

# Working Toward EXCELLENCE

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## Doing Whatever It Takes

*Professional learning communities develop a culture that stretches the hopes, aspirations, and performance of students and adults alike. These schools know how to respond when kids don't learn.*

THE MOST IMPORTANT and difficult job in school-based reform, says education researcher Roland Barth, “is to change the prevailing culture of a school.” A school’s culture “has far more influence on life and learning in the schoolhouse than the state department of education, the superintendent, the school board, or even the principal can ever have.”

Richard DuFour and his co-authors chose Barth’s comments as an epigraph for Chapter 10 of their recent book *Whatever It Takes: How Professional Learning Communities Respond When Kids Don’t Learn*. The chapter explores the process of creating a stretch culture in a school, where educators are constantly setting challenging but attainable “stretch goals” that, in the words of Noel Tichy, “move people’s focus from a determination to be as good

as we *have* to be” to asking themselves “how good *can* we be.”

In this issue of *Working Toward Excellence*, we feature stories about two Alabama schools that have undergone significant cultural change on their way to building true professional learning communities. Buckhorn High in Huntsville and Calcedaever Elementary in rural Mobile County are evolving into “stretch cultures” where principals, teachers and support staff no longer waste time defining limits on what kids can learn. Instead, the sharply focused educators in these schools have committed themselves to doing whatever it takes to assure the academic success of every student.

At Calcedaever and Buckhorn, educators are breaking free of what Michael Fullan has called the “culture of dependency” that is prevalent in

many American schools—a culture that tends to wait for solutions from the outside. These Alabama educators are looking for and finding the answers that work for *their* students, in *their* schools. When new problems arise, they are prepared as a community to tackle them and solve them. “We are always a work in progress,” says Buckhorn curriculum leader Sarah Fanning. “We’re about continuous improvement.”

As our stories indicate, these two schools have followed very different paths to becoming stretch cultures. But we heard the exact same phrase from leaders in both buildings: *We never give up*. “We’re going to try everything we can possibly find to try,” says Calcedaever principal LaGaylis Harbuck. “And if we go down, we’re going to go down

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### ON THE WEB

#### Creating a Culture of Teacher Inquiry

Why does teacher collaboration take root in some schools and not in others? Robert Garmston, co-author of the influential book on effective collaboration, *The Adaptive School*, reflects on the factors that “differentiate schools that create a culture of inquiry.”

<http://snipurl.com/InquiryCulture>

## WHATEVER IT TAKES

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## DOING WHATEVER IT TAKES

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fighting. But we're most likely going to be on top."

Neither Buckhorn nor Calcedeaver can make the claim that they have become the perfect model of the professional learning community. But as their outstanding results indicate, they have broken loose from the barnacle-encrusted anchor statement of the old school culture—"We're doing all we can." The educators in these schools now see how much is possible when you leave the can't-do-any-better attitude behind.

Calcedeaver and Buckhorn are among a growing number of Alabama schools that are experiencing the cultural shifts described by DuFour as necessary to develop a genuine professional learning community (PLC). Here is a brief description of those shifts, summarized from Chapter 10 of *Whatever It Takes*. The Alabama Best Practices Center recommends this book to principals, teachers and faculty study groups. For book study ideas, visit: <http://www.bestpracticescenter.org/>

### ***Shifting from a Focus on Teaching to a Focus on Learning*** –

"The single most important step a school will take on the journey to becoming a PLC will be the adoption of learning as the central purpose of the school," says DuFour. Many schools might say, "we do that already." But as DuFour notes, traditional school cultures are teacher centered. Their guiding question is "what should teachers teach, and how should they teach it?" Instead, the question needs to be "what do we expect students to learn in each course, grade level and unit of instruction." And then, "what will we do if students experience initial difficulty in learning?" These questions, DuFour says, flow "from the conviction that the school exists not

to provide students with a place in which they are taught, but rather to provide them with a place that ensures they learn."

### ***Shifting from Working in Isolation to Working Collaboratively*** –

"Schools can guarantee all students have access to the same essential outcomes only when the teachers in that school work together to clarify and commit to those outcomes," says DuFour. Schools must monitor on a timely basis both the learning of students and the strengths and weaknesses of instruction. That only happens consistently across a school, DuFour contends, when "teachers work together to develop common assessments, analyze the results, and assist one another with areas of concern."

### ***Shifting from Focusing on Activities to Focusing on Results*** –

Most schools have a tendency to honor activities rather than results. They count the number of new programs, measure the thickness of strategic planning documents, and point to the variety of staff development experiences. A PLC "does not confuse activity with effectiveness." Instead, it continually challenges the people within the school to work together to answer the question, "What impact will this activity have on our fundamental purpose of learning for all?"

### ***Shifting from Fixed Time to Flexible Time*** –

Time is a fixed resource in traditional schools, says DuFour. "In a PLC, time is considered a critical component in learning, and the school become resourceful in providing additional time for students who need it." Staff members look for ways to make the school schedule "a resource rather than a restriction." At both Calcedeaver Elementary and Buckhorn High, creative scheduling is a critical component of success.

### ***Shifting from Average***

#### ***Learning to Individual Learning*** –

In traditional schools, DuFour contends, "averaging is a way of life." Success is judged on average performance. In a PLC committed to high levels of learning for all students, "averages reveal very little." The learning community collaboratively monitors the learning of each individual student and intervenes whenever necessary. At Calcedeaver Elementary, teachers and professional support staff constantly track individual student progress through regular data meetings and grade-level discussions.

### ***Shifting from Punitive to***

***Positive*** – Many students, particularly in middle and high schools, hear this message: "Here are our rules. Obey them or we will punish you." Schools need consequences, DuFour agrees, but PLCs do not take actions that exclude the student from the opportunity to learn. They *require* students to learn material they miss and create "a system of incentives and privileges that encourage students to attend to learning."

### ***Shifting from "Teacher Tell/Student Listen" to "Teacher Coaching/Student Practice"*** –

"If a Martian were to observe a contemporary school and report his findings back on Mars," writes DuFour, "he would report that school is a place where adults come each day to work very, very hard, and children come to watch them work." Most of us learn by doing, and teachers in a PLC "understand that one of the keys to high levels of student learning is to design their classrooms and instruction to ensure that *students* do the work." They become "coaches who guide students with clear direction, incremental steps, repeated practice, and immediate feedback."

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### ***Working Toward Excellence***

is a quarterly publication of the Alabama Best Practices Center. The Best Practices Center, located in Montgomery, works to identify and promote promising education practices, with an emphasis on staff development for teachers and administrators. It collaborates with existing organizations such as the State Department of Education, higher education, local school systems and schools, the regional inservice centers and others. It is facilitated by the A+ Education Foundation, with the generous support of BellSouth Foundation, Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham, Microsoft Corporation, Wachovia Foundation, and the State of Alabama. For more information, call (334) 279-1886.

John Norton, *Editor*

# Buckhorn High School: An Unrelenting Attitude Toward Student Success

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*“We make no apologies for our nurturing environment and our celebratory approach to learning,” says Buckhorn principal Tommy Ledbetter. “That’s what we’re all about.”*

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BY JOHN NORTON

“YOU LOOK LIKE a middle school,” visiting educators will sometimes say after a tour of Buckhorn High School. And they don’t always mean it as a compliment.

But principal Tommy Ledbetter and curriculum leader Sarah Fanning choose to take the comments that way. “If someone says Buckhorn feels like a middle school,” says Ledbetter, “I think they’re responding to all the evidence they see that this school is focused on positive support for students. We make no apologies for our nurturing environment and our celebratory approach to learning. That’s what we’re all about.”

As you walk through the halls of this modern, 1000-student high school, colorful displays of student work serve as purposeful wall decorations. In the commons area and along each of the nine main corridors, posters advertise the Word of the Week, the Learning Strategy of the Week, the Character Trait of the Week, the Quote of the Week. There are Word Walls, samples of student writing, the results of scientific experiments, and inspirational slogans. “We like a print-rich environment,” Fanning says with a wry smile.

Open the door to a classroom and look around. Instructional and

motivational messages cover the walls here, too. Students may be working in small groups, often on cross-curricular projects that integrate two or more subject areas. Students may be presenting their work to the class singly or in teams. Drop by the lunchroom and you’re likely to find teachers who teach the same students having lunch together, discussing the progress of their shared charges.

It does indeed feel like a middle school. A very good middle school.

“At one time I was a principal who wanted the halls clean, the walls bare, the desks in straight rows, and the teacher up in the front managing that class,” Ledbetter says. “It was the law-and-order approach to schooling. But over time it became obvious to me that we weren’t getting the results I thought we were capable of getting.

“So we started doing some other things. And we discovered that high school kids aren’t all that different from middle school kids. They’ve got girlfriends and cars and other pressures on them, but they’re still kids in many ways. So we’ve gone back to doing a lot of the things that engage the younger students. And we find that with certain adjustments, they also engage our students.”

Buckhorn High is located on the suburban fringes of Huntsville. About 30 percent of students are minority and 25 percent meet federal poverty guidelines. From the second-story windows of this once-rural school, you can see one of the upscale housing developments that are literally popping up like mushrooms down the highway. Many say Buckhorn is the fertilizer.

Thanks in part to a video documentary that has been widely viewed across Alabama and the nation, the Madison County school is best known for its strong literacy focus and its commitment to addressing the problems of struggling students who are reading below grade level when they arrive in ninth grade. The school’s good reputation was further enhanced in 2002, when it received a national School of Excellence award from the U.S. Department of Education—evidence, Fanning says, that Buckhorn provides “a challenging academic program to all of our students,” including Advanced Placement classes and a dual-enrollment program for college credit.

In 2004, every Buckhorn senior passed the state graduation exam and earned a high school diploma. That feat was nearly repeated in 2005, when only two students missed the mark. Fanning attributes this achievement to the faculty and administration’s “unrelenting” attitude toward individual student success. “We are very competitive, and we don’t accept failure. We will do whatever it takes.”

At Buckhorn High’s website, in a position of prominence, you’ll find the school’s mission statement and beliefs. The mission statement is one you might expect from any good high school: *The mission of Buckhorn High School is to produce a competent graduate who is able to function and communicate in a diverse and global society.*

What is more telling, perhaps, are the beliefs about how to get there. They were crafted by a committee of faculty and administrators, and they offer clues about what makes

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Buckhorn an out-of-the-ordinary high school:

- Student learning is the primary focus of the school.
- Success comes with a variety of opportunities.
- Students should be provided with multiple instructional approaches to support their learning.
- All individual needs should be met.
- Students excel best in a safe and positive environment.
- Students should have the opportunity to be actively involved in a team setting.
- The commitment to continuous improvement is imperative if our school is going to enable students to become confident, self-directed, and lifelong learners.
- Teachers, administrators, parents, and the community share the responsibility for advancing the school's mission.

A decade or more ago, in the days before Buckhorn began a journey that transformed its approach to teaching and learning, this list of beliefs would have looked quite different. The commitment to students would certainly have been there. That's been a hallmark of principal Tommy Ledbetter's leadership for 23 years. But the phrases "multiple instructional approaches," "individual needs" and "continuous improvement" are indicators of a high school that has made a conceptual leap—away from a traditional focus on "what teachers teach" and toward the much more challenging proposition that "we are responsible for what students learn."

English department head Tracy Wilson says the faculty and staff of Buckhorn have come to view themselves "some-what like stockholders in a company. We share ownership in everything that happens here, and we all have an investment in the outcome."

### **A journey toward excellence**

"Night and day" is principal Tommy Ledbetter's answer to the question: *What's the difference in teaching and learning at Buckhorn today and 23 years ago when you became principal?*

In the early 1980s, "most principals were much more managers than they were instructional leaders," he says. "And when I came here, there were a lot of managerial changes I wanted to make. There was no student handbook, no printed rules, no policies or guidelines about how the school would operate. So for the first several years, all I did was deal with changes of that nature, trying to get everything more structured."

Ledbetter says he "can't put a finger on exactly when I looked around and said, hey, I've got to be a lot more involved in the instructional program." But Buckhorn veterans generally agree that their change process began to

accelerate in the mid-1990s, when they transitioned from a traditional six- or seven-period day to a block schedule.

Ledbetter chaired a district-wide committee to study block scheduling and soon became a champion of the idea. "Thinking through the implications of a block schedule made us take a real hard look at the entire instructional program in the district and the curriculum we were teaching," he says.

After a year of discussion and a summer of training, teachers moved from teaching 50-minute classes to teaching in marathon 96-minute segments. As part of the process, content-area teachers from across the district worked together to rethink their curriculum and how it would fit into a new schedule that called for 18-week courses meeting two or three times a week. Curriculum alignment, pacing and careful content selection became priorities.

Block scheduling also dictated a change in teaching style. With more than an hour-and-half to fill during each class period, "We knew we had to get away from the 50-minute lecture," says Ledbetter. "We no longer relied on the textbook as the single source of material. And we began to emphasize more project work and hands-on learning."

"This was the point when I started looking at the curriculum a lot closer myself," Ledbetter remembers. "In fact, I started looking at everything a lot closer."

These were the days before Alabama began to develop tests tied closely to state curriculum standards or to report test data at a high level of detail. But Ledbetter realized "that the state testing data we'd been putting into folders could tell us a lot if we really took a close look at it." He began to analyze SAT-9 data by hand, break-

ing down the information as best he could "to reveal weaknesses and develop plans to address those problems."

By 1996 the block was up and running. That year, Ledbetter made another decision that would greatly accelerate Buckhorn's transformation into a school sharply focused on instructional improvement. "It was probably the best decision I ever made," he says.

When the county approved a new assistant principal's position to work with instruction, Ledbetter decided against putting an administrator in the job. "I had someone in mind who did not have an administrative certificate," he recalls. "I wanted her to be in a role that was clearly not administrative, but really focused on instructional support. I didn't want the faculty to look at her as a threat of any kind." Ledbetter selected Sarah Fanning, "a top-notch teacher who was very innovative and well-respected by the faculty."

"Her total focus is the instructional program, and it has been that way for 10 years," he says. "She has no responsibilities for discipline or for supervision. She doesn't do ball games and those kinds of things. I could have hired somebody and had them do administrative work as well as instruction. But I think you lose something when you do that."

As Buckhorn's curriculum leader, Fanning spends much of her time in classrooms, observing instruction, sharing best practices across the school, and helping novice and veteran teachers solve learning problems. She meets regularly with department chairs and the myriad of school committees that are part of Buckhorn's continuous improvement process.

"I have the luxury of thinking about teaching and learning all the time," Fanning says. "Mr.

Ledbetter is truly the instructional leader in this school, but like all principals, he has a dozen non-instructional issues on his plate at any moment of the day. So we're a partnership. He totally understands and supports our teaching philosophy, and I'm able to keep him well-informed about how it's all going."

Ledbetter and Fanning are able to maintain a fine balance in the school—supporting and celebrating effective teaching while they constantly monitor and assess the quality of the instructional program. Through their department chairs, teachers are required to submit weekly lesson plans based on a schoolwide template. Fanning reads every lesson plan and provides every teacher with a review sheet containing notes and comments.

"When I look at lesson plans, I'm looking for a minimum of two or three varied activities in each block," Fanning explains. "I'm looking for at least one to be a hands-on activity or a project. I'm looking for reading strategies, I'm looking for Course of Study content and skill-building for the graduation exam. It's all identified, and everyone knows what we're looking for."

When Fanning spots a particularly intriguing lesson or strategy, she's likely to drop by the teacher's class to check it out. She may highlight what she sees in Buckhorn's weekly in-house newsletter, the *Friday Forecast*, which includes a back-page feature called "Excellence in Action." The feature, Fanning says, "has generated healthy competition. We all want to be recognized for our good work."

"There's a lot of value in highlighting the innovative ideas of teachers and sharing them all over the school," Ledbetter adds. "Nobody here is trying to reinvent the wheel."

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## SOME OTHER WAYS BUCKHORN HIGH IS DOING WHATEVER IT TAKES

Here are some other ways the Buckhorn High professional learning community ensures that all students and teachers have multiple opportunities to succeed:

**Cross-curricular cooperation** – Teachers in different content areas look for ways to support each other and prepare students for their graduation exams. Elective teachers may incorporate materials in their lessons that support a standard in math or science. Last spring, teachers in the ninth grade remedial reading program reviewed the state Course of Study in social studies and aligned some of their reading assignments with the history content. "Our goal is not so much to teach the content as it is to help give the kids some prior knowledge of events they will encounter in their history classes," says English department chair Tracy Wilson. "We're surveying our social studies teachers to find out the areas where they feel the students know the least. We'll focus some of our reading in those areas."

**Schoolwide interdisciplinary projects** – Each semester the Buckhorn faculty organizes a schoolwide unit of study, usually tied to the school's reading and writing initiatives. One recent effort: a Black History Month project. "English and science teachers might assign a paper like 'Famous Black Scientists' together," says science chair Matt Dean. "The science teachers are looking more at the content and the English teachers looking at the writing."

**Engaging lesson plans** – "We use a three-activity lesson plan, where we ask teachers to do a minimum of two activities in each hour-and-a-half block period," says curriculum leader Sarah Fanning. "One of those should be a hands-on application, individually or in groups. So we think of it in chunks of three 30-minute lessons. It supports our whole philosophy of getting away from teacher-dominated classrooms and giving students more responsibility for their own learning."

**Staying ahead of the curve: Writing** – Tracy Wilson tells the story that several years before the State Board of Education announced the creation of a 10th grade writing assessment, Fanning "dragged me to a workshop on the writing exams for 5th and 7th grades. We were the only high school there. Sometimes I think she's clairvoyant. As we took our notes, she turned to me and said, 'This is coming.' So we went back to school and started brainstorming about a comprehensive approach to writing." Now the English department provides professional development across the faculty, encouraging other content-area teachers to provide more writing opportunities and to create assignments that mirror what students see on the high school writing assessment. It's working. On the past two state writing exams, more than 80% of Buckhorn's students have scored above average.

**Preparing new teachers** – Each year, as new Buckhorn teachers are hired, they are "encouraged" to attend summer training modeled on the Alabama Reading Initiative and financed by the Madison County school district. "And then we do intense professional learning for that new teacher throughout the first term," says Fanning. "We give them a strong mentor, and I spend a lot of time with them in their classrooms as well." Wilson adds: "This school has built the structures and the trust so that a first year teacher feels comfortable coming to a school leader and admitting, 'I need some help here.' We've had mentor teachers go in and coach our less experienced teachers – and vice versa. The new teachers may need a little advice about classroom management and discipline, but they're fresh out of college and usually have the more innovative teaching strategies. It's nice to have a faculty that's open-minded enough to learn from the novices. And it gives the new teachers some pride that they're a true part of the team."

**Teachers share in decision-making** – Buckhorn regularly involves teachers in key decisions. A Committee for Excellence serves as the principal's policy advisory group and includes all 10 department chairs and the chairs of specialty committees. "At the beginning of the year, we ask teachers to identify different communities and focus areas in the building that they'd like to be involved in," says Fanning. Wilson and Dean agree that teachers are not only asked for their advice but listened to. When the school added a new wing several years ago, Dean says, he and his science colleagues worked with the architects to design classroom and lab space. Says Wilson: "We as teachers have been invited by the administration to be a part of all this change."

Fanning likes to quote Katherine Mitchell, a leader in Alabama's reading reforms. "She says if you don't inspect it, don't expect it. I truly do believe that so much." Even so, Fanning says, maintaining a collaborative relationship with the faculty is critical to her success. "Before school or after school or on their planning block, you will find teachers in my office. If they can catch me, we're in there collaborating. I take that opportunity to either praise or suggest or to delve deeper into why we are not doing something that I think would be effective. If I pick up on a lack of understanding, then I'm going to provide an opportunity or resource that will help them."

Science department chair Matt Dean is a 13-year veteran who has spent his entire teaching career at Buckhorn. "I can't really imagine how we'd do the job we do here without someone in Ms. Fanning's position," he says. "She's somebody who can take the instructional temperature of the school on a daily basis. That may be in a principal's job description but there's just no way for the principal to do what she does in a large high school."

Ledbetter is in complete agreement. "I'll say without fear of contradiction that she's making a bigger difference than I am." But Fanning offers a different perspective. "If you want to change the culture of a school, it always starts with the principal. He's the reason my job exists."

### **Taking teaching to a higher level**

As Buckhorn's leadership team tracked student performance on state assessments through the late 1990s, a persistent problem emerged. Although the school's student population was largely middle class, the data made it clear that many students had weak reading skills.

It was Sarah Fanning's idea to investigate the newly emerging Alabama Reading Initiative. Fanning and her colleagues thought ARI might provide some extra reading help. What they did not anticipate was the profound impact ARI would have on teaching and professional development across the entire school.

When Buckhorn joined the Initiative in 1999, only one other high school was participating. Ledbetter says Buckhorn's commitment to better instruction had evolved to the point that his faculty "was ready to try an approach that many other high schools might not have been ready for."

ARI was in its second year, and Buckhorn was also one of the few participating schools with a largely middle class student population. "Some people thought and still think that ARI is an initiative simply for the below grade-level reader," Fanning says. "But the research-based strategies that are embedded in ARI are for all students' expansion of their reading power. If you have a student who is at a post-

secondary reading level, it just continues their growth."

Perhaps more than anything else, the ARI training and follow-up helped Buckhorn's educators discover the value in carefully analyzing individual student data, diagnosing problems, searching for teaching solutions, and applying those solutions in a targeted way. If the solution requires teachers to learn and practice new ways of teaching, then Buckhorn's faculty is eager to do that work.

"ARI pushed us, pushed our teachers, to look closely at our test data and have some real 'Aha' moments," says Ledbetter. "The first faculty meeting we had when we entered the ARI training, we took our test scores and we just discussed specific students. We'd say, 'OK, here's John Smith. John scored in the third stanine in reading. And teachers would sit there and say, 'I had him in class. Let me share my insight into this student.' And when you start doing that, the student is no longer a statistic. That's a person with a face that we identify with."

That summer, many Buckhorn faculty members began to make the shift from teacher-centered to student-centered instruction.

English teacher Tracy Wilson says the experience was a revelation to her. "I had no idea what it meant to analyze data to determine individual student needs," she admits. "I just assumed they all needed the same things. You take the Course of Study and you teach it to them all the same way. I never really thought about diagnosing problems and taking action like a doctor might write a prescription for your infection—coming up with a plan of treatment."

Wilson says the Buckhorn approach to teaching has been bolstered by refinements in the state graduation exams and improvements in data reporting.

"Now when we look at an individual student's data, we can break it down to a particular subject and a particular standard or objective. This is where he is weak and this is what is keeping this student from achieving more, from passing this course, or passing the graduation exam. That's how we teach now."

After their summer of ARI training, the Buckhorn faculty returned to school and committed what most high school educators will admit was a courageous act. They administered reading level assessments to all of their incoming ninth grade students.

The results, Ledbetter says, "startled the entire faculty." Buckhorn's professional staff knew they had reading problems but no one expected to find that 40 percent of incoming freshmen were reading on the sixth grade level or below. "Every high school in the state has those kinds of numbers," Ledbetter speculates. "But most of them don't want to admit it."

Buckhorn, however, had the courage of its convictions. "We needed to know our students' weaknesses as well as their strengths in order to move them," says Fanning. "So we opened the can of worms. And once you look inside, you can't just close it back. You must address problems you know exist."

For Tracy Wilson and many other teachers at Buckhorn, the knowledge that "we have students who cannot read" became a personal issue. "You might say, that student was doing well for me," she explains. "She always did her work. She never bothered anyone. And then you look and see she's only reading on the fourth grade level. And you start to wonder, what's wrong with me that I didn't see that?"

Asked if some teachers responded by trotting out time-worn but sturdy excuses like "it's the middle school's fault" or "it's

the parents,” Wilson replies: “Those excuses don’t fly around here. We know the buck stops with us.”

While the stark data was depressing, Wilson says, the faculty’s reaction was not resignation but rather determination. “I think that’s because we’d been through ARI training, and we knew there were things we could do. You may have to learn them, you may have to practice them, you may have to work together and have conversations about them, but there were avenues to take. Our reading problem wasn’t a terminal sentence.”

The faculty also found strength in Ledbetter and Fanning’s total commitment. “So many principals sent their staff through the ARI training but didn’t go themselves,” Wilson says. “Mr. Ledbetter was there every step of the way. He had his hands in the data. He was sitting there learning these strategies with us.”

What did Buckhorn do exactly? They began by building a strong intervention program in ninth grade, led by Wilson. Teachers across the curriculum accepted responsibility for working on reading skills in the content areas. Instruction became more explicit as teachers began to isolate individual student learning problems. Teachers enlarged their toolbox of teaching strategies and became more adept at matching teaching styles to learning styles. They used graphic organizers and other tools to help students break down and absorb difficult text. Reading comprehension became the school’s top priority.

In 2003, four years after Buckhorn launched its reading intervention program, 100% of Buckhorn’s students passed the reading portion of the high school graduation exam—a feat that Buckhorn repeated in 2004 and 2005. “We still have a significant

percentage of freshmen identified as struggling readers when they arrive,” Fanning says, “but after our intervention they have all passed the reading exam.”

Ledbetter and Fanning believe Buckhorn is “living proof” that reading comprehension is the key to high school success.

“The number one focus here is improving reading comprehension for all students,” says Fanning. “We’re teaching math, we’re teaching science, we’re teaching art, we’re teaching physical education, we’re teaching choral music—and we’re teaching them well. But we’re teaching that content according to what the research tells us is the most effective way for that content to influence reading comprehension.

“If we expect to prepare students for a productive life after high school, literacy has to be our first priority. It’s the ultimate survival skill.”

Ledbetter adds—from a practical principal’s point of view—that reading comprehension is also the secret to success on the entire battery of Alabama graduation exams. “Reading comprehension is a necessary skill in every one of those exams. If we’re going to be held accountable, how better to do that than to address the area that has the most influence on test performance?”

In recent months, Ledbetter joined a group of middle and high school principals lobbying Congress for the recently approved “Striving Readers” program, which will begin targeting federal dollars to support adolescent reading programs next year. Ledbetter hopes Alabama will be one of the first states chosen for the project, and he’ll be meeting this fall with First Lady Laura Bush to share Buckhorn’s story and perhaps do a little lobbying on Alabama’s behalf.

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## THE BUCKHORN FACULTY ENGAGES IN MANY “POWERFUL CONVERSATIONS”

Several Buckhorn High School innovations were inspired by the school’s participation in *Powerful Conversations*, a program of the Alabama Best Practices Center that helps schools examine and improve their approach to professional development. The process begins with a facilitated self-assessment of the school’s professional learning plan, using state and national standards as a guide. Schools then attend quarterly meetings where they share ideas and improvement strategies.

“The *Powerful Conversations* process was a real eye-opener for us,” curriculum leader Sarah Fanning says. “It deepened our thinking about what meaningful professional development should be. It has really had a profound impact on our professional learning climate – we’ve taken full ownership of our own growth.”

Fanning cites two examples:

**Professional book studies** – “Our first faculty book study was funded through a mini-grant from the Best Practices Center,” she says. “Book studies are now completely embedded in our learning community.” Some studies take place in small groups; others are schoolwide. Over the past several years, study groups have combed through books like *I Read It But I Don’t Get It*, Cris Tovani’s breakthrough work on “fake readers” in secondary school; David Booth’s *Even Hockey Players Read* about gender-specific teaching; high school teacher Kelly Gallagher’s *Reading Reasons*, and *The Respectful School*, a book aimed at assuring a respectful learning environment free of harassment and bullying. Tovani, Booth and Gallagher have all been featured speakers at area staff development meetings.

**Lunchroom professional development** – At one quarterly meeting of the *Powerful Conversations* schools, says English teacher Tracy Wilson, “we were all talking about embedded staff development. Our bright idea was: Lunch! Our teachers usually ate lunch together by departments. But we came back from the meeting and started changing lunch schedules. Now we have lunch with teachers who teach the same students. There’s no specific agenda, but it’s purposeful. Maybe there’s a student you’re not having a lot of success with, but Ms. Jones is making good progress, and now she’s telling me what’s working for her. It’s one of the most innovative ways we’ve come up with to embed staff development into the day.”

## BUCKHORN HIGH SCHOOL

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### Doing whatever it takes

When we visited in late February 2005, the Alabama High School Graduation Exam (AHSGE) was much on the minds of Buckhorn's leadership team. Buckhorn is no different than other Alabama high schools in one sense—the high-stakes exams in reading, language, science, math and social studies drive the curriculum and are (sports notwithstanding) the primary measure of a high school's success.

At the time of our visit, 100% of Buckhorn's senior class had passed the science and math portions of the AHSGE. Five students had not passed either language, reading or social studies. They had one more opportunity. Determined to match their 100% graduation rate in 2004, Buckhorn's staff was mounting an all-out effort to help the last five students over their personal exam hurdles.

Individual action plans were prepared for each of the five, and teachers volunteered to provide intensive one-on-one tutoring and support before school, after school, or during teacher planning periods. "We talked to each student to find out what was the best way to get prepared for this last opportunity," Fanning explained, "and they all wanted to do it individually."

Although 98% of Buckhorn's students were already certain to earn a diploma, "we're still scared," Fanning told us last winter. "We really believe every student matters. That's not just something we say. This is probably the most important test our group of five students will take in their lives. I know this is important to them because they haven't dropped out. They have taken this test six times

and they are still with us. So we're going to do whatever it takes to work with them."

For Fanning, the story had a sad ending. Two of the five students didn't pass one portion of AHSGE on the seventh and last try. "We were crushed," she told us recently. "You are always asking, what else could we have done?"

Here are some of the things Buckhorn is already doing:

#### **Individual student plans** –

The administration, working with department chairs, provides an individual data profile of each student based on their performance on reading and writing assessments and the state graduation exam. Each student's data is reviewed by all of their teachers. If a student is struggling in a subject or having trouble grasping some particular concept or content, "we formulate a plan to make sure they succeed the next time around," says science teacher Matt Dean. "I think that's the best example of our ongoing teacher collaboration."

#### **Student course selection** –

In the past, like many high schools, Buckhorn allowed students to sign up for whatever classes they wanted to take the next year. "It was all in their hands," says Dean, "and lots of times they ended up in the wrong course placement." Under a program adopted several years ago, students now sit down and talk with teachers about the best choices before class registration begins. "The teacher has the final call on student placement now," Dean says. "And I think that's worked well. We've gotten a lot more students where they need to be."

#### **Students supporting students** –

Matt Dean supports a Scholars Team that offers tutoring support to students who need help in a

particular content area. "With those bright kids, the students are in good hands because they are very knowledgeable," says Wilson. "They provide an invaluable service and I think they communicate better with the kids than we sometimes do."

**Continuously strengthening academics** – Buckhorn offers an array of Advanced Placement and college-level courses (students can graduate with up to 26 hours of college credit). The school is also a partner in the state math, science and technology initiative and regularly draws on the services of the Science in Motion program, which loans sophisticated equipment (e.g., spectrophotometers) to schools and trains teachers in their use. "I use it just about every week," Dean says.

#### **"We're a work in progress"**

In July 2005, a Buckhorn team was invited to tell the school's story at a breakfast meeting of the Alliance for Excellent Education, a powerful education reform lobby based in Washington, DC. U.S. Senators Jeff Sessions and Richard Shelby both spoke at the event, where the sole focus of discussion was "The Alabama Reading Initiative at Buckhorn High School."

The growing national recognition "gives our school community a lot of pride," says Fanning. But she and principal Tommy Ledbetter will both tell you that Buckhorn still has problems to solve. "We were very frank when we spoke to the Alliance group that we're still a work in progress," Fanning says. "And the number one problem we're working on right now is our dropout rate."

Under the state's system of Adequate Yearly Progress goals, Buckhorn was expected to achieve a four-year projected dropout rate of 10 percent or less in 2004. The

## ON THE WEB

### Professional Development and Student Achievement

With the wide variety of professional development options available, which methods have the most impact on student learning? AERA's *Research Points* (Summer 2005) summarizes studies of "learning opportunities for teachers that are explicitly aimed at increasing student achievement." (100k PDF file)

<http://snipurl.com/AERApd>

actual projected rate was 23 percent. Ledbetter and many other Alabama high school principals question the process by which dropout rate is determined. But the Buckhorn staff has chosen to be proactive and not just wait for a better counting system.

“If a student comes in today and says ‘I want to quit,’ we don’t just let that student quit,” says Ledbetter. “The student has to sit down with me or one of our assistant principals and we want to know why.” This and other proactive steps helped Buckhorn lower the projected dropout rate to 16.3 percent in 2005, enough to assure that the high school met all of its 17 goals under *No Child Left Behind* and achieved “Adequate Yearly Progress” for 2004-05.

This fall Buckhorn is unveiling another innovation—this one aimed directly at the heart of the dropout problem. Five teachers have volunteered to teach a nine-week course called “High School

Essentials” in which all incoming ninth graders will participate.

“Our largest percentage of failures occurs in ninth grade,” Fanning says. “That’s the staging area for dropout problems. This new course is designed to help students make a smooth transition into high school and to be sure they have the skills that we expect of high school students.”

The course will zero in on organization and planning, time management, reading and writing strategies, and career interests. “They’ll learn how to organize a high school notebook,” Fanning says. “That’s something we might assume they know how to do, but many do not.” The ninth graders will also participate in a book study around Stephen Covey’s *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Teens*.

The course also includes a component to encourage all freshmen to get involved in extra-curricular activities. “We will

require them to select at least one club in which they’ll participate,” says Fanning. “We believe this is a critical factor in keeping kids in school. It keeps them involved and gives them a positive group in which to belong.”

The High School Essentials course is a perfect example of Buckhorn’s willingness to tackle problems head on, says Madison County reading coach Jennifer French, who works with teachers in the school on a weekly basis.

“There’s always a strong focus on continuous improvement,” she says. “That’s what sets Buckhorn apart from many other high schools. They never surrender.” ❖

*Materials from Buckhorn High School’s presentation at the Alliance for Excellent Education (July 13, 2005) can be found on the Web at <http://snipurl.com/buckhorn>.*

## ON THE WEB

**Student Mentoring Toolkit**  
*Mentor*, a website dedicated to “expanding the world of quality mentoring,” has released a comprehensive tool kit that offers step-by-step instructions to implement four key components of effective student mentoring programs. Organizations can download the tool kit for free.

<http://snipurl.com/MentoringKit>

## DOING WHATEVER IT TAKES

*Continued from page 2.*

***Shifting from Recognizing the Elite to Creating Opportunity for Many Winners*** – DuFour points out that schools have many ways to honor top-performing students, but in most schools “the overwhelming majority of students recognize from the very day they enter the school that they have no chance of ever receiving that recognition.” Tom Peters and other researchers have found that high-performing cultures consciously develop systems “to generate a lot of winners” and then celebrate “individual and collective achievements.” Buckhorn High makes sure

that *all* students are involved in club and sports activities and makes a point to recognize students for a myriad of accomplishments.

“A stretch culture rests upon high expectations,” DuFour says. This requires more than nurturing and cheering “You can do it!” Schools cannot hug or shout their way out of their achievement predicament. Neither can they simply raise the bar and demand that students rise to new challenges. “The concept of high expectations rests upon neither unwarranted optimism nor additional unsupported demands.”

It’s not really the staff’s perception of student ability that is most important, DuFour concludes. “The

staff members’ perception of their own personal and collective ability to help all students learn is far more critical.” The belief in one’s own ability to impact the outcome “is the cornerstone of a culture of high expectations.” ❖

*What kind of culture do you have in your school? To explore this question further, visit the APBC website and download an excerpt from Chapter 2 of Whatever It Takes, “How Do We Respond When Kids Don’t Learn?”*  
<http://snipurl.com/WTEindex>

# Calcedeaver Elementary: Doing Whatever It Takes To Move Kids

*Calcedeaver's children are mostly poor and mostly minority, yet the school's young readers are consistently outperforming the vast majority of Alabama's elementary schools.*

BY JOHN NORTON

IN SO MANY ways, Calcedeaver Elementary is a world of its own.

First and foremost, it's a school where educators not only beat the odds—they defy them. Its children are mostly poor and mostly minority, yet the school's young readers are consistently outperforming the vast majority of Alabama's elementary schools, including many in the state's most-advantaged neighborhoods and communities.

Second, Calcedeaver's classrooms are filled with Indian children. More than 90% of the school's students are Native American, members of the MOWA Choctaw Band which earned tribal recognition from the state of Alabama in the 1980s.

Third, Calcedeaver is geographically isolated. Take I-65 north from Mobile for 20 miles and get off at Exit 19. Drive another 17 miles down a spit of land surrounded by the vast marshlands of the Mobile River. At the stop light, take a left. Go 10 miles and turn left again at the flashing yellow light. Watch for a cluster of low buildings. It must be the school because you can see some portable classrooms. But where's the front?

"We don't really have one," laughs principal LaGaylis Harbuck. "That's my next project."

There are lots of "Ms. Harbuck projects" underway at this little

K-6 school tucked away in a remote corner of Mobile County, nearly 50 miles from the school system's downtown headquarters. Some projects focus on the physical plant; others come under the heading of community development. But the biggest project of all began in the late summer of 2001, on the first day Harbuck spoke to the faculty at her new school.

"I told them I don't aspire to be #1 in Mobile County. I don't aspire to be #1 in the state. I aspire to be #1 in the nation," she recalls. "I know the children here have the ability to be the smartest and the most academically advanced students in the world. I want us to strive to be at the very top."

Crazy talk in a 92%-minority school, with 95% of its students living in poverty? Some of the teachers thought so, says Harbuck. "Probably a lot of them were thinking, 'this woman is way off.'"

Four years later, it doesn't sound quite so crazy.

## Rising to the top

Several times each school year, the state Department of Education compiles a ranking of elementary schools, based on the percentage of K-3 students who have "benchmarked" on the DIBELS reading

assessment. The DIBELS is widely used around the nation to provide feedback to teachers as they work with students on the fundamental building blocks of reading—phonics, phonemic awareness, oral language and related skills. The DIBELS goals are moving targets, calibrated to keep pace with the progress experts believe is necessary for children to become strong readers by the end of third grade.

In the mid-year DIBELS rankings compiled in January 2005, Calcedeaver Elementary benchmarked 88% of its K-3 students, tying for 16th among more than 700 Alabama schools with primary grades. Calcedeaver was 2nd among schools with 60% or more students living in poverty. To put this achievement into perspective, the young readers at Calcedeaver outperformed schools in Homewood, Hoover, Vestavia Hills and many other low-poverty districts.

The performance attracted state and national attention. The U.S. Department of Education featured Calcedeaver's outstanding results on its website last winter and began recommending that principals of other high-poverty schools around the nation contact the little Mobile County school to find out more about their successful strategies.

## ON THE WEB

### Professional Learning Communities Writ Large

Education researcher Michael Fullan acknowledges there is an increasingly clear picture of the nature and importance of schools that function as professional learning communities, but he contends such schools will remain "rare and transitory" if the larger system of education is not examined and improved. He offers the concept of "tri-level" development that underscores the critical importance of school district leadership in PLC development. (272k PDF File)

<http://snipurl.com/Fullan>

## A PUBLIC SCHOOL WITH A SPECIAL CULTURAL HERITAGE

When the final bell rings at Calcedeaver Elementary, signalling the end of the school day, children hurry to a gravel parking area where they line up at one of four signs: *Weaver, Reed, Byrd* or *Johnson*. These are the names of the bus drivers, it turns out, but they're also the names of a large percentage of the students. Most are descended from Indians who became fugitives during the Indian Removal of the 1830s. Their ancestors survived by isolating themselves in the remote area where these children still live and go to school today.

Harbuck herself was born a Weaver and grew up not far away in Washington County, where her father is a well-known minister, educator and Choctaw tribal leader. He met Harbuck's mother (a Cherokee) when they both attended a Native American college in Oklahoma. They married, returned to Alabama, and when Harbuck was born they gave her the Choctaw name *Lagaylis*, which means "Rushing Wind." (Folks in Mobile County's district office, who often find Harbuck's name on a pile of pink "Please Call" slips, would probably describe this name choice as prophetic.)

When Harbuck became Calcedeaver's second-ever Native American principal, the school lacked a true playground area. Harbuck soon marshalled the necessary forces to fill in a gully on the school property with 140 truckloads of dirt, and organized a team of community volunteers to bring the new turf to life during a string of Saturday work days.

In the second phase of the project, students and families helped build a group of miniature homes representing the dwellings of several Native American cultures. It's now used as part of the school's cultural education program. Students from 29 schools visited last year, with Calcedeaver's kids serving as docents. There's also room for a portable stage where the children present powwow ceremonies and dances for their visitors.

"It's all part of what we do to help these children rediscover their own heritage," Harbuck says. "So much of our past was lost. And we were taught by the dominant culture to be ashamed of what we are. When the children are able to present their history and culture, that not only builds a sense of pride, but it's a context within which we can teach academic skills."

*If you'd like to learn more about the history of the MOWA Choctaw and their survival in the swamps and piney woods of Mobile and Washington counties, we recommend They Say the Wind Is Red by Jacqueline Anderson Matte, published by NewSouth Books in Montgomery [www.newsouthbooks.com].*

Still, Harbuck wasn't satisfied. "Every time someone comes here, they ask me if the reading results surprised me," she says. "And I tell them 'Yes, it surprised me that we weren't Number One.' I expect my children to be the best."

When the end-of-year DIBELS results were released in July 2005, Harbuck was close to her goal. Among all Alabama schools with grades K-3, Calcedeaver now ranked 3rd, with 97% of students at benchmark. The two schools above Calcedeaver in the rankings were Forest Avenue Elementary in Montgomery (14.1% poverty) and Cherokee Bend Elementary in Mountain Brook (zero percent poverty).

All of this success begs the question: How does Calcedeaver do it? The Alabama Reading First Initiative staff at the state Department of Education wondered the same thing. After several visits to the school, ARFI program specialists identified two key factors. First, the school faithfully implements a research-based comprehensive reading program (Open Court) and supplements it with lots of targeted intervention (using Voyager Passport). Second, and equally important they say, the school has "an absolute commitment to every child," and a no-excuses principal who will go to any length to avoid teacher or student failure.

### The principal who won't take no for an answer

As you listen to LaGaylis Harbuck talk about her philosophy as the leader of a high-poverty, high-needs school, "touchy feely" is not the first descriptor that comes to mind. "Gritty determination" would be closer. Four years ago, when she became Calcedeaver's second Native American principal, Harbuck says she brought this education philosophy with her: *Any teacher who believes they can move students*

*can move them. A child just wants to know that they are loved and that you believe in them.*

Teachers quickly learned that stories about students' difficult home lives, uncooperative parents, or the past failures of other teachers would not relieve them of their responsibilities. "If you tell me a child can't learn, I'm going to ask you what you've done to make sure they learn," she says, recalling a recent data meeting where two teachers had raised just these kinds of issues.

"I told them what I tell every teacher who begins to offer excuses. We're going to get out the strategy book, and we're going to try everything we can possibly find to try. And if we go down, we're going to go down fighting. But we're most likely going to be on top."

Harbuck admits that teachers sometimes bridle when they hear this, and in the first year or two or her leadership, several made the choice to leave. "I told our teachers from the beginning—I'm not here to make any teacher happy or make any teacher sad. That's not part of the job description. We're here to make life better for these children. They have a critical need, and we have to make the most of every minute we have with them."

Harbuck's total commitment to mission—and her own willingness to go many extra miles for the kids in her school—has, over time, won the grudging and often admiring respect of teachers and professional staff.

"She won't take no for an answer," says reading coach Mary Stockman, a 26-year veteran of the school. "She won't take less than the best. She says 'I'll give you a lot of help, but you've got to bring them up and bring them up fast. I've seen more success in the last two years that we saw in the previous 24. And she's the reason.'"

*Continued on page 12.*

“She has high expectations for teachers,” agrees second grade teacher Kelly Mott. “She accepts no excuses, and that’s why this school is performing as well as it is. I really think a school is only as strong as its leader.”

### Calcedeaever’s reading odyssey

Harbuck began crunching data from the moment she walked through the schoolhouse door. “I’m a big believer in data,” she says. She found students were doing pretty well in math, but less well in writing and reading.

A strong reading program, Harbuck was convinced, was the key to transforming Calcedeaever into a high-performing school. “But I came from high school and middle school,” she says. “When it came to teaching beginning reading, I was like a fish flopping around on dry land, looking for water.”

Harbuck invited a team of reading experts to visit the school and “they blew us out of the water. They said we were not doing reading right. I told them I didn’t know a lot about reading, but if they’d point me to who was doing it right, we’d learn—and we’d learn to outperform them.”

Harbuck came back from one successful high-poverty school so enthused that she arranged for all of her faculty to visit. “That school had reading specialists, they believed in what they were doing, and it was working. They were moving kids.” Her visit, she says, was nothing short of a revelation.

“In all my life in education, there’s always been a low, middle and high in the classrooms. We let the children sort themselves out and we really offered them very little ‘value added’ teaching. We didn’t really think about explicit instruction tailored to each and every child. We didn’t think about mastery—about moving every child toward a goal and benchmarking all along the way. But I saw that happening at that school we visited.”

Harbuck sent every professional on campus to visit the model school. “I wanted them to spend the majority of their time with the reading coach. I said, do you see what she’s doing? She’s having explicit lessons. They’re actually moving children that people say can’t be moved. We’re not doing that.”

Calcedeaever didn’t have the funds to match the model school’s program, but to the best of their ability Harbuck and her support staff began to reshape their own reading program around explicit instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness. They established regular data meetings with teachers and revamped the school schedule so that everyone was focused on uninterrupted reading instruction in the morning. After a year, Harbuck could see some incremental improvement, but she knew a much bigger leap was needed.

“When I looked at those schools that were really making gains, and why they were at that level, I could see that they were investing in the professional development and the materials

and the expert personnel they needed to be successful. We didn’t have that.”

When the opportunity came to apply for the federal Reading First Initiative, Harbuck says, “I thought to myself, ‘This is it.’” The school needed a 100% faculty commitment to qualify. She told her staff, “Every day we worry about funds. Now here is an opportunity for you to get the professional development you need, to get materials you need, to get the reading coach we so desire.” The faculty agreed, and Calcedeaever was accepted into the ARFI program in the spring of 2003.

Reading First requires participating schools to adopt a comprehensive reading program that carefully scripts each day’s teaching activities throughout the year and across the affected grades. Calcedeaever chose Open Court, which spans grades K-3. Like most principals in schools that adopt a scripted program, Harbuck encountered some initial resistance from her faculty, especially when teachers were called to task for falling behind in the program’s pacing schedule.

“What I’ve found is that when teachers are not keeping pace with the instruction, they’re having more ‘teachable moments.’ They want to bring extra things in, but many times what they’re bringing in is not advancing the children’s reading skills. So we’ll tell them we’ve got to keep our focus on what we *know* makes a difference in students’ learning. And that’s this research-based curriculum.” When teachers complain of the lack of creativity in Open Court, “we’ll have them observe in a classroom where a teacher has learned to add her own touches but still stays on task and uses the time in the way the program says it should be used.”

Harbuck and K-3 reading coach Mary Stockman do not make the claim that a scripted program is the best solution for every school.

“We can say that with the right professional development behind it, this program has really worked well for our own group of children,” says Stockman.

Harbuck adds: “Our approach might not work as well in Vestavia Hills, because those children come to school phonemically aware. We have to start from scratch here, and we have to move children a great distance. We don’t have a minute to waste, and this program helps us make sure we don’t.”

### Reading nuts and bolts

To assure quality control in the Reading First program, the school’s two reading coaches regularly observe in classrooms and can help teachers fine-tune their techniques by modeling or asking them to observe another teacher who’s mastered the strategy.

“Once a month we do data meetings by grade level,” explains Harbuck. “We look at DIBELS and which children are performing at benchmark. If we see a student is losing ground, we look for strategies that aren’t working and decide what else we’re going to try. If we think a teacher is not using the strategies correctly, we will spend some time in the classroom with her.”

From a drawer, Harbuck pulls a large metal ring strung with laminated sheets about the size of a large index card. “These are my routines cards for Open Court,” she says. “I’ve got every grade and everything that needs to be taught. Any class I go into, I have these. I want teachers to know the program, and I want them to know that I know. But it’s not like I’m saying ‘know it’ and not offering them any help. We’ve got all the help in the world here.”

Calcedeaever has invested heavily in the professional development materials and training that accompany the Open Court series. In summer sessions, the teachers have seen the

whole teaching process in action and have opportunities to practice themselves. Harbuck also buys several weeks of training from Open Court during the school year. “We plan that carefully, based on a needs assessment we do in advance.” It’s expensive, she says, so this past year she devoted a portion of the time to more in-depth training for Calcedeaver’s two reading coaches. “I don’t want to have to fly a trainer in forever.” Harbuck has also purchased a CD/DVD collection that Open Court offers. “They’re expensive but you have to weigh out the cost vs. benefit. You see very explicit instruction that’s done exactly as it should be done.”

Harbuck, the assistant principal and the reading coaches continu-

ously monitor instruction, using the “walk-through” strategy that’s an integral part of the ARI and ARFI teaching quality process. “We try to zero in on explicit pieces where teachers need the most help,” she says. “If a teacher is having problems with time, we’ll go together to observe someone who has mastered this. We’re trying to establish a less threatening environment in which to improve.” Teachers then return to their own classrooms and practice the timing themselves. When they’re satisfied, “they let us know so we can come in and observe.”

Anytime a teacher feels the need for some specific coaching, they can sign up and get on a reading coach’s weekly schedule. Harbuck

keeps an inventory of the requests “so I know what has been modeled and what hasn’t in every classroom.”

This past year, the school also adopted the Voyager Passport intervention program, a very highly scripted process that allows schools to supplement reading instruction for students who are most at risk of missing the DIBELS benchmarks. “Passport is for the really struggling reader,” Harbuck says. “And it’s beneficial to do it twice a day. The first is like a pre-teach, and then we do it again—the exact same lesson.” How does the school manage all this extra instruction? “It’s all in the scheduling.”

Calcedeaver has a large complement of special services staff for a school of only 250 students: two full-time reading coaches, a speech teacher, a Title I teacher, a guidance counselor, a technology coordinator, two special programs teachers (supporting full inclusion), and a physical education teacher. There’s also a Native American interpreter (for cultural education) paid for with federal Indian Education funds. All of these professional staff members are trained in Voyager Passport, as are several members of the non-professional staff.

“I’ve told visitors that when it comes to reading interven-

*Continued on page 14.*

## Alabama DIBELS Reading Assessment – Honor Roll (2004-05)

School/System (by rank)	Percent of Students at Benchmark – End of 2004-05 School Year*					School Poverty (f/r lunch)**
	K	1st	2nd	3rd	Average	
Forest Ave EL <i>Montgomery Co</i>	100%	99%	100%	98%	99%	14.1%
Cherokee Bend EL <i>Mtn Brook City</i>	100%	99%	98%	97%	99%	0%
Calcedeaver EL <i>Mobile Co</i>	100%	95%	94%	97%	97%	95.5%
Bear Exploration Ctr. <i>Montgomery Co</i>	100%	100%	96%	93%	97%	20.2%
Crestline EL <i>Mtn Brook City</i>	98%	98%	96%	90%	96%	0%
Mtn Brook EL <i>Mtn Brook City</i>	100%	98%	95%	91%	96%	0%
Liberty Park EL <i>Vestavia Hills City</i>	98%	98%	95%	94%	96%	1%
Brookwood Forest EL <i>Mtn Brook City</i>	100%	88%	93%	92%	93%	0%
Wynton Blount EL <i>Montgomery Co</i>	100%	96%	86%	88%	93%	19.2%
Underwood EL <i>Lauderdale Co</i>	93%	92%	87%	96%	92%	16.4%
Memorial Pk EL <i>Jasper City</i>	100%	89%	95%	85%	92%	15.3%
Montana Academic <i>Dothan City</i>	100%	95%	84%	81%	90%	33.1%
Alexandria EL <i>Calhoun Co</i>	97%	88%	87%	84%	89%	52%
<b>STATE AVG</b>	<b>91%</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>50.3%</b>

Honor roll established by the ALSDE; top-ranking schools among all Alabama elementary schools with grades K-3.

\* Percentage of students who met state goals for the DIBELS reading assessment.

\*\* 2003-04 data

tion, we don't double dip or triple dip here, we baptize them," laughs Harbuck. "The students who struggle are literally immersed in this."

Harbuck says her biggest criticism of Open Court is its lack of specific professional development for administrators. She has developed her own data checks and other processes. Her ring of self-laminated routines cards is one example. "I found them on the Internet and downloaded them." She and her leadership team have also developed a tracking tool for teachers "that's really an accountability device."

"When we go in for a data meeting with teachers, we want to know where students are supposed to be in relation to benchmarks, where they are, and why. We want to know how many times they've had intervention, who gave it them, and when they were absent. This form is turned in at the end of every week and it describes not what a teacher planned to do, but what was actually done."

During the frequent data meetings, the tracking tool helps focus the conversation as coaches and teachers make decisions about addressing students' learning gaps. If absenteeism is a problem, Harbuck contacts the parent directly and emphasizes how critical attendance is to the child's reading development. If necessary, "I'll simply tell them that we are giving them something very valuable and they are throwing it away by getting the child out early or being absent when it's not absolutely necessary."

### **Attending to the whole curriculum**

The DIBELS early reading assessments are only one of several state and district performance measures that Calcedever's teachers and administrators rely upon to monitor achievement across the curriculum.

In addition to the data provided by the state through its Alabama Reading and Mathematics Tests (ARMT) for grades 3-6, Calcedever annually administers the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) in grades K-2. "It helps us keep an eye on reading comprehension in the grades before the state test kicks in," says Stockman. "Last year our Stanford scores proved that our kids were doing pretty well in comprehension. Our first grade was about 70% in reading."

In 2003, Mobile County adopted a criterion-referenced testing program aligned to Alabama's Courses of Study standards. Students complete short assessments using scan sheets that are scored at the school and uploaded into the district's online system. The result is a steady flow of data about student performance. "Every nine weeks," explains Harbuck, "we get a data snapshot that covers all of our content. The CRTs help us make sure our curriculum is aligned with state objectives."

The school leadership team also looks at trend data, ever alert for problems that suggest a need for schoolwide

curriculum revisions. Most recently, Harbuck became convinced that Calcedever's math and science programs need retooling.

"I wanted to get our school into AMSTI (the Alabama Mathematics, Science and Technology Initiative) because their professional development emphasizes a lot of hands-on learning, which we know works really well with our students," Harbuck says.

Calcedever applied to enter the program in 2004-05 but was told space was not available. Harbuck decided to push a little harder. Three days before training began, she convinced state program leaders to allow Calcedever to buy its way into the program (which is normally offered free to qualifying schools) and convinced district officials to provide the \$15,000 needed to have the program in grades 4-6.

After their first year in AMSTI, Harbuck and her faculty give the program an enthusiastic endorsement. "It's been really good in helping teachers use manipulatives with struggling math students," she says. AMSTI's science component has also pushed Calcedever's teachers to make better use of the school's science lab. "The program really demands a hands-on approach."

### **New hires have many skills—including fund-raising**

When Harbuck hires new faculty and staff, she looks for professionals who have a mix of skills that can be applied in more than one place in the school program. "You have to be a jack of all trades to come to work here," she says. "We have a lot of needs."

Assistant principal Aimee Rainey has a background in speech pathology, has taught middle school science, and helped write neighboring Washington County's ARFI grant before coming to Calcedever in the fall of 2004. "My heart was in reading,"

Rainey says. "The more I learned about Alabama's new reading curriculum, the more interested I got in curriculum. That was my main reason for going into administration."

Rainey's myriad skills made her a perfect fit for Calcedever, says Harbuck. "Especially with our focus on full inclusion and her special education experience. It's helped tremendously." Rainey is also a successful grant writer—a skill that is highly valued at Calcedever, which relies heavily on public and private grants to augment its programs. In addition to Rainey, most of the special services staff are involved in grant-writing, as are several faculty members.

As Harbuck, Rainey and technology teacher Felicia Myers tick off the outside support they've received for computers, software, physical plant improvements and special projects, it's clear that private grants add many tens of thousands to the school budget each year—in addition to federal Title I, ARFI, and Indian Education funds.

Dupont, one of the largest employers in the area, is a major contributor of time and money. Through Dupont's Partners in Education program, company employees have helped improve drainage on the school grounds and built cubbies in the parenting/technology center. Dupont also contributed computers and provided a grant to build Calcedever's Simple Machines facility, a open-air playground-like area where teachers lead students in activities involving giant fulcrums, pulleys and levers.

The Simple Machines project grows out of Harbuck's conviction that Native American children often have a special aptitude for math and physics concepts. "If they think we're doing well in reading and writing," she laughs, "just wait. We'll show them what engineers of made of."

## Calcedeaver's reach extends beyond the school walls

During her first year as principal, Harbuck dug into the school's records and made a list of sixth graders who should have been 12th graders in 2001. "I knew all of these kids, so I followed up on every one of them. And what I discovered was shocking—a 68% dropout rate."

"Our community is so small that I was able to track down each former student and ask them, 'What would have made you stay in school?' And when you boiled it all down, each one of them told me to same thing: They needed somebody to believe in them and care what happened to them."

Harbuck's discovery spurred her to develop a new project. "Most of our students are Native Americans, and there are no Native Americans working at the middle schools or the high schools we feed into. So what we've done is start our own support program in those schools."

Every two weeks, the Title I teacher goes to the middle school to check on Calcedeaver's graduates. "If they're starting to slack off, we get their attendance, we get their discipline record, we get all their data. We talk to their parents and we talk to them," Harbuck explains. Calcedeaver continues to track students into high school. "We've found that many of them weren't being counseled to take the college entrance exam. So every Thursday, two of our staff go to the high schools. We basically work with juniors and seniors to make sure they have college on their radar screen."

Calcedeaver's teachers will also attend parent-teacher conferences at the secondary schools to share what they know about their former students. "I've noticed that sometimes our parents in this community are intimidated by teachers at the middle or high school," Harbuck says. "And

I think the teachers at those schools are glad to have us help."

Harbuck and her staff view the parent-school partnership as a critical component of Calcedeaver's success. "We ask the parents to listen to the children read at home," she says. "We help the parents learn how to use a timer and to have children retell what they've just read. This helps the students and the parents see that the more we work on the skills, the faster and better the children read. And the retelling makes sure we focus on content, and not just calling out words."

Calcedeaver's parent-community outreach extends far beyond the reading program. The school has a parent center and offers GED classes twice a week for adults who want to finish high school. With support from a Dupont grant, technology teacher Felicia Myers offers technology classes for adults twice a month in the evening. Myers and other staff members also help the parents of community teenagers complete college loan and scholarship applications. Through the school's parent involvement "merit system," parents earn points when they volunteer in the school, come to PTO meetings, or participate in the GED or technology classes. "All these services are free, of course, but as an added bonus, the two people who earn the most points get a free computer," Myers says.

Harbuck believes Calcedeaver also has a cultural mission in the surrounding community. Parents and other adults help students prepare for the school's powwow events. Harbuck's mother make the regalia for the traditional dances, "and we expect the parents to come and help. My mother explains what the different symbols and designs mean and discusses the best choices for each child. So we are educating our Native American parents about

their own culture and getting them more involved in the life of the school as well.

"We can educate children all we want to, but they still go home every day. So we've got to work on parents. We've got to work on cultural pride. And through our adult programs, we're also working on the academic pride of parents, not just the children."

## Doing whatever it takes

During a recent follow-up phone call for this story, LaGaylis Harbuck described the electric energy that ran through the school in early May, when one student after another emerged from the room where DIBELS assessments were being given with the news that they had benchmarked.

"When they came out, their teacher would be there, and all the intervention teachers would be there, and the teachers would take them and hug them and twirl them around. There was real ownership among the teachers for the success of all the kids."

On another day in May, a team from a distant school came looking for some answers of their own. After a tour, Harbuck says with a smile, "they asked if they could bottle this up and take it with them. They said 'we can be successful next year if we all love it like y'all do.'

"And I said, it didn't start out that way. But when the teachers start buying in, and the students buy in and the parents buy in and all the staff buys in, then it happens, because everybody gets close to the children and they know how much these students want to succeed.

"When our kids came out of that DIBELS assessment with success written all over their faces, it wasn't just the teacher who was crying. Every adult in that hallway was crying. That's what I mean by *ownership*." ❖

## ON THE WEB

### Sharing Teacher Expertise

Have you wondered whether sending teachers to national conferences is the best way to invest precious professional development dollars? What about creating your own teacher conference, drawing on the depth of teacher expertise within your own school and district? That's what the Starkville (MS) Schools decided to do, says this story in NSDC's *Tools for Schools* (April/May 2005), which includes lots of "how-to" information. Starkville found the process not only saves money, it builds teacher leadership, deepens relationships among teachers, and encourages collaborative, job-embedded professional growth experiences that improve teaching and learning. Members of NSDC receive this and other useful publications as part of their annual membership package.

<http://snipurl.com/YourOwnExpertise>

Find links to other resources on this topic at: [www.bestpracticescenter.org](http://www.bestpracticescenter.org)

### Addressing Teacher Concerns about Change

The ideas about guiding the school change process in this issue of NSDC's *Tools for Schools* (February/March 2003) can help faculties work through familiar change issues that often become barriers represented in questions like: "Why should I do this? How long is it going to take me to work through this? I know my kids and I don't think this will work." Includes a "how-to" guide to applying the research-based Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM), plus the "Seven Stages of Concern" often expressed by teachers and a parallel set of ideas about effective ways to address these concerns. There's also a list of "10 Things to Do About Resistance" and a "Scheduled Maintenance" plan to make sure you follow up on innovations. (625k PDF file) Join NSDC and receive all their great resources: <http://snipurl.com/joinNSDC>.

<http://snipurl.com/CBAMmodel>

### Reach Them To Teach Them in High School

"Two observations from teachers of adolescents are so prevalent these days that they sound like theme music," write Carol Ann Tomlinson and Kristina Doubet. "The more recurrent refrain says that there's no time for covering anything in high school classes other than curriculum or standards: There's no time for discussion, for student interests, for products beyond mandatory quizzes and tests, or for activities." The second refrain, they say, "has to do with the impracticality—if not impossibility—of really knowing one's students in a high school setting." In this article from *Educational Leadership* (April 2005), Tomlinson and Doubet profile four high school teachers who challenge these two pervasive beliefs, teachers who "connect with their students and who persevere in making learning a process that engages the minds and imaginations of the adolescents they teach."

<http://snipurl.com/ReachThem>

### A Coach, Not a Supervisor

The job of instructional coach is new to many schools, and most teachers who find themselves in these groundbreaking positions can relate to the questions often heard by coaching expert Cathy Toll: "How can I convince teachers that I'm not working with them as a supervisor?" "How often should I report to the principal and how much should I tell her?" Toll explains how she might handle such situations and shares other tips about the coach/teacher relationship. (120k PDF file)

<http://snipurl.com/CoachNotSupe>

### Uniting Special and General Education

This issue of WestEd's *R&D Alert* (2004) makes the case that "When Special Education and General Education Unite, Everyone Benefits." The cover story examines the debate over NCLB's ultimate impact on special education and whether the federal mandate could become "a much-needed catalyst for improving the education of students with special needs." A second article explores a promising alternative for identifying students with learning disabilities—strategies that might make special education eligibility unnecessary for some students.

<http://snipurl.com/GenSpEd>

### Literacy Coaching in High School

The Annenberg Institute has published a new report featuring portraits of six high school literacy coaches working across content areas. *Coaches in the High School Classroom* sheds light on the processes, choices, and challenges posed by the promising role of the instructional coach. Our source notes that "it is an excellent starting point for staff discussions about the potential and the challenges of coaching." Download the report and other coaching resources at this webpage.

<http://snipurl.com/HSCOaches>

## Working Toward EXCELLENCE

A NEWSLETTER OF  
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