

Issue Brief № 60

Profiles of Community Leaders in the Black Belt

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“Building a sense of place, collaborating with neighbors and being opportunistic about funding—requires what I heard one community leader describe as “scrappiness.” It’s a hard thing to define, but we know it when we see it: a mix of determination, optimism and creativity that sets some places apart. Every town I’ve mentioned has scrappy local leaders who just won’t give up.” —Tom Barkin, *The Daily Yonder*¹

Black Belt 2022 began as a follow up to the Education Policy Center’s fall 2020 nine-brief *Black Belt 2020 series*. Both series investigated a wide range of public policy areas, ranging from economic issues to education and health care. The purpose of these briefs is to shed light on the region that has often been neglected by state and national policy makers for decades. This final edition in the *Black Belt 2022* series aims to highlight the good work of leaders in various roles who are on the ground and already making a difference in their Black Belt communities.

To gather the information for this brief, the authors interviewed three community leaders in three different counties:

1. Dr. James Mitchell, President of Wallace Community College Selma (Selma, AL in Dallas County)
2. John Clyde Riggs, Executive Director of Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission (Camden, AL in Wilcox County)
3. Dr. Marcia Smiley, Superintendent of Perry County Schools (Marion, AL in Perry County)

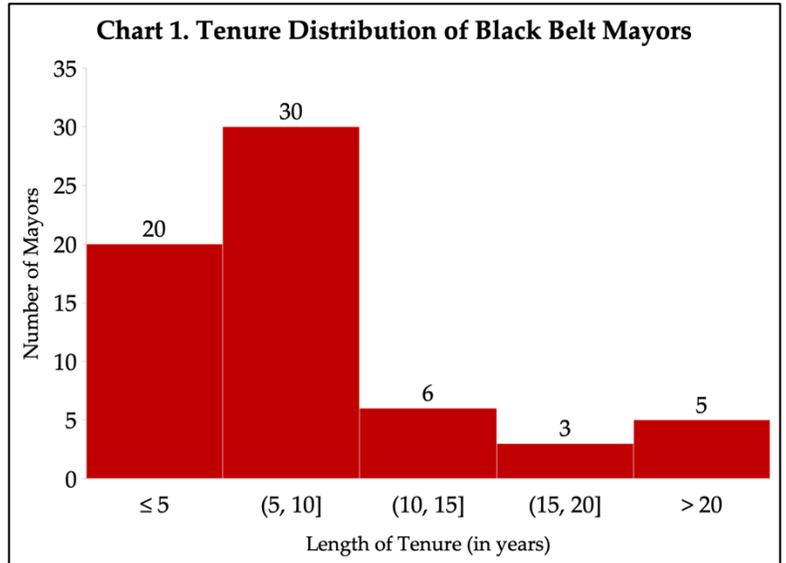
Additionally, the authors gathered data on the demographics of mayors and school superintendents in the Black Belt by consulting town and city hall websites, Facebook pages, and news articles.

Tenure of Community Leaders

Of the three community leaders interviewed for this brief, all have been in public service for almost their whole career. In a previous role at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, Dr. Mitchell gained valuable and diverse experience rebuilding the Historically Black University in the 1980s that prepared him for his current role as president of Wallace-Selma, a position he has now held for 22 years. Similarly, Mr. Riggs has served as Executive Director of the Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission (ATRC) for 25 years. Prior to becoming executive director, Mr. Riggs began working at ATRC in 1975 as an assistant accountant, before eventually moving into an economic development role. Dr. Smiley is now in her second year as the Superintendent of Perry County Schools after beginning her career as a middle school math teacher, then later serving as the Perry County Schools federal programs coordinator, assistant superintendent, and in other roles.

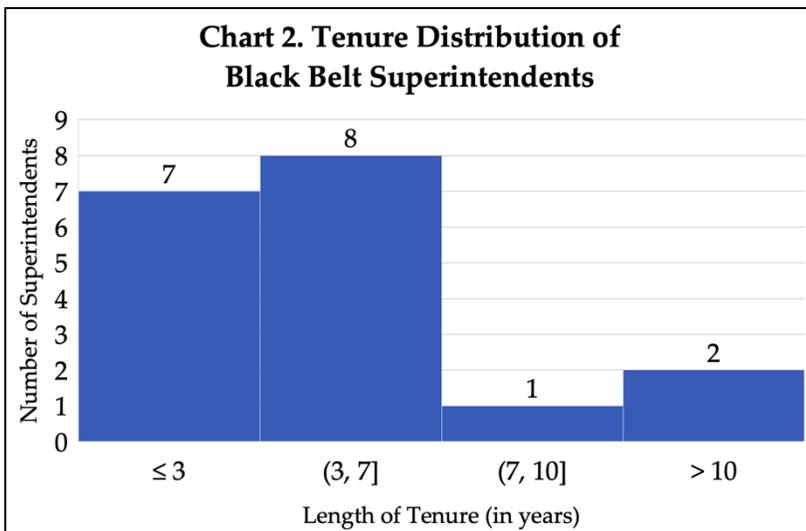
In order to determine how reflective of the leaders in the Black Belt the interviewees are, the authors gathered data on the tenure of current mayors and school superintendents. While none of the three leaders interviewed is a mayor and just one is a school superintendent, these data were easily accessible and provided a larger sample size than the 5 community colleges and 7 economic development districts that serve the Black Belt's 25 counties.

An examination of almost 70 current mayors in Black Belt cities shows that the long tenures (more than 20 years each) of Dr. Mitchell and Mr. Riggs are outliers when compared to mayors across the region in 2022. Chart 1 shows that the overwhelming



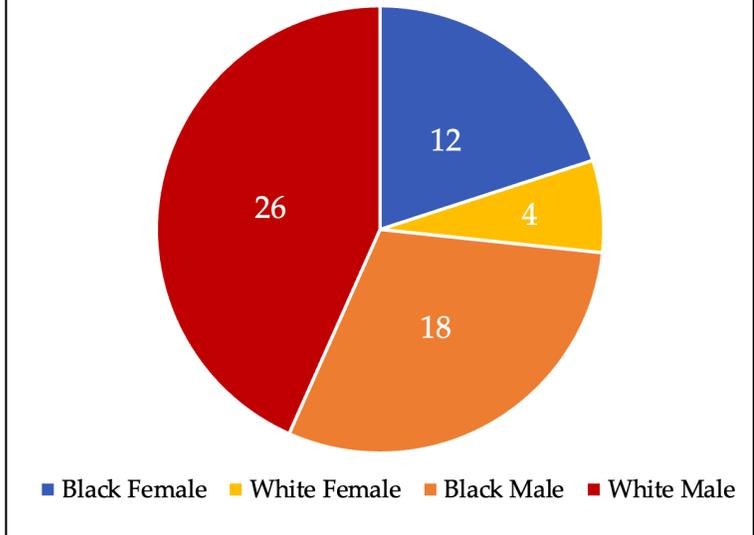
majority of the 64 current mayors in the data set have held their position for no more than 10 years, and nearly a third have served in their current positions for no more than 5 years.²

Dr. Smiley’s tenure as superintendent of Perry County Schools is more reflective of the trends of both mayors (Chart 1) and superintendents (Chart 2). Like mayors in the Black Belt, most of the 15 current school superintendents included in the data set have served in their position for



no more than 7 years.³ Of the 15 superintendents serving 7 years or less, nearly half have served in their current role for 3 years or less, including Dr. Smiley who is in her second year as superintendent of Perry County Schools.

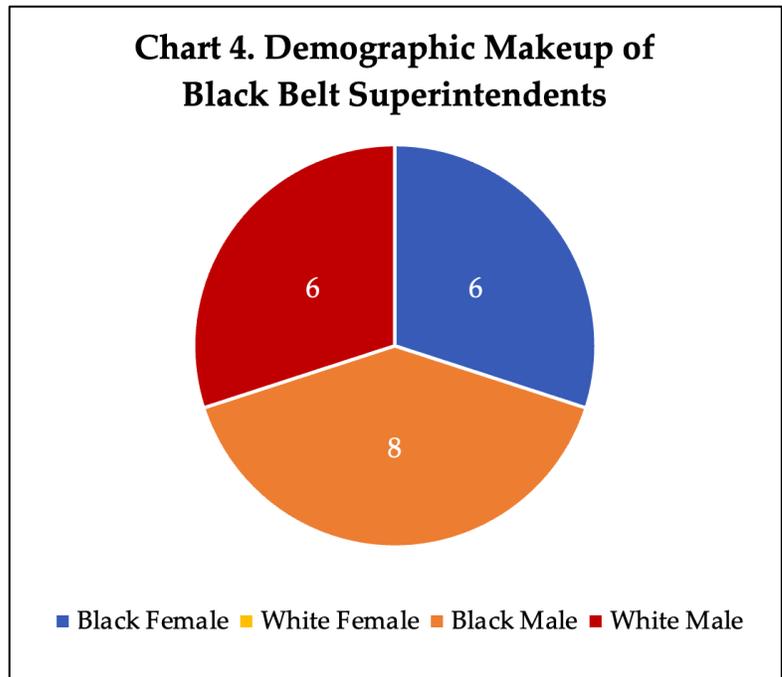
Chart 3. Demographic Makeup of Black Belt Mayors



Additionally, since the Black Belt is home to all 11 of Alabama’s majority-minority counties, it is important to consider whether the leaders are reflective of the larger community. Of the 60 mayors in this

data set, 38 served communities located in a majority-minority county, and 20 of the 38 mayors in majority minority counties are Black—just over half.⁴ Overall, 30 of the 60 mayors in this set of data are Black, including some Black mayors serving in counties that are not majority-minority. While the leaders in these communities generally seem to be reflective by race, there is still room for improvement for gender representation, since women—both Black and White—make up less than one-third of all Black Belt mayors in this data set. It should be noted that the average tenure of current male mayors in this set is 2.7 years longer than their female counterparts across all races. This likely indicates a trend of women only recently getting increasingly elected in a historically male-dominated political arena.

There are 20 current Black Belt school superintendents in the data set represented by Chart 4.⁵ Of these 70% (14 of 20) are Black. There are 12 Black Belt school districts in majority-minority counties in this data set. Of these 12 districts, 10 are led by a



Black man (7) or woman (3). While the current Black Belt superintendents are very reflective of their communities by race, like the mayors, they are less representative by gender, with women making up less than one-third of all current superintendents (with zero white women currently serving as superintendent in the Black Belt in this data set). Overall, the group of leaders interviewed for this issue brief is very demographically reflective of current leaders in the Black Belt.

Addressing Challenges in the Black Belt

In each of the interviews, the three leaders were asked to identify the challenges facing their communities. Given their different roles and perspectives, they each identified different weaknesses within their communities. Dr. Mitchell said Selma’s status as a symbol can be a weakness, saying, “While everyone comes to Selma once a year to celebrate, nothing has been done to transform it from a symbol to a better place. We don’t have all the resources from the state we should have, even though

Selma is one of the highlights of state tourism marketing. When we have the Bridge Crossing Jubilee, every president and vice president (except the Trump administration) has visited Selma since Clinton, but it hasn't brought funds."⁶

Mr. Riggs, in Camden, said the Black Belt struggles with an image problem, recalling Birmingham-based newspapers calling the Black Belt a "third-world country" in the early 2000s.⁷ Riggs argued that while the Black Belt does have extreme poverty, those negative narratives detract from an area that is "rich in culture."⁸ Dr. Smiley, in Perry County, said the main weakness in her community is "attracting and retaining teachers because of how rural it is. If the choice is between [a position in] Tuscaloosa, Montgomery, Jefferson, and Perry, we know which one they're *not* going to choose."⁹ An earlier brief in this series cited the Black Belt's difficulty attracting and retaining certified teachers as a significant factor affecting math and science proficiency, a problem that has only been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰

While each offered different perspectives on challenges facing the Black Belt, there were also several common threads across the interviews. Dr. Mitchell and Dr. Smiley both identified a lack of state funding and commitment to the Black Belt as a major challenge, whether in investment in social, human, economic, or physical capital and infrastructure. This includes the ongoing challenge of limited high-speed broadband access throughout the rural Black Belt, which Mr. Riggs and Dr. Smiley both stressed as one of the biggest challenges. Dr. Smiley noted that "broadband would allow additional opportunities for business, industry, and satellite

college campuses, and allow Perry County Schools to expand opportunities for students.”¹¹ A previous edition of the *Black Belt 2022* series, which covered infrastructure in the Black Belt, found that since 2020, high-speed broadband access has expanded from 0% to 9% coverage in Perry County.¹² However, the recent influx of investment in broadband expansion is expected to build on this progress in the coming years.¹³ Furthermore, Dr. Smiley said that “additional state funding would help expand teacher retention and recruitment” by leveling the playing field between more affluent school districts (that have larger tax bases and extra revenue) and school districts like Perry County which “may need more [state] resources.”¹⁴

As the *Black Belt 2022* and *Black Belt 2020* series have highlighted, there are many challenges facing the Black Belt and its leaders. These interviews reveal that it is not necessarily a lack of knowledge on the issues in the Black Belt impeding progress in the region—Dr. Mitchell, Mr. Riggs, and Dr. Smiley are all very familiar with the challenges in their communities—rather, there is a general lack of outside resources and support.

Efforts to Improve

When asked what their organizations were doing to improve their respective communities (or the greater Black Belt region), the three leaders spoke of the numerous community partnerships they’ve formed to take action and address a wide range of issues. At Wallace-Selma, Dr. Mitchell highlighted the work the college is doing with the Center for Nonviolence to write grants that will fund and sponsor nonviolence training with hopes to address “the high Black on Black murder rate in Selma.”¹⁵ Dr. Mitchell

also spoke of a collaboration with Craig Field Airport & Industrial Authority to bring aviation opportunities and industries back to Selma. Wallace-Selma is providing aviation training to prepare the workforce for current and future opportunities in the industry, and last year the college was accepted as an affiliate member of the Federal Aviation Administration's Center of Excellence program.¹⁶ Most recently, a coalition of about five to seven organizations (including Wallace-Selma) put together a proposal to develop physical, human, social, and economic infrastructure and presented it to Vice President Kamala Harris when she visited Selma for the annual Bridge Crossing Jubilee.

In the interview with Mr. Riggs, he spoke extensively on the community development initiatives ATRC is involved with. Within the ten-county service area—comprised of Choctaw, Clarke, Conecuh, Dallas, Marengo, Monroe, Perry, Sumter, Washington, and Wilcox—the Alabama Tombigbee Regional Commission works with the local chambers of commerce and economic development agencies.¹⁷ Mr. Riggs said they encourage these counties to “focus on using the existing features and resources to promote the community and attract visitors” because they may not ever have more than one big industry, but there is an abundance of natural and cultural resources already in the Black Belt.¹⁸

The ATRC also engages in economic development grant writing to create jobs and opportunities through different avenues. Mr. Riggs highlighted a revolving loan program for small business, noting the program distributed over \$10 million in loans to small businesses through the program. Other programs Mr. Riggs emphasized were a rural transportation program that

serves four counties, a Medicaid waiver program to help keep elderly people in their own homes with healthcare, and a recent grant from COVID-related funds to address broadband inadequacy in the ATRC service area of the Black Belt.¹⁹ Mr. Riggs noted that the impact of COVID-19 “has given a lot of opportunities, especially for grant opportunities—there seems to be money everywhere,” for projects ranging from infrastructure improvements to recreation development, and 7 of 10 ATRC counties have received money from COVID funds.²⁰

Like Dr. Mitchell and Mr. Riggs, Dr. Smiley underscored the community partnerships Perry County Schools are engaged in to make a difference for their students and larger community. Sowing Seeds of Hope is one of PCS’ biggest partners, and they previously partnered to provide basic school supplies (e.g., pencils, notebooks) for students. This year, PCS was able to provide school supplies for all its students (about 1,200), so they didn’t have to buy any supplies on their own. Dr. Smiley said that Sowing Seeds of Hope’s “tell me what you need mentality” led to them partnering to provide students with things outside the realm of “normal” school supplies, like earbuds and uniforms.²¹ Sowing Seeds of Hope has an extensive network of connections on its own and has brought other organizations into the partnership, like Sight Savers, which provides free glasses to students in need.²²

Dr. Smiley said that PCS is also utilizing grants, like the 21st Century Grant, to bring in resident artists, technology, and other opportunities to expose students to opportunities they wouldn’t normally have access to. Another partnership Dr. Smiley highlighted is with WCCS to create a welding

program at Robert C. Hatch High School in Uniontown, that they hope can expand to serve students at Francis Marion High School in Marion as well. Dr. Smiley noted that “we provide the space, and Wallace-Selma provides the instructors and the instruments. Without that partnership, we would not have been able to afford this program because we couldn’t afford the teacher.”²³ These partnerships help not only to meet the needs of students, but also to prepare them for the future by exposing them to a wider range of opportunities.

Dr. Mitchell emphasized that “to resolve a problem, you can’t sit in a government office and change a problem—you have to be on the ground.”²⁴ That is exactly what these leaders and their organizations are doing. Through the partnerships they’ve forged, these three leaders are facilitating collaborations that are meeting previously unmet needs in their communities, expanding the horizons for their young people, and changing the narrative of what is possible for the Black Belt.

Strengths and Resources

In addition to asking about their communities’ weaknesses and the ongoing efforts to improve it, the three leaders were also asked to identify their communities’ greatest strengths. Dr. Mitchell, who had identified one of Selma’s weaknesses as its status as a symbol, also was quick to say that “Selma’s strength *is* its symbol and what it represented to the world for voting and civil rights—and it remains that symbol today.”²⁵ This iconic symbol is a key part of history for Alabama and the nation, and Dr. Mitchell noted that it continues to inspire people: “More young people are getting involved in the community, running for office, bringing creative and

innovative ideas, getting involved in local organizations to promote the city, and growing community collaboration and cohesiveness.”²⁶

Dr. Mitchell also identified his own institution, Wallace-Selma, as one of the greatest resources for the Black Belt, calling it “the beacon of the Black Belt.”²⁷ “Wallace-Selma,” he said, “is bringing opportunities to people who can’t go to Montgomery, Tuscaloosa, or Mobile.”²⁸ WCCS offers GED sites, workforce development training, mobile labs for computer and coding training for K-12 students, and dual enrollment programs for high school students.^{29,30} “Education is one of the greatest transformers of human behavior. And we are going to offer whatever the community needs. We can’t be everything to everyone, but [we can do] things we can do well, that are sustainable, and have a direct impact on the skill level of the workforce, which is why we’ve been successful.”³¹

Mr. Riggs emphasized the quality and character in the Black Belt as one of the region’s greatest strengths, saying “the Black Belt is rich in culture, recreation, fishing, and hunting.”³² He argued that those are things that can be capitalized on to make towns more attractive to outside visitors. One of ATRC’s projects, Black Belt Treasures, was started in 2005 to sell and promote goods and services created in the Black Belt, and Mr. Riggs called it “one of the greatest resources currently capitalizing on the culture and history.”^{33,34} Black Belt Treasures has brought visitors to Camden, Alabama in Wilcox County from all 50 states and over 27 foreign countries since it opened and reflects the collaborative spirit that Mr. Riggs said makes the Black Belt unique.³⁵

Similarly, Dr. Smiley emphasized the strong community support in Perry County as a strength of the community, saying “everyone is very supportive and have the same goal in mind. We’re working towards the betterment of the community, and we know that means bettering the school district.”³⁶ Dr. Smiley also emphasized the thriftiness often found throughout the Black Belt, speaking about how the school district has actively pursued grants to supplement state funding to provide the best opportunities possible for the students, noting that “In Perry County, we have crafted the skill of doing more with less. We make sure that our students are able to be competitive because they are going to leave Perry County, and the goal is to make sure students are able to compete—and they are.”³⁷

On the Ground and In the Dirt

The “on the ground” accounts in this brief corroborate the findings of the *Black Belt 2022* series: that the Black Belt struggles with health/healthcare disparities, K-12 teacher recruitment and retention, high levels of poverty, and inadequate infrastructure, especially broadband. But they also add to the narrative in a critical way. *While Dr. Mitchell, Mr. Riggs, and Dr. Smiley are intimately familiar with the challenges facing their communities, they are hopeful despite those challenges, and are confident in their own abilities to make a difference in the Black Belt.* The overwhelming sentiment in each of the interviews was pride in their communities rooted in a love for the people and the place; Dr. Smiley noted the familial atmosphere in Perry County that breaks down social barriers “because everyone knows each other.”³⁸

Careers in public service are not easy, much less in a place such as the Black Belt that is so wanting for resources, but the leaders interviewed for this brief expressed a strong dedication to serving the region. Dr. Mitchell, who is not a native of the Black Belt, came to Wallace-Selma in 2000 thinking his role as president would be the first of several college presidencies in his career. Originally, he saw Wallace-Selma as a steppingstone to other opportunities, and he planned to “spend a few years here then move to another college or university,” as so many people starting their career in the Black Belt do.³⁹ Instead, Dr. Mitchell was drawn to stay in the Black Belt by a belief in the area and the thought that “I can make a difference in the position I am in.”⁴⁰ As a product of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. Mitchell also said he has a strong belief that he needs to be a part of the solution to rebuild his community, and that drove him to help places that need the most support from all levels. Dr. Mitchell emphasized that “Selma has nowhere to go but up,” and spoke about how in his position, with the resources of Wallace-Selma, he has done everything he can do to make the community stronger, to rebuild Selma, and rebuild the Black Belt.⁴¹

For Mr. Riggs, who was born and raised in Camden, his career in public service simply began as a job. After about five years, though, “it became a passion just solving the problems that we had with economic development.”⁴² Something Mr. Riggs noted was how the job opened his eyes to the poverty in the area because he attended segregated schools growing up, saying “As I went to work here, my eyes started opening and I started seeing the need in the Black Belt. I wanted to get into economic development because I saw an opportunity to write grants and bring potential job opportunities to increase people’s standards of living in the

Black Belt.”⁴³ Now, Mr. Riggs believes that we need to do a better job showing young people that there are a lot of people who don’t have what they need because so many people’s eyes are closed to the need in their communities.

Dr. Smiley is a native of Perry County, attending the same schools as a child that she now is superintendent over. She said, “I have always loved children and being from a rural community, I wanted to go into a field where I didn’t have to leave home looking for a job, and I wanted to be immersed in a field that I’m passionate about.”⁴⁴ This passion for students evolved over the course of her career as Dr. Smiley eventually took on roles in the school district outside of the classroom. But her commitment to serving students as not changed, and she noted “As I’ve been elevated over the years, I continue to make a difference for the students even if not working directly in a classroom with them. My stance has always been that I’m going to be the voice for the children who don’t have a voice, who don’t have an option, who don’t have the same opportunities. I want to make a difference at a place where it really counts.”⁴⁵

The passion, dedication, and commitment to the Black Belt exhibited by Dr. Mitchell, Mr. Riggs, and Dr. Smiley in these accounts reflects the pride they feel for their communities and a deep affection for the Black Belt. This pride fuels the hope they have for a better future in the Black Belt, and it is evident in each of their track records, as they have worked tirelessly to improve and expand opportunities in the region—even in the face of challenges some would find insurmountable.

Given the relatively short tenures among most leaders throughout the Black Belt (Charts 1 & 2), however, implementing leadership development initiatives—like the proposed Black Belt Leadership Academy of the Education Policy Center’s *Driving Regional Innovation through Vehicle Electrification (DRIVE)* grant—can aid new mayors, superintendents, and other community leaders throughout the region become stronger and more well-rounded.

The various public policy issues addressed across the *Black Belt 2022* and *Black Belt 2020* issue brief series do not have simple solutions. Creating sustainable improvement in the Black Belt will require comprehensive approaches as well as collaboration between public, private, and non-profit entities. The leaders profiled in this brief, who are making great strides to improve their own communities already, clearly understand the power of collaboration for community improvement, and it was a point of emphasis across all three interviews. So often, the focus is on what is going wrong in the Black Belt, but this brief has aimed to spotlight what is going right and the leaders who are on the ground and in the dirt making a difference. To succeed, long-term strategies will need to start with the Black Belt’s greatest assets—it’s people—and give to as many of them as possible 21st Century skills that our global economy needs.

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² Data compiled by the Education Policy Center, 2022.

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