

Engagement for Success:

Team-based Improvement Works in Meriwether County Schools

Overview

Innovation at a Glance

GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit leadership development program has significantly influenced Meriwether County Schools' Team-based Improvement efforts. In 2005, Meriwether's first cohort to Base Camp and Leadership Summit, which included the superintendent, assistant superintendent, principals from all district schools, and a RESA colleague, used the knowledge and skills gained from their GLISI experience to drive systemic change within the system. Meriwether utilized their District Change Team (DCT), which was made up of the original cohort members, to model the strategic planning and school improvement process for the newly formed Better-seeking Teams at the school site. Since their initial exposure to GLISI training, additional cohorts have participated in Base Camp and Leadership Summit.

Impact at a Glance

Meriwether County Schools, once a "system of separate schools," now exemplifies the meaning of the term "one school district." Based on their work with GLISI, Meriwether County Schools' leaders have created an aligned focus around student achievement and their strategic plans to attain system goals. While still slightly behind the state average, this district of 100 percent Economically Disadvantaged students has increased the graduation rate for all students by 7.3 percent in the last three years and 20.3 percent since 2004. The graduation rate for black students has increased 8.4 percent since 2005 and 18.6 percent over the five-year period. In addition, the graduation rate for Students with Disabilities has increased 16.6 percent since 2006.

The Impact Story

Background/Context

Meriwether County Schools serves approximately 3,150 students in this rural county in middle Georgia. With 81 percent of the system qualifying for free and reduced lunch, the school system meets federal guidelines to be classified as 100 percent Economically Disadvantaged. Black students account for 59 percent of enrollment, and white students 38 percent. Twenty-one percent of the students are served as Students with Disabilities. Meriwether County is surrounded by the more populated, industrial counties of Coweta, Troup, Harris, Upson, Pike, and Spalding. The majority of Meriwether residents work outside of the county due to little industry, and the median annual income is \$31,800.

Meriwether County Schools Superintendent Carol Lane was determined to work toward improvement and committed to "doing whatever it took" for the students of the county. In 2005, Superintendent Lane took the initiative to contact GLISI, and requested to bring a team to the Base Camp and Leadership Summit events, GLISI's cornerstone leadership development process.

Learning and implementing GLISI's Team-based Improvement methods within the district has proved to have a strong and long-lasting impact.

What Was Done?

Under the guidance of Superintendent Carol Lane and Assistant Superintendent Martha Ann Todd, Meriwether County Schools now has a unified goal of improving student achievement. The first cohort to attend GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit in 2005 included all school principals, the Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, and a Regional Education Service Agency (RESA) representative. This cohort embraced the GLISI concept of Team-based Improvement, bonded as a team, and became the guiding force for change in the district. Meriwether's Team-based Improvement process first began to develop as cohort members shared their "Who Am I" and Vision stories with each other while at the GLISI event. The sharing of these personal and powerful stories gave cohort members an opportunity to get to know each other on a deeper level and understand the strengths each leader brought to the team. One of the team members said, "The 'Who Am I' stories meant so much to us in our team-building. It gave us a chance to bond as we had never done before." The district administrators came to Base Camp and Leadership Summit as individuals representing different schools or departments, but they left as a team, focused on improvement throughout the district.

Members of this first GLISI cohort served on the new District Change Team (DCT) and were instrumental in the development of the new mission, vision, beliefs, and strategic plans for the district. Members of the DCT learned and practiced the improvement process at the district level. The district was committed to implementation for improvement. At least one full day each month was devoted to DCT meetings that were organized around the Team-based Improvement topics learned at GLISI. During these meetings, the DCT analyzed system data, conducted root cause analysis, and worked together to write the strategic improvement plan for Meriwether County. DCT members read research, conducted book studies, and discussed topics such as meeting the needs of black students, understanding how to teach children of poverty, increasing expectations for all students, and implementing best practices for instruction and assessment. The Meriwether County Strategic Improvement plan became a living document that was changed as new research was found and was constantly monitored for implementation. Throughout this improvement process, the emphasis was always on working as a team to improve education in Meriwether County.

The DCT Meetings modeled the improvement process for the team members, which became a guide for implementation at the school level. By participating as a DCT member, senior school leaders learned how to replicate the steps and cascade the Team-based Improvement process back to each school. For many of the school leaders, this was the first time that they had led the school improvement planning process at their schools. Prior to attending GLISI, the district had hired an outside consultant to work with and lead each school in writing improvement plans. Though the plans were well-written, the schools had no "ownership" in the plans.

Because great care was taken to outline the steps for improvement at the district level, principals were more confident in leading their Better-seeking Teams in the improvement process at the school level. The result was a continuous, clearly aligned process for improvement, as school improvement

plans reflected each of the district's strategic goals and performance objectives. The plans integrated site-specific data and additional school performance objectives based on the needs of the school. Team-based improvement continued to grow in Meriwether County as dynamic teams (grade-level, department, and vertical teams) were developed and met on a scheduled basis to review benchmarks, units and lessons, common assessments, student work, and to address identified areas for improvement.

What were the Results?

The focus on student achievement in Meriwether County Schools, as outlined in their mission statement: *"Meriwether County School District is committed to do whatever it takes for all students to aim high, achieve, graduate, and succeed"* is now understood by all. With this expectation and a strong commitment by the superintendent and senior leaders, Meriwether County Schools has continued the work with GLISI through other training opportunities. Senior Leaders have attended GLISI Communities of Learning and Achievement, the Developing High-performing Leaders At All Levels (DHPLAAL) leadership and planning retreat, and Leadership Preparation Performance Coaching (LPPC) training.

As a result of participation in these programs, Meriwether County has identified leader competencies, written leader job descriptions, identified behavioral interview questions, trained system leadership coaches, and implemented a Rising Stars Collaborative™, GLISI's aspiring leader preparation program. In addition, the system has clearly seen the following results from their implementation of Team-based Improvement:

- Aligned goals and a consistent focus on improvement between system and schools.
- Increased use of instructional best practices and monitoring of instruction in all schools.
- A process for distributed leadership.
- Tools for measuring and evaluating success.
- Better-seeking Teams and Dynamic Teams in each school that are focused on school improvement and increasing student achievement.
- Improved data analysis at all levels, linked to improvement plans, and written to address identified needs.
- Use of instructional best practices and monitoring of instruction in all schools.
- Balanced Scorecard development, with four areas for improvement.
- Rising Stars Collaborative™ for Meriwether County, with West Georgia RESA and the University of West Georgia. Twenty Rising Stars candidates began the program in January 2009.

Throughout Meriwether County, there is now a focus on improving the student achievement and the graduation rate for all students. Not only is it reflected in the district strategic plan and all school improvement plans, but it is also reflected in the culture of the schools. As you walk through the elementary and middle schools in the district, you will find banners over each hallway to remind students that they are the graduating "Class of 2018" or "Class of 2020." One elementary school has grade-level teams adopting the colors and mascots of colleges and universities. The hallways have been decorated to match the college or university, and the students talk about the colleges and what it will be like when "they attend college." Another elementary principal spent time getting names and

pictures of high school students who had dropped out and presented this information to his staff of teachers. The impact was overwhelming. Teachers reminisced about the students they had taught and grieved losing them from the educational system. The system has now developed a culture of high expectations that permeates throughout the schools. Assistant Superintendent Martha Ann Todd reflected on the change in culture within Meriwether County by saying, "The change in the culture of our schools and system may have been one of the greatest benefits that has come from the Team-based Improvement process."

The building of a team in Meriwether County has extended to all stakeholders. An example of this is the annual "kick-off picnic" which began in 2004 as a way to refocus the team at the beginning of the new school year and involve staff in the vision of improving student achievement. All staff members in the district participate as a way to celebrate everyone in the district and recognize those who are exemplifying high expectations. Awards are given to bus drivers for safety, custodial staff members for the cleanest school, teachers that met achievement goals with test scores, and other staff members who model the "Meriwether Way." State School Superintendent Kathy Cox has attended the picnic to speak to the group and congratulate the system on its improvement initiatives.

What was the Impact?

One of the most dramatic impacts has been the increase (20.3 percent) in the overall graduation rate for all students since 2004. To achieve this goal, the school district has involved all staff members (teachers, custodians, bus drivers, etc.) in establishing high expectations for Meriwether County schools.

The MCS dropout rate has decreased from 7.1 percent in 2006 to 4.4 percent in 2007 to 2.4 percent in 2008. There have been multiple cases of individual students being persuaded by their high school principals to remain in or return to school to complete their graduation requirements. A number of high school students in both schools had given up on the possibility of graduating. The principals and their staffs helped find a way to interest and motivate them, and to support them in the appropriate ways to complete the required course work. A dual enrollment program with West Georgia Technical College (particularly with students in the welding program) has had a significant impact on a number of students who would have otherwise dropped out and gone to work. The development of a credit recovery program has also helped a number of students make up lost credits and graduate on time.

Because of implementation of the Georgia Performance Standards, the Criterion-referenced Competency Test (CRCT) scores and Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHS GT) scores are not consistent, but the data indicated significant improvement in the following areas:

- CRCT Reading/English/Language Arts meets/exceeds scores increased from 74.2 percent in 2006 to 82.9 percent in 2008 (up 8.7 percent).
- GHS GT Math passing scores increased from 53 percent in 2006 to 67 percent passing in 2008 (up 14 percent).
- GHS GT English/Language Arts passing scores increased from 74.5 percent in 2006 to 79.8 percent in 2008 (up 5.3 percent)

The improvements in Meriwether County have also been recognized by others. Ed Boswell, principal at Manchester Middle School, was named a High Performance Principal in 2007 by Governor Sonny Perdue and the Georgia Department of Education. Mountain View Elementary School has been recognized as a Title I Distinguished School from 2002-2007, and Unity Elementary School from 2001-2007.

The GLISI's Team-based Improvement process gave the district the mechanism for improvement. With the tools from GLISI and the commitment of the district leaders, Meriwether County has been able to see success.

Next Steps

Continuing the current initiatives and commitment to student achievement in Meriwether County is critical to success, but this system continually strives to grow and to improve. Their next steps include establishing clear, universally understood measures for their initiatives. The system has set high expectations for their employees, and they recognize that "what gets monitored and measured, gets done."

Another next step will be to continue to work on making the data "real" and personal. The school system has used personal stories to help employees put names with numbers, but they continue to work on this need. They recognize that the motto of "one child at a time" can help schools move forward and will have a life-changing effect on each child.