



Ferguson's Curriculum Team Making A Difference

TUPELO, Miss. — When it comes to giving students the best opportunity to succeed in any classroom environment, Amy Ferguson isn't afraid to roll up her sleeves and dive into the field of play.

Being connected with each school, she says, is the key to success.

As the Tupelo Public School District Elementary Curriculum Director, Ferguson has assembled a talented and dedicated team of five instructional coaches to aid students in kindergarten through fifth grade reach their highest potential.

In her second year with this role, she's seen a shift from a district curriculum team to a school-based curriculum team, meaning she has one coach working with all K-2 schools and one coach in all four of the 3-5 schools.

"We want to be a coach for instruction," said Ferguson, a former teacher and principal. "We have our people in buildings to be a liaison for teachers. We want to empower them to give them the tools they need to be successful with the standards, but also to be someone that listens to the voice of teachers and to be someone to partner with the teachers to make sure we are really effective in growing students."

To reach her goals, she's strategically placed her coaches in the schools that play best to their individual skills. April Gray, in her first year as a coach, oversees all K-2 schools. At Lawhon is

Janet Tubb, while Susan Hankins is at Lawndale. Rounding out the team is Latonya Slater at Pierce Street and Celeste Ellis at Rankin.

So, how do the coaches interact with the teachers and staff at their respective school? For starters, all five have their own specific role within each building. They do fall under the direction and supervision of the principals, who then decide how each one is best utilized.

But despite being located throughout the district, all five instructional coaches use the same mechanisms for success.

“We provide collaborative support,” Ferguson said. “You’ll see them at PLCs (professional learning communities) where they are collaborating with teachers and working as part of the team, or we will coach one-on-one with the teachers. So, if there are teachers who need more instructional support or have a challenging group, then you’ll find that coach going in partnering with the teachers.”

The ideal of a curriculum team started to evolve seven years ago when Ferguson was researching solutions to help struggling students. She’d start by developing a vision, and then cultivating that vision within the schools. In essence, she went from working with struggling students to now working with all students.

“What I’ve learned is that the same things that worked with struggling students work with all students,” Ferguson said.

It’s a responsibility she doesn’t take lightly, and one that begins with the standards set forth by the Mississippi Department of Education. But when it comes to attacking those standards, it’s Ferguson’s job to navigate and personalize the best path for Tupelo.

“We pull together teacher teams, and teachers help us to develop what we call the Tupelo curriculum,” Ferguson explained. “Then our coaches help us to put that plan into action. We meet weekly as a team and talk about the needs of the district level and the needs we see at the school-based level and what we need to work on to move forward.”

How is that achieved? Well, it starts with developing power standards. Her team will dissect all standards to determine what was most heavily tested and how well all students did. They will then determine in every grade level what those power standards are and what standards need the most focus.

“We teach all the standards to mastery,” she said. “But we want to make sure the non-negotiables are covered. Another thing that we do is have interim assessments throughout the year. We will have an assessment three times a year to prepare for the end result.

“We work with teachers to decide in pacing what needs to be taught at different times of the year. So, we decide what should be taught first term and what should be taught second term.

Then we are able to assess our students at those different bench marks. Like a doctor would take a checkup, we are able to see what our students' needs are and what instructional strategies we need to employ so our teachers are ready to attack what the standards say they need to."

The impact has been seen and felt. Even other districts have reached out for advice.

"We're always learning," Ferguson said. "We're here to help the teachers and administrators be the best they can be. We're here to provide the tools to help our teachers."

And the best way to do that is by being in the field, or in this case, out in the schools.

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