

'Mississippi Miracle' in reading occurred over time thanks to programs that work, specialist says

Mississippi Today by Taurean Morton
Mississippi's recent gains in reading and math have attracted national attention. A state long associated with low academic rankings is now being discussed as a model for improvement. In education circles, the turnaround has been called the "Mississippi Miracle."
The label has helped shape the national conversation around Mississippi schools, even if it simplifies a much longer story.

Miracles are usually understood as rare, unexplained events. Mississippi's progress in literacy was neither sudden nor mysterious. The state's gains followed years of changes in reading instruction, teacher training and academic accountability. Those improvements came from decisions made inside classrooms, schools and intervention programs across the state.
The progress did not happen by chance.
Over the last decade, Mis-

issippi has steadily shifted toward literacy instruction rooted in the science of reading, a research-based approach built on decades of study in cognitive science, language development and education. The framework focuses on five major components tied to reading success: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension.
Those practices have increasingly shaped instruction in Mississippi class-

rooms, particularly in the early grades. When implemented consistently, they tend to produce measurable results. Mississippi's improvement on fourth grade reading scores from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, often referred to as the Nation's Report Card, reflects that broader shift toward structured literacy and evidence-based instruction.
Similar patterns are beginning to emerge outside the traditional school day, as well.

Across parts of the Mississippi Delta, after-school literacy programs are using many of the same strategies to support struggling readers. At Reading Roadmap Inc., where I serve as director of strategic partnerships, our intervention model is built around the same research base guiding classroom instruction.
Students are grouped according to specific literacy deficits identified through assessment data. Lessons are designed intentionally around those needs, and progress is monitored throughout the year rather than assumed after a few weeks of instruction.

Moore named a Stephen D. Lee Scholar at MSU

MISSISSIPPI STATE, MS - Demeria Moore, of Goodman, MS, was recognized as a Stephen D. Lee Scholar during Mississippi State University's spring 2026 commencement exercises.

Moore is among more than 160 students who at-

tained this honor among about 4,000 spring graduates. Stephen D. Lee Scholars have achieved a cumulative 4.0 GPA during their college careers.
Moore, who studied Biological Sciences, earned the Bachelor of Science from MSU's College of Arts & Sciences.

Jackson Zoo improvements draw families from across metro area

By Molly Minta by Mississippi Today
It was 9:50 a.m. on Saturday. The zoo – and its renovated splash pad – wouldn't open for another 10 minutes.
"We're excited that y'all are here," said Heather Logan, a ZAPP board member, who took a video on her phone to remember the moment.

trees, and a magnolia flower. Justin Ransburg, one of the two muralists, said he wanted to capture "how peaceful it is here."
Deanna Crews, a 35-year-old teacher, said she could tell ZAPP's work had freshened up the historic property. Her son, 4-year-old Issan, loves animals and is "a young scientist in the making," but the last time she brought him to the zoo was a year ago.

hibit. The Gluckstadt boy loves to recite facts about animals that he learns from watching YouTube videos, and the large bird reminded him of his favorite type.
"That's a dinosaur," he shouted.
Lyniah was more critical of her time at the zoo. Standing in front of a shady exhibit housing a kookaburra, she said she thought some of the animals looked sad and that the \$5 snow cone was too expensive.

In many cases, growth follows that structure.
Some students who begin the school year performing significantly below grade level can move from Tier 3 intervention status to grade-level proficiency within the same academic year. For families who have spent years watching a child struggle with reading, that kind of progress can feel dramatic.
Still, dramatic does not necessarily mean miraculous.
Students often improve when instruction reflects how reading development works. Teachers tend to improve when they receive consistent training and support. Intervention programs are more effective when they rely on data and evidence instead of habit or repetition.

or community equally. In her 2024 Mississippi Today article, "Mississippi's 'reading miracle' has been out of reach for some schools," reporter Julia James noted that many high-poverty and historically underserved communities have not experienced literacy gains equally across the state. In many districts, challenges connected to staffing shortages, chronic absenteeism and limited intervention resources remain ongoing barriers.
Those disparities matter because Mississippi continues to face deep economic challenges that affect many students long before they enter a classroom.
According to the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 1 in 5 Mississippians lives in poverty. The Annie E. Casey Foundation has also ranked Mississippi near the bottom nationally in overall child well-being, considering factors such as child poverty, school access, health insurance coverage and teen births. For many students, academic struggles are tied to broader conditions that extend beyond literacy instruction alone.
That reality makes the state's progress more impressive, but it also underscores how much work remains.
The next phase of Mis-

issippi's literacy progress will depend on whether evidence-based instruction becomes more consistent across schools, intervention programs and after-school settings. Sustaining those gains will require continued investment in teacher development, stronger alignment between school day and out-of-school learning and broader access to structured literacy support for students who continue to fall behind.
Research has consistently shown that high-quality after-school programs can improve academic outcomes, particularly for students in under-resourced communities. When those programs reinforce what students are learning during the school day, the impact can become even more significant.
Mississippi's literacy growth is real and explainable.
The state made intentional choices about reading instruction. Educators adjusted their practices over time, and schools committed themselves to methods grounded in research rather than tradition alone.
Those decisions produce measurable results.
That may not fit the narrative of a miracle. Overall though, it may prove to be something far more valuable because it means the progress can be repeated.

A number of events on Saturday drew families from across the metro area to the Jackson Zoo – from Pocahontas to Pearl – including many who said they couldn't remember the last time they'd visited. About 175 people went to the zoo last weekend, Logan said.
The turnout encouraged volunteers, local leaders, city officials and zoo employees who've been working to revitalize the struggling west Jackson attraction. Earlier this year, Jackson Mayor John Horn announced his Planning and Development department would seek developers for the Jackson Zoo and the adjoining Livingston Park, but the city has yet to open bids.

As they walked past the gibbon exhibit, Crews and her friend remarked that the zoo seemed like it had more animals than it did last time.
The zoo also has at least 10 prairie dog pups that were born within the past few weeks, said Dave Wetzel, the deputy director.
The prairie dogs – which Wetzel said don't have names, because there are so many – are the only animals the Jackson Zoo is currently breeding. Wetzel said the chimpanzees are partially related, so they take oral birth control. The black-necked swans are brother and sister. The ostriches are too old. And don't get Wetzel started on those gibbons, Buster and Emma.

There might be a grain of truth to Lyniah's observation. Wetzel said the animals are happier when lots of people visit the zoo – especially Mathan, the North American black bear that Wetzel affectionately calls "Buddy."
"He likes company," he said. "He likes people to sit there and talk to him." Zoos, Aquariums & Preserves
Ray McCants, the president of ZAPP, said the zoo is holding another family friendly event this coming Saturday, the "Kidpreneur Youth Marketplace" where dozens of kids will set up vendor booths.
"Hopefully we repeat the traffic again next week," he said.

What happened in Mississippi was not accidental. It was the result of sustained implementation over time.
At the same time, Mississippi's literacy gains have not reached every school

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Nonetheless, improvements are underway. After three years, kids can once again wade in the bright-blue splash pad, featuring a tiger-tongue slide and a pelican that dumps water from its orange bill.
"I'm so excited about the splash pad that I don't know what to do," said Pamela Junior, the director of the city's Human and Cultural Services department.
ZAPP volunteers also spruced up the entrance of the 100-year-old zoo. With the help of a \$5,000 grant from the Community Foundation of Mississippi, they installed signs featuring some of the zoo's prized animals, including Big Mike, the rare white rhino. Family
Two local artists painted colorful murals featuring birds,

"The gibbons, they do everything but breed," he said. "They are allowed to, if they so choose to."
Instead, Buster and Emma prefer to groom each other and snuggle. Wetzel speculated their relationship has remained platonic because Buster was hand-raised.
"He didn't get to see those movies," he said.
A 7-year-old boy named Keylon and his 9-year-old sister named Lyniah toured the zoo with their parents, who did not want the family's last name published. With lips stained from a blue raspberry snow cone, Keylon hollered in excitement at the ostrich ex-

hibit. The Gluckstadt boy loves to recite facts about animals that he learns from watching YouTube videos, and the large bird reminded him of his favorite type.
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