

# ***Engagement for Success:***

## **Hancock County's Team-based Improvement of Student Achievement**

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### **Overview**

#### ***Innovation/Solution/Practice at a Glance***

Hancock County School System officials combined learning from Georgia Leadership Institute for School Improvement (GLISI) Base Camp, Leadership Summit, GLISI's Balanced Scorecard Training, and GLISI's Rising Stars Program to enhance their system's strategic planning. They initiated and then cascaded strategic teams and dynamic teams focused on academic improvement. Superintendent Dr. Awanna Leslie said that GLISI provided the research base and the methodology to validate and expand the system's best practices, including team-based improvement.

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

For years, student achievement data ranked Hancock County Schools among the lowest-achieving systems in Georgia. Based on their learning from GLISI's Base Camp and Leadership Summit, Rising Stars, and Balanced Scorecard Training, Hancock County combined local initiatives and team-based improvement to impact student achievement to the extent that the system was recognized by the Georgia Department of Education in 2008 for their academic improvement and for their academic ranking among other Georgia schools.

### **The Impact Story**

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

Hancock County's School System serves approximately 1,468 students in three schools. Ninety-eight percent of Hancock's students are African-American, 91 percent are eligible for Free/Reduced Meals, and 14 percent are served in the Students with Disabilities subgroup. The median household income in the county is substantially below the state average, at \$24,297. Thirty-eight percent of the adult population age 25 or older did not complete high school. Only six percent graduated from college with a Bachelor-level degree. In 2005, 79 percent of the babies born in Hancock County were born to unwed mothers, and 17 percent of those babies were born to unwed, teen mothers.

Improving student achievement in a small rural district with a high poverty level presents difficult challenges. Hancock County's recent Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) history and Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHSQT) history reflect the struggle of school officials and teachers to overcome the barriers they encountered as they worked toward school improvement.

### Hancock County Schools AYP History

	2006	2007
Hancock County School District	No	No
Hancock Central High School	No	No
Hancock Central Middle School	Yes	Yes
M.E. Lewis Elementary School	No	Yes

### Hancock Central High School/State of Georgia GHS GT History

	Mathematics			Science			Social Studies		
	2005	2006	2007	2005	2006	2007	2005	2006	2007
<b>Hancock</b>	85	80	84	60	57	60	78	74	65
<b>Georgia</b>	92	92	92	68	72	74	83	85	87

Although Hancock Central Middle School made APY in 2006 *and* 2007, M.E. Lewis Elementary fell short of the standard in both reading and mathematics in 2006. By 2007, Hancock’s only school failing to make AYP was Hancock Central High School.

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

Prior to being appointed superintendent, Dr. Leslie successfully practiced data-driven decision-making to move Hancock’s two elementary schools out of Needs Improvement status. When Dr. Leslie started her work as the system’s top official, she realized that all of the system’s schools needed to develop new plans for school improvement with goals established by performance measures derived from data analysis and root cause analysis. First, she restructured the culture of the schools to establish a community of learners.

Next, Dr. Leslie led the school system toward the implementation of Team-based Improvement through participation in GLISI’s Base Camp and Leadership Summit (2006-2007). Simultaneously, teacher leaders and assistant principals from all three Hancock schools participated in the first two Oconee RESA Rising Stars Collaborative™ cohorts. Rising Stars candidates led existing teams of teachers and administrators and formed new teams to study leading and lagging data indicators to implement timely instructional interventions.

Finally, Dr. Leslie sought to reorganize the system’s school improvement plan into a format that would allow system officials and teachers to monitor their performance measures incrementally by studying leading indicators, as well as lagging indicators or summative data. She initiated a balanced approach to school leadership by engaging her staff in GLISI’s Balanced Scorecard with Strategy Map planning in the spring of 2008.

The school system leadership team utilized Base Camp and Leadership Summit training to cascade school-level Strategic Teams and Dynamic Teams. The system's Rising Stars candidates assumed leadership roles on some of these teams as part their program requirements.

Aspects of this team-based approach included:

- Grade-level and subject-area teachers representing all grades (K-12) and all subject areas met weekly to analyze data, analyze root causes, and to set goals with leading indicator performance measures that were monitored on a scheduled basis. Elementary, middle, and high school Rising Stars candidates focused their Action Research Projects on the effect of implementing GLISI's *Plan, Do, Check, Act* cycle to utilize benchmark assessment results and student work as leading indicator planning tools to ensure desired CRCT and GHSGT results.
- Vertical subject-area (SWAT) Teams, established by the system's academic coaches to analyze benchmark data and student work, met twice weekly.
- A system-level team focused on the impact of student discipline upon student achievement. The team revised the system's discipline code.

The community embraced the system's team-based improvement approach, and the school district formed a team of community members to address student motivation.

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

A system-level change team, grade-level teams, vertical subject-area (SWAT) teams, and community based teams met on a scheduled basis to study leading and lagging indicators to ensure timely interventions, such as the following:

- Changes in school rules included a requirement that students wear uniforms. In addition, the team developed a zero-tolerance policy with regard to fighting and other disruptive behavior. Dr. Leslie said that the resulting reduction in student discipline infractions created an environment conducive to student learning.
- Grade-level teams and vertical subject-area SWAT teams met on a scheduled basis to study student work, benchmark tests, and other leading indicators to identify "hot spots." Areas of weakness were identified and addressed. For example, the elementary math vertical team identified word problems as a hot spot and initiated reading and vocabulary lessons to improve student comprehension of math word problems. Also, to ensure immediate student achievement feedback to math teachers, the team recommended SMART Boards that were purchased for most of the math classrooms.
- Teams led by the systems' Rising Stars candidates implemented GLISI's *Plan, Do, Check, Act* protocol. The middle and high school subject-area teams met weekly to plan instruction, study student work, and, when needed, to revise instructional plans for regrouping and re-teaching.

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

All of Hancock's schools made AYP in 2008. In fact, State Superintendent of Schools Kathy Cox recognized the system as one of 34 in the state with all schools making AYP. In addition, Hancock Central High School was one of 10 in the state that received the State Superintendent of Schools' *Distinguished Achievement Award* for making the fourth-largest percentage gain of 22 percent from 2007 to 2008 on the Social Studies GHSGT.

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Dr. Leslie and other system-level and school-level leaders say that the GLISI recommended cycle for Team-based Improvement - *Plan, Do, Check, Act* - has been embedded in the district's school improvement work. For example, as the high school social studies strategic team members met this past year, they planned lessons, executed the lessons, reviewed benchmark data, and based their next steps on the data. In addition, Dr. Leslie said, "GLISI contributed to the system's success by teaching us to effectively analyze our data and to determine root causes of deficiencies." The system expanded the use of benchmark testing through implementation of GLISI Base Camp and Summit protocols and through the work of administrators and staff, including Hancock's Rising Stars Collaborative™.

### Next Steps

Hancock County has taken full advantage of learning opportunities offered by GLISI. Clearly, they have transferred their learning from Base Camp and Leadership Summit, Rising Stars Collaborative™ participation, and Balanced Scorecard training to begin to rewrite their school improvement goals, to begin to establish measurable leading and lagging indicators, and to begin to establish teams to monitor the leading indicators to ensure timely interventions.

Hancock County will continue their team-based improvement practices, and they will refine these practices by sending an additional team to 2008-2009 Base Camp and Leadership Summit. In addition, the system will continue to develop their Balanced Scorecard Improvement Plan with individualized help from GLISI's Executive Development Director, Scott Cowart.