

STARTING WITHIN

How Mississippi is Setting a Vision and Plan for Inclusive Leadership

When the Mississippi Department of Education joined CCSSO’s Advancing Inclusive Principal Leadership (AIPL) State Initiative in 2018, the agency was already making progress in its work to promote inclusive principal leadership. Since 2016, the state has partnered with the CEEDAR Center to integrate inclusive practices into teacher and leader preparation programs. The state had just convened a task force with the goal of aligning principal preparation programs to the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL).

Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) define expectations for educational leaders, focused on achieving more equitable outcomes, and describe the work, qualities, and values of effective leaders

However, the state’s AIPL team found that their efforts to teach leaders how schools can support students with disabilities were often siloed — i.e., the AIPL programs were treated as separate from other principal preparation work, such as professional development and licensure oversight. Moreover, limited staff capacity within the state’s special education office meant that most of the office’s time was spent on compliance with federal and state regulations.

Since joining the AIPL State Initiative, the Mississippi AIPL team (representing the divisions of special education, educator preparation, educator effectiveness, professional learning, and school improvement) has recognized this challenge and taken clear steps to usher in a more inclusive approach to leadership within the state education agency (SEA). The cross-agency AIPL team is building on the state’s CEEDAR partnership and related efforts to shift the state’s focus from licensure and accountability to supporting school leaders in understanding and implementing inclusive practices.

They are also making concrete policy changes to train current and aspiring principals in what it means to lead in a way that authentically supports all students, particularly those with disabilities. The agency has developed an online course introducing school administrators to inclusive leadership, with engaging activities and resources to support professional growth and development.

Combining policy changes with a culture shift, Mississippi has laid the groundwork for a substantive, long-term commitment to advancing inclusive principal leadership that complements and strengthens their work on inclusive teacher education.

Building Internal Capacity

The Mississippi AIPL team approached its work on inclusive leadership with a clear philosophy:

Change must start at the top.

“Before we could do it with school principals, we had to do it within our agency,” said Robin Lemonis, Mississippi’s special education director. “We had to model that when we talked about ‘all students,’ that meant everybody, including students with disabilities.”

“We’ve got to change the way we think about educating all children,” said Debbie Burson, Director of Educator Preparation at the Mississippi Department of Education. “We want the leaders to be able to model and support teachers to be inclusive and lean on those High-Leverage Practices [HLPs].”

Leading by example is not exclusive to the AIPL team. State Superintendent of Education Carey M. Wright has prioritized developing inclusive schools throughout her tenure, helping to create buy-in for the team’s work.

High Leverage Practices

High Leverage Practices (HLPs) are the knowledge and skills principals need to lead an inclusive school, focused on effective collaboration, assessment, social and emotional learning, and instruction.

“It was so important to have the Chief’s support. She conveyed the message of this work’s importance across the agency,” Lemonis reported. “Dr. Wright once said, ‘You have to put pressure where you want the priority to be.’ That was a game changer.”

At CCSSO’s 2021 AIPL Winter Convening, Dr. Wright offered a presentation about her state’s focus on inclusive education and discussed their approaches to building capacity and collaboration.

“Inclusive education has to include the entire school environment – it’s not just one particular place,” Wright said. “In Mississippi, ‘all means all.’”

To encourage that mindset shift at the top, the AIPL team has worked to develop a shared understanding and vision of inclusive leadership by hosting stakeholder meetings, disseminating new resources, and promoting alignment with other department priorities.

“We looked at all the different vocabulary and we said, ‘Okay, we’ve got to come up with common definitions and everybody has to understand those,’” Director of Educator Preparation Burson said.

The team collaborated with staff throughout the department to help promote a common vision of inclusive leadership, working with representatives from the educator preparation, special education, teaching and learning, and academics divisions. They asked questions to encourage others to think about the ways in which their work intersects with efforts around inclusive leadership and the Office of Special Education.

“Initially there were reservations,” Lemonis said. “People were like, ‘that’s your job.’”

Over time, however, the lines between special education students and general education students have blurred. The Mississippi AIPL team says the inclusive leadership work is now becoming embedded throughout the department.

“We as an agency had to come together and evaluate our resources and things we developed to ask, ‘when we’re pushing this out, are we really thinking about all students?’” Lemonis said.

Sometimes, embedding that work is as simple as asking the right questions. For example, in meetings with other departments, the team will often ask, “have you thought about how this will affect students with disabilities?”

The department also has developed new resources to promote a common understanding of inclusive leadership. In 2021, the department updated the [Access for All Guide](#) which provides a comprehensive framework of the state’s vision for inclusive education in Mississippi. The guide outlines evidence-based strategies that teachers and principals can use to support all students, including those with disabilities, significantly shifting the way that Mississippi educators perceive student accommodations and/or modifications.



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Director of Educator
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It is an essential companion for the inclusive school leader, providing detailed background on federal law, state policy, and instructional best practices.

“Even though this is an Office of Special Education initiative, we’ve really embedded it into each department,” said Christy Hunt, a professional development coordinator within the Office of Special Education.

“This intentional alignment has helped Mississippi strengthen and scale up their efforts to ensure that every school leader and teacher is ready to educate students with disabilities in effective environments,” said Meg Kamman, CEEDAR Center Co-Director and state lead for Mississippi. “They are a model for other states when it comes to vision, strategic integration, commitment and collaboration.”



Developing a Pipeline of Inclusive Leaders

Prior to the AIPL initiative, the state's role in leader preparation was focused mostly on compliance, ensuring that principals were licensed and had passed the appropriate tests. "But now we're taking a deep look at the programs and what's being taught and saying, 'are we preparing the kinds of teachers and leaders that our state needs?'" Burson observed.

The state's new requirements for principal preparation programs have aided the team's shift away from focusing on basic compliance. Thanks to coordination with the Mississippi Education Leadership Faculty Association, all education leadership programs are now aligned to the PSEL standards. The state team is now working with program faculty to develop statewide assessments for aspiring principals that embed HLPs and inclusive practices.

The team's efforts are also reaching current administrators. Online courses for both teachers and leaders in inclusive practices are being offered, and the state has developed rubrics and resources to embed HLPs into the Mississippi Professional Growth System – the statewide feedback and evaluation tool for teachers and administrators.

The state's goal is that by fall 2021, 85% of administrators who participate in training on HLPs will develop the skills and knowledge necessary to create inclusive school environments.

"The AIPL provided Mississippi the opportunity to extend their work on inclusive educator preparation and scale it up to school districts and principal professional learning," said Mary Brownell, CEEDAR Center Executive Director. "Mississippi has leveraged the AIPL and CEEDAR partnerships to strengthen their state's mission to improve inclusive, effective education for students with disabilities."

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Looking Ahead

With the foundation set for Mississippi's long-term commitment to inclusive leadership, the state team is scaling up its efforts by expanding professional development opportunities and resources. Plans include monthly "inclusive conversations" for administrators and teachers across the state. These conversations will include discussions about available information and resources while providing opportunities for participants to network and share questions as they reflect on their work.

"We just keep taking it a little bit deeper and keep exploring ways that we can strengthen inclusive leadership across the board," Burson said. "Some people say, 'I don't want to have to do one more thing,' but this is not one more thing, this is the thing."

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