A program to reimagine rural school districts is inspiring change in Clarksdale

Leaders in the Clarksdale Municipal School District are turning to the community and developing new community-focused curricula in an effort to reinvent the district and become a model for districts in the Mississippi Delta.

The district is one of 10 across the country chosen by Transcend, a national education research and development-focused nonprofit, to take part in an effort to help rural districts redesign their districts with community input.

“Historically, rural communities have been left out of opportunities for redesign that support schools to reimagine education for students,” Transcend co-founder Aylon Samouha said in a statement. “At the same time, our collaborations with school leaders across the country have shown us that so many of our nation’s rural communities want to engage in deep redesign.”

Transcend's program focuses on school development through "leaps," curriculum goals that take traditional methods like narrowly focused lessons and memorization and work toward prioritizing critical thinking and interaction between teachers, students, parents and the community.

Clarksdale Superintendent Earl Joe Nelson said the district has traditionally been ranked in the bottom 5% of all Mississippi school districts prior to when he took over in 2019.

Results from the 2018-19 Mississippi Academic Assessment Program show fewer than 20% of Clarksdale’s student population in nearly all grade levels were proficient in math and English Language Arts.
Proficiency fell when statewide testing was reinitiated in 2021, but the results were in line with other districts where learning was hampered by disruptions over the past two school years due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A former principal for Pass Christian Middle School, Nelson said he knew something like the Transcend program was necessary to help the district reboot and learn through in-depth analysis of its deficiencies.

"The Transcend opportunity presented itself as a blessing at the right time," he said. "As we are looking at our strategic plan and as we realign the level of success for our structure, it plays a huge part in that to be able to take that data and build based on what our students say and what our stakeholders say."

'I think you'll see a radical change'

Elizabeth George, technology integration specialist for the Clarksdale district, said since the cohort began in August, the district has reached out to several students, teachers and community leaders to form study groups to learn about issues.

"Some of the (issues) we saw were relevance," George said. "They're trying to learn what comes for them next after high school, whether it's career, college, military or whatever else might happen."

George said students also asked for more stimulating lessons in the classroom, which came as a surprise to officials, though many teachers agreed with the student assessments after begin presented with focus group data.

The findings are already being used to start changes in lessons, though bigger goals, such as improving focus on student mental health, are still in the works, George said.

Rob French, chief strategy officer for the district, said a new five-year strategic plan is also in development.

"If you look at where we are now and where we are five years from now, I think you'll see a radical change," he said. "What we hope (families) don't feel in this district is that it's us trying to rapidly change things, but instead create systems that make sustained change over time."

French said the critical analysis done so far has already helped them determine which offerings may not be relevant to students while helping plan which offerings may be expanded, such as more advanced placement courses or career-focused classes.
"We've gotten a lot of feedback from different stakeholders, but we're probably also asking deeper questions than we ever have in the past," French said.

Nelson, the superintendent, said the district had already been reviewing offered courses prior to joining the Transcend cohort. Combined with the new feedback and data they hope to collect through new technology introduced in the district through the Mississippi Connects program, administrators hope to develop even more effective programming for students.

George, the technology specialist, said as the district works on maintaining course relevance and other issues, local business owners may be asked to contribute expertise to ensure students are getting the most out of classes.

Connecting with the community and ensuring they have a say is a vital part of the new direction in which the district hopes to go, George said.

"We do want to make sure that if we tried something and we had mixed feedback on how it went, we want to share that with the community," she said. "Maybe we try something, and it bottomed out. We're going to share that with them, too, so that they know that we're taking the feedback that they've given and are responding to it."

Nelson said while improvements won't happen overnight, he and other administrators in the district feel involving the community more will lead to better outcomes and more opportunities for Clarksdale students going forward.

"Watch our data and watch what we're doing," he said. "It's a new day for Clarksdale."

Correction: This story has been modified to reflect that Superintendent Joe Nelson was a former principal at Pass Christian Middle School.

Have an education-related news tip? Contact Keisha Rowe at nrowe@gannett.com, on Twitter or at (601) 760-2483.