

# ***Engagement for Success:*** **Rising Stars Collaboratives™ at Northeast Georgia RESA**

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## **Overview**

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

Northeast Georgia Regional Education Service Agency (RESA) partnered with the 13 school districts in its service area to provide its aspiring leaders a custom-designed, performance-based, just-in-time leadership training program using the Rising Stars Collaborative™ model, developed by Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI).

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

As a result of the Rising Stars Collaborative™ model, the 13 school districts in Northeast Georgia RESA currently have a pool of 43 highly qualified aspiring leaders ready to move successfully into leadership positions.

## **The Impact Story**

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

The districts in the Northeast Georgia RESA region are like those in many areas of Georgia and the nation, with large numbers of educational leaders eligible for retirement in the next five years. The 13 superintendents knew it was vital to hire qualified, performance-ready people for the positions – but how best to approach the problem? With leadership from Northeast Georgia RESA, the superintendents decided to take a regional, rather than district-by-district, approach to the issue of building leadership capacity, and created a comprehensive continuum of leadership development activities. The *Rising Stars Collaborative™* process, designed by GLISI, was selected to ensure this region's aspiring leaders were ready to perform as leaders on Day One.

### ***What Was Done?***

The districts in Northeast Georgia RESA have been actively involved with one or more GLISI programs for some time. Six have sent one or more cohorts through Base Camp and Leadership Summit, GLISI's core leadership training; six have worked on succession planning by sending teams through the Developing High-performing Leaders At All Levels (DHPLAAL) training; nine have sent teams through the Executive Development program, which includes Balanced Scorecard training; six have participated in Rising Stars Collaboratives™; five have attended one or more Communities of Learning and Achievement (COLA); and three districts have attended a Display of Excellence, GLISI's achievement showcase event.

To implement the Rising Stars Collaborative™, Northeast Georgia RESA partnered with GLISI and North Georgia College and State University. The Northeast Georgia RESA school districts chose to adopt a regional rather than district-specific model for leader preparation because they recognized that districts hire across county lines. By developing a regional pool of performance-ready candidates, each district increased its ability to find a candidate that would be a good fit for leadership vacancies that become available.

A Rising Stars Collaborative™ is an innovative leadership preparation program that trains new and aspiring leaders to perform the real work expected of leaders in their schools, in real time, with coaching and feedback so that they can reach competency in the key roles expected of today's leaders faster and more fully.

The research of GLISI and others has shown that to be a successful school leader in today's environment, leaders at all levels must be able to perform in GLISI's 8 Roles of School Leaders™:

- Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction Leader
- Data Analysis Leader
- Process Improvement Leader
- Learning and Performance Development Leader
- Relationship and Engagement Leader
- Performance Leader
- Operations Leader
- Change Leader

Under the guidance of Dr. Rhonda Hefner-Packer, Northeast Georgia RESA Coordinator of Leadership and Organization Development, and Northeast Georgia RESA Director Dr. Russ Cook, aspiring leaders are given an opportunity to practice, develop, and showcase their skills in these eight roles through a case study of the fictional Rutledge Elementary School. Over a school year, participants spend 15 days reading the literature, working with experts in the field, and applying what they learn to analyze the needs of Rutledge Elementary School and develop plans for improvement. Because they are using the Georgia Assessment of Performance on School Standards (GAPPSS) analysis process developed by the Georgia Department of Education to help low-performing schools become successful, all of the work done by participants is completely transferable to their current school situation.

To further strengthen the Rising Stars Collaborative™ process, participants complete a personal inventory before beginning the program to assess where they are in their mastery of GLISI's 8 Roles of School Leaders™. The results of this inventory are used to tailor the Rising Stars program to the specific needs of the participants and the school districts that are sponsoring them. For example, one school district sent a person who had experience with curriculum, but little exposure to operations in his current job. His Rising Stars experience channeled him into opportunities to fill in those specific gaps in his experience.

Performance coaching is an important aspect of the Rising Stars Collaborative™ program. Northeast Georgia RESA has developed a large cadre of leadership coaches trained through GLISI's Leadership Preparation Performance Coaching (LPPC) Program, a rigorous four-and-a-half-day training that also requires a detailed portfolio of evidence of actual coaching. Each Rising Stars participant is assigned a trained leadership coach to work with throughout the year and who remains available to them after their graduation from the program. The participant and the coach work through some of GLISI's more than 67 Performance-based Modules according to an individualized development plan. This plan, called the Performer Path Plan, is specifically designed to fill gaps in each leader's preparation and give him or her opportunity to perform the real-life practices that are studied in class. This blending of theory and practice is, in itself, a best practice. The coach provides the aspiring leader clear and specific feedback on areas that need improvement.

The monthly Rising Stars group classes help participants stay focused and involved. A participant from Clarke County remarked that getting "other people's opinions and feedback...added up to a more complete picture [than you would get] in a traditional program." Rising Stars sessions are held on the same day as the Superintendents' RESA Board of Control meeting. This was planned to enable the superintendents to visit the classes and interact with their staff as well as meet the aspiring leaders from other districts. Again, it is mutually beneficial for aspiring leaders to be able to interact in professional – but low-risk – situations with potential employers. One participant said that the program "definitely" helped her get her current job and also felt that it would be easier to get future promotions across district lines because of the contacts she made in the program. Another participant said that because of mobility issues, districts would "do themselves a disservice if they did not depend on their neighbors" for potential leaders.

### ***What Were the Results?***

From the district perspective, Rising Stars has been very successful because it created a regional pool of well-prepared aspiring leaders. Barrow County sent three aspiring leaders the first year and increased that to seven the second year. According to the Assistant Superintendent, "they did an awesome job of leading their schools through data analysis." She added that they were increasing the visibility and responsibility of the participants by helping them to move from classroom performers to leadership performers.

After the first year, three participants became assistant principals; two went to central office positions and five to other leadership roles, primarily as instructional coaches. A small number of participants chose not to pursue a career in school leadership after participating in the program because they realized that this kind of career was not a good match for them.

### **What Was the Impact?**

From the participant perspective, Rising Stars is successful because it allows participants opportunity to broaden their knowledge and skills, showcase their abilities, and to meet superintendents from other school districts. A participant from Clarke County who was promoted into a central office coordinator position felt that she was, “ahead of the curve on data-digs” and very well-equipped because of the data-driven decision-making activities she went through in Rising Stars. Another participant from Social Circle City Schools cited the fact that her involvement gave her “experiences with all facets of the job.” She went on to add that the networking across districts was a benefit because she got to “discuss similarities and differences between large and small school districts.”

The Rising Stars Collaborative™ program has given 13 school districts in northeast Georgia the opportunity to grow a cadre of performance-based leaders that can be tapped as soon as leadership openings occur. From the superintendents’ perspective, the program represents a strategic allocation of district assets by tailoring the learning plans to district needs, thus cutting down the time needed to get a new hire functioning at maximum productivity. Giving participants an arena to showcase their abilities has been mutually beneficial to the districts and participants. Participants have been able to display their strengths through performance-based activities and superintendents have been able to make more informed decisions about hiring and placement. They are able to select school leaders who have the skills they are looking for and who are steeped in and matched to their district’s culture. Staff retention is an issue for schools, and those hires who are put on the “right seat on the bus” are much more likely to stay in that seat.

### **Next Steps**

The Rising Stars Collaborative™ occupies an important position in the regional leadership development continuum developed by the 13 districts of Northeast Georgia RESA. The Northeast Georgia RESA Leadership Advisory Council that steers the continuum is now working to develop regional selection criteria for admission to Rising Stars and other leadership programs. In addition, the schools plan to develop internal leadership academies to maintain the value added by participation in Rising Stars after project completion. Finally, the Northeast Georgia RESA Leadership Design Team is collaborating with several universities to create partnerships that offer the new performance-based Ed.S. degree in leadership.