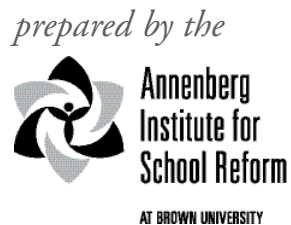


Mobile County
Public School System

Findings and Recommendations
from the
**Central Office Review for
Results & Equity**

conducted in partnership with the
Annenberg Institute for School Reform and the
Mobile Area Education Foundation



April, 2007

Central Office Review for Results and Equity

In March 2006, the Mobile County Public School System (MCPSS) began working with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University on a Central Office Review for Results and Equity, or CORRE – a three-phase process developed by the Institute’s School Communities that Work: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts. CORRE in Mobile County is a partnership between the Annenberg Institute, MCPSS, and the Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF).

The goal of CORRE is to help a school district transform itself into what the Task Force described as a “smart district” – one that ensures results and equity for all children in all its schools. (For information on smart districts, see Annenberg Institute [2002], page 28.) The Task Force identified three essential functions of a smart district:

- Provide schools, students, and teachers with needed supports and timely interventions.
- Ensure that schools have the power and resources to make good decisions.
- Make decisions and hold people throughout the system accountable by using indicators of school and district performance and practices.

Building on the work of the Task Force, the Institute has continued to expand understanding of key central office roles in supporting the functions of a district, such as promoting a service orientation and a data orientation, as well as brokering community partnerships.

CORRE was designed to help a district community evaluate how well it carries out essential functions. Participants in CORRE identify high-priority issues in the district, examine quantitative and qualitative data about the district, and determine action for improvement. CORRE is not an audit, a consultant report, an external review, or any other practice commonly done *to* districts. The CORRE process is facilitated by Institute staff and consultants *in collaboration with* a district and its community. Districts that participate do so voluntarily, motivated by a strong desire to look closely at their central office practices and improve their work with schools.

The process is also intended to build the capacity of a team of district stakeholders to work together collaboratively and effectively as they gather and examine data needed to improve policies and practices across the district. CORRE helps school districts engage in a cycle of continuous improvement; ask important questions; and incorporate information, reflection, and feedback into their decisions, policies, and practices.

A more detailed description of CORRE’s methodological approach appears in Appendix A.

The CORRE Process in Mobile County

A core belief of the Annenberg Institute is that collaboration and partnership are integral aspects of education reform and of effective practice in supporting education reform. To that end, in the Mobile County CORRE, we conducted a group research project that involved core leaders of MCPSS, MAEF, and other partners, as well as Annenberg Institute staff.

MCPSS is one of the largest districts in the country, with 104 schools and nearly 65,000 students. Since the development of the district's new strategic plan in June 2003, MCPSS has seen a steady rise in high school graduation rates, improved test scores, and significant increases in the number of schools making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). The plan's comprehensive approach is built on effectively using data to increase student achievement.

The district is led by veteran superintendent Harold Dodge, who has served as superintendent of MCPSS since 1998. Overseeing daily operations of the district, Dr. Dodge works in conjunction with a governing school board composed of five elected members. Dr. Dodge's tenure as superintendent will come to a close this year and the district is moving into a transitional phase.

The involvement of the Mobile County community in the district is significant, thanks in no small part to the efforts of the Mobile Area Education Foundation. Working in the community since 1992, MAEF undertook a major public engagement in 2001 when it began the Yes We Can initiative. Following the first property-tax increase in forty years, this grassroots campaign engaged community members through methods such as community meetings and presented the findings of this process to the district's school board.

The five big ideas that emerged from this effort – in the areas of student achievement, quality leadership, changes in governance, equity, and the start of a new story about public education – were the foundation of the district's 2003 strategic plan, PASSport to Excellence, which included nineteen performance targets across these areas. In 2006, MAEF went back to the community for a series of "Community Conversations" designed to generate feedback about the district's progress and direction for the future.

Conversations between Mobile and Annenberg Institute representatives began when a Mobile team made a presentation at the Institute's Emerging Knowledge Forum in March 2005. Carolyn Akers, executive director of MAEF, resumed discussion with the Institute about CORRE in December 2005, and district leadership expressed interest in conducting a CORRE to help the MCPSS central office examine its capacities to make effective decisions regarding organization of the district's human and material resources to create more effective supports throughout the system.

In spring 2006, Institute representatives met with district leadership, MAEF representatives, local legislative groups, and principals to give more information about CORRE and to discuss goals, sponsorship, and a timeline. CORRE in Mobile was jointly funded and supported by MCPSS and MAEF.

The review itself was launched in August 2006, when the CORRE Team orientation was held. The twenty-six CORRE Team members – who represented various stakeholder groups including central office staff, principals, teachers, parents, community leaders, students, and representatives from local higher-education institutions – were acquainted with the project’s purpose and plan and developed a deeper understanding of their roles.

In September, CORRE Team members participated in observations of elementary, middle, and high schools to gain a shared understanding of what teaching and learning look like in the district. With the Institute’s support, the CORRE Team agreed on a set of questions designed to yield valuable perspectives about education in MCPSS. The CORRE Team was also integral to developing a list of key informants and key focus areas. The CORRE liaison scheduled almost all the data-collection efforts, totaling 34 individual interviews and 47 group interviews, primarily conducted in mid- to late October. Figure 1 describes the characteristics of all the people who served as informants. Individuals are not identified because they were promised confidentiality.

Figure 1. Characteristics of individual and group interview participants, Mobile County CORRE, Fall 2006

Participant	Total	Race/ethnicity recorded			Race/ethnicity and gender not recorded	Gender recorded		Interview method	
		White	Black	Asian		Male	Female	Individual	Group
Central office staff	24	17	7	0		7	17	24	
MAEF staff	6	3	3	0		1	5	6	
MCPSS board	4	2	2	0		2	2	4	
Principals	95	57	38	0		22	73		95
Union	4	3	1	0		3	1		4
Teachers	71	50	15		6	7	58		71
Support staff	12	8	4	0		1	11		12
Students: middle school	53	17	27	5	4	14	35		53
Students: high school	48	21	21		6	16	26		48
Parents/community	50	23	14		13	13	24		50
Total number	367	201	132	5	29	86	252	34	333
Percentage of total	100	54.8	36.0	1.4	7.9	23.4	68.7	9.3	90.7

CORRE Team members and Institute Site Team staff facilitated and documented all of the interviews. All informants were asked to reflect on the priorities of the district, what the central office does well and does not do well, and which groups of students are best and least well served in the district. Additionally, individuals with knowledge in particular areas (e.g., special education, family/community partnerships) were asked questions specific to their expertise. Using an electronic template, all the notes from the interviews and focus groups were coded and loaded into an N6 qualitative database, housed at the Institute, for further coding and analysis.

By December 2006, the N6 database included about 80 coded documents. Institute staff extracted a set of topic areas, and a text-search feature was used to identify responses around issues in such areas as district priorities, underserved and well-served students, instruction, special education, professional development, and leadership. Institute staff were assigned specific sections of the notes to read and analyze, generating an early set of findings that was then carefully reviewed for clarity and adequacy of evidence. That review led to another draft of the findings document, which was shared with the CORRE Team on January 26. Their comments, which helped Institute staff identify factual errors and add nuance to the findings, were incorporated into the version of the findings published here.

Once the findings were approved by the CORRE Team, Institute staff began to build recommendations based on the findings. These recommendations take into account not only knowledge of MCPSS gained during CORRE, but also the Institute's experiences in other sites and expertise in districtwide improvement.

This report on the CORRE findings and recommendations in Mobile County is the *beginning* of a process, rather than the end. MCPSS has already identified some key areas for action based on these CORRE findings. As Mobile enters a period of transition and prepares for a change in its superintendency, it is important to continue the conversation that was started in the CORRE process. Building upon the areas in which Mobile has made progress, while developing a shared understanding of its areas in need of improvement and continuing to seek common ground for action, is the ongoing challenge for Mobile's stakeholders in public education.

Summary of Key Findings and Recommendations

The Mobile County Public School System undertook this central office review of its own work in the spirit of self-reflection and continuous improvement, understanding that the findings would touch on both strengths and areas in need of improvement. The district's willingness to receive and act on the recommendations based on these findings reflects its commitment to conduct business differently and more effectively for the benefit of the students and families that the MCPSS serves.

Key Findings

- The significant increase in the number of schools that have made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is widely acknowledged and celebrated. However, respondents questioned whether this constitutes strong evidence for improvement in the quality of instruction that serves all students well.
- Parents and students, in particular, commented on the disparity in quality among schools in the strength of instructional programming, facilities, class sizes, supplementary supports, and instructional quality. In essence, there are MCPSS students who do not have access to optimal learning environments and excellent instruction.
- The majority of stakeholder groups expressed the view that on the pre-K–12 continuum, the most attention and improvement was needed at the middle school level.
- There is a strong perception from all stakeholder groups that educators are committed to serving their students in the best ways possible, given limitations in resources and time.
- Teachers and principals expressed appreciation for the abundance of professional learning opportunities available throughout the district.
- Respondents noted the progress being made by the district in the use of technology within schools, in the development of the MCPSS Web site, and through the STI Home system.
- Many stakeholders noted that the orientation of the central office has changed from that of service and support to monitoring and supervision. Moreover, teachers and administrators remarked that school visits and the strong focus on testing restricted the time and opportunities needed by students to explore their areas of study and by teachers to innovatively and creatively develop their professional practice.
- Teachers, principals, and central office staff members said that the central office needs improved coordination within and among central office divisions and improved communication, both internally and with schools, to provide essential information.

Key Recommendations

We recommend that the central office:

- Develop a focused set of instructional priorities with the involvement of leaders in various sectors of the system – schools, Board of School Commissioners, and community – and include expectations for high-quality instructional practices.
- Lead the system in identifying and disseminating the most effective professional practices.
- Promote professional behavior and reflective practice characterized by collaboration, mutual respect, and ongoing professional learning.
- Provide professional learning opportunities for all practitioners, both through districtwide course offerings and through school-based and job-embedded workshops and collaborative study, accommodating practitioners’ diverse learning needs and interests.
- Combine the use of data to inform decisions about teaching and learning with a service orientation and respect for professional judgments of school-level staff.
- Develop and maintain connections among all parts of the MCPSS and its larger community, in formal and informal partnerships, to address common goals for students and strengthen shared accountability for results, and to nurture these partnerships by providing effective, ongoing, open communication.

We urge the MCPSS, the Board of School Commissioners, key partners, and the larger community to recognize that “good” is not good enough; to raise expectations throughout the school community; and to make a commitment to continuous improvement. The following sections of this report include suggestions about specific action steps to help the Mobile school community continue along this path.

Findings from the CORRE Team

The findings are grouped so that they correspond to areas that the Annenberg Institute has found to be valuable in our work with school systems across the country in promoting equity, scale, and access in school districts. These include a focus on student achievement, instructional quality and supports, professional learning and supports, and central office practices.

Student Achievement

1. The significant increase in the number of schools that have made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is widely acknowledged and celebrated.
2. However, respondents expressed doubt that this accomplishment, although laudable, can be used as an indicator that significant progress is being made in providing the quality of instruction that serves all students well (see Additional Findings on pages 11–13 for a comparison of the state standards, on which AYP is based, with national standards based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress).
3. Participants in all stakeholder groups noted the district's strong focus on testing. This is widely viewed as restricting the time and opportunities needed by students to explore their areas of study and by teachers to innovatively and creatively develop their professional practice.

Instructional Quality and Supports

4. There is a strong perception from all stakeholder groups that teachers are committed to serving their students in the best ways possible, given limitations in resources and time.
5. The quality of learning experiences is seen as inconsistent when comparing elementary, middle, and high school levels.
 - Elementary schools were widely perceived as being relatively strong with respect to instruction, relationships within the schools, and connections to parents and caregivers.
6. The majority of the stakeholder groups expressed the view that middle school was the area that needed the most attention districtwide.
 - It was noted repeatedly that the district loses many students at this level, as parents transfer their children to private schools or to home schooling.
7. Parents and students, in particular, commented on the disparity in quality among the district's individual schools in the strength of instructional programs, facilities, class sizes, supplementary supports, and instructional quality.
8. When asked about students who were well served in the district, some pointed to special education students, some pointed to students designated academically gifted, and some pointed to any student groups receiving additional resources.

9. Transformation Schools and Magnet Schools are viewed as being well supplied with resources and having strong programs for students and supports for teachers. Respondents expressed a desire to have these programs made available to other schools as well.
10. When asked about students who were underserved, many respondents pointed to the “average” students or students in the mid-range of academic performance, who are perceived as getting by without the need for special or individualized instructional supports or interventions.
11. All stakeholder groups reported that student behavior interferes with classroom learning. Some participants stated that these issues were especially problematic at the middle school level.
 - Others attributed part of the problem to special education inclusion in those cases where the necessary supports for teachers and students are not available consistently.

Professional Learning and Supports

12. Teachers and principals referred to an abundance of professional learning opportunities available throughout the district. Specific mention was made of the Character Counts program, the math initiative introduced by the Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF), and the principals’ leadership academy.
 - Principals who are the only administrator in their buildings noted that it is often difficult for them when they are pulled out for trainings.
13. Professional development opportunities provided by the district were often noted as being related to the adoption of particular curricular programs.
14. Principals, particularly the more experienced administrators, cited the support they receive from each other in developing their professional practice and addressing shared problems.
15. Teachers reported that they receive support and expressions of appreciation from their principals and other colleagues in their schools.

Central Office Practices

16. Respondents noted that the district has been very successful at pulling together and responding in times of need or crisis, whether in dealing with community-wide issues or those that directly affect even a single school.
 - The leadership of the superintendent and others in the central office was cited as instrumental in this regard.
17. Generally, the central office was seen as in need of improved internal coordination among divisions.
 - Some respondents expressed the belief that decisions were made reactively and were not always consistent across various divisions.

- Also, the central office was perceived as deficient in communicating the vision and goals that led to decisions made.
18. Many stakeholders noted that the orientation of the central office has changed from that of service and support to monitoring and compliance.
 - School visits were frequently mentioned as being representative of this new orientation, with an emerging lack of trust and poor morale within the schools.
 - Adding to the concern about the current condition of middle schools in the district is the perception, among school-based educators particularly, that the central office lacks sufficient personnel with expertise directed specifically at the development and improvement of middle schools.
 19. Some members of the central office staff noted that the time and energy required of them by school visits decreases the amount of time they have to provide direct and ongoing support to the schools.
 20. The paperwork required of schools is seen by most stakeholder groups – and particularly by principals and teachers – as being burdensome and overwhelming.
 - It was often mentioned that not only is the volume of paperwork high, but its nature is often redundant.
 - Many stakeholders expressed the opinion that this redundancy indicated a lack of coordination of data collection at the central office level.
 21. Teachers, principals, and central office staff members said that communication was a shortcoming of the central office, both internally and in providing essential information to schools.
 - Most frequently mentioned were the lack of consistency of messages from various divisions as well as a lack of timeliness in communication.
 - Also, respondents cited inadequate communication as a complicating factor in developing relationships with external partners and community members.
 22. The image of the district was mentioned as a central office priority. However, there is a perception that much of what is reported to the public through local media undermines confidence in the district and overshadows its achievements.
 23. Particular divisions within the central office are seen as being responsive and service-oriented, despite the perception that these divisions are under-resourced.
 - Respondents made specific mention of student support services, human resources for classified staff, and facilities/maintenance.
 24. The expansive physical size of the district combined with staffing limitations in the department of facilities/maintenance leads parents, teachers, principals, and students to state that school facilities are lacking or, in some cases, in active disrepair.

25. Respondents noted the progress being made by the district in the use of technology within schools, in development of the district's Web site, and in Web-based communication.
 - Parents, in particular, expressed appreciation for the STI Home system that gives them access to information regarding homework assignments, attendance, grades, etc.

Other Priorities

26. Many stakeholders perceive members of the Board of School Commissioners as dedicated to serving their respective individual districts rather than the system as a whole. Board members acknowledged that they do not yet have a shared set of priorities.
27. With the abundance of new workforce opportunities coming into the area, all stakeholder groups expressed concern that students are not well enough prepared to take advantage of such opportunities.
 - Some respondents advocated strongly for increased and improved vocational education, especially for those students who were not expected to go on to higher education. Others expressed the belief that a strong core academic education was crucial for all students in preparing them for whatever new learning environments they might encounter, whether in a college setting or in the workplace.
 - Many respondents cited the need for student support in developing the social skills, awareness of responsibility, and habits of mind that would serve them well in any career path.
28. Teacher recruitment and retention was often mentioned as a necessary area of concern for the district, with many respondents noting that teachers are lost to nearby systems that offer more competitive compensation or other attractive incentives.
29. Board members and central office personnel noted the significance of partnerships such as that with MAEF in providing supplementary programs for school-based educators and for raising community interest in what is happening in the district's schools.
 - The superintendent is generally seen as instrumental in developing positive partnerships and maintaining contact with external partners.

Additional Findings

The Mobile County Public School System has much data at its disposal that would be useful to the district in deepening its understanding of areas in need of improvement.

Alabama State Standards: Low Compared to National Performance Levels

The student-achievement data displayed in figures 2 through 6 provide an example of how the district could move to a deeper reading of data it already possesses.

Data from the 2005 Alabama Reading and Mathematics Test (ARMT) show that Mobile students are meeting state proficiency standards about on a par with the state as a whole. In the fourth grade, Mobile outperforms the state, especially in mathematics (Figure 2).

However, a comparison of ARMT data with data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP),¹ the federal test of proficiency, reveals that even though Mobile students are meeting Alabama state standards, these state standards are low compared to national standards.

Figure 2. Percentages of students meeting or exceeding proficiency standards on ARMT: Mobile compared with state

Test	4th Grade		8th Grade	
	Reading	Mathematics	Reading	Mathematics
ARMT statewide	83	74	70	63
ARMT Mobile	84	82	69	60

Source: Alabama State Department of Education, Accountability Documents and Reports, www.alsde.edu/Accountability/preAccountability.asp

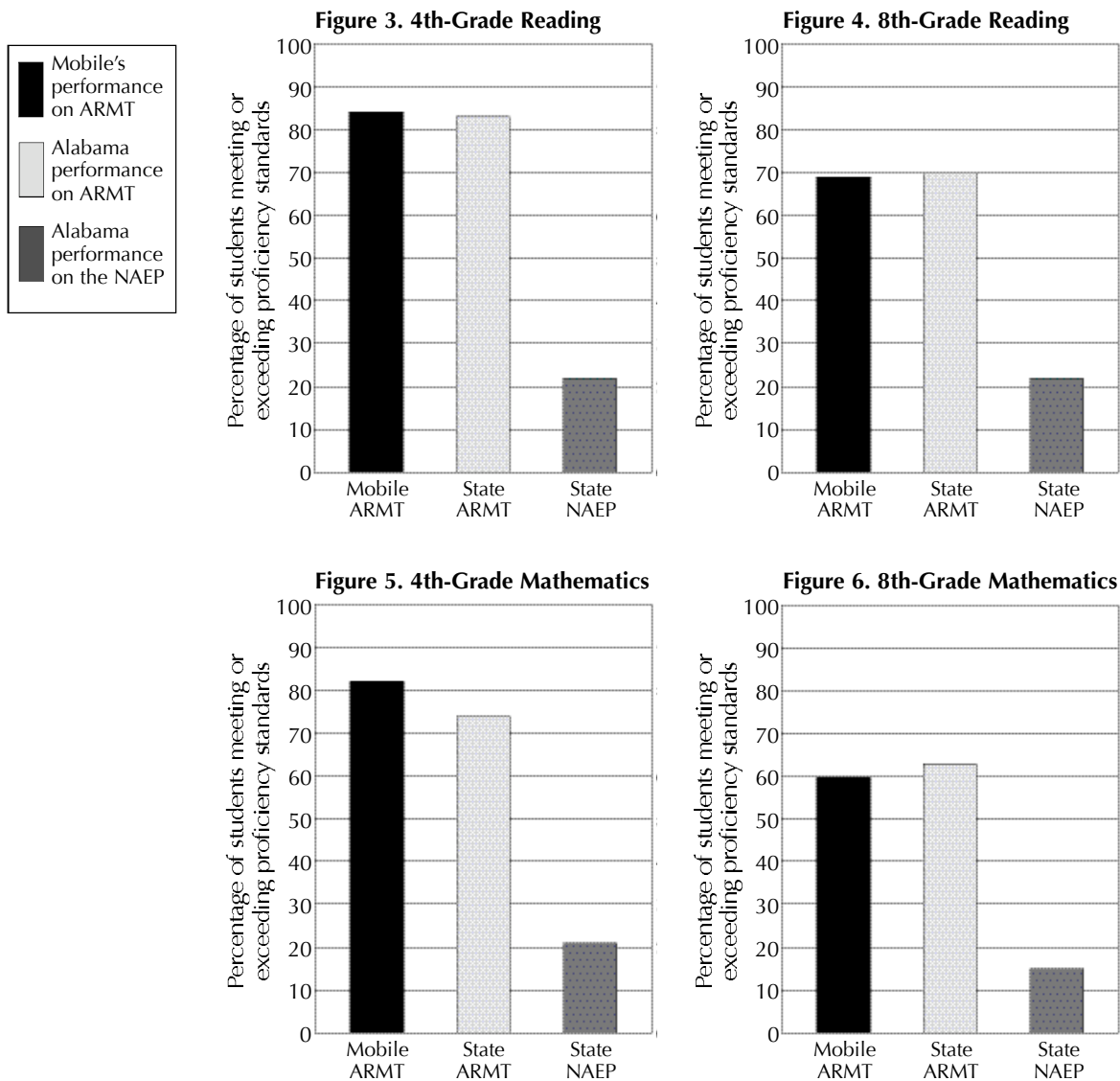
Figures 3 through 6 show that while upwards of 60 percent of students in Mobile – and in Alabama as a whole – score in what Alabama defines as the proficient range on the ARMT, they fare far worse against the NAEP standards for proficiency, which are much more rigorous. For example, while 83 percent of Alabama fourth-graders score as proficient in reading on the ARMT, only 26 percent of Alabama fourth-graders are proficient or above in reading on the NAEP.

In 2006, Paul Peterson and Frederick Hess² published an analysis of state performance on tests that states constructed themselves (such as Alabama's ARMT) versus the performance of each state's students on the NAEP. Then they graded the rigor of state proficiency standards based on the discrepancies between the state tests and the national test. States that had small discrepancies got the highest grades; those with large discrepancies received the lowest. Alabama received a D–.

¹ NAEP is a nationally representative and longitudinal assessment of American students' academic performance. Over the last 40 years, assessments have been conducted periodically in grades 4, 8, and 12 in reading, mathematics, science, writing, and other subjects.

² P. E. Peterson and F. M. Hess, "Keeping an Eye on State Standards," *Education Next* 2006, no. 3, available online at <www.hoover.org/publications/ednext/3211601.html>.

Figures 3–6 show a comparison of Student Performance on 2005 Standardized Tests.³



Sources: Alabama State Department of Education, Accountability Documents and Reports, <www.alsde.edu/Accountability/preAccountability.asp> and NAEP, State Profiles, Alabama, <<http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/states/profile.asp>>

³ Both the NAEP and the ARMT sort students into four categories. The NAEP titles these categories Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Below Basic. The ARMT uses Exceeds Standards, Meets Standards, Partially Meets Standards, and Does Not Meet Standards. In its accountability reporting, the state of Alabama equates levels III and IV (Meets Standards or Exceeds Standards) with the federal definition of proficient, so they are combined in the data and charts in this section.

Gifted Program: Not Serving All Students Equally

The Annenberg Institute urges the district to make full use of readily available data to make sure it is providing equitable access to services to all students.

An examination of data from the Alabama Department of Education, for instance, shows that while 49.8 percent of Mobile public school students are African American, only 23.3 percent of the students in the gifted program are African American.⁴ Such notable differences as these signal areas the district should examine more closely.

⁴ State of Alabama, Department of Education, Information Systems Services Section. Child Count for December 1, 2005: System (including Special Schools) Count by Exceptionality, Ethnicity, and Sex, EDSER001, p. 49, <<ftp://ftp.alsde.edu/documents/65/EDSER001.pdf>>

Recommendations from the Annenberg Institute Based on the CORRE Team Findings

MCPSS stakeholders are justifiably proud of aspects of their school system such as the significant increase in schools meeting Adequate Yearly Progress and the improvements made in a handful of the most challenging schools. And they have thoughtful concerns about other aspects of the system – ranging from excessive testing to uneven academic quality.

But the findings across stakeholder groups suggest an unwarranted complacency about the overall health of MCPSS and how well the schools are doing for Mobile’s children – a sense that “good” is good enough for Mobile. That sense seems to be at odds with Mobile’s recent history of significant effort within the school system and broad engagement and support beyond the schools in the larger community. The idea of “good enough” is also at odds with what it takes for a community to remain civically healthy and economically viable.

Mobile has a recent history that positions it well for the challenges of the future. It has been stable enough to retain the same superintendent for nine years – long enough to change the achievement trajectory. Even with the many demands placed on them, teachers largely feel supported by the leaders of their schools. Stakeholders recognize the key role of the Mobile Area Education Foundation, not only in providing programmatic support, but also in building and sustaining community interest in schools. And many political leaders, community organizations, and citizens are stepping up to do their part. So, Mobile County has a significant head start in recognizing the critical importance of leadership and understanding that it comes from many places in many forms.

To move beyond “good” to “great,” the central office must build on existing strengths and maintain a focus on the continuous improvement of the system in providing opportunities for all students to realize their full potential.

A Commitment to Continuous Improvement

Districts that succeed in sustaining continuous improvement in order to ensure results and equity for each student in every school share several characteristics. These districts are persistent in their efforts to do the following:

- demonstrate strong *instructional leadership* that sets clear priorities and expectations of optimal performance by all adults and children engaged in teaching and learning;
- identify the most *effective practices* in their schools and make those practices the rule, rather than the exception, districtwide;
- develop a culture of *professional behavior* that includes mutual respect, collaboration, and reflective practice;
- recognize the need to continue building the capacity of their educators through ongoing *professional learning*;

- maintain close *connections* among all parts of the system – schools, central office, board – and its larger community by means of clear, timely, and effective *communication*;
- combine systemwide use of *data to inform decisions* about teaching and learning with a central office *service orientation* and respect for professional judgments of school-level staff.

(See Selected References on page 28 for resources on relevant research.)

Instructional Leadership

Maintaining continuous improvement in the service of students requires that MCPSS develop a focused set of instructional priorities with the involvement of leaders in various sectors of the system – schools, central office, Board of School Commissioners, and community – and include expectations for high-quality instructional practices.

It is essential that leaders across the system be focused on, committed to, and have a shared understanding of these priorities. Nearly as important as having such priorities is reinforcing and continuously communicating their significance and focus and the roles of various stakeholders in achieving them. Moreover, movement toward strong, clearly developed instructional leadership requires redefining the role of central office leaders and staff. And, not least, it requires a unity of purpose and high degree of focus among board members. The central office has implemented strategic plans and has put support behind particular curricular strategies, but in our interviews we heard no common voice within or across stakeholder groups about a shared vision or concrete goals for improved student learning.

We recommend that the central office:

- Consider redefining central office staff roles and, if necessary, reorganizing staffing within divisions to reflect the focused set of instructional priorities and the supports schools need (in curriculum, instruction, and material and human resources) to provide consistently high-quality teaching and learning. Too often, we find that central office structure reflects history, convenience, and turf concerns more than it does desired school and student outcomes.
- Recognize that strategic communication must be a core competency of central office and staff and resource it accordingly.
- Assess the adequacy and effectiveness of supports for instruction throughout the district that are directly related to the district’s instructional priorities by referring to:
 - ✧ multiple indicators of student performance;
 - ✧ feedback from school-based educators and support staff.
- Target central office supports and resources toward schools’ differing needs and ensure these supports and resources are clear and easily accessible by school-level leaders and staff. One existing example of effective resource targeting is Transformation Schools.

- Recognize that building the capacity of central office and school administrators to influence continued improvement in teaching and learning must also be a core competency – and one that may reasonably require the knowledge and assistance of local and national partners.
- Acknowledge and capitalize on leadership functions performed by those who are not positional leaders – teachers, families, students, and community partners.

Effective Practices

Providing the necessary supports and guidance for student learning and development requires that the central office lead the system in identifying and disseminating the most effective professional practices.

It is important to note that there are many talented, experienced, and dedicated educators in the MCPSS who could inform the practice of others and influence the system's continued development. These practitioners can contribute significantly to improvement efforts throughout the system.

Many stakeholders cited the need to focus on development of Mobile County middle schools. As the district anticipates significant changes to some of those schools, it would be wise to engage in the planning and decision making some of the practitioners who have demonstrated effective instructional leadership and performance in working with students in those middle grades.

Respondents cited inconsistency in the quality of learning experiences provided for special needs students. The inclusion model, which is preferred for most of these young people, provides good results where it is fully and successfully implemented. Successful sites should provide guidance to others in developing their programs.

We recommend that the central office:

- Identify and learn from teachers, school and central office administrators, and support personnel who have developed strategies and demonstrated expertise in
 - ✧ conducting ongoing, formative assessment of students' performance and instructional needs;
 - ✧ conducting school visits in ways that demonstrate an understanding of the classroom context and the intent to support educators in improving the most significant elements of their professional practice in the service of students;
 - ✧ helping students develop habits of mind/work and social skills that will optimize their chances for success in future study or occupational pursuits;
 - ✧ developing strong connections between schools and families/community;
 - ✧ working effectively with middle school students;
 - ✧ developing and implementing inclusion models for special needs students.

Professional Behavior

A commitment to continuous improvement requires that the central office model and promote professional behavior and reflective practice characterized by collaboration, mutual respect, and ongoing professional learning.

District leadership, especially central office administrators and members of the Board of School Commissioners, must determine how best to foster working relationships and conditions that encourage optimal performance by all adults in the system.

We recommend that the central office:

- Ensure that all central office personnel take time to reflect on the effectiveness of their work as individuals and to assess their working relationships with colleagues. Staff members should have time and opportunity to discuss working conditions and factors that enhance or limit their professional practice and affect morale within that office.
- Provide opportunities for central office personnel, school-based educators, board members, and community partners to engage in collaborative problem solving and decision making addressing system priorities.
- Create opportunities, in addition to the principals advisory council, for central office personnel to hear from and interact with school-based practitioners in order to acquire a clearer picture of the circumstances influencing the work of those educators. This might include open forums, annual surveys, or periodic e-mail queries on specific topics of concern to school-based staff.

Professional Learning

An effective professional development program requires that the central office continue to provide professional learning opportunities for all practitioners, both through districtwide course offerings and through school-based and job-embedded workshops and collaborative study, accommodating practitioners' diverse learning needs and interests.

A comprehensive professional development program would include a traditional workshop or training model – but would also go beyond that. Such a comprehensive program would provide opportunities for practitioners to form communities of practice or professional learning communities within and among schools and would address all grade levels and content areas – not just content included on standardized tests.

We recommend that the central office:

- Review current practices about how professional development sessions and meetings are used and look for opportunities to use time differently and more effectively.
- Establish the expectation that all central office and school employees will continue to improve their practice through ongoing professional learning – through workshops or specific training sessions, through participation in study groups or learning communities, and/or through individual or independent study.

- Ensure that when a workshop or training model is used, the providers – system employees, consultants, and/or community partners – include follow-up and on-site support to facilitate the integration of effective practices.
- Attend to the learning needs of paraprofessionals and support staff and include them in workshops that address the student populations they serve.
- Provide regular opportunities for educators to learn with and from each other. Work with school administrators and classroom practitioners to devise schedules that will provide time for professional learning through peer observation, coaching, and/or collaborative problem solving. Provide skilled facilitators when needed to assist in the establishment of study groups or learning teams/communities.
- Develop study programs for groups representing multiple roles. Examples: including central office personnel in workshops for teachers of middle school science; bringing teachers, parents, and principals together to study how best to prepare children for the transition from elementary to middle school; having central office personnel join working meetings of School Action for Excellence teams.

Combining Use of Data and Service Orientation

Providing both timely interventions and needed supports requires that MCPSS combine the use of data to inform decisions about teaching and learning with a central office service orientation and respect for professional judgments of school-level staff.

As noted above, the primary responsibilities of central office staff are providing service and support to each of Mobile County’s schools. In many instances, this responsibility is taken very seriously, but greater consistency and accountability are required so that all central office staff interact with and place demands on building-level colleagues in ways that are helpful and challenging, but also respectful.

In addition, MCPSS has access to readily available data that could help deepen its understanding of areas in need of improvement. For instance, data that compare the performance of Mobile’s students against national standards paint a substantially less optimistic picture than comparisons with Alabama state standards. Also, racially disaggregated data indicate the need for the central office to look deeper into its practices to make sure it is providing equitable access to services to *all* students. (See Additional Findings on pages 11–13 for a more detailed discussion.)

We recommend that the central office:

- Review existing data directly related to MCPSS’s instructional priorities and examine how that data could be better used to inform decisions at the central office and school levels.
- Develop and model a strong service orientation across individuals and units in the central office that emphasizes the district’s instructional priorities while acknowledging the

needs and concerns of school-level staff most directly responsible for student learning. Central offices with a strong service orientation hold themselves accountable for achieving the right combination of monitoring for compliance and providing the genuine supports needed to improve teaching and learning.

Connections and Communication

Creating a world-class school system requires accountability within and beyond the staff of the school district and requires that all responsible adults act in formal and informal partnership toward common goals.

The MCPSS should be expected, of course, to lead the way in providing excellent education for its students. But creating the conditions for high-quality learning and development in Mobile is not just the responsibility of those on the district payroll. School/family, district/community, board/superintendent, and other partnerships are essential. A common thread among such partnerships is that they must be nurtured by effective, ongoing, open communication to operate and achieve their goals.

There are critical issues to be addressed in the Mobile community that must be engaged by leaders and partners beyond the MCPSS central office – particularly the school system’s funding body and the county’s elected and community leadership. The most important of these are the inadequacy of overall investment in resources for the schools and related issues of equity in access to educational opportunity as reflected in uneven quality of instruction, facilities, and educational resources. But the central office’s role here is more limited and other players must take the lead.

We recommend that the central office:

- Create and maintain an infrastructure for internal and external communication that:
 - ✧ functions to both disseminate information and gather feedback;
 - ✧ ensures that messages and requests going from different divisions of central office to schools are consistent and clear and not conflicting or redundant;
 - ✧ builds on and extends its current technology, such as the district’s Web site and STI Home, to continue to keep parents and the community informed of instructional priorities and progress, student performance, and other critical issues such as policies and resource use.
- Draw on the wealth of data available to ensure that information on equity issues, such as student achievement by subgroup and use of central office and school-level resources, is transparent and widely disseminated to inform public debate.
- Encourage a community-wide dialogue that explores what kinds of opportunities would emerge if the education system were viewed as a broad set of partnerships that included both the school district and a wide variety of civic, business, and community partners.

Moving toward Action

This report on Mobile's Central Office Review for Results and Equity is the beginning, not the end, of the effort. In large and complex school systems like Mobile, a commitment to improve key functions and structures of the central office can get lost in a combination of day-to-day concerns and crises and in change efforts that have a more immediately visible payoff. This document is intended to help provide a touchstone for the high-priority and difficult, yet essential changes to the way MCPSS works that will determine its future course.

This section outlines some specific challenges and opportunities for action, suggested by the recommendations in the preceding pages, as the Mobile community builds on its past work and prepares for its next phase. An early task for the district will be to sort these possible actions into short-term, mid-term, and longer-range action steps, then to plan and execute the actual changes.

The leadership challenge for the Mobile community, looking toward the future, is to recognize that "good" is not good enough. More of the same will not move a school system from where it is to "great," and the first task of leadership – wherever it is situated – is raising expectations.

For the central office this means:

- balancing a focus on compliance with a service orientation;
- making instructional priorities clear;
- making hard decisions about how central office staff time is spent, which, in turn, drives how school-based staff time is spent (revisiting school visits);
- strategically embedding internal and external communications in all its work;
- finding ways to provide teachers with the time and classroom conditions needed to develop and implement their professional practice.

For the Board of School Commissioners this means:

- using these findings and recommendations and other available information/reports (e.g., Center for Teaching Quality) to identify the qualities needed in the next superintendent of MCPSS and aggressively recruiting that person as its first priority;
- achieving unity in supporting instructional priorities for the continuous improvement of teaching and learning throughout the county, in every district and in every school.

For key partners this means:

- serving as critical friends that will celebrate successes of the school system while continually prodding for additional improvement;
- ensuring that the larger community's voice is heard in a way that reaches beyond the participation of high-profile organizational partners to grassroots, community, parent, and civic bodies;

- demanding that the board state publicly their criteria and process for selecting a new superintendent, while maintaining appropriate confidentiality for candidates in the early stages.

For the larger community this means:

- fostering the uncomfortable debate about investment and inequity in the system;
- demanding optimal learning opportunities for all children in MCPSS schools.

Mobile already has some changes under way that have the potential to address some of the issues raised in this report. We encourage the district and the community to reflect on what it will take to mobilize and sustain the effort to transform public education in Mobile from a good system to a great system.

Appendix A **CORRE: An Inquiry Tool**

The Central Office Review for Results and Equity (CORRE) is a group inquiry process that focuses on central office practices.

Similarities to a Comprehensive Research Study

While it is not a comprehensive research study, CORRE shares many qualities with such studies. First, it is built around a conceptual framework. Annenberg Institute staff and the CORRE Team work together to develop and reach consensus on questions to ask in individual and group interviews. Institute staff review the questions so that they reflect a central office framework that emphasizes seven key concepts:

- Communicating big ideas
- Service orientation
- Data orientation
- Increasing capacity
- Brokering partnerships
- Advocating and supporting underserved students
- Addressing inequities

CORRE also uses research tools – mainly individual and group interviews – to collect data about central office practices. In developing interview questions and setting the interview schedule, the CORRE Team works extensively to help capture all the district’s voices, so that the information gathered will be useful and revealing to the district. We strive for neutral wording, being careful to avoid leading language and to order the questions carefully. Our goal is to present the questions in clear, easily understandable language.

We also adhere to the strictest research ethics when visiting classrooms, interviewing central office staff, or conducting group interviews of various stakeholders. We get the permission of everyone we speak with or observe as part of the inquiry, and all responses are confidential. Notes taken are shared only among Institute staff, and no one is identified in written or oral summaries of the data. Group interviews with students are conducted based on the district’s standards for data collection with minors and are led by CORRE Team members adhering to those principles.

Differences

Our work differs from a comprehensive study primarily around sampling. Rather than develop our individual and group interview lists using randomized sampling or a related method, we develop them based on the collective wisdom of the members of the CORRE Team. We ask this group – again, not a statistically representative group of the district or community, but one in which many perspectives are represented – to identify the key people to talk to. In all cases our subjects are volunteers. In the case of groups such as parents,

we often have to be very opportunistic about our samples, *usually finding that people tend to participate based on their availability and time to do so.*

Our samples are not intended to be representative. From both the individual and group interviews, we report perceptions and then, looking across groups, we note similar themes about the role or function of central office. From those themes we build recommendations for improvement.

Legitimacy of CORRE as an Inquiry Tool

CORRE's legitimacy stems from the shared criteria of the team members who are part of the process and is validated when findings are shared and the team members confirm that the findings are on target and reasonable. The Institute places a great deal of emphasis on reviewing preliminary findings with the full CORRE Team and with the district's superintendent. We believe the standards of such stakeholders provide a "public lens" that is critical to ensuring that the results of the inquiry are both legitimate and actionable.

Appendix B CORRE Team Members

MCPSS and Community

Bethany Andrews, *Student, Davidson High School*
Rebecca Brower, *Teacher, Grand Bay Middle School*
Randy Campbell, *Principal, Lott Middle School*
Lewis Copeland, *Principal, Davidson High School*
Suzanne Crist, *Principal, Grand Bay Middle School*
Carl Cunningham Jr., *Manager, Office of Multi-Cultural Student Affairs, University of South Alabama*
Harold Dodge, *Superintendent, Mobile County Public School System*
Phillip Feldman, *Associate Dean, College of Education, University of South Alabama*
Alli Flowers, *Teacher, Leflore Preparatory Academy*
Hazel Fournier, *Mobile County Board of School Commissioners*
David Gray, *Chair, Department of Leadership and Teacher Education, University of South Alabama*
JaaDaa Holcombe, *Principal, Whitley Elementary School*
Devin Hudson, *Student, Baker High School*
Samantha Ingram, *Deputy Superintendent, Mobile County Public School System*
Lane Jones, *Teacher, Lott Middle School*
Andi Kent, *Assistant Professor, University of South Alabama*
Terry King, *Teacher, Shaw High School*
Willie Mae Longmire, *Parent/Community Leader*
JoAnn McKnight, *Community Leader*
John Midkiff, *Business Community Leader*
Terrence Mixon, *Principal, Williamson High School*
Karen Mohr, *Assistant Superintendent*
Jeremiah Newell, *Director of Student Engagement, Mobile Area Education Foundation*
Jewel Simmons, *Teacher, Robbins Elementary School*
Paul Tate, *Assistant Superintendent, Human Resources, Mobile County Public School System*
Nicole Williams, *Parent/Native American Interpreter, Calcedeaver Elementary School*

CORRE Steering Team

Carolyn Akers, *Executive Director, Mobile Area Education Foundation*

Andrea Barbour, *Assistant Superintendent, Mobile County Public School System*

Michelle Parson, *Program Administrator, Mobile Area Education Foundation*

Annenberg Institute Site Team

Debi King, *Associate Director*

Jude Pelchat, *Principal Associate*

Tracie Potochnik, *Research Analyst*

Marla Ucelli, *Director, District Redesign*

Appendix C Timeline for CORRE by the Mobile County Public School System

I. Preparation

- March 6–7, 2006 Staff from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform met with representatives from the Mobile County Public School System (MCPSS), Mobile Area Education Foundation (MAEF), and local legislative groups to present information about the Central Office Review for Results and Equity (CORRE).
- April 25–26, 2006 Institute staff made a presentation on CORRE to a group of principals and met with representatives from the district and MAEF to establish guidelines for CORRE Team membership, a timeline for the project, and the roles of the various entities involved.
- August 30–31, 2006 Institute staff met with the Mobile CORRE steering team to finalize the project timeline and plan next steps. The 26-person CORRE Team attended an orientation meeting, which was facilitated by Institute staff.
- September 20–21, 2006 The CORRE Team visited schools to get a shared “feel” for the district. Following the visits, the group discussed their observations and worked together to reach consensus on interview questions. Facilitators and documenters were trained in conducting and recording group interviews.

II. Inquiry

- October 2006 Members of the CORRE Team and the Institute Site Team conducted a total of 81 group and individual interviews. The 47 group interviews involved community members, parents, principals, students, support staff, teachers, and union leaders. The 34 individual interviews included members of the district central office, school board, MAEF, and teachers union.
- November–December 2006 Institute Site Team members, with support from additional Institute staff, coded, reviewed, and analyzed the data from the individual and group interviews, reviewed key MCPSS and MAEF reports and documents, and requested additional data needed to complete a preliminary analysis of the CORRE Team’s findings.

January 26, 2007

Institute staff presented preliminary findings to the district superintendent and the CORRE Team. The CORRE Team offered feedback on the findings and suggestions for areas in which to look deeper. There was consensus from the Team that the findings reflected the data that were collected.

III. Action

April 2007

Institute Site Team members briefed key players in Mobile on the findings and recommendations, and the report was released publicly.

The Institute will maintain contact with MCPSS and MAEF to provide feedback on the implementation of action items during the coming year.

Appendix D Selected References

- Annenberg Institute for School Reform. 2002. "School Communities That Work for Results and Equity." In *Portfolio for District Redesign*. Providence, RI: Brown University, Annenberg Institute for School Reform. Available on the Web at <www.schoolcommunities.org/archive/portfolio/results_equity.html>
- Bryk, A. S., and B. L. Schneider. 2002. *Trust in Schools: A Core Resource for Improvement*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Burch, P., and J. Spillane. 2004. *Leading from the Middle: Mid-Level District Staff and Instructional Improvement*. Chicago: Cross City Campaign for Urban School Reform.
- Corbett, H. D., and L. B. Wilson. 1991. "The Central Office Role in Instructional Improvement," *School Effectiveness and School Improvement* 3, no. 1:45–68.
- David, J., and P. Shields. 2001. *When Theory Hits Reality: Standards-Based Reform in Urban Districts*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.
- Manning, J. B. 2001. "Emerging Models of Governing School Districts," *Center on Education in the Inner Cities Review* 10, no. 2.
- Massell, D. 2000. *The District's Role in Building Capacity: Four Strategies*. Policy Brief. Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education.
- Snipes, J., F. Doolittle, and C. Herlihy. 2002. *Foundations for Success: Case Studies of How Urban School Systems Improve Student Achievement*. Washington, DC: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation and Council of the Great City Schools.
- Spillane, J. P. 2000. *District Leaders' Perceptions of Teacher Learning*. Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education.
- Stringfield, S., and A. Datnow. 1998. "Scaling Up School Restructuring Designs in Urban Schools," *Education and Urban Society* 30, no. 3:269–276.
- Supovitz, J. 2006. *The Case for District-Based Reform: Leading, Building and Sustaining School Improvement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Togneri, W., and S. Anderson. 2003. *Beyond Islands of Excellence: What Districts Can Do to Improve Instruction and Achievement in All Schools*. Washington DC: Learning First Alliance.

Acknowledgments and Appreciation

The Annenberg Institute wishes to thank the Mobile County Board of School Commissioners, the superintendent, and the Mobile Area Education Foundation for the opportunity to work with the Mobile County Public School System community. We thank the members of the CORRE Team for their hard work and dedication to capturing the voices of the district's various stakeholders, as well as their insight, candor, and good will in addressing the challenges present in the system. We particularly appreciate the leadership of Carolyn Akers; the information, feedback, and access provided by Andrea Barbour; and the logistical and scheduling support provided by Michelle Parson. We would also like to thank other members of the Mobile County Public School System and Mobile Area Education Foundation who were not on the CORRE Team, but whose work facilitated our own.

Annenberg Institute Contributors

Writing

Ellen Foley
Debi King
Jude Pelchat
Tracie Potochnik
Marla Ucelli

Data Gathering and Analysis

Jacob Mishook
Carol Walker

Data Analysis

Miriam Aguilar
Joanne Thompson

Research and Student Data

Ellen Foley
Jacob Mishook

Editing

Margaret Balch-Gonzalez
Susan Fisher

Design and Production

Haewon Kim
Mary Arkins Decasse

For information on the work of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University, please visit our Web site at <www.annenberginstitute.org>.



**Annenberg
Institute for
School Reform**

Brown University
Box 1985
Providence, RI 02912

T 401.863.7990

F 401.863.1290

www.annenberginstitute.org