



ARKANSAS LEADERSHIP
ACADEMY
SCHOOL SUPPORT
PROGRAM

Arkansas Leadership Academy
University of Arkansas
College of Education and Health Professions
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Arkansas Leadership Academy

Purpose

The Academy, through the use of research and best practices, designs creative and innovative approaches to establish learning communities in public schools by developing human resources and by modeling and advocating collaboration, support, shared decision making, team learning, risk taking, and problem solving. Partners commit to changing their organizations to support system improvement.

Vision

An innovative academy preparing educational leaders who develop high performing learning communities throughout Arkansas.

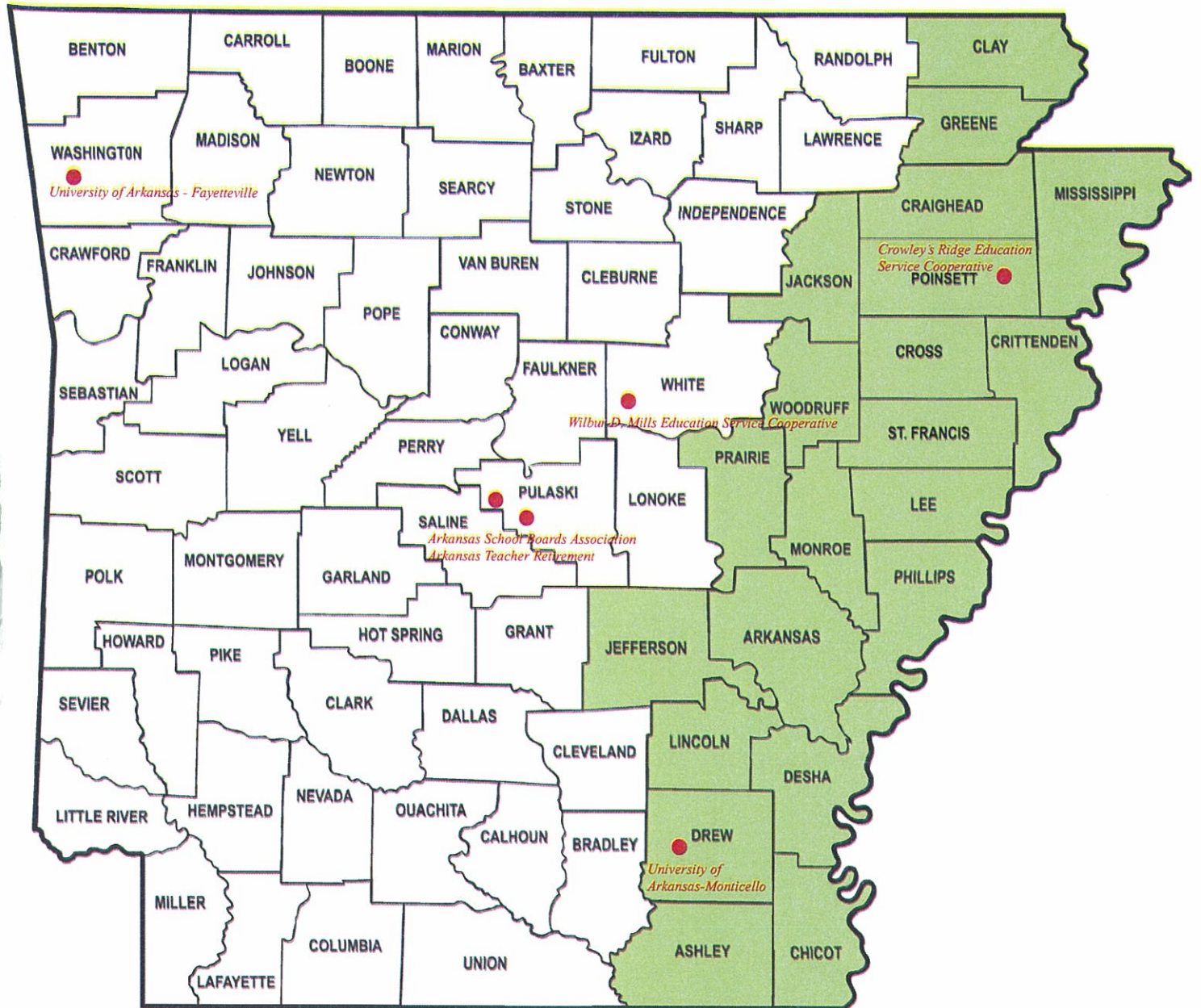
Mission

To develop and sustain a cadre of leaders in public education in Arkansas through collaborative governance by Academy partners resulting in an expanded vision, statewide system change initiatives, synergy among stakeholders, and leadership development institutes.

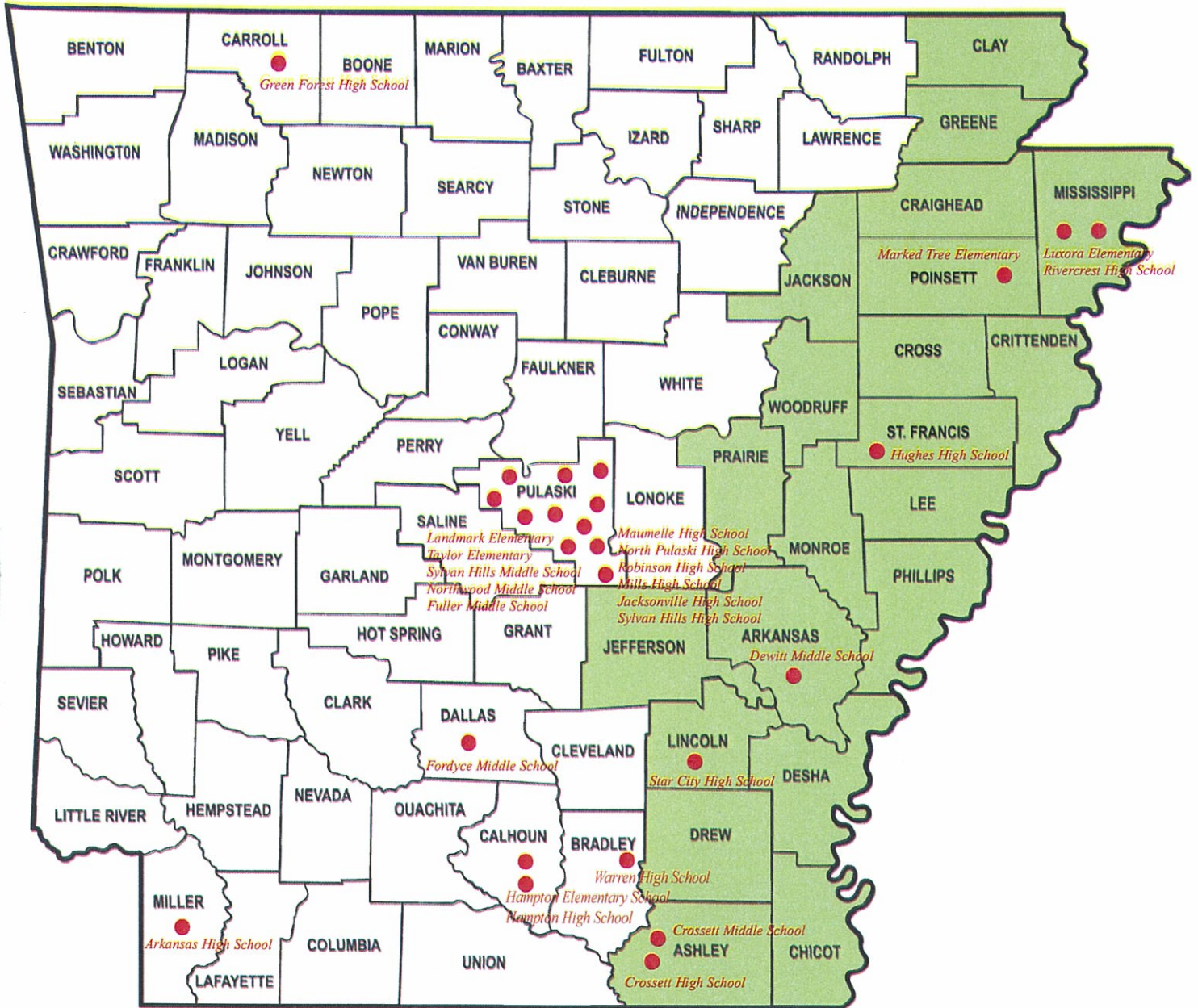
Beliefs

- People support what they help create.
- Diversity is embraced and valued.
- To change others, change yourself.
- The greatest leaders are known by the number of leaders they create.

Arkansas Leadership Academy Offices 2011-2012



Arkansas Leadership Academy School Support Program 2011-2012



School Support Program Outcomes for Years 1 & 2

Results were compiled for Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 schools. Cohort 1 schools completed two years of the School Support Program (SSP) and Cohort 2 schools completed their first implementation year for SSP. For this report, results from 2009-2010 include only Cohort 1 schools participating in the SSP. Results for 2010-2011 include schools from Cohorts 1 and 2 participating in the SSP.

AYP 2010 for School Support Schools

The Arkansas Leadership Academy (ALA) began its work with Cohort 1 Schools in July 2009. Cohort 1 schools were in various levels of School Improvement in 2009 when the ALA began providing school support services. School Improvement levels ranged from School Improvement Year 4 to Year 7. Table 1 provides a summary of the 2010 AYP status for Cohort 1 schools. Green highlights indicate positive change in school status.

- 57% of schools moved to their first or second year of achieving standards.
- SSP schools doubled the number of groups meeting AYP from 2009 to 2010.
 - Specifically, Cohort 1 schools met AYP for 53 groups in 2010 compared to only 27 in 2009, effectively doubling the number of groups meeting AYP.

Table 1. Summary of NCLB AYP School Improvement Status

District	School	NCLB AYP Status 2009	NCLB AYP Status 2010
Fordyce SD	Fordyce Elementary School	Targeted Intensive Improvement Achieving Year 4	Achieving
Lee County SD	Whitten Elementary School	Whole School Intensive Improvement Year 5	Whole School Intensive Improvement Achieving Year 5
Lee County SD	Anna Strong Middle School	State Directed Year 6	State Directed Year 7
Lee County SD	Lee County High School	State Directed Year 6	State Directed Year 7
Texarkana SD	Arkansas High School	State Directed Year 6	State Directed Year 7
So. Mississippi County SD	Luxora Elementary School	Targeted Intensive Improvement Achieving Year 5	Achieving
So. Mississippi County SD	Rivercrest High School	State Directed Year 6	State Directed Achieving Year 6
Marked Tree SD	Marked Tree Elementary School	State Directed Year 6	State Directed Year 7
Pulaski County Special SD	Landmark Elementary	State Directed Year 6	State Directed Achieving Year 6
Pulaski County Special SD	Sylvan Hills Middle School	State Directed Year 7	State Directed Year 8
Pulaski County Special SD	Oak Grove High School	State Directed Year 7	State Directed Achieving Year 7
Pulaski County Special SD	Taylor Elementary	Whole School Intensive Improvement Year 4	Whole School Intensive Improvement Year 5
Hughes SD	Hughes- Mildred Jackson Elementary	State Directed Year 7	State Directed Achieving Year 7
Hughes SD	Hughes High School	State Directed Year 7	State Directed Achieving Year 7

2011 AYP post-appeals reports were not available at the time this report was compiled.

Recognitions

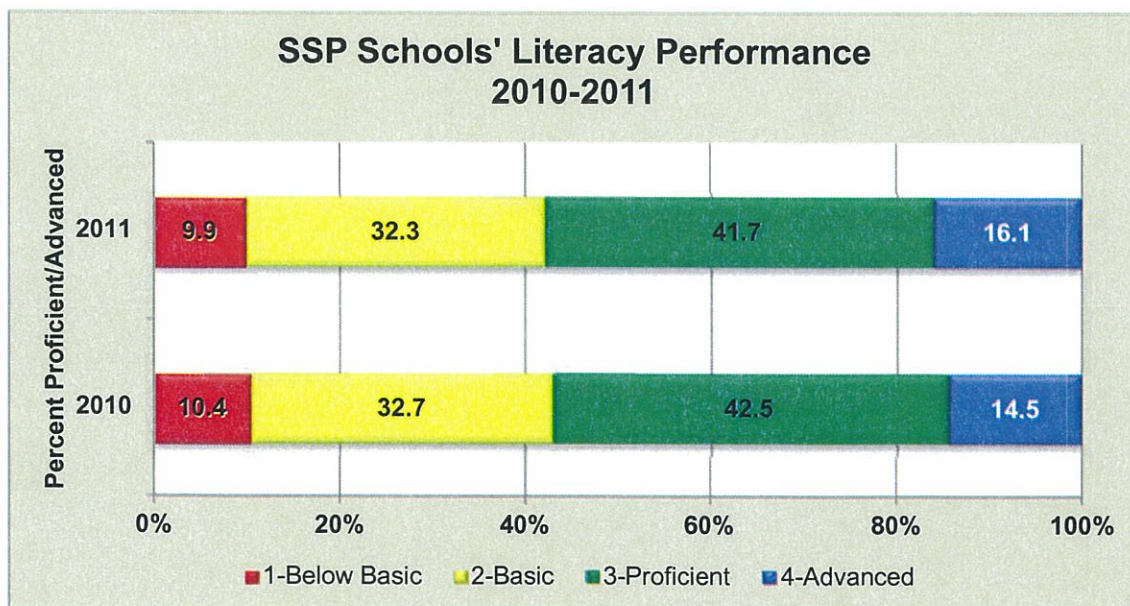
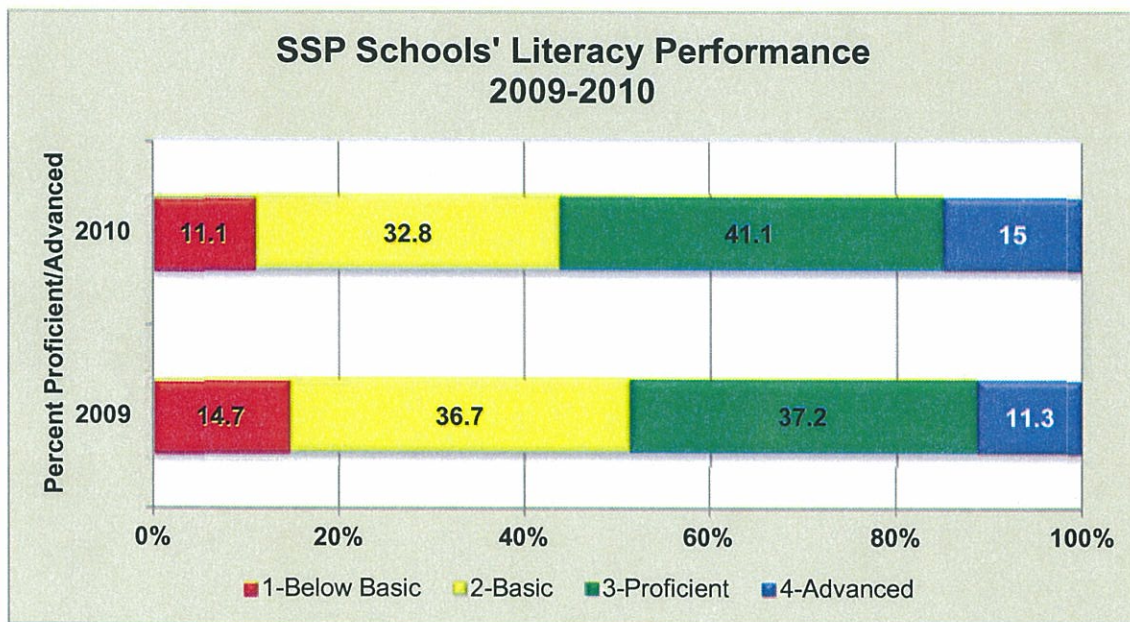
Several SSP schools were recognized by the University of Arkansas' Office of Education Policy for Outstanding Educational Performance Awards in 2010.

- Luxora Elementary (South Mississippi County) was recognized as a *Beating the Odds: High Achieving Schools Serving Low Income Students*.
- Luxora Elementary, Landmark Elementary (Pulaski County) and Mildred Jackson Elementary (Hughes) were recognized in the *Top 20 Most Improved Elementary Schools on Benchmark Mathematics Achievement 2009 to 2010* ranking 2nd, 10th, and 13th, respectively.
- Luxora Elementary and Mildred Jackson Elementary were recognized in the *Top 5 Most Improved Elementary Schools in Arkansas by Region, Benchmark Mathematics Achievement from 2009 to 2010*.
- Luxora Elementary was also recognized in the *Top 20 Most Improved Elementary Schools on Benchmark Literacy Achievement from 2009 to 2010* with a rank of 2nd.
- Luxora Elementary and Mildred Jackson Elementary were recognized in the *Top 5 Most Improved Elementary Schools in Arkansas by Region, Benchmark Literacy Achievement from 2009 to 2010* for the Northeast region.
- Hughes High School was recognized in the *Top 5 Most Improved Middle Schools by Region, Benchmark Literacy Achievement from 2009 to 2010* with a 17 percentage point increase in literacy.
- Oak Grove High School and Hughes High School were recognized in the *Top 20 Most Improved Schools Based on EOC Algebra Achievement from 2009 to 2010* ranking 5th and 7th, respectively.
- Oak Grove High School was ranked 2nd in the *Top 5 Most Improved High Schools in Arkansas by Region, Algebra Achievement from 2009 to 2010* for the Central region.
- Hughes High School was ranked 3rd in the *Top 5 Most Improved High Schools in Arkansas by Region, Algebra Achievement from 2009 to 2010* for the Northeast region.

Luxora Elementary (South Mississippi County) was recognized as a *Beating the Odds: High Achieving Schools Serving Low Income Students* again in 2011.

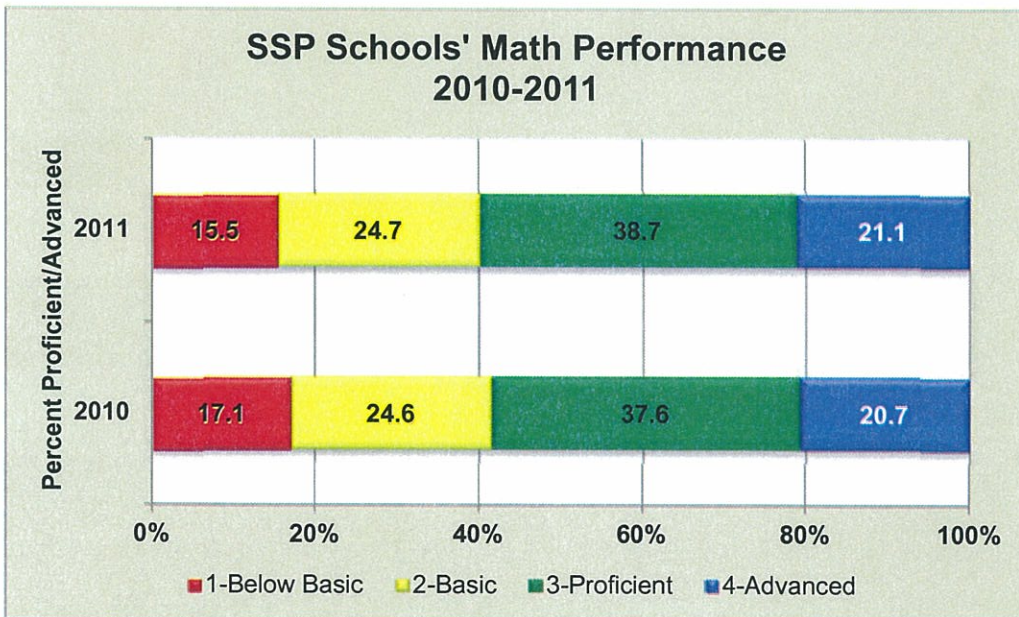
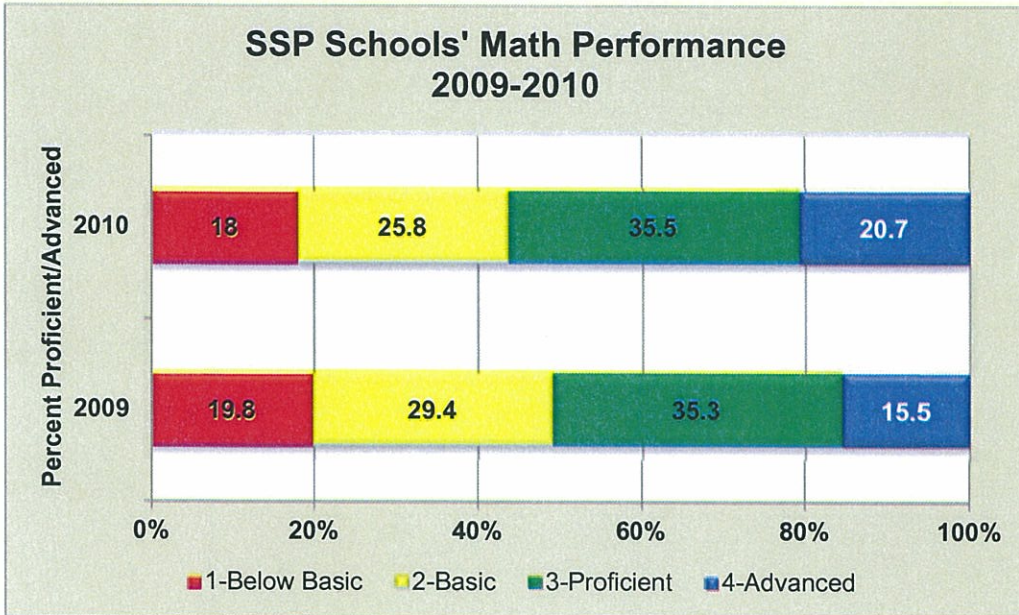
Summary of School Performance for Literacy

Although the focus of accountability is on moving all students to proficiency, a primary goal of the SSP is to improve learning for all students across the achievement continuum whether that student is Below Basic or Advanced. The following charts indicate the progress of students at each achievement level: Below Basic, Basic, Proficient and Advanced. Note SSP Cohort 1 schools demonstrate a desirable pattern. The percentage of students scoring at the Below Basic and Basic levels was reduced from 2009 to 2010 in literacy. This pattern continued in 2010-2011 although the magnitude of change for Year 2 was not as large as for the first year of SSP. This is not unexpected given the magnitude of the Year 1 increases and the addition of 9 schools to the SSP.



Figures 1 and 2. Performance in literacy for Grades 3 through 8 and Grade 11.

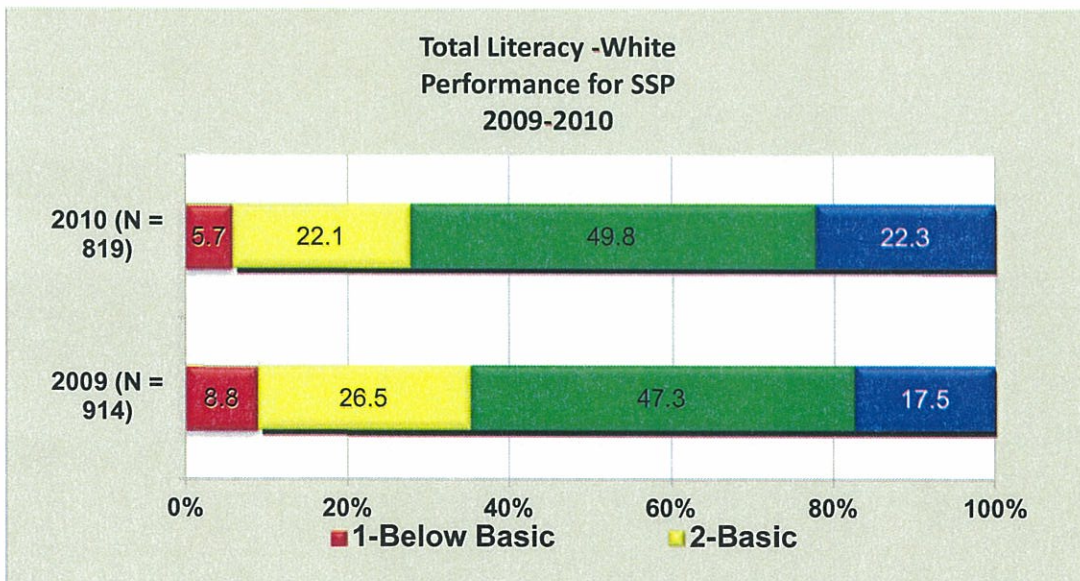
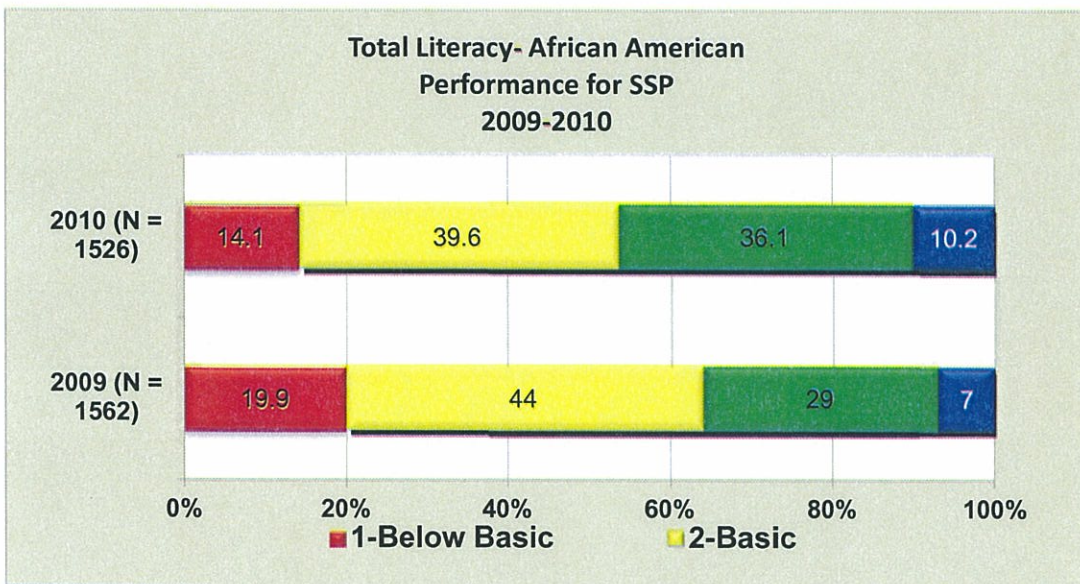
Math performance also exhibited a similar desirable pattern with the percentage of students scoring Below Basic and Basic declining from 2009 to 2010. The percentage of students scoring proficient remained relatively stable during the same time period. However, schools participating in SSP increased the percentage of students scoring Advanced by 5.2 percentage points in 2009 to 2010. Results for 2010 to 2011 also demonstrate increases in the percentage of students scoring Proficient and Advanced, with fewer students scoring in the lowest performance range of Below Basic.



Figures 3 and 4. Performance in math Grades 3 through 8, Algebra and Geometry.

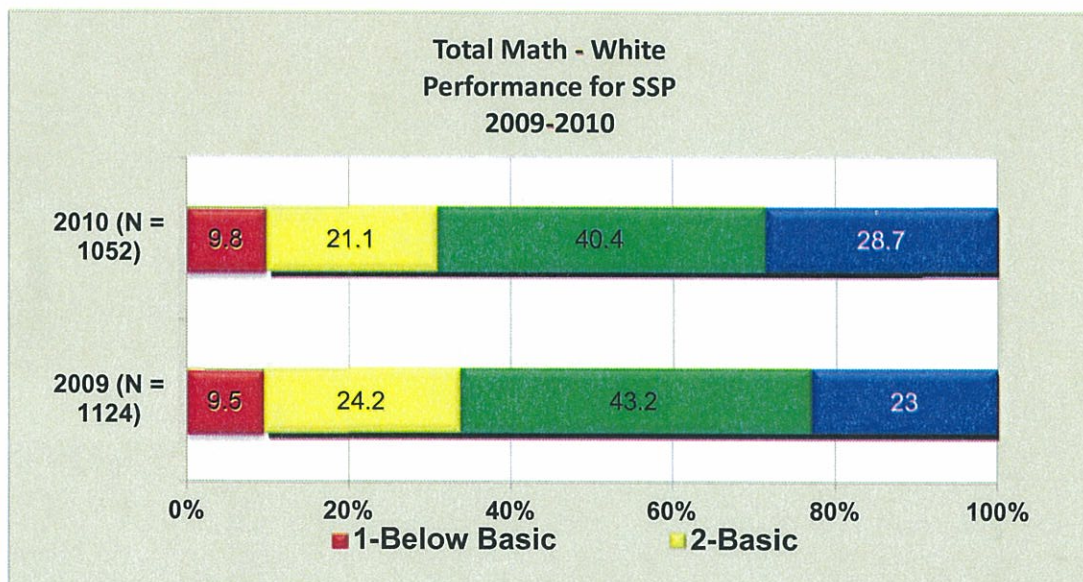
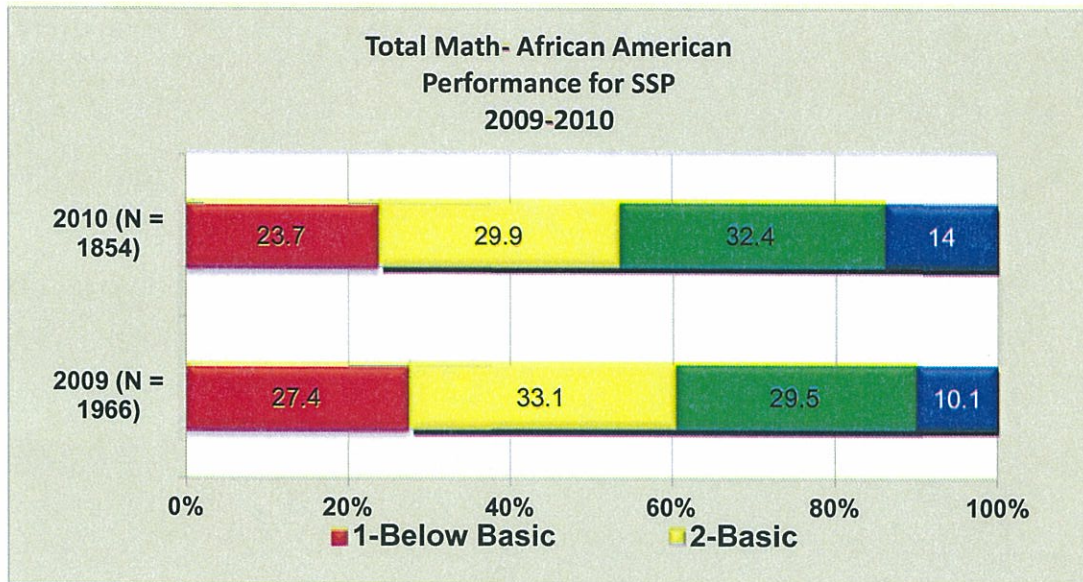
Subgroup Performance

Overall performance sometimes masks achievement gaps for subgroups of students. Schools in need of improvement, particularly in School Improvement Year 4 and beyond, struggle with underperformance of specific subgroups. In some cases, these differences in performance have existed for a long period of time. The SSP facilitates schools' use of student achievement data to identify these gaps and to plan and implement strategies for closing these gaps. Figures 5 through 8 illustrate the performance of race subgroups for the first year of SSP. African American students in schools beginning their work with the SSP exhibited the largest achievement gaps compared to White students. Note that both subgroups improved in literacy, but the improvements for African American students (an increase of 10.3 percentage points) are greater than those for White students (an increase of 7.3 percentage points), thus providing evidence these gaps are narrowed from 2009 to 2010.



Figures 5 and 6. Performance in literacy by subgroup for Grades 3 through 8 and Grade 11.

Results by subgroup also demonstrate the gap for African American students for math. African American students exhibited a 6.8 percentage point increase in the Proficient and Advanced scores as compared to a 2.9 percentage point increase in Proficient and Advanced scores for White students. Math results are provided in Figures 7 and 8.

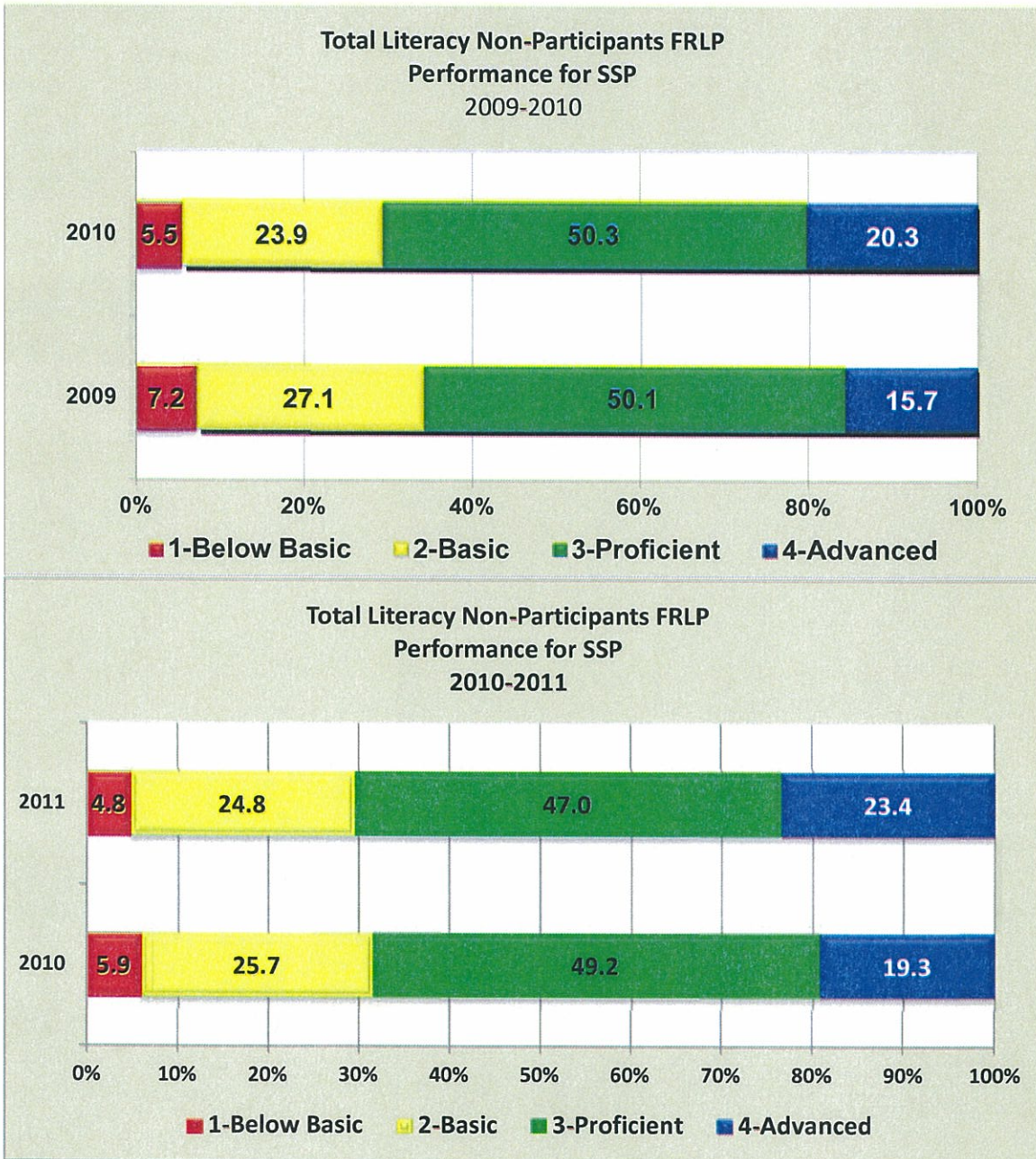


Figures 7 and 8. Performance in math by subgroup for Grades 8 through 8, Algebra and Geometry.

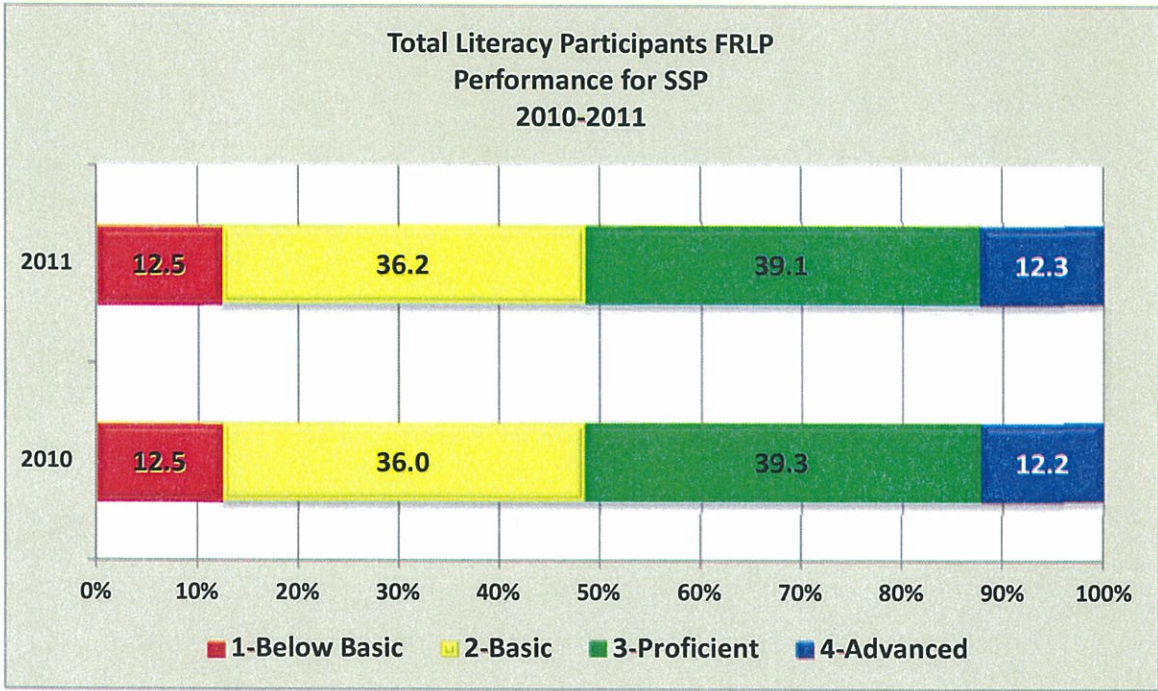
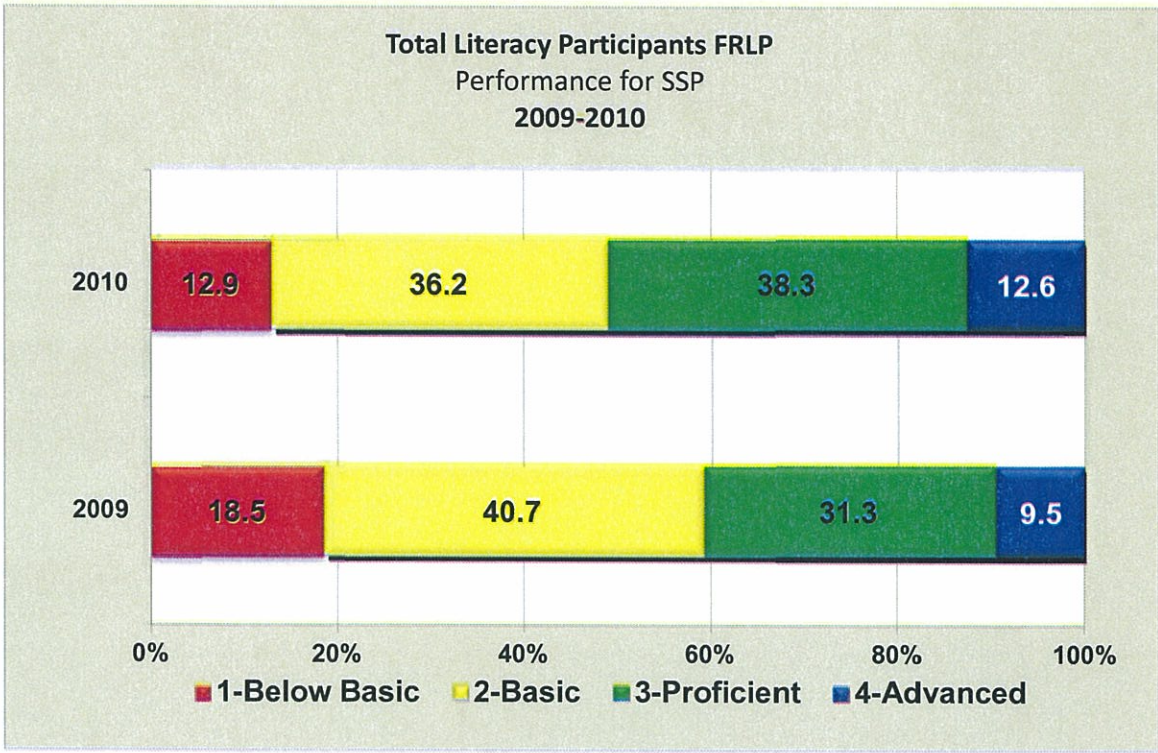
Race designations were changed for 2010-2011 to comply with federal regulations for race designation in education. Results by race subgroups for 2010-2011 are in process. The race indicators for 2009-2010 must be cross-walked with the new federal race categories for 2010-2011.

Another subgroup of interest is that of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These students are likely to be participants in the Free/Reduced Lunch

Program (FRLP). Figures 9 through 16 indicated the performance broken down by students participating in FRLP and students who are non-participants. Note once again that the students participating in FRLP made equal or greater gains than their non-participant peers in 2009-2010. Performance for 2010-2011, although not as dramatic in terms of increases, also reflects the diversity of schools in SSP for the 2010-2011 school year. Specifically, six high schools were added to SSP in 2010-2011. High school FRLP participation rates are lower than elementary and middle school rates in general. This is hypothesized to be due to problems with getting high school students to return forms to allow them to participate in FRLP.

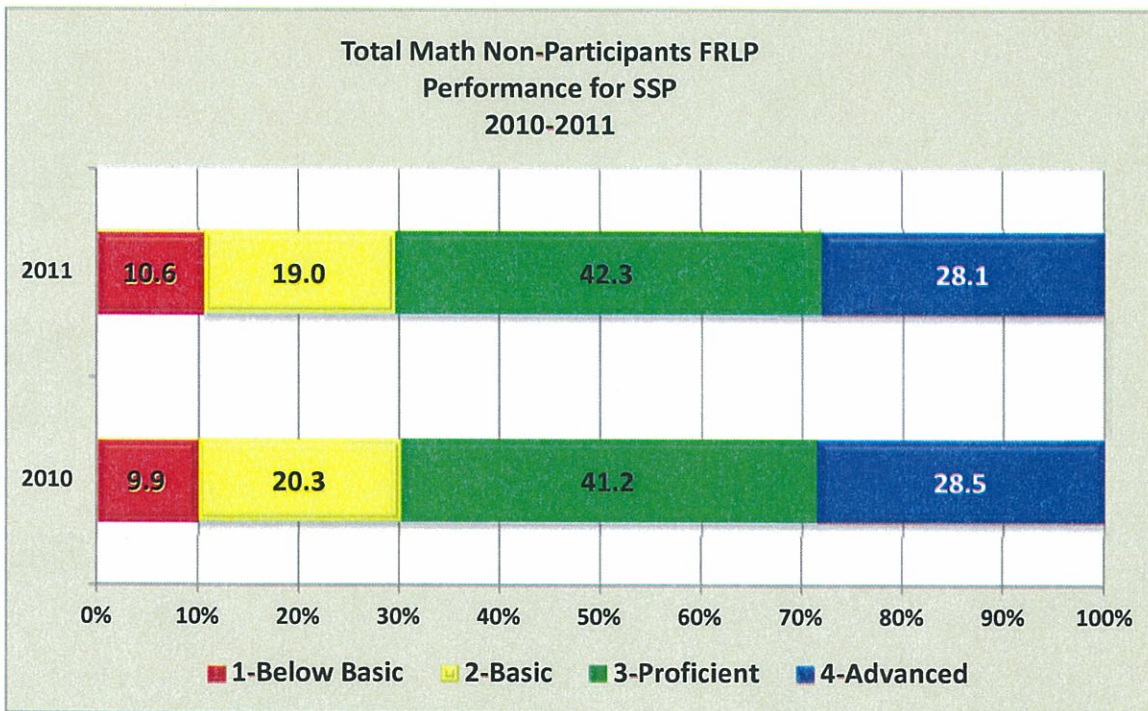
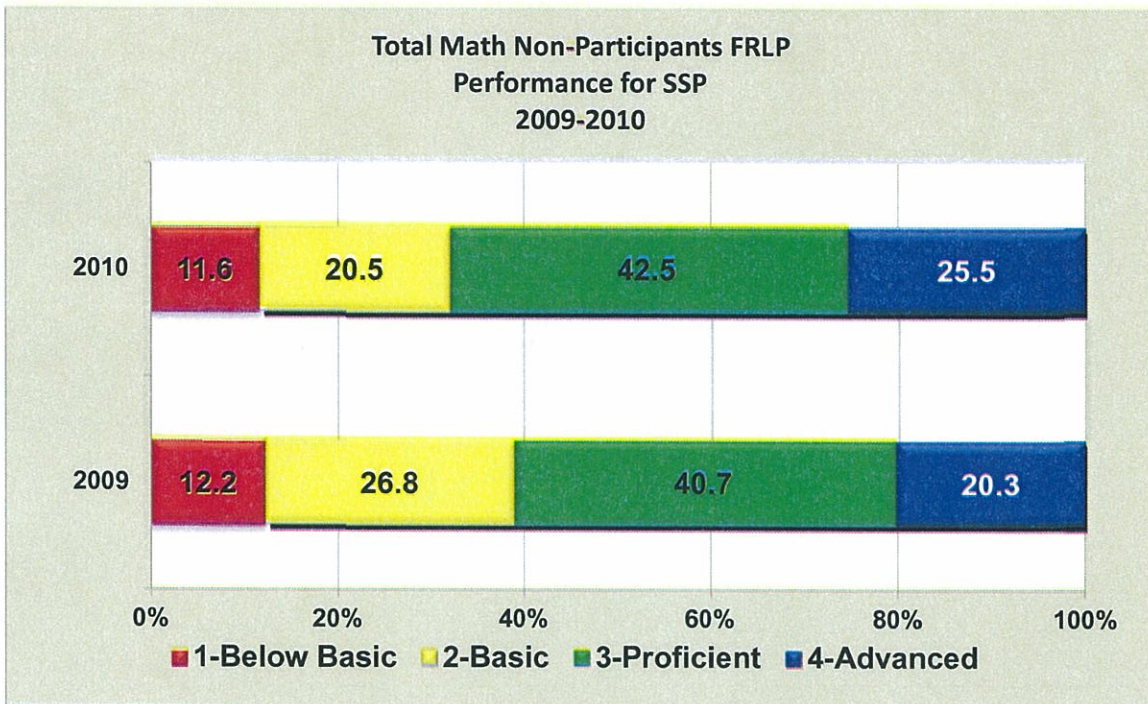


Figures 9 and 10. Literacy performance for Non-FRLP participants Year 1 and Year 2 SSP.

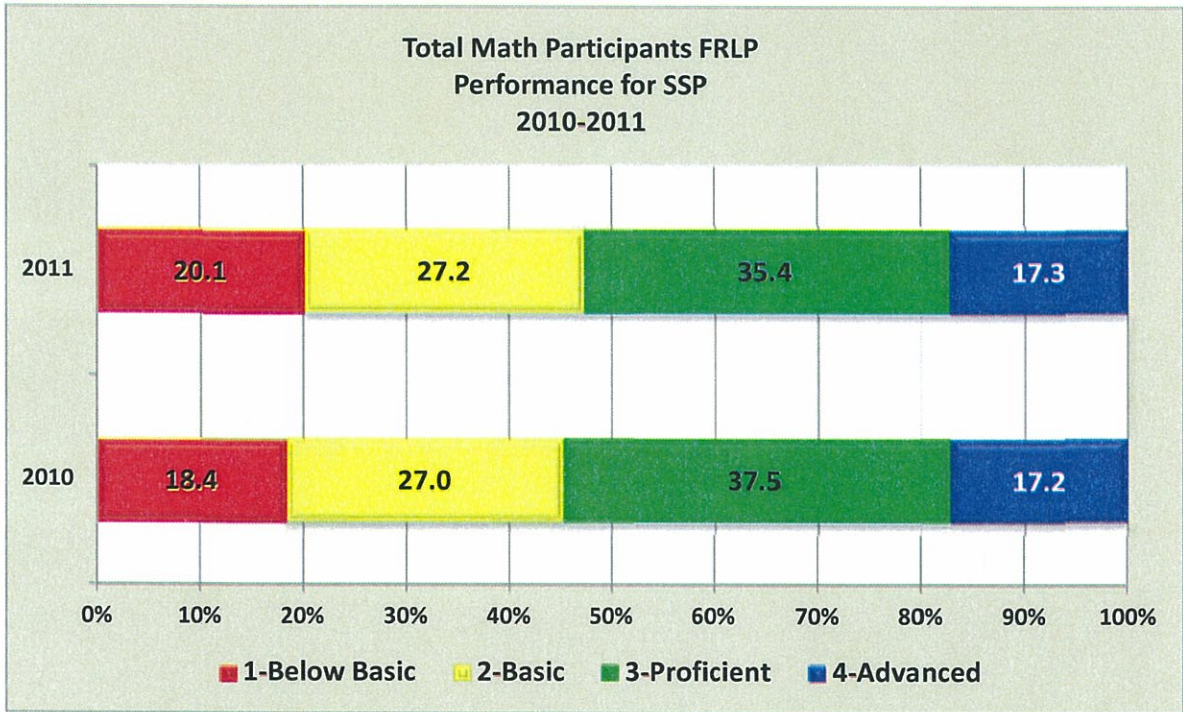
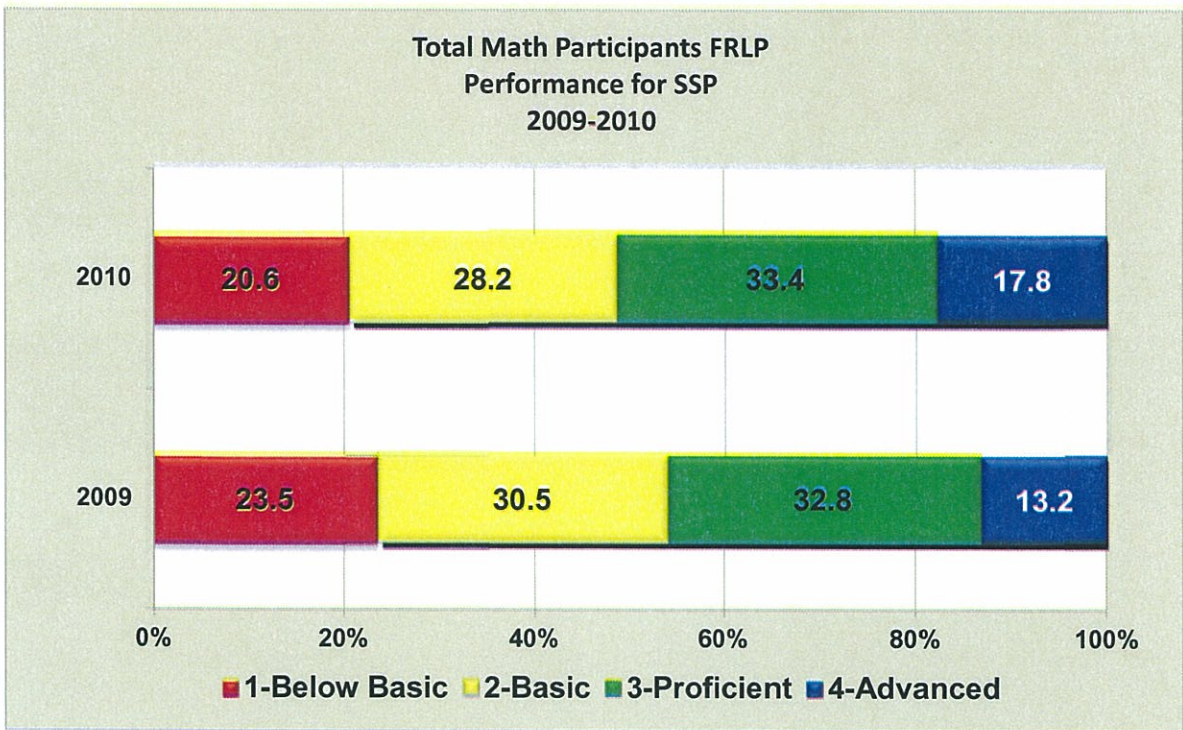


Figures 11 and 12. Literacy performance for FRLP participants Year 1 and Year 2 SSP.

Math performance varied much more in the 2010-2011 school year.



Figures 13 and 14. Math performance for Non-FRLP participants Year 1 and Year 2 SSP.



Figures 15 and 16. Math performance for FRLP participants Year 1 and Year 2 SSP.

Leader Efficacy

A primary focus of first year professional development for principals in the SSP is the development of leadership skills. Research has indicated that efficacy is a predictor of leadership behavior. Efficacy is a leader's confidence in their ability to accomplish specific leadership tasks within their school. Figure 17 exhibits the leadership efficacy for the three groups of leaders involved in SSP efforts. Cohort 1 leaders are in the beginning of their third year of the SSP, Cohort 2 leaders are in the beginning of their second year, and Cohort 3 leaders are in the beginning of their first year of SSP. Note that Cohort 1 leaders, principals who have been participating in the SSP and other ALA Institute programs, demonstrate the strongest efficacy in all areas: Management Efficacy, Instructional Leadership Efficacy and Moral Leadership Efficacy. The differences between Cohort 1 and the new principals in Cohort 3 are statistically significant and very meaningful. Cohort 1 principals who have benefitted from several years of SSP and ALA Institutes have the strongest efficacy regarding their ability to accomplish the specific tasks of a school leader.

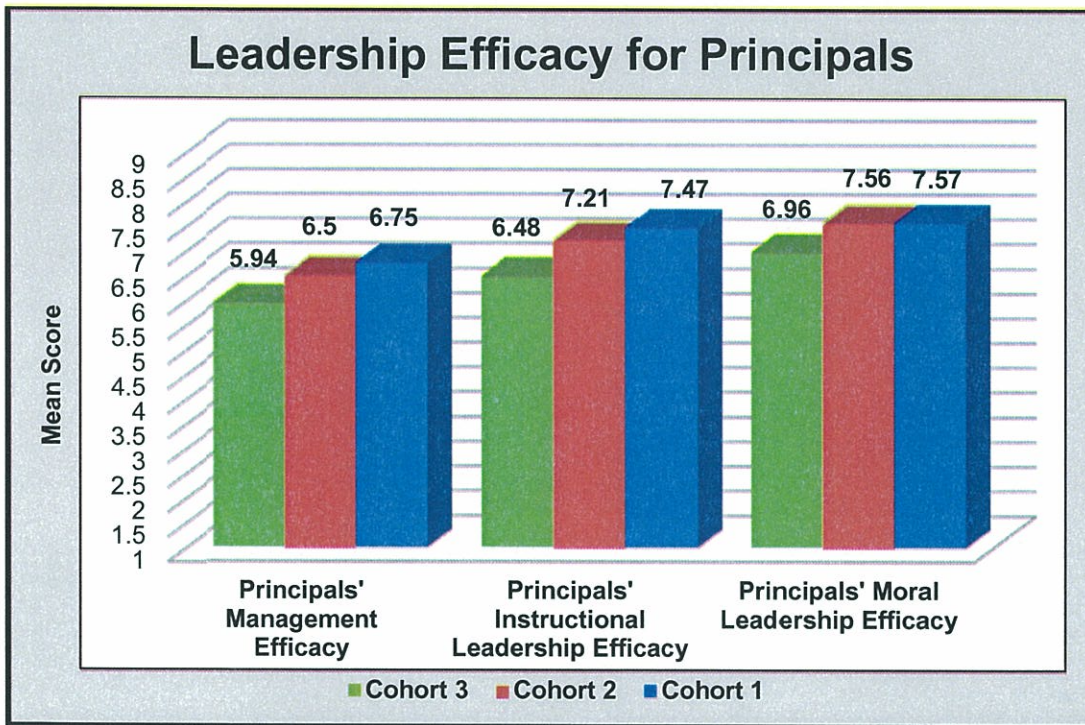


Figure 17. Leadership Efficacy for Cohort 1, 2 and 3 principals.

Summary

Schools participating in the SSP for one to two years demonstrated improvements in mathematics and literacy in general. The magnitude of these improvements varied with the largest gains experienced during the 2009-2010 school year. 2010 to 2011 school year results include the addition of six high schools, 2 middle schools and one elementary school. The high school results were more variable, with schools with larger gains being averaged in with schools that had more static results. The research literature indicates system change takes a minimum of three to five years to move to scale throughout an organizations, with high schools taking the longest to exhibit systems changes such as those facilitated by schools' work with the SSP.

In addition to the overall improvements in performance, SSP schools have narrowed the achievement gap for subgroups that have been underperforming for a number of years.

A final finding from the data is in regards to the leaders in SSP schools. Principals participating in more years of the SSP and other ALA Institutes demonstrate significantly greater efficacy for leading their schools through the complex change required to improve student achievement in schools labeled as failing over several years. This is particularly strong for Cohort 1 principals in the areas of Instructional Leadership Efficacy and Moral Leadership Efficacy.

Report Card

August 2011
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Student Voices

Rivercrest High School knew it had a problem with how African-American students were scoring on state exams, so it asked the students what was wrong and how to fix it. The result: Students took charge, academics became cool, and minority test scores rose 17 points in one year.

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The Gentlemen of Knowledge:
Front – DeSean Gordan, Tay Baber, Robert Cooney
Middle – Timothy Talley, Rakeem Stewart, Ty Baber
Back – Kavian Ingram, Terrian Tyler, Khalil Williams



GENTLEMEN OF KNOWLEDGE. Inspired by their school's student voice project, a group of Rivercrest High students formed the Gentlemen of Knowledge to hold themselves and their classmates accountable academically. Front, sophomore DeSean Gordan and junior Robert Cooney. Back, sophomore Rakeem Stewart, freshman Kavian Ingram, freshman Timothy Talley, junior Tay Baber, junior Terrian Tyler, freshman Khalil Williams, and junior Ty Baber.

Student voices

How one Arkansas high school raised minority test scores 17 points by listening to its students

By **Steve Brawner**
Editor

WILSON – Rivercrest High School English teacher Lindsey Kelley and Assistant Principal Tom Bennett could not accept that, on the 2010 end-of-course exam for literacy, only 30.8 percent of their school's African-American juniors scored at least proficient while 64.7 percent of white students

scored at that level. So they tried a new approach known in education circles as "student voice": They asked the African-American students to help them solve the problem.

The result? In one year, that population's test scores rose 17 points, to 47.8 percent scoring at least proficient on that exam.

The junior class at Rivercrest is unusually small – only 22 African-Americans and 63 total, so a swing of a few students makes a big difference.

Still, African-American juniors at Rivercrest scored almost as high as their white counterparts in a state where, overall, the achievement gap remains a

gaping problem. In 2010, 68.9 percent of white students in Arkansas scored at least proficient on that junior level literacy exam, compared to 38.5 percent of students who are African-American.

How did the student voice concept help Rivercrest buck that trend? Teachers were armed with new information about how their students best learned. Students felt they had ownership of their education. And a group of African-American male students banded together with a mission to improve their own and their fellow students' academic performance.

They called themselves the Gentlemen of Knowledge.

The idea of giving Rivercrest's students a voice in their own education began to take shape last summer when Kelley took a professional development course at a Teacher Institute offered by the Arkansas Leadership Academy, a training consortium involving a number of education organizations, including the Arkansas School Boards Association. She wanted her action research project to focus on African-American test scores but wasn't sure about the details when the ALA's Blaine Alexander, a school support capacity builder, suggested a student voice project where students were asked how to solve the problem.

A former principal in the Cabot and Pulaski County school districts, Alexander had tried to incorporate student voice into the schools where he worked, but only informally and never to this extent. He saw the concept as the best way to motivate Rivercrest High students to become more involved in their own academic success.

"In so many of our high schools, the adults make the decisions, and we try to force education on the students, and the students sit there doing everything that they can do not to get an education," he said. "And so it seems like many times there are two sides, and so we felt like if we get everybody on the same side, adults and students, then we would be much more successful."

Kelley presented the idea to the assistant principal, Tom Bennett, a former assistant football coach and Rivercrest High graduate. He was immediately receptive. "I thought it was an outstanding idea because for years I think that education is something that we do to kids," he said. "We tell them, 'You come in this classroom. You sit in this chair. We're going to tell you what you need to know. We're going to do this to you.' We don't ever ask for their input. We don't ever ask their opinion. That's kind of what this student voice project is all about."

The focus would be on English, Kelley's subject, and the three of them, all Caucasians, began mapping out a rough course of action that would go far beyond typical student participation projects such as student councils and prom committees. "To say that we had a full goal to reach at the beginning would be saying too much because we didn't really know where we were going," Kelley said. "We were on the very beginning of something, and we knew it was going to be good, but that doesn't mean we had a full plan."

Student Leadership

Figuring that students would more likely listen to peers than to them, they decided to show the test scores to two of Kelley's star students, Terrian Tyler and Robert Cooney, both of whom are

African-Americans, and ask for their help. Taken aback by the disparity, they were eager to solve the problem.

"My initial response was, I was like, we need to boost the scores up because it was kind of ridiculous to me while other ethnicities were making 60 percent, we were down to 20s," Tyler said. "I mean, I felt kind of ashamed. Although I was trying hard for me to get my personal test scores up, I hadn't really thought about helping other people get their test scores up, so it seemed like a pretty good idea to me."

For Kelley, a 24-year-old graduate of all-white Valley View High School in Jonesboro, the conversation was "a little bit" awkward, but the two young men said they had no problem with her delivering the news. In fact, they said that it might have been an advantage to hear the news from her because she offered a perspective they might not have gotten from a teacher of their own race. More important to them was the fact that she is young and can relate to them. "No," Cooney said. "It's like, I know Miss Kelley, she's my teacher, she's not racist or anything like that, so I wasn't offended. But I was kind of hurt – I guess you could say 'hurt' – because the scores that were shown, it's not accurate of the African-Americans in this school because (everyone's) smarter than what the scores showed."

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VISIONARY. Eleventh grade English teacher Lindsey Kelley listens to her students present a book report with student Hannah Kirk.

Two sophomores, Rakeem Stewart and DeSean Gordan, both suggested by Tyler and Cooney, were recruited to the effort. And then two weeks later, an unusual announcement was made over the intercom: All African-American ninth-graders, please report to the library. As the students left their desks and made their way down the hallways, they wondered why they had been singled out by race. Waiting for them were Tyler, Cooney, Stewart and Gordan, along with Kelley and Alexander.

The process was repeated with each succeeding grade. Tyler would open the discussion. Each time, he could see the students were wondering what was happening and why he was up there. He would let the conversation die down and then, using flip charts, explain the test scores' three-year trend line and the purpose of the meeting, emphasizing that this was not meant to be an occasion for teacher-bashing. "It's a serious problem, so I used a serious tone," he said. "I made sure they knew I was not joking. These are real scores. This is really what's happening, and if you want to do better, you have to make a real effort to fix it."

After the data was presented, each class was broken into smaller groups to delve into why African-American scores were lower and what could be done about them, with each group then presenting their findings to their classmates. Even the ninth-graders took the project seriously, offered realistic solutions, and vowed to take accountability for their own improvement. Tay Baber, then a junior, said, "At first I was a little dumbfounded. I was like, 'OK, as long as I've been at Rivercrest, I've never heard anything like this, so what did we do?' OK, so when we get to the library, I saw what they called us in for. I was like, 'It's about time.' I was kind of happy they did it because it kind of makes us look bad, like everybody else is above us, and we're down here. It's not that we can't do the work. It's just that we choose not to do it."

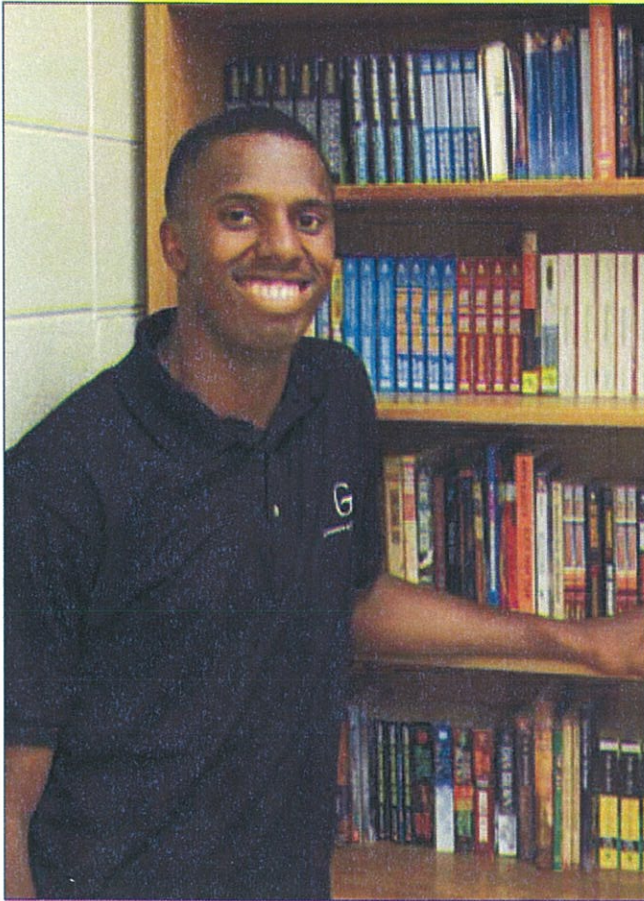
Most of the suggestions related to the students' own motivation and study habits, but they had ideas for educators as well. One clear message: Students work harder for teachers who they know care for them. Students said they needed more encouragement and explained that sometimes teachers were rushing through lessons in order to stay on schedule, even when the students needed more time and a little more help to understand a concept.

These were not race-specific issues, and only a few of the students made any charges related to racism regarding the mostly white faculty. But some of the non-school-related problems were more severe among African-American students, such as poverty, families with absent fathers, and living environments where academics isn't stressed. African-American students questioned for this story said that they are recognized more for athletic achievements – Rivercrest won state championships last year in football, boys basketball and track – than for academics.

"Whenever I go out, they look at me and they'll say, 'Well, you're tall and you're black. You must play basketball, or, you know, he must be some wide receiver on the football team. He must be some all-star track runner,'" said Tyler, who estimated he has seen his birth father twice in his life. "They never really consider the fact that I could have something up here (pointing to his head). ... It offends me, and it makes me feel bad, but it makes me want to do better because I'm like, I'm fixing to break this stereotype. I'm tired of everybody thinking all we can do is shoot a basketball or throw a football or just run around a track. We can do more than that, but a lot of people act like they don't know it."

While frustrated by the stereotype, Tyler said it's up to students to overcome it. "Sometimes I do feel like people put a label on us, but most of the time I feel like we put a label on ourselves," he said. "You know, we can talk all day about what teachers do wrong, what we do wrong, but it starts with us. We put in an effort to do our best. I can say a teacher's the worst teacher in the world. There are more teachers in here teaching the same subject, so why am I sticking myself with the same teacher knowing that I can go get help and get another teacher?"

For Tyler, the biggest challenge was leading the discussion with the senior class. Not only was he talking to older



“ It’s a serious problem, so I used a serious tone. I made sure they knew I was not joking. These are real scores. This is really what’s happening, and if you want to do better, you have to make a real effort to fix it. ”

- Terrian Tyler

Located 45 minutes northwest of Memphis in rural Wilson, the school is part of the South Mississippi County School District, a conglomeration of small towns and wide spots in the road. Almost half of Rivercrest students come from economically disadvantaged homes.

That doesn’t mean that the students are unaware of the societal problem of racism. Tay Baber’s twin brother, Ty, said that players on opposing all-white football teams will use the “N-word” in the heat of battle, especially when it’s a rival, and that it was especially bad in last season’s playoffs. “I feel like some people don’t know how it feels to be African-Americans,” he said. “But, I mean, it makes you mad, but in the end it makes you a better person. You take more, but it is like a motivation to do better in life.”

Continued, next page

students, but he also was talking specifically about their test scores at a time when it was too late for them to do anything about them. The seniors were surprised to learn the news and wondered why it had taken so long to try this approach, but they gave helpful feedback about their junior year English class that Kelley soon began incorporating into her teaching.

After the class meetings, Coach Bennett and the ALA’s Alexander personally interviewed all of the African-American students in the junior class in groups of about three at a time. Students were asked about their personal learning styles and where they liked to sit in the classroom. That information was given to each of their teachers. At the end of each session, Bennett looked each student in the eye and asked to be held accountable for following through on the recommendations. “They looked at him in a totally different light, like, wow, this guy really cares about us,” Alexander said.

Afterwards, students were asked to give their impression of the whole process, and comments were positive. At the time, Cooney said, “It gave me a sense of direction and motivation. It was like a ‘revival’ for learning.” Junior Micha Harris said, “I loved these meetings! I am happy that everyone is noticing that we all need help, and it makes me feel important.”

The process may have been easier because of the environment at Rivercrest. The ratio of white students to black students is about 60-40, and the African-American students interviewed for the story describe it as a racially harmonious school community where friendships cross ethnic lines.

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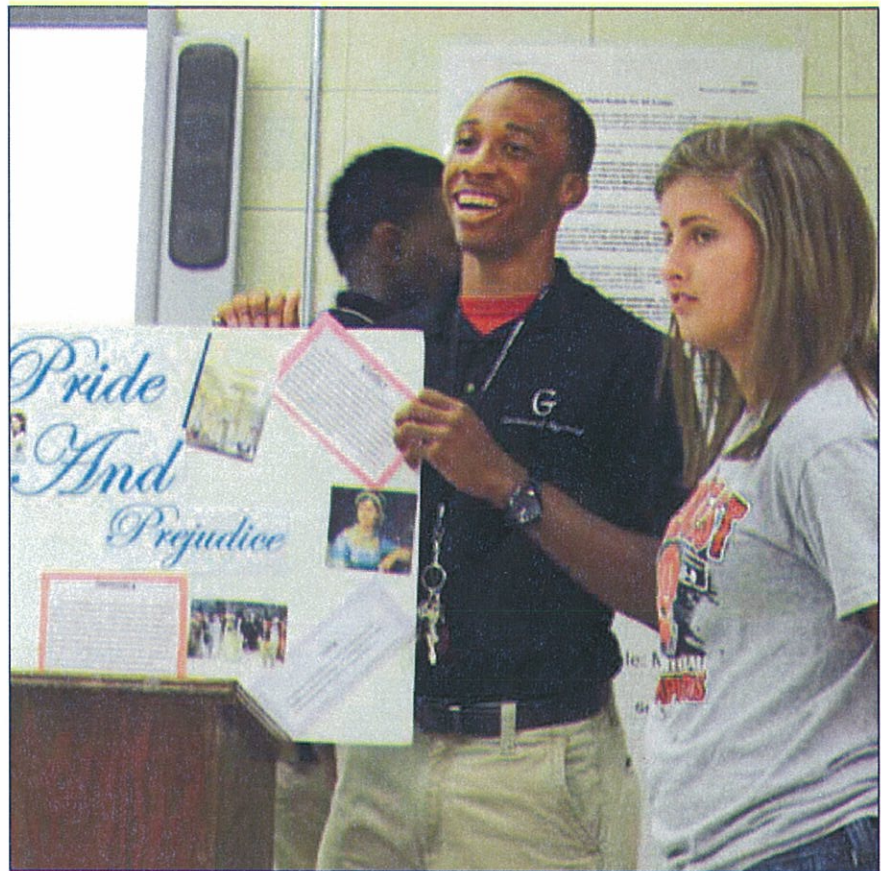
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The information collected from the class meetings and individual interviews was given to faculty members, some of whom had been skeptical when they first heard of the project. Students had asked for a mentoring program, and while that is still being organized, adults were assigned to each student to check on their well-being on a regular basis.

Meanwhile, teachers were involved in a “data wall” project that contributed to the student voice project’s success. This was a room taped with individual cards for all students starting in grade seven containing scores on previous standardized tests along with demographic information such as their ethnicity and their free and reduced lunch status. Those cards were organized for each tested subject in four color-coded rows: green, the top row, if a student was likely to score proficient on the benchmark exam; yellow if they needed help to reach that status; orange if they needed more attention; and red if they needed significant attention. For teachers, the walls provide a powerful visual representation of student achievement. The walls are located in a meeting room not frequented by students, but Kelley did tell them individually about the project and about where their cards were located as a competitive inducement for them to improve.

Gentlemen of Knowledge

Meanwhile, something else was happening that the adult planners hadn’t expected: The students were becoming leaders and role models. The four original students – Tyler, Cooney, Gordan and Stewart – began inviting other male African-American students to join their group based on their leadership, academic performance, and enthusiasm during the initial class meetings. Tay and Ty Baber, who had spoken out on nearly every question with good insight, were obvious choices to join from the junior class. Sophomore Clifton Boone was asked to join, though he moved to a different district during the middle of the school year. Three freshmen – Kavian Ingram, Timothy Talley and Khalil Williams – also were invited. Once the group formed, Kelley presented its members with the option of



STUDENT LEADER. Junior Robert Cooney presents a book report while his classmate, Bailee Tyler, looks on.

finding another sponsor, but they wouldn’t even consider it. They wanted her, the teacher they knew had believed in them from the beginning.

The group needed to create a name that would uniquely describe themselves and what they were trying to accomplish. For an hour-and-a-half, Tyler said, “We went everywhere.” According to Tay Baber, “The first thing we were going to be was like, ‘Boys to Men,’ but then we were like, ‘Naw, it’s already been taken.’ ... You know, The Temptations, how long it took them to come up with a name? It was something like that.” Gordan quipped, “I wanted it to be ‘Justice League,’” the fictional name of the alliance of DC Comics superheroes.

Finally the group came up with “Gentlemen of Knowledge,” which summed up what its members were trying to accomplish. As a motto, Tay Baber suggested, “Impossible,” a word that broken into two parts creates the phrase, “I’m possible.” The young men even bought matching shirts with logos.

The young men, all athletes and most the product of single-parent homes, became a support group for each other and a source of healthy competition. “The group helped me because I don’t want to lose to any of them,” Talley said, drawing a laugh from the rest. “Because if his grade is better than mine, I might come up to him and ask him what I should do, but really I’m not going to lose to any of them academically and in my grades.”

Meanwhile, the young men became an outspoken inspiration for other students. The Gentlemen requested and were granted a meeting with the entire junior class the day before the state end-of-course exam in which they gave their fellow students a motivational speech about how important it was for everyone to do their best. A few of their peers questioned why the test was important, but the Gentlemen did not back down. Some of the football players – black and white – later told Coach Bennett that the assembly was the

The Achievement Gap

Arkansas still has a long way to go in assuring an equal education for all. Below are percentages of students scoring proficient or advanced on the state's benchmark exams. Could Rivercrest's student voice model be the answer? Sources: Rivercrest High; Arkansas Department of Education website.

	Rivercrest	
	Combined	African-American
2011 11th grade literacy	55.4	47.8
2010 11th grade literacy	52.3	30.8

	State - 2011	
	Combined	African-American
Grade 8 Mathematics	63	37
Grade 8 Literacy	77	58
Grade 7 Science	39	13
Grade 7 Math	74	54
Grade 7 Literacy	67	49
Grade 6 Mathematics	77	58
Grade 6 Literacy	71	53
Grade 5 Science	56	27
Grade 5 Mathematics	78	58
Grade 5 Literacy	77	62
Grade 4 Mathematics	82	67
Grade 4 Literacy	82	69
Grade 3 Mathematics	85	72
Grade 3 Literacy	76	61

reason they tried hard on the test. "You would be amazed by the other African-American students that pay attention to what these young men do," Kelley said. "I think that's something that I didn't foresee at all."

The result was that 17-point increase described at the story's beginning. Two of the junior Gentlemen scored advanced and the other two scored just below it. In the entire junior class, four students scored advanced, compared to one in the previous four years. While the Gentlemen celebrated their achievements, they were not satisfied. Informed by Coach Bennett of the 48 percent showing, Tay and Ty Baber's response was that next year's score should be 58 percent.

From an outsider's perspective, the ALA's Alexander said he could see a change not just in a few students but in a culture. When he brought visitors to the building, he made sure to introduce them to the Gentlemen, who were so

fired up about the upcoming exams that they actually were high-fiving each other.

With leadership comes responsibilities, and the students are well aware that wearing shirts that proclaim themselves the "Gentlemen of Knowledge" can put targets on their backs. While people are following their example, they also are watching to see how they perform. And that's OK with them.

"Actually, it's not just in the classroom," Terrian Tyler said. "It's on the football field and basketball courts. Like, say for instance, I mess up on a dumb play. (Someone will say), 'Come on, baby, you're a Gentleman of Knowledge.'"

From its current nine members, the group plans to grow in number this upcoming year. A group of white students innocently had wanted to form their own group – a cringe-inducing concept that Kelley hoped would die on

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Multiple Choice

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- Which HVAC company has Equipment Overhauls and Upgrades?
 Carrier Carrier Carrier
- Which HVAC company has Remote Access and Monitoring?
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its own when she learned it was percolating. Thankfully, the Gentlemen soon approached her saying they didn't want a competition to form between the races, so this year the group will become multiracial. A girls' group also is forming.

The Gentlemen also are spreading their message. Luxora Elementary School, which also is in the district, invited the young men to speak to students there before they took their benchmark exams. A Skype session with administrators at an Arkansas Leadership Academy conference brought tears to grown men's eyes and led to Skype sessions with student groups at Arkansas High School in Texarkana (story, page 15) and Sylvan Hills Middle School. The Gentlemen are scheduled to address the Arkansas School Boards Association's annual conference in December. Coach Bennett has spoken to educators in Memphis.

As for the individual students, they have big dreams that reach well beyond high school. Several, particularly the younger ones, hope to be professional athletes, but they have plans regardless of what happens on the field or on the court. Terrian Tyler wants to be a mechanical engineer, Robert Cooney an aeronautical engineer or a sports trainer. Tay Baber wants to be a diesel technician, while brother Ty wants to be a graphic designer. Rakeem Stewart plans to be a doctor, while Deshaun Gordon hopes to start his own business. Among the freshmen, Kavian Ingram would like to be a sports trainer or technical engineer, while Timothy Talley and Khalil Williams would like to coach at the professional level if they aren't able to get paid as players.

As for Rivercrest High, educators are reflecting on what worked and what didn't this first year. One lesson learned: Inform the parents first. Summoning African-American students to the library based on their race came as a surprise to some of their parents, and Bennett had to meet personally with three or four of them to explain the project's purpose. Once they understood the school's intentions, all the parents were supportive. But next time, Bennett plans to take care of that on the front end. One thing

What is the Leadership Academy?

The student voice project at Rivercrest High wouldn't have happened without Blaine Alexander and the Arkansas Leadership Academy.

Based out of the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, the ALA is a partnership between 49 entities, including 15 universities, the Department of Education, and nine professional associations, including ASBA. Its purpose is to design creative programs for the state's educational community and provide professional development opportunities for educa-

tional leaders, including school board members.

Alexander is one of six school support capacity builders with the ALA that work with schools that are in at least year five of school improvement. He works full time with Rivercrest High, Luxora Elementary, Marked Tree Elementary, and Whitten Elementary School in Marianna.

For more, check out the ALA's website, www.arkansasleadershipacademy.org, or call 479-575-3030.

the school knows it did right: It listened to the students. According to Bennett, a student voice project won't succeed if students believe they are being ignored. "If you're going to ask them their opinion, you'd better be ready to do something with it when they give it to you," he said. "And that's a challenge that we're going to meet."

This year students will be given an even greater voice in their education. The school plans eventually to interview students as young as the seventh grade, where teachers have expressed an interest in the project. A mentoring program suggested by the students is being organized. So is a tutoring program, also a student suggestion. Bennett hopes to involve students in other facets of school administration, including serving on the technology committee and helping change the school handbook.

Special attention needs to be paid to one subpopulation: white students. Thanks to the improvement in African-American test scores, the school's junior literacy exam performance was its best ever, with 55.38 percent of students scoring proficient or advanced, more than four points higher than the previous year. But scores for white students dipped significantly, from 64.7 percent last year to 57.9 percent this year, the lowest since 2008. With the upcoming junior class containing a large number of high-achieving African-American

students, it's conceivable that Rivercrest could be looking at another achievement gap – except this one would be going the other direction.

This year may be more challenging than the last one was. Skepticism among the faculty melted away as test scores were revealed, but many expressed a healthy concern about the future and a desire to build on their success. Next year's junior class is larger and the sophomore class even larger than that, so the next two years will go a long way toward demonstrating if the student voice project is really making a difference or if that 17-point increase is merely a statistical fluke brought on by a handful of students doing better than expected.

Bennett and Kelley understand those worries, but they already have come so far and will have a powerful ally in the Gentlemen of Knowledge, whose members will be returning to school a year older and, one hopes, equally as inspired. "I think the challenge for us and for other faculty members – the easy part really is this year," Bennett said. "The difficult part is going to be making sure that the momentum doesn't stop – and carrying this forward."

"And living up to their expectations," Kelley added. "... They have expectations of learning that our teachers will have to live up to for this to work, for them to believe that they have a real voice in their education."



LEADERS. Chris Shamberger, left, founder of Arkansas High's Future Black Male Leaders of America, with, from left, Keenan Robinson, Andrew Williams, and sponsor Matt Coleman.

In Texarkana, one student found a voice

Chris Shamberger helped change a culture because he wanted more from himself and his peers

By Steve Brawner
Editor

TEXARKANA – Near the end of his junior year, Chris Shamberger took a close look at his own academic performance and at how his fellow classmates were faring at Arkansas High School and realized he wasn't pleased with either.

So he decided to leave a legacy. Already a good student, he dedicated himself to his studies. He ran for, and was elected, senior class president. And he decided that he and some of his peers would become examples for his fellow African-American students who he felt

were underrepresented in the Advanced Placement courses he was taking and in other measures of academic achievement.

"I felt like it was unequally balanced," he said. "I felt like too many were wasting their lives, and it was very few who were actually trying to get an education, who actually were trying to go higher in their lives."

Shamberger, who plans to join the Marine Corps ("because it's the toughest") and maybe someday be a United States senator (as a Republican, he points out), was convinced that what his fellow students needed was the right inspiration.

"I believe the achievement gap existed because too many people depended on stereotypes to base their lives off of," he said. "They thought, 'Well, since so many other people failed,

I'm not going to be able to change things.'"

He decided to create what would become the Future Black Male Leaders of America. He shared his vision with his principal, Robin Stover, who was supportive, and with his 10th grade English teacher, Matt Coleman, now an instructional facilitator, who agreed to help.

"He's a really big-hearted kid," Coleman said of Shamberger. "He's pretty quiet and pretty reserved in a lot of ways, but he really has a heart to want to see people be the best they can be. You can feel it in talking to him. It hurts him to see people not achieving their full potential."

Shamberger began talking to his fellow students, and after the new school year began, he and Coleman organized a

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Saturday meeting with a couple of ministers. Only two other students showed up, including Andrew Williams, one of Arkansas High's star students who is considering attending an Ivy League school, but Shamberger figured the poor turnout was merely the result of busy schedules and a lack of communication and didn't give up.

The second meeting saw better attendance. During that meeting, Shamberger, an imposing six-foot-two-inch athlete, set the tone for the rest of the year by demanding high standards and performance.

"That was the impression that I was trying to make is that, 'If you're not here for the right reason, then you can hit the door,' and I believe I'm quoting exactly what I told them at the beginning of the year," he said.

Several snickered at his tone, but he didn't let that discourage him. "I understood what I was getting myself into when I came into it and that they were going to do little things like that, but I shook it off, and when it was time to get serious, they got serious," he said.

Keenan Robinson, an all-conference tight end on the football team, was one of those in the meeting who was not laughing. While he was a good student, he knew he could do better and appreciated what Shamberger was trying to accomplish. He noticed that most of the ones laughing at Shamberger ended up following his lead. "I guess it was just the fact that they were kind of like me," he said. "I needed somebody sometimes to say something to me so I could get straightened back up."

For the rest of the year, members of the group met regularly to hold each other accountable for succeeding in school and in life. About 15 attended every meeting, while another 10 attended occasionally. One white male student asked if he could attend and was welcomed as an active participant. A white female student even attended one meeting.

Meanwhile, its members served as examples for their fellow students, sometimes challenging them directly to reach their potential. Coleman, the sponsor, noticed that FBMLA members became more active in other campus

"They just were a powerful influence on the culture and climate of our campus because they stepped up and they started to lead, and they inspired others to lead."

- Robin Stover
Arkansas High Principal

organizations. Stover, the principal, remembers watching Robinson tell a fellow student, "You know, it just isn't cool to get in trouble in our school anymore. The cool thing is to make good grades and do positive things and be a role model for younger kids, and that's what we want you to start doing."

Stover said it was "one of the most powerful things I've ever witnessed."

That encounter occurred as part of a peer mediation group conceived by Robinson that was an outgrowth of FBMLA and was designed to reach young people of every race who needed a boost. High-achieving students – the valedictorian, the Student Council president, the homecoming queen – were recruited to serve as mentors. Students who expressed an interest in getting help were sent home letters for their parents to grant permission. Coleman emailed the faculty asking for names of students who needed positive peer role models. At first the response was limited, but soon a frustrated first-year teacher sent him a name of a student who was disrupting class. Robinson, Shamberger, and A.J. Morris, another FBMLA member, along with Coleman sat down with the student and encouraged him to do better in school. Robinson also sat through part of a class period and watched how the young man behaved.

"After we met with him, I went to the teacher, and I told her, I said, basically, if you have any more problems with him, contact Mr. Coleman, myself, Chris or A.J.," Robinson said. "I told the teacher directly. So then I told her some days I might step in for probably five minutes or so and just watch his actions. And he was a completely different person from before we met with him and after we met with him."

By the end of the year, eight or nine students were being mentored.

Not everyone was supportive of the FBMLA's efforts. Several students and

more than one faculty member openly questioned what would happen if a Future White Male Leaders of America were formed. Those words, said in mock jest, stung a little, though not enough to discourage the members. Shamberger couldn't help noticing that those were the type of people who also complain about the problems the FBMLA was trying to address.

The effect the group has had on the school is difficult to quantify, but the 1,200-student school is showing marked improvement in some test scores among its African-American subpopulation. Freshman Algebra I scores rose from 26.5 percent reaching at least proficient last year to 51.6 percent this year, while geometry scores also rose. Junior literacy scores were disappointing, rising from 24 percent last year to 26 percent this year, but educators are encouraged by the fact that the youngest test-takers, the freshmen, saw the biggest gains, indicating a culture change may have occurred.

According to Stover, FBMLA deserves a large share of the credit for that turnaround. She said the school has seen dramatic decreases in discipline referrals and fights at the same time that students are expecting more from themselves. "They just were a powerful influence on the culture and climate of our campus because they stepped up and they started to lead, and they inspired others to lead," she said.

Some of the group's most important leaders, including Shamberger and Robinson, are graduating, but a committed core of five, including Williams, as well as another five who were less active are returning. Coleman, the sponsor, is convinced it's a strong enough nucleus for the group to thrive. Williams, who will be the president, would like for the group to add a community service aspect. "One of my main goals is to be the most active club on campus," he said.