

# ***Engagement for Success:*** **Transforming School Leadership Through Performance Coaching**

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## **Overview**

### ***Innovation/Solution/Practice at a Glance***

Coaching has long been recognized as an important strategy for developing teachers as instructional leaders. More recently, educators have come to recognize the impact that coaching can also have for educational leaders. Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement's (GLISI) Leadership Preparation Performance Coaching™ (LPPC) program has been a valued source of training for principals and their coaches in Clayton County Public Schools. Appropriate implementation of GLISI's LPPC coaching process has assisted the district in reaching clarity on the strategic direction for its leadership development programs. It has also provided job-embedded professional learning to the principals, which is contributing to the continuous improvement of their performance as instructional leaders, as well as to their ability to lead a team-based improvement process in their schools.

### ***Impact at a Glance***

As the performance coaching process has evolved over time, the quality of school leadership has greatly improved in Clayton County. In recent years, the district has undergone a dramatic shift in student demographics, frequent changes in superintendents and the fallout from SACS accreditation woes. Nevertheless, the district has maintained its commitment to provide effective professional development to its leaders. Full implementation of GLISI's LPPC program and coaching process is supporting school leaders to develop the skills and knowledge they need in order to lead their students and teachers through periods of transition. The principals perceive performance coaching as a contributing factor to their growth as instructional leaders, and as a valuable asset to the district. They welcome the support and guidance provided by their trained leadership performance coaches.

## **The Impact Story**

### ***Background/Context***

Clayton County Public Schools, under the direction of Superintendent Dr. Edmond Heatley, is the 113<sup>th</sup> largest school district in the United States and the fifth largest in Georgia. Just 12 miles south of Atlanta, Clayton County covers 142 square miles and is the home of over 273,718 residents with an unemployment rate of 12.6% (2009). The school district serves approximately 50,000 students in 61 schools (36 elementary, 15 middle, and 10 high schools). The student population is 72.5% African-American, 4.47% white, 14.7% Hispanic; 4.4% Asian, and 3.8% other ethnic groups. Of these students approximately 82% qualify for free and reduced lunch, and nearly 9% are categorized as students with disabilities.

Over the past 10 years the school district has undergone significant changes in its student demographics. The enrollment of Caucasian students has decreased (from 17,000 to less than

2,206) while the number of African American students and Hispanic students has grown (from 21,000 to over 35,000, and (from 1,300 to nearly 7,200, respectively) . Additionally, the percent of students who qualify for free or reduced meals increased from 48% to 82%. Today, all of the district's schools are classified as Title I.

School and district leaders are continuously investigating and implementing strategies to meet the needs of diverse student learners, many of them from families that are experiencing the downturn in the nation's economy. They are also striving to address the challenges and mandates of federal No Child Left Behind legislation. School administrators and teachers are keenly aware that they are accountable for each student's progression from grade to grade, and for their timely graduation into post secondary educational opportunities. Simultaneously, these leaders are focused on how to implement new learning and performance standards. The changing demographics of the district, and increasing state and federal student achievement requirements, have caused a shift in the district's strategic focus as it relates to leadership. The quality and performances of its leaders are especially significant as the district struggles to improve teaching and learning at all schools for all students.

Historically, Clayton County Public Schools has embraced and supported development of its leaders at both school and district levels. In the early 1990s, the district instituted its own leadership development programs as the foundations of a systemic leadership development process that would prepare it's performers to meet the needs and expectations of the district. The programs were useful as a springboard to a leadership position; however, once a participant assumed the new position, s/he often discovered that there were aspects of the work for which they had not been prepared. These program participants had primarily attended classes in which they listened to practitioners describe their work, coupled with limited field experiences to observe the work – but, they were not provided opportunities to practice the real work themselves. This was especially unfortunate for those aspiring to be principals, given the new responsibilities of principals as instructional leaders who are accountable for student achievement. Although new and novice principals were assigned a veteran principal to serve as a mentor, he mentors did not receive ongoing support and professional development they needed in order to effectively model the transition from school managers to instructional leaders.

The district's development programs were not only limited in scope, but also were not performance-based. They were not preparing participants for the roles and challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century school leaders. In 2004, the superintendent at that time was concerned that many principals lacked the skills and knowledge associated with distributed leadership. She initiated and set the expectation that all of Clayton County's principals would participate in GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit™ to become proficient in leading school improvement using a team-based approach. From that time forward, the district has supported the participation of its leaders in GLISI programs and events. Currently, 100% of the principals in the district have attended GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit™, as well as a large percentage of the assistant principals and district-level leaders.

### ***What Was Done?***

Principals and other leaders were expected to implement a team-based improvement initiative in their schools or departments after participating in GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit™.

They were to begin by selecting, training and leading members of a strategic team (Initial Better-Seeking Team, I-BST) in goal setting, action planning, implementing, and monitoring the tasks necessary to improve teaching and learning in the school and district. From the Initial Better-Seeking Teams, the work would be cascaded to other structural and dynamic teams trained by the leader to follow a plan-do-check-act-cycle of improvement. Many of the principals and leaders returned to their schools and formed the Initial Better-Seeking Team and began to implement some of the components of the team-based improvement process. However, with the exception of the Improvement Implementation Coordinator (IIC) attending some of the meetings of the Initial Better-Seeking Teams, senior district leaders did not create any oversight mechanisms to measure, manage, and monitor the fidelity of implementation of team-based improvement in the schools and departments. Academic achievement and stakeholder engagement were not improving to the degree expected. The Superintendent believed that a different strategy for leadership development was needed in the district. She assigned responsibility to the professional learning department to redesign the district's leadership development programs. She wanted programs that would be aligned with research-based leadership standards including performance coaching.

The decision was made to focus first on preparing individuals for principalships in the district. This led to the development of Forward LEAP (Leadership Effectiveness for Assistant Principals) to equip a cohort of ten assistant principals with the leadership skills needed to effectively execute the roles and responsibilities expected of principals. The increased emphasis on performance standards, accountability, and achievement for all students, dictated that the district transform the existing programs from a "sit and get" format to one that was performance-based – In which participants not only attended classes, but also demonstrated proficiency in critical leadership skills with feedback from a performance coach. The Superintendent identified ten experienced principals to be trained by GLISI as Leadership Preparation Performance Coaches (LPPCs) and assigned them to coach the Forward LEAP participants. The principals successfully completed GLISI's performance-based LPPC training, developed individual growth plans (Performer Path Plans) for their assigned LEAP participants, and began to implement the coaching process on which they had been trained. However, they soon realized that they simply did not have enough time to execute the responsibilities of a performance coach and effectively perform the demanding duties of a principal. Feedback from the LPPCs indicated that limited time, trying to coach someone external to their schools, and unclear strategic directions from senior district leaders greatly contributed to the coaching effort failing to yield the desired results expected by the district for its aspiring and developing leaders. In addition, the Superintendent was not pleased with the caliber of leaders in the leadership pool. She stated that assistant principals when appointed to the principalship were still unprepared for the demanding role of an instructional leader, and that they were not sufficiently skilled at engaging stakeholders in school improvement. Moreover, even experienced principals were not demonstrating adequate skills, knowledge and ability to impact student achievement. Although the graduation rate was increasing steadily from 58.6% in 2002 to 76.5% in 2008 and more schools were meeting AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) targets (41 out of 59 schools in 2008), overall the district's status remained at Needs Improvement. At this point, the district was once again experiencing a change in the superintendency, plus the challenges of losing accreditation by SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools), which interrupted the focus on professional development programs for leaders in the district.

In 2008, Clayton County Public Schools was offered the opportunity to participate in a pilot program being developed by GLISI in which professional learning for principals would be strategic, on-going, job-embedded and performance-based. The district agreed that all of its principals and a few selected district administrators would participate fully with six other districts in Power of 100™, a 24-month learning experience for 100 school leaders and their supervisors. The district appointed a Lead District Representative (LDR) and committed to providing a GLISI-trained performance coach to work with each participant in fully implementing program expectations. Participants would be expected to:

- lead learning communities in an action research project that improve teaching and learning in their schools and the district;
- recruit, develop, and retain an adequate supply of qualified staff; and
- plan, measure, monitor, manage, and communicate performance expectations for individuals and for the school.

In 2009, newly appointed Superintendent (Dr. Edmond Heatley) endorsed the Power of 100™ program as part of his strategic focus on sustainable leadership development that can positively impact student achievement. Dr. Heatley tasked the LDR, Dr. Mildred McCoy, with the selection of competent individuals to serve as performance coaches. Learning from past experiences, these individuals would not be full time employees in the district so they would have adequate time to support and coach the Power of 100™ participants in talent management, performance management, instructional leadership, distributed leadership, and team-based improvement. The LDR recruited retired administrators who had served as principals in accredited schools and had demonstrated the ability to lead teams in school improvement to be trained in GLISI's LPPC process. The selection process, and the GLISI training, yielded 8 strong performance coaches whose backgrounds ranged from having served in the role of elementary school principal to that of Deputy Associate Superintendent. Unlike the previous leadership coaches in the district, the Power of 100™ coaches would be non-sitting principals with proven successes in schools and exceptional skills as relationship leaders. They would be trained to support aspiring and developing leaders, to develop the proficiency of these leaders, and to ensure that they master the skills critical to improving student achievement and organizational effectiveness.

In addition, the LDR, a fully trained LPPC herself, would oversee and facilitate the coaching process in the district. She began by assigning 9 principals to each coach, according to the coach's previous school level experiences. She led the coaches in planning and conducting an orientation to the performance coaching process for principals and their supervisors (area assistant superintendents). She ensured that GLISI's 8 Roles of School Leaders Assessment was administered as a 360° instrument to each principal, their supervisor, and five individuals directly reporting to the principal. The coaches utilized the assessment results and the skills and knowledge expected by the district to develop a Performer Path Plan for each assigned principal. Furthermore, the coaches met together to develop their initial performance coaching action plans in order to have a standard format and common expectations. Then the coaches scheduled regular meetings with the principals to plan when and how the principals would practice the essential skills identified by the district as areas for growth. They frequently visited schools to observe, assess, and document the principal's proficiency in the assigned essential skills. Although it was not a requirement, the coaches also attended the

monthly principals' meetings to remain abreast of district improvement initiatives and innovations. They also were present at each of the scheduled Power of 100™ convenings, which demonstrated their commitment to support their assigned principals and to continuously strive to enhance their own knowledge and skills.

The LDR planned, scheduled, and facilitated monthly meetings with the performance coaches to monitor the principals' progress and to address questions and concerns about the coaching process. These meetings were also opportunities for networking among the coaches and for their own professional growth. The LDR collaborated with the coaches in offering training on using technology to enhance their coaching tasks; creating tools, timelines, and action plans for time management; and practicing coaching conversations with each other for dealing with reluctant participants. The coaches also shared interventions and feedback protocols that they used with their principals. They have continued to meet regularly as a group and individually with the LDR to maintain a systemic approach to school leadership development in Clayton County Public Schools.

### ***What Were the Results?***

To assess the performance coaching process, the LDR administered an informal survey and received responses from some of the principals. Qualitative descriptive data was collected to determine the principals' perspectives of performance coaching and how it has contributed to their success as leaders. While the district faced a challenge in convincing principals of the worth of embracing a new professional learning initiative, principals now state that they use some of the tools and resources experienced in the Power of 100™ training sessions, and that they appreciate the performance coaching model because it is customized to their specific issues and needs. Many of them have been guided and supported by their coach in utilizing GLISI's Performance-based Modules™ to enhance their leadership skills. They are becoming more confident in their ability to lead improvements in their schools and to acquire and use resources and tools to assist them.

One Power of 100™ participant who has been a principal for almost 10 years contributes his success in his current position to his coach. He stated,

*She has helped me transition from my role as a middle school principal to my current position as a high school principal. My coach identified my strengths and helped me align them to the needs of the students and staff at my high school... One thing that I have found helpful with the coaching has been the opportunity to reflect upon the work I engage in each day. Having an experienced, former principal question me, listen to my responses, and then share feedback (confirmations, recommendations, shared successes) has been one of the most effective and helpful experiences of the coaching.*

Later, when asked about suggestions for improving the current coaching model in Clayton County, the principal stated that he would like, *"more time to meet regularly with his coach to encourage consistent progress."*

Some of the novice principals credit their survival on the job at least in part to the relationship they have developed with their performance coach. A principal who is serving his first full year stated that he *"loves"* his coach and that she has been a blessing to work with this school year. He said,

*Dr. Barbara Hill has been more than a coach for the Power of 100™ initiative, she has been a true mentor. Her wealth of knowledge from a long and successful career has been instrumental in my growth as a principal and school leader. Not only do we discuss necessary benchmarks with the Power of 100™ initiative, we discuss what is needed for me to grow and impact learning to the greatest extent at Mt. Zion Elementary. Dr. Hill states that our work ‘should be meaningful and useful to the job at hand’ and she works hard to keep that focus. Over the course of the year we have had several direct discussions about situations impacting learning at Mt. Zion Elementary. Dr. Hill has always welcomed these discussions and leads me to think through the situation thoroughly so the best possible solution can take place. Dr. Hill possesses the gift to guide you to sound decisions without making you feel that she is telling you what to do. She simply discusses the options and possible outcome of each and through this process the answer becomes clear, always keeping in mind that what we do is always in the best interest of children. Specifically, Dr. Hill has assisted me with navigating some potentially serious personnel situations, not stopping with the incident at hand but working through all possible outcomes so teaching and learning is least affected. I would certainly call that ‘meaningful and useful’.*

In summary, the LDR found that, overall, principals in Clayton County have embraced the performance-based coaching model as a source of support for their professional development. Unlike the previous mentoring model – which focused primarily on induction of principals by assigning a colleague to assist them in maneuvering through the district’s protocols and hidden rules – the GLISI performance coaching model provides for the identification of specific leadership behaviors that the principal is expected to demonstrate and consistent support in demonstrating the behaviors proficiently. It allows for ongoing feedback from a coach, principal reflection, documented evidence of competency and opportunities for sustained school improvement. The principals appreciate the time that their coaches spend with them working to improve their skills and knowledge.

### ***What Was the Impact?***

The LDR stated that several principals have indicated that they want to continue to have the services of a coach in the next school year. This is a testament to the success of the performance coaching model in the district.

Furthermore, performance coaching aligns with goal # 6 in Clayton County’s Strategic Plan - *to recruit and retain highly qualified and effective staff*. One of the initiatives related to the goal states that the district will provide a systemic training program that provides enhanced professional development and support of employees. Transforming leadership through the use of performance coaches models a commitment to this goal. GLISI’s performance coaching process used in the Power of 100™ pilot positions the district on the path to achieving this initiative for principals.

The district is beginning to realize that its leaders can be developed best by experienced, trained coaches who are not full-time employees, and that the district must be deliberate in committing sufficient financial and personnel resources to maintain the positive momentum that principals perceive as helpful to their development. Furthermore, the commitment of the coaches to implement

with fidelity the tasks that they had learned and practiced during their training with GLISI contributed to their success as performance coaches.

Under the guidance of the coaches, Clayton County principals have implemented and are leading professional learning communities in their schools. They are leading their staffs in collecting, analyzing, and using data to conduct action research to address critical academic needs and issues. They are modeling for their staffs the benefits of using a professional growth plan (GLISI's Performer Path Plan) and GLISI's Performance-based Modules™ to develop skills and knowledge that can result in improved teaching and learning.

Principals are learning from their experiences with their coaches the importance of using effective interpersonal skills in communicating and collaborating with teachers, students, parents, district administrators and other stakeholders. The principals feel that their performance coaches are fair and genuinely care about helping them; that they are trustworthy and can relate to a wide variety of people; and that they listen and answer their questions effectively. The performance coaches are modeling skills in active listening, giving constructive feedback, and problem-solving as a team. The principals in turn are practicing these skills when working with their staff and through their continuous efforts they will be able to positively influence teacher and student productivity in their schools.

### **Next Steps**

Effective implementation of GLISI's LPPC program, superintendent endorsement and support, selection of outstanding individuals as coaches, oversight by a Lead District Representative became the catalyst for optimal leadership development and performance in Clayton County Public Schools. The district plans to continue the performance coaching process begun with principals in the Power of 100™ pilot. This experience has assisted school and district leaders in seeing the importance of differentiating professional learning for leaders. Professional learning in the district will be redesigned to address the diverse needs of leaders according to their levels of experience and skills. Clayton County's professional learning department will reorganize the training opportunities for leaders to include a sequenced, tiered course progression for participants. This will result in a scaffolded learning approach for each participant with some courses as prerequisites before moving on to others. Trained performance coaches will be essential in assisting participants in selecting the appropriate sequence of courses to meet their growth needs and for assessing their progress in meeting performance goals.

The performance coaching process will also be enhanced by continuing to include professional learning for the coaches in the areas of: 1) creating an effective coach-principal relationship, 2) gauging coaching effectiveness, and 3) the coach's role in the professional learning communities.

The ultimate impact on student achievement resulting from the implementation of the performance coaching process cannot currently be determined. However, Clayton County will continuously strive to develop the caliber of leader that can get the results described in the U.S. Senate Committee Report on Equal Educational Opportunity:

*...If a school is a vibrant, innovative, child-centered place, if it has a reputation for excellence in teaching, if students are performing to the best of their abilities, one can almost always*

*point to the principal's leadership as the key to success. (School Leadership That Works, p.6)*