

Conditions for Success:

A case study of leadership practice in a rural Georgia school district

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Message from the Executive Director

Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) cares deeply about developing the capacity of districts to provide the structures principals need to support teachers in their efforts to improve instruction and student performance. Why? Fundamentally, we believe that districts matter. Our experience, as former district staff, school leaders, and researchers, tells us that few initiatives to improve schools and leaders get off the ground without strong superintendent direction and district leader support. Moreover, even fewer initiatives “take root” and become sustainable or scalable without superintendent commitment and the aligned district actions to set direction, create conditions for teacher and principal success, and build the infrastructure to develop and support its leaders. GLISI’s “big bet” on the district has been validated by recent research that verifies that district leadership does indeed matter — as does principal and teacher leadership.

That’s why our mission continues to focus on developing world-class education leaders, including district leaders, who advance student learning and organizational effectiveness. Over the past decade, we have seen dedicated districts and their teams engage enthusiastically in our flagship leadership development program, Base Camp and Leadership Summit. Since the 2002-2003 school year, 317 teams of district and school leaders have attended, helping 4,320 leaders in Georgia districts to learn key management and leadership processes necessary to maximize student achievement.

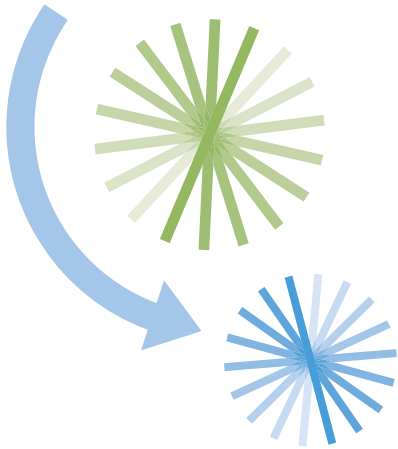
But what, exactly, does district leadership that supports improved student outcomes look like? What are the leadership behaviors and actions that make a positive difference? This study of one small rural district in Georgia found three key conditions that were present when the case study district achieved substantial changes in graduation rates:

- **A clear organizational direction and sustained focus on that direction over an extended period of time;**
- **Optimized data collection and usage through learning communities to drive instructional improvement;**
- **Comprehensive talent management practices that grow and keep quality teachers and leaders.**

While findings here, as in all case studies, are not generalizable, there are nuggets of learning to be gleaned. I invite you to learn with us about the conditions for success created by district leaders in one rural Georgia district.

Gale Hulme
Executive Director

The District Role in Leading Improvement Efforts



For too long, much of the debate about how to improve achievement for all students has centered on reform efforts at the school level. While schools have the power to change students' educational outcomes, they do not stand alone — schools must operate within conditions created by districts. Researchers have begun to recognize the importance of district conditions in education reform and are shifting their focus to the role school districts play in facilitating or impeding educational improvement.¹ Emerging evidence indicates that districts can be a key driver of system-wide improvement that enhances the quality of teaching and learning.

Knowing that districts and district leaders can influence teaching and learning, however, is not enough. Even more important is identifying how districts influence teaching and learning — understanding the specific district practices that create conditions under which improved student learning and achievement occur, so that these practices can be adopted and adapted across districts to improve student outcomes. Yet, caution is needed in the approach to adapting district practices. Given the range of variables — size, resources, community context — that can affect each district's operation, not all district leadership practices found to be effective in one district will be appropriate in other districts.

The growing body of literature on district effectiveness has focused primarily on leadership practices in large urban school districtsⁱⁱ and is less definitive when it comes to identifying effective leadership in small rural districts. Given that more than 61 percent of Georgia school districts are rural¹, understanding the role of rural district leaders in educational improvement efforts is an especially relevant state policy issue.

This report outlines findings from a study conducted by the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) to identify the district leadership practices and conditions in a small rural district in Georgia that achieved notable gains in graduation rates. The study focused particularly on how district leaders who participated in a team-based leadership development program influenced or created conditions under which those gains were achieved. This work fills a gap in the existing literature by spotlighting effective leadership practices in a small rural setting — a district context that is rarely explored. GLISI's hope is that district leaders facing similar circumstances can use the lessons learned through this study to create the conditions school leaders need to support teachers in their efforts to improve instruction, leading to improved student learning.

¹ Locale classifications are designated in the Common Core of Data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics. Locales describe a district's location based on several factors including proximity to urbanized areas.

Case Study Design

Selecting the Case Study District

To be considered for inclusion in this study, districts had to participate in the GLISI Base Camp and Leadership Summit program for a minimum of two cohorts between 2005 and 2010. (See the box below for more information about this program.) A total of 69 districts met that criterion. To narrow the field of eligible districts, GLISI researchers conducted further analysis to identify districts that posted substantial gains in student achievement or graduation rates for at least one of the following traditionally underperforming student subgroups: Black students, Hispanic students, economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, or (5) English-language learners.ⁱⁱⁱ “Substantial gains” were defined as:

- **increases of 13 percentage points or more in graduation rates; or**
- **increases of 5.33 points or more in the percentage of students meeting and exceeding fourth-grade math standards as measured by Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) scores; or**
- **increases of 4.12 points or more in the percentage of students meeting and exceeding eighth-grade reading standards as measured by CRCT scores.**

What is GLISI’s Base Camp and Leadership Summit?

GLISI’s Base Camp and Leadership Summit 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 typically led by the superintendent and can include board members 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.*

Of the 69 districts identified initially, six districts met the criteria for substantial gains for at least one student subgroup during the 2007–2010 school years. Three of the six districts were eliminated because they had been featured in previous GLISI publications² or flagged in the 2009 CRCT investigation³, leaving three districts for further consideration. Upon recommendation of internal experts with extensive knowledge of district and school improvement, one of the three remaining districts was selected as the subject of this study. To protect the identity of the site and case study participants, this report will refer to the district using the pseudonym Drexler County Public Schools (DCPS).

Study Methods

GLISI researchers interviewed a variety of key actors in the case study district — including school board members, central office personnel, and principals — to get a balanced, comprehensive view of what was occurring in the district during the time period being studied.⁴ Researchers also conducted two focus groups with a blend of elementary, middle, and high school teachers to capture the perspectives of the individuals who are most familiar with how policies and practices are experienced at the classroom level. Interviews and focus group discussions were designed to explore district practices in key domains identified in the literature on district effectiveness, such as how performance expectations and evaluations are aligned, how district goals are communicated, and how teachers and leaders are supported in their professional growth and development.

Overview of the Case Study District

²GLISI Success Cases highlighted partner districts that demonstrated improvements in organizational effectiveness or student achievement.

³The Governor's Office of Student Achievement conducted an investigation into allegations of misconduct on the 2009 CRCT administration. Classrooms were flagged as clear of concern, minimal concern, moderate concern, or severe concern based on any irregularities found in the test environment.

⁴Nine interviews were conducted. Interviewees included the superintendent, an associate superintendent, two board members, one elementary school principal, two middle school principals, and two high school principals.

DCPS is an economically disadvantaged district with little industrial and population growth. Nearly all study participants — from board members to classroom teachers — indicated that the community is struggling to attract industry and young families, contributing to the trend of a declining population in the middle and upper income range. These factors contribute to DCPS's struggle to recruit educators to a distressed community that, as one central office staff member noted, "can't afford to pay what a lot of other metropolitan and larger areas can pay."

In 2004, at the beginning of a new superintendent's administration, district leadership determined that a sea change was needed in the district's approach to teaching and learning. Rather than giving every teacher authority to independently implement any new instructional innovation, district leaders articulated a specific process for analyzing student learning needs and developing effective instructional approaches, providing all teachers with training to use that process. Principals and teacher leaders participated in further training to ensure all schools and teams would have the tools and skills needed to incorporate the new system-wide instructional approach into each classroom.

Over time, DCPS managed to excel in its mission to increase high school graduation rates, despite the challenges inherent to its rural setting. Specifically, through the district's targeted efforts to improve outcomes for all students, graduation rates among black students, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities increased substantially between the 2007 and 2010 school years. (See Table 1.)

Student Subgroup	Percentage-Point Increase in Graduation Rates (SY2007–SY2010)
Black Students	15.3
Economically Disadvantaged Students	16.6
Students with Disabilities	15.1

Table 1. Changes in Graduation Rates Among Traditionally Underperforming Student Subgroups, 2007–2010. Data source: Governor’s Office of Student Achievement.

While DCPS’s small rural setting posed several obstacles for the district, it was also an asset. When asked about the district’s strengths, both principals and teachers noted that the community had an “everybody knows your name” feel, enabling them to establish rapport with students’ parents and guardians. One principal noted that the vast majority of families had resided in the county for several generations and graduated from the same school their children were attending. This level of familiarity with the school allowed the principal to build strong trusting relationships with the community.

Another advantage of small districts is increased visibility and accessibility of district leadership — a strength mentioned by DCPS teachers from all school levels. While most small rural districts may have increased access to district leaders, relative to large urban districts, this access in DCPS translated to two-way communication that allowed for positive change to take place. For example, principals reported that there was a clear and standing invitation to contact the superintendent via cell phone at any time, which facilitated communication with senior district leadership. Teachers and principals commented that the superintendent was a constantly visible fixture in the district, whether in the schools conducting informal observations or at extracurricular activities supporting students’ scholastic and athletic interests. DCPS’s small size, with fewer than ten schools, also afforded greater opportunities for principals to collaborate with their feeder schools and with other leaders across the district. Each of these defining characteristics of the small rural district was linked in some way to the positive changes that DCPS has achieved.

Perhaps one of the most critical factors at play in DCPS was leadership longevity. At the time of this study, the superintendent in DCPS had been leading the district for seven years.^{iv} This staying power and enduring leadership contributed not only to the development of various processes that were adapted following the district’s first experience at Base Camp and Leadership Summit in 2005 but also to the sustainability of those processes.



How DCPS Made System-Wide Improvement a Reality

Far too often, districts implement reform after reform without achieving substantial changes in educational outcomes. Despite its challenging rural context, DCPS was able to break this mold and implement change with sustained results. Because of its achievements, DCPS stands out among other districts facing similar size and resource constraints, making it an ideal case from which to draw leadership lessons.

The strategic actions undertaken in DCPS were not novel; most were consistent with research-based findings of district effectiveness. What, then, set DCPS apart from similar districts? This study identified three district leadership practices that helped DCPS improve graduation rates: (1) setting a clear organizational direction and sustaining focus on that direction over an extended period of time; (2) optimizing data through learning communities to drive instructional improvement; and (3) implementing a comprehensive talent management plan.

1. *Setting a Clear Organizational Direction and Sustaining Focus on that Direction*

Setting direction perennially appears at the top of the list of influential leadership practices on organizational effectiveness.^v District leaders must understand where the district must go, communicate a plan for how to get there, and establish critical buy-in from all stakeholder groups along the way. The actions undertaken by district leadership in DCPS to effectively communicate and garner support for its **clear and sustained organizational focus** are described below:

Communicating a Rationale and Setting the Stage for Change

District leaders' recognition that it was time for a change was one of the most critical aspects of the reform — but equally important was communicating that need effectively to all stakeholder groups so the district could move forward together. According to the superintendent, creating a sense of urgency among central office personnel was accomplished by using data to identify areas for improvement in teaching and learning.

Once district leaders had communicated *why* the district needed to change, they needed to define how change would be accomplished. This included a re-culturing of the organization. As described by the superintendent, this meant challenging the status quo and shifting the focus away from doing what was easy to doing what was right for the district. Prior to setting a clear direction, the superintendent described the district's efforts to improve instruction as random and uncoordinated. With a single direction and process identified, district leaders were able to give teachers clear criteria for how to test new instructional innovations in regard to their contribution to the specific goal of increasing the district's graduation rate. This focus on a single, system-wide goal persisted through the time when this study was conducted and was evident in the focus group conversations with teachers, whether teachers worked at the elementary, middle or high school level.

District leadership made strategic decisions to align all aspects of the reform effort specifically to achieve the district's improvement goals. According to the superintendent, the reform process began with two main initiatives: (1) the adoption of new practices and (2) the establishment of new external partnerships. The district decided to implement the Learning Focused Strategies (LFS) model to target its instructional core, which the superintendent noted had not been the focus of prior initiatives. Another milestone came when the district invested in a variety of GLISI training programs and services, most notably Base Camp and Leadership Summit.

These two early initiatives became key drivers of the district's initial success with its improvement efforts, because both LFS strategies and GLISI processes were implemented with fidelity. (See the box below for more information about the processes learned through GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit. An overview of how the district implemented these practices is provided in the next section.) The superintendent described it this way:

"We came back from the training and we embraced the District Change Team, we embraced the Better Seeking Team, we embraced the Dynamic Team, and we implemented [them] — and this is where a lot of systems go wrong. They pick and choose what they implement. They pick and choose, and then they wonder why it didn't work. Well, hello? We implemented the whole thing."

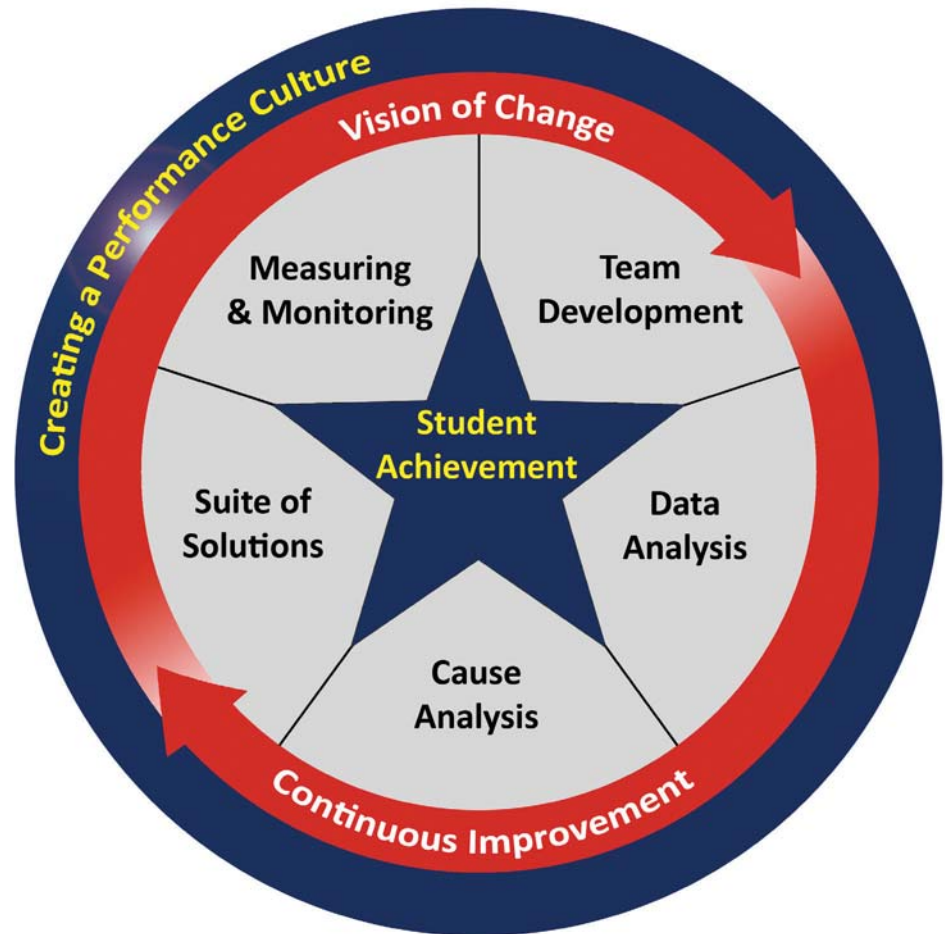
The successful implementation of these initiatives helped to build quick wins, and district leaders used that success to gain much-needed support for and commitment to its improvement efforts.

Implementing "The Whole Thing"

The content that teams learn at Base Camp and Leadership Summit is captured in what GLISI calls a Leadership Framework for System Improvement, shown in the graphic on the facing page. This framework illustrates GLISI's core message: meaningful instructional improvement is not likely to occur over time and at scale by only "analyzing the data" and "changing instruction."

Reflecting persistent findings from research of effective schools, GLISI believes that systemic change (not just incremental or superficial change) comes about by creating a performance culture — first for adults, then for students. Research further supports that cultural shifts only occur when there is a compelling, coherent vision of change connecting all aspects of instructional innovation and organizational improvement.

At GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit, teams learn to avoid looking for "silver bullet" solutions; instead, they practice protocols for identifying research-based suites of solutions, which require continuous measuring, monitoring, and course correction. Because monitoring and course correction occur over time, well beyond the six days of training that teams receive at Base Camp and Leadership Summit, GLISI provides tools and consulting support to districts. Many districts have found it helpful to send multiple teams, over many years, to GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit to enable implementation of "the whole thing."



Leadership Framework for System Improvement

Reinforcing the Direction for Change

Setting a new direction in DCPS involved more than simply telling teachers and leaders about the new direction. The district leadership aligned key resources and actions to show, through action, that the district was committed to the new direction. Specifically, the district identified a highly effective and respected staff member to act as a dedicated curriculum resource from the central office, providing support to all schools and school leaders and ensuring continuity of the initiatives from school to school. Another key practice aligned to the district’s new direction was the removal of staff members who would not or could not support the new direction — either because they were strongly committed to “the way we used to do it,” or because they did not have the skills and dispositions needed to support the curricular innovations that would move the district forward. Finally, the district showed strong commitment to the new direction by providing professional development to central office staff, principals, and instructional lead teachers in how to lead the change. Teachers received professional development in the LFS method, which the district coupled with follow-up performance expectations to ensure that the professional learning “took” and would be reflected in practice.

2. Optimizing Data Through Learning Communities to Drive Instructional Improvement

Data-driven decision making is paramount to district and school improvement. Teachers and leaders must understand the proper methods of collecting, analyzing, and using data as evidence to inform practice. But this work should not occur in isolation. In order for data analysis to bring about meaningful change, it must be a collaborative effort among various actors in the district. In DCPS, the process of **optimizing data through learning communities to drive instructional improvement** included the following:

Data-Driven Decision Making for Continuous Improvement

At the core of the district's efforts to institute improvement was a focus on building teachers' and school leaders' capacity to use data to drive a continuous improvement process. Individuals received training on how to define objectives to achieve a specified goal; execute a plan designed to bring about the desired outcome; analyze data to monitor progress toward outcomes and determine whether the expected goals were achieved; and follow up with corrective action when necessary. One principal noted how an understanding of this process helped increase the efficiency of instruction:

"If we were looking at some of our initiatives . . . we [would] offer extended professional learning. If we saw the improvement we needed to see, we would change it to a different level of professional learning, [using] areas of weakness we saw from the walkthrough to decide what we were going to do next."

As part of the continuous improvement process, data-driven decision making was crucial not only for monitoring students' progress toward intended outcomes but also for improving instructional practices of adults in the district. One principal explained that in the past there had been little accountability for teachers. No one was looking at the data to understand what factors were contributing to poor student performance. Because increased student achievement was mentioned as part of nearly all principals' professional growth plans, it was incumbent upon them to ensure that every teacher understood how data could and should be used as a tool for change and reflection.

Principals used the summer months as an opportunity to come together as a learning community and review DCPS's performance, compared with the state and surrounding counties. They looked at specific subgroups within each grade level at each school, noting any patterns that emerged. Principals then took that information back to their schools and presented it to teachers during pre-planning. This helped paint a clear picture of how the school was performing relative to expected outcomes and encouraged teachers to consider how their instructional practices should be altered to help move the district toward the goal of increased graduation rates. One principal described the process this way: "We [would] break it down all the way to the teachers' level to identify the teachers' weakness, and then they [would] work together within grade levels. They created grade-level action plans, and then each teacher [created] their own personal growth plan."

In addition to achievement data, teachers used attendance records, discipline referrals, and satisfaction ratings to inform practice. The data told the story of what was actually

occurring in DCPS and legitimized the need for instructional improvements. Instead of making assumptions without proper evidence or relying solely on standardized test scores, teachers used a variety of indicators to pinpoint strengths, identify opportunities for improvement, and prioritize instructional decisions.

Root Cause Analysis

One data analysis strategy that teams learn through GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit focuses on understanding what factors — sometimes not immediately obvious or visible — are truly at the heart of student and school performance challenges. The trend among schools to be data-driven can lead to quick fixes based on shallow data analysis; such fixes cannot meaningfully address student learning over time, as they fail to identify and understand the underlying factors that are actually at play.

Teams attending GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit learn to use an array of quality tools that help them work together to brainstorm those underlying causes — called *root causes* — and display them for further analysis. Before identifying solutions to the root causes, teams are encouraged to validate brainstormed causes using data. Teams at GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit learn to use a rich combination of student performance data, demographic data, process data, and surveys of teachers, parents, and community stakeholders to create a true portrait of school performance, drawing on the work of Victoria Bernhardt.^{vi}

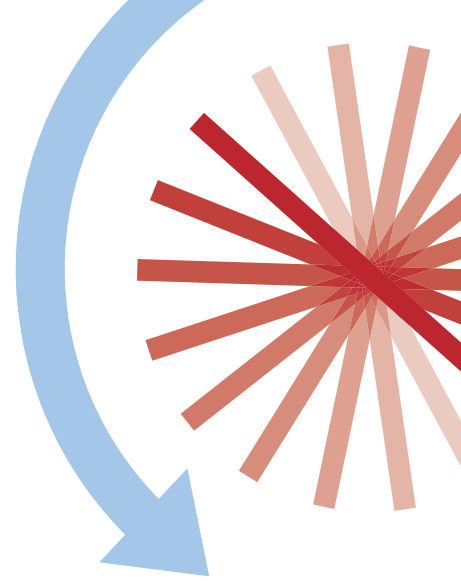
This disciplined process of root cause analysis provides teams with greater confidence that the resulting changes they make in instruction and teacher behavior will be more likely to positively impact the original student performance issue. As a bonus, chances are good that other “symptoms” will disappear when the root cause is addressed effectively.

Collaborative Inquiry

Collaborative inquiry was an especially pragmatic practice in DCPS, where the small size of the district encouraged and facilitated opportunities for dialogue among various leaders throughout the district. The strategy of team-based improvement was particularly instrumental in promoting collaboration and fostering collective responsibility. Specifically, district leaders, school leaders, and teacher leaders came together in professional learning communities (PLCs) to engage in purposeful conversations about teaching and learning. Principals and teachers alike noted that the PLCs created beneficial opportunities to share knowledge and exchange ideas in ways that were likely to yield powerful results. For example, the PLCs encouraged wider participation in conversations that had once been reserved for central office personnel.

The process of developing learning communities began with the formation of a District Change Team (DCT) and Better Seeking Teams (BSTs), strategies learned through the district's participation in GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit. The DCT consisted of district and school leaders, while the BSTs functioned at the school level and were comprised of teachers and teacher leaders. Understanding the importance of working in teams, the district allocated time for the DCT and BSTs to come together to diagnose needs, review research-based practices, analyze data, and share best practices.

Members of the DCT and BSTs indicated that they considered the constant two-way flow of information one of the most beneficial aspects of teaming. For example, one principal noted that the school leadership would typically take the topics discussed at the district level and bring them to the school level, where the BST would use the information to make sound decisions for that particular school. A teacher who participated in the focus group conversations supported this assertion by describing how the BST was often instrumental in the development of school improvement goals. A member of the DCT noted that district-level decisions were frequently motivated by feedback from school-level teams, especially decisions about the district vision and expectations. As a result of this constant flow of information, even teachers who never participated in a BST knew of the teams' existence and were familiar with their overall purpose.



Cascading the Work

Effective team structures are the lynchpin of systemic improvement that leads to improved student learning and outcomes. Of course, having a team is not a surefire path to success. Many districts have experienced what happens when one small energized team comes back from a strategic planning session ready to “roll out” change across the system: too often, very little.

In DCPS, district leadership was able to “cascade the work” and get the entire district moving together in one direction by faithfully implementing the team structures learned through Base Camp and Leadership Summit — including a District Change Team that interfaced routinely with robust and active Better Seeking Teams at each school.

DCTs and BSTs are designed to maximize distributed leadership by engaging strategic teams of district and school leaders in the work of setting organizational direction, monitoring improvement plans, and tracking progress toward intended outcomes. These teams embody the characteristics and practices of effective teams — understanding the roles and responsibilities of team leaders and team members, as well as understanding the broad-reaching cultural impact healthy team function will have on a school or district. Although there are many different school and district contexts, the central feature of healthy team-based culture anywhere is a laser focus on optimizing student learning.



3. Implementing a Comprehensive Talent Management Plan

To achieve sustainable changes, a district cannot focus only on how it needs to improve; it must also focus on who can make the necessary improvements — and getting the right people on the bus and moving in the right direction takes effort. Succession planning is a critical strategic action with long-term implications, and school districts are like other types of organizations in that unsuccessful leadership transitions can compromise organizational sustainability or reverse positive changes. Devising and executing a well-developed and well-managed plan is what separates effective leadership succession from ineffective succession.^{vii} Districts are often unsuccessful in this regard, because they fail to view talent management as a multi-stage process.^{viii} In less effective districts, district leaders stop short of executing a well-crafted plan, focusing on the hiring component of talent management and not devoting significant attention to the subsequent stages of providing teachers and leaders with the flexibility, support, and opportunities to succeed.^{ix} DCPS's approach to **implementing a comprehensive talent management plan** included both identification of potential leaders and follow-through to help those potential leaders develop into highly-effective leaders:

Intentional Focus on Leadership Transition and Succession Planning

In the case of DCPS, an intentional focus on building and sustaining a culture of strong leadership began at the highest level of the organization with the school board's identification of a promising future superintendent from inside the district. According to a board member, the school board looked for a leader who had good working relationships with major players in the district and a deep understanding of local politics. One individual emerged as an obvious choice and was tapped as a potential candidate for the superintendency. Through a careful talent development process, the incoming superintendent came to share and extend the clear mission and vision that would help propel the district toward higher levels of student success.

Supporting, Retaining, and Developing Quality Teachers and Leaders

As a small rural district with little economic growth, DCPS struggled to attract and retain highly effective teachers and leaders. The district observed that it was investing considerable resources to recruit and support new teachers only to lose those employees to higher-paying districts (usually in more geographically desirable locations). One principal explained that the district had fallen into the trap of "hiring who we could hire just to fill positions." After a relatively short time, many of those individuals would leave to pursue more attractive opportunities (e.g., higher salaries, fewer furlough days) in other districts.

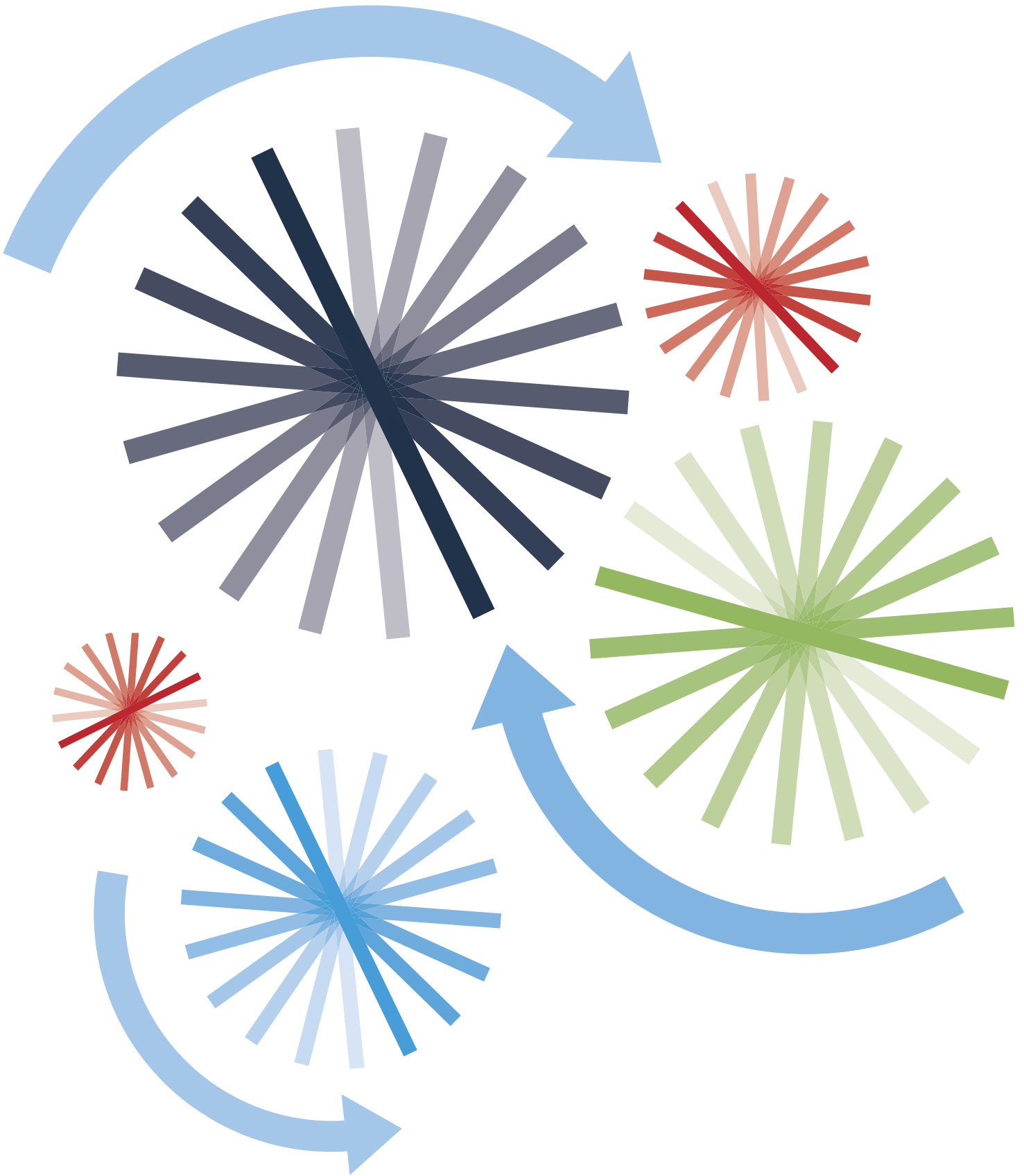
To combat its recruiting problem, DCPS implemented a "grow-your-own" approach, diverting resources to help manage and develop the talent that already existed within the district. The district's primary focus was on developing a strong pool of highly-effective leaders who possessed the knowledge, skills, and talents to move the district in a positive direction. As one principal explained, "They didn't necessarily go out and find qualified people elsewhere; there were qualified people in the county. And they mentored and raised us as leaders."

Rather than waiting for potential applicants to identify themselves, the district implemented a process for recognizing and encouraging qualified individuals to pursue leadership positions. According to central office personnel, these individuals were generally teachers who (1) demonstrated a capacity to lead schools effectively and (2) aspired to become school leaders. District leadership identified teachers who were then strategically transitioned to a leadership position, such as department head or instructional lead teacher. If the promise and desire to lead were still evident, the teachers were selected to participate in either the district-initiated leadership preparation program or a program offered through GLISI (e.g., Rising Stars). Eventually, those individuals were tapped for the principalship. In fact, four out of the five principals who participated in this study began their careers in the district as classroom teachers.

Talent development was a continuous process throughout the district, not only to develop new leaders but also to ensure each school had quality teachers in the classroom. All principals indicated that their performance was monitored by the superintendent throughout the year and, when appropriate, corrective action was taken to modify leadership practices. Principals then modeled this behavior when conducting performance evaluations of their staff. Teachers noted that principals frequently conducted formal and informal observations, provided feedback, and offered support aimed at improving instructional practices. When supportive efforts were not successful, ineffective teachers were removed from their positions. Principals noted that when they had a proper, well-documented cause to dismiss a teacher, they were supported in their decision. One principal noted, “If I said, ‘I want to non-renew this person’ — it didn’t matter if they were tenured, it didn’t matter if they weren’t — district personnel would back me up. You’ve got to give them a lot [of credit] because it’s not that way in every county.”

Autonomy and Flexibility at the School Level

Support for quality school leadership also came in the form of autonomy in DCPS. While all schools shared the responsibility of achieving the goal of increased high school graduation rates, each school was afforded the latitude of creating a plan that spoke to its unique context. For example, principals were encouraged to use their school improvement plans to drive site-specific professional development. Nearly all principals indicated that professional development followed research-based strategies and was tailored to address teachers’ weaknesses. Some principals took the liberty of implementing support programs and interventions for students, targeting critical instructional areas. This often required principals to modify students’ schedules to allow time for participation in support classes, and district leadership gave them the autonomy to make these modifications. (Attendance and, in turn, improvement rates in targeted academic areas were much higher when support structures were woven into the school day as opposed to being offered after school or on weekends.) Principals also had the autonomy to build time into the schedule for collaborative planning, particularly for co-teachers — autonomy that they found crucial to the improvement process.



Implications for Practice

DCPS implemented some not-so-radical strategies and used them to make improvements in teaching and learning, defying conventional expectations for small rural school districts. Instead of succumbing to the stereotypical pattern of rising dropout rates and declining high school graduation rates in rural districts, DCPS achieved substantial gains in graduation rates, particularly for traditionally underperforming student groups. While there is not enough evidence to directly link student success with the strategies DCPS adopted, the positive changes in leadership practices and instructional behaviors likely contributed to the conditions yielding improved educational outcomes. Accordingly, the implications resulting from this study warrant reflection and consideration by district and community leaders in similar districts.

Implications for Setting a Clear Organizational Direction and Sustaining Focus on that Direction

- **Select one process-focused approach, stick with it, and align other district initiatives to support that approach.** For more than eight years, DCPS consistently rolled out a comprehensive implementation plan using a specific instructional improvement strategy (LFS). This roll-out included teacher and leader training and continual incorporation into district and school-based team discussions. When the district sent teams to GLISl's Base Camp and Leadership Summit, it was to prepare the District Change Team to support implementation of LFS by the school-based Better Seeking Teams.
- **Give teams latitude and autonomy within a framework of "non-negotiables" so they can drive schools toward district direction.** Teams in DCPS were given tools and training that enabled district leaders to confidently confer more authority on teams to make decisions in line with the district direction. It did not hurt that, as a small central office in a small district, DCPS did not have enough staff members to micro-manage school teams.

Implications for Optimizing Data through Learning Communities to Drive Instructional Improvement

- **Use teams as the primary means for accomplishing the goal of the district: improving teaching and learning.** Many districts will report that they have teams — but in DCPS, the teachers, teacher leaders, principals, and district office leaders all described the DCT as a living, working entity through which all instructional decisions and strategic priorities flowed. The DCT and BSTs were institutionalized structures within the system, and the meeting schedules for those teams were well-publicized and honored — not rescheduled, postponed indefinitely, or canceled in favor of "more important" meetings. Most importantly, district and building leaders *attended* the meetings, allowing the real work of the district to be accomplished and high-priority issues to be addressed. The DCT and BSTs met regularly, and all teachers knew exactly whom to talk to if they wanted ideas brought to the DCT. DCPS's

team structure ensured that all teachers were conversationally familiar with the key parameters that allowed flexibility in instructional innovation while remaining faithful to the core strategy.

- **Use a common language consistently across the district to describe teams, goals, and expectations.** Every participant in the case study — whether teacher or principal (elementary, middle, and high school), superintendent or board member — used the same specific language to describe the teams and team processes used in DCPS. Further, use of Georgia’s Class Keys and School Keys as teacher and leader evaluation tools helped ensure clear shared expectations for instruction and leadership.
- **Use a systematic and uniform process for analyzing data and root causes.** Principals and teachers in DCPS knew how to use student performance data and other data sources to make decisions. The district provided training for several team leaders in how to analyze data, and those who did not participate directly in that training reported learning about the content of the training from team leaders who attended.
- **Invite new ideas from everyone and create opportunities to share those ideas.** Teachers in DCPS felt authorized to identify and research potential strategies or ideas for improving instruction and learning in the district. They indicated that their principals were highly encouraging of such innovations and felt confident that the professional environment in DCPS would be respectful of their ideas. Teachers also clearly understood that the adoption of any new idea would be closely monitored through data analysis, adjusted as needed, and possibly discontinued if expected results did not materialize.
- **Take corrective action when data indicate the need to do so.** At best, data analysis can only identify what may be “working” or “not working” in the school improvement process. What leads to improved instruction and student learning is the action that is taken as a *result* of what the data say. Teachers across all levels reported that corrective action was a reflexive process in DCPS. Indeed, some teachers reported that there was a risk of “innovation fatigue” when too many strategies were attempted successively. However, data analysis *without* corrective action cannot lead to changes in teaching and learning.

Implications for Implementing a Comprehensive Talent Management Plan

- **Engage school board members and superintendents in intentional superintendent succession planning,** identify promising leaders and promoting them to central office leadership positions. Give promising leaders opportunities for on-the-job experience and coaching from the sitting superintendent, especially in the area of managing the political challenges of the position.
- **Promote teachers who have consistently demonstrated leadership capacity within the district to fill principal vacancies.** District leaders in DCPS intentionally tapped aspiring leaders from within the district, provided them with experiences to develop their leadership skills, and — importantly — placed these proven leaders into principal positions when there was an opening.

- **Create school-level leadership roles, other than principal and assistant principal, to give promising leaders a platform for developing and showcasing leadership skills.** The school-based BSTs in DCPS provided teachers with the opportunity to lead teams of teachers in addressing the authentic challenges facing their students and school.
- **Cultivate a close, family-like culture to compensate for challenging financial conditions — such as furlough days and salaries.** Teachers acknowledged that the financial challenges in DCPS may have contributed to some teacher turnover in the district. However, teachers overwhelmingly reported that a perk of working in DCPS was the connection they were able to develop with one another and with their students in this close-knit community. They cited the strong role of teams, the visibility and accessibility of leaders, and leadership receptivity to their ideas as conditions that made them feel that the district was like a family — conditions that kept them coming to work every day.

Conclusion

This case study offers insights about how district leadership in a small rural school district with limited financial resources created conditions that contributed to a notable increase in graduation rates. The district in this case study provides a real-world example affirming findings from literature illuminating how district leadership can influence school and student success. According to research on district leadership and school improvement:

- *organizational focus and consistency are factors in carrying forward successful change initiatives;*^x
- *teachers and leaders in successful schools are engaged in robust professional learning communities that systematically use data to identify priorities, develop instructional innovations, and monitor progress;*^{xi} and
- *as Jack Welch notes, “People are the whole ball game: the players, the national anthem, the hot dogs, the seventh-inning stretch, the whole game.”*^{xii}

Interviews with a broad range of district stakeholders revealed in DCPS: 1) district leaders set and sustained direction; 2) district leaders focused on using data and teams to drive up the quality of instruction; and 3) district leaders focused on finding, growing, and keeping talented school leaders.

Amid substantial pressures, leaders in this district — from the superintendent, to the school board, to principals and teacher leaders — exerted sustained energy in these three critical domains. While the findings of this inquiry are not necessarily predictive of outcomes or conditions in other districts, school and community leaders in similar districts should carefully consider the lessons learned through this study as they work to improve their leadership practices and student achievement.

End Notes

ⁱ Anderson, S. E. (2003). *The school district role in educational change: A review of the literature*. Retrieved from https://sdcoe.net/lret2/dsi/pdf/District_Role_Change.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>

ⁱⁱ See, for example: Galvin, P. (2000). Organizational boundaries, authority and school district organization. In N. Theobald, & B. Malen (Eds.), *Balancing local control and state responsibility for K-12 education* (pp. 279-310). Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education, Inc.; Institute for Educational Leadership (2001). *Leadership for student learning: Restructuring school district leadership*. Retrieved from <http://www.iel.org/programs/21st/reports/district.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Data were obtained from the Governor's Office of Student Achievement: <http://www.gaosa.org/>

^{iv} The superintendent had been seated for seven years at the time this study was conducted and remains in that position as of the date of this publication. Studies indicate the national average ranges between five and seven years. See for example: Fusarelli, L. D., Cooper, B. S., & Carella, V. A. (2003). Who will serve? An analysis of superintendent occupational perceptions, career satisfaction, and mobility. *Journal of School Leadership*, 13(3), 304–327; Natkin, G., Cooper, B., Alborano, J., Padilla, A., & Ghosh, S. (2002, April). Predicting and modeling superintendent turnover. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA. Retrieved from <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED466036.pdf>

^v Leithwood, K., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning*. New York: The Wallace Foundation.

^{vi} Bernhardt, V. (2004). *Data analysis for continuous school improvement* (2d ed.). Larchmont, NY: Eye on Education.

^{vii} Rothwell, W. J. (2005). *Effective succession planning: Ensuring leadership continuity and building talent from within* (3rd ed.). Retrieved from http://books.google.com/books?id=4GZTHBUVNH8C&pg=PA1&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=4#v=onepage&q&f=false

^{viii} Normore, A. (2007, December). A continuum approach for developing school leaders in an urban district. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 2(3), 1–45.

^{ix} Ibid.

^x Leithwood, K., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning*. New York: The Wallace Foundation; MDRC. (2005, July). *The challenge of scaling up educational reform: Findings and lessons from First Things First*. Retrieved from: <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/412/full.pdf>

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^{xii} Welch, J. (2001). *Straight from the gut*. Alberta, Canada: College of Alberta School Superintendents. Retrieved from http://o.b5z.net/i/u/10063916/h/Pre-Conference/CASS_Research_Paper_3_Leithwood_Turning_Around_School_Systems.pdf

Credits

This report was made possible by the gracious cooperation of the district leaders, principals, and teachers in the case study district who shared their time and opened their schools to our research team. It was researched and written by Meca Mohammed, Director of Research and Evaluation, and Leslie Hazle Bussey, Chief of Staff. The GLIS team including Jennie Welch, Gale Hulme, and Mary Anne Charron provided comments that helped shape the final report, while Emily Boness of the Fanning Institute provided valued research assistance. The report was edited by Emily Kagey and designed by Paige Taylor at Sage Sublime.

About GLISI

The Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement

The Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) was founded in 2001 as an initiative of the state of Georgia with the backing of Governor Roy Barnes and a broad bipartisan coalition of voices representing the business, education, higher education, and state government communities. GLISI was established to strengthen the capacity of school leaders to drive improvement in outcomes for all students, drawing on best practice from business, K-12 and adult learning.

Our theory of change is that through training, consulting and technical assistance, we achieve systemic improvement of education leadership, resulting in improved student learning over time and at scale.

GLISI's Mission

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

Our mission is rooted in the understanding that effective school and district leaders are a key driver for improving educational outcomes for all students, and that improved educational outcomes lead to improved life outcomes for young people and communities.

Reflection Questions for District Leaders and School Board Members

Strategic Focus

- Can teachers and school leaders in our district point to a singular strategic focus that we have maintained year after year?
- Have we aligned our professional learning to that focus?
- Have we defined the “non-negotiables” of our district direction that all schools must address?
- Do we clearly understand the connection between our strategic focus and emerging developments in the field, such as Common Core Georgia Performance Standards?
- Do we effectively communicate those connections to teachers and leaders?
- If we asked our teachers to tell us what is important in this district, would we hear the same thing from every teacher?

Teams and Data Analysis for Improvement

- Are the teams that operate in our district consistent, positive, and integral to the core work of the district?
- Do we rely on our district teams and school teams (rather than on a few individual leaders) to monitor and direct the work of improving the quality of teaching and learning?
- Have our teams created a climate that builds confidence and skill in teaching and leadership craft, or does the team climate foster negativity?
- Do our teams know what is expected of them when they meet? Are there protocols for team meetings and discussion? Do district and school leaders follow up with team leaders to monitor team effectiveness?
- Do our teams know how — and do they have the materials needed — to analyze student performance?
- Do teams in our district have the authority to recommend and implement decisions based on data analysis?

Talent Development and Succession Planning

- Do teachers who aspire to become leaders in our district know what to do to be considered for a leadership position?
- Has our district set clear expectations for teacher leaders and school leaders? Does the professional learning available to teachers and leaders in our district help them meet our expectations of them? Is our performance evaluation aligned to our expectations and to the professional learning we offer?
- Do our hiring practices mirror our expectations of leadership? That is, are the leaders who are placed in vacant positions the most qualified and best prepared candidates, even if they are not the candidates with most seniority?
- Are we making plans for superintendent succession?
- Are there leaders in the district who could grow into central office leaders with support?



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