

## Context

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Memphis City Schools (MCS) is the primary school district serving the city of Memphis, located in the southeast corner of Tennessee. MCS is the largest school district in the state and the 21<sup>st</sup> largest school district in the nation. The district serves more than 115,000 students in 191 K-12 schools. Riverview Elementary, one of the 112 elementary schools in the district, is a Title I school serving 386 African American students, the vast majority of which are economically disadvantaged. The school underwent a complete renovation five years ago and currently has “the latest innovations in technology and all advantages to ensure quality education for all children.” The school, however, currently faces shrinking student enrollments due to changing community demographics that include older families without elementary-aged children.

The mission of Riverview Elementary is to provide students with a high quality education, creating “life-long learners by ensuring mastery of critical content skills... [using] the most innovative techniques to ensure the success of every student.” Riverview Elementary’s school vision is to ensure “all students will be prepared academically and socially to become productive and successful citizens.”

<b>Enrollment</b>	<b>Riverview Elementary</b>	<b>Memphis City Schools</b>	<b>Tennessee State</b>
Student Count	386	115,928	911,735
<b>Special Programs</b>			
% Free or Reduced Lunch	99.0	74.9	49.9
% Transitional Bilingual		3.5	2.1
% Migrant			
% Special Education		12.8	15.9
<b>Ethnicity</b>			
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.0	0.1	0.2
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.0	1.2	1.7
Black	100.0	86.4	24.8
Hispanic	0.0	3.4	3.2
White	0.0	8.9	70.5

Table 1: Student Demographics (Source: Tennessee State Report Card 2003-2004)

## Curriculum and Academic Goals

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### Curriculum Development and Documentation

District administrators offer praise for the Tennessee Curriculum Standards, but they note that the standards represent the baseline expectations for students in the district. The superintendent explains that she is impressed with the state’s efforts to define curriculum standards, and she believes the state is making strong progress in these efforts. An associate superintendent in the district adds, however, that while the state standards are adequate at meeting basic needs and establishing baseline targets, MCS sets higher curriculum requirements. At the school level, though Riverview Elementary administrators describe the state standards as adequate, they state the standards were designed for mainstream students and do nothing to address issues around diversity.

MCS has placed a strong focus on developing district curriculum standards. The district originally introduced the MCS curriculum in 1998, and all schools in the district are required to follow these district curriculum standards. The MCS curriculum currently in place is a

spiraling curriculum fully aligned to the Tennessee Curriculum Standards. According to an associate superintendent in the district, curriculum developers examined the state curriculum framework and formulated the district curriculum such that it is properly sequenced, is integrated across disciplines, and fully aligns with the state standards. The MCS superintendent emphasizes that she wants strong district standards, a fully aligned curriculum, and additional supports for students not making progress.

Administrators at Riverview Elementary state that the MCS Division of Curriculum and Instruction coordinates curriculum development efforts. They explain that the division collaborates with teachers to draft curriculum standards by grade and content area. The draft curriculum is then distributed to schools for teacher input before formal adoption occurs. Administrators at the school offer praise for the MCS curriculum, noting it is well designed to meet the state standards and Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) competencies. They add, however, that the MCS curriculum does not currently include strategies for revisiting concepts or guidelines for remedial education. A teacher at Riverview notes that he has participated in formal curriculum development through serving on district curriculum committees.

### **Curriculum Use**

Consistency in communication and delivery of the curriculum is a top priority both in MCS and at Riverview Elementary. The MCS superintendent believes it is imperative for the district to be clear about the curriculum standards across the school system. She stresses that consistency in the curriculum and in curriculum delivery is important, particularly with MCS's urban student population, which is predominantly poor, black, and mobile. To ensure consistency in curriculum delivery, MCS has developed curriculum guides with scope and sequence and curriculum mapping documentation at each grade level for English, mathematics, science, and social studies. Within the curriculum guides, expected skills are coded as introduced (at the current grade level), developing (introduced at a previous grade level), assessed (correlated with the TCAP), or mastered and maintained. All curriculum documents are available on the district website in formats readily accessible to school administrators and classroom teachers.

At Riverview Elementary, administrators attribute their school's success, in part, to following the MCS curriculum and supplementing it with school-level programs. They note the MCS curriculum components vary by subject and by grade, though the curriculum at all grades and subjects includes benchmarks, curriculum maps, and standards. The district also provides curricular materials for adopted textbooks. A teacher at Riverview Elementary adds that the MCS curriculum includes pacing guides aligned with curriculum maps and the TCAP competencies.

School educators at Riverview Elementary report that district meetings, district professional development, and weekly school-wide professional development activities reinforce consistent curriculum use in the classroom. A teacher at the school adds that school faculty meetings and grade-level teacher meetings provide educators with opportunities to discuss the curriculum and pacing. Teachers at the school are expected to complete weekly lesson plans that clearly identify the standards taught. Monitoring of curriculum implementation occurs through analysis of student and teacher data. Curriculum implementation in Riverview Elementary classrooms is adjusted based on identified student needs. School administrators also emphasize that educators continually differentiate the curriculum and integrate literacy across all curricular domains to ensure all students succeed.

### **Curriculum Revision**

MCS continually revises its curriculum to align to state standards and to meet teacher and student needs. According to the superintendent, the district curriculum has greatly improved in some content areas, particularly in reading; however, in other content areas such as science, gaps continue to exist. To address this limitation, MCS is currently examining the state standards in relation to the existing MCS science curriculum and student performance in science across the district.

At Riverview Elementary, administrators state that curriculum revisions are aligned with the district's textbook adoption. They note that revisions also occur in response to student needs assessments and achievement data. A teacher at the school adds that curricular adjustments are made at the classroom level when students are not achieving desired results (as identified through analysis of student data).

### **Goal Development, Content, and Review**

MCS has six strategic goals focusing on quality instruction. The six goals of the school system target improvements in students' academic achievement: 1) create academically challenging, safe, supportive and effective learning environments; 2) ensure that all schools are staffed with highly qualified personnel; 3) work effectively with community agencies to support the physical and social/emotional development and well-being of students; 4) strengthen the family/school/community partnership to support the academic, vocational, social and emotional development of all students; 5) establish high levels of accountability for academic and fiscal performance throughout the system; and 6) create a climate system-wide that is sensitive and responsive to the needs of a diverse student and community population.

Goal development in MCS involves a variety of stakeholders. Each department in the district collects and analyzes student and educator data. Focus groups are conducted with parents and community members, and school staff complete surveys regarding current needs. Results from the MCS Climate Survey also inform MCS goal development. Departments use data from all sources to review goals from the previous school year and formulate goals for the upcoming school year. The district's Executive Leadership Team reviews proposed departmental goals and finalizes goals for the district's annual consolidated plan.

Each MCS school must develop an annual school improvement plan based on school and district needs. For example, MCS has determined that schools should focus on literacy and numeracy in the upcoming school year, and school goals must reflect this mandate. School Improvement Plans are monitored and reviewed annually. Riverview Elementary' goals target student achievement and include concrete objectives. The school identifies two primary goals in its Five-Year Self-Study Action Plan:

- 1) Expand students' abilities to use thinking and reasoning skills effectively, reaching a 50 plus percentile by the end of the 2005-2006 school year and a 4% growth each year for the next four years
- 2) Expand students' abilities to use communication skills to communicate with clarity, purpose and understanding

School administrators report that their school goals are aligned to MCS goals, but they emphasize that school goals specifically target the needs of the school's student population, as identified by research and data analysis. Behind the school's goals are consistently high expectations for student success and a philosophy that every student can learn.

## **Staff Selection, Leadership and Capacity Building**

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### **Selection of Principals and Teachers**

*Principal Selection:* Prospective principals complete an online application and submit a resume and personal statement. A selection team completes the initial screening process of online applications, identifying principals with the minimum educational and professional experience as well as those with proven leadership and communication skills, community involvement, participation in professional development, and recognition (awards, general recognition, or publications). The selection team then conducts interviews with qualified applicants and makes recommendations to the MCS Academic Directors based on the interviewees knowledge of teaching and learning, belief that all children can excel academically, commitment to ongoing learning, problem solving and project management skills, innovation, interpersonal and team building skills, and an effective use of technology. The MCS Academic Directors and the selection team then conduct final interviews with recommended applicants. Final recommendations are based on the prospective principals' vision, instructional leadership, management, family and community collaboration, ethical behavior, and understanding of the larger social, political, and economic climate. The superintendent and deputy superintendent make final decisions about principal selection and administrator school placement.

The district superintendent emphasizes the key attributes of principals that she looks for are a focus on student learning, willingness to listen and learn, high expectations for self and others, willingness to devote extensive time in order to accomplish goals, and responsiveness to the day to day issues as well as the larger issues that emerge in public schools. At Riverview Elementary, the same individual has served as principal for the past 28 years. According to the school's principal, support from the district office contributes to the retention of MCS principals. He explains that the main issue principals currently face is maintaining student achievement progress—principals who are able to accomplish this remain in good standing with district and state educational leaders.

According to the superintendent, the district currently employs more than 60 principals with 30 or more years of educational experience, and she expects that the majority of these principals will retire in the next two years. In response to this impending principal shortage, the district participated in the 2003 competition for the New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS) principal development program, which targets leadership transformation in urban school districts. With its selection, MCS, in partnership with the University of Memphis, became one of five urban school districts in the program, which provides intensive job-embedded development and support for promising principalship candidates. Selected candidates participate in a six-week Summer Foundations Institute and serve as interns in a "resident principalship" for one year with a high-performing MCS principal. Candidates receive training in leadership development through the Leadership Academy. A teacher at Riverview Elementary reports that six teachers from Riverview Elementary have left the school and become principals.

*Teacher Selection:* To recruit teacher applicants, MCS holds an annual job fair and advertises vacant teaching positions on the district website. Prospective applicants complete an online application through the MCS website and submit a resume. The MCS Human Resources department pre-screens applicants to ensure candidates meet minimum eligibility requirements and licensure criteria. Those deemed eligible are granted an initial interview with an MCS staff member. Initial interviews focus on the applicants' qualifications, teaching experience, and their instructional philosophy. Those applicants passing the initial interview are then referred to specific schools for additional interviews.

School administrators at Riverview Elementary report that the MCS Human Resources department handles initial teacher recruitment, and the department hosts job fairs for both new teachers and those wishing to transfer to different MCS schools. School administrators believe they have a good pool of candidates from which to choose. Teachers interested in positions at Riverview Elementary must complete a Riverview Elementary Teacher Application. The application requests information on their educational background and qualifications, particular areas of expertise or talents, a brief description of student teaching or prior experience, expectation of teaching experience, and personal educational philosophy. The principal and an interview committee comprised of classroom teachers interview prospective applicants. The committee and principal collaborate before the interviews to select interview questions that will best determine whether the prospective teaching candidates have the commitment to help the school’s student population achieve academically. Interviews typically begin with a review of the license and educational qualifications of the applicant, followed by a discussion regarding the school’s structure (i.e., nature of the teaching environment, governance structure). Grade-level teachers at Riverview Elementary have the opportunity to provide input on teacher selection before the principal makes the final hiring decision.

In discussing teacher retention, school administrators at Riverview Elementary note that their school’s teacher turnover rate is low. They believe that their success in retaining teachers is due, in part, to the support teachers receive from both school administrators and their fellow educators. They add that ensuring teachers have the materials necessary for instruction also contributes to teacher retention. A teacher at Riverview Elementary asserts that the school’s environment encourages teachers to continue teaching at the school. He describes the school as the perfect teaching environment, characterized by support, professionalism, consistent expectations, and respect.

<b>Teacher Statistics</b>	<b>Riverview Elementary</b>	<b>Memphis City Schools</b>	<b>Tennessee State</b>
Classroom Teachers	27	7,045	58,577
Average Years of Teacher Experience			
% of teachers with at least a Master’s Degree	41.0		
% of teachers teaching with an emergency/conditional certificate	0.0		
% of classes taught by teachers meeting the federal definition of highly qualified		35.6%	55.5%

Table 2: Teacher Information (Source: Tennessee State Report Card)

### **Induction and Mentoring Programs**

New principals in MCS participate in a year-long mentoring program. The district matches new principals and mentors in ways that maximize new school leaders’ potential. Leadership coaches are also available to provide support to novice principals. Administrators at Riverview Elementary cite new principal support through the New Principal Leadership Academy, the principal mentoring program, and the University of Memphis’s leadership program.

To support beginning teachers, MCS has recently developed a formal partnership with the New Teacher Center (NTC) at the University of Memphis. The NTC program provides two

years of support for beginning teachers, including a monthly seminar series focused on content-specific pedagogy, effective instructional practices, and literacy. Beginning teachers in the NTC program are guaranteed ample release time to focus on assessment, observation, curriculum planning, and participation in professional development. Additionally, beginning teachers in the NTC program receive support from New Teacher Advisors, master teachers whose sole responsibility is to provide support to new teachers both inside and outside the classroom. New Teacher Advisors meet onsite with novice teachers on a weekly basis to observe, coach, provide emotional support, demonstrate lessons, offer curriculum resources, and facilitate teacher-principal communication. In its first year, five master teachers served as New Teacher Advisors, supporting a total of 75 new teachers in the district.

In addition to support from New Teacher Advisors, teachers in MCS are also paired with mentors at their school sites during their first two years in MCS. Mentors and coaches working with beginning teachers participate in Mentor Academies facilitated by the NTC Program. The Mentor Academies consist of a total of eight three-day seminars conducted over a two-year time span. The sessions cover a wide variety of topics, including foundations in mentoring and formal assessment, coaching and observation strategies, planning and designing instruction tailored to beginning teacher needs, reflecting on data to inform practice, mentoring for equity, coaching in complex situations, artifacts of practice, and mentor leadership skills. Additionally, mentors meet on a weekly basis to discuss problems and issues and share advice and effective mentoring strategies. Two teachers at Hamilton Elementary currently have participated in the Mentor Academies.

At Riverview Elementary, mentor teachers are trained by the State Department of Education, and they receive compensation for their mentoring services. According to a teacher at the school, mentors help new teachers understand the school's expectations and make sure new teachers are successful. Administrators at Riverview Elementary note that new teachers attend the MCS new teacher orientation, and the school's instructional facilitator is available to support and guide new teachers throughout the school year.

### **Development of Principals and Teachers**

MCS uses technology to communicate with educators throughout the district. Riverview educators note that district communication occurs through emails, MCS website postings, and district meetings. A teacher at Riverview adds that MCS has a television station, and the district superintendent has begun giving public addresses to the community through this medium.

*General Collaboration and Support for Principals:* The principal of Riverview Elementary reports attending principal meetings as well as small-group meetings targeting specific educational and administrative topics.

*General Collaboration and Support for Teachers:* Administrators at Riverview Elementary note that teacher collaboration takes a variety of formats. District-wide teacher collaboration occurs through a Literacy Cadre, comprised of teachers at the elementary, middle, and high school levels who meet twice each month to discuss district literacy issues. Teachers at the school also meet twice monthly in grade-level teams, which school administrators sometimes attend. Grade-level teams meet during the school day and are required to submit minutes of their meetings to the school principal. According to meeting minutes, teachers discuss intervention programs, instructional strategies (e.g., thinking maps, small group instruction), professional development workshops, and student assessment. In addition to these grade-level meetings, teachers are required to attend

periodic staff meetings as well. Administrators at the school attribute Riverview Elementary's success, in part, to the close working relationship that administrators and teachers share.

A teacher at the school reports weekly collaboration with his peers through grade-level meetings. Teachers at the school also meet with support teachers on a monthly basis, and faculty meet together through staff meetings. The Riverview Elementary teacher adds that teachers at the school are encouraged to visit other classrooms, and he has frequently helped other teachers with analysis of their classroom data. At the end of the school year, teachers meet across grade levels to discuss summer enrichment activities and share ideas to maximize student achievement in the upcoming school year.

Riverview Elementary has formed research groups to collaborate on data analysis. Teachers at the school meet in research teams where they analyze their student data to identify strengths and weaknesses and then design classroom-based programs to address the identified needs. Teachers in these research cadres are expected to present their research projects at school staff meetings and communicate their findings to parents, informing parents of ways to support learning in the home environment. School administrators participate in these research teams on a monthly basis to identify innovative instruction and best practices that improve instruction and student learning. Research team presentations that occurred during the school year covered such topics as good first teaching; gathering class data, analysis, and application/classroom interventions; literacy; thinking and reasoning; and test taking skills.

In addition to collaborating with peers, teachers at Riverview Elementary also receive support from an instructional facilitator. The Instructional facilitator, a full-time individual funded by the district, assists teachers in using achievement data to improve student learning. The school has additional support staff as well, including a librarian, ten paraprofessionals, and physical education, music, and resource teachers,

*The Professional Development Process:* All principals in the state of Tennessee are required to complete 72 hours of training through the Tennessee Academy for School Leaders every five years. The training, which is linked to the State Board of Education Master Plan for Tennessee Schools, provides principals with in-depth information about management, leadership, and communication. In addition to this training, MCS requires principals to attend the Institute for School Leaders, a three-day training. The principal of Riverview Elementary adds that MCS makes a variety of training opportunities available to both its new and "seasoned" principals.

One of the main sources for teacher training is the MCS Teaching and Learning Academy. The district surveys principals and teachers to identify needed professional development, and MCS communicates Teaching and Learning Academy training opportunities through quarterly catalogues and posts on the district website. School administrators at Riverview Elementary note that professional development sessions through the Teaching and Learning Academy generally occur after school during the school year or during the day in the summer. Some teachers receive stipends for their professional development participation during the summer months.

Teachers at the school are required to attend a minimum of 12 hours of professional development, and school administrators often make training recommendations to teachers based on teacher and student assessment. Teachers who attend professional development activities are asked to share the information learned during staff meetings. School administrators note that technology training is a current need that is being addressed at

their school. In Riverview Elementary's Technology Project Worksheet, the school principal identifies specific technology training offered through the MCS Teaching and Learning Academy that he expects his teachers will attend. Topics included Internet support, computer skills in spreadsheet graphs and data analysis, basic computer and Internet skills, and thinking maps.

Though they appreciate the district-provided professional development, administrators at Riverview Elementary describe school-level training as the most important for educators at their school. They note that their teachers develop professional development activities, and the school also provides specific training based on climate survey results and teacher needs assessment data. School-level training has recently focused on strategies to reinforce the use of the MCS curriculum in the classroom.

Each school year, Riverview Elementary creates a Professional Development Plan, which highlights training needs and targeted activities for school in-services and Title I training activities. The professional development team, comprised of the principal, instructional facilitator, and three teachers, develop the Professional Development Plan and conduct an evaluation at the end of each school year. The school's professional development plan identified the following as priority training needs:

- improve communication and literacy using a Balanced Literacy Approach across the curriculum;
- improve thinking and reasoning skills using thinking maps across the curriculum;
- increase retention of content knowledge by using visual tools that correspond to thinking processes and that students can use to organize their ideas on paper or by computer, and as an end result, read, write, and think better; and
- increase the home-school connection.

In the Professional Development Plan Evaluation, the team details indicators of success, data collection strategies and sources of data, formative review, end results, a timetable for data collection and analysis, and the cost of the following training activities:

- TCAP/CRT data analysis—improve students' learning by doing an in-depth analysis of students' learning needs
- SACS/TSIPP workshop—understanding the School Survey to help the school improve student learning
- Thinking Maps
- Differentiated Instruction—a concept in which the classroom teacher plans for diverse needs of students
- Technology training—using websites for elementary students

### **Instructional Programs, Practices and Arrangements**

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According to the MCS superintendent, the district has a strong focus on literacy. In addition to evaluating the literacy programs currently in place, the district is evaluating principal and teachers' understanding of these programs. The superintendent stresses that there is a need for collaboration on literacy "across the board." At Riverview Elementary, a classroom teacher asserts that the current focus on literacy has made a major impact on improving students' literacy achievement.

### **Selection and Creation of Programs and Materials**

MCS follows the state textbook adoption cycle for textbooks, and the district is currently in the process of adopting new English/language arts textbooks. As part of this process, MCS principals are asked to serve on the textbook adoption committee. Grade-level textbook adoption committees are also convened, and teachers in MCS can apply to be members of the committees. The textbook adoption committee has established guidelines for textbook evaluation. After reviewing proposed texts, the committee then provides a rating for each textbook and makes recommendations for textbook adoption. Riverview Elementary administrators note that instructional programs are selected in a collaborative process involving teachers, school administrators, and district officials. They report that instructional programs are chosen based on alignment with MCS goals, particularly the district's goals around literacy development.

### **Educational Programs and Materials**

For the core content areas, MCS has adopted the following instructional programs: Everyday Math, Scott Foresman Reading and Leap Frog Reading, and Harcourt Brace social studies textbooks. In describing these instructional programs, the superintendent asserts that Everyday Math requires strong teaching skills and Scott Foresman Reading and Leap Frog are good instructional programs for reinforcing literacy areas in which students are struggling. In speaking about instructional programs for science, the superintendent stated that she was not a big advocate of using textbooks for the subject, arguing that science should be more hands-on. For example, MCS students as young as first grade conduct science experiments in class. The superintendent adds, however, that MCS is not currently doing enough to maximize science instruction programming in ways that engage students, and this is a current focus of the district.

As part of the focus on literacy, Riverview Elementary uses the Scott Foresman reading program in combination with Reading First and the Voyager reading intervention program. Additionally, a classroom teacher at the school notes that the school uses the General Balanced Literacy approach to teaching reading, which places a strong emphasis on reading for understanding. As part of its ongoing literacy efforts, the school hosts three parent nights about home literacy strategies, and Adopt-A-School has enabled the school to send each child home with two books. The school also integrates both reading and mathematics enrichment programming as well, including workbook activities and other materials that are selected based on student needs.

According to administrators at Riverview Elementary, the effectiveness of selected instructional programs is evaluated by the district through benchmark assessments and other measures of student success. A classroom teacher explains that programs are evaluated using student data analysis and teacher input to determine whether they enhance student learning.

### **Instructional Strategies**

Teachers at Riverview Elementary record all methods of instruction on their weekly lesson plans. The school's lesson plan template requires teachers to identify:

- the anticipatory set and instructional input—discussion, illustration, audiovisual, explanation, chalk talk, review, reading, question/answer)
- Modeling—chalkboard illustration, demonstration, visual
- Checking for understanding—oral signals, silent signals, written signals
- Resources and materials—textbook, workbook, duplicate work, films, tapes, adapted materials, projector, listening, language master, transparency, computer

- Student tasks—individual practice, problem solving, laboratory, role playing, reports, reading, small group discussion, class discussion, debate
- Homework assignment—practice, preparation, extension
- Closure and evaluation—summary, quiz, formal test, observation, recitation, reports, projects
- Best practices—authentic, interactive, learner centered, inclusive, continuous learning

Riverview Elementary has developed an Instructional Practices handbook based on the principal and instructional facilitator's research, reflection, and analysis of test data. The handbook provides detailed information on instructional programs and practices, including Accelerated Reader, Balanced Literacy, good first teaching, differentiated teaching, and higher order thinking strategies. Further information is specifically provided on instruction in math and science, designing homework, lesson planning, and test preparation.

In discussing high quality instruction, Riverview Elementary administrators report that teacher quality is reflected in teachers' use of the MCS curriculum as well as supplementary materials in all academic areas. High-quality instruction, according to administrators at the school, should include the use of learning centers, student enrichment activities, and innovative activities (e.g., use of non-fiction reading materials integrated into lessons to teach both reading and math). Administrators add that teachers at their school do not teach in the "abstract," and they "teach to *all* students, not just the middle student." Teachers differentiate the curriculum so that all students can be successful. Students, particularly those at the higher grade levels, are expected to do a great deal of reading, reflecting, and reasoning in order to evaluate the information they are reading. Administrators at the school assert that evidence of high-quality instruction is seen in student success indicators.

A classroom teacher at Riverview Elementary explains that teachers use a variety of instructional strategies in the classroom. For literacy, teachers reinforce reading fluency and understanding in every subject, and they require students to complete book reports. He notes that school administrators also worked with Adopt-A-School to ensure every classroom has a library to enhance the amount of reading material in the classroom. In describing high-quality instruction, this teacher states that effective instruction must meet the needs of every student in the class. High-quality instruction also must enrich students' educational experiences while supporting their feelings of self-worth. High-quality instruction is reflected in orderly classrooms with involved students that are lead by teachers who provide both instruction and opportunities for interactive learning. This teacher adds that all teachers at Riverview Elementary are expected to adhere to best practices and always treat children and parents in a professional manner. Teachers at the school also make continual adjustments to their classroom instruction based on review and analysis of student data. For example, when students do not perform well on a particular lesson, this teacher re-teaches the material using a different instructional model, or he provides individualized reinforcement lessons for small student groups while other students complete enrichment projects.

In addition to in-class instruction, teachers at Riverview Elementary are required to assign homework on a daily basis in all core subjects. The goal of homework should be to improve higher order thinking skills and problem solving or to establish authentic lessons. Teachers send homework logs to parents every Monday. Parents are expected to use the logs to monitor their children's homework. At the end of the week, parents must sign the log and return it to their child's classroom teacher.

Technology is an important instructional tool at Riverview Elementary. School administrators cite a particular emphasis on improving the school's technological infrastructure, which has included the development of a 26-station computer lab and placement of at least three computers (one teacher-designated and two student-designated) in each classroom. Lab computers are connected to the Internet and include a library of educational software appropriate for students at each grade level. Classroom-computers are also connected to the Internet, and they are equipped with Voyager software, used for intervention activities.

### **Instructional Arrangements**

MCS requires that elementary schools schedule a 90-minute block for daily literacy instruction and a 60 minute block for mathematics instruction. Requirements for science and social studies are 90 minutes of instruction for each subject per week. At Riverview Elementary, literacy is a primary focus, as reflected in the 120 minutes per day the school devotes to literacy instruction. Students attend class from 8:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m., and the school offers after-school activities as well from 3:30 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. A teacher at the school notes the school schedule is flexible and is designed to meet students' needs.

### **Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis and Use of Data**

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In discussing the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS), the state's accountability program, and *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), the MCS superintendent explains that the state and national focus on accountability has instigated changes in the district—one of the district's key priorities has been the creation of its own accountability system that incorporates the TVAAS accountability expectations. As part of this process, the district had to clearly define benchmarks and identify where student performance currently stands in relation to these benchmarks. At the school level, administrators at Riverview Elementary note that NCLB has significantly influenced MCS. They report the district has implemented specific accountability measures in reading and mathematics and has allotted substantial resources for improving students' literacy skills. Administrators add that the new accountability standards also resulted in technology upgrades at the school. A teacher at the school explains, however, that the school's students already achieve above the state benchmarks, and Riverview Elementary's student continue to achieve at the school's higher expectations.

All Tennessee students in are required to take the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program (TCAP) Achievement Test in grades 3 to 6. The TCAP achievement test is a timed, multiple choice test that assesses student skills in reading, language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. In grade 5, the TCAP also includes a writing assessment component. Tennessee schools may choose to administer the TCAP achievement test to K-2 students, and MCS mandates administration of the reading and language arts TCAP achievement test at second grade. In discussing the state assessment, an MCS associate superintendent describes the TCAP as solid. He adds, however, that because TCAP results are not released until the following school year, educators are forced to work with data that are more than a year old. At Riverview Elementary, students begin taking the TCAP in first grade, which school administrators believe gives students a head start, particularly those who are not achieving up to grade-level standards. Administrators explain, however, that the state assessment does not address all objectives in the MCS curriculum, and thus additional evaluation is necessary to determine whether the school is meeting students' learning needs.

	Riverview Elementary		Memphis City Schools		Tennessee State	
	2002-03	2003-04	2002-03	2003-04	2002-03	2003-04
% Reading						
% Math						
% Writing						

Table 3:

MCS has instituted a variety of local assessments to benchmark student progress. The district has created a comprehensive student assessment calendar for literacy at the elementary level. All K-6 students take the Scott Foresman Placement Test during the first two weeks of the school year. Kindergarten students also take the Developing Skills Checklist at school entry. Students in kindergarten and first grade take the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) three times a school year. Second- and third-grade students in Reading First schools also take the DIBELS three times during the school year. District formative literacy assessments are administered every six weeks for grades 2 to 6. The district uses the Memphis Urban Systematic Program (MUSP) for assessing math and science progress. MUSP tests are conducted three times each school year. According to school administrators, MCS updates its assessments each summer, ensuring assessments align with TCAP items and objectives, and teachers have input into this assessment revision process. According to Riverview Elementary administrators, the district monitors school progress through analysis of TCAP and district assessment data. Tennessee School Report Cards, issued by the state department of education, provides MCS with information regarding how schools are performing in relation to NCLB requirements.

Riverview Elementary teachers monitor student progress through unit tests, teacher-made tests, classroom observations, and students’ interactions and collaboration on class projects. Teachers track student achievement on oral comprehension record forms, individual assessment progress summaries and scoring guides, class progress indicator forms, portfolio summaries, experiment/project evaluation checklists, concept and unit checklists, skills rating charts, observation checklists, TCAP achievement CRT individual student profiles, and grade-level skill mastery charts. School administrators monitor success based on periodic tests, classroom performance, and six-week grading reports.

Administrators at Riverview Elementary attribute their school’s success, in part, to their continual use of data, which they assert started with the district’s emphasis on using data analysis to identify instructional weaknesses and student needs, a reform effort initiated by the previous MCS superintendent and continued under the new superintendent. According to these administrators, MCS requires monitoring and disaggregation of student data every six weeks. The school’s instructional facilitator assists teachers in using achievement data to improve student learning. Administrators review teacher and student data to make decisions about instructional programs as well as personnel assignment and reassignment decisions. Teachers review student data weekly, making instructional changes based on student mastery of the material.

Teachers at Riverview Elementary send student progress reports to parents on the Monday of each week. The report details students’ performance in academic subjects (i.e., reading, composition, grammar, spelling, mathematics, science, and social studies) and their social and academic behavior (e.g., conduct and work habits). In discussing challenges, school educators cite the achievement difficulties of the school’s transfer students. These students transfer to Riverview Elementary unprepared academically and are frequently far below grade level compared to Riverview Elementary’s existing student population. Additionally, transfer students are often not prepared to do the level of work required by the daily

homework assigned. As a result of all these factors, transfer students commonly fail the TCAP, which, in turn, reduces the school's performance rating.

### **Other Methods of Monitoring the Teaching and Learning System**

*Teacher Evaluation.* In Tennessee, teachers are evaluated through the State Board of Education-approved Framework for Evaluation and Professional Growth. The evaluation model promotes teacher growth through its focus on student progress, teacher self-reflection, and school-wide improvement. The Framework for Evaluation requires that Apprentice-Licensed teachers in their first two years must participate in formal observations three times per year at minimum. Apprentice teachers in their third year are required to have a minimum of two observations during the school year. Tenured teachers (those with Professional Licenses) are evaluated at least two times during a ten-year period, with evaluations consisting of at least two observations or Focused Assessments during the school year.

At Riverview Elementary, administrators describe teacher evaluation as constant, noting evaluations are based on student achievement and reviews of lesson plans. The school requires additional classroom observations and administrator walkthroughs beyond those mandated by the state and MCS. When conducting walkthroughs, administrators complete an Instructional Checklist, citing evidence of Balanced Literacy strategies, writing activities, use of instructional technology, classroom arrangements and posted information/student work, and hallway bulletin board content. Teachers' research team presentations at faculty meetings provide administrators with an additional opportunity to both encourage teachers' self reflection and evaluate teachers' performance. Each summer, the school reviews teachers' classroom data to determine strengths and opportunities for improvement.

*Principal Evaluation.* Principals in MCS are evaluated on a three-year basis. As part of the principal evaluation process, MCS surveys students, teachers, and parents for their feedback on the principal. If principals are rated as below satisfactory, they must participate in an evaluation the following year. This evaluation is tied to data on student achievement and progress.

### **Recognition, Intervention and Adjustments**

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#### **Recognition**

Reading First teachers across MCS attend a special banquet with district and state representatives to celebrate the Reading First accomplishments of the year. Riverview Elementary publishes the Principal's Honor Roll (all A's) and the High Honor Roll (A's and B's) at the end of each six weeks. In addition to high grades, students receiving the honor roll distinction must have satisfactory conduct. Students in fourth and fifth grades are inducted into the National Beta Club if they earn A's and B's each six weeks and maintain satisfactory conduct. The school also hosts an academic assembly program each six weeks to recognize students for academic achievement, most improved performance, and perfect attendance. At the end of the school year, Riverview Elementary hosts an Academic Honors Assembly, a large celebration to recognize student achievement. A teacher at the school notes that educators strive for all students to be recognized. Student awards for achievement (i.e., academic excellence, improved academic performance, attendance, number of books read) include treats, certificates, and trophies, and high achievers' pictures are displayed in hallway. Students with strong achievement also have opportunities to participate in Science on Wheels and in several community activities.

## Staff and Student Interventions

*School Interventions.* Using TCAP testing and MCS reading and math assessment results, MCS identifies low-performing schools. Schools that are not performing up to state standards are placed on notice, and principals at these schools must submit a Baldrige Level I application to identify their strengths, opportunities for improvement, and plans for making those improvements. In addition, low-performing schools are assigned an Exemplary Educator to facilitate teachers' use of student data to inform instruction. The success of these interventions is determined based on student performance, improvement in standardized test results, and progress on targeted areas for improvement.

*Teacher Interventions.* Struggling teachers at Riverview Elementary meet at the district level twice monthly to perform demonstration lessons and receive individualized feedback and coaching. The instructional facilitator at the school also provides personal teacher evaluation and individual coaching to struggling teachers. A teacher at the school notes that mentoring and the support of the school administration and instructional facilitator help teachers who are struggling.

*Student Interventions.* MCS has developed a five-step Academic Intervention Process for K-8 students, based on scientifically-researched principles and aligned with the Tennessee Curriculum Standards, the MCS curriculum, and NCLB expectations. According to the associate superintendent, the goal of the Academic Intervention Process is "not doing it over, [but] doing it differently." At Stage I, educators identify students who are performing below expectations academically as early as possible through review of classroom grades and reading and mathematics assessment results. All students with an average below 70% in reading and/or mathematics are required to participate in the academic intervention, and MCS suggests that schools also include those earning grades between 70% and 75% in academic intervention activities. At Stage II, educators determine students' specific needs through the use of ongoing and varied student assessments. Students' specific skill deficiencies are then documented in the Student/Teacher Academic Report (STAR). Application of student interventions occurs during Stage III of the Academic Intervention Process. According to MCS policy, "intervention strategies include, but are not limited to, specialized instructional programs and software, tutorial sessions, extended school day, after school program, Saturday school, and summer school." At this stage, intervention strategies to support student improvement are documented in the STAR. MCS has identified three levels of intervention:

- Level I: Prevention—Good Teaching First, which focuses on teaching that reinforces concepts and skills.
- Level II: Just-in-Time Intervention specifically for students with diagnosed needs that require additional instructional time.
- Level III: Intensive Intervention for students' with multiple diagnosed weaknesses who need intensive intervention to meet standards expectations. Students at Level III receive at least five hours of intervention on a weekly basis.

Stage IV of the Academic Intervention comprises systematically monitoring student progress to inform future intervention activities. Data sources for monitoring achievement are report cards and progress reports, reading checklists, Leap Into Literacy Reports, PALS report sheets, Everyday Math profiles and progress indicators, and teacher observations. Monitoring activities are documented in the STAR. Stage V of the Academic Intervention Process is the evaluation of academic interventions. The evaluation process identifies particularly effective intervention strategies, and those strategies deemed ineffective are discontinued by MCS.

The district has adopted two Reading First intervention programs to support its Academic Intervention Program. The first is an in-school and after-school tutoring program, entitled Early Success for kindergarten to second-grade students and Soar to Success for students in grades 3 and 4. The second Reading First intervention program is the Three-Tier Reading Instruction Program.

As part of the Reading First intervention program, teachers at Riverview Elementary use the Voyager Learning, Star, Accelerated Reader, Passport Know and Go, and Leap Frog Programs to intervene with struggling readers. With the programs, teachers provide instruction and reinforcement that minimizes the gap between students' language skills and the difficulty of the materials they are reading. Teachers also use cooperative learning groups and workbook activities to build students' understanding of vocabulary language structures and their comprehension skills. The Weekly Readers program targets K-5 students' academic skills in social studies and knowledge of world events. Additionally, Riverview Elementary offers before- and after-school enrichment and tutoring activities, Saturday School, and a summer school program for students who are not at grade level in reading and mathematics. Students are identified for these after-school and summer school intervention programs depending on their individual needs. Peer tutoring, TCAP coaching, and support from teacher aides are other methods classroom teachers use to intervene with struggling students. Monitoring of interventions occurs through classroom visits, reviews of lesson plans, and informal administrator walkthroughs.

Students with special education needs participate in a pull-out program for up to four hours each school day. Classroom teachers collaborate with the resource teacher to coordinate lessons for these students. Accelerated students at Riverview Elementary receive enrichment through the Creative Learning in a Unique Environment (CLUE) program. Students at the school may also be transported to other schools for a gifted and talented pull-out program.

## **Underlying Factors**

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In the sections to follow, district and school educators provide information about resources allocation, relationships with stakeholders, and their core beliefs about teaching and learning.

## **Resources Allocation**

The MCS superintendent indicates that the district budget "absolutely" affects academics, particularly given the budget cuts the district is facing. Administrators at Riverview Elementary report no school input in the district budget process. They identify school funding streams from the district, county budgets, and Title I. The Title I dollars in particular fund most of the school's supplementary materials, intervention programs (e.g., summer school, after-school enrichment, TCAP coaching), and additional teacher professional development activities. A Title I committee, comprised of teachers and administrators, determines Title I fund allocations. In addition to these funding sources, the school has several Adopt-A-School partners who donate funds for special programs and projects throughout the school year. The school generates additional revenue by recycling workbooks, which the school uses to purchase important supplemental materials. Every teacher receives funds for supplies based on need.

## **Local Influences, Relationships, and Communications**

*Teacher's Union.* The superintendent, associate superintendent, and school educators at Riverview Elementary report that MCS has a good relationship with the teacher's union, the Memphis Education Association (MEA). They believe MCS and the union are effectively collaborating to identify ways to support teachers. Riverview Elementary has two MEA representatives who distribute information to the faculty.

*Community.* In discussing priorities in MCS, the superintendent states that one of the district's key priorities is establishing and maintaining the community's confidence and partnerships within the community. Relationships with the community are key, according to the superintendent, because the community will not risk its children's futures on a system that does not effectively educate them. The associate superintendent adds, however, that communicating the district's strengths to members of the public is a continuous challenge.

Evidence of Riverview Elementary's connection with the community is the school's "very active" participation in the Adopt-A-School Program. Riverview Elementary currently partners with four adopters who "are dedicated to working with the principal, teachers, students and parents at [the school] to ensure academic success." Cargill Corn Milling, Inc. employees accompany fifth-grade students to the Civil Rights Museum, provide school supplies throughout the school year, and host a Knowledge Bowl for several schools, including Riverview Elementary. Hershey's of Memphis provides each student a lunch box and pencil holder at the beginning of the school year as well as student behavior incentives, monetary donations, and speakers for school assembly programs. Hershey's of Memphis Employees volunteer at the school carnival and sponsor school fundraising activities. The Memphians Inc., a social organization of professional men in the community, serve as role models for students. Finally, Premcor provides students with school supplies at the beginning of the school year, and they sponsor Junior Achievement activities and assist students in science projects. All Adopt-A-School partners donate holiday food baskets.

*Parents.* MCS has instituted a number of mechanisms to increase parent involvement in the district. In 2000, MCS created the Parent Assembly, comprised of a parent representative from each school in the district. The Assembly communicates with both the MCS superintendent and school administrators concerning issues important to students and parents. Additionally, MCS in collaboration with its Parent Assembly has created the Parent Learning Academy (PLA). The PLA offers free classes in the fall and spring semesters throughout the district to help parents better support their children's school success. Class topics include curriculum content and expectations by grade level, creation of home learning environments, and helping students succeed in the core content areas. The district also has created nine Family Resource Centers, which provide educational programming for children and parent support services targeting parenting and educational/vocational skills. To increase communication with parents, the district distributes the *School Matters* newsletter with students' report cards every six weeks. Though the district has implemented a variety of activities to better involve parents, the associate superintendent expresses concerns that MCS is not currently providing enough family support—as he states, "we haven't found the way to touch them."

Administrators at Riverview Elementary report that a major part of their school reform has centered on improving communication with parents. The school has created a Parent Involvement Committee comprised of one parent, the instructional facilitator, and six teachers. The committee's primary goals are to increase home-school communication and to improve parent involvement. The committee is charged with developing the schools parent teacher organization and creating partnerships to strengthen student achievement.

Parent involvement at Riverview Elementary can take on a variety of forms. The school hosts parent meetings monthly, and they are careful to plan these meetings at times that are convenient for parents' schedules. These meetings focus on topics such as literacy and expectations for parents. Parents can also attend weekly meetings focused on helpful hints to assist children at home. Teachers communicate with parents through weekly progress reports, and teachers have frequent conversations with parents, every six weeks or as needed. Teachers at the school keep parent contact logs in which they record all parent-teacher interactions, including phone calls, letters, weekly homework pages, and progress reports. Parents also sign a compact at the beginning of the school year. Finally, parents participate in parent-teacher conferences, at which time teachers review the parent compact and the parental involvement policy, discuss student behavior, review the school's grading system and progress report structure, present the student's portfolio and collected work, and identify the student's specific needs.

### **Core Beliefs about Teaching and Learning**

According to the MCS superintendent and associate superintendent, the district's key priorities are supporting student learning and academic achievement in a challenging academic environment. The superintendent asserts that all children can learn if they are taught well, though she explains that, as a nation, we have not created educational communities that make this a reality. The associate superintendent agrees, stating that all children can learn, but this requires that educators have a passion for children and their ability to succeed.

Administrators at Riverview Elementary explain that educating students to be successful adults is a top priority for their school—they want to ensure students receive a good educational foundation that will promote future success in middle school, high school, and college. A teacher at the school reiterates this belief, noting that the school's first priority is making sure every child will succeed. To support this goal, the school seeks to establish connections with students' homes, to teach children to be useful citizens, and to learn and grow as an educational institution. The teacher adds that Riverview Elementary educators teach to children where they are *and* where they need to be.

According to administrators at Riverview Elementary, the school has a very positive learning environment and a close faculty. A teacher at Riverview Elementary notes that the school's climate is "excellent" and a perfect teaching environment that promotes academic success. He explains there is an attitude that making children successful "will be done." The school climate communicates high expectations for students, teachers, and parents, and everyone in the school building is expected to support teachers in their efforts to educate students. Faculty at the school are treated equitably and with respect, and they work together as a team without professional jealousies. Children at the school are happy and feel supported in their learning efforts.