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"Be just and fear not."

Global Teaching Project supports Pontotoc AP students in time of need

By Brock Puckett and Brant Puckett Guest columnists Jul 10, 2025

Successful schools differ in many respects, but they all share a common trait: Successful schools, and the school districts of which they are a part, result from the hard work of a community fully committed to its students.

The heart of that community is, of course, the schools' faculty, administrators, and staff working together with students and their families. Yet the community also includes a much broader group of persons whose energy, expertise and resources are critical to academic achievement.

The value of that broader community, and the difference it makes in students' lives, was recently demonstrated in the Pontotoc County School District when the Global Teaching Project stepped up to help our students persevere during challenging circumstances. We share that story to affirm what a community can achieve, and to highlight a unique initiative in which Mississippi is the national leader.

The Global Teaching Project works with rural Mississippi public high schools to ensure that promising students have access to Advanced Placement science courses those students need to achieve their full potential.

GTP's Advanced STEM Access Program provides classes in four Advanced Placement courses — AP Physics 1, AP Computer Science Principles, AP Biology, and AP Statistics — by providing a range of resources, teachers, professional development, tutors, and university-based residential instructional programs.

Over the past eight years, GTP has worked with North and South Pontotoc high schools, and dozens of other schools throughout Mississippi, which remains GTP's focus. Many of these schools are in the state's most impoverished communities, where AP courses would otherwise be unavailable. Most schools working with GTP previously offered no APs. Other schools, such as in Pontotoc County, have used GTP to enhance existing AP programs.

GTP's services and resources are provided for free to school districts, schools, students, and their families, and they use no state or local funds. GTP is not a vendor, but a member of our community.

This spring, our district experienced tragedy when our revered AP Biology teacher at South Pontotoc became ill and subsequently passed. GTP responded as a member of the community — they sought to help.

When the teacher took medical leave, GTP worked closely with another AP science teacher, Ms. Sharon Schaefer, and school and district administrators to help support the grieving students. GTP team member Dr. Nicole Roberson, who teaches Secondary Science Education at the University of Mississippi and is herself an accomplished AP Biology instructor, taught numerous sessions of the class, both in person and via video conference. The GTP tutor, who had already been working with the class, Varshini Odayar, a Harvard neuroscience graduate and current Michigan medical student, conducted twice-weekly, hour-long tutoring sessions. GTP's director of student engagement, Oso Ifesinachukwu, a Yale bioengineering graduate, also taught both remotely and in person. Together, they provided exceptional instruction for the students in a time of great need.

Remarkably, GTP also stepped up to support AP Biology students at both North and South Pontotoc two years ago after teacher vacancies arose. At that time, Dr. Roberson also regularly traveled to Pontotoc County, and tutors from Harvard and the University of Virginia also continued their work with the classes. In addition, Dr. Lisa Urry, a Northeastern University professor and lead author of the nation's most widely used AP Biology textbook, also taught classes remotely. (Dr. Urry also teaches at GTP's residential instructional programs; the only high school students she's taught are in Mississippi.)

Through GTP, Mississippi has become the leader in expanding educational opportunities for potentially high-achieving students in rural areas, an issue of pressing national importance. The Equity and Excellence Commission, an advisory committee chartered by Congress, concluded a decade ago that "inequities are perpetuated (through) coursework that is low in academic rigor" and the lack of AP courses for underserved students "aggravate the achievement gaps" and "impair our ability as a nation to raise student achievement." More recently, the pandemic has exacerbated those disparities.

College Board, which created and administers the AP Program, recently reported to the U.S. Secretary of Education that GTP's "Advanced STEM Access Program has proven uniquely successful in addressing disparate access to AP STEM courses."

In fact, in the nation's 50 highest poverty rural school districts, the only schools to offer AP Physics, and a majority of the schools that offer AP Biology, AP Computer Science, and AP Statistics do so through GTP, according to recent College Board and U.S. Census data.

In Pontotoc County, we are grateful to our community, and to GTP.

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