

BILOXI SCHOOLS

1990-1999

The Biloxi Schools In The 1990s

Biloxi – Population, 1990 Census – 46,319

Mayor, 1990 – Pete Halat

City Council, 1990 – Anthony Mattina, William F. Stallworth, A.J. Holloway,
Russell Bistle, Norman J. Broussard, Emry F. McNeill,
Mickey Bellande

Superintendent, Biloxi Public Schools – Dr. Tom Burnham, 1988-1992
Bruce Stewart, Acting Supt., 1992-1993
Virgil Strickland, 1993-1994
Robert Bowles, Acting Supt. 1994
Larry Drawdy, 1994 - present

Biloxi School Board –

1990 – Jimmie Roy, Lucy Denton, Thomas Vu, Jerry Adkins, Sandra Patterson

1991 – Lucy Denton, Sandra Patterson, Jimmie Roy, Thomas Vu, Ann Pringle

1992 – Lucy Denton, Sandra Patterson, Jimmie Roy, Thomas Vu, Ann Pringle

1993 – Sandra Patterson, Ann Pringle, Jimmie Roy, Lucy Denton, Ronnie Bogard

1994 – Lucy Denton, Jimmie Roy, Ronnie Bogard, John Tapper, Sr., Rufus Smith

1995 – Lucy Denton, Jimmie Roy, Ronnie Bogard, John Tapper, Sr., Rufus Smith

1996 – John Tapper, Sr., Lucy Denton, Jimmie Roy, Ronnie Bogard,
Madelon Gruich

1997 – John Tapper, Sr., Jimmie Roy, Madelon Gruich, Ronnie Bogard, Jaye Brice

1998 – Jimmie Roy, John Tapper, Sr., Madelon Gruich, Jaye Brice, Rick Stewart

1999 – Jimmie Roy, Madelon Gruich, Jaye Brice, Rick Stewart, David Blaine

Student Enrollment in 1990-1991, from December Court Report – 6,688

Total Budget, Biloxi Public Schools, for 1990-1991 – \$21,698,508

IX. THE BILOXI SCHOOLS – 1990 – 1999

A review of the Biloxi schools during this period must begin with what was happening in the state. With a reform-minded governor and a responsive legislature, the Mississippi BEST Education Act of 1990 became law. It was widely viewed as Educational Reform Number Two, a successor to the reforms in state education that had occurred under Governor William Winter's leadership in the 1980s. Former Biloxi superintendent Dr. Olon Ray, working with the governor as his education assistant, was deeply involved in working for passage of the legislation that would have such a great effect on Mississippi schools.

Among the most important features of the new law was a section on discipline, requiring greater parent responsibility and strengthening the role of the teacher in discipline matters. Compulsory school attendance was given force through the alternative school programs authorized for every school district. Required training for School Board members was established so that they could carry out their roles more effectively and be exposed to new ideas involving school restructuring.

Through a newly established Executive Management Institute, School Board members and school principals were required to attend EMI programs. The law set minimum requirements for School Board members; provided for supplements to salaries for personnel working with academically-oriented extracurricular events and teams; established parent support groups and awards for parent involvement; established the Educational Improvement Fund for funding programs and purchasing technical equipment; authorized State Department of Education personnel to develop a reliable data collection system and a public awareness program to publicize dropout data and work with at-risk students; denied driver privileges to students who were under eighteen and not in school or who had not graduated or enrolled in GED or vo-tech programs.

The law further required the Department of Human Services to develop and implement family literacy programs, expand and improve adult and basic education programs; expanded programs with public school nurses in an intervention pilot program to help prevent teenage pregnancy; permitted noncertified personnel to teach under certain conditions; required every certified teacher for recertification to complete prescribed inservice training or coursework for credit or programs developed by the College Board; mandated that after July 1, 1993, preparation to teach in grades 7 through 12 required a major in an academic field other than education or a combination of disciplines other than education; required that preparation to teach in kindergarten include specified concentrations (minors) selected from language arts, reading, social studies, mathematics, foreign languages, science, or other disciplines; required the Institutions of Higher Learning and the State Board for Community and Junior Colleges to develop and implement accountability measures geared to measuring and improving performance of students; provided a state health insurance plan for teachers and other school employees at their own expense; provided for issuance of bonds for capital improvements and transportation vehicle purchase.

During this decade, the legislature would substantially increase teachers' salaries, provide health and life insurance for school personnel, and make efforts to see that Mississippi schools worked with classes of manageable size.

No one would say that everything was done that needed to be done—but no one could justifiably say that there had been no improvement at the state level. In Biloxi, the schools would continue to employ a very large number of teachers and support personnel at local expense, and classroom enrollment was generally kept at an enviably low level. (Later criticism of the size of classes, one concludes, had more to do with the size of the classroom than with the actual number of students. While there would always be some classes that were crowded, actual figures show that the teacher-student ratio in the Biloxi schools remained at a very favorable level.)

There was always some concern that the state would mandate programs and fail to provide the additional funding that was required for implementing them. This problem existed in even greater measure in federal programs. Too often in these years the federal laws set requirements that school districts had to meet at their own expense—or at a level higher than government funding alone would permit.

In 1990 the School Board approved brining in outside consultants to review the operations of the Biloxi middle schools. Since 1985 the schools had operated under a K-5, 6-8, 9-12 alignment. The Board and the administration were concerned about the particular problems students encountered at the middle school level and wanted to develop goals for the next five years that would help determine immediate or long-range plans for the schools.

In 1990, enrollment figures for the Biloxi schools, as shown in the response to Court Order requirements, showed the following:

Biloxi High – 1583	Fernwood - 615	Michel - 410	Nichols - 448
Beauvoir –547	Dukate - 647	Gorenflo - 516	Howard II – 337
Jeff Davis - 502	Lopez - 362	Popp's Ferry – 687	District- 6688

New residency requirements for students were established by the state in 1991.

The Biloxi School Board remained the same at the beginning of this period, with Jimmie Roy, Lucy Denton, Thomas Vu, Sandra Patterson, and Jerry Adkins.

Under Dr. Burnham's direction, the high school curriculum had expanded to include Advanced Placement courses. The classes included AP United States History, taught by Mrs. Myra Gottsche; AP Biology, Mrs. Della McCaughan; AP Computer Programming, Mrs. Peggy West; AP English Language, Mrs. Susie Pitalo; AP English Literature, Mrs. Patricia Caranna; AP Spanish III, Mrs. Ana Hayden. Students were encouraged, though not required, to take the advanced placement examinations

Based on Dr. Burnham's efforts to define the role of school personnel and school-community relationships and district needs more clearly, through use of the Managerial Grid Interface Program, some specific changes were made. In the summer of 1990, Scientific Methods consultants returned to evaluate the Biloxi schools. In a report titled "Things Ain't Like They Used To Be," the consultants, after interviewing most of the participants who were in the Interface Activity, formed the following conclusions:

There was a shared feeling that many positive changes had occurred since the Interface. Most of these positive changes were credited to the actions of the superintendent. He was described as being 'more visible in the community.' He was praised for 'having the courage to go through with the Interface, knowing that he was opening himself up for criticism.' It was observed that he 'no longer felt threatened by disagreement' and was 'much easier to talk to.' A change in his decision-making philosophy was noted: 'In the past his decisions were based solely on academics; now attention is also given to community variables.' The superintendent's staff noted that he was much more open to input from them. They now saw him as being willing to delegate responsibilities; they felt that a true team-management philosophy now governed how the district was managed.

The administrators were now viewed as being much more accessible. They were seen as being more involved in the community. Community input was solicited in the selection of a new high school principal and a new football coach; both choices had been very popular. One observer noted that 'the school system is now running smoother than it has in ten years.'

The school board was praised for establishing a scheduled time for community input at board meetings. The board was seen as taking a more positive role in the school system since the Interface. They were no longer viewed as just a 'rubber stamp.' Board members were high in their praise of how the superintendent had been managing the school system.

The community was observed as being much more actively involved in the schools. It was noted by one member of the community that there was 'less discontent with the schools now than there has been for years.' Another observed that 'we all gained a better understanding of the parameters within which the administration must work. Often they are really constrained by law in what they can do.' It was felt that the administration could now be open to input from the community 'without feeling threatened by it.'

The budget crisis had been resolved. Financially, the school system was in better shape than it had been in years. Budget hearings held by the administration were praised for their openness and honesty.

Anson McCause summed up the findings of the Interview Team:

The leadership turnaround is evidenced in more than merely solving a budget crisis. It is related to a much broader and richer concept of the exercise of power and authority. The superintendent's behavior is cited as being more consultative, less impulsive. He now seems to place a high value on demonstrated strength, on certainty, on decisiveness. Nevertheless, he has opened himself up to input from others in order to make sounder decisions that receive more widespread support.

Another key turnaround factor is the reweighing of community culture variables with significantly increased emphasis. There is something of a shift from curriculum leadership to school/community leadership...Revising the priorities of the curriculum versus the community to achieve greater balance has been a major step. ("Beyond Adopt-A-School" 9, 10)

The report went on to say that the community had also changed, noting that a group called Biloxi First had been organized and was actively working with the administration for the betterment of the school system. The new organization was made up, the consultants observed, of concerned citizens from throughout the community. Interviewing the community individuals who had participated in the Interface Program, the consultants wrote that they "observed behaviors during the interviews that were reflective of a changing attitude. We witnessed no withholding or not coming forward. There was no twisting, distorting or placing of emphasis to achieve effectiveness. All in all, there seemed to be much more openness and candor in their communication" ("Beyond" 10).

Though the report was no doubt a reflection of what the consultants actually saw and felt as they reviewed the past year, they could not have predicted what would follow.

During the 1990s the Biloxi schools underwent extraordinary changes in administrative leadership that were to have what many observers saw as negative effects on the district and on the staff. Within a seven-year period, Dr. Ray left the district to go to Jackson to work with the governor's office; Mr. Stewart served for a short period as interim superintendent; Dr. Burnham held the office for less than four years; Mr. Stewart again was acting superintendent; Dr. Strickland was superintendent less than a full year; Dr. Bowles was briefly interim superintendent; and Dr. Drawdy was elected to the office in 1994.

Dr. Burnham left the Biloxi schools in 1992 to assume his new position as State Superintendent of Education.

All of these changes at the top level of administration were accompanied by equally frequent changes in individual school administration and other central office positions. It was impossible for the district to maintain the high level of staff morale and student achievement, despite the fact that many useful and positive changes in emphasis and direction and curriculum were made during these years.

When the School Board employed outside consultants in 1995 to review school needs and operations in the early nineties, few people could have been surprised to note the strong direct and implied criticisms of school programs and the recommendations for immediate changes and long-range strategic planning. According to the report, much of the criticism could be attributed to those shifts in administration that brought with them a lack of stability and focus.

Changes at the top level of school administration almost always seem to be accompanied by equally

frequent changes in individual school administration and other central office positions. While that observation cannot be taken as blanket opposition to change, it should be obvious that a school system needs stability in leadership as much as it needs stability in support staff and faculty. Too often programs begun under one administration are abandoned under another. One administrator's pet project may be another administrator's poison. New ideas enthusiastically initiated by one superintendent may be discarded under another.

It also should have been no surprise that there was some confusion and unease among the faculty. These were particularly troubling years for teachers, faced so often "with new state and federal mandates, new administrative directives, new demands, changing certification requirements, innovative curricular programs, complex staff development procedures, shifts in direction from year to year and school to school, site-based management that depended heavily on the vision and strength of the principal, experimental classes, rejection of traditional teaching strategies, introduction of expensive and complicated technology without adequate training, changes in discipline practices, pressures from every side to produce results geared to state-imposed variables, tests and more tests, day after day and year after year" (*Mississippi Teacher* 187, 199).

The increased emphasis on testing seemed to drive the most important decisions regarding curriculum, teacher assignment, scheduling, Board policies and administrative directives. Seen on one hand as an inevitable result of widespread dissatisfaction with the results of public school performance—not locally, to be specific, but across the nation--the testing could be defended as a necessary tool to provide for accountability and to improve instruction. But a great many people viewed the process as an overemphasis on test results that might be flawed from the start. There were valid criticisms of the testing procedures, the tests themselves, and the use of test results.

The state was gearing up for an even more demanding assessment program; and so was the federal government. But somewhere in all of that there were valuable things that were being lost. It seemed inconsequential on the face of it when a Dukate parent asked principal Paul Tisdale in late 1989, "What ever happened to class plays? They would promote teamwork, be fun and give an opportunity for parents to come to school to see their kids perform. If there is not enough time for individual class plays, then how about grade plays?" And the principal responded that he saw the value in such student performances, but with mandates from the State Department of Education, few teachers were willing to reduce classroom instruction time since their students' performances were monitored on basic skills and achievement tests. It was a question and a response with far greater implications than could be seen at first glance. But nobody could spend time worrying about such small matters as class plays in the era of testing and more testing

This was only one small example of something of value that had been lost along the way. Older teachers, no doubt, could point to many other things equally valuable and irretrievably lost. The key to success today was in test results—and teachers and administrators and Board members knew that.

In addition to those problems, the Biloxi schools, like almost all other public schools in the nation, were dealing with the results of social changes that could not have been imagined twenty or thirty years earlier, changes in family lifestyles that seemed to bring with them new and more difficult discipline problems, threats of litigation looming behind every new federal rule or regulation, fewer people choosing education as a career field, decreasing direct parent involvement in children's school lives—it was in so many ways a new world.

Standing with the administration during these years was a School Board whose members were always committed to doing what was best for Biloxi's young people. Serving as president of the Board at one period or another during the 1990s were Jimmie Roy, Lucy Denton, Sandra Patterson, John Tapper, Sr., and Madelon Gruich. Serving with them and continuing the line of prominent Biloxians named to the School Board were Jerry Adkins, Ann Pringle, Thomas Vu, Ronnie Bogard, Rufus Smith, Jaye Brice, Rick Stewart, and David Blaine.

Figures for the Court Report, required to be filed annually by the United States District Court, Southern Division, were presented in a chart that showed the racial composition of the student body in the Biloxi schools in the 1990s:

Year	Enrolled	#White	#Black	#Other	%White	%Black	%Other
1990	6688	4213	1762	713	63%	26%	11%
1991	6646	4187	1755	704	63%	26%	11%
1992	6578	3867	1989	722	59%	30%	11%
1993	6697	3979	1969	749	59%	29%	11%
1994	6469	3658	1986	825	57%	31%	13%
1995	6338	3554	1967	817	56%	31%	13%
1996	6278	3530	1988	760	56%	32%	12%
1997	6217	3487	1955	775	56%	31%	12%
1998	6126	3368	1992	766	55%	33%	13%

Note: "Other" includes students who are not white or black, and it is likely that a very large percentage of those students are of Vietnamese descent.

Bids were received and opened on April 18, 1991, for a proposed addition to Popp's Ferry School, with R.K. Wallace Construction, Inc., winning the bid.

One of the most dramatic changes in the community—with an equally significant effect on the school system—came in 1992 with the introduction of the gaming industry on the Coast. Following a favorable vote by Harrison County residents, the industry quickly set about the business of establishing itself as a driving economic force in Biloxi. A survey by the City of Biloxi in December 1995 showed that 33% of the casino employees were local Biloxians, 33% relocated to Biloxi to work and live, and 33% worked in Biloxi but lived elsewhere. Because of state regulations, local school districts from the beginning received a portion of the gaming taxes

collected from the new industry. Those funds totaled more than \$1-million in 1993 and were expected to increase as the industry grew.

The Biloxi Public School District budget for the 1993-1994 school year was \$24,442,356; for the 1994-1995 school year, \$29,485,082.

The Biloxi School Board on January 10, 1993, elected Dr. Virgil Strickland as superintendent of the school district. Strickland came to Biloxi from Cleveland, Mississippi, where he had been superintendent of the Cleveland Public Schools since 1989. In his first message to the staff, Dr. Strickland expressed his appreciation of the opportunity to become part of the Biloxi Public Schools.

"Educators in Mississippi have long recognized that public education in Biloxi is synonymous with excellence," he said. "This is just recognition due to the efforts of dedicated teachers." He added, "To build a new generation of schools we must teach children to think, to reason, to solve problems. We, teachers and administrators, must constantly explore the possibilities. Together we must be prepared to take bold fresh steps and to light a fire in our heart to be the best. We have the most important job in the world—we shape the future through our children" ("New Superintendent For The Biloxi Public Schools," February 1993).

Until Dr. Strickland was able to come to Biloxi, interim superintendent Bruce Stewart continued his work with the system until the end of the school year. Stewart was particularly active in strengthening community relations by, for example, encouraging the development of publications that reached into the community and meeting with Biloxi-Ocean Springs realtors in question-answer sessions that helped the realtors become better acquainted with the schools.

"One question I hear from every side these days," Stewart said in a *Staff Talk* report, "is this: Where is the money going? While it is true that we have greatly improved financial conditions, it is also true that we need to catch up and take care of things that were neglected because of reduced state funding for the past few years. I can report to you that Dr. Strickland's attitude toward budgeting procedures is one which seeks input from everyone interested in and affected by our schools. I know that he will have a great deal to add to the dialogue he encourages regarding budgetary needs and the entire process" ("New Superintendent," 2).

One of the important legacies of Dr. Burnham's tenure and Mr. Stewart's continuing efforts was the growth of technology in the schools. In *Staff Talk*, an article noted that computers were already in place in every grade 3-5 classroom; a Chapter I training program was being conducted, with at least one teacher from grades 3, 4, and 5 in every elementary school in the district; teachers were training other teachers to activate the WICAT language program; teachers were able to use computers for SAT-skills exercises through the central file server permitting all computers to be in use simultaneously. In addition, five computers were being ordered for the Writing to Read program for

every classroom in the first grade. The program was reported to have received high marks from participating schools throughout the state.

Among the innovative programs offered by the Biloxi schools when Dr. Strickland was superintendent was the HOSTS (Help One Student To Succeed) Program. A structured mentoring (tutorial) program, HOSTS operates at individual school sites under the direct supervision of a qualified teacher. HOSTS places a student who needs help in reading or math with either a trained paraprofessional or a trained community volunteer who serves as a mentor. All one-on-one instruction takes place on-site in a structured/supervised classroom.

Biloxi's HOSTS program was the first language arts program of its kind to be implemented in the Southeastern United States. The language arts HOSTS was begun in 1993; the HOSTS math in 1996. All Biloxi sites have been designated exemplary programs, based upon academic achievement, decreased student discipline problems, high student exit rate, and increased student self-esteem. Biloxi HOSTS teams have been featured at national HOSTS conferences every year since incorporation of the program.

Other programs that were designed to assist students in special ways, beyond the ordinary curriculum, included mentorship, elementary peer counselors, and drug/violence prevention programs, Partners in Education, with Biloxi businesses working closely with individual schools; an increased emphasis on applying for grants available through various sources for educational purposes, including Mississippi Power Foundation and Tandy Educational grants.

Biloxi First made initial grants to teachers to support creative and innovative projects. A new preschool program at Dukate was funded under a grant from the Office of Bilingual Education and Minority Language Affairs; a non-graded program at Jeff Davis Elementary School; a parenting skills program; the Even Start federally funded pre-school program providing family-centered activities; the Adopt-A-School program and other outreach projects, including the Drug Free Schools program—all were added to school operations.

The CREATE program grew as a resource program for students in grades two through seven who were identified as intellectually gifted. The teaching approach for CREATE classes involved special curriculum and enrichment activities and development of higher cognitive processes. Early Bird and Extended Day programs were initiated as the schools tried to assist working parents who needed help with child care before and after school hours.

The mentorship program was a successful and valuable use of community resource personnel, with volunteers working individually with students. It is a non-structured program allowing flexibility for the volunteer mentor to work around his or her schedule while helping to light the way and make a lasting difference in the life of a child. Elementary Peer Counselors are a select group of high school students who meet with children in the public and parochial elementary schools to help educate them about the dangers and the effects of tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs, along with safety rules and self-esteem. Individual efforts in the drug/violence prevention education program

cover a broad range of activities developed by individual schools and implementing the Mississippi Substance Abuse Curriculum in grades K-12.

In retrospect, one may view some of the changes going on in the early 1990s with some skepticism as to their value, since many of those changes seemed to have short lives. The middle schools in early 1994 were experiencing what Biloxi educators called "an integrated curriculum." The basic concept for sixth grade classes was that of bringing together academic disciplines which had traditionally been taught in isolation.

"This synthesis may result in team teaching, with math and science study integrated, or reading and social studies, for example, or in self-contained classrooms in which one teacher integrates the subjects" ("Middle School Sixth Graders Study In Integrated Curriculum," *School Talk*, January 1994). Non-gradedness was another concept advanced during these years, with limited success. A program called "The Arizona Plan" was inaugurated in a whole language curriculum that left many teachers struggling to meet administrative expectations without the resources required for successful implementation. The on-site management and the failure to provide sufficient training and to maintain all the new programs during these years would be subjected to severe criticism later. Teachers were understandably feeling pressures that made their jobs more difficult.

Again Mississippi teachers were being subjected to sweeping changes in the testing programs that were occupying more and more of the time and resources of state school districts. State Superintendent of Education Tom Burnham in February 1994 responded to a series of questions posed by Biloxi teachers about the new performance-based assessment program that was to begin in the 1994-1995 school year.

Dr. Burnham told the teachers that the Mississippi Assessment System, MAS, was the model that would be used for teacher training; he promised that comprehensive training modules would be developed at the state level, with a cadre of outstanding teachers to be selected and trained to serve as trainers of other teachers.

Asked to give the most important reasons for changing the testing program, Burnham replied: "Current Mississippi assessment practices do not mirror the changes that have occurred in national assessment. However, the more important issue is that our current assessment system drives an instructional process that focuses on children's ability to recognize and recall. Twenty-first century job requirements are centered in analysis, problem solving, and ability to function in a technology-based environment. Our new assessment program is structured to meet these needs and will also move us back into the mainstream of national testing" ("An Interview With the State Superintendent of Education" 2).

He noted that a number of states, including Kentucky, California, and Arizona, were using similar assessment processes, but that a vendor for the program had not been selected. The new assessment model would be designed to drive a change in both the instructional process and the classroom

assessment process, Dr. Burnham said. "It will require that classrooms become more of an application environment. Hopefully, it will also drive a change in classroom testing to focus more on application and less on selecting A-B-C-D from a scantron sheet. Increased emphasis will be placed on each student's ability to express himself/herself both verbally and in writing."

Dr. Burnham summed up the process for Biloxi teachers by saying, "Employability skills of the future demand that young people have certain skills. These include being able to analyze, problem solve, and synthesize information. . . . These goals will necessitate that teachers teach differently with the expectation of different results. Simply stated, the product becomes secondary to the process. Students must be able to utilize information in different situations to resolve problems."

For the first two years, all eligible students in grades four through nine were to be assessed to allow teachers to evaluate the instructional process in light of the new assessment procedures. Performance-based assessments, according to state personnel, "measure process (communicating, reasoning, and problem-solving) as well as content knowledge." The Norm-Referenced Assessment Implementation Committee and the State Department of Education viewed the proposed Mississippi Assessment System "as a vehicle for improving instruction while at the same time providing accountability data. The new assessment is significantly different from the current norm-referenced testing program."

Both Superintendent Strickland and Assistant Superintendent Mina Bryan expressed the district's commitment to helping prepare the staff to work successfully under the new testing guidelines. "We cannot allow this to be a replay of other state programs which offered only vague philosophy and unclear goals, with little attention to the bottom-line specifics to inform teachers about what they need to do and how they can do it," Dr. Strickland said.

Biloxi teachers were given two previously scheduled instructional days for staff development that would include preparation for the assessment procedures. School personnel had visited educators in Arizona who had extensive experience with the new assessment program, and the administration hoped that Biloxi teachers would benefit from the Arizona experience.

Biloxi superintendent Dr. Strickland predicted that the new assessment program, when implemented in the fall of 1994, would have as great an impact on classroom instruction as did the Educational Reform Act of 1982. "The assessment program will shift the emphasis of testing from standardized multiple choice tests to testing for individual performance measured against a set of national standards and will focus instruction on complex thinking, effective communication, and responsible citizenship," Strickland said. "It is with this system that the State Department of Education will drive changes in classroom practice" ("New Assessment Program To change State/Local Instruction," 4).

By the end of the school year Dr. Strickland had resigned, and the School Board began a search for a new superintendent. Prior to the election of Dr. Larry Drawdy as superintendent, deputy superintendent Dr. Robert Bowles served as interim superintendent.

The School Board in 1994 was made up of Mrs. Lucy Denton, president; Mr. Jimmie Roy, vice president; Mr. John Tapper, secretary; Mr. Ronnie Bogard, member; and Mr. Rufus Smith, member. They were responsible for establishing school district policies and overseeing the operations of the district, which was simply by virtue of its payroll alone one of the largest businesses on the Gulf Coast.

As in years past, the Board at every meeting dealt with staggering amounts of money, enormous problems centered in finance and construction and discipline, assessments of policies and procedures affecting not only every student and staff member but all Biloxians, always having to balance vision with practicality, hope with reality, and making life-altering decisions that demanded their best thought and effort. The men and women who have served on the School Board are never fully recognized in the public mind for what they do with single-minded purpose: doing what is best for the children! And always dependent in so many ways on the superintendent and central office personnel.

Central office personnel were superintendent-elect Dr. Larry Drawdy; interim superintendent Dr. Robert Bowles; assistant superintendent Dr. Mina Bryan; administrative assistants Mr. Bob Cherry and Ms. Jude Lupinetti; director of business management Mr. Jude McDonnell; director of purchasing and food services Mr. Nolan Broussard. Principal of the high school was Mr. Lloyd Seymour; Fernwood, Mr. Ronnie Farris; Michel, Mr. Murray Killebrew; Nichols, Mr. Charles Guy; Beauvoir, Dr. Virgel Fulcher; DuKate, Mrs. Bonnie Kirkland; Gorenflo, Mrs. Bobbie Jackson; Howard II, Ms. Beryl Dupont; Jeff Davis, Ms. Mandy Strong; Lopez, Ms. Gwendolyn Chandler; Popp's Ferry, Mrs. Andrea Petro.

During the period of Dr. Bowles's tenure as interim superintendent and just as Dr. Drawdy was coming on board to assume his new office, the district on June 14, 1994, completed its five-year plan update, as mandated by the State Department of Education. The final report for the 1994-1995 school year, *Biloxi Public Schools Strategic Planning Data*, included voluminous data to describe the school system, individual schools, district mission, demographics, goals and objectives, school governance, fiscal operations, staff development, and other matters vital to planning for the future of the district.

Describing the curriculum adoptions and implementations during the preceding five years, the report noted that "Mastery learning was implemented prior to five years ago. Revisions have been made in the curriculum between the years 1990-1992. The State Curriculum Guides are the basis for instruction. The most recent revisions in these State Guides are in mathematics, social studies, and science. On a district level, the curriculum is fragmented and incomplete. Most schools are using a textbook driven approach to meet State Guidelines. In 1993-94, Biloxi schools implemented

the restructuring of Math in K-12 through the Knight Foundation. We are currently studying and rewriting the curriculum as needed" (*Biloxi Public Schools Strategic Planning Data*).

Graduation requirements for Biloxi High School students were becoming more demanding, as the state required certain courses and the district added to the already extensive curriculum. Providing a large number of choices for students, the administration and Board felt, would be useless unless the students were given opportunities to schedule a large number of electives.

By 1995-1996, ninth graders entering the Biloxi schools would be required to have 24 units for graduation in 1999. By 1997-1998, students entering ninth grade during that year would be required to have 26 units for graduation in 2001. They would be permitted to have 8-1/2 Carnegie units in elective courses. All students were required to complete four units in English, three in mathematics (with a minimum of Pre-Algebra, Algebra I, and Geometry), four in social studies (including Geography, Mississippi Studies, World History, United States History, Economics, and United States Government), one-half unit in Comprehensive Health, one unit in Keyboarding/Applications/Computer Discovery (grade 8) and Technology Discovery in Grade 9, and one unit in the arts. Students interested in choral music and art and journalism and speech and band were still able to include these areas in their scheduling through the electives permitted. Requirements for college-bound students were more demanding in mathematics and science and foreign languages.

Net enrollment in the eighth month of the 1994-1995 school year showed the following:

Biloxi High School – 1536	Fernwood Middle School– 666
Michel Middle School– 415	Nichols Middle School – 418
Beauvoir – 577	DuKate – 536
Gorenflo – 467	Howard II – 292
Jeff Davis – 459	Lopez – 306
Popp's Ferry – 670	

In an analysis of student enrollment by race, the State Department of Education report included in the Five-Year Plan showed that of the 6,469 total number of students attending the schools as of December 1994, there were 3,658 white students, 1,986 black students, 101 Hispanic students, 709 Asian students, and 15 Indian students. The Strategic Plan also included charts showing the enrollment by race in individual teachers' classes and in individual schools.

The growth of the Vietnamese student population was evident in the number of students classified as Asian.

Final draft of the district's Strategic Plan was adopted by the School Board on July 18, 1995.

Recognizing the need to examine the curriculum, the buildings, the financial structure, and the total instructional program of the schools, in 1994 the Board had contracted the services of Morgan Associates, a consulting firm from Auburn, Alabama, to make a comprehensive study of the school district. When the final report was released in December 1994, it was highly critical of the schools, though the consultants found many things to commend. Noting that Mississippi law is specific in requirements governing the composition and role of the Board of Trustees, the type of instructional program the district shall offer (performance based education, personnel appraisal and a core curriculum), the report examined all these areas in great detail. Based on interviews with the superintendent, president of the School Board, classified and certified personnel and members of the planning committee, together with community leaders, teachers, and administrators, consultants found a high level of morale and enthusiasm regarding the future of the district.

Part of that favorable attitude was attributed to the employment of a new superintendent, Dr. Larry Drawdy, who had served as assistant superintendent of the Biloxi schools from 1975 until 1986 and as superintendent of the Picayune and Meridian school districts before returning to Biloxi. "The current superintendent, Dr. Larry Drawdy, was appointed by the School Board after an informal campaign was waged throughout the community to employ him following the resignation of the previous superintendent," the report stated (Morgan Associates 143). "The President of the Board has served several terms and apparently demonstrated effective, efficient, and sensitive leadership during a period of turmoil, dissension, and confusion" (Morgan 143). The report continued:

The curriculum in this school district is splintered, going off into many different directions. There does not appear to be any continuity, underlying structure, or planned sequence, from one classroom to the next or one school to the next. Findings clearly document this. Findings in this study were based on Mississippi Curriculum structures, where available, various national association guidelines, and evaluative criteria from the National Study of School Evaluation.

The present condition of the curriculum did not happen overnight, but over a period of years. Today it reflects reform efforts over the years, efforts resulting in programs begun and then dropped in favor of the next program to come along. It also reflects a clear lack of effective leadership and planning at all levels of the school district. It reflects lack of effective staff development programs, a lack of effective communications, and above all, a lack of adequate funding to support instruction at all levels.

Curriculum consultants, in taking an unbiased view of what is currently going on in the system acknowledged that perceptions of leadership roles in the school system vary widely. The central administration's view of leadership roles does not always coincide with teacher views of leadership roles, or even with teacher perceptions of their own roles.

This wide disparity of perceptions is evident throughout the various levels of schooling, but most apparent at the elementary school level. Seven elementary schools, grade by grade, classroom by classroom are being pulled in different directions. This condition began with piecemeal attempts to 'reform' and has deteriorated further as piecemeal attempts are now directed toward restructuring. There is no apparent planning to provide consistency within grade levels, within

each individual school, or between schools. As a result, what is being taught and learned in one kindergarten or first grade classroom differs from what is being taught or learned in the next kindergarten or first grade classroom in the same school. (Morgan 1, 2)

The lengthy and fully detailed report of almost 200 pages does not spare the district and makes no effort to disguise criticism in soft terms: "The Biloxi elementary school program has no curriculum *per se*. There is little or no continuity in subject matter taught throughout the grades and no theoretical or philosophical framework guiding the manner by which subject matter is taught. Innovations are thrust on teachers without any preparation as to why such innovations should be embraced, and without the necessary materials and continued support to enable them to make adequate implementation. Each year or two different innovations seem to be in vogue, and little consideration is given to the current curriculum when the new innovation is offered" (Morgan 17, 18).

Surely when the report was delivered to the Biloxi schools, it must have been an unpleasant reading experience for the people in the schools who cared so deeply about their work and who wanted to keep the district at the highest level in the state.

But just as surely, members of the Board and the administration were aware of the critical needs and wanted a study by competent professionals to pinpoint wrongs and help to right them.

Language, mathematics, social studies, science—all the basic academic areas, particularly in the elementary schools, were examined and found wanting in the most fundamental ways. There were needs for increased funding, of course, in every area, but there were also severe needs for better facilities and better equipment and more instructional resources. Space deficiencies abounded in school after school as makeshift areas were used for the new technology programs. The use of technology suffered because of insufficient or inoperable equipment, poorly trained users, crowded rooms. Central administrative personnel were needed in specific instructional programs to give direction and purpose and assistance to people who were struggling to make sense of what too often seemed incomprehensible.

The situation in the middle schools and the high school was seen by the consultants as somewhat better, though not by much. The same kinds of needs existed at those levels, but without as much "going in every direction" as was true of the elementary schools (perhaps because there were so many more elementary schools, so many more teachers, so much less communication among schools or grade level groups).

The picture painted by the consultants was not altogether negative. In fact, there were areas that came in for some praise—the new HOSTS Program, for example; the new Tech-Prep Program; teachers who cared enough about their mission to use their own resources and time to help make their classroom situations better; some parent-teacher programs that were very effective; individual administrators at several of the schools; art and music enrichment programs; fully qualified staff;

excellent purchasing, warehouse, business, community outreach, and personnel practices; "an excellently written and complete" *Policies and Procedures Manual*; salary scale higher than salaries in other state districts; a dedicated School Board sensitive to the needs and concerns of the community and to its responsibility "to formulate policy rather than administer the schools." All of these things were points in the school district's favor. But there were far too many areas that were in deep trouble, according to the report.

One area of the Morgan Associates Study dealt with sources of revenue of the Biloxi Public School System. "The three major sources of revenue for the Biloxi System are local, state, and federal. There are some 'other' sources; however, the amounts are not significant," the Study noted (149).

Local sources are primarily ad valorem taxes. In the 1993-94 fiscal year ad valorem taxes made up 86% of the local revenue. The projection for 1994-95 is that ad valorem will make up 88% of the local revenue. Cafeteria food sales and student activity services are other sources that produce an amount over \$100,000. However, these are designated funds. Interest on investments is also a part of local sources. These funds may also produce in excess of \$100,000.

State sources are made up of homestead exemption, various state supported programs, gaming tax and state minimum program funds. The major producer is the minimum program. In the 1993-94 year this fund produced over 77% of the state sources. In 1994-95 the minimum program is projected to produce 74% of the state funds. The state also provides funds called enhancement funds. These funds are provided to offset any state mandated program or increase that may increase local cost. These funds were slightly over \$1,000,000 in 1993-94 and are projected at approximately \$1,700,000 in 1994-95. The gaming tax is a relatively new source of revenue coming from the casino gaming establishments within the City of Biloxi. Revenue from this tax produced \$1,066,369 in 1993-94 and is projected to yield \$1,620,000 in 1994-95.

Federal sources are generally those funds provided from the federal government for specific programs. USDA funds, cafeteria reimbursement and various chapter funds usually make up this source. In Biloxi, because of the high number of military personnel, PL-9874 funds are made available. These funds are unique in that they can be used by the system as needed. Because the military base covers much of the land that would be taxable, the federal government provides PL-874 funds to replace the missed ad valorem revenue. This source of revenues produced almost \$2,000,000 in 1993-94 and is expected to produce at least that much in 1994-95.

Other sources include revenue from sixteenth section property, any sale of assets and indirect costs. The total income from this source is \$240,641. (Morgan 149, 150)

Despite the generally unfavorable picture of the schools found in the Morgan Associates study, in 1994, the state-required Functional Literacy Examination (FLE), ITBS reading, language, and math tests (ITBS) in grades 4-8, the TAP in grade 9, and the SATP Algebra I test, Biloxi students in every area in every school scored well above the state averages in the performance-based assessments. Scores in certain grade levels in the elementary schools, however, did not compare

favorably with those of other Coast school districts. Obviously there was a real need for something to be done to turn things around. When the Morgan Associates consultants said that there was "an absence of a mathematics curriculum" in the elementary schools and that immediate remedies were recommended, it seemed incumbent upon the Board and the new administration to take notice.

Prior to his assuming his duties as the new superintendent of the Biloxi schools, Dr. Drawdy wrote the staff in the May 1994 issue of *School Talk*:

The first thing I'd like everyone to know about my returning to Biloxi as superintendent of schools is that for Kathleen and me it really will be like coming home again. You know, we're already in the process of building our home in Biloxi, and we had intended to live there when our school careers were over. Now we'll just be coming home a little sooner than we had expected.

I'm happy to return to Biloxi and to the school district I served as assistant superintendent in the seventies and eighties. I have thoroughly enjoyed my work in the Meridian schools. It's a good school system, with an excellent staff and a supportive community, and I have been gratified by all the work I've been able to do here. I'm looking forward to doing equally satisfying work in Biloxi. I have firsthand knowledge of the school system, the staff, and the community. It will be good to be home again, and I am deeply appreciative to the School board for giving me this opportunity.

I pledge to the Board, the staff, and the community my complete dedication to the work that lies ahead, my undivided loyalty to the schools, and my best efforts to build on the good things in our schools and correct anything that needs to be changed. I realize that with a school system as diverse and complex as Biloxi's, there are some elements that would compare favorably with similar programs or practices or personnel in any other schools in the country—but there are also some problems that need both immediate and long-range attention. Many of those problems are common to school districts all over the country, I suspect, but some of them are at the local level and can be locally solved. We will set high goals for our schools in a partnership involving parents and schools and the entire community. The very diversity and growth of this area bring both problems and promise. Underlying every decision I will make in my office, every program and project and procedure we will undertake, will be this principle: we will do what is right and best for the young people in our charge. Not every decision will satisfy every Biloxian—but you can bank on it that it will have been made with the ultimate goal of keeping our schools safe and welcoming places where good education can take place, teachers can teach, and students can learn. Students who can't function under those conditions will have to be helped to succeed in other ways and in other settings, perhaps, but our main goal must be to provide quality education for every student who is willing to and wants to or can be taught to take advantage of it. Children will always be first in our priorities.

Biloxi teachers are among the best and most caring in the country, and the parents and children here, in the main, want the best schools we can offer them. I'm ready to meet whatever challenges that must be met in order to provide the leadership this school system needs. I'm looking forward to every day of my work in Biloxi. I hope that everyone in the community will want me to succeed and will help me to make our schools even better than they are. There are no limits to the good things we can do if we all work together! ("It Will Be Like Coming Home," *Staff Talk*)

Dr. Drawdy would be coming in to lead a school system where teachers had dealt with far too many programs and changes and projects and proposals and plans and mandates during the years immediately prior to his election as superintendent.

They had been subjected to all the requirements and associated problems of mastery learning, non-gradedness, multi-age grouping, performance-based assessment, integrated curriculum, pull-out programs, a variety of computer assisted instruction programs, the use of basal textbooks, various reading programs and teaching strategies, a literature-centered curriculum, the Arizona Plan, tech-prep, multicultural diversity, non-referenced assessment, realignment of schools with a middle school arrangement, Back to Basics and Basic Skills Assessment, reteaching and retesting, philosophical shifts in regard to grading and promotion, new staff development requirements, new ways of producing lesson plans, changing assertive discipline plans, federal and state mandates that seemed never-ending, one new program after another that required accommodation by teachers, changing alternative education programs, elimination of programs and reinstitution of the same programs, new leadership management programs, changing certification requirements, changing personnel evaluations and new performance appraisal instruments, turnovers in administrative leadership and direction. Not all of these changes, of course, affected every teacher—but they did directly affect the district as a whole.

Sometimes the ideas seemed to be regarded as the "pet projects" of the superintendent of the day; others were proposals handed down from the state or results of workshops and staff development programs. Teachers could well ask some very basic questions about some of these changes. How far does the teacher go in trying to rid himself of dependence upon a basal textbook? Would it be better to follow a textbook than "to make it up as you go along"? Is it really sufficient simply to have two or three teachers from a school attend a workshop and expect them to return to a school and teach all the other teachers what they learned—and when is time set aside to do such things?

"Splintered and going off in too many different directions [without] continuity, underlying structure, or planned sequence from one classroom to the next or one school to the next," the outside consultants had said. Perhaps the Morgan Associates consultants had it exactly right!

In an article in the *MPE Journal*, Dr. Drawdy was quoted later as saying, "I believe in strategic planning for educational improvement. In developing a student-centered school program, the staff must move toward clearly defined objectives, setting goals that will help young people become lifelong learners, able to compete in a technically advancing job market, exercising the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and maintaining a healthy and productive lifestyle in a world which is always challenging and often difficult and unrewarding" (March 1998, 9).

The Biloxi superintendent went on to say that schools should provide a favorable environment for learning, with the kind of leadership that provides programs and experiences and instructional processes to foster student success. "At the same time, students must be assisted in developing

skills and behaviors they need in order to make sound choices in their academic, personal, social, and vocational lives," he said.

Putting his philosophy to work, in 1994 and 1995 Dr. Drawdy brought together a group of parents, students, members of the staff, professional and civic leaders, city officials, and consultants to help develop a strategic plan for the future of the Biloxi schools. The long-range plan was adopted by the Board in 1995; its mission statement recognizes the district's rich heritage and traditions of excellence, resilience, and community commitment.

The plan is, in effect, a chart for the course of the school district as it nears the end of this century and the beginning of another. Planning is centered in several specific areas selected by the core committee for examination, evaluation, and research, followed by recommendations by teams of Biloxians charged with helping to carry out the mission of the district.

Among the goals of the Biloxi Public Schools, identified by the committee, are the provision of ongoing training for all personnel; integration of all aspects of the diverse cultures in the Biloxi community; developing strong partnership and mentor programs; increasing district-wide achievement and performance ratings; redesigning and realignment of the curriculum; and improved and expanded technological resources and programs. ("Biloxi Public Schools," *MPE Journal* 9)

The Strategic Planning Committee recommended, and the Board adopted, a Mission Statement that represented the best thinking of the group as it reviewed the operation of the schools and hopes for the future: "The mission of the Biloxi Public School District, known for its rich heritage and traditions of excellence, resilience, and community commitment, is to encourage and empower every student to develop individual creative abilities and to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to make sound choices, act responsibly and achieve goals through a safe and welcoming environment, providing appropriate and stimulating programs which foster student success."

It is admittedly a long sentence—but included in the statement is the district's commitment to providing opportunities for students to acquire both knowledge and skills. For some educators during these years, it seemed that content-based courses had been slighted in favor of classes developing technological skills and emphasizing applications and use of manipulatives and problem solving. At least in its mission statement the Biloxi schools appeared to recognize that there was still an important place in the schools for the acquisition of knowledge—implying that the schools would continue to teach content as well as thinking and critical skills.

It is hard to argue that a person can read intelligently and comprehend the true meaning of a newspaper article or a speech by a legislator if he does not have a knowledge of cultural references. For an editorial writer to state, for example, that a particular situation is an "albatross around the President's neck" is meaningless to a reader who does not understand the literary allusion. A reader or listener should bring to the task of listening or reading a store of knowledge, of specific communally shared information, that many young people in schools today do not acquire. And so much of that shared information comes from studies in the humanities and the arts. Those programs

are often the first to be abandoned by school districts faced with cuts in funding or demands to meet other needs or services. The record will show that the Biloxi schools continue to provide these courses and classes as part of the total instructional program.

For the 1995-1996 school year, a new realignment of the Biloxi schools was implemented, with the middle schools abandoned as part of the district's instructional structure. Fernwood, Michel, and Nichols again became junior high schools, serving students in grades 7, 8, and 9. Biloxi High School again enrolled students only in grades 10-12. And the elementary schools returned to the K-6 structure that had been in place before 1985.

"The grade configuration change was recommended by the Facility Study Committee, a blue ribbon group of school officials, business people, and community leaders, who did a year-long study of the district's physical facilities, programs, and services. The thirty-three member committee was headed by Biloxi businessman Alton Bankston. Bankston and his committee were assisted in the technical aspect of facilities evaluation by the architectural firm of Guild, Jaubert & Guild. Programs and services were evaluated by Morgan & Associates, Educational Consultants of Auburn, Alabama" (*Community Report*, June 1995).

In addition, Dr. Drawdy and the Board received from his staff a Facilities and Grade Configuration Analysis that answered questions regarding three possible school realignments, with one possibility being a K-5, 6-8, 9, and 10-12 arrangement. The thorough report gave both advantages and disadvantages of the configurations, without making a recommendation. The report was prepared under the supervision of Dr. Bowles, with Nolan Broussard, Mina Bryan, Bob Cherry, Jude Lupinetti, Jude McDonnell, Joe Sabbatini, and Jerry Tatum assisting.

To implement the new grade configuration in the fall of 1995, the school district had to provide a minimum of two new classrooms at Beauvoir, Gorenflo, Howard II, Lopez, and Popp's Ferry. The School Board noted that DuKate and Jeff Davis had adequate space, with some adjustments, to accommodate the expected increase in enrollment.

The district budget for the 1995-1996 school year showed that for the fifth consecutive year no property tax increase was proposed. "Budgeted revenues show a shift in funding, resulting in an increase necessary in local revenues to replace reduction in federal monies," Director of Business Management Jude McDonnell reported. "Most noticeable is a budget reduction of \$400,000 in Federal Impact Aid funds. Although the budget anticipates gaming tax revenues to be up in 1995-1996, it has provided reserves in the event that the casinos are exempted from ad valorem property taxes as a result of a suit filed by a casino," he added.

The budget reported proposed expenditures of \$32,147,301, an increase of \$2.6-million over 1994-1995, including \$21,860,165 for direct instructional costs. Construction and renovation projects were estimated at \$875,000 to provide science lab renovations and science equipment upgrading. An estimated \$100,000 would be spent to modernize school restroom facilities; \$185,00 to fund

construction of a new physical education building at Biloxi High School; \$200,000 for new bleachers for Biloxi High, Nichols, and Michel. The budget also provided for the hiring of two additional nurses and guidance personnel ("Biloxi School District Presents 1995-96 Budget").

Viewed against the background of Mississippi schools as a whole, the Biloxi School District remained one of the larger districts. In 1995 State Superintendent Burnham, in testimony before a U.S. Senate subcommittee examining the federal role in funding programs supporting integration of technology, pointed out that 78 of the state's 153 school districts had fewer than 3,000 students; 117 of the districts had fewer than 4,000 students. There were more than a thousand public schools in Mississippi, and the state dedicated 45% of the total state budget to education.

To help teachers develop familiarity with technology becoming available in the Biloxi schools, Dr. Drawdy in 1995 led a program to provide training in relation to Tech Prep and to offer computer classes at no charge to school employees. Other immediate improvements in the schools included safety features at the schools, new lighting at the high school and Michel for night events, refurbishing science labs at the high school through local funding, the development and publication of a number of particularly helpful and informative handbooks, including a cafeteria handbook, a handbook for district media/library personnel, an athletics handbook, and a handbook for secretaries and office personnel, and the establishment of curriculum coordinator positions. In addition, the former PACH Hall, central office annex, was being rebuilt (it would be named the Annex Building), directly east of the high school.

In March 1996 the Biloxi School District's accreditation status was improved to Level 4.5 on the 5.0 scale used for state accreditation purposes. In congratulating the staff for this accomplishment, Dr. Drawdy wrote, "It is important to emphasize that the test results—which are almost entirely the basis for determining a school district's accreditation status—are not the ends we hope to achieve; rather, they are simply the best objective indicators available to us in determining how well we are meeting our true objectives—providing opportunities for all our students to receive the best education they can receive and doing our part to help them learn, to grow, to progress. The responsibilities teachers share in this process are heavy and too often unrecognized and not fully appreciated. I want you to know that I do recognize how hard our teachers have worked and that I do appreciate everything you do to make our schools better day by day." He also noted that the new standards and new requirements are increasingly difficult to meet. "Our goals continue to be centered in the education of Biloxi's children, in their learning and their achieving; the test scores will continue to be a reflection of what we do in the classrooms of the Biloxi schools to move successfully toward those goals."

In February 1996 the newly refurbished natatorium reopened for public use after extensive renovation. Cost of the project was shared by the city and the school district. Use of the facility for swimming classes for Biloxi students had proved to be one of the most attractive features of the schools since its opening.

Science Department classrooms at Biloxi High school were completely renovated during the summer of 1996, together with the foreign language laboratory. Architect was Leonard A. Collins; general contractor was D.N.P.Contractors, Inc. These renovations were totally funded through gaming tax revenue budgeted to the Biloxi School District, with a cost of \$987,500 for the science labs and \$110,000 for the foreign language lab. The projects were debt-free, it was reported, and did not require a property tax increase to fund.

Although the state accreditation standards in 1996-1997 required a minimum local expenditure of \$15 per student, the Biloxi district provided \$23 per student at the high school level and \$21 per student for junior high and elementary schools, with an additional \$18 allocated for each special education student. Further, an allocation of \$15 per student is funded from sales tax funds. The budgets were managed by the school principals for the purpose of providing classroom supplies and costs of staff development training and conferences, according to Jude McDonnell, Director of Business ("Staff Newsletter," December 16, 1996).

The school district during 1995-1997 continued to make efforts to carry out programs and act on recommendations resulting from the Strategic Planning study in 1994-1995. Important elements of strategic planning included ongoing staff training, development of community-school partnership programs, curriculum evaluation and restructuring, and encouraging greater recognition and utilization of the diversity that is vital to the strength and unique heritage of Biloxi.

Implementation of a centralized information and resource center; cultural fairs; curriculum coordination; expanded and innovative uses of resource personnel; action plans to provide focused staff development sessions—all were among the district's growing recognition of the importance of strategic planning in directing efforts to move the Biloxi schools successfully into the 21st century ("Strategic Planning Update," *School Talk*, March 1997).

One important project was the initiation of a pilot program at Fernwood Junior High School and Gorenflo Elementary School as sites for an administration software package tracking student attendance, student discipline, and student grade reporting. Based on results from the pilot study, all the Biloxi schools would soon have those capabilities. The addition of computers for all schools gave access to the Internet and network access to the State Department of Education.

During the mid- and late 1990s Susan Hunt, longtime Biloxi educator who had served as principal at both Gorenflo and Michel, was named to the new position of coordinator of community outreach programs. She was influential in the development of many programs that fostered greater communication between school and community, school and parent, and school and business/industry. In addition, she used the position to create useful publications that highlighted the district's curriculum, student and staff achievements, information packets for Keesler-connected children transferring into the Biloxi schools, volunteer programs, and other important areas of school life. Miss Hunt's office was in the new Biloxi Schools Annex building, built with local funds and with no tax increase. The Annex Building housed the community outreach program, the

district's in-school-suspension classes, the graphics department, a special Board and public meeting room, offices, an open area for large meetings, and special smaller areas for individual programs. It is located directly west of the Biloxi High School building on Father Ryan Avenue on a site that had originally housed a neighborhood fire station.

Project Read, also in the Annex Building, is an alternative approach to language arts that has been designed to teach reading, written expression, comprehension concepts and skills to students in mainstream classrooms. It has also been used effectively with dyslexic students, ESL students, and those testing below the 25th percentile on standardized tests. The curriculum is divided into three strands—phonology, comprehension, and written expression or sentence structure. In addition, the Language! program introduced and supervised by coordinator Mrs. Martha Tripp is used with students who have not become fluent readers, writers, and speakers. The structured language program is designed for ease of individualization, taking students from their own developmental levels to the stage of literacy at which they can function.

Members of the Board at this time were Lucy Denton, president; John Tapper, Sr., vice president; Jimmie Roy, secretary; Jaye Brice, Ronnie Bogard, and Madelon Gruich, members.

One of the new procedures Dr. Drawdy put into effect soon after his becoming superintendent was the Parent-Teacher Conference Days scheduled twice each year; they were first used in October 1995 for parents to meet with teachers in scheduled conferences, to discuss their children's work, to see at firsthand what was being done in the schools, and to receive their children's first and third term report cards. Response by the parents was at a very high level.

On Wednesday, October 4, and Thursday, October 5, schools were closed because of the threat of Hurricane Opal, which hit the Florida-Alabama coast and which fortunately spared the Mississippi Gulf Coast

The Mississippi Adequate Education Program (MAEP) was passed in the 1997 state legislative session. According to State Superintendent Burnham, the new program was the most significant change in state funding for education since the Minimum Program was implemented in 1954. MAEP was designed to provide adequate funding for a school district to develop and implement an accreditation Level 3 education opportunity for children, regardless of the wealth of the district. Further, the funding initiative, according to Burnham, would increase the level of equity for children living in counties with high poverty levels" ("Staff Newsletter," May 7, 1997).

In 1997 the School Board voted a \$600 across-the-board increase to supplement the recent state-mandated teacher pay raise—the third local increase approved by the Board in the last four years, Director of Business Management Jude McDonnell said. In the "Staff Newsletter" he noted that for the 1993-94 school year "the Board authorized a \$1,375 across-the-board local raise. The Board again granted another local increase of \$475 the next year. The \$600 increase approved for the

1997-98 school year gave a cumulative total of \$2,450 of local increases during the four-year period and places Biloxi's teacher pay scale near the top in the state."

In his analysis of the pay raises, McDonnell noted that supplement increases are not often considered by school districts because those supplements must come entirely from local funding, most often requiring a tax increase. "Biloxi, however, has opted to use a portion of the gaming tax revenue to provide these well-deserved raises to our certified staff," he said. "The effect of the local raises during the four-year period has increased the salary of a teacher with no experience by an average of \$5,388, a 25.5 percent increase; whereas, a teacher's salary at the maximum point on the pay scale has increased an average of \$11,311, or 36.5 percent." The budget for the Biloxi Public Schools for the 1997-1998 school year was \$40,049,950.

At the beginning of the 1997-1998 school year, the administration gave a detailed report to the staff on the new curriculum frameworks prepared by the state.

The Biloxi Public School District Curriculum Office has distributed to teachers and principals a Course Syllabus or 'Content-by-Term' for each subject area K-12. The documents, with input from all teachers, were written based upon the Mississippi State Department of Education Curriculum frameworks and state assessment objectives. Each syllabus contains a cover sheet listing topics to be covered each term, term-by-term objectives, and an effective practices data sheet. The intent of the course syllabus is to promote consistency within the district, and to identify, based on data, the most effective instructional practices, resources, and timelines to teach specified tasks or skills. The Course Syllabus is a 'document in progress' that is expected to evolve into a standard, yet flexible, lesson plan.

Throughout the 1997-98 school year, teachers and principals are encouraged to provide frequent feedback as they implement the syllabus. Sequencing of objectives, clustering of skills, and lesson timeframes may be revised based upon evaluation of submitted data. To assist with the collection of feedback, an 'Effective Practices Data Sheet' has been included with each term's syllabus. As teachers complete instruction of a specific objective or cluster of objectives, they will indicate on the data sheet how long the initial presentation took in days, the percentage of students who passed the initial assessment of the objectives, and whether or not this objective is an essential skill. To ensure accuracy, it is suggested that the data sheet be completed on a regular basis alongside completion of weekly lesson plans. It is also important to note that objectives teachers are unable to cover in a given term should be carried over to the next term. (Prior to submitting the Effective Practices Data Sheet at the end of the term, teachers should xerox that term's sheet so documentation can be completed on not-yet-covered or clustered objectives.)

In addition to the curriculum content and lesson plan goals, the Curriculum Office is beginning to collect data to develop, with significant input from teachers, a consistent grading system for each grade level (K-6) or grade level (7-12). A standard scheme for the manner in which student achievement and performance is measured will help to provide consistency and equity for students throughout the district. ("Curriculum Update," Staff Newsletter, August 12, 1997)

By the summer of 1998, District Media Center Director Ann Denison announced that all library media centers were now automated, using Unison by Follett. Students and staff could access information from the on-line card catalog on search stations, and materials were scanned for circulation. The Biloxi Public Schools and the Parochial Schools were awarded a \$160,000 grant from the State Department of Education. The schools committed to the goal of wiring each school for local area network (LAN) and Internet access and to placing additional multimedia computers in targeted classrooms as funds become available. This has been an ongoing objective of the Biloxi schools, with implementation furthered with grants of almost \$2-million from E-Rate, through the School and Libraries Division of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

In the late 1990s the School Board and the administration made plans for school improvements and building that would be submitted to Biloxi voters in a bond issue proposal on May 19, 1998. With prominent businessmen Chevis Swetman and Alton Bankston heading the drive to pass the bond issue, many Biloxians rallied to the program

Looking back at the history of the capital improvements plan, one can trace the beginnings to the strategic plan instituted by Dr. Drawdy to give direction to the school district as it neared the end of the century. In addition, one can look back at the 1994 architectural study commissioned by the Board of Trustees to report on the condition of existing facilities and future needs. The report was compiled by the architectural firm of Guild, Jaubert, Guild, Slaughter, Allred, McNabb; it recommended a renovation and building program of approximately \$57,000,000.

Primary focus of the bond issue proposal was the new high school, to be built north of Biloxi Bay, the consolidation of the three junior high schools into a single junior high school occupying the present high school and Michel campuses, a new Nichols Family Life Center, extensive renovations at the present Biloxi High School, Michel, Beauvoir, Jefferson Davis, Lopez, and Popp's Ferry; and new elementary schools at DuKate, Gorenflo, and across the Bay.

Bankston called on members of a steering committee to work on the proposals. "It is vital to our community that we think not only of the present but of a vision for the future as we consider the education of our children," he wrote. "The only bond issue approved for the school district since 1959 was for air conditioning of all the Biloxi schools in 1984. That bond issue will be retired on December 1, 1999, leaving the district with no other bonded indebtedness. The most recent school plant built under a bond issue is Biloxi High School, constructed in 1960-1961. Many of our school buildings are much older than the high school, some of them having been built over 70 years ago."

By way of comparison, Bankston pointed out that in the past five or six years other Coast school districts had successfully proposed bond issues subsequently approved by voters in Harrison County, Gulfport, Jackson County, Stone County, Pascagoula, George County, and Hancock County. It was necessary, he added, for Biloxians to begin now to chart the future of the Biloxi

schools in a time when the city itself was undergoing significant changes in growth patterns and development.

A large number of volunteers worked to develop support for the \$35.5-million bond issue. The committee, urging voters to turn out so that the required sixty percent approval could be reached, made its case: "Educational progress is a process, not an event, and having good schools is never an accident. It is the result of continuing evaluation of present facilities and programs; providing buildings and equipment and resources that are appropriate and up-to-date; selecting the best qualified and most capable staff; and anticipating needs and making plans to take young people far into a successful future."

Efforts were made to answer questions often centered in use of gaming money received by the school district. It was pointed out that the district had received revenue from gaming for only the past five and one-half years, that the gaming revenue represented only an average of 7.5 percent of the total budget, and that the property tax millage rate to support the Biloxi schools had not increased at all in the past seven years, despite the dramatic and substantial costs for everything that went into school operations, including supplies, salaries, utilities, and equipment.

Biloxians were informed that sixty-five percent of the gaming revenue was used for recurring costs related to state-mandated salary increases for personnel and programs not state-funded; one-third was used for such things as classroom supplies, renovated restrooms, new school buses, local costs of new technology programs, extensive renovations of buildings and replacement of some classroom furniture in all schools. At 37.60, the Biloxi schools had the lowest millage rate for schools in South Mississippi. Gaming revenues, the public was told, had been used to keep the millage rate low and still operate the school district at an exceptionally high level of efficiency and effectiveness.

It was obvious before the vote that there was some organized opposition, most particularly from the ad hoc Save Nichols Coalition and from some residents who were concerned about traffic problems across the Bay.

On May 19, 1998, by a 24-vote margin, according to the *Herald* report the next day, the bond issue was turned down by Biloxi voters. For the people who had invested so much of their volunteer time and energy and pinned their hopes for the future on passage of the proposal, it was a particularly difficult time. The close vote, however, was a hopeful sign that the Board and the administration could reexamine the proposal, make changes they considered best in the total capital improvements program, and work closely with the city administration to move forward.

Dr. Drawdy wrote the staff in August 1998, expressing his appreciation for support of the bond issue proposal. "Even in defeat by the narrowest of margins—18 to 24 votes—we can still take a positive view that 59.61% of the people in this community indicated strong support for public education through their vote (a 60% favorable vote was required for passage of the bond issue). It is

disappointing to all of us, I think, that only about 25% of the electorate actually voted. At the time of this writing, the Board has not made a final decision about when or whether another bond issue proposal will be made ("Staff Newsletter," August 12, 1998).

In 1998 the Biloxi Public School District was awarded the highest accreditation level possible under state accreditation procedures, becoming a Level 5 school, one of very few in the state. It was a goal that the superintendent and the Board had set from the beginning of Dr. Drawdy's tenure, and the staff took great pride in this accomplishment.

It was not long, however, before the administration and the Board were working to refine a new bond issue proposal that would be submitted to the city's voters. A great deal of work and investigation and planning went into the new proposal, which this time would not include funding for the new high school or the elementary school across the Bay. It was decided to finance construction of the new high school through a capital-lease arrangement, financed largely through gaming revenue, and to use state funds to build the North Bay Elementary School. Still operating under the Federal Court Order resulting from the 1963 court decision regarding desegregation, the District sought approval by the United States District Court for the Southern District of Mississippi for its proposed changes in school make-up and operation.

On December 3, 1998, the district court issued the following order:

The District has determined to construct a new high school, to close two junior high schools and to consolidate the present three junior high schools into a single 7th grade school and an 8th and 9th grades school, to construct three new elementary schools, to close Howard II Elementary School and Dukate Elementary School, and to make renovations and additions to all other schools in the District. Except for the new elementary school across Biloxi Bay and general renovations, these plans are contingent upon passage in 1998 or 1999 of a bond issue to finance the construction.

THEREFORE, IT IS ORDERED, ADJUDGED, AND DECREED as follows:

1. A new high school for grades 10, 11, and 12 shall be constructed at a site across Biloxi Bay marked on the map attached to this Order as Exhibit "A."
2. Fernwood Junior High School and Nichols Junior High School shall be closed. All students in grade 7 will attend a consolidated 7th grade school at the current Michel Junior High School campus. All students in grades 8 and 9 will attend a consolidated 8th and 9th grade school at the current high school.
3. A new elementary school shall be constructed at a site across Biloxi Bay marked on the map attached to this Order as Exhibit "A." The District shall begin immediately the bid process to construct this new elementary school.

4. All elementary schools in the District shall have the same grade configuration of kindergarten through sixth grade.
5. Gorenflo Elementary School will be razed, and a new elementary school of the same name will be constructed on the same site. The new school building will have an approximate capacity of 500-550 students.
6. Nichols Junior High School will be razed, and a new elementary school known as Nichols Elementary School will be constructed on the same site. The new school building will have an approximate capacity of 350-400 students.
7. All other elementary schools will be renovated and improved. Student learning centers, computer laboratories, administrative and support staff spaces, and electric power upgrades may be made at Jefferson Davis Elementary School, Beauvoir Elementary School, and Popp's Ferry Elementary School.
8. Howard II Elementary School will be closed.
9. Dukate Elementary School will be closed.
10. The Court hereby approves the construction plans set forth in paragraphs 1-9 above. Approval is based upon the Court's consideration of the testimony and evidence at hearings on May 12 and 13, 1998, and all pleadings, memoranda, and exhibits filed in this action from December 1997 to date.
11. The District will propose to Plaintiffs revised attendance zones and resulting racial makeup for the elementary schools. If agreement is reached by the parties, such agreement will be submitted as supplemental order for the Court's approval. If agreement cannot be reached by the parties, the Court shall determine the new attendance zones for the elementary schools.
12. The construction and renovation described above is contingent upon passage of an approximate \$35-million bond issue by the voters of the District. The District understands that this Order is contingent upon its commitment to call for a referendum on such general obligation bonds before December 1998. If the bond referendum is delayed for any reason, the District agrees to call such referendum not later than May 1999. Upon passage of the bond issue, the order of new construction financed by the bond proceeds shall be the new high school followed, upon closure of the junior high schools, by Nichols Elementary School and Gorenflo Elementary School simultaneously.
13. If the bond issue is not approved, the District shall proceed to construct the new elementary school across Biloxi Bay and to make improvements and renovations to all facilities in the District on an equitable basis over a period of five to seven years. If the bond issue is not passed, the District will not construct the new high school, will not close the three junior high schools, will not build new elementary schools at the Gorenflo and Nichols sites, and may not close Howard II Elementary School and Dukate Elementary School. (Federal Court Order)

The Federal Court Order also noted that if for a period of three years from the date of the order the district satisfactorily complied with the terms of the agreement and supplemental orders dealing with racial makeup of students and faculty and minority recruitment, the district might move for a declaration of unitary status, declaring that the district has eliminated all vestiges of past discrimination and fully satisfied the consent order: "Satisfactory compliance with this Consent Order and any and all supplemental orders shall be prima facie proof that the District has achieved unitary status."

The following September, in a meeting with the Biloxi City Council, the School Board and Dr. Drawdy and other members of the administration discussed the likelihood of asking voters to approve a new capital improvements proposal. School Board president Jimmie Roy, whose distinguished service to the schools in a leadership role for several years had made him a particularly effective spokesman for the district, said, "There has been some healing and unity in our community, and I think everyone is on board to bring this community to the next level" (*Daily Herald*, September 23, 1998). Reporter Kristi Ruggles wrote that "The bond issue would still be \$35.5-million, but the burden on taxpayers would be less because more property is on the tax rolls." As it turned out, the bond issue would not still be \$35.5-million and substantial changes would be made in the plan submitted to Biloxians the following year.



(Pictured – School Board member Jimmie Roy, appointed to the Board in 1984, who served three terms as president of the Board and who worked tirelessly to help ensure passage of the bond issue and to support other school projects and programs during his long tenure as Board member. A Keesler Air Force Base executive, Mr. Roy was among Biloxi's most active civic workers, serving on numerous Boards and participating in an exceptionally wide variety of community activities. He was described by a Keesler officer as "a real inspiration to everyone . . . he leads by example, is strongly committed to excellence . . . and embodies the true spirit of Keesler." He was actively and effectively engaged in momentous changes in policies and school construction and planning for the future. Upon his death in 2000, an entire community paid its respects to a man whose life was dedicated to serving others, in particular the children of Biloxi and whose career was filled with honors. He was succeeded as a member of the School Board by his wife Mildred Roy.)

In the interim between the two separate bond issue proposals, the school district used funds from state sources to build the new North Bay Elementary School. The North Bay School was part of the entire capital improvements program, but it was not part of the bond issue. The administration and the Board also clarified total costs for the program.

The revised bond issue, to be submitted to voters on September 28, 1999, included the following: construction of two new elementary schools, Gorenflo and Nichols, at a cost of \$17-million, and

extensive elementary school improvements of Beauvoir, Jeff Davis, Lopez, and Popp's Ferry at a cost of \$10-million. The remaining \$2.5 million of the \$29.5-million bond issue would be used for school improvements in grades 7, 8, and 9, Howard II facility improvements, and bond issuance fees and expenses.

A capital lease project totaling \$31-million was being planned for a new Biloxi High School north of Biloxi Bay, a vocational-technology facility, and athletic and parking facilities. Under capital lease financing, these projects would be financed from general fund revenues, with what is commonly referred to as "casino money," payable over a 20-year period.

The Biloxi School Board made its long-range commitment to these projects, Dr. Drawdy wrote staff members on August 19, 1999, after the most intensive study and with input from many Biloxians who recognized the need to build today for a better future for all Biloxi children" ("Staff Newsletter").

Following passage of the \$29.5-million bond issue on September 28, 1999, in what was described by the administration as a resounding vote of approval by voters, the district began immediately to review the project completion schedule prepared by architects and submitted to the Board. Included in the schedule were bid advertising dates and dates for opening bids, together with projected dates for starting and finishing construction and renovation of schools. Both administration and Board officials emphasized that the dates—particularly in regard to starting and finishing construction—were tentative, with every step in the total process dependent on prior completion of the preceding step.

"A project this large and this complex first requires enormous effort in the planning," superintendent Larry Drawdy said, "and we are trying to make sure that everything is in place and carefully considered before any actual construction can begin. Right now we are in what the architects call the 'project definition phase,' and design of the new high school and related facilities, together with design of renovation and improvements to four elementary schools, under this tentative schedule would begin in December. We are not looking at beginning any construction until the middle of next year, when work would begin in the present elementary schools that will undergo extensive upgrading and renovation" ("City Newsletter").

Biloxi was one of the fifteen pilot districts selected for inauguration of the Mississippi Tech Prep program, helping to implement and evaluate the giant step into technology represented by Tech Prep. Building on that early start, Biloxi schools have seen the growth and the favorable results of providing technological resources in appropriate settings for Biloxi students, beginning with seventh, eighth, and ninth grade computer and technology introductory courses. Such programs are viewed as invaluable curricular roads into the 21st century for Biloxi students.

As the 1990s drew to a close, the Biloxi schools looked back at the past few years with a great deal of pride not only in the new building and renovation projects and increased staff benefits but also in

such accomplishments as having achieved the highest accreditation level, a 5.0 rating, awarded by the State Accrediting Commission; Biloxi High School's being named a Blue Ribbon School District by *Expansion Management Magazine* in 1998, the only school in the state so honored; National Board Certification by twelve district teachers; feature articles about the schools in the *Mississippi Professional Educators Journal* in March 1998; the high school's having been featured in *Teen People Magazine* in August 1999 and in *Seventeen Magazine* in 1998; expansion of support services to include Information on Demand, the Accelerated Reader Program, Project Read, Elementary Peer Counselors, Parenting Programs, and school nurses in all schools; teacher assistance teams; HOSTS Award for Quality Assurance in 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2000, six Reading Renaissance Model Classrooms in 1999-2000; and numerous honors won by Biloxi teachers.

While Biloxi was celebrating its Tricentennial in 1999, the Biloxi schools were beginning a journey into the twentieth century that would start with an impressive building program.



Biloxi School Board – 1998

Mrs. Madelon Gruich, Mrs. Jaye Brice, Ms. Patti Golden, Board Attorney,

Mrs. John Tapper, Mr. Jimmie Roy, Mr. Rick Stewart, Dr. Larry Drawdy,

Superintendent, KAFB Liaison Lt. Col. Jim Boynton