

OCTOBER 2013

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS:

Community Pride, Sustained District Focus, and
Teaching Excellence in a Rural Georgia County

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MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Educators are expected to help students achieve and perform at increasingly higher levels — and rightly so. Parents entrust the education of their children to school leaders and teachers. They trust that these leaders will make a difference for their children. But what are the conditions that contribute to the school district ensuring accomplishment of this sacred trust? How do these conditions play out? And can the conditions for success found in one district be applied in other districts?

A growing body of literature on district effectiveness delineates conditions that are typically present in highly successful school districts.ⁱ Among the practices most frequently cited are setting a clear direction, communicating a vision, granting principals autonomy to make sound instructional decisions based on their context, allocating resources to promote and support classroom instruction, and creating a culture of high expectations.ⁱⁱ In general, one would assume that when these elements are in place there is greater probability of success. We found this assumption to be true particularly in one rural Georgia school district: Monroe County Schools (MCS). Yet the district's success appeared to result not only from the elements commonly identified in emerging research on district effectiveness — there are other conditions in place that also played a critical role in the district's success. What are those other factors? What role do they play in advancing the district's efforts to improve student achievement? Our study found that conditions at three levels — external community, central office, school — likely contributed to improved student achievement.

This *multilevel ecosystem of support* is a difference maker in MCS, and that is why we have chosen to make it the primary focus of this report. In the pages that follow, you will read about the ways in which strong community backing and trust in the school district, administrators who promote both collective and self-efficacy among staff, and teachers who care as deeply about their work as they do about the students in their classrooms help to drive the district toward success.

Similar to our 2012 publication, selection criteria used to narrow the field of potential case study sites led GLISI's research team to a small rural district. However, what is most exciting about our findings is that the practices and processes the case study district implemented can and should be in place wherever the primary focus is on doing and being better for students. In other words, the successes MCS achieved are attainable anywhere and are not limited to a small rural context. And while we fully acknowledge that no district has all the answers, this snapshot of what was occurring in MCS between 2009 and 2011 has the potential to prove useful to anyone leading instruction and leading or supporting districts in their efforts to improve learning through strong leadership and high-quality instruction.

Gale Hulme, Ed.D.
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Acknowledgements

GLISI would like to thank Monroe County Schools for opening its doors to our research team. We are deeply grateful to the central office leaders, principals, teachers, and school board members who contributed their time and voices to this study. We also owe a great amount of gratitude to the GLISI team who helped shepherd this study from infancy to completion: Leslie Hazle Bussey for participating in the data collection and analysis; Gale Hulme and Mary Anne Charron for providing comments on an earlier draft of the report; and Pam Henderson and Nanci Foster for providing critical technical assistance. GLISI also recognizes Emily Kagey for editing the report and Paige Taylor of Sage Sublime for the design.

OVERVIEW

“I want my children to go to these schools.” How many public school teachers say this about the school where they teach? How many rural districts in Georgia have teachers who move their families into the county so that they can teach in and send their children to those schools? At least one: Monroe County Schools (MCS).

This report shines a light on the work of leaders and teachers in MCS who decided that in order to widen the doors to college and career success for their students, their first priority had to be ensuring every child was reading on grade level by the third grade. As a result of the system’s years-long, unified dedication to improving teachers’ technical mastery of teaching literacy, third-grade students achieved steady, incremental gains on the state’s Criterion-Reference Competency Test (CRCT) in reading (See Figure 1 below).ⁱⁱⁱ And these improvements are significant because research shows literacy at early grades, especially third grade, is a strong predictor of future educational success.^{iv} In other words, higher third-grade reading levels can have a ripple effect on later outcomes, with potentially *more* students reading on level by 8th grade, *fewer* students dropping out before 10th grade, and *more* students graduating from high school.^v

FIGURE 1.
MCS Third-Grade Reading CRCT Scores:
2009 - 2011

	2008-2009 to 2009-2010	2009-2010 to 2010-2011	Total Increase Across Both School Years
BLACK	↗ +2 %	↗ +3 %	↗ +5 %
STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES	↗ +8 %	↗ +2 %	↗ +10 %
LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY	↗ +5 %	↗ +2 %	↗ +7 %
ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED	↗ +5 %	↗ +2 %	↗ +7 %

THE PERCENTAGE THAT “MEETS AND EXCEEDS” STANDARDS

What steps did MCS's leaders and teachers take to realize these gains? What were the difference-making conditions that enabled their success? And what can other school systems — rural and non-rural, large and small, traditional and charter — learn from the successes of MCS?

The short answer is that reading scores went up in MCS because teachers taught more students how to read and to read with greater fluency. The longer answer requires looking well beyond the classroom. This report documents a case study conducted by a team of researchers from GLISI that will give you a glimpse into the conditions at three levels: 1) external community, 2) central office, and 3) schools that fostered and promoted improved teaching and learning in MCS.

2013 Conditions for Success Selection Criteria

All districts that participated in GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit for a minimum of two cohorts between 2007 and 2011 were considered for the study. A total of 64 districts met this criterion. The GLISI research team reviewed student achievement data from these 64 districts for two outcome measures: third-grade reading CRCT and eighth-grade math CRCT results. Researchers were specifically interested in districts in which achievement among traditionally underperforming subgroups — black students, economically disadvantaged students, hispanic students, students with disabilities — was on the rise in at least one of the two outcome measures over several years (SY2009–2011). "On the rise" was defined as continuous incremental growth in the percentage of students meeting or exceeding state standards on CRCT tests, totaling at least 4.03 percentage points on the third-grade reading CRCT or at least 5.38 percentage points on the eighth-grade math CRCT. Eleven districts met this second criterion. After narrowing the pool to only those districts that had already been recognized as a Success Case for successful use of GLISI strategies to drive student performance, a panel of internal content experts recommended Monroe County School District as the 2013 case study site.

ABOUT MONROE COUNTY

Located in a rural area of central Georgia, Monroe County is home to nearly 27,000 residents — a population that has grown by more than 17% in the last decade.^{vi} This growth is due in part to the county's transition from a rural community to a bedroom community. One district leader noted that Monroe County has seen an influx of commuter families whose children attend MCS schools while parents and guardians travel to neighboring counties for work. Although the population has grown as more commuter families move to the area, a shrinking industry base has led to fewer employment opportunities within the county, declining per capita income, and rising poverty rates.^{vii} But shaky financial conditions have not dampened spirits in Monroe County. Nearly everyone interviewed for this study described a community that, even in the midst of challenging times, maintains a strong tradition of pride that emanates from and flows to the school district.

“It’s about performing every day as if your child was in the classroom.”

Monroe County Schools (MCS) is a small school district, comprised of only six schools — three elementary, one middle, one high, and one alternative — serving approximately 3,800 students. Just over two-thirds of MCS students are white and nearly one-third are black. Students with disabilities represent nearly 10% of the total K-12 population, and more than half (55%) of all students in the district qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

The schools in MCS are led by administrators with anywhere from 2 to 19 years of experience in the principalship, with five of the district’s six administrators having taught or served as an assistant principal in MCS. Nearly half of the teachers we interviewed have been teaching in the district for more than a decade, while the others were relatively new to their positions. Regardless of their position or level experience, however, all teachers and leaders communicated one consistent theme about the practice of educating MCS students: It’s about performing every day as if your child was in the classroom.

WHAT’S NOTEWORTHY ABOUT MONROE COUNTY SCHOOLS?

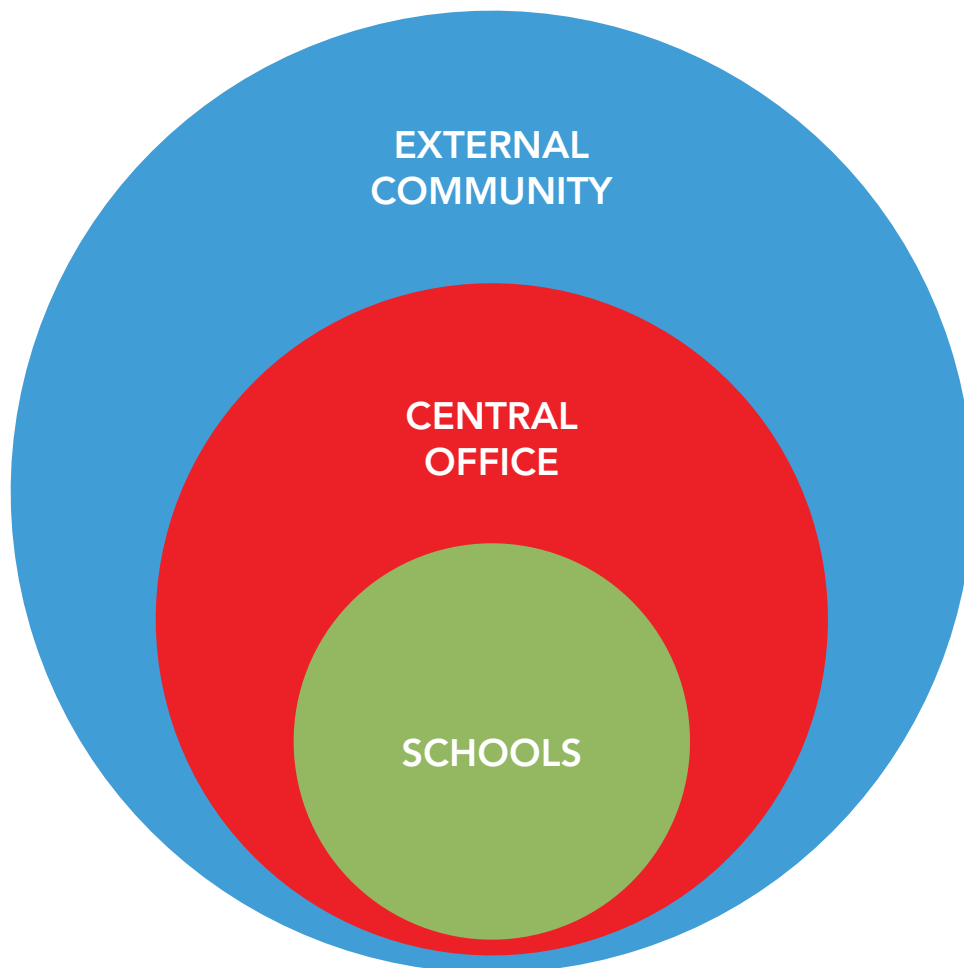
The leaders of MCS reject the low expectations conventionally linked to small rural districts. Research suggests that rural districts are perpetually underfunded and lack steady revenue streams, are less able to provide access to professional development opportunities for staff, and typically offer lower salaries and benefits compared with their more urban counterparts.^{viii} In addition, the average rural student has less access to the Internet and advanced course offerings (Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate), is less likely to enroll in college than children from other locales, and has parents who have completed less education.^{ix} In many rural communities, these challenges can have a negative effect on student achievement. Although MCS is a typical rural Georgia district in many respects, it is distinguished by sustained high performance in third-grade reading among traditionally underperforming students. The GLISI research team conducted interviews with MCS teachers, principals, central office leaders, and Board members to identify the conditions that have enabled students to be successful. **(See Appendix A for more information on the methods used to conduct this study.)** What the team found is shown in **Figure 2** on the next page: an ecosystem of support for driving up the quality of teaching and learning, with supportive conditions at the external community, central office, and school levels playing key roles in that effort.

These supportive conditions look different at each level:

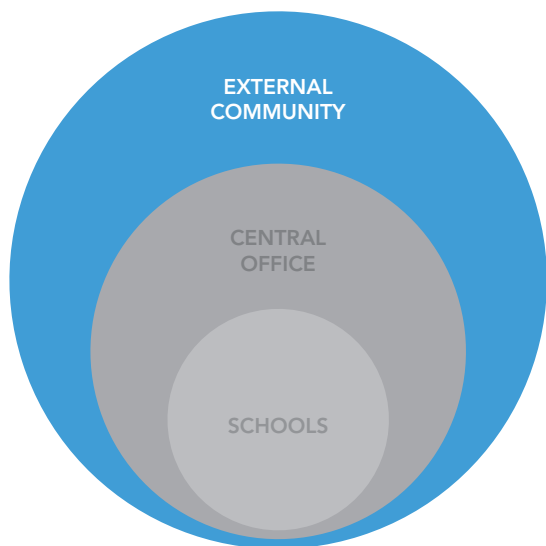
- **The external community** provides the supportive condition of trust in district and school leaders to lead improvement efforts and a high level of respect for the teaching profession.
- **The central office** creates supportive conditions for principals, teachers, and students by setting clear direction and maintaining focus on initiatives long enough for them to take root.
- **Schools** promote efficacy and accountability by empowering teachers as classroom experts while also equipping them to take ownership of their instructional practices.

The conditions found at each level of the ecosystem are explored more fully in the sections that follow.

FIGURE 2. MCS's Ecosystem of Support



HOW DID SUPPORT AT EACH LEVEL WORK TO PROMOTE SUCCESS IN MCS?



EXTERNAL COMMUNITY

Deep sense of pride

Monroe County boasts a strong tradition of community pride. Teachers and administrators point to the school district as a focal point of this longstanding pride. For example, multiple generations of families have graduated from the district's only high school, Mary Persons, since it opened in 1929.^x As one administrator explains, that multi-generational tradition is something the community values and celebrates:

We have kids who come to [elementary school] eager to be educated, and they enjoy the school district. The pride is in one lone high school. That's the ultimate goal for many of those kids, and they want to do what they have to do to get there.

This tradition of community connection extends beyond students in the district to teachers and leaders as well. One teacher described the deep sense of pride that comes with being able to say, "I was born here; I was raised here; and I'm back to teach here." This teacher is part of a fairly large segment of current MCS faculty and staff members who graduated from the district and returned after completing college to give back to the community by educating its young people. In fact, at the time this study was conducted, nearly one-fourth of the high school's staff was alumni. The local school board is also largely made up of graduates of the district, which interviewees generally referred to as an asset to MCS. Board members were described as caring deeply about the reputation and quality of the district, primarily because they see it as a reflection of themselves. This pride, some noted, has proven useful in the board's efforts to communicate and promote a strong community-wide vision for education.

Positive reputation and dedication to learning

Nearly everyone interviewed for this study described the district as an exciting and rewarding place to work and live. Teachers, administrators, and school board members emphasized a sense of community in the county. Interviewees suggested that Monroe County's traditions and values, as well as its citizens' dedication to learning, have enabled the district to maintain its reputation throughout the state and region as a provider of high-quality education. Several teachers indicated that their decision to relocate to Monroe County and pursue a position in the district was motivated by its reputation, with one teacher explaining:

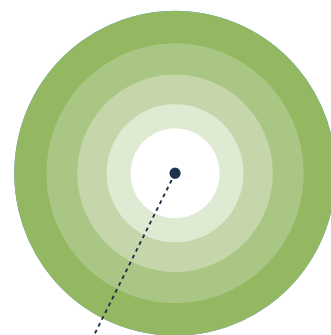
I want my children to go to these schools. ... We moved here for that reason. I lived in another county, but I knew I could bring my children with me to [be educated] in a good system. I didn't want it just for me; I wanted it for my children as well.

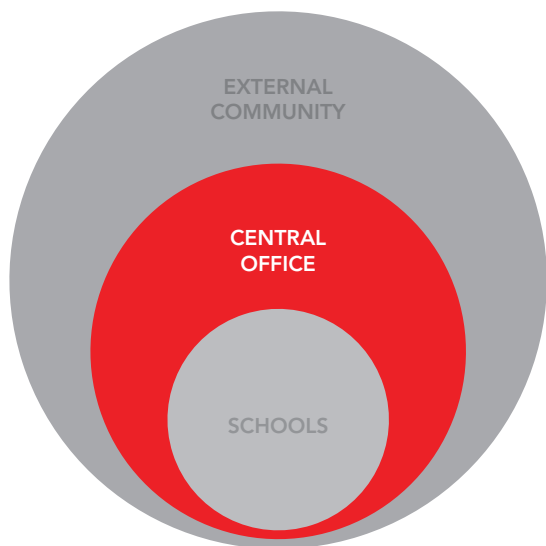
Support and trust

Teachers and administrators suggested that the Monroe County community fosters an environment that incentivizes quality teachers to stay in the district. This encouraging environment is evident in the community members' trust in and support for district staff, and their belief that these individuals have the capacity and desire to ensure students receive a quality education. One administrator described the district's reputation as "one of the strongholds of the community," further noting,

If you ask the citizens here what's great about Monroe County, they will tell you that the school [district] is great. They would tell you that the team of educators that make up the school [district] is thoroughly engaged and committed to the success of the children in the district.

According to teachers, these favorable impressions translate to an appreciation for the district's teachers and leaders. They also communicate a level of respect rarely shown for the teaching profession.





CENTRAL OFFICE

Sustained initiatives and stable leadership

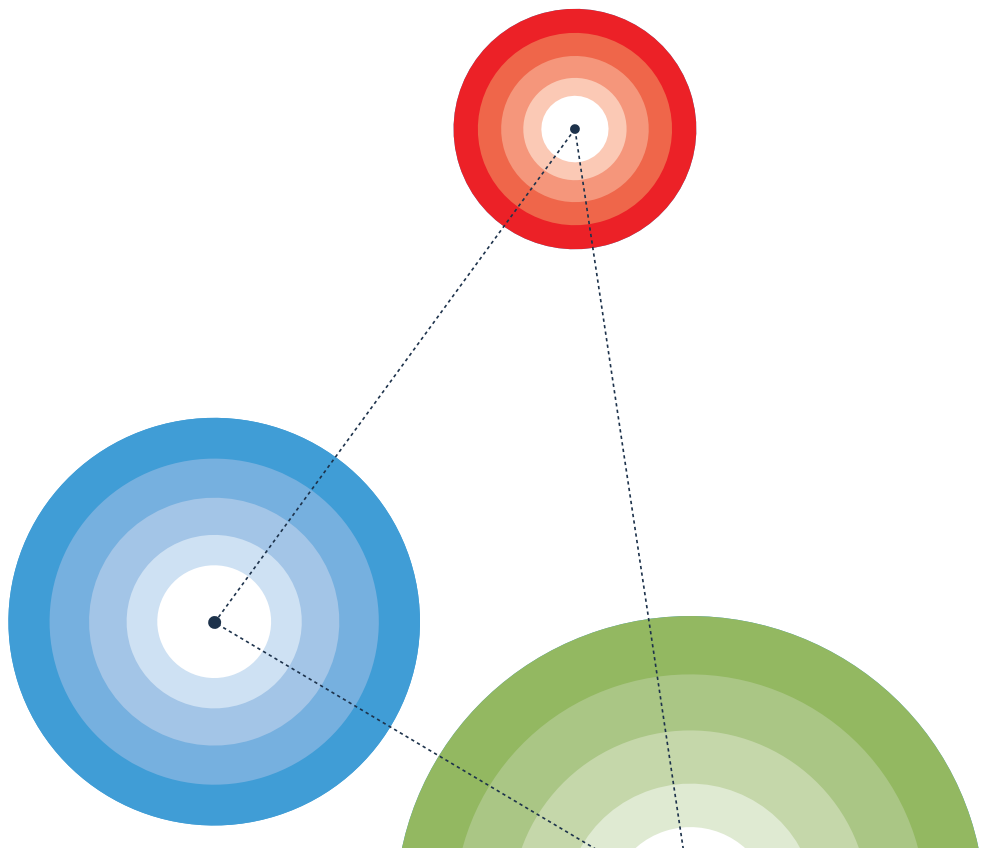
MCS has enjoyed the benefit of stable and effective leadership, creating a unique opportunity with respect to district goals and initiatives. In the last decade, the district has experienced only one superintendent change and one vacant seat on the seven-member elected school board. This stability has been a key factor in MCS's ability to sustain its focus on long-term improvement efforts.

Under the previous superintendent, the district worked to identify key areas of academic concern and implemented strategies specifically designed to target those issues. One of the ways this was accomplished was through participation in GLISD's flagship training program, *Base Camp and Leadership Summit (BC/LS)*. **(See Appendix B for an overview of BC/LS.)** In fall 2002, MCS sent a team of 10 leaders to BC/LS to learn how to use the continuous improvement process and balanced scorecard to drive change. While at BC/LS, the team engaged in activities designed to encourage deep reflection on high-leverage causes of a particular academic issue. This meant peeling back layers of excuses and justifications for why students were demonstrating deficiencies in certain academic areas to uncover the root of the problem. According to one administrator, this also meant "stirring the pot" and getting the team to "recognize, acknowledge, and accept that things had to change." The district's hard work continued beyond BC/LS, as leaders returned to the district and began experimenting with various ways to use data to make performance transparent and guide decision making.

These ranged from the use of *balanced scorecards* to track and monitor progress against targets to a data room that served as a way to communicate and visually report results. The balanced scorecard was particularly helpful in engaging the board in the process of tracking school-level performance against district-wide goals. One of the ways district leaders achieved this in MCS was by using the annual board retreat as an opportunity for principals to make reports on their progress, highlighting both successes and challenges. Armed with this information, the board was better positioned to provide guidance on the development of the district's strategic plan for the following school year.

During the 2002-2003 school year, MCS worked to address low student performance in literacy head-on. With an eye on better analyzing and using data to inform instructional decisions, the district developed and implemented the *Monroe County Balanced Literacy Initiative* (MCBLI). The goal of this initiative, one teacher said, "was to provide true interventions in the areas of reading and writing" so that all children would be reading on grade level by the end of third grade.

Literacy has remained a top instructional priority in MCS. With the board's backing, district leaders have continued to align and allocate resources — human and financial — to support faithful implementation of MCBLI as well as other instructional priorities that have emerged over the years. These include 1) streamlining professional development opportunities to ensure a clear connection to district goals; 2) instituting interventions such as *Guided Reading*, differentiated instruction, and the Early Intervention Program (EIP) to help reinforce students' mastery of concepts; 3) investing in Learning-Focused training; and 4) hiring literacy coaches and instructional coaches to share critical expertise with classroom teachers.



Balanced Scorecard

Balanced scorecard is a performance management concept that helps organizations link strategy with action.^{xi} This planning and measurement system has its roots in the business world, but has proven quite useful in the education sector by providing leaders with a roadmap for driving improvement efforts. Popularized in the 1990s by Richard S. Kaplan and David P. Norton, the balanced scorecard approach targets four areas that impact mission, vision, and strategy: 1) financial performance; 2) internal business processes; 3) learning and growth; and 4) customer service.^{xii} Over the years, the approach has evolved to focus narrowly on key “management processes.”^{xiii} In education, this may begin by setting and articulating clear goal areas that are in sync with the district’s mission. Strategic objectives within each goal area describe the specific actions that will lead to those goals, and define which performance metrics and targets will be used to measure and monitor progress. A simplified diagram of these elements is shown below:

FIGURE 3.
Basic Elements of a Balanced Scorecard



Balanced scorecards can also help support district leaders align all priorities and activities throughout the organization, engage local school boards in targeted efforts and initiatives, and establish transparent practices for reporting progress to the community.

While the district has expanded its focus to include other improvement efforts (e.g., the Monroe County Mathematics Initiative), teachers and administrators commented that district leadership has been careful not to “pile on the work” or “bite off more than they could chew.” Interviewees explained that the district prioritizes the work and maintains focus on each initiative long enough for it to take root. Even with a superintendent change in 2009, the district has maintained its focus on improving literacy in early grades, using data to drive any adjustments in strategies, preventions, or interventions. MCS also remains closely connected to programs that have proven useful in the district’s goal of effecting positive changes in student outcomes. For example, the district has sent numerous teams to GLISI’s BC/LS over the years and worked purposefully to drive the concepts taught at BC/LS into the classroom. **Figure 4** on the next page shows some of the significant improvement efforts that have occurred along MCS’s journey to shore up literacy in early grades.

Monroe County's Balanced Literacy Initiative (K-5)^{xiv}

GOAL #1: To ensure that all children are able to read well and independently by the end of third grade.

GOAL #2: To ensure that all children become proficient readers and writers able to put literacy to work in the real world by the end of fifth grade.

GOAL #3: To develop a research-based professional development system that will assist reading teachers in the delivery of best instructional practices which maximize reading gains for all students.

MONROE COUNTY'S BALANCED LITERACY INITIATIVE

Framework Components

Reading Aloud

Shared Reading

Guided Reading

Independent Reading

Shared Writing

Interactive Writing

Guided Writing

Independent Writing

Teachers must see an expanding definition of literacy. Literacy is more than decoding, although words and letters and sounds are obviously part of the process. Literacy is more than just reading; it includes writing and talking and other ways we choose to communicate with others. Literacy includes comprehension, composition and students' responses to literature. And we cannot forget that the roots of literacy are in oral language and that speaking and listening must be a part of any comprehensive approach to helping learners become more literate. This expanded definition of literacy makes teaching reading a much more complex (and exciting) process.

Every K-3 classroom must create structure that promotes reading as the top instructional priority. Literacy will continue to be a major instructional focus for grades four and five, with teachers supporting independent readers and writers into the ranks of reading and writing proficiency.

Guided Reading

Guided reading is an instructional strategy that promotes literacy development through differentiated, small-group instruction. Unlike traditional reading instruction methods that require an entire class to read one text collectively, guided reading allows teachers to group students and assign texts, both fiction and nonfiction, according to students' abilities and instructional needs. Based on students' reading ability, sometimes called their individual reading levels (IRLs), the instructor groups the students according to their instructional needs. The instructor then assigns an ability-appropriate text for each group, choosing from books of varied difficulty.^{xv} The reading sessions that follow are usually divided into three Segments: *Before*, *During*, and *After*.

- *Before Reading*: During this phase, the teacher introduces the text, examines its graphic elements with the students, and encourages them to predict what may happen in the story. The instructor may also establish the purpose for reading and introduce vocabulary during this segment.^{xvi}
- *During Reading*: This phase revolves around students reading and the teacher listening, guiding, helping, and praising accordingly. Reading strategies vary during this segment, but may include independent reading, group reading, or partner reading.^{xvii}
- *After Reading*: The final phase is marked by "closure activities," such as a discussion about the text's meaning, a review of phase one skills and strategy, or a writing exercise. Closure activities can also take the form of visual arts and/or theatrical expressions.^{xviii}

The flexible nature of the groups ensures that teachers can support students' individual needs, but it also requires teachers to continually observe and assess student progress and regroup students as they demonstrate greater proficiency in their reading. Ultimately, the aim is to help students learn and utilize effective reading strategies to become strong, increasingly independent readers.^{xix}

FIGURE 4. MCS's District Improvement Timeline

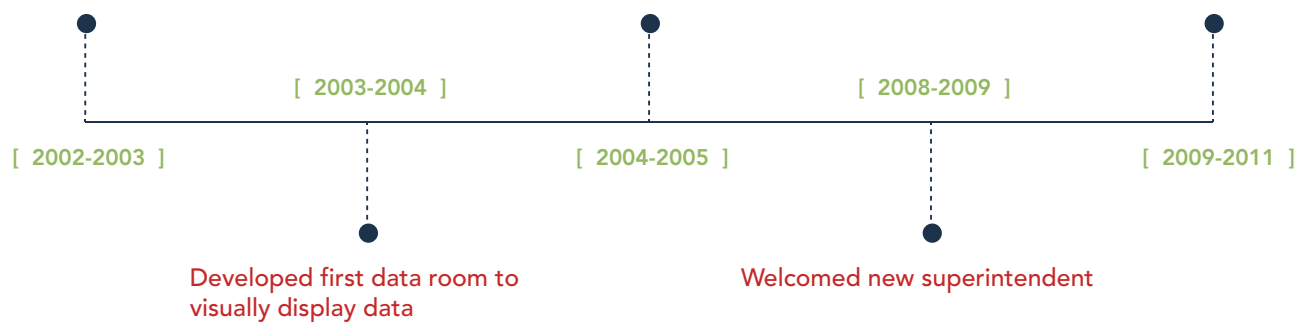
Sent first team of leaders to GLISI's inaugural BC/LS to gain experience with the continuous improvement process and balanced scorecard

Rolled out the Monroe County Balanced Literacy Initiative

Instituted an Early Intervention Program

Implemented Guided Reading

Observed steady, incremental gains in third-grade reading scores among traditionally underperforming students*



* Note: Initial gains preceded the 2008-2009 school year.

Laser-like focus on high-quality instruction

MCS focuses relentlessly on delivering high-quality instruction each day to every student. District leaders demonstrated a keen awareness of their responsibility in supporting teachers' efforts to achieve this important goal. When asked how they support teachers, district leaders indicated that they prioritize instructional responsibilities such as conducting frequent classroom visits and walk-throughs. They use the classroom visits as opportunities to observe teachers in action, assessing the quality of instruction while also noting whether there is evidence that standards are being taught. The observations also open the door for district leaders to demonstrate their expertise in the area of instructional leadership by modeling the process of delivering honest feedback aimed at helping teachers improve their craft. One teacher explained,

Our district has high expectations. ... They set us up so we don't fail, because they're so involved. They're constantly checking on us: coming in, wanting to conduct focus walks, and talking to us about our performance.

These visits build trust and credibility among staff because they demonstrate respect for teachers as professionals, as well as a level of engagement that teachers appreciate.

In addition to helping teachers grow in practice, MCS district leaders also promote efficacy among staff. Teachers indicated that they are recognized as classroom experts and content specialists, and are encouraged to use their knowledge and skills to promote student learning. This, in turn, boosts teachers' confidence in their ability to improve student outcomes through high-quality instruction.

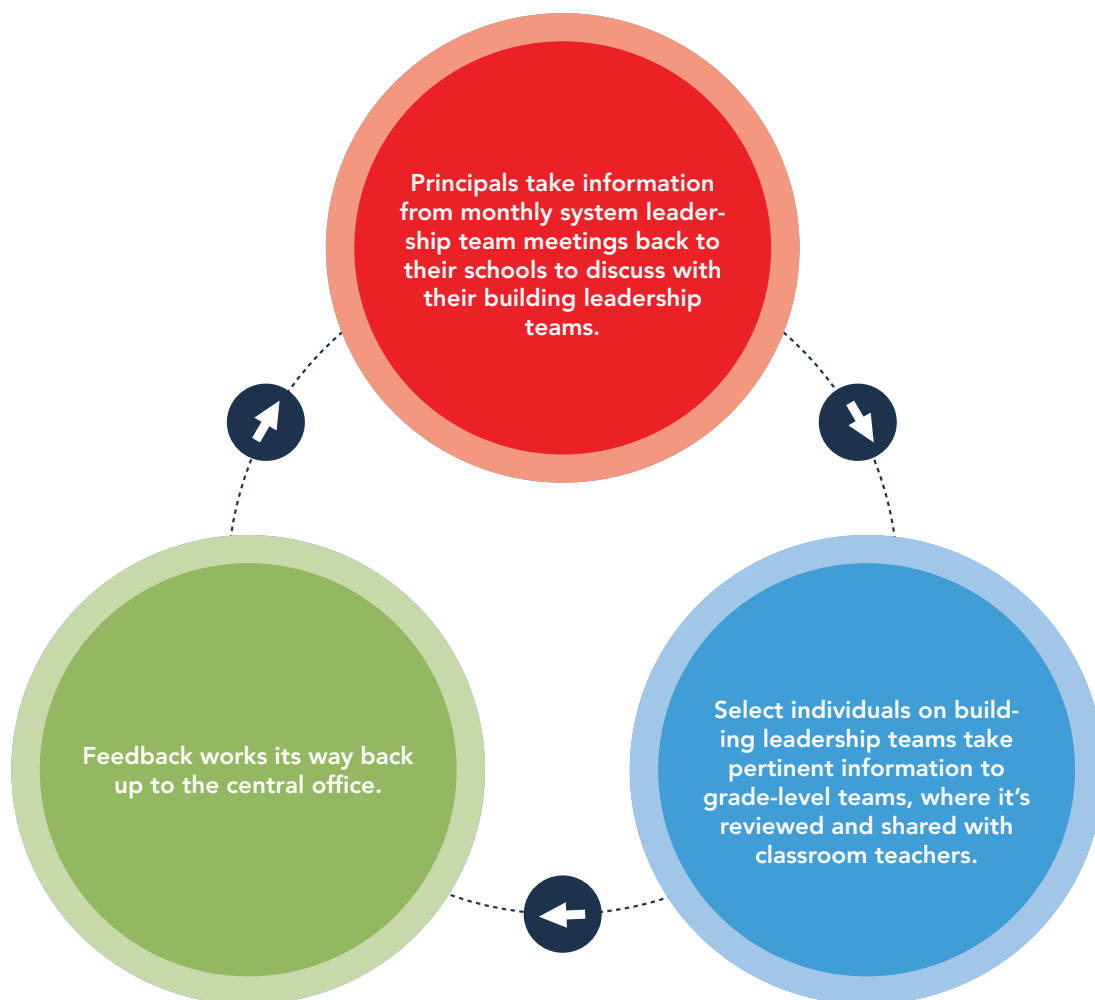
Continuous improvement

"How do we know where we're going if we don't know where we are?" This is one of the most important questions asked in MCS — and it is asked frequently, because the district is committed to continually assessing performance among students and staff in order to determine what adjustments, if any, are necessary to achieve district goals. All administrators in the district agreed that continuous improvement and the purposeful utilization of data are vital to the work in MCS. Several administrators referred to a four-step process that is used throughout the district to promote a continuous improvement culture: 1) setting goals, 2) executing the plan, 3) measuring and monitoring progress toward intended goals, and 4) assessing results. One administrator offered the following description of how the process is carried out at the school level:

... We plan, do, check, and act. I mean, we live by that. That's looking at the data, then using those data to assess instruction. If [what we're doing is] not working, we revamp it, change it, figure out a way to make it better and then try again. ... We use the continuous improvement process. We're focused on what we know is important and what we have success with, and our folks don't mind the critical analysis. ... The disaggregation and analysis of data brings 'reality' to them, which keeps it at the forefront of their mind as we're planning and writing curricula and setting up our benchmark tests. ... All of that comes into play so that we make sure we're meeting the needs of the students and that they're achieving.

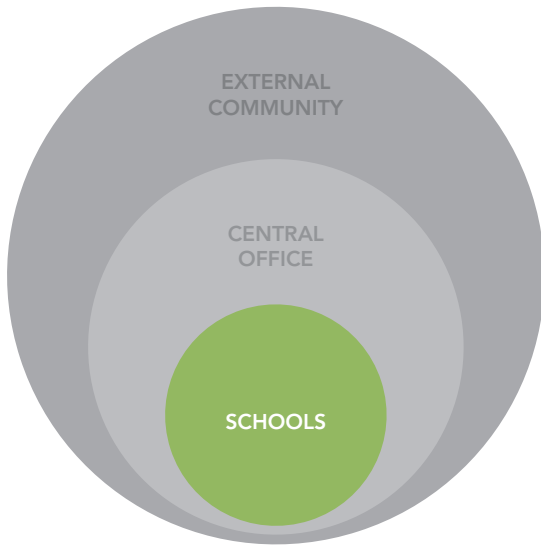
A solid continuous improvement process requires ongoing collaboration and effective communication, a point several administrators made. In MCS, this process has proven to be most effective when implemented through a team-based approach that is deeply engrained at every level of the organization. For example, the district office maintains a system leadership team consisting of the central office cabinet as well as all six principals. Each school also maintains its own school leadership team, which includes the administrative staff and other individuals who hold important leadership roles in the schools. Additionally, each school utilizes grade-level teams that, although organized differently in each school, typically consist of department chairs, teachers, and teacher leaders. Regardless of the type of team — system leadership, school leadership, or grade level — meetings generally provide opportunities for members to analyze data, debate issues, assess progress against targets, and set new goals. These actions are not set in stone, however. Because the needs drive the work in MCS, activities are heavily dependent upon the central purpose of each meeting.

Interviewees indicated that the team structure provides an efficient way to cascade the work throughout the organization:



This feedback loop enables the district to tap into expertise at each distinct level of the organization and to tighten alignment of continuous improvement plans between the central office and individual school sites.

The pursuit of academic excellence is not without costs, though. While most individuals we interviewed described high expectations and continuous improvement efforts of the district as strengths, some teachers and administrators seemed concerned about their ability to “keep up” and also expressed concern that limited opportunities to celebrate “wins” can, at times, sap morale. (See **Appendix C** for participants’ perceptions of district strengths and challenges.)



SCHOOLS

High level of personal investment

Teachers in MCS are deeply committed to their work and highly invested in their role as educators. One principal talked about teachers apologizing for missing days of work because “they know students are going to be affected when substitutes have to cover their classrooms.” This is because teachers in MCS understand that their actions — everything from pedagogy to absenteeism — impact students. Regardless of grade level and experience level, the teachers who participated in focus groups for this case study were motivated, dedicated, and driven to do the best they could possibly do as educators to help students learn and grow. As one teacher framed it,

We believe all students can learn more than they’re currently learning. We strive to take the children that are meeting the expectation to exceeding. ... We try to take those from exceeding to exceeding more, and we try to take those who are struggling to meeting and/or exceeding expectations.

When students succeed by hitting performance targets on benchmarks and assessments or making incremental progress in their academic development, teachers said they feel “included in that success.” The same is true when outcomes are reversed, with teachers indicating that they take ownership of the unsuccessful moments as well. Instead of pointing fingers at the students, teachers ask themselves: “How can I alter my instructional practices to better meet the needs of those students in the future?”

Advocacy and efficacy

What if all teachers taught every day as if it were their children in the classroom? Several MCS teachers talked about adopting this philosophy to ensure they were delivering high-quality instruction to all students at all times. As one principal noted, “everybody wants what’s best for their child,” so teaching as if they were in the classroom is one way to create a culture of high expectations. And there appeared to be a strong culture of self-efficacy in MCS, where teachers hold themselves personally responsible for student learning because they are confident in their ability to make a difference. Teachers also talked about a shared norm around teaching excellence. Interviewees described trusting their colleagues to always do the right things for students, and feeling strongly that anyone whose actions are not in line with collective expectations should be shown the door. One principal framed it this way,

This is what our belief system is around here, and all of us have an opportunity to contribute to that belief system. If anyone doesn’t want to be a part of that belief system, then they don’t have to sign a contract for next year. But if you work here, you’re saying, ‘I’m signing on to be part of the belief.’

HOW DOES THE DISTRICT MAINTAIN ITS MOMENTUM?

For school and district leaders in MCS, the idea that student achievement will ebb and flow is unacceptable. Though fluctuations occur, the district is committed to creating a system where all students are given the opportunity to grow and succeed — a system that does not succumb to the factors often used to explain away poor academic performance among certain subgroups. The district has devoted more than a decade to the goal of improving literacy in early grades in order to increase students’ opportunities for success in high school and beyond. Within a few years of initiating the *Monroe Balanced Literacy Initiative*, the district saw performance in third-grade reading begin to climb — and that trend has continued, with 100% of some traditionally underperforming groups meeting or exceeding standards on the state reading test.

At the core of this work was an intentional focus on equipping teachers with an arsenal of tools and resources to build students’ skills in reading and writing. The work was sustained through the district’s ongoing effort to improve teaching and learning in every school so that all students across the district could enjoy the benefits of a high-quality education. It is this relentless pursuit of continuous improvement that prevents MCS from resting on its laurels, and it is this same relentless pursuit that will define the next chapter of the district’s story.

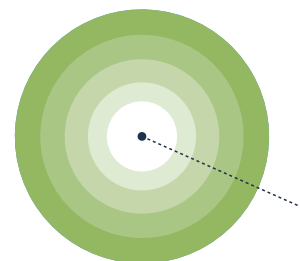
To ensure teachers are engaged in the types of instructional practices that will continue to maintain an upward trend in student achievement, the district has adopted an evaluation tool designed by the Georgia Department of Education: the Georgia Assessment of Performance on School Standards Analysis (GAPSS Analysis).^{xx} Currently, the Georgia Department of Education requires only designated schools^{xxi} to undergo the GAPSS Analysis process, though any school or district in Georgia can request a GAPSS Analysis from its local Regional Education Service Agency (RESA). Monroe County's leaders saw value in the GAPSS Analysis process, particularly in how it could enhance their understanding of what was occurring in classrooms. They also recognized the importance of arming teachers and teacher-leaders with a process for critically and constructively critiquing their colleagues' instructional methods, hopefully leading to a deeper self-awareness of each teacher's practice.

The GAPSS Analysis process, which is facilitated by a carefully assembled team of teachers and district personnel, utilizes classroom observations and a list of 83 performance indicators to help the team and the teachers identify opportunities for instructional improvement. Knowing what they hoped to gain through this process, MCS leaders made the decision to conduct their own GAPSS Analysis, led by the central office. Teams include a range of actors within the district — from classroom teachers to the superintendent. In the case of classroom teachers, members were selected based on their combined expertise in relevant areas and charged with observing and assessing the school's progress against the 83 indicators identified in the GAPSS Analysis protocol.

One of the benefits of adopting this practice has been exposing teachers to good instructional practices across school levels. Being part of the GAPSS Analysis team allows a secondary instructor to visit an elementary school and ask the question, "Is there anything I can take back and use in the high school?" Likewise, an elementary school teacher can visit a high school and ask, "What's my role in preparing students to be successful at the high school level?" The GAPSS Analysis allows and encourages teachers within the district to think beyond their classrooms, to be inspired instructionally by their colleagues, and to be aware of the district-wide implications of their work.

One principal described how this exposure to a variety of effective instructional practices has benefited his school. He explained that, although MCS holds county-wide meetings for principals to share ideas and work collaboratively toward common instructional practices, "there are still some of those specific little classroom things going on that teachers are going to pick up on that ... we're not really looking at in the same way." So when his teachers have the opportunity to visit other buildings as members of a GAPSS Analysis team, "they're all coming back telling me, 'They do this. They do that.'" But the teachers aren't returning simply excited about trying new instructional techniques; they're also returning encouraged to use what they've seen and learned to critique their own instructional strategies and are more aware of the value that brings to the overall educational experience of students in the district.

From one district leader's perspective, the GAPSS Analysis process is crucial because it helps to align all schools to a common standard and ensures that there is a clear relationship between instructional practices and the GAPSS Analysis indicators. For example, GAPSS Analysis was instrumental in helping district leaders identify a discrepancy in teachers' knowledge and actual practice of differentiated instruction. According to the

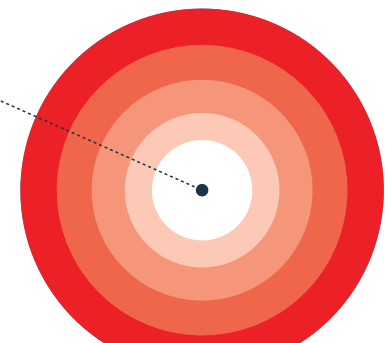


district's balanced scorecard, 100% of MCS's teachers were trained in differentiated instruction; however, the GAPSS Analysis process revealed that, although all teachers had been trained in differentiated instruction, only half were actually implementing the strategy. As the district leader noted, having high expectations is not enough; what is key is "having expectations and then monitoring for implementation. We can train all day long, but ... are we implementing what we're training?"

Monitoring the progress of each school in the county is a top priority for MCS leaders, and the GAPSS Analysis has been instrumental in doing so. The data the leaders have gathered enable them to more effectively differentiate between outliers and trends in instructional practices at the classroom, school, and district levels. With information that accurately reflects what's happening in the district, the district leaders and the school Board members are better able to make data-driven decisions about the system's achievement goals and objectives and to keep moving student learning and growth in the right direction.

CONCLUSION

How did MCS enable third-grade students in traditionally underperforming groups to achieve and maintain noteworthy gains in literacy? It was likely a combination of factors at the external community, central office, and school levels that provided the structure and support for improvements in teaching and learning. From a community that wants the best for its young people and trusts educators to get the job done, to a central office that maintains a sustained focus on targeted initiatives long enough for them to take root, to the leaders and teachers in schools who challenge themselves and others to perfect their craft while also holding each other accountable for getting the job done. This multilevel ecosystem worked individually and collectively to create an environment that values and fosters improvement, enabling this small rural district to distinguish itself not only in terms of student achievement but in terms of a unified focus on continuous improvement and high-quality instruction. This unified focus continues to drive the work in MCS to achieve even greater heights — to take the district, as one teacher put it, "from exceeding, to exceeding more." It's this insatiable appetite for improvement that led the current superintendent to adopt and adapt the GAPSS Analysis process for implementation in MCS. By utilizing GAPSS to assess, critique, and modify practice, the district has deepened its commitment and ability to make a difference for every child in the system.



APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: Methodology

In May 2013, the research team at the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement, Inc. (GLISI) conducted interviews with key district leaders and administrators in Monroe County Schools (MCS), which averaged 90 minutes in duration. Researchers also collected qualitative data through two focus groups with teachers, each with a mixture of elementary, middle, and high school teachers from various schools in the district.^{xxii} Across all of the conversations, GLISI researchers aimed to capture participants' observations on topics drawn from literature on district and school effectiveness, including district mission and vision, performance expectations, leader behaviors, alignment, resource allocation, and instructional practices.

Data analysis in the form of informal conversations among the research team began following the first interview. Initiating data analysis while conducting other interviews provided researchers with an opportunity to explore emerging topics in greater depth in subsequent interviews. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded in NVivo, a qualitative data analysis tool. Open and axial coding was used to analyze the interview data, highlighting patterns in conversations that emerged through the analysis.^{xxiii} The research team also utilized thematic networking for the purpose of 1) identifying key concepts derived from the raw data, 2) linking these concepts throughout the data, 3) organizing data by topic, and 4) using the topics to define and confirm relationships.

APPENDIX B: What Is GLISI's *Base Camp and Leadership Summit*?

GLISI's *Base Camp and Leadership Summit* (BC/LS) is an intensive training partnership for teams of school and district leaders in Georgia, designed to refine and grow their ability to lead systemic school improvement. The program includes an initial residential training (Base Camp), followed by a six-week implementation period and then a second residential training session (Leadership Summit). Teams are comprised of school leaders and teachers/teacher leaders, and typically led by the superintendent. Teams can also include board members, local business leaders, and postsecondary partners.

Base Camp and Leadership Summit teams learn how to implement a research-based process for driving and sustaining systemic improvement through high-performing teams. Specifically, they learn to:

- Align district culture and action around a strategic vision;
- Develop high-performing teams that work together effectively;
- Use data to set student achievement goals, analyze causes, and develop responsive solutions; and
- Build the commitment and discipline to implement a plan-do-check-act process that ensures continuous improvement is pervasive and systemic.

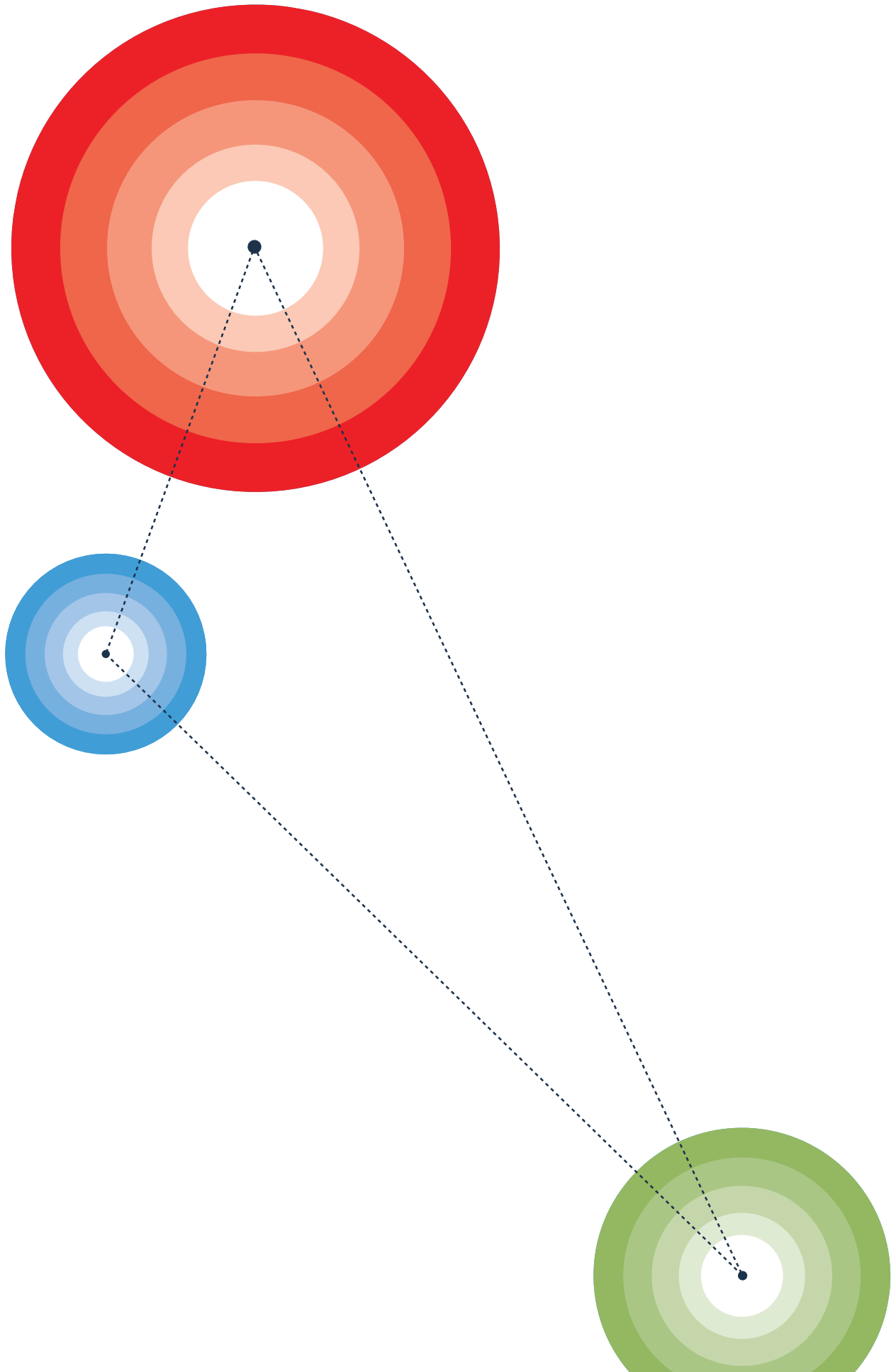
To learn more about GLISI's *Base Camp and Leadership Summit*, visit www.glisi.org/basecampandsummit

APPENDIX C: Perceptions of District Strengths and Challenges*

+	STRENGTHS	+	-	CHALLENGES	-
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community support, respect, and pride in education, in the district mission, and in the staff that seek to achieve it • High-quality people at both the school and district levels and an organizational commitment to making human capital investments • A clearly defined mission focused on student achievement, with consistently communicated expectations aligned to this purpose • A collaborative and supportive working environment (both horizontally across schools and vertically from district to school) • Size, reputation, traditions, and values of community 			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Achievement gaps between student groups by race, socioeconomic status, etc. • Limited parental involvement due to the emergence of a “bedroom community” • Budget, resource, and time constraints • Keeping up and staying energized in a culture defined by high expectations and a commitment to continuous improvement 		

**The figure highlights the common perceptions of the district’s strengths and challenges across all respondent groups (teachers, principals, district administrators, and school Board members).*

It is important to note that the overall tone of the focus groups and interviews conducted in Monroe County was extremely positive, with respondents placing a much greater emphasis on the strengths of the district and spending significantly less time discussing the perceived challenges. Nevertheless, challenges persist. Fortunately, both teachers and administrators voiced a high level of dedication to the mission and vision of Monroe County Schools (MCS). Rather than discussing the perceived challenges in the district as barriers that could never be overcome, district leaders and staff expressed sincere dedication to addressing the perceived challenges head-on and the belief that eliminating them was possible.



Endnotes

- ⁱ See for example: Anderson, S. E. (2003). *The school district role in educational change: A review of the literature*. Retrieved from <http://fcis.oise.utoronto.ca/~icec/workpaper2.pdf>; American Institutes for Research. (2005). *Toward more effective school districts: A review of the knowledge base*. Retrieved from: <http://www.ped.state.nm.us/div/psb/dl10/AIR%20Toward%20more%20effective%20school%20districts.pdf>; Jacobson, S. (2011) *Leadership effects on student achievement and sustained school success*. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 25, 1 pp. 33 – 44; Leithwood, K., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning*. New York: The Wallace Foundation.
- ⁱⁱ Ibid.
- ⁱⁱⁱ While the state’s standardized test used to assess reading (Criterion-Referenced Competency Test) is not the most precise measure of proficiency and fluency, it’s currently the state’s best source of data and continues to spur the conversation around the importance of reading ability in early grades. Data were obtained from the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement: <http://www.gaosa.org/>
- ^{iv} Hernandez, D. J. (2011). *Double jeopardy: How third-grade reading skills and poverty influence high school graduation*. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.; Lesnick, J., Goerge, R. M., Smithgall, C., & Gwynne, J. (2010). *Reading on grade level in third grade: How is it related to high school performance and college enrollment?* Chicago, IL: Chapin Hill at the University of Chicago.
- ^v Ibid.
- ^{vi} Based on the 2012 Census estimate. Data retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/popest/data/intercensal/county/CO-EST00INT-01.html>
- ^{vii} Data retrieved from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/13/13207.html>. Poverty rate estimates in the school district for 2009, 2010, and 2011 were 16.2%, 19.0%, and 19.3%, respectively. Data retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/did/www/saipe/index.html>
- ^{viii} National Education Association. (2013). *Rural schools*. Retrieved from <http://www.nea.org/home/16358.htm>.
- ^{ix} Provasnik, S., KewalRamani, A., McLaughlin Coleman, M., Gilbertson, L., Herring, W., & Xie, Q. (2007). *Status of rural education in America*. Retrieved from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2007/2007040.pdf>.
- ^x The current high school now stands on a different site, with the original facility now serving as the home of the district’s Board of Education.
- ^{xi} Balanced Scorecard Institute. (n.d.). *Balanced Scorecard Basics*. Retrieved from <http://www.balancedscorecard.org/bscresources/aboutthebalancedscorecard/tabid/55/default.aspx>.
- ^{xii} Kaplan, R. S., & Norton, D. P. (2007, July). *Using the balanced scorecard as a strategic management system*. Retrieved from <http://hbr.org/2007/07/using-the-balanced-scorecard-as-a-strategic-management-system/ar/1>.
- ^{xiii} Ibid.
- ^{xiv} This language is taken directly from Monroe County’s working draft of its Balanced Literacy Initiative. The document was being updated at the time this study was conducted, so slight variations may appear in the published version.
- ^{xv} Pinnell, G.S., & Fountas, I.C. (2010). *Research base for guided reading as an instructional approach*. Retrieved from http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/guidedreading/pdfs/GR_Research_Paper_2010.pdf.
- ^{xvi} Wright, L. M. (2006). Guided reading, literature circles, and reading workshops. *The Journal of Adventist Education*, 68(4), 11.
- ^{xvii} Ibid., 12.
- ^{xviii} Ibid., 12.

^{xix} Kreul, M. (n.d.). *Guided reading in the primary classroom: The steps of a guided reading lesson, and how they encourage fluent, skilled readers*. Retrieved from <http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/article/guided-reading-primary-classroom>.

^{xi} The Georgia Department of Education designed GAPSS Analysis to measure how well schools are performing in accordance with Georgia's School Keys, the state's standards for determining the concepts students must master. For more information, visit <http://www.gadoe.org/school-improvement/pages/GAPSS.aspx>

^{xii} The Georgia Department of Education requires certain schools to receive a state-led GAPSS Analysis every two to three years, notably schools that receive a School Improvement Grant (SIG), schools that receive Race to the Top (RT3) funding, and state-directed schools (classified as Needs Improvement Level 5 and above). For more information, visit <http://www.doe.k12.ga.us/School-Improvement/Pages/GAPSS.aspx>

^{xiii} Each participating principal was asked to submit the names of seven to 10 teachers to participate in the focus groups. The GLISI research team sent invitations to all 42 teachers whose names were submitted for the focus groups. Of the 42, 15 agreed to participate in the study. However, only 14 teachers were present on the day of the focus groups. Each participant received a \$100 VISA gift card as compensation for his or her participation.

^{xiv} Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.; Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1981). *Effective evaluation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

HOW TO USE THIS REPORT TO HELP YOUR DISTRICT

Questions for Board Members to Discuss

1. How closely do we associate our personal reputations with the reputation of the school district? Is the school district a reflection of who we are?
2. If, as an individual Board member, I were to consider the school district a reflection of me, would it change how I talk to others about the school district, teachers, and students to others?
3. When our teachers hear us talk or read about what we say in the paper, are they likely to feel that their importance to our students and community is understood and that their hard work is appreciated? What can we say and do as a Board that will affirm our teachers, and inspire them to continue to work — and continue to learn and improve - in our district?

Questions for District Leader Teams to Discuss

1. What are our priority initiatives this year? Are there more than three? How many of those priority initiatives were also priorities last year, and the year before, and the year before that?
2. How do we communicate our priority initiatives among ourselves as a central office team and then to our principals, teachers and broader community? Are they discussed more than once? What systems are in place to check progress regularly on those priority initiatives? What progress are we making on those initiatives? If we walked into a random classroom in any school in the system today and asked the teacher to tell us what the current district priority initiatives or goals are, how likely is it that he/she would know?
3. How often do principals, teachers, and students see us in schools? What percentage of our time is spent observing instruction in a given week?
4. On what basis do we have credibility as instructional leaders with school staff? How do we talk about instruction? What role do they observe us playing in prioritizing instruction? How often do teachers accompany central office staff on walkthroughs, and engage in discussions about instruction facilitated by central office leaders?
5. What opportunities do teachers have to demonstrate their teaching expertise to other teachers in our district?

Questions for School Leader Teams to Discuss

1. How do teachers in our school describe one another instructionally? Have teachers in our school that have proven effectiveness in teaching particular subjects or skills been identified? How can the schedule or class groupings be modified regularly to ensure that students are paired with the teachers that have expertise needed to address their learning needs?
2. What happens in our school when a teacher is not effective instructionally? How do other teachers respond to this? What can we do to ensure teachers have opportunities to gather firsthand knowledge about other teachers' instructional expertise and effectiveness, such as through peer observations or lesson study?
3. Consider this statement: *At this school, we know how to teach every child effectively and that is how we know all students can learn.* If we do not believe that statement as a team, what action do we need to take so that we can say unequivocally that we know how to teach every child effectively?

About GLISI

The **Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI)** was formed in 2001 by a broad partnership of education, business, and government leaders. Their commitment was to empower school leaders with the tools they need to prepare every Georgia student for college and career success. Since then, GLISI has become the training and consulting partner of choice for districts throughout Georgia to develop strong leaders who transform lives in their communities.

GLISI's Mission

GLISI's mission is to develop world-class education leaders who advance student achievement and organizational effectiveness.



