

**Extended Learning Opportunities in Fostering
Student Achievement**

Pass Christian Elementary School Profile

Pass Christian, Mississippi



*Council of Chief State School Officers
Division of State Services and Technical Assistance
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Background

Pass Christian School is a medium-sized elementary school located in the small Gulf coast town of Pass Christian, Mississippi. Approximately 440 students attend kindergarten through fifth grade at Pass Christian. The school is one of two elementary schools in the Pass Christian School District in Harrison County that also includes a middle school and a high school. The school demographics do not reflect that of the town of 6500 citizens. The racial composition of the school is 59% African American, 36% Caucasian, 5% Asian, and 0.5% Hispanic; whereas, that of the surrounding community is 61% Caucasian, 32% African American, 6.6% Asian, and 0.5 % Hispanic. 79% of the students are eligible for Free and Reduced Price Meals. Pass Christian also has a Gifted and Talented program that involves approximately 6% of the students. The mobility rate is quite high at 25% and 39% of households are headed by a single parent or guardian. Approximately half of the town's population have school-age children.

Pass Christian is staffed with a principal and lead teacher, 32 classroom teachers and 15 teacher assistants. The teaching staff has an average of 15 years of experience and over 75% have an advanced degree. 20% of the teachers and administrators are African-American. The administration and staff have been diligent about keeping class sizes small. Class size reduction grants have assisted in this effort at the primary level (K – 3) where the average class size is typically between 20 – 22 students. This has allowed staff to provide more focused and differentiated instruction on a regular basis.

Recently, Education Trust and the U.S. Department of Education have named

Pass Christian Elementary School a “Top Performing School” in a national report. During the past few years, Pass Christian has developed parent training sessions and implemented parent volunteer programs to ensure that quality curriculum and instruction is provided in a supportive and effective learning environment.

Beginnings

The Mississippi Department of Education has recently embarked on an extensive reading initiative and has taken a number of steps to strengthen student reading skills. They have established the Mississippi Reading Reform Model¹ which includes reading instructional intervention, extended instructional opportunities, parent-family literacy programs, early literacy intervention, and extensive professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators.

The administration and staff at Pass Christian Elementary have made reading excellence one of their top priorities and applied for and received a Reading Excellence Act Grant from the State Department of Education. The grant is a multiyear (January 2001 – June 2003) reading intervention program focused on under-performing pre-kindergarten through third grade students. This focused reading intervention program is delivered through both extended day and extended year opportunities for at-risk students. The program is targeted to students with reading deficiencies. The goals of these extended learning initiatives are quite explicit: to have all students reading on grade level by the third grade;

¹ The Mississippi Reading Reform Model began in 1998 and is a multi-faceted, cross-cutting initiative focused primarily on improving the reading skills of K-3 students. More information can be found on the Mississippi Department of Education website, www.mde.k12.ms.us.

to decrease the number of student referrals to special education; and, to provide an opportunity for Pre-K at-risk students to make a smoother transition to kindergarten.

Both the Summer Reading Program and the Extended Day Program are designed to be an early intervention tool to provide extended time and additional instructional support to students who are not successful readers. Although the program content and the program focus is limited to improving reading skills, many elements of the school and surrounding community were involved in the design and implementation of the Reading Excellence Grant. The principal and staff have been able to weave together the reading grant and a technology grant to expand the capacity of the program. In addition, they have worked with the parents, community, and local university all of whom were part of the grant development process. There is an extensive mentoring program and on-going professional development for both teachers and parents.

“We care and we want our kids to succeed.” - Principal Lettie Burger

Program Structure and Content

Pass Christian Elementary School received their Reading Excellence Grant from the state in January 2001 and began the extended year component of the program that summer. The extended day component was introduced in the following fall semester. The goal of the initiative is to improve the reading and literacy skills of students at-risk of reading failure. The program is viewed as intense remediation designed to impact student success. Because of limited resources and the need to keep class size small for this focused approach, participation is limited

to students who have failed, or are at-risk of failing, reading.

The Summer Reading Program is a 4-week session that meets for three hours per day, Monday through Thursday. There are five classes (Pre-K, K, 1, 2, 3) with a limit of 15 students per class. The Extended Day Program meets for one hour at the end of the regular school day four days per week, Monday through Thursday, for 30 weeks. The Extended Day Program is for first through third graders only. The school district provides bus transportation for the students attending the summer program and extended day initiative.

As part of the grants process, a Community Stakeholders Board was created to develop goals and objectives, build community support, monitor progress, and develop sustainability plans. The Board meets three times a year and membership includes the Principal, teachers, District Superintendent, Mayor, university staff, parents, community groups including the Director of the local Boys and Girls Club, Director of Federal Programs from Harrison County, and the Director of Head Start. In addition to helping refine the components of the extended learning initiative, they are actively involved in investigating ways to further meet community need and how to recruit additional mentors from community organizations. They are also working with the local School Board to examine policy issues to determine what is needed to institutionalize the program.

The Pass Christian teaching staff were an integral part of the grant development process. They helped design the program, assessment process, professional development components, and methodologies used to support the reading initiative. The teachers at all

grade levels work together through a peer coaching process to develop the list of students recommended for the extended learning program. In fact, early in the process they recommended the student list should be expanded to include not just those students who were failing reading but those who were at-risk – either not at grade level or experiencing significant difficulty with reading, especially after previous interventions. The program was modified to meet this concern and to address the needs of all students considered at-risk.

The Reading Excellence Grant has three main components: 1) resources for additional staff and stipends for the teachers providing the summer school and afterschool program; 2) extensive professional development; and, 3) additional library and technology support. Certified teachers are paid an additional hourly supplement to teach in the afterschool or summer program. The regular classroom teacher provides the extended services although not necessarily for his/her grade level. The additional staff support the reading and literacy focus and include: a teacher and teaching assistant to provide a K - 1 transition class, a Literacy Assistant, an English Language Learner Assistant, and a Parent/Family Liaison.

The K-1 transition class is specifically designed to provide additional support for those kindergarteners who are not quite ready for first grade, especially in language arts. Class size is limited to 12 students and includes a fully certified teacher and full-time teaching assistant. This class has an additional emphasis on improving reading and literacy skills. Some students may transition out of the K-1 class during the school year depending on their readiness level and academic growth.

The Parent/Family liaison provides an additional connection between what is occurring in the classroom and afterschool and the family. The liaison works with the teachers and parents to improve parental involvement and to provide parents with support and additional tools to help them work on improving their children's reading skills. An important aspect of the liaison's role is garnering parental support in enrolling their Pre-K children in the summer school program. In the Spring 2001, letters and phone messages were sent to the parents of children who were attending the local Head Start Agency and were struggling with reading readiness skills to inform them of the opportunity to attend the Summer Reading Program. The Parent Liaison visited the homes of those who did not respond. This personal approach led to the enrollment of all the students targeted for additional support and contributed greatly to the overall success of the program.

A key element of the grant is the extensive professional development in reading and literacy. Professional development was provided by the Mississippi Department of Education and the Houghton Mifflin Publishing Company whose reading intervention programs (*Early Success* and *Soar to Success*)² were utilized in the extended learning initiative. The Kindergarten teachers and the Head Start teachers participated in joint professional development sessions. This allowed for a coordinated approach to the new reading initiatives from both the Pre-K and K

² Reading Intervention for *Early Success* and *Soar to Success* are research-based reading intervention programs for students in grades 1 and 2 and grades 3 and above, respectively, who need extra support to become proficient, grade-level readers. It is a small group model that provides daily instruction that is in addition to the core reading/language arts program. The daily lesson plans provide explicit, direct instruction in a multi-component approach to improve fluency and comprehension.

teachers. In addition, the Pre-K and K teachers took part in extensive classroom observations in the others' classes. This process ensured that the same pedagogy was being used for both the preschool and kindergarten classes and that the teachers were implementing the same measures to judge reading readiness and reading ability and to identify at-risk students. The first through third grade teachers also received extensive professional development.

“My daughter used to hate school. Now she really enjoys it and talks about her school day all the time. ... The afterschool program has helped make her an independent reader. She is reading much more at home now.” – Mother of Second Grade Student

All of the teachers take part in peer coaching sessions and share information about students' progress on a regular basis throughout the school year. This is especially critical as students tend to move into and out of the extended day program as their reading skills improve. In addition to training on approaches and techniques to improve reading and literacy skills, there was training on assessment, data analysis, and technology. Some of the professional development and training was coordinated and provided by the University of Southern Mississippi. In addition, students at the University participated in an extensive mentoring and tutoring initiative at Pass Christian. University staff would hold classes in the cafeteria at Pass Christian and their students would spend time in the afternoon tutoring the fourth and fifth graders who were not part of the Extended School Day program.

Pass Christian created a Parent Resource Center in the library and with the

additional library support personnel are able to provide support and assistance to parents. School staff work with parents to help them get involved in their child's reading and to encourage “reading for fun” at home. The Parent Resource Center provides books and learning guides and a place for parents and children to meet to expand parent-family literacy programs and community support.

Technology plays a vital role in implementing the objectives of the reading initiative. The principal has been able to leverage the additional technology support funded through the state grant with a Mississippi PowerPALS (Partnering AmeriCorps with PowerUP Labs and Students) Grant.³ This grant funded the school's technology laboratory which is used by students and the community at large. AmeriCorps Members provide community service through their participation with the MS PowerPALS project. These AmeriCorps volunteers provide computer training and tutoring in math and reading to students, parents, and community participants.

Both the Summer program and Extended Day program focused on the lowest quartile of performers. Teachers met on a regular basis and through a process of student assessment and classroom performance came to consensus on the children who should be invited to participate in the extended learning

³ The Mississippi Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology, Training and Support has partnered with the Mississippi Commission for Volunteer Service and PowerUP in implementing Mississippi PowerPALS. Through this competitive grant, school sites were awarded a 20-station computer lab. The MS PowerPALS sites offer extended day/year programs to increase student, parent, and community participant computer literacy skills, and to support teachers in the integration of technology in the classroom. For further information visit <http://mspwpals.mde.k12.ms.us>.

programs. Letters were sent to parents advising them of the opportunity for their children to participate in this extended learning initiative. This was followed up with personal contact by the classroom teacher and parent liaison.

Two key components of the Reading Excellence initiative are early intervention and continuous assessment. Early in the school year, teachers conduct screening assessments for all Kindergarten through third grade students. Students performing inadequately are then targeted for further assessment. These students are administered assessments to diagnose particular strengths and weaknesses. The peer coaching study teams review and analyze these results to prescribe an intervention plan geared to the individual needs of the student. As the students progress through the program, additional assessments – pre-testing, post-testing, classroom, and portfolio – are employed to monitor their progress and refine the methodologies.

“The individualized assessment is time consuming but extremely valuable for developing an individualized intervention plan and monitoring students’ progress.” – Second Grade Teacher

The curriculum and pedagogies employed in both the summer and extended day programs are substantially different than those employed on the regular classroom. The emphasis is on building comprehension skills through guided reading, retelling stories and summarizing, class discussion, and writing. Techniques are also used to improve phonemic awareness, phonics, and decoding skills. Interactive and variable reading instructional practices are used throughout the program.

Class size is kept small (15 students) to focus on one-on-one and small group discussion. Three staff – a certified teacher, teacher assistant, and technology specialist – each work with a group of five students in the extended day program. In general, the group of five students rotates through the three staff during the one-hour period. The teacher focuses on building reading and comprehension strength in the students; the teacher assistant works on improving different language arts skills; and the technology specialist works with computer software focused on phonics and vocabulary. There is strong cooperation and collaboration amongst all the staff involved in the extended learning initiatives.

Administration and Funding

The lead administrator for the extended learning initiative is the Principal, Lettie Burger. The Lead Teacher, Doris Flettrich, works closely with the Principal and staff in coordinating and implementing the program. Their responsibilities include coordinating the grant writing process, acquisition of materials, staffing the program, coordinating professional development, securing transportation for students, and coordinating with the Head Start program. As noted above, the entire teaching staff were an integral part of the program design and grant writing process. Different groups of teachers wrote various sections of the grant proposal.

“The teachers’ opinions are valued at Pass Christian. They were part of the entire process and they have buy-in to our goals and objectives.” – Lead Teacher

The Reading Excellence Grant runs from January 2001 to June 2003 and totals \$619,572. Approximately 3.1% of the grant is attributed to transportation costs. The remaining funds support additional staff and stipends for teachers' participation in the extended learning initiative – both summer and after-school.

Elements of Success

The first session of the Reading Excellence Summer Program was held in July 2001 followed by the extended day program in the fall semester. The site visit occurred in the Spring 2002. Although this extended learning program is somewhat limited in scope and focus, the initial data shows great promise and indicates that the goals and objectives are being met. There is great enthusiasm for this initiative that is shared equally amongst the administration, staff, parents, and students.

“The after-school program has been great for my kids. Their reading is a lot smoother and they enjoy reading more advanced books. They participate in class and like to answer questions now.” – Second Grade Teacher

Teachers were universal in their praise for this initiative. They were enthusiastic about the new techniques they employed and the different learning styles they were able to address in the small group format in after-school. They also remarked about the noticeable progress achieved by students participating in afterschool, improved levels of comprehension, and improved confidence in the regular classroom.

“We focus on helping our students learn how to summarize and this builds their comprehension skills. I can see the progress – it’s measurable. Their attitudes are better – they want to read.” – Third Grade Teacher

“Every child needs to feel successful. And this program does that. It instills confidence and this quality of high achievement at an early age.” – Principal Lettie Burger

Assessment data collected at this early stage of the program substantiate the teachers' enthusiasm. Some of the outcomes for the Pre-Kindergarten students who attended the Summer Program were: children were ready for school, they were familiar with the school, and they knew proper behavior and expectations. Their reading levels improved substantially. 40% of the children tripled their reading score as measured by the pre- and post-tests. All of the Pre-K children who attended the Summer Program were achieving at the Satisfactory to Excellent levels in Reading through the Second Quarter grading period as measured by in-class assessments. All of these children had scored in the lowest quartile in reading in pre-test assessments at Head Start.

There has been a marked improvement in attitude in the classroom and in the reading scores and reading ability of the first through third graders who participated in the extended day program. Only 7% of the first graders were achieving at the Unsatisfactory level in the second grading quarter (nearly 80% were at the Good to Excellent level). Over 80% of the second and third graders were achieving at the level of C or better. Again, all of these students were

performing in the lowest quartile prior to participating in the afterschool program.

“I didn’t like after-school at first. I didn’t want to be here ... but then my grades shot up!” – Third Grade Student

“Sometimes ... in the classroom ... we know things before the other kids do.” – Third Grade Student

The reading intervention program has been quite successful. Although the breadth and depth of the program is limited by the availability of state resources, the administration and staff at Pass Christian Elementary School have implemented a well-designed extended learning initiative that has yielded significant positive outcomes: opportunities for one-on-one instruction; creating an atmosphere in which to develop a positive relationship with the teacher; developing positive self-concept through academic achievement; fostering an “I can read” environment; and, improving the community-school relationship by providing a necessary service to impact at-risk students to increase academic achievement. Involving parents at the beginning of the grant development process, expanding parent-family literacy programs, getting parents involved in helping their children read and learn, and the ongoing Stakeholders Board which addresses community need, have also improved the community-school relationship.

“One additional hour has had a great impact on our students’ achievement and increased their enthusiasm for learning.” – Second Grade Teacher

In addition to the vision and commitment of the administration and staff, a good deal of the success of the reading initiative can be attributed to the extensive professional development component and the strong collaborative partnership formed with the Head Start Agency. There has been excellent training and support at the state level. The early assessment and intervention and the coordinated approach to addressing and improving reading and literacy skills has had a measurable impact on student success.

The challenge for Pass Christian Elementary School will be finding the resources to sustain this successful initiative after the grant ends. There appears to be a strong desire to keep the reading intervention portion of the extended day initiative at one hour but to include more students and expand to the fourth and fifth grades. A real concern is the limit of 15 students at each grade level. Because of the limited funding, students are rotated out of the extended day program once they reach a satisfactory reading level so another under-performing student can participate. There is a strong desire, and growing impetus, from the principal, teachers, and community to expand the afterschool efforts and incorporate additional programs and services. They are working with the District Superintendent and School Board to develop policies to support and sustain this initiative.