



GLISI

Strong leaders transform lives.

STARTING WITH **WHY**:

**How District Leaders Create a Compelling
Sense of Urgency to Drive
District-Wide Change**

A Case Study in the GLISI *Conditions for Success* Series

METHODOLOGY

In October 2014, the research team at the Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) conducted interviews with key district leaders and administrators in Wilkinson County School District (WCSD), which averaged 90 minutes in duration. Researchers also collected qualitative data through two focus groups with teachers, each with a mixture of primary, elementary, middle, and high school teachers. Across all of the conversations, GLISI researchers aimed to capture participants' thoughts on important topics such as district mission and vision, performance expectations, 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 enabled researchers 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.¹

The research team also utilized thematic networking to:

- 1** identify key concepts derived from the raw data,
- 2** link these concepts throughout the data,
- 3** organize data by topic, and
- 4** use the topics to define and confirm relationships.

¹ Miles & Huberman (1994); Guba & Lincoln (1981).



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

DISTRICT LEADERSHIP STARTED WITH WHY 5

DISTRICT CULTURE PUSHED TAKING
COORDINATED CALCULATED RISKS WHEN
SUBSTANTIATED BY DATA AND RESEARCH 13

DISTRICT PROCESSES EMPHASIZED EXPLICIT
INSTRUCTIONAL EXPECTATIONS FOR TEACHERS
AND ALIGNED THOSE EXPECTATIONS WITH SUPPORT 21

CONCLUSION 25

REFERENCES 27

APPENDICES 29

QUESTIONS FOR SELF-GUIDED REFLECTION 33

WILKINSON COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT



1,550
STUDENTS



130
STAFF MEMBERS



4
SCHOOLS



1
VISION

INTRODUCTION

Readers looking for an inspiring story of unlikely academic success will certainly find it in this case study. But the case study is aimed even more so at readers who are looking not only for inspiration but for practical advice about leading learning from the central office – readers interested in knowing how a district facing what seemed like insurmountable challenges, including a community divided by race and class, seismic shifts in local economy and industry, and a stagnant culture of instruction, took purposeful actions to ensure that all students in the community would be equipped with skills and knowledge needed to have choices for their future. In this study, we take pains to provide clear and concrete examples of those actions rather than painting them in broad strokes. There is nothing superhuman or mysterious about what district leaders did. But what they started, they continued – every day, to this day.

Wilkinson County is a rural school district located in middle Georgia, where the backbone of industry has been kaolin, a naturally occurring clay that is used to manufacture products ranging from make-up to diaper cream.² But with the kaolin industry that once employed generations of Wilkinson residents on a steady decline, the path for many young people in the county looks different today than it did for their parents and grandparents who went to work at the local plants directly out of high school. With a shrinking industry base, the school district has emerged as Wilkinson County's greatest resource.

[Wilkinson County School District \(WCSD\)](#) employs 130 staff members³ and enrolls approximately 1,550⁴ students across its four schools. The majority of WCSD students are African American (57%) and qualify for free/reduced-priced lunch (86%).⁵ The high proportion of students who qualify for free/reduced-price lunch reflects socioeconomic conditions in Wilkinson County, where the median household income hovers around \$36,000.⁶ The racial makeup of WCSD differs from the county, however, which is predominantly white (58.4%).⁷ This profile is similar to other rural Georgia districts; yet this district's academic performance makes it a standout. This is particularly true when it comes to eighth-grade economically disadvantaged and African American students' performance on the state-wide math assessment between SY2010 and SY2012.⁸ (See Figure 1.)

2 Kennedy (2010, January).

3 Staff count includes certified administrators, teachers, and support personnel. Source: Governor's Office of Student Achievement (2015).

4 Governor's Office of Student Achievement (2015).

5 Governor's Office of Student Achievement (2015).

6 The five-year average is reported for 2009–2013. Source: United States Census Bureau (2015).

7 United States Census Bureau (2015).

8 The sampling frame included only districts that participated in GLISI's [Base Camp and Leadership Summit](#) for a minimum of two cohorts over the time period of 2007–2012. Outcome measures were analyzed for 57 districts identified. Of those districts, 6 were shown to have notable changes for at least one student subgroup between SY2009 and SY2011. "Notable change" is defined as continuous incremental growth totaling 4.03% or more in third-grade reading Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) scores and/or 5.38% or more in eighth-grade math CRCT scores.

PERFORMANCE ON STATE-WIDE ASSESSMENT


8TH GRADE MATH (MEETS + EXCEEDS)	SY2009-2010	SY2010-2011	SY2011-2012	CHANGE
ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED	82%	91%	94%	 12%
AFRICAN AMERICAN	85%	88%	94%	 9%

Figure 1: Performance on-state-wide assessment.

Were these results anticipated? Did they take leaders in WCSD by surprise? “I expected them because we really put a focus on instruction; so no, the results didn’t at all surprise me,” admits Virginia Whipple, Wilkinson’s Assistant Superintendent. Whipple participated along with principals, teachers, board members, and the superintendent in a case study conducted by a team of Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) researchers to better understand what conditions and leader actions were precursors to these results. (See the *inside cover* for more about the study design.)

What our team found through this study was a system of supports and preconditions that had been cultivated in the district for several years before starting to bear fruit in academic outcomes. Certainly, a focus on instruction was pervasive. What we hope to illuminate in this report, however, is a

more detailed account of how the superintendent’s unwavering commitment to better educating students, along with other critical factors, translated to day-to-day actions for central office leaders, principals, and teachers. Specifically, we will focus on three key factors that were part of the district’s deliberate approach to achieving its mission:

- ▶ District leadership started with **why**.
- ▶ District culture pushed taking coordinated calculated risks when substantiated by data and research.
- ▶ District processes emphasized explicit instructional expectations for teachers and aligned those expectations with support.

DISTRICT LEADERSHIP STARTED WITH *WHY*

When Dr. Aaron Geter was appointed superintendent of Wilkinson County School District (WCSD) in January 2009, he looked at the district's assets and needs with fresh eyes. During his years as a school leader and an athletic coach, Geter's leadership was powered by a deep-seated belief that world-class educational experiences and opportunities are basic rights that all students deserve, especially students in a working-class rural community like Wilkinson. When he stepped into the superintendent's seat, he looked around and saw that too many students enrolled in the county were denied this basic right. While he saw assets like caring teachers and supportive board members, he also saw low student and teacher morale brought on by years of enduring deteriorating infrastructure, such as a dilapidated 60-year-old primary/elementary school building. Geter set out to do something about it so that WCSD would live up to its civic and moral responsibility to provide all students with the highest quality education, under the best conditions possible. He used three key strategies to help others see and embrace the reasons why change was urgently needed in the district:

- 1 operationalizing a vision,
- 2 launching a capital outlay plan, and
- 3 building and encouraging relationships.

“*...world-class educational experiences and opportunities are basic rights that all students deserve, especially students in a working-class rural community like Wilkinson.*”

OPERATIONALIZING A VISION

Rather than making immediate dramatic changes, Geter approached his new role with a “start small and go slow” mentality, spending the first six months listening, observing, and asking questions that would help shape his vision for district-wide improvement. Resisting the instinct to immediately jump into action can be a challenge for any new superintendent. Often, pressure to act swiftly limits opportunities for new superintendents to take a step back and reflect on **why** things need to change as opposed to starting with **what** needs to change and how to go about changing it. Geter was clear on his **why**: WCSD students deserved better. He operationalized his vision for district-wide improvement beginning with a paradigm shift, followed by a systematic shift, and concluding with an organizational shift. (See Figure 2.)

OPERATIONALIZING GETER'S VISION

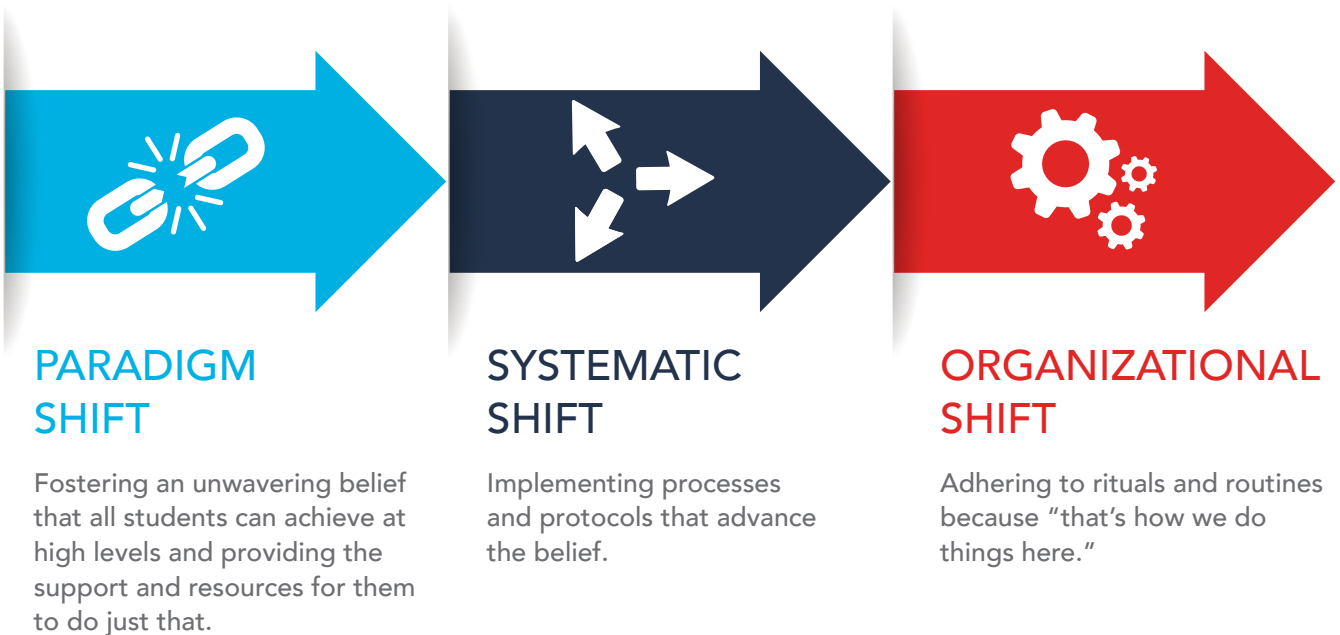


Figure 2: Operationalizing Geter's Vision.

Geter knew that simply telling people to behave differently would not result in lasting change. Real, authentic change begins with inspiration and passion – and that type of change was overdue in WCSD. For example, an analysis of course grades revealed that many students in the district were failing courses, but just barely failing, with 68s and 69s. This information was alarming to Geter, who knew students had the potential to be more successful but lacked the appropriate support and motivation to help see them through. To foster a paradigm shift in the district’s culture, he created a sense of urgency that included modeling the behavior central office leaders expected from teachers. Their actions aimed to reinforce key messages such as “students come first” and “we always do what’s best for students.” Geter also attended to the systematic shift that was necessary to reinforce the behavior district leaders expected. This included the design and implementation of processes to prevent other students from “falling through the cracks.” One such safety net at the classroom level was weekly reports (or scorecards) that teachers developed to help students monitor their academic progress. At the school level, principals used AdminShare, a balanced scorecard, to report student attendance, teacher attendance, benchmark scores, and discipline. Geter and his central office staff reviewed the reports and had one-on-one conversations with principals to discuss progress and identify high-leverage actions for the following month. Beyond processes, central office staff helped teachers and administrators show, through their actions, how much they believed in their students.

LAUNCHING A CAPITAL OUTLAY PLAN

While shoring up the fund balance needed to actualize his vision for the district,⁹ Geter zeroed in on an ambitious capital outlay plan that included building a new central office and primary/elementary school. When reflecting on Geter's plan, one school board member commented:

“ Our old central office was unsuitable for running a major organization like a school district. Over the years we had gone from being jammed in a one-room space to an old three-room post office that was too small to comfortably accommodate central office staff, let alone visitors. Neither was the type of place that should function as WCSD's hub. It was bad. When Dr. Geter took his post, that's when we began a crusade to build the new central office. Our commitment and perseverance eventually sparked community interest and support, which was key. Before long, our dream of a new building became a reality. ”



OLD CENTRAL
OFFICE BUILDING



NEW CENTRAL
OFFICE BUILDING

Geter made capital outlay a priority because he believed that no one should be subjected to deteriorating infrastructure. Although one selling point for the new building was to rebrand the school district as a community asset by bringing its antiquated facilities into the 21st century, Geter's decision to build a new central office was about more than keeping up with the times or protecting property values. It was a symbol of change and advocacy for doing the right thing. The bold improvement also showed the local school board and central office staff what was possible with visionary leadership. Geter listened to them and aligned his leadership priorities to support the most pressing needs of the district. This was the same stance Geter took when, backed by the local school board, he began campaigning for a new primary/elementary school. Despite blatant problems such as a leaking roof, peeling paint, and outdated technology, many community members were against building a new school. In fact, in 2009, an Education Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (E-SPLOST)¹⁰ extension that would have helped fund school facility improvements through 2018 was voted

down.¹¹ A local school board member recalled, "There were people who just did not want it. 'Can't you patch it up?' they would ask. Well, we had patched and patched and patched the school up until we couldn't patch anymore. It had been 60 years since we built a new school. Our children deserved better."

Geter led an effort to build support for the plan through consistent messaging of "no new tax," "zero percent interest," and "new primary/elementary school."¹² By the next vote on November 2, 2010, the E-SPLOST passed with a vote of 1796 to 1533. The building campaigns did not seem like actions that would galvanize the community, promote a renewed sense of pride in WCSD, and get the district one step closer to fulfilling its civic and moral responsibility. And yet they ultimately achieved all of this because they became lasting monuments to the passion and advocacy of the superintendent for serving the needs of all children in the community. They are a daily reminder to the residents in Wilkinson County of the mission of the school to provide a rigorous education to "every student, every day."

9 Educational funding had been cut for the 2010 fiscal year, and austerity cuts totaled approximately \$2,530,136 dollars over the previous six years (Wilkinson County Commission Meeting Notes, September 1, 2009).

10 A special-purpose local-option sales tax (SPLOST) is a financing method for funding capital outlay projects in the state of Georgia. It is an optional 1% sales tax levied by any county for the purpose of funding the building of parks, schools, roads, and other public facilities. Source: Special-purpose local-option sales tax (2016).

11 The E-SPLOST extension on the September 11, 2009, ballot lost by a vote of 525 to 526.

12 Funds from the Education SPLOST were earmarked for the new primary/elementary school. Source: Burke & Geter (2012).

BUILDING AND ENCOURAGING RELATIONSHIPS

Geter understood that he could not carry forward change of the magnitude he had in mind without enlisting sustained commitment from others – and that commitment deepened in direct proportion to the development of relationships with people up and down his reporting chain.¹³ From day one as superintendent, Geter worked hard to establish a cooperative and harmonious relationship with local school board members, fostering a culture in which professional respect trumped personal agendas. This is because Geter understood that his relationship with the school board was perhaps one of the most critical, as it would set the tone for the entire district. He shared the following insights about the intentionality needed to create and sustain that connection:

“*It's all about relationships and clearly defined roles. We tried to establish parameters up front so the focus could be on taking care of the business of the school district. We don't want people working in our organization to worry about whether we're fighting. That would be a distraction, and they have more important things to focus on. I tell the board, 'When it comes time to make tough decisions, vote your conviction.' Once the decision is made, I've got my marching orders and I'm moving forward. That's how I approach it. Whether I'm here as superintendent or if it's 20 years from now, I want us to have a genuine relationship where we come up, talk, and laugh about things.*”

Not only did Geter invest time building relationships, but he also encouraged others to do the same. Among the most important relationships he attended to was stronger personal connections between teachers and students. The research is clear that “Improving students’ relationships with teachers has important, positive and long-lasting implications for both students’ academic and social development.” With growing concerns about student attendance, engagement, and performance, the need for even more meaningful relationships with students was evident. Teachers at the middle school level were encouraged to adopt a “whatever it takes” mindset, which meant going the extra mile to understand and meet students’ needs. Some achieved this by making themselves more available to students, either before or after school, while others renewed their focus on what it took to truly recognize and teach to “each child’s learning style.” Teachers told us that they began to notice small, gradual shifts in student engagement at the middle school level when math teachers began looping in SY2009. By moving from one grade level to the next alongside students, teachers explained, “We got to know students and form trusting relationships.

Strong student-teacher rapport was a necessary precondition to improved student learning.” Around this same time, the district began to see an uptick in math achievement at the middle school level. When teachers and administrators reflected on these positive changes in student outcomes, particularly among eighth-grade economically disadvantaged and African American students between SY2010 and SY2012, they simply noted, “This is what happens when you do the right things.”

Rather than coming right out of the gate with a series of new programs and initiatives, Geter started with **why**, setting a context for change that was rooted in meeting a responsibility to students. He modeled how to back into action by using a disciplined approach, asking, “Why is this happening?” and “Why should we take this action?” – and this approach generated broad-based community support that led to new school buildings and cultivated the relationships and trust needed to operationalize his vision of district-wide improvement. In this manner, he showed others how to take calculated risks to spur district action.

13 Drago-Severson (2012).

14 Rimm-Kaufman & Sandilos (2011).

DISTRICT CULTURE PUSHED TAKING COORDINATED CALCULATED RISKS WHEN SUBSTANTIATED BY DATA AND RESEARCH

What do you do when things aren't working? Some may be tempted to stay the course, hoping things will get better. Others will jump ship and cling to the next thing that floats by. Then there are those who will take calculated risks, unsure of the outcome but arming themselves with the information needed to make sound decisions. Central office leaders in Wilkinson County School District (WCSD) chose this third strategy, because the status quo was not working. They set out to create a culture in which taking calculated risks was the norm – an environment where teachers felt empowered not only to use data to develop theories that could explain student performance issues, but to conduct research to propose interventions that would address those issues. The sections below describe how WCSD equipped teachers and leaders to use data to drive decisions and research to guide action.

EQUIPPING TEACHERS TO USE DATA

Developing sound theories about the causes of student performance issues begins with data. But access to data is not always enough. Although WCSD was data-rich, the district struggled to transform data into improved practice. It was not until Geter partnered with a leadership development organization skilled in leading teams through system improvement that teachers and leaders in WCSD began to understand what it truly meant to be "data-driven." Principals and central office leaders cited their partnership with the [Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement \(GLISI\)](#) as a turning point for the district, crediting GLISI for encouraging them to scrutinize their practice in ways that had not been expected in the past. As Figure 3 shows, WCSD has participated in [GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit \(BCLS\)](#) seven years since SY2010.

One principal recalled:

“Prior to attending GLISl’s Base Camp and Leadership Summit,¹⁵ I didn’t understand that I wasn’t using data as effectively as possible. In fact, we weren’t even doing it. A lightbulb went off while I was there, and it helped me see data and the data-analysis process in a different way. I was like, ‘What? I hadn’t learned it that way.’ I hadn’t learned that you can’t jump to the [solutions] before identifying high-leverage causes. I came back to my school and helped others look at the data more closely and begin asking the question, ‘Why?’ – that’s something that we’re really immersing ourselves in so that we can get better at fine-tuning instruction to meet students where they are.”

15 Focus group participants stressed that the district provides ongoing professional development and opportunities for them to seek innovative ways to improve their practice. This included exposing nearly every employee to GLISl’s Base Camp and Leadership Summit at least once, partnering with their local Regional Education Service Agency (RESA), and attending content-specific professional conferences.

WILKINSON'S PARTICIPATION AT BCLS

BCLS PARTICIPATION SINCE SY2010
SY2009-2010
SY2010-2011
SY2011-2012
SY2012-2013
SY2013-2014
SY2014-2015
SY2015-2016
TOTAL YEARS = 7

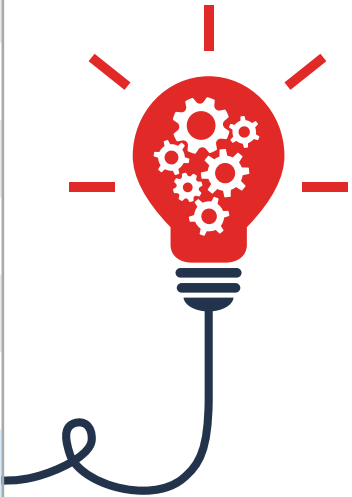


Figure 3: Wilkinson's participation at BCLS.

This emphasis on improved data usage permeated the district. Teachers indicated that they began to conduct more frequent item analysis on benchmarks to identify and resolve misalignment between instruction and assessments. One teacher described it this way:

“We meet by content area and look at the data and say, ‘Okay, what questions did they [students] miss?’ Then, we analyze the question to make sure that it was a question that was understandable and it wasn’t one that was confusing to the child. If it wasn’t confusing and it was a valid question, then we explore other reasons why the students missed the questions and what adult behavior needs to change in order to address that.”

Using data to facilitate more meaningful conversations about instruction has helped teachers become more adept at selecting research-based solutions to guide their actions.

USING RESEARCH TO GUIDE ACTION

Geter had long been a proponent of coordinated and calculated risk-taking. In fact, that’s how single-gender classes were adopted at the middle school level in SY2008. When Geter was the principal at Wilkinson County Middle School, a teacher came to him with an idea for an instructional program to address achievement, attendance, and discipline gaps. Although students’ performance on the state-wide assessment in math was above the state average, a closer analysis of the data showed gaps among African-American males and other groups of students.

Geter recalled:

“We started studying assessment data and found that we still had a gap with our black male population, although aggregate results showed that we were doing well. We also observed troubling trends in discipline, as well as small pockets of attendance problems with certain kids and certain families at the middle school level. We started developing explanations for what we were seeing, then turned to research to help us figure out what action to take.”

With brain-based learning differences between male and female students as the guiding theory, Geter set out to understand how single-gender classes in core academic areas could be used as a strategy to help close achievement gaps at the middle school level. He began by assembling a study group that worked with the school's design team to conduct research on brain-based learning and single-gender education. He also identified opportunities to learn from other schools in full implementation of single-gender education. This led him (and a few study group and design team members) to a professional conference in South Carolina, a state where single-gender classes were proliferating.¹⁶ The conference provided an opportunity for Geter and his team to better understand the nuances of implementing a single-gender education program, such as teacher training, federal regulations, and public relations. Around the same time, a neighboring district was in a highly publicized dispute with parents over its decision to move to single-gender classes at the middle school level. Geter did not let that neighboring dispute deter him, though. He plowed ahead, using the data he compiled to present a compelling case for why the district should take the risk.

Geter takes a similar posture as superintendent, welcoming fresh ideas that are substantiated by data. He explains the **Plan-Do-Check-Act** cycle the district uses this way: "Teachers take their ideas to

their principals, who roll them up to the central office. If we think it's worth the risk, we tell them to pilot the initiative, track progress often, and keep good data. We assess the data and determine if it's something we want to tweak, abandon, implement at the pilot site, or rollout through the whole district." In addition to spurring calculated risk-taking across the district, this approach has also led teachers to feel empowered because their ideas have the potential to result in better educational experiences for students. As one teacher explained, "Our district seeks out ways – research-based ways – to improve student engagement, student learning, and student achievement, and they don't shrink from that. They're constantly seeking out better ways" to educate students.

Central office leaders in WCSD did not settle. They pushed themselves, as well as other leaders and teachers, to do better for their students. Doing better meant doing things differently, especially in terms of data analysis. By sharpening their analytical skills and becoming more disciplined in their behavior, the adults in WCSD were better positioned to identify student performance issues, theorize about the causes of those issues, and design research-based instructional solutions to address those issues in a way that aligned with district expectations.

PLAN-DO-CHECK-ACT (PDCA) PROCESS

The Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle is a four-phase continuous improvement model that includes developing a plan based on data (**Plan**); implementing the plan (**Do**); analyzing and reporting results (**Check**); and adopting, adapting, or abandoning practices based on the results (**Act**).



DISTRICT PROCESSES EMPHASIZED EXPLICIT INSTRUCTIONAL EXPECTATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND ALIGNED THOSE EXPECTATIONS WITH SUPPORT

Organizations, including school districts, often use expectations and accountability to drive performance toward desired outcomes. Since Geter's sole focus was providing the highest quality educational experiences to every student of Wilkinson County School District (WCSD), his efforts to ensure district-wide improvement resulted in a stronger emphasis on adult practice and behavior. Bringing about more effective practice in WCSD meant defining instructional expectations more explicitly and monitoring progress against those expectations through a variety of support mechanisms.

EXPLICIT SHARED EXPECTATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION

In WCSD, the message from central office leaders was "This is what we expect...now, how can we support you to ensure you are effective so that our students are successful?" Take, for example, the district's adoption of a **common lesson plan template** designed to reduce variability across classrooms.¹⁷ (See Appendix A.) Inspired by the Understanding by Design framework, the templates served as a way to help teachers use a uniform process to (1) identify desired results, (2) determine assessment evidence, and (3) plan learning experiences and instruction.¹⁸ Central office leaders selected a small group of teacher leaders to collaborate on the development of the tool, then provided district-wide training to reinforce expectations. One central office leader explained, "Lesson plans were a big part of what we were doing. They had a lot to do with the growth we're seeing in students' math performance... Everybody uses the same template for lesson plans; it's expected K-12."

¹⁷ Rothman (2009); Dr. Walter Shewhart is credited with defining the causes of variation in 1924, which W. Edwards Deming later extended and popularized.

¹⁸ McTighe & Wiggins (1999).

Another example of instructional expectations included Basic Training, a district-developed concept that was implemented to address concerns that students were matriculating from one grade to the next while still struggling with basic concepts that they should have learned in earlier grades. The problem was most prevalent at the middle school level, where students' inability to recall foundational math skills prevented them from fully grasping new concepts. In response to this issue, math teachers used Basic Training at the beginning of every class as a way for students to activate prior knowledge while preparing their brains for the day's work. Although the process was consistent across all math teachers, the content varied by grade level. Basic Training for students in the seventh grade might have included practice converting a fraction to a decimal, while students in the sixth grade focused on grouping numbers with decimals in different places. Teachers and principals commented that Basic Training made an observable difference in student engagement and morale. *(See more about other instructional strategies the district adopted, such as 12 powerful words, R.A.C.E. strategy, and Understanding by Design, in Appendices B-D.)*

MONITORING AND SUPPORT

Instructional monitoring in WCSD included a combination of strategies – Adminshare, K-12 instructional support specialists, and School-Wide Assessment Team (SWAT) – all of which worked together to give central office leaders a comprehensive picture of how students were performing and insight into where teachers and leaders needed additional support.

Adminshare:

All principals in WCSD used Adminshare, a balanced scorecard, to submit monthly reports to Geter. The reports included multiple sources of data, such as student attendance, assessments, benchmark scores, and teacher attendance. The data provided a pulse check on each school's progress toward specified targets and helped to facilitate conversations around emerging trends and patterns. Geter and principals used the data to reveal areas of concern, develop an action plan to address those areas, and identify the support required to execute the plan with as much precision as possible.

K-12 Instructional Support Specialists:

Recognizing the need for greater support in school buildings, Geter created new K-12 instructional support specialist positions to monitor and support teachers' progress and performance. The specialists focused on both vertical alignment from kindergarten through 12th grade and horizontal alignment across grade levels and content areas. Geter described their role this way:

“*They rotate through assignments on a weekly basis. It might be elementary school one week and middle school the next week, or it might be focus on a specific department or content area. We have protocols for looking at certain processes to make sure they're being done and being done the right way. If an issue is identified, the first level is to let the teacher know and to let their administration know, because we want them to be in lockstep with what's supposed to be going on.*”

The K-12 instructional support specialists' proximity to the work placed them in the unique position to provide immediate feedback and support to teachers beyond what they received from principals.

SWAT visits: The School-Wide Assessment Team (SWAT) – comprised of principals, an assistant principal, a K-12 instructional specialist, the superintendent, and the assistant superintendent – performed random, monthly classroom walkthroughs for the purpose of observing and providing feedback on classroom instruction. Using a protocol, team members recorded their observations of the lessons and jotted down feedback for principals to consider. After the visits, team members debriefed their observations and aggregated their feedback in a report that was given to the respective principal. The reports were designed to identify opportunities for both celebration and instructional improvement.

“ This is a survival story of a county and its leaders that not only looked at the past and the present and found conditions wanting, but thought about the future of the community and what aspirations young people could hope for... ”



CONCLUSION

In study after study of leadership that makes a difference for student learning, we hear about the importance of setting direction, developing people, and managing the instructional program.¹⁹ What we set out to do in this case study is to bring those phrases to life by shining a light on a district that might seem to be an unlikely exemplar – a rural district in Georgia, a district where a majority of students are African American and nearly all of the students qualify for free/reduced-priced lunch. The statistics say this is not a place to look for stellar math performance. Yet it is; and it is because of the passion and commitment of a leader who understood that, to effectively set direction, he had to enlist the hearts and souls not only of teachers, principals, and students, but also of the community at large. He started by articulating a compelling reason why change was needed in this community.

But he did not stop with setting direction. He developed his people by building relationships that became coalitions of committed teachers and principals. He nourished those relationships through training, modeling data use, and encouragement to take risks that could lead to breakthroughs in student learning. Finally, he provided concrete and specific instructional supports, including uniform lesson planning templates, programs for reviewing and remediating foundational concepts, and disciplined practices for monitoring results.

The case study of Wilkinson County is important not only because it adds to the body of research dispelling the myth that the barriers of poverty are too great for students to overcome in achieving academic success. It is an essential story of adaptation in a new economy where the local mineral-based industry can no longer be relied upon to support families. This is a survival story of a county and its leaders that not only looked at the past and the present and found conditions wanting, but thought about the future of the community and what aspirations young people could hope for if working in a local factory was no longer an option. Because of the building blocks put in place in Wilkinson County School District (WCSD), students are graduating equipped to succeed in postsecondary pursuits that will empower them to build careers and families both in their community and beyond. And that is the biggest **why** of all: to give students the power and the choices to build a fulfilling future.

¹⁹ Leithwood et al. (2004).

REFERENCES

12 powerful words that trip up students on standardized tests (n.d.). Charleston, WV: West Virginia Department of Education. Retrieved from <https://wvde.state.wv.us/teach21/12PowerfulWords.html>

ASCD. (2012). Introduction: What is UbD™ Framework? Understanding by Design white paper. Alexandria, VA. Retrieved from http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/siteASCD/publications/UbD_White-Paper0312.pdf

Bell, L. (n.d.). *12 powerful words: Increase test scores and help close the achievement gap*. Jamestown, TN: Fentress County Schools. Retrieved from <http://www.fentress.k12tn.net/LarryBellStrategies/12powerfulwords.pdf>

Burke, P., & Geter, A. (2012, June). Preparing for an eSPLOST. Presented at the Georgia CEFPI, Inc. Summer Conference, Pine Mountain, GA. Retrieved from <http://cefpi-ga.org/pdfs/2012presentations/Session%20Two%20-%202012%20Georgia%20CEFPI%20Conference%20-%20E-SPLOST%20Planning.pdf>

Chadwell, D. (2010, March 18). Single-gender classes can respond to the needs of boys and girls. *ASCD Express*, 5(12). Retrieved from <http://www.ascd.org/ascd-express/vol5/512-newvoices.aspx>

Chenoweth, K., & Theokas, C. (2011). *Getting it done: Leading academic success in unexpected schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Drago-Severson, E. (2012). *Helping educators grow: Practices and strategies for leadership development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Governor's Office of Student Achievement. (2015). *K-12 public schools report card*. Retrieved from <https://gosa.georgia.gov>

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1981). *Effective evaluation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Kennedy, K. (2010, January). Wilkinson County: Looking beyond kaolin. *GeorgiaTrend*. Retrieved from <http://www.georgiatrend.com/January-2010/Wilkinson-County-Looking-Beyond-Kaolin/>

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

McTighe, J., & Wiggins, G. (1999). *Understanding by Design professional development workbook*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Printable 12 powerful words with student friendly descriptions. (n.d.). Lawrenceville, GA: Gwinnett County Public Schools, Taylor Elementary School. Retrieved from <http://www.gwinnett.k12.ga.us/TaylorES/documents/12PowerfulWordsStudentFriendly.pdf>

Rimm-Kaufman, S., & Sandilos, L. (2011). *Improving students' relationships with teachers to provide essential supports for learning*. American Psychological Association. Retrieved from <http://www.apa.org/education/k12/relationships.aspx>

Rothman, R. (2009, November/December). Behind the classroom door: A rare glimpse indicates the extent – and persistence – of variation in teacher practice. *Harvard Education Letter*, 25(6). Retrieved from http://hepg.org/hel-home/issues/25_6/helarticle/behind-the-classroom-door_427

Sinek, S. (2009). *Start with why: How great leaders inspire everyone to take action*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.

Special-purpose local-option sales tax. (2016). In Wikipedia. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special-purpose_local-option_sales_tax.

Spicer, B. (2013, December 17). *R.A.C.E. strategy presentation*. Lake Zurich, IL: Lake Zurich Community Unit School District 95, Isaac Fox Elementary. Retrieved from https://prezi.com/v7xq-_u_wlro/race-strategy-written-response/

United States Census Bureau. (2015). State & county QuickFacts: Wilkinson County, Georgia. Retrieved from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/13/13319.html>

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: BLANK LESSON PLAN TEMPLATE

Day#:	Date:	
Teacher/s:	Subject/Title:	
Grade:		
Standard(s)		
WIDA Standard		
Warm-up:		
Lesson Activities:		
Essential Question/s:		
Remedial Activities	Acceleration Activities	Enrichment Activities
Closure:		
Assessment:		

APPENDIX B: 12 POWERFUL WORDS

Educational consultant Larry Bell has identified 12 words that often appear in standardized test questions and may cause students confusion as they attempt to answer the questions.²⁰ He believes that this confusion could result in students answering a question incorrectly, even if they know the information. Bell recommends that teachers find ways to embed these words in their instruction to increase students' understanding of and familiarity with these terms, which should lead to better test scores and ultimately increase student achievement.

Figure 4.
The 12 powerful words and their "student friendly" meanings.

POWER WORD	"STUDENT FRIENDLY" MEANING
TRACE	List in steps
ANALYZE	Break apart
INFER	Read between the lines
EVALUATE	Judge
FORMULATE	Create
DESCRIBE	Tell all about
SUPPORT	Back up with details
EXPLAIN	Tell how
SUMMARIZE	Give me the short version
COMPARE	All the ways they are alike
CONTRAST	All the ways they are different

APPENDIX C: R.A.C.E. STRATEGY

The R.A.C.E. strategy is a constructed response writing strategy that is designed to help students develop a satisfactory answer to a question about a text. It can be modified for use at all grade levels. The acronym “R.A.C.E.” stands for Restate, Answer, Cite, and Explain. To execute the writing strategy, students first restate the question in a topic sentence. Then, students make sure to appropriately answer all parts of the question. Next, students refer back to the text to identify and cite the evidence that best supports their answer. Finally, students explain their answer by using background knowledge and connections to their own experiences to build on the answer.²¹

APPENDIX D: UNDERSTANDING BY DESIGN

The Understanding by Design (UbD™) framework is a teacher’s planning tool developed and published by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe.²² The UbD™ framework encourages teachers to start lesson planning with the end in mind. It is designed to guide curriculum, assessment, and instruction through two key concepts: (1) a focus on teaching and assessing for understanding and application of learning, and (2) starting curriculum design by describing what students should understand after the lesson is taught. The framework suggests that teachers should first think about what they wantw students to learn from a lesson, then work backwards to determine the best way to engage students in learning to achieve those outcomes. This concept is called “backwards design.” Wiggins and McTighe’s rationale for backwards design is that teachers cannot start planning how they will teach until they determine exactly what they want students to learn.

The UbD™ framework breaks the backwards design process into three stages: In the first stage, teachers identify the lesson’s desired results. In the second stage, teachers determine acceptable evidence and how they will collect that evidence of learning (e.g., assessments, projects, and homework). Finally, in the third stage, teachers plan the learning experiences and their methods for instruction. The UbD™ framework provides a template and design tools to support teachers in aligning the content at each stage and completing the entire process.

QUESTIONS FOR SELF-GUIDED REFLECTION

These questions were designed for superintendents, central office leaders, or aspiring central office leaders to reflect on their practice and apply the three strategies used in Wilkinson County School District (WCSD) to their own context.

They aim to push district leaders to:

- ▶ Practice the discipline of self-reflection to guide their own growth and change in understanding and behavior
- ▶ Analyze the superintendent strategies described in the case study with a critical lens
- ▶ Seek to understand what the leaders did and how those actions led to positive outcomes

Starting with Why

- ▶ How would you capture – in a single bullet point – the “purpose, cause or belief that inspires you to do what you do” as superintendent?²³
- ▶ On a scale of 1 to 10, how confident are you that teachers in your district can answer the questions, “What is the superintendent’s **why** in your district? Why does your district do what it does?”
- ▶ If you answered below a 7, what do you think would be different in your district if more teachers were able to articulate your **why**?
- ▶ What specific strategies do you use to communicate your **why** to each stakeholder group: students, teachers, parents, school leaders, school board, and community members?
- ▶ Which of these strategies is most effective and for which stakeholders? What can you do to build on that successful strategy with other stakeholder groups?

Taking Coordinated Calculated Risks (to Improve Student Outcomes)

- ▶ Think of a time when your district took a risk by piloting a new instructional intervention. How did you communicate the risk – and your “bet” or your [theory of action](#) – to leaders and teachers?
- ▶ What was the theory on which you took the risk? What data did you use to base your decision to take the risk? How did others in the district participate in analyzing the data and assessing the risk? How did it connect to your [why](#)?
- ▶ What could you do to leverage risks you have taken as superintendent to create an environment that encourages risk-taking for leaders and teachers?
- ▶ If teachers or leaders in your district fear taking risks, why do they feel this way? What negative consequences have accrued to people historically when risks were taken? What actions can you take to neutralize those fears?
- ▶ What criteria would you define as parameters for acceptable risks in your district? What would make a risk a “calculated” risk?

Setting and Monitoring Instructional Expectations

- ▶ If someone picked a random teacher from any school in your district and asked that teacher, “What are the district’s instructional expectations of teachers here?”, what would they hear?
- ▶ How do you know what is happening instructionally in your schools on a week to week basis?
- ▶ What actions do you take to reduce variability in performance across classrooms in your district?
- ▶ What would teachers in your district rate as the most appreciated instructional expectation or support the district could establish?
- ▶ What is the support provided to teachers in your district that they most value that is key to improving classroom instruction?

**Protocols, materials, and links to related resources
can be found here on GLISL’s website.**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to everyone – central office leaders, board members, principals, and teachers – who welcomed GLISI’s research team into Wilkinson County School District (WCSD). The authors of this report are especially grateful to those who participated in this study for being so incredibly generous with their time and insights. This study would not have been possible without them. Special thanks to GLISI team members who provided invaluable research assistance and offered thoughtful comments and feedback on earlier versions of the report. The final report was edited by Emily Kagey and designed by Cory Holz at Holz Creative Group.



Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement

1755 North Brown Road, Suite 200
Lawrenceville, GA 30043

770.464.9299
www.glisi.org

© 2016 Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI).
All rights reserved.

Portions of this work may be reproduced without permission,
provided that acknowledgment is given to GLISI. Suggested Citation:
Mohammed, M. B., & Osanyinbi, J. (2016). *Starting with why:
How district leaders create a compelling sense of urgency to drive
district-wide change*. Lawrenceville, GA: Georgia Leadership Institute
for School Improvement (GLISI).

GLISI is a non-profit organization specializing in the development of
education leaders to drive district and school improvement through
training, consulting and research. Learn more at: www.glisi.org