

# ***Engagement for Success:*** **Leadership and Literacy in Candler County**

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## **Overview**

### ***Solution at a Glance***

Candler County School District administrators collaborated with the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) to develop a plan of action that would provide incumbent leaders with the knowledge, skills, and tools to lead system and school improvement initiatives successfully while also preparing a pipeline of well-trained aspiring leaders. Throughout the Cohort Leadership Development Program, which included GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit programs, Candler County School District Superintendent Dr. Tom Bigwood led a newly formed Better-seeking Team in implementing this new process by choosing to focus on literacy, which the team identified as the district's weakest area.

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

The Better-seeking Team returned to Candler County after Base Camp/Leadership Summit and developed its Literacy Plan, which was approved by the Board of Education (BOE) with \$200,000 in support funds. The plan was implemented across grades one through eight and included training for all school leaders in the district. The plan has also allowed leaders to practice the knowledge and skills they learned in becoming more prepared leaders of school improvement.

## **The Impact Story**

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

Candler County is located in a predominately rural area in southeast Georgia, and has approximately 11,000 citizens. According to census figures, 43 percent of the adults in Candler County do not have a high school education or equivalent. This is significantly higher than the overall average in Georgia, which is 21.4 percent. Per capita income is \$21,459, lower than the state average of \$30,914.

In 2007, the school system served 1,779 students in four schools: an elementary school, an intermediate school, a middle school, and a high school. The student population is composed of approximately 52 percent white students, 32 percent black students, and 14 percent Hispanic students. Sixty-six percent are Economically Disadvantaged (ED), 15 percent are Students with Disabilities (SWD), 5 percent are English Language Learners (ELL), and 3 percent are migrant.

Although gains have been made in some areas, the district has not made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) since 2005, and a negative trend has been reflected since that time. In 2006, three out of the four schools made AYP, but only one school met AYP requirements in 2007.

Initially, no schools met AYP requirements in 2008, although summer remediation and testing resulted in two schools (intermediate and middle) making AYP. Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) math scores for black students and SWD significantly impacted AYP in 2008, as did CRCT Reading/English/language arts scores for SWD. At the high school level, several subgroups – as well as the overall student population – did not meet minimum AYP requirements on the Georgia High School Graduation Tests (GHS GT) in English/language arts or math. Although the high school graduation rate has increased from 56.9 percent in 2006 to 64.1 percent in 2008, this has not been a sufficient increase for AYP.

### **What Was Done?**

Candler County had established a partnership in 2005 with the First District Regional Educational Service Agency (FD RESA). FD RESA surveyed stakeholders, observed classroom instruction, and compiled data that showed a need for a comprehensive Literacy Plan across the district. Although efforts were made during the 2005-2007 school year to improve literacy, specific goals and most benchmarks were not being met.

In reviewing the lack of progress, the superintendent saw a need to further develop his leadership team to ensure that initiatives would be successful. He called upon GLISI to help him strengthen his district and school leaders by helping the leaders create a process to successfully address strategic issues. Led by their superintendent, 10 district leaders began the Base Camp/Leadership Summit process by attending Base Camp in February 2008 and Leadership Summit in March 2008.

A “blended” instruction approach by GLISI focused on practice and performance, as well as the transfer of learning into practice. Candler County leaders also found that the data-driven “Plan-Do-Check-Act” cycle of continuous improvement would lead to better processes, which in turn would lead to better results. During the initial Base Camp training in 2008, a Better-seeking Team was formed. Members of the team recognized major gaps within their own district, they learned how to develop action plans, and they conducted a root-cause analysis to determine exactly what should be targeted in their Literacy Plan.

A more inclusive and larger Literacy Team was formed later, and work began on writing and implementing a district-wide Literacy Plan that aligned materials, instruction, assessment, and interventions. According to this plan, the most important goal would be to improve literacy and thereby improve student achievement. In connecting this plan to the No Child Left Behind Act requirements, Candler County has sought to close the achievement gap among all student subgroups. The plan is based on several key components that are well-supported by national and scientifically based research. These components have proven effective in improving outcomes for students when implemented with fidelity and integrity in other schools. The plan includes a powerful instructional model for each grade level. The instructional model is supported by high-quality, job-embedded professional development for teachers and district leaders that builds their foundational knowledge in delivering reading instruction as well as their capacity to implement the components of the plan.

While participating in GLISI Base Camp and Leadership Summit activities, Candler County leaders began to understand the importance of their roles in instructional improvement. Foreseeing the projected path of future AYP results, district leaders felt a sense of urgency to make changes that would positively impact student achievement. They identified literacy as their primary focus because many of their other initiatives were being negatively influenced by students who were unable to read on grade level and thus unable to comprehend and solve word problems in math and science, for example.

Having been included in this process from the beginning, BOE members also recognized the problem and supported its proposed solution. They approved the Literacy Plan and allocated \$200,000 to support it, including the immediate employment of a Literacy Director to implement their new plan. Allocating \$200,000 to support such an initiative is a challenge for a small rural school system, but the GLISI process was sound and the outcome was critical for student achievement.

The leadership process that was learned while collaborating with GLISI enabled the Better-seeking Team to effectively identify a strategic problem (literacy), devise a solution (Literacy Plan), and justify the need for additional resources (\$200,000 plus existing teacher and support resources). During Base Camp and Leadership Summit, GLISI provided intensive opportunities for Candler County School District participants to understand and implement performance-based learning. It also helped the superintendent and his team to learn how to effectively utilize team-based improvement. This systematic approach enabled the team to begin leveraging best practices and engage all stakeholders in a concerted effort to increase the graduation rate, reduce the dropout rate, and improve student progression. The process also provided a context in which leaders at all levels could be identified and developed.

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

Candler County has been positively affected in two strategic ways as a result of GLISI training. First, the leadership has applied this newly learned process to improve student literacy. This initiative can have profound effects on student achievement. Second, the superintendent and his leadership team can use this process to further develop leadership capacity. Building leadership capacity at all levels is now a major initiative of the school system. Taking what has been learned and continuing to collaborate with GLISI will thus enable Candler County leaders to further identify and solve strategic weaknesses, as well as develop future leaders.

Immediate outcomes – including some unintended consequences – have been favorable. First, the speed with which school leaders applied the process they learned was unexpectedly fast, and this speed enabled the new Literacy Plan to be implemented in time to have positive effects

during the next school year. Second, it was also observed during this process that the local Accelerated Reader (AR) initiative was flawed, and changes were made to more effectively use AR to support the Literacy Plan.

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

The first initiative in this new process has resulted in a Literacy Plan that will increase student achievement levels. Furthermore, by applying a new process to improve student literacy, the Better-seeking Team also began further developing the leadership capacity of current and future leaders in Candler County.

The leadership process that Candler County leaders learned through GLISI Base Camp and Leadership Summit and subsequent GLISI professional development opportunities such as Communities of Learning and Achievement (COLAs) and the Developing High-performing Leaders At All Levels (DHPLAAL) leadership and planning retreat have provided a clearer understanding of their responsibilities. By expanding these new practices, a more consistent effort is being made to further develop leadership capacity within the school system, and a larger pool of qualified leaders is being created and trained. For example, nine more leaders joined the superintendent in attending Base Camp in September 2008 and Leadership Summit in November 2008. With this training, there are now 20 district and school leaders who have participated in GLISI-sponsored training, a significant number of leaders in a small school system. Under the leadership of the superintendent, these participants have systematically demonstrated their ability to transfer their GLISI learning into daily practice. By working together to develop a Literacy Plan, teamwork among school district leaders and subordinates has improved.

The organizational impact indicates that this initiative is sustainable. First, the Literacy Plan is sustainable because of its clear long-range focus, and the new Literacy Director is free to devote all of her time to implementing and monitoring the plan. Second, the leadership development process is sustainable because it has become an integral part of strategic planning and decision-making at all levels. It is providing a culture of leadership that is focused, cooperative, and energetic; however, sustaining this new culture will require ongoing professional development for current leaders and cohort training for new leaders.

### **Next Steps**

Candler County School District intends to stay engaged with GLISI professional development opportunities. The current focus on implementing its new Literacy Plan is continuing. Sustainability can occur through the Literacy Director working in concert with the Literacy Committee. The committee has scheduled quarterly meetings throughout the year. The purpose of these meetings is to discuss the literacy initiative, evaluate its progress, set specific objectives based on data, and design action steps for the next quarter.

A Literacy Plan administered by a Literacy Director enables the system to monitor progress. The intermediate projections for success are *70 percent of students reading at or above grade level* and an *80 percent graduation rate by 2011*. Early success will be measured by assessments including the System to Enhance Educational Performance (STEEP), which is a response to intervention (RTI) strategy. STEEP assessments are given in Candler County three times per year. The CRCT and Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) are also used, and are administered once

each school year. The Pyramid of Success Tier II Intervention Assessments will also be included in the overall literacy assessment. Ultimately, success would be measured by the graduation rate. Although initial results will not be known until the summer of 2009, assessments are expected to indicate significant improvement.

This Success Case reveals two important accomplishments for Candler County. First, the school district has crafted a process to address important strategic issues that also develop current and future leaders. Second, its newly trained leaders are applying this new process to quickly and effectively solve its literacy problem.