

# ***Engagement for Success:***

## **Burke County Public Schools' Team-based Improvement of Student Achievement**

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### ***Overview***

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

Burke County Public Schools' leaders formed a partnership with Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) to find student achievement solutions that would improve classroom instruction. Burke leaders used these solutions to generate concrete and measurable student performance increases without placing a prohibitive burden on staff time and resources. According to school system leaders, the combination of GLISI's protocols and the district's vision to develop high-performing schools brought immediate and dramatic results, and Burke leaders attest to the effectiveness of the partnership. According to Superintendent Linda Bailey, "The collaborative partnership with GLISI was the missing piece of the puzzle we had been seeking for a long time." GLISI provided step-by-step guidance on how to utilize Better-seeking Teams to initiate and organize for school improvement.

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

Sardis-Girard-Alexander Elementary School Principal Sam Adkins succinctly describes the impact of the partnership between Burke County School System and GLISI. He states, "Our participation with GLISI has allowed us to gain the insights and tools to reorganize the infrastructure of our school. This reorganization has allowed for greater opportunities for academic success. As a result, our achievement levels are steadily increasing, collegiality has reached new heights, and a climate for comprehensive school improvement has been established." Other Burke County School System administrators echo Mr. Adkins' assessment of the results of the collaboration and generalize the improvement description to a system-wide status.

### **The Impact Story**

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

The Burke County School System serves 4,739 students in six schools. Demographically, the student population is 68 percent black and 30 percent white, and 83.3 percent are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Since 2005, Burke has been engaged in a school improvement effort to become a quality system respected for high standards, outstanding performance, and excellence in student achievement. Like many teachers and administrators across the country, Burke staff knew that despite their best efforts, a number of their students were falling short of mastering standards. District administrators needed to find a job-embedded solution that would enable administrators to improve student achievement.

## **What Was Done?**

According to Burke County School System leaders, their solution was an innovative partnership that combined the district's vision with the suite of solutions offered by GLISI. The partnership was formed through the school system's participation in GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit in 2007-2008 and 2008-2009. This included three cohorts that consisted of district leaders, principals, instructional coordinators, and teachers. System leaders explain that meshing GLISI's systemic improvement solutions and the district's vision to develop high-performing schools ignited immediate and impressive results. Superintendent Linda Bailey observes, "GLISI provided step-by-step guidance to initiate school improvement, organize for improvement, lead Better-seeking teams, analyze data, and identify root causes." Principal Sam Adkins adds, "Specifically, through the leadership of our Better-seeking Team, instructional best practices such as vertical teaming, flexible grouping, data-driven decision-making, and enhanced collaboration have permeated our building, thus allowing a greater capacity for ownership to be built."

## **What were the Results?**

Burke County District Change Teams attended GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit in 2007 and 2008. Local implementation of learning transferred from Base Camp and Summit include the following components:

**Team-based Improvement:** Superintendent Bailey states, "Burke County principals believe that no single individual is as smart as the whole school team. By recognizing the talents, resources, and contributions of others, principals set a tone for collaboration and successful school improvement through Better-seeking Teams. Teachers no longer teach in isolation and principals do not sit in an office making decisions while talking about working collaboratively. Weekly content and grade-level meetings focus on student performance data and research-based practices. Principals ignited passion around the schools by writing and sharing each school's *Who I Am Story*, *Who We Are Story* and *Our Future Story*."

**Data Road Map:** According to school system leaders, GLISI data analysis protocols and root cause analysis tools enabled the principals to lead teams to collect data to construct a picture of each school. Goals were set to address identified patterns and needs. Teams from each school participated in the district-wide math data retreat in October 2007, and the district-wide literacy retreat in September 2008. The retreats provided opportunities for teachers to work collaboratively to reflect on student performance. During this process, team members also analyzed student demographics, staff and parent perceptions, and curriculum and program data. These interpretations formed the basis for identifying primary concerns for improvement and shaped the direction of the improvement plan. Student data is currently displayed on data walls and in data rooms.

**Curriculum:** School system administrators report that GLISI's *Plan-Do-Check-Act* cycle has been implemented to raise student achievement in each school. Instruction is planned according to student learning needs at each grade level based on district and state standards and assessments. School leaders monitor the achievement of individual students, work with the teachers to identify interventions for students as needed, and monitor classroom instruction. The district has also

implemented system-level walk-throughs to provide feedback and support to schools. As a result, an instructional framework using learning-focused strategies and non-negotiables has been created for the district. Burke County leaders believe that GLISI has provided an avenue for them to become more system-oriented and focused on setting and achieving goals. A more pervasive understanding of the work to be done and a more noticeable climate of collaboration among the schools (and with the central office) now exists.

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

According to Superintendent Bailey, "GLISI has provided the Burke County Public School System with the opportunity to examine its potential for progress, define its focus, develop a systemic process for improvement, and implement data-driven decisions and best practices to make a positive impact on student achievement. Our involvement in GLISI has made a profound impact on how we *practice what we preach*. Being a part of the GLISI network has been an honor."

Two of Burke County's school improvement goals were to increase the graduation rate and to improve Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHSQT) Mathematics scores. School system officials believe that the student achievement gains reflected in the following data can be attributed to each school's culture change achieved through the system's partnership with GLISI.

<b>Graduation Rate Data</b>			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Graduation Rate, 2005</b>	<b>Graduation Rate, 2008</b>	<b>Percentage Gain</b>
All Students	51.1%	60.9%	9.8%
Black Students	45.1%	57.9%	12.8%
White Students	63.5%	67.4%	3.9%
Students with Disabilities	0%	28.6%	28.6%
Economically Disadvantaged	51.1%	60.9%	9.8%

<b>Georgia High School Graduation Test, Mathematics</b>			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Average Score, 2005</b>	<b>Average Score, 2008</b>	<b>Percentage Gain</b>
All Students	59.7%	75.8%	16.1%
Black Students	46.9%	68.1%	21.2%
White Students	81.9%	91%	9.1%
Economically Disadvantaged	59.7%	75.8%	16.1%

### **Next Steps**

Burke County has begun to expand their collaboration with GLISI. The system is participating in their first Rising Stars Collaborative™ cohort in the current year (2008-2009). In addition, the district is developing a system-level Balanced Scorecard.