

Engagement for Success: **Making High Expectations a Reality in Fannin County**

Overview

Innovation/Solution/Practice at a Glance

Fannin County's expectation of 100% graduation rate for their students has become a "true vision" in the community as actual student faces have replaced statistics and numbers. While attending Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement's (GLISI) Base Camp and Leadership Summit (BC/LS), Fannin County senior leaders were shown the current statistics for the State of Georgia's graduation rate and given opportunities to analyze their district's statistics. The Fannin leaders analyzed their district data on graduation rate, revisited their mission, vision, and goals, and set a new goal of 100% graduation rate.

While the district leaders understood the importance of 100% graduation rate, communicating the new goal and getting stakeholders to "buy in" was an important next step. Using a picture illustrating 100 Fannin County students, the Board of Education (BOE) members, educators in the district, and other community groups were asked to identify which 22 students could be removed from the display, thus meaning that it would be acceptable for them to become "Fannin County drop-outs." Using this scenario, adapted from a GLISI BC/LS activity, residents in Fannin County suddenly began to understand that 78.7% graduation rate was no longer acceptable. As a result, the goal of increased graduation rate has been adopted by all in the community and education arenas.

Impact at a Glance

For years, the graduation rate in Fannin County was considered acceptable. While attending GLISI's BC/LS, the Fannin County District Change Team realized that graduation expectations had to be increased for their students. Fannin County made 100% graduation a district goal. Using an activity from their training at GLISI, the district made high school graduation a personal issue and gained community support. Since 2005, the district has increased their graduation rate by 15.2%. During the 2007-2008 school year, the graduation rate increased by almost 4%, from 78.7% to 82.6% after implementing GLISI's strategy for transforming the mindset of stakeholders and increasing expectations for all children. This increase is 7.2% above the state average. In addition, Fannin County High School was honored in 2008 by the Governor's Office of Student Achievement when it received the Platinum Award for greatest gains in meeting and exceeding standards.

The Impact Story

Background/Context

Fannin County is a predominately rural school district, situated in the mountains of north Georgia. Blue Ridge, the county seat, is a small yet growing town that appeals to tourists, retirees, and people seeking to escape the metro Atlanta environment. Fannin County serves approximately 3,200

students in 5 schools. The student population consists of 97% white students, 1% Hispanic, 1% Asian, and 1% other ethnic groups. Of these students, 55% qualify for free or reduced lunch (Economically Disadvantaged) and 14% are categorized as Students with Disabilities (SWD).

In 2007, leadership changes were plentiful in Fannin County. Mark Henson was newly appointed as superintendent, 3 of the 5 principals were new, and 3 of the 5 district leaders were also new to their positions. With this new leadership came a strong commitment to student achievement and district improvement. At the time, most of the schools were working extremely hard; however, each was working in isolation on school-specific goals. There was little alignment of district-wide initiatives and limited accountability for success. Fannin County had become affiliated with GLISI during 2006 under the direction of the previous superintendent, Sandra Mercier, when they attended Developing High Performing Leaders at All Levels (DHPLAAL). Through Mr. Henson's leadership, Fannin County continued their association with GLISI and began to implement GLISI training in the district.

What Was Done?

Fannin County School District attended GLISI's BC/LS for the first time in 2007-08. While at BC/LS Fannin senior leaders were presented with graduation rate statistics for the State of Georgia. Included were facts on the economic impact of drop-outs and the graduation rate gap of different ethnic groups. Districts attending BC/LS were challenged to analyze their graduation and progression data and consider ways to increase the number of high school graduates. GLISI districts were taught the process for implementing team-based improvement, and Fannin County embraced the process by developing a District Change Team (DCT) and school Better-Seeking Teams. Using other processes for reviewing the mission, vision, and goals learned through GLISI, Fannin County's District Change Team developed a clear, systemic focus on school improvement and revised their district's vision to include a graduation rate of 100% with successful progression at each level.

Before BC/LS, the county's 2006 - 2007 graduation rate of 78.7% was considered acceptable by the BOE, the schools, and the community. The general attitude among the citizens was that the graduation rate was fine. After all, Fannin County's graduation rate was above the state average, and only 71% of the county residents had graduated from high school.

During a BOE retreat, the superintendent presented the new vision of 100% graduation rate against the current reality of 78.7%. Knowing that the vision of 100% graduation rate was ambitious and that stakeholders in the community felt that 78.7% was "pretty good," the superintendent found a way to make this graduation rate personal for the BOE members. He used the GLISI picture illustration of 100 student faces, but he replaced GLISI's pictures with the faces of actual students in Fannin County. After he explained the current graduation rate to the BOE members and made a correlation to the Fannin County picture illustration, he asked board members which of them would be willing to select the 22 pictures (i.e., students) that would NOT graduate in Fannin County. With this personal connection of faces, instead of statistics, the Fannin County Board of Education was now fully behind raising the graduation rate expectation to 100% for the district.

The communication of this vision and the development of a sense of urgency continued as the same processes were repeated with faculty and community groups. Following the superintendent's

presentations, all stakeholders agreed that Fannin County must achieve 100%. This consistent message, along with the personal connection of students' faces, has created support for the district's vision. According to the District School Improvement Coordinator, "everyone is on board" and understands the urgency behind the increased expectations.

What were the Results?

During the 2007-08 school year, the graduation rate increased by almost 4%, from 78.7% to 82.6%, which is 7.2% above the state average. Since 2005, the district has increased its graduation rate by 15.2%. Fannin County High School was honored in 2008 by the Governor's Office of Student Achievement when it received the Platinum Award for greatest gains in meeting and exceeding standards. Fannin understands it didn't meet its 100% target this year, but the raised expectations are a result of their commitment to their graduates and their community and they expect the rate to increase each year.

Another result of the increased expectations in the district was the achievement gained with Students with Disabilities. In 2007-08, 59.1% of high school students with disabilities met or exceeded on the GHSGT in Math. This was an increase of 25.8 percentage points over the previous year. As a result, Fannin County School System received two awards from the Georgia Council for Administrators of Special Education for outstanding efforts to improve the performance of students with disabilities:

- Certificate for highest performance recognition for excellence in educating students with disabilities by decreasing the number of students who drop out
- Certificate for meeting state target recognition for excellence in educating students with disabilities by:
 - meeting the state target for students who meet or exceed achievement standards for Reading/English Language Arts
 - meeting the state target for reducing the students who drop out

What was the Impact?

The impact of the focus on increased graduation rate in Fannin County has been recognized by the increased graduation rate and student achievement scores and by the impact on students and teachers in the district. Recently, a high school student requested permission to use the 100 student slide that had been used with the BOE to discuss graduation rate. The student wanted to show the slide to the Fannin senior class to illustrate the number of homeless students at Fannin County High School. This student participated in the "Interpretive Talk" category in the district competition. As a homeless student himself, he focused the talk on homeless students and the impact of homelessness on graduation rate. The student went on to compete at the regional level, where he won a gold medal for his presentation. Along with the appearance at the competition, the student has presented his talk to both the Fannin DCT and the BOE. He will graduate in 2009, and will be attending post-secondary school to become a chef.

All teachers are taking the idea of a higher graduation rate seriously and are emphasizing graduation at all school levels. During a meeting for the parents of students transitioning from Pre-K to Kindergarten, the parents were given buttons that said, "See you at high school graduation in

2023". The teachers want parents and students to know that graduation is important and are stressing it with "class of ____" signs in the hallways and over classroom doors. Teachers are engaging the parents and the students just as they engaged the district education leaders.

With the focus on increased graduation rate, the impact on individual students, their families, and the community has yet to be fully realized, but for every student that graduates, there is an immediate impact on that student's life opportunities as well as Fannin County.

Next Steps

Through their association with GLISI, Fannin County has participated in other GLISI trainings and opportunities. They attended DHPLAAL in the spring of 2007 with the new leaders, had three people trained as Leadership Performance Preparation Coaches (LPPC), and have had their principals, assistant principals, and academic coaches participate in Rising Stars. The district plans to continue their current focus with an emphasis on developing teacher leaders. The Plan, Do, Check, Act cycle has become part of the processes that building level leaders utilize in their schools, and will also be utilized this summer as the district and school leaders begin revising their strategic plans. Establishing clear expectations and monitoring implementation are two areas of focus for the upcoming year. During the summer retreat, each school and each department will also identify their goals for the upcoming year and will outline quarterly progress toward the goal for fall, winter, and spring impact reports to the superintendent. These goals will be aligned to the strategic plan of the district.