

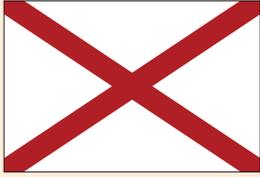


Center for  
Educator Compensation  
Reform

## Case Summary

*Transforming Schools  
in Mobile County, Alabama*





# Transforming Schools in Mobile County, Alabama

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## Introduction

The Mobile County Public School System (MCPSS) in Alabama implemented the Transformed Schools Initiative in its five highest need schools at the beginning of the 2004–05 school year. Each transformed school went through a reconstitution process in which MCPSS required all staff to reapply for their current positions in the schools. MCPSS transferred teachers not chosen to work in the transformed schools to other district schools. Transformed schools received additional instructional resources and professional development from the district, and all teachers, principals, and assistant principals at each school became eligible for financial incentives, such as recruitment/retention bonuses and performance-based bonuses.

MCPSS originally designed the Transformed Schools Initiative as a five-year pilot program, with the possibility of expanding it to the entire district. The district discontinued the financial incentives component after the final year of the program because of cost; however, MCPSS continues to implement some aspects of the program, such as supplemental professional development and instructional resources, in the transformed schools and in additional schools in the district. Even though the five MCPSS schools no longer offer the financial incentives, there are still some valuable lessons to learn from MCPSS' implementation efforts.

This case summary begins with a focus on the recent history of community engagement in education reform in Mobile County, which helped set the stage for the program. The paper then examines how the district started the program and provides a detailed description of different aspects of the program, including the financial incentives offered to teachers and principals. The paper concludes with a discussion of lessons learned from the program.

## Case Summary at a Glance

- The Transformed School Initiative in Mobile County, Alabama, was a five-year pilot program that included annual recruitment and retention bonuses as well as annual performance-based bonuses for teachers and administrators.
- The goal of the initiative was to increase student achievement in the five lowest performing MCPSS schools.
- Student achievement scores and the attainment of performance goals set by teachers and administrators at the classroom and school levels determined the performance-based awards.
- Lessons learned included the importance of three factors: sustainable financing, community engagement in education reform, and collaboration between stakeholders.

## Reforming MCPSS Schools: Coming Together to Improve Student Achievement in Mobile County

In the early stages of the Transformed Schools Initiative, MCPSS faced many of the same challenges as other high-need districts. These challenges persist in the schools selected for the program. On average, the district serves a substantially higher proportion of students who are eligible for free or reduced-price meals than the state as a whole. In 2007–08, the district free or reduced-price meals rate was 66 percent compared with 51 percent statewide (Alabama State Department of Education, 2008). Furthermore, the student achievement requirements included in the 2001 reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)* highlighted the district's struggle with student achievement. District leaders realized early that it was time to rethink district strategies to meet higher expectations for student performance (C. Taylor, personal communication, August 6, 2009). Mobile County has a history of community engagement and commitment to improving education, which played an important role in the development and implementation of the program.

In spring 2001, a local nonprofit organization, the Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF), called for reform in Mobile schools. MAEF decided that it was time to take action and worked to galvanize the Mobile community to support education reform in MCPSS schools. Three main actions came out of this public campaign, the YES WE CAN Community Agreement:

- Citizens in Mobile voted to support a new local sales tax to provide additional funding for public education in Mobile County.
- MAEF conducted research, including surveys and focus groups of MCPSS teachers, on the state of teaching in MCPSS schools.

- MAEF worked with MCPSS to develop a strategic plan, called the PASSport to Excellence, for the district, which led the way to implementation of the Transformed Schools Initiative (Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County, 2004; Chrismer, 2007).

**Community Engagement.** MAEF proposed a tax referendum in 2001 and initially designed the YES WE CAN Community Agreement to inform the community about the referendum. The referendum grew out of the Education First Amendment of 2001. The amendment, which pertained only to Mobile County, included multiple tax options that the public could approve, all designed to provide additional funding for the county's public schools. In the end, the voters supported the School Sales and Use tax, which went into effect August 1, 2001 (Mobile County License Commission, 2008). The legislation included a  $1/2$  percent sales and use tax for general education and authorized the school district to determine the use of the additional funds. As a part of the public awareness campaign about the proposed new tax, MAEF organized and convened community agreement meetings, called Community Conversations, throughout the year (Chrismer, 2007).

**Surveying Teacher Opinions.** MAEF used the momentum from the public awareness campaign to organize and engage the public in other reforms. MAEF believed that bringing the community together would increase the amount of public responsibility for the performance of students in the school system (Mobile Area Education Foundation, n.d.). This strategy created a means for engaging concerned citizens in the process of education reform (Chrismer, 2007).

MAEF also conducted a series of teacher surveys across the district and focus groups with a smaller subset of teachers. They worked with district leaders to analyze the survey results. Not only did the survey

provide valuable information to MCPSS leaders, but it also helped lead to the creation in 2005 of a statewide Commission on Quality Teaching. One of the commission's goals was to survey teachers in other districts to determine effective teacher recruitment and retention strategies for the state (Chrimer, 2007). The survey revealed that teachers who were thinking of leaving MCPSS felt that they did not receive enough support. In addition to nonfinancial incentives, such as reduced class size and more planning time, teachers reported that financial incentives might persuade them to move to, or remain in, a hard-to-staff school (Chrimer, 2007).

**MCPSS and the PASSport to Excellence.** In response to the *ESEA* and the YES WE CAN Community Agreement, MCPSS leaders developed a new strategic plan, called the PASSport to Excellence, for the district. As the basis for its strategic plan, the district used the Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence in Education, which emphasizes the following components: leadership; workforce focus; strategic planning; customer focus; measurement, analysis, and knowledge management; process management; and results (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2009). Since 2004, when MCPSS developed the first set of PASSport to Excellence standards, the district has continued to customize and strengthen the criteria. Following are the current standards (Mobile County Public School System, 2008):

- Ensure quality leadership at all levels—district, school, and classroom.
- Invest, align, and sustain community resources to address all needs of the students—physical, social, creative, and emotional.
- Implement a communication plan that informs, inspires, and unites all key education stakeholders and the community.

- Develop a relationship with the parents of MCPSS students and promote values and expectations for all students' academic success.
- Implement a system to improve, track, and forecast the financial condition of MCPSS.
- Provide all students with access to a rigorous curriculum that prepares them for full participation in the workforce and higher education.

## Collaboration Among Stakeholders: Planning the Transformation Process

At the beginning of the 2003–04 school year, MCPSS convened a meeting and invited all key education stakeholders in the district. Attendees included the superintendent of MCPSS; the assistant superintendents for various MCPSS departments, including Curriculum and Instruction and Federal Programs; and other district leaders. Representatives from the Mobile County Education Association, the local arm of the Alabama Education Association, which is the National Education Association's state affiliate, also attended the meeting. The goal of the meeting was to discuss how to implement the district's new strategic plan for improving student achievement. During the course of its deliberations, the group agreed on a new program to improve MCPSS schools, starting with the highest need locations (C. Taylor, personal communication, August 6, 2009).

The committee began with an overall concept of transforming schools. Based on results from the MAEF teacher survey, which indicated that financial incentives might sway more teachers to accept positions in high-need schools, the committee decided early to include incentives as a component of the program. Committee members also agreed that incentives should not be the only reform; instead, the incentives would be part of a systemic

approach to improving student achievement. This systemic approach included a focus on curriculum and instruction as well as on professional development for teachers. The district lacked experience with financial incentives, so the committee brought in a consultant with experience in the development of Denver's differentiated compensation program, ProComp. The consultant spent a day with the MCPSS committee, discussing the successes and challenges that Denver faced as well as the pros and cons of different types of alternative compensation systems that MCPSS might use (C. Taylor, personal communication, August 6, 2009).

At the end of the design phase, MCPSS introduced a pilot program, called the Transformed Schools Initiative, in five schools. The district also included in its plans an option to extend the program to the entire district if the pilot received a positive evaluation. The initiative included the following four major components:

- School restructuring
- Financial incentives for teachers and principals
- Intensive and ongoing professional development
- Enhanced resources and support (Rasberry, 2006; C. Taylor, personal communication, August 6, 2009)

After much consideration, MCPSS decided to pilot the Transformed Schools Initiative in the lowest performing schools in the district. To identify these schools, MCPSS used a ranking system based mainly on schoolwide Stanford Achievement Test scores. The target schools included two elementary schools and three middle schools.

MCPSS pulled funding from regular district resources to fund the program. In addition, program implementation depended on collaboration across

district departments. Each department took ownership of different aspects of the program in order to share administrative responsibilities. The Curriculum and Instruction division of MCPSS oversaw the implementation of new reading and mathematics programs and a recently developed criterion-referenced test that MCPSS implemented across the district, not just in the transformed schools. This test measured quarterly progress in all core subject areas at each grade level. The Academic Affairs division oversaw the development of teacher and principal performance goals, which they used to determine the size of the performance-based awards. The Federal Programs office was in charge of the professional development program, and the Human Resources department was responsible for disseminating the payouts (D. Reed, personal communication, August 18, 2009; C. Taylor, personal communication, August 6, 2009). Although there were benefits to effective collaboration, including a shared vision for the program, MCPSS also faced many implementation challenges. The largest obstacle was the fractured program administration. No central office or individual oversaw the overall program implementation. Each department was in charge of its own piece and sometimes did not know the status of implementation in other departments (D. Reed, personal communication, August 18, 2009).

## The Transformed Schools Initiative

As noted previously, MCPSS established the Transformed Schools Initiative with the idea that isolated reforms would not improve the condition of education—change needed to be systemic. To that end, MCPSS developed a set of reforms intended to provide a more supportive working environment for teachers and to change the way that teachers delivered instruction.

**School Reconstitution.** The first step that MCPSS took was to reconstitute the five schools chosen

for the initiative, transferring all employees at the school, and then re-staffing the school. MCPSS then identified the reconstituted schools as transformed schools. In order to start the process and as required by law, MCPSS posted an announcement of the plan at the end of the 2003–04 school year. The announcement detailed the district plan to restructure the schools and gave teachers and administrators fair notice of the plan. The district developed two applications for employment, one for teachers and principals to apply for positions in the reconstituted schools, and one for other district schools. MCPSS assigned the teachers and principals not selected for rehire at the transformed schools to other schools in the district. To restaff the schools, MCPSS officials first selected a principal for each of the transformed schools. MCPSS then gave the principals the power to fill each teaching position at their schools, which was a significant change in district policy. In the past, only the district’s central office had the authority to hire and assign teachers to schools. To reduce the likelihood of turnover, MCPSS asked faculty and staff at the transformed schools to commit to the full five years of the pilot program at their transformed schools, with one caveat. If students failed to make progress toward adequate yearly progress (AYP) benchmarks, the superintendent had the power to transfer individual teachers, principals, and other staff out of the transformed schools (C. Taylor, personal communication, August 6, 2009).

#### **Intensive and Ongoing Professional Development.**

MCPSS provided staff in transformed schools with increased professional development services. The enhanced professional development program aligned curriculum, instruction, and assessment at the transformed schools. As required by MCPSS, all personnel in the transformed schools attended an intensive, weeklong summer program called “Raise the Bar, Close the Gap.” This program aimed to increase the ability of teachers and administrators to understand students’ backgrounds,

create a positive school climate and culture, implement differentiated and standards-based instruction, and use data-driven decisionmaking in their classrooms (Rasberry, 2006; C. Taylor, personal communication, August 6, 2009). Although the program targeted staff in the transformed schools, other teachers in the district also attended the training, especially staff in schools considered high-need but not selected for the pilot. The professional development seminar occurred each summer during the first four years of the pilot (C. Taylor, personal communication, August 18, 2009).

In addition to the annual summer session, all school staff received year-round pedagogy and content site-based professional development provided by a combination of district and state resources (Rasberry, 2006; C. Taylor, personal communication, August 6, 2009). MCPSS had already implemented a districtwide reading curriculum and professional development program after the Alabama Reading First initiative gave them a grant for Grade K–3 teachers in 14 low-performing schools. In addition to this grant, each transformed school received a reading coach, funded and selected by the state, who provided in-service staff development for all teachers. The coaches worked closely with the schools to provide data-driven and targeted professional development to the teachers at the site.

**Increased District Resources and Specialists.** In addition to enhanced professional development, the transformed schools also were eligible for a variety of additional resources to support instruction. Each transformed school hired an achievement specialist, using funds from the pilot program. The role of the achievement specialist was to perform a thorough analysis of each teacher’s student achievement data and review the results with the teacher. This activity reinforced the training that teachers received during the summer professional development conference and helped them use their classroom data to modify and improve instruction. The achievement specialist

also worked with the school’s data specialists, the principal, and other instructional leaders at the beginning and end of each school year. The achievement specialists created data reports for all teachers to help them tailor instruction for each classroom. The district also developed a plan to build a data warehouse to enhance the accessibility and use of data for the program (C. Taylor, personal communication, August 6, 2009). During 2005–06, only the five transformed schools had achievement specialists. In subsequent years, the district used Title I funds to place achievement specialists in 13 additional schools.

In addition to achievement specialists, the district provided academic coaches to each transformed school to help classroom teachers improve delivery of content instruction, increase student motivation, and improve classroom management. Coaches were available for reading, writing, and mathematics instruction. The Alabama State Department of Education funded and selected reading coaches from the ranks of former teachers deemed successful and effective in the classroom (Rasberry, 2006; C. Taylor, personal communication, August 6, 2009). The district also assigned additional social workers, counselors, school nurses, and other support staff to the transformed schools to enhance physical and mental health services available to students (Rasberry, 2006; C. Taylor, personal communication, August 6, 2009). MCPSS used some funding to reduce class size in the transformed schools, expanding other district class-size reduction efforts from elementary to middle schools (Rasberry, 2006; C. Taylor, personal communication, August 6, 2009).

**Financial Incentives.** MCPSS offered two types of financial incentives: a recruitment/hiring incentive, sometimes called a signing bonus, and a performance-based incentive. Teachers and other certified personnel could earn up to \$8,000, assistant principals could earn up to \$9,000, and principals could earn up to \$12,000 in incentive pay each year (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Incentive Structure**

Type of Incentive	Teacher or Other Certified Personnel	Assistant Principal	Principal
Recruitment/Hiring Incentive	\$4,000	\$4,500	\$6,000
Performance Incentive	\$4,000	\$4,500	\$6,000
Total Possible Awards	\$8,000	\$9,000	\$12,000

Source: D. Reed, personal communication, August 18, 2009

**Recruitment/Hiring Incentives.** The recruitment/hiring incentive was available the first year of the program. The incentive was \$4,000 for teachers, \$4,500 for assistant principals, and \$6,000 for principals who agreed to remain in a transformed school for at least five years. MCPSS prorated the incentive up to 50 percent, based on teacher attendance during the first year of the program (D. Reed, personal communication, August 18, 2009).

**Performance-Based Incentives.** Teachers could earn an additional \$4,000 at the end of each year by meeting student test score goals and by receiving high ratings on teacher performance evaluations conducted by their principals. Assistant principals could earn an additional \$4,500 per year, and principals could earn an additional \$6,000 per year, based on schoolwide student achievement scores and performance evaluations that their respective supervisors conduct (see Table 2). All teachers, assistant principals, and principals automatically received half of the maximum performance-based incentive if their transformed school met schoolwide AYP benchmarks (D. Reed, personal communication, August 18, 2009).

**Table 2. Performance Incentives**

	Teacher or Other Certified Personnel	Assistant Principal	Principal
Met Schoolwide AYP (50 percent of award)	\$2,000	\$2,250	\$3,000
Met Individual Goals (40 percent of award)	\$1,600	\$2,250	\$3,000
Met Team Goals (10 percent of award)	\$400	\$1,800	\$2,400
Maximum Performance-Based Awards	\$4,000	\$450	\$600

Source: D. Reed, personal communication, August 18, 2009

All teachers and administrators developed a set of performance goals at both the individual and team levels. The goals could be based on either teacher (or principal) performance or on student performance. Team goals were worth 10 percent of the total performance-based incentive. In elementary schools, each team set goals based on grade level. In middle schools, content area determined team goals. Principals and assistant principals could also set goals to tie their rewards to a specific grade level or a content area for their team goals (D. Reed, personal communication, August 18, 2009).

Furthermore, all staff members at transformed schools developed two individual performance goals in order to receive 40 percent of the total performance-based incentive. The teacher, assistant principal, and principal wrote individual goals. The teacher or administrator's direct supervisor and other MCPSS staff who oversaw the initiative approved these goals. A teacher's goal, for example, needed approval from the principal as well as staff in the Academic Affairs department at MCPSS. Following are some examples of measures that teachers and administrators used to set their goals:

- Student achievement on statewide standardized achievement tests (Grades 3–8)
- Student achievement on MCPSS-designed criterion-referenced tests in reading, mathematics, science and social studies (administered every year with a pretest and posttest to measure student progress)

Teachers in subjects for which there were not standardized state tests and other school-level education personnel had other options:

- Teachers in nontested subjects could link their goals to teachers in tested subjects.

- MCPSS implemented a full-inclusion special education model. The school principal or assistant principal could set special education teachers' individual goals to align with the goals set in the classrooms in which they assisted, such as student performance on mathematics assessments if the special education teacher assisted in mathematics classrooms.
- Physical education teachers could link their students' performance to presidential or gubernatorial physical fitness guidelines.
- School counselors have a state-required set of small-group interventions that they must conduct. They could link to this particular measure to determine their individual awards.
- Principals and assistant principals could base their individual goals on the number of students who participated in the state assessments or on whether their school met requirements under *ESEA* (D. Reed, personal communication, August 18, 2009).

At the beginning of each school year, all staff in a transformed school wrote a memorandum of understanding (MOU) that included each individual and team goal. Supervisors approved the MOUs before submitting them to MCPSS staff for final approval. At the end of each year, MCPSS staff in Academic Affairs collected all evidence of goal attainment in order to determine which staff would receive an incentive award and the amount that each would earn. Each school submitted this information to Human Resources and to the Payroll department, which was in charge of the dissemination of the award money in October of the following school year. MCPSS implemented a dispute process for teachers and administrators who felt their bonus amounts were incorrect, which led to a review of evidence collected by the staff in the Academic Affairs office (D. Reed, personal communication, August 18, 2009).

## Mixed Program Results

In general, teachers and administrators in the district responded positively to the program at the beginning. They found the financial incentives available for working in the transformed schools attractive (Philips, 2009a). Staff in schools not chosen for the pilot program expressed some opposition to the program. Teachers in these schools, especially those in the high-need schools that were close to the bottom, felt that they also worked hard and deserved to receive the additional pay that staff in the transformed schools received (D. Reed, personal communication, August 18, 2009; C. Taylor, personal communication, August 6, 2009). In addition, some teachers reported that the relocating and rehiring process did not go smoothly; teachers who previously worked in the transformed schools felt overlooked when the district transferred them to other schools (Rasberry, 2006).

There were also some initial issues with other aspects of program implementation. For the first year of the program, MCPSS did not have a sufficiently sophisticated data system, so all document analysis occurred manually and was subject to human error. The manual analysis delayed the first incentive payout (D. Reed, personal communication, August 18, 2009). This process revealed the problems caused by the lack of a centralized program office. Program staff in Academic Affairs struggled with getting all information collected from the different departments on time, which delayed oversight of the award and dispute process (D. Reed, personal communication, August 18, 2009).

The program also had mixed retention results. Throughout the program, some teachers and principals decided to leave the transformed schools despite the five-year contracts they signed. The average turnover for the program was 11 percent each year; in one school, turnover reached 23 percent

annually. Furthermore, only one school kept the same principal during all five years of the program (Philips, 2009a). While in some schools the retention rate was an improvement over previous years, the low retention rate indicated a struggle to meet program goals.

Interviews from early program implementation revealed that MCPSS focused heavily on the importance of school leadership. School principals had the power to hire the teachers they thought would best support the students. Furthermore, although principals were still responsible for the daily administrative responsibilities, MCPSS also encouraged them to focus on instruction and creating a positive learning environment (Rasberry, 2006; C. Taylor, personal communication, August 6, 2009). Although some of the transformed schools struggled to maintain this focus during the course of the program, the one school that maintained consistency provides an example of the program's success. George Hall Elementary School steadily increased student achievement scores throughout the course of five years and was the recipient of the U.S. Department of Education's Blue Ribbon Award. In addition, the school received the Alabama Torchbearer award twice during the course of the program, which is an award that goes to the top schools in the state (Philips, 2009b).

Other schools saw some improvements in scores during program implementation. Two schools met AYP goals each year with an annual increase in the percentage of proficient students. Other schools made AYP 60 percent of the time during the five years of the program. The main reason for schools not making AYP was participation below 95 percent in subgroups and special education reading proficiency (D. Reed, personal communication, September 28, 2009). Unfortunately, four of the schools still performed below the national average on the Stanford Achievement Test ("Keep the Focus," 2009).

In 2009, state officials announced that they would need to make cutbacks in education program funding. Because of these funding cuts, MCPSS discontinued the Transformed Schools Initiative (“Keep the Focus,” 2009; “Schools Play Big Role,” 2008). District schools continue to implement some aspects of the program, including curriculum and professional development, because they are part of the Alabama Reading Initiative and the Alabama Math, Science, and Technology Initiative. These programs, which provide instructional coaches to school districts, did not face budget cuts (Philips, 2009c). The state discontinued the financial incentives, which were the most expensive parts of the program (C. Taylor, personal communication, August 6, 2009).

## Lessons Learned

Collaboration is essential. MCPSS collaborated with community representatives and other key education stakeholders to design a program that would work for their school system. Furthermore, the district staff worked with other departments at MCPSS to make sure that implementation of the program went as smoothly as possible. While there were some initial implementation problems, the ability of staff to work together was essential in riding out the bumps and making the necessary program adjustments.

The role of leadership is important. MCPSS recognized early that the most important element for staffing the transformed schools was to get the right leadership in place at each site. Data from the MAEF survey indicated that lack of support from principals was a key reason some teachers decided to leave MCPSS schools. In choosing the right leadership for each implementation site, the principals needed to choose the right teachers and create a supportive and collaborative atmosphere from the beginning. In at least one transformed school, this process led to great academic success.

Appropriate administrative support is necessary. One thing that MCPSS learned from program implementation is that collaboration, while important, also led to fractured program administration. MCPSS staff indicated that if the program were to go full-scale throughout the district, it would be important to have a central program office, as well as enough administrative support, because the program administration is time consuming.

Financial incentives are not enough. Financial incentives cannot be the sole source of reform to improve student learning. MCPSS understood this from the beginning and set up a system of reforms to improve student achievement. The program also focused on higher curriculum standards and more supportive working conditions for teachers through increased resources for the schools.

Quality data warehousing is essential. After the first year of the program, information technology staff at MCPSS designed a system of coding and analysis to support the decisions that the program needed to make. This development led to a more streamlined data input system, allowing for a smoother awards process.

Financial sustainability is essential. Because of losses in funding across the state, MCPSS could not continue to offer financial incentives to teachers or administrators. The district could not sustain the financial incentive program in the pilot schools, let alone expand the program districtwide. The district hopes to keep many of the other reforms in place and hopes to expand these initiatives into more schools. MCPSS will continue to focus on ongoing and intensive professional development, as well as on additional resources such as achievement specialists, in order to create the most collaborative and supportive working environment possible for teachers. However, the experiences of MCPSS indicate the importance of finding outside funding for alternative compensation programs, especially in the current economic climate.

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The primary purpose of CECR is to support Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grantees in their implementation efforts through provision of sustained technical assistance and development and dissemination of timely resources. CECR also is charged with raising national awareness of alternative and effective strategies for educator compensation through a newsletter, a web-based clearinghouse, and other outreach activities.

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Center for  
Educator Compensation  
Reform

Allison Henderson, Director

Phone: 888-202-1513

E-mail: [cecr@westat.com](mailto:cecr@westat.com)