

Engagement for Success:

Using Action Research to Transform Problem-Solving

Overview

Innovation/Solution/Practice at a Glance

Dr. Sally Krisel, Assistant Director of Teaching and Learning for Hall County School System – and a participant in Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement’s (GLISI’s) North Georgia-Pioneer Rising Stars Collaborative – led a team of high school teachers to resolve an issue of concern to the district: low Advanced Placement (AP) scores. Using GLISI’s Action Research protocol, Hall County was able to transform problem-solving into an effective and collaborative Plan-Do-Check-Act process with clearly identified goals and results.

Impact at a Glance

Only 34% of Hall County high school students in Advanced Placement (AP) English/Composition classes scored 3 (out of 5) or higher on the AP Exam – meaning 66% are not receiving college credit. As a result of lagging scores on AP Exams in all six high schools, and as a requirement for her Rising Stars class, Dr. Krisel formed a team of AP teachers to collect and analyze data using the GLISI Rising Stars action research process to determine why AP Exam scores were so low. Through a collaborative team effort, she engaged teachers to delve deeper into this teaching and learning issue. In just one year, their efforts resulted in 10% increase in AP Exam scores in ELA/Comp; a 14% increase in US Gov’t /Politics; and a 13% increase in US History. In addition to the improvement in AP Exam scores, but there was also an increase in the number of AP courses offered, and an increase in the number of students taking AP courses. Perhaps the most significant changes occurred in the system’s positive perception of Advanced Placement as a program, and increased recognition of the value of team-based problem-solving.

The Impact Story

Background/Context

As GLISI searched for a performance-based leadership program to help new leaders prepare for the real work of today’s schools, they found much literature on the subject at large, but little on the topic of team-based or performance-based learning. They began to develop a performance-based leadership program by:

- researching proven leadership practices,
- defining the knowledge and skill set necessary for leaders to be successful,
- aligning those leadership practices with national and state standards,
- developing a competency model for all school and system leadership positions, and
- designing performance-based modules for use by aspiring and incumbent leaders to lead teams of teachers in the new work of schools.

GLISI developers then devised a method to determine the specific leadership needs in each system, and provided a strategy to address the concerns of school systems in need of new leaders equipped to improve student achievement. This work led to the start of the GLISI Rising Stars Collaboratives™ program.

Following these research and development efforts, collaborative discussions began between JoAnn Brown from GLISI, Bob Michael and Shirley Davis from North Georgia College and State University, and Sandy Addis, Director of Pioneer RESA. They envisioned the GLISI Rising Stars program for aspiring and incumbent leaders in the North Georgia region, with 13 system superintendents participating. The discussion centered on the systems' need for new leaders well versed in GLISI's **8 Roles of School Leaders™**, to be tapped by the superintendents and engaged in a performance-based, customized internship leading to leadership certification. This success story is built around the joint efforts of these individuals and groups to successfully transition school leaders to the new roles demanded in a time of greater accountability for student achievement.

An integral feature of the GLISI Rising Stars Program is that it required the districts in the RESA to work together to strategize about leadership and succession planning in their region. As a result of these meetings, system superintendents nominated candidates to participate in the year-long, Rising Stars internship program. For example, Hall County Superintendent Will Schofield “tapped” 10 candidates for the Rising Stars Program during both the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school years.

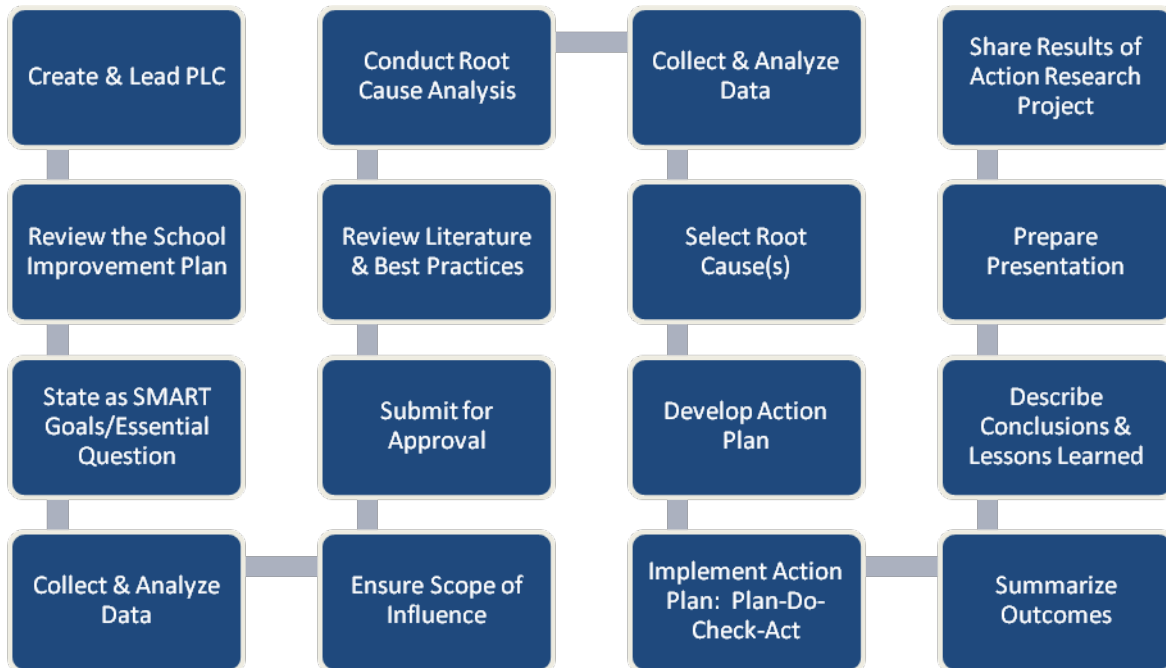
Dr. Sally Krisel, Assistant Director of Teaching and Learning for Hall County Schools – an accomplished educator in gifted education and K-12 curriculum and instruction, but without the new education leadership certification – was also “tapped” to participate. She wanted to learn the 8 Roles of School Leaders™ and the knowledge and skills new leaders were being expected to master to receive leadership certification. These skills learned contributed to her ability to lead work in the district using GLISI tools, modules, services, and support.

What Was Done?

All Rising Stars participants are required to complete an Action Research project related to a problem or issue under consideration in their school or district. They must lead teams of teachers, organized in professional learning communities to investigate an academic issue, question, or need; review relevant literature and best practices; conduct root cause analyses of the issue or need; collect and analyze the data; and develop an action plan using the Plan-Do-Check-Act protocol to address the causes identified. In other words, the candidate must demonstrate in real-time, with real teachers, the real work of a school and model the lessons learned from their GLISI Rising Stars program experiences.

Dr. Krisel, Hall County Central Office leader, was able to practice what had been modeled during her Rising Stars sessions by leading a team of teachers through the Performance-based Module titled “Leading a Team to Analyze Root Causes Using Quality Tools” as part of her Action Research project. Her team was composed of all AP teachers of ELA/Composition, US Gov’t, and US History from all six Hall County High Schools. She led the team to complete an intensive analysis of student participation in and performance on the Advanced Placement (AP) Exams. The flow chart below

summarizes the steps necessary to conduct an Action Research Project, revised to fit GLISI's needs and teachings:



When the team began, they were initially focusing on these two objectives:

1. Increase by five percent per year the number of AP, Honors, Honors Mentorship, IB, or Dual Enrollment classes offered
2. Increase by five percent per year the percentage of 9-12 students taking AP, Honors, Honors Mentorship, IB, or Dual Enrollment classes

As the root cause analysis was conducted by the professional learning community, the College Board's AP Score Distribution Reports brought some good and some bad news. The bad news was that many of the teachers had never seen these reports. The Instructional Planning Reports (part of the Distribution Reports) fascinated the teachers and led to many good questions about why students showed consistent weaknesses in some areas. The exam scores range from 1-5 and have the following descriptors: 5 = extremely well qualified, 4 = well qualified, 3 = qualified, 2 = possibly qualified, and 1 = no recommendation. In some of the AP courses there were lots of scores of 1s. In other courses, there were mostly scores of 2s. The minimum score of 3 equates to a college grade of C. Only 34% of AP students scored a 3.

These score reports were compared to an analyses of the End of Course Tests scores (EOCT) for all prerequisite courses. This was not conducted to place blame, but rather to seek a better understanding so the team could work within their departments to strengthen ALL courses.

As the root cause analyses began to uncover deeper issues than just participation, the focus of the action research shifted slightly from **increasing the number** of classes offered and **increasing the number** of students taking AP courses to **why the AP Exam scores were so low**. While increasing the number of classes and the number of students in AP were very important objectives, it was soon

clear that the low success rate on AP Exams could become an issue across the district. This was particularly true because Hall County had made a very public commitment to excellence using GLISI's Balanced Scorecard to validate the rigor of the curriculum.

Having the team of teachers look into the performance of their students could have been perceived as questioning their own effectiveness. Dr. Krisel, in her district level role, had to draw deeply upon her verbal strengths and effective communication skills (from previous Rising Stars lessons) and establish the cross-cutting skills of credibility and trust with the members of the team. Her role had to be one of leader, facilitator, and supporter in order for the team to work together collaboratively on the right work. She did this by utilizing the Four C's of Leadership: Courage, Collaboration, Capacity building, and Commitment.

After broadening their scope, the data collection process continued by comparing the AP participation rates and scores for the last several years. This necessitated that the teachers meet more and more frequently. As they collected and analyzed the data, they began to assume responsibility for finding, disseminating, and discussing relevant literature and research evidence related to the importance of students participating in a rigorous high school curriculum like AP courses, and the importance of doing well on the AP Exams. This led to dispelling some myths about including more students in AP classes who, as they said, "just can't do it."

The data from the Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) was analyzed, which showed that while Hall County was marginally more inclusive in AP course participation, they were significantly less successful in AP achievement. The essential question continued to come into focus: the relationship of the Advanced Placement Exam to the overall teaching and learning processes found in Hall County's curriculum. The concern was described in this manner by Dr. Krisel,

If students at the top of the ladder of coursework, coursework that is being touted as "rigorous," could do no better than this (scores of 3's) on external measures of achievement, could we with a straight face talk about a commitment to excellence and "Rigor for ALL" in Hall County?

Because success in AP courses is a cumulative process, Dr. Krisel became concerned with what this data said about the advanced coursework beginning in the middle school and even in the elementary school level. To answer this question, the group used various root cause analysis tools taken from GLISI and the Root Cause Performance-based Module™, such as the fishbone diagram, the 5 Whys, and the affinity diagram, to further explore the problem. On each bone of the fish, they listed possible causes of poor performance from "a need for more strategies for working with diverse populations to the need to assess more frequently in ways that match the exam to needing time to learn from one another to a need to analyze the score reports to inform AP course content," among other causes cited.

Excuse-making was put aside and the team concentrated on those things they could control during the school year. They learned from the research that of all the factors affecting student success in AP courses, the greatest was teacher quality! Good teaching is good teaching, no matter what the demographics of the group, and this – along with high expectations for all students, a deep understanding of individual differences, and the willingness and ability to differentiate to be more

responsive to individual differences – would change the results for AP courses. The teachers decided that **they** could control the quality of their teaching.

What were the Results?

The 2009 AP data in the chart below for the targeted courses (English Language and Composition, US Gov't/Politics and US History) shows progress that is statistically significant. The teachers were able to make some teaching and learning changes to affect these scores after finally focusing on the correct problem: performance on the AP scores (as opposed to AP participation). In addition, they also discovered through their data analysis work and the research that other important and lasting progress can be seen in the continuation of the practices embraced by the group as they worked on the root cause analyses together. For example, they have more rigorous reading assignments including summer reading; purchasing and sharing materials for more consistent curriculum implementation across the county; collaboration and data-driven decision-making; plus parent and student AP information meetings.

Two results stand out as the most important of all. The first is the changed perception of “Rigor for All” in Hall County. The second is the lesson learned that taking a brutally honest look at current practices, and engaging in urgent and aggressive action research, might lead to the investigation of a different issue than originally presented – but, it can also reap untold and unexpected benefits.

Outcomes: 2008 & 2009 AP Exam Scores

AP Course	2008			2009		
	Number of Exams	# of Scores ≥ 3	% of Scores ≥ 3	Number of Exams	# of Scores ≥ 3	% of Scores ≥ 3
English Lang/Comp	294	101	34	294	129	44
Gov't/Politics US	219	31	14	273	76	28
US History	315	74	23	183	65	36

What was the Impact?

Some of the positive changes resulting from this process include:

- The continuing application of GLISI's Action Research process to future school/system issues as an effective means of achieving results through data analysis and collaboration
- Open and honest dialogue about teaching and learning, with a dual goal of equity and excellence
- Increased levels of communication and collaboration between central office leaders and the schools
- Improved sharing of lesson plans, materials, and assessments to collaboratively improve AP teachers' practices
- Changed organizational views of Advanced Placement courses and rigor for all
- Changed high school culture to data-driven decision making
- Examination of policies related to weighted grades

- Stronger vertical alignment of curriculum within departments and with middle school teachers
- Curriculum and policy improvement

High school teachers now share materials and ideas; there is a healthy sense of camaraderie and competition. They work together instead of working in their “AP silos.” Principals have offered incentives and are asking for reports from their teachers on students’ progress. Policies about students’ taking exams have been revisited and are now being implemented more consistently. Parents have been enlisted in communicating to their children the importance of taking AP classes and doing well on the exam. Another overarching change is the consistent use of a more formal, effective collaborative process to solve problems. The Action Research process provided Hall County with a way of engaging leaders and teachers in a productive, team-based learning approach to solving large issues in the district. And whether or not the scores for 2009 AP exams met Hall County’s SMART Goal, the changes – in large part due to the GLISI Rising Stars Collaboratives™ program - will be permanent changes in policies and practices that will benefit the students in Hall County Schools.

Richard Sagor, in his book, *Guiding School Improvement with Action Research*, states three purposes for Action Research: building a reflective practitioner, making progress on schoolwide priorities, and building professional cultures. He further states that “when individual teachers make a personal commitment to systematically collect data on their work, they are embarking on a process that will foster continuous growth and development.” This example of Hall County’s commitment to Action Research shows a powerful impact on team building, student achievement, and program development. School faculties, with guidance from an accomplished, performance-based leader like Dr. Sally Krisel, can use action research as a tool to help transform themselves into a learning organization – a “community of learners” who collaboratively study and improve the teaching and learning process.

Next Steps

According to Dr. Krisel, there have been enough positive results from this action research initiative that, even before the next AP Exam results are in, the process will be replicated with the next 3 highest-enrolled AP classes. In addition to continuing to revisit these issues as they relate to AP Exams in high school, the district also intends to transfer the Action Research process to impact teaching and learning in other elementary, middle, and high schools. In 2009-2010, after her participation in GLISI’s Rising Stars program and her success in leading teams of teachers in a healthy resolution of a pressing district-wide issue, Dr. Krisel stated that the district will continue to utilize GLISI’s Rising Stars Action Research process as they continue data collection and analysis of AP courses and exam scores. They will expand the data collection, root cause analysis processes, and utilize other GLISI tools and resources to resolve important issues both at the district and school level. By engaging teachers in inquiry, exploration, discovery, problem-solving, and collaboration and the lessons learned from the GLISI Rising Stars Action Research experience, everyone benefits!