

Calhoun County School District

Alabama

Superintendent: H. Jacky Sparks

Primary contact: Bobby J. Burns, deputy superintendent*

Schools studied:

Saks Middle School

Saks Elementary School

Ohatchee Elementary School

9,012 students, K-12, rural and suburban

District and School Descriptions

Calhoun County School District covers a large section of northeastern Alabama along the Appalachian Mountains. The district, which includes both suburban and rural areas, is located between Birmingham, to the west, and Atlanta, Georgia, to the east. Within the county are four independent cities: Anniston, Piedmont, Jacksonville, and Oxford. Each of these independent cities governs the schools within its city boundaries. The Calhoun County School District and its schools serve a varied population, including small-town residents, farm families, mill workers, and government employees. This school year, evacuees from the coastal hurricanes have added even more diversity to the area. Half of the district's students are eligible for free and reduced-price meals; in individual schools, the percentage of low-income students ranges from 30% to 70%.

The large military presence of the past (the Army Depot and Fort McClellan) is gone, but the remaining federal facility, a chemical storage site that disposes of chemical weapons, requires special vigilance and safety drills in the schools.

Saks Middle School and Saks Elementary School serve the suburban area between the small cities of Jacksonville and Anniston. The elementary school serves grades K-4 and the middle school serves grades 5-7. Students in grades 8-12 attend Saks High School, located in the same area. Two-thirds of the students at these schools are white, one-third are African American, and 2% are Asian or Latino students. Ohatchee Elementary School, located in a more rural region, is 96% white and 4% African American.

Key Findings

- Calhoun schools have implemented a widescale initiative to improve reading in the elementary grades as part of the Alabama Reading Initiative, a program funded by No Child Left Behind's Reading First. The program begins with a site-based decision to participate that assures the desire of all teachers to be part of the change. The Alabama Reading Initiative includes extensive teacher training, classroom coaches, observation by administrators, and continuous student assessments in fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, phonics, and phonemic awareness.

* Other contacts for this case study include Judy Stiefel, deputy superintendent; Hector Baeza, principal, Saks Elementary School; Wendy England, principal, Saks Middle School; Karen Winn, principal, Ohatchee Elementary School; Gail Carpenter, administrative assistant; Diane Henderson, Title I director; and Kenneth New, administrative assistant.

- Saks Middle School is in year 1 of improvement. To improve student achievement, the school has added a one-hour intervention period that is used for remediation and special instruction for struggling students and as an enrichment period for other students. Saks Middle School is studying the possibility of single-gender classes to determine whether they would be an effective way to improve learning for male students. Their achievement in math and English/language arts is a concern, as is the large number of male students identified for special education.
- The district is devoting special attention to reducing the high school dropout rate, which contributed to the lack of adequate yearly progress at several high schools. The district has established partnerships with local businesses and the military to keep students on track in acquiring the skills they need to graduate and succeed in the workforce. A special program was designed to tutor credit-deficient students in reading, writing, and math to keep them on the path toward graduation.

Overall Impact of NCLB

NCLB is having a major impact on Calhoun County School District, which has its first school in improvement in 2005-06. As a result, choice has been offered for 2005-06. According to Deputy Superintendent Bobby Burns, issues concerning teacher quality are being resolved. All paraprofessionals now meet the requirements for NCLB, test participation rates are better, and student achievement is improving.

NCLB and Student Achievement

Student achievement in Calhoun County schools has increased steadily, especially at the elementary level, since statewide testing began at all grade levels. Alabama reports AYP by three grade spans: grades 3-5, 6-8, and high school. The state uses a proficiency index to determine AYP results, rather than simply percentages of students scoring at the proficient level. A positive index number means that a group exceeded the AYP target, and a negative number means that a group fell short of the target. The magnitude of the index number shows the margin by which the group exceeded or missed the target. In other words, a high positive number means that the percentage of students scoring proficient was far above the target, while a high negative number means the percentage proficient was well below the target.

In 2004-05, the index numbers for Calhoun County show that in reading, the districtwide percentage of students scoring proficient exceeded AYP targets by a healthy margin in grades 3-5 and 6-8, and by a somewhat lesser margin in high school. In math, the districtwide percentages proficient were well above AYP targets for all three grade spans.

Some subgroups did not reach the state targets—in particular, students with disabilities at all three grade spans and both subjects, and African American students in high school reading. The African American subgroup still made AYP, however, because its performance fell within the state's confidence interval. (A confidence interval is a statistical technique that makes allowances for natural fluctuations in test scores by creating a window around a test score, similar to a margin of error. A group that misses the target but scores within this window will still be considered to have made AYP.) The subgroup of students with disabilities made AYP at the elementary and middle school spans because its performance improved enough to qualify for NCLB's safe harbor provision. The only subgroup that did not make AYP was students with disabilities at the high school level.

Adequate Yearly Progress and School Improvement

DISTRICT AND SCHOOL AYP STATUS

The Calhoun County district and all of its elementary schools made AYP in 2004-05. Saks Middle School, a Title I school, is in year 1 of school improvement—the first school in the district to reach that status. Although all subgroups of students met the AYP proficiency targets in 2003-04, fewer than the mandatory 95% of students took the reading test. In 2004-05, test participation was fine, but the students with disabilities subgroup did not meet the targets for reading and math, so Saks Middle School entered school improvement and had to offer school choice.

Alexandria High School is also in its first year of school improvement, but the school is not served by Title I and therefore is not subject to the same sanctions. In both years, the problem at Alexandria was the dropout rate, but also in 2004-05, the students with disabilities subgroup did not meet the test participation rate.

Four other Calhoun County high schools did not make AYP because their dropout rates were too high. One of the four, Pleasant Valley High School, also missed the AYP targets in math and reading for students with disabilities.

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES

Wendy England is the new principal at Saks Middle School, which is in its first year of school improvement. One major change the school implemented in fall 2005 to improve student performance was to establish a one-hour intervention period for all students during the regular school day. During this period, targeted students who are struggling or falling behind receive special instruction and remediation. Students who do not need that kind of attention take other classes, such as participating in a literature circle. The goal is to have all students meeting grade-level standards and demonstrating proficiency in reading and math by the time they go on to grade 8.

The principal hopes to get Saks Middle School out of improvement by focusing on students who are not performing as well as they should. But England also recognizes the importance of keeping students from falling behind. “If we don’t catch them right away,” she said, “they will just fall farther and farther behind. We have to find out why they are not learning, and then we have to do something about it.”

When England and the school staff reviewed test data from past years, they found that female students scored consistently higher than male students in both reading and math. They also noted that the students with disabilities subgroup included 40 male students but only 3 female students. These observations spurred the school to conduct a study of whether single-gender classes could provide better academic focus for the male students.

“We thought the boys somehow needed more space and more direct instruction,” said England. The study was completed, and in January of 2006 all 5th, 6th, and 7th grade students at Saks Middle School were assigned to gender-specific classes in two periods—language arts and math.

Saks Middle School is also continuing its efforts to improve test participation for students with disabilities. In addition, the school is using several approaches to address the achievement of this subgroup in reading and math, including the coaching model used in the elementary schools.

Since dropout rates have been a factor in the district’s high schools that are not making AYP, Calhoun County is conducting a study to determine how to reduce its dropout rate and is taking other actions to ensure that more students graduate. Three years ago, the district began a program to use staff members with backgrounds in social work as “student advocates” who focused special attention on students at risk of dropping out, but the program was discontinued due to lack of funds.

The district has found other ways to help students develop and carry out realistic plans for their futures. It has partnered with local employers, such as Cisco Systems and the U.S. Army Depot, which provides specialized half-day classes such as machine shop and welding. In addition, the district reconnects potential dropouts with school, using funding from the federal Work

Force in Action program and the NCLB Title V Innovative Programs initiative. Through this initiative, retired teachers provide individual or small-group instruction to credit-deficient students in the district's Career Tech Center in Jacksonville, with a focus on reading, writing, and math. The program also offers counseling.

Testing Issues

Alabama schools test students in grades 3 through 8 in reading and math with the SAT 10. In addition, students in grades 4 and 8 take the Alabama Reading Test and those in grade 11 take a general curriculum test, which is required for graduation. All of these tests count toward the determination of AYP. Attendance is the second performance measure used for the elementary and middle schools, and for the high schools, the dropout rate is counted as required by NCLB.

Prior to 2004 testing, Calhoun officials expected the 95% requirement for test participation to be a problem, since the district's overall student attendance was not as high as it should be. The district undertook a major effort to involve parents in improving student attendance, and this produced the desired results, according to Bobby Burns, deputy superintendent. "We also worked with the students," he said, "and it looks like our efforts paid off at most schools. Now we just need to keep it up."

Alabama has required a graduation examination since 1985, but it has been revised several times and is now based on the state standards for grade 11. For the past two years the math and reading portions of the test have been part of the AYP determination. Students take the test for the first time in grade 10, but they have additional opportunities to retake it if they do not pass it on the first attempt.

Kenneth New, district testing administrator, explained that the district takes testing very seriously, and uses many safeguards to make sure the entire assessment process is followed carefully. "We are always concerned about test security," he said. "We have a test coordinator at each school, and even the teachers do not see the test until it is administered."

Impact of NCLB on Curriculum and Instruction

Dr. Judy Stiefel, deputy superintendent, recognizes the importance of educators accepting continuous change in curriculum and instruction to improve student achievement. "When it comes to NCLB," she said, "curriculum is everything. In order to improve learning, we have to change how we teach."

To prepare for changes that needed to be made in Calhoun County, Stiefel established a district task force to review the curriculum at all grade levels and the delivery of instruction at all schools. A specific focus was on grades 5 through 8. The task force has not completed its work, but change is already taking place. Principals are identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their schools through the accountability data collected.

The first major effort focused on reading as part of the Alabama Reading Initiative. Alabama was one of the first three states to have its Reading First proposal funded, and as long as students continue to make progress, the program will be funded for six years. Calhoun County was selected to participate in the reading program in 2003. Among the requirements for schools was a full-time reading coach, staff development for teachers, and selection of a scientifically based comprehensive reading program and assessments. The program goal is to have all students reading fluently and with comprehension at every grade level. Reading has continued to be a major emphasis of professional development for teachers at Calhoun's elementary schools, and coaches have been placed in every elementary school to support teachers with strategies to improve instruction. All schools continually review their practices to make sure that the strategies they are using are producing results, and individual student progress is closely monitored.

As part of the Alabama Reading Initiative, Calhoun schools have implemented the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) program from the Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Oregon. The program consists of standardized literacy assessments that are used in a systematic and structured way to monitor how individual students acquire reading skills. Teachers learn how to use the four types of assessments—screening, diagnostic, progress-monitoring, and outcome-based—to organize their instruction.

“It’s a quick and easy way to find out what you need to know about what a student is learning,” said Gail Carpenter, the administrative assistant who works with curriculum and instruction in the district.

Karen Winn, principal of Ohatchee Elementary School, is very interested in keeping up the good performance record of her school and has found that the DIBELS program is making a big difference in how teachers focus their instruction. “What I see every day,” she said, “is that teachers are becoming more and more aware of how their students are moving along in acquiring the necessary reading skills. DIBELS tells you exactly where every child is, and that is how you can help each one of them get better.”

During the 90-minute reading block, the teacher works with small groups of students while other students work at the literacy centers still in view of the teacher, who is accessible when needed. The activities include the main components of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension—all of which should be observable to the principal or other support personnel as they walk through the classroom. The school reading coach helps the teachers implement all aspects of instruction and assessment and supports them as they learn new ways to teach.

Making major instructional changes in reading has not been a quick process in some schools, said Principal Hector Baeza of Saks Elementary School. “You just can’t expect all this to happen overnight,” he said, observing that administrators tend to underestimate teacher resistance to change. “But when it starts to happen,” he added, “it is there to stay. When we are satisfied with what we have done in reading, we will move on to other content areas.” Assured that continued improvement will take place in reading, Saks Elementary and some other schools are beginning to look at instructional changes in math.

The curriculum task force will soon turn its attention to math as well, particularly middle school programs, curriculum, and instruction. The task force will also look for ways to keep high school students on track to graduate.

NCLB School Choice

Saks Middle School is the first school in Calhoun County to be required to offer choice to students, and it made that option available for 2005-06. Saks parents, however, showed little interest in taking advantage of the opportunity to transfer their children to another school. Only 14 parents attended the meeting held to inform them about their choice options. Although all 371 students at the school were eligible for transfer to another school, only one student, a 7th grader, ended up going to a different school. Transportation is provided by the district.

Teacher Qualifications, Support, and Professional Development

HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS

Alabama faced a problem with the NCLB requirement for highly qualified teachers because of a 20-year-old lawsuit. The specific problem pertained to the state’s option of allowing teachers to take a test to demonstrate the subject matter expertise required by NCLB. A class action suit filed by African Americans two decades ago contended that teachers could not be required to take competency tests because the tests were racially biased. The court’s ruling did not allow teacher competency testing in the state. In the fall of 2004, a consent decree was reached that

permitted the state to administer content-area tests to teachers as required by NCLB, but teachers had to volunteer to take the tests. This situation delayed the efforts of some Alabama teachers to demonstrate that they had skills and qualifications required by NCLB. In May 2006, the state will be able to use subject matter tests for entry-level teachers.

Largely as a result of this uncertainty, the Calhoun district had 69 teachers across all grades that had not completed the requirements to become highly qualified at the beginning of the 2005-06 school year. By January of 2006, after having taken the Praxis test or used the HOUSSE (high objective uniform state standard of evaluation) procedures, only 17 teachers had not yet met the requirement.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In all Calhoun schools, reading is receiving much more emphasis than it has in past years. Teachers continue to be trained in new strategies that are part of the state reading initiative, and soon all elementary teachers will have participated in the training. The specialized training for teachers in the entire region took place at Saks Elementary in the summer of 2005, and this made it easy for Calhoun teachers to be included.

Paraprofessional Qualifications and Support

Although 96% of Calhoun's 150 paraprofessionals did not meet NCLB's highly qualified standard two years ago, they all do now. The Work Keys test was used by most of them to reach the 100% marker.

Funding and Costs

Though Calhoun's share of federal funds has decreased in recent times, 2005-06 has been the second year of funding stability. Title I allocations, which have steadily decreased from several years ago when the military was a large presence, are now increasing. The 2005-06 allocation is \$1.8 million.

Data File—Calhoun County School District

Location: Northeastern Alabama

Type: Rural

Number of Schools

Total: 17

Elementary: 7

Middle/junior high: 1

High schools: 7 (grades 4-12, 5-12, 7-12, 8-12)

Other: 2

Number of Title I schools: 9

Student Enrollment and Demographics

Total enrollment: 9,012

White: 84%

African American: 14%

Other: 2%

Low-income students: 49%

Students with disabilities: 14%

English language learners: 1%

Teachers

Total number of teachers: 562

Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: 97%

Paraprofessionals

Total number of Title I instructional paraprofessionals: 150

Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: 100%

Total Number That Did Not Make AYP Based on 2004-05 Testing

Title I and non-Title I schools that did not make AYP,
including those in improvement, restructuring, or corrective action: 6

Number of Title I Schools in Improvement, Restructuring, or Corrective Action

	Based on 2003-04 testing	Based on 2004-05 testing
Schools in year 1 of improvement (Did not make AYP for two consecutive years):	0	1
Schools in year 2 of improvement (Did not make AYP for three consecutive years):	0	0
Schools in corrective action (Did not make AYP for four consecutive years):	0	0
Schools in restructuring (Did not make AYP for five or more consecutive years):	0	0

Number of Schools Offering Choice and/or SES

	Based on 2003-04 testing	Based on 2004-05 testing
Schools offering choice <i>only</i> :	0	1
Schools in year 1 of school improvement offering SES <i>instead</i> of choice:	0	0
Schools offering SES <i>and</i> choice:	0	0