset of participants contributing to systemic changes at the district level and significant measurable academic improvement. But as Linderman (2016) states, an influential leader is a key element for successful Collective Impact.
My first research question asked if it was possible to identify any Mississippi school districts that had reversed a general downward trend in academic outcomes. This research identified four such school districts and conducted case studies of two. The second research question asked if there were such school districts, would it be possible to identify some of the causes of that success. The case studies of Jefferson County School District and Hattiesburg Public School District did reveal causes that would be applicable to other struggling school districts: the right kind of leadership, a district-wide focus on the whole student, and creating a foundation of change through relationships.

Leadership is critical. The administrators I interviewed were strong leaders, but their style was servant-leadership, not authoritarian. Their focus was on building a positive culture for students and teachers, creating collaborative teamwork within the district and between the district and community. They empowered their teachers, students, and parents. Commitment to their students was the priority and guided them in making organizational changes. Each one had a creative flexibility in finding new ways to use the resources they had. They used a strength-based approach rather than one of deficiency.

Awareness of the whole student i.e., what they bring from their homelife into the classroom - was paramount in how they assigned teachers, the teacher training they provided, and their intentional inclusion of students’ family into school processes. This awareness provided clarity in what students needed from their education, to identify specific issues such as poverty and trauma that other administrators might mislabel as a student’s lack of academic ability. Their emphasis on the whole student led to change in
teacher perception of students and increased academic expectations which the students met with their performance.

Undergirding their leadership style and awareness of the whole student, was the conviction that relationships of trust, mutual respect, and collaboration were essential to change student academic outcomes. Each administrator invested themselves in building those relationships with students, teachers, staff, parents, community groups and leaders, and local government. They saw their job as a responsibility to improve the district for their students, not as sole actors, but in relationship with other invested parties.

6.4 Summary

A review of the literature on struggling school districts reveals an education system that holds all districts equally accountable to meet standards of instruction, proficiency and growth but does not ensure that all have the necessary funding to meet those standards. It is also apparent that the gaps in educational experience and outcome in this country fall along racial and socioeconomic lines and that the current system of education maintains and contributes to those gaps. While there is comparative agreement in what the issues are, the complex interplay of politics, race, and class in education, and teacher and student interactions has prevented the development of a comprehensive strategy to equip all schools to provide a good education for their students. Struggling school districts and their communities need to determine how to improve their schools now. This research has identified two struggling school districts who saw F ratings become C ratings, and leadership as the critical key to this change.

Because of the complex interaction among politics, races, socioeconomic status, and education, this research was conducted following Grounded Theory methodology
and utilizing mixed methods research. This research would have been strengthened with
the addition of interviews with Mississippi Department of Education officials. I anticipate
that the findings of this research can be used to replicate significant academic
improvement in other struggling school districts. Future research is indicated to examine
on the impact of the education system the development of the kind of leadership
epitomized by the administrators interviewed in Jefferson County School district and
Hattiesburg Public School District.

Hope for struggling school districts is a significant finding. Although adequate
funding and change in the education system is needed, human capital in the form of
creative, inclusive leaders committed to the whole student can lead a struggling school
district into academic success. Ability is inherent in every child; it is the job of
administrators, educators, parents, politicians and community members to create a school
environment for it to blossom and grow.

The system does not have the final say over whether students become
academically successful. Administrative leaders, empowered teachers, and the students
themselves have the last word.
The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the “Adverse Effect Report Form”.
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.
- Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 18013003
PROJECT TITLE: Can Struggling School Districts be Saved?
PROJECT TYPE: Master’s Thesis
RESEARCHER(S): Mary D. Travis
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Science and Technology
DEPARTMENT: Geography and Geology
FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: Arnhell Kelley Scholarship
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 01/30/2018 to 01/29/2019
Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.
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NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 21, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
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- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months. Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: R18013003
PROJECT TITLE: Can Struggling School Districts be Saved?
PROJECT TYPE: Renewal of a Previously Approved Project
RESEARCHER(S): Mary D. Travis
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Arts & Sciences
SCHOOL: Geography and Geology
FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: Arthel Kelley Scholarship
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 01/23/2019 to 01/23/2020

Donald Sacco, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board
REFERENCES


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