

How does probation work? What will it mean for me? Will it keep me from graduating? Is there anything for me to do about it? These questions are likely running through the heads of many Murrah students after the audit on JPS earlier this year.

JPS was placed on probation after being found to violate 22 of Mississippi's 32 accreditation standards during the audit in April. The term 'probation' is assigned to a district that meets less than 100% of the Accreditation Policies and Process Standards. Once a district is placed on probation, they are given a defined timeline to develop and implement a Corrective Action Plan to address the issues. JPS's Corrective Action Plan applies to all of the schools in the district.

According to the district, the probation status in no way related to JPS's finances or JPS's student's achievement. There will be no substantive impact on students, employees, athletic programs, or day to day operations, which means the school environment should not change. Students who meet the graduation requirements established by the district and the Mississippi State Board of Education will be awarded a diploma from an accredited school district. The probation status will not affect a student's ability to enter college.

A lot of people are still worried about how the audit will affect them even though JPS said that there would be no negative effects. Supporting JPS's assessment, Regina Hutchins, Siwell Middle School's librarian, says, "I do not find that it is hindering any education. If anything, it is having the opposite effect. Teachers are teaching like they always have been. A true teacher, that's what they're there for."

In the spring of 2016, a P16 council, also known as a Community Engagement Council, was formed for JPS. A P16 council is a community-based entity that serves as the public voice on

what policies could be adopted and/or enforced to help improve education. They hope to assist with JPS getting off of probation.

Sherman Nunn, the president of the P16 council, says “The audit itself is a wake up call. The clock had been ticking for quite a while, but I think this is get up or stay down. What I mean by that, specifically, is that people are going to have to get involved with their school district because the school district alone will not be able to eradicate every problem or difficulty that comes about. It’s a community effort. Personally, that’s where I’m hoping P16 will be able to step in.”

Amber May, P16 council member and Program Director of Operation Shoestring, addresses P16’s role in the matter. She says, “We are currently taking the audit findings seriously. Our goal is just to make sure that Jackson Public Schools is the best school district that we could possibly make it. We are very, very passionate about that and we are trying to figure out how we can assist those efforts right alongside JPS, the staff, and the teachers at those particular schools.”

JPS is taking enormous strides forward. Already, JPS has been cleared on 2 of the violated standards. The Corrective Action Plan (At-A-Glance) was recently released to the public and can be found on the JPS website. It includes things such as recruiting and hiring teachers with a valid Mississippi license, purchasing buses, adding GPS systems to buses, updating fire extinguishers, and making sure all graduation requirements are met and are recorded.

Nunn says, “I think that a lot of the audit was, perhaps, a little bit beyond where it had to go. I think that the position that JPS is in may not be as desperate as the picture paints right now.”

Expanding on this, Hutchins says, “I’m at a school that was not audited last year and we felt like we were doing everything we should. As we go back and just pick a cumulative folder and check it, it’s not in the order it’s supposed to be. Is that really a ding? Is that really something we should be written up for? It’s in the folder, just not in the right order. Nobody is perfect. It’s not affecting the classroom and the quality of education that people are receiving. I don’t see it in my school and, I don’t think, in any school in JPS.”

What can students and community members do about it?

May says, “It’s just about having those conversations and making sure that the youth is equipped with the skill sets and the mindsets and that the adults can provide the opportunities and the place for those things to actually take place.”

Nunn specifies what students can do once they are equipped with the right skill sets and mindsets. He says, “I would like to see more youth involved in the process of correcting these things that have been going on with the audit and with other issues facing their schools and JPS. Students may not be directly affected by that in terms of their response academically, but at the same time, it’s an excellent opportunity for them to learn how to use their voice and become more socially conscious and more aware of the things that are happening around them, things that will affect them eventually. Hopefully, throughout this process we’ll see more students take heed to what’s happening and become more involved. They need to have a voice in these processes and things that are taking place. As they become more proactive, and I think that’s probably the best way to describe it, they’ll have more control in the way they play a bigger role in the direction that these matters go in.”

The probation may not be actively affecting students, but that doesn't mean that students can't play a role in what results from it. The community is a large part of how well JPS does. With a full audit coming just around the corner, now is the time for everyone to band together in order to help the educational environment excel.

———Erin Mauffrey, P16 council representative and Murrah Spanish teacher, says, “The point is not to pass the audit, the point is to have successful schools where students are able to learn in a secure learning environment, and a good one.”