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One Stop Along the Corridor of Shame: A Portrait of Public Education in Marlboro County in the Post-No Child Left Behind Years

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To the Dean of the Graduate School:

We are submitting a thesis written by Jackson Branch entitled “One Stop Along the Corridor of Shame: A Portrait of Public Education in Marlboro County in the Post-No Child Left Behind Years”.

We recommend acceptance in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in History.

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ONE STOP ALONG THE CORRIDOR OF SHAME:

A PORTRAIT OF PUBLIC EDUCATION IN MARLBORO COUNTY IN THE POST-NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND YEARS

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty

Of the

College of Arts and Sciences

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the

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Of

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In History

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By

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Abstract

In the years following the passage of the historic No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, South Carolina has dropped to having one of the lowest ranked public education systems in the United States. As many schools in South Carolina are rural and in high poverty areas, this should have been a state where the federal legislation made great strides towards closing the education gap. One of the greatest struggling counties in the state, Marlboro, has seen its share of troubles since the passage of NCLB. This thesis will look at Marlboro County in the post-NCLB years and will examine (1) how the county fared with testing and other measurements of progress, (2) what kept teachers from doing their jobs well, and (3) some areas in which the district did thrive. While NCLB's narrower focus on curriculum and state standards was intended to help specify the information students should know and help them succeed on state testing, the opposite largely occurred, and more students fell farther behind. In addition to this, the new guidelines created by NCLB created more oversight on teachers and their classrooms, which caused many to grow frustrated within the profession.

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I want to thank my interviewees for speaking to me about their time working in Marlboro County. Thank you for your candid honesty about your time working in the district and for giving great guidance about being in a system that is struggling. Finally, I want to dedicate this to Marlboro County. I spent eight years in public schools there and have seen firsthand some of the struggles that still exist today. I hope that this discussion

about the school district can help both it and the county come to a better and more prosperous place.

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Introduction

In 2019, the last typical year for schools prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, one public school district in South Carolina found itself locked in a cycle of educational hardship. End-of-year test results showed that only 23% of students in Marlboro County met or exceeded expectations in both English and math, trailing behind the state average of 45%. The other 73% were either close to meeting the expectation or falling further behind, yet the state still defined them both as "need[ing] additional support to be prepared for the next grade level."[1] At least 99.8% of students were tested in 2019. With numbers such as these, what was the district doing to ensure academic success? What caused the fall to such a low point?

Eighteen years prior, newly elected President George W. Bush found one of his first major victories with the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act, a sweeping education bill aimed to target students facing higher disadvantages in education and help bring them towards state and national averages. Many believed that with hard work and setting high goals, substantial change could be seen by 2014. One of those districts that Bush would have had in mind was a small county in the Pee Dee region of South Carolina, Marlboro County. Marlboro certainly fell under the umbrella of areas struggling to succeed and should have found success with NCLB, yet this was not the case.

[1] "Academic Achievement," Marlboro County School District – 2018-2019, SC School Report Card, https://screportcards.com/overview/academics/academic-achievement/details/?y=2019&t=D&sid=3501000&q=eT0yMDE5JnQ9RCZzaWQ9MzUwMTAwMA.

Marlboro County is home to 26,000 residents, made up of five small towns (Bennettsville, Blenheim, Clio, McColl, and Wallace), and has had anywhere from nine to ten schools operating at one time in the twenty-first century. The county is on the edge of what has become known as the "Corridor of Shame," an area of the state where a vast majority of the schools are dilapidated, both academically and structurally. While some school buildings have been kept up, the quality of education in the district leaves much to be desired.

With the passing of NCLB, the federal government believed that more direct involvement in public education would ultimately help bridge the gap between areas where educational progress was vastly different, specifically in lower and higher income areas. Marlboro County should have been a prime candidate for this experiment to take place. Thinking about the broader legislation from President Bush's perspective, surely Marlboro County would be an area where much improvement could be made as the century progressed. However, even with NCLB in place, the county continued to struggle, and often scored less than comparable districts. If legislation and funding flowed towards disadvantaged counties with the intent to help, why did the federal support not help? What happened?

The case of public schools in Marlboro County is not only intriguing because the district had fallen so far behind, but also because it completely contradicted a narrative about the state of education in South Carolina drafted in the early twenty-first century. By this time, many believed the state was on a fast track to implement extremely promising educational reform. South Carolina became well known across the nation. State superintendent of education Inez Tenenbaum received acclaim for turning around SAT

scores and NAEP ratings in the state, and publications like *Quality Counts* and *Education Weekly* even identified the state as a nationwide leader in areas such as accountability and standards. This narrative complemented the high standards that the state had set for itself, claiming that by 2010, they would be able to boast "one of the fastest improving systems in the country."[2] NCLB was meant to help all students receive a quality education. One would think that if progress was being made, as many were claiming during the mid-2000s, then results would be seen across the entire state, not just in more affluent districts.

This; however, was not the case for Marlboro County. While standardized testing cannot, and should not, be the sole factor in determining the effectiveness of either students or teachers, it certainly suggests how both are faring, and the data for Marlboro does not show great progress. Throughout the twenty-first century, the district struggled to maintain steady progress; and while there years when some improvement was made, lackluster test results, administrative issues, and seemingly ineffective teachers marred the district. If a stereotype existed that schools in impoverished and rural areas were bound to struggle and possibly fail, it appeared on the surface that Marlboro would be the poster child.

That said, the district also had areas of success. Some schools performed on par with other schools based on the same criteria. At the only high school in the district, graduate rates improved during the twenty-first century. This was an impressive feat for the district. Throughout this period, there was also one middle school, the School of

[2] "State SAT average rises another 7 points; 5-year improvement rate still tops in U.S.," Press Release, South Carolina Department of Education, last modified Tuesday, August 30, 2005. www.myscschools.com (archived content).

Discovery, which consistently performed well and boasted testing scores on a level of some of the best school districts in the state. These areas show that the district was capable of progress and meeting standards, even if it was not consistent.

Through analysis of data from the Marlboro County School District, as well as interviews with former teachers and administrators, this study will serve to analyze the history and progress of the district in the twenty-first century. While there have been some strides toward improvement, the district largely has failed to maintain progress in reaching the standards set by the state. The story of the Marlboro County School District also falls in line with two larger narratives that have been told throughout the twenty-first century. First, many of those who have taught and worked in the district largely say educational discrepancies among South Carolina counties is the fault of the teachers who work there, as a rural district such as Marlboro does not generally attract the strongest educators. Second, districts in areas such as Marlboro are doomed to fail, since little can be done to rejuvenate those students who are already so far behind.

A number of educators were interviewed for this thesis, and among them the consensus seems to be that the district's problems began at the turn of the century. The schools in the district were good work environments and highly prosperous up until the mid-to-late 1990s. Change occurred in the district after the passing and early implementation of NCLB, which suggests that negative trends in education in places like Marlboro County occurred after NCLB altered the landscape of public education. NCLB pushed for standardized testing, and subsequently many educators began to share frustrations they had with the profession and the endless need for paperwork, student data, and more intense oversight by their administrators. In interviews done for this

thesis, educators did not think the passing of NLCB had a direct impact on their daily tasks as teachers. But it seems that there was a direct negative correlation for many teachers For their part, they simply wanted to educate their students to the best of their abilities without jumping through the new hoops placed before them.

This study also aims to place the story of the district in the twenty-first century alongside other schools that struggled with the legislation. Around the time NCLB was being discussed and passed into law, many educational scholars were beginning to say that the legislation would not have the intended effect, and this seems to be true for Marlboro. Some of these ideas will be analyzed with Marlboro County in mind, offering a unique perspective on the history of education in the post-NCLB years. This analysis also offers a new approach to understanding the history of South Carolina, as the state is severely struggling in education in the present day and is ranked among the worst in the United States in trying to maintain standards. Looking at what went wrong in the district in these years will hopefully offer insight as to what could be changed to better help it in the future.

This thesis is generally organized chronologically and ends by placing education in South Carolina in general and Marlboro County in particular in a broader context. Chapter One will give a brief history of the federal government seeking a greater role in public education, a trend that dates back to President Lyndon B. Johnson. There has long been a push for greater federal oversight in education and understanding why it took so long to get passed will shed light on its effectiveness. Chapter Two will offer a brief discussion on the NCLB legislation that was passed in late 2001. This legislation was a turning point in public education across the country, and it can be argued that issues

plaguing schools to this day are because of the legislation. Understanding the legislation and what it intended to do is crucial before looking at any potential ramifications. Chapters Three and Four will talk about some of the major issues that have kept Marlboro County from growing and excelling in the twenty-first century. Chapter Three will look at teachers and school administrators in the district and will highlight the differences between some who were highly effective and others who were not. Chapter Four will look at what South Carolina teachers, including some interviewed for this thesis, viewed as their largest hurdles: a lack of parental involvement, the presence of standardized testing, and oversight on what they taught in their classrooms. Chapter Five will talk about the School of Discovery, a school that excelled for years in the district, only to be shut down in 2019. Chapter Six will take an extensive look at the district's testing data. This data is an important barometer for measuring a district's success or lack thereof. Finally, Chapter Seven will contextualize this study amongst the broader narrative of struggling rural schools in the twenty-first century. Many of these schools are truly still being left behind, and understanding how Marlboro fits into the larger narrative will hopefully shed light on how the district can move forward, experience improvement, and help students succeed.

The historical impact of NCLB is something that is seldom studied, let alone its impact on the rural parts of South Carolina. Looking at how this legislation affected Marlboro County will enrich the history of the state and help contextualize the current state of education, which has taken a fall from grace from what was being lauded in 2005. In fact, looking at the state of education in South Carolina in the late 2010s and early 2020s (prior to the disruption of public education due to the COVID-19 pandemic)

presents an entirely different picture from that of 2005. At this recent point in the state's history, many independent studies that rank the fifty states in education based on factors such as teacher credentials, funding, class size, and performance generally put South Carolina in the bottom forties, at times falling as low as forty-five or forty-six. If South Carolina was riding on a wave of success according to its own superintendent of education in 2005, what happened to the trajectory of that course in just fifteen short years?

Chapter One

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Beyond:

The Federal Government's First Major Venture into Regulating Education

The road to education reform that would impact the most impoverished, rural, and educationally disadvantaged parts of the country was not an idea that was born with George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Tackling this issue has been on the mind of almost every president since Lyndon Baines Johnson, with different tactics and outlooks largely falling on either side of the political line. However, all these different men would agree that this truly was an issue that was affecting millions of children and reforming the educational system and helping better public education would largely benefit the country as a whole.

Looking at the different legislation from the latter half of the twenty-first century, some of which passed while others did not, shows how the national mindset was geared towards the issue of education and in what ways it was trying to be addressed and reformed. Lyndon B. Johnson laid the framework with his Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and the criticism of it became a part of the national conversation for the remaining part of the century. Almost every president who followed either agreed with it and wanted to help it better succeed or opposed it and wanted to scrap it and move things in a different direction. Regardless, this sweeping legislation permanently changed the tide on public education in the United States, and there will likely never be a time where things will go back to the way they were before ESEA.

Looking at the goal of ESEA, as well as the criticisms that were aimed at it by numerous politicians and outside organizations, will help to better lay the framework for the state of education that Bush inherited when he took office and set out to pass NCLB. ESEA certainly changed the national conversation and understanding it will better help to understand the significance of NCLB. This chapter will largely look at ESEA but will also offer a look at legislation that was also proposed by Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Bill Clinton. Different aspects of legislation that were proposed but never passed during their presidencies ended up taking shape when Bush passed NCLB. Understanding the road to that legislation and the long battle surrounding reforming public education will not only set up the context of its passage in 2001, but also how effective it was when it was implemented.

LBJ

After unexpectedly assuming the office of the presidency in late 1963, the following January brought Lyndon B. Johnson his first State of the Union address and with it his first major initiative as president. What came to be known as his "War on Poverty" was birthed out of a concern that the national poverty rate was holding steadfast at around 19%, and from that came a variety of programs under the Great Society that were intended to combat and reduce this number. Naturally, attention was soon turned to the realm of education. Later that year, President Johnson tasked John Gardner, president of the Carnegie Corporation and eventual head of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, with investigating the state of education in the country and to formulate new lines of thinking concerning the role that the federal government played in education.

Gardner ultimately recommended a targeted approach to federal aid and spending, predominantly towards areas with a higher concentration of poor children. Thus, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was born on April 11, 1965, with Title I declaring that the intent was to "provide financial assistance to local educational agencies serving areas with high concentrations of children from low-income families to expand and improve their educational programs by various means."[1] While this may have been the intention of the federal government, the execution of this on the local levels varied greatly and gave rise to opposition of the legislation.[2]

The text of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 tried to provide a precise indicator of which students would receive greater aid, although textual vagueness led way to exploitation. When initially discussing and proposing the legislation, President Johnson made it very clear that the ones who were supposed to receive the help via funding and grants were students who were "children of low-income families" who, as being educationally deprived, had "special educational needs."[3] However, the parameters which were used to determine this were vague. Data on child poverty was used to determine how much funding a district would receive, with the intention that individual districts would target the specific schools which were eligible to receive Title I aid and use this funding towards enhancement programs that would exclusively aid students who fell under Johnson's description. However, since funding

[1] An Act to strengthen and improve educational quality and educational opportunities in the Nations elementary and secondary schools, H. Res. 2362, 89th Congress, Statute at Large 79, Stat. 27. (April 11, 1965).

[2] Janet Y. Thomas and Kevin P. Brady, "The Elementary and Secondary Act at 40: Equity, Accountability, and the Evolving Federal Role in Public Education," *Review of Research in Education,* Vol. 29 (2005): 51-2. https://www.jstor.org/stable/3568119.

[3] ESEA, 1965.

was distributed to schools based on their percentage of children who came from low-income households, it was entirely possible, and likely, that there were some students reaping the benefits of ESEA funding whose parents were not poor and had no greater educational needs of their own.[4]

Despite the high gains that President Johnson anticipated accomplishing through the implementation of the ESEA, numerous gaps in the legislation itself made this very difficult. For starters, many may have viewed Title I of the ESEA, which dealt with all the funding, as an additional source of financial aid to districts across the nation. However, this was not the case. Instead, this was more of a "categorical aid," as defined by political scientist Patrick McGuinn.[5] In reality, funding was quickly abused and used for other purposes, as the parameters for its distribution were vague and there was virtually no enforcement or oversight on the ones who were handling the funds. Despite this abuse, both those for and against the legislation believed that the federal goal in education would likely be expanded from that moment forward, something that was largely to the liking of Democrats and dismay of Republicans. For Democrats, this was something that had long been desired, while many Republicans feared that it would make way for the federal government having more control over education and what was taught in schools. Regardless, the initial $1 billion poured out to schools nationwide was just the start of federal spending into the program. Just three years after the passing of the ESEA,

[4] ESEA, 1965; "ESEA at 40"; John F. Jennings, "Title IL its legislative history and its promise," *Phi Delta Kappan 81*, no. 7 (March 2000): 516-22. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=eft&AN=503642078; Patrick J. McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965-2005* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 30-3.

[5] McGuinn, 32.

the new levels of spending on education reached a staggering level: ten years prior in 1958, the number sat at $375 million; now, in 1968, that number was around $4.2 billion. As McGuinn also notes, the federal share in education in that same time window also jumped from three percent up to ten. As more money began to flow into public schools, more controversy began to engulf the legislation and its implementation.[6]

In the years following the passing of the ESEA, the legislation was met with much criticism from educators, politicians, and activist groups. One of the first vocal opponents came from an unlikely organization: the National Education Association (NEA). While the legislation was still being drafted and had yet to pass Congress, the NEA made it clear they were extremely disappointed that private schools were eligible for receiving ESEA funding if they fell under the parameters, as the legislation could essentially lead to federal funding of private schools. To garner the support of the NEA, it was then established that a public trustee would be the one to administer the funds, which was a role that was almost always fulfilled by the public school district. Another heavy source of criticism proved to be congressional Republicans, who largely opposed the passing of the legislation. One of the main fears of Republicans was that through providing more direct financial aid to districts, it would essentially amount to the federal government having complete control over curriculum and standards that were being taught in public schools. While there was a veto-proof majority and nothing needed to be done to quell the fears of those in opposition to the legislation, Johnson instructed a section be added that explicitly stated that the federal government could have no direct

[6] McGuinn, 30-5.

control over education and curriculum in schools. Despite this, ESEA still did not receive any support from congressional Republicans in either chamber of Congress.[7]

One of the final main opposition groups to ESEA was the NAACP, who highlighted their many concerns in a report published in 1969. One of the main areas of concern was that Title I funding was not even reaching the students for whom it was intended. For instance, twenty-three of Louisiana's sixty-four counties gave close to $650,000 in equipment to schools that were deemed ineligible to participate in Title I. In Washington DC, around $225,000 was given to twenty-five elementary schools whose attendance was made up of less than half of the students who fell under the ESEA criteria. However, these problems were not just limited to the southeastern region of the United States. This report highlighted two counties in California, Sanger and Shasta, who faced their own issues in distributing these funds. Sanger spent $15,000 of funds to establish a portable classroom unit at a school that was not eligible to receive funding, and from 1965 to 1968, Shasta gave money to three high schools when only one of these was found to be eligible in an independent audit. It was only after this report that the other two schools were dropped from funding.[8]

When reading this report highlighting the problems that were plaguing ESEA implementation in the mid to late 1960s, it is best to keep in mind that the original intent of the Title I funding was not to service all students in the eligible schools, but instead only the specific students in these schools who fell under the criteria initially set by President Johnson. What the NAACP found was that instead of funding being used

[7] Ibid.

[8] NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. *Title I of ESEA: Is It Helping Poor Children?* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Research Project, 1969), 9.

heavily on a specific subsect of students, it was instead being distributed "so thinly to so many children that there is little reason to expect any substantial gain in academic achievement from Title I participants."[9] Once again, specific examples were provided. For instance, a principal in Mississippi admitted that all students at the high school he worked at were receiving the benefits of the funding even though all were not eligible. In Chicago alone, $3.8 million in films and equipment were sent to all schools in an area of high poverty, rather than just those who had the higher concentration that was established by the ESEA.[10]

Reagan, Bush 41, and Clinton

While the presidents following Johnson also made their own attempts to fix what they perceived was wrong with the ESEA, the next substantial change came under the presidency of Ronald Reagan. After taking the office of the president in 1981, Reagan began to heavily highlight the nationwide problem of poor academic performance. This scrutiny came at a time where support for the ESEA was at an all-time low. Many independent reports throughout the 1970s showed that overall, ESEA implementation was failing to accomplish what it originally set out to do. While schools that had many underprivileged children were receiving more funding, it did not change that the schools largely did not know how to adequately put it to good use, which led to a lack of substantial change. In addition, data from around 500 schools showed that the difference between per-student expenditures of poor and rich schools were still at a great distance.

[9] Ibid., 11.
[10] Ibid., 9-12.

At the same time, Johnson's Great Society was coming under fire, with critics from both political parties saying that the funds that were intended to be used to help poorer Americans get back on their feet and better their lives were instead having the opposite effect by promoting a dependency on the government.[11]

In 1983, increased attention was placed on the situation in the United States' public education system. That year, Reagan's secretary of education ordered a commission to investigate the issue and provide solutions. With the publishing of the National Commission on Excellence in Education's report entitled *A Nation at Risk* came recommendations that included hiring more qualified teachers, implementing more complex academic standards, and emphasizing the role the federal government played in fixing the problem that plagued many public schools. As the Reagan White House distorted the results of this report to align with his wishes for education in the United States, many states began to drastically take a more direct approach to fixing their broken schools: forty-one states implemented higher standards, and twenty-nine required a test for teacher certification.[12]

Reagan's successor, George H.W. Bush, held an education summit in 1989 that intended to once and for all find a solution to the issues that plagued the ESEA. At this, it was decided that while the ESEA did have good intentions, the thing that it needed to succeed was more accountability in both standards and spending. Two years later, Bush introduced a massive legislation entitled America 2000, which called for national standards and testing for all students. Despite the bill passing the House, it was killed in

[11] "ESEA at 40," 52-4; McGuinn, 37-41.
[12] "ESEA at 40," 53-4; McGuinn, 42-3, 46.

the Senate by a filibuster conducted by members of his own party. While Bush, who tried to sell himself as the "education president," presented no other strides towards fixing education in the United States, the ideas outlined in America 2000 did "[act] as a catalyst for education reform based on the activism of states and the development of academic standards common to all students."[13]

In 1994, Bill Clinton built on this reform with legislation called Goals 2000, which was able to pass Congress. These two legislations had goals that largely mirrored one another, although Clinton's went into greater detail. Clinton also built upon the ESEA with the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA). One of the major implementations of the IASA was requiring school districts to meet a predetermined adequate yearly progress, and those that did not were to be singled out and put on a plan to make improvements. Seeing as this policy called for greater measures of accountability in exchange for the funding being provided, Clinton was met with support from some Republicans, something unusual up until this point when coming from a Democratic president. As Clinton noted, "This bill says the national government will set the goals. We will help develop measurements to see whether [you are] meeting the goals. But you will get to determine how you're going to meet the goals."[14] Still, many Democrats were concerned that though there was now a requirement of testing to showcase progress or lack thereof, this would pale in comparison to what they viewed as the greater needs: more resources and funding. Meanwhile, others claimed that the repercussions for schools who did not meet their goals were not nearly severe enough. Though Clinton did

[13] "ESEA at 40," 54.
[14] McGuinn, 97.

make sweeping changes, there was still a desire for greater change and more partisan compromise, which George W. Bush inherited when he took office in 2001.[15]

Conclusion

Since 1964, the way public education was viewed in politics was highly debated, with those debates often falling down partisan lines. While George W. Bush was the one who passed what came to be known as the largest education reform in history, his predecessors paved the way for this, and Bush learned from their mistakes and incorporated those lessons into No Child Left Behind.

The lack of accountability under Johnson's ESEA, the push towards higher qualified teachers under the Reagan administration, the introduction of national and state standards under H.W. Bush's America 2000, and the proposed AYP under Clinton's Goals 2000 were all taken into consideration and incorporated into Bush's legislation that he was able to pass. The latter half of the 20th century was a long road regarding the attempt to change education for those who were falling behind, and many of these components found their way into what was eventually able to be passed. While they were mostly good in intention, it remained to be seen if they made way for any meaningful change for those in rural America.

[15] "ESEA at 40," 54-5; McGuinn, 51-6, 94-8.

Chapter Two

No Child Left Behind:

A Brief History of Its Passage and Its Content

From its inception until the years after its passing and implementation into schools, No Child Left Behind was viewed as deeply flawed and was highly criticized by educators and lawmakers alike. The legislation was a staple of President George W. Bush's domestic agenda, and he felt that helping students stuck in the cycle of poverty would cause the nation to flourish. This legislation was built upon the backs of presidents dating back to Lyndon B. Johnson, as almost every president since then had tried to make sweeping education reform a reality, which would have increased the federal government's role in education.

However, with the passing of NCLB came critics who said that its implementation would be detrimental to those it was trying to help most. Many argued that this was creating a "one size fits all" approach to schooling and was instilling in children in impoverished schools that the only thing that truly mattered was their results on standardized testing. Others harkened that some of the parameters for teacher quality and measuring a school's growth were flawed and were not providing a holistic view of how a school was performing.

This chapter will look at NCLB and the significance it holds in the history of education. Looking at its initial introduction and passing in Congress will show how it truly was a monumental achievement for President Bush in the early days of his

presidency. Then, analyzing some of the key components of the legislation will bring to light what its broad intentions were and what was expected to be accomplished for students in under-performing areas. Lastly, discussing some of the major criticisms of the legislation shows that there were deep flaws in NCLB from the beginning and that it was very idealistic in how it attempted to help students rise to the national average.

History of Passage

On January 20, 2001, George W. Bush marked his inauguration with a bold promise: that he would make education the top priority of his presidency. He saw that many of the schools across the United States were struggling and locked in a deep cycle of falling behind, and he firmly believed that improving the nation's schools would help improve the country. He had developed a blueprint for a sweeping new education reform, and in his first days of office he sent his No Child Left Behind bill to Congress. While many of his predecessors had tried to make sweeping education reform as well, his was drastically different: he only proposed an outline so that room would be left for debate, as he desperately wanted this to be a bipartisan effort.[1]

Doing this immediately distanced Bush from many of his fellow Republicans, who would have preferred to take away funding from public schools and instead allocate it for vouchers or the creation of more charter schools. Instead, Bush firmly believed that "change will not come by disdaining or dismantling the federal role in education."[2] The debate that followed had the Bush administration walking the fine line between

[1] Patrick J. McGuinn, *No Child Left Behind and the Transformation of Federal Education Policy, 1965-2005* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 165-6.

[2] Ibid., 166

Republicans who still wanted to allocate funds for these and Democrats who wanted to exponentially increase funding for public schools, thinking that this was a component to public schools having poor results. Throughout the months of debate, both parties were consistently hung up on their respective beliefs, and Bush kept the debate going by harkening to the polling that showed most Americans were in support of new legislation aimed at education.[3]

Throughout negotiations, congressional Republicans consistently felt that Bush was turning his back on them and would end up offering little to decentralize and privatize education, two aspects they longed for. As many Democrats were against the bill solely because they were not eager to work closely with a Republican president, Bush had an uphill climb from the early days of negotiations and had to give much to congressional Democrats in terms of funding and increased accountability. However, there was an interesting component in getting both parties to tamper down their respective expectations: outside business groups. Many of these groups were lobbying in favor of stringent requirements for testing, teacher quality, and school improvement plans. They believed that there was a direct correlation between how schools were faring academically and the future of the labor force and saw that there needed to be great strides towards improvement to secure a strong workforce for the years to come.[4]

After months of debate, the bill initially passed Congress with extremely wide margins. In the House, this was 384-45, and in the Senate, it was 91-8. While the legislation had passed, there was still work needed on how funding was to be allocated

[3] McGuinn, 167-8, 173-5.
[4] Ibid., 174.

and to what degree school accountability would look like. Many in Congress believed that hinging a school's success on their Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) reports was too high of a bar to reach, and that many schools would already be failing. However, these talks were put to rest for a recess, and the terrorist attacks on September 11 occurred before discussions began again. After this, many were anxious to get the bill passed to show a front of national unity in the wake of the tragedy, and a highly compromised version of the legislation was put on the table and eventually passed the conference report. In the end, Democrats got much more of what they wanted than Republicans, as many did not want to oppose the legislation since their party held the presidency.[5]

No Child Left Behind: What Did It Entail?

One of the major changes under NCLB was an increased level of accountability for districts. For years, many districts had only been showing a baseline average for how students were doing and were failing to show the breakdown of results in all categories, which could make it falsely seem like a district was doing well enough. The parameters for progress were also loosely defined, meaning that a higher performing school would have a higher bar to meet and a lower performing one would have one that was much lower. This accountability was mostly affecting schools servicing students living in poverty and with higher numbers of students of color, as these schools were technically meeting the low expectations set before them, yet these expectations were nowhere near where they needed to be.[6]

[5] Ibid., 176-7.

[6] Daria Hall and Ross Weiner, "Accountability under No Child Left Behind," *The Clearing House 78*, no. 1 (Sep.- Oct. 2004): 18, https://www.jstor.org/stable/30181987.

NCLB sought to combat this with the introduction of AYP. Every state was to design a clear and uniform set of goals for where students should be in their learning. Each school in a district would be ranked on their AYP, and any school that consistently did not meet these goals would be placed on an improvement plan. Having a clear set of goals that each school was to follow would help eliminate districts trying to mask their lack of improvement and would also help highlight those schools who were greatly struggling and help bring them to where they needed to be academically. The barometer at which this was measured was wholly contingent on the 20% of lowest learning students in the state. Starting at the lowest school performing in a state, the averages of their testing scores were to be added up until 20% of the students in the state had been accounted for. The average of those numbers would represent what the baseline for AYP was in the state. This was intended to show that where low performing students in the state were, which would then become the starting point for trying to make a change. The idea was that if states kept meeting their AYP yearly, all schools would be brought up to proficiency by 2014.[7]

The other tentpole of NCLB was the requirement that all teachers working in a school were "highly qualified." The legislation defined this as a teacher who was certified or licensed by their state department of education and displayed a high level of competence in whatever subject they taught. This also included alternative methods of certification, such as programs like Teach for America or the PACE Program in South

[7] An Act to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind, H. Res. 1, 107th Cong., *Public Law* 107-110. *January 8, 2002); McGuinn, 180-2.

Carolina that allowed individuals who displayed some level of mastery in an area of content to teach while they worked to get certified.[8]

Another requirement of NCLB was that each district had to publish yearly report cards for each school, as well as for the entire district. These were to present data about test scores, student demographics, the qualification level of teachers, and notes from the principals and superintendent that highlighted the year's progress and what else needed to be done.[9]

The last major requirement of NCLB was that all students in grades three through eight had to be tested yearly for math and reading. The results of this testing were what helped to determine how AYP was measured, and therefore was crucial in measuring how a school was improving. Each state was allowed to craft its own tests, but the content on the tests was required to be pulled from the standards that teachers used in their classrooms. The results of these tests were seen as the most important indicator of how a school was fairing, and lack of improvement could lead to corrective action being taken against a school and a loss in funding. Naturally, this added immense pressure to administrators who quickly began to treat it as one of the most important aspects of their schools.[10]

Criticisms

[8] An Act, US Congress, 130-134; Thomas S. Dee, Caroline M. Hoxby, Brian A. Jacob, and Helen F. Ladd, "The Impact of No Child Left Behind on Students, Teachers, and Schools [with Comments and Discussion]," *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity Fall 2010,* (fall 2010), pg. 197-8, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41012846; Eric A. Hanushek and Steven G. Rivkin, "The Quality and Distribution of Teachers un the No Child Left Behind Act," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives 24,* no. 3 (Summer 2010): 135-6, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20799159.

[9] An Act, US Congress, 30-33; McGuinn, 180.

[10] McGuinn, 180-3.

As NCLB was designed to completely overhaul the education system, there were those who were immediately critical of it and its true intentions. Its main critics have stayed steadfast through the years and have also criticized President Barack Obama's "Race to the Top" for the same reasons: that legislations such as these are trying to instill a business mindset into the realm of education, an institution where it has no place.

One of the areas in the legislation that received heavy scrutiny was AYP. The main criticism of it was the series of consequences that were put in place if a school consistently did not meet its goals. If any school did not meet its AYP for two consecutive years, that school would be placed on an improvement plan, receive heavy assistance from the district, and would be forced to offer school choice to any parent who wanted to take advantage of it. If a school did not meet AYP for a third consecutive year, the above would still occur in addition to offering private tutoring to any students whose parents requested it. If this continued for a fourth year, the district could either replace staff members or change the curriculum taught at their own discretion. If this happened for a fifth year, the school would either be turned into a charter school or surrender its operations to the state department of education.[11]

As many schools across the nation were immediately not meeting their AYP after the passing of NCLB, many critics viewed these measures as being too harsh considering many schools in the nation were failing right at the start. In the years immediately following, almost 70% of schools across the country were already failing to meet their AYP and inching closer to having action taken at their school for improvement. While this was affecting all types of schools, it was disproportionally hitting lower income

[11] Ibid.

schools. For example, in some states the number for all schools was close to 70%, but schools in high poverty areas were close to 100%. While it was meaningful to highlight those schools that needed help and to change how they conducted themselves, many critics felt like the repercussions were beginning too quickly and were not allowing time for meaningful change.[12]

There was also heavy criticism towards the way AYP was determined. As the parameters for how it was determined were contingent on the performance of some of the lowest performing schools in any given district or state, many said that was putting more pressure on them to perform well enough to meet AYP, not on improving their school because it was needed. Others noted that there was a subsection in the legislation that stated that if one subgroup of students failed to meet the standards, the entirety of the school would fail. As one said, "the more subgroups a school tries to serve… the greater the likelihood that the school will not make AYP."[13] As racial minorities were among some of those who were most struggling, critics felt that this was putting undue pressure on them to just try to make it instead of succeeding.[14]

Another area of criticism was the new requirement that all teachers be "highly qualified." Many critics pointed out that the standard of "highly qualified" could vary depending on the state, and therefore some states were setting these standards so low that all their existing teachers met them if they were not actually qualified. In addition to this, some believed that the legislation was insinuating that having a teacher who was "highly

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[12] McGuinn, 184; "Seventy Percent of Schools to 'Fail,'" FairTest, https://www.fairtest.org/seventy-percent-schools-fail.

[13] Deborah Meier and George Wood, eds., *Many Children Left Behind: How the No Child Left Behind Act is Damaging Our Children and Our Schools* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), 46.

[14] Ibid., 45-8

qualified" would immediately equate in higher test scores and better performing students, which they argued was not the case. Because few states were introducing more stringent requirements for employment, there was little evidence to suggest that a higher caliber of teachers was going into schools that needed more help. But even if states were changing their requirements for what deemed a teacher "highly qualified," critics said there was little to suggest a teacher with a higher degree, such as a masters or doctorate, would improve their quality of instruction and how students performed academically. This requirement only added more hoops to jump through and did nothing meaningful to get better qualified teachers into classrooms in high poverty areas.[15]

The last, and arguably largest, area of criticism aimed at NCLB was the introduction of testing results as the main measure of success for schools. Many believed that at its core, this policy was teaching students to just pass a test instead of genuinely learning the information in a meaningful way that would prepare them for the grades to come and for their life after schooling. This was creating a narrow focus on education and was telling children that the most important aspects of their education were the ones they were to be tested on. In addition to this, teachers were now just "teaching for the test," and many were not given much room to put their own creative spin on instructional time. There was also heavy criticism against these tests using a multiple-choice format. The reason for this was that they were the easiest and quickest to grade, yet they offered little room to show if students knew something about the concept if they did not understand it entirely. Many said that a better method for tracking mastery of a subject would have

[15] Hall, 18-9; Hanushek,135-8.

been written tests, which could have also shown if a student held a deeper understanding of a topic.[16]

This method was naturally taking away focus from some of the other aspects of schooling, such as extracurricular activities or classes in science and social studies. One research showed that class time for English in some schools was significantly raised, and therefore time was taken away in other classes like social studies, art, music, and recess. Areas like these are crucial for a child's understanding of the world around them and help to give them a well-rounded education, yet the emphasis was being taken from them and put onto more core subjects instead.[17]

Conclusion

The passage of NCLB marked a huge bipartisan victory for George W. Bush in the early years of his presidency. The legislation was intended to help close the achievement gap between the low-performing schools and the high-performing ones, yet many of its critics were skeptical that it would be able to achieve this. Regardless, Bush's legislation was one built upon the backs of his presidential predecessors and represented a long effort to increase the federal government's role in public education.

Regardless of the new emphasis placed on standardized testing results and the qualification of teachers, many still believed that there would be harm done to the schools that NCLB was trying to help succeed, and the years following would show if every

[16] Helen F. Ladd, "No Child Left Behind: A Deeply Flawed Federal Policy," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management,* 464-5; Monty Neill, "Leaving Children Behind: How No Child Left Behind Will Fail Our Children," *The Phi Delta Kappan 85,* no. 3 (Nov. 2003): 225-6, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20441538.

[17] Ibid.

school would be at full proficiency by 2014 as some believed that they would. For better or worse, NCLB forever changed the way public schools in the United States are operated, and Bush truly made a long-lasting impression on the country's public education system.

Chapter Three

Hurdles of Progress:

How Marlboro County Has Struggled with Administrators and Teachers

In the years following the passage of No Child Left Behind, many publications across the United States began producing pieces highlighting their criticism of the legislation and why they believed it was doomed to fail and offer little meaningful impact on the very students it was meant to serve. One of these, published by the Nebraska Law Review in 2003, was written by an eight-year veteran of the United States Department of Education. Amidst her analysis, she provided anecdotal interviews with children who were fictional accounts but were "real to rural and small-town America."[1] One of these hypothetical children displayed his dismay with his teachers, claiming that many of them were often complaining about their pay and "wishing they were in schools where the students were smarter and less disruptive."[2] While this child was hypothetical, it does beg the question of how many students in rural parts of America found themselves thinking along the same lines.

Teachers are the lifeline of schools, and their success, or lack thereof, defines that school's success. This expectation has brought new burdens to teachers, especially in the era of ever-changing methods and protocols fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic, and

[1] Judith A. Winston, "Rural Schools in America: Will No Child Be Left Behind? The Elusive Question for Equal Educational Opportunities," *Nebraska Law Review 82*, Issue 1 (2003): 193, https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nlr/vol82/iss1/7.

[2] Ibid., 195

many great teachers have found themselves leaving the profession as they personally discovered that for them, the ends were not worth the means. While this new burden on public education is a new reality for many parts of the country, it is one that has existed in many impoverished areas for the better part of the twenty-first century. As teachers discovered that there were better opportunities in more affluent districts, such as better resources and opportunities for growth and pay, there has been an exodus away from the districts and students who arguably need these high-performing teachers the most.

Marlboro County has been no stranger to these issues. In recent years, the district has faced difficulty in recruiting new teachers, and many of the ones they do have struggle to meet the bar that the state has set for them. While one might think that this has been an issue systematically written into the district's history, there was a plethora of teachers who were willing to work in the district in the 1980s and 1990s, and this issue has been one born of the twenty-first century.

This chapter will predominantly look at teachers in the district: both those effective and ineffective at teaching. This analysis will be prefaced with a discussion on recruitment efforts for the county in the late 20th century: why it was so effective then and what caused that to dwindle over time. This discussion on recruitment will lead into what is often called one of the largest hindrances for successful teachers in the county: a bad administration that was not supportive of their efforts. Next will be two sections that juxtapose each other: a discussion of highly effective teachers in the county and some of their unconventional methods that led to great success, and then those who were described as "lazy and indifferent" at their job. Comparing these two will help create a better understanding of some of the dynamics that exist in the public schools in Marlboro

County, and perhaps better explain why great success has been elusive. The last portion will analyze data coming from the state report cards concerning teachers in the district and will see if any of these trends and patterns have had an adverse effect on the county.

Finding an Appeal to Teachers- Teacher Recruitment in Marlboro County

Because Marlboro is a very rural area, it lacks many of the amenities and characteristics that larger counties have. That might make it seem like it would be difficult to recruit individuals from outside of the district to come and work there. In recent years, that assumption would be correct, but this was not always the case. During the 1980s and 1990s, there was little issue with recruiting people to fill vacancies within the district, and this was largely in thanks to Macky Norton, a forty-one-year veteran of the district who spent the better part of the 1990s in charge of teacher recruitment.

Norton said that he was highly successful in bringing new teachers into the district because he was able to appeal to their sense of adventure. He described how many who were coming out of college had a "missionary" mindset, and that this was something he tried to speak to when recruiting. These adults in their early twenties were looking to spend time helping students and communities who were less fortunate, and Norton was able to use Marlboro County as a prime candidate. In addition to traveling to some of North and South Carolina's universities to speak to these prospects, he would also spend his Sunday afternoons calling them on the phone and "praying to get their voicemail,"- that way he could speak uninterrupted and, in his opinion, sell the district better.[3]

[3] Macky Norton, interview by Jackson Branch, Bennettsville, SC, November 8, 2021.

Norton also said there used to be a network of colleagues he could call throughout the state to help fill positions. For example, if he needed a music teacher for one of the schools in Marlboro, he would call someone in Horry County or York County who would give him names of highly qualified candidates who were not hired simply because there were not enough open positions. This example spoke to a higher level of comradery among those in education that he claims does not exist anymore. Those trying to fill positions today have enough trouble filling their own and would not give away prospective candidates, as it would detract from the hiring in their district. He also said that during his time of working in recruitment, he almost never had to go outside of North and South Carolina to find teachers, as there was an abundance who were willing to work for the district. He said this has drastically changed in more recent years. and there has now become a larger dependence on both recruiting from other parts of the country and from alternative methods of teaching, such as Teach for America and the PACE program.[4]

In addition to finding quality candidates to hire for Marlboro, Norton said at this time there also existed excellent teachers who were already from the county. Back in the 1980s and 1990s, he discussed how residents of the county had a desire to continue working in their hometown and wanted to help the district improve. For example, during his years as a principal at McColl Elementary/Middle, he said that his staff included a handful of his former classmates from when he was in school, as well as teachers who had taught him when he was younger. He said that having a staff who were familiar with one another led to a healthier and more prosperous work environment, something that

[4] Ibid.

reflected in the outcome of the teaching. He feels that this no longer exists within many of the schools within the district, which could be one of the reasons they are struggling so greatly.[5]

"Drove Away Many Good Teachers" – Administrators in Marlboro County

Two of the most crucial factors in fostering a healthy and prosperous school environment are the administration and the teachers. Both play a crucial role in making sure that students see the growth that they need; therefore, it is imperative that both are functioning at a high quality to see that success. If one of the two is lacking, it often negatively impacts the other and causes them not to perform in the way they need to. But when both are doing this, it leads to an extremely toxic work environment and causes harm and suffering to both those few employees who want to do good and ultimately the students.

Marlboro County has unfortunately boasted numerous examples of schools where both have operated at a level that resulted in poor performance and results. For both the administrators and the teachers who did not fall into this category, this environment has soured their work experience and has often driven them away from the profession entirely.

One of those teachers was Sharon Beaty. Her tenure with the district started in 1991 at Bennettsville Middle School, and immediately she noticed a drastic difference from her previous district of employment, Horry County. She experienced such shellshock that she came home in tears her first week of working. While the causation of

[5] Ibid.

this was largely on the behavior of the students, another major point of contention for her was her colleagues. While some of them were engaged with their students and were invested in teaching them to the best of their ability, she was deeply concerned by the gross negligence of others. She described teachers in classrooms next to her eating during instructional time and having students performing personal errands and tasks for them, and she felt this was unprofessional.[6]

Behavior such as this should be handled with swift action by administration, yet this kind of discipline is difficult to achieve when the same school has administration not meeting the duties of their job, as Beaty also described. During this time, she described the administration at Bennettsville Middle as being very dismissive and not enforcing teacher behavior as they should have been. This story was corroborated by another employee of the school, who spent time there both as a teacher and administrator. He lamented that the school used to have several high-performing teachers and that there came a time where "one singular administrator drove away many good teachers."[7] This example seemed to be representative of an unfortunate pattern of behavior in the district where many teachers felt they were not supported and ultimately left either the school or profession entirely because of it.

As there was a lack of support from administration concerning behavior, many teachers had to instead learn how to tackle bad behavior on their own without much support from administration. As Beaty recalled from her first few years of teaching, she had to learn how to simultaneously keep a borderline authoritarian-like grip as well as

[6] Sharon Beaty, interview by Jackson Branch, Bennettsville, SC, July 18, 2021.
[7] Jack Swann, interview by Jackson Branch, Bennettsville, SC, October 5, 2021.

becoming an effective teacher just to be able to successfully teach from day to day. She believed that having to tackle both tasks with little support detracted from giving her full potential to her students. She personally noticed a correlation that where the principals at a school were better, the behavior tended to follow. Even at schools where the administrator was strong, there was always a large lack of presence concerning parental support with their children's behavior and adding a lack of support coming from administration made a bad problem even worse. While this was already a growing issue when she began teaching in the 1990s, it only seemed to progress in its severity as time passed.

What caused administrators to have indifference towards many of the issues in their schools? As former teachers-turned-administrators discussed, it was easy to get in an administrative position and forget what it was all about. There are few who would argue that the intent of a school is to teach and enrich children and help prepare them for their future, but it could also be said that when you become removed from them daily, it can be easy to lose sight of that. Instead, one becomes engrossed in another world full of paperwork and red tape, and it becomes easy to place focus on those things instead of what really matters. Additionally, those in a position of power are prone to become more self-serving than meeting the needs of either the students or teachers. This behavior was true for those who were in administrative positions at schools, but even worse for former teachers who moved on to serve in roles at the district level. One said that for her, it became extremely difficult when she was no longer engaged daily with a certain set of students and instead had to engage with multiple schools. While she had no denial that

she still held a passion for education and students, it simply was more difficult to keep a steady hand on it when you were a layer removed.[8]

Ineffective Teachers in Marlboro

As there are those teachers who would do everything in their power that was best for their students, there are also those who did not hold the best interests of their students at heart. This negligence is certainly not a problem that was exclusive to Marlboro County, as there are teachers in some of the best districts in the nation who are in the profession for the wrong reasons. There is no clear diagnosis as to why this issue runs as rampant as it does, but it does seem to be an issue that is more prominent in districts that are "failing." Unfortunately, teachers like this ultimately cause great harm to a district like Marlboro because the students who have already fallen so far behind need teachers who are willing to go above and beyond to rectify the mistakes of the previous ones and still bring them up to speed. Yet, the sad reality is most of them only give them enough knowledge to barely make it through, which is clearly reflected by the scores that the district receives. This type of educator has only played into the cycle of the public education system here and will for years to come unless the chain is broken.

One former teacher found that her biggest realization when transitioning to her new role as an administrator was that many teachers were not doing their jobs. As a teacher, she had always believed that her colleagues were teaching an adequate amount of content daily. Yet, it took her becoming an administrator to see how many were just

[8] Toma Dees, interview by Jackson Branch, Bennettsville, SC, September 22, 2021; Swann, interview.

doing the bare minimum and not giving their full attention or potential to their students. This example is easily proved by the data coming out of the district for test scores, as "these were not a reflection on the students, they are a reflection on the teachers."[9] Many teachers were simply not setting high enough standards for themselves and how much they needed to give; and the direct reflection of this was how much knowledge their students were reciprocating, which appeared to be little. Especially for a district like Marlboro, the way a teacher conducts himself is crucial, as many students are coming from difficult situations at home, and their teacher may be one of the only bright spots they see each day.[10]

Another issue with that was rampant in Marlboro County was behavioral issues in the classrooms and how they were handled. While some teachers were able to get small issues under control without any assistance from administrators, there were others who refused to handle any issue, small or large, and would always defer to their administration to handle it. The reasoning behind this was either inability to handle classroom conflict, laziness, or somewhere in between. Yet some viewed outbursts like these as a direct reflection of how the teachers were conducting themselves. One noted that they saw countless teachers who did not handle their classroom duties, such as lesson plans, and then were appalled when their students did not do what they were expected to do. She remarked, "You expect children to behave a certain way because they are children; I did not expect some of the adults to behave the way that they did and have countless excuses as to why they did not have their lesson plans complete or even arrive at school on

[9] Dees, interview
[10] Ibid.

time."[11] Others noted a correlation between how the teachers and students acted, wondering if the students largely acted the way that they did because they were emulating their teachers. When asked if behavior like this was in the minority or majority, the answer was almost always that it was many teachers who conducted themselves this way.[12]

As noted above, unprofessionalism in the district was not something that always existed, and instead has only become a larger issue in recent years. Those who worked as administrators in the district in the latter part of the 20th century said that you did not have to worry about whether teachers were doing their job, and that the outcome spoke for itself. While it was still true then that there were still those doing the job with ulterior motives, many teachers were doing so effectively, and most administrators did not have to keep much oversight on areas such as lesson plans, teaching style, and behavior.[13]

"High Expectations, High Concentration" - Effective Teachers in Marlboro

As the national landscape of education changed after the passing of NCLB in late 2001, so did the expectation for what teachers taught in their classrooms. While state testing already existed at the end of the school year, there were now stipulations tied up in how students performed, which would become a reflection of how well a teacher was doing their job. Naturally, many teachers now had to reevaluate their pedagogy, as well

[11] Dees, interview; Norton, interview.
[12] Dees, interview; Norton, interview; Swann, interview.
[13] Ibid.

as make it through a set of standards that each state deemed crucial for a student to master to move onto the next grade.

While there was an expectation and timeline given of how quickly teachers should move through standards and how much material they needed to cover, many found themselves operating outside of these parameters so that they teach as they deemed was best for their students. For history, that may have meant spending an additional week on the founding of the United States and the Revolutionary War so that a student would better understand how our nation's founding correlates with how it operates today. In math, a teacher may have had to sacrifice her lunch break so she could help reinforce a concept with which a student was struggling. For a more extreme example: one second grade teacher who excelled in math and struggled in ELA and another who was the opposite were allowed to teach a classroom of thirty-six students so that they could play off each other's strengths and weaknesses. Throughout the schools in the district, it was evident that there were dedicated teachers who were willing to do whatever necessary so that the concept was fully taught, and the student was prepared for what followed. However, the caveat was that the school had to have an administration that fully trusted the teachers to do the right thing. Coming from the district office was a stern push for administrators to ensure that their teachers were moving through at the pace thought best. Yet some teachers described having years at schools where they were trusted enough to "close the door and do what was right for the children."[14] While this may have ultimately been reflected in some of the testing scores, other times it had little effect; and some

[14] Dees, interview

teachers boasted that their scores were marginally higher than other districts in the state because of it.[15]

These types of teachers in Marlboro County understood that teaching in an area such as this required a nuanced approach tailored to each situation and student. One teacher said that she quickly learned that homework was not effective for her students, as their afternoons and evenings demanded that they watch younger siblings while their single mother was at work. This teacher felt that it would be best for her to cover all material in the classroom and try to get in any additional reinforcement during the school day because the children needed their time at home to be a break from learning. This type of thinking taught an even more valuable lesson: every child in an area like this is coming from a completely different situation, which demands one to look differently at each child. There was no "one size fits all" approach, which therefore demanded a teacher to be much more involved, observant, and persistent of both situations occurring in the personal life of a student, as well as trying to grasp how their pedagogy was landing on the ears and minds of their students. In an impoverished area such as Marlboro, this was not a task for the faint of heart and instead demanded that those up to the task were the ones who felt as if they were born to teach. When asked if those who dedicated themselves in such a way were in the majority or minority of teachers, it was said that it was a definite minority. When elaborated upon, she said that in Marlboro County there were "patches of great teachers, but patches are not enough" to make meaningful impact.[16]

[15] Beaty, interview; Dees, interview; Swann, interview.
[16] Dees, interview.

The best description for how teachers were able to succeed in Marlboro County was "high expectations, plus high concentration, equals manifestation."[17] The idea behind this was that your students could meet the expectation that you felt that they were capable of as long as you also equally poured enough of yourself into them to make it happen. The key detail was that one truly had to have faith that his or her students were capable of meeting said expectations. In an area such as this, students are often written off as not being capable of performing highly, largely because the data shows that students in impoverished areas are not capable of succeeding. While it would be easy to give these students just enough to get by, the more rewarding thing for many teachers seemed to be going above and beyond to make any difference that could possibly be made. Another described this in a similar way: "The problem is not that there were low expectations; it was that the expectations were not high enough."[18] She went on to say that these students needed to have a high standard to meet, which was something that they may not have experienced before. If they believed in them enough and offered them copious amounts of support, then it was very likely that they would be able to rise and meet what was set before them. If a teacher could believe in what her students were capable of, they could then pass it onto the students and help retrain how their brain thought about themselves. However, the point still stood that many teachers were not willing to put in this extra effort, as it would have been much easier to write off their students as victims of their circumstance who would not be able to break the cruel cycle they were in. [19]

[17] Swann, interview.
[18] Dees, interview
[19] Beaty, interview; Dees, interview; Swann, interview.

This commentary offers a nuanced look at how classrooms are operated, and what happens if there is too much legislation coming from the outside and not enough from the inside. This kind of methodology in Marlboro County's public schools was a definite minority and hinged largely upon an administration that was supportive of it. Many teachers simply felt that those outside of their classroom were having too much say in how their classroom was operated, especially considering some of those voices had little experience teaching. While methods such as straying from the standards and spending more time than what the state department allocated could certainly fail and backfire, they did yield positive results.

The Data

While looking at anecdotal evidence gives the best indicator of the quality of teachers in the district, there is also merit in examining the data given on the annual district report card concerning teachers. This section will look at data concerning Marlboro County for the years 2005, 2009, 2013, 2017, and 2021, and will also compare it with districts that are comparable in demographics.

The first category is the percentage of teachers with advanced degrees. In 2005, the percentage in Marlboro was 50.4%, in 2009 it was 54.5%, in 2013 it was 56.9%, in 2017 it was 61.6%, and in 2021 it was 54.4%. This timespan shows excellent growth for the district, and was consistently trending upward until 2021, which may have caused a decrease due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the years where data from other districts was offered alongside Marlboro, they were often alongside those averages or even slightly above. While they were not able to boast the numbers of some of the more

affluent districts in the state, which often trended somewhere in the 60% range, these were still impressive numbers considering the geographical area the county was in and the poverty level in the county.[20]

The next category to examine is the percentage of teachers each year who had the status of continuing contract. This area was a caveat exclusive to South Carolina that was established with the passing of the NCLB legislation. The state code of laws for education discussed these candidates as follows:

> Continuing contract teachers must be evaluated on a continuous basis. At the discretion of the local school district, evaluations for individual teachers may be formal or informal. Formal evaluation processes developed or adopted by school districts must address legal and technical requirements for teacher evaluation and must assess typical teaching performance relative to state standards for teaching effectiveness.[21]

In 2005, the percentage of those with continuing contracts in Marlboro was 78.8%, in 2009 it was 78.5%, in 2013 it was 79.2%, in 2017 it was 69%, and in 2021 it was 65.2%. For the years where this data can be examined alongside that of other districts, Marlboro

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[20] "Greenville District Report Card – Full Report Card," South Carolina Department of Education, 2009, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2009/district/?ID=2301; "Greenville District Report Card – Full Report Card," South Carolina Department of Education, 2013, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2013/district/?ID=2301; "Horry District Report Card – Full Report Card," South Carolina Department of Education, 2009, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2009/district/?ID=2601; "Horry District Report Card – Full Report Card," South Carolina Department of Education, 2013, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2013/district/?ID=2601; Annual District Report Card for Marlboro County, The State of South Carolina, 2005 and 2009, Obtained under the Freedom of Information Act from the South Carolina Department of Education; "Marlboro District Report Cards – Full Report Card," South Carolina Department of Education, 2013, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2013/district/?ID=3501; "Marlboro County School District – 2016-2017," South Carolina Department of Education, 2017, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2017/view/?y=2017&t=D&d=3501; "Marlboro County School District – 2021-2022," SC School Report Card, 2021, https://screportcards.com/overview/?q=eT0yMDIxJnQ9RCZzaWQ9MzUwMTAwMA.

[21] "Title 59 – Education," South Carolina Code of Laws: Unannotated, South Carolina Legislature, https://www.scstatehouse.gov/code/t59c026.php.

found themselves right at the median for the state, and even going around 10% higher than other districts that were similar. Nevertheless, there was still a downward trend over the twenty-first century, one that had taken a sharp decline even before the pandemic. While Marlboro ranked alongside other districts in the statewide trends for the years this data was still reported, there seemed to be a divergence in the years that followed. For example, in 2017 Marlboro only had 69% of the teachers reach this. For Dillon District 3, one of the districts famously located in the state's "Corridor of Shame," 79% of teachers did. For Lexington/Richland District 5, one of the best districts in the state, that number was 87.6%. While that number is high, it is even more surprising when considering that they employed close to 1,300 teachers that school year, when Marlboro only had around 300. This area seemed to be one where Marlboro continually struggled over the years and where other districts were able to maintain a steadier percentage.[22]

The next area to examine is the percentage of teachers returning from the previous year. In 2005 in Marlboro, that number was 90.2%, in 2009 it was 83.5%, in 2013 it was 88.5%, in 2017 it was 86.1%, and in 2021 it was 82.1%. Marlboro consistently ranked alongside both districts like it and the median for the state. These numbers were high, but there has been a slight downward trend since 2013. As will be examined in the data for the district later, this could possibly be a correlation with the years that standardized testing scores in the district also began to take a decline.[23]

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[22] "Dillon 03 School District – 2016-2017," South Carolina Department of Education, 2017, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2017/view/?y=2017&t=D&d=1703; "Lexington/Richland 05 School District – 2016-2017," South Carolina Department of Education, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2017/view/?y=2017&t=D&d=3205; "Marlboro County School District- Report Card", 2005, 2009, 2013, 2017, and 2021.

[23] "Marlboro County School District- Report Card", 2005, 2009, 2013, 2017, and 2021.

While this was the main data given for teachers (besides average pay, which kept a steady average of around $40,000), there was another interesting trend to note. In the early 2000s, teachers in Marlboro were receiving around eighteen professional development days each year; that number decreased to six by 2017. These days were classified as being set aside for additional courses or seminars in which teachers could broaden their professional skills in the realm of education, as well as receive new skills and tactics that could be used in the classroom. While these were sometimes done outside of the traditional workday, they were at other times done in lieu of a regular school day, and it is odd to see this number decrease as drastically as it did over the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

Teachers in Marlboro County faced many unique hurdles, and from the start of instruction faced many challenges in trying to help their students succeed. While this would be a daunting task to most anyone, there were many teachers in the district who were committed to helping their students succeed, no matter the cost. For them, overcoming these issues consisted of meeting their students where they were and trying to help them defy the odds set against them, in addition to finding alternatives methods to operate outside of the parameters that were set by their school administration.

While there were those in Marlboro County who were up to this task, there were also those who seemed to only do enough to get by. Many teachers said that their colleagues who acted in this way contributed to some of their lowest points of working in the district, and that some of the district's results happened because of teachers like this.

This behavior also was found in some of the school administrations who did not have a firm grasp on their schools and allowed this type of behavior to occur. These both represent large hurdles that the district still must overcome to this day.

Chapter Four

Hurdles of Progress:

How Marlboro Has Struggled with Parents and State Testing

After the passing of No Child Left Behind in 2001, many veteran teachers found that the landscape of teaching was quickly changing from what it once was. Districts now felt the added pressure of meeting the standards set by their state, as falling behind and consistently underperforming would lead to consequences. As officials in district offices across the nation felt new pressure coming from their state department of education, that pressure to succeed was then placed on school administrators and teachers.

Marlboro County was no exception to this. Beginning in 2002, the district acknowledged they had much ground to make up in trying to raise the standards for their students and help them reach the average for the state. The district began saying that this was going to be a collaborative process with teachers, and that they would do whatever necessary to help these students who faced unique circumstances that were harder to overcome. However, this was not the way that things were carried out for the years that followed, and many teachers said that things went about very differently from how they were publicly portrayed.

In addition to hurdles coming from the district office, teachers in Marlboro County found that another issue was the lack of parental involvement. It was deemed necessary to improve the state of education in the district, yet there consistently was no improvement in trying to get parents better involved in their children's education.

When asked what kept them from truly succeeding and helping students do better in their education, many teachers interviewed for this research consistently said that two of the main issues they encountered while working in Marlboro County stemmed from oversight by the district office in how they taught in their classrooms and the lack of parental help with reinforcing content and with behavior. Looking at these two areas show the challenges many teachers faced in their classrooms, as well as areas of disappointment that were often occupying their minds when they should have instead been focused on giving their students the best education they could. These two factors present another key piece of why the district has continued to fall so far behind in the twenty-first century.

Parental Involvement

A crucial part of any child's education hinges on having the full support and guidance of their parents. For children who are struggling academically, having their parents' guide them through their education can, at times, be the turning point for them to start doing much better. In addition to this, teachers also need to know that they have the support of their students' parents. Having that support can greatly help teachers succeed in their role. However, the absence of this support can create a difficult classroom environment that results in unnecessary stress.

This lack of parental support was often said to be true in the public schools in Marlboro County. Teachers felt that parents were largely unaware of many of the aspects of their children's education, which added difficulty to teaching in a district that was already far behind. While many in education view homework as being necessary to

reinforce what is taught in the classroom, many in Marlboro discovered that it was difficult to get their students to complete it. One elementary teacher said that while it was something that she did try to enforce in her early years of teaching, she quickly had to learn that her efforts would better be reserved for giving all work in the classroom. However, she did not blame this on the students, but instead found that it was because many parents were absent in their children's home lives after school, either because they were working evenings and nights or for other reasons. Ultimately, she thought that was more of an unfortunate circumstance than outright dismissiveness, and she wrote it off and tried to make the best of the situation.[1]

However, there were others who felt that this lack of involvement had deeper and more serious implications. One teacher who moved to Marlboro after teaching elsewhere immediately noticed that the students in her classes were extremely "belligerent" in their language and mannerisms towards her.[2] This type of student behavior came as a shock to her, as she had never experienced students who spoke to and treated her in such a way. She eventually diagnosed this issue as stemming from lack of parental involvement and felt that because many students were facing no consequences for their actions at home, they would continue to act in the way that they wished. In addition to this, it was felt that many of these students had little example set before them to try and replicate, which resulted in worse behavior in classrooms. Many said that behavior in classrooms across the district was almost out of control, and that teachers who did not have strong disciplinarian skills were not able to handle it or get the situation under control without

[1] Toma Dees, interview by Jackson Branch, Bennettsville, SC, September 22, 2021
[2] Sharon Beaty, interview by Jackson Branch, Bennettsville, SC, July 18, 2021

resorting to help from their administration if they offered much at all. The reason given for behavior such as this was often the same as the above, and some felt that having stronger parental involvement would lead to better behavior in classrooms.[3]

Some administrators felt that parents in Marlboro would only get involved in areas that were particularly appealing to them. One said that while attendance from parents was extremely low at events such as parent-teacher conferences or academic awards, he noticed there was almost always a significantly higher turnout at sporting events that were held at the same school. It seemed to be a common thread across the district that sports were placed at a higher level of priority than academics were. Another administrator noted that many students were solely concerned about the sports they were participating in, something that could have adversely affected their education. If parents were more concerned about sports than what was happening in their children's education, then it only seems natural that their children would be given the impression that this was the more important of the two.[4]

Another diagnosis for the lack of involvement went deeper than just a lack of interest: some believed that it was because they had no idea how to be involved. After describing how defeating it was to see parents not have much say in their child's education, he said he did not consider it to be the result of malicious intent. He simply thought these parents did not know how to be involved, and therefore did not do much because they had no idea where to even start. One of the ideas behind this is that when

[3] Beaty, interview; Macky Norton, interview by Jackson Branch, Bennettsville, SC, November 8, 2021.

[4] Norton, interview; Jack Swann, interview by Jackson Branch, Bennettsville, SC, October 5, 2021.

these people were growing up in school, they did not have much experience with their own parents being involved in their education, and when they grew up to have children of their own, they just emulated what they had witnessed in their own childhood. This presents an interesting play on the cycle of poverty: those who do not do well in school because their parents do not support or help them succeed are bound to not succeed and will then do the same to their own children because they do not know any other way.[5]

This lack of parental support was even an area that the district office recognized as being an issue. For the 2004 district report card, Superintendent David Sherbine wrote that while he felt the district was making decent progress, he still noticed an absence in parental support in trying to maintain this progress. He said that for "events where school administrators and teachers plan informative meetings for parents, few parents attend."[6] Considering these report cards were published and intended to be viewed by the public, his candid nature about the lack of involvement shows how much of an issue it truly was. He went on to say that "we continue to struggle with challenges in dealing with students coming from a society where behaviors are defiant and a motivation to learn is limited."[7] He ultimately stated that improving the district had to be a joint effort of many: students, teachers, administrators, the community, and especially the parents. Sherbine's opinion about the lack of parental involvement and the struggles the district faced were very forthcoming and showed that this was a point of contention in the district that was felt by teachers, administrators, and those in the district office alike.

[5] Beaty, interview; Norton, interview.

[6] Annual District Report Card for Marlboro County, The State of South Carolina, 2004, Obtained under the Freedom of Information Act from the South Carolina Department of Education

[7] Ibid

Instructional Time

After the passing of NCLB, district officials for Marlboro County began to heavily focus on the results of standardized testing and push their teachers to help their students get better scores. To commemorate this new start that the district was taking in 2001, district superintendent Ray Brayboy wrote on the district's report card for that year that:

> The School District of Marlboro County has embarked upon an educational transformation that already is changing "the system" from one that was showing little, if any, academic progress by the students to one that will, in short time, demonstrate that our students and our community are the equals of any in our region, state, and nation. Complacence and satisfaction with "things as they always have been" is no longer acceptable.[8]

These were lofty goals, but they showed that the district initially did aspire to turn around the district from what it was to something that was higher performing. Brayboy also went on to comment how the district would be supplementing these desires by giving their teachers and administrations extra professional development that was intended to help them give higher outputs in their classrooms and schools. This course correction marked a significant change in focus for the district, yet it has resulted in little progress since then. The years that follow show that the way things have been handled have not always worked for the best of the teachers and has created negative attitudes towards the district for many of them.

[8] Annual District Report Card for Marlboro County, The State of South Carolina, 2001, Obtained under the Freedom of Information Act from the South Carolina Department of Education.

Prior to this change, many teachers in the district already felt as if they faced unique hurdles in helping students to achieve their best potential. Many said that this largely stemmed from being in a rural area, which often led to students having a lower base level of knowledge when they moved to a new grade. One noted that when she gave a pretest for seventh grade world geography, many of her students struggled with identifying the state they lived in and where it was located on a map of the United States. Another said that it was often difficult to help students retain knowledge simply because they were not engaged and not getting parental reinforcement of the new information at home. The data largely shows this was a constant struggle for the district, as test scores seldom showed significant improvement, and any improvement that did happen was never retained for long or built upon. Additionally, students who were clearly struggling to reach the baseline level of understanding for a subject were often moved onto the next grade, adding much difficulty for that teacher to bring them up to speed on the content and then add onto it.[9]

Before adding on additional stressors, it was clear that many of the teachers in Marlboro County faced a herculean task in trying to help their students succeed. However, the district still wanted more from their teachers and tried new methods that were meant to help in raising test scores. One of these new implementations was benchmark testing in the early 2010s. This was a biweekly ten-question test in all subjects that was meant to ensure that teachers were on pace with meeting the state standards by the end of the school year. Before this, the district already had a calendar that teachers were to follow to make sure they were on the fastest timeline to cover all

[9] Beaty, interview; Swann, interview.

material for the year, which theoretically would mean that their students would know and be familiar with all content when testing came in May. The district clearly felt this was not happening as many students were doing poorly on the standardized tests, so the benchmarks tests were meant to be constant reminders of the content a student was learning. These tests were written to correlate with the standardized tests and were created by curriculum coordinators who were working in the district office instead of by teachers who were teaching students.[10]

While the intent behind these benchmarks was to help ensure students were on track, they ended up becoming a nuisance for teachers and a point of contention between them and those working at the district office. Some teachers felt that the benchmarks did not address their students' actual needs, as they were already struggling to help their students grasp content and were now expected to keep a tighter timeline than the one they already had. In addition to the test itself taking away from instructional time, teachers also had to take class time to review content before the benchmark, which was taking away even more of their time that was viewed as being so precious. These benchmarks ultimately did little to help students, as standardized testing results stayed largely the same, and were eventually phased out.[11]

Another point of contention for teachers was the new push for standardized testing and the emphasis that the district placed on it. In 2008, acting superintendent Tommy Clark noted that the district's new push was to create a focus on instruction that was to ultimately lead students to meeting the standards and move successfully to the

[10] Beaty, interview; Dees, interview.
[11] Beaty, interview; Swann, interview.

next grade level. He claimed that teachers were differentiating in their instructional time to meet the unique needs of every child and that curriculum was designed to meet this challenge. This statement made it seem as if teachers were able to go about teaching the material at their own discretion to most efficiently convey the information that their students needed to know. It also implied that there was cooperation between teachers and administrators in trying to help bring their students up to the standards, and that the progress that was being worked towards was being done with mutual understanding that every situation and path to instruction would look vastly different, as the district faced unique challenges and struggles.[12]

While the district was making this pathway to progress seem like it was a collaborative effort, many teachers in the district viewed it differently. The district presented teachers with the state standards and a tight timeline that they were expected to follow to cover all necessary material before standardized testing at the end of the school year. The district also stressed to teachers that keeping this timeline would only allow them the opportunity to cover the basic facts of any concept. Veteran teachers were appalled by this timeline that was often viewed as completely unrealistic and thought that there was not enough time left for emphasis on areas that they viewed as crucial. For example, one social studies teacher thought that the district gave not nearly enough time for major events in United States history, which often led to her veering from the district's plan and spending the time on it that she deemed necessary. Other teachers thought that these guidelines did not implement necessary time to help students who were

[12] "Marlboro District Report Card – Full Report Card," South Carolina Department of Education, 2008, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2008/district/?ID=3501.

clearly struggling, as many were going into the next grade level with not enough of a grasp on the previous year's material.

With such emphasis placed on standardized testing results, teachers felt that they needed to do whatever was necessary to try to help their students do their best on the tests, although this largely did not happen. Some teachers described completely stopping the teaching of new material in early May and would then spend one to two weeks going back over all the material learned throughout the school year that could possibly be asked about on state tests. This intense focus on review gave students an overload of information in a short amount of time and may have ended up working against the original intent as students were often overwhelmed with all the information they were expected to recall. One teacher eventually was so exasperated with the push for testing that she decided to count all the instructional days she lost to it, which varied from twelve to fifteen days in any given school year.[13]

In addition to the new parameters surrounding testing, the district was now requiring teachers to keep logs of written data on their classes and how they were faring, which was seen as an extremely time-consuming process. Teachers were told that notating progress for their students who were especially struggling would help them succeed eventually and help create better processes for other students in similar situations, but in reality, many teachers found this process to be time consuming and taking away from time they could instead be preparing their material and lesson plans.[14]

[13] Beaty, interview; Norton, interview.
[14] Beaty, interview; Dees, interview; Swann, interview.

The push towards a higher emphasis on standardized testing and its results was ultimately not well received by many teachers in the district. Many veteran teachers felt that their highly effective methods were now pushed aside for a more streamlined, one-size-fits-all approach that the district was trying to promote. The transition towards more data collection on struggling students was also viewed as time consuming and something that was not even utilized or taken into consideration once the necessary data was collected. While the district was promoting this new push as a collaborative process, many teachers clearly felt they were trying to be pushed to teach in a way that they did not view as effective or familiar.

Conclusion

While many teachers wanted to do their best for their students and help them succeed, they felt impaired by the lack of support they needed to properly teach. In addition to this, the introduction of new parameters brought about by NCLB and the greater push towards standardized testing was a point of contention for many teachers who remembered the days before this, and they felt they could no longer teach as effectively as they once did. They now felt held back by timelines for how quickly they were teaching, required data on their low performing students, and benchmark testing to make sure they were on the right track to finish by the end of the school year. For many teachers, these things were occupying their minds more than the actual purpose of their job: to teach their students.

In addition to this, the lack of parental involvement was becoming a more prevalent issue and was felt by teachers and those in the district office alike. Many

parents were only focused on extracurricular activities and not the important aspects of their children's education, and many thought that a child could never truly be successful until they held the full support of their parents.

The preexisting issues of teachers in Marlboro County, such as colleagues not fully doing their jobs or negligent administrators, were only exasperated by these new factors brought about by the twenty-first century. These all have truly held the district behind in recent years, and to this day continue to prevent the district from discovering all they can be.

Chapter Five

The School of Discovery

In the fall of 2002, a new school opened its doors in Marlboro County that was unlike anything else in the district. When the school year began in August, 150 students were seated at the new School of Discovery, one that let them also take additional classes that centered around five creative arts: art, band, chorus, dance, and creative writing. These students faced an added challenge, as these additional classes were incorporated into their eight-hour school day and not as done as an extracurricular activities after hours. While this would change in the years to come, those students in 2002 were able to voluntarily sign up to attend, with no prerequisites other than a strong drive for their studies in the arts.

To an outsider looking in, the School of Discovery could be described as a tough sell. The first year that state report cards were published showcased that 53% and 44% of students in the district were below basic in mathematics and English/language arts, respectfully.[1] One could assume (for good reason, based on the data) that students who were already struggling to test at level for the foundational subjects would struggle when also adding on other classes. However, the opposite ended up being true. Throughout its eighteen years as an established middle school, the School of Discovery consistently found itself as the top performing school in the district. Considering that the school was

[1] Annual District Report Card for Marlboro County, The State of South Carolina, 2001, Obtained under the Freedom of Information Act from the South Carolina Department of Education.

in the same county, and was composed of students coming from other schools that were testing low, what made this school different, and why was it suddenly closed in 2019?

Looking at the School of Discovery provides a glimpse of what schools in Marlboro County had the potential to be. A discussion on the teachers, administration, and functioning of the school showcases a rare success story in an impoverished district in the state and how they were able to succeed. On the other hand, a look at some of the criticisms and misconceptions concerning the school shows how it may not have gotten the full support from the district that it needed and offers ideas as to why it was closed when it was still performing at a high level. This school was a peculiar case in the history of the Marlboro County School District, and examining it offers a contrary narrative to the often told negative one.

This chapter will start out with a brief history of the School of Discovery and what intentions were behind its founding. From there it will go into the mindset of those who were employed there and how it helped its long-term success. After that will be an analysis of data that shows end of the year testing results compared to other middle schools in the district, which puts the school into a different perspective. Following this will be a discussion on how instructional time at the school was executed and how the school's emphasis on the arts played into it. The last portion will be on misconceptions about the school and the validity of them, which may directly tie into why the school was unexpectedly closed in 2019.

"We Wanted This School to Be Successful"

The School of Discovery was conceived in 2001 by then-superintendent of Marlboro County, Ray Brayboy. He envisioned a school that greatly supported the arts where its students could not only grow and excel in those, but in their academics as well. The school was to offer lessons in five of the arts: band, chorus, creative writing, dance, and visual art. After its planning and approval, the school opened in the fall of 2001 in an existing building in Clio, one of the smallest towns in the county.

One of the defining factors that set this school apart from its earliest days was the faculty. Brayboy was greatly dedicated to ensuring that this school had everything it needed to excel, but to do that he first had to employ people whom he considered exemplary teachers. Employees of the school at the time and in future years both said that he took it upon himself to search the district for the best teachers it had to offer and to stop at nothing to make sure they were staffed at the school. Sharon Beaty was one of those teachers who was invited to come teach at this new school. While she had complaints about her colleagues at her former school who lacked the care and concern that being an educator demanded, she arrived at SOD and was met with a welcome surprise: her new coworkers largely held the same care of their students that she did, and this type of dedication nurtured a more positive and enriching work environment for her. She said that with faculty who "wanted the school to be successful," SOD quickly became a school unlike the district had yet to see.[2]

Many of the teachers at the School of Discovery had arrived from other schools in the county where they had to have a more authoritarian-like hold on their classrooms behaviorally to be able to also teach their classroom material effectively. When the

[2] Sharon Beaty, interview by Jackson Branch, Bennettsville, SC, July 18, 2021.

school was first opened, its principal was extremely aware of any behavioral issues that may have been happening, likely because he knew that these types of problems plagued other schools in the district. After all, these were the very students who just months ago had composed the student bodies of the other schools in the district. But something quickly happened; he realized that behavior was not as large an issue as it was at other schools.

There were a variety of reasons why this may have been the case. To preface, it was made known through many interviews that this school did not house the "best of the best" behaviorally as many have tried to claim. However, a vast majority of the teachers simply held high expectations for their students and would accept nothing less. Likewise, the teachers also expected a substantial level of parental involvement in their children's education and would also loop parents in on any behavioral issues that students may have been having. This level of involvement was in stark contrast to other schools in the district around the same time, where it was evident that many parents played no role in their children's education or the necessary reinforcement at home, something that can tangibly be seen in many of the testing results. One teacher noted that students will almost always rise to high expectations if they are set out for them, and it is evident through this school at least that this was the case for both students and parents.[3]

The Tangible Results

Looking solely at the state testing results for various years during the years the School of Discovery was operating shows the vast lead in scores that the school had over

[3] Toma Dees, interview by Jackson Branch, Bennettsville, SC, September 22, 2021.2

others in the district. The following data is compiled from the years 2008, 2014, and 2019, which provides a broad look over the years that the school was in operation.

The first set of data to examine comes from the 2007-2008 school year, with testing that occurred in the spring of 2008. For ELA at the School of Discovery, 46.3% of students were advanced or proficient, 44.4% were basic, and only 9.4% were below basic. At Wallace Middle, 16.8% were advanced/proficient, 50.5% were basic, and 32.7% were below basic. At Bennettsville Middle, 7% were advanced/proficient, 37% were basic, and 56% were below basic. For math at SOD, 39.4% were advanced/proficient, 49.4% were basic, and 11.3% were below basic. For Wallace Middle, 16.1% were advanced/proficient, 53.8 were basic, and 30.2% were below basic. At Bennettsville Middle, 9.6% were advanced/proficient, 35.9% were basic, and 54.5% were below basic.[4]

An interesting parameter to look at when gauging the varying level of success among Marlboro County's schools is the comments the principals of said schools make in their yearly report card. The 2008 school year is no exception to that. The School of Discovery leans into their progress in both academics and extracurricular activities stating that they have yet again made their AYP. After highlighting various other achievements, such as the creation of an Academic Challenge Team and the awarding of four Junior Scholars, principal Jack Swann states that "high expectations are the norm…

[4] "Bennettsville Middle – Full Report Card," South Carolina Department of Education, 2008, https://ed.sc.gov/sites/scdoe/assets/archive/reportCards/2008/middle/c/m3501018.pdf; "Marlboro County School of Discovery – Full Report Card," South Carolina Department of Education, 2008, https://ed.sc.gov/sites/scdoe/assets/archive/reportCards/2008/middle/c/m3501028.pdf; "Wallace Middle-Full Report Card," South Carolina Department of Education, 2008, https://ed.sc.gov/sites/scdoe/assets/archive/reportCards/2008/middle/c/m3501025.pdf.

and those high expectations continue to translate into positive results."[5] Wallace Middle this year boasted decent scores, as well as average growth, so their principal highlighted some of this while not saying much about room for potential upward expansion.[6]

Another example is for the testing of the 2013-14 school year, which occurred in the spring of 2014. For ELA at SOD, 80% either exceeding or met the standards, and only 20% did not meet. For Wallace Middle, 49% either exceeded or met, and 51% did not meet. For Bennettsville Intermediate (formerly known as Bennettsville Middle), 46% either exceeded or met, and 52% did not meet. For math at SOD, 70% either exceeded or met, and 28% did not meet. For Wallace Middle, 39% either exceeded or met and 61% did not meet. At Bennettsville Intermediate, 48% either exceeded or met, and 53% percent did not meet.[7]

These scores show a vast difference in mastery level of content between these three schools. It should also be pointed out that the sample size of the students among these schools was not too different: the number of students tested were thirty-five at SOD, thirty-one at Wallace Middle, and 116 at Bennettsville Intermediate. As these results were in the year 2014, the School of Discovery had been operating for over a decade at this point. It was now clear that the method utilized by the faculty was consistently working and producing results. To reiterate, standardized test results are not

[5] "Marlboro County School of Discovery – Full Report Card," 2008.

[6] "Bennettsville Middle – Full Report Card," 2008; "Marlboro School of Discovery – Full Report Card," 2008; "Wallace Middle – Full Report Card," 2008.

[7] "Bennettsville Intermediate – Full Report Card," South Carolina Department of Education, 2014, https://ed.sc.gov/sites/scdoe/assets/archive/reportCards/2014/elem/c/e3501029.pdf; "Marlboro School of Discovery – Full Report Card," South Carolina Department of Education, 2014, https://ed.sc.gov/sites/scdoe/assets/archive/reportCards/2014/middle/c/m3501028.pdf; "Wallace Middle – Full Report Card," South Carolina Department of Education, 2014; https://ed.sc.gov/sites/scdoe/assets/archive/reportCards/2014/middle/c/m3501025.pdf.

the end all be all, but they do provide an insightful and meaningful outlook as to educational progress.[8]

The last example comes from the 2018-2019 school year, with the scores coming from the SC Ready test in the spring of 2019. This is also the final year that the school was in operation. For ELA at SOD, 81.8% of students either approached, met, or exceeded expectations, with only 18.2% not meeting expectations. For Blenheim Middle (which now was the school for those students zoned for the former Bennettsville Intermediate), 49.04% of students tested approached the expectations or better, with 46.9% not meeting expectations at all. At Wallace Middle, 60.9% at least approached, with 39.2% not meeting.[9]

While these results alone present a large gap, looking more specifically shows even more of a divergence. At SOD, 44.6% of students found themselves meeting or exceeding expectations. For Blenheim, only 16.7% met that threshold. That means that 83% of middle school students at Blenheim were only approaching expectations or not meeting them at all.[10]

For math at SOD, 78.8% of students approached or did better than expectations, with 21.2% not meeting at all. At Blenheim Middle, 53% approached or did better, and 46.9% did not meet expectations. At Wallace Middle, 60.9% approached or did better, with 39.2% not meeting expectations. Yet again, closer analysis provides a different

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[8] Ibid.

[9] "Blenheim Middle School – 2018-2019," SC School Report Card, 2019, https://screportcards.com/overview/?q=eT0yMDE5JnQ9TSZzaWQ9MzUwMTAyNw; "Marlboro School of Discovery – 2018-2019," SC School Report Card, 2019, https://screportcards.com/overview/?q=eT0yMDE5JnQ9TSZzaWQ9MzUwMTAyOA; "Wallace Middle School – 2018-2019 Report Card," SC School Report Card, 2019, https://screportcards.com/overview/?q=eT0yMDE5JnQ9TSZzaWQ9MzUwMTAyNQ.

[10] Ibid.

outlook. At SOD, 42.3% of students tested in math either exceeded or met expectations, and only 12% did at Blenheim Middle, leaving over half (54.4%) not meeting expectations. Wallace Middle students were not much better, with only 16.8% meeting or exceeding and 39.9% not meeting expectations. While a majority of the district's middle schools were falling substantially behind, superintendent Gregory McCord made no comments on the district report card concerning areas for improvement, or even acknowledging the clear need for it. Instead, he highlighted that the district was continually "committed to providing a solid foundation for learning," yet over half of students in some schools could not even meet the state threshold for a core subject.[11] The lack of acknowledgement, which some might take as complacency of the current academic standing, directly goes against the district's self-described motto "We love you! We care about you! We are here for you!"[12] If you have such great love for some of the most underprivileged students in the state, then at what point do you acknowledge your own shortcomings and strive to do better for them?[13]

Instructional Time

It is clear from examining the testing data that the teachers at the School of Discovery had greater effectiveness than other schools in the district. Why was this the case? From talking to those who worked there, teachers felt a greater freedom to pace themselves how they saw fit without worrying about constant interference from

[11] "Marlboro County School District – 2018-2019," SC School Report Card, 2019, https://screportcards.com/overview/?q=eT0yMDE5JnQ9RCZzaWQ9MzUwMTAyNQ

[12] Ibid.

[13] "Blenheim Middle School – 2018-2019," 2019, "Marlboro School of Discovery – 2018-2019, 2019; "Wallace Middle – 2018-2019," 2019.

administration. While this was something of a point of contention in the early days of the school's operations, both with academics and behavioral issues, it waned over time as principals realized that the teachers at SOD held great control over their classrooms and did not need supervision as they might in other schools. While standards were still discussed, they were often never met or fulfilled in the way that the district would want them to be. However, there clearly was still somewhat of a handle on them, as children were made familiar with them at the end of the year and were still able to test to a mastery level on the entire year's content. In fact, one teacher even boasted that her test scores for end of year testing were always comparable with some of the more affluent districts in the Upstate, which begs the statement that teachers in Marlboro County, who were allowed to teach in the way their pedagogy demanded, could highly succeed.[14]

The results of the school are even more surprising when viewed considering how the School of Discovery operated their day. In addition to the traditional academic courses, lunch, and recess, students took an additional three elective courses each school day, which ranged from forty-five minutes to an hour each. These classes were rooted in an offshoot of the different arts that the school focused on, with one of these classes being required to be in the field for which a student auditioned and was admitted. For a student to be able to continue taking the class in their field of expertise, they had to keep up their grades in the core classes or face the fear of being put on probation. This standard got students to study their hardest in their required courses so that they could continue to pursue the field that they loved enough to devote their time. While the audition process created passion in the students at the School of Discovery, it did have its

[14] Jack Swann, interview by Jackson Branch, Bennettsville, SC, October 5, 2021.

critics and was eventually removed from the process of being admitted to the school in the final years of its operation.[15]

While the academics and arts were kept separate throughout the day, there were also times where the two were integrated. Those who taught the arts were always keenly aware of their students' standing in the academic courses, but not only for fear of them being out on probation from their class. It was common for those who taught the arts to pull students from their academic courses to teach them a lesson on how their current topic of study tied into the arts. For example, the music teacher at times would take over the history class and teach them about music during the Great War and how it played a part not only in the trenches but on the home front. Not only did this give students a break from their traditional classroom time, but it also helped them engage in the same content in a different, more memorable way. Considering that many of the students at SOD were artistic minded, this integration also helped speak to their brains in a way that was more attractive and interesting to them and often helped them remember the information better.[16]

Outside Opinions about the School

As the School of Discovery was consistently the highest performing school in the district during the years of its existence, many from the outside had questions and concerns about its operations. Faculty and staff who were spoken to drove conversation naturally towards points of contention that they felt others in the district held towards the

[15] Dees, interview; Swann, interview.
[16] Beaty, interview; Dees, interview.

school. Looking at these different opinions not only shows a potentially different side of the school, but also may provide insight as to why it was closed.

One of these opinions was that the school catered to a subsect of students who were both academically smarter and better behaved. However, there is no evidence that either of these were prerequisites to admittance to the school. While a student's behavioral record was taken into consideration during the first years of the school's existence, this was quickly dropped and never looked at again. Former principals and teachers also stated that academic records were not looked at, with one going as far to say that the school was composed of "gifted, regular, and even some [in] special education."[17] Any students who held the talent in one of the arts was given an opportunity to audition and potentially attend the school. Another described how in the realm of academics, the school was composed of students who were on every imaginable level, with some outright struggling, yet they were still able to perform well academically. While many teachers and administrators said that this was not an academic school and that these were the same children as the ones who attended other schools, what they also said was that the mindset here was vastly different. By that it was meant that teachers held a greater belief in their students, and held them to a much higher standard, which in turn helped the students to excel in their classes.[18]

While the anecdotal records state this, reports coming from the state department tell a slightly different story. Every school in the district was given an annual breakdown of their student population, and the School of Discovery consistently boasted a higher

[17] Swann, interview.
[18] Beaty, interview; Dees, interview; Swann, interview.

percentage of students who were eligible for the gifted and talented program. For example, in 2009 SOD had 40% of students being eligible for the program, while other schools only had anywhere from 6 to 10% eligible. While the parameters the state was using are unclear and not stated, this is quite a difference in numbers, especially considering the average for middle schools in the state was 14%. While it is somewhat possible that these students could have been lower performing when they arrived at the school and were brought up to another level by the high caliber of teachers the school possessed, it does seem that there may have been some merit to this statement.[19]

The other major misconception is one that is very easily disproven: that the school catered to a white student body. This claim is simply false: after randomly pulling report cards from 2009, 2011, 2014, and 2017, the record shows that anywhere from 40-50% of the student body was African American, with the remainder being white. This argument invalidates itself because there was almost an even split in the race of students who attended the school.[20]

There was also the existence of rumors, from both those who worked there and others, that some district officials did not view this school in the most positive light. Some teachers felt that certain superintendents had personal vendettas against them and

[19] "Bennettsville Middle – Full Report Card," South Carolina Department of Education, 2009, https://ed.sc.gov/sites/scdoe/assets/archive/reportCards/2009/middle/c/m3501018.pdf; "Marlboro School of Discovery – Full Report Card," South Carolina Department of Education, 2009, https://ed.sc.gov/sites/scdoe/assets/archive/reportCards/2009/middle/c/m3501028.pdf; "Wallace Middle – Full Report Card," South Carolina Department of Education, 2009, https://ed.sc.gov/sites/scdoe/assets/archive/reportCards/2009/middle/c/m3501025.pdf.

[20] "Marlboro School of Discovery – Full Report Card," 2009; "Marlboro School of Discovery – Full Report Card," South Carolina Department of Education, 2011, https://ed.sc.gov/sites/scdoe/assets/archive/reportCards/2011/middle/c/m3501028.pdf; "Marlboro School of Discovery – Full Report Card," South Carolina Department of Education, 2014, https://ed.sc.gov/sites/scdoe/assets/archive/reportCards/2014/middle/c/m3501028.pdf; "Marlboro School of Discovery – Full Report Card," South Carolina Department of Education, 2017, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2017/view/?y=2017&t=M&d=3501&s=028.

their style of teaching, although these claims were never verified or validated. The district wanted to emphasize to their teachers to just teach the basic facts, which would allow them to get through more material, yet many teachers at SOD did not follow this and focused on areas they felt were more important, which could be the root of some of the alleged animosity.[21]

A former principal at the school took this further and provided more concrete evidence that the district paid little mind to the school. She stated that in her three years there, no one came from the district office to observe the school and its progress, and instead would only examine the school when there was a controversy or issue. One issue in question was when a questionable dance number was done at a public recital, which the principal did take fault for and say was wrong. While this does provide minimal clarity, it still does not give a good impression when the only outreach being made is in times of difficulty and not when the school was succeeding and thriving, which it was during this time. She stated that this negligence was, in her mind, a lack of support for the school. While there could have been valid reasons why the school was never given a visit, it certainly does give a bad impression and certainly explains why she would feel that way.[22]

There was also an additional reason why the district would have treated the school that way. This same principal described that for years before she had arrived there, there was a culture surrounding the school to say that things were always going well, even if there were issues present. She said that while the school was run efficiently most of the

[21] Beaty, interview.
[22] Dees, interview.

time, there was a mentality to not accept things for what they truly were, so as to not disturb the status quo. For example, there were numerous behavioral problems that were present at the school when she arrived, yet it did not exist on paper because some of these problems may have not been being reported outside of the school and were remaining internal. This took much work on her part to curtail the problems and get the school back on track to where the students should have been in that regard, even though they were not affecting the school's academic performance. The underlying assumption was that the district simply may have left the school to itself because they were performing highly and there was no indication that there were other ongoing issues, even if they were there. While this does not excuse the indifference by the district, it does shed some light on to why administrators and teachers felt they were being neglected or disliked. Unfortunately, this is a question about the school that will likely go unanswered.[23]

An Unexpected Ending

The more intriguing question posed by the entirety of the test results, predominantly the ones from 2019, is why was the School of Discovery was closed when it was consistently performing much better than the other middle schools in the district? Those who worked there were not apt to discuss the issue of closure, and the only real reason that exists is what the district office told the local press: that the school needed extensive repairs, the district was on a tight budget, and that it would not be financially

[23] Ibid

smart to repair the school when there was room to house these same students at other schools in the district.[24]

News of the school's potential closing came as a shock to many in Marlboro County, considering both that the school performed exceptionally well in academics and artistic extracurricular activities, and that voters had just voted months before on a $10 million referendum that would allocate funds throughout the district that would administer much needed repairs to many of the schools. Many thought that the School of Discovery would be an ideal candidate for this, but Superintendent Gregory McCord felt that these funds would be better served in other schools across the district. While that was true, and other schools did receive much needed repairs, Dr. McCord also proposed reconfiguration plans for where students would now attend school, which led to many students in the district now having to attend a school they were not zoned for and that was in another town than the one in which they resided. Those who previously attended the School of Discovery in Clio were now to attend Blenheim Middle School, with the promise that they would still be able to participate in the classes for whatever art they had originally auditioned for and participated in at the school. It was intended that all of those who had auditioned would be able to continue to take those classes solely with that group of students, but that intention was never materialized. Eventually, these classes were composed of all the students at Blenheim Middle. Over time, the allure of what made that

[24] Matt Parris, "Marlboro Co. Schools hosts community forum on grade reconfiguration plans," ABC15 News, February 6, 2019

school special for so many years was diminished, and the school is now described as hardly even resembling what it once was.[25]

While this was the official reason for the district closing the school, there were still those who felt that there were ulterior motives for this decision. The reasoning behind this goes back to the previous discussion of how many who worked at the school always felt that the district took a disliking to the school and the progress that it was able to make, far outshining other schools in the district. While the truth of this is ultimately unverifiable, and the official reasoning is still that the district could not justify the costs of repairing the school, it still does raise an interesting question of why the district would not go out of its way to help preserve the one school that was able to rise above not only the others in the district, but also the very idea of what a school in an impoverished area looked like.

Conclusion

For better or for worse, the School of Discovery defied expectations consistently for nearly twenty years, defying what a school in the "Corridor of Shame" should look like and instead demonstrating a school that was handled with care and tenacity by those in charge. The teachers and administration showed that they deeply cared about the students and how their lives could be changed by their education, and this showed in the progress that the school was able to make. Those who taught them in their courses in the

[25] Briana Fernandez, "District plan may close Marlboro School of Discovery," WBTW News 13, February 7, 2019, https://www.wbtw.com/news/pee-dee/district-plan-may-close-marlboro-school-of-discovery/; Dees, interview; "Marlboro County voters approve $10 million bond referendum for school district," WMBF News, November 8, 2018, https://www.wmbfnews.com/2018/11/08/marlboro-county-voters-approve-million-bond-referendum-school-district/.

arts not only helped them to excel, but also constantly reminded them of how these tied in with their academic courses and were blended together and equally important. For Marlboro County, this school helped to create many well-rounded individuals, many of whom went on to use their talents in their future careers, and who also came out in support of the school in its final days and spoke about how it had fundamentally changed the course of their lives. The central theme in these messages was the teachers. From the school's earliest days to its final year, those who taught at the school were spoken of in high regards and were remembered as one of the brightest parts of the school. What helped them to stand out was their dedication to their craft and students, and that they would do anything in their power to help them succeed.

While the school district of Marlboro County has faced many challenges and not made much progress in the twenty-first century, looking at the School of Discovery shows what the district truly was capable of and how far it could succeed if it supported those who wanted to truly make a difference. While there were some criticisms of the school, with some of them possibly holding value, the school was largely a huge success story, and provided some success for the history of a public school system that has fallen far behind. It could be said that if other schools in the district were handled with the same care and tenacity, maybe the district could be in a better and more flourishing place than it is now.

Chapter Six

The Data:

Examining the State Report Cards of Marlboro County in the Twenty-First Century

One of the new implementations of No Child Left Behind was greater transparency when describing a district's performance. For South Carolina, this led to report cards being published for each school in the district, in addition to one for the district overall. These report cards gave various insights into how a school was performing, how many attended, and information concerning teachers.

This chapter is going to examine data coming out of the school district from 2001 until the present day and will find any trends that exist in the district's progress. As previous chapters have discussed the shortcomings by teachers and administrators in the district, this data will back up the anecdotal claims made by those employed within the district. It will also show that the district is largely struggling to maintain any sort of normalcy or growth with student success and that great changes need to be made to put the schools on a better pathway. However, there are some spots where the district is making good growth, mainly at the district's sole high school, which will also be discussed. Each section will be devoted to a different measure that is given on the report cards and will also contain comparisons with other districts as well as analysis on the trends that are shown from year to year. The first examined will be the various end of year tests that were taken by third through eighth graders in the district. While these went by a variety of different names through the years, all of them closely resemble one

another as far as content is concerned. Next will be a look at the HSAP exam that tenth graders took. After that will be a look at the SAT scores for those in the district who chose to take it. Last, there will be a look at the graduation rates for the district. All these categories will be taken into context alongside two other districts in the area that were also rural and impoverished, Dillon 3 and Lee, as well as the average for the state overall. These comparisons serve to truly contextualize the state of education in the district and areas of improvement that are needed. While data such as these do not account for everything, it is a crucial part of a school district and serves to speak for the progress that is or is not being made.

End of Year Testing

Throughout the twenty-first century, end-of-year testing in South Carolina has gone through many names, but they all closely resemble one another in intent and execution. These tests were taken by every student starting in the third grade and ending when they were in the eighth. From 2003 until 2008, this was known as the Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (PACT). From 2009 until 2014, it was known as the South Carolina Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (SC PASS). Starting in 2015, the test for science and social studies was still referred to as SC PASS, and the ELA and math portions were known as SC READY. Data is going to be pulled from every five years, and the years that will be examined are 2003, 2008, 2013, 2018, and the 2021, the most recent year available. While the scores for 2021 do reflect the school year upended by the pandemic and switching from remote to in-person learning, they still reflect the overall progress of the school as well as how it handled the added challenges of the pandemic.

The first year to examine for Marlboro County is 2003, which is the first year that the district implemented the PACT test. This year's results will be used as a baseline for future scores and will show what level the students in the district were at the first year it was introduced. For this year, the state rated the district overall as below average and classified their improvement as unsatisfactory. For PACT testing in ELA, 47.5% of students were below basic, 40.8% were basic, 11.3% were proficient, and 0.3% were advanced. For math, 45.5% were below basic, 44.2% were basic, 8.2% were proficient, and 2.1% were advanced. These results show that about half of the students in the district who were tested were below the basic level of knowledge as determined by the state. This data shows that the thesis statement of NCLB was correct and that students in rural and impoverished areas of the country were truly struggling and needed assistance with getting to a more acceptable level of knowledge in their basic subjects.[1]

The next year examined is 2008, which found the district being considered at-risk and continuing to have a growth rating of below average. In addition to the continued reporting of PACT results for ELA and math, the results of science and social studies were as well. While every student was tested in ELA and math, students were chosen at random to receive either the science or social studies test, which resulted in half the class taking one and the other half taking the other. In ELA, 39% of students were below basic, 41.1% were basic, 18% were proficient, and 1.9% were advanced. In math, 41.1% were below basic, 43.9% were basic, 11% were proficient, and 4.6% were advanced. In science, 55.6% were below basic, 30.6% were basic, 9% were proficient, and 4.8% were

[1] Annual District Report Card for Marlboro County, The State of South Carolina, 2003, Obtained under the Freedom of Information Act from the South Carolina Department of Education.

advanced. In social studies, 48.5% were below basic, 37.9% were basic, 8.1% were proficient, and 5.5% were advanced. In the five years since the last set of scores, the district did show improvement with ELA and math and was able to boast that about 10% less of students were classified as below basic. This does show good improvement, yet the state still did classify it as below average. The results of science and social studies showed areas of great concern, with over half of the former not meeting the basic threshold. One idea to explain for the reasoning behind this is that teachers may not have been spending as much time reviewing for these subjects since the entirety of the student body would not be tested for it. Nevertheless, the district still did show some signs of improvement yet still had a long way to go to meet what the state was requiring for proficiency.[2]

What was true for Marlboro this year was not necessarily true for other rural districts. For Dillon 3, their rating was average, and their growth rating was defined as being good. For ELA and math, the number of students who were below basic was 29.6% and 23.2% respectively. While Dillon 3 did have higher numbers than this for below basic in science and social studies, they were not nearly as high as the numbers in Marlboro. While the numbers for basic were practically the same in the two districts for ELA and math, Dillon 3 had about 10% more students whose results were either in the category of proficient or advanced. However, Lee's numbers were substantially worse than Marlboro's, with 50% of students not being basic in ELA and math, 72% in science, and 60% in social studies. All three of these districts were about the same in quality, yet

[2] "Marlboro District Report Cards," South Carolina Department of Education, 2008, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2008/district/?ID=3501

Dillon 3 was able to keep in line with the state's average, while the other two fell behind.[3]

The next year examined is 2013, which rated the district overall as below average but with an excellent growth rating. The state said on the report card that the level of growth was raised from good to excellent because one group of students who historically have underachieved was able to show vast improvement. While this does sound promising, the scores for the year (now the SC PASS test) were worse than they had been five years prior. This year included only three ratings to measure progress instead of four, and now tested students' writing abilities. For ELA, 42.6% of students did not meet the standard, 38.8% did, and 18.6% were exemplary. For math, 46% did not meet the standard, 40.8% did, and 13.2% were exemplary. For science, 50.2% did not meet the standard, 42.2% met it, and 7.6% were exemplary. For social studies, 47.6% did not meet standards, 41.1% of students did meet it, and 11.3% were exemplary. In writing, which required students to write based on a given prompt, 46.7% of students did not meet the standards, 40.5% did, and 12.8% were exemplary.[4]

Marlboro County showed real signs of struggle this year, as progress that had been made from 2003 to 2008 was not improved upon or even maintained. In that timespan, there were significant improvements in the percentage of students who tested below the average set by the state, but 2013 showed that around 5-8% of students had

[3] "Dillon 03 District Report Cards," South Carolina Department of Education, 2008, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2008/district/?ID=1703; "Lee District Report Cards," South Carolina Department of Education, 2008, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2008/district/?ID=3101; "Marlboro District Report Cards," 2008.

[4] "Marlboro District Report Cards," South Carolina Department of Education, 2013, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2013/district/?ID=3501.

regressed into that category. While 2013 does show a larger number of students who were in the exemplary category, it should be kept in mind that before there had been separate categories for proficient and advanced, and that the assumption was that the new exemplary category was the two of those combined. There was no reasoning as to why this data was now reported differently, but it possibly could have been to make the results look somewhat better, even if they were close to the same as they had been in prior years. With that taken into context, this category was similar to the way it was on the 2008 report card.[5]

The trends for the previous years largely held true for other districts in 2013. Dillon 3 was able to make progress in decreasing the number who did not meet standards, as well as keep steady numbers for the other two. While there was little difference in the percentage of those who just met the standards, there was a great deviation between those who did not meet and those who were exemplary, with Dillon 3 having a lower number not meeting and a higher one exceeding. Yet Lee was still much worse off than Marlboro was, with 55.1% not meeting the standards for ELA and 63.3% not meeting it for math. The pattern shows that while Dillon 3 was able to closely maintain the state's average, Marlboro trailed behind it and Lee much further behind.[6]

The 2018 report card for Marlboro County showcased the worst results yet, as well as a very different and somewhat confusing way in which the state reported data.

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[5] Ibid.

[6] "Dillon 03 District Report Cards," South Carolina Department of Education, 2013, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2013/district/?ID=1703; "Lee District Report Cards," South Carolina Department of Education, 2013, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2013/district/?ID=3101.

The state now broke this information into four different categories that varied from those used in previous years: exceeds expectations, meets expectations, approaches expectations, or does not meet expectations. In a different location, they also showcased the percentage of those students who met or exceeded the standards. These parameters are very loose in how numbers are measured. For example, a student who fell into the category of approaching expectations was believed to be close to what the standards were, yet still needed support to be prepared for the next grade level. The numbers or parameters for this are nonexistent on the State Department of Education's website, so there is no way of knowing if said student was even close to meeting the standards. With that being said, it could be argued that any student who "approaches expectations," yet is still not prepared for the next grade level, would technically not meet the expectations. These two categories clearly should be placed together, as differentiating between the two gives little to no additional meaning except for attempting to make the data look better. While the full list of data can be viewed on the South Carolina Department of Education website, the following data listed will place "approaches" and "does not meet expectations" together, as they are both not prepared for the next grade and will separately list meets "expectations" and "exceeds expectations."[7]

For ELA (reading and writing), 78.7% of students did not meet expectations, 16.6% met expectations, and 4.4% exceeded expectations. Out of 1,845 students in the district who were tested this year, 1,457 of them did not meet expectations and were not prepared for the next grade level. For math, 76.4% of students did not meet expectations,

[7] "Marlboro County School District – 2017-2018," SC School Report Card, 2018, https://screportcards.com/overview/?q=eT0yMDE4JnQ9RCZzaWQ9MzUwMTAwMA.

15.6% met, and 7.6% exceeded. For this, 1,417 students in the district were not prepared for the next grade level. For science, 72.7% of students did not meet expectations, 19.9% met the expectations, and 6.3% exceeded. The scores for social studies were not presented as they had been in previous years. These numbers make it clear that most students were not up to even the minimum standard for proceeding to the next grade level, yet the retention rate was 1.8%. Again, while testing is not the only parameter that should be examined, students should still be able to reciprocate some of the knowledge that they learned, which should be reflected on the tests. That was not the case, and it is also evident that students were not being retained to ensure they fully understood the material. Naturally, it would be an issue if students went on to the next grade level without fully understanding the prior year's subject matter, and not having that base layer of knowledge could cause them to perform poorly. These results could partially explain why there was such a drop in the numbers for testing this year, but overall, this is the first year examined that showed that the district was in dire levels of distress and disarray when it came to how the children were performing.[8]

The numbers for Dillon 3 and Lee counties also took a drastic turn in 2018. For Dillon 3, there were 57.8% of students who were not meeting the goals for ELA, and 52.7% not meeting them for math. While these numbers were almost identical to what the state average was, they were still significantly lower than what they had been in prior years. For Lee, there were 83.8% of students not meeting the goals for ELA, and 85.6% not meeting them for math. For all three of these districts, it appears that 2018 served as a

[8] Ibid.

turning point where scores significantly dropped, with no explanation coming from the districts as to why.[9]

The last set of test results to examine is for the 2020-2021 school year. The SC Department of Education prefaced this with a warning to not compare these numbers to previous years as they are not a fully accurate representation, yet for Marlboro they were only slightly different from the ones for 2018. With that in mind, the only categories for results that will be conveyed for 2021 are met or exceeded and did not meet. For ELA, 20% met or exceeded and 80% did not. For math, 84.3% met or exceeded and 15.7% did not. For science, 17.6% met or exceeded and 82.4% did not. These numbers show that even in the pandemic, the district was continuing trends that had started prior to it, and that there seemed to be little incentive for improvement. Due to the caveat about the pandemic and its impact on scores, Marlboro will not be compared to other individual districts for this year, although it is worth nothing that for ELA and math, the state average of meeting or exceeding the average was 42.6% and 37.3%, respectively.[10]

Looking at the testing that third through eighth graders took at the end of each school year helps to present a pattern of the district's progress. While there were some years early on that there was some progress being shown, these ended up taking a drastic trend downwards. It also appears that the SC Department of Education kept changing the ways in which this data was presented to try and make it seem as if the districts were

[9] "Dillon District Three – 2017-2018," SC School Report Card, 2018, https://screportcards.com/overview/?q=eT0yMDE4JnQ9RCZzaWQ9MTcwMzAwMA; "Lee County School District – 2017-2018," SC School Report Card, 2018, https://screportcards.com/overview/?q=eT0yMDE4JnQ9RCZzaWQ9MzEwMTAwMA.

[10] "Marlboro County School District – 2021-2022," SC School Report Card, 2021, https://screportcards.com/overview/?q=eT0yMDIxJnQ9RCZzaWQ9MzUwMTAwMA.

doing better than they actually were. Today, there exists a concerning number of students in the district who are not actually understanding the content for their grade level yet are moving on to the next one regardless. Long term, this will only create confusion for them and make it very difficult to even catch up to where they should be, let alone get ahead and excel. In 2018, the acting superintendent noted that the district was dedicated to its theme for the year "Every Student, Every Day, Whatever It Takes."[11] While this may have been true for him personally, there was still no acknowledgement of how bad things had gotten, how they had gotten that way, or what was intended to help move forward. Based on these scores looked at since 2003, the district is only getting worse, and there needs to be serious acknowledgement of fault and a strong plan for improvement to move forward towards a better and bright future for the children of Marlboro County.

HSAP Testing

The High School Assessment Program (HSAP) is a test taken by tenth grade students in South Carolina that is used to calculate the Absolute Ratings, Growth Ratings, and Federal Accountability status for high schools. Starting with its inception in 2006, passage of the test was a requirement for matriculation, although this could be waived beginning in 2014. As with other end of year tests, students were tested in both ELA and math. As the years this was in full effect were different from the years sampled for other sections in this chapter, the years that will be examined below are 2006, 2010, and 2014.[12]

[11] "Marlboro County School District – 2017-2018," 2018.

[12] "Beginning with Class of 2015 - High School Exit Exam (HSAP) Not Required to Receive Diploma," Greenville County Schools, May 1, 2014,

The first year of HSAP test results to examine is 2006. For ELA, 16.3% of students were below basic, 39.6% were basic, 29.5% were proficient, and 14.6% were advanced. For math, 26.6% were below basic, 35.5% were basic, 26.6% were proficient, and 11.4% were advanced. These numbers boasted much better results than those students who were tested in younger grades, and this was only the first year HSAP testing was administered.[13]

The next year to examine is 2010. For ELA, 23.5% of students were below basic, 42.5% were basic, 23.5% were proficient, and 10.5% were advanced. For math, 33.7% of students were below basic, 37% were basic, 21.3% were proficient, and 8% were advanced. For both ELA and math, the number of students who were below basic increased by about 6% each, as well as the number of those who were advanced slightly decreased by about the same. The numbers did slightly change for both basic and proficient, which showed some signs of improvement.[14]

The report card stated that the state's objective was for 71.3% to be proficient or advanced for ELA, and for 70% to be in math. Marlboro was nowhere near either of these and had the percentages of 49.3% and 42%, respectively. This year's results were significantly behind the state average, which was 65.9% for ELA and 62.3% for math. Dillon 3's numbers were significantly better than Marlboro's. For example, in ELA there were 19.1% of students below basic, 22.6% at basic, 26.1% at proficient, and 32.2% at

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https://www.greenville.k12.sc.us/News/main.asp?titleid=1405hsap; "High School Assessment Program (HSAP)," South Carolina Department of Education, https://ed.sc.gov/data/test-scores/state-assessments/high-school-assessment-program-hsap/.

[13] Annual District Report Card for Marlboro County, The State of South Carolina, 2006, Obtained under the Freedom of Information Act from the South Carolina Department of Education.

[14] "Marlboro District Report Cards," South Carolina Department of Education, 2010, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2010/district/?ID=3501.

advanced. Well over half of their students were either advanced or proficient in ELA compared to only around 33% for Marlboro. Lee's numbers were very similar to Marlboro's for both ELA and math. For math, they had 36.7% below basic, 37.3% at basic, 21.7% at proficient, and 4.2% at advanced.[15]

The last year to examine was 2014, which was the last year the HSAP test was required. By this time, the state had changed the way that these numbers were presented, and the full breakdown of percentages was no longer given on the report card as it had been in previous years. The only categories now given were "passed both subtests," "passed one subtest," or "passed no subtests." In Marlboro, 58.5% passed both, 23.6% passed only one, and 17.9% passed none. These numbers are decent on their own, yet when examined on the report card against the previous three years, it shows that the number for passing both was decreasing by 2% each year and that the number of those passing none was increasing by 1% each year. While this is not a drastically large trend, there still was precedent that things were getting slowly worse. It is also odd that the district stopped giving the larger picture and more precise breakdown of the ELA and math scores. It would be assumed based on evidence presented for other end of year tests that this was changed to conceal how things were declining.[16]

Both Dillon 3 and Lee had better scores that Marlboro for the last year the HSAP was administered. For Dillon 3, 82.5% passed both, 8.7% passed just one, and 8.7%

[15] "Dillon 03 District Report Cards," South Carolina Department of Education, 2010, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2010/district/?ID=1703; "Lee District Report Cards," South Carolina Department of Education, 2010, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2010/district/?ID=3101; "Marlboro District Report Cards," 2010.

[16] "Marlboro District Report Cards," South Carolina Department of Education, 2014, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2014/district/?ID=3501.

passed none. For Lee, 69.1% passed both, 19.1% passed just one, and 11.8% passed none. This year is one of the only times that Lee was able to surpass Marlboro, which highlights how little progress was made for this last year of testing. This was largely an area where Marlboro struggled to make much significant progress.[17]

SAT Scores

Up until 2021, the SAT was long viewed as one of the major requirements to be accepted to a four-year college. Those who took the exam were tested in reading, writing/language, math, and an optional written essay. Until 2016, the highest score one could get on the test was a 2400, and after that it was brought down to 1600. However, students are not penalized for questions they skip, and will only lose points if they answer a question and get it wrong. The following sections will be giving Marlboro's average scores for the test and comparing them to both the state average and national average. This section will omit from comparing these from other similar districts in the state.[18]

The first year of SAT scores to examine for Marlboro is 2003. The average score for those high school students who chose to take the test was 427 for verbal and 456 for math, with the total for the district being 883. The average for the state of South Carolina was 493 for verbal, 496 for math, and 989 total. While Marlboro was lower than the state

[17] "Dillon 03 District Report Cards," South Carolina Department of Education, 2014, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2014/district/?ID=1703; "Lee District Report Cards," South Carolina Department of Education, 2014, https://ed.sc.gov/data/report-cards/historic-school-report-cards/2014/district/?ID=3101.

[18] "A Brief History of the SAT and How It Changes," Peterson's, December 20, 2017, https://www.petersons.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-the-sat-and-how-it-changes.

average, both the district and the state fell behind the national average, which was 507 for verbal, 519 for math, and 1026 total.[19]

The next year to examine for SAT scores is 2008. This year had the section previously labeled as verbal broken up into critical reading and writing. For critical reading, the average was 405, math was 412, and writing being 399, with a total average score being 817. The district was still significantly lower than the state average, with critical reading for the state being 484, math being 496, writing being 471, and the average for the state being 1007. The average for South Carolina was now virtually identical to the national average and was only around twenty points lower than it for each subsection and total score. While the state made improvements that placed it closer to the national average, something that did receive media attention at the time, Marlboro found its students doing worse overall than they had been in 2003.[20]

The SAT scores for 2013 showed little improvement across the individual subsections, but now showed that the total average was calculated differently and reflected a higher number, even though the same three categories were being presented on the report card**.** For critical reading, the average was 410, for math it was 418, writing was 401, and the total was 1230. For the state's averages, it was 479 for critical reading, 484 for math, 460 for writing, and 1423 total. The national average was 491 for critical reading, 503 for math, and 480 for writing, with a total being average 1474. The scores for Marlboro were largely the same as they had been in prior years, showing little improvement towards making either the state or national average.[21]

[19] Annual District Report Card for Marlboro County, 2003.
[20] "Marlboro District Report Card," 2008.
[21] "Marlboro District Report Card," 2013.

The scores for 2018 now reflected the test being scored out of 1600 points instead of 2400. For 2018, 51% of students in Marlboro were tested, and the average score for reading/writing was 461, the average for math was 429, and the total average score was 889. For the state the average number tested was 45% of students, and the average score for reading/writing was 543, the average for math was 520, and the total average was 1064. For the national average, it was 536 for reading/writing, 531 for math, and 1068 total. While it is impossible to compare these numbers to previous years, as the grading scale was completely different, it can still be seen that students in Marlboro who were tested were trending significantly lower than the state average, even though the state was slightly edging ahead of the national average.[22]

The scores for 2021, while taking place during the midst of the pandemic, do not much provide much insight to interpret, as only 18% of high school students in Marlboro County took the test. Overall, the SAT numbers for Marlboro show little growth, or decline, as the district stayed mostly stagnant in how their students did on the test. Even as South Carolina was able to get close to the national average, this was never something that the district itself was able to do.

Graduation Rates

[22] "Dillon District Three – 2017-2018," 2018; "Lee County School District – 2017-2018," 2018, "Marlboro County School District – 2017-2018," 2018; "SAT Results: Class of 2018," SAT Suite Results: 2018, CollegeBoard, https://reports.collegeboard.org/archive/sat-suite-program-results/2018/class-2018-results.

The last set of data from the district that will be examined is the graduation rate. This area is arguably one of the most important numbers coming out of a school district, as it shows how many students are successful enough to ultimately finish high school.

In the spring of 2003, 73% of seniors from Marlboro County High School graduated, which amounted to 356 students. This was the first year that this data had been given, so unfortunately there is no way to say what this number had been in the years prior. However, this number was significantly higher than the 57% graduation rate for South Carolina, which ranked the state forty-ninth in the nation.[23]

In 2008, only 67.9% of seniors in Marlboro County graduated high school, showcasing around a 6% drop from what it was in 2003. The number for Marlboro dropped while the percentage for the state overall stayed practically the same, now being 58.9%. For Dillon 3, that number was significantly higher, coming in at 86.2% of seniors graduating high school. Lee offered a number closer to Marlboro at 73.4%. Other districts like Marlboro were able to have high numbers for 2008, much higher than the state average, while Marlboro's number dropped from what it previously had been.[24]

The year 2013 boasted some improvements across the state for the percentage of seniors graduating. In Marlboro, the number rose around 8% and was now at 75.3%. This number was now slightly higher than it had been back in 2003 when this data was first given. For Dillon 3, the number dropped down to 80.2%, although it was still slightly

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[23] Annual District Report Card for Marlboro County, 2003; "Study: SC graduation rate 49th in US, college preparedness above avg.," WIS News 10. September 19, 2003, https://www.wistv.com/story/1446443/study-sc-graduation-rate-49th-in-us-college-preparedness-above-avg/.

[24] Averaged freshman graduation rates for public secondary schools, by state or jurisdiction: Selected years, 1990-91 through 2006-7," Digest of Education Statistics, National Center for Education Statistics, 2008, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d09/tables/dt09_105.asp; "Dillon 03 District Report Cards," 2008; "Lee District Report Cards," 2008; "Marlboro District Report Cards," 2008

higher than it was in Marlboro. In Lee, the number slightly rose to 76.3%. While these three districts showed numbers that were vastly different in other areas measured, they were able to keep around the same for graduation rate, and even offer some slight improvements across the board.[25]

The upward trend continued for 2018. For Marlboro, the number was now at 80.4%, almost identical to the state average. For Dillon 3, it was 88%, and for Lee it was an impressive 91%. All three of the districts showed extremely strong growth this year and were able to keep up and exceed the state average.[26]

Despite the pandemic, these numbers held steady for 2021. For Marlboro the number of students graduating was 81.1%, for Dillon 3 it was 84.9%, and for Lee it was 88.3%. Seeing as these stayed fairly similar to the numbers from 2018, it seems that the graduation rate for these districts going forward will likely remain around the same or go a little higher. Throughout the twenty-first century, Marlboro and districts like it have been able to steadily raise their graduation rate and are closing in on 90% of seniors graduating high school. While other testing has shown a downward trend through this same time, it is impressive to see these numbers continue to rise.[27]

Conclusion

[25] "Dillon 03 District Report Cards," 2013; "Lee District Report Cards," 2013; "Marlboro District Report Cards," 2013.

[26] "Dillon District Three – 2017-2018," 2018; "Lee County School District – 2017-2018," 2018, "Marlboro County School District – 2017-2018," 2018

[27] "Dillon School District Three – 2020-2021," SC School Report Card, 2021, https://screportcards.com/overview/?q=eT0yMDIxJnQ9RCZzaWQ9MTcwMzAwMA; "Lee County School District - 2020-2021," SC School Report Card, 2021, https://screportcards.com/overview/?q=eT0yMDIxJnQ9RCZzaWQ9MzEwMTAwMA; "Marlboro County School District – 2020-2021," 2021.

The data presented in these different sections do not show an exhaustive, yearly look at how Marlboro was performing, but do show how the trends were moving over time. For standardized testing, there was a huge downward trend in how students in the district were performing, the timeline of which lines up when many teachers were stating that things in the district took a turn for the worse. The scores since 2018 clearly reflect that many students are not grasping the information they are being taught, yet a large portion of them are moving on to the next grade each year. There have been no clear efforts by the district to push their teachers forward to help rectify these scores, which begs the question if they are clearly a priority for the district at all. It is odd that throughout the statements given by the various superintendents on the district's report cards, very few of them reflect on the standardized testing scores. These are pushed to be an important part of education, and teachers are pushed to prepare their children for them, yet there is no acknowledgement of failure or room to grow when things do not go as planned.

The scores for end of year testing, which only occurs until the eighth grade, show that little progress had been made in the district's elementary and middle schools. There is a clear struggle in moving those forward to becoming higher performing schools, which lines up with many of the prior interviews given. However, things do not seem quite as bad at Marlboro County High School. For both the SAT scores and HSAP scores, there is a steady line maintained throughout the years, and if any numbers ever dropped it was not by a drastic amount. In addition to this, the growing graduation rate is a high point for the district and shows that they have been committed at Marlboro County

High School to help push their students towards graduating. This area is also reflective of positive trends throughout the state and is truly a high point.

Comparing Marlboro to similar districts helps to contextualize where they are on their path to progress. While they are not performing the worst, there is precedent that they could perform much higher, as Dillon 3 consistently did. Dillon 3's results are more surprising when taken into context how geographically close the two are, in addition to them both being referred to as the "Corridor of Shame." It is evident that Dillon has refused to let that hold them back from making progress with their students and scores, something that Marlboro would do well to take into consideration when trying to better their schools.

Chapter Seven

The Post-No Child Left Behind Years:

How Have Public Schools Fared Since Its Passage?

In the 1970s, Marlboro County native Marian Wright Edelman founded the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), which sought to fight for greater policy work concerning child welfare and public education systems. Edelman recognized that children living in poverty faced unique challenges that could likely last for the rest of their lives, and she felt she could offer meaningful change by working for these children. She also felt that the federal government could significantly help this problem by making this a top priority. The CDF has found great success in the years that followed and has made great progress towards meeting children in poverty where they are and helping them succeed.

The goals of the CDF sound very similar to what George W. Bush was trying to accomplish with his No Child Left Behind legislation, and the similarities between the two go deeper than this. One of the slogans that Edelman adopted for her work was "leave no child behind." However, Bush's adoption of a similar name for his sweeping education reform was not something she appreciated. In an interview in 2004, she said that while her work with the CDF served to be all-encompassing for children in poverty, Bush's work with NCLB was instead single-issue. By this, she was implying that Bush was only trying to appease businesses who were concerned about the labor force (who

were staunch lobbyists for the legislation) and went as far to say that the legislation was "a smokescreen to dismantle all of the gains we have made for children."[1]

While Edelman criticized Bush's push for education reform in parts of the country that were near to her heart, the legislation has not produced the results that were expected. This is certainly true for Edelman's hometown, which has not only struggled in the years following NCLB with testing and raising scores, but also with a decrease in school and workplace quality and an increase in teachers who find themselves unhappy with the new changes. Around the time the legislation was debated and passed, there were some critics who were already claiming that the legislation would prove detrimental to those it sought out to serve and end up widening the gap between them and more affluent schools. This impact is something that has continued to be studied on a national level in the years after, and many have convincingly argued that some of the changes brought about by NCLB have done the opposite of what was intended.

This chapter will look at the years following the passing of NCLB and will try to answer three central questions surrounding the legislation: did it work, how were schools in poverty affected, and what were the true intentions behind the passing of the bill? This contextualization of the state of education in the years following will help to put in place the case of the Marlboro County School District. The story in Marlboro is not just true for one small district in rural South Carolina, but instead part of a larger national problem that has been quickly spinning out of control in the twenty-first century.

Did the Legislation Work?

[1] "Five Questions for: Marian Wright Edelman," *Ebony*, January 2004, 20.

One of the most general, and difficult to answer, questions that can be asked about any legislation is whether it was effective. In the years following its passage, this question has also been asking regarding NCLB. One of the tangible goals of the legislation was for the nation to be at 100% proficiency by 2014. For that ambitious goal, it is safe to say that it was nowhere near achieved. From a broader standpoint, many education scholars began debating whether the legislation was effective in closing the achievement gap as soon as a year after the legislation was passed. While it is hard to get a clear, widespread answer to this question, the consensus is that overall, the bill was largely not effective and did not make much change. But there was one gain acknowledged: answering multiple choice tests.

The years following the passing of the legislation showed that teachers and administrators were pivoting their focus away from educating their students and instead towards meeting the steep requirements that were now set before them. Many principals, who were now being partially evaluated on the test scores of their schools, now instructed their teachers to only teach in such a way that would reinforce the preparation for the end-of-year tests. Teachers began to take this quite literally and moved away from heavy emphasis on subjects that were not tested, such as science, social studies, and any extra classes that were focused on the arts. Some schools went as far as to take away recess time from their students so that instructional time could increase. For that time, the emphasis was often brought back to the testing, and many schools introduced test prep

and multiple-choice drills into their classroom time so that students could be familiar with how to engage the material in the format that it would be tested.[2]

Once high school students moved past standardized testing and had to transition to more open-ended writing, many were struggling with how to properly convey their thoughts. The push to retrain students' brains to look at information in the way it could be presented in a multiple-choice test showed that they were beginning to struggle with how to express their thoughts when the answer could be many different things. In addition, students were now having trouble connecting with their creative side and being able to fully express themselves, something many teachers knew was a result of having to "teach for the test."[3]

There have been specific studies done on schools which show results that are more shocking. One of these was done by Linda Perlstein, who spent an entire year in an elementary school in Annapolis, MD. This was a school that was intended to receive great help from NCLB, as it was in a high poverty area and primarily served African American and Hispanic students. But instead of these students becoming more deeply rooted in general knowledge, they instead were taught how to answer multiple choice questions and, if they were not fully sure what that answer may have been, how to use process of elimination to make their best educated guess. Perlstein noticed that many of these students lacked knowledge about basic math, the city or state where they lived, or even current affairs that were happening for which a child should have been privy. She

[2] Diane Ravitch, *The Life and Death of the Great American School System* (New York: Basic Books, 2016), 114-5.

[3] Ibid.; Angela Montefinise, "Lost Lessons in Test-Prep Craze," *New York Post*, January 28, 2007, https://nypost.com/2007/01/28/lost-lessons-in-test-prep-craze/.

said that while this school showed moderate progress on increasing their scores, students completely lacked any sort of general knowledge that would best serve them in high school or wherever they progressed after they finished their formal education. In her opinion, these students were being trained, not educated.[4]

While there were small gains in test scores on a national scale, they were nowhere near what Bush believed they would be. There also was a discrepancy that was reported amongst testing organizations, with some showing that moderate progress was being made and others showing that there was little to none. FairTest, an education organization that studies testing results and national trends, began reviewing the changes in scores as soon as 2003, and throughout the rest of the decade noted that nationally, there was only close to a five-to-seven-point increase in scores. But in the 1990s, the national average for growth was trending closer to twenty points. While some progress was made, it was nowhere near as successful as when teachers and schools were largely left to their own devices to teach their students. When looking at how many students were now completely rewired to thinking in terms of multiple-choice questions on a standardized test, it makes one wonder if the ends were worth the means.[5]

How Did Poverty Schools Fare?

While there has been much anecdotally written about how NCLB adversely affected schools in poverty, there is not a great deal of research written on the specific

[4] Ravitch, 115.
[5] Ibid., 113-6.

progress in these schools. However, there has been a great deal written on how the morale of schools in high poverty has been affected.

One conclusion that can be drawn from research done in the post-NCLB years is how the achievement gap between African American and white students has fared. One study that began in 2003 showed that out of a sample size composed of 27,000 public schools, African American students were only scoring around 80% of what white students scored. One of the factors that affected the achievement gap was their school environment. These schools were more likely to be found in areas of high poverty, and class size was often higher. As there were more students in a classroom, it was easier for students who were struggling to go unnoticed, either because the teacher could not keep track of all the students' individual progress or because there was simply not enough time to tend to all who were struggling. Another factor that played into this was their home lives. The African American students were more likely to have a single parent and a larger number of siblings, which significantly detracted from their ability to get assistance at home on their schoolwork. The staggering difference in these numbers show that the early years of the legislation being implemented were off to a rough start, and the years to follow would not show much better progress for those in poverty.[6]

While other reports showed that gains were being made to close the achievement gap between students, some felt that these results were being shared in bad faith. In 2005, the National Assessment of Educational Progress began to report that for nine-year-old African American and Hispanic students, the levels of proficiency in math and reading

[6] Rochelle L. Rowley and David W. Wright, "No 'White' Child Left Behind: The Academic Achievement Gap Between Black and White Students," *The Journal of Negro Education 80*, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 95, 97-8, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41341113.

were at an all-time high, and that the numbers of increased literacy in this group had been higher in the past five years than the last twenty-eight combined. While these numbers are impressive on paper, one study that came out of Harvard told a different story. The author of this study, Jaekyung Lee, argued that these trends were largely reflective of progress that was already being made before the passage of NCLB and was not an indicator that the passing of the legislation was making a substantial impact. In addition to this, she argued that most of these states reporting the highest gains were also the ones who had the "least demanding standards and lowest threshold for achievement," which meant that less progress was being made. [7]

Many reports were also showing that teachers in high poverty schools struggled in the years after NCLB was passed. While teachers were hailed as the most important factor in student success while the legislation was being introduced and debated, their morale quickly depleted under the new pressures born of the legislation. Many teachers felt that the pressure put on them by administrators to help their students score well on tests was unrealistic. While it would have been different if the added pressure also came with added support, that was often not the case. Many felt that administrators were increasing the pressure and then abandoning the teachers, unwilling to offer them unconditional support in trying to raise their student's scores. Teachers also felt that there was too much material to cover in both ELA and math, which made them decrease emphasis from other subjects like science and social studies. As the scores mattered most in the schools that were doing the worst, teachers who already had a difficult challenge

[7] Lois Harrison- Jones, "No Child Left Behind and Implications for Black Students," *Journal of Negro Education* 76, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 347-51, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40034577.

ahead of them were having to now take on a much harder task, which caused many to begin to resent their profession and others to leave it all together.[8]

These factors play into a larger conversation that centers on the idea that schools in poverty are destined to stay that way, as it is virtually impossible to improve them without revitalizing the entire area in which they are located. One of the ideas that has come about during the post-NCLB years is that there is a "powerful relationship that exists between concentrated poverty and virtually every measure of school-level academic results."[9] The data certainly proves this, harkening back to the studies that show that those with a more inconsistent home life, a single parent, and more siblings have trouble getting support with their schooling. These factors were certainly prevalent in Marlboro County throughout the twenty-first century, with many referencing that this was one of the most difficult parts of their job to overcome. While teachers can give all their support to their students who are struggling, there is only ultimately so much they can do themselves, and there comes a point where this support also must be given by administrators and parents, both of which are severely lacking in the areas that are hurting the most.

What Were the True Intentions Behind NCLB?

From the days of its passage, there were those who were staunchly opposed to and skeptical of the NCLB legislation. Seeing how the years after have played out has not

[8] Helen F. Ladd, "No Child Left Behind: A Deeply Flawed Federal Policy," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 36, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 463-6. https://doi.org/10.1002/pam.21978.

[9] Judith A. Winston, "Rural Schools in America: Will No Child Left Behind? The Elusive Quest for Equal Educational Opportunities," *Nebraska Law Review* 82, no. 1 (2003): 200, https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nlr/vol82/iss1/7.

only emboldened those critics but have led others to call into question what the true intentions were behind the passing of the bill. While many of these are just theories, they do present valid arguments that make one wonder if President Bush had any ulterior motives to his sweeping education reform.

One of the harshest criticisms leveled at NCLB was that it tried to act as a poverty deterrent. One of the central ideas behind the bill was that if students in poverty received a better-quality education and performed better in school, they would be more likely to continue their education after high school, get a degree, and then enter the labor force, effectively ending the cycle of poverty in their lives. This focus created a narrow view that education was the only way of escaping poverty, which left no room for other means of action by the federal government, such as social reform, creating jobs aimed at those in these situations, or raising the federal minimum raise.[10]

Others argued that Bush was trying to serve some of his business partners from years past. A school's progress was hinged solely on their AYP, which was measured by how well they did on a standardized test. The years following the passing of NCLB saw McGraw-Hill become one of the leading test distributors and textbook writers in the nation. Harold McGraw, Jr. was a board member for the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy in the 1990s and was awarded for strides made to increase literacy. In turn, Bush's eventual education secretary was given an educator award by the McGraw Foundation. After elected president, Bush placed Harold McGraw III on his transition team along with one of the company's board members, Edward Rust, Jr., who was also a

[10] Jean Anyon and Kiersten Greene, "No Child Left Behind as an Anti-Poverty Measure," *Teacher Education Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 157-8. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23479022.

member of the Business Roundtable for educational issues in the country. But the coincidences did not stop there. As a penalty for not reaching AYP, a school would have to start offering outside tutoring to their students, of which the school would foot the bill. One of the top candidates for this was Reading First, a federally funded program that was bringing in close to a billion dollars a year during this time. Bush also had deep business ties with many of its initial developers and publishers. These instances seem too close to be coincidences and show a disturbing trend of moving many of the efforts of public education towards privatization.[11]

Bush did appear to have a deep concern for the nation's children who were in poverty, and there is little doubt that he did have genuine intentions to help better their education and lift them out of poverty. Yet the point stands that there were other economic means that his administration could have taken to also combat poverty but did not. In addition to this, it is also deeply troubling that some of the money from this largely federally funded program was going to individuals who had deep ties with the president. Seeing that little change was truly made in the years following the passing of NCLB, it does call into question if there were other factors at play when the bill was conceived and proposed.

Conclusion

While the years following the passing of NCLB have shown some progress in raising scores nationally, these have largely been reflective of preexisting trends and do

[11] Anyon, 160-1; Stephen Metcalf, "Reading Between the Lines," *The Nation*, January 28, 2002, https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/reading-between-lines/.

not indicate substantial growth. Regardless, this has come at a great cost to many of the teachers in the country, who have felt a large burden fall on them and have found little support to help them carry it. The years following NCLB have also found a larger achievement gap between students struggling and those excelling and are largely indicative of the areas in which these schools are located. While NCLB tried to create a better learning environment for students, it could not account for outside factors that also prevent students in poverty from succeeding, and the twenty-first century has not seen great improvements in those areas.

This lack of substantial growth has also called into question what President Bush's true intentions were with the passing of the legislation. It seems that many people he was already in business with have benefited greatly from a higher emphasis on testing and tutoring, which has caused booms for their respective businesses. In addition to this, if it is true that students also need a better home life to succeed in their education, then why would the passing of NCLB not also be supplemented with other anti-poverty measures that could lead to a more prosperous learning environment both in school and at home?

Conclusion

Public schools have not been the only issue for Marlboro County in the twenty-first century. The county has also been plagued by struggling local businesses, plant closures, a rising crime rate, and numerous public scandals, some of which involved the public schools. Marlboro has seemed to struggle at getting ahead, and it has become a more prevalent issue as the years have passed.

Many in the county, including some of those interviewed, fully believe that the root cause of this issue has been the public schools. One person interviewed said that in many schools, the mindset was that if they would do better, new industries might start to arrive in the county and give better jobs. At the same time, the mindset of industries is that they would not come into the county until the schools began to do better. He said that of the two, industries had a choice to come or not, but regardless the schools still had to be there, high performing or not. This commentary bookended a harsh conversation about the trajectory of the public schools: as students continued to not succeed in their education, they were forced to stay in a county where jobs were becoming few and far between, and to one day bring children into the world and let the cycle begin again. This is a harsh reality for too many today in the United States, one of the most affluent nations in the world.

The passage of No Child Left Behind ultimately sought to prevent scenarios such as this from happening. It was thought that helping to give those in poverty a better education would ultimately help them to get further in life, get better jobs, and ultimately

be better citizens. While this was a worthwhile idea in its concept, the harsh reality is that the one size fits all approach was bound to fail. What works for one school or teacher may not work the same in other circumstances and trying to force all teachers to conduct themselves in the same way was never going to be fruitful. In addition to this, basing a school's progress on its testing scores was never truly going to help it improve, and it seems to have had the opposite effect. Many schools ended up just teaching the bare minimum that would be on their standardized testing, and in the process many teachers have lost their creative outlook. This has adversely affected many schools, including those in Marlboro County. For example, in 2021, that over 70% of students were not meeting expectations in ELA or math shows that there are deep issues within the schools, ones that were not nearly as bad when NCLB was initially implemented.

At the same time, there have been high spots for the county in the twenty-first century. While standardized testing results have gotten worse and show that students are struggling more, there has been an increase in the graduation rate, as well as certain schools and teachers that have excelled despite the odds being stacked against them. Unfortunately, these have not received the full support of the district, and the highest performing school in the county was closed and many high performing teachers have left either the district or the profession.

Looking at these high points for the district show that it is very possible to have success and growth, yet support is needed to sustain it. Especially with the case of the School of Discovery and its closing, it is unfortunate that the district made little effort to replicate its results elsewhere, in addition to not trying to do anything in its power to keep a high performing school open. The performance of that school was impressive for any

district in the state, and especially one such as Marlboro. According to those who worked there and others who looked in from the outside, it was the combination of dedicated teachers and largely involved and motivated administrators. Those was the reasons that the school thrived. If only the same care had been put into other schools in the district, there could be a true change in results.

While it is important to examine the factors that hold a school back, it is also important to consider what can be done to make things better. Those spoken to said that because of Marlboro's geographical location and how rampant poverty is in the county, there was naturally going to be a large hurdle to overcome. However, it was also suggested that if teachers were given more freedom to teach in the way they saw most effective, then there could be better results. This also had to come with administrators who were willing to observe carefully but at the same time give full support. Marlboro is severely lacking in both things, and the results speak for themselves.

Some interviewed also pointed to another potential solution: to allow those from within the district to be placed in administrative positions. Almost all the superintendents in the last twenty years have been hired from outside of the county, meaning that when coming into the role they were not uniquely aware of the county and its struggles. Some said that if the district would support qualified individuals from within to rise to this position, there could be better results as these people would be more dedicated to the growth of the schools and the community since they had a higher stake and more personal connection to the results. The caveat here is again that the schools are going to reflect the community, and it is very difficult for one to succeed while the other still suffers.

As for those in Marlboro who have begun to feel new pressures in their job, this seems to be indicative of a larger problem as well. Nationwide teacher shortages show that many feel this way, especially in the wake of the pandemic. Many teachers have decided they no longer want to put up with this type of work environment where there are too many high expectations required and little support or pay to reimburse those for their hard work. This demonstrates that even after South Carolina and other states have long applied for a waiver to be exempt from the requirements imposed by NCLB, the lingering effects of the legislation are still rampant in schools. Teachers feel they are stretched too thin with paperwork, testing, and a much higher percentage of students who are far behind. Far too many qualified teachers have either moved to private schools or retired, and for Marlboro County, their results have likely kept many new candidates from moving there to teach and live.

Instead of focusing on fixing the teacher shortage issue or test scores that were at an all-time low in 2021, the district has been dealing with other issues. Some of these are funding a nearly million-dollar football field renovation, handling numerous teacher misconduct scandals, and having to remove a superintendent who was misusing school property. Both from the outside looking in, as well as based on what those working for the district have said, it seems that to turn things around, there needs to be a major transition towards leadership that wants the students to thrive, as well one that supports teachers who are also motivated to do this. Otherwise, it seems that Marlboro County is destined to continue in the cycle of poverty that has encapsulated so many public schools across the country in the years following No Child Left Behind.

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