Gwinnett County Public Schools, Gwinnett County, Georgia

A leadership program focused on quality

School buildings: 132

High schools: 19

Middle schools: 26

Elementary schools: 77

Special buildings: 6

Charter schools: 4

Total enrollment: 170,444 students

Hispanic: 27 percent

African American: 31 percent

White: 28 percent

Asian/Pacific Islander: 10 percent

Other: 4 percent

Economically disadvantaged: 56 percent[1]

Gwinnett County Public Schools, or GCPS, is the largest public school district in the state of Georgia. Serving approximately 170,000 students in 132 buildings, GCPS is often the school district of choice for those living in the Atlanta area.[2] Growing rapidly, the district added 3,700 students during the 2012-13 school year. Winner of the Broad Prize for Urban Education in 2010, GCPS is uniquely focused on the value and importance of school-based leadership.

"Not just anyone can be a successful principal today," explains GCPS CEO and Superintendent J. Alvin Wilbanks. "The demands of the job are great and require exceptional expertise. With enrollments of 1,000 to 3,000 students, staffs as large as 300 people, sizable local budgets, and key performance goals that must be achieved, a principal in Gwinnett is essentially the CEO of a good-sized company."[3]

GCPS is one of 26 school districts in Georgia to participate in the Race to the Top funding agreements with the state to boost resources for instructional improvement.[4] Understanding the significant impact the principal has on the quality of instruction, the district chose to implement the Teacher Keys Effectiveness System, or TKES, in the 2013-14 school year as a piece of its Race to the Top initiative. The TKES is a model of teacher evaluation and development designed to enhance the quality of observation and feedback to teachers on their classroom performance. The system will be implemented statewide in the 2014-15 school year.[5]

The TKES is a three-pronged approach that combines classroom observations, student-perception surveys, and student academic growth to calculate a final Teacher Effectiveness Measure, or TEM.[6] The system focuses on teacher development and continuous learning and is based on the following 10 standards:[7]

1. Professional knowledge
2. Instructional planning
3. Instructional delivery
4. Differentiated instruction
5. Assessment strategies
6. Assessment uses
7. Positive learning environment
8. Academically challenging learning environment
9. Professionalism
10. Communication

Each standard area has a list of high-leverage indicators that help evaluators and teachers discuss specific strategies that would support the standards during the assessment process.

The classroom-observation component of the system is called the Teacher Assessment on Performance Standards, or TAPS, and it provides a more structured framework than past assessment instruments used in Georgia. Teachers participate in a self-assessment process regarding the 10 standards at the beginning of each academic year. A minimum of four brief observations and two longer formative observations are required during the TKES process. Conferences are required at the self-assessment stage, at midyear, and at a summative review at the end of the year. Guidelines imply that there will be feedback and conferences for the two formative observations and that feedback will be provided after brief observations. Therefore, nine interactions with each teacher are required over the course of the school year. Indicators that support each standard are documented in an electronic system so that the summative conference can include feedback on evidence collected from all stages of the process.[8] Principals and other evaluators must be trained and certified by the state on the TAPS rubrics used for scoring sections of the evaluation system.[9]

The second element of the TEM is the student-perception instrument, known as "Surveys of Instructional Practice."[10] The surveys are based upon four standards: instructional strategies, differentiated instruction, positive learning environment, and academically challenging learning environment.[11] The surveys, which are differentiated based upon student grade levels, are administered anonymously and do not allow open-ended responses.[12]

The third element of the TEM is student academic growth based on selected state measures at specified grade levels. Teachers of subjects not tested by the state of Georgia are assessed on outcomes on district-developed assessments. Student-learning objective data from state tests and student-growth targets set at the beginning of the year are used to measure student-performance gains. The student-outcome component of the system was not piloted in the 2012-13 school year, but it will be included in the system for the first time in summer 2014. Student scores on the student-performance component will be from the prior year and will be used to calculate the TEM for the following year.[13]

In an effort to support school leaders in the implementation process, GCPS has taken a systemic and strategic approach. In its draft "Implementation Guide," the district outlines what it views as the three core pillars of creating effective school leadership:

1. School leadership is a key component of GCPS' overall district strategy.
2. GCPS develops a pipeline of effective school leaders.
3. GCPS creates conditions enabling school leaders to be effective.[14]

Far from being empty slogans, these pillars support a concerted district effort to develop the capacity of its building leaders.

Support for principals from central-office staff is a hallmark of GCPS' focus on quality leadership. The district's senior leaders—including the superintendent—spend significant time and energy creating a culture where all district employees, including central-office staff, support the district's school leaders in order to drive student success in GCPS. Some examples include coaching and mentoring during the first two years in the principalship and the creation of peer-support networks made up of other school leaders who face similar demographic conditions and related opportunities. Assistant superintendents are the direct supervisors of principals and deliver professional development and real-time training as principals' needs are discovered through the supervisory process.[15]

GCPS' Department of Leadership Development, under the direction of executive director Glenn Pethel, sponsors several programs that are the cornerstone of the realization of the superintendent's vision for leadership in GCPS. Support for the new TKES demands is one of several functions of the Department of Leadership Development. "The depth and frequency of conversations about instruction for principals and assistant principals has increased with the new evaluation system," says Pethel.[16] With financial support from The Wallace Foundation, the Department of Leadership Development created the Quality-Plus Leader Academy, one of the more substantial leadership-development programs in the country and one of only five nationally to be recognized as an "exemplary program" by the Bush Institute's Alliance to Reform Education Leadership.[17]

The Quality-Plus Leader Academy has three programs. First, the Aspiring Leader Program is designed to develop strong teacher leaders for assistant principal roles. This program is a half-year experience. Second, the Aspiring Principal Program is designed for talented assistant principals, requiring them to complete a year-long set of trainings followed by a 90-day residency in a school. Third, the newly formed District Leader Program has the goal of training district-level administrators who supervise principals to provide more effective support and coaching. GCPS can boast that 80 percent of its school leaders have been trained through the Quality-Plus Leader Academy, which helps ensure that leaders have a common language, a clear sense of mission, and a network of cohort support as they assume principal positions in the district.[18] However, GCPS' leadership-training programs do not provide Georgia certification or the state-required master's degree. The district has selected five university-based programs that align with district standards for credentialing purposes.[19]

The Department of Leadership Development provides a two-year mentoring program for new administrators, ongoing just-in-time training modules, and a well-designed annual summer leadership conference for all practicing administrators. The department also provides screening assessments for emerging leaders and 360-degree assessment processes for practicing leaders.[20] One area of training for practicing principals is focused on effective team building. Because growth in the district has resulted in larger schools, the importance of building a cohesive and high-performing team of assistant principals and teacher leaders has become crucial to the implementation of the TKES and related efforts to improve the quality of instruction for students.

Another area of responsibility for the Department of Leadership Development has been the launch of a new system of principal evaluation. The Leader Keys Effectiveness System, or LKES, is a statewide initiative that was implemented with the TKES system. The same 26 districts that piloted the new teacher-appraisal system also piloted the principal-evaluation system in the 2012-13 school year. GCPS has customized the leadership system while still basing its model on the following eight state standards for school leaders:[21]

1. Instructional leadership
2. School climate
3. Planning and assessment
4. Organizational management
5. Human resources management
6. Faculty/staff evaluation
7. Professionalism
8. Communication and community relations

The modified system is being launched in the 2013-14 academic year and will award 70 points for student-achievement measures, 12 points for initiatives taken by the school to promote student achievement, eight points for parent and employee satisfaction surveys, 10 points for school management, and two bonus points for improvement over last year's plans and goals.[22] Assistant superintendents are assigned to evaluate principals at the high school, middle school, and elementary school levels.[23]

GCPS has taken the bold step of closely examining and modifying the responsibilities of the principal to make the job more manageable in consideration of all the additional instructional leadership responsibilities that come with reform. It is one of the districts nationally that participates in The Wallace Foundation's School Administration Manager, or SAM, pilot program. The Department of Leadership Development manages the program, which is optional for school principals. Through the SAM program, the district has been able to train other personnel to assume some of the management tasks that distract principals from classroom observation and teacher support.[24] In GCPS, a few schools have repurposed existing positions to manage time-consuming tasks after retraining on specialized tools and technology. In an effort to underscore the centrality of instructional leadership in the role of the principal, the job descriptions of both principals and assistant principals have been rewritten to focus on human capital development, instructional support, and curriculum alignment based on achievement data.[25] In the forthcoming "Implementation Guide," the recommendations that are current practice in GCPS suggest that districts leave autonomy to principals in key areas such as the collection and analysis of relevant data, budget, staffing, scheduling, and the selection of instructional techniques. The guide also suggests that districts should manage maintenance requests, policies on student discipline, and most compliance issues, including those in human resources.[26]

The programming designed by the leadership of GCPS raises questions of sustainability. Superintendent Wilbanks has worked with the Gwinnett County Board of Education and the Gwinnett Chamber of Commerce to join a community effort known as Partnership Gwinnett. Because of the Great Recession, the Gwinnett County tax base was lower than expected from 2007 to 2008. By joining the economic-development effort of the chamber of commerce, both the school district and the county have benefited from the work of the project staff.[27] Continued efforts by Partnership Gwinnett benefit the school district and county in efforts to sustain and improve services to the community.

In summary, GCPS has one of the most focused and comprehensive approaches to leadership development in the country. The alignment of resources with the stated beliefs about the value of leadership in the instructional-improvement process is a model with much promise for districts looking to raise the level of performance for students, teachers, staff, and leaders within an educational organization.

Endnotes

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22 The Wallace Foundation, "Districts Matter: Cultivating Principals that Urban Schools Need" (2013), available at http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/district-policy-and-practice/pages/districts-matter-cultivating-the-principals-urban-schools-need.aspx.

23 Pethel, phone interview with authors.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 Personal communication from Glenn Pethel, executive director, Department of Leadership Development, Gwinnett County Public Schools, January 9, 2014.

27 Gwinnett County Public Schools, "GCPS Community," available at http://publish.gwinnett.k12.ga.us/gcps/home/public/community (last accessed January 2014).