

Good morning,

My name is Brent Harrison, and I am the Superintendent of Saraland City Schools in Saraland, Alabama. Saraland City Schools is a relatively young district, having opened its doors in 2008 with approximately 1,500 students. Today, we serve around 3,400 students—representing more than a 126% increase in enrollment since our inception.

Of our current student population, 73% are White, 17% are African American, and the remainder identify as Native American or two or more races. Over 53% of our students qualify for free or reduced lunch.

Despite these socioeconomic challenges, Saraland City Schools has consistently ranked among the highest-performing districts in Alabama on both state and federal report cards. Our students excel in the Alabama Comprehensive Assessment Program (ACAP) in English Language Arts, Math, and Science. We are proud to be the top-performing district in the state relative to our poverty level. Our state rankings for the past four years for on the ACAP are as follows:

2022 – Math: 4<sup>th</sup> highest

English Language Arts: 6<sup>th</sup> highest

Science: 5<sup>th</sup> highest

2023 – English Language Arts: 3<sup>rd</sup> highest

Math: 5<sup>th</sup> highest

Science: 7<sup>th</sup> highest

2024 – English Language Arts: 5<sup>th</sup> highest

Math: 5<sup>th</sup> highest

Science: 8<sup>th</sup> highest

2025 – English Language Arts: 5<sup>th</sup> highest

Science: 6<sup>th</sup> highest

Math: 7<sup>th</sup> highest

Our students are being compared every year to those in communities where median home prices begin at \$987,000 and average household incomes reach \$302,000 annually. In contrast, Saraland's median home price is \$231,000, and the average household income is \$60,000. We take great pride in these accomplishments.

While I've been asked to speak today about educational laws and curriculum in Alabama, I wanted to first provide context about the district I am honored to represent. Saraland is a blue-collar community, which I believe contributed to the minimal learning loss we experienced during the COVID-19 shutdown and reopening. Saraland City Schools was one of the first districts in the state to reopen in August 2020, and I'm proud to say we did not miss a single day once we resumed in-person instruction. Our students and faculty performed exceptionally well during this time.

Beyond our strong culture, we attribute much of our success to the curriculum we use and the impact of recent legislation. The Alabama Literacy Act of 2019 established the Science of Reading as the state-approved curriculum and introduced a summative assessment for third grade. Students must demonstrate proficiency on the ACAP Reading subtest to advance to fourth grade. Saraland City Schools uses Phonics First, an Orton-Gillingham-based program that aligns explicitly with the Science of Reading. It emphasizes phonological and phonemic awareness, systematic and explicit phonics, decoding and encoding, cumulative review, decodable texts, and multisensory instruction. This approach supports both Tier 1 instruction and interventions for struggling students in Tiers 2 and 3. Last year, only five of our 262 third-grade students did not meet proficiency on the ACAP Reading subtest—all of whom had already been identified with significant learning disabilities and had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).

In Math, our teachers focus on building automaticity and fluency with math facts and concepts. While we have moved away from rote memorization, we use engaging tools like Reflex Math, a computer-based program that reinforces math facts through interactive games. This keeps students engaged and supports learning outside the classroom. Another key strategy we use is spiraling—introducing math concepts at a basic level and gradually increasing complexity over time. This allows students to revisit concepts throughout the year, deepening their understanding and building true math fluency: the ability to use math fact knowledge to select appropriate strategies for problem-solving.

Our greatest gains, however, come from how we approach Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction. Unlike many schools that focus on reteaching current material, we use formative and summative assessment data to identify and address foundational skill gaps in reading and math. This targeted approach continues until the data shows the student is ready to succeed with Tier 1 instruction alone.

At Saraland City Schools, we eat, sleep, and breathe data. It drives every decision we make for our students. We've built systems to constantly review and analyze every piece of data available to us. Combined with strong curriculum and proven instructional practices, our

data-driven culture is what sets us apart. We believe in this process not for the accolades, but because it is what's best for children.

Thank you for having me today. It is truly an honor and privilege.

Brent Harrison