

# 'We just pick up the pieces': As a new school year starts, this Mississippi Delta community is fighting for survival

*Generations of Black children in Holmes County bear scars from the state's underinvestment in their education. Now, the community is trying to regroup as a new school year begins.*

By Bracy Harris  
The Hechinger Report

*This story was produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education.*

Francine Jefferson tries to be careful about small talk these days. Prolonging pleasantries comes with a risk in this region which has been leveled by the coronavirus pandemic. Her own sister-in-law, Clara Kincaid, 50, became sick while still on the job at a local chicken plant. She had to drive 40 miles to get tested for Covid-19. The results didn't come back until a week after she died.

Jefferson is now helping to raise her nephew, who is also being looked after by his 29-year-old brother.

"This is not a game," she said.

Jefferson, a community activist who lives in the Mississippi Delta, spends most of her week as the county's veterans' service, coordinating outreach efforts for retired servicemen and servicewomen and for hungry families in Holmes County. Most days, when she's delivering meals or shuttling folks who don't have transportation to



In this file photo, a school bus in Holmes County transverses the rural roads of the Mississippi Delta. Since the pandemic, the district has used school buses as traveling mobile hotspots in an effort to provide families with reliable Internet.

(Credit: Rory Doyle for The Hechinger Report)

errands, there's not a lot of traffic on the county's rural roads. On the days when the county distributes free boxes of produce and dairy products, "that's when you see a lot of cars out," Jefferson said.

With almost 1,200 — or one in five — of the county's residents out of work, the demand for food assistance has escalated in a community where thousands of families already struggled to make ends meet before the virus came here.

"Poverty was the pandemic for Holmes County, long before Covid was. We look at our health issues, educational issues ... all of this stuff comes back full force to poverty," Jefferson said. "We've been fighting that a heck of a lot longer than Covid-19."

Covid-19 may be less likely to sicken kids, but there's little guarantee they will come through the crisis unscathed. In Holmes County, it's children who are bearing the brunt of the dual pandemics coming to a head as summer ends. Schools are struggling to keep learning going

as buildings remain closed, federal help for the poor and hungry is shutting down, and desperate families have been left largely on their own to figure out how to avoid a deadly disease while also feeding, housing and educating their children.

For Jefferson, the window is narrowing on making a decision on where — and how — her nephew will return to school. Public schools in Holmes County will start school online next month. Central Holmes Christian School, a private school in the county, reopened for in-person classes this month but Jefferson is reluctant to send her nephew into a classroom at this point.

Classrooms here, which never fully integrated after Jim Crow, have long been at the frontlines of a battle against poverty and for equal opportunity. For the most part, it's been easier to point to academic casualties in the county's public school system than educational victories. Generations of Black students in Holmes County have the scars and missed earnings to show for it. Black children who grew up in low-income households in the county just 15 years after a landmark school desegregation victory were likely to enter their mid-thirties with a household income of \$24,000, according to a 2018 analysis of Census Bureau data by a Harvard and Brown team of researchers. In contrast, their white peers whose parents made low wages were likely to have an average household income of \$37,000 by their mid-thirties, researchers found.

Now, district officials are trying to regroup for the 2020-21 academic year amid a global pandemic and financial crisis that threatens to outmaneuver even the most well-thought-out school reopening plans. The

predicament is particularly pernicious for students who received the least in normal times, in a state where access to even the basics largely falls along the lines of race.

Buildings in Holmes County were already vulnerable to flooding during storms; classrooms had outdated textbooks, while aging pipes threaten to burst. Superintendents struggled to stretch local funds to cover underfunding by the state, making it nearly impossible to offer competitive salaries for fully certified educators. Teacher turnover has left the low-rated district with one of the highest percentages of non-certified educators in the state. That was the baseline, before the budget crisis that's likely to affect districts across the country. It has advocates worried about the consequences yet to come.

Sylvia Gist, a Holmes County native and former dean of Chicago State University's School of Education, said schooling here prior to the pandemic left too many students "unprepared to survive in the global society."

Before the pandemic hit, Gist had been a proponent of distance learning as a possible solution to the county's educational woes, if it could be done effectively and bring certified teachers to the classroom. This past spring, she followed with interest when the district outfitted several homes with laptops and tablets to complete school work. Buses were parked outside of apartment complexes to provide Wi-Fi for families without reliable internet access. In more remote areas of the county where houses can be spaced a mile or more apart, families were provided with individual hotspots.

But Gist heard feedback that the service quickly became sluggish under the strain from so many children

signing on. Then there were the matters that seemed out of everyone's control. Families living on top of hills in the county could catch a signal, while those downhill remained cut off. While the district had made a good-faith effort to connect families, Gist argues that the effort can't substitute what's really needed — substantial investment that would provide high-speed internet to communities, much like efforts in the late 1930s to bring electricity to rural America.

Democratic Rep. Bryant Clark of Holmes County said he supports the district's plan to stay online for the first part of the semester, but he's worried about internet access issues that will leave families in the lurch. Every child who can't connect, risks missing weeks or even months of instruction and falling further behind.

"If you live outside of the city limits, any type of internet other than dial up is almost impossible," Clark said.

Gist knows the disconnection comes at grave cost for students. Gist, who runs the Migration Heritage Foundation, which documents the county's history and provides aid to students, said the number of teenagers in the county applying for a fellowship to help cover textbook costs went from 16 last year to three this spring. Students who normally would have filled out applications using the school's network didn't have another way to get online. With so few applicants, the foundation decided to double its scholarship awards this year and plans to disburse remaining funds next year.

For many Holmes County parents, the lack of access to an education for their children is just one of the losses they're facing. Though 20 percent of adults here are unemployed, those who are still working in Holmes County are often employed in processing plants and grocery stores. They don't have the option of working from home. And, as is the case nationwide, Black residents in Holmes County have contracted and died from the virus at high rates.

When Rep. Clark returned to in-person work at his downtown law office, he kept the front door locked to discourage drop-ins. He knows more than 10 of the 50 county residents who have died from the disease. One, a neighbor in his early 50s, was barely three years older than Clark.

Black residents have accounted for almost all of the deaths on record from the disease in the county. And while more of those killed by the virus are older, many of the victims in Holmes "have been relatively young," Clark said. "Some have children and, in some situations,

they were the sole providers for their kids."

Clark, whose mother died when he was 2, is deeply worried about the emotional toll families — and by extension, schools — will face.

Jefferson, the veterans' outreach coordinator, said her nephew attended the county's public schools; she's not sure what the fall will hold. The school system was strained in the best of times: She can't see it stepping up to provide resources like counseling that could help her nephew navigate his grief. He was her sister-in-law's baby boy and loved snuggling up and resting on his mom's legs.

Jefferson said her sister-in-law, Kincaid, wanted a different future for her sons than the hard labor of deboning and cleaning chickens. She was unwavering about her expectations when it came to schoolwork and wasn't a fan of repeating herself.

Jefferson said the family used to joke: "Your mama does not play the radio. She is not going to play the song over."

Kincaid had a lot to be proud of: None of her three oldest children dropped out from high school. One graduated from college and started his own trucking business while another plans on studying at Mississippi State this fall.

Jefferson shared the plight of families displaced by backwater flooding in the county last year and shared her own family's story with national news outlets. She also spoke at a virtual gathering of the Poor People's Campaign, an advocacy group. She had hoped for help but can't shake the feeling that there's no "cavalry" coming to the rescue.

The Centers for Disease Control has conducted free testing and extensive contact tracing in the county. It's a welcome sign, but families are still struggling with other matters like paying rent and health care costs. Parents without internet are unable to check online announcements and keep up with updates from the district. This summer, the district's superintendent stepped down, adding even more uncertainty for families about how the district will weather the upcoming school year.

Jefferson said it's overwhelming. But there's an understanding in this county where "less is the norm" that the current crisis will recede one day.

"On the other side, we just pick up the pieces that are left behind and keep going," Jefferson said. "What else can we do? Grieve our losses and keep going."

*This story about Holmes County, Mississippi was produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education.*

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