

Engagement for Success:

Qualified Leadership in Walker County

Overview

Innovation at a Glance

Walker County Schools developed an integrated Leader Performance and Supply System by utilizing three key initiatives of Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI): the Rising Stars Collaborative™ process, the Developing High-performing Leaders At All Levels (DHPLAAL) leadership planning workshop, and a Community of Learning and Achievement (COLA). With these programs and tools, they were able to revise their interview and hiring process as well as clearly define the Walker leadership path – starting with the interview process and professional development opportunities for its leaders.

Impact at a Glance

Walker County Schools has redesigned its assessment and leadership development processes. They have used their new interview and hiring process to hire five principals and five assistant principals who are widely considered quality, capable leaders. Walker County Schools and its community have also benefited from a common language and focus, based on the work they have done with GLISI, to use in their pursuit to grow their own leaders and improve student achievement.

The Impact Story

Background/Context

Walker County is located in northwestern Georgia, and has about 9,300 students in 16 schools: nine elementary, three middle, two high schools, and two alternative learning centers. Sixty-two percent of students are economically disadvantaged and over 16 percent of students qualify as students with disabilities. The 442-square-mile rural area has little industry and business growth. The community borders Chattanooga, Tennessee at its northernmost point. Population growth in Walker County has been evident for the last several years, and preliminary findings show that Walker County, with a 9.4 percent increase in the last five years, is growing faster than surrounding counties. This growth has equated to approximately 810 students.

What Was Done?

Walker County Schools used the research and lessons of GLISI to implement a new interview process as well as new development plans and processes for leaders in the district. In 2006, Walker County needed to hire two new high school principals. A high dropout rate and low graduation rate dictated that the two new leaders needed to be able to lead the schools to new successes as quickly as possible. To ensure that the district leaders selected the best candidates, they used the GLISI *Developing High-performing Leaders At All Levels* (DHPLAAL) framework to redefine their interview process. As a leadership and planning retreat for senior leaders, DHPLAAL aims to help leaders improve their leader performance and supply systems, making sure that properly trained and

qualified leaders are available when needed and that those leaders are monitored on their performance. DHPLAAL provides district participants with a framework to follow to focus on and provide leader performance support. Specifically, the district leadership team was able to better understand performance-based learning and gain fluency in how to use the DHPLAAL framework in their district with their challenges and goals.

To start their work and follow this framework, Walker County Schools reviewed the *8 Roles of School Leaders™* to prioritize the skills, knowledge, and experiences that were needed to make a difference in their schools and system. With the help of GLISI Performance Consultant Mike Moody, Walker County leaders developed a new interview process that included new questions based on the *GLISI 8 Roles of School Leaders™* and the GLISI core competencies of principals. These two resources helped to focus the interview and the questions on what the interviewers needed to address with potential candidates. The teamwork of system-level leadership served not only to develop a process, but to truly crystallize the dimensions required of a Walker County leader. Participating in the interview process provided each candidate insight into what is expected of a leader in Walker County.

The new interview process also included a diverse and representative panel of parents, teachers, business leaders, and other stakeholders to listen to the candidates' responses and provide input on who they thought best met the needs of their community. Melissa Mathis, Walker County Superintendent, said, "Selecting one-third of our total school leadership by a new process could be considered an extreme challenge, compounded by a diminished supply and growing need for qualified leadership. Yet our process guided us. We trusted it and it has served, without a doubt, to supply the best leaders for each unique assignment." (Details of the process are provided in the results section below.)

The updated interview process was revised after its initial use and then used three more times, when Walker County needed to hire three elementary school principals. Replacing five principals in two years in a small district is a large undertaking and warrants a proven interview process to hire the right people. Again, the process used a representative panel of stakeholders and questions that reflected the *GLISI 8 Roles of School Leaders™* and the needs of the district. Ms. Mathis commented that, "The process led to the hiring of three outstanding candidates as new principals."

The fully aligned interview questions, along with the representative panel of stakeholders, together formed the new Walker County interview process for principals, which is now used for assistant principals. The questions are slightly different, based on the core competencies of assistant principals, but the format and process remain the same, providing continuity between the two leadership roles.

As work around the interview process continued, district leaders noticed that they needed to define what it takes to be a leader in Walker County Schools and how to become a leader. After attending a GLISI Community of Learning and Achievement (COLA) on *Leader Performance and Supply*, Walker County started looking more closely at their leadership programs and professional learning. They realized that the path for their assistant principals to become principals was not clearly defined

and that in order to replace the growing number of retirees, they needed to work on the leadership path within their district. They started the work with assistant principals to make sure the district had the leaders it needed, prepared and qualified to make improvements in student achievement.

The core district leadership team met with the assistant principals to assess the level of knowledge, skills, and training they currently had. The assistant principals reviewed the GLISI core competencies for assistant principals and were asked to prioritize on two issues: 1) which core competencies were most important to their role in terms of their district and school's success, and 2) which areas they felt they needed more training in. The district leadership team also asked the principals in the district to do the same exercise, based on what they thought was important for assistant principal competencies. The results were aligned, and using GLISI's framework, the district leadership team for Walker County developed competency tasks for the assistant principals and created a *Performer Path Plan (PPP)* for the role of an assistant principal in Walker County. The PPP is a GLISI-created template that helps outline the skills and performances that a leadership candidate will work on during their growth and development process.

The next step in working with their assistant principals was to identify *GLISI Performance-based Modules (PBMs)* for each of their assistant principals to complete. PBMs were chosen based on the skills and areas of need that were identified in the PPP as well as the individual strengths and areas for growth of the candidates. At this time, Walker County also started a GLISI Rising Stars Collaborative™ and picked seven assistant principals to participate in the one-on-one customized leader preparation program. The PPPs were revised for each of the seven assistant principals to reflect what they individually needed and what their school needed.

With the help of GLISI's processes and programs, Walker County Schools was able to effectively change their interviewing process and provide a more focused approach to building their leaders, starting with the assistant principals, to create a deeper pool of highly qualified leaders and a common language within the district. The district leadership team was able to take what they had learned at GLISI events and bring it back as an *Integrated Leader Performance and Supply System* to their district to make an impact. The team implemented the DHPLAAL framework to revise their interview process and work with the district and its community to think differently about the school system and the leaders within it. The district leadership team also redefined their leadership path for assistant principals and teacher leaders. The leaders are benefitting from this work, as their growth and development is a key priority of the district and the community.

What were the Results?

Walker County Schools effectively revised its interviewing and hiring process and also worked to better align professional development with the new definition of leadership and the goals of the district. The District Leadership Team was able to use what they had learned through GLISI to apply a new *Integrated Leader Performance and Supply System* for the district, and the leaders feel the result in the changes in their professional development and the opportunities they have to learn and share their skills. The new interview process and the focus on leadership in Walker County have led to the highest graduation rate in seven years and also improvement in Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) achievement indicators.

Some of the most visible results are the organizational changes that have occurred in the new common language the system is using, the common focus of the system, and in the new conversations between leaders. Some of the key organizational changes have been:

- A shift toward all system leaders “speaking the same language” and truly focusing on what is happening in the classroom.
- A clear picture of what leaders need to do and be able to do to improve student achievement.
- A change in the conversations between principals and assistant principals from operational topics to curriculum, assessment, and instruction.
- A common instructional framework across the district so that children will know what is expected of them, no matter what grade or school they are in.
- A commitment to supporting Walker County Schools’ leaders, as they are the ones who can make a difference for the students.

What was the Impact?

As shown by the results (below), the major impacts of Walker County’s work with GLISI and the work within their school district to define leadership are the hiring of qualified leadership (five principals and five assistant principals) and the changes to their organization, allowing every leader to be aligned with language, focus, and knowledge. This allows for the system to concentrate on curriculum, assessment, and – most importantly – instruction, with a strong desire to improve student achievement. These changes and improved processes have led to student achievement gains. In addition, the work is developing a pool of highly qualified potential leaders for Walker County Schools.

The system graduation rate is at the highest point in 10 years but is still a dismal 58.6 percent. To improve these results, both veteran and recently hired Walker County leaders are now moving their schools in the same direction. “An education in Walker County Schools is more rigorous and more relevant as we strive to graduate all students ready for college, ready for work, and ready for life,” concluded Mrs. Mathis.

Graduation Rate: Lafayette HS and Ridgeland HS AYP								
	All Students		Black Students		Economically Disadvantaged		Students w/ Disabilities	
	LHS	RHS	LHS	RHS	LHS	RHS	LHS	RHS
2006-2007	57.3%	54%	43.8%	43.5%	50.4%	45.4%	15.4%	18.5%
2007-2008	59.8%	57.5%	76.9%	64%	50.3%	45.2%	20.5%	30.8%

Walker County SAT Scores			
	Walker Co. 2006-07	Walker Co. 2007-08	Georgia 2007-08
Verbal	484	490	486
Math	476	482	490
Writing	471	483	477
Total	1431	1455	1453

Georgia High School Graduation Test Scores: Lafayette HS and Ridgeland HS meets/exceeds AYP				
	Enhanced GHS GT English		Enhanced GHS GT Math	
	LHS	RHS	LHS	RHS
2006-07	87.4%	89.5%	62.6%	67.6%
2007-08	89%	84.5%	71.1%	67.4%

Next Steps

Walker County Schools plans to roll down this process to support selection of academic coaches and is considering using it in the future to select teacher and student leaders. Work is needed to educate the community at large about leadership qualities expected within Walker County Schools and how to identify the different facets of leadership through widespread engagement in the leader selection process. School Board members will continue to embrace and value the yield of the new processes and tools for effectiveness and transparency at all levels of leadership and operations. Monitoring and evaluation tools based on performance and the 8 Roles of School Leaders™ will continue to be tweaked at the administrative level and developed at the teacher and student level.

Walker County Schools will continue to refine this process as unique needs arise from the ever-changing climate related to student achievement as well as the changing needs of students, parents, and community. This practice, coupled with the roll-out of a Balanced Scorecard to the public, will allow the community a deeper view into school progress and system effectiveness.