

Engagement for Success:

School Reform Teams and *Flipping the Script* in the Atlanta Public Schools: Creating a Customer-focused Culture in the Delivery of Services from the Central Office to the Schools

Overview

Innovation at a Glance

This Success Case chronicles both the initial structural reform and the subsequent transformation of the Atlanta Public Schools' (APS) central office to improve service delivery to the schools in support of student achievement. The first step was to reorganize the school system into five School Reform Teams (SRTs) to bring leadership, services, and support closer to the schools. Once that framework was firmly in place, school-level, SRT-level, and system-level leaders who were committed to continuous improvement focused on improving not just the organizational structure, but also the work processes performed in support of the schools. That transformation is called *Flipping the Script*.

Flipping the Script is a paradigm shift, where formerly “top-down” decision-making is replaced with decision-making that starts with the schools as they identify the support they need to implement district priorities. The SRTs identify commonalities among schools and broker services from the central office for their schools. Leaders and staff throughout the organization use information provided by the schools for planning purposes and work to improve the critical processes, procedures, and customer service that enhance and support the schools' needs as they implement the district's reform agenda.

The reorganization into SRTs and the transformation in thinking, decision-making, and work processes driven by school needs are not discrete innovations; instead, they are two elements of a complex, multi-year comprehensive reform agenda implemented by APS and must only be considered as best practices within that context and framework.

Impact at a Glance

The initial reorganization into SRTs set the expectation that executive directors who supervise principals and schools would be proven leaders – not just administrators – who employ a collaborative leadership style to support principals as they implement APS' aggressive reform agenda. It also created “one-stop shopping” for principals to access needed services.

The subsequent *Flipping the Script* transformation to a “bottom-up” service delivery model where schools define their needs in order to meet district priorities has redefined the work of the central office and also how the work gets done.

The Impact Story

Background/Context

For a decade, the Atlanta Public Schools, like many urban districts, struggled to maintain stable leadership, with five different superintendents serving in a 10-year period. In 1999, Dr. Beverly Hall, a nationally recognized education leader, accepted the position of superintendent in APS. Dr. Hall found that students from all ability groups and all grades were underperforming, and the school system's culture fostered low expectations. An analysis of multi-year trend data of student performance on tests, enrollment patterns, attendance, staff evaluations, and other information confirmed that total and comprehensive reform was required throughout the organization.

Dr. Hall assembled a cross-functional leadership team of internal staff and external consultants. They reviewed the body of research and looked to other leading systems across the country to identify a comprehensive school reform model that would fit the diverse needs of APS. While several other districts engaged in specific best practices designed to improve student achievement, none had designed a comprehensive strategic plan to reform the entire organization. The team realized that they were designing and implementing a unique and innovative solution to completely reform all parts of an urban school system.

Given the urgent need to induce rapid change, Dr. Hall and the leadership team devised a *Theory of Action* to establish a reform agenda focused on instruction and accountability: ***To improve the quality of educational experiences students receive and ultimately student performance, a system must be reformed from the classroom to board room.***

This change process focused on *all* aspects of the organization and how each should be reformed to ensure a focus on instruction and accountability. Changes to curriculum and pedagogy, while challenging, were at least familiar territory. Reforms in governance, business operations, and central office organization were complex but critically important if APS was to achieve sustainable reform.

The existing organizational structure failed to support the schools. Decision-making was top-down and often arbitrary. Communications between departments, and between departments and schools, was limited, delayed, and confused, often leading to duplications in service or even no services at all. Each department within the organization existed in a "silo," and no one asked the schools what they needed. Services were often provided in a one-size-fits-all fashion, and schools were frustrated when they were held accountable for goals but lacked the resources to achieve them.

What Was Done?

Step One: Structural Reform. Dr. Hall and the leadership team began by changing the structure of the organization. The school system was divided into five School Reform Teams. Four of the teams, comprised of elementary and middle schools, are based on geographical proximity. The fifth SRT is comprised of all the system's high schools.

Each SRT is led by an Executive Director, who has direct supervisory responsibility and accountability for the principals and schools assigned to the team. Executive Directors are education leaders, not administrators, who have a proven track record of success at the building level. They also demonstrate an in-depth knowledge of best practices in comprehensive school reform and instructional strategies that allow them to operationalize the superintendent's vision by improving the schools and the principals who lead them. Executive Directors are given significant autonomy and use a collaborative, coaching leadership style to change the organization's culture by training principals, building relationships, and leading by example.

School reform teams are also given the resources they need to achieve desired results. Staff from every major department within APS, including Curriculum and Instruction, Finance, Operations, Legal, and Human Resources, is assigned to provide primary support for an SRT. These positions are dubbed "critical connectors," and ensure that service providers have close ties and direct links to the schools.

What were the Results?

The structural reorganization of APS into SRTs resulted in:

- Coaching and collaborative leadership to supervise and support principals and schools. Executive directors set expectations for a culture of high expectation and achievement, and also advocate for the needs of their schools.
- "One-stop shopping" for schools to secure needed services
 - Minimized distractions for principals who could then focus on instructional leadership rather than operational concerns.
 - Timely services provided to schools.
 - Closer relationships between schools and central office service providers
- An organizational climate that supports improved student achievement¹

Step Two: Transformation: Thinking about the Work and Changing Work Processes. As stated previously, the implementation of the SRT structural reorganization occurred as a part of an overall comprehensive reform initiative that was changing APS into a school system with a culture of continuous learning and high expectations. Learning became inherent in everyday actions. The phrase "*Leaders as Learners*" became commonplace in the system as the organization began to operate as a learning community. That spirit of continuous learning led school, SRT, and central office leaders to examine their own practices to see what might be done to accelerate improved services to schools.

Using principles of project management, the district began to work in cross-functional teams. These teams, facilitated by the Panasonic Foundation's Leadership Associates Program, discussed questions like, "Who is the customer?;" "How are decisions made?;" "What is best for instruction?;" and "How do I need to change the way I am working?" These discussions led to the realization that not only the structure of the organization had to change, but also that the work processes

¹ The reorganization into SRTs is only one element in the complex, multi-year comprehensive reform plan implemented by the Atlanta Public Schools. While the district's significant gains in student achievement are included as results in this performance analysis, they must be considered within the context of the overall reform plan.

themselves and the people who perform them had to *transform* in order for the organization to become high-performing. Thus, the concept of *Flipping the Script* emerged from the culture of continuous learning as a natural “next step” in support of the schools.

Flipping the Script inverts the traditional top-down decision-making model, allowing the schools to determine their needs as they implement the district’s reform agenda. Schools also provide significant input into the strategic planning process. *Flipping the Script*, however, is not synonymous with site-based management, where power and authority is decentralized to the school level. Instead, this innovation focuses on a change at the central office level where the school becomes the focus of attention. Central office staff members recognize that the school principal is the direct customer for their services and that providing high-quality customer service to the principal is their way to have an indirect, but important impact on student achievement. Central office employees also understand that when they focus on school and SRT priorities during cross-functional planning, it ensures that the goods and services they provide align with identified school needs.

Initially, this model was piloted within the Division of Curriculum and Instruction. However, it quickly became clear that bottom-up decision-making would not be effective unless implementation occurred systemically, since work processes were cross-functional across multiple departments. *Flipping the Script* is in the initial stages of implementation and system-wide student achievement continues to improve².

What were the Results?

Survey data and anecdotal reports support the following results:

- The organization’s capacity is growing.
 - Authentic conversations are occurring about the critical work, and they flow up, down, and across the organization.
 - Collaboration and cross-functional teamwork is increasing.
 - Employees express both positive feelings and concerns about the new work and the new ways the work is done.
 - Organizational leaders use coaching techniques to support employees and assist them in the development of new skill sets during the transformation process.
 - The organization supports continuous learning. Employees are consciously exploring new ways of working and are motivated to succeed. Employees are internalizing organizational goals and taking ownership of their work and its outcomes.
- School principals report that:
 - Services have improved and errors have decreased.
 - Goods and services are more aligned with school needs and priorities.
- Site visits to schools by central office staff have increased.
- Central office staff members identify their direct customer as the school principal.

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- Decision-making:
 - Begins with the schools' needs.
 - Considers the impact on instruction.
 - Is more cross-functional and collaborative.
- Routine functions are becoming automated and user-friendly.

What was the Impact?

The structural reform of the central office into SRTs and the transformation to bottom-up decision making and changes to work processes, called *Flipping the Script*, were designed to achieve the following goals:

- Creation of a sustainable, streamlined organization and culture that supports student achievement.
- Data-driven work and the allocation of resources and services based on school and SRT needs and priorities.
- Greater alignment of all resources for more effective and efficient services.
- Improved quality of goods and services.

Next Steps

The Atlanta Public Schools is committed to the SRT model and its school-focused paradigm shift, *Flipping the Script*, as elements in its comprehensive reform plan. It will be formally and informally sustained and monitored by:

- Incorporation of specific strategies and performance measures on the APS Strategy Management System (balanced scorecard), which was developed with support from Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI).
- Incorporation of requirements on staff evaluations at every level of the organization.
- Ongoing employee surveys.
- Ongoing expectations of SRT Executive Directors and school principals.
- Ongoing discussion as part of the Panasonic Foundation Leadership Associates Program.

What Helped? What Didn't?

Accelerators

- **Information:** The vision, mission, purpose, and expectations of the initial SRT reorganization were clearly explained throughout the organization with a flow chart to show roles and relationships. *Flipping the Script* was also well-communicated and explained throughout the organization, in large part because it was conceptualized by the very staff whose work would be impacted.
- **Rewards/Consequences:** *Flipping the Script* was conceptualized by staff who were influenced by the culture of continuous learning to improve their own work. It relies strongly on intrinsic motivation; however, performance measures are in place to monitor and ensure compliance.

- **Design:** A senior leadership team comprised of veteran APS staff and new leaders brought in by the superintendent, designed the SRT concept. This group had knowledge of the existing organization, what successful schools required, and best practices in school reform. The *Flipping the Script* concept was designed by staff members who were actively engaged in the work and who were committed to continuous improvement.
- **Capacity:** Initially, SRT Executive Directors supported critical connectors and explained the new work and new expectations. The *Flipping the Script* concept required a paradigm shift for employees throughout the organization; however, it was conceived by employees who were performing the work and was supported by a culture of continuous learning. Leaders throughout the organization expanded their capacity through consistent training on transformational coaching. The organization's capacity grew:
 - As a result of the implementation of the comprehensive reform agenda.
 - With support from outside groups such as the Panasonic Foundation and Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement.
- **Congruence:** Alignment between school needs and services is the primary goal of the SRT reform and the transformation to bottom-up decision-making and changes to work processes. The innovations were also congruent with other aspects of the organization's comprehensive reform agenda.
- **Governance/Sponsorship:** Senior leaders, SRT executive directors, and principals championed the initial SRT structural reorganization. SRT executive directors provided training on the new work of the organization. Likewise, leaders and individual contributors at all levels of the organization champion the *Flipping the Script* concept and see it as the next step in continuous improvement. The concept is becoming part of the organization's culture, thus supporting long-term sustainability.

Barriers

- **Capacity:** Based on past history, staff capacity was the biggest barrier to the initial SRT reorganization. Prior to 1999, employees had been able to resist change and maintain positions of authority during a decade of instability in senior leadership. Now, central office staff are held accountable for the customer service they provide to the schools and the SRTs.