

# The Learning Curve

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Your weekly guide to students, schools, teachers and triumphs in Bibb County's Public Schools

## Orientation helps new teachers get ready for school

A new school, new bosses, new students, new city, new colleagues....some or all of these things are going through the minds of Bibb County Public Schools' new teachers as they approach a new school year. Many of them are coming here for their first job out of college, only increasing their anxiety because they have never done this before.

To help make their transition into the system smoother, they attend three days of orientation to help cover these issues and answer their questions. "We want to welcome them to the system and let them know that their teaching experience in Bibb County will be a pleasant and supportive one," says Bibb County Public Schools Program Support Coordinator Saketha Sarter.

For the first two days, they attend sessions "to become familiar with system policies, procedures, and expectations," says Sarter.

It's not all lectures and general information, though. For many of their sessions, they are split up by grade and content, allowing for more focused instruction on Georgia Performance Standards, the county's Code of Ethics, classroom organization and procedures, grading, student engagement, and ways to reach struggling learners.

The smaller groups also give them "an opportunity to meet other teachers new to the school system as well as those teachers who may be assigned to the same school," Sarter adds.

This is not something they have to face alone, she stresses. Each teacher is assigned a mentor to help them through their first year. This will be a veteran teacher within their school who either teaches the same grade or course, giving them someone who can guide them through that first year and answer any of their questions.

The third day of orientation is split so they spend half the day listening to presentations on behavior management and half the day in their classroom with their mentor getting ready for school to start.

"The orientation went well because of the vast knowledge, experience, and willingness of the veteran teachers who volunteered their time to work with the new teachers," Sarter praises.

Support for the teachers does not end when they walk out of the orientation, though. A voluntary Behavior Management Clinic is offered three times throughout August at the Hutchings Career Center Annex and required follow-up seminars are held several times a month throughout the year.

## Math teachers receiving many opportunities to develop professionally



Math teachers at a recent workshop held at Hutchings High School.

"It's the data that drives the workshops," says Khalil Derzi, School Improvement Coordinator for the Bibb County Public Schools' Office of Teaching & Learning. One of his duties is to help set up workshops to further the training of the county's math teachers, and using past data on areas where students did and did not excel plays a major role in the topics covered.

"We've seen progress, but we also see holes which we need to focus on," he says. By looking at past year's scores for tests like the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT), the high school End of Course Tests (EOCT), the Georgia High School Graduation Tests (GHSGT), and the SAT's, they can see what areas students need extra help in and where they are excelling.

From tracking each student's progress, to required training, to offering voluntary workshops, to encouraging specialization classes the data the Bibb County Public Schools is compiling is all considered deciding the best ways to

help the teachers improve.

To help get a more complete picture of how the students are performing, the data is dissected from every angle possible. For example, the 8<sup>th</sup> grade scores on the CRCT this past year will be not only be compared to the 8<sup>th</sup> graders from the year before, it will also be compared to the 7<sup>th</sup> grade CRCT scores from the year before. That will show them if the teacher's instruction is improving from year to year as well as if the students are improving as they get into the higher grades.

The system also wants to take a personal approach to student achievement by tracking each student's progress from year to year. With the Georgia Performance Standards moving the schools' to standard-based teaching, this gives the system the ability to focus on each individual student to help them with what they are lacking. "We want to make sure there's mastery before they're passed on," says Derzi.

To help the teachers improve, the system will be offering three required workshops, each one spanning four intensive days of training in the areas of middle school math, high school algebra, and high school geometry. According to Derzi, these are crucial areas in which the system must make sure their teachers are performing up to standards. This year, 8<sup>th</sup> graders must pass the Reading and Math portions to be promoted to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Also, algebra and geometry (9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade subjects) require the students to pass an End of Course Test.

"We really need to concentrate on the 8<sup>th</sup> graders while preparing the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders," he says. "We want to make sure the

students have a good background when they take algebra and geometry."

These workshops will be required of any teachers identified by the student data as needing improvement. It will give them the opportunity to be brought up to speed on current and innovative ways to pass along the material. Teaching the teachers will not only be outside consultants, but also teachers from inside the system whose students are excelling.

"It's helping these teachers grow professionally," says Derzi. "They can get ideas for more teaching methods."

As well as the required workshops, more than 20 voluntary workshops will be offered to all math teachers, all varying in time and subject matter. By attending these, teachers can receive professional learning units and can be updated on some of the newest teaching methods. Another voluntary action teachers can take to improve their teaching is concentration courses. Several years ago, Georgia began requiring teachers in grades 4 – 8 to have specialization in the area they were teaching, not just general math degrees. Should their students not be performing to standards, they will be encouraged to take four concentration classes as refresher courses. By offering both options, the teachers will be receiving instruction on strategy and content.

By looking at the data in so many different ways and having so many opportunities for the teachers to improve professionally, they are trying to make it so "the instruction will reach as many kids as possible."

## Applying Middle and Communities in Schools publish students' writing

"It helps me express myself," says Applying Middling 8<sup>th</sup> grader Sade Winchester of her recently published book *Poems of My Life*.

"I wanted to write a story based on things that happen in real life," says fellow 8<sup>th</sup> grader Lamira Newsome of her book *Drunk Driving in the Darkness*.

During the Communities in Schools' (CIS) After School program last year, students were given an assignment to write a short story or put together a collection of their poetry. "You have the opportunity to write and publish your very own book," they were told by Language Arts teacher Sarah Hunt. They were even able to provide the illustrations.

10 students worked on them during the course of the year in the program as well as in Hunt's class. With money from CIS, the books were sent off to be published on May 25 and were ready and waiting for the students when they came back to school this year.

"I think they did a great job," says Hunt. "I hope to have more children doing it this year because these kids had so much fun." She's hoping to convince all of the Language Arts teachers to encourage their students to participate.

Hunt even threw a presentation celebration for the students, where the community could come into the school, view each of the books, and

meet the authors. Each student received a complimentary copy of the book, but as 8<sup>th</sup> grader Sharisia Parham proudly pointed out, "my mom bought an extra copy."

Inspiration came in many different forms for



Applying 8th graders show off their books at the presentation ceremony at the school.

the students, especially since they were given an option of writing a short story or gathering together many poems. 8<sup>th</sup> grader Charmaine Woody began by writing a story for the assignment, but was writing personal poetry on her own. It was then she decided to just publish all the poetry, which meant more to her.

8<sup>th</sup> grader Taylor Robinson wanted to have more variety in her publication, so she picked poetry. "I wanted to write about many different things, not just one."

According to 8<sup>th</sup> grader Stevie Davis, he has been writing poetry since he was in 1<sup>st</sup> grade and has always been fascinated with Greek legends and stories, so he wrote poems based on them for his collection *Greek Poems*.

Like Davis, many of these students are not writing for the first time; many of the poets have spent years compiling their works, jumping at this opportunity to have them published. For 8<sup>th</sup> grader Shantarius Stone, she wanted to publish a short story, but not one she had already written. So she decided to write *The Best Summer Vacation*, a sequel to *The Almost Best Summer Vacation*, written several years ago. The experience was so good for her, she plans on rounding the series out as a trilogy with *The Worst Summer Vacation*.

Each student's face beaming with pride and joy at being published, they were all smiles and laughs, eager to show off not only their writing ability, but their drawing ability. Each had a different tale to tell, each had their own reason for writing. But why do they want to write? For 8<sup>th</sup> grader Jessei Humphrey, that's the easy part, saying with a laugh:

"We're good at it."