MISSISSIPPI SCHOOL OF THE ARTS
THE MISSISSIPPI SCHOOL OF THE ARTS (MSA), located in Brookhaven, Mississippi, is a public, statewide residential high school for artistically gifted students.

Established by the state legislature in 1999, MSA is located on the former Whitworth College campus and is home for up to 120 residential high school juniors and seniors from across the state. The school is under the direct supervision of the State Board of Education.

Admitted students enter one of six artistic disciplines: dance, literary, vocal, visual, theatre, and media arts, which they must balance alongside their regular academic studies. Students attend academic classes from 8:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m., prior to any additional practice, rehearsal, or studio time required for their art studies and performances. MSA also holds a formal partnership with the local public high school, Brookhaven High School, to offer classes that are not provided on the MSA campus but are required for students to fulfill graduation requirements. Students live on campus throughout the academic year but are required to go home every other weekend in addition to holidays recognized by the Brookhaven School District. Many students have earned National Scholastics Art & Writing awards, Poetry Out Loud recitation contests, scholarship awards, and national recognition while attending the school, and most students go on to pursue their arts disciplines as careers.

As shown in Figure 3, the Mississippi School of the Arts was home to students from 37 counties during the 2020-2021 academic year. The largest concentration of students comes from Hinds County, located in Central Mississippi, with 12 students, followed by Lauderdale County, located in East Mississippi, with 9 students enrolled. Every other county has anywhere from 1-4 total students enrolled. Approximately 80% of the student body is female. 55% of students are white, 38% are Black or African-American, and the remaining seven percent are either Hispanic/Latinx or bi/multi-racial.

In a typical year, MSA has the capacity to enroll up to 120 students. However, due to COVID-19, the enrollment numbers for 2020-2021 were down for MSA.
Although MSA’s smaller student population gives it a natural advantage in developing close relationships, the statewide nature of the school can make it more difficult to reach parents and families than a district that is located in a city or county. MSA is unable to rely on local media to reach students and families because the majority of students and families are not located near the school. Other factors that make the student profile unique are the small size of the school, its enrollment exclusively of high school juniors and seniors, and its residential model. When students are on campus, the school is responsible for them at all times, a greater level of responsibility than that faced by other districts.

To improve its relationship with families and ensure students are being met where they are, MSA annually spends time assessing where its students are from and how to best reach their families. This practice has been ongoing since its inception. Over the course of the year, faculty and staff develop deep connections with each individual student and their families. However, as half of the school is new each year, MSA must start over with learning their audiences’ needs annually.

Finally, like the Mississippi Achievement School District (MASD), MSA is unusual in that it is directly under state oversight per state law. Unlike MASD, though, MSA is a permanently established statewide school and never faces the prospect of revolving back into a local school district. This means that the school has never had, and will never have, a local board, as its executive director reports to the State Board of Education. Although this structure suits a school with a statewide purpose, the nature of state board oversight means that the school must follow the direct instructions of the state board at times, rather than choosing its own path.

As a small residential high school serving students from all across the state, MSA’s main communications tools prior to COVID-19 were direct mailings to parents and sending additional information home with students during mandatory go-home weekends. MSA would additionally share major updates and announcements on their social media platforms, which were Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Until March 2020, most messages were focused on performances, important dates and events, and urgent information for parents and students. The school would also share opportunities and social events to students via email. MSA does not employ any full-time communications staff.

In March 2020 when schools were closed, MSA Executive Director Suzanne Hirsch drafted more than five potential reopening plans, in the hope that students would return by the end of the 2019-2020 academic year. However, with the governor’s executive orders, MSAs only option was to go 100% virtual.
As a residential arts school, MSA found its transition to virtual learning particularly difficult. MSA had no experience in trying to replicate its performance-focused curriculum without students on campus. MSA began using Moodle, an open-source learning management software, to facilitate coursework but struggled with students not having reliable internet access, especially in rural areas.

The dispersed nature of its stakeholders predictably created communications challenges. MSA chose a comprehensive approach to getting information to families, but there was still much work to do, according to the executive director. “We called a lot; we started using Survey Monkey [an online survey tool] and had to make sure all the students had access to resources like the internet, computers, [and] textbooks. We already knew 100% of students had phones. We mailed, emailed, posted on social media, took surveys from parents and students, [and] held Zoom conferences.”

While most of its critical communications prior to the pandemic were distributed in hard copy directly to parents in person or via postal mail, MSA had also used email and social media for major announcements and community updates. To that end, the school was lucky to have those systems in place as the COVID-19 pandemic pushed students from their classrooms to their bedrooms.

**THE MSA 2020–2021 SCHOOL REOPENING PLAN**

On August 24, the Mississippi School of the Arts (MSA) announced its plan to offer two models of instruction: a 100% virtual model and a hybrid model. To accommodate MSA’s partnership with Brookhaven High School (BHS), those students enrolled at BHS had remote learning for the entire first nine weeks. At the start of the school year, there were 100 total enrolled students (53 juniors and 47 seniors), populating the six arts disciplines. While most students opted for the hybrid model, there were approximately five students who opted into 100% virtual learning. Fewer than ten students withdrew altogether. Mississippi School of the Arts is directly advised by the state board; however, the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) did not provide MSA additional or different recommendations for their communications strategy. Still, MSA submitted some of their own reopening plan strategies to MDE for review based upon planning meetings that had taken place between MSA and state agencies. The MDE’s chief academic officer gave positive feedback to MSA’s plans and endorsed the school’s efforts.
For the first nine weeks, hybrid junior and senior students alternated being on campus every two weeks. While on campus, students followed their prescribed schedule. While at home, teachers engaged with them at the same time as their prescribed schedule as if on campus. Seniors were first invited to campus for a weekend prior to the start of the school year to move in, receive resources, go through orientation, and attend senior-reserved events, such as the annual candlelight dinner. Following the weekend, seniors were sent home to start the year virtually. Hybrid juniors were moved in the next weekend to begin in-person classes on August 31 as residential students. The final reopening plan was distributed to students at these move-in weekends. Seniors had their first in-person rotation two weeks later on September 14.

While attending in person, hybrid students were clustered on residential floors by arts discipline and prevented from inviting outsiders to limit contact and reduce the chances of spread. (Male students were clustered together due to their small numbers.) MSA additionally set up sanitizing stations at every entrance, put up barriers for teachers, and employed temperature checks.

With social distancing, very little opportunity for students to interact, and personal protective equipment available, MSA was able to operate the first nine weeks of school without reporting a single case of COVID-19. However, when its partner school reopened and students began classes there, MSA encountered its first case two weeks before Thanksgiving and subsequently dismissed students to virtual learning the week before that holiday. Students returned from Thanksgiving break in a hybrid model, and there were three more cases. MSA then released all students to virtual instruction the week before the December winter break.

THE STATE OF REOPENING, SPRING 2021
On January 3, following the winter break, MSA transitioned back to its hybrid instruction model:

Hybrid seniors worked virtually from home January 4-15. Seniors returned to campus for MSA classes January 18-29.

Hybrid juniors returned to campus for MSA classes January 4-15. Juniors worked virtually from home January 18-29.

All hybrid juniors and seniors came back to campus beginning January 31 for the remainder of the third nine weeks.

Also in January, student performances, which had also been 100% virtual, resumed with social distancing precautions in place. Attendance for performances in the Black Box Theater, which hosts theatre, dance, literary, and various other art productions, was restricted to 25-30 people. The number of people allowed in Lampton Auditorium, which hosts vocal performances and recognition ceremonies, was limited to 75 people.

When changes to the plan were made, MSA distributed communications through the school’s instant messaging database for automated texting and calling, in addition to social media posts, postal mail, email, website notices, and an app software called Remind. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, the school did not communicate through email, text, or social media as often.
The Mississippi School of the Arts offers two key insights. First, with a diverse, geographically dispersed audience, saturation of information was critical to MSA’s success in COVID communications. MSA’s goal was to make stakeholders aware as soon as possible, in as many ways as possible, of any updates or changes throughout the school year. To do this, they used Moodle, Survey Monkey, social media, emailing, telephone calls, and other channels. MSA leveraged low- or no-cost channels in order to get out the same message as many ways as possible, adjusting characters and using graphics as necessary. Nonetheless, even though MSA added many new communications channels in order to communicate changes in their reopening plan throughout the year, MSA still found the most effective form of communication to be handing documents to parents when students were picked up to go home for the weekend and the least effective to be Twitter, due to its low traffic and interaction, and automated voice calling, due to stakeholders dismissing the calls as “robocalls.”

Secondly, MSA attributes its success to placing an emphasis on transparency. At MSA, transparency means engaging stakeholders in dialogue about the challenges the school is facing and the capacity at which MSA could realistically operate considering its size and its residential status. According to Executive Director Hirsch, families were more likely to trust MSA’s decisions when they knew the school was being transparent with them, even if every family did not agree with the approach. Families understand schools were facing tremendous challenges during COVID and were supportive of efforts to operate in the best way the school could. MSA believes transparency is going to be even more important as districts start spending the COVID relief money they receive from the state and federal government. Districts must have a plan to communicate with transparency how the funds are increasing educational opportunities for students.