

Engagement for Success:

Gilmer County's Commitment to Improving Graduation

Overview

Innovation/Solution/Practice at a Glance

In the fall of 2005, a Gilmer County District Change Team partnered with Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) to provide leaders and teachers with the knowledge, skills, tools, and expertise to increase the graduation rate, to decrease the dropout rate, and to improve student progression. Through the Base Camp and Leadership Summit™ experience, GLISI provided the framework and tools to guide the school improvement process.

Impact at a Glance

The Gilmer County School District's partnership with GLISI led to creation of district- and school-level plans for improvement, organization of Better-Seeking Teams, sharing and implementation of best practices, and a new emphasis on professional learning. As a result of these efforts, the district and schools implemented teaching and learning strategies, analyzed student test data, and analyzed causes for low achievement. Expectations for student achievement increased and interventions were implemented to meet the needs of students. These efforts achieved a major goal of increasing the high school graduation rate from 63.0% in 2004 to 88.2% in 2009 (a 25.2% increase). This success placed Gilmer High School among Georgia's 85/10 High Schools as reported by the Georgia Partnership for Educational Excellence ("Commonalities of Georgia's 85/10 High Schools," December 2009). Of the fifteen high schools included as meeting all the criteria (pages 10, 18, and 56 of the report), Gilmer High had the largest overall increase in graduation rate, and Gilmer was one of only four rural school districts in the state to meet these criteria. This success was the result of an effort that extended from the Boardroom to the classroom, including a broad spectrum of stakeholders and partners in the process.

The Impact Story

Background/Context

Gilmer County is located in rural North Georgia with a 2008 estimated population of 28,537. The county seat is Ellijay. In 2009, Gilmer County School District consisted of approximately 4,221 students: 16% Hispanics, 82% White, and 2% other minorities. Approximately 64% of the student population qualified for free and reduced lunch, 10% were identified as Students with Disabilities, 9% were English Language Learners, and 8% were enrolled in the gifted program. In 2003, Gilmer County's unemployment rate was 3.9%. However, like the rest of the state, the county has seen an increase in unemployment to 10.9% in 2009.

At the start of the intervention, in 2005, the Gilmer County School District consisted of seven school sites. Two schools housed grades K-6; one school included grades K-2; one school site housed grades 3-5; middle school accommodated grades 6-8; one high school provided for students in

grades 9-12; and an alternative school served students from grades 6-12. Also, another state and federally supported facility served Pre-K and Head Start students. The grades 6-12 program included an academic course of study, career and technical programs, and a diverse extracurricular/athletic program. Today, Gilmer County has 1 primary school, 3 elementary schools, 2 middle schools, and 1 high school.

What Was Done?

In 2005, the Gilmer County District Change Team returned from the GLISI Base Camp and Leadership Summit experiences ready to organize Better-Seeking Teams at each school, establish action plans for improvement, and engage stakeholders in the process. Additional Gilmer teams engaged in Base Camp and Leadership Summit in Fall of 2007 and Winter of 2008, including a newly appointed Board of Education member on the 2008 team. These leadership efforts changed the school district from a “system of schools” operating partly in isolation to a “school system” with networking, collaboration, sharing best practices, vertical alignment, applauding successes, and working toward common goals of providing excellence and consistent education to all students regardless of the school attended. Throughout this work, a major goal was to increase the high school graduation rate for the Gilmer County School System.

District's Process of Change:

The District Change Team (led by the Gilmer County School Superintendent, Dr. Raiford Cantrell, and Improvement Implementation Coordinator (IIC), Danette Ozment, continued the Base Camp and Leadership Summit professional learning through team sharing, book studies, and collaboration time. The District Change Team members who participated in the training shared their “Who Am I Stories.” The Superintendent and IIC developed and shared the District’s “Future Story.” Through the three year process, professional learning occurred using book studies including The Handbook for SMART School Teams, Closing the Achievement Gap: No Excuses, and Making Classroom Assessment Work. The book studies supported the process of Team-based Improvement learned at Base Camp and Leadership Summit, and continued the opportunity for leadership growth in the district. All of these experiences helped the leaders move toward cohesiveness, building relationships, and responding as a school district devoting energies, efforts, plans, and resources to achieving the common goals. During the process, a culture of high expectations was established.

Changes were made and much work was done to move schools and the district toward achieving the common goals. The goal of increasing graduation rate and decreasing dropout rate was everyone’s challenge, and the credit for the present and future successes belongs to all those K-12 teachers and other stakeholders who contributed positively to the effort. The middle school and high school leadership and teachers worked on communications, collaboration, and vertical alignment. Root cause analysis was conducted, and identified transition between middle and high school to be a key area of concern. In response, the district implemented a Ninth Grade Academy program within the high school facility, including updated processes and procedures, and additional staff assigned to provide valuable instructional assistance. Activities and meetings involving staff, students, parents, and other stakeholders were held to communicate and implement this smooth transition with the Ninth Grade Academy. Benchmark assessments were implemented and common assessments was developed. Curriculum alignment and curriculum mapping were the results of

collaborative efforts of staff and leaders. Administrators became instructional leaders and “leading learners” as opposed to the traditional school managers.

In addition to the Ninth Grade Academy, a high school graduation coach and two middle school graduation coaches were employed fulltime to focus on coordinating and implementing efforts to meet the needs of students at risk to drop out of school and/or not graduate with their class. Individual student needs were assessed by teachers, the graduation coaches, and the support staff. Courses were then implemented to meet identified needs. Students were tutored and mentored, and the student advisement process was closely managed and monitored. Collaboration between the high school and the alternative school made it possible for students with behavior issues to be in class and achieve credits to keep them on track to graduate. Also, the services of the Mountain Education Center High School were made available in several ways: high school students who had failed a class and needed credit could take evening classes, and students who needed an alternative high school approach could withdraw from Gilmer High School and enroll as a full time students in the evening classes and graduate from Mountain Education Center with a high school diploma.

During this time, the Gilmer County School District leaders and staff worked diligently with other partners that supported their improvement process. The Georgia School Boards Association provided assistance in Strategic Planning, which lead the way to Gilmer County becoming fully SACS accredited. Many community, business, and organizational partnerships were also strengthening, including an ongoing partnership with the superior court system which provided for free drug testing for students participating in competitive extracurricular activities. Some students were motivated to stay in school and make passing grades in order to continue to participate in extracurricular programs.

One School’s Process of Change:

While the entire district was benefitting from the implementation of the GLISI improvement process, individual schools were seeing the changes and impact on students first hand. At Gilmer County High School, the focus on continuous improvement became the norm. Current Superintendent Randy Parson started the continuous improvement process as principal at Gilmer High School in 2005 prior to being named Assistant Superintendent. In 2006, Gilmer High School’s new Principal, Erick Hofstetter, took steps to continue to build a caring high school environment and positive relationships with students. He implemented a change process working with his teachers, leadership team and other stakeholders to move Gilmer High School’s improvement initiatives to even greater success.

Over the last four years, Gilmer High School (GHS) has taken the work of GLISI’s Base Camp and Leadership Summit to a deeper level. GHS continues to use research and professional learning to close the “believing-doing gap” and to practice the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle of improvement. For many, the improvement in graduation rate from 2006-07 to 2007-08 of 8.9% proved it “could be done.” The school has continued to focus on building relationships with students through the work of the graduation coach; data analysis of individual student’s assessments; implementing effective Response to Intervention (RTI); strengthening the connection between middle and high schools; connections with the community and parents; and a strong advisement program. All at-risk students

at GHS have a profile and plan for success created by analyzing data and working one-on-one with the students. The students also have data-driven schedules and weekly advisement meetings. Regular meetings are held with the student, teachers, parents, community agencies, government systems, and anyone else involved in the student's life. Mr. Hofstetter's goal of putting the students first has been achieved. When asked about the students at Gilmer High, he said, "There are a lot of subcontractors with joint custody, and all these subcontractors have the interest of the student as their priority."

Student data, starting when the students are in 5th grade, is collected and analyzed by GHS, so by 8th grade the high school faculty already knows the students that will be coming to GHS. Eighth grade students visit GHS several times during the year, where they are paired with high school students for tours and honest conversation about what high school is about. Teachers from the Career, Technology, and Agriculture Education (CTAE) department visit the middle school to work with students on a personal plan for their high school schedule. The transition between 8th and 9th grade has turned into a formal process of transferring responsibility: during the last week of school the 8th grade students walk to the high school for the "Walk to the Rock" where the middle school principal "officially" gives the high school principal the Class of _____ (year of graduation). During the summer months, students are given additional opportunities to build a relationship with GHS during "Cat Herding," an introduction to 9th grade that occurs prior to the start of school. Faculty members, 9th grade Advisors, administrators, the GHS band, and cheerleaders are all there to welcome the new 9th graders and their parents to school. Students receive t-shirts with their graduation year on it and pledge to successfully complete high school. This building of relationships with the students continues throughout the students' four years at GHS.

In a recent publication from the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (GPEE), Gilmer High School was one of 15 high schools in the state to be recognized for their high graduation rate ("Commonalities of Georgia's 85/10 High Schools," December 2009). The report identified the following common characteristics among the 15 schools:

"The caring culture encompassed continuous improvement practices and focused on the mission and goals of the school. High expectations for students and faculty were evident, and there was a single-minded focus on a rigorous curriculum and mastery of curriculum standards by each student whether postsecondary-bound or career-bound. The focus was on students earning the course credits to move to the next level of learning and passing the GHSGT. Students who had not mastered the standards were provided concentrated, focused, strategic remediation on those standards, and they had opportunities to earn course credit for subjects previously failed. Students were assessed to determine mastery of standards. Teachers were knowledgeable of the curriculum and employed a variety of effective instructional strategies, and administrators were effective instructional leaders who nurtured a culture of high expectations. Additionally, the schools had an intense concentration on an effective transition of students from eighth to ninth grade and on the structure of the ninth grade itself, ensuring it was conducive to student learning. Teachers, administrators, graduation coaches, and students were accountable for student learning. The schools emphasized an increase in the amount of student-learning time and the flexible use of time, particularly for remediation. Teachers and administrators worked together to create and use tools, including professional learning, to ensure rigor and effective instruction in

each classroom. These schools used data and continuous improvement processes in their shared decision-making structure to tackle and resolve barriers to student learning.”
(p. 62)

The successes at GHS exemplify the changes occurring at the District Level and in the other Gilmer schools: a caring culture, focus on the mission and goals, high expectations for students and faculty, mastery of curriculum, rigorous and effective instruction in each classroom, and the use of data to drive continuous improvement processes.

Rising Stars Participants:

Gilmer County School District has also participated in three Rising Star Cohorts with North Georgia RESA during the 2008-09 and 2009-10 school years. In both cohort groups, action research was completed that identified additional ways to increase the graduation rate. For example, one of last year's action research studies completed at the high school involved an innovation that focused on improving student attendance and tardiness. As a result of the action research, tardiness was reduced significantly. The action research projects for this year's Rising Stars are also focused on improving student achievement. The idea of continuous improvement is part of the culture and philosophy of Gilmer County School District.

What were the Results?

Gilmer High School's graduation rates have increased dramatically over the last five years, and the school has also recently been identified as an 85/10 high school by the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education (GPEE) based on this improvement in graduation rate. The 85/10 schools have been defined as "Schools that Had a Graduation Rate of at Least 85 Percent in 2008 and Increased the Graduation Rate by at Least 10 Percentage Points Over Five Years, 2004 – 2008, and Sustained the Improvement Through 2009 ("Commonalities of Georgia's 85/10 High Schools," December 2009). Gilmer County High School's graduation rate has been:

2004 Graduation Rate:	63.0%
2005 Graduation Rate:	73.4%
2006 Graduation Rate:	73.9%
2007 Graduation Rate:	76.2%
2008 Graduation Rate:	85.1%
2009 Graduation Rate:	88.2%

The percentages show an impressive increase of 25.2%, but even more important is the impact on those individual students that have successfully completed high school.

What was the Impact?

The most dramatic impact was the increase (25.2%) in the overall graduation rate and the narrowing of gaps in subgroups over a five-year period. Prior to this systematic means of identifying, measuring, and monitoring the success of district initiatives, the graduation rate was 63%. After five years of systematically implementing the Balanced Performance Improvement steps learned at GLISI, the graduation rate rose to 88.2% (2009) with incremental gains noted for each year of implementation.

Increasing the graduation rate resulted in immediate positive implications for individual students, the community, and the school system. The most obvious impact is for those students who achieved a high school diploma, but perhaps would not have if the interventions had not been enacted. Using baseline (2004) and current (2009) data, there were 62 students who graduated in 2009 who would have dropped out in 2004, had the trend remained constant. For these students, their lifetime income potential and value to the community has increased dramatically. Other areas of impact included a change in student and public perception, as measured by an opinion survey. Although the community had generally held the district in high esteem, results of the survey showed an even greater increase in community satisfaction with the school.

The successful implementation of the Base Camp and Leadership Summit process created a model of success for any strategic objective the district might adopt while nurturing a professional learning culture. Within this context, an atmosphere was created that encouraged stakeholder input and expressed value for the contributions of each team member. The positive energy generated when success was experienced motivated, encouraged, and became contagious as more teams took the initiative to aggressively tackle additional challenges and performance objectives with confidence and deliberate action.

Erick Hofstetter, Gilmer High School Principal remarked,

I believe that everyone now owns our mission to equip and inspire students to GRADUATE! Our number one goal is to increase the graduation rate. Our leaders (and teachers) now really see that when you focus on something K-12 and are committed to finishing strong in 9-12, there is a positive result.

This success is larger than one initiative, however. Leaders propose that this process has changed the future of education for the Gilmer County School System by providing focus, alignment, accountability, and unity of purpose. Mr. Hofstetter praised the process that led to the increased graduation rate with these comments:

I believe that the aligned process founded on GLISI concepts and tools has helped to bring focus to our leaders as they work together to meet the needs of all students. We always had 'plans' for improvement; however, by connecting to a bigger picture with a common plan and end in mind, we've been able to close the believing-doing gap. Now, we have a Gilmer STRONG Continuous Improvement Plan and Balanced Scorecard that are inter-connected with the purpose of driving improvement at the school level. All the arrows are going in the same direction! Our plans are continuous and build/expand, year after year.

In addition to the desired outcome, there were several positive unintended consequences associated with this initiative.

- The action steps implemented to increase the graduation rate resulted in an increase of scores on the Georgia High School Graduation Tests scores in English/Language Arts as well as Mathematics. Baseline math scores in 2004 reflected that 77% of students met or exceeded standards while in 2009, 83.3% of students met or exceeded standards (an increase of 6.3%). Data from 2004 reflects that 85.6% of students met or exceeded standards in English/Language Arts while 91.2% met or exceeded in 2009 (an increase of 5.6%).

- Science Achievement increased significantly from 2006 to 2009. In 2006, 78.49% of students met or exceeded standards in Science while 92.4% met or exceeded in 2009 (an increase of 13.91%).
- Post-Secondary enrollment in a Georgia Public College increased by 17.1% from 2005 to 2008. In 2005, 46.3% of enrolled in a Georgia public college while 63.4% enrolled in 2008.
- Advanced Placement Courses have increased from 4 courses in 2004 with total enrollment of 53 students (4.5% of students) to 11 course offerings in 2010 with enrollment at 285 (23.4% of students).

School leaders feel that measures implemented through their continuous improvement plan and reflected in their Balanced Scorecard are successful. They are dedicated to the refinement and further implementation of current initiatives now that they have found a system that demands excellence, commitment, collaboration, and constant evaluation of success. A strong K-12 leadership team, consisting of administrators and teacher leaders from all levels, share a common vision for the district and are committed to the “Plan, Do, Check, Act” cycle for continuous improvement, thus ensuring continued alignment, effectiveness, and implementation of identified strategic objectives.

Next Steps

Gilmer County Schools will continue to implement the training and school improvement initiatives learned at GLISI. As opportunities arise, teams of leaders will participate in GLISI events to ensure that an enduring mass of leaders are trained in the team-based approach to school improvement and have the necessary knowledge and skills to ensure the success and sustainability of the strategic goals.

At GHS, these leaders will implement a new hybrid bell schedule with a dedicated Response to Intervention (RTI) component during the 2010-2011 school days by specially trained Reading and Mathematics teachers, as well as allow for deliberate collaboration times among teachers and staff. Working in partnership with North Georgia Learning Resources System and the National Dropout Prevention Center, GHS will focus on reading enrichment at the secondary level, and on overall classroom and community engagement, in an effort to further close the believing-doing gap. All curriculum, instructional opportunities, and learning experiences will focus on college, careers, and civic participation performances, thus creating a seamless integration of the traditional academic focus with the Career, Technical, Agricultural Education application in concert with the community.