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Two Districts, Five Miles Apart: A Comparative Analysis of the Lauderdale County and the Meridian Public School Districts

Daneel Konnar
University of Mississippi

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TWO DISTRICTS, FIVE MILES APART: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE

LAUDERDALE COUNTY AND THE MERIDIAN PUBLIC SCHOOL DISTRICTS

by

Daneel Konnar

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of

the requirement of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, MS

May 2024

Approved By:

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Advisor: Dr. Melissa Bass

_____
Reader: Dr. Marvin King

_____
Reader: Dr. Tom Brady

ABSTRACT

DANEEL KONNAR: Two Districts, Five Miles Apart: A Comparative Analysis of the Lauderdale County School District and the Meridian Public School District (Under the direction of Dr. Melissa Bass)

K-12 public education in Mississippi has sparked much conversation and debate regarding the factors and forces that influence school performance on test scores, teacher pay and salaries, infrastructure, and student performance. Mississippi's children deserve the best quality education and opportunities to grow into the best version of themselves. However, school districts across Mississippi within the same county are facing many disparities. The purpose of this study is to examine the disparities between the Meridian Public School District and Lauderdale County School District in Meridian. I interviewed seven school officials to gain perspective on the differences between the two school districts. From these interviews, I identified four major themes that were mentioned as potential sources of the performance gap between the two districts: funding, technology, socio-economic status, and the role of parents and guardians. I then used these findings to develop policy recommendations to close the gap between the two districts. Increased funding, technology integration alternatives, teacher recruitment and retention incentives, and parental and guardian engagement programs were the four policy recommendations made.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Mississippi Department of Education	MDE
Lauderdale County School District	LCSD
Meridian Public School District	MPSD

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE), under the supervision and guidance of the State Superintendent of Education, is directly in charge of implementing education policy initiatives, crafting a state-wide system of measuring education performance, and allocating resources to public school districts across the state of Mississippi (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.). With its vast control and leadership over the state's entire education system, MDE serves a significant role in the implementation and advocacy of new ideas and initiatives and also providing opportunities for school districts across the state to flourish. However, with the Southeastern United States' highest paid State Superintendent of Education (Ballotpedia 2024), Mississippi falls significantly behind on performance level compared to neighboring and other Southeastern states. This raises an important question: If the state's chief officer of education is one of the highest paid in the country, how are there significant disparities amongst school districts across Mississippi? Understanding the differences between school districts is essential to finding policy solutions and alternatives to improve school districts across the state.

My research focuses on studying the two school districts in my hometown of Meridian, MS to understand how two school districts a few miles apart are facing significantly different challenges from one another. How do two school districts just a few miles apart from each other face different challenges? What factors contribute to the disparity in state accountability test scores and school performance between the Lauderdale County School District and the Meridian Public School District? Through my research, I focused on looking into funding, school resources, technological needs, and

state accountability grades between the Lauderdale County School District and the Meridian Public School District to understand the similarities and differences between the districts.

Existing literature indicates that Mississippi's education system has faced challenges stemming from historical issues like segregation and inadequate funding. The state's budget constraints, exacerbated by events like the COVID-19 pandemic, have impacted funding and resources for schools. Funding inequalities persist, affecting high-poverty districts disproportionately. Additionally, teacher quality, certification, and working conditions also play a role in student outcomes, and Mississippi has faced challenges ensuring teachers are properly certified to teach in the classroom. Historical factors like white flight, segregation academies, and ongoing racial and income segregation contribute to educational challenges. The literature further suggests that efforts to address segregation and funding disparities require creative solutions and policy changes at various levels. I hypothesized that different funding levels and socioeconomic backgrounds of the two school districts has caused a difference in performance levels between the two school districts.

To explore the differences between the school districts, I collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews with five school officials from the Lauderdale County School District and two school officials from the Meridian Public School District. These interviews were conducted and recorded on Zoom, a teleconferencing platform, and transcribed using Otter.ai software. I asked the school officials about their perspective on state accountability grades, how funding influences the quality of education a student

receives, parent and teacher relationships, and how technology has influenced the classroom experience for teachers and students.

From the interviews, I was able to identify four main themes. Funding, technological needs, socio-economic status, and the role of the parent and guardian emerged as major concerns amongst the interviewees. Through these findings, I was able to compare and contrast the differences between the two districts. Several insights were gathered regarding funding from the Lauderdale County School District (LCSD) and Meridian Public School District (MPSD). LCSD educators expressed concerns about inadequate funding for classroom supplies, technology, and teacher units, highlighting a disparity in resources compared to teacher-funded classrooms. They also discussed historical factors like white flight impacting tax bases and funding. Conversely, an MPSD assistant principal noted a perception that MPSD has more funding, particularly due to federal title funding and higher salaries, despite ongoing challenges in teacher recruitment and retention. Overall, both districts acknowledged funding shortcomings but noted recent improvements, especially with ESSER funds post-COVID-19. In relation to technology, both the districts have ample technology resources. Educators in LCSD expressed concerns about the heavy reliance on technology in classrooms. They noted that while technology can enhance learning, it may also hinder hands-on experiences and social-emotional growth. The educators emphasized the importance of quality teaching over technological advancements and expressed a desire for more face-to-face interaction between teachers and students.

Additionally, the interviews revealed a range of viewpoints regarding the influence of socio-economic status on a student's education. While some interviewees

acknowledged a correlation between socio-economic status and academic performance, others emphasized the role of qualified teachers and effective teaching methods in mitigating these effects. Concerns were raised about the fairness and accuracy of the state's accountability model in assessing schools' performance in relation to their students' socio-economic backgrounds. It also revealed contrasting perspectives on the role of parents and guardians in students' education. Faculty in the LCSD emphasized the positive impact of parental involvement on students' academic success, with initiatives like educational nights and ongoing communication with parents. On the other hand, faculty in the Meridian Public School District expressed concerns about decreasing parental involvement, citing challenges such as parental absence due to various reasons and the need for teachers to take on additional roles beyond academics.

Based on these facts, I then developed policy recommendations to be implemented to resolve the issues school officials discussed. The proposed solutions to address the challenges faced by the MPSD and LCSD entail a comprehensive approach to improving education quality. One key solution focuses on Teacher Recruitment and Retention Incentives, emphasizing stronger financial support for teachers through measures like paying for professional development outside the state, forgiving student loans, providing housing assistance, and implementing wellness programs. Technology Integration Alternatives will balance the use of technology in classrooms, promoting physical education activities, fostering closer student-teacher relationships without heavy reliance on devices, and creating technology-free zones. Parental and Guardian Engagement Programs will boost parental involvement through cultural events, social media communication, family literacy nights, and community engagement campaigns.

Finally, the Funding solution emphasizes the need for increased financial support for schools, encouraging community advocacy, pursuing grants, building partnerships, and advocating for equitable resource distribution through a state-level funding formula. These solutions aim to create a supportive and conducive environment for students' learning and development, requiring collaborative efforts from educators, parents, communities, and policymakers to achieve meaningful and lasting improvements in education quality.

Mississippi's children deserve the best quality education to improve their lives and to foster a new generation of learners and leaders. By eliminating these challenges school districts are facing, schools across the state can flourish and provide the best learning experience and environment for students. Consequently, teachers can learn to grow as well, further encouraging their students and families to utilize education as a way and means of breaking cycles of poverty and other challenges.

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND

Lauderdale County, Mississippi, is home to two vital public school districts, the Lauderdale County School District and the Meridian Public School District. These districts play a critical role in shaping the future of the county's youth through education. This chapter delves into the intricacies of Lauderdale County's demographics, public school funding, teacher salaries, and experience levels. Furthermore, it examines the county's poverty rate and the Mississippi Adequate Education Program. By exploring these factors, this chapter aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the educational landscape in Lauderdale County and its impact on student outcomes.

Lauderdale County Statistics

Lauderdale County is located in the eastern part of Mississippi, bordering the state of Alabama to the east. The county seat and largest city is Meridian, which is situated approximately 93 miles east of Jackson and about 134 miles west of Birmingham, Alabama. Lauderdale County is well-connected to other parts of Mississippi and Alabama through major highways. Interstate 20 runs east-west through the county, connecting Meridian with Jackson to the west and Birmingham to the east. U.S. Route 45 runs north-south through the county, linking Meridian with other cities in Mississippi, such as Tupelo and Columbus. Interstate 59 from New Orleans merges with Interstate 20 in Meridian. The county's location, combined with its transportation infrastructure, has made it a regional hub for commerce, healthcare, and education.

According to the 2020 United States Census study, Lauderdale County had a population of 72,983 individuals. The city of Meridian has a population of 33,816, and 37,326 live in the county limits of Lauderdale County. The county's racial and ethnic

make up was 52.5% White, 45.1% Black or African American, 2.4% Hispanic or Latino, and 2.4% other race (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). These results show a near even split between White and Black/African American residents.

Education levels between high school graduate or higher attainment and Bachelor's degree or higher attainment vastly differ. Census data shows that although 84.6% of Lauderdale County residents age 25+ have a high school degree or higher, 20.7% of residents age 25+ have a Bachelor's degree or higher. There are a total of 1,796 employer establishments in the county with a total of 27,518 individuals who are employed.

The median household income for the county is $45,649, which is below the state and country's median household income of $52,985 and $75,149, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). The county's 2022 per capita income per household is $26,590, which is below the state and country's per capita income per household of $29,209 and $41,261, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

Lauderdale County Economy

Serving a pivotal role in the economic development and job industry for the county, Lauderdale County's economy primary employers are Naval Air Station (3,000 employees), Ochsner Health System (2,465 employees), Baptist Memorial Health (1,343 employees), Mississippi Air National Guard (1,200 employees), and Meridian Public School District (1,000 employees) (East Mississippi Business Development Corporation, n.d). The main industrial employers are iQor (inbound customer contact center with 420 employees), Avery Products (office products and distribution center with 250 employees), and Peavey Electronics (manufacturer of amplifiers, guitars, and sound

equipment with 200 employees). Additionally, Lockheed Martin, a global security and aerospace company, has an aircrafts parts and sub assembly plant in Meridian with 200 employees (East Mississippi Business Development Corporation, n.d).

History of Lauderdale County

In the first United States Census of 1840, Lauderdale County had a population of 4,005 free individuals and 1,353 slaves. This number grew within two decades; in the 1860 Census, Lauderdale County's free population grew to 8,225 free individuals and 5,088 slaves. Many of the county's farms and plantations practiced mixed agriculture with cotton, corn, and livestock as the main products (Mississippi Encyclopedia, 2018). During the Civil War in 1864, Union forces led by General William Tecumseh Sherman burned Meridian to the ground; properties and railroad infrastructure were completely destroyed, leaving nothing behind for residents to claim.

The 1900 Census showed dramatic growth in the county, with a population of 38,150, split almost equally between Whites and African Americans and featuring a notable percentage of first and second generation immigrants (Mississippi Encyclopedia, 2018). Six decades later, the county's population grew to 67,119 individuals with a majority two-thirds white population (Mississippi Encyclopedia, 2018). The county ranked within the top five counties in the state in population, population density, per capita income, and percentage of the population with a high school education. Nearly eighteen percent of the county's workforce had positions in the furniture, food, apparel, and textiles industries along with a large number of people working for the healthcare system (Mississippi Encyclopedia, 2018).

As of 2023, the largest industries in the county are healthcare, retail trade, and educational services. These industries continue to provide many jobs to the workforce and contribute to the financial stability of the county (DataUsa, n.d.).

Historical Struggles and Inequalities in Mississippi's Education System

Since the beginning of the Civil War, the battle and fight for education in the state has been a long reach for many individuals; in 1878, the face of school segregation was already evident in Mississippi. Mississippi lawmakers drafted a bill and enacted a law that required, "white and colored children shall not be taught in the same school-house, but in separate school-houses" (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.). Laws passed in the late 1800s are still having a significant effect on the school system today; many schools in impoverished counties are falling behind in school resources, funding, and technology for students to utilize. The setbacks the state faces today are partially due to Mississippi's state constitution, which offers various roadmaps to not providing constant, uniform education (Harrison, 2020).

ACT Scores Affecting Graduation Rates and College Readiness

Also known as the American College Test (ACT), the ACT has been used by public and private schools in Mississippi as a gauge to understand how prepared students are for college. College readiness is the set of skills, knowledge, and behaviors a high school student should have upon graduation (Wignall, 2020). While the average ACT score for public high school juniors in Mississippi slightly increased from 17.6 in 2019 to 17.7 in 2020, many policy analysts and educators have argued that nearly 90% of students are still not hitting all four benchmarks on the test (Betz, 2021). As for the average ACT scores for private schools, private schools in Mississippi had an average

score of 23 (Private School Review, 2021). With this in mind, private school funding allows teachers within the system to provide students with the necessary resources to score higher than a public school student would on the ACT (Burroughs, 2019).

Mississippi's K-12 School Funding

Mississippi's K-12 school funding formula has an extensive background and protocol that involves the Mississippi Department of Education and the Mississippi Legislature. The Office of Budget and Planning helps maintain the Mississippi Department of Education's Budget, which is approved and appropriated by the Mississippi Legislature. The $3 billion budget includes funds from state, federal, and other outside sources for the agency's operations and disbursement to Mississippi's K-12 public schools (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.).

MAEP: Mississippi Adequate Education Program

The Mississippi Adequate Education Program, also known as MAEP, was enacted by the state legislature in 1997. Recognizing that schools in property-wealthy districts had more local property tax funding support, the legislature designed and enacted MAEP. MAEP's goal was to increase funding for schools in general and equalize funding between low and high property value districts. This was due to the fact that for many years, education analysts and policymakers had recognized the disparities within public schools in Mississippi, limiting the opportunities for student achievement for many students across the state (Mississippi Association of Educators, n.d.).

First implemented in 1997, MAEP helped address many of the educational inequities Mississippi public schools were experiencing. The formula starts with the amount of money to provide each student an "adequate" education. Then, it subtracts

how much the local district pays. There is also a cap on local district contributions. Since 1997, MAEP has only been fully funded twice (Mississippi Association of Educators, n.d.).

Funding: How Much Has Been Truly Poured In?

The last time public schools in Mississippi were fully funded was during the 2007-2008 school year (Parents' Campaign, 2023). Since 2008, Mississippi schools, teachers, and students have had their education shortchanged by nearly $3.5 billion. Following the Great Recession of 2008, public schools received low amounts of assistance; nearly every other state agency was able to recover to its pre-recession level of funding before the public school system. A recent study indicated that 73 school districts in the state spent more on salaries and benefits for teachers than they received in their total MAEP allocation (Parents' Campaign, 2021).

For the 2023-2024 school year, the Mississippi Legislature increased funding for school districts by nearly $117 million (Parents Campaign, 2023). Public schools still remain significantly under budget and underfunded for the 2023-2024 school year, which is nearly $175.8 million below what the state of Mississippi law states for students and teachers to be fully successful (Parents' Campaign, 2021).

However, Mississippi has seen consistent improvements in education; the state now ranks 32nd in the country for education (James, 2023). With a recent consistent improvement in the education system, Mississippi still has one of the lowest per-pupil-expenditure rates, ranking 47th in the country (Wisevoter, 2023).

Title I Funding

Title I is part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which was first passed in 1965 and has been reauthorized several times, most recently as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015. The goal of Title I funding is to close the achievement gap between low-income students and their more affluent peers by providing additional resources and support to schools serving disadvantaged communities. Title I funds are utilized to ensure students in low-income districts are able to sufficiently meet the standards and challenges of the state's academic standards (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.). Title I funds can be utilized from Kindergarten to 12th grade, and these funds are available for any public schools with a low-income population of at least forty percent.

Mississippi K-12 Education Accountability Model

The Office of District and School Performance (ODSP) within the Mississippi Department of Education is tasked with providing annual accountability measures and performance ratings at the state, district, and individual school levels. These data serve as a crucial tool for stakeholders to identify areas of strength and weakness within Mississippi's education system and guide decision-making for improvement efforts.

Under the Mississippi Statewide Accountability System, schools and districts are assigned a performance rating of A, B, C, D, or F based on a comprehensive set of criteria. These criteria encompass various aspects of student achievement and growth, including performance in math and English Language Arts on state assessments for grades 3-8, as well as Algebra I and English II in high school. The accountability system also takes into account whether all students, particularly the lowest-performing 25%, are

meeting annual expected growth targets in these subjects. In addition to math and English Language Arts, the accountability system considers student performance in science on state assessments in grades, as well as performance on the high school U.S. History assessment.

At the high school level, the accountability system evaluates student performance on college and career readiness assessments, such as the ACT or ACT WorkKeys. Participation and performance in accelerated courses, including Advanced Placement (AP), International Baccalaureate (IB), and dual credit college courses, are also taken into account. Finally, the system considers whether high school students are graduating on time, as this is a key indicator of a school's success in preparing students for post-secondary education and careers.

To ensure the reliability and validity of the accountability measures, schools and districts are expected to maintain a minimum assessment participation rate of 95%. By analyzing the comprehensive data provided by the ODSP's accountability system, educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders can make data-driven decisions to support continuous improvement in Mississippi's public education system.

Two School Districts: Why?

The existence of two separate school districts in Lauderdale County, Mississippi can be traced back to the state's constitution and its provisions regarding the establishment and organization of school districts. The Mississippi Constitution of 1890 includes a provision that allows for the creation of separate school districts within a county. Article 8, Section 271 of the Mississippi Constitution states,

The legislature may, in its discretion, provide for the maintenance and establishment of free public schools for all children between the ages of six and twenty-one years, by taxation or otherwise, and with such grades as the legislature may prescribe.

This provision grants the state legislature the authority to establish and maintain public schools, including the power to create separate school districts within a county. As a result, many counties in Mississippi have multiple school districts, often divided along municipal or geographic lines.

In the case of Lauderdale County, the two school districts were established to serve different areas of the county. The Lauderdale County School District serves the unincorporated areas of the county and some smaller municipalities, while the Meridian Public School District serves the city of Meridian, which is the county seat and the largest city in the county. The separation of school districts in Lauderdale County is not unique, as it is a common practice throughout Mississippi and is permissible under the state constitution. However, this structure has sometimes led to disparities in resources, funding, and educational outcomes between districts within the same county, as is the case with the Lauderdale County School District and the Meridian Public School District.

Lauderdale County Private Schools

Lauderdale County is home to private schools and academies that offer alternative educational options to families in the area. Some of the notable private schools and academies in Lauderdale County include Lamar School, which was founded in 1964. Lamar School is an independent, co-educational college preparatory school serving students from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade.

Russell Christian Academy is a private, Christian school serving students from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. The school is affiliated with the Baptist denomination and is accredited by the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI).

St. Patrick Catholic School is a private, Catholic school located in Meridian, serving students from pre-kindergarten through 7th grade. The school is part of the Catholic Diocese of Jackson and aims to provide a faith-based education.

These private schools and academies offer a variety of educational approaches, religious affiliations, and extracurricular activities. They often have smaller class sizes, more individualized attention, and a focus on college preparation. The presence of these private schools and academies in the county provides families with additional choices beyond the public school districts.

Lauderdale County School District: Per-Pupil Expenditures and Teacher Qualifications

For the 2021-2022 school year, the Lauderdale County School District's average per-pupil expenditure amounted to $10,206.7 (Mississippi Department of Education, 2022). The 2022-2023 school year shows that the district has a total of 427 teachers, with nearly 83.2% of teachers with four or more years of teaching experience (Mississippi Department of Education, 2023). 1.8% of teachers are considered provisional teachers, which are teachers that hold an emergency or provisional license to teach in Mississippi. 99% of teachers have a valid certificate and teach a course for which they are properly endorsed and licensed to teach (Mississippi Department of Education, 2023). 84.6% of

the teaching staff have four or more years of experience teaching in a school with low levels of poverty.

Meridian Public School District: Per-Pupil Expenditures and Teacher Qualifications

For the 2021-2022 school year, the Meridian Public School District's average per-pupil expenditure was $11,891.90 (Mississippi Department of Education, 2023). The school district employed 329 teachers for the 2022-2023 school year, with approximately 65.5% of teachers with four or more years of teaching experience (Mississippi Department of Education, 2023). 7.3% of teachers are classified as provisional teachers, and 91.4% of teachers have a valid certificate and teach a course for which they are properly endorsed. 65.5% of teachers have four or more years of teaching experience in a school with low levels of poverty.

CHAPTER 3: LITERATURE REVIEW

I reviewed existing literature on public school education in Mississippi and funding using the University of Mississippi's JSTOR database to find useful and important academic journals. Searches included the keywords "public school funding in Mississippi," "school segregation in Mississippi," "Mississippi public schools accountability model," and "education quality in Mississippi." OneSearch, EBSCOHost, and Google Scholar also provided important peer-reviewed articles using these keywords and provided an in-depth look at the various topics regarding public education in Mississippi. The combination of these databases allowed for a multifaceted understanding of the subject matter, encompassing critical issues such as school funding disparities, historical and ongoing segregation, accountability measures, and overall educational quality. By synthesizing the findings from this literature review, I aim to contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding educational equity and excellence in Mississippi.

Private School Movement in Mississippi

The private school movement in Mississippi from 1964-1971 was a direct outgrowth of the segregationist White Citizens' Councils and their efforts to maintain segregated education in the face of federal legislation and court orders mandating integration. Michael Fuquay's study *Civil Rights and the Private School Movement in Mississippi, 1964-1971* provides insight as to how private segregation academies were established using a combination of legal and illegal public funds and resources, making their "private" nature largely a semantic distinction to evade federal requirements while still benefiting from public support (Fuquay, 2002).

The Citizens' Councils provided the organizational structure and mobilized white communities to quickly establish private schools as a destination for segregationist ideology as public school integration became unavoidable. Additionally, the academies served to protect and pass on white supremacist beliefs to a new generation as the civil rights movement made overt racism unacceptable in the public sphere and national culture (Fuquay, 2002).

Delta communities with large black majorities and a history of hostility to black education were quickest to abandon public schools, while those in other regions of the state clung longer to segregated public education, establishing academies only as a last resort in the face of court-ordered integration in 1969-1970. Intimidation of black families attempting to enroll in white public schools limited integration to token levels in many districts. However, the federal government's growing power to enforce desegregation orders and investigate racial violence made massive resistance unsustainable. As calls for local control gave way to wholesale rejection of an increasingly integrated government at all levels, the private school movement cultivated an anti-government, pro-privatization ideology among white Mississippians (Fuquay, 2002).

Thus, these events from the 1960s and 1970s still have a very significant impact on school districts across the state, including the Lauderdale County and Meridian Public School Districts. The formation of the private school in Meridian in 1964, Lamar School, has attracted families residing in the city and county school district to attend the school.

Urban Segregation and Education

Racial segregation remains a persistent issue in many parts of the United States, particularly in the Deep South region, including Jackson, Mississippi. In "Urban Segregation in the Deep South: Race, Education, and Planning Ethics in Jackson, Mississippi" by Joan Marshall Wesley, Matthew Dalbey, and William Harris, the study examines the historical roots and current manifestations of segregation in Jackson's public schools, housing patterns, and other aspects of urban life. The study traces the roots of segregation in Jackson to the era of slavery and the subsequent implementation of Jim Crow laws in the post-Reconstruction South. Mississippi's defiance of the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling led to the establishment of private "segregation academies" that allowed white families to avoid sending their children to integrated public schools (Dalbey, Harris, and Wesley, 2005). The article also provides detailed statistics on the resegregation of Jackson's public schools in the decades following the *Brown* decision.

As white families fled to the suburbs or enrolled their children in private academies, the Jackson Public School District became increasingly segregated, with the African American student population rising from 67% in 1970 to 94% in the 2000-2001 school year. This trend was due to factors such as white flight, real estate steering practices, and the perception among many white families that urban public schools were "too black" or of inferior quality (Dalbey, Harris, and Wesley, 2005). Various consequences of residential and educational segregation in Jackson resulted, including the concentration of poverty in predominantly black neighborhoods, the loss of the middle class from the city, urban sprawl, and the erosion of the city's tax base (Dalbey, Harris, and Wesley, 2005).

19

This very issue is seen similarly in Meridian in which a majority of property-wealthy homes are outside of the city limits. This report correlates nicely to the research, giving a better understanding of why individuals left the city school district and moved to the county.

School Segregation and Racial Academic Achievement Gaps

"School Segregation and Racial Academic Achievement Gaps" by Sean Reardon provides a thorough examination of the relationship between various dimensions of racial segregation and academic achievement disparities between white and minority students in U.S. metropolitan areas. The study analyzes segregation along four key dimensions: residential vs. school segregation, between-district vs. between-school/neighborhood segregation, absolute vs. relative segregation (exposure and unevenness), and racial vs. socioeconomic composition as the main factor driving segregation's effects.

Several key patterns were identified: School segregation measures are more predictive of gaps than residential segregation measures; between-school/neighborhood segregation matters more than between-district segregation; and unevenness in exposure to poverty or same-race peers is more salient than absolute exposure levels. The study emphasizes that although his findings do not prove causality, the consistency and magnitude of the associations—particularly for differential exposure to school poverty—are highly suggestive of powerful effects of segregation on achievement inequities (Reardon, 2016).

The study finds that residential segregation likely affects achievement gaps primarily by shaping school segregation patterns, as the two are highly correlated (Reardon, 2016). Additionally, it also highlights that school racial segregation matters

because it is strongly linked to unequal exposure to school poverty. Given large racial differences in family income and neighborhood contexts, racial integration is essential for reducing disparities in exposure to poor schoolmates and the associated achievement gaps (Reardon, 2016).

Funding and Equity

Policy makers, the general public, and the courts have all shown a great deal of interest in the distribution of educational opportunities and the equity of educational spending among areas for more than 30 years. In the study "The Equality of Public School District Funding in the United States" by Michele Moser and Ross Rubenstein, financial equity for school districts in all 49 states for the fiscal years 1992 and 1995 were examined using national data sets. The study investigated variables that could be connected to the degree of equality within states and to variations over time and gave rankings of each state's funding equality. In spite of the fact that few states' relative rankings changed between 1992 and 1995, the studies imply that overall within-state equality improved modestly during that time (Moser and Rubenstein, 2002). The allocation of education funding was generally more equal in states with fewer school districts relative to population than in states with more districts (Moser and Rubenstein, 2002). In comparison to states whose districts were more reliant on local earnings, states with higher percentages of state government revenue often displayed a more equitable allocation of resources (Moser and Rubenstein, 2002).

In addition to this, states all around the country cut significant amounts from their public education budgets as a result of the Great Recession of 2009 and due to less local funding to rely on (Knight, 2017). Therefore, districts with higher numbers of pupils

living in poverty were disproportionately affected by the financial cuts brought on by the

Great Recession (Knight, 2017). Knight's study looks at how state school finance

systems responded to funding reductions brought on by the recession. Using data relevant

to each state to assess how local district taxation has changed in response to reductions in

state spending, the study discovers that (a) high-poverty districts, on average across

states, experienced an unfair share of funding and staffing cuts following the Great

Recession; (b) changes in the income-based funding gap varied across states; (c)

higher-poverty districts in Texas specifically increased local tax rates more quickly than

low-poverty districts; (d) the funding gap increased in Texas by more than in 43 other

states; and (e) there were no subsidies for facilities funding and other idiosyncrasies

within the Texas school finance system prevented high poverty districts from maintaining

equitable funding levels, despite increasing tax rates at a faster rate than otherwise similar

wealthier districts (Knight, 2017).

Pay, Funding, and Equity: A Tie Together

Undoubtedly, pay, funding, and equity are key components that are tied together.

These three components have a significant impact on student achievement in the

classroom. In Kanfond Wilder's 2019 dissertation, a Jackson State University PhD

student, Kanfond's thesis examined the correlation between funding and academic

achievement in schools across Mississippi. Similar to my thesis in certain ways, the study

looks to see how funding affects the way students perform inside and outside of the

classroom, and it also discusses the way how location of a school and a student's

background can often influence the way in which a student performs academically inside

and outside of the classroom. Wilder's study finds that though black students made up

22

half of the student population, ProPublica data shows white students were 2.1 times more likely to be enrolled in an Advanced Placement (AP) course than black students, and 1.9 times more likely to be enrolled in one than Hispanic students (Kanfond, 2019).

This is not the only issue affecting the state's education system. Less is known regarding patterns in income segregation, despite the fact that trends in racial segregation of schools are well documented. To identify patterns in the distribution of money between schools and school districts, Christopher Jencks, Ann Owens, and Sean Reardon drew on a variety of data sources. From 1990 to 2010, families with children enrolled in public schools had a rise in between-district income segregation of almost 15% (Jencks, Owens, and Reardon, 2016). Between 1991 and 2012, between-school segregation of pupils eligible and ineligible for free lunch increased by more than 40% within big districts (Jencks, Owens, and Reardon, 2016). Research shows that the rise in income segregation between schools and districts over this time period was influenced by rising income disparity, which is consistent with research on neighborhood segregation (Jencks, Owens, and Reardon, 2016). Increased income disparity between districts and schools affected how equally pupils have access to resources. Mississippi continues to face segregation in schools and school districts, and understanding this correlation between race and funding is crucial to the proposed research study.

It is also important to keep in mind that some states have tightened teacher preparation and certification criteria to increase the caliber of the teaching workforce, while others have loosened requirements and added "alternative" routes to certification to draw in more candidates (Boyd, Goldhaber, Lankford, and Wyckoff, 2007). This research suggests that after two years on the job, instructors from highly selective alternative route

programs perform roughly on par with teachers from standard routes. Additionally, they discovered that teachers who perform well on certification exams can moderately increase student results (Boyd, Goldhaber, Lankford, and Wyckoff, 2007) . There is some evidence that certification requirements may reduce the application pool, but there is little proof that they have an impact on student results (Boyd, Goldhaber, Lankford, and Wyckoff, 2007). The authors also discovered that schools only have a limited capacity to recognize qualities in potential teachers that will enable them to raise student achievement. Especially in Mississippi and Lauderdale County, understanding teacher certification levels is going to be crucial to analyzing student achievement in the classroom.

In addition to teacher quality and certification, studies have shown that since 1940, the incomes of teachers have continuously decreased when compared to those of other college graduates. However, there are currently few differences in average incomes between urban and suburban areas. Urban districts are more expensive in some metropolitan regions, whereas suburban districts are more expensive in others (Hanushek and Rivkin, 2007). However, the working environments in urban and suburban districts are very different, with urban teachers reporting much less support from administrators and parents, fewer resources, and more severe student issues (Hanushek and Rivkin, 2007). The gap between the turnover of teachers and the movement of instructors between schools may be largely attributed to difficult working conditions. There is minimal evidence that teacher transitions are harmful to students' learning, despite the fact that pay and student characteristics both influence instructors' decisions and cause a sorting of teachers across schools (Hanushek and Rivkin, 2007). The effectiveness of

school personnel policies in selecting and retaining the best teachers as well as restrictions on both entry into the profession and the dismissal of low performers play a significant role in how much differences in salaries and working conditions translate into differences in the quality of instruction. Hanushek and Rivkin draw the conclusion that raising teacher salaries generally would be both costly and counterproductive. Lowering barriers to becoming a teacher, such as certification, would be the best method to increase the quality of instruction (Hanushek and Rivkin, 2007). Though this provides suggestions for improving the number of teachers in the workforce, this may be relevant to the proposed research to have a gauge and closer understanding of how teacher certification levels can affect the student achievement in the classroom.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this research is to gain insight into the differences between the Lauderdale County School District and the Meridian Public School District, focused on the factors that have led to their disparities in school performance. Through my study, I evaluate school funding, resources, and programs that the two school districts receive and how these factors influence student performance and teacher experience in the classrooms. I use the findings from my research to develop recommendations for the two school districts to utilize to ensure every child in Lauderdale County has a quality education.

The research on the disparities between the Lauderdale County School District and the Meridian Public School District is significant and important for several reasons. First, it sheds light on the factors that contribute to the differences in school performance between the two districts. By examining school funding, resources, and programs, this study aims to identify the root causes of the disparities and provide a deeper understanding of how these factors influence student performance and teacher experience in the classroom.

Moreover, this research is crucial because it has the potential to inform policy decisions and drive positive change in the education system of Lauderdale County and the state of Mississippi. By developing recommendations based on the findings, the study can guide the two school districts in implementing strategies to improve their schools and ensure that every child in the county receives a quality education. This is particularly important given the historical struggles and inequalities that have plagued Mississippi's education system, as highlighted in the previous section.

The question guiding this research is, "What factors contribute to the disparity in state accountability test scores and school performance between the Lauderdale County School District and the Meridian Public School District?" To answer this question, I interviewed school officials and teachers to gain a better understanding of each district's challenges, extracting themes based on common responses.

I hypothesized that the lack of certified and qualified teachers in the Meridian Public School District and a difference in the socio economic status of students causes the Meridian Public School District to not perform as highly as the Lauderdale County School District.

Research Protocol

I intended to interview a total of 10 school teachers, administrators, and leaders within the two school districts – 5 individuals each from the Lauderdale County School District and the Meridian Public School District, respectively. Contact was made through their email which were listed online. Questions regarding school funding, teacher quality and certification, parent/family involvement, and how funding affects the quality of education were created. Interviews would be conducted via Zoom and transcribed using Otter.ai.

I utilized qualitative methods with semi-structured interviews to identify and recognize the issues students, teachers, schools, and districts are facing within Lauderdale County. With the semi-structured interview set-up, I was able to easily switch the order of questions and have follow up questions that aided in providing me with a stronger understanding of what my participants had to state. Additionally, the semi-structured format allows the opportunity to utilize participants' responses to use the follow-up

questions as a way and means of having a deeper insight into the original response they provided me with.

In order to conduct this research, I had to receive approval from the University of Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB). After receiving approval from my thesis advisor regarding my interview questions, I completed and submitted an "IRB Exemption Application" to the university's IRB. IRB approved my exemption, application, and interview questions on October 14, 2023. Following this approval, I was able to reach out to potential interviewees to set up a date and time for interviews via Zoom.

Sampling and Data Collection

I contacted individuals in the Lauderdale County School District first; I found emails and contact information on the school district's and schools' website and decided I wanted to interview the superintendent to receive his perspective from the administrative standpoint. I reached out to two high school administrators whom I knew personally from attending school who would provide valuable insight into the accountability model and funding. An elementary school assistant principal whom I used to work with would provide perspective from an elementary school standpoint; additionally, I wanted to gain insight from a retired elementary school teacher who had worked in the Mississippi public school system for over 25 years. Ultimately, the sample from the Lauderdale County School District consisted of the district's superintendent, high school principal, high school assistant principal, elementary school assistant principal, and a retired elementary school teacher.

Similarly with the Meridian Public School District, I was able to find emails on the school district's and schools' websites. Interviewing the superintendent would grant

me her perspective on school operations, funding, and accountability from the administrative standpoint. From the middle school perspective, I wanted to interview a middle school principal to understand their perspective of how middle schools perform and operate. I also wanted to reach out to two assistant elementary school principals to understand what the elementary school challenges are; lastly, I wanted to reach out to a high school teacher to gain insight into the specific challenges that students and teachers face in the classroom.

Interviews would be conducted via Zoom, a teleconference platform with audio and video capabilities. Informed consent would be obtained from participants, including permission to record the interviews for transcription and analysis purposes. Participants would have the option to remain anonymous and have their identities kept confidential. Interviews would be recorded using Zoom's built-in feature and securely stored on a password-protected laptop. Transcriptions would be generated using Otter.ai software. Recorded interviews and transcriptions would be accessible only by me and would be securely stored for the duration of the project. Data will be deleted after a specified period following the study's completion, in accordance with the University of Mississippi's IRB.

Questions

The interview questions were designed to gather comprehensive insights into the educators' experiences and perspectives on the Mississippi education system, focusing on the Meridian Public School District and Lauderdale County School District. The questions covered various aspects, including the educators' professional backgrounds, their assessments of their districts' strengths and weaknesses, and their views on the

relationship between school funding, resources, and student outcomes. Some questions aimed to establish the educators' experience and roles within their districts, while others sought to uncover their perceptions of the fairness and accuracy of the state accountability system and its relationship to socioeconomic factors. The interviews also explored the impact of school funding and resources on student outcomes and teacher retention, with questions that delved into the challenges faced by educators and students due to resource constraints.

Additionally, the interview included questions that allowed the educators to share their personal experiences, success stories, and suggestions for improvement, providing an opportunity for them to reflect on their experiences and offer insights on potential solutions to the challenges faced by the Mississippi education system.

I asked the interviewees the following questions. Depending on the nature of the interview, the order of questions may be shifted:

Background Questions:

1. *How long have you worked in the Meridian Public School District/Lauderdale County School District?*
2. *In what all capacities have you worked in education?*
3. *Have you worked in any other school district or state education system before this? If so, when, where, and what role did you serve in?*

Substantive Questions:

4. *What made you enter the field of education?*
5. *What does your district do especially well?*
6. *Where does the district most need to improve?*

7. *How do you think PPE relates to state accountability grades?*

8. *In my experience, LCSD doesn't have the most up to date technology, but still does well on state tests. How do you explain this outcome?*

9. *How well do you think state accountability grades reflect school quality? Or college readiness?*

10. *To what extent do you think state grades reflect the Socio Economic Status (SES) of the students?*

11. *How do school funding levels affect the district's ability to recruit and retain quality teachers? Counselors?*

12. *Does your district have enough resources to provide a high quality education? Do you know of any instances where it didn't have enough?*

13. *Can you discuss any examples or instances in which a student could not receive adequate education or preparation for a state test was hindered due to a lack of resources and funding within the classroom?*

14. *What do you believe could be the sole resolver to addressing and solving the issues teachers and students face across the state in relation to preparing for state tests and receiving a quality education?*

15. *Has your school/school district presented you with any model(s) or new policies to follow to improve the classroom experience for yourself and students? If so, what do these policy model(s) entail?*

16. *Can you share a memorable success story or a particularly challenging teaching experience?*

17. *What role do parents and guardians play in the education of their children, and how do you communicate with them?*

18. *How has the role of a teacher evolved in recent years, and how do you see it changing in the future?*

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS

The results chapter is a crucial component of this thesis, as it presents the findings from the interviews conducted with educators from the Lauderdale County School District and the Meridian Public School District. This chapter provides valuable insights into the experiences, perspectives, and observations of professionals who have worked within these two school districts in Mississippi. By analyzing the data collected through these interviews, we can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges, successes, and potential areas for improvement within the state's education system.

During the recruitment process, I contacted ten individuals through email with information regarding the purpose of the study and an invitation to participate in an interview through Zoom. I contacted a total of five individuals who work or have worked in the Lauderdale County School District and another five who work or have worked in the Meridian Public School District. I received immediate responses from the individuals working in the Lauderdale County School District.

However, I did not receive any initial response from the Meridian Public School District. After multiple follow up emails and phone calls, four individuals responded. This proved to be very challenging. Individuals in this district were not receptive at all to my emails and invariably disregarded follow up emails. I contacted the school district's central office inquiring about setting up a time to interview the district's superintendent but did not receive any call back or email at all. I emailed all of the MPSD interviewees again; finally, only four responded. After completing the interviews, two individuals contacted me and informed me that they no longer wanted to have their responses included in the research and asked for their responses to not be utilized. These calls were

received on February 26th, 2024 at 11:37 am and 1:42 pm. With this, only a total of two individuals were interviewed from the Meridian Public School District.

All my interviewees' identities were kept confidential throughout the study. Information about the participants is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Interviewee	School District
Retired Elementary Teacher	Lauderdale County School District
High School Principal	Lauderdale County School District
High School Assistant Principal	Lauderdale County School District
Elementary School Assistant Principal	Lauderdale County School District
Superintendent	Lauderdale County School District
Elementary School Assistant Principal	Meridian Public School District
Elementary Teacher	Meridian Public School District

Student Demographics

The literature indicates that student demographics can affect student performance

and outcome. Table 2 shows the data for the the two school districts:

Table 2

District	Number of Students	Racial Makeup	Free and Reduced Lunch % Eligible
Lauderdale County School District	5,910	61.96% (White) 31.29% (Black)	72.2
Meridian Public School District	4,614	91.92% (Black) 3.14% (White)	72.4

Source: Mississippi Department of Education (2022-2023 Report), n.d.; U.S. News and World Report (2019-2020 and 2020-2021 Report), n.d.

School District Funding

The literature and research indicate that per-pupil-expenditure, percent spent on

instruction, per-pupil-expenditure on instruction, and the mill rate can affect student

performance and outcome. Table 3 shows the data for the two school districts:

Table 3

District	Per-Pupil-Expenditure (PPE)	% Spent on Instruction	PPE on Instruction	Mill Rate
Lauderdale County School District	$10,891.43	68.5	$8,824.54	56.65
Meridian Public School District	$13,379.12	67.8	$11,533.68	60.70

Sources: Mississippi Department of Education (2022-2023 report), n.d.; Mississippi Department of Revenue (2022), n.d.
Author's calculation based on data from this report.

Revenue by Source

The research and literature indicate that revenue by sources per pupil (local, state, federal) can affect student performance and outcome. Table 4 shows the data for the two school districts:

Table 4

District	Local	State	Federal
Lauderdale County School District	$3,199	$7,910	$555
Meridian Public School District	$4,960	$6,060	$4,539

Source: Mississippi Department of Education (2022-2023 Report), n.d.
Author's calculation based on data from this report.

School Achievement

The research and literature indicate that achievement levels and scores can affect student performance and outcome. Table 5 shows the data for the two school districts:

Table 5

District	District Grade	% Scoring Proficient	ACT Average	Graduation Rate %	Discipline Issues
Lauderdale County School District	A	58.3 (Math) 54.2 (English)	17.9	94.4	187
Meridian Public School District	C	26.1 (Math) 29 (English)	13.8	84.1	82

Source: Mississippi Department of Education (2022-2023 Report), n.d.

Teacher Data

The research and literature indicates teacher certification and qualification level can affect student performance and outcome. Table 6 shows the data for the two school districts:

Table 6

District	Teachers	Experienced Teachers %	Provisional Teachers %	In-Field Teachers %
Lauderdale County School District	427.4	83.2	1.8	99.0
Meridian Public School District	328.6	65.5	7.3	91.4

Source: Mississippi Department of Education (2022-2023 Report), n.d.

Themes

To better understand factors that might influence student achievement, I asked interviewees questions about school funding, technology in the classroom, grades and the students' socio-economic demographics, and the role of parents and guardians. With these elements serving as the main themes in the responses, the responses for each school district were not the same. I have included insights from school individuals in both school districts that were very unique. I have kept all responses included in this chapter anonymous. Responses differed between both school districts but not within districts.

Funding

Interviewees from the Lauderdale County School District and Meridian Public School District had differing viewpoints regarding funding. A retired elementary school teacher in the Lauderdale County School District discussed how school funding levels

affect a district's ability to recruit and retain quality teachers. She mentioned that teachers in her district often had to buy classroom supplies with their own money, such as printers, because the district would not provide funding for equipment. She then highlighted the disparity between classrooms funded solely by the schools themselves — what she calls "government funded" classrooms and those supplemented by teachers themselves, noting that teacher-funded classrooms are often better equipped to meet students' individual needs. She explained:

> I had to buy the printer and ink with my own money because the district said procurement cards cannot be used to buy equipment. Tables were breaking, chairs were breaking, and they didn't buy us furniture. I don't know if you've ever seen it on Instagram or not where they have two pictures of a classroom: They have an empty classroom — that's government funded, and they have a classroom that looks like it came off Pinterest — that's teacher funded. They don't give you the items you really use to teach a child how to read and how to write. For instance, if you were interested in dinosaurs in kindergarten, I would have found something that had to do with dinosaurs; the school is not going to find that for me, I have to go find that on my own and pay on my own.

Interviewees from the Lauderdale County School District also discussed how funding is desperately needed to hire more teachers. An elementary school assistant principal believes there is a "lack thereof" of state funding. She explained that their school needs additional money to hire more teachers, and that if the district had more money, she would want the funding to hire more teachers. She stated:

> I just need more funding. I need more teacher units. And our district, if it had more money, I wish they could give me more teacher units. I don't need the technology: I need the teachers. Maybe they need to work on getting us teachers somehow. But I don't want more money to buy more technology and more workbooks – I need it for more teachers.

I also asked a high school assistant principal in the Lauderdale County School District about their perspective on whether the Lauderdale County School District has

enough funding to provide a high-quality education. She responded that she believes the district has everything they need to provide high-quality education, but that this is probably due in part to being careful and innovative with their limited funding. She also discussed differences in tax bases and property values between the City of Meridian and county areas, noting how this impacts school funding. In addition, she also discussed how white flight from the city to the county has caused a gap in the tax base for the two school districts, which has benefited the county school district:

> There is a historical phenomenon of white flight and it doesn't have anything to do with skin color. When the term was coined, people were exiting the city, and the mass exodus continues [today]. There are barely any houses for sale or rent in West Lauderdale, Southeast School District, and in Clarksdale School District [in the county]. Very little rental in the Northeast School District [also in the county] — maybe some more for sale, but very little rental. If I wanted to move to the city limits today, though, I could go buy a house with my specifications, so there's a ton of vacant properties that are earning no income because no one is paying the taxes and living there. Additionally, no one is taking care of them.

The same individual also touched on the number of low-income government housing complexes in the city and how many higher-income families and homes are located in the county. This difference in the tax base has influenced the amount of funding each school district receives:

> Meridian [Public School District] has around 13 housing projects. That's a different demographic, and it's a different tax bracket. It's a different set of funding. We (Lauderdale County School District) partly got annexed into the city. The neighborhoods that are bringing in this large amount of tax money [for the county] — that's something Meridian Public School District doesn't have.

However, an elementary assistant principal in Meridian Public School District stated she believes the Lauderdale County School District has less funding, "I think in the county, financially, I don't think there's as much money. Also, every school in the city is a

Title [1] School — that's federal funding." She discussed how teachers in her district do

not have to purchase their own ink and paper supplies, while county teachers do.

This same individual discussed that the district's inability to recruit and retain

teachers is an issue for the city schools. This is despite the fact that teachers working for

MPSD are paid more than those working in LCSD:

> We (MPSD) actually pay more than the county. For my position, if I went to work for the county, I would probably lose money. However, MPSD used to do sign-on bonuses. Now we do get a recruitment bonus. For instance I recruited two teachers this year; I only got credit for one of them. I got, I think $250, at the beginning of the year, and then I'll get $250, towards the end of the year, just added to my check.

All of the school individuals interviewed in LCSD agreed that there are

shortcomings and areas in need of improvement regarding funding. However, there have

been improvements in recent years especially due to ESSER (Elementary and Secondary

School Emergency Relief) funds following the COVID-19 pandemic. MPSD

interviewees did not discuss how ESSER funds have impacted school funding.

Technology

The individuals working in the LCSD discussed the importance of technology and

how a lack of technology early in their teaching careers had an impact on how they taught

their students. All four individuals who work in the schools on a daily basis discussed

how the COVID-19 pandemic pushed educators to find new, innovative methods of

teaching. With the shift from traditional paper and pencil to a stronger focus on

technological devices such as iPads and platforms such as Canvas, the educators in the

LCSD discussed how the learning experience for students has improved but also has

many drawbacks.

All of my interviewees in both school districts feel they have adequate resources for technology. However, they feel there is too much screen time and over-reliance on programs rather than teacher instructional time, especially at the elementary level. They all believe students would benefit more from small group instruction with paper and pencil rather than always using technology. Technology overuse can contribute to students having short attention spans and seeking instant gratification rather than learning effectively from teachers. While technology is useful, it cannot fully replace quality teacher-student interaction and face-to-face learning experiences.

While technology has the potential to enhance education, the interviewees suggest that a balance between technology use and traditional teaching methods is necessary. They emphasize the importance of quality teacher-student interactions and face-to-face learning experiences, which technology cannot fully. Finding the right balance and using technology as a tool to supplement rather than replace effective teaching practices appears to be the key to maximizing its benefits while minimizing its drawbacks.

A retired elementary school teacher from the LCSD shared how the lack of technology initially in her career had benefits and then discussed how the emergence of technology in the classrooms recently has drawbacks:

> As teachers, we knew we had to work hard no matter what, so we found ways to teach the child where they are and make them grow. Because of that, no matter what type of technology you had, your children were going to learn and your children were going to grow more. We knew we had to get creative — especially early in my teaching career when we did not have as much resources or technology for us to implement in the classroom for our students to experience. We did get more technology when COVID came through, and technology in the classrooms got updated. We all got Apple products: The teachers have Macbooks, and the kids all have iPads. We also have Apple TVs. Now, we're seeing an issue of students not wanting to pay attention and be willing to learn face-to-face from a teacher.

A majority of my interviewees from LCSD spoke about the concerns of the heavy reliance on technology in the classroom. Some shared the belief that technology and devices in modern education could be negatively impacting students' learning, development, and reducing hands-on experiences. In discussion about how the classroom experience has shifted since the COVID-19 pandemic, many mentioned how this reliance on technology will either positively or negatively affect the child's development and learning style. The retired elementary school teacher from LCSD shared the following:

> I feel like everything is technology based. Because everything is technology based, the technology system is giving them [as students] that constant feedback. I always wonder if this is affecting children's brains and learning capabilities because they're all in devices, everything is centered around technology so much. Are we hurting kids? Are we hurting our future by making them spend more time on devices? They're losing the hands-on learning with peers and teachers. They're also missing out on a lot of social-emotional growth.

She even described a specific instance in which technology has shifted from a hands on experience to a more technological-based setting:

> We used to get toothpicks, and students would dig the chocolate chip out of the Chips Ahoy cookie and pretend they were archaeologists. That's how we used to teach students through hands-on-learning. However, they are now watching the same experiences on a computer to learn about how to pretend to be an archaeologist and dig from the ground. Visual and hands-on-learners don't truly learn the process. As a result, the students are missing out on all the other skills that they are supposed to learn in the process.

An assistant high school principal in the LCSD also discussed the effects of technology and the strong dependence on technology systems for the classroom experience. She noted that technology can have a positive impact on the classroom experience for students and teachers, but emphasizes that good teaching is more important, saying "the bells and whistles are nice, but if you have good teachers, that's

42

the answer." This individual and other LCSD employees talked about the importance of

having qualified teachers over technology:

> There's much research and articles about what makes students in school successful. Yes — it is culture, climate, and technology, but the number one indicator for student success is teachers. Solid, fundamental teaching. I've seen even in the Mississippi Delta that there is strong teaching going on. I think the bells and whistles such as iPads and Apple TVs are nice; it's nice to feel comfortable. It's nice to have a fancy, new iPad. However, if you have good teachers, if you have teachers who are committed to student achievement, that's the answer to having a successful learning environment for all students.

An elementary assistant principal in the MPSD discussed the effects of

technology on students' and teachers' demands in the classrooms. Because of this gradual

shift in demands and needs, teachers have to find innovative methods to stay engaged

with students. They warned that this gradual shift to technology can have a negative

influence on students' behaviors and how they interact with their peers and adults:

> Students have received too much screen time. Instead, I would like to see and need more teacher and student face-to-face interaction. My students simply need that face-to-face interaction. It's just that kids learn better [through face-to-face interaction]. You cannot replace a teacher with an online program. I mean, with the program, you just can't learn the same way.

Additionally, the addition of technology to the classroom in the LCSD has been

very recent; the addition of technology to the classroom in the MPSD happened during

the 2015-2016 school year. During the COVID-19 pandemic, LCSD was able to provide

students with iPads. Both school districts have an abundance of technology, with faculty

in both districts expressing a strong concern for the high dependence on technology.

Socio-Economic Status

Interviewees had differing viewpoints on how a student's socio-economic status

has an influence on their academic achievement. When asked how socio-economic status

43

influences a student's ability to receive a quality education, most interviewees mentioned

how they believe socio-economic status and state accountability grades, which are mostly

based on students' standardized test scores, have a slight correlation. Some interviewees

expressed that the state accountability model is unfairly disadvantageous to schools with

higher populations of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, as proficiency

may be out of reach for some due to factors outside the school's control. A high school

principal in the Lauderdale County School District who used to work for the MPSD

shared why he believes the accountability model is unfairly disadvantageous to certain

schools:

> I have friends that work in some of the most prominent (wealthy) districts in Mississippi, and I can tell you without a doubt that in some of those places — their accountability rating or their total accountability points — may be even slightly higher than ours. However, I know for a fact that we are seeing more growth within our students [than those schools with property-wealthy taxes]. Our teachers are working harder. That is the problem with it [the accountability model and socio-economic status correlation] because it is not going to be a perfect system that does not truly represent socio-economic status and school performance.

The same individual also expressed how students from lower socio-economic

status backgrounds often face more challenges in areas such as reading comprehension,

which has a significant impact on proficiency scores a school receives:

> Proficiency is what every school wants. As someone who's worked in a very struggling school before, in other words, we were always going to struggle deeply with proficiency more than Ocean Springs or Madison Central, for example. Ocean Springs is going to hit their target. People can debate and argue about why it is like that. There's not necessarily a right answer to that. Look at data about parents who read to their children at a young age of three to six and the impact it has on a child's reading comprehension. You can look at this data and see how this influences a student's proficiency level. Additionally, you can look at the quality of teachers in [higher performing] districts. They are able to attract and

retain quality teachers at a much better rate than [struggling] districts that are having to face other issues.

The number of lower-income housing units provided by the government can also influence a school and school district's accountability grade. With 10 government-funded apartment complexes within the City of Meridian, the same interviewee mentioned how this influences accountability grades:

> We're [Meridian High School] a fully funded Title One school. We have ten low income housing projects we serve, and that is a very large number. Statistics [of the correlation between low-income housing and a school district's performance] show when you look at this even nationwide, the odds are against you as far as being a successful school. That alone is another problem we have to face.

Similar viewpoints were shared by other interviewees in both school districts. While some believe socio-economic status does play a role in the quality of education a student receives, an assistant elementary school principal in the MPSD described how socio-economic status does not have a significant role in years past:

> If you'd asked me this a couple of years ago, I would say that socio-economic status probably played a big part [in how a child receives a quality education]. I don't think that is the case now. Take Meridian High School for example; they were a "B" rated school this year. I think if you have the right, qualified people and teachers in place, and teachers are teaching what the kids need, I don't think it matters where you come from [in regards to socio-economic status]. As long as you are building the background knowledge with those students, providing them with what they need, actually teaching [methods that work], and not just showing a slideshow — that's a quality education no matter one's background.

A similar perception was shared by an assistant elementary school principal who works for the LCSD. They mentioned that the state's accountability system does not truly reflect their school's demographics:

I don't think it's a true representation. Families at my school have nice houses, they make [high] incomes, and parents even stay at home. But I look at another elementary school in our school district, and we are totally different [in terms of accountability grades]. The big element that is constantly pushed, which is a wonderful element, is to show growth. The state and district want us to show growth. Let's take my bottom 25% [socioeconomically] as an example. I have level four performers in my bottom 25% of students. It's crazy to think that the bottom 25% of my school are very proficient. However, you go to another school in the district whose bottom 25% are not performing [at a level four]. I say all of this to say we have to show growth in the lower 25%. My bottom 25% and the other school's bottom 25% are not the same. For that reason, I do not believe you can correlate a student's socio-economic status with the quality of education they receive, especially since each school's demands and needs are different.

Interviewees in both districts stated the state's accountability model does not provide a true representation of schools when it does not account for the differing socioeconomic factors that impact student performance. Because of this, some interviewees expressed a desire for the accountability system to change to give a true and fair representation of the education system and socio-economic status of their students. All of the interviewees do not believe the current state accountability model gives a fair reasoning and explanation regarding the performance gap between the two districts.

Role of the Parent & Guardian

Interviewees in both school districts had differing viewpoints of the role of parents and guardians in their student's education. Interviewees in the Lauderdale County School District described positive experiences with parents and guardians; all of these interviewees went into depth regarding how parents and guardians play an instrumental role in the development and support of their students. The retired elementary teacher from the LCSD described how her school would host "math nights, literacy nights, and science nights" on campus for parents, guardians, and students to come out to. She noted that from her experience, these nights were meant to foster curiosity amongst young

46

students while also building positive relationships with their parents, guardians, and the

community. In regards to the importance of parents and guardians in the LCSD, she

mentioned:

> Lauderdale County [School District] did a good job of trying to educate
> parents. And for the third grade, they would ask the parents to come in for a
> dinner and teach them about the third grade reading test. That was so important to
> keep the parents involved. I thought that was a good thing: Educating the parents
> to ensure their child stayed on track and received the proper support.

The superintendent of the LCSD expressed the same sentiment regarding the role

of parents and guardians. Additionally, he touched on how parent involvement typically

shifts from the elementary school level to high school. He expressed this:

> When in elementary school, there's a lot of [parent] involvement. There's a
> lot of oversight. There's also demand in middle school. Slowly kids start pulling
> away from parents, so there's less parent involvement. By the time we get to high
> school, outside of extracurricular activities, we usually see a much lower input or
> cooperation and partnership between parents and the schools. Without a doubt,
> though, parents have to stay involved.

He then touched on the importance of parental involvement and how this is

correlated to a school's success:

> Without parental support, without community support, the schools will not
> have success. Even if they're not involved on a day to day basis, they still have to
> support their child. Take fundraisers for instance: The schools and its families go
> out in the community and ask for support. They're building community and
> showing their own children they care about their school and education. This can
> tremendously help a school do well and receive the proper attention it deserves
> from its parents and guardians. To answer the question, it is without a doubt that
> parental and guardian support is very important and can be tied to student and
> school success.

A retired elementary school teacher from the LCSD noted that parental

involvement aids in the development of students and has a positive impact on the way in

which a student can grow. They mentioned how building close relationships with parents

allows teachers to provide ongoing support and guidance to students throughout their life, not just while in the classroom. Additionally, they mentioned the level of involvement and support from parents has a major impact on a child's academic success and growth.

An assistant elementary school principal in the MPSD talked about how parents and guardians are not actively involved with their children's education at their school. They raised concern about how parental involvement has decreased over the years she has been teaching, though it increased some during remote learning due to COVID. Many of their students are being raised by grandparents or other relatives instead of parents, who are often incarcerated or absent from their children's lives. Because of this, teachers are having to take on additional roles and serve as mentors and "cheerleaders" because students do not receive the same encouragement and support from their home. They even stated that the school provides transportation for students to attend extracurricular activities such as sports since parents may not be willing to send or pick up their child. The individual stated:

> Parent and guardian involvement decreases every year, although we did see a big jump and parental involvement during COVID. Parents were a little bit more involved then. Now, for example, today, there was field trip money due for a grade level. Out of 22 students, only four kids paid. Our secretary is on the phone, trying to call parents to ask them to pay for the field trip. We even had instances where teachers are trying to contact parents, and we had to send our social worker out to their houses because they would not answer the phone. Following that, the social worker will set up a meeting for the parent to come in.

They continued by giving a specific, recent example of a parent not responding to calls and messages:

> Just this week, I was supposed to meet with a parent because her child is failing and has behavior issues. The parent was supposed to come [to my office]

Tuesday. She still hasn't shown up, even after promising she would be in attendance for the meeting. She didn't show up.

Other school faculty in the MPSD expressed how teachers are having to serve as the parent to their students. Some spoke of having to ensure students have clean clothing, have been fed properly, and are staying up-to-date to graduate or advance to the next grade. This was not a main concern for any of the faculty in the LCSD. All of the faculty in LCSD had a majority of positive experiences with their parents.

LCSD seems to have a more positive experience with parental and guardian involvement compared to MPSD. This is due to several reasons that contribute to the LCSD's success in engaging parents and guardians. First, LCSD hosts events like "math nights, literacy nights, and science nights" on campus, which are designed to foster curiosity among young students and build positive relationships with their parents, guardians, and the community. Additionally, LCSD makes efforts to educate parents about important aspects of their child's education. For example, they invite parents of third-grade students to a dinner where they teach them about the third-grade reading test, ensuring that parents stay informed and involved in their child's academic progress. The LCSD superintendent noted that there is a lot of parental involvement and oversight in elementary school, which helps establish a strong foundation for parent-school partnerships. Not only that, LCSD encourages community support through initiatives like fundraisers, where schools and families ask for support from the community. This helps build a sense of community and shows children that their parents and guardians care about their education.

In contrast, the MPSD faces challenges with parental involvement, such as absent or incarcerated parents, students being raised by grandparents or other relatives, and a

lack of response from parents when contacted by the school. These factors contribute to the LCSD having a more positive experience with parental and guardian involvement compared to the MPSD.

According to faculty in both school districts, though, finding ways to keep parents engaged with their child's school community is essential to ensuring students are successful.

Limitations

One limitation to this study is that I interviewed five individuals from the LCSD and two from the MPSD. Because these are small numbers, the responses may not be representative of district employees overall or fully reflect the differences between the school districts. The interviewees each have unique perspectives that are correlated to the school they currently work for, so their responses may only give insight and understanding to what is occurring at their school and not a true reflection of their respective school district. Further, findings are unique to each school district and may not be generalizable to other school districts in Mississippi.

Additionally, the years of teaching experience for each of the interviewees varied, which could be a potential limitation. Some interviewees have been in the field of K-12 education for a long time while some are relatively new to the field or their current position. This could give them different and non-comparable perspectives.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study's interviews provide a deeper understanding and clearer picture of the differences between the Lauderdale County School District and the Meridian Public School District. School officials in each school district and school have unique viewpoints and perspectives from the experience working in the districts. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools in Lauderdale County and across Mississippi had to make numerous shifts in teaching methods and styles to meet the needs of their students. Though individuals in both school districts have seen improvements in teaching methods since then, all individuals expressed a concern for the heavy reliance on technology. Additionally, many touched on the state's accountability model and discussed how there are many shortcomings in the current model. Through their responses, I was able to identify significant differences between the two school districts.

First, the two school districts have differences in terms of funding. Existing data shows the two school districts have different budgets. With the LCSD having a budget of $90.6 million (Sanders, 2023) and the MPSD having a budget of $136.5 million (Sanders, 2023), teachers in the Lauderdale County School District are having to feel this impact. Not only so, LCSD's per-pupil-expenditure for the 2022-2023 school year was $10,891.43 (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.). MPSD's per-pupil-expenditure for the 2022-2023 school year was $13,379.12 (Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.). As noted in the results, teachers in the LCSD often have to purchase their own school and supplies while teachers in the MPSD do not purchase their own printer supplies. Additionally, although schools in both the MPSD and LCSD receive Title I

funds, which are federal funds mainly provided to local school districts that have high

percentages of children from lower-income families, MPSD receives more. Ultimately,

my research shows that the MPSD has a higher budget with a smaller number of students

while the LCSD has more students with a smaller budget. Table 7 displays this data:

Table 7

District	# of students	Budget	Title I funds received (FY2020)
Meridian Public School District	4,758	$136,000,000	$4,734,205
Lauderdale County School District	5,873	$90,600,000	$1,617,916

Sources: U.S. News and World Report, n.d.; Mississippi Department of Education, n.d.; The Meridian Star, 2023, U.S. Department of Education, 2020.

Furthermore, many interviewees in the LCSD expressed concerns about resource

allocation, emphasizing the need for funding to be directed toward essential classroom

supplies and equipment. The issue of teachers having to use personal funds to purchase

items like printers and ink highlighted a gap in the provision of necessary resources.

There was a distinction made between the allocation of funds for technology and

the need for more teachers. Educators in the LCSD stressed that, in some cases, the focus

on technology might overshadow the more critical need for additional teachers. The

discussion pointed towards a reevaluation of funding priorities for more teachers.

Educators in MPSD stressed the need for innovative methods to hire and retain teachers.

Technology also emerged as an area of concern for teachers in both school

districts. However, through the interviews, interviewees from the MPSD talked about

how technology has been implemented throughout the classroom experience and teaching methods for a very long time; many schools have had updated technological tools since 2016. Interviewees from the LCSD mentioned that many of the technology upgrades and updates happened in 2021 following the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to interviewees in LCSD, the district now has sufficient technological resources to keep students engaged with their work and also provide them with a classroom experience that is up-to-date on today's standards. Interviewees from the MPSD discussed how the district's technology resource pool is abundant and allows for students to connect with the classroom even while at home.

However, while respondents noted and expressed the benefits of technology they also expressed concerns about overreliance, reduced hands-on experiences, and potential negative impacts on student learning and social-emotional growth. A few teachers in the LCSD also discussed how early usage of technology at the elementary level presents a room for concern. Many emphasized that while technology is a valuable tool, it should be balanced with other instructional methods, especially in the lower grade levels, to avoid potential negative consequences, such as shortened attention spans and a preference for instant gratification.

Educators in the MPSD also expressed concerns extended to the potential drawbacks of online learning, with some educators expressing worries about the impact on students' ability to learn certain processes and skills. However, the interviewees believe that the integration of technology in the classroom is very beneficial to ensuring students are receiving an education and learning how to integrate technology into

everyday life. They believe it is a benefit that the district has implemented technology into the classroom experience.

The correlation of socioeconomic status and a student's ability to receive a quality education also brought differing viewpoints and ideas. Interviewees from both school districts acknowledged a perceived correlation between students' socio-economic status and academic achievement. They discussed how state accountability models might disadvantage schools with higher populations of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. MPSD interviewees expressed their belief that socio-economic factors were linked to challenges in teacher recruitment and retention while LCSD respondents did not see this as an issue. These findings suggest that schools in lower socio-economic areas might face difficulties attracting and retaining high-quality teachers. Additionally, the MPSD interviewees discussed how the concentration of low-income housing in the MPSD was a potential factor influencing school performance. This raises the need for more programs that help students from lower-income families in both school districts academically and emotionally, considering many students are not receiving adequate support at home.

An area of concern for interviewees in the MPSD is a notable decrease in parent involvement, which indicates parents and guardians are not as invested in their student's success in the classroom. On the other hand, interviewees in the LCSD discussed how parents are sometimes "too involved" in their child's education, a clear indicator that a majority of students in the district have attentive parents and guardians.

The results of the interviews provide valuable insights into several factors that contribute to the disparity in state accountability test scores and school performance

between the Lauderdale County School District and the Meridian Public School District. Factors such as funding and resource allocation, technology integration, socioeconomic factors, parental involvement, and the state accountability model provide a clearer understanding of the complex role of resources, technology, socioeconomic conditions, parental involvement, and accountability measures that may contribute to the disparity in state accountability test scores and school performance between the LCSD and MPSD. Addressing these factors through targeted interventions, resource allocation, and policy changes may help bridge the performance gap between the two districts.

Policy Recommendations

Providing educators with policy solutions and alternatives can improve the classroom experience for teachers, students, and parents, which can directly impact the factors contributing to the disparity in state accountability test scores and school performance between the Lauderdale County School District and the Meridian Public School District. By developing targeted policy recommendations based on the findings of the study, school districts and schools can address these factors and work towards closing the performance gap.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention Incentives

Teachers are the core of the education system, and they ensure students are well-equipped to step into the next stage of life. Without teachers, a school cannot function and keep communities alive and well. Based on discussions with interviewees, MPSD and LCSD are facing challenges to hire, recruit, or retain teachers. This can have serious, long-term negative effects in the way schools operate and provide students with a quality education.

One of the key factors identified in the study is the challenge of attracting and retaining high-quality teachers, especially in the MPSD. This issue can have a significant impact on student performance and overall school success. By implementing stronger financial incentives, such as paying for professional development conferences, assisting with student loan forgiveness, and providing housing assistance, school districts can make teaching positions more attractive and competitive. These measures can help draw talented educators to work in districts facing recruitment challenges, ultimately improving the quality of instruction and student outcomes.

Moreover, the interviews highlight the importance of modern, new, and clean facilities in attracting teachers, particularly in the LCSD. Investing in infrastructure improvements can create a more appealing work environment for educators, potentially increasing teacher retention rates and job satisfaction. This, in turn, can lead to a more stable and experienced teaching workforce, which is crucial for maintaining high academic standards and closing the performance gap between the two districts.

In addition to financial and infrastructural support, the policy recommendations emphasize the significance of teacher well-being. Implementing wellness programs that address the mental, spiritual, and physical health of teachers can have a positive impact on their performance and job satisfaction. By demonstrating a commitment to the holistic well-being of educators, school districts can foster a supportive and nurturing work environment that attracts and retains high-quality teachers. This, in turn, can lead to better student-teacher relationships, increased engagement, and improved academic outcomes, thereby reducing the disparity in state accountability test scores and school performance between the LCSD and MPSD.

While the Mississippi Legislature has to implement this solution, there is a desperate need to assist teachers in forgiving student loans. Programs such as the Mississippi Excellence in Teaching Program (METP) pay for college students' loans and work in a Mississippi K-12 public school following graduation. However, there is a strong demand and need for more programs that forgive student loans for teachers. With Mississippi teachers paid the lowest average salary in the United States (World Population Review, 2024), teachers in Mississippi are constantly concerned about student loans in a position that does not adequately pay. A teacher loan forgiveness policy for the state can help school districts such as MPSD and LCSD recruit and retain teachers.

Another essential component that districts must take into consideration is the mental, spiritual, and physical well-being of teachers. The implementation of wellness programs for teachers and their families can attract teachers to work for school districts. Providing wellness programs and resources such as mental health counseling, stress management programs, fitness classes, and physical well-being programs can help in the recruitment of teachers; teachers will see that a school district is not just worried about ensuring their success in the classroom but also outside of the classroom.

By implementing these solutions, school districts can create a more attractive and supportive work environment for educators, ultimately leading to better teacher quality, increased student performance, and a reduction in the achievement gap between the two districts. Investing in teachers through financial incentives, infrastructure improvements, and wellness programs is a critical step towards ensuring that all students, regardless of their district, have access to high-quality education and the opportunity to succeed.

Technology Integration Alternatives

Interviewees from both districts stressed the challenge of the overuse of technology in the classroom. Moreso from the LCSD, teachers and administrators have seen a strong reliance on technology devices to "modernize" the classroom experience. While this has many advantages for students, schools, and teachers, a balanced approach is needed to ensure students are able to formulate ideas, critical thinking skills, and connections with teachers and peers without the assistance of an electronic device. The use of electronic devices can also present many advantages that must also be taken into consideration. By implementing strategies to manage technology use, both districts can work towards creating a more engaging and effective learning environment that supports student success and reduces the performance gap.

First, school districts can implement "wellness" times for students to partake and engage in. For many students, physical education (P.E.) is a time to relax, spend time with friends, and socialize. With a heightened concern that students are not able to fully take care of themselves inside and outside of the school setting, technology can be utilized to promote wellness classes and breaks during the school day. The use of an iPad to lead a yoga session, mind break, or timer to socialize with other peers without a device can be used to curb excessive use of the device for non-related school activities. By prioritizing student well-being, both districts can create a more supportive learning environment that positively impacts academic performance and helps bridge the disparity in educational outcomes.

Furthermore, interviewees from the MPSD discussed a desire to ensure students are able to develop a closer relationship and connection with teachers. After talking with

interviewees from the LCSD, many of these individuals discussed how some teachers are aiming to develop more one-on-one small group interactions with students. According to an interviewee, these attempts and proposals have shown a positive development between students and their teacher and have led to a decrease in student behavior issues. The exclusion of technological devices from this would allow students to foster a more meaningful relationship with their teachers and peers. The MPSD can adopt similar strategies being utilized in the LCSD to enhance student-teacher relationships, thereby creating a more conducive learning environment that supports academic success.

A few of the interviewees in the MPSD discussed how they have implemented "technology free zones" in the classroom space. One difference I noticed after completion of interviews was how MPSD teachers aimed to not use technology only for the use of assignments and homework; technology is used in incremental amounts to ensure students are receiving face-to-face instruction with teachers. To decrease the usage of devices, creating technology free zones and spaces can ensure students and teachers are able to work with each other and foster collaboration. This is especially vital during a time in which students and young adults have a strong, heavy reliance on technology for everyday life. By striking a balance between technology use and traditional teaching methods, both districts can work towards improving student outcomes and closing the performance gap.

By implementing strategies such as wellness times, fostering closer student-teacher relationships, and creating technology-free zones, both districts can create a more balanced and effective learning environment that supports student success. These measures can help mitigate the excessive reliance on technology, promote the

59

development of essential skills, and ultimately contribute to reducing the achievement gap between the two districts.

Parental and Guardian Engagement Programs

One major difference between the school districts is the level of parent engagement and support. Parents and guardians have high amounts of engagement and participation in the LCSD, which is not seen in the MPSD. With parent and guardian engagement vital to a student's success inside and outside of the classroom, certain strategies and programs are needed to encourage these individuals to contribute to the success of their child. By implementing strategies and programs to encourage family members and the community to be more involved in their child's education, the MPSD can work towards closing the achievement gap with the LCSD.

First, cultural and community events tailored to each school's demographics can encourage family members and the community to be engaged with their child's school community. The implementation of nightly or weekend programming can bring students and families together with school teachers and administrators. These programs can bring people from different aspects of the community together; whether it is the local health department tabling to promote healthy living, companies recruiting parents for jobs, or different literacy programs in the community promoting reading, these fun-filled programs with bounce houses and live music can promote parental and guardian involvement in the school setting. This increased engagement can also lead to better communication, shared goals, and a more supportive learning environment, ultimately contributing to improved student outcomes and a reduction in the performance disparity between the two districts.

In a world with increased social media presence and usage, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now known as "X"), Instagram, and TikTok should be utilized to ensure parents stay up-to-date on events taking place in the community. Despite the widespread use of social media today, the LCSD only uses X to post updates but does not use Facebook or Instagram. The MPSD only uses Facebook, and as of February 24, 2024, the MPSD's last post on X was made on May 15, 2023. By engaging parents with updates and community events on all social media platforms, parents and guardians can connect better with schools and opportunities in the community. The LCSD and MPSD should prioritize maintaining a strong presence on all relevant social media platforms to ensure that they are reaching a wide audience and maximizing their engagement efforts. This increased communication and transparency can help build trust and foster a stronger sense of partnership between schools and families, which is crucial for student success.

Furthermore, the LCSD interviewees from elementary schools discussed how "Family Literacy Nights" have positively impacted relationships among students, administrators, and teachers, and family members. The implementation of these types of events should be hosted more often for students and families to come together and develop a sense of community while also aiding in the progress of a student's education. Family Nights will have different demands and needs depending upon the type of school (elementary, middle, and high). Because the MPSD does not see much engagement with parents, these nights can serve as a way to encourage students to come out at night with their family or guardians and foster a stronger connection with their school. By implementing similar events across all grade levels and tailoring them to the specific

needs of each school, both districts can create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. These events can also serve as a platform to address any concerns or challenges that families may be facing, ensuring that students receive the necessary support both at school and at home.

By hosting cultural and community events, leveraging social media platforms, and implementing targeted family engagement initiatives, schools can foster a stronger sense of partnership and shared responsibility for student success. These efforts can lead to improved communication, increased support for students, and a more cohesive learning environment, ultimately contributing to a reduction in the achievement gap between the two districts.

Increase Funding

With a high amount of expenses, both school districts are in need of additional funding to meet the needs and demands of their schools. While the sources for funding come from different aspects of local, state, and federal dollars, new policies are needed to equip schools with adequate and proper resources for students and teachers to take advantage of. The disparity in funding can have a significant impact on the availability of resources, programs, and support services, which in turn can affect student performance and contribute to the achievement gap between the two districts.

A majority of the interviewees in both school districts mentioned minimal community engagement for increased funding in education. Interviewees did not mention any specific examples of community engagement or involvement to advocate for more funding. To increase funding, the LCSD and the MPSD should encourage community engagement and advocacy for funding through public awareness campaigns and

community forums. Through these campaigns and forums, parents and teachers are able to use their voices to amplify the need for increased funding from the legislature and additional local entities such as district supervisors and city council members. Both districts should also build partnerships with local organizations to amplify the voices advocating for increased financial support for schools. This increased community involvement and advocacy can help draw attention to the critical need for adequate funding and put pressure on decision-makers to prioritize education in their budgets.

In addition to this, many of the interviewees from LCSD voiced concern about the small budget the district has. The district should explore and encourage the pursuit of grant opportunities at the district and school levels, and they should also develop strategies for identifying and applying for grants to supplement existing funding. By building even stronger partnerships for more funding with local organizations such as the Riley Foundation, Meridian Community College Foundation, Phil Hardin Foundation, and the Community Foundation of East Mississippi, districts can tap into these additional resources for increased funds and provide teachers with the opportunity to purchase supplies or enhance the classroom experience for students. These efforts can help level the playing field between the two districts by providing more equitable access to the financial resources needed to support student learning and success.

Lastly, the implementation of a state-level funding formula that ensures more equitable distribution of resources among school districts can ease the challenge and burden that many school districts such as the LCSD and MPSD are facing. The new, proposed formula should consider factors like student population, socio-economic status,

and special education needs to allocate funds more fairly. This can lead to more balanced educational opportunities and a reduction in the achievement gap between districts.

By encouraging community engagement and advocacy, pursuing grant opportunities, and implementing a more equitable state-level funding formula, both districts can work towards securing the financial resources necessary to provide high-quality education and support student success. These efforts can help level the playing field, ensure more equitable access to resources, and ultimately contribute to a reduction in the achievement gap between the two districts.

After thoroughly analyzing the interviews conducted with school individuals from the Meridian Public School District and Lauderdale County School District, I recommend focusing on implementing these proposed solutions to alleviate the problems and differences the two school districts are facing. While many of these proposed solutions will require effort and support from individuals from each school, the Mississippi Legislature should also take into consideration these solutions to ease the burden from school districts. Already, the two school districts in Lauderdale County and across Mississippi are facing numerous other challenges that hinder their ability to perform at the best possible level. Implementation from the state legislature will ensure that school districts receive the proper support and resources from the state level. With a stronger demand for students and teachers to perform at higher levels without sufficient support, increased support from the Mississippi Legislature to support the proposed solutions is needed for a brighter future for the state's most vulnerable children and to address the disparity between the Lauderdale County School District and Meridian Public School District.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Mississippi's children deserve the best quality education to advance lives and families forward. While the state has seen improvements in the education system, there are still many shortcomings that place numerous challenges and burdens on children, teachers, and school officials, and families across the state. Through interviews with school officials in the Lauderdale County School District and Meridian Public School District, I identified potential barriers that hinder the classroom experience for students and teachers and discussed differences between the two school districts in Lauderdale County, Mississippi.

The study supports and reinforces the existing literature and studies that have analyzed Mississippi's education system. However, many of the school officials I interviewed from the LCSD and MPSD indicated many areas that require solutions. From technology, funding, parent involvement, and socio-economic status disparities, Lauderdale County's two school districts are in need of solutions to bridge the disparities. To address these issues, I offer various policy solutions. Technology alternatives, improved parental involvement programs, additional funding programs, and teacher recruitment/retention solutions ensure that school districts such as the LCSD and MPSD are able to meet the demands and needs of the communities it serves.

Implementing these policy solutions can address many of the longstanding issues the two school districts have faced and also improve the climate of the schools in the county. I plan to share the research conducted with all of my interviewees, school district officials in MPSD and LCSD, and other community stakeholders in hopes of providing these individuals with a helpful resource to improve the schools and school districts. My

research focuses on the two public school districts in Lauderdale County, Mississippi; future research could take a look into different school districts across the state of Mississippi and use the research to compare Mississippi's public school education to other states across the country. Additionally, future qualitative research could include parents, students, and public officials to have a more thorough understanding of the systems and policies that are currently in place and also have stronger insight into the challenges schools and school districts are facing in Mississippi.

Taking measures to mitigate the issues discussed in this research should be of top priority for local, state, and federal elected officials. By making steady improvements to the current policies and systems in place, children across Mississippi can be guaranteed a quality education no matter their race, background, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status, to name a few. Addressing the issues within the two school districts in Lauderdale County, Mississippi and districts across the state of Mississippi is more important than ever to improve the future of the state and its people.

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