MISSISSIPPI
ACHIEVEMENT
SCHOOL
DISTRICT
**BACKGROUND**

**THE FACTS**

**THE MISSISSIPPI ACHIEVEMENT SCHOOL DISTRICT** is a statewide, stand-alone school district with no geographical restrictions; it may comprise any public schools or school districts that are designated an “F” for multiple years. The current Mississippi Achievement School District was established June 1, 2019, by the State Board of Education pursuant to state law.

MASD currently operates in the Mississippi Delta, serving approximately 3,700 students across the former Humphreys and Yazoo County School Districts, with 1,374 students from Humphreys and 2,278 students from Yazoo County. An overwhelming majority of students, 98% (3,584 students), identify as Black or African American, with a near-even split between male and female students. Students’ ages range from 4 to 20, spanning pre-kindergarten through 12th grade.
Due to its status as a newly created state takeover entity, MASD has had to work hard to negate its “outsider” identity. Mistrust was particularly high in 2019 immediately after the takeover in both the Yazoo and Humphreys communities. Families initially saw the new district only as an oversight institution rather than one meant to support their children. This perception was reinforced by both districts’ school boards being disbanded and their superintendents terminated as required by law. Under the law, the state-appointed superintendent Jermall Wright reports directly to the Mississippi Department of Education. Members of the school community, therefore, only have the superintendent to direct their concerns to, unless they want to take them to the department in Jackson.

The communities in Yazoo and Humphreys not only found themselves under a state takeover but also in a consolidation. However, whereas Starkville Oktibbeha County School District combined two contiguous districts into a single, permanent countywide district, MASD has the rather unique experience of operating as a single district across two different regions for an indeterminate amount of time. When one or both former districts reach academic benchmarks, the districts can be reconstituted by the state into independent, locally controlled districts. This has created unique challenges for MASD in trying to build community and communicate.

Finally, on top of challenging community relations, MASD also operates in an extremely rural and impoverished area of the state. This means that students and families struggle with reliable transportation, access to internet and devices, and sometimes adequate telephone service. These conditions make communications difficult even in typical times.

MASD inherited communications channels and processes that were not particularly well developed in either district. Each district had a website before the takeover, but these were replaced with the MASD website, which was not very functional at first. MASD also created a single social media account on Facebook and Twitter for the new district, which it updated with events and other major announcements throughout the academic year. Because the district operates under a single
account on each platform, the district has to be careful not to overlook information that is pertinent to one region, and more importantly, not to neglect to share information with both regions. Overall, communications were not differentiated, with the exception of specific school operations and natural disasters or other crises affecting students based on their location.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, monthly, in-person meetings were MASD’s most important communications tactic. These meetings took the place of school board meetings as each community’s school board had been disbanded. During these meetings, MASD would discuss the district’s goals and the community’s concerns. Attendees included families, school administrators, educators, and other community members. These meetings were the primary opportunity for district leaders to connect directly with community members. MASD used these meetings to get familiar with the stakeholders in both Yazoo and Humphreys and to gather and disseminate information.

Despite some strides, MASD was still very much in the early stages of building trust with its stakeholders as well as redesigning all district processes, including communications, when the pandemic began. Consequently, the conclusion of the 2019-2020 school year was distinctly challenging for MASD. While their work prior to the pandemic was certainly not easy, the district now faced the added pressure of ensuring their students had access to an equitable education from their homes.

Students’ access to devices and broadband in MASD was low going into the pandemic. This meant the district faced practical difficulties in communicating with families and students above and beyond the willingness of families to engage with MASD. In deciding how to communicate and continue instruction, the district noted, “There was a lot to consider, mainly because of the infrastructure itself in the Delta. It wasn’t as easy for us to say, ‘Okay, now we’re just going to do work from home’ and expect every child to have a computer, or every child to have internet, or every child to have a device.”

The lack of time to put a new system in place and the fact that most of the district’s students are located in two very rural counties also made it difficult for the district to ensure high-quality educational opportunities during the first few months of the pandemic. Therefore, when MASD notified parents of the school closures in spring 2020, they offered two “enrichment activity” options, dependent upon students’ access to personal devices. Students were able to access online instructional resources or pick up instructional packets if they did not have device access. Packets were also distributed via bus routes at the end of March. While these instructional resources were provided to students to keep them on track academically, the material was not counted against students who did not complete it.

In order to close the spring semester, and in preparation for the fall semester, the Mississippi Achievement School District asked students and parents to disclose what devices, if any, were available to students. MASD additionally held several discussions with stakeholders—including students, families, teachers, administrators, and other community members—in the early summer. On June 19, 2020, the district held its first virtual “District Stakeholder Meeting” via Zoom. There were approximately 400 attendees at this meeting, which engaged parents, teachers, students, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders. This meeting was an online version of MASD’s regular monthly stakeholder meetings. As stakeholders’ interest piqued in district operations in response to the pandemic, the continuation of these meetings in the virtual space became integral to the district’s communications plan.
MASD held another meeting with stakeholders on June 23, 2020, via Zoom, where attendance ranged between 260-300 people over the course of the meeting. The purpose of the meeting was to receive feedback on tentative reopening plans, allow stakeholders to express any concerns using the chat feature, and provide responses to previously collected questions. The district also used Google Forms to survey families.

Using the input from their June stakeholder meetings, on June 30, 2020, MASD made the announcement to delay reopening until September 8, 2020, when they would offer 100% virtual and hybrid instruction model options. The district opened the 2020-21 school year with a Monday-Thursday in-person or 100% virtual options to their elementary students. The district’s secondary students (middle and high school students), were 100% virtual. All special education students regardless of grade were offered an in person option for the entire school year. Fridays were virtual for all students, which provided time to offer continued professional learning opportunities for staff and in-person tutoring for targeted student populations.

With access to relief funding that came in summer 2020, MASD purchased devices for each of its students. Parents were required to pay a $25 device usage fee ($50 for parents with two or more students requiring devices), and students had to sign usage agreements. Families who were unable to pay these fees upfront were provided planning options to resolve their debt.

MASD provided internet access to students through hotspot setups at schools, learning centers, and churches throughout each community. The district released an announcement on September 1, 2020, detailing which spaces would be open to students based on their respective counties. This announcement also provided families with information on meal pickups throughout the week for students attending virtually and bus routes and stop locations for students attending in-person school.

Following an increase in COVID-19 cases after the Thanksgiving holiday, MASD transitioned to 100% virtual learning until the winter break began on December 15, 2020.
STATE OF REOPENING, SPRING 2021

Following the winter break, MASD transitioned from virtual learning back to hybrid and virtual options. Elementary students continued to follow either their Monday-Thursday in person with Fridays being 100% virtual or the 100% virtual as an option. In February when case numbers began falling, secondary students were offered an A/B-day hybrid option. Students with a hybrid schedule attended in person according to their designated A/B-day schedule, adhering to COVID-19 precautions. Students in the virtual model of instruction attended from home during normal school hours. Schools reported cases of COVID-19 and made communications available via the school district website and social media. Throughout the spring semester, the district made changes to the model of instruction, transitioning to 100% virtual when exigent circumstances, such as weather, prevented students from being able to attend in person.

LESSONS LEARNED

Communications

Of all our sampled districts, MASD perhaps had the most difficult challenge in that they had the least amount of time to establish basic communications processes and build trust prior to the onset of the pandemic. Nonetheless, MASD’s focus on engaging stakeholders throughout the pandemic has allowed it to emerge from the 2020-2021 school year stronger than it started, with an increase in community cohesion and trust in the district.

The first key to MASD’s success has been an intense focus on building trust with community members through consistent, informative updates and multiple opportunities for input. MASD made particularly good use of Zoom to include stakeholders in decision making. MASD found Zoom’s chat, polling, and other instant response features to be useful functions to get responses from stakeholders. Furthermore, these features allowed more people to participate in feedback as including each individual’s voice one at a time such as in a typical public comment period would get unmanageable with large numbers of participants at any given meeting. The polling feature was an especially powerful tool for the district to collect live data on family preferences for reopening plan options.

Monthly district stakeholder meetings held via Zoom had surprisingly good attendance. According to the district’s Strategic Communications and Marketing Specialist Morgan McMurtry, pre-pandemic, in-person district stakeholder meetings turned out only small numbers of parents and community members but Zoom meetings garnered over 200 stakeholders consistently. Of course, this is also partially a result of the heightened urgency brought about by the pandemic. MASD believes these meetings were the foundation for the expanded trust it has gained from stakeholders.

Nonetheless, the district believes Facebook was the most effective communal correspondence, with the most feedback and inquiry from stakeholders being posted on the school’s page. Facebook is a platform where parents, families, and even some students already had an account. This made it easier to share information and to gain the most responses from families. MASD also shared stakeholder meeting information and other social updates on Facebook to encourage families emotionally as the pandemic brought more stress due to issues like employment, academic progress, and general family stability.

Twitter had less interaction than Facebook but still proved to be a useful and somewhat effective communications tool for the district. The same communications were posted on both social media platforms, as well as on the school district’s Instagram account, which was the least effective tool for the school district. MASD’s Instagram account has the smallest following and least interaction of all of its communications channels. Still, the district provides regular updates on their account for students and families who may not have access to other channels.