



Research Report

School Case Studies

Wonder Elementary School

Osceola Middle School

Dollarway High School

November 2011

Prepared for

**THE HOUSE INTERIM COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION
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BUREAU OF LEGISLATIVE RESEARCH

One Capitol Mall, 5TH Floor Little Rock, Ark., 72201 (501) 682-1937

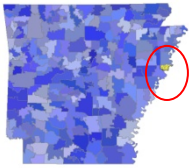
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Over the past decade, federal and state governments have focused a tremendous amount of money and resources on turning around failing schools. Industries have been created to provide struggling schools with tutoring services (supplemental services), school improvement consultants, and student testing and data analysis services. Additionally, the Arkansas Department of Education has developed teams of people to evaluate schools' performance and teams to help schools plan for school improvement, and teams in the cooperatives to help schools put their plans in action. And the federal government has granted millions of dollars for school turnaround, sending hundreds of thousands of dollars to the worst schools in exchange for drastic measures, such as firing the school staff or closing the school.

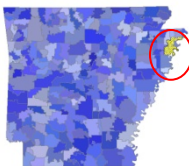
With all the attention on improving school performance it's important to know why some schools are still failing and what is happening in schools that have been able to turn things around. What impact are all these school improvement efforts — collectively — having?

We selected three Arkansas schools to visit and examine as case studies. We hoped that by looking at these schools' histories within the context of their community, we would better understand why some efforts to improve student test scores worked while others did not. We selected an elementary, middle and high school we hoped would help us understand what impediments schools face. Those schools are:



Wonder Elementary School

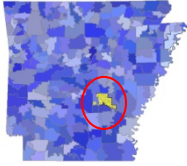
We chose Wonder Elementary in West Memphis for the extraordinary improvements it has achieved in the last five years. It is the only school in Arkansas to have been in school improvement for six years or longer and get out of school improvement. In 2005, a third of Wonder's students were testing at grade level in literacy and just a quarter were testing at grade level in math. Five years later, in 2010, 77% were proficient in literacy and 84% were proficient in math, exceeding the state average and the No Child Left Behind targets in both subjects. What's more, Wonder Elementary had a student population that was as challenging as any. Nearly all of its students were eligible for free or reduced price meals.



Osceola Middle School

On the other end of the spectrum was Osceola Middle School. We wanted to visit Osceola Middle because it was listed as one of the state's 14 "persistently failing schools." It was given that designation because its percent of students who tested as proficient or advanced over the previous three years was among the lowest in the state. In 2010, Osceola Middle had the lowest percentage proficient or advanced in math of any traditional public school in the state. Just 18% of the students were proficient in math that year. While the percent of students proficient or advanced for the state as a whole has

steadily increased over the past five years, Osceola's scores have been up and down, never exceeding 50% proficiency. Osceola Middle School was one of seven schools to receive one of the large federal school improvement grants — a total of nearly \$1.3 million in 2010 and 2011, and we wanted to see the on-the-ground impact of that infusion of funding.



Dollarway High School

Like Osceola, Dollarway High School was designated one of the state's persistently failing schools. In 2010 Dollarway High had the second lowest percentage of students testing at or above grade level in math (behind only Osceola Middle School). The school's percent proficient or advanced in literacy was a dismal 35%, though that was a dramatic improvement over the previous year when less than 15% of the students were proficient or advanced.

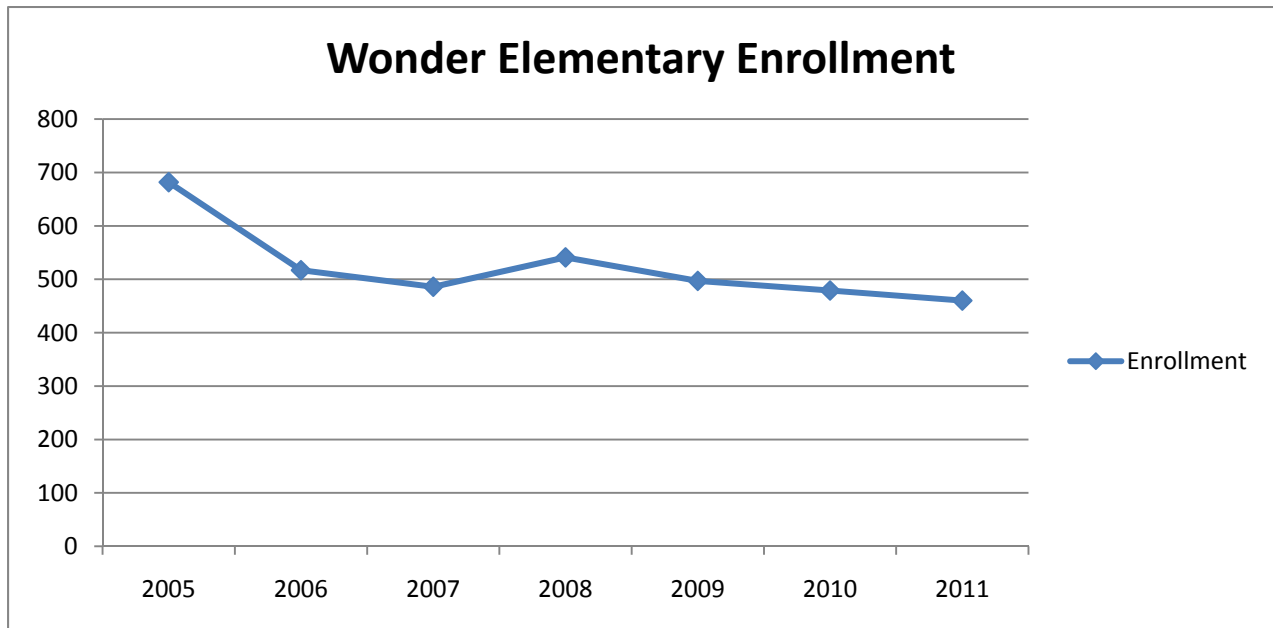
To prepare this report we reviewed as much documentation as we could on each school. We read each school's scholastic audits, accreditation reports, school improvement grant applications, and school facility reports. We read newspaper articles to track significant events in the school and district's histories. We pulled historical data too, including enrollment figures, school test scores, and annual school improvement statuses, to see what trends the school was facing. We visited each school in May earlier this year, and spoke with each superintendent and principal as well as a number of teachers.



Demographics and Location

Wonder Elementary, a K-6 school in West Memphis, sits at the end of a residential street populated with small dilapidated single family homes. The school is housed in a half century old building that once served as the city’s high school. Inside, the building is virtually spotless — even on the day we visited, not 24 hours after severe flooding caused the school to close for the day. Student names posted at the school’s entrance recognized those who excelled on the district’s recent tests. Despite this building’s considerable age, the cleanliness and brightly colored wall décor clearly communicated that Wonder Elementary is devoted to nurturing children.

Currently 99% of Wonder’s students are African-American¹, and 97% of the school’s students are eligible for free or reduced price meals². The school’s student enrollment declined from 682 in 2005 to 460 in 2011.



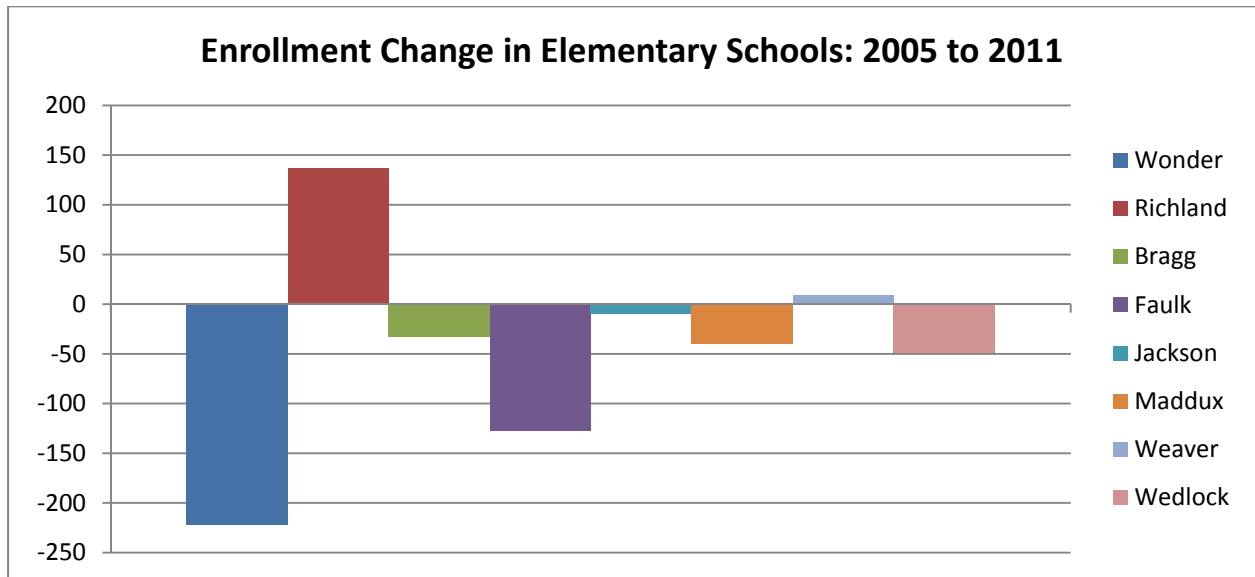
West Memphis School District Superintendent Bill Kessinger said Wonder Elementary’s enrollment decline is the result of population shift caused by the opening of a low income housing complex outside the Wonder school zone. The district revised the school zone lines in 2005 to more evenly distribute elementary students across all elementary schools, which caused additional enrollment declines at Wonder. The result was fewer students at Wonder Elementary and a more reasonable, less expensive bus route. Wonder Elementary Principal Ora Breckenridge said the decline also helped instruction because there was now a more manageable number of students. If the

¹ <http://adedata.arkansas.gov/statewide/>

² ADE, Provision 2 School-Level Eligibility Percentages for School Year 2010-2011

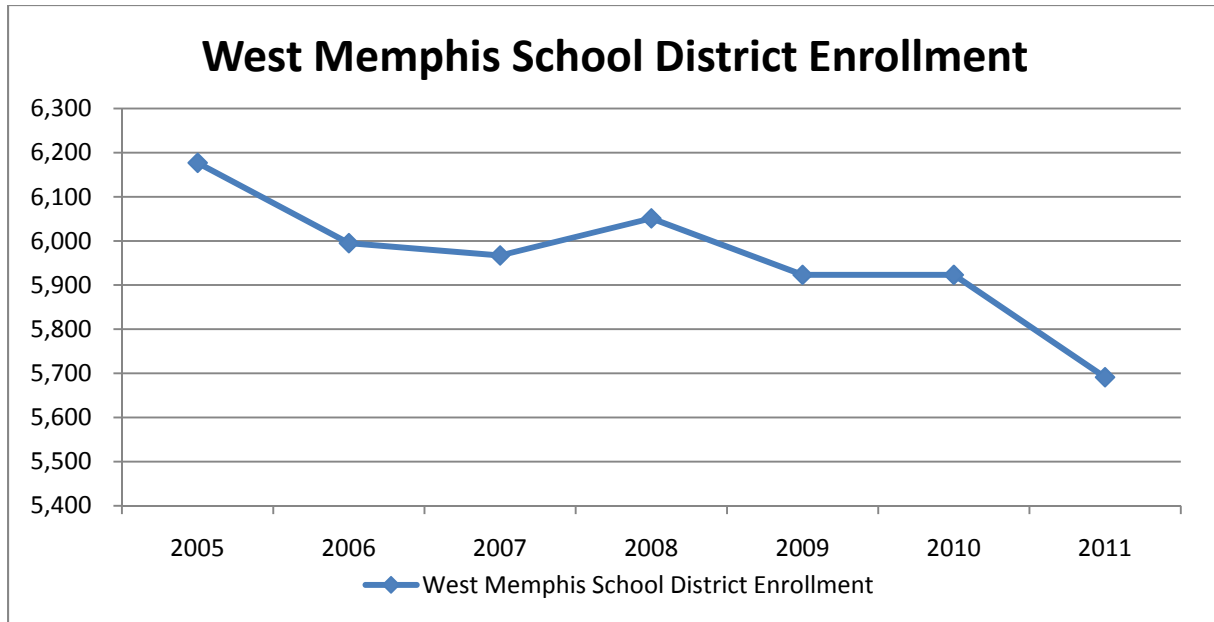
rezoning caused any angst among parents in the district, there was very little documented display of it. News articles at the time recorded no objections to the redistribution of students, even though the two schools affected, Wonder and Faulk Elementary, were both in school improvement.

Of the eight elementary schools in West Memphis, Wonder has lost the greatest number of students between 2005 and 2011, followed by Faulk Elementary. While Wonder and Faulk lost students due to the effects of population shift and rezoning, another school, Richland Elementary increased its enrollment. Richland Elementary is a majority white (79%), high achieving (93.3% proficient in literacy and 96.2% proficient in math) school. While Faulk, Jackson, Weaver, and Wonder struggled year after year in school improvement, Richland has never had the same stigma. The teachers we spoke with said Wonder Elementary parents, many of whom are former Wonder Elementary students, feel a strong connection with the school and are not interested in their children attending another school just because it has higher test scores.



School and district officials say parents were not pulling students out of these low performing schools and putting them in Richland. In fact, Ms. Breckenridge said every year that Wonder was in school improvement, parents had the option of moving their child to a better school within the district, but she said only one student in those six years took advantage of that option. And, she said, that one student later returned to Wonder.

Like Wonder Elementary, the 5,700-student West Memphis district is also losing students — nearly 500 of them, or about 8% — over the course of seven years. District officials don't know exactly why. Particularly puzzling to them is a loss of 100 black elementary students in the 2010-11 school year alone.



District Administration

One thing going for Wonder Elementary is the stability in its school and district leadership. Superintendent Bill Kessinger has led the West Memphis School District for more than 25 years.

Along with Wonder Elementary, a number of West Memphis schools have spent years in school improvement, but the district as a whole is beginning to see real change. In 2008, the district had six schools in school improvement, including two in year five and one in year six. By 2010, two of the six were out of school improvement, and one (West Memphis High) was on the verge of getting out. At the same time, West Memphis has one of the highest achieving schools in the state: Richland Elementary. In 2010, 93.3% of Richland Elementary students were proficient or advanced in literacy and 96.7% were proficient or advanced in math.

During his tenure Kessinger has twice helped fend off proposals to start charter schools in West Memphis, convincing the community that the district could provide as high quality education as any charter school. Kessinger publicly opposed a 1999 effort to open a charter school proposed by Secure for Excellence in West Memphis and a 2009 effort to open a KIPP charter school.

Another group is currently making yet another attempt to locate a charter school in West Memphis. According to a Sept. 5, 2011, *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* article, the Osceola Communication, Business and Arts Inc. has proposed high school dropout recovery programs for Jonesboro, West Memphis and Osceola. The group started a charter school in Osceola in 2008 — the Osceola Communication, Arts and Business School — but its charter was revoked earlier this year.

School Administration

Ora Breckenridge, who plans to retire after the 2011-12 school year, has led Wonder Elementary for 26 years and was a student at the school in the 1950s. Breckenridge has a history of effective leadership even as the school was in advanced stages of school improvement. For example, a 2007 scholastic audit performed by the Arkansas Department of Education, gave Wonder relatively high marks for leadership. Positive comments about the school's leadership include:

- "School leadership actively embraces and models the belief that all children can learn and succeed at high levels...The school leadership's high expectations have been transferred to most staff and students as demonstrated through classroom culture."
- "School leadership exhibits a strong commitment to high student performance."

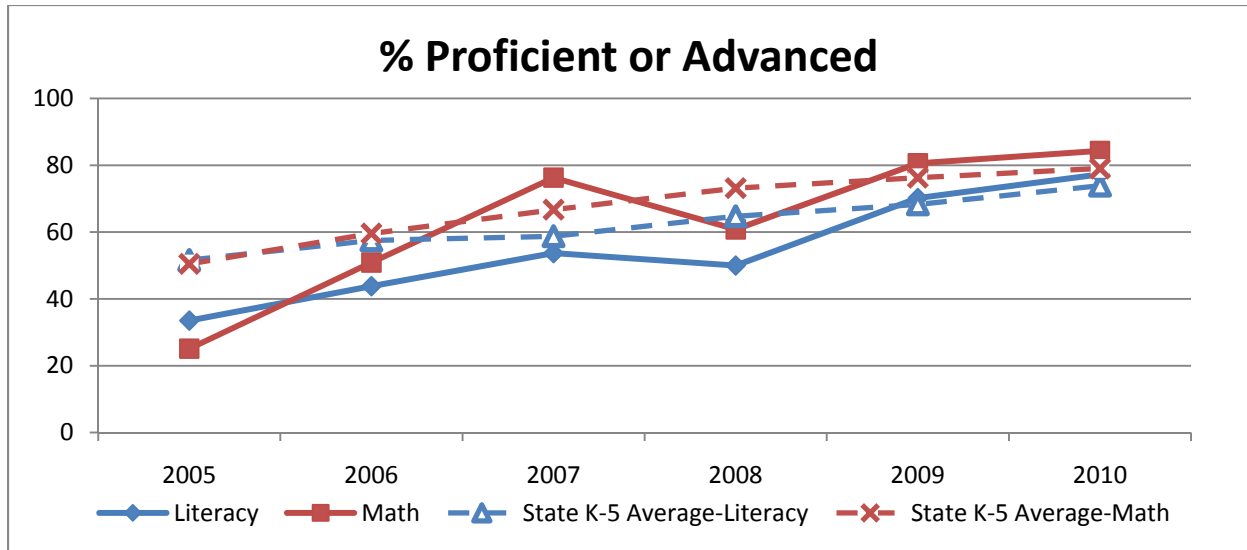
When the school got into school improvement Breckenridge did not respond by being defensive. She welcomed criticism as opportunities to improve, and was able to work effectively with a district-hired school improvement consultant.

The district also has the financial resources to attract quality teachers. The district's average teacher salary in 2010 was \$50,161, the 16th highest average teacher salary among the state's districts.



Student Achievement

For years, Wonder Elementary's students scored below the state average. In 2005, just a quarter of students were proficient or advanced in math and a third of students were proficient or advanced in literacy. Then, in 2009, the percentage of Wonder students who scored at grade level or above outpaced the state average for elementary schools for the first time. In one year, the percentage of students who were proficient or advanced in literacy jumped from 50% to just over 70% and in math the percentage grew from just under 61% to above 80%.



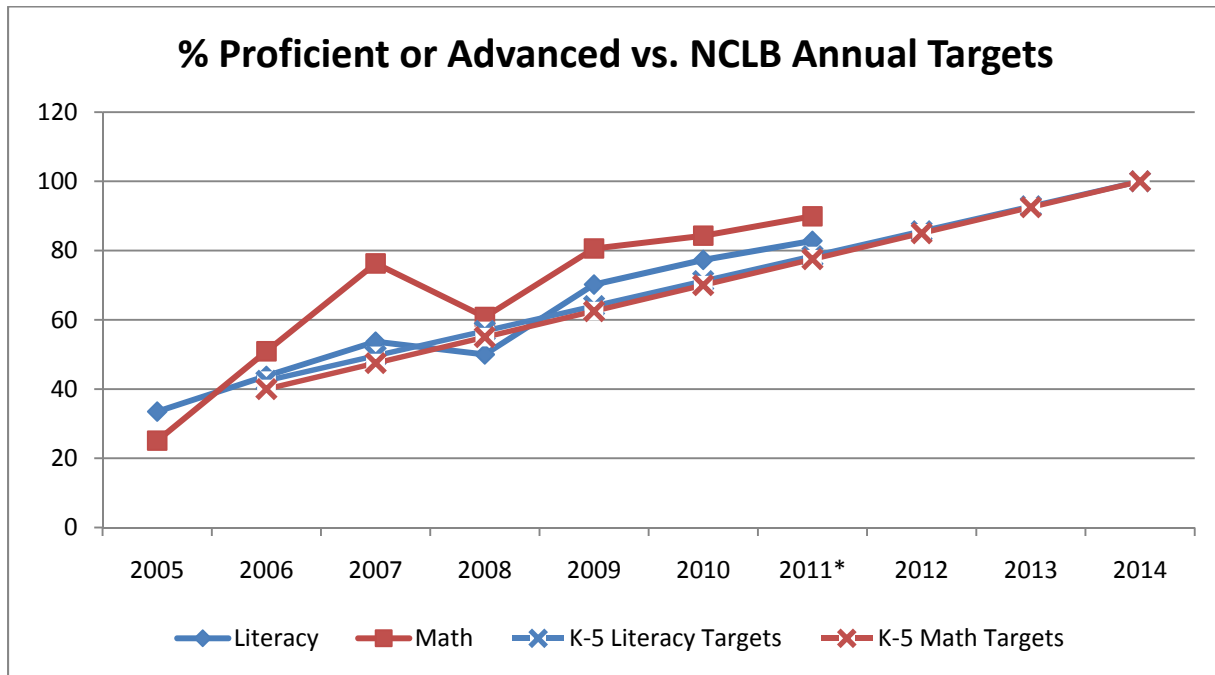
School Improvement

Wonder Elementary was one of the state’s first schools to be placed on the school improvement list in 2003, the second year schools were designated to be in school improvement under the No Child Left Behind Act. The following table shows changes in Wonder Elementary’s school improvement status over the past six years, with improvement in status designated in green and worsening status designated in red.

Annual School Improvement Status						
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Wonder Elementary	SI_3	SI_4	SI_5	SI_6	SI_6(M)	MS

In 2008, the school was in its sixth year of school improvement. That year, just 17 schools (1.5% of the nearly 1,100 schools across the state) were in Year 6 or higher of school improvement. The school met standards for the first time in 2009 and then again in 2010, allowing it to be removed from the school improvement list. (The number in the chart above indicates the years in school improvement. An “(M)” means the school met standards that year but is not yet out of school improvement. It takes two years of meeting standards to get out of school improvement. “MS” indicates the school met standards and is no longer in school improvement.)

The following chart shows that Wonder’s overall test scores were generally at or above the NCLB targets beginning in 2006. However, the school continued to miss targets for certain subpopulations, giving Wonder a school improvement status that suggested it was among the lowest performing schools in the state. For example, in 2006, when Wonder’s overall scores were above the NCLB targets, the school was in year four of school improvement. That year, less than 3% of the 1,100 schools in Arkansas were in year four or higher of school improvement.



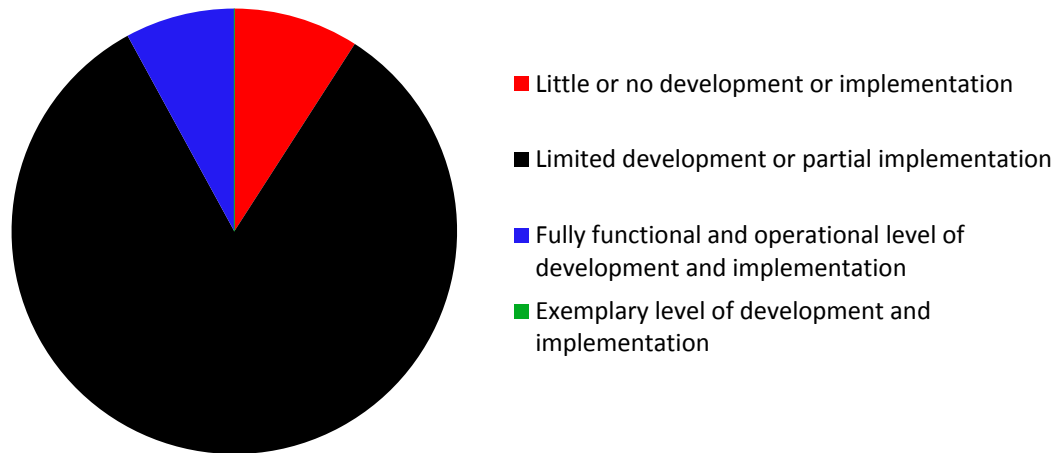
* 2011 percentages for Wonder Elementary are based on preliminary data.

But despite promising test score gains, Wonder Elementary failed to make AYP in multiple subpopulations. Wonder Elementary’s 2006 school improvement status (fourth year of school improvement) made the school eligible for a new program ADE was implementing in 2007, scholastic audits.

Wonder was among the first 34 schools to receive a scholastic audit. ADE’s scholastic audit scores the school on 88 selected indicators within nine general standards. For each indicator, the schools receive a score from 1 to 4, where 1 indicates “Little or no development and implementation” and 4 means “Exemplary level of development and implementation.” Out of 88 indicators, Wonder was said to have made little or no development on 67 indicators, and limited development on the remaining 21.

The school received a rating of 2 out of 4 in most of the nine scholastic audit standards (indicating “limited development or partial implementation”), as shown in the pie chart on the following page.

Scholastic Audit: Wonder Elementary



However, the audit narrative actually contained only limited criticism. For example, the audit acknowledged that “the emphasis on student achievement has intensified in the past two years with significant gains being made in literacy and math combined population.” It complimented the school’s very structured and organized school day that is “designed to maximize instruction from the very beginning of the day to dismissal.” The audit noted the school’s adequate allocation of resources that is consistent with the ACSIP and its supportive environment for teachers and students.

The audit did find some areas to be corrected. It noted that grade-level teachers were meeting weekly, but the district was not making sure teachers in the upper grades were meeting with those in the lower grades. The audit also noted that the district had developed a curriculum pacing guide that aligned with state literacy and math standards, but urged the school to finish developing science guides. Wonder was also criticized for not evaluating teachers effectively and in compliance with state law, for not collaborating with the parent-teacher organization and community organizers to develop the school’s ACSIP, and for not having an updated mission statement posted in classrooms.

Ms. Breckenridge welcomed the scholastic audit critique and its recommendations, calling it “the best thing that could have happened.” It “helped us to see us,” she said.

School Improvement Interventions

About five or six years ago, the West Memphis school district hired outside school improvement consultants using state NSLA funding. The district began working with school improvement provider Teachscape. About two years later Teachscape changed focus from providing in-school consulting to developing online professional development. Around the same time Donna Gordy, who had been a consultant for Teachscape, was starting her own school improvement consulting business, Elbow 2 Elbow (E2E).

For the 2006-07 school year, the West Memphis School District hired Elbow 2 Elbow to work with Wonder Elementary and all of its other district schools. Through Teachscape and later E2E, Ms. Breckenridge and her staff began to realize they were teaching the right content, but they weren't teaching it effectively. They were teaching the textbook "cover to cover," Ms. Breckenridge said, with little understanding about whether students were actually learning the material. When they began to really examine the way they were teaching, Ms. Breckenridge said, "We realized we were not teaching writing at all." Courses were not linked across grade levels and content areas, and students were unfamiliar with Benchmark exam content and many question formats. They were especially unfamiliar with open-ended responses.

They also began to realize that other schools were not only teaching the grade level content, but they were incorporating test-taking practice into their instruction. Wonder students, Ms. Breckenridge said, didn't even know what to do with the writing pages in the Benchmark exam. The school began getting released Benchmark questions to use as practice.

The school's teachers said they realized the sense of urgency when the school was placed on the state school improvement list, and they saw data regarding student performance. As a result, teachers generally were motivated to work together and with the principal, Dr. Gordy, and the coaches to make curriculum and organization changes.

With the help of Teachscape and later E2E, Ms. Breckenridge and her staff got students writing by requiring them to practice "writing with a purpose," for 30 minutes every morning through exercises like journal writing. The consultants recommended that teachers emphasize building vocabulary, and they taught them how to instruct students in examining passages and analyzing content. They showed teachers how to include special education students more in these exercises in the regular classroom, and teachers also began to co-teach to maximize resources and assist one another in improving instruction.



Teachers began using Marzano's high yield strategies, which emphasize teaching techniques, such as comparing and classifying information and reinforcing new skills and knowledge through home work. Teachers and coaches said Ms. Breckenridge and Dr. Gordy were highly involved in the daily operation of teaching students and assisting teachers in implementing new strategies. Academic coaches provided ongoing assistance in modeling teaching strategies, giving feedback based on classroom observations, and providing professional development.

They got parents more engaged with students' homework by telling them to expect it every single night and established incentive programs to reward parental involvement with prizes such as \$5 gas cards.

The school established "in-school" tutoring during planning periods, as well as an hour of "after-school" tutoring three days a week. The former is more impromptu tutoring based on a particular day's assignment, whereas the

latter is regular scheduled activity dealing with explaining and elaborating on classroom material. Students are highly encouraged to attend tutoring, but it is not mandatory.

Ms. Breckenridge embraced the consulting work of Elbow 2 Elbow. Though she has been the principal of Wonder Elementary for more than two decades, she saw Donna Gordy and her math and literacy coaching consultants as partners, not as outsiders telling her how to run her school. Principals in other districts have reported tense relationships with outside consultants. They complain that the consultants' judgment is more valued than their own and deviating from the consultant's decisions results in bad reports to the superintendent or the school board.

E2E's approach with Wonder was different. While Wonder staff said the consultants would make suggestions about how to improve instruction, their presence wasn't insulting or demeaning to the teaching staff. When Gordy arrived, Ms. Breckenridge said, the former Van Buren principal didn't present her own set of recommendations and action plan. Instead she asked how she could help. She committed herself to improving the school's student achievement and vowed to do whatever it took. When Ms. Breckenridge and Dr. Gordy identified 3rd grade literacy as one of the school's weaknesses, both Ms. Breckenridge and Gordy got in the classrooms and personally taught 3rd grade reading and writing.

What the Wonder teachers were doing began to work. In one year between 2004-05 and 2005-06, the school's percent proficient or advanced jumped 10 percentage points in literacy and 25 percentage points in math. Still, at the end of the 2005-06 school year, Wonder was in its fourth year of school improvement, and the Arkansas Department of Education was going to require the school to work with America's Choice, a school improvement consulting company. The state had signed a new \$6 million contract with the school improvement provider and was requiring 30 or so schools that had been in school improvement the longest to work with the company as part of the schools' "restructuring" requirement under No Child Left Behind.

The Wonder administrators and district officials, however, thought what they were already doing was working, and they didn't want to switch to America's Choice. After all, they were producing gains more rapidly than the improvement that America's Choice promised. District officials appealed, but ADE officials needed to be convinced. Then-Education Commissioner Ken James invited the school and district officials, along with Donna Gordy, to come to Little Rock and explain their school improvement initiatives and results. In September 2006, Wonder Elementary received a letter waiving them from the America's Choice requirement.

In 2009, the district received \$500,000 in 1003(g) funding and used it to expand E2E's services in the district's schools. In total West Memphis spent \$2.35 million with E2E between 2007 and 2009, more than any other district

— even those with similar resources — spent on school improvement services in that timeframe.

District administration also took tremendous responsibility for raising student achievement. The district developed the Delta Curriculum Alignment and Assessment Blocks, known as DCAAB, which puts teachers throughout the district in lock-step with one another. The program was a district-designed pacing guide that organized curriculum for the school year into 4- and 5-week blocks. DCAAB made sure grade-level teachers throughout the district were teaching the same curriculum at the same time. At the end of each block, students are required to take district-created tests to see what they actually learned and where they needed additional instruction. Results of the block tests are shared and discussed among the schools so teachers can see how their students compared with students in the other district schools.

Each school's score was ranked, giving Wonder Elementary, perpetually ranked at the bottom, some incentive to outperform district leaders like Richland Elementary. DCAAB also required weekly meetings among the math and literacy coaches throughout the district. Those meetings allowed schools that were successful covering a particular lesson to share strategies with those whose students faltered with that same material.

Teachers at Wonder Elementary said the weekly assessments help them identify where individual students need help and they have been instrumental in providing differentiated instruction. The teachers indicated that learning to interpret and use test data and formative assessments have been among the most effective strategies in their efforts to improve student achievement gains. The implementation of data-driven instruction has been facilitated by academic coaches, Dr. Gordy, and specialists at the educational cooperative.

Not all of the teachers embraced the changes happening at Wonder. When the district introduced a new calendar mapping out the curriculum pacing on a day-by-day basis, some teachers resisted. To combat that Breckenridge and the Wonder staff began trying to create enthusiasm for test-taking among teachers and students. They started an small incentive program for teachers, awarding prizes such as \$5 gift cards or the rights to preferred parking spots, when a certain percentage of their students passed the weekly formative tests. And Breckenridge created a schoolwide cheer for a "threepeat" to get students excited about improving student achievement for a third year in a row.

Today most of the professional development for teachers is done within the district and by the educational cooperative. Coaches are sent to regional and national workshops and conferences to learn new content and innovative skills to teach to teachers. There is a concerted effort made to link teacher evaluations to professional development and to student performance.

In 2010, Wonder’s test scores were high enough to remove the school from the school improvement list. Wonder Elementary is the only Arkansas school to get out of school improvement after six or more years. (As of 2010, just 79 schools have ever been in school improvement for six or more years.)

Other Student Achievement Designations

In recent years, the state has introduced two additional school achievement ratings by which schools are measured: the gains rating and the status rating. A gains score measures a school’s performance based on changes in individual students’ learning; for example the improvements made in the test score of individual 4th graders over their individual scores as 3rd graders. The gains rating differs from the school improvement status in that school improvement is based on changes in a single grade from one year to the next; for example, 3rd grade test scores in 2011 compared with 3rd grade test scores in 2010. Gains scores are between 5, “schools of excellence for improvement,” and 1, “schools in need of immediate improvement.” Between 2008 and 2010, Wonder Elementary’s gains score has been both a school in need of immediate improvement and a school of excellence.

Year	Gains Score
2008	1 (in need of immediate improvement)
2009	5 (school of excellence for improvement)
2010	4 (school exceeding improvement standards)

In 2010, the state started using a new measure, called a status rating. A school’s status rating is a measure of the number of students who score advanced, proficient, basic and below basic. While the school improvement status is based on the percentage of students who are proficient or not, the status score weights each of the four performance categories. For example, a school with 25 proficient students and 25 advanced students would get a higher status score than a school with 50 proficient students. Status ratings range from 5, “schools of excellence,” to 1, “schools in need of immediate improvement.” Wonder Elementary received a status score of 4 in 2010.

Year	Status Score
2010	4 (exceeding standards)

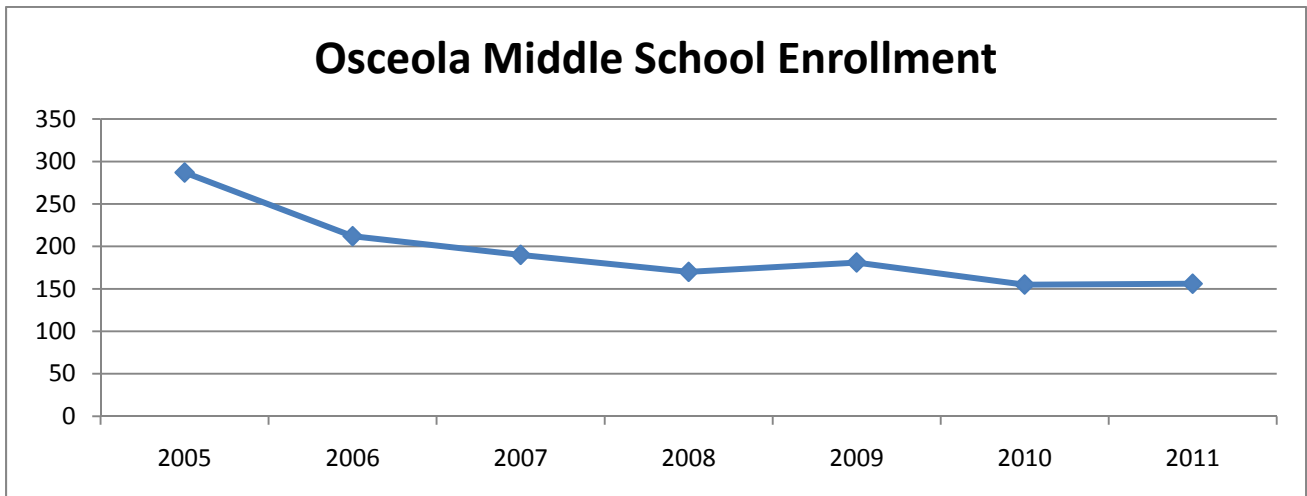


Demographics and Location

Osceola Middle School serves about 150 students in grades 6 through 8 in Osceola, Arkansas. The district is located on the state’s eastern border, about an hour and 15 minute drive from Jonesboro and an hour drive from Memphis. It is surrounded by the South Mississippi County School District which horseshoes around three sides. Osceola Middle School was built more than a half a century ago, and parts of the building provide a bleak environment for education. During our visit, classroom furniture and materials were in disarray. Wall boards appeared sparsely populated and course materials were disorganized.

Nearly all students in Osceola Middle School — 98% —are eligible for free or reduced price lunch, according to the Arkansas Department of Education³. While just 54% of the Osceola community is African American⁴, nearly all of the students at Osceola Middle School (95.5%) are African American and just 4.5% are white. School officials said many of the community’s white students attend the district’s Osceola Academic Center of Excellence (ACE), which until recently operated as a charter school. In 2009-10, the last year ACE operated as a charter school, white students made up about 36% of that school’s population⁵. One school official indicated that some white students who live in Osceola may also be falsifying their address so they can enroll in Rivercrest High School, which also serves 7th and 8th graders, in neighboring South Mississippi County School District, where 64% of the students are white.

Osceola School district lost about 13% of its enrollment between 2005 and 2011, and Osceola Middle School is losing students even faster. Osceola Middle School lost 45.6% of its enrollment during that six-year period.



³ 2010-2011 Provision 2 Data FINAL CERTIFIED

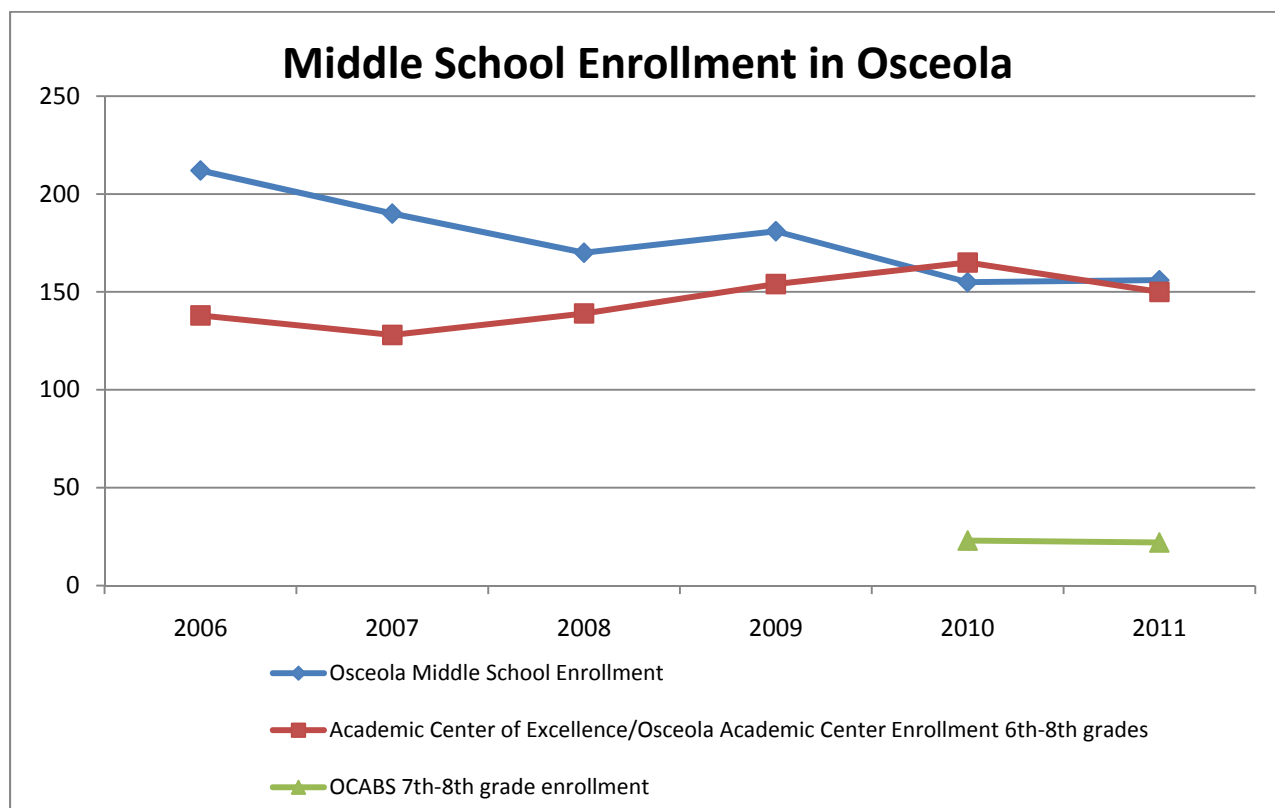
⁴ <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk>

⁵ <http://adedata.arkansas.gov/statewide/>

In 2006 the school changed from being a 7th through 9th grade school to a 6th through 8th grade school. That grade configuration change appears to have had a dramatic impact on student enrollment, with the school shrinking 26%, from 287 in students 2004-05 to 212 in 2005-06.

Osceola Middle School is the only traditional middle school in the Osceola School District, but during the last five years or so, the school has had to compete for students with two charter schools. The Osceola School District opened the Academic Center of Excellence, a conversion charter school, in 2002 to serve 1st through 8th graders. It expanded in the 2006-07 school year to 9th graders, and to 10th graders in the 2007-08 school year. In 2010, the State Board of Education revoked the school’s charter for failing to meet accreditation standards for teacher licensure for three consecutive years. The district then renamed the school Osceola Academic Center, and it returned to being a fully accredited 1st through 8th grade school for the 2010-11 school year.

In 2008-09 the open enrollment charter school Osceola Communication, Arts and Business School (OCABS), opened to serve 9th through 12th grade students. The next year it added 7th and 8th grades, competing with Osceola Middle for those students. As a result, Osceola Middle School lost over 14% of its enrollment in 2009-10. In 2011, the State Board of Education revoked OCABS’s charter over concerns that the school was not successfully targeting high school dropouts, which had been part of its promised mission.

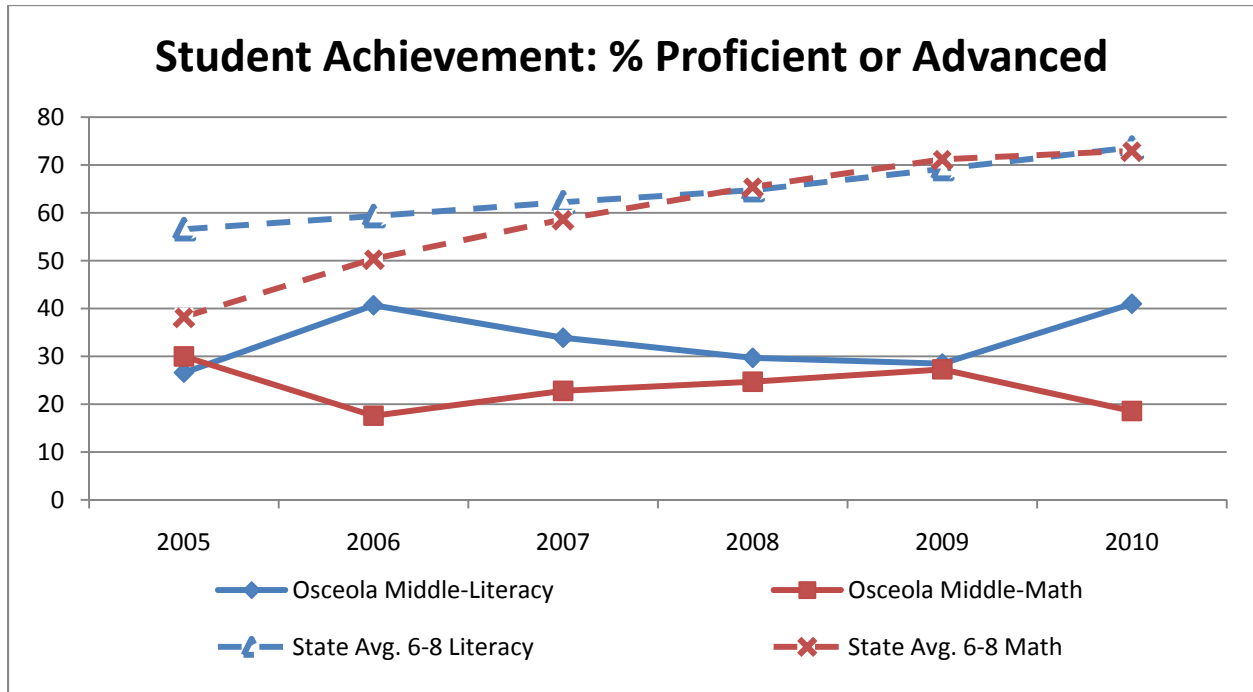


Student Achievement

Osceola Middle School is one of the lowest performing schools in Arkansas. Statewide the percent of students who scored proficient or advanced on benchmark exams has steadily increased in recent years, Osceola Middle's scores have been up and down with little overall progress. In the school's best years, only about 40% of its students have tested proficient or advanced in literacy. The school's math scores have been even worse. Since 2005, the school has never had more than 30% proficient or advanced in math. (Preliminary data for 2011 indicate the school is making progress with 50% proficient in literacy and nearly 39% proficient in math.)

Challenging the school's educational efforts is the fact that incoming 6th graders in recent years haven't mastered 5th grade work. In 2008 and 2009, only about a third of the 5th graders in Osceola scored either proficient or advanced on benchmark exams. Fifth graders' test scores did improve considerably in 2010, with 54% testing at grade level in literacy and nearly 70% in math.

In 2006, when Osceola Middle went from a 7th through 9th grade configuration to 6th through 8th grades, the school saw much improved test scores in literacy and plummeting scores in math. Since the reconfiguration, math scores have improved, while literacy scores have dropped. In 2010, the first year the competing open enrollment charter school opened to 7th and 8th graders, the school saw impressive gains in literacy and similarly steep declines in math. In 2010, Osceola Middle had the lowest percentage proficient or advanced in math of any traditional public school in the state. Just 18% of the students were proficient in math.





In a grant application, the school noted that math is “traditionally the weakest area.” It also notes that consultants the school hired “used record keeping” to help Osceola district administrators determine the problem “that was not apparent to the leadership.” An ADE report describing a December 2010 grant monitoring visit, noted that “[k]eeping math teachers has been an issue at the school. Several of the math teachers have been on extended leave due to illness or have left the district for personal reasons.”

Scholastic Audit

In February 2009, the Arkansas Department of Education conducted a scholastic audit of Osceola Middle School. The audit found deficiencies in the school’s curriculum, assessments, teaching style and leadership. The following are examples of the problems described in the scholastic audit:

- The school has only partially developed curriculum in the core areas aligned with state standards. The current core curriculum lacks aligned assessments, rubrics, resources and materials. The school is not involved in efforts to revise the curriculum.
- Classroom assessments are text-book based and not intentionally aligned with the state standards. Most are not rigorous. Teachers are not involved in developing assessments. Data analysis is handled by district, not school staff and is not used to identify gaps or make changes to the curriculum.
- Teaching occurs mostly as teacher-centered lectures, and does not address students’ different learning styles. Teachers are assigned to teach subjects with little regard to their strengths. Student learning expectations are not communicated to students. School leadership has not used formal evaluation to improve instruction. Instruction is monitored only informally by the school’s consultants, and teachers are provided limited feedback.
- The school’s leadership staff does not demonstrate high academic expectations. Students who make the honor roll get a free dress day, but there is little evidence that school leadership monitors and supports the effort. Most teachers told the scholastic audit reviewers that the most important factors contributing to student failure are outside the school environment. The school has no policy linking teacher performance and student performance.

A year later, in a 2010 grant application, the school acknowledged that the district was slow to implement the scholastic audit recommendations, blaming district leadership changes (the high school principal and the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction left the district).

School Improvement

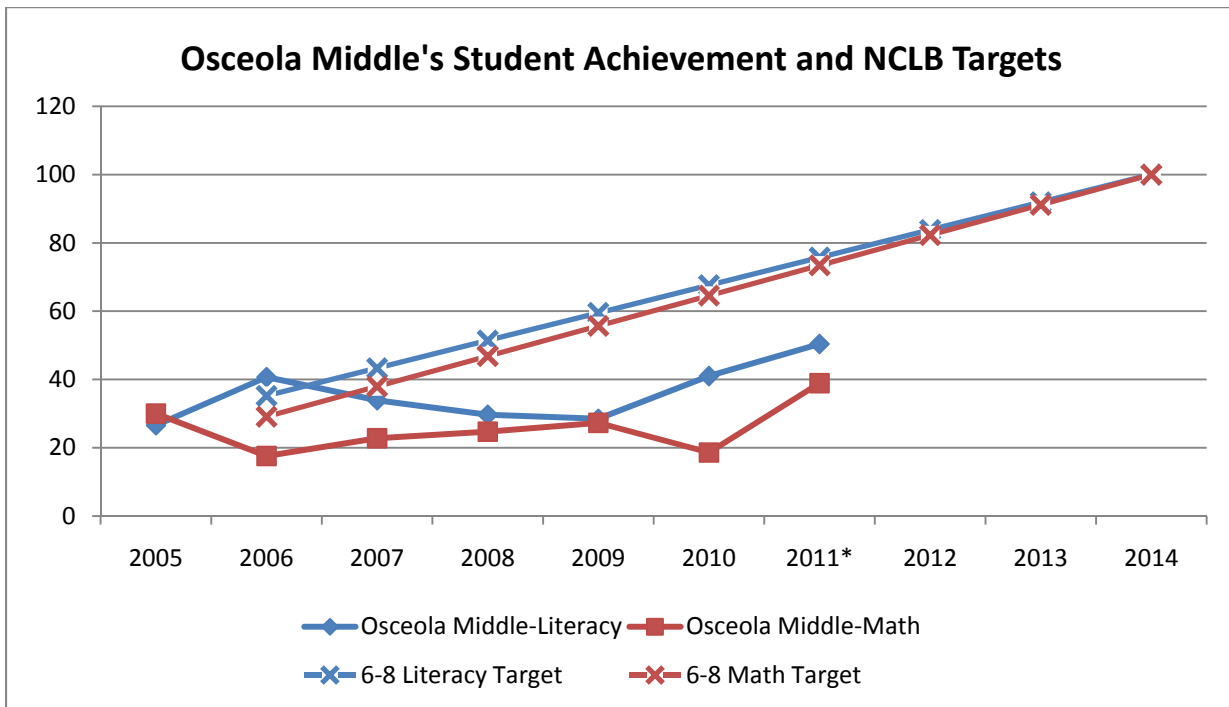
Osceola Middle has had a long history in school improvement. The following table shows the school’s school improvement status since 2005. The number indicates the year of school improvement, and the “M” indicates the years in which Osceola Middle has met the standards set for Arkansas schools under

the No Child Left Behind Act. (A school must meet standards for two consecutive years to be removed from school improvement.)

Annual School Improvement Status						
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Osceola Middle	SI_2	SI_2(M)	SI_3	SI_4	SI_5	SI_5(M)

In 2010, the school was in its fifth year of school improvement. However the school was considered to have met standards that year. Because schools must meet standards for two years before they can get off the school improvement list, Osceola Middle could potentially be removed from school improvement in 2011 if it meets standards a second year.

But Osceola Middle’s school improvement status is a little misleading. Even though Osceola Middle “met standards,” the school’s 2010 test scores were actually nowhere near the No Child Left Behind targets set for Arkansas. The chart below shows that in 2010, the No Child Left Behind targets expected middle schools to have nearly 68% of students proficient or advanced in literacy and about 64% proficient in math. Osceola Middle had just 41% proficient in literacy and less than 19% proficient in math. (Preliminary data for 2011 indicate the school is making progress with 50% proficient in literacy and nearly 39% proficient in math.)



*2011 percentages for OMS are based on preliminary data.

The school’s year-by-year school improvement status and the reason it was designated as such is outlined in the following table.

Year	School Improvement Status	Smart Accountability Status (first used in 2009)	Reason for the status
2005	School Improvement Year 2 (SI_2)		Year 2 of school improvement due to low literacy scores
2006	School Improvement Year 2, Meeting Standards [SI_2(M)]		The middle school was reconfigured. It went from being a 7 th -9 th grade school to being a 6 th -8 th grade school. Because of the reconfiguration, ADE did not hold the school accountable for its test scores that year. The school maintained its year two status and was considered “meeting standards that year.”
2007	School Improvement Year 3 (SI_3) ⁶		Year 3 of school improvement due to literacy scores Year 1 of school improvement due to math scores
2008	School Improvement Year 4 (SI_4)		Year 4 of school improvement due to literacy scores Year 2 of school improvement due to math scores
2009	School Improvement Year 5 (SI_5)	Whole School Intensive Improvement Year 5: Restructuring	Year 5 of school improvement due to literacy scores Year 3 of school improvement due to math scores
2010	School Improvement Year 5, Meeting Standards [SI_5(M)]	Whole School Intensive Improvement Achieving Year 5	The school’s literacy scores met standards for the first time. The school did not meet the No Child Left Behind targets, but it did meet standards through the safe harbor method ⁷ . Year 4 of school improvement due to math scores. Because the school’s literacy status—Year 5, meeting standards—is considered a lower status than the school’s math status—Year 4—the school’s overall status is Year 5 meeting standards.

Other Student Achievement Designations

In 2010, the school was listed among the state’s “persistently lowest-achieving schools.” This designation was created by a federal initiative that gave states large school improvement grants to help turnaround their worst schools. Arkansas identified its persistently lowest achieving schools by ranking all schools based on their percentage of students testing proficient or advanced over the previous three years. Both Osceola Middle and Osceola High are Tier I schools on that list, meaning they are among the 14 lowest.

⁶ Schools are given individual statuses for literacy scores and for math scores as well as for the total school population and for each of the subgroups (e.g., economically disadvantaged). A school’s final, overall school improvement status is the lowest status (i.e., most years in school improvement) of any group for any subject.

⁷ The Safe Harbor methodology allows schools to be considered “meeting standards,” even though they have not met the proficiency targets established under the No Child Left Behind Act. Schools can meet standards through the safe harbor method if they reduce the percent of their students who are NOT proficient by 10%.

In recent years, the state has introduced two additional school achievement ratings by which schools are measured: the gains rating and the status rating. A gains score measures a school’s performance based on changes in individual students’ learning; for example the improvements made in the test score of individual 4th graders over their individual scores as 3rd graders. The gains rating differs from the school improvement status in that school improvement is based on changes in a single grade from one year to the next; for example, 3rd grade test scores in 2011 compared with 3rd grade test scores in 2010. Gains scores are between 5, “schools of excellence for improvement,” and 1, “schools in need of immediate improvement.” Between 2008 and 2010, Osceola Middle has received ratings of 2 and 3.

Year	Gains Score
2008	2 (approaching standards)
2009	3 (meeting improvement standards)
2010	2 (approaching standards)

In 2010, the state started using a new measure, called a status rating. A school’s status rating is a measure of the number of students who score advanced, proficient, basic and below basic. While the school improvement status is based on the percentage of students who are proficient or not, the status score weights each of the four performance categories. For example, a school with 25 proficient students and 25 advanced students would get a higher status score than a school with 50 proficient students. Status ratings range from 5, “schools of excellence,” to 1, “schools in need of immediate improvement.” Osceola received a status score of 2 in 2010.

Year	Status Score
2010	2 (approaching the standards)

District Issues

Osceola Middle School’s test scores reflect ineffective school-level strategies and a district rife with problems. When asked why Osceola Middle has been unable to improve its student achievement, the current superintendent Mike Cox said, districtwide, “No one has been held accountable.”

Cox took over operations in September 2010 at a time when the Osceola School District was overwhelmed with problems. The district was in district improvement and fiscal distress. Two of its schools were on the state’s list of persistently lowest achieving schools. All of the district’s schools had accreditation violations, and the district’s only charter had just been revoked. Mr. Cox was hired to bring efficiency and accountability to a district that had been poorly managed and lacked accountability throughout the system.

A month before Cox was named superintendent, in August 2010, the Osceola School Board took the unusual step of asking the State Education Board to fire the district’s long-time superintendent Milton Washington. Osceola board attorney Mike Gibson complained to the state board that Washington did not tell the district board members its charter school was on accreditation

probation or that there had been an opportunity to appeal the revocation. Because of the district's fiscal distress designation, the board couldn't afford to buy out the superintendent's contract. The state board, however, declined to remove the superintendent, arguing that was the local school board's job.

Less than a month later, Washington resigned and accepted a one-year contract as an educational consultant for the South Mississippi County Chamber of Commerce. The deal was struck with help from the city, which, in an unusual arrangement, gave \$100,000 to the Chamber to hire Washington. The district, working with ADE, then replaced Washington with Cox. The previous year Cox had worked with the district as a consultant for JBHM, a Jackson, Mississippi-based firm that provides schools with on-site school improvement consultants. Cox hired former state representative David Cook as his deputy superintendent several months later.

Two weeks after the district hired Cox, the state board was scheduled for an update on possible sanctions for Osceola Middle's accreditation violations. Dr. Kimbrell informed members that "he had assurances" from Mr. Cox and the school board that they would "work with the Department to ensure standards are met and students served appropriately," according to minutes from the Sept. 13, 2010, meeting. About six months later, in March of 2011, ADE released the district from fiscal distress, noting that the district was on target to end the year with \$2.3 million in reserves.



Fiscal Distress

The Osceola School District had been in fiscal distress since April 2009, the second time the district merited that designation in the last decade. (The first was in school years 2003 and 2004.) Osceola landed on fiscal distress in 2009 due to a rapidly declining fund balance. The district's balance in 2005-06 was nearly \$2.2 million, according to a 2009 article in the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, and it had declined to a little more than \$700,000 by June 2008. David Cook, who is reviewing the district's financial situation, said the district doesn't appear to have maximized its limited funding. For example, the district spent unrestricted state funds before maxing out restricted-use federal funds. That left the district with little flexibility in spending its excess reserves. Additionally, Mr. Cox and Mr. Cook reported that the federal grant process was a "mess," and as a result, stimulus money had been held up. Mr. Cook was hired, in part, to bring order and systemization to the budget practices generally and to the federal grant process in particular.

Another expense weighing on the district's budget is its commitment to building a new school. Voters approved a 2.90 mill increase in 2008, and the district plans to build a 1st-5th elementary school. The new school will replace East Elementary School, which closed after the 2009-10 school year. It's a considerable expense in a district that has been criticized for having more school buildings than it can efficiently run, given its enrollment.

Charter Schools

Another long-standing issue affecting education in Osceola is the push for charter schools. More than a decade ago, community members began an effort to open a charter school, but the local school board at the time blocked the move. They worried the charter school would cherry pick the best students in Osceola and further entrench racial disparities. But the charter school advocates continued to push for a charter school, and in 2002, they got it. The school district received state approval to open the Academic Center of Excellence (ACE) for 5th through 8th grades. When it opened, the school promised a college preparatory program, a partnership between the school and the business community, and a longer school day. One Osceola Middle School official said what community members actually wanted was a better school for white students. In 2009-10, white students made up about 36% of that school's population, compared with 3.2% of Osceola Middle's population⁸.

In 2008, a second charter school—this time an open enrollment charter—opened for high school students. The Osceola Communication, Arts and Business School (OCABS) added 7th and 8th graders the next year.

However, both charter schools failed within a matter of years. In August 2010, the State Board of Education revoked the district's ACE charter, eight years after the school was approved. The school had operated with some unlicensed teachers and was not teaching the required amount of physical education. In a press release following the revocation decision, the district suggested the end of the charter school amounted to a name change. "The Academic Center of Excellence will no longer function under this name," the announcement said. "The new name of the school will be the Osceola Academic Center."

In 2011, the State Board of Education revoked OCABS's charter over concerns that the school was not successfully targeting high school dropouts, which had been part of its promised mission.

This past summer Mayor Dickie Kennemore made a plea to the Osceola School Board to apply for another charter. According to minutes from the school board meeting, Kennemore said a charter learning environment would attract business and industry and will help keep students in Osceola. At the following meeting in August, the school board unanimously voted to send a letter of intent to the Department of Education to develop a new charter school, Osceola STEM Academy.

School Administration

The principal of Osceola Middle at the time of our visit was Mary Hayden. She had led the school for three years, but was being removed from that position for the 2011-12 school year. Prior to serving as principal, she worked for one year as a district instructional facilitator and for three years as the literacy specialist for Crowley's Ridge Cooperative.

⁸ <http://adedata.arkansas.gov/statewide/>

For the 2011-12 school year, Mr. Cox had decided to return her to her position as literacy specialist, citing issues with her leadership skills. He said she had made limited efforts to develop a coherent curricula with linkages between courses and grade levels, and she did not establish a systematic teacher evaluation linking classroom teaching, professional development, and student performance.

A year earlier, when Osceola Middle applied for the federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) under the previous superintendent, the district had supported Hayden's leadership efforts. In applying for the \$665,000 grant, the district had to choose between four turnaround models. Osceola Middle selected the "transformation" model of school improvement, which requires the school to replace the principal "with a highly capable principal with either a track record of transformation or clear potential to successfully lead a transformation." However, under the school improvement grant guidelines, a school choosing the transformation model "may retain a recently hired principal where a turnaround, restart, or transformation was instituted in the past two years and there is tangible evidence that the principal has the skills necessary to initiat[e] dramatic change." At that time, the district decided it would not replace Hayden. "It is the philosophy of SetPoint [a partnership between JBHM and computer-based assessment provider Renaissance Learning], our chosen external provider, not to abandon the frontline educators but rather to provide them with the necessary tools for success."



School Teachers

Mike Cox said the issue with some of Osceola's teachers is that for years they have not been held accountable. One of his biggest problems is the high absenteeism rate among teachers in the district. In a report required as part of a grant, Osceola Middle said its teacher attendance rate is just 75%, compared with 92% at the neighboring Osceola Academic Center. Osceola Middle is not the only school with a problem getting teachers to come to work. Cox said across the district he had several teachers who were absent 30 to 70 days and two who were absent 100 days. While he begins the lengthy process required to terminate weak or absent teachers, he's moved some teachers to grades or subjects that are not benchmark tested to minimize the impact of their poor performance on the school's school improvement status.

To a large extent, teachers seemed to operate independently and receive limited oversight; there did not appear to be regularly scheduled classroom observations. One teacher indicated that she thought the Osceola schools have been neglected for many years because they are predominantly African American, and she felt that teachers are negatively affected by this perceived attitude. This teacher said faculty at Osceola Middle school perceived preferential treatment in terms of resources and building in favor of neighboring districts with higher concentrations of Caucasians, and that this perception had led to low morale in the Osceola district.

As a former JBHM consultant, Mr. Cox is a proponent of the "coaching model." When we visited, he was using math and literacy coaches from JBHM. The

coaching model advocated by Mr. Cox includes frequent use of formative assessments to guide differentiated instruction, and reliance on test data and graphic displays to direct lesson plans and pacing of presentations. Test results are used to group students into performance levels in order to more effectively address individual needs. Academic coaches are used to model teaching strategies and content, and to provide classroom observation feedback to teachers. These coaches also provide professional development to teachers, including transferring innovations from regional and national workshops and conferences.

Mr. Cox indicated that he did not have a significant problem recruiting teachers due to the proximity of Arkansas State University. However, the district has considerable competition from surrounding districts, such as Marion or Jonesboro, that have better reputations in the community. Osceola also has trouble competing on salaries. The average teacher salary for Osceola was \$40,341 in 2009-10, compared with \$45,781 in Jonesboro and \$49,067 in Marion. However South Mississippi County School District, Osceola's closest neighbor has an average teacher salary virtually identical to Osceola's. Most teachers do not live in Osceola, Mr. Cox said, choosing instead to drive in from neighboring communities such as Jonesboro.

The two Osceola Middle School teachers interviewed seemed enthusiastic about teaching. Both spoke passionately about their content area and desire to reach students with that content. However, they suggested there had not been a concerted effort made to clearly delineate specific course objectives and coordinate these objectives across content areas and grade levels. There did not appear to be regularly scheduled teacher meetings within content areas and grade levels.

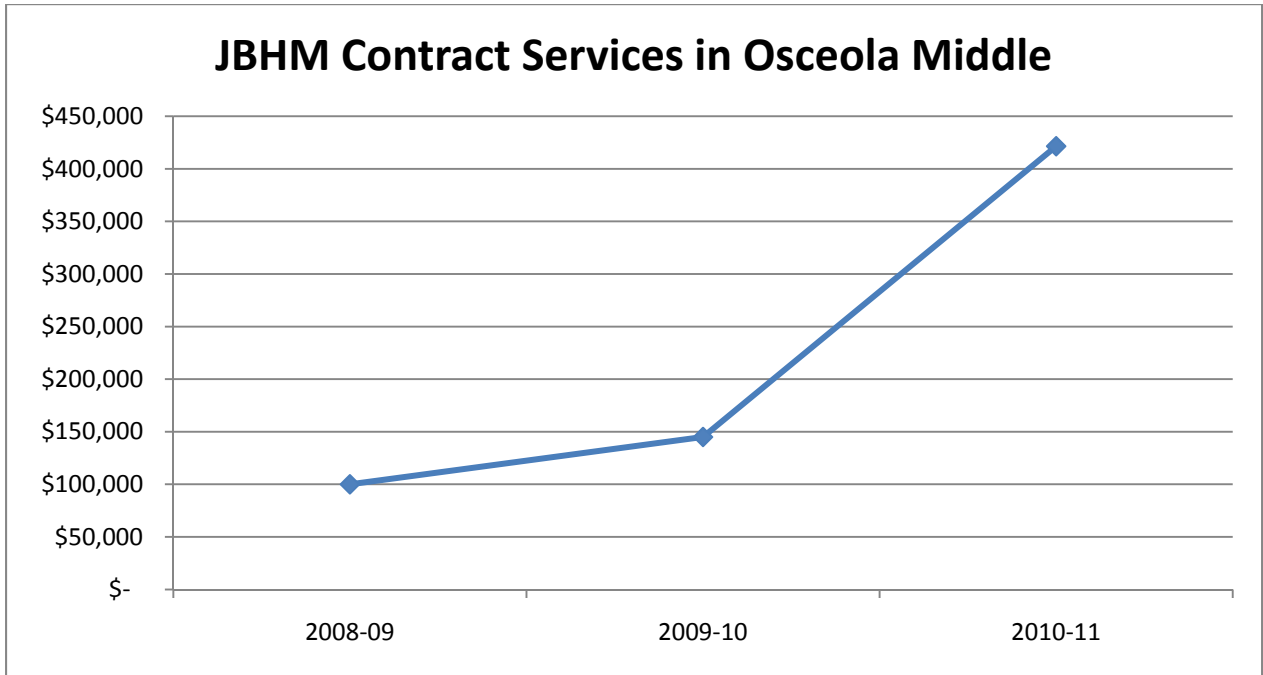
Ms. Hayden indicated that the school has an outdated library and only a part-time librarian. One of her priorities has been to stock the library with updated books, especially those designed to improve reading. The school also has technology needs and teachers need training on how to use new technology. Currently, there is no district-employed math coach in the district. The math and literacy coaches from JBHM, along with teachers, provide tutoring. After-school tutoring relies on the willingness of teachers to volunteer for this extra duty, and it did not appear to be a formally scheduled activity.

School Improvement Interventions

Osceola Middle School has a long history of low student achievement and has received significant help in the last several years, hiring one consultant after another⁹. The school has worked with JBHM for three years (2008-09, 2009-10 and 2010-11), receiving services that JBHM calls its "School Improvement

⁹ Despite being one of the state's persistently lowest achieving schools, Osceola Middle School has never received any state-funded school improvement services from America's Choice. For four years, the Arkansas Department of Education had a contract with America's Choice to turn around schools, like Osceola Middle, that had been in school improvement the longest. Osceola did not receive those services, though the current superintendent does not know why. Instead the district spent its own funds to purchase services from JBHM.

Process.” The middle school also received one year of JBHM’s “Struggling Learners” services. (The district has spent almost \$1.7 million with JBHM over three years for the services provided in all of its schools.)



For its School Improvement services, JBHM placed a consultant in the school two days a week. The consultant coaches, mentors and models for the principal effective instructional leadership strategies and works with teachers to develop lesson plans and improve teaching strategies. Mr. Cox served as a school improvement consultant for the middle school the year before he was named superintendent of the district. JBHM’s Struggling Learner service provided a separate consultant to help teachers work with “bubble” students, those who score just below the proficient level. Ms. Hayden said the consultant’s expertise on teaching strategies for struggling students was very helpful and gave her teachers a new perspective on helping these students. However a technical issue with the funding Osceola was using for the Struggling Learner service forced them to have to give up that consultant, a disappointment for Ms. Hayden.

She indicated that some of the JBHM school improvement consultants have been helpful, while others have been less so. One problem, she said, is that the school receives new consultants each year. The turnover resulted in a lack of continuity and confusion because consultants offer different strategies and practices. “This building needs consistency,” she said. And while some of the consultants have been supportive, Hayden said, others seemed punitive. She noted that her assistant superintendent wrote her up if she failed to do what the consultant suggested. On the other hand, Hayden said, JBHM consultant turned superintendent Mike Cox, “didn’t try to take over the building.”

We saw similar struggles between outside consultants and school personnel in other failing schools. School principals sometimes feel the consultants have more control over the school than they do. A principal at a failing school we visited in 2009 felt she had to ask permission from district administration before implementing a program that was not approved by her America's Choice consultant.

Osceola Middle School receives guidance from a number of other sources beyond JBHM. The district has contracted with Renaissance Learning, a company that provides formative tests and helps analyze the results. An ACSIP team visited the school last year to follow up on the school's implementation of the 2009 Scholastic Audit recommendations, and to assess implementation of the ACSIP plans. District officials also meet monthly with the School Improvement team at the educational cooperative to discuss progress and receive assistance with any educational issues.



In addition to the guidance from JBHM, Renaissance Learning, and the ADE ACSIP team, Hayden said the school also hired a private scholastic audit consultant and worked with math and literacy specialists from the Department of Education. Despite the cacophony of advice, Hayden said the consultants' suggestions seemed to mesh well together, though she acknowledged that at times she did feel pulled in a lot of directions.

In 2010, the Arkansas Department of Education awarded Osceola Middle School with a \$665,000 federal school improvement grant. Osceola Middle was one of seven schools across the state to be awarded the money. (Osceola High School also received \$695,000.) Only 14 of the state's "persistently lowest achieving" schools were eligible for the grants, and Osceola Middle was one of just seven schools that received funding. Schools that were awarded grants were asked to choose between four drastic turnaround models. The school chose the "transformation model," which requires:

- The replacement of long-serving principals
- A rigorous staff evaluation
- Comprehensive instructional reform
- Rewards for staff who increase student achievement
- Removal of staff who have not increased student achievement after ample opportunity
- Increases in learning time
- Greater operational flexibility and support for the school

In compliance with that model, the school has continued to work with JBHM, although the partnership was more intensive and expensive than in previous years. In 2010-11, Osceola contracted with JBHM for \$421,500 to work with the middle school. The additional money nearly doubled the number of consulting days from 72 principal mentoring days and 30 Struggling Learner days to a total of 200 consulting days. The 200 days include 130 days with a school improvement specialist. The \$421,500 contract also paid for 35 days of

services from Renaissance Learning, an assessment vendor that partnered with JBHM. The school also purchased NEO computers, small word-processor like devices that are equipped with assignments and formative tests.

In 2010-11, the school also contracted with JBHM to provide a math and literacy coach. The school's SIG application for the 2011-12 year indicates that it has now hired a literacy coach, a math coach and an instructional technology supervisor.

Preliminary data for 2011 indicate the school is making progress, with 50% proficient in literacy and nearly 39% proficient in math. That's represents a 21% improvement over the previous year's performance in literacy and a 109% improvement over the previous year's math performance.

Osceola Middle School was awarded a second round of SIG for 2011-12. The school was one of 11 schools receiving second-year funding. Osceola Middle will receive \$632,500 to continue its progress.



Demographics and Location

Dollarway High is a 9th through 12th grade high school located in the Dollarway School District in northwest Pine Bluff. It is a poor, mostly black school consisting of 94% African American with 90% of the student body eligible for free or reduced price lunch. In a recent grant application, Dollarway High School described its student population this way: “An overwhelming portion of our students reside in environments that are deluged with poverty, unemployment, underemployment, drugs, gangs, violence and a gamut of health related disparities...Public housing, rental units and assisted living housing are undoubtedly significant characteristics of the enrollment area of Dollarway School District.”

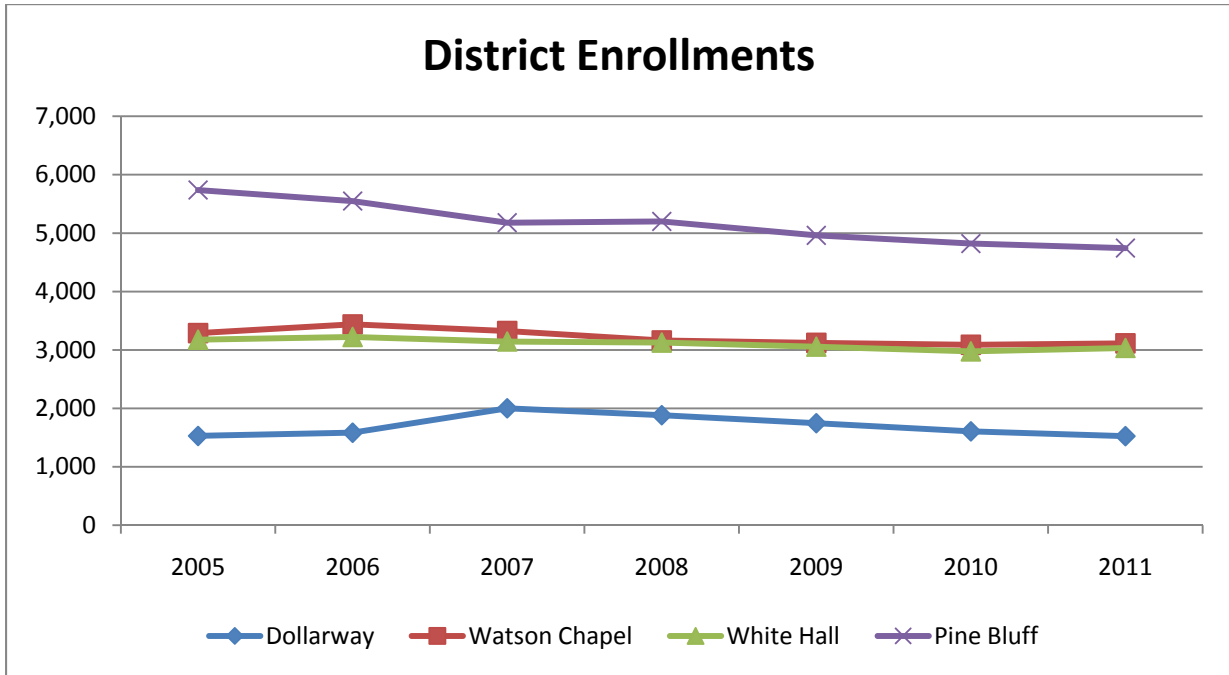
The high school shares its campus with the district administration office, giving the high school staff close proximity to the superintendent. A mix of buildings make up the high school. Some are relatively new and others, such as the gymnasium, are very old and poorly maintained. Dr. Arthur Tucker was the superintendent at the time of our visit. He was anxious for us to see the old buildings’ poor condition. In fact the oldest buildings seem to have been allowed to fall into disrepair, perhaps the product of not wanting to spend money to maintain a facility that ultimately should be replaced. The district passed a millage increase in 2007, part of which paid for a new cafeteria and classrooms for Dollarway High School. The District’s 10-year-master facilities plan includes the addition and renovation of classrooms at a total cost of \$2.8 million.

The poor condition of the high school buildings appears to be an issue district-wide. During an April 2011 school board meeting, a member of the Concerned Parent Organization pleaded with the board to consider pushing for a millage increase, according to a *Pine Bluff Commercial Appeal* article. During the same meeting, a school board member said the district’s facilities were in such poor condition she wouldn’t bring a child into the district.

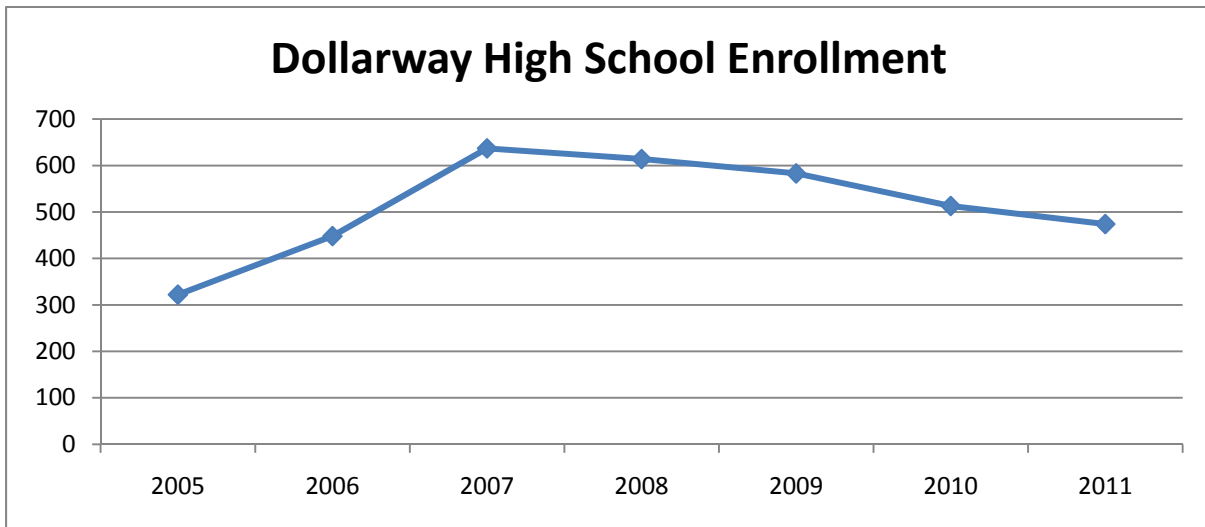
The district has low test scores to match its dilapidated buildings and there is little consensus about which part of the problem to address first. “Until we turn around the academic program, the buildings can wait,” one board member said during the April school board meeting. “This is all we have. We encourage our parents to get involved in academics and recognize it as a priority. If they are successful, I can bet you a dollar to a doughnut that if the scores are up we won’t be able to keep people out.”

Adding to the pressures is the district’s declining enrollment. At the time of our visit, Dr. Tucker said he was losing students, in part due to migration out of Jefferson County due to unemployment. But he said he’s also losing students to Watson Chapel, White Hall, charter schools, and private schools. As illustrated in the following graph, enrollments in the Watson Chapel and White Hall districts have remained steady in recent years, compared with Pine Bluff

and Dollarway, which have been in decline. Tucker said he believes some of these losses result from the poor reputation the Dollarway School District has in the area and the rundown school facilities.



Dollarway High School has 474 students, a loss of about 25% of the students it had at a peak in 2007. The school is losing students at about the same rate as the district—about 25% of students between 2005 and 2011.

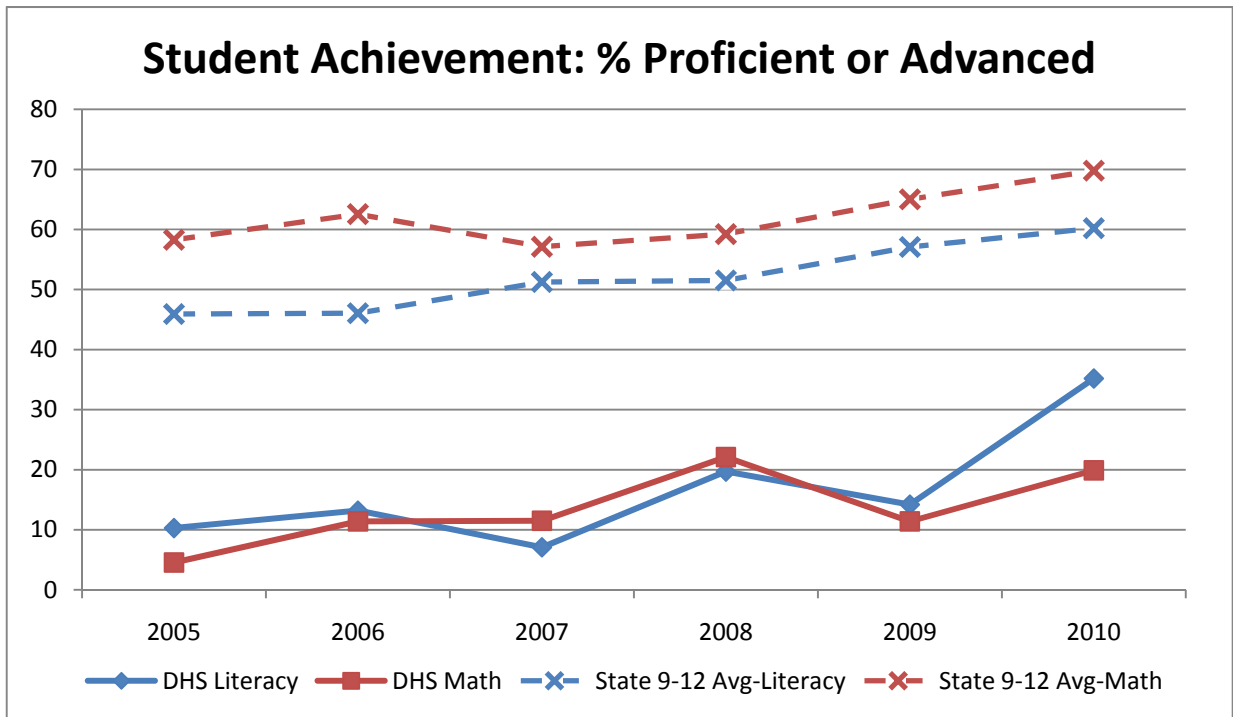


In 2006, the Dollarway School District merged with the Alzheimer Unified School District, a 400-student district whose financial conditions were so dire, the state ordered it to consolidate with a neighboring district. Dollarway, itself in fiscal distress at the time, was the only district that agreed to take on Alzheimer, according to a 2006 *Democrat-Gazette* news article. For its trouble,

the Dollarway School District received about \$1.7 million in consolidation incentive funding, which helped the district get out of fiscal distress in 2007. The two districts started operating as one during the 2006-2007 school year. Dollarway High absorbed Altheimer-Sherrill High School in 2007, giving the school an enrollment boost. The principal of Altheimer-Sherrill High School took over as principal of Dollarway High.

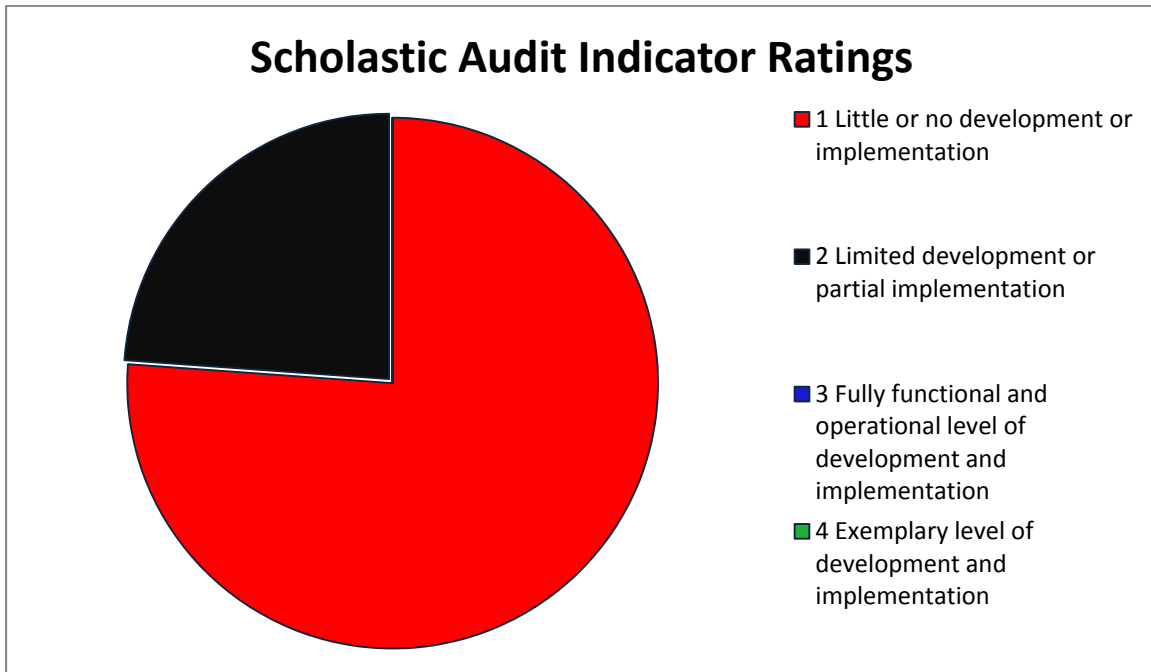
Student Achievement

Dollarway High School’s test scores have long lagged behind the state averages and fall well short of the No Child Left Behind AYP targets. Merging with the Altheimer School District in 2007 didn’t help. In the months before consolidating, the Altheimer School District was in state academic distress and Altheimer’s high school’s test scores were just as low as Dollarway High’s. Though Dollarway High’s literacy scores decreased the first year it merged with Altheimer, the scores didn’t have far to drop. Among the traditional public schools in the state, Dollarway High had the second lowest percent proficient or advanced in math in 2010 (behind only Osceola Middle School): 19.9%. However, that was an improvement over the school’s 2009 scores, when just 11.4% of students were proficient or advanced in math. While the school’s percent proficient or advanced in literacy was a dismal 35%, that score showed dramatic improvements over the previous year when less than 15% of the students were proficient or advanced. The following chart shows how far below the state average Dollarway students have tested.



Scholastic Audit

ADE performed a scholastic audit of Dollarway High School in February 2009. The audit reviewed the school's performance across nine categories, including curriculum, leadership and instruction. ADE's scholastic audit scores schools on indicators within each area. Scores are provided on a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 indicates "little or no development and implementation" and 4 means "exemplary level of development and implementation." Out of 88 indicators, Dollarway was said to have made little or no development on 67 indicators, and limited development on the remaining 21.



The scholastic audit's critiques included:

- "Students are frequently out of class without proper authorization. Some parents frequently monitor campus areas during the lunch and early afternoon period due to safety concerns...Tardiness, truanancies, fighting, and student insubordination comprise the major disruptions to school culture. There is no sense of urgency in addressing these issues."
- "The district does not have a formal process to identify or eliminate unintentional curricular gaps and/or omissions in all content areas between schools. Data sharing or discussions about students' weaknesses that result in revision of practice do not occur on a consistent basis between schools."
- "A systematic, formal process for monitoring and evaluating the curriculum is not specified within the policy and does not occur."
- "Most classes lack rigor and evidence of high expectations for students."
- "There is minimal expectations for teachers to be accountable for the success and failure of students."

The scholastic audit recommended the district take the following steps immediately

- Develop a teacher evaluation instrument.
- Develop a leadership team by assigning lead teachers in all subjects.
- Develop a curriculum team to create a plan for curriculum development and revision.
- Increase the visibility of staff in hallways, on campus grounds, and in the cafeteria.

When we visited Dollarway in May 2011, Superintendent Dr. Tucker said he had not yet had an opportunity to work on the scholastic audit recommendations due to his being suspended for four months in 2010 after a year on the job (see the District Administration section below). However, Dr. Tucker said he thought the ADE Scholastic Audit was so valuable, he requested audits for the elementary schools in the district — at district expense. He thought it was “important to have the state tell us what we need to do.” He said he wanted the ADE audit team to identify all problems in the district and make recommendations, and that he was willing to pay for these scholastic audits, which can cost more than \$30,000 each.

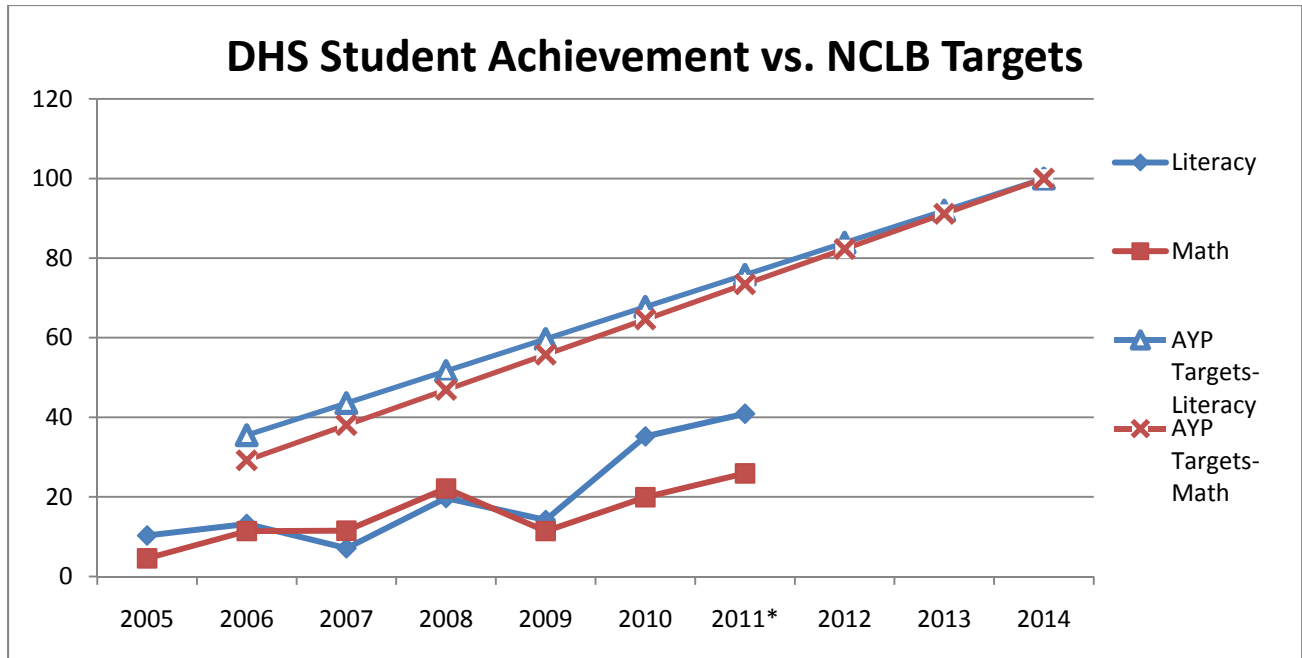
School Improvement

Dollarway High School is in year five of school improvement. Notably, Dollarway High School met standards in 2008, a year when just 19.7% of its students were proficient in literacy and 22.1% were proficient in math. That year the school met standards using the safe harbor calculation¹⁰ which recognizes significant improvement in achievement even when a school does not meet the established targets. The following table shows changes in Dollarway High’s school improvement status over the past six years, with improvement in status designated in green and worsening status designated in red. (The number indicates the years in school improvement. An “(M)” means the school met standards that year but is not yet out of school improvement. It takes two years of meeting standards to get out of school improvement.)

Annual School Improvement Status						
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Dollarway High	SI_1	SI_2	SI_3	SI_3(M)	SI_4	SI_5

The following chart shows that while Dollarway High’s test scores are generally improving, they are far behind the targets the school needs to reach for the No Child Left Behind standards. Notably, however, the school made significant improvement in 2010, and preliminary data indicate the school continued improving in 2011.

¹⁰ The Safe Harbor methodology allows schools to be considered “meeting standards,” even though they have not met the proficiency targets established under the No Child Left Behind Act. Schools can meet standards through the safe harbor method if they reduce the percent of their students who are NOT proficient by 10%.



*2011 DHS percentages represent preliminary figures.

Other Student Achievement Designations

Dollarway High School is a Tier I school, meaning it has been designated as one of the 14 persistently lowest achieving schools in Arkansas. This designation was created by a federal initiative that gave states large school improvement grants to help turnaround their worst schools. Arkansas identified its persistently lowest achieving schools by ranking all schools based on the percentage of students testing proficient or advanced over the previous three years.

Additionally Dollarway High had one of the highest grade-inflation rates in the state at 77.8 percent, according to a Jan. 2010, *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* article. Of the 27 Dollarway students who earned A's and B's in math courses, 21—more than three quarters—failed to score at proficient or better on state End of Course tests.

In recent years, the state has introduced two additional school achievement ratings by which schools are measured: the gains rating and the status rating. A gains score measures a school's performance based on changes in individual students' learning; for example the improvements made in the test score of individual 4th graders over their individual scores as 3rd graders. The gains rating differs from the school improvement status in that school improvement is based on changes in a single grade from one year to the next; for example, 3rd grade test scores in 2011 compared with 3rd grade test scores in 2010. Gains scores are between 5, "schools of excellence for improvement," and 1, "schools in need of immediate improvement." Gains scores were not calculated for high schools before 2010. Dollarway High's only gains score indicated it was in need of immediate improvement.

Year	Gains Score
2008	NA
2009	NA
2010	1 (in need of immediate improvement)

In 2010, the state started using a new measure, called a status rating. A school's status rating is a measure of the number of students who score advanced, proficient, basic and below basic. While the school improvement status is based on the percentage of students who are proficient or not, the status score weights each of the four performance categories. For example, a school with 25 proficient students and 25 advanced students would get a higher status score than a school with 50 proficient students. Status ratings range from 5, "schools of excellence," to 1, "schools in need of immediate improvement." Dollarway High was one of just 19 schools to receive a status score of 2 in 2010. (The only schools to receive a score of 1 were alternative learning schools and the Arkansas School for the Deaf.)

Year	Status Score
2010	2 (approaching the standards)

District Administration

It has been a tumultuous few years for the Dollarway School District, with three superintendents serving the district over the past four school years. When we visited in May 2011, Dr. Arthur Tucker was leading the district. He had been hired as Dollarway's superintendent in May 2009, replacing Thomas Gathen, who left to become the superintendent in the McGehee School District. Gathen's departure occurred after he came under criticism for promoting, in election fliers, an incorrectly calculated impact of a proposed property tax increase. The millage increase (9.7 for residents of the former Alzheimer Unified School District and 1.5 for Dollarway residents) passed, and the mistake provoked a lawsuit in which property owners sued to void the election. The higher millage helped get the district off the fiscal distress list in 2007, but in 2008 voters approved a millage reduction. (The lawsuit was dismissed in 2010.)

Tucker came from the Texarkana School District, where he had served as assistant superintendent, according to a news article. He had also completed the Arkansas Leadership Academy's Superintendent Institute. A little over a year into Tucker's tenure, in July 2010, the Dollarway School Board suspended him but never explained why publicly. According to news accounts, Board members said the suspension was not the result of illegal activity or conduct violations. Dr. Tucker told us that even he did not know why he had been suspended. Nearly three months later, the board extended his suspension, again refusing to explain why. The board reinstated Tucker less than a month later in November 2010.

Dr. Tucker told us that his primary goal for the district was to achieve student performance gains each year. The district's test scores did increase during Tucker's two years on the job. But his leadership was cut short in June 2011,

when he resigned to become the superintendent of the Brinkley School District at a reduced salary. The Dollarway district hired Dr. Bettye Dunn Wright, an assistant professor of education at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, to replace him.

School Administration

At the time of our visit, Arnold Robertson was in his first year as the principal for Dollarway High. He replaced Michael Anthony who took a job as an assistant principal at Hall High in Little Rock. Mr. Robertson was previously the principal for Dollarway Middle for one year and the Malvern High School's assistant principal for a year before that. Dr. Tucker appointed Mr. Robertson as principal of the high school in the Fall of 2010 because of his success in raising student performance at Dollarway Middle School.

Mr. Robertson said the high school has sufficient resources, but the school needs to use them more efficiently. For example, student test scores have not been used to inform teaching. Mr. Robertson said he is also placing a priority on utilizing test data to design curricula and guide instruction.

School Teachers

Everyone we spoke with at Dollarway High School acknowledged, in one way or another, that too many teachers are disillusioned and unmotivated. According to Dr. Tucker, they feel like "everyone blames them for all that is wrong with the district's student performance." Mr. Robertson is trying to change the apathy and discouragement among teachers, who have become comfortable with taking the path of least resistance. He said the school's older teachers, who are used to having significant autonomy in their classroom, are his biggest challenge in improving the school's performance. These teachers resist changing teaching strategies and assuming responsibility for discipline and student absenteeism. Dr. Tucker acknowledged the school "doesn't have a family atmosphere," and teachers do not have collegial and supportive working relationships with one another or the principal. Too many teachers have low expectations regarding student performance and being able to curtail absenteeism. When asked about terminating teachers, Mr. Robertson said there were about six teachers out of 30 he would consider releasing if he could.

Salaries are another major problem. Although Dollarway's average teacher salary, \$45,037 in 2010, was the 60th highest average salary of all Arkansas districts, Dollarway has trouble competing for teachers. Surrounding districts pay on average \$4,000 to \$5,000 more than Dollarway, and starting salaries of neighboring districts are \$2,000 to \$5,000 more than Dollarway's. Dr. Tucker pointed out that many graduates of the local universities are enticed to go to Texas because they start at \$40,000, and they are given \$5,000 signing bonuses and \$4,000 for moving expenses. This recruiting problem is worse in some teaching areas than others. For example, until the current school year, the district had to use online courses for chemistry and Spanish. The district also experiences a big problem in retaining teachers because of the opportunities for better incomes and fewer challenges elsewhere.



We spoke with several teachers who acknowledged that the faculty's morale is low and many teachers are apathetic. They said the pressures of testing were partly to blame. Teachers have very limited opportunity to observe one another in the classroom because of the pressures of paperwork and testing. The teachers believe testing takes too much time away from teaching and should be reduced. The school's poor reputation in the community, unresponsive parents, and the challenges of teaching in poverty-stricken neighborhoods also weigh heavily on faculty morale. One teacher complained that the superintendent was disconnected from teachers and disengaged from what is going on in classrooms.

The teachers indicated that there are no meetings across grade levels to discuss curriculum alignment. Although the literacy coach is helping the faculty incorporate reading and writing in their courses, irrespective of the subject they teach, district leadership is needed to coordinate these activities across the curriculum. Also, these teachers believe there is a real need for reading and writing to be taught in summer school. The majority of students are reading and writing at levels below high school.

Low teacher morale is likely related to another problem at Dollarway High: teacher absenteeism. Mr. Robertson indicated that seven or eight teachers are absent on any given day, out of a faculty of 30. Dr. Tucker indicated that attendance is greater among younger teachers. Several teachers were absent more than 20 days during the 2010-11 school year. He admits that changing entrenched attitudes and behavioral patterns has been difficult. For too long, teachers have been allowed to be absent.

Mr. Robertson is trying to change teachers' negative attitudes and low expectations by providing a consistent message that students actually like more structure and rigor in their courses when they feel teachers care. He promotes the idea that structure and rigor will improve not only student achievement, but it will reduce student absenteeism.

The high school hired a literacy coach and a math coach who provide ongoing feedback from classroom observations, and they provide informal evaluations of teaching periodically. Veteran teachers are given a formal summative evaluation annually by the principal, and new teachers are formally evaluated twice a year. These formal evaluations are open-ended (teachers are not rated on a scale), and conferences are held with teachers to discuss the written observations. Mr. Robertson indicated that he plans to link teachers' evaluations to professional development, and he wants to institute an "intensive PD" for ineffective teachers.

The teachers who spoke with us said they were, in fact, held more accountable under Mr. Robertson's leadership. They think teachers are beginning to be more collaborative, resulting in part from more regular teacher meetings scheduled according to courses taught and grade level.

Student and Parent Issues

In the school's 2009 scholastic audit, the standard on which Dollarway High School scored the lowest was school culture. The scholastic audit describes students sleeping during instruction, an unenforced dress code, disengaged students, students coming and going from the campus throughout the school day, and classroom disruptions caused by frequent tardiness, truancies, fighting and student insubordination. Students roaming around campus when they should be in class has been a particularly prominent problem for DHS. The bell would ring, signaling the start of class, but students continued standing where they were. When Mr. Robertson came to the high school in the fall of 2010, he said many students felt no urgency about getting to school on time in the morning. Students would arrive at school at all points in the day. There would be 100 absences for first period, then 80 for the next, and so on.

The teachers who talked with us are disappointed the school does not have student organizations, such as chess clubs, quiz bowl, or Spanish club. They indicated that there was an over-emphasis on athletics to the virtual exclusion of other student activities, and that students often returned from other districts lamenting the fact that they do not have these activities. They also said AP classes have a wide variety of students, many of whom are not qualified to be in these more advanced classes. A problem that has contributed to misassignment of students to AP classes is the loss of students in recent years.

Mr. Robertson said his top priorities, in addition to increasing student achievement, are lowering student absences and reducing discipline problems. The student attendance rate, 90.1, is below the state average of 94.2. State disciplinary data suggest that rates of student assaults (.2%) and expulsions (0%) are below the state average, but the rates for weapons incidents (1%) and staff assaults (1%) are above the state average. The teachers stated that while there are discipline problems and physical fights, the school does not have serious drug problems, gangs, or violence. The high school's graduation rate, 81.5%, is about the same as the state average. The teachers who spoke with us credited the new principal with more consistent discipline of students and more support of teachers in their discipline. However, the teachers reported that the problem with absenteeism has continued.

Mr. Robertson and his teachers also have managed to curtail much of the roaming on campus and roaming off campus during the school day. He said during the second or third week of school last year, neighboring stores called to see if school was actually in session because they weren't getting the business they'd received in the past from students during the school day. Still Mr. Robertson and the teachers acknowledge there are still too many students roaming around during classes. During our visit, it appeared that there was an inordinate number of student roaming around the campus during class periods without a purpose.

Mr. Robertson explained that another major goal is to somehow get parents more involved in their children's education. The most successful approach he has tried so far has been an athletic banquet, which he estimated attracted about 20% of his high school parents. However, neither he, nor the teachers interviewed, seemed to have ideas or plans about how to engage parents more fully in their children's education. The prevailing attitude seemed to be that parents were either unable to be involved in education because of jobs that did not permit time off for school conferences, or they were simply disinterested in their children's education.



School Improvement Interventions

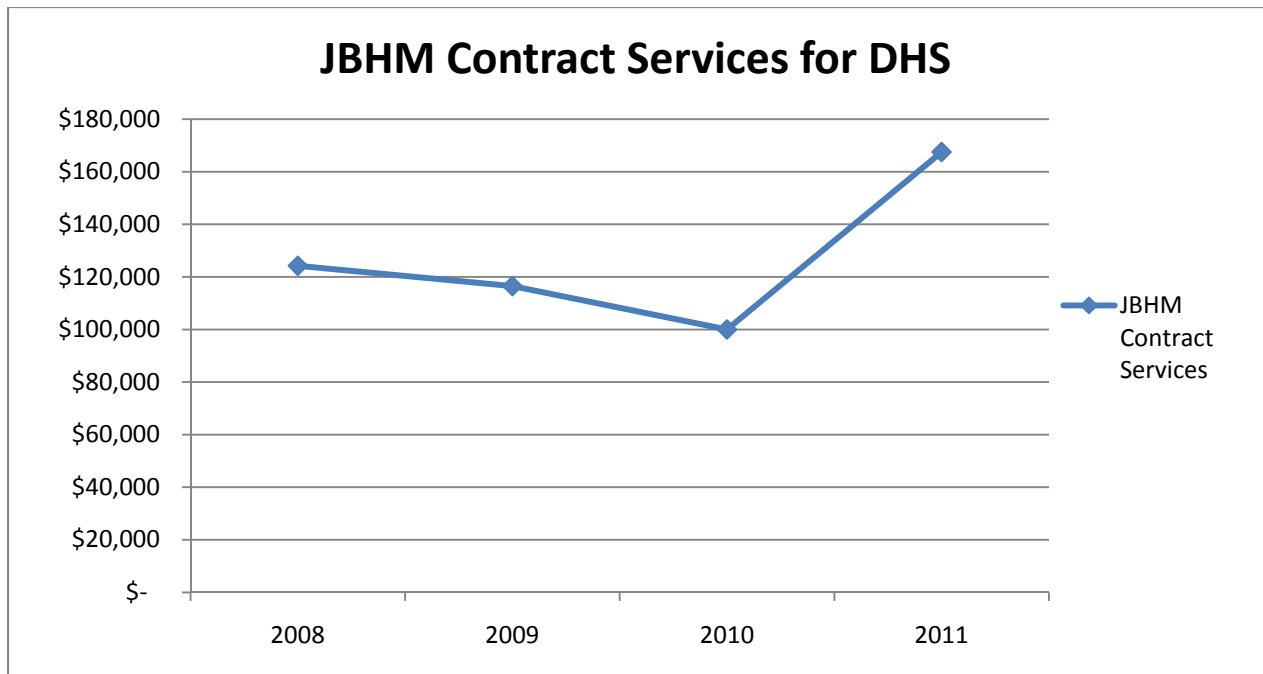
In the past five years, Dollarway High has implemented a number of reform efforts including hiring a literacy coach and a math coach, reorganizing the school day from seven to eight periods to provide point-in-time remediation, and contracting with The Learning Institute to provide formative testing. In June 2010, Dr. Tucker took a delegation from each Dollarway school to Orlando, Florida, for a Modern Schools Conference, sponsored by the International Center for Leadership in Schools.

The school also started a summer enrichment program using five teachers and five paraprofessionals. The program targets the so-called "bubble kids," students who are scoring just below the proficiency threshold. However, Mr. Robertson said few students showed up for the summertime tutoring.

The school also offers after-school tutoring, which is funded by district funds and a 21st Century grant. Attendance in that program has improved. When the after-school tutoring began, just 30 students took advantage of it. School consultants helped DHS target students for tutoring, and now 75 regularly attend.

Like other districts, Dollarway has received federal funding to support school improvement efforts. The district received \$300,000 in federal school improvement 1003(g) funding in 2008-09, but received no funding during the 2009-10 school year. In 2010, ARRA funds greatly enhanced the federal dollars available for these grants programs. Dollarway High School applied for school improvement grant funding, but was not awarded any funding for the 2010-11 school year. The school again applied for funding for the 2011-12 school year and was awarded \$1,987,425.

Perhaps Dollarway High School's most costly effort to improve student achievement was its hiring of JBHM, a Jackson, Mississippi-based consulting firm that provides schools with school improvement consultants. Between 2008 and 2011 Dollarway School District spent \$915,350 on services from JBHM. More than half of that amount was spent for the high school alone. The district spent between \$100,000 and \$167,500 per year on JBHM services for Dollarway High.



Dr. Tucker indicated that there had been some inconsistencies in JBHM services, primarily in the coaching offered. At the time of our visit, the district had a math and a literacy coach from JBHM who divided their time between the middle school and high school. JBHM also provides an administrative consultant who works directly with the superintendent and principal at the high school. This consultant reports on how strategies are working and how faculty are performing in implementing the strategies. However, the principal ultimately is held accountable for operations and teacher performance in the high school.

The high school also uses Academic School Turnaround (AST) consulting service offered by Little Rock-based Learning 4 Today. The AST services provide on-site coaching for school leaders. The district has contracted AST services since the 2008-09 school year.

Mr. Robertson believes JBHM has been helpful in assessing teachers' strengths and weaknesses in their attempts to assist with professional development. While he believes JBHM has had good ideas and valuable services, at times the consultants' ideas are difficult to implement, and they don't always welcome differing opinions. Mr. Robertson said he feels more comfortable with the AST consultants than the JBHM consultants. The principal indicated that some teachers do not use the JBHM coaches. The math coach from JBHM has worked especially hard with math teachers overcoming their resistance to using test data to inform curriculum and differentiated instruction.

The teachers and academic coaches believe they have benefitted slightly from JBHM services, but they also discussed a number of complaints with the consultants. Both the principal and the teachers complained that the school board expects staff to adhere to JBHM's recommendations, and the board

values the consultants' opinion above the staff's. They are especially upset with what they perceive as condescending attitudes toward teachers, and they reported that too often JBHM rates teachers at board meetings by name without having discussed these ratings with teachers. They think teacher ratings are presented to the board in a very perfunctory fashion without considering the totality of their performance as teachers. They indicated this lack of respect also has demoralized teachers at Dollarway. They stated that DHS needs "turn-around" administrators who can implement proven change strategies, and leaders among teachers need to be identified and encouraged to take on the responsibility of organizing curriculum.

Dr. Tucker said he believes it is essential to change the culture at Dollarway in regard to learning. Students, teachers, and parents need to "buy into" the idea that they can make changes that result in significant gains in student performance.

Despite these issues DHS has achieved improvements in test scores, which had previously been inconsistent over the years. The school saw significant gains in 2010, and preliminary data indicate continued increases in 2011. The percentage of students proficient in literacy rose 188% between 2009 and 2011, and the percentage of students proficient in math increased 127%. Still, the percentages remain quite small: about 41% proficient in literacy and 26% proficient in math.

DISCUSSION

The following discussion is informed primarily by the three schools that have been analyzed in the preceding sections of this report. However, some broad observations and generalizations also draw upon case studies done in 2010 in two elementary schools (Meadow Park in North Little Rock and Thirty-Fourth Avenue in Pine Bluff), two middle schools (Rose City in North Little Rock and Stuttgart Junior High), and two high schools (Camden-Fairview and McClellan in Little Rock). Results of these 2010 case studies are discussed in the BLR report titled, **Examination of Efficiency and Achievement Gaps in Arkansas School Districts: Case Studies and Statistical Analyses**.

(<http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/education/K12/Pages/InitiativesAndReports.aspx?catId=13>)

All of these case studies were conducted by two BLR staff with the same interview protocol, which allowed for probing for a more complete accounting of issues. The 2010 case studies served to inform the issues that were more extensively probed in the 2011 case studies, such as contracting with service-providers. Also, the 2011 case studies and the present report contains more information about school demographics and performance than the previous case studies.

Role of Superintendent

How school districts are managed is very important. A lack of efficiency and accountability in managing budgetary issues and grants appears to also be reflected in leadership and handling of personnel. At Osceola we were told that the district had been poorly managed and lacked accountability throughout the system. As a result, the district was in fiscal distress, and we were told that the handling of grants was a “mess,” and several personnel had been misplaced in positions. For example, an effective academic coach had been promoted into a principal position, where she was not able to hold teachers accountable and lacked organizational skills.

Superintendents also can become disconnected from the operations of schools and concerns of teachers. As a result, school policy and teacher issues can be overlooked or misrepresented to the school board, a major complaint at Dollarway. Teachers become demoralized when they believe their concerns and needs are ignored or misunderstood by the school board. Three teachers at Dollarway High School made these observations in our interview with them.

Superintendents’ ineffective leadership can be reflected in poorly managed schools, where there is high absenteeism among students and teachers. This link between leadership and absenteeism was expressed by the teachers interviewed at Dollarway and Osceola. In sum, the superintendent’s expectations and management skill and style tend to set the tone for the district. Effective leadership appears to require communication between the superintendent and teachers, in which there is a consistent message of rigorous high standards and concern for how policies and practices are working for teachers and students.

The superintendent also influences the quality of education in a district through hiring, evaluation, retention, and dismissals of faculty and principals. The superintendent is a key decision-maker in academic programs developed and adopted, and professional development opportunities available. Expectations for students, faculty, and administrators are influenced by the superintendent’s priorities and philosophy. Because superintendents are major decision-makers in budgetary management, they exercise considerable influence over factors that are associated with student achievement, such as contracts with supplemental services, availability of technology and library resources, and high quality tutoring.

Role of Principals

The principal also plays a pivotal role in personnel decisions, professional development (PD), and expectations of teachers, other staff, and students. In schools that are in the process of “turning around” student performance in a positive direction, principals have taken an aggressive, “hands-on” approach to shaping curriculum, expectations of students and teachers, school culture, personnel decisions, and absenteeism/discipline.

In all schools, except one, where students are beginning to show increases in student performance, there has been a change in principals because the former principal had limitations in management and leadership skills. In the school that is an exception to leadership change, the principal made a very concentrated effort to change the curriculum and how teachers taught, and the district made a major investment in receiving consultation and services from Elbow-to-Elbow.

In the majority of the “successful” schools visited, the new principal was aggressively pursuing changes in policies and practices that impact student learning, such as expectations regarding attendance, discipline, performance, and relationships between students and teachers. They were consistent in their performance expectations and stipulation of rules and regulations in written documents and in meetings. They conveyed and monitored academic expectations through “pep rallies,” postings on wall boards, banners in hallways, faculty meetings, and feedback sessions with individual teachers. In addition to regularly scheduled classroom observations of teaching, some effective principals make a practice of sitting with students on the playground or at lunch and asking them questions about content they are learning in classes. These first-hand data from students are used, in tandem with classroom observations, in regular feedback sessions with individual teachers.

These more informal teacher evaluations are designed to help and support teachers, in contrast to the more formal summative evaluations conducted at the end of the year to rate teacher performance. Although these formative evaluations typically are not factored into the summative evaluation, they provide highly valuable feedback to teachers for making changes in teaching. Teachers affirmed the value of these feedback sessions in the onsite interviews we conducted. These informal evaluations are especially useful to new teachers and teachers who have been rated as ineffective. They can provide “real time” specific data on weaknesses and on individual student needs to differentiated instruction. In successful schools, ineffective teachers are dismissed if they are unable to meet performance expectations after receiving individually-tailored professional development to address their particular deficiencies. To make interim or informal evaluations more feasible in terms of time, successful schools use academic coaches to assist principals with these evaluations. In fact, many of these informal evaluations are conducted as an aspect of coaching and classroom observation feedback.

A noteworthy distinction between successful and unsuccessful schools seems to be the attention given to teacher evaluation and to dismissing ineffective teachers. Many schools do not conduct interim teacher evaluations, and schools that are struggling with student performance appear to retain teachers irrespective of effectiveness. Moreover, several only conduct a complete summative evaluation on seasoned teachers every few years, allowing them to do a project in lieu of an evaluation in the intervening years. This intermittent pattern of evaluating teachers seems to encourage laxity among seasoned teachers. Retaining ineffective teachers appears to be a major factor in distinguishing schools that struggle in student performance from successful schools. A prominent complaint of principals at struggling schools was the presence of ineffective teachers. Although tenure and unions make dismissal more difficult, the schools that are demonstrating enhanced student achievement have gone through a process of dismissing ineffective teachers after a period of targeted professional development to remedy weaknesses.

Successful schools were led by principals and academic coaches that had a missionary, or highly dedicated, zeal for educating students and teachers in how to learn and improve performance. These principals had strong teaching backgrounds and led by example, often assuming a role of academic coach by modeling teaching and providing instruction on pedagogy. At the same time, these principals encouraged academic coaches and other teacher leaders to assume responsibilities for providing professional development, modeling teaching skills, and classroom observational feedback.

Principals also have considerable sway over school policies and practices that impact teaching and student learning, and over the rigor of curriculum, academic programs and interventions, teacher morale, and student discipline. For example, the principal largely determines the priority, rigor, and type of tutoring. It is typically the principal that decides whether tutoring is going to be an ongoing, systematic intervention aimed at providing extended classroom instruction, or more fragmented, impromptu meetings aimed at helping with homework.

The primary liaison in many instances between the school and community and parents is the principal. In addition to meeting with community and business leaders, the principal typically takes primary responsibility for parent involvement in children's education. Successful schools seem to make more overtures to engage parents, such as spaghetti dinners, math and literacy nights, and helping parents connect with social services such as childcare and transportation.

Academic Coaches

Principals, in tandem, with academic coaches have a strong influence on the type and nature of professional development that is available and taken by teachers and other staff. For example, successful schools seem to focus more on individualized and job-embedded PD, and on modeling and classroom observation feedback from coaches. Research indicates single-session PD activities, with no follow-up modeling or feedback, are not as useful for improving teaching skills. Requiring workshops that are not relevant to teachers' responsibilities also do not benefit teaching. Yet, the unsuccessful schools appear to retain PD regimens that are characterized by single sessions, irrelevancy, and lack of follow-up practice.

Academic coaches appear to be essential to improving teaching, and thereby, raising student achievement. The most advantageous coaches seem to have a noteworthy zeal to acquire knowledge and skills to impart to teachers. They also have extensive teaching experience in their area of coaching (e.g., math), and a strong academic preparation for that content area. A Masters degree and various forms of continuing education seem to be major assets in coaching. Academic coaches need to be used as teaching coaches rather than as additional teachers and tutors because of the value of job-embedded modeling, instruction and classroom observational feedback.

Teachers seem to learn more from observing others (e.g., academic coach), practicing teaching, and receiving feedback and further instruction than from about any other method of presenting PD. Another noteworthy observation about successful schools is that they had well- educated, highly motivated academic coaches who had several years of classroom teaching experience in their area of concentration. These coaches spend a great deal of time furthering their expertise through ongoing university coursework, workshops, and national conferences and seminars. A very beneficial role for academic coaches involves transferring innovations in teaching from national forums to teachers in their school district.

Some successful schools have relied on academic coaches from firms with which they have contracted such as JBHM. In some instances, this arrangement works out very well and teachers report that they

have learned a lot about teaching from these coaches. On the other hand, there were reports of coaches from these firms not showing up until the middle of the year, and being unreliable in their attendance even after they showed up for duty. The relationship between these firms and administration and teachers is critical to the effectiveness of these contractual services. There were reports of coaches presenting teachers with strategies and philosophies that conflict with those espoused by the principal.

Teachers

Research shows teaching is one of the strongest predictors of student achievement, and teaching is affected by morale and the respect and appreciation teachers feel that they have from administration. In the successful schools we visited, principals and teachers agreed that they had trusting and respectful relationships between leaders and faculty. Open and supportive relationships between the principal and teachers seem to encourage positive and collegial relationships between teachers. In successful schools, teachers appeared to be more supportive and collegial with one another and the principal than in schools that struggle with student performance.

Teachers that enjoy collegial relations are more productive in working in professional learning communities and other faculty meetings. They meet more frequently and are able to plan, implement, and monitor interventions more effectively than faculty bogged down with dissent and interpersonal problems. Teachers at successful schools, as a whole, seem more motivated and committed to making whatever effort is needed to raise student performance. Highly motivated teachers are more likely to seek out and attend professional development activities that enhanced their particular content area and skills.

Successful schools tend to make greater use of technology and to make sure teachers know how to properly use valuable technology such as smartboards. For example, successful schools were more likely to have a technology instructor than schools that struggle with student performance.

Teachers at higher performing schools appear to have spent more time designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating curriculum than teachers at struggling schools. One of the more impressive observations about successful schools was the rigor that goes into making sure that course objectives are integrated across grade levels as well as between courses. Course content and pacing were coordinated across classes, grade levels, and subject areas in successful schools. This integration and coordination was less evident in struggling schools.

In several successful schools, teachers keep portfolios that contain lesson plans, pacing timetables, student projects and exams, test scores, parent interactions, teaching evaluations, and other relevant indicators of teaching responsibilities. The portfolios are kept from year-to-year so their professional development and performance can be assessed with information in addition to the traditional classroom observation evaluation. This portfolio also provides a running account of their progress in addressing professional development needs across several years.

The discussion of overarching observations made in the case study can be summed up with a generalized statement that successful schools, in comparison to struggling schools, are explicit and rigorous in their planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of teaching, curriculum, strategic and programmatic interventions, administration, and budget management. In other words, they are more efficient than schools that show little or no increases in student achievement. In fact, a systematic efficiency analysis conducted with multiple regression procedures, known as quadriform analysis, support this generalization. The analysis is based on the assumption that there is a linear relationship

between total instructional costs and student performance, i.e., in other words, increases in costs are associated with corresponding increases in performance. This is the standard assumption found in the professional school efficiency literature. A report made to the legislature in 2010 details the methodology and findings, and it can be requested from us or found at:

(<http://www.arkleg.state.ar.us/education/K12/Pages/InitiativesAndReports.aspx?catId=13>).

Efficiency Analysis

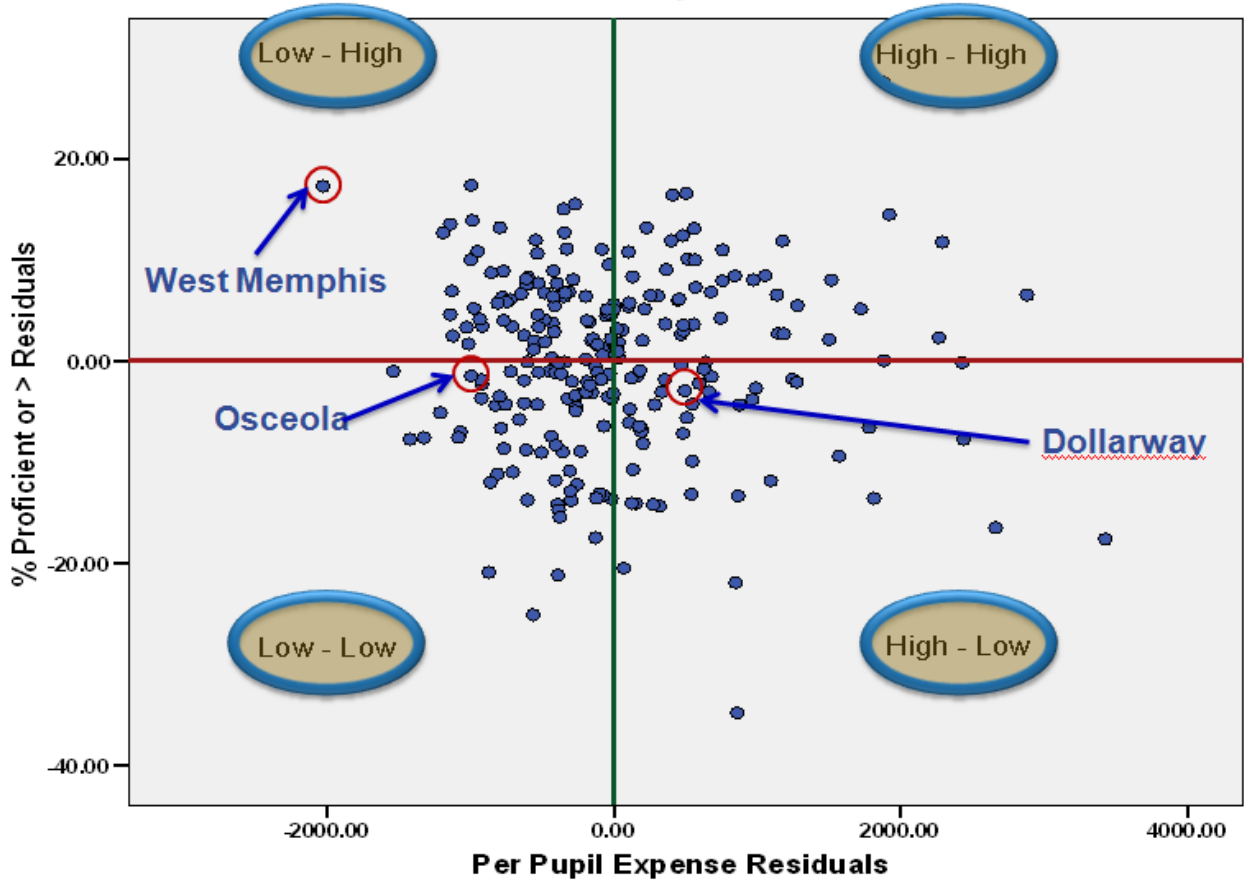
The linear relationships between total instruction costs (state, federal, local sources) and student performance on the 2010 state 4th grade literacy Benchmark exams were examined for the 244 school districts that existed in 2010. These relationships were examined after considering the effects of race and NSLA on performance – this is referred to as controlling for the effects of competing influences on an outcome in statistics. In other words, the complicating effects of race and NSLA were considered (controlled) before examining the relationships between costs and student performance.

The results of this quadiform analysis are shown in Chart 1. Each of the 244 blue dots represents the school districts that existed in Arkansas in 2010, and the dots indicate the intersection of costs and student performance for each district. More specifically, the dots represent the differences between the actual and predicted costs and performance. The predicted values for costs and performance are derived from the multiple regression statistic based on the assumption of efficiency, or a linear relationship between costs and performance. In financial terms (rather than statistical), increased funding should lead to corresponding increases in student performance.

If there was perfect efficiency, there should be no differences between actual and predicted values of costs and performance. Hence, the 4 quadrants seen in Chart 1 are formed by drawing lines at zero differences in costs (green line) and performance (red line). School districts represented in the top left quadrant had lower than predicted costs and higher than expected performance (highly efficient), and this quadrant included West Memphis. The lower left quadrant shows districts that had both lower than predicted costs and performance (inefficient), and it contains Osceola. Finally, the lower right quadrant includes districts that had higher than predicted costs and lower than expected performance (highly inefficient), and it contains Dollarway. Similar results were observed with analyses of 4th grade math, and 8th grade literacy and math in 2010 and 2007. In other words, replications of the analysis presented in different grades, subjects, and years produced nearly identical findings.

These results are in full agreement with observations made in our case studies. Both methods (case study and systematic statistics) classify our 3 schools in precisely the same way, which offers considerable assurance to the confidence we would place in the validity of our case study observations.

Chart 1. Linear Relationship Per Pupil Total Expenses to % Proficient or > 4th Grade Literacy 2010



CONCLUSION

Because this report examined just three schools, we must be cautious about drawing broad conclusions about the causes of school failure or the strategies that result in higher student performance. However some issues revealed through these case studies (as well as from six case studies we prepared last year) can be used to inform future decision-making. The following points attempt to highlight common themes we heard from these school officials, and they compare the distinctive characteristics of the struggling schools with those of the school that achieved great success.

The relationship between school improvement consultants and school personnel

The relationship between school personnel and the school improvement consultants the district hires can have a tremendous effect on the degree of improvement made in the school. For example, the relationship between the Wonder Elementary principal and the E2E consultant appeared to be a balanced partnership. The principal was open to ideas and criticism from her school improvement consultant, and in return, the consultant approached the school as an advisor. Although the consultant had been hired by the district to raise Wonder's test scores, she did not make demands of the school or undermine the principal's authority. That relationship, perhaps partially serendipitous, was not evident in other schools. Principals often complained that their opinions and judgment were frequently overridden by the consultants. Several said they would get "written up" in the consultant's weekly report to the district if they did not do what consultant wanted. A school we visited last year said one teacher was designated as the America's Choice liaison. This person's job was to monitor teachers' compliance with the America's Choice program when the America's Choice consultant was not there. Some teachers complained about negative reviews of their performance during school board meetings where they had no opportunity to disagree with the consultant's findings. The consultants have their own frustrations. Mike Cox said that when he served as the JBHM consultant for Osceola, the superintendent at the time was unresponsive to Cox's weekly reports. He had trouble making inroads with apathetic principals and teachers because he could not get the superintendent to enforce his recommendations.

The difficulty of removing ineffective or apathetic teachers

One issue mentioned again and again in our case study visits—by both successful schools and failing schools—is the difficulty of getting rid of poor teachers. Many of the administrators we spoke with said the process for firing ineffective teachers is lengthy, time-consuming, and laborious. Principals, particularly those in failing schools, said the inordinate number of challenges they face forces them to decide whether to spend time on the paperwork necessary to remove a bad teacher or find creative ways to work around them. Some try to do both at the same time. The principals with whom we spoke tended toward the latter. These administrators said that while they gather the documentation necessary to fire their bad teachers, they moved those educators to grade levels or subjects that are not benchmark tested, such as 2nd grade or social studies. Others took a do-whatever-it-takes approach. Instead of removing weak teachers and hiring replacements, the principal at Wonder Elementary said she and her school improvement consultant personally taught the weak teachers' classes.

The impact of a school's poor reputation

Without exception, every struggling school we visited (including some last year) noted the damaging effects of a school's bad reputation. Some said that although they've had a long history as being the

bad school in town, the No Child Left Behind school improvement label solidified it. The inability to shake that reputation drives these schools in a downward spiral. It drives good students to other schools, it demoralizes teachers and hinders recruitment, and it impedes community support and investment.

The entrance of a charter school in the community

The entrance of charter schools in a community can have a significant impact on the existing public schools. We saw this clearly in the few schools we visited. It's notable that the West Memphis School District, where great strides have been made in student achievement, faces no competition from charter schools. Twice the West Memphis School District has dissuaded outside organizations from establishing charter schools in its community. The West Memphis School District was able to convince community members that the district was already providing high quality education, and a charter school option was unnecessary. On the other hand, the Osceola School District has struggled for years with the community's own push to open charter schools and the resulting loss of students. Some Osceola school officials said the charter schools exacerbated the school district's dismal student achievement record. However, it's clear the district's poor performance made it more vulnerable to the development of charter schools. A lack of confidence in the school system led community leaders to look elsewhere for quality education.

The effect of a school's compounding problems

Schools that have been in school improvement for many years or have low percentages of student achievement have a multitude of problems that compound one another. The problems preventing them from improving student achievement are neither simple nor singular. For example Dollarway High is juggling a litany of problems including rapid superintendent turnover, a history of fiscal distress, rampant teacher absenteeism, declining enrollment and a poor reputation in the community. On the other hand, when Wonder Elementary began to focus on raising test scores, it had the good fortune of already having strong district and school leadership. The school needed to adjust some of its teaching strategies and improve the skills of its weaker teachers, but it was building from a stable foundation.