



**WHAT WE LEARNED
BY STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF THE GIANTS
OF GULFPORT (MS) SCHOOL DISTRICT**

**A Monograph of Ideas Shared and Lessons Learned
— Ohio Appalachian Collaborative Contingent**

GULFPORT, MISSISSIPPI SCHOOLS—MY EDUCATION. MY WAY: “Standing on the Shoulders of Giants”

“...we stand on the shoulders of giants, asking what education policy might look like in the United States if it was based on the experience of our most successful competitors.”

—Tucker, Marc S., Author, *Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: An American Agenda for Education Reform*, 2011.

In 2010, Gulfport High School began the transformation to become the first public high school in the state of Mississippi to realign its educational structure to offer work-based learning and career pathways through its Academic Institutes with the goal of ensuring that “all roads lead to a J-O-B.”

The Academic Institutes at Gulfport High School in Gulfport, Mississippi take a real-world approach to student career exploration. As students reach their junior year, they begin experiencing structured opportunities to receive real-world exposure in their area of interest through assigned opportunities such as: seminars, project-based learning, clinical observations, internships, and job shadowing. The Academic Institutes allow students the opportunity to discover and develop their passions, while empowering them to choose an educational pathway that integrates their skills, aptitudes, and interests.

A good example of this focus on providing students with real-world experiences is perhaps best exemplified in the career path rotations that 15 Academic Institutes students participated in with the Gulfport Police and Fire departments. One of these students was Will, who was 16 years old at the time. Will began his career path experience in the fire department rotation, and like many typical 16-year-olds, asked if he could wear shorts to “work” every day. He didn’t talk much, or inquire about what it takes to be a fireman. As his rotation progressed, however, Will started to change. He engaged with the fire station staff, asked questions, and found that he liked the team atmosphere and enjoyed the physical aspects of the job. In September 2014, Will became the first high school intern working for the City of Gulfport in the Gulfport Fire Department.

The message the Gulfport Academic Institutes sends is clear, and is reflected in its approach: “*Every decision. What is Best for Children? Every Time.*” Citing inspiration from Mark S. Tucker’s work in “Standing on the Shoulders of Giants,” Gulfport’s transformation continues today. Interested in learning more and about the successes of the Institute, representatives from the Ohio Appalachian Collaborative visited the Gulfport Academic Institutes in 2015. This paper cites lessons learned in creating and replicating career pathways for our own students in rural Ohio.

The work that the Academic Institutes of Gulfport High School is doing directly aligns with the four foundational components of sound career pathways – academic and technical coursework, personalized learning, work-based learning, and career advising and counseling. These same components drive the Ohio Appalachian Collaborative’s Model Pathways – STEM, Arts & Communication; Health & Human Services; and Business & Entrepreneurship – that will lead to student success in Appalachian Ohio.

Following are the key takeaways and more detail around each of the four components of sound career pathways as exhibited in the Gulfport School District.

COMPONENT 1: ACADEMIC AND TECHNICAL COURSEWORK

In keeping with the Gulfport School District's mission, "... to inspire each student to become a problem solver, lifelong learner, and productive member of society," the lessons learned from their Academic and Technical Coursework models include:

1. **Pathway discussions need to begin very early—in the 4th grade.** The use of student data at an early age is vital and is used to tie academic and technical coursework to student aspiration.
2. **The curriculum is compacted, beginning in middle school.** All students at Gulfport attain high school credit prior to entering high school. The courses in which students can earn credit in middle school include:
 - a. ICT 2 (Keyboarding)
 - b. Pre-Algebra
 - c. STEM Class
 - d. Algebra I
3. **In high school, the curriculum continues to be compacted so that students may earn a majority of their high school credits by the end of 10th grade.** This is a "3 for 2 model," which means students take 3 courses over the span of 2 semesters each year, during 75-minute learning periods. This sequence includes:
 - a. 3 credits of English (English I, World Literature, English II)
 - b. 3 credits of Math (Algebra I, Algebra II, Geometry)
 - c. 3 credits of Science (Biology, Physical Science, Chemistry)
 - d. 2 credits of Social Studies (World History, U.S. History)
 - e. Electives as appropriate
4. **The Career and Technical Curriculum is blended with the Academic Curriculum.** All students receive both types of education. Gone are the days when a student was on a "career track" and others were on a "college track." These "tracks" have merged to allow students to earn industry credentials while attaining college credit and work-based learning experience. All in a pathway that is best suited to their strengths.
5. **Dual credit coursework.** Students who attain a 19/20 on the ACT are eligible to take dual credit coursework, mainly during years three and four of their high school experience. These courses are completed through Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College where students may work toward a degree or certification.
6. **Intense focus on ACT preparation and assessment.** Classrooms focus on daily "bell-ringers" centered on ACT questions. All students take ACT assessments in 9th and 10th grade, and participate in practice testing along the way two times per quarter. The assessment schedule includes:
 - a. PARCC Algebra I – 9th grade end-of-year
 - b. ACT Aspire Test – 9th grade end-of-year
 - c. PARCC English 2 – 10th grade end-of-year
 - d. ACT Test – 10th grade end-of-year
 - e. ACT test – 11th grade end-of-year
 - f. PARCC – Year 3 & 4 as appropriate for end-of-course exams
 - g. ACT – Year 3 & 4 for re-take purposes
 - h. Capstone Project – Year 3 & 4
 - i. iCAP – Individualized Career and Academic Plan – Year 3 & 4

COMPONENT 2: PERSONALIZED LEARNING

Personalized learning is part of the culture of the Gulfport School District both for the students and the staff. Each student has a personalized pathway, and teachers experience a culture of professional learning communities. The most notable takeaways from this component are:

1. **The Gulfport Way. “Every decision. What is Best for Children? Every time.”** Perhaps the most striking trait of Gulfport is their commitment to their strategic planning and mission. The culture of the district is preparing students for life, not simply preparing them for assessment. All learning is driven by this, with a palpable passion and focus on building strong relationships with students. This culture drives all learning.
2. **What about the other 262? Focus on pathways for ALL students.** One of the first statistics Gulfport staff cited was the “brutal reality” of education today. This reality is:
 - a. Twenty-five percent of high school students will receive a bachelor’s degree in six years. For a senior class of 350 students, that’s 88 students.
 - b. **What about the other 262? Focusing on every student is the mantra at Gulfport.**
 - c. **As a result, the focus of the Gulfport School District is helping every student become College and Career Ready.** To do this, there are three Institute pathways that underpin every student’s education: (1) CAB Institute – Communication, Arts, and Business; (2) HHS Institute – Health and Human Services; (3) STEM Institute – Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics.
3. **Focus on blended learning and project-based learning.** All of the instruction in Gulfport is geared around mastery learning and applying skills to real-world problems and products. Using new technologies and modern methodologies are an integral part of daily instruction. For example, all students experience a STEM class in middle school as a way to introduce an entrepreneurial and problem-solving mindset.
4. **Teacher Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).** Gulfport teachers are provided needs-based professional learning opportunities in several learning patterns: individual, small group, and whole staff. Teachers participate in systemic PLCs to further their instructional methodology to improve student achievement. Every year begins with a district-wide summit called “Essential Pieces,” that allows teachers to choose personalized tracks to further their own instructional goals. Throughout the year, teachers participate in PLCs where they co-plan instruction, watch one another teach, and offer professional feedback to each other. Common planning time is built into their teaching schedules.

COMPONENT 3: WORK-BASED LEARNING

The Academic Institutes allow students the opportunity to discover and develop their passions while empowering them to choose an educational pathway that integrates their skills, aptitudes, and interests. The Institutes' entire curriculum is essentially focused on this transition from secondary schools to successful post-secondary educations and, most importantly, to careers. Again, all roads lead to a J-O-B. Therefore, the key learnings from the Work-based Learning component are:

1. **Individualized Career and Academic Plans (iCAP).** All students have iCAPs that guide their pathway selection and completion. These plans begin early, but become a concrete 4-year plan in high school. Students are nurtured through career advising and counseling from elementary through high school. To help students build and complete their plans, the district employs a **Career Pathways Specialist** to further the process. This staff member coordinates all work-based learning experiences and helps students find their "niches" in the community beyond the classroom.
2. **Intentional leadership training for students.** One of the biggest opportunities students have at Gulfport is the opportunity to learn to lead. One such example of this programming is the Gulfport Student Ambassador program. This group of students serves as the "face" of the school district, and has opportunities to host guests, mentor fellow students, and learn leadership skills. Through the Student Ambassador program, students are trained in speaking skills, etiquette, conversation, and social hosting; the skills they will need to be leaders in the real world.
3. **Real-world learning.** As students reach their junior and senior years of high school, they move beyond the career exposure and exploration phases of their middle school and early high school years. During years three and four of their high school careers, students begin experiencing real-world structured experiences through assigned opportunities such as: project-based learning, clinical observations, internships and job shadowing. Students continue to complete academic coursework and may also participate in the 23 athletic teams and/or 43 extracurricular clubs at the high school. The kicker? Many students are transported to these real-world internships and learning experiences by their own school teachers who attain CDLs to drive their local school buses to business and community sites. Yes, all hands on deck.
4. **Senior Capstone Project.** Students must use their entire learning experience to complete their Senior Capstone Project, which requires students to identify a need in the community and work to solve that need via their projects.

COMPONENT 4: CAREER ADVISING AND COUNSELING

This pathway component is perhaps the component that engenders the greatest pride and aspiration in Gulfport students. Gulfport's counseling staff of five counselors, one behavioral specialist, and one testing coordinator lead the charge in helping students aspire to and navigate through their pathways. Students at Gulfport are, as a result, proud members of their community and feel a great deal of ownership in their own educations and in their schools. The most salient parts of the Career Advising and Counseling program include:

1. **A systemic intervention system.** Intervention is offered after school. Teachers stay a minimum of one afternoon a week, and the tutoring bus runs twice a week. In truth, many teachers stay multiple days providing intervention assistance for students. This intervention system helps to provide real-time intervention for struggling students.
2. **Individualized Career and Academic Plan Meetings.** Every summer, counselors and administrators conduct over 800 individualized meetings with parents and students to discuss and develop personalized Career and Academic Plans. Students build electronic portfolios and use their own academic and career data to mark progress and make future choices. And what if students do not show up for this individualized meeting? No problem. Counselors and administrators visit them at their homes.
3. **Career Pathways Specialist.** This staff member, mentioned earlier in the Work-Based Learning component, is an integral part of Career Advising and Counseling. It is important to note that these two components of the career pathways are inextricably connected. As a result, intentional staffing and support are given to the furthering of student pursuits.



STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

There are great similarities in both the processes and components of the pathways we are building in rural Ohio and the ones that are already well-entrenched in Gulfport, Mississippi. As a result of some Straight A Innovation Funding through the state of Ohio, we have the opportunity to begin this journey, and the pleasure to see the vision of how it might look just a few years down the road.

The Ohio Appalachian Collaborative is grateful to have stood on the shoulders of these giants for a few days in Gulfport, Mississippi. As a result, we learned a great deal from these dedicated students, teachers, and administrators. Our takeaways will help us in guiding our own pursuit of building strong model career pathways for students and helping the students of rural Ohio achieve and excel in their pursuits beyond high school where all roads lead to a J-O-B.

WORKS CITED

Tucker, M. *Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: An American Agenda for Education Reform*. The National Center on Education and the Economy. Washington D.C., May 24, 2011. <http://www.ncee.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/Standing-on-the-Shoulders-of-Giants-An-American-Agenda-for-Education-Reform.pdf>.

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