

BILOXI SCHOOLS

1980-1989

The Biloxi Schools In The 1980s

Biloxi – Population, 1980 Census – 49,311

Mayor, 1980 – Jeremiah O'Keefe

City Council – Frank J. Barhanovich, A.H. Patterson

Superintendent, Biloxi Public Schools – Olon Ray, 1975-1987
Bruce Stewart, Acting Supt., 1988
Tom Burnham, 1988-1992

Biloxi School Board –

1980 – Fred Carron, Alton Bankston, Elijah McGee, Mrs. Emile Rousseau,
Ernest Henley, Jr.

1981 – Alton Bankston, Elijah McGee, Ernest Henley, Jr., Fred Carron,
Annette Luther

1982 – Fred Carron, Ernest Henley, Jr., Annette Luther, Lucy Denton, Elijah McGee

1983 – Fred Carron, Ernest Henley, Jr., Annette Luther, Lucy Denton,
Carla Culbreath

1984 – Annette Luther, Lucy Denton, Fred Carron, Carla Culbreath, Laddie Weems

1985 – Annette Luther, Lucy Denton, Fred Carron, Laddie Weems, Jimmie Roy

1986 – Annette Luther, Lucy Denton, Fred Carron, Laddie Weems, Jimmie Roy

1987 – Lucy Denton, Annette Luther, Fred Carron, Laddie Weems, Jimmie Roy

1988 – Jimmie Roy, Annette Luther, Lucy Denton, Laddie Weems, Thomas Vu

1989 – Jimmie Roy, Lucy Denton, Jerry Adkins, Thomas Vu, Sandra Patterson

Student Enrollment in 1980-1981, from December Court Report – 6,649

Total Budget, Biloxi Public Schools, for 1980-1981 – \$11,917,050

VIII. THE BILOXI SCHOOLS – 1980 – 1989

As the Biloxi schools moved into the 1980s, one of the first matters addressed by the Board and the administration under Dr. Ray's leadership was to look for sound projections that would give a better sense of what lay ahead, particularly in matters related to student population.

Working with Dr. Ray at the beginning of the 1980s were Board members Mr. Fred Carron, Mr. Alton Bankston, Reverend Elijah McGee, Mrs. Emile Rousseau, and Mr. Ernest Henley, Jr. Mrs. Annette Luther and Mrs. Lucy Denton joined the Board in 1982 and 1981 respectively; Miss Carla Culbreath in 1983; Mr. Laddie Weems in 1984; Mr. Jimmie Roy in 1985; Mr. Thomas Vu in 1988; and Dr. Jerry Adkins and Mrs. Sandra Patterson in 1989. A remarkable stability in Board membership defined this period, as several of the Board members served more than one full term in the office.

The Board on February 12, 1980, heard a report from Dr. Bill Lee, who had formerly served the schools as Assistant Superintendent and who was then part of the administration of the University of Southern Mississippi's Coast programs at Keesler and Gulf Park.

Based on his statistical analysis, the report showed a continuing decline in enrollment for the Biloxi schools. An enrollment of 9,245 in 1969 had declined to 7,059 ten years later. If present trends proceeded with no significant interruptions, projected enrollment, Dr. Lee said, would be 4,879 in 1990. Among the most important reasons for the decline were the decreasing birth rate and the lack of migration to Biloxi (Board Minutes 7397). Based on enrollment projections, the superintendent said that it would be necessary to take appropriate steps to bring utility and staffing levels in line with current needs.

Addressing a matter that had caused some concern among Biloxi school and city officials, the Board on May 26, 1980, discussed annexation of the Fernwood area known as "No man's land," to take in the school property that was being served by the Biloxi district. There had been rumors that Gulfport was considering annexation of the area.

The Federal Court Order which remained in effect in school operations after 1964 and which required breakdowns by race, together with total enrollment figures, showed total enrollments by school for selected years during this period:

1980 - Biloxi High School, 1522; Fernwood, 780; Nichols, 805; Beauvoir, 621; Dukate, 594; Gorenflo, 474; Howard II, 299; Jeff Davis, 630; Lopez, 316; Popp's Ferry, 608; Biloxi Municipal Separate School District, 6649.

1985 – Biloxi High School, 1848; Fernwood, 636; Michel, 410; Nichols, 556; Beauvoir, 478; Dukate, 511; Gorenflo, 402; Howard II, 298; Jeff Davis, 479; Lopez, 250; Popp's Ferry, 496; District, 6420.

1989 – Biloxi High School, 1585; Fernwood, 583; Michel, 415; Nichols 483; Beauvoir, 504; Dukate, 588; Gorenflo, 552; Howard II, 327; Jeff Davis, 503; Lopez, 321; Popp's Ferry, 682; District, 6543.

Although enrollment was higher than had been predicted, it was true that total enrollment had declined, though not appreciably. There had been no increases in the student population, but population shifts had resulted in changes in individual school figures. The administration continued its efforts to meet the guidelines of the Court Order in relation to black/white ratios among both students and teachers and at the same time keep students being transported from one zone to another to a minimum.

Dr. Ray's ability to connect with people in the community, to maintain and strengthen the public support that had been a part of the history of the schools, was apparent in a program he directed on May 4, 1980. The program was a Heritage Recognition Program, intended to pay recognition to members of families who were pioneers in helping to establish the Biloxi Public Schools, to make presentations to these families, to recognize graduates of the high school prior to 1925, and to honor retired teachers and past and present School Board members. The program also served as the introduction to a history of the Biloxi Public Schools from the beginning of the school system through 1924, written by David Wheeler and Stephanie Richmond under the leadership of Julia Guice, editor. Committee members for this program included Mrs. Guice, Miss Odin Haas and Mrs. Elmear Hatcher, longtime Biloxi teachers, Miss Richmond, John Collins, and Zan Skelton.

The relationship of the school district to the federal government in financial aid matters had been among the most important considerations facing the administration and the School Board for the past forty years. Always there seemed to be questions regarding the amount of federal aid the district could reasonably expect to receive, how levels of funding were determined, when money would actually be received, what had to be done in order to maximize district efforts to secure necessary funding for federally mandated programs. And always it seemed that the business staff faced threats of reductions in federal funds.

For the 1979-1980 school year, the threat seemed even more likely to become reality, and the superintendent and his staff tried to anticipate what would happen if federal funding was reduced in significant ways. If Congress followed the federal administration's recommendations, Dr. Ray said, some \$300-million in federal aid to the nation's school districts would be eliminated. For the Biloxi Public Schools, the reduction would eliminate payments for category 3-B students, those whose parents worked on designated federal property but did not reside on that property.

"Biloxi this year has 1,798 students who fall into the 3-B category," Dr. Ray noted. "Our projected entitlement is \$265,000 for 3-B students only. In addition to that, we get just over a million dollars for students whose parents live on base and work on base—or 3-A students." Loss of funding for the 3-B students would put the district into an extremely difficult position, the superintendent continued. "Most of the funds we get from the state are fixed—in the sense that we are entitled to a specific amount and there is nothing we can do to get more funds. State funds are tied to enrollment, and with declining enrollment, we are losing the sole basis for qualifying for more state money. We have to look, then, to the local tax base for revenues not available from federal and state sources.

Emphasizing the concern of the Biloxi school administration over the prospective loss of funds, Dr. Ray explained that the district was also restricted in the use of federal funds, tied in most cases to programs for which they are approved and not available for any other spending purposes. "For instance, PL-142 funds are used exclusively for education of the handicapped; they can be spent for no other reason. On the other hand, impact aid funds—PL-874 funds—can be put into the maintenance and operations budget and spent for any purpose. We can do anything from buying gas to operating buses to paying teachers' salaries or providing classroom supplies with those funds."

The gradual loss of impact aid funding over the years would continue to plague the Biloxi schools, and school officials would find themselves calling for help from the state's congressional members with increasing frequency. It was a situation that would not go away, and local school districts throughout the nation fought to keep federal funding for children whose parents lived on federal property with no local ad valorem tax revenue coming from that property. Inadequate appropriations would also result in district officials' visiting Washington, D.C., on a regular basis to testify before congressional committees in support of funding that the district considered only right.

One particular area of federal aid came with what had been called the Chapter I Program, begun in 1965—but which by 1980 was the Title I program, designed to provide special assistance to students in schools with high enrollments of children from low-income families. In 1980 all Biloxi elementary schools qualified for participation in the Title I program, based upon the percentage of students on the free lunch program.

"Each school day thirty percent of the elementary students of the Biloxi Public Schools are receiving special assistance through the Title I Program," Director Bob Cherry reported in the staff newsletter (Fall 1980). He noted that thirteen reading teachers scheduled 624 students each day for individualized remedial instruction; 413 first grade students were receiving extra assistance from 26 Title I tutors; 12 tutors were divided among second grade teachers in each of the elementary schools, serving 198 students each day. Two Title I nurses, two Title I guidance staff members, one Parents Advisory Council Coordinator, and two program coordinators completed the Title I

staff. The programs were, as required by law, supplemental, and funding could not be used for programs that were otherwise funded by the district.

Construction needs met during the early 1980s included an addition to Biloxi High School for physical education and study hall facilities. A wing was added to Biloxi High School in 1985, with J. Wesley Toche architect and King Construction Company, builders.

During this period a subject of particular concern to all the students and staff members of every school occupied a great deal of the Board's attention, with Dr. Ray leading the effort to air condition all the schools. The matter was pursued in December 1980 when Board minutes report that attorney Don King had presented a request to the City Council for a bond issue requiring a 3-mill level to fund district-wide air conditioning.

Despite efforts by a large number of volunteers and staff members and students, Biloxi voters on February 10, 1981, turned down the bond issue proposal to air condition the schools, together with a proposal for a 3-mill increase for operation and maintenance of the air conditioning. (The City Council had also added a proposal for streets and drainage.) "A red flag of warning to city hall was raised Tuesday by Biloxi residents—no more taxes," *Herald* reporter Marie Langlois wrote ("Biloxi Bond Issues Shot Down").

The proposals, which would have increased Biloxi property taxes by ten mills, were soundly defeated at the polls. Voting was light in all boxes, Langlois noted, adding that only a small percentage of the city's voters had braved torrential rains and thunderstorms to vote. There were a great many people in the community who thought that the bond issue had been presented at the wrong time. Perhaps it would have been best to submit it to voters in the summer or at the beginning of a school year when classrooms were insufferably hot. On the other hand, there were also a great many people who said that they had gone to schools without air conditioning and they were none the worse for the experience. Teachers and students in uncomfortable classrooms found that argument indefensible, particularly in light of the fact that other Coast schools were already air conditioned.

With the district considering alternatives to air conditioning, including installment of ceiling fans in classrooms, it was a spot of good news to learn that students would be able to use the new swimming pool in March 1981. Dr. Ray noted that the facility was one of the best returns for the amount of money invested by the system; out of a total cost of \$652,000, the school district's share had been only \$190,000. Swimming instruction would become a regular part of the physical education program of the Biloxi Public Schools and would prove its value in years to come ("Community Report," Spring 1981).

Among the growing services of the Biloxi schools during this period was the employment of school nurses, who were among the busiest people in the district. Early in 1981, the nursing staff included two Title I nurses, one special education nurse, one L.E.A. nurse, one L.E.A. health aide, and one

Migrant Education health aide. Ever-expanding services provided by the nursing staff included first aid and emergency care, vision and audio screening, hygiene and nutrition programs, sex education programs, counseling regarding health matters, referral services, homebound program, CPR, dental and general health screening, drug abuse—and many other matters vital to the welfare of the students of the Biloxi schools. Mrs. Julia Longino was a pioneer in nursing services for the schools.

Approximately seventy students were enrolled in the program for gifted students offered by the Biloxi School District (the program was called CREATE, an acronym for Creative Reasoning, Enrichment, and Thinking Experiences). It provided experiences for students with high levels of academic and intellectual ability demonstrated in the required testing. With no grades being given and with no individual academic subjects being covered, CREATE was designed to expose students to new areas of interest, to help develop inductive and deductive reasoning, to assist student in learning to distinguish fact from fiction, and to provide enrichment activities in special interest areas ("Community Report," Fall 1981). The CREATE program is still part of the Biloxi curriculum today, having undergone some changes in structure and in governing policy but fundamentally concerned with the same goals.

In 1981 Biloxi High School counted eight National Merit Scholarship students in its ranks. These students, headed by Roger Stewart, who later was named one of Mississippi's two Presidential Scholars and whose PSAT/NMSQT qualifying score was the highest in the state, were among a long and impressive list of students from the high school who were named National Merit students. The list began with Carol Thomas, a finalist in the first of the National Merit Scholarship competitions in 1955.

Undaunted by voters' failure to approve a bond issue for air conditioning, the school district moved ahead in 1981 with a study of air conditioning under a committee headed by Biloxian Dave Wise. On December 9 the Board received a report from the committee, recommending that the school proceed with a full air conditioning program; that a bond issue in the amount of about \$4.6-million, with a 15-year retirement schedule be presented to the public; and that the bond issue proposal should be accompanied by a companion proposal for a three-mill taxing authorization to pay for operation and maintenance of the system.

Provision of air conditioning in the schools would be a vital part of the community's most important investment in educating its young people. The fact that there had been no bond issue for the Biloxi schools in almost twenty-five years, coupled with the low bonded indebtedness of the school system and the fact that no substantial school construction was planned made the bond issue a viable project, the committee concluded ("Community Report," Winter 1981). Members of the committee serving with Wise were Mrs. Katie Criddell, Mrs. Kathy Varble, Mr. George Davis, Mrs. Mary Cavanaugh, Mrs. Betty Green, Mr. Gerald Piltz, Mr. Tommy Munro, Mrs. Mary Warmack, Mr. Ray White, Mr. Jimmie Roy, and Mrs. Judy Rash. The committee emphasized that continuing inflation would render cost estimates meaningless in the face of any delay.

In the view of insiders, these years were characterized by staff members as the testing years, as the state moved inevitably and rapidly toward greater accountability from its public schools.

One particular outgrowth of the legislature's increasing efforts to hold personnel accountable for the work being done in the state's public schools was an Accountability And Instructional Management Program (commonly referred to by all of the state's teachers as AIM). Dr. Ray, in a meeting with his Round Table representatives in the spring of 1981, described the program as a potentially valuable aid in the improvement of the district's instructional program ("Inside," Spring 1981).

AIM required an enormous investment of time and resources in the production of materials designed to govern teaching at every level, with teachers having to produce lengthy and almost minutely detailed materials based on behavioral objectives. The program was designed to be completed in three stages: Program Design; Program Description; Program Evaluation. The amount of paperwork involved, the countless meetings, the heavy investment in outside consultants, inservice programs that often received negative evaluations, the perception by teachers that AIM was an intrusion into areas where educators had long been able to operate without real interference—these things made a trying situation for teachers.

In the fall of 1981, Dr. Ray further discussed the AIM program and reported that "teachers are taking hold and doing a good job so far in their preparation of AIM materials" ("Inside," Fall 1981). At the same time he commended the staff for hard work and patience and cooperation, he wrote, "Occasionally, it is true, we run into people who seem to spend their whole lives complaining—they do their work grudgingly and painfully; nothing suits them—or ever will suit them. We simply have to develop a kind of tolerance for those people's weaknesses and an armor against the subtle damage they might do to the rest of us. In general, I am very much pleased with our staff's cooperative efforts in working with AIM."

Again in the staff newsletter (Winter 1981), Dr. Ray emphasized the positive aspects of the AIM program, among them the local district's setting goals instead of having them set by some distant agency or federal group. "Self-evaluations ought to—and most often do—result in positive reinforcement of the good things about us and reasonable changes to correct weaknesses," he wrote. He also added that the final objectives of the AIM program, implementation through evaluating student achievement—would not take place until five years down the line. As late as the spring of the following year, the superintendent was reporting that in his meetings with his Faculty Advisory Committee, teachers expressed concern over the amount of time being spent on the AIM plan and recommended other areas for inservice work.

For many teachers in the schools, it was small comfort to realize that the work they were doing as a result of state mandates seemed to be at a state level directionless. It would be difficult to find a teacher who went through this period without feeling the most acute frustration and helplessness.

Fortunately, in large measure as a result of the planning by the administration and the excellent work of district teachers, students in the Biloxi Public Schools scored exceptionally well in state assessment programs.

For instance, in 1980, students in grades four, six, and eight—the only grades required under state testing—scored higher than the national norm groups in reading, language, and mathematics on the Statewide Assessment Tests administered in April 1980. In grade four, 52% of the students scored above the national norm in reading; 60% above the national norm in language; 53% above the national norm in mathematics; and 62% above the national norm in reference skills. In grade six, 58% scored above the national norm in reading; 64% in mathematics; 68% in language; 64% in reference skills. In grade eight, 50% scored above the national norm in reading; 55% in language; 53% in mathematics; and 50% in reference skills ("Newsletter For Parents," May 1980).

An editorial in the *Herald* noted that "Biloxians have reason to be proud of their public school system, whose students scored higher than the national norm in a recent assessment program." The editorial continued by noting that "the administration of the Biloxi school system has addressed itself to the matter of curriculum development and the employment and motivation of classroom teachers committed to improving the instructional program. The commitment is obviously producing favorable results, as evidenced in the high overall achievement the assessment program revealed ("Newsletter" 3).

Although the state required testing in grades four, six, and eight only, the school district made a decision—which would affect future district decisions in regard to testing—to include students in grades one through five and grade eleven. Purpose of the expanded testing was to determine how well students in Biloxi compared in student performance with the performance of other students in the local school district, the state, and the nation, Mrs. Helen Russell, district test coordinator said ("Community Report," Fall 1980, 3).

In the fall of 1980 an extensive Community Education Program began in the Biloxi schools, with Charles Benton, director. Benton described it as a "people-to-people program, where everybody learns and everybody teaches." With more than seventy courses planned for the introductory session, the Community Education Program included cultural activities, such as voice and guitar; enrichment courses, like French and Spanish; academic courses, such as high school evening classes; recreational activities, including weight lifting and magic; and health programs, like CPR, first aid, and slimnastics.

Also in the fall of 1980, with Dr. Ray spearheading the movement and the School Board (Fred Carron, president, Alton Bankston, Elijah McGee, Mrs. Emile Rousseau, and Ernest Henley, Jr., members) in full support, the district began a new insurance plan for certified staff members at the expense of the district. It was believed that Biloxi was the only district in the state to offer such a plan to its certified personnel.

The insurance plan was a result of exhaustive work by an insurance committee headed by Bob Cherry, administrative assistant, meeting with numerous insurance representatives over a long period, drawing up specifications, refining those specifications, evaluating bids. In addition to paying the full premium for certified employees, the district opened the plan to classified employees at their own expense. Working with the chairman were Biloxi faculty members Kathleen Malpass, Louise Harris, Percy Howard, Zan Skelton, Gerald Jones, Jim Peters, and Les Sturtevant.

Dr. Ray noted the faculty's appreciation to the School Board, "whose members acted unanimously to endorse the basic concept of insurance coverage for the faculty and to implement the program. The initial interest in such a plan was expressed a number of years ago by individual members of the Board and the administration, but it was not until recent legislative action that the full implementation of those concerns could be realized" ("Inside The Biloxi Public Schools," Fall 1980).

Dr. Ray was an administrator who had a state-wide reputation as an educator whose vision was coupled with political savvy and a realistic view of what could be done, given state history and resources. Serving on the Ad Hoc Committee on Education in the summer of 1982, he was instrumental in helping to bring about long-needed reforms in state education.

Reporting to the Biloxi staff, he noted that he had expressed concerns and made specific recommendations dealing with teacher morale, teacher salaries, equalization of educational opportunities requiring extensive changes in the Minimum Program of financing state education; compulsory education to provide that every child be required to attend school on a regular basis until the child was sixteen, with penalties being prescribed for parents or guardians who failed to follow the law; and the establishment of a state-wide kindergarten program to provide a firm basis for educational success.

His preliminary work with state legislators and the governor's staff and other prominent educators would be part of the impetus for historic changes in state education later. The superintendent sounded both hopeful and disheartened at the end of the summer as he looked toward education reform and struggled with deficit funding that had a profound negative impact on school programs. It was in 1982 that the highly praised Education Reform Act was passed by the state legislature, and in the fall of 1983, Dr. Ray was able to report to teachers that he expected the new school year to begin a new era in state education. Following passage of the far-reaching Reform Act, many changes were in store for Biloxi and other school districts. Dr. Ray headed the state task force appointed by the Governor to do initial work in the establishment of guidelines and criteria for a performance-based school accreditation system.

The report of the task force was to be made to the Commission on School Accreditation by April 1984. In addition, a Commission on Teacher and Administrator Education, Certification, and Development was at work to chart the course for professional personnel in Mississippi education. These two groups were expected to be highly influential in setting the course of education in

conjunction with more widely publicized provisions of the Reform Act. Compulsory school attendance and public school kindergartens were key components of the school reforms.

Dr. Ray noted in his Fall 1983 staff report that he expected faculty members to follow the AIM program in revising instruments of evaluation and to use tests and test items on a tentative basis. He also noted that administrators would be more closely involved in checking lesson plans to see that teachers were following AIM objectives, teaching items as scheduled in the AIM plans. In the fall of the next year he wrote to teachers:

I expect every teacher in the Biloxi Public Schools to participate effectively in meeting his/her responsibilities regarding AIM, particularly in these respects: (1) to review every objective listed for the course or grade he/she teaches, as presented in the Program Description, and to follow carefully the Scope and Sequence prepared for our teachers' use; (2) to follow the pattern established for each course or grade in matters of timing and emphasis (in other words, to teach required materials when they are scheduled to be taught and to spend the amount of time on those materials as indicated in the Program Description); (3) to work with other teachers of the same course or grade to coordinate teaching efforts (in duplicating tests, for example, or other instructional materials, sharing teaching aids, helping new teachers fit into the system more effectively, teaching the same material at the same time, etc.); (4) to use evaluation instruments prepared by Biloxi teachers for testing students in regard to their achievement of specific objectives. I want to make it clear that the Biloxi schools are expected to take a leadership role in Accountability and Instructional Management in our state and that we will be satisfied with nothing less than our best efforts to implement this demanding program. ("Inside The Biloxi Public Schools," Fall 1984)

The school years of 1982-1983 and 1983-1984 were particularly demanding years for teachers, who found themselves undergoing intensive self-evaluations and professional evaluations by administrators; preparing for the ten-year evaluation required by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools and visits by SACS committees and the Mississippi School Accreditation Commission; preparing more detailed lesson plans keyed to AIMS objectives; attending an increasing number of inservice programs and contributing to department and grade level preparation of materials and evaluation materials; reviewing and evaluating and selecting textbooks and other teaching materials; dealing with changes in grading and student performance; changing policies related to student behavior and the new assertive discipline program; and unsettling requirements of teachers in relation to the federally required removal of asbestos from all schools and the resulting shifts in supplies and classroom materials that teachers had to handle, even though most of the work was completed during the summer of 1984.

Shifts in personnel took place as Michel Junior High School was closed in 1983, because of declining enrollment throughout the district—and at Michel in particular, where total enrollment no longer justified maintaining a full staff and instructional services at the school. The school would be used, in part, for alternative education programs and special education.

Changes in the instructional program during this period also included the introduction of a new drug education program under the direction of Vick Robbins in 1982; changes in the grading program of elementary schools to indicate mastery of grade level objectives, with teachers using check lists to indicate student mastery of such objectives as finding the main idea in a story, writing complete sentences using punctuation and capitalization correctly, and adding and subtracting double-digit numbers; and new programs recommended by the Personal Growth and Development Advisory Committee in the spring of 1983 that would include sex education, values clarification, and decision-making skills in the elementary schools, and family living and child development information and sex education at the junior high school. These programs would be carefully introduced and supervised, with special selected team members responsible for developing plans and schedules.

Classes began in the Michel Alternative Learning Center for the Biloxi Public Schools on October 12, 1983. The main purpose of the program, housed in the school plant that had recently been closed as a junior high school, as reported in a "Community Report," was to reduce the tendency for young people to rebel against a system that penalizes them severely for their lack of educational skills, according to Director Walt Ewing. Employing seven teachers, one part-time administrative assistant, and one clerical aide, the center offered elementary education, special education, and secondary courses in language arts, mathematics, physical education, and social studies, together with GED preparation. An admissions committee was appointed to review referrals for each prospective student.

The administration believed that the alternative education center offered an acceptable outlet for "high risk" students of the district, who could be referred because of behavioral problems that might lead to suspension or expulsion or academic problems that eventually might lead to dropping out of school. Classes were offered in grades 1 – 12. In the first year approximately 70 to 85 students were enrolled in the alternative school ("Alternative School Now Operating," Fall 1983).

In a publication called "Goings-On In The Biloxi Public Schools," sponsored by the PTA Council, Biloxians were informed in the early fall of 1984 that the schools, according to the headline, were "Moving Ahead With The Bond Issue."

"It seems to us that Biloxians have seldom been so united as they are in regard to the bond issue which will provide air conditioning and heating systems for the Biloxi schools," the PTA Council wrote. "Hundreds of people in the school district have rallied behind the proposal, which will be presented to Biloxi voters on October 9th." At the same time, Biloxians could read in the local newspaper and in school publications that the Biloxi Municipal Separate School District had neither short-range nor long-term debts as it entered the 1984-1985 school year. With final payment of the bonds issued for construction of Biloxi Senior High School in 1960-1961, the school district became debt-free, placing the district in an enviable position among a very small group of school districts in the state.

A headline in the *Daily Herald* told the story on Wednesday afternoon, October 10: "Biloxi bond vote passes in landslide." Reporters Ruth Ingram and Margaret Henry wrote that "It didn't take more than a few precinct results for supporters to savor a victory Tuesday in Biloxi's \$5.5-million school bond issue to finance air conditioning and heating. The final results posted in City Hall, 4,816 votes for and 568 against, said it all: Biloxi voted for our kids. And although they expected the issue to pass, school and city officials expressed shock as the 89.5 percent victory margin began to build." Board president Annette Luther and Mayor Gerald Blessey were particularly pleased as they examined results with Superintendent Olon Ray.

"I felt confident we'd pass, but I'm really surprised it's this high," Ray said. He credited a strong public relations campaign and a united community effort for the victory. "When the people of Biloxi have the right information, they'll respond to educational issues," he added.

It would not be until the schools were well into the 1985-1986 school year that the air conditioning and heating system could be completed. Assistant superintendent Bruce Stewart noted in the "Community Report" of Fall 1985 that unavoidable delays in the production of units had caused disappointing schedule changes, noting that units were being installed as rapidly as they were delivered to the schools. After more than 100 years of attending classes in rooms that were almost unbearably hot in early fall and late spring and, of course, in summer school—and often equally unbearable in the winter—it seemed a small price to pay to have to wait a few months for comfort at last. For many students and teachers this was the best gift Biloxians could have given them.

Following the evaluation of secondary schools by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools in October 1985, Dr. Ray reported that the SACS committee had "found not a single failure to meet accreditation standards, and the committee recommended continuing 'AA' accreditation by the SACS."

In 1985 members of the Biloxi faculty participated in an unprecedented strike that included a large number of Mississippi teachers, particularly in the southern part of the state. Although the strike was short-lived and ended by judicial decree, it had effectively made the point that teachers would no longer be so easily taken for granted and that their voices would be increasingly heard as the state deliberated about salaries and school governance. One result of the strike was that the legislature soon passed a law forbidding strikes by teachers. Another result was the creation of a group called Mississippians for Quality Education that for several years added another voice to the chorus of voices demanding better working conditions and wages for state educators.

One of the most far-reaching changes in the history of the Biloxi Public Schools came in 1985 as the schools were reorganized in a realignment that began with assignment of students in kindergarten through grade 5 to elementary schools; students in grades 6 through 8 to middle schools; and students in grades 9 through 12 to the high school. The kindergarten program was a pilot program; state funding of kindergarten classes would begin the following year.

Nine new classrooms, the administration and Board reported, would be constructed on the Biloxi High School campus, and approximately 500 additional students would attend the high school, making it one of the state's largest. (Enrollment, however, would not be a record high for the high school, since at one time in the early 1970s enrollment had exceeded 2,000 students in grades 10 through 12.) One result of the reorganization was the reactivation of Michel as a fully operating middle school in the district, with Fernwood and Nichols also serving as middle schools.

The School Board, a report to the community and to the staff noted, acted to reorganize the schools with the intent of providing more personal attention to children of the three middle schools, with increased participation on the part of the students involved in school activities but decreased competitiveness. In addition, the realignment provided for all high school courses, previously split between the junior high schools and the high school, to be offered on one campus for the first time. Such access to the comprehensive high school program was expected to be of enormous benefit to the ninth grade students, who would have early access to programs they were previously unable to enter until the tenth grade. The district's "Community Report" for Summer 1985 discussed the concept of the middle school:

Underlying the concept of the middle school is the belief that programs in the middle grades between elementary school and high school must be basically child-centered. These are the transitional years in the students' school experiences. Emphasis in the middle schools will not be in maintaining the same programs the high school has, and there will also be an emphasis on co-curricular activities which will increase student participation and involvement.

One of the major differences between the middle school program and that of junior high schools is that skill development is reinforced, with the middle schools providing more opportunities for self-pacing and creative exploration. Students learn more acutely in these grades that they are in large measure responsible for their own learning and that they must begin to achieve a measure of independence in their school work. However, they are not given too much responsibility and independence at these grade levels. It is hoped that the three middle schools, with smaller enrollments and less involvement in upper-level activities and courses, will offer these students more individual attention and counseling and help them to build better self-images. Learning is based on a strong positive note, with students helped to master fundamental skills and concepts that will give them increased chances for success at later levels. ("Community Report" 4)

One point most frequently made in regard to realigning schools around the middle school concept was that students would have increased opportunities for participation in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. Emphasis in sports, for example, would be on student participation and involvement rather than on competition. Football, basketball, and track would be provided for middle school boys; girls could participate in basketball and track. In football, plans were being made to increase participation through having longer quarters and allowing students to play only half a game, thereby increasing opportunities for more students to participate. The band would be a training band rather than a marching band, and students would have more course selections.

President of the School Board during this period was Mrs. Lucy Denton, who became a member of the Board in 1981, succeeding Alton Bankston. Longtime Board member Fred Carron was vice president; Annette Luther, secretary; members Jimmie Roy and Laddie Weems.

Under Dr. Ray's direction, the schools entered a period in which the concept of mastery learning was introduced and mandated, beginning first in the elementary schools, extending through those schools by the 1985-1986 school year. Teacher committees were assigned to work on grade reporting, translations of grades to parents, and other subjects related to the new instructional system.

In the "Staff Newsletter," Fall 1985, Dr. Ray wrote, "The school district will continue to involve teachers in the instructional process, and the district is fully committed to the mastery learning concept, with no turning back. Mastery learning will possibly move into the middle schools later this year in a more formal way, but that process will be determined on the basis of staff preparation and readiness."

He would later describe the mastery learning and outcome-based instruction as "nothing more than good, organized instruction that has been common to good classrooms for years. The difference is that we now have a conscious-level commitment throughout the district to the most powerful teaching model available today. It doesn't happen by chance" (*Building Success, Step By Step*, November 1986).

That many staff members were having problems dealing with some fundamental outgrowths of the mastery learning system was evident in inservice meetings and in programs conducted by outside consultants. That such problems also concerned students was made clear in an article by Biloxi High School student Seth Williams in a late 1987 issue of the *Hi-Tide*:

Mastery learning, a new method of measuring academic performance, has been partially implemented at Biloxi High this year. This system, which has already been fully introduced in the elementary and middle schools, is an educational system that raises the requirements for advancement. The major function of mastery learning is that it does away with failures. In the place of D's and F's, students are given incompletes and are expected to retake tests until satisfactory scores are achieved.

Mastery learning's goal is academic excellence. It is a noble concept. But as with many noble concepts, mastery learning looks better on paper than in reality. This technique can limit the creative ability of students and may not adequately teach the students. Allowing students to retake tests as many times as they need can cause students to study less.

Educators are sacrificing true learning for superficial test scores by implementing mastery learning. Soon the school may graduate large groups of C students who can fill in a circle on a scantron card. These students will be able to answer 'Trivial Pursuit-type' questions, but will not be able to effectively think for themselves. At this time, mastery learning is too weak and too impractical to implement.

Mastery learning may program students for future failure. It could mentally ruin a generation of students and greatly harm the quality of education. In this writer's opinion, mastery learning might accomplish the opposite of what was intended, if interpreted the wrong way.

Dr. Burnham feels that the factor which will either make or break mastery learning is how it is interpreted by administrators. He says that Biloxi High's version of mastery learning will go far beyond the boundaries set by other educators. According to Dr. Burnham, there are good and bad forms of instruction. Whether or not teaching is good is determined by how a teacher structures his lesson plans. Dr. Burnham is going over every teacher's lesson plans and is returning plans that do not meet with BHS's mastery learning requirements. (*Biloxi Hi-Tide*, December 1967, 2)

In his "Superintendent's Message," Dr. Ray recounted the work that always goes into preparation for the coming school year, noting that the groundwork had been laid for an exciting and beneficial session.

"There are changes in the educational climate of both the state and the local community that require significant responses from each of us," the superintendent said, "if we are to meet the challenges of this new school year. I believe very deeply that we have the resources, the commitment, and the expertise we require to make this the most rewarding year in the history of the Biloxi Public Schools, and I call on every staff member to begin this adventure with a renewed spirit of dedication to excellence, a heightened awareness of both the demands and the rewards of our work, and a knowledge that constructive efforts must not be subjected to thoughtless and damaging criticism characteristic of people who believe neither in themselves nor in others."

Dr. Ray continued to be an innovative and forceful administrator unafraid to introduce new elements into the educational mix, including inauguration of a new program in 1986 for high school students, EXCEL, designed to provide a demanding four-year academic experience for students in grades 9-12. Students identified as most academically talented and promising were invited to participate in the EXCEL journey.

In the history of storms and the Biloxi schools, a 1985 storm occupies a prominent position. Howard II and DuKate were most heavily damaged by Hurricane Elena on September 1 and September 2, 1985. The roof was completely destroyed at Howard II, with water having soaked the

old plaster ceilings on all three floors, ruining carpets and walls and causing about half-a-million dollars worth of damages to the building and over \$100,000 damages to contents. At DuKate the east building was heavily damaged, with the roof having been destroyed and extensive water damage to interior and contents. Architect Gerald Hopkins worked to help bring Howard II back into shape, and Leonard Collins worked with DuKate. The administration and the Board knew that it would not be until the following school year that the buildings would be reoccupied. The school system attempted to restore both schools in a manner designed to retain the aesthetic values of the older buildings and at the same time provide improved classroom settings for the most modern educational environment.

A report in the *Biloxi Hi-Tide* of November 1986 noted that the high school had undergone a facelift during the previous summer. New windows were installed for energy conservation. Over one third of the building received new roofing. The stairways and courtyard were repainted. The walls in the auditorium were replastered. The gym floor was completely redone. The coaches' office, band hall, and media center received new carpeting. These improvements were the result of Hurricane Elena, and renovations were made only after sufficient funding was available.

Rededication programs for Howard II Elementary School and DuKate Elementary School were held on October 16, 1986, symbolizing the commitment of a new generation of students to follow the example of those Biloxians who had given so much to the schools and to the education of Biloxi children. Because of loss of time caused by Hurricane Elena, the 1985-1986 school year was extended to June 10 rather than June 5 as originally planned.

Because of the damages to the two elementary schools, double sessions were put into place for the 1985-1986 school year, not ending until February of the following year. Although repair of the schools would not be completed until the summer of 1986, students ended the double sessions with assignments of DuKate students to Nichols Middle School and Howard II students sharing facilities at Beauvoir and Popp's Ferry.

The 1985-1986 budget for the school district was \$16,102,175.

At the end of the 1985-1986 school year, the *Daily Herald* reported on results of the ACT taken by state students in the spring. With Gulf Coast students scoring at or slightly below the national average, it was good news to Biloxi school officials that Biloxi students had scored well above the national average in English, slightly above the national average in math and social studies, slightly below in natural science. The school's composite score was above the national average—and in all cases was significantly above the state average. It is important to note that these scores were for all students who took the test, with no student scores set aside because of variances in curriculum or special education. The district was justifiably proud of the excellent results—and the excellent publicity.

As the school year began in September 1986, district teachers were working very hard to deal with new grading practices and problems that were resulting from new grading policies, in addition to preparing basic skills objectives and tests at all grade levels, under the supervision of Laverne Collins, Director of Instruction. The new Mississippi Teacher Assessment Instrument was also in place as an evaluation system that was supposed to remove much of the subjective assessment of teacher competence. MTAI was state-mandated and required a large investment of time and district resources in programs designed to help teachers cope with the new system. MTAI required certified teacher evaluators, and eventually tuition-free classes would be offered by the University of Southern Mississippi to help increase the number of MTAI evaluators.

The school year also began with a new public relations director, Cyndy Rentz, whose first efforts to publicize school programs and activities came with Issue No. 1 of "What's News?" in October. Among the stories Rentz reported was a reference to a jump in enrollment in the schools, with an increase of more than 600 students. Total enrollment was 6,511.

One of the new public relations coordinator's first feature stories was about Popp's Ferry Elementary School principal Percy Howard. He had served as principal of the school for the past seventeen years and during that time, Rentz wrote, he had hired all except three of the twenty-six teachers who were presently on the staff. A native Mississippian, Howard had made a reputation as a top student in his Jackson school and at Jackson State University. Having come to Biloxi twenty-four years earlier, he had served as a classroom teacher and then assistant principal before becoming principal of Popp's Ferry. Teachers in the school, the story continued, had come to know the principal's high expectations from both staff and students. "I believe in following rules," Howard said, adding that putting together a good team was a priority.

An editorial in the Biloxi *Hi-Tide* of November 1986 addressed a problem that had caused justifiable dismay to BHS students and school officials. On November 6 the *Daily Herald* published an article stating that the drug problem at Biloxi High School had "reached epidemic proportions."

With both the superintendent and Mayor Gerald Blessey involved, an answer to the article was written and the paper published a retraction. Both the administration and the student editors agreed that some local high school students had drug problems, but a survey of students showed that while the use of alcohol (though limited, by student accounts) was fairly prevalent, the use of hard drugs was not. Only a very small percentage of the students had ever "tried" hard drugs, and the students did not like everyone's being tarred with the same brush. Like other communities throughout the nation, Biloxi and other Coast cities were aware that the use of drugs was increasing during this period, but it did not appear to be a fair conclusion that at the high school it was of "epidemic proportions."

On March 2, 1987, members of the faculty, many of whom had served with Frank Sabbatini at both Biloxi High and Fernwood, mourned the sudden death of the Biloxi High School principal.

A member of the Biloxi schools faculty for twenty-eight years, Sabbatini had joined the staff of Biloxi High School in 1959 as an assistant football coach, track coach, and physical education teacher. While he was coaching, the football team won two Big Eight football championships and the track team won many honors, including district championships for four years. Among his duties had been six years of service as attendance director for the high school. He was principal of Fernwood Junior High School for four years before becoming principal of BHS in 1979, when he succeeded Dr. George Cannon as principal. He was a native of Leland, Mississippi. A memorial service was held at Biloxi High School on the day of his funeral, when acting principal Kenneth Deere paid tribute to the late principal in a moving eulogy. "For many of us he lighted the way," Deere said, "and we followed—gladly and happily, because we believed in him, respected and admired him, and loved him. We shall miss him always." Mr. Deere was in his 27th year of service to the Biloxi schools and had served as assistant principal at Biloxi High School since 1974.



In 1987 Dr. Tom Burnham was named principal of Biloxi Senior High School, a position he would hold only a short while before becoming superintendent.

As the 1980s went by, more and more stories came from the schools about testing, assessments, evaluation, mastery learning, teaching and reteaching, outcome-based instruction, model instructional programs, working in a consortium with Moss Point and Laurel schools to begin a network of cooperative school improvement, legislative actions affecting all Mississippi schools, new programs in composition and literature, pilot programs in reading, extended school days, basic skills tests, functional literacy examinations, an extended summer program called "Summerama." It was true that this was a period of exceptional and almost constant change—in philosophy, funding, curriculum, objectives, policies, expectations, and school governance.

The proposed budget for the 1987-1988 school year was \$19.7-million, business director Jude McDonnell reported in the "Community Report" in June of 1987. The budget included about \$150,000 in local funds to give \$1,000 pay raises ordered by the state to 123 of the 410 certified staff members not covered by the Minimum Program Foundation, which funded core programs and salaries. It also included \$100,000 to give a five percent raise to classified employees.

New programs in the budget proposal required expenditures of \$100,000 for salaries and benefits for two art and three music teachers for a new cultural arts program for grades K-5 to replace the elementary music program cut the preceding year because of loss of state funding; \$150,000 for a computer-assisted instruction program; \$36,000 for salary and benefits for a full-time school psychologist; \$125,000 for one of two final payments on the district's \$500,000 share of the \$1-million natatorium construction project. Local funds for operation of the schools included \$4.29-million, with state funds totaling \$9.15-million and federal funds totaling \$3.41-million.

The school district in 1987 received a \$1.4-million bilingual education grant to serve the growing number of students in Harrison County with limited knowledge of English. Biloxi's bilingual grant, up to that point the largest such grant ever awarded in Mississippi, would be used to help students improve their proficiency in the language and their academic performance in addition to helping bridge the cultural gap between native and foreign-born students ("Community Report," August 1987, 3).

In the August 1987 issue of the "Community Report," a story featured new Biloxi High School principal Tom Burnham. His work in developing learning centers to offer what he called "focused help" for students was indicative of his approach to instruction. "Each student will receive individualized instruction on the specific skills or concepts in which he or she is deficient," Burnham said. He added that eventually he would like to develop a learning center curriculum for every subject offered so that it would touch every student in the building.

According to the article, curriculum development was Burnham's long suit; he had consulted extensively on curriculum development across the state. Burnham had served as teacher, principal, and education specialist for Mississippi Educational Television and assistant dean for continuing education at Delta State before coming to Biloxi.

Reporting to the community at the end of the 1986-1987 school year, Superintendent Olon Ray wrote that the year had been "a great one for the Biloxi Public School District. School improvement efforts brought dramatic gains in achievement test scores. Numerous staff members and students honored themselves and our community with their accomplishments." He pointed to the significant gains in test scores by Biloxi students as clear evidence of progress for the Biloxi schools.

On March 2, 1987, Board member Fred Carron resigned, after having served twenty years on the Board, thirteen as president. During his tenure the schools had made great progress in curriculum expansion and in the improvement of the physical plant, despite the devastation of three major hurricanes. He had also worked to increase teacher pay to the point that when he resigned, Biloxi teachers' salaries were third highest in the state.

Carron also looked back on what he called "the peaceful integration of the Biloxi schools" during his first few years of Board service. "I feel proud that we integrated our schools without any incidents of violence," he said. "I attribute a lot of that to the community—the people really got together to make it work." He added that he felt the Biloxi school system was one of the finest in the South.

Mayor Gerald Blessey announced the appointment of Thomas Vu to fill the vacancy on the Biloxi School Board created by Carron's resignation. Mr. Vu was a naturalized citizen of the United States and the owner of several small businesses in Biloxi. He was the first of the Vietnamese community to achieve prominence in civic affairs and was president of the Vietnamese Mutual Assistance

Association. A member of the advisory board of Jefferson Bank, he worked for Gulf National Life Insurance Company.

At the end of the year in 1987, Dr. Olon Ray resigned his office after having served as superintendent of the Biloxi Public Schools for thirteen years. He left Biloxi to become special assistant for education to Governor Ray Mabus, beginning his new work on January 13, 1988, the day after the new governor's inauguration. He had joined the faculty as a history teacher in 1962 (*See "Biographies" Section.*) Dr. Ray would be remembered for many important and far-reaching changes in the structure and instructional program of the Biloxi schools—but he would later recall passage of the bond issue to air condition and provide new heating systems for all Biloxi schools as the most memorable accomplishment of his administration.

Assistant superintendent Bruce Stewart, a member of the Biloxi faculty since 1959, was named by the School Board as acting superintendent while the Board began its search for a new administrative leader for the school system. Stewart had first served as a member of the Central Junior High School faculty and in 1964 was named principal of Central Junior High School. He later served as principal of Nichols Middle School from 1968 until 1975 and was named assistant superintendent in 1975 (*See "Biographies" Section.*)

After a wide-ranging search, headed by a committee with Board member Annette Luther as chair, the Board decided to elect as superintendent a member of the local staff, choosing Biloxi High School principal Dr. Tom Burnham on April 12, 1988, to lead the schools. Dr. Burnham, given a three-year contract by the Board, was to begin his work on July 1, 1988, officially retaining his position as high school principal until that time. The Board at this time was led by Jimmie Roy, president; Annette Luther, vice president; Laddie Weems, secretary; Lucy Denton and Thomas Vu, members.

During Stewart's brief tenure, the publication "Biloxi Public Schools...for all the right reasons" gave a sweeping picture of the system he headed:

Educators in the Biloxi Public Schools are exceptionally qualified and are committed to the ideal that all children can learn.

They serve a community that has traditionally stood squarely behind its public schools, providing the finances and support necessary for a first-class education.

In recent years, the district has taken a lead in school improvement with its outcome-based instructional program that provides a flexible framework to meet the special needs of each child.

Our pledge is to continue giving our best efforts to providing the highest quality programs and services as we prepare our students to be the leaders of tomorrow.

Enrollment figures for the 1987-1988 school year showed the following (total enrollment was 6,760):

Biloxi High School – 1,838	Fernwood Middle School – 570
Michel Middle School – 403	Nichols Middle School – 468
Beauvoir Elementary – 564	DuKate Elementary – 621
Gorenflo Elementary – 564	Howard II Elementary – 330
Jeff Davis Elementary – 476	Lopez Elementary – 281
Popp's Ferry Elementary – 599	Biloxi Alternative School – 44

With the \$19.7-million budget for this school year, the district per pupil spending was \$3,060, compared with a state average of \$2,506.

Stewart noted the comprehensive curriculum of the schools, the record of achievement of its staff and students, and the wealth of special and support services that distinguished the district. Among those services were special programs for exceptional students, speech therapy, enrichment programs, drug education and counseling services, an expanding school nurse staff, one of the state's most impressive media centers, high school learning centers that were models for other schools, guidance and homebound programs, an extended day program and a summer program, a high school evening division, and community information services.

The high school curriculum, one of the state's most diverse, included a range of courses in each of the major disciplines, four foreign languages, and such specialty courses as law-related education, leadership, diversified technologies, and Air Force Junior ROTC. Ninety percent of the high school students participated in more than fifty activities and clubs.

In March 1988 the district was subjected to demanding scrutiny by state evaluators checking compliance with new state accreditation standards. Director of Instruction Laverne Collins noted that "The evaluators came here specifically to find things that are wrong. For them to find so little is really a credit to our employees." He added that the evaluators, who were teachers and administrators from other school districts in the state, complimented every department and school in the district. Interim superintendent Stewart added that the faculty and support staff should feel proud since state auditor Ginger Steadman said "that Biloxi has a model school district and needs to find ways to show it off" ("Smoke Signals," February/March 1988).

It was this system that Dr. Burnham would lead as superintendent for the next five years.

Laverne Collins, writing in "Smoke Signals" in April 1988 praised the district's teachers for what he called "an emergence of true professionalism among teachers. Teachers are beginning to feel they truly control the destiny of students and can influence positively the success of students. Teachers are beginning to view themselves as team members, and teams are emerging as a dynamic force influencing the organization and, most importantly, the performance of students."

He was optimistic about the development of a spirit of vision among principals, with greater interaction with teachers and a commitment to making teachers successful. "The high school has taken great strides to truly become an outcome-based school," he wrote. "Teachers have worked diligently all year to put into place the curriculum and to investigate the philosophy of outcome-based instruction." The high school learning centers, he noted, were exceptionally helpful in preventing student failure on the Functional Literacy Examination (passing the test would be required of graduating seniors in the class of 1989, with a seventy percent passing score established by the state). "We have only caught a glimpse of what we can be. Our challenge is to continue with unity of purpose and a commitment to each other," Collins concluded.

Required by the state to develop a five-year plan for development, the district began by conducting a survey of Biloxi residents and Biloxi businesses. During the week of November 14, 1988, volunteers from the community interviewed 315 randomly selected residents of the district and 99 randomly selected businesses located in the district. Residents were asked to give certain demographic information to help determine whether these characteristics helped shape their attitudes.

Of the 315 Biloxi residents interviewed, more than half had lived in Biloxi for more than ten years. The largest group of respondents was in the 25-44 age range; 78% per white, 13% black, with the remaining 9% Asian, Hispanic or "other." All but 14% of the respondents had at least a high school education.

Results of the survey showed that 94% of the interviewees felt that the schools were either "very important" or "somewhat important" in attracting new businesses and new residents. Sixty-eight percent felt that they were well-informed about their public schools; more than one-third said that the primary source of information about the schools was through personal contact with students or other adults or school employees; one-fourth cited newspapers as the primary source of information.

When asked to grade the schools as students are graded—with letter grades of A, B, C, D, or Fail—70% of the respondents gave the schools passing grades of A, B, or C; 5% gave the schools D or F grades.

It could not have been much comfort to school administrators and the Board and the teachers to learn that 31% said that the schools had stayed about the same for the past five years—with 93% of the business respondents making that judgment; 34% of individual respondents said that student achievement was lower than that of students nationwide and 31% of business people made that assessment.

As Dr. Burnham moved into his new position, he began almost immediately to make changes in the structure of the administration and the curriculum. He announced when school began that he would be exploring ways for administrators and Board members to spend more time in school buildings

with the teachers and students. One way of initiating that program was through having Board luncheons at a school; another was to hold principals' meetings in schools rather than in the administration building. He also began what would be perhaps the most important part of his work with the schools as he was the only Mississippi administrator, one of twenty-five superintendents nationwide, invited to attend the Technology and Education Conference sponsored by the American Association of School Superintendents. The meeting was in September of his first year, and the purpose of the conference was to explore directions for future use of technology in the schools.

The Biloxi schools received a \$142,000 Family Literacy Grant early in the school year to help in teaching English and effective parenting skills to parents and other adults in the community who spoke primarily Spanish, Vietnamese and Tagalog (a Philippine language). It was apparent that the district was making efforts to provide special services to its Vietnamese students, as announcements and reports were sometimes written in Vietnamese and a Vietnamese translator was employed by the schools to work directly with members of the Vietnamese community and programs like Summerama were provided.

One of the most significant—and lasting—accomplishments of Dr. Burnham's tenure was the founding in 1989 of Biloxi First, Inc., a non-profit organization established to fund creative and innovative teacher-designed and student-centered projects that would not otherwise be funded by the district.

Following the lead of the Tupelo schools, which had in place a working and productive foundation based on a school-community partnership in education, the Biloxi schools organized Biloxi First, with former School Board president Alton Bankston serving as chairman of the steering committee and former Biloxi administrator Charles Benton chairing the committee to build residents' support. Ann Denison, who remains a guiding force in the work of Biloxi First in its twelfth year, chaired the education committee. Mrs. Denison has served as treasurer of the organization, which in 2001 had foundation assets of approximately \$120,000 and had awarded approximately \$50,000 to Biloxi teachers. Other members of the steering committee were Col. George Long, Dr. Gilbert Mason, Larry Patterson, and Jimmie Roy. The professional committee chair was Buddy Baker; organizations, Carla Culbreath; business, Carol Trahan.

Biloxi First operates through support from membership contributions made by individuals and businesses and civic groups and through a unique Named Grant program, in which donors make contributions in the name of an individual or organization as living memorials, matched in part by Biloxi First. Teacher grants are made in the name of the person or organization, with only interest from the foundation's assets being used each year while the principal remains intact.

The kick-off reception to introduce Biloxi First to the community on November 6, 1989, was attended by Mississippi's Governor Ray Mabus as guest speaker. Before the event, Bankston and Biloxi First wrote Biloxi residents a letter in which recent accomplishments of the Biloxi schools were noted, including the fact that Biloxi High School had produced 120 National Merit Finalists

since the beginning of the program in 1955. In addition, people were reminded of the higher than national average of Biloxi students' test scores, honors won by both students and faculty members and athletic and academic teams during the past year (the BHS basketball team won the State 5A championship in 1989 and the baseball team was the current 5A championship team), and other memorable achievements representing a top-level school district. "Our purpose is to provide positive public leadership in education and economic development, and we need the involvement of all concerned Biloxians to build on the strong foundation we already have and to provide the best possible educational experiences and environment for our young people," Bankston wrote.

The superintendent wrote in the "Staff Bulletin" of September 1989, "Biloxi First will call on educators and business and community leaders and all Biloxians to join us in our efforts to make Biloxi First a viable and significant force in the educational life of our community. We are working now to bring together a means of securing financial support that will help to provide the highest quality of education for our young people through a foundation able to fund special programs or pay for special equipment or supplies the district might otherwise be unable to afford. This will be a real partnership between the schools and the community, and everyone can become an active supporter of this innovative and rewarding program."

Twenty-one years later, Biloxi First is still operating and still growing as a force for school improvement in the district, with growing recognition of its importance to teachers and students.

It was an unfortunate beginning to Dr. Burnham's tenure that the school district faced financial problems that required quick and sometimes unpleasant actions.

The new superintendent wanted to inform staff members about the situation and to let them know what had been done and what would be done in a critical time for the Biloxi schools. He noted that in a called meeting of the Biloxi School Board on February 2, 1989, the Board made several important changes designed to meet financial needs of the district and at the same time retain the highest possible level of quality on the total instructional program. Those actions included limited reductions in force, all of which were being made in accordance with district policy. Teachers and other employees affected by the reduction in force would receive copies of the policy as part of their official notification.

Approximately \$157,000 in budget cuts would come from administrative costs (over \$119,000 from the central office), with other cuts affecting a number of other staff members. In the central office, Burnham noted, five positions were eliminated: the Director of Instruction (through resignation); the Director of Personnel and Community Education (assigned to a building level principal's position); the Public Relations Director (through resignation); two clerical positions (one resignation and one reduction in force); and the Director of the Alternative School Program (reduction in force).

The Biloxi High School principal, Mike Neyman, was reassigned to the central office to assume some of the responsibilities previously carried out by the two administrations who had resigned or been reassigned. All central office and administrative salaries and salaries of principals were frozen at the current level for the coming school year. Cuts in extended contracts for principals and other administrators were expected to result in a savings of \$37,499. System-wide positions eliminated included school psychologist (with duties to be assumed by counselors, nurses, private contracts with outside firms); homebound coordinator; drug education director (duties to be assumed by other personnel and in other programs)

It was a painful administrative decision that the alternative school principal, three teachers, one PE assistant, and one secretary would face reduction in force. Elimination of salaries for the alternative school and changes in the natatorium project were expected to save \$57,000. In the elementary schools staffing would be reduced by two positions (covered by resignations). In addition, six elementary physical education teachers faced reduction in force, with the physical education program to be continued by using trained technicians and assistants—total budget savings of \$152,000. In the secondary schools, reduction in force would affect twelve secondary teachers (two through resignations and three through vacancies not filled where resignations were received earlier in the year). The director of activities and a librarian would be reduced in force.

The remaining reductions in force would basically bring staffing in line with enrollment. In middle school athletics, three middle school PE/coaching positions and one high school teacher/coaching position would be cut. Four full-time positions and four-part-time positions were also to be cut. Other cuts came in the purchase of supplies and materials. No cuts in programs or services and no reduction in the quality of instruction would result from these changes, Dr. Burnham emphasized.

In a letter to the staff, the beleaguered superintendent expressed his appreciation to staff members who had been supportive and helpful during the past few weeks as the administration tried to meet and solve the financial problems facing the school district. "It has been a difficult and painful task to advise some of our staff members of the necessary reductions in force and of the impact those reductions will have on their lives. I have been sustained and strengthened by a feeling of support and good will from our staff. You have helped pull together to meet the financial needs of our district and at the same time to preserve our commitment to the highest levels of quality education."

At the beginning of the 1989-1990 school year, enrollment of 6,554 students showed a decrease of approximately 100 from the preceding year.

Individual school enrollments were as follows: Beauvoir, 509; DuKate, 575; Gorenflo, 576; Howard II, 328; Jeff Davis, 503; Lopez, 310; Popp's Ferry, 693; Fernwood, 584; Michel, 413; Nichols, 466; Biloxi High, 1597 (grades 9-12).

The Gulf Coast was selected by Governor Mabus as the kick-off point for building public support for Mississippi's BEST program, which was widely known as Educational Reform II. Dr. Burnham

urged staff members to support the program, in which former school superintendent Dr. Olon Ray played a leadership role as the governor's assistant in educational affairs.

In a period when good news seemed in short supply, the "Staff Bulletin" for the first month of the 1989 school year reported that Biloxi High School students had made gains in the ACT scores reported for the previous spring testing, with the district scoring above both state and national averages. In addition, the school had four National Merit finalists.

Dr. Burnham, at the beginning of the 1989-1990 school year reviewed for the community and the School Board the steps taken by the school district during the past year to overcome a projected deficit which at one time was estimated to be over \$800,000 for the fiscal year 1988-1989.

In the Biloxi Public Schools "Staff Bulletin" of September 1989, he wrote, "We are pleased to report that the district will operate on a solvent financial basis during the coming school year and continue to provide a quality education for Biloxi students." He noted specific actions taken by school officials in dealing with the bleak financial situation at the beginning of the last school year.

"At the beginning of school last year, the district estimated a deficit of \$400,000 for the fiscal year. Even though we realized that we had prospects of this deficit and announced it, we also announced that we would take steps to deal with it," Burnham said.

Continuing to review the sequence of events surrounding the financial picture in the Biloxi schools, Burnham noted that as a result of substantially lower enrollment at the beginning of the school year, the district was required to raise its estimate of the projected operating deficit. The district had already employed teachers on the basis of higher projected enrollment figures and faced a loss of teacher units under the Minimum Program funding by the state. The deficit for the year was then projected at an additional \$200,000.

In December, prepayment and carry-over funds from PL-874 Federal Impact Aid funds were approximately \$234,000 less than had been anticipated, raising the projected deficit to about \$834,000. "It is important to note," Burnham pointed out, "that revenue from PL-874 funding is always unpredictable as to total amount and time of receipt, though these fluctuations in the amount of two-hundred to three-hundred thousand dollars are not critical until a school district is operating without reserves. Biloxi school contacts with officials in Washington made it clear that the district could expect to receive no more PL-874 money during this fiscal year."

As a result of these situations, the school district began to escalate plans to bring the budget back into line through reductions in force announced in February and March and reductions in expenditures, all of which led school officials to believe that the district could deal with the budget deficit by the close of school year 1989-1990. Reductions in personnel were accomplished primarily because of a decline in enrollment and cuts in administration, and the quality of education was not affected, the superintendent emphasized.

He also noted that Biloxi school employees who earlier were scheduled for reduction in force had been called back to their former jobs or to other comparable school positions or did not accept offers of recall.

Adding to the favorable turn of events in regard to the school district's financial situation, the district received payment of an additional PL-874 allocation of \$293,000, with no prior notice that it was to be received, a reallocation of PL-874 funds accomplished with the help of the Congressional delegation in Washington. The district also recovered approximately \$100,000 through increased average daily attendance resulting from an intensive district program to increase the ADA despite reduced enrollment and as a result of proper management of Minimum Program funds.

Other things fortunately also helped in reducing the deficit, primarily through reducing expenditures for materials and for the administrative staff. All vacancies opened up by attrition were not filled. Furthermore, cost control measures were taken, including postponement of major purchases, such as cancellation of planned purchase of new school buses, with savings of more than \$190,000. This was possible, the superintendent pointed out, because the school district has maintained an excellent fleet of buses through its regular maintenance and replacement plan.

The result of expense control and cost containment programs, together with an excellent year in tax collections (with approximately 99 percent of collections as opposed to the former 92 to 93 percent), further reduced the deficit by an additional \$266,000.

The result was that the Biloxi Public School District ended its fiscal year with a balance of approximately \$15,000 instead of in a deficit funding position.

"Cost containment was vital to the total school program, since we realized that if we ended the year with a deficit, we would be put on probation," Burnham reported.

"The financial condition of the Biloxi Public School District," he concluded, "is not without problems, but we have worked extremely hard to eliminate a large projected deficit in funding through excellent fiscal management and by attacking our problems head-on. We are happy to be able to report to the community and to the School Board the reversal of a previously clouded financial future and the favorable fiscal condition of the school district as we begin the new school year."

Underlining Dr. Burnham's administrative goals was a shift in philosophy and attitude that he summed up in the "Staff Bulletin" that welcomed personnel back to school at the beginning of his second year as superintendent. It could be summed up, he said, in two words: *moving on*.

The 1989-1990 school year would see an expansion and building on the mastery learning and outcome-based instruction of the past few years. The school district, Dr. Burnham wrote, recognizes that the standards established under the data-based system are minimum standards and that the time

has come to move on, to begin to focus on higher skills. Perhaps this was a response to early criticism of the program that it had been too heavily weighted toward lower expectations centered in a reteaching, retesting philosophy with which many teachers were uncomfortable from the beginning.

Curricular changes could be most readily seen at the high school level in the implementation of Advanced Placement classes during the past year; further revisions of the mathematics and language curricula over the summer months were expected to assist in the incorporation of strategies measured by SAT and ACT programs. Summer work in the elementary and middle schools focused on mathematics and social studies, with new curricula being developed in higher cognitive skills. The faculty would be involved in even more far-reaching examinations of programs and curricular changes during the next few years.

In addition to everything else that was going on in the schools, there were also a number of changes in policies with which personnel were required to deal. Among the most significant changes were those involving attendance and discipline, with the discipline policy detailed in student handbooks in regard to student misbehavior and consequences. Field trips, business leave, the homebound program, vandalism and destruction of school property, correspondence courses, additions to the dress and grooming code—all were subjects for revision.

The Biloxi Public School District, since 1975, had been a leader in the area of development and presentation of school policies and procedures, and many other state school districts had followed Biloxi's example.

Using the alphabetical coding system developed by the National School Boards Association, the district had developed a comprehensive policy manual and updated it every year so that new policies were added, revisions were made, and statements covering discontinued or outdated policies were removed.

This handling of policy manuals proved invaluable to the district as changes in federal and state requirements (both legislative and State Department of Education regulations) mandated responses from local school districts. Faculty and support staff and students and parents were expected to follow detailed and explicit rules governing behavior or attendance or grading or discipline or medication or leaves and absences or—whatever could be rationally regarded as a proper subject for School Board policy statements.

As the 1980s ended, the Biloxi School Board was composed of Jimmie Roy, Biloxi businessman and Keesler Air Force Base executive, president, and member of the Board since 1984; Lucy Denton, formerly a Biloxi teacher, appointed to the Board in 1981, vice president; Sandra Patterson, appointed to the Board in 1988, secretary; and members Thomas Vu and Dr. Jerry Adkins, appointed in December 1988 to fill the unexpired term of Annette Luther.

Committees at work in the district included a certified staff evaluation committee, completing procedures and requirements for evaluations of certified personnel as required under accreditation guidelines; the classified staff evaluation committee, completing evaluation instruments and outlining the process for district-wide evaluation of classified personnel job performance; grading committees for middle schools and elementary schools; a committee of teachers working on revision of the mathematics and social studies curriculum; a high school group working on language arts and mathematics; the Policy Research and Development Council; the Superintendent's Round Table; the Consensus/Curriculum Committee, working on upgrading the middle school and elementary curriculum; and the Disciplinary Hearing Committees.

All in all, it was a busy time for Biloxi teachers and administrators. Administrators and School Board members, in particular, were deeply involved in a unique management leadership training program.

The Managerial Grid program developed by Scientific Methods, Inc., of Austin, Texas, sponsored by the Mississippi Power Company was inaugurated by Dr. Burnham in a groundbreaking two-year management training and organizational development project. The initial Managerial Grid Seminar, with its emphasis on individual development, was followed by a team building phase, then a phase called Interface, focusing on the relationships among teams, departments, or divisions of an organization. Biloxi provided an opportunity to apply the Grid Interface Program in bringing together the three basic components of the school system, the administration, the School Board, and the community, to work together in a sound way while at the same time operating under high standards

In "Beyond Adopt-A-School: Better Utilization of Community Resources," the Managerial Grid Seminar personnel traced the background and development of the program, noting that in 1989 the Biloxi Public Schools became one of several school districts in south Mississippi that began to participate in the Managerial Grid project. The Grid approach to management development in training executives and managers had been tested and successfully implemented by Mississippi Power Company for several years.

Following an initial seminar at the Gulf Coast campus of the University of Southern Mississippi, response by Coast school administrators and state officials led to inclusion of the Administrator's Grid as part of the curriculum of the state's School Executive Management Institute. In addition, two state superintendents, Dr. Larry Drawdy of Meridian and Dr. Tom Burnham of Biloxi, decided to explore possibilities of the program as applied to a public school system.

Developed by behavioral psychologists Robert Blake and Jane Mouton, Grid Organization Development had been used for more than twenty-five years by successful businesses. It emphasized skills in such areas as initiative, inquiry, advocacy, decision-making, problem-solving, and critique.

In a section of the report called "What We Have Here Is A Failure To Communicate," the Scientific Methods/Grid Management staff gave a brief history of Biloxi's background regarding participation in the program in which the role of Dr. Burnham was highlighted and in which he emerged as a leader who was deeply committed to making meaningful changes in the schools even though he might be subjected to severe criticism. Part of the introductory background report follows:

Tom Burnham had been superintendent [of the Biloxi Public Schools] for one year. Prior to assuming the superintendency, he had served for one year as the high school principal. Dr. Burnham followed an extremely popular superintendent into the role; his predecessor had been widely recognized throughout the state as a leader in public education; he had resigned to assume a role as education advisor to the governor of the state. Whereas the previous superintendent had been described as very charismatic, Dr. Burnham was described as more reserved, and most probably suffered by comparison when he became superintendent.

The new superintendent soon learned that he had inherited a significant problem: a huge budget deficit. Faced with a projected deficit in excess of \$750,000, he immediately froze 25% of all departments' budgets. This was something to which Biloxi administrators were unaccustomed, and discontent with the new administration began. A subsequent decision to release 40 teachers in order to slash the projected budget created a community furor. Teacher groups blasted the decision as unfair; parents complained about the loss of many programs and reduced funding for athletics; the local chapter of the NAACP accused the staff cuts of being discriminatory. In the face of all this the superintendent stood firm in his decision. One very strong group emerged as most vocal: the athletic boosters. Burnham, by his own admission, is very strongly academically oriented. The booster group saw this as a bias against athletics, especially since athletic budgets felt the budget slash most dramatically. Biloxi has a long tradition of sports excellence, something in which the community takes great pride. The boosters saw Burnham as an 'outsider' who failed to appreciate this. Thus did special interest groups all over the city rise up in protest of the administration's moves, blaming the new superintendent for the budget problems.

As a result of careful analysis and planning and with unexpected reappropriation of federal funds for the school district, the administration was eventually able to reinstate those staff members who had been previously let go. Even so, wounds in the school-community relationship had been opened that would not easily heal.

Two other problems served to contribute to the uneasiness of the situation. A new city administration had taken office at about the same time as had the new superintendent. The previous mayor [Gerald Blessey] had been most generous and supportive in his dealings with the public schools. The new mayor had run on a platform that had been critical of the city's 'liberal' spending, including criticism of overspending in support of the schools. Therefore the new city administration had been elected on a platform of fiscal conservatism, giving the superintendent little expectation of assistance in his budget problems. In addition, there seemed to be a growing restlessness among the members of the school board toward the new superintendent. After all, the board members had also come under considerable fire as a result of the budget controversy. Board members were unaccustomed to Dr. Burnham's no-nonsense approach and began to feel that he perhaps could be more flexible in his dealings with the community. By the summer of 1989, after

one year with Dr. Burnham, there seemed to be a sense of uneasiness among board members about their selection of Dr. Burnham as their new superintendent.

Throughout all of this Tom Burnham had remained steadfast in his primary goal: He wanted to move the Biloxi schools toward greater academic excellence while at the same time restoring a degree of fiscal conservatism into the operation of the school system. Apparently the school board and the community wanted these same things: yet somehow communication between these three groups had rapidly deteriorated.

It was in light of these circumstances that Dr. Burnham and Scientific Methods decided upon a bold and unprecedented action: they would attempt an Interface Activity made up of three groups—school administrators, school board, and community members. Thus was the stage set for an activity whose impact is being felt still in the Biloxi community, more than a year after its completion.

In the Interface program that was a part of this project, three groups met for several days to work through the activities designed to bring about the most critical elements they agreed upon as vital to school-community improvements: school mission; trust and respect; communication; finance and resource allocation; curriculum and extra-curricular activities; professional accountability; and policies and procedures.

Group A consisted of the superintendent, two assistant superintendents, the food services director, the director of elementary education, the administrative assistant, and three principals. Group B was made up of four members of the five-person School Board, who included two housewives, a surgeon, and a civilian employee at the nearby Keesler Air Force Base. Group C represented a cross-section of the community and included a PTA president, a minister, a policeman, seven local business people, a teacher, and a housewife. Members of the black community were represented, though there were no representatives from Keesler or the Vietnamese community.

In initial joint sessions, followed by group meetings, the Interface participants addressed a number of specific concerns and agreed upon several conclusions:

- Administrators needed to be more involved in community activities.
- The district should develop a mission statement for the schools using the Interface format.
- The administration should hold budget hearings before recommendations were made. They should hold more budget hearings and conduct a workshop for the school board on the intricacies of the school budget process.
- The administration should provide for more community input into the curriculum. This should include forming a community curriculum committee to assist the administration in curriculum decisions.
- The district should continue the emphasis on improved academics, but not ignore the value of extracurricular activities.

- The school board and administration should conduct frequent community round table sessions. Administrators should avoid educational jargon in communications with the community, and should listen more to the community.
- Goals and objectives should be revised on an annual basis; with provision made for input from the community.
- The school board should establish a "Citizens' Input Time" at school board meetings.

It was a tall order by any accounting, and the school district would have to make real changes in the administration and in overall school operations. But by following this route, Dr. Burnham had proved that he was able to put himself on the line and that he was determined to provide the leadership that the schools and the community expected of him. The 1980s had also not been years of school construction; the years had dealt most often with instructional and financial matters that were demanding and far-reaching. The 1990s would have its own challenges and problems and successes, like every other decade in this history.



Biloxi School Board – 1982

*Lucy Denton, Fred Carron, president, Annette Luther,
Ernest Henley, Jr., secretary, Reverend Elijah McGee, vice president,
Dr. Olon Ray, superintendent, Don King, attorney*

Biloxi sports physician Dr. Robert Middleton, a graduate of Biloxi High School. He worked with longtime team physician Dr. D.L. Hollis, beginning in 1964, and became sports physician for the Biloxi schools when Dr. Hollis retired. He made time in his busy schedule to attend almost every BHS football game, both home and away, since 1964 until the 1990s, and he was an invaluable part of the total sports program of the school district. With help from other physicians, he gave physical examinations to all students in the junior high schools and the high school who participated in the sports program.

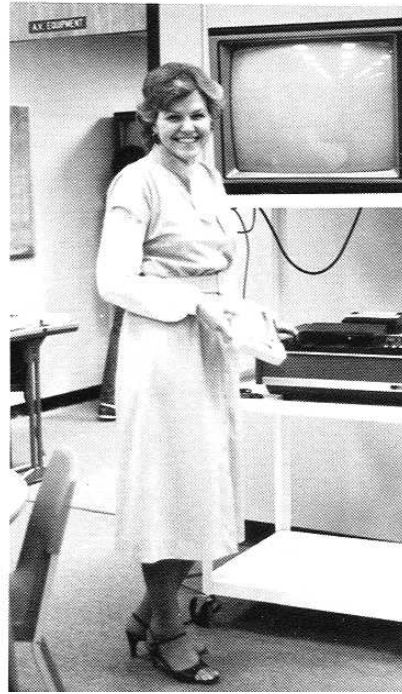




Mrs. Carol Stewart, well-loved school nurse for many years, both as coordinator of nursing services and later as school nurse for Biloxi High School, where she was counselor and friend to thousands of Biloxi High students



Lt. Col. Tom Varble and Chief M/Sgt John Smith, with AFJROTC Color Guard



Two very important Biloxi High School staff members – Sue McClure, BHS media supervisor, and Ann Denison, district media supervisor, pictured in 1981



English Teachers Claire Turner and Linda Strange Galloway in 1982