

Engagement for Success:

Monroe County's Quarterly Performance Reviews

Overview

Innovation/Solution/Practice at a Glance

In 2001, to help improve performance of Monroe County schools, the superintendent and a team of key central office staff established three quarterly meetings at each school to hold conversations about the school's progress toward meeting the goals laid out in the annual school improvement plan. The first part of the meeting usually lasted about two hours and included a cross-section of certified and non-certified staff, district leaders and sometimes parents and students. In the second part of the performance review, the superintendent met for up to an hour with the school principal to review the conversation and go deeper into the principal's roles and responsibilities. This second section became part of the principal's evaluation.

Impact at a Glance

The performance review process enabled schools to become more accountable for reaching performance targets. The process of meeting with key stakeholders and setting goals helped school staff to see the connection between their daily work and their school improvement plan. The process also enabled central office staff to know what resources might be needed at the school level to meet the identified targets.

The Impact Story

Background/Context

Monroe County, a central Georgia district of approximately 4,000 students, started working with the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) in 2001 and implemented many of the systemic processes they learned through that partnership. They developed a system of nested and aligned school and district continuous improvement plans. The schools plans were nested under the district plan, and all school programs and initiatives were aligned within them. The plans contained clear performance targets that had been agreed on by the superintendent and principal with input from the school's leadership team.

The progress toward meeting the targets was measured by a set of Balanced Scorecards, a tool and process learned through a GLISI community of learning and achievement. Although this system of plans and scorecards was working well, there was still a need to increase the level of buy-in from staff and to increase their level of understanding of the connectivity between all of the elements in the plan.

In 2004, the district instituted quarterly performance reviews to leverage the Balanced Scorecard, district improvement plans, school improvement plans and all improvement processes. In 2006 the district developed a Best Practice Rubric based on the High Impact Rubric included in the Georgia Department of Education's Keys to Quality: Implementation Resource to further link systemic improvement with Best Practices. After 2006, progress on this rubric was also included in the performance review process.

What Was Done?

The superintendent schedules three performance reviews for each school. The first series occurs in October, the second in January, and the third in June. Principals choose the staff members they want to attend, and typically include the assistant principal(s), media specialist, counselor, instructional coach if they have one, and representatives from each grade or department.

Scheduling does not always allow all members of the leadership team to be present and principals also like to rotate other teachers through the meetings to increase understanding of the process. Principals are also encouraged to include their school food nutrition manager and their lead custodian in at least a portion of the review. The first and second performance reviews take place in each school's data room and generally last about two to three hours. The reviews are conducted as a group discussion and then a further half-hour, in-private conference between the principal and the superintendent; the review information becomes part of the principal's annual evaluation process. The third review, which occurs in June, is between the superintendent and the principal and serves as the principal's annual summative conference.

Approximately four weeks before the performance review, the superintendent e-mails principals a protocol that will be used to structure the conversation. Principals have an opportunity to discuss the protocol with the superintendent at the monthly Principal's Meeting. The principal then sets to work with the school staff to gather the data needed to answer the questions outlined in the protocol. Elementary teacher Andrea Norman reported that the process helped her to make "a genuine connection between the central office, school administrators, and the classroom . . . and helped [her] to see the role that [her] classroom plays in the school's success."

In order to maintain alignment, the protocol is divided into the same sections as the school improvement plan and the Monroe County Balanced Scorecard:

- Attaining High Student Achievement and Success
- Developing Organizational Effectiveness
- Ensuring Student/Stakeholder Engagement and Loyalty
- Ensuring Quality Professional Learning

The October performance review focuses on the strategies that the school has designed to sustain past success and address areas that need improvement. In addition, leadership teams use the district's Best Practices Rubric to rate their performance from "Not Addressed" to "Fully Operational" on six overarching performance categories:

- Leadership Teams
- Data-Driven Decision Making
- Plans with Action and Measurable Goals
- Standards-based Classrooms
- Student Success
- Professional Learning

These categories are broken down into 36 performance objectives which are rated and discussed, and evidence is provided to support the ratings. According to superintendent, Anthony Pack, "The critical component is not the rating, but the discussion of what root causes are impacting success and/or movement along the continuum and the evidence used to substantiate their beliefs."

The January performance review focuses on the results of the mid-year benchmarks, teacher predictions for the percentage of students who will meet state requirements and the new strategies they will use to meet the needs of those students predicted not to pass. During the January review, the performance review teams also pick one weak performance objective from each of the categories on the district's High Impact Practices Rubric to indicate how the school has improved in that particular area.

Principals and staff use the quality tools and strategies learned through GLISI to prepare for the Performance Review. Susan Kyte, a third grade EIP teacher, has noticed that this process, "gives teachers the chance to check progress of strategies that were implemented to address weak performance objectives on the Continuous Improvement Plan." It "often results in the allocation of additional funds to support staff development and needed resources."

The third performance review generally occurs in June. It serves as the principal's annual evaluation and includes only the principal and the superintendent. The basis for the conversation is the school's progress toward meeting the targets set out in its Balanced Scorecard. Failure to meet targets does not automatically lead to a Needs Improvement or Unsatisfactory rating; however, such a rating could be given if a clear pattern of failure to meet objectives over several years emerges. This approach to evaluation is valuable because it enables the superintendent to focus on the work and results work rather than the personality of the principal.

What were the Results?

According to middle school principal Dr. Mike Hickman, Monroe County's Performance Reviews "really help school leaders focus on what is working and what is not working so well at the school level. The process encourages school stakeholders to look critically at school action steps, specific school interventions, performance targets, and budgeting priorities as we all work together to ensure and sustain student improvement efforts."

In addition, the reviews have made it easier for teachers to understand the linkages between the school's improvement plan and their everyday activities in the classroom. Teachers and school leaders are now more aware that they will be held accountable for the results of the strategies that they select, but they are also more willing to collaborate with others to increase performance. Providing an open forum where teachers can have a professional conversation about their classroom practices and student achievement with the superintendent and central office staff is another added benefit of the review process.

The district has achieved steady across-the-board improvement in student achievement, the achievement gap between special education and regular education students has been recognized several times by the Georgia Department of Education, and the graduation rate has risen from 67% in 2006 to 75% in 2009.

What was the Impact?

All of Monroe County's schools and the district have met AYP for the last four years. All four Title I schools are Schools of Distinction and one was named a National School of Distinction in 2008. Although this success cannot be attributed only to the implementation of performance reviews, it is clear that they have been an important ingredient in the district's recipe for success.

High school principal Jim Finch acknowledged how valuable the process is in making schools accountable for student achievement. He admitted, "During my first year I would often "forget" about the Continuous Improvement Plan at times simply because I had never really used one to drive the work. In Monroe County, you don't have a choice but to honor the improvement plan that is laid out for your school. Consequently, it maintains district initiatives instead of schools simply "going out there and doing their own thing". Sometimes you can get so "busy" being a principal (i.e. dealing with problems, operations, putting out fires, etc.) that you lose focus on the school improvement plan. Having performance reviews lessens the likelihood that a school improvement plan will simply sit on the shelf collecting dust."

District and school leaders also see an increased sense of satisfaction and fulfillment in their teachers as they are better able to see their hard work, strategies, and teaching make a difference

in children. The ability to set goals, monitor them, and then meet them has allowed teachers and leaders to focus more clearly (effectively?) on student achievement.

Next Steps

Monroe County will continue to maintain its association with GLISI and to cascade the improvement initiatives further down into the schools. At the district level, the superintendent and his staff will continue to refine the protocols used to prepare for the performance reviews.