

# ***Engagement for Success:***

## **A Turnaround at Mitchell County Middle School**

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### **Overview**

#### ***Innovation at a Glance***

As a district, the Mitchell County School District was not meeting Adequate Yearly Progress goals, primarily because of a lack of performance at Mitchell County Middle School stemming from low expectations from both the staff and the students. The school was in year six of being on Georgia Department of Education's Needs Improvement list when a new principal was hired from within the school. The principal implemented a strategy that included a distributed leadership model of ownership and accountability and a "Plan, Do, Check, Act" cycle of continuous improvement, and within two years, the school was removed from the Needs Improvement list. Since then, the school has leveraged Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) training, which has made the turnaround sustainable. As a result, the school district has met Adequate Yearly Progress goals for two consecutive years.

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

In addition to being removed from the Needs Improvement list after eight years, Mitchell County Middle School made significant gains in CRCT scores, and the district increased the graduation rate by 32.8%. The school's goals and initiatives have resulted in substantial academic growth for students in Reading/ELA and Math. Additionally, attendance rates have drastically improved, and discipline referrals have decreased. While gaps continue to exist between all students and students with disabilities, these gaps have incrementally decreased. There are no significant performance gaps among other subgroups.

### **The Impact Story**

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

Mitchell County, with a total population of approximately 24,000 citizens, is located in a predominately agricultural region of southwest Georgia. Of these citizens, approximately 4,200 are between the ages of 5 and 18. Within the county there is a county school system, a city school system, a K-12 charter school, a Mennonite Christian School, and a secular private school. The Mitchell County School System serves approximately 2,400 of the students residing within the county. According to year 2007 estimates from the Census Bureau report, approximately 25.3% of

those living in Mitchell County are below the poverty level. However, 75% of students attending Mitchell County Schools receive free or reduced priced lunches, and 94% of students at Mitchell County Middle School receive free or reduced priced lunches.

For years, Mitchell County Middle School suffered from a stigma of failure. As a result, enrollment steadily declined. As parents with other options withdrew their students, the middle school became charged with educating a high percentage of economically disadvantaged students (currently at 94%). The student composition also lacks significant diversity among its student population, which is 88% black, 7% white, and 4% Hispanic.

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

In 2004-05, when a new principal was appointed from within the ranks of the staff, an attitude of failure had pervaded the school, affecting both students and staff alike. The principal was challenged with taking a school in NI6 status and turning it around. The current principal of Mitchell County Middle School was on the first Mitchell County team to participate in *GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit™ (BC/LS)* in 2007-08. In 2008-09 he returned to BC/LS and brought several members of his school leadership team. Their involvement enhanced their work of implementing a distributed leadership model of team-based decision making, making data-informed decisions, identifying root causes, and executing a "Plan, Do, Check, Act" cycle of continuous improvement.

Mitchell County Middle School's plan included a focus on six specific areas:

- 1) Ongoing and deliberate collaboration among internal and external stakeholders with established and maintained protocols
- 2) Analysis of multiple sources of leading and lagging data
- 3) Prioritization of initiatives based on data and identified root causes
- 4) Creation of a performance culture which expects excellence and commitment from each student and staff member
- 5) Provisions of support to ensure students and staff had the time, resources, skills, and knowledge to meet expectations
- 6) A deliberate process for recognizing and rewarding excellence

An Initial Better-Seeking Team (IBST) was created which consisted of administrators and instructional coaches, as well as the media specialist, the guidance counselor, and the graduation coach. This team led school-level teams in disaggregating data from the prior year's CRCT reports, a GAPSS Analysis, state mandated benchmarks, informal and formal observations, focus walks, attendance reports and discipline reports. This data was used to identify focus areas for school-wide interventions. After intense data analysis, the team identified two primary areas on which to focus: math and students with disabilities. A school-wide leadership team was expanded from this team to include teacher representation.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were developed to serve as the vehicle for professional growth as well as for planning for interventions and providing oversight of implementation. Grade level PLC teams met weekly to discuss data gathered on Awareness Walks, and teachers met after school for targeted professional learning. Grade level/subject area planning times were scheduled and highly protected. This allowed teachers to develop common lesson plans and common assessments. Content-specific professional training was provided to teachers of students with disabilities to ensure the curriculum was consistent with that being taught to all other students.

After analysis of the data, individual students were identified for extensive remediation. One group of students, identified among the staff as the Principal's Targeted Students, were primarily those who were slightly below or slightly above the level of acceptable mastery as determined by the state (a score of 800 on the CRCT). Intervention strategies provided for this group of students ensured that they received additional time and support needed to remediate and master skill areas.

Some of these interventions included the establishment of a Numeracy course, an after-school program, and Saturday school (including transportation). Academic intersession, a week-long period at the end of each nine weeks where students received concentrated instruction in deficit areas (based on the nine weeks exam data) was also particularly effective. Students with Disabilities were invited to attend each intersession.

A mandatory school-wide safety net support session was held each Wednesday for any struggling students. This session occurred during each teacher's 90-minute planning time where remediation was provided to students identified as needing additional support. Connection class teachers

included remediation skills for students attending their classes, and members of the Initial Better-Seeking Team paired with Principal Targeted Students, providing them individual tutoring during connections classes. Instructional coaches provided remediation for Students with Disabilities in math and English/Language Arts.

Proactive measures were taken to ensure students' needs were appropriately identified. Post CRCT assessments were given to validate scores and identify at-risk students not previously identified. Benchmark assessments were used along with other frequent formal and informal assessment strategies. Additionally, all students received instruction in test taking strategies.

Teachers were provided numerous resources to guide and support the instructional program. All students were taught a curriculum that was consistently guided by the Georgia Performance Standards. Teachers used the Georgia Frameworks, curriculum maps, and pacing guides as they collaboratively developed daily instructional plans. Technology integration was an important component in each classroom. Laptops, Promethean boards, data projectors, document cameras, and scanners were purchased to create 21<sup>st</sup> Century Classrooms. Computer-based assessment programs such as New Century, OAS, Odyssey Ware, Classworks, and Holt were available to help identify deficiencies. Leveled libraries were purchased for each English/Language Arts classroom.

A performance culture was created within the school that demanded excellence from the staff and students alike. Staff members adopted the philosophy of mutual accountability for all students. The goals to increase math performance and increase performance for Students with Disabilities (SWD) became the responsibility of each staff member. Frequent formal and informal monitoring of instruction by administrators ensured consistency and quality of instruction.

In addition, clear and specific norms and protocols for staff and students were implemented. This was evidenced in the development of a school-wide discipline plan that was consistently enforced as well as the institution of an attendance policy that included both consequences and rewards. Expectations for students became more rigorous. In addition to a more rigorous daily curriculum and behavioral expectations, students were required to read at least one book from each content area every nine weeks, and writing across the curriculum became the norm. To ensure students with

disabilities were being held to the same level of accountability as regular education students, inclusion classrooms were implemented throughout the school.

This culture of performance and high expectations was also supported through the deliberate adoption of a “student first” philosophy. Policies and systems were analyzed and revised as necessary. An example of this was a mutual decision that students would not be allowed to accept a zero on an assignment. Instead, the student would be required to return to the class during a connections time to complete the work or to correct the assignment.

With increased demands being made on students, the staff realized the necessity to measure, manage, monitor and reward desired behaviors. Each year students participated in a “Promise to Graduate” ceremony, and an “Eagles on Track” program monitored student progress and behavior. Students were rewarded with celebrations for having no discipline referrals throughout the month, passing all subjects for each nine weeks, meeting nine week reading goals, and meeting or exceeding standards on the CRCT.

Following the GLISI process of looking across all systems that impact student achievement, the leadership team acknowledged that external stakeholder engagement was critical to success. Parent perception data was obtained through surveys and conversations to which goals were established in this area. Initiatives were identified that allowed for deliberate parent input in the decision-making process, thus encouraging parents and the community to share in the responsibility for providing a quality education for all students. Family night sessions were held to inform parents of expectations and to provide them guidance and tips for how they might support student goals.

### ***What were the Results?***

After being on the Needs Improvement list for eight years, Mitchell County Middle School earned Adequate Yearly Progress status for school years 2007-08 and 2008-09, thus eliminating the prevailing stigma of failure. Mitchell County Middle School has made consistent, incremental gains in both reading and math scores on the CRCT over the past seven years. In 2003-04, 73% of students met or exceeded standards in reading/ELA compared to 91.3% in 2008-09. This reflects a gain of 18.3%. Gains have also been achieved in math. In 2003-04, 59.5% of students met or exceeded math standards.

By 2008-09 the percentage had risen to 76.2%, amassing a gain of 16.7 percentage points. Additionally, the attendance rate improved dramatically from 2004-05, when 14.9% of students were absent 15 or more days. In 2006, this rate climbed to 15.9% and therefore was a deterrent to making AYP. Over the next three years, initiatives were enacted that resulted in only 2.4% of students missing 15 or more days in 2008-09.

A primary goal for the school was closing the achievement gap between all students and students with disabilities. In 2003-04 only 14% of SWD met standards in math. By 2008-09, this percentage had increased to 50%. Likewise, in 2003-04, 19.5% of SWD students met standards in reading; however, by 2008-09, 59.7% of SWD students met standards in this area.

### ***What was the Impact?***

The school improvement efforts had far-reaching implications. While these documentable gains in student achievement scores and the graduation rate reflect positively on the district and school, the most significant impact is on individual students whose lives have been changed. Research clearly shows that students who are overage entering high school, who lack prerequisite skills, or who feel disconnected from the educational process are far more likely to drop out once they reach high school. In 2003-04, the graduation rate for Mitchell County was 45.7%. The graduation rate for 2008-09 was 78.5%. Mitchell County Middle School had been the “weak link” in a system striving for excellence. Through district support, deliberate analysis of data, data supported decisions regarding targeted goals, vertical and horizontal alignment of initiatives, and a teams-based approach to implementation, the district’s graduation rate has increased by 32.8 percentage points over the past five years.

This process for improvement has become the way the district works and learns together. The entire district has embraced the distributed leadership model of empowerment in the decision-making process and has developed a system Balanced Scorecard to ensure alignment of initiatives and a continuous focus on high priority goals and high impact solutions across all levels.

### ***Next Steps***

An obvious characteristic of a healthy performance culture is one that is never satisfied with the current level of performance. Mitchell County Middle School is proud of their accomplishments; however, they are determined to continue this upward cycle of continuous improvement. The team

realizes that they must continue to focus on closing the achievement gap between all students and students with disabilities. They are committed to ongoing vertical and horizontal teaming, and they see a need to expand upon the conversations and partnering with the elementary schools and high school. Although it is improving, public perception continues to be a struggle within the community, especially as many of the families who have enrolled their students in other schools are not familiar with the positive changes.

There has been a great deal of change for the school within the past five years, which has created a level of stress for those involved. A challenge will be to keep the highly trained teachers who commute from other districts. No doubt in today's economy, they will be tempted to secure a position closer to home, and with their reputation as "turnaround educators," these teachers and leaders will be highly marketable.

The future work of the district and school will be supported with GLISI's current efforts to implement a Balanced Scorecard at the district level that is cascaded to the schools, thus providing alignment of strategic goals and objectives. A continuing part of this process will be to analyze current systems and weed out work that is redundant or not effective.