

Advancing Principals

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Growing Your Own Through NISL Research & Practice

Distinguished Principal Spotlight: Cederick Ellis

Cederick Ellis is the superintendent of the McComb school district in Mississippi. While Ellis has worked in several roles through his long career, including as a computer science teacher, district director, and as both a middle school and junior high school principal, he was not always an educator.

It was only after working for the Centers for Disease Control and as a capacity building coordinator for organizations funded by that federal agency that he began his career in education. His first job as an educator saw him return as a computer science professor to the community college he attended as a student. It was during this initial foray into teaching that he realized his greatest impact would be in K-12 education.

“I didn’t have an education background prior to working at the community college and there were students coming to me, majoring in computer science, who didn’t have the basic mathematical skills,” said Ellis.

During seven years as a community college professor, he found that this lack of foundational academic skills was a recurring problem.

“These were students who had high school diplomas,” Ellis said, “and I felt as though there was something that was happening in the K-12 space that gave these students a false sense of what they could accomplish.”

More than 20 years after Ellis realized that K-12 education would be the best place to make an impact, he is entering his fifth year as superintendent of McComb schools, just a few hours from his hometown, where he oversees seven schools and about 2,700 students.

In this particular school district, Ellis has his work cut out for him. Based on the Mississippi accountability system, the district as a whole has a D rating, and its one high school has a C rating, which is up from an F four years ago when Ellis first came to the district.

In an interview with NISL, Ellis discussed in depth his ongoing initiatives in the district including one school's focus on STEM at an early age, a computer science course offering at the district's junior high school, and virtual reality labs in two schools. But his main focus is on the district's pilot of a personalized learning school which, according to Ellis, is the only school in the district that has seen double-digit gains in English Language Arts and mathematics.

The personalized learning school provides every student at the school with a personalized learning plan and the students are grouped by readiness. For example, if a third grade student is functioning at a second grade level, that student will receive second grade content in his or her third grade classroom. Similarly, if the student is functioning at a fifth grade level, the student will receive fifth grade content in his or her third grade classroom.

"We now know that by meeting those students where they are, we're filling in the gaps and we're moving more students towards proficiency on the state assessments," he said.

He attributes much of this success with the personalized learning effort to NISL's Executive Development Program (EDP). When Ellis first took district office leaders and principals through the EDP a couple of years back, two school leaders chose to hone in on the personalized learning pilot school as their Action Learning Project (ALP) and through that effort, McComb rolled out student-centered teaching and learning not just at that individual school but through other schools across the district.

"Our ALP through NISL is a living breathing project even today," he added.

Because Ellis has witnessed first-hand the impact of NISL on his own skills as a leader and on those of other school leaders in his district, he became trained as a NISL facilitator and currently has 21 of 22 leaders and aspiring leaders in the district going through the EDP.

"We're taking them through this program so that we can grow our own leaders," Ellis said. "We believe that we have to grow our own folks and we think that with the national benchmarking that NISL has done, with the constant redesigning of their work and with that being grounded in research, we think this [program] is one of the ways that we can strengthen our leaders so that our leaders can empower and strengthen the people that they lead."

One of the current district leaders going through the EDP is Ellis' assistant superintendent. The assistant superintendent can retire any day, according to Ellis, but at a recent meeting she thanked Ellis for enrolling her in the EDP.

“Even as a seasoned educator, it has re-energized her love for leadership. Even though she’s at retirement age,” Ellis added, “I think going through this NISL piece has re-energized her and I think she’ll be with us for some additional years.”

Ellis has come a long way from his days as a professor choosing to enter K-12 education to improve students’ basic math skills.

“Now as a superintendent, I think that it’s not just those mathematical skills that I have an opportunity to influence, but I think I have an opportunity to influence the whole child now—a college and career ready piece,” he said.

And by building the capacity of the school leaders in his district through the EDP he’s doing just that, and embracing the NISL curriculum every step along the way.

“We know that the only way we’re going to transform what we’re doing and become like those high-performing countries is that we have to be grounded in solid research,” he said. “As educators and as school leaders we don’t have the time to do it. NISL is the framework of the research, doing all of the benchmarking. Now we can utilize what they’ve done to help us lead our schools.”