HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE LABORATORY SCHOOL
AT
SOUTHERN UNIVERSITY AND A&M COLLEGE

The primary, grammar, and high school level program of study has always been associated with Southern University from its original founding date 1922, and through the formative years of the late 1980s. The “Laboratory School” records its formative years with the founding of the “New Southern University” when it moved to the Scotlandville (Baton Rouge) site. The Academic Department of the University was reorganized by Dr. Joseph S. Clark with the grammar and high school grades place in the newly formulated “Model Training School” Department in 1914. In the early years of the “New Southern University” students who attended the seven grammar grades and three-year high school course of study were actually enrollees of the then University curriculum. The only courses taught beyond the high school level were those in the teacher training department. During the early 1990s, classes for the grammar school students were held in the basement of the Multi-Purpose Administration Building often called the “Academic Building”, located on the campus near the Mississippi River in front of the buildings now occupied by the Army and Navy ROTC programs. The high school students attended classes in a small wooden frame building located behind the Academic Building.

Many of the students enrolled in the early years lived in the dormitories and all who attended were required to complete one hour of work each day without pay. Tuition for grammar school (elementary students was fifty cents [$.50] a month. Tuition for high school students was one dollar [$1.00] a month. In the earliest years of the New Southern University a normal school period (first quarter, a later semester) generally lasted two to three months. During the period in between terms, boarding students worked full time on the farm, in the laundry, and making a variety of products for sale at fairs and exhibitions including garments, baskets, brooms, and furniture which often surpassed the quality of those available in local stores.

Beginning with the eighth grade, the required four-year high school academic program included four years of English with at least one year of English Literature, one year each of Arithmetic, Plane Geometry, Solid Geometry, Algebra, Geography, Louisiana History, Civics, American History, Modern European History and Latin. Also included was General Science, Botany, Zoology, Physics, and Chemistry and a required reading list of more than 50 Literary classics. In addition to regular academic work, elective courses for young ladies included domestic art, domestic science, and home nursing; young men could elect to take agriculture,
black smithing, plumbing, electrical repair, woodworking, brick masonry, or carpentry. An additional year of study beyond the last year of high school for persons seeking teacher certification included School Management, Methods of Instruction, Review of Common School Subjects and Observation and Practice Teaching in the Model Training School. The successful completion of this additional year of study allowed a student to be awarded a State of Louisiana Negro Teaching Certificate. Several of the “senior students” who had graduated from the Model Training school and who continued on in the Normal Teacher Training Course taught classes in the Grammar and High School.

The 1921-1922 university term was the year in which the “Laboratory School” at Southern University started to count its age as a university-based school administered by the College of Education with a four-year university level teacher-education certification curriculum. The establishment of the Southern University College of Education in 1921-1922 was also the first year of the Southern University Laboratory School in its present configuration as a university-based elementary and secondary school. Using the state’s criteria to determine its beginning, the Laboratory School completed its seventy-fifth (75th) year of continuous operation in the spring of 1997. Dr. Joseph S. Clark modified the school’s name to reflect its new role. He officially named the new department – The Southern University Model Practice School. The Model Practice School was a separate entity from the high school department (still named the Southern University Training School) in all respects. Dr. Clark believed that both a strong preparatory and training school were essential to the academic growth of the University, particularly for students enrolled in the teacher training curriculum.

The Model Practice School Building accommodated about 110 students in a building which had only four large classrooms. Enrollment in the Model Practice School in the early twenties was limited to 12 students per class at the grammar school level. The building was constructed by the male students enrolled in the Training School industrial classes under the direction of their instructor. It was located on a site at the corner of Swan Street and Farm Road where the Agricultural Science building now stands. Students attended classes in shifts, rotating academic course work and domestic art, domestic science, industrial trades and agricultural science electives with compensatory chores essentially to the functioning of the university. (Students who did not work were required to pay an additional $2.00 per month in fees). Tuition for one full academic term (138 days) was estimated to be about $5.00 for non-boarders. This fee included the annual cost of a yearbook, a subscription to the school bi-monthly newspaper, required membership dues for the Pelican Literary Society and an athletic activity fee.
Students who enrolled in the Model Practice School (in each of its early forms) attended all University functions, actively participating in them. The Model Practice School also had the same academic as the University at large. Enrollment in the Model Practice School in the early twenties was limited to 12 students at the grammar school level. The student body was composed primarily of the children of the faculty and staff of the University. From 1914 until 1935 all girls enrolled in the University were required to wear a uniform described as being a plain white waist (blouse) and blue serge pleated skirt for fall and winter and a white one-piece shirtwaist dress for spring and summer. The boys had no prescribed uniform, but were cautioned to be “neat and in good taste.” This regulation included students in Grammar School, High School, Model Practice School, and the Teacher Training Program. Courses in the curriculum of the Model School(s), in the form of “Model Lessons”, were taught by senior Teacher Training Course students, the Model School principal, and critic teachers. The famed Mrs. Myrtle McCloud, the first-grade teacher from 1921 until her retirement in 1966, was one of two teachers assigned to the Model Practice School in the early twenties. A typical curriculum included the following: Arithmetic, English Grammar, Penmanship, Geography, and U.S. History for the Primary and Elementary Grades (1-8). In the early 1930s, the name was changed to Southern University Demonstration School. A brick structure was completed on the site now occupied by the John B. Cade Library. Grades nine through twelve were added as a separate entity from the University Training (High) School. The state recommended high school curriculum to be taught. However, students enrolled in the Model Practice School were expected and encouraged to enter college immediately upon graduation, therefore all courses were taught at the college preparatory level. The faculty and administration for the “Laboratory School” in its various forms from 1914 to the present were carefully chosen by the University administration. Its first Head Teacher, Miss Hildred Thomas (appointed by Dr. Joseph S. Clark) was on hand at the Opening Day Ceremonies for the “New Southern University” in 1914. (There is some evidence that a series of temporary appointments were made in the earliest years). A review of the sources available identifies sixteen (16) academic leaders followed Miss Hildred Thomas. They are as follows: Dr. Jane McAllister, was the first permanent Supervisor of the Model Practice School, serving from 1923-1926. Mr. John B. Cade was named Supervisor from 1928-1930 and Director of Teacher Training from 1930-1931. Dr. William Wallace Stewart (W.W. Stewart) was Director from 1931-1935 and Principal from 1936-1939. His name graces the current College of Education Building [W.W. Stewart Hall]. Mr. E. E. Green filled the capacity of the principal of the Demonstration School from
1939-1940 and also taught in the Extension program in New Orleans, Louisiana in 1940. And Dr. William H. Gray, Jr., was Principal from 1940-1942.

The 1942-1943 term ushered in an era of the Laboratory School’s history that is perhaps the most remembered of its illustrious life span. Miss Almira A. Boley who (Boley Hall dormitory is named after) was appointed Principal in the fall of 1942 by President Felton G. Clark. Students who attended the Laboratory School while Miss Boley was principal recount the many “adventures” experienced under her leadership, first as principal of the Southern University Demonstration School and then as its first principal with the name Southern University Laboratory School when it moved to its current site in the fall of 1956. The one-half million-dollar modern facility had a new name, new school colors of Emerald Green and Lemon Yellow, its own marching and concert band, and a new Mascot led the Laboratory School Jaguar Kittens. Miss Boley retired in 1958. Following in Miss Boley’s impermeable footsteps from 1958 to 1960 was Dr. Joseph P. McKelpin. Known as the “quiet principal”, the school experienced growth in enrollment and academic offerings. When Dr. McKelpin left the University in 1960, Mrs. Isabel Herson donned the mantle of leadership. She was always present at the Founder’s Day Pilgrimage, an activity traditionally conducted by the Laboratory School.

In 1966, President Felton G. Clark appointed Dr. Thomas J. Wilcox, Jr. as Principal. Dr. Wilcox was also retired from the university. During the tenure of Dr. Wilcox, many changes were initiated which led the Laboratory School into educational pursuits for its students on an international level as they traveled to participate in highly selective high school summer programs in Mexico, London, Spain, and other European countries. The Laboratory School boasted of innumerable State Championships and First Place ratings in academic competitions, often sweeping the entire field of awards. In the Fall of 1979, Chancellor Roosevelt Steptoe appointed Dr. Wilcox to the position of Vice Chancellor of the Administration and Mr. W.W. Williams assumed the position of Acting Principal until Dr. Gussie Trahan was appointed principal in 1980. The Laboratory School continued to flourish under the leadership of Dr. Trahan, with the establishment of The Middle School Curriculum for grades 6-8 and the opening of a well-equipped student computer Laboratory. During Dr. Trahan’s tenure, the Main building of the Laboratory was damaged by a May 2, 1981 fire. Dr. Trahan had the awesome responsibility of supervising renovations and the daily trek of the middle and high school students to classes in the Old School for the Deaf, a building located behind the Nursing School that was destroyed in a fire years ago. Dr. Trahan accepted a position in the College of Education at the administrative level in the Fall of 1986.
completing a brief tenure as Acting Principal, the position was filled first by Mrs. Carolyn Moody and later by Mr. Grover Perkins for the 1986-1987 school terms. Dr. Annette Paul served as Principal from 1988-1989. Dr. Paul was instrumental in establishing a strong high school science department and brought with her expertise in the securing of outside funding for Laboratory School academic programs.

In the Fall of 1989, the Laboratory School students were again required to wear school uniforms. Mrs. Matte F. Spears had been Assistant Principal during the deliberations about the new “uniforms” serving as its chairperson. She became Principal in 1988. Enrollment at the Laboratory School soared during her tenure even though selection/retention criteria for students were stiffened. The Laboratory School continued to enjoy a spot in the “winner’s circle” as it filled the school’s showcases to capacity with trophies and plaques and ribbons proclaiming excellence and superiority of performance by its students in local, regional, state and national competitions. Mrs. Lyndia M. Williams, instructor of vocal music at the Laboratory School for many years was named Assistant to Mrs. Spears and also served as Assistant Director to the current principal from 1991-1993. Mrs. Williams designed the School Crest which now identifies the Laboratory School on the World Wide Web.

Director of the Laboratory school was Mr. James T. Machen, appointed after an extensive search for the best of the best. The name of the school’s academic leader was changed at the onset of his tenure in the Fall of 1993, taking the school’s leadership title full circle in the manner in which one addresses its academic on-site supervisor. Mr. Machen’s tenure, to date, records for the Laboratory School its greatest leap forward in the full implementation of an outcome-based academic program which boasts of classrooms and student laboratories filled with ever-changing world-class technology. As Laboratory School faculty and administrative assistants secure state, federal and corporate-funded grants, now totaling hundreds of thousands of dollars, graduates of the Laboratory School can continue to “raise the standard of excellence” as they strive to enhance the quality of life for the global society in which we now live. Mr. Machen’s second-in-command, Mrs. Brenda Shamlin Sterling, joined the ranks of Laboratory School leadership in the Summer of 1996. Spear-heading instructional leadership programs, Mrs. Sterling came to the Laboratory School with a proud Southern University heritage. Her father, Mr. Bertrand Cook was one of several brick masons who constructed many of the first permanent buildings of the “New Southern University.” She brought to the Laboratory School leadership and wealth of supervisory experience gained in the public schools of East Baton Rouge Parish.
The school continued to flourish under the leadership of Brenda Shamlin Sterling. She added Shelia Lewis (primary) and Josie Williams (secondary) to her administration as Assistant Principals. As academics remained at an all-time high, so did athletics. All athletic teams were either District, Regional or State Champs. In 2000, Marcus Spears was voted the first team on offense and defense in Class 1A by the Louisiana Sports Writers Association. He was later drafted by the Dallas Cowboys and remained until he retired. In the 2003-2004 school year, Jamal Russell grandson of the late Issac Greggs was the first Southern Lab graduate to sign a full academic scholarship to an Ivy League School. All American Quianna Chaney signed with LSU and later played in the WNBA and played professionally overseas. Mrs. Sterling remained Director until she fell ill.

From years 2003-2006, Mrs. Shelia Lewis led the Laboratory School. Under her leadership, the school kept a strong and steady pace to greatness. With technology growing during this period Lewis brought more up to date technology.

In 2005, Mrs. Lewis also led the school during Louisiana’s worst natural disaster, Hurricane Katrina. The school welcomed many students from New Orleans, Louisiana. At the end of the 2005/2006 school year, she transitioned to the College of Education.

In the Fall of 2006, Southern University named a new Director for the Laboratory School, Dr. Derek Morgan. He attended Southern Lab in his early years. Dr. Morgan welcomed Dr. Judith Williams, as Assistant Principal to his administration. Judith Williams remained in her position as Assistant Principal.

Dr. Ronnie Harrison became Director in 2010. Under his leadership the school added another educational component under its umbrella. The Southern University Virtual School was established. The creation of the Virtual School allowed SULS to educate students located within the borders of Louisiana. Mrs. Vanessa Cade was selected as the Director of the Virtual School. He also instituted a scholarship program for students.

The school also initiated the Southern University Laboratory School Foundation working under the umbrella of the Southern University System Foundation as the fundraising arm of the institution. The annual building, and scholarship funds are housed in the foundation.

Dr. Harrison transitioned to the College of Education in the Fall of 2015. After his departure, the school went through several leaders, Judy Guilbeaux-James and Kimberly Williams assumed the role of Interim Director during 2015-2016 Fiscal Year. After the departure of Kimberly Williams, Averil Sanders became the Director of the school in 2016.
In July 2017 Herman R. Brister became the Director of Southern University Laboratory School (SULS). During this school year, Mr. Brister selected Mrs. Nadia Washington Seals (% ’02) to oversee the Virtual School as Director.

Currently SULS holds an Annual Gala to kickstart the Annual Homecoming events for the school. During the Gala the school recognizes notable alumni, students, and teachers who have been positive contributors within their community. Under Mr. Brister’s leadership students who attend the school, experience the benefit of many technology upgrades within the school. This includes 1:1 technology and smart televisions. Students also enjoy the privilege of walking out of the front doors of the Laboratory School and attending class at SUBR. This is done through Dual Enrollment where students are able to take college courses while earning high school and college credit. The school has also bolstered its ability for students to take Advanced Placement courses. As a result of Dual Enrollment and Advanced Placement course offerings students have achieved as many as thirty college hours.

Southern University Laboratory School. Personal Papers. Archives and Manuscripts Department, John B. Cade Library, Southern University and A&M College, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

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