Joint School District # 2-Meridian
Idaho

Superintendent: Dr. Linda Clark
Primary contact: Dr. Linda Clark
29,904 students, K-12, suburban

District Description

The Meridian school district is officially known as Joint School District # 2 and is located in the city of Meridian, Idaho, about 10 miles west of the state capitol in Boise. This rapidly growing school district, once a small farming community, has outgrown its neighbor city district by over 6,000 students. Nine schools were built in the past five years and more are on the way. Meridian’s student enrollment tripled over the past three decades and now approaches 30,000 students, with most of this growth occurring since 1995. District projections indicate that enrollments will swell by at least 10,000 more students in the coming years, as many acres of farmland in the 400-square-mile district are being developed for housing.

This growth places many demands on the school district, particularly because the new arrivals have brought greater cultural and linguistic diversity to the area. Although English language learners do not account for a large proportion of the district’s enrollment, the ELL students speak more than 50 languages. Some of the children came to the U.S. from refugee camps and never attended school until they arrived in Meridian.

Key Findings

- Meridian students, like those across Idaho, take the Idaho State Assessment Test (ISAT) two times a year, in fall and spring. All testing is done on computers, and the results are quickly known. The fall testing is used for diagnostic purposes, but the spring testing is counted for adequate yearly progress as required for No Child Left Behind.

- English language learners in Meridian speak more than 50 languages and represent great cultural diversity. Recent arrivals, who are very limited in English proficiency and include some children from refugee camps, attend magnet programs known as “critical beginners’ programs” so they can adjust to their new living situations and learn English at the same time.

- With the goal of improving achievement for all students, not just those who are behind, Meridian is expanding its offerings for students to include magnet schools, programs for gifted students, more advanced placement classes, and an international baccalaureate program.

Overall Impact of NCLB

Superintendent Linda Clark is pleased with some of the NCLB accountability measures for Meridian schools because the findings have spurred most schools to make key improvements in math and reading instruction. However, she has concerns about procedures for testing students
with disabilities because three schools did not make AYP in math in 2004-05 due to the performance of this subgroup. Students with disabilities are showing excellent growth, according to the superintendent; in the past five years, the number of students assigned to resource rooms rather than regular classrooms declined by 200. Clark attributed this trend to effective use of student achievement data to inform individualized education plans (IEPs) and daily instruction, adding that “it highlights the fact that students with disabilities should be held accountable for growth.”

**NCLB and Student Achievement**

Idaho’s AYP targets in 2004-05 were 72% of students scoring at proficient levels or above in reading and 60% in math. In 2002-03, students in grades 4, 8, and 10 were tested. In 2003-04, grades 3 and 7 were added, and in 2004-05, all students in grades 3 through 8 plus grade 10 were tested.

Table 1 shows the percentages of Meridian students scoring at the proficient level or above during the past three years.

As table 1 shows, the percentage proficient rose for all subgroups in reading except Latino students, whose performance changed little between 2003-04 and 2004-05. In math, several subgroups showed improvement, but some subgroups stayed about the same or showed slight declines between 2003-04 and 2004-05. Although some achievement gaps have narrowed slightly, according to the table, notable gaps remain for American Indian, African American, and Latino students, as well as low-income students, ELLs, and students with disabilities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Percentage of Meridian Students Performing at Proficient Level or Above, by Subgroup</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
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<td><strong>2002-03</strong></td>
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<td>State targets</td>
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<tr>
<td>All students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Low income</td>
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<td>American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
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<tr>
<td>African American</td>
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<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
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<tr>
<td>English language learners</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students with disabilities</td>
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Table reads: The percentage of Asian students scoring at the proficient level or above on Idaho state reading tests rose from 73% in 2002-03, to 84% in 2003-04, to 90% in 2004-05. All of these percentages were above the state AYP targets in reading for those years.

Note: Subgroups are listed in order of their performance in reading in 2004-05.

Adequate Yearly Progress and School Improvement

DISTRICT AND SCHOOL AYP STATUS
Although 12 Meridian schools did not make AYP in 2004-05, only 3 of these were Title I schools. Crossroads Middle School missed an AYP target last year, but met all the requirements in 2005-06, so the school remains in year 1 of improvement. Three elementary Title I schools, McMillan, Summerwind, and Ustick, did not make AYP for the first year in 2005-06. Two of these schools missed the reading target, and McMillan did not have enough students take the math test. More schools missed the target in math than in reading, and in most schools, the subgroups of low-income students and students with disabilities had the greatest difficulty meeting the targets. One high school missed the graduation rate indicator.

Eight of the district’s schools are in school improvement. All are middle or high schools, but only one—a middle school in year 1 of improvement—is a Title I school. Four of these schools are in year 1 of improvement, and four are in year 2. Eight more schools are on the state’s “alert list,” meaning that they have not made AYP for one year. This group includes the three Title I elementary schools mentioned above.

Following 2003-04 testing, the Meridian district was identified for improvement due to the performance of students with disabilities. In 2004-05 testing, the disabilities subgroup again fell short of AYP targets but made sufficient progress to qualify for NCLB’s safe harbor provision. So the district made AYP based on 2004-05 testing, although it remains in improvement until it makes AYP for a second consecutive year.

DISTRICT AND SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STRATEGIES
The Meridian district plans to improve student achievement by continuing district- and school-level efforts to analyze test results and determine students’ strengths and needs by grade level, subject, and skills. The district is also planning to address more specifically achievement for students with disabilities and English language learners. “We are working on regular reviews of basic skills at all schools,” said Superintendent Clark, “and we will expand what we have learned at the schools such as Meridian Elementary that continue to make great progress.”

Meridian Elementary, a Title I School, was in corrective action three years ago. The school began a series of interventions to improve achievement under the leadership of a new principal who was brought in to reverse the school’s decline. With 74% of its students from low-income families, the school underwent a major transformation in a two-year period. Teachers received intensive training and the school adopted research-based practices for instruction, particularly in reading. In the next two years the school made AYP and exited school improvement status. Once again in 2004-05, Meridian Elementary met its targets for all subgroups in both math and reading. “The school is truly a success story,” said Clark. “Change can take place, and it can improve the learning of all students.” The research-based practices for reading and math, changes in grouping of students, and the extensive professional development that were implemented at Meridian are being put into place at other schools.

The two alternative high schools, Meridian Academy and Eagle Academy, are totally composed of at-risk students. Eagle Academy is in year 2 of improvement, and Meridian Academy is on state alert in all three areas—reading, math, and graduation rate. According to Superintendent Clark, both academies are making a concerted effort to improve achievement. Both schools have added more math courses and are using the PLATO software program adopted and purchased by the Idaho State Board of Education. Eagle would have made AYP, except for a state provision requiring schools to average test scores over three years if they have a small number of tested students. “Both schools are showing great gains in growth of students,” she said, “but these students start way behind, and that is why there is difficulty with proficiency as measured by AYP. This is another indicator of the need for a growth model to accurately measure and fairly report student achievement.”
Testing Issues

Idaho students take the Idaho State Assessment Test twice, once in fall and once in spring. The fall test results are used for diagnostic purposes and program interventions. The spring test results have the same purpose, but they are also used to determine the adequate yearly progress of schools, subgroups, and the district for NCLB.

All Idaho students in grades 2 through 10 take the ISAT in reading and math. What is somewhat unique is that all tests are administered by computer, so school officials can receive results within 24 hours after the tests are completed. Classroom teachers have the results as soon as the students finish the tests. “It is incredible that we can have such rich stuff so fast,” said Superintendent Clark. “All we have to do after testing is decide on our next steps, and we base those on what the kids show us they can do as well as what they can’t do.” Students take each test only once, but in the 10th grade they are allowed to retake the tests in which they did not attain proficiency because passing the tests is required for high school graduation.

The superintendent and the staff at some high schools and middle schools are concerned about the performance and assessment of students with disabilities, especially in math. Even though modifications have been made in testing these students, Clark is not pleased with how the scores of this subgroup affect the district. “Our schools show tremendous growth, but they still get dinged because of our students with disabilities,” she said. “We are a poster child for growth even for that subgroup, and our schools are showing great growth overall, but that doesn’t count enough for AYP.”

English language learners take the same tests as other students, and Idaho also requires an individually administered English proficiency test that is taken annually. The state is very strict about the modifications that are acceptable for the Idaho Standards Achievement Test, according to Clark. All of the district’s magnet programs have shown growth for their English language learner subgroups.

Impact of NCLB on Curriculum and Instruction

GENERAL CHANGES IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

School staff members at all levels review their test data on an ongoing basis. Although the district has used technology for some time, the superintendent’s goal, in her words, is to “make the power of the data” work in every classroom, from kindergarten through high school.

Elementary teachers have become accustomed to continuous change in K-3 programs because of statewide reading assessments given to all K-3 children in Idaho three times a year. These assessments are administered individually to students in the fall, winter, and spring. Adjustments in teaching are made immediately to make sure that no student falls behind. In addition, Meridian has a strong coaching model in place in all the elementary schools, with academic coaches for math and language.

The district’s middle schools emphasize mastery of basic skills in all subject areas. Students in grade 6 are assigned to core classes taught with a team approach to ease the transition to middle school. In addition to the foundation of basic skill learning, students have many opportunities to participate in the arts and elective classes.

At the high school level, the number of advanced placement classes has tripled in the past two years. The district is also planning to introduce an international baccalaureate program and further increase its college credit course offerings.

The principals and teachers at the Meridian schools have made many changes to curriculum and instruction. Reviews of their assessment results have shown the need to change how teachers teach and how students learn, according to the superintendent, and district staff members continue to research best practices and better ways to reach out to students who are not meeting grade-level standards.
CHANGES IN CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION FOR SUBGROUPS
Meridian staff members are working to more closely identify the instructional strands that keep students with disabilities from achievement targets. Three schools missed the proficiency targets for this subgroup. Because the schools serve different grade levels (one high school, one middle school, and one elementary school), district officials believe that the analysis will provide them with good data to use at the other schools if they need it.

District officials find that accountability for students with disabilities continues to be challenging. “This is a real frustration,” said the superintendent. “These students are in special education because they are significantly behind grade level, and they are the students who should be held to a growth standard.” Their instruction is differentiated, she explained, and students’ individualized education plans are written based on the assessment data.

The Meridian district has greatly increased its student enrollment in the past few years, and most special education programs have grown proportionately. For example, the district has 100 new autistic students, and there are similar numbers in other programs. Yet, as Clark explained, the resource room where students with disabilities have traditionally received special instruction has 200 fewer students than previous years because students are being mainstreamed. Clark said, “Students are being staffed out of the resource room because they are making progress in the regular education curriculum to the point where they are functioning at grade level.”

Clark credits the growth measures and the tools that go with the district assessments for the achievement of students with disabilities as well as other students. “Teachers have received a lot of training and support, and academic coaches were expanded this year,” she said. “We use leveling, a form of flexible grouping, in many classes. In this way we make sure that students receive skill instruction at their academic level, but they also receive instruction at their grade level every day.”

English Language Learners
Meridian students in the elementary grades who have very limited English proficiency attend a magnet program called “critical beginners” at McMillan Elementary School or Lewis and Clark Middle School. Both schools are focusing on math, the area in which English language learners had the most difficulty. Various forms of English immersion and language acquisition are the methods of instruction for English language learners. For the newest students, survival skills are a large part of their instructional day. Some of the refugee children have never been to school and have never seen books. Some do not know how to use forks or knives or how to dress appropriately. These children from Somalia, China, Mexico, and Eastern Europe learn English together at the same time they learn about their new country. The district goal is to get all the students into the mainstream as quickly as possible so they can be successful there.

Instruction for English language learners is differentiated according to the students’ instructional level and needs. Additional academic coaches support classroom efforts to better instruct English language learners, and additional resources, such as instructional software, are used.

Choice and Supplemental Educational Services
Choice has not been an issue in Meridian because parents have long had some choices of schools, such as magnet schools, available to them. The district had two schools in the past that were required to offer choice, and only one school is required to do so in 2005-06. No students transferred to other schools in previous years, and none has done so in 2005-06.

No schools are required to offer supplemental educational services.
Teacher Qualifications, Support, and Professional Development

HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS
About a dozen Meridian teachers are still completing their requirements to be considered highly qualified, and most of them have letters of authorization for their certification, which means they are on the way to finalizing their qualifications. All are expected to complete the requirements by the end of 2005-06.

Because of the huge growth in student enrollment, the district has a large percentage of new teachers. However, with Boise State University nearby, recruitment has not been difficult. In addition, the district has an ample pool of teachers to choose from because many prospective teachers want to move to the area. Many new hires in 2005-06 were experienced teachers who came from as far away as Alaska and Long Island. The district was even able to find teachers for English language learners, and administrative hiring was finished by early summer. Special education teachers were the hardest to find. As Clark noted, “We have special education teachers, and they get burned out. They may have the proper certification, but they are teaching in other areas.”

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
New teachers in Meridian receive support from academic coaches assigned to their schools. This support includes demonstrations of model lessons by the coach with the teacher observing, and lessons taught by the teacher that are observed by the coach. Instructional support staff and district curriculum specialists provide specific training and on-site classes for teachers of specific grade levels or specific subjects. All Meridian teachers continue to be trained in the latest technology, especially in administering assessments. They have also been trained in the use of assessment data to analyze the achievement of their students and determine their needs. In addition to district funds, both Title I and Title II funds are used for professional development.

Paraprofessional Qualifications and Support
Meridian does not use its Title I funds for paraprofessionals to provide instruction to students. Only two paraprofessionals are employed in the district. One is highly qualified, and the other one will retire this year.

Funding and Costs
Title I funds for Meridian are very limited because the district poverty level is less than 20%. Only 7 of the 41 schools have low-income percentages that are greater than the district average. These are the Title I schools, and their proportion of low-income students is as high as 74%. The district has lost Title I funding over the years; the current allocation is only about half of what it once was.

In 2005 the Meridian district passed a $140 million bond initiative with an approval rate of 72%, an indication of the strong level of public support for the schools. From these funds, seven schools will be built: a high school, a middle school, three elementary schools, a K-8 magnet school for math and science, and an alternative school. In addition, the funds will allow the district to acquire the land needed for the schools.
Data File—Joint School District # 2-Meridian

Location: Central Idaho, west of Boise
Type: Suburban

Number of Schools
  Total: 41
  Elementary: 25
  Middle/junior high: 7
  High schools: 9

Number of Title I schools: 7

Student Enrollment and Demographics
  Total enrollment: 29,904
  White: 92%
  Latino: 5%
  Asian: 2%
  African American: 1%
  Low-income students: 18%
  Students with disabilities: 11%
  English language learners: 4%

Teachers
  Total number of teachers: 1,803
  Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: 99%

Paraprofessionals
  Total number of Title I instructional paraprofessionals: 2
  Percentage meeting NCLB “highly qualified” requirements: 50% (one does not)

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: 12

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

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<td>Schools in year 2 of improvement (Did not make AYP for three consecutive years):</td>
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<td>Schools in corrective action (Did not make AYP for four consecutive years):</td>
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<td>Schools in restructuring (Did not make AYP for five or more consecutive years):</td>
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Number of Schools Offering Choice and/or SES

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