



BETTER

*UNCG and Rockingham County
team up to transform K-5 education*

MOSS STREET PARTNERSHIP SCHOOL – MSPS – isn’t your average “lab school.”

In fact, MSPS avoids that term, though it’s used in the 2016 legislation that created this and similar schools in low-performing districts across the state.

UNC Greensboro faculty and MSPS staff want people to understand this isn’t a scenario in which a university goes into a community, overhauls a school, and then steps back to do its own research.

This is anything but that. What’s happening in Rockingham County is a partnership – among UNCG, the school district, and the community. Researchers, teachers, students, and their families are working together to create an environment of authentic teaching and learning that will ultimately change the trajectory of these students’ lives and transform the community.

With just one year under their belts, researchers and staff will tell you that there’s still a lot to learn. But if the success they saw in the first year – engaged reading, STEM integration, and gains in social and emotional learning – are any indication, there’s a lot to be excited about for the future.

UNPACKAGING THE CURRICULUM

It’s a place with a lot of pride.

MSPS – formerly Moss Street Elementary School – has a strong history and a deep connection to the rural community of Reidsville, North Carolina.

But over the years, it has struggled with high

teacher turnover, lack of resources, and a student population that faces distinct challenges. All students receive free or reduced lunch, and the majority of students come from underserved populations.

Then there’s UNCG, just 35 minutes down the road. It’s the region’s largest public institution with a renowned School of Education and a reputation for strong, community-engaged research and partnerships.

Bringing the two together to transform K-5 education in Rockingham County wasn’t a hard sell. It just made sense.

UNCG School of Education’s Dr. Carl Lashley and Dr. Christina O’Connor serve as co-directors of the school. Tina Chestnut, who attended Moss Street when she was a girl, was hired in the summer of 2018 as the MSPS principal and associate director. Dr. Allison Ormond, a doctoral alum of UNCG’s School of Education and N.C. Teacher of the Year, serves as associate director for curriculum.



UNCG-POWERED Three-fourths of the Moss Street Partnership School leadership team – Chestnut, Ormond, and O’Connor – are UNCG alumni, and many of the school’s teachers are currently enrolled in master’s programs at UNCG. The School of Education is supporting their efforts by holding graduate classes on site at MSPS.

THEIR



LEGISLATIVE ACTION Moss Street Partnership School is part of the UNC Lab School initiative, which aims to improve student performance in low-performing schools, as well as prepare future teachers and school administrators. UNCG was one of nine campuses selected by the state to participate in the initiative.

What sets MSPS apart? Teacher autonomy, a focus on STEAM – science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics – and experiential learning.

Traditional school settings typically utilize pre-packaged curricula, prescriptive lesson plans, and pacing guides. Often, the result is that teachers – and their expertise and experience – get left out of the equation.

That’s why if you ask UNCG researchers how to best facilitate teaching and learning, they’ll tell you it’s anything but pre-packaged curriculums. It’s letting teachers do what they do best – teach kids – in experiential, collaborative, and interdisciplinary environments that move the needle for student learning.

This kind of environment is what enticed Chestnut to return to the school she attended as a child, and led as a principal a few years ago, during its Moss Street Elementary School days.

“These kids deserve to have access to education that is relevant to them and that engages them,” Chestnut says. “Traditional ways of teaching and learning have not proven effective in Title I schools like Moss Street. Rather than adopting specific programs, we look at the North Carolina standards and then figure out how can we facilitate learning using our guiding principles.”

And this is where UNCG researchers come in. Over the past year, UNCG faculty have worked alongside teachers to help bridge theory and practice.

They haven’t conducted formal studies, yet. Right now, they’re talking to teachers about their needs, sharing their research expertise, and working in classrooms to see what kinds of small interventions may prove successful.

They’ve been “tinkering,” as one faculty member describes it – researchers alongside teachers.

“We really believe in the idea of doing things together,” says O’Connor. “The teachers’ work informs the faculty’s work, and vice versa.”

Just how innovative is MSPS? When it comes to experiential learning or STEAM education, the school isn’t reinventing the wheel. But the way it’s piecing these different components together, in a low-performing, high-needs school in rural North Carolina? That’s exciting for O’Connor, even after 25 years working in public education.

“To do it this way, in this context – I haven’t seen this before.”



“My students went from listening to me read to being fully engaged and requesting books to read. They went from writing one-sentence stories to writing complete stories. They developed a genuine love for books.”

– Nicky Pickard, MSPS kindergarten teacher

READING FOR YOUR OWN REASONS

Perhaps the best example of “tinkering” is the work done by Dr. Gay Ivey, William E. Moran Distinguished Professor in Literacy.

Ivey has spent decades conducting school-based research that seeks to understand children’s motivations to read. Her work has shown that the secret sauce for reading achievement is reading engagement – kids truly investing in reading for their own purposes.

In previous projects, she worked with eighth grade teachers to abandon all assigned reading in favor of student-selected reading with no strings attached. Students could read whatever they wanted and do whatever they wanted with the reading. That was the language arts curriculum.

The results?

“They read like crazy,” she says, noting that time spent reading is directly correlated to reading achievement.

“We do so many things to get kids to read. Principals are promising to color their hair green if students read a certain number of books, and it doesn’t take that. Kids find the process of reading the reward itself.”

Over the past year, Ivey has been working with MSPS teachers across grade levels to help them prioritize reading engagement. The school’s library and individual classroom libraries have been transformed – for example, there are significantly more books with characters of color, so that kids can see themselves in the stories they read.

“Our biggest problem is we’re running out of books because they’ve read so much already,” Ivey says.

It’s not just about “becoming a better reader.” Reading also helps with socioemotional growth.

AVID READER “Children read to understand other people and themselves better,” says Ivey, “to figure out the world, to laugh, to cry, and even to play, much like adults.” Pictured: Ivey (top photo, center), MSPS kindergarten teacher Pickard (left), and fourth-grade teacher Kristen Perkinson (right) facilitate engaged reading time in their classes.

For example, when kids read fiction, they start to live through the characters’ lives, and begin to learn empathy by seeing different perspectives. Reading can help children build relationships, regulate their own emotions and behaviors, and understand issues of morality, explains Ivey.

Additionally, people learn most of their vocabulary through contextual reading – not through studying weekly vocabulary lists.

Ivey is now gearing up to begin a formal study in which she and a team of teachers will design instruction to help students learn the important

“Research suggests that children are most likely to become engaged in reading when the characters and social worlds of books are familiar to them,” says Ivey, “particularly when characters look and talk like them, their friends, and their families.”

skills associated with reading, while experiencing reading as a personally and socially meaningful activity – with books of their own choosing, of course. The effectiveness of instruction will be measured, and modifications will be made based on the data.

The ultimate goal is for the findings to have an impact beyond MSPS.

“We’re trying to innovate locally, knowing that what we learn will be shared with the larger research and practice communities,” she says. “I hope to be publishing and having teachers as co-authors with me. I envision us out on the trail together, sharing our work.”





GROWING STEM Above, Carlone’s doctoral student Dearing Blankmann (left) helps a kindergarten class explore the relationship between bees and flowers. Carlone’s work at MSPS is part of her larger STEM TLC project – the STEM Teacher Leader Collaborative. Co-founded in 2013 by Carlone and Dr. Jennifer Mangrum, TLC is a network of teachers enacting STEM in high-needs elementary schools in the region. “Teachers working in high-needs schools are under great pressure to raise test scores and feel isolated. Our collaborative supports, connects, and nurtures STEM-capable, imaginative, and motivated elementary teacher leaders,” Carlone says. The project is currently funded by the Cemala Foundation, Duke Energy Foundation, and Summit Rotary of Greensboro.

ROOT, STEM, FLOWER

The pressure for elementary schools to focus on literacy and mathematics can mean that science gets lost in the shuffle.

But for Dr. Heidi Carlone, these disciplines don’t have to be viewed as separate areas of study. They can be combined in productive ways that are mutually beneficial.

Along with her doctoral students Alison Mercier and Dearing Blankmann, the Hooks Distinguished Professor of STEM Education is working with MSPS teachers to help integrate science and engineering into their curriculum.

The work started in the summer of 2018, when Carlone’s team held a workshop for all MSPS teachers with an interest in STEM.

Carlone was floored by the level of interest in the first workshop – nearly all MSPS teachers across grade levels voluntarily attended. Ultimately, the entire school decided to implement an interdisciplinary

“design a windmill” unit in inter-grade groups.

Why is early exposure to STEM so important?

Carlone explains that many MSPS students may not have access to STEM outside of school through summer camps, enrichment programs, or afterschool programs – which are often more readily available to upper-middle-class white students. If students don’t have the chance to engage in interesting, robust STEM in elementary school, Carlone says, studies show it is much less likely that they will consider those pathways as they move to middle and high school. That’s why excellent school STEM is so high stakes.

Her plan for year two is to integrate STEM into the regular curriculum. And she means good STEM.

“I’m talking about STEM that really engages in disciplinary practices: collaboration, analyzing data, modeling scientific ideas, coming up with alternative solutions, iterating on design, etc.,” she explains. “It’s rigorous and responsive STEM, versus the traditional ‘read the textbook and answer the questions.’”

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

The work done in elementary schools goes beyond teaching literacy and STEM, as important as those are. Teachers, counselors, and social workers also work together to help young children build positive relationships, regulate their emotions, and learn to communicate.

These are skills that are often considered part of social and emotional learning, or SEL, an area of research for Ben Dyson, associate professor in the Department of Kinesiology, and for associate professor and MSPS co-director Carl Lashley.

Dr. Dyson's background is in health and physical education and innovative curriculum pedagogy. Recently, he's started to explore SEL, which has become, he says, a buzzword of sorts in many political and education circles.

While different individuals and organizations have tried to define SEL and prescribe how to best foster it in schools, Dyson's perspective is that we should be listening to the teachers, principals, and students.

"It's easy to create a definition of SEL from the literature and the research, but I'm suggesting that we need to know more about what teachers really think about it and then work with them to develop SEL at their schools. We have to tailor it to the specific school context or environment."

Last year, Dyson and Lashley worked with the school social worker, guidance counselor, and a team of teachers to implement restorative practice to help with social and emotional learning – something the MSPS staff had already begun exploring on its own.

Restorative practice involves people coming together for



RESOURCE RICH Dr. Jason Herndon, director of UNCG's Psychology Clinic, and MSPS speech language pathologist Melissa May are part of a multidisciplinary team – made up of licensed faculty, graduate students, and MSPS staff – that provides testing for children at MSPS to help determine if they meet criteria for educational accommodations. "This partnership provides a valuable training opportunity for our graduate student clinicians," says Herndon, "while expanding available services in a resource-limited rural community."



LIFE SKILLS Above, the restorative practice team meets in the MSPS library. Left to right: Lashley, physical education teacher Justin Somers (also pictured right, working with Dyson), fourth-grade teacher Kristen Perkinson, fifth-grade teacher Shellie Cridge, school social worker Johnette Walser, and third-grade teacher Balaun Carter. This fall, Walser and fourth-grade teacher Tayler Engelhardt led the first school-wide restorative practices teacher training.



dialogue, to help resolve problems. At MSPS, students participated in the restorative practice of circle time, in which kids sit in a circle and have a conversation about an issue in class. Teachers help guide the conversation, but it is student-centered.

In today's digital age, facilitating this kind of social interaction is critical for kids.

"We're working on what we call dialogic interactions," Dyson says. "Kids need to learn how to talk to each other and with their teachers appropriately." Children come out of the experience empowered, with new skill sets.

Dyson is now beginning to conduct qualitative research by interviewing MSPS teachers about their perspectives on social and emotional learning and restorative practice. He will then scale up his work to interview teachers across the state. Looking ahead, the goal is to implement programs and interventions that "are really in tune with what's needed."

"I believe that we can learn a lot from teachers and a lot from kids in schools. In their context, they are the experts on social and emotional learning."

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