

Engagement for Success:

Polk School District and *Leadership POLK*

Overview

Innovation at a Glance

Increased stakeholder engagement with leaders at all levels has been one result of Polk County School District's work with the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI). After sending their first cohort to GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit, the district began to implement the Team-based Improvement process, which had a positive impact on the schools and district. However, it was the district's participation in GLISI's *Developing High-performing Leaders At All Levels* (DHPLAAL) leadership and planning retreat that was the catalyst for broadening the support of the district to interested and involved district stakeholders, reaching from school leaders to business and community leaders. After attending DHPLAAL, the district recognized a need to develop their own leaders, so they created a leadership preparation program called *Leadership POLK, Preparing Our Leaders with Knowledge* for the future.

Impact at a Glance

Leadership POLK, the intensive leadership preparation program, allows the district to provide learning opportunities for aspiring leaders, with the goal of preparing future leaders for the district. Twelve candidates were selected to begin the program in the fall of 2008, and one of the 12 has recently been promoted to an Assistant Principal in the district. Through the implementation of this program, the district has gained increased support and commitment from the Leadership POLK candidates, the community, local business leaders, and the Board of Education (BOE) by involving them in the design and implementation of the program, thus creating leaders and supporters.

The Impact Story

Background/Context

Polk County is a rural county on the far northwestern side of Georgia, next to the Alabama border. Polk School District serves approximately 7000 students, with 55 percent of the student population qualifying for free or reduced lunch. There are six elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools in the district. The eastern side of Polk County is experiencing growth as a "bedroom community" for Atlanta, but the western side of the district has seen little population growth. Finding teachers and leaders for this school district has been a challenge for Polk County, which is surrounded by larger school systems, such as Floyd, Bartow, Paulding, and Carroll Counties.

What Was Done?

In 2006, the Polk County Superintendent, Mr. Marvin Williams, and the BOE became concerned that the majority of leadership positions were being filled by individuals from outside the district because so few qualified leaders within Polk County were available. The BOE began to look for a way to

combat this trend and begin developing leaders from within the district. In 2007, Superintendent Williams, a team of senior leaders, and a BOE member recognized the need to act to improve the pipeline of highly qualified leaders and begin to strategize about how to strengthen the skills of potential leaders within Polk County.

This senior-level group attended GLISI's Developing High-performing Leaders At All Levels (DHPLAAL) training in 2008, where they were introduced to strategies to distribute leadership and ways to engage all stakeholders in developing high-performing leaders within Polk County. The BOE member who attended the DHPLAAL event felt that the work was exactly what Polk County needed, and brought the processes back to the other Board members. The GLISI training had essentially created a leader at the Board level who was willing to work with other Board members and the district to ensure that high-performing leaders were being developed. This Board member's excitement about the GLISI training and the anticipation of the development of a Polk leadership program became a positive influence on the other Board members, and the BOE signaled its desire to be a part of Polk's success by unanimously signing a resolution of support for the new leadership development program, entitled "Leadership POLK."

Leadership POLK was intended for aspiring leaders in the district. The senior leaders worked as a team to identify four areas as critical components for success: the identification, induction, orientation, and development of the candidates. Using the Plan-Do-Check-Act process learned in GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit, each of these components was further developed with input from many. Leadership POLK also included a well-developed outline of upcoming events prior to the beginning of the program. The processes from the two GLISI programs – DHPLAAL and Base Camp/ Leadership Summit – worked together to create an environment of teamwork and increased stakeholder engagement. This environment also created focus on Leadership POLK and the core skills and tasks that Polk leaders needed to know and be able to do. The senior-level leaders had learned from DHPLAAL that the definition of leadership can differ for each district, so the group worked together to define what leadership looked like in Polk County and what skills and knowledge were necessary for their leaders in order to be successful in the Polk environment.

To launch Leadership POLK, the Senior Team held a "kick-off" dinner and invited all employees in the district with a leadership certificate, as well as many stakeholders. The event provided the district an opportunity to provide information about Leadership POLK to district employees and the community. Businesses in the community (Kroger, Casey's, and Walmart) were able to become leaders in the process by helping to sponsor the dinner. The dinner was attended by 60 employees with leadership certificates, BOE members, district senior leaders, and GLISI representatives, all supporting the task of developing high-performing leaders in Polk. At the dinner, the senior leaders of the district shared the skills and knowledge required for administrators in Polk School District that they had created following the DHPLAAL process. The attendance at the dinner of the stakeholder groups was a demonstration of the support generated from the community, businesses, BOE, and district employees for creating a highly qualified leadership pipeline within the district.

The district and its stakeholders were committed to Leadership POLK, as evidenced by the substantial time, energy, and financial resources provided to the program through the planning and

kick-off phases. This commitment was to show the potential candidates for the program that the district was investing in their leadership capacity and that expectations were high for the first Leadership POLK cohort. A rigorous application and interview process was developed through the district that included the use of the GLISI 8 Roles of School Leaders™ assessment as well as a requirement for three professional references for the applicant. Candidates were interviewed extensively and, if accepted, signed a Memorandum of Understanding about their role in the program and the expectations of not only themselves and the district leaders, but also the community and business leaders.

Leadership POLK provided an opportunity for the candidates to work as a team towards the improvement of leadership within the district. The program began with candidates learning Polk County's internal handbook and participation in sessions on Polk's culture, expectations, district goals, department overviews, and roles and responsibilities. Before the end of this session, candidates completed an individual leadership inventory to identify their specific strengths and areas for professional growth.

The intent of Leadership POLK was to empower local leaders, but district leaders also needed to show their support and leadership. District Directors served as teaching leaders throughout the program, as the cohort met monthly for teaching sessions. Leadership POLK continued to build on the foundation of customized professional growth and development with training on (1) curriculum, assessment, instruction, and textbooks; (2) personnel, interviews, recommendations, hiring, evaluations, documentation, dismissal, and grievances; (3) public relations, parents, community, conference skills, types of communication; (4) finance, budget, purchase orders, receipting, bookkeeping; (5) data management, record keeping, FTE, Powerschool; (6) facilities, maintenance reports, lawn care requests, transportation, bus discipline process; (7) student services, code of conduct, discipline, attendance, DFACS, tribunals; and (8) special education law, IEP, discipline, manifestations, transportation, procedures manual, timelines. Each training session encompassed a full day and candidates were given opportunities for job shadowing within the district several times during the year. The sessions taught by district employees and staff, as well as the job shadowing experience, provided a chance for other district employees to become leaders and support the program and its candidates.

The state of Polk's leadership pipeline forced the district to begin asking how they could develop qualified leaders from within. Overall, district leaders, community and business leaders, as well as school-level leaders, all worked together to develop leaders among themselves and in 12 aspiring leaders through Leadership POLK. GLISI's DHPLAAL training helped Polk participants not only start a leadership development program, but also create leaders at all levels while building stakeholder engagement.

What were the Results?

While long-term results are still to be determined, several short-term results have already been identified.

- The greatest result, according to the Polk School District Curriculum Director, is that each of the candidates in Leadership POLK is now a cheerleader for the district and its future. The candidates now have a greater understanding of the work of the various departments and a deeper understanding of leader responsibilities, which creates a level of support back at the school building that did not exist before the program.
- A process for strengthening leader skills within the district has been developed. This process involves a clear, replicable plan of action based on the GLISI Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle that encompasses candidate selection, initiation, training, and observable, measurable skill development.
 - The Leadership POLK candidates express an appreciation for the training and skill development opportunities they are receiving and feel that their understanding of leadership has broadened. One Leadership POLK candidate stated, “The fact that our school district is taking the initiative to provide this kind of learning opportunity affirms that we are part of an innovative educational district hoping to cultivate the local leaders for the ultimate benefit of our schools.”
 - One participant in Leadership POLK has been promoted to Assistant Principal following completion of the program, showing district-level faith in the program’s ability to prepare high-quality education leaders.
- The district has become more “value-added,” due to the expanded ownership and leadership among its stakeholders. The community now sees Polk School District as a worthwhile investment and they want to support it.
- The engagement, excitement, and support of leaders at all levels of the county has increased, including BOE members, district senior leaders, district directors, school leaders, and aspiring school leaders.
- The definition and criteria for leadership in Polk County has been clearly established.

What was the Impact?

The stakeholder engagement, support, and excitement from leaders at all levels in the county (Leadership POLK candidates, senior district leaders, district directors, school leaders, the BOE, and the community) have increased. Having Leadership POLK candidates who understand district processes, requirements, and expectations has filtered back to each school in the district, improving relations and organizational effectiveness. These knowledgeable potential leaders have become positive voices at the school level who can convey the district processes to fellow teachers. The BOE member that participated in the GLISI training has continued to provide encouragement and support for the GLISI process, referring to herself as a “GLISI proponent” because of the positive impact GLISI influence has had on Polk School District. Polk senior leaders believe that the establishment of Leadership POLK has had positive results on their district, having already seen noticeable results on stakeholder engagement.

A positive and beneficial partnership among the community, district stakeholders, the Board of Education, and GLISI has been established. Expectations for leaders in Polk County have also been clearly communicated to all stakeholders in the community, schools, and district.

Next Steps

Leadership POLK will continue to follow the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle as they evaluate program success and make changes for the upcoming year. In addition to the Leadership POLK experience, the candidates will attend GLISI Base Camp and Leadership Summit with the district and then begin the Rising Stars Collaborative™ between GLISI and Polk County during the next year as a continuation of their learning for an additional year. Polk School District will continue to support and grow its leaders and potential leaders through in-house initiatives and their partnership and training opportunities with GLISI.