

# ***Engagement for Success:***

## **Implementing GLISI Initiatives to Increase the Graduation Rate in the Jones County School System**

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### **Overview**

#### ***Innovation/Solution/Practice at a Glance***

Jones County School System senior leaders participated in GLISI's Balanced Performance Leadership Training in an effort to provide alignment of and focus on strategic goals among all stakeholders. The work resulted in a system Balanced Scorecard that was cascaded to the school level where alignment between the schools' improvement plans and the system's strategic goals was ensured. This focused and aligned systemic culture among all stakeholder groups provided a collaborative environment where the district's needs were identified and prioritized.

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

Stakeholder groups agreed that the graduation rate was abysmal and should receive the highest priority within the Student Achievement Strategic Goal. The district's Balanced Scorecard provided a framework for developing system-wide initiatives for improving the graduation rate while each school developed individual action steps to support the goal. Prior to implementation of the graduation rate initiatives (2004), the graduation rate was 61.5%; after five years, the graduation rate rose to 75.3% (2008) with incremental gains noted for each year of implementation. Gaps between subgroups also narrowed.

### **The Impact Story**

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

Jones County is a predominately rural, bedroom community situated in the middle Georgia area between Macon and Milledgeville. Gray, the county seat of Jones County, is a small, yet growing, town that maintains a small-town appeal for those seeking to escape the more urban, highly populated areas nearby. Jones County serves approximately 5,600 students in one primary school, three elementary schools, two middle schools, one high school, and a ninth-grade academy. The student population is comprised of 71% white students, 27% black students, 1% Hispanic, and 1% multiracial. Of these students, 40% receive free or reduced lunches (Economically Disadvantaged, or ED) and 11.5% are categorized as Students With Disabilities (SWD).

In 2005, a new superintendent, Jim LeBrun, was appointed to Jones County. Prior to this appointment, the district benefited from a high degree of community satisfaction and stakeholder loyalty; however, upon delving into the data, the new superintendent realized that there was work to be done in order for the district to continue to merit this favorable public view. Most of the schools were working extremely hard; however, each was working in isolation on school-specific goals. There was no alignment of initiatives and little accountability for success. Superintendent LeBrun

found the graduation rate particularly concerning. Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) data revealed that the overall graduation rate for 2003-2004 was 61.5%, with a significant disparity among subgroups: 62.4% of white students graduated; 59.4% of black students graduated; 50% of ED students graduated; and 6.9% of SWD graduated.

### **What Was Done?**

Superintendent LeBrun began leading initiatives within the district that would create a balanced performance culture, aligning system and school goals. In order to do this, he began creating a sense of urgency for sustainable improvement throughout the district and sought assistance from GLISI to help in creating a team-based approach to school improvement. GLISI involvement would also provide the tools and background knowledge of best practices that would enhance the teams' ability to identify and address systemic needs. This was accomplished by sending leadership teams through GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit, and members of these teams formed the District Change Team. It was the mission of these team members to cascade a team-based approach throughout the district to ensure unity and singleness of purpose for all stakeholders.

After beginning the process of a team-based approach to school improvement and equipping leaders with the necessary background knowledge and tools, the superintendent and a team of leaders took the next step in the process by participating in GLISI's Executive Development sessions. According to the superintendent and the leadership team, this was the catalyst for real change within the district. This team of leaders became acutely aware that the district still lacked a framework for identifying, monitoring, measuring, and evaluating systemic initiatives. It was at this point that the district began work on a Balanced Performance Leadership initiative that included the development of a district Balanced Scorecard that was aligned to school improvement plans.

The realization that this process had implications for dramatic and sustainable change was an epiphany for the superintendent and the initial Balanced Scorecard team. The first step in the process was to review the mission, vision, and beliefs, as all else would be predicated on the premise that every decision must support these foundational principles. After coming to agreement and codifying the mission, vision, and beliefs, the team began to look at prioritizing district needs. Within the framework of the Balanced Scorecard, the team identified three strategic goal areas for improvement: (1) Student Achievement; (2) Operational Efficiency; and (3) Stakeholder Satisfaction. Once these three broad goal areas were identified, the district level Balanced Scorecard team began looking at Performance Objectives within each subgroup. For each Performance Objective there were Performance Measures and targets which were extended over a three-year period. This process was cascaded to the school level where School Improvement Plans reflected each of the district's strategic goals and performance objectives and integrated site-specific data and projected targets. Schools also added performance objectives, based on individual needs of the school.

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

Increasing the graduation rate for all students, as well as subpopulations, was identified as a top priority. Collaborative teams (led by members of the District Change Team) applied knowledge and tools received in GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit trainings to conducted analyses to verify the data and identify the root causes for the poor graduation rate. Within the framework of the Balanced Scorecard and individual School Improvement Plan, district and school action steps were

developed to support the graduation rate initiative and implemented using the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle of continuous improvement. Findings and plans for improvement were strategically and aggressively shared with various stakeholder groups within the community. "Raise the graduation rate" became the slogan for leaders as they met with civic groups, board members, PTA members, and parents. As a consequence, the graduation rate was no longer perceived as a high school problem, but a sense of urgency was created at each level and for all stakeholders. The graduation rate was now elevated to a community problem.

While the graduation rate increased through use of this process, long-term implications for using this process were apparent. The balanced performance culture that was created within the district created a sustainable way of identifying strategic goals, setting performance measures and goals, and establishing attainable targets at the district as well as the school level.

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

The most dramatic impact was the increase (13.8%) in the overall graduation rate and the narrowing of gaps in subgroups over a five-year period. Prior to this systematic means of identifying, measuring, and monitoring the success of district initiatives, the graduation rate was 61.5%. After five years of systemically and systematically implementing the Balanced Scorecard plan, the graduation rate rose to 75.3% (2008) with incremental gains noted for each year of implementation.

In 2004, 50% of Economically Disadvantaged students graduated compared to 66.7% in 2008 - an increase of 16.7%. The graduation rate for Students with Disabilities was a mere 6.9% in 2004; however, by 2008, the rate had increased by 41.4 percentage points to 48.3%. The gap between black and white students had been minimal throughout this time period with white students graduating at a slightly higher rate than black students, but in 2008, black students graduated at a higher rate (78%) than white students (74.6%) for the first time in history.

Increasing the graduation rate resulted in immediate positive implications for individual students, the community, and the school system. The most obvious impact is for those students who achieved a high school diploma, but perhaps would not have if the intervention had not been enacted. Using baseline (2004) and current (2008) data, there were 29 students who graduated in 2008 who would have dropped out in 2004, had the trend remained constant. For these students, their lifetime income potential and value to the community has increased dramatically.

Other areas of impact included a change in public perception, as measured by an opinion survey. Although the community had generally held the district in high esteem, results of the survey showed an even greater increase in stakeholder satisfaction.

The successful implementation of the Balanced Performance Leadership process created a model of success for any strategic objective the district might adopt while nurturing a professional learning culture. Within this context, an atmosphere was created that encouraged stakeholder input and expressed value for the contributions of each team member. The positive energy generated when success was experienced invigorated, encouraged, and empowered teams to aggressively tackle additional strategic goals and performance objectives with confidence.

A senior-level administrator remarked, “I believe that everyone now owns our mission to GRADUATE students from Jones County who are prepared for the real world! Our number one goal is to increase the graduation rate. Our leaders (and teachers) now really see that when you focus on something K-12, there is a positive result.”

This success is larger than one initiative, however. System leaders propose that this process has changed the future of education for the Jones County School System by providing focus, alignment, accountability, and unity of purpose. The same district administrator praised the process that led to the increased graduation rate with these comments:

*“I believe that the Balanced Scorecard concept has helped to bring focus to our leaders as they work to strategically improve schools. We always had “plans” for improvement; however, the plans were static and often not connected to a bigger picture. Now we have a system Continuous Improvement Plan and Balanced Scorecard that are interconnected with the purpose of driving improvement at BOTH the system and school levels. Plans are now active and people actually use them! Our plans are continuous and build/expand, year after year. It is easier for us to see where we have lost focus using the BSC. Everything is right in front of us in living color! It is hard to ignore the RED on the Balanced Scorecard!!”*

In addition to the desired outcome, there were several positive unintended consequences associated with this initiative.

- The action steps implemented to increase the graduation rate resulted in an increase of scores on the Georgia High School Graduation Tests scores in English/Language Arts as well as Mathematics. Baseline math scores in 2004 reflected that 70% of students met or exceeded standards while in 2008, 79.3% of students met or exceeded standards. Data from 2004 reflects that 91% of students met or exceeded standards in English/Language Arts while 94.8% met or exceeded in 2008.
- Attendance rates increased significantly from 2004 to 2008. In 2004, 15.4% of students missed 15 or more days, while in 2008 only 11.5% of students missed 15 or more days.
- Students are afforded an opportunity to participate in seven dual-enrollment courses with partnering colleges.
- Student enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) Courses has increased from 140 students in 2006-2007 to 307 students in 2008-2009.

System leaders unanimously feel that measures delineated through their Balanced Scorecard are successful and leaders are dedicated to the refinement and further implementation of current initiatives. They vow that gone are the days when they will jump from one promising initiative to another because they have found a system that demands excellence, commitment, collaboration, and constant evaluation of success. A strong district leadership team, consisting of administrators and teacher leaders from all levels share a common vision for the district and are committed to a “Plan, Do, Check, Act” cycle for continuous improvement, thus ensuring continued alignment, effectiveness, and implementation of identified strategic objectives.

### ***Next Steps***

Plans are to continue sending teams of leaders to GLISI opportunities to ensure that a critical mass of stakeholders is trained in the team-based approach to school improvement and has the necessary knowledge and skills to ensure the success and sustainability of the district's strategic goals. A new team of administrators is scheduled to attend Base Camp and Leadership Summit during the 2008-2009 school year.