

Study Reveals Common Routes To High School Completion In Georgia

One of the best ways to measure the success of a K-12 education system is to monitor the quality and the quantity of its end product: high school graduates. Georgia has reason to be proud about helping students reach this important milestone of high school completion. Completion rates have made an impressive jump from 65 percent in 2004 to 79 percent in 2009, a 14 percentage point increase in a comparatively short six years.

THE GEORGIA PARTNERSHIP FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION

began drilling deeper into this data to determine which schools made these extraordinary gains and what was behind their improvements. Fifteen high schools emerged that **(1) graduated at least 85 percent of their students in 2008; (2) improved their graduation rate by at least 10 percentage points over the 2004-08 period; and (3) sustained at least the 85 percent level through the 2009 graduation year.** Because this is an exceptional accomplishment for a widely diverse group of schools – different in size, student demographics, and geographic location – the Georgia Partnership commissioned a study to determine if these schools had characteristics and conditions in common that allowed them to lead the way in ultimately preparing students for college and career.

WHAT WAS LEARNED...SELECTED FINDINGS

The strategies used by the 85/10 schools varied, yet mutually dependent commonalities emerged. Similar to the findings of the Alliance for Excellent Education in its Ten Elements of a Successful High School report, common core values and beliefs allowed each of the schools to be successful. Each school had a **culture of high expectations** for all **and support** for students who were struggling academically, which is a requisite for students' academic success. The vocabulary of excellence including goal setting, data, growth and achievement was the same for the entire community – administrators, teachers, students, parents, and community leaders. The importance of an open, respectful, caring environment that nurtured personal relationships among educators, students, and families was stressed also.

"Our expectations are high for our students and even higher for ourselves."*

"We provide rigor with accountability but also rigor with support."

THE 85/10 SCHOOLS:

- ★ **Buford High School**
(Buford City)
- ★ **Gilmer High School**
(Gilmer County)
- ★ **Grady High School**
(Atlanta City)
- ★ **Greenbrier High School**
(Columbia County)
- ★ **Hardaway High School**
(Muscogee County)
- ★ **Houston County High School**
(Houston County)
- ★ **Loganville High School**
(Walton County)
- ★ **Lumpkin County High School**
(Lumpkin County)
- ★ **Mays High School**
(Atlanta City)
- ★ **Perry High School**
(Houston County)
- ★ **Redan High School**
(DeKalb County)
- ★ **Riverwood High School**
(Fulton County)
- ★ **Union County High School**
(Union County)
- ★ **Washington-Wilkes High School**
(Wilkes County)
- ★ **Westlake High School**
(Fulton County)



The 85/10 schools provided an **integrated system of curriculum, assessment and instruction**. They set an appropriately high bar in terms of rigor and all students had access to quality course content and quality instruction. Assessments were used to ensure that teaching and learning of the prescribed curriculum were taking place in every classroom. Analysis of testing results supported good teaching and became a tool for instructional improvement.

“Our career prep courses are as rigorous as our college prep courses.”

“We unified the instructional program by implementing common planning and common assessments.”

Multiple safety nets or **interventions** were provided by the 15 high performing schools for students who needed them. Administrators and teachers routinely collaborated to create **innovative approaches** to ensure challenging courses and effective practices. They also provided individualized and timely interventions such as expanded learning time and successful 8th to 9th grade transitions. Remediation was available to all students through structured classes and informal tutoring, much of which was technology-driven.

“We have flexible grouping in classes and flexible scheduling of our classes.”

“Our graduation coach works with our struggling students.”

All the schools were intentional on how teachers and students can improve. They applied **continuous improvement** processes such as **using data to inform decisions** about instruction in the classroom and to analyze the academic needs of students. Creating a school improvement plan as a team with clearly defined goals and widespread input from the schools’ stakeholders and providing professional learning opportunities and other tools to knowledgeable, dedicated faculty helped bring a laser focus to increasing the graduation rate.

“Professional learning has ‘...changed what teachers do in classrooms.’ It also changed the conversation in the teachers’ lounge.”

“Our CIP (continuous improvements process) changed our culture.”

“Our balanced scorecard drives our continuous improvement process.”

WANT TO LEARN MORE?

The 85/10 study supports the message that where schools are located is not as important as what they are doing and how they do it. To find out more...

- Go to www.gpee.org for the full **Commonalities of Georgia’s 85/10 High Schools** analysis with details on the “what” and “how.”
- Contact information for the school leaders of the 15 exemplary schools is provided in the full study.
- If interested in a presentation of the study findings to your school or organization, contact the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education.

*Quotes taken from research participant responses.



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