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# Implementing High-Quality Early Learning Curriculum: Lessons from Mississippi

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## Key Lessons Learned

- 1 Windows of opportunity and strong state curriculum policies are critical for change.
- 2 Build in time for learning and for adapting curriculum to local contexts for a smoother implementation process.
- 3 Be intentional about the pace of implementation and be flexible to promote buy-in and local autonomy.
- 4 Teachers trust other teachers. Identify and lift up teacher champions of the reforms.
- 5 Strong supports—including teacher training, coaching, opportunities for teacher collaboration and peer observation, and training for administrators—are essential.
- 6 Expect change to be hard and plan for common challenges. These include different definitions of “developmentally appropriate”; logistical challenges; difficulties fitting in all components of the curriculum; classroom setup/management; and teachers retaining prior curricula.
- 7 Stay the course and recognize that high-quality early learning at large scale will always be a work in progress.

# Introduction

Research has shown consistently that access to high-quality preschool sets children on a path to success in kindergarten and beyond. But ensuring public preschool programs are high-quality has been challenging.<sup>1</sup> Although on average programs in the United States are well organized and emotionally supportive, instructional quality is stubbornly mediocre.<sup>2</sup> Combining curricula that have a scope and sequence and rich content, with supports for educators, has proven to be a “good bet” for delivering high-quality preschool at scale.<sup>3</sup> The National Academy of Science, Education, and Medicine further highlights the importance of preschool curricula that offer engaging activities that give children agency and that are relevant to their own lives.<sup>4</sup> Yet, these kinds of curricula are rarely used in public preschool programs, despite the strong evidence supporting their efficacy.<sup>5</sup>

One reason for this limited scale-up is the dearth of research on *how* these curricula can be implemented at large scale.<sup>6</sup> To help fill this gap, with support from the Gates Foundation, our team is releasing a series of briefs focused on the stories of localities that have implemented these kinds of curricula. In this first brief, we summarize Mississippi’s implementation story in scaling-up a new curriculum, *Mississippi Beginnings*, in state-funded Pre-K classrooms. Drawing on interviews with state and local practitioners and Pre-K classroom observations, we describe lessons learned in the state. Mississippi’s experience offers practical advice and a North Star for other localities considering a pivot in their early learning curricula to match leading guidance in the field.



## Mississippi Pre-K Background

Mississippi serves approximately 25% of its four-year-olds in its two state-funded preschool programs: State Invested Pre-K (SIP) and Early Learning Collaboratives (ELCs).<sup>7</sup> Both are relatively young programs, with ELC created in 2013 and SIP in 2022. SIP is only available to public schools, while ELCs are a mix of public school, private schools, parochial schools, and community-based organizations (CBOs). Overall, 34% of districts offer preschool seats through ELC and 8% via SIP. Both SIP and ELC are open to all children, regardless of income or other background factors, and operate a minimum of four hours/day.

ELC and SIP both have sound structural quality that match program recommendations in the field. For example, each program requires a BA minimum for lead teachers, at least monthly coaching for teachers, and good teacher-student ratios (i.e., 1:10 maximum).<sup>8</sup> Teachers in public school Pre-K classrooms (but not those in CBOs) are also compensated with parity with their K-12 peers.<sup>9</sup> In terms of governance, Mississippi is one of 28 states where the governor’s strength is categorized as “high” and one of twelve

states where the Governor helps to appoint the State Board of Education which then appoints the State Superintendent of Education<sup>10</sup> (see Appendix B Figure 1 for additional details on Mississippi’s governance structure). Recent research conducted by a team at the University of Michigan provides suggestive evidence that greater gubernatorial control may help promote alignment in education governance and priorities and support student achievement.<sup>11</sup>

In August 2022, the state began to implement *Mississippi Beginnings* in state-funded Pre-K classrooms (see timeline below). As of spring 2025, approximately 28% (10,560) of Mississippi four-year-olds were in the estimated 528 classrooms implementing *Mississippi Beginnings* across the state.<sup>12</sup> Of those, approximately 25% (9,369) were in SIP or ELC programs and the remaining share were in programs with other funding streams that opted into the curriculum.

*Mississippi Beginnings* is a preschool curriculum adapted from the Boston Public Schools’s *Focus on Pre-K* curriculum. *Focus* is an open-source, free curriculum developed by the Boston Public Schools Department of Early Childhood.<sup>13</sup> It was designed to be culturally responsive, match how young children learn best with hands-on engaging activities, has a scope and sequence, and includes rich vocabulary and content following a theme/area of inquiry.<sup>14</sup> *Mississippi Beginnings* was designed to maintain these strengths, but with content tailored to the Mississippi state context. Using *Mississippi Beginnings*, the Pre-K day is structured into different content and activity blocks (see the sample daily schedule on the next page).<sup>15</sup> Math activities come from the state’s implementation of *Building Blocks*, an evidence-based early math curriculum that emphasizes hands-on activities and has a heavy focus on verbal mathematical reasoning.<sup>16</sup> As we detail later in this brief, the

## Key decisions timeline: *Mississippi Beginnings*





Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) and districts offer a range of implementation supports, including coaching and training.

Notably, Mississippi has been in the national spotlight in recent years due to its strong test scores gains. Specifically, Mississippi fourth graders showed the greatest growth in the nation between 2013 and 2023,<sup>17</sup> and after adjusting for student demographics, the Urban Institute found that they had the highest National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores in reading and math.<sup>18</sup> These gains cannot necessarily be attributed to the introduction of Pre-K that began in 2013. In particular, in tandem with its preschool investments, the state simultaneously invested in Science of Reading reforms in early elementary school and enacted the Literacy Based Promotion Act which led to the development of new progress monitoring and accountability systems, increased literacy coaching capacity, and additional state-funded professional learning opportunities. Some have called the gains the “Mississippi Miracle,” while MDE administrators prefer the phrase “Mississippi Marathon” to emphasize the hard work and intentionality the reforms required. Either way, the early elementary reforms and success are important context for understanding the preschool curriculum reforms in the state and education reform momentum in the state.

## Methods

This brief is based on 21 interviews across Pre-K teachers (10), state coaches (2), district coaches (2), counselors (1), and school administrators (4), as well as state administrators from the Mississippi Department of Education Early Childhood Office (2) (see Appendix B Table 1 for



~15 MIN

### Arrival and Community Meeting

Students move freely through easy-to-clean-up arrival centers while the teacher gathers stories from children for Story Acting. The class then moves into community meeting.



10 MIN

### Introduce New Centers

The teacher chooses 1 or 2 new centers to introduce today.



60 MIN

### Free Choice Centers

Students freely choose which centers they would like to work in today. All centers tie back to the read alouds for the week and extend learning. Centers include: Creative Arts, Library and Listening, Puzzles, Creative Writing, Blocks, Dramatic Play, Math, Science



10 MIN

### Thinking and Feedback

1-2 students share something from their thematic work in the classroom or during centers. Their classmates offer suggestions on what to do next, following a protocol (i.e., looking, noticing, listening, wondering, suggesting, and inspiring).



15 MIN

### Read Aloud

Read 4: The teacher chooses 3 scenes from the book she has read to the class three times before and children act out scenes in small groups focusing on character motivations and emotions.



20 MIN

### Literacy Small Groups

Students work in small groups with teacher support. Tasks include writing letters to new Pre-K students, story sequencing, and browsing books.



20 MIN

### Building Blocks Math Small Groups

Students work in small groups with teacher support. Small groups are focused on building and recognizing different shapes.



15 MIN

### SWPL (Songs, Word Play, and Letters)

The teacher leads students in whole group activities to address foundational literacy skills through songs, word play, and letter activities.



10 MIN

### Building Blocks Math Whole Group

The teacher leads students in whole group activities to build numeracy skills through a hidden pizza topping activity in which students practice adding by listening and counting.



10 MIN

### Let's Find Out About It

As a whole group, students explore concepts and build background knowledge related to the unit (Things That Grow) through investigation of non-fiction texts and resources.



10 MIN

### Story Acting

Students act out the child stories gathered by the teacher at the beginning of the day.



additional details on interviewees). To gather brief background information, interviewed participants completed a short online survey prior to the interview. Survey questions captured education experience, teaching experience, age, race/ethnicity, languages spoken, and ranking of the most helpful and unhelpful supports when implementing a new curriculum (see Appendix B Table 2 for demographics of survey respondents). Interviews took place in person and online from April-August 2025 and were informed by an initial visit to observe 11 Pre-K classrooms in 4 elementary schools and 1 CBO (a Head Start program) across 3 districts. Observation and interviews occurred in the same sample of districts and schools. We analyzed interview data using a thematic coding approach, with interrater reliability checks to ensure consistency and validity.

We drew a purposeful sample of schools and districts in collaboration with the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE), with attention to funding type, setting, student demographics, and urbanicity. Ultimately, our sample consisted primarily of districts and schools in the northeastern part of the state; one district was located in a midsized city and the other two were in rural areas. In terms of Pre-K funding, District A is part of an Early Learning Collaborative while

Districts B and C receive SIP funding for only some of their Pre-K classrooms (See Appendix B, Tables 3 for additional details on districts and schools in our sample). Our sampling approach allows for a deeper understanding of the process of rollout and implementation across different contexts, including those with distinct state funding mechanisms and levels of support. However, it does not allow for generalizable claims across all schools and classrooms in the state. More methodological details are included in Appendix A.

## Lessons Learned

Below we highlight the key lessons learned based on our interviews across participants. Lessons are presented in the general chronological order in which they occurred. We begin with the broad policy window in which curriculum reform was introduced, detail state rollout efforts, describe district-level implementation and insights from on-the-ground classroom experiences, and conclude with a glimpse into sustaining change and Mississippi's current growth areas.

### **Leverage windows of opportunity.**

Policy windows facilitate change.<sup>19</sup> In Mississippi, a policy window opened in 2019. MDE learned that the publishing company Pearson was phasing out the *Opening the World of Learning* (OWL) curriculum, which had been the only curriculum that met all the requirements of the state's Early Learning Collaboratives Act. OWL had a scope and sequence and covered all developmental domains, though it was particularly strong in language and literacy. OWL going out of print opened a window of opportunity for change, which MDE leveraged.

## Curriculum policies matter.

Nationally, about half of state-funded Pre-K programs have recommended or required curriculum lists, usually with several different choices.<sup>20</sup> However, states generally require that curriculum to be *research-aligned* or *research-based*, not *evidence-based*. In contrast, in Mississippi, state law required that all state funding should support evidence-based practices. Accordingly, using the research out of Boston’s Early Childhood Research Practice Partnership and a review of the curriculum by Head Start’s National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning, Mississippi leaders determined that Boston’s *Focus* curriculum met the state requirements, while few other curricula did so.

In addition, MDE made implementation of the curriculum and participation in state-led evaluations a condition of receiving SIP or ELC funding. Specifically, ELCs created prior to 2022-2023 currently can choose to implement the new curriculum or use the previously approved OWL curriculum, while all SIP-funded classrooms and ELCs created after 2022 are required to implement *Mississippi Beginnings*. MDE worked with the Mississippi Legislature to communicate a clear timeline and expectations for the curricular transition of all state-funded programs. Using the recommendations of the Joint Legislative Committee on Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review (PEER), MDE required that as of the 2027-28 school year, all state-funded Pre-K programs would fully switch over to *Mississippi Beginnings*, regardless of when they received funding or through what funding stream. An MDE leader emphasized the importance of policy in facilitating the curriculum

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— State-level leader in Mississippi

changes in Mississippi Pre-K: *“Policy supports it all ... policy is the backbone of it and if you can get it in policy, then you can make it happen.”*

## Allow time for learning and curriculum adaptations.

Shifting curriculum required MDE staff to learn the *Focus* curriculum and allow time for adapting it to the Mississippi context. To learn the curriculum, MDE staff began virtual professional learning sessions with the Boston Public Schools Department of Early Childhood in the summer prior to and throughout the first school year of implementing *Mississippi Beginnings*. They met with the Boston curriculum team once in August of 2021 to discuss potential professional development opportunities for teachers, child outcome data from Boston that would help promote buy-in for the curriculum, and worked through creating Mississippi specific resources. They also attended a virtual back-to-school professional development and a Google Classroom training.

For adaptations, MDE leaders identified a clear need to adapt and rebrand Boston’s *Focus*

curriculum for their state context and align it with state standards. Notably, the recent National Academies preschool curriculum report highlighted that an important curriculum feature is local and cultural relevance.<sup>21</sup> Essentially, young children tend to be more engaged if they can see themselves and their world reflected in their classroom experiences.

In Mississippi, the goal was to change resources, pictures, and other Boston-based references to ensure relevance, without changing the curriculum's key features or overall content. Materials from Maine, another state that had already begun adapting *Focus* for early grades to support this adaptation, also informed Mississippi's adaptation. MDE invited practicing Pre-K teachers across Mississippi to collaborate on collecting relevant resources, attending to the diversity within the state, to make the curriculum culturally relevant to diverse school and classroom contexts. They began working with a graphic artist to modify the look of the curriculum and they re-named it *Mississippi Beginnings* to promote buy-in and ownership of the curriculum for their districts.

## Be intentional about pacing.

A critical early decision—and one without much guidance from empirical research—was how fast to rollout *Mississippi Beginnings*. Mississippi opted for a gradual approach, while also consistently messaging that the state was going to require this full curriculum shift for all programs funded through SIP or ELC grants by 2027-2028. MDE emphasized that a district's initial year of implementation was a pilot year, meant for teacher learning and practice.

The slow transition has paid off, in MDE's view, allowing schools to approach the *Mississippi*

*Beginnings* curriculum at their own pace. It has given MDE time to build their internal capacity, allowing them to better support teachers, introduce fidelity tools, offer more specialized trainings, orient educators to curricular materials, and promote buy-in. Further, a slower pace allowed MDE to build trust with schools, for some of whom a relationship with MDE was new. MDE staff recognized, “*Nobody likes MDE coming into their building. They all think that you're in trouble for something.*”

Approaching the implementation incrementally has also allowed teachers to gain familiarity with the curriculum in a lower-stakes environment, feel autonomous over the choices they are making about when and how to implement particular pieces, continue learning as they implement, and to see for themselves how the curriculum is working.



# A glimpse inside a *Mississippi Beginnings* classroom in the Things That Grow unit

17 pairs of eyes closely track their teacher, Ms. Chase, as she leads a story walk on a book she has read aloud before, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. She reminds them that the story is tied to their unit on the life cycle and then she walks them through the plot, drawing their attention to vocabulary words that are integrated into activities throughout the day. She asks them “And then what happened?” Students respond using vocabulary words she has listed on the board: cocoon, chrysalis, leaf, caterpillar, and butterfly.

The story walk isn’t the main event, however. Ms. Chase next introduces them to materials that she has for them to act out the story. Hands wave eagerly and others call out, “I want to be the caterpillar!” and “Can I be the cocoon?” The teacher reminds them, “We all have a special part to play. You may not get to [act]... but the audience helps the story too.”

Ms. Chase flips through the pages again as the actors take center stage on the rug. The chrysalis/cocoon proudly clutches his tan blanket, the caterpillar pulls a green sock up one arm, the egg hugs a round pillow, and the butterfly straps on her wings. As the class names and counts what the caterpillar ate, Ms. Chase pulls out magnets to represent the numbers of apples, plums, oranges, etc. She reminds them, “Remember that big word we talked about that tells us about the lifecycle of a frog? Metamorphosis!” The story concludes with all 17 children flapping their wings like butterflies and then full-class applause.

Next, Ms. Chase instructs children to choose a center, in which they explore concepts related to the unit focus—i.e., centers with a farmers market complete with flowers and vegetables for sale; butterfly, frog and ant lifecycle puzzles; books about a frog’s lifecycle and how sunflowers grow; and frog lifecycle figures for putting in chronological order (eggs, tadpole, froglet, frog, adult frog). The children engage happily, while the teacher works with a small group on practicing letter sounds.

## Be flexible to promote buy-in and local autonomy.

Research shows that buy-in to education interventions and curriculum change is critical to successful implementation.<sup>22</sup> Though SIP and most ELC sites were required to implement *Mississippi Beginnings*, the state also promoted choice and autonomy in several ways that helped to promote buy-in. The SIP and ELC grants, for instance, provided flexibility in curriculum supports, allowing districts to make decisions about some expenditures depending on their needs (i.e., whether to use funds to hire staff, including coaches, program coordinators, or additional or more qualified teachers; purchase educational materials or equipment; extend educational services; or defray costs associated with professional development or assessments).<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, MDE emphasized approaching the curriculum in smaller pieces with a focus on teacher choice—i.e., trying out the component(s) a teacher felt most comfortable with—and building from there. An MDE leader explained, *“So we would kind of give them ideas and choice, narrow their choices down so that they could pick a component. But we never really went in and said, you have to do it this way and you have to do it that way. Each coach, we try to meet the teacher where they’re at.”* This was an intentional decision for building buy-in and reducing teacher feelings of overwhelm in learning a new, full-day curriculum.

All three districts we interviewed shared positive reactions to the state’s flexible rollout, with the process varying across them. One district (District A) with a strong local coach but no curriculum prior to *Mississippi Beginnings* adopted more of an “all-in” approach to the



curriculum, with all Pre-K classrooms attempting full implementation in their pilot year. In contrast, a neighboring district (District B) opted for a “try one piece at a time” approach, in which teachers selected the part of the curriculum they felt comfortable implementing first. Specifically, multiple teachers in that district reported first implementing components that felt most aligned with what they had previously done, such as read alouds or centers. A third district (District C) relied on initial SIP-funded teachers to lead the way for the other Pre-K teachers at the school to fully implement in the following school year.

There were also positive unintended consequences of the flexible and autonomous rollout. Some districts and school leaders opted to implement the curriculum in classrooms supported by other funding streams (an estimated 10 classrooms total in the state so far). District leaders explained having the same curriculum in all their preschool classrooms helped parents across settings have aligned expectations, as well as streamlined district supports and practices. As one teacher put it: *“We just, as a county, want everybody to use the same thing that where we’re all on the same page and one’s not doing one thing and one is not doing the other because...that way you don’t have to deal with, you know, parents be[ing]*

like, ‘well, I want this class instead of this class.’ I mean, we’re doing the same things. So we all kind of learned together.” This broader impact may be likely in other localities as well, given the common blending and braiding of early education funding streams nationally.<sup>24</sup>

It is important to note that although flexibility and autonomy were key, there were curriculum fidelity expectations (and as we discuss later, a fidelity tool). A district coach explained that they collaborate with the MDE coach to, “help the teacher create their schedule at the beginning of the year so that it looks like we want it to look like, but we give them a lot of input... And then as the year goes on. And they say, you know, I wanna flip this or I wanna add this or, then all we ask is that we’re involved in that so that our schedules are always matching MDE’s requirements and then we’re always aware of any changes. And we don’t do that in a dogmatic way, but they just know upfront that that is something that we could take seriously because to me, one of the best things that we do is time on task and follow schedules.” This dual theme of flexibility and respect for autonomy, paired with accountability, was consistent between teachers, coaches, administrators, and MDE staff.

## Identify and lift up teacher champions.

Research shows that teachers value peer-to-peer learning and tend to have high levels of trust in other teachers.<sup>25</sup> In Mississippi, as another way to promote buy-in, the state has elevated teacher champions of *Mississippi Beginnings*. One state-level leader explained, “We can try to be the messenger and but you know, we’re the administration, and so, you know having

the teachers sell the message is much more effective than us trying to do it.” Teachers in exemplary classrooms, often identified by state-level coaches, have been chosen to present to other educators or have their classrooms featured online as models for other teachers’ learning. Further, MDE has made an exclusive batch of lapel pins and certificates to recognize champions who promote the curriculum. The goal is to reinforce teachers as the messenger.

## Supports are critical.

Curricula do not implement themselves; research shows that implementation and instructional quality is higher when teachers have strong supports, such as curriculum-specific training and coaching.<sup>26</sup> To support *Mississippi Beginnings* implementation, the state offered support through in-person and online curriculum training for teachers, district and state-level coaches, and administrators. Specifically, in January prior to the first school year of implementation, MDE offered training first for state-level coaches and then individualized training to district and school administrators and coaches. The teachers received their first introduction to the curriculum, focused on the first three units, in May prior to beginning



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— State-level leader in Mississippi

implementation in September. The state also set up ongoing training opportunities for teachers and assistant teachers, including one-hour curriculum Q&A sessions; a separate but similar Q&A was offered for administrators and curriculum leads. The final training opportunity prior to initial implementation was offered at a summer conference, with multiple one-hour sessions about the new curriculum. As new units were developed, the state continued the model of providing training, two units at a time, first to state-level coaches and then to teachers and district/school level leads. Coaches were then tasked with supporting implementation in classrooms after receiving training on

the curriculum. MDE also hosts a coaching consortium to train district coaches in the same way that MDE coaches are trained, which fosters alignment in implementation expectations and supports. Lastly, MDE holds trainings for teachers and administrators on-site or online that are tailored to a site’s specific needs.

In addition to trainings, MDE provided schools with coaches to support curriculum implementation. Coaching support is offered in-person, online, through email, and in group settings, with each classroom having at least one monthly touchpoint with their MDE coach. Family engagement coaches also provide support primarily to school-level administrators, family engagement coordinators and teachers, or work directly with families. One state-level leader sees coaching as *“the special sauce... the piece that I feel like makes the change. You know, we can do trainings every day all day long. And if they come, they may get 10% of what we say. But when the coach comes in the classroom and models for the teacher about how that ought to look and how implementation ought to look, that means something very different. So, I just think that the more coaches that we can have, the better all of our teachers are going to be, because that’s where we’re going to make the difference.”*

All three districts we interviewed relied on district-level coaches to support *Mississippi Beginnings* implementation. State-level coaches supported multiple districts, but they did not always have the capacity to meet with individual teachers consistently. Teachers and administrators reported relying heavily on district coaches who knew the curriculum well and who visited classrooms as frequently as once per week. Pointing to a particularly

impactful approach, teachers in District A (but not the other two districts) reported aligned, coordinated in-classroom coaching from their state and district coaches, as well as the district early childhood director.

When asked how helpful coaching and professional development were to implementation in a short survey, all responding teachers (n=7) found the professional development either somewhat helpful or very helpful. Half of responding teachers rated coaching as somewhat or very helpful, potentially highlighting district-level differences in coaching implementation. Only one teacher ranked coaching as not helpful at all. Notably, teachers also rated their administrators and their own personal interest/background as somewhat helpful or very helpful.

## Support teacher collaboration and peer observation.

When implementing new reforms, teachers learn from one another by working together to interpret expectations, share expertise, and drive a collective effort toward instructional improvement.<sup>27</sup> In Mississippi, opportunities to collaborate with colleagues consistently arose as a facilitator of implementation. 90% of the teachers we interviewed placed high value on opportunities for co-planning, sharing resources, and observing colleagues' classrooms. One teacher recommended that teachers not *"be afraid. Just try it and if you don't understand it, you know, go find a teacher who's teaching it, take a few minutes out of our day, go to their room, watch them do it."* Opportunities for collaboration supported teachers initially as they worked to understand the curriculum's structure and organization, and also helped

them problem solve and share resources and practices throughout the year. One district (District A) organized shortened school days throughout the year and used these for teacher collaboration. A teacher reflects that, *"we came up with so many more ideas because we're working together. Because everybody... takes different approaches."* Another teacher describes the value of cross-school collaboration, *"I think that just meeting with the other teachers and seeing what they're seeing, and talking about what's working for them and what's working for me and what's not working. I think just bouncing off ideas of other people that are doing the exact same thing that you're doing is the most beneficial thing that we can do."* These examples illustrate the importance of collaboration amongst teachers both during the initial stages of implementation and also over time.

## Train and support administrators.

Research has shown that many administrators lack background in early childhood development and early education, and that training administrators is a promising component for promoting strong curriculum implementation.<sup>28</sup> This theme was clear in Mississippi as well. An MDE staff person reported practices in some Pre-K classrooms like teachers *"drilling the*



children on sight words and having tests.” MDE staff attributed these mismatched practices in part to administrators without an early childhood education background. As one district coach expressed, “Now we have great administrators, but if you don’t come from that [early childhood] background, and you go in and you tell an administrator who came from high school that I’m about to have 20 four-year-olds who are choosing a center and stay there as long as they want, and then they’re going to clean up and choose something else. I mean, they go, what?” Some administrators said they did not know enough about the *Mississippi Beginnings* curriculum to support teachers, though they expressed strong confidence in their coaches. As one explained, “I want to give them [teachers] support, but I don’t know if I’m at the place where I know how to give them... the support they need.” Recognizing the key role administrators play, MDE has recommended that administrators attend curriculum trainings to learn what to expect to see in classrooms and how to support teachers. Since 2024, 73 administrators have attended state-sponsored curriculum training for *Mississippi Beginnings*.

## Expect change to be hard.

Adult developmental theory suggests that behavioral change is possible across the life course, but changes in teacher practices can be challenging, especially for veteran teachers.<sup>29</sup> As a district administrator put it, “Nobody loves change... I’ve had to have tough conversations about what’s best for kids here.” Accordingly, nearly all teachers we interviewed (9 out of 10) expressed tension and doubt associated with their implementation of *Mississippi Beginnings*. This included feeling overwhelmed and having difficulty fitting all components in, especially

in their first year of implementation. One teacher shared, “It’s too much. It’s so much stuff. ...so then you feel defeated.” Some teachers also found particular curriculum components harder to implement than others (i.e., certain subjects like math, particular units or resources, or curriculum routines).

Teacher implementation experiences varied according to their previous practices, consistent with prior research.<sup>30</sup> For example, teachers with previous experience with centers tended to find that component more enjoyable. Those for whom centers were new found it more challenging to implement, especially supporting students in transitions between different centers or accepting that students are not expected to visit centers they are not interested in. One teacher explained, “I’ve had to personally get over the fact that there are kids who don’t go to certain places.” Coaches reported supporting teachers in incorporating writing opportunities into all centers to help manage this challenge, as teachers worried especially about children missing out on writing opportunities by not visiting centers with more explicit writing activities.

In addition, some leaders and teachers were reluctant to let go of previous curricula. As an MDE leader explained, “In some spots we have found that they’re trying to implement two [curricula] ... And we’re like, that’s not going to work.” MDE staff believe this form of district and teacher resistance to change stemmed from mistrust in the curriculum and district messages that contradicted those of MDE. Ultimately, this led to add-ons that dilute the curriculum, contradict its overall aims, and compete for teachers’ instructional time

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— Pre-K teacher in Mississippi

and attention. In one case, MDE found that a district was using seven add-on curriculum components. MDE has attempted to work with districts using add-ons, as an MDE leader explained: *“We’re trying to help them understand that if you just work with us with our curriculum, and let that be your foundation and tier one instruction, then the teachers would not be so stressed and unsure what to do.”*

Mississippi has used a multi-pronged approach to address resistance. For example, their new fidelity tool (more below) awards 25 (out of 100 possible) points for using only the *Mississippi Beginnings* curriculum and no add-ons. MDE’s

strategy also has been to encourage teachers and district leaders to talk with the MDE curriculum team, or to organize training sessions that incorporate the curriculum in action. They also encourage communication across districts. MDE has, for example, offered other schools where teachers and administrators can observe classrooms implementing the curriculum and peer-to-peer learning opportunities. Teachers’ responses are essential to creating buy-in amongst other teachers and district leaders. *“You know, we can talk until we’re blue in the face, but we don’t have a classroom where we’re running [the curriculum]. But they do. So, we really try to use community efforts, you know and use people within that community to be able to share that message. That’s much more effective.”*

## **Expect different definitions of “developmentally appropriate.”**

The broader early education field historically has had different conceptions and definitions of what is developmentally appropriate instruction for preschoolers.<sup>31</sup> Not surprisingly, this theme and debates emerged as a tension in Mississippi as well. *Mississippi Beginnings* is designed to be a play-based, intentional curriculum with a scope and sequence in key developmental domains. Ultimately, nearly all interviewed teachers and leaders described it as highly developmentally appropriate and a good fit for the diverse learning needs of young children. Some veteran teachers described it as a return to how they used to teach, a more play-based approach that they felt was better for children. As one teacher expressed, *“I was a little nervous at first, but I was also excited because reading about the curriculum... it was so developmentally appropriate, and I loved it. It was what I was doing when... I first started*

teaching Pre-K, if that makes sense. And I feel like we had started to push our kids too much, and adding things that were not developmentally appropriate with some of the other curricula. And we're pulling back and going back to the developmentally appropriate where it's based off the Read Alouds, like your Centers are based off their Read Alouds in it. Everything connects just seamlessly and I love that about that."

But some district leaders and teachers had initial doubts about whether the curriculum would adequately prepare children academically for kindergarten, especially those with elementary school backgrounds who were more comfortable with instruction that relied more on rote learning and worksheets. As one teacher put it, "When I was first introduced to it, I was like, there's no way this is gonna work. There's no way. How are they going to learn if they are in charge of everything they're doing? I was like, they're gonna play all day? We can't make them sit in seats and give them things to do? It really blew my mind." One district coach also described, "We're all geared toward a test score at the end

of third grade. I mean, everything, and they feel like the more we can push paper and pencil and rote instruction in front of these kids, the faster they're going to learn it. And that is just not the truth... So it took us a minute to grasp that developmentally appropriate mindset." It was especially a mindset change to see learning as a process, recognizing that, as one district administrator put it, "there doesn't necessarily have to be a product at the end of the day."

These experiences in Mississippi point to both the importance of anticipating this potential barrier and proactively responding to it, especially given that definitions and assessments of kindergarten readiness vary across school districts and states.<sup>32</sup> To address concerns and help shift mindsets, MDE staff used artifacts from earlier units to assure teachers that children had been writing, especially in centers, but the practice looked different from writing on lined paper. An MDE coach also discussed how she specifically showed teachers how literacy was built into the curriculum throughout the day. And a district coach explained that in interviewing new prospective teachers, the district now emphasizes the importance of a developmentally appropriate approach to instruction. "We just want them to know up front, this is what we're working towards."

## **Plan for common challenges.**

MDE staff, administrators, and teachers across the three districts referenced a set of challenges that also emerged in research on the implementation of the *Focus* curriculum in Boston Pre-K settings.<sup>33</sup> These included difficulties with logistics, fitting in all the components of the curriculum within the school day, classroom setup, and managing free choice



centers. Many of these challenges can be addressed a priori via training and coaching.

For logistics, there were challenges with the distribution of an open-source curriculum. For example, MDE struggled to contract a printer to ensure timely printing of new curricular materials. Instead, MDE had to direct teachers to online unit outlines and resources, which was a source of frustration for both MDE and for teachers. An MDE staff person reflected, “*We were disappointed, because we wanted to have papers and materials in teachers’ hands... We were very frustrated that we could not give what the teachers needed at the time.*” Teachers that started implementing using the online version of the curriculum found it difficult to navigate which led to increased frustration and confusion. One teacher reflected after they received hard copies: “*We could do it online, we could find some stuff online but we did not have the books where it explained it a little bit better. So that was helpful. Once I got those books in to start looking through there and saying, that makes sense now... I could read through, I can flip, I could see pictures that they put in there with it to explain the activity, whereas online it’s just written out. There’s no pictures or anything like that.*”

## Stay the course.

Despite concerns and worries from teachers in the first year, ultimately, most school leaders and teachers expressed enthusiasm for *Mississippi Beginnings* and the curriculum change as they gained familiarity and more practice. In addition to implementation supports and more experience with the curriculum, the consistent messaging from MDE that *Mississippi Beginnings* was here to stay seems to have made a difference in gaining buy-in. Research has long



highlighted that when curricula and education policies change frequently, teachers can quickly grow “reform weary” and adopt a stance of waiting out the most recent policy shift.<sup>34</sup>

An MDE leader explained their approach: “*We listened and assured people that the curriculum was going to be there, and it was not going to go anywhere. We weren’t going to change our minds. This is what we’re doing.*” One teacher noted the importance of this messaging, explaining that her district had undergone three curriculum shifts in eight years and thus she approached *Mississippi Beginnings* with skepticism about whether the curriculum would stick. She reflected, “*Do I really want to dig deep into this third one? Are we really going to keep this? Are we? Really? Is this one? Is this where I want to spend my time?*”

Recognizing that implementation is a messy process, one that is difficult for adults, and also sticking with it, was critical to the *Mississippi Beginnings* implementation. At the same time, MDE has had to accept that not all districts are willing to change or commit fully to the *Mississippi Beginnings* curriculum. As an MDE leader explained regarding some sites’ fidelity to the curriculum: “*We have to let it go... And*

*it's hard, I don't like that. That's very hard because we feel like we know we're trying to help them, and help them do better, and they don't, they choose not to do. So we have to let them."* Staying the course as Mississippi has, with a clear timeline and signals that a change is here to stay, has helped to address this common challenge in education reforms.

## **The work is never done.**

Implementing a new curriculum statewide also requires systems changes, some of which are likely to be multi-year endeavors. For example, MDE is still building its coaching capacity, requesting additional funds from the Legislature each year. They currently have about 1 coach for every 28 classrooms, and the goal is to reach a ratio of 1 coach for every 15 classrooms. The state is continuing to build their curriculum fidelity monitoring system and hone their internal evaluation/quality monitoring approach across the different tools they require.<sup>35</sup> For fidelity, MDE leaders are working to balance accountability and access, via a new progress monitoring tool that includes an improvement plan for those who are not yet in compliance with state requirements. As an MDE leader described, *"For many years, we have not been able to hold them to the monitoring component. We've put them on probation and then we've lost a classroom in one of our communities. And I was like, this isn't working to lose classrooms, to lose access where then they have to bus kids 30 minutes away to go to a different classroom."* With the new tool, for sites that fail to improve, leadership and/or teacher changes are required.

Coaches also noted spending significant energy assuaging teacher concerns that the Pre-K curriculum, although developmentally

appropriate, was not aligned with later grades. This concern around misalignment comes from both the Pre-K teachers feeling that their students might not be ready for what is to come in kindergarten, but also from teachers' perceptions of how kindergarten teachers view what and how they are teaching Pre-K. One teacher states that when she sees her next door neighbor's classroom and *"what they're teaching their kindergarten kids, which my kids are only a year behind, then it feels like it falls short in some ways... I feel like [the curriculum's] developmentally where it should be. It's just more of this, I think it's society pushing kids too far. It's not the curriculum that's wrong, more of if this is the correct thing for four-year-olds, which it is, then we're not doing the correct things for five-year olds."* Curriculum alignment from Pre-K through the early elementary grades is an important growth area for most states and districts and one with research support.<sup>36</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Large-scale change of teaching and learning is a complex, multi-system endeavor. Mississippi's implementation experience provides important considerations and lessons for other localities considering or planning a curriculum change in their early programs. Future briefs in this series will similarly explore other localities' experiences with a focus on identifying themes that can help inform other contexts.

# Appendix A: Methods

The focal case represented in this brief is part of a larger study. This Appendix contextualizes the study design, rationale, methods for data collection, and approaches to analysis for the Mississippi case.

## Research design

This study was designed to illustrate the process of adapting and implementing high-quality, open-access curricula in the early grades. An in-depth study of a single state context allows for understanding of how educational actors initiated, communicated, and implemented state-wide reform, as well as how actors responded to those reforms. We designed the study to explore these central research questions:

1. How did state actors approach large-scale curricular reform?
2. What are the conditions in which districts, schools, and early childhood programs are implementing the curriculum?
3. How have educational actors at all scales responded to this shift?

These questions enable exploration of the strategies as intended, enacted, and experienced across various actors in a system, highlighting factors that facilitate and hinder implementation.

## Data collection and sampling

**Sampling.** We purposefully sampled 4 elementary schools and 1 CBO (a Head Start program) across 3 districts, to facilitate a deeper understanding of the process of rollout and implementation across various contexts, including those with distinct state funding mechanisms, levels of support, and expectations for fidelity. Our sampled districts were all recommended by the state agency leaders who were our first point of contact in

the state. In sampling, we requested classrooms and schools that were implementing the curriculum and ideally those who had varied experiences doing so (e.g. we did not request only exemplar classrooms). We also requested sites be reasonably close together (i.e., within about a two hours drive) to facilitate efficient data collection. The state leaders identified locations and supported our connection with the lead in each district to coordinate the visit. All three counties were in their second year of implementation during data collection, allowing for a comparison across school actors at a similar stage of implementation.

In total, there were 27 participants in our study in Mississippi. This sample included 2 state administrators, 2 state coaches, 3 district coaches, 1 district administrator, 6 school administrators, 1 school counselor, and 12 Pre-K teachers. Of the 27 individuals, 21 were interviewed (described in detail below) and of the 21 interviewed, 16 completed a short demographics survey. Those who were not interviewed nor completed a survey included teachers with only an observation and administrators we had informal conversations with, rather than full interviews, largely due to time constraints during the site visits. The 21 interviews make up the majority of data for this case.

**Consent and incentives.** All study activities were covered by University of Michigan IRB, under an approved exemption. All participants

were provided with a one-page description of the project and their role in it. Prior to beginning interviews, we followed an oral consent script and recorded verbal consent for the interview and for recording. All participants were made aware that the interview itself, and all questions during the interview, were voluntary and any publications would not identify them beyond the state in which they work. All observed teachers gave oral consent for researcher presence in their classrooms during observations. All interviewed participants were offered a \$50 gift card upon completion of the interview.

**Survey.** To gather brief background information, we requested interviewed participants to complete a short online survey prior to the interview. Five interviewed participants did not complete the survey despite repeated follow-up after the interview. Survey questions included education experience, teaching experience, age, race/ethnicity, languages spoken, and ranking of the most helpful and unhelpful supports when implementing a new curriculum.

**Observations.** To understand the approach, conditions, and responses of educational actors in Mississippi, we began with school visits and classroom observations in April-May 2025 in the midst of the scale-up of *Mississippi Beginnings* across Pre-K classrooms in Mississippi. In total, we observed 11 Pre-K classrooms across 4 schools and 1 CBO (a Head Start program) in 3 districts, including one Head Start classroom. Observations were focused on documenting classroom practices, building relationships with various stakeholders, and better understanding the contexts in which the curriculum was implemented. We observed one to three curricular elements per classroom. Efforts were

made to observe all elements of the curriculum across various classrooms, to understand the full scope of classroom activities. These initial observations also enabled more informed data collection in subsequent stages of the study.

**Interviews.** During and following school visits, we conducted 21 interviews with state and local practitioners, including Pre-K teachers (n=10), state and district coaches (n=4), counselors (n=1), and administrators (n=4), as well as Mississippi Department of Education Early Childhood Office staff members (n=2). Interviews took place in person and online from April-August 2025. Questions centered on the context, rationale, and approaches to implementation at each level, accounting for state, district, school, and classroom decisions, as well as the experiences and attitudes of educators implementing the *Mississippi Beginnings* curriculum. Interview and observational data sought to understand barriers and facilitators of implementation for all actors.

## Data analysis

Following data collection, interviews were transcribed verbatim and input into Dedoose, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, to systematically develop and apply a coding scheme. A codebook was created after reading across all data and generating initial thematic codes. We refined it over the course of iterative analysis and team discussion. Our process began with “collaborative coding,” in which we sought consensus on our coding approach. As we iterated and refined the coding scheme, codes became more focused, and we organized them into thematic and organizational categories, mapping onto the implementation process across levels (e.g., state, district/program, and school decisions) and

chronologically (i.e., prior to implementation/ initiating curriculum change, rollout, and responses). We further distinguished between affective and attitudinal responses from stakeholders, in order to capture emotions such as enthusiasm and overwhelm, alongside positive and negative responses or mindsets regarding the curriculum change. The codebook also included attention to mindset shifts and practices evolving over time through implementation enactment, experiences with professional learning and support, tensions and doubts, and recommendations so that we would be positioned to share “lessons learned” in participants’ own words, prioritizing their local meaning in context.

Throughout the coding process, the team completed two inter-coder reliability (ICR) checks to ensure consistency and internal validity ( $\kappa > .6$ ). If the kappa threshold was not met, the coder discussed disagreements with the master coder. ICR checks guided team discussion, identifying areas of divergence that required additional clarity and definition in the codebook. As such, the codebook continued to evolve over the course of analysis and team discussion. Throughout the coding process, team members memoed on emergent analytic themes and to build connections across data.

We created interview profiles for all stakeholders in order to ensure attention to key themes that fell outside the codebook, and to facilitate comparisons across actors, schools, and districts with attention to context. In order to contextualize the historical trajectory of *Mississippi Beginnings*, we analyzed key state documents such as communication from the Mississippi Department of Education,

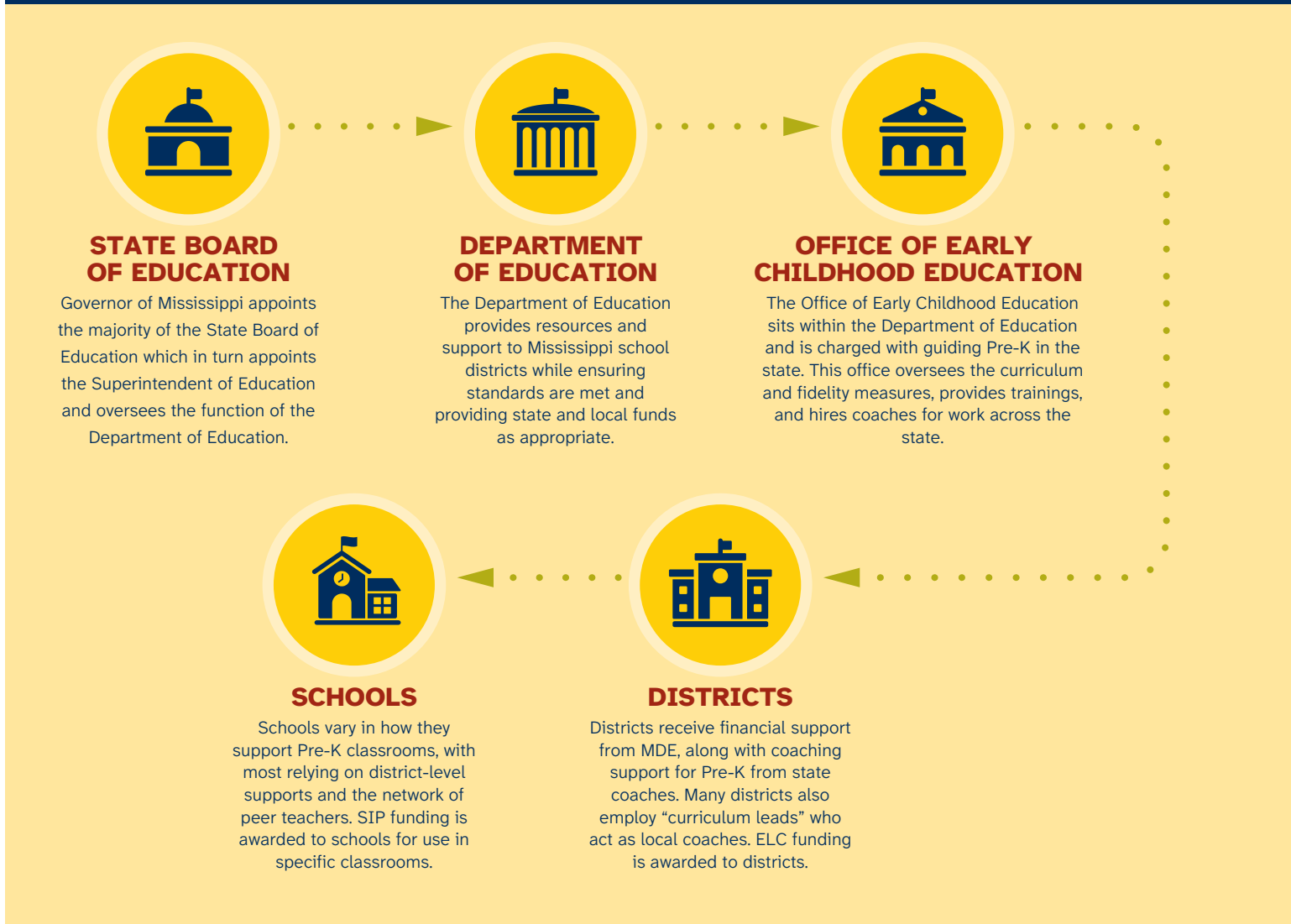
Senate bills, and evaluation reports conducted by both the state legislature and outside agencies. For Mississippi Department of Education Early Childhood Office staff members, we conducted member-checks to ensure accurate representation of state processes, timelines, and discourses.

## Limitations

Observations and interviews with local stakeholders are limited to 4 schools and 1 CBO (a Head Start program) in 3 districts in the state. This sampling approach enables exploration of implementation across various contexts and conditions. However, it does not allow for generalizable claims across all schools and classrooms in the state, nor can we draw systematic conclusions about how particular conditions, such as diverse state funding mechanisms, compare to one another. The study began several years into the implementation of *Mississippi Beginnings*. One advantage of this timeline is that the state, schools, and districts are more familiar with the curriculum, have had opportunities to implement, and are well-positioned to reflect on their experiences, while projecting into the future. However, we do not have access to the decisions and strategies made during initial preparation and rollout, particularly at the state level. Instead, we rely on retrospective data from the perspective of key stakeholders involved in these decisions.

# Appendix B: Additional tables and figures

Figure 1: Overview of Mississippi governance structure and resources in Pre-K



**Table 1: Summary of Interviewed Participants**

MISSISSIPPI	DISTRICT	SCHOOL	ROLE	N
	N/A	N/A	MDE State Administrator	2
			MDE State Coach	2
	District A	N/A	District Administrator	1
			District Coach	1
		School 1	Pre-K Teacher	1
		School 2	Pre-K Teacher	2
	District B	School 3	School Administrator	1
			Counselor	1
			Pre-K Teacher	3
	District C	N/A	District Coach	1
		School 4	School Administrator	1
			Pre-K Teacher	2
		School 5	School Administrator	1
	Pre-K Teacher		2	
<b>TOTAL</b>				<b>21</b>

**Table 2: Demographics of survey respondents**

		TEACHERS (N=8)	COACHES (N=4)	ADMINISTRATORS (N=4)
Highest degree	Bachelors	4	2	0
	Masters	3	1	1
	Other - specialist	1	1	3
Race/Ethnicity	White	8	3	4
	Black or African American	0	1	0
	Hispanic	0	0	0
Gender	Female	8	4	4
	Male	0	0	0
Years in current role	Mean	10.0	6.7	4.0
	Range	1-28	3-10	2-7

Note: 5 interviewed participants did not respond to the survey. All survey respondents were interviewed.

**Table 3: School Demographics in 2023-24**

	AVERAGE PUBLIC SCHOOL IN MS GRADES PREK-6 <sup>37</sup>	SCHOOL 1	SCHOOL 2	SCHOOL 3	SCHOOL 4
District	N/A	District A	District B	District C	District C
Funding structure	Varies	ELC	SIP	SIP	SIP
Grade levels offered	Varies	Pre-K - 5	Pre-K	Pre-K - 12	Pre-K - 12
Free or reduced priced lunch*	75%	50%	60%	40%	70%

Note: \*Average school Free-reduced lunch data created using the state-wide average from the 2019-2020 school year (see: [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23\\_204.10.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d23/tables/dt23_204.10.asp)). Free or Reduced Lunch data at the school level were obtained from this report: [https://www.mdek12.org/sites/default/files/documents/OCN/2023/SFSP/free\\_reduced\\_msis\\_23-24.pdf](https://www.mdek12.org/sites/default/files/documents/OCN/2023/SFSP/free_reduced_msis_23-24.pdf). ELC=Early Learning Collaborative; SIP=State Invested Pre-K. Free-reduced lunch percentages were rounded to the nearest 10% to protect anonymity. Across focal schools, race/ethnicity varied from 0-5% Hispanic or Latino, 33-85% White, 5-50% Black, and 1% or less for Asian, Native American, and two or more races (and with rounding to the nearest 5 to protect anonymity). District enrollment ranged from 3,000-6,000 students in our sample (rounded to the nearest thousand to protect anonymity). Data (except free or reduced priced lunch) obtained from Mississippi Department of Education Data Explorer (<https://newreports.mdek12.org/DataExplorer>). Note that we visited a CBO in District A, but these data were not available for that site. Note that School 2 enrolled Pre-K students only.

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