

Engagement for Success:

The Impact of Shared Leadership within a School Community

Overview

Innovation at a Glance

After identifying a need for a distributed leadership model for systemic improvement, the Dougherty County School District created school and district Better-Seeking Teams. The teams targeted specific achievement goals for students as well as organizational procedures that supported the district's mission. As a result of these collaborative efforts, the district has made significant gains in student achievement; dramatically increased the graduation rate; decreased the drop-out rate; improved attendance rates; and reviewed and aligned operational procedures that support overall district success.

Impact at a Glance

In 2001-2002, Dougherty County's graduation rate was 50.2%. Incredibly, by the 2008-2009 school year, the graduation rate had increased to 75.4%, reflecting a 25.2% gain. The state gain for this same period was 17.1%. Coinciding with this increase was a decrease in the dropout rate in grades 9-12. In 2002, 7.5% of high school students dropped out of school compared to 3.1% in 2009. Success at keeping students in school at the middle school level was astounding. In 2002, 35 middle school students dropped out of school, compared to only one in 2009.

Gains on the CRCT in reading have been equally as impressive. In 2003-04, 79% of students in grades 1-8 met or exceeded standards in reading; however, by 2008-09 this percentage had increased to 87.8% of students. Combine these statistics with the fact that Dougherty County has a disproportionate number of students living in poverty (79% Economically Disadvantaged*), a predictor of student success, and the results are even more impressive.

* This percentage is determined by the number of students receiving free or reduced priced meals. The state average is 53%.

The Impact Story

Background/Context

In the 1990s, Dougherty County educators were facing the reality of a community that was rapidly changing in demographics. Many middle and upper class families were moving to neighboring counties and commuting to Albany each day for work while simultaneously a number of small private

schools were growing. This reality resulted in a high poverty student population (79% Economically Disadvantaged) within the public school system. Desirous of creating a public education system where all parents could feel confident that their students would receive a quality education while still realizing the challenges associated with educating students from poverty, district leaders in Dougherty County understood that sustainable success would depend on a balanced and systemic approach to improvement.

What Was Done?

District leaders recognized the importance of community and stakeholder involvement in the change process. A sense of urgency was created within the community as leaders reminded stakeholder groups that the success of Dougherty County's students was not just a school system problem, but a community problem. If students did not receive a quality education, the community would eventually pay. An unqualified workforce would be a deterrent to new businesses as they considered locating to the area and would result in the best students leaving to seek employment elsewhere. The superintendent and other leaders spent months listening to teachers, administrators, parents, and community members. In the course of these conversations, three common threads were detected from among all groups:

1. High expectations were needed for all children.
2. Students needed to learn to read well.
3. A consistent curriculum was needed in all content areas, at all schools, and at all grade levels.

There were significant enhancers and barriers associated with improvement initiatives. The superintendent, Dr. Sally Whatley, was committed to instituting a process of distributed leadership and joint accountability. She immediately recognized the overall strength and commitment of district and school level leaders. As she shared her vision for the future with other district leaders, they eagerly embraced the challenge. They adopted a "no excuses" philosophy towards student success while establishing collaborative goals and aligning resources to support these goals.

At the time, there was a high inner-district mobility rate among students. As children moved numerous times during their educational career, gaps in learning were created. With a lack of consistency in curriculum and no benchmark measures of accountability during the school year, there were inconsistencies in academic achievement and student expectations. The realization of such drastic inconsistencies led to a series of events that began a transformation of the district. Magnet school offerings were dramatically increased, and resources were aligned that would ensure every child was provided transportation to any magnet program, regardless of zoned attendance areas. Once enrolled in a magnet program, students could stay in no matter how many times they moved, and transportation was always ensured. Amazingly, in view of this enormous task, the transportation department has achieved a 97% on-time arrival rating.

To ensure all students were receiving a quality education that would be consistent from school to school, the district instituted a monitoring process to check for consistent use of the Georgia Performance Standard, and district support was provided in all curriculum areas. Vertical and horizontal alignment was supported through the use of curriculum maps and the frameworks, while

professional learning opportunities were aligned to support effective implementation. Benchmark tests provided leading data indicators, allowing for adjustments in learning opportunities for students based on specific needs.

A significant enhancer to this process began in 2006, when Dougherty County leaders began their partnership with the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI). Perceiving the need for support in taking the district to the next level of success, the district began engaging teams in Base Camp and Leadership Summit experiences. This process helped leaders systematize their model for distributed leadership, analyze the effectiveness of current practices, narrow the focus of initiatives, and align human and fiscal resources with identified district goals. Development and implementation of action plans was cascaded throughout the district to the school level, fostering a culture of shared ownership for success.

This began a relationship of support and accountability where district leaders formalized the use of a team-based process of continuous improvement that used multiple sources of data to identify the most pressing needs, analyze root causes, and develop strategic action plans that focused on a few high-impact solutions. After overwhelming results from the first cohort, a commitment was made to engage leaders at all levels in this process. By February 2010, 90% of principals in the 26 schools as well as the Early College Coordinator, several curriculum supervisors, and select assistant principals were immersed in the GLISI process through their attendance at Base Camp and Leadership Summit. This involvement created a strategic means for implementing a Plan-Do-Check-Act process of continuous improvement whereby the work could be systematically managed, measured, monitored, and revised as needed.

On reflecting on the GLISI experience, Dr. Whatley remarked,

“This ongoing GLISI training created not only a common language but enabled all administrators to be firmly planted on a solid foundation with regards to their role as leaders. They are better equipped with strategies to move their sites to higher ground, and immediately began implementing their new learning upon completion of the training. Not only the new administrators but veterans were energized by the training. The professionals in the Dougherty County School System have grown immensely from the GLISI training—actually more than they have from any other professional development. GLISI is absolutely the finest professional learning and growth opportunity that I have experienced in 30+ years as an educator. GLISI has truly solidified our efforts to grow as a team and to equip professionals at each site and in the system to function as a team to get the work done. At each site, we are better able to define the work, determine the root cause, and develop goals to accomplish the work.”

What were the Results?

Dougherty County teams have worked diligently to prioritize goals and strategically develop action plans to ensure systemic improvement. Their efforts to increase the graduation and achievement rates and decrease the dropout and absentee rates in all schools have been highly successful:

- Dougherty County had a graduation rate of 50.1% for the 2001-2002 school year. This rate increased to 75.4% in the 2008-2009 school year, reflecting a 25.3% gain. The state gain for this same period was 17.1%.
- In 2002, 7.5% of high school students dropped out of school. This percentage decreased to 3.1% in 2009.
- In 2002, 35 middle school students dropped out of school compared to only one in 2009.
- The number of students with 15 or more total absences decreased considerably during this same nine-year period. In 2001-02, 12% of all students were absent more than 15 days; however, in 2008-09, only 6.19% of students were absent more than 15 days.

In addition, numerous other accomplishments have been noted since 2001. Some of these include:

- Four schools have been recognized as National Blue Ribbon Schools of Excellence (out of a total of only 26 schools).
- One school has been recognized twice as a Georgia School of Excellence.
- One school has been recognized three times as a Georgia School of Excellence (The most recent recognition occurred during the 2008-09 school year.).
- One school received recognition as a National Title 1 Distinguished School.
- Thirteen Title I Distinguished Schools made AYP three or more consecutive years.
- Three Non-Title 1 schools made AYP for 7 years.
- A total of 16 schools were recognized as Distinguished Schools.
- Five out of Georgia's 44 No Excuse Schools named by the Georgia Public Policy Foundation were from Dougherty County in 2009.
- In 2009, 89% of Dougherty County schools (23 of 26) made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP).

A balanced approach to system improvement has supported these many accomplishments. Student achievement goals were supported by ensuring standardized operational procedures and continuous improvement goals for each department. The following are some of the successes for operational initiatives:

- Dougherty County has been certified through the International Organization for Standardization (one of only 8 schools systems in the nation).
- Magnet school offerings have been dramatically increased, and transportation is provided for any student attending a magnet program, regardless of zoned attendance areas.
- The transportation department has achieved a 97% on-time arrival rating.
- The system's nutrition department operates debt free.
- Seven facilities have received major renovations.
- Six new schools have been built.
- Audit findings were reduced from seven in FY2002 to one in FY2008.
- Asset discrepancies for tangible assets were reduced from \$492,660 in 2002 to \$28,000 in 2009.
- Dougherty County ranks seventh in the state for student-to-computer ratio.

What was the Impact?

Substantial changes have been made within the district, resulting in a focused and aligned school system. These changes, which have permeated the culture of the district, will ensure sustainability of the current initiatives and support a climate of continuous improvement.

- A culture of high expectations, high academic achievement, and accountability has been fostered.
- Every school and every department set annual, realistic goals that are measured, managed, monitored, and communicated.
- There exists an atmosphere of collegiality and ownership for successes as well as failures. There is a true team atmosphere.
- Collaboration and communication within and among schools and departments has become standard operating procedure.
- Consistent expectations, training, and communication ensure that students at every school receive a solid education.
- A performance culture has been created where district and school leaders recognize the need to continue to increase their leadership skills.

Success breeds success. The Dougherty County School District has seen marked improvement on all system goals. Stakeholder perception is more favorable, and the community's willingness to support and partner with the district continually increases.

Next Steps

Much has been accomplished within Dougherty County over the past few years. As in any organization seeking excellence, much remains to be done. Within the past year, approximately 100 Dougherty County leaders have participated in GLISI's Developing High Performing Leaders at all Levels (DHPLAAL). These participants are leading efforts to develop competency models for leaders at all levels, aligning desired competencies to job descriptions and evaluation instruments. Additionally, the district is developing a leadership academy for incumbent assistant principals. This academy, modeled after GLISI's Rising Stars Program, will provide job-embedded opportunities for participants to perform the real work of schools, in real time, with real teams of teachers. Coaches to support the work and provide performance feedback have recently been trained through GLISI's Leadership Performance Coaching Program.

The success of Dougherty County is not dependent on any one person. The changes that have been enacted have altered the culture of the district. The work is now performed in teams, with input from internal and external stakeholders; decisions are made collaboratively with joint ownership for success; a systems approach to improvement is taken; and a system of managing, measuring, and monitoring success is in place.