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## Lamar County Schools Commit to Progress

After two years of work, and input from dozens of people, the Lamar County School District has a new strategic plan for this school year – one that includes four major goals and 20 measurable objectives to go with each goal.

"I think accountability is important," said district superintendent Ben Burnett who was at the helm of the plan.

The district has had a strategic plan in place since 2000. But Burnett made updating and improving on that plan one of the platforms in his 2007 campaign for superintendent.

On Oct. 18, the Lamar County School Board approved the new strategic plan for the district.

"If we meet our goals in the strategic plan, we'll have a better system of educating our children, and that's why we exist," Burnett said.

The four goals of the plan are:

- Maximize academic success of all children.
- Unite school communities.
- Provide a safe and secure learning environment for students and staff members.
- Plan for the future, anticipating budget and facility needs.

The plan involved the input of many people, including the architects of the original plan, the executive director of the Mississippi School Boards Association, school board members and school administrators, including 15 school principals and assistant principals.

### **Accountability**

"To me, a strategic plan for a school or business, is a systematic process to plan the organization's future," Burnett said. "To do that, you have to develop goals and objectives and steps to achieve them. You also need to review those objectives each year to hold yourself accountable for your progress."

Some of the 20 objectives include:

- Reduce the number of schools not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress goal (as determined by No Child Left Behind Act) from 1 to 0 by 2011. (The school not meeting AYP is Oak Grove High School.)
- Hold district-wide community meetings in January to determine how the school district can better serve student needs.
- Develop a drug task force between the school district and other local law enforcement and drug prevention agencies to train staff and parents on warning signs of drug use and possible resources.
- Every school will meet average daily attendance of 96 percent by May. (Average daily attendance in 2009-2010 was 95.5 percent, according to Burnett.)

Developing the four goals, let along the objectives, was a long process for Burnett.



Burnett kept the three goals of the original strategic plan, but enhanced them, making them more appropriate for the district now.

Then Burnett added a fourth goal, after meeting with the writers of the initial plan.

"One of the first things I did was meet with the original core team of the strategic plan. That happened the first year I was in office," Burnett said. "The biggest outcome from that meeting was to add the goal to prepare for the future for the school district with the growth that was coming."

Burnett then took the four goals he had developed to the school board.

Last year, the five board members and Burnett met with Mike Waldrop, executive director of the Mississippi School Boards Association to talk further about the plan.

"We wanted to be sure we set some broad goals that were easily measurable," said board president Kyle Hill. "We wanted them to be broad enough that they could stand down the road. It was casting a vision that we wanted for the school district."

Then came the task of setting the objectives – which Burnett wanted to see accomplished in the 2010-2011 school year.

Burnett involved his assistant superintendents, his administrators, his school principals and his assistant principals.

### **Defined goals**

Assistant Superintendent of Academic Education Carolyn Adams had input on the objectives.

"If all of us don't improve, we will fall behind," she said. "We do expect improvement every year."

Assistant Superintendent of operations Johnny Downs says the defined goals and objectives give him direction.

"If you don't have a strategic plan, you're just wondering what you need to do and when you need to do it," he said.

Lamar County school principals say the strategic plan is helping them do their jobs.

"In everything that we teach our children, and with our teachers, you have to have the end in mind," said Oak Grove Lower Elementary School Principal Teresa Jenny. "The strategic plan says 'this is what we want.' This gives me some guidance as to what I need to do with my school."

"If we don't have goals, we don't know what we're trying to accomplish," said Oak Grove Upper Elementary School Principal Donna Rigel. "When we got the strategic plan, we knew – this is what we're trying to accomplish this year."

Burnett says everyone in the school district is aware of the strategic plan and what's in it.

"I e-mailed to the entire school district that it had been updated on the website, to look over it and to become familiar with it," he said. "I also expect our administrators to communicate it to staff."

Burnett says he'll be reviewing the goals and objectives throughout the year to see if progress is being made, with a final review coming around September 2011.

In the meantime, he's put the strategic plan on the school district's website where everyone in the community can see it, along with a copy of how the district did meeting last year's less developed plan.

"You have to say, 'here are priorities for us,' he said." "We'll be evaluating as we go. We'll be discussing objectives in district administrative meetings, because if you're going to reach a goal, you have to evaluate it."