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CASE STUDY

Managing Principals for Results: Gwinnett County Public Schools (GA)

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Managing Principals for Results: *Gwinnett County Public Schools*

J. Alvin Wilbanks, CEO/Superintendent of Gwinnett County (GA) Public Schools, called the district’s research and evaluation team into his office to give them a clear charge: “I want a new evaluation system and I want it based primarily on student achievement.”

Sound familiar? Conversations like this are happening across the country. As the enticements of Race to the Top accelerate a general trend toward higher accountability of teachers and principals, state departments of education are issuing new or expanded evaluation rubrics; school districts are developing their own customized evaluation systems in response to or in anticipation of the new standards.

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In this context, Gwinnett’s work may not sound unique. Two critical details, however, distinguish the above conversation between Superintendent Wilbanks and his research and evaluation team.

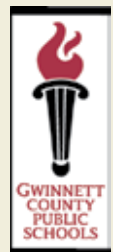
First, it took place not in the past year, but in 1996. Second, the product of that conversation was a system not just majority-based on student achievement: instead, student achievement came to represent a decisive 70% of a principal’s and school’s annual assessment in Gwinnett. Dale Robbins, Gwinnett’s associate superintendent for teaching and learning support and a former principal in the district, encapsulated the district’s rationale: “The 70/30 split [between student achievement and other factors] makes it clear where our priorities are. A 50/50 split would have been a much less powerful statement.”

Beyond question, Gwinnett County has been a first mover in ascribing predominant weight to student achievement in the evaluation process. The Results-Based Evaluation System (RBES) that the district started using in 1997 to tie principal and school evaluations to student outcomes has endured as the district’s central accountability framework and its strongest mechanism for enforcing the theory of action. Gwinnett’s experience in achievement-based evaluations

over the past 15 years may thus offer a road map for districts now structuring new protocols to define and evaluate school leadership. Perhaps more than anything else, this case study on Gwinnett underscores that implementing a new evaluation system is not a one-time undertaking to respond to state or federal mandates, but a gradual process of clarifying priorities, raising understanding, and deepening commitment.

Gwinnett County (GA) Public Schools Fast Facts

- CEO/Superintendent J. Alvin Wilbanks (Spring 1996-present)
- Largest school system in Georgia; 14th largest in the country
- 162,500 students (2011-2012)
 - 30.7% White
 - 28.6% African American
 - 25.3% Hispanic
 - 10.3% Asian
 - 3.7% Other
- 22,000 total staff (2011-2012)
- \$1.702 billion total budget (FY 2012)



Source: Gwinnett County Public Schools



Narrowing racial achievement gaps was one of the accomplishments that helped earn Gwinnett the 2010 Broad Prize.

A Dynamic and Innovative District

With 162,500 students in 133 schools, Gwinnett is the largest school system in Georgia and the 14th largest in the country. The county has been one of the nation's fastest-growing since the 1970s, a demographic force reflected in the district's enrollment growing by as many as 9,000 students a year. While growth has now slowed, the county's African American and Hispanic populations have doubled since 2000.¹ Superintendent Wilbanks has witnessed much of the change. His 16-year tenure in the superintendency makes him the longest-serving leader of a large school district in the United States.

Wilbanks has treated the district's staggering growth rate and stark demographic makeover as an impetus rather than an impediment to student achievement. In 2010, the district won the prestigious \$1 million Broad Prize

for Urban Education. The Broad Foundation cited Gwinnett for:

- Outperforming comparable Georgia districts.
- Narrowing the African American/White and Hispanic/White achievement gaps.
- Raising minority participation rates on the SAT, ACT, and AP exams.
- Having more minority and low-income students perform at advanced levels than state counterparts.² ▶

“The 70/30 split [between student achievement and other factors] makes it clear where our priorities are. A 50/50 split would have been a much less powerful statement.”

Gwinnett subscribes to a seemingly paradoxical but internally consistent theory of action, split between “managed instruction” and “empowerment.” Superintendent Wilbanks reconciles these distinct threads: “We centralize what needs to be centralized. We give autonomy to everything else.” The RBES system is a key component in making this theory of action operational.

A Shift from Inputs to Outputs

The fact that Gwinnett stands out on these academic grounds is a testament to the unmistakable primacy the district has brought to student achievement as the overriding measure of the district’s success. When

Wilbanks became superintendent in 1996, the idea of holding public education more accountable was starting to gain traction. But it was directed more toward counting inputs than measuring outcomes. This distinction can best be seen in the evolution of the effort to define and promote great teaching. The dialogue originally focused on expressing great teaching through the quality of teachers, which translated into an input rather than an outcome orientation: How many years of experience did a teacher have? How many certifications did the teacher acquire? These are, of course, worthy questions, but they do not centrally capture what takes place in the classroom. In the past few years, therefore, the dialogue has shifted from emphasizing teacher quality to prioritizing teacher effectiveness, as measured by student achievement scores and growth rates.

Wilbanks was sensitive to the risk of running numbers for the sake of running numbers and not framing insight. From the outset, he made it clear that RBES would not be a comprehensive balanced scorecard system with myriad measures; it would be a measure of ultimate effectiveness. “I don’t need to track how many buses break down. My head of transportation has to know this, but I don’t,” Wilbanks explains in an example.

RBES: A Weighted, Unified Assessment

RBES reflects a laser-like focus on student achievement. While RBES is a comprehensive system that feeds down into goals for individual classroom teachers and up into a school and district plan for improvement, the whole system comes down to a single school-wide score, based on a 0–100 scale. This is the “Weighted School Assessment,” shown in Exhibit 1. The overall score breaks down into the following weights:

Category	Weight
Student Achievement	70
Initiatives to Improve Student Achievement	12
Customer Satisfaction	8
School Management	10

The numbers speak for themselves. The lion’s share of the score flows from student achievement.

EXHIBIT 1

The Weighted School Assessment to Calculate RBES Scores

2009-2010 Weighted School Assessment	
GWINNETT HIGH SCHOOL	
2009-10: Principal's Name, Number of Years as Principal; Area Sup's Name, Area Sup's	
2010-11: Principal's Name, Number of Years as Principal; Area Sup's Name, Area Sup's	
Preparation Date: November 1, 2010	
1. STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT	
A. Local Standards	
Gateway Language Arts in Science (CogAT Leveler)	14.0
Gateway Language Arts in Social Studies (CogAT Leveler)	14.0
Gateway Science (CogAT Leveler)	14.0
Gateway Social Studies (CogAT Leveler)	14.0
Advanced Placement Course Enrollment	15.0
Advanced Placement Test Participation	15.0
B. NCLB Standards	
IE Status (Percent of applicable targets achieved)	12.0
AYP Status (Percent of applicable indicators achieved)	12.0
Black Average Scale Score Gain in HSGT English Language Arts	14.0
Black Average Scale Score Gain in HSGT Mathematics	14.0
Hispanic Average Scale Score Gain in HSGT English Language Arts	14.0
Hispanic Average Scale Score Gain in HSGT Mathematics	14.0
C. National/World-Class Standards	
Regression Analysis (FR Lunch Percent Leveler)	16.0
Advanced Placement Tests Scored 3 or Better	16.0
Graduation Rate	16.0
SAT Critical Reading	14.0
SAT Mathematics	14.0
SAT Writing	14.0
Student Achievement Subtotal	100.0
2. INITIATIVES TO IMPROVE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT	
A. Academic Knowledge and Skills/Continuous Quality Improvement	12
B. Benchmarking and Data-Driven Decision Making	12
C. Local School Plans for Improvement	12
D. Staff Development	12
E. Quality-Plus Teaching Strategies and Student Advisement	12
F. Technology	12
Initiatives to Improve Student Achievement Subtotal	12
3. CUSTOMER SATISFACTION	
A. Parent Perceptions	14.0
B. Staff Perceptions	14.0
Customer Satisfaction Subtotal	8.0
4. SCHOOL MANAGEMENT	
A. Data Quality	12.0
B. Financial Audit	12
C. School Cleanliness and Maintenance	12
D. Staffing	12
E. Physical Asset Inventory	12.0
School Management Subtotal	10.0
SECTIONS 1 - 4 SUBTOTAL	130.0
Plus ___ Improvement Points	
OVERALL TOTAL	

Source: Gwinnett County Public Schools

While the components come together in a neat 0–100 score, the sub-calculations are nuanced and complex, befitting a system that aims to be fair to all of its schools. For example, the student achievement section has three components, carefully sequenced to balance contextual realities with world-class aspirations. The student achievement components can be thought of as answering three fundamental questions:

1. Where do we stand?

The Local Standards component builds off of a school's current level of performance. It uses results from the Cognitive Abilities Test administered in third, fifth, and eighth grades to establish performance benchmarks on Georgia's state assessment—the Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests. Schools get points based on how much their actual scores are above or below their predicted benchmarks. As a predictive model, the system has many logical similarities to other growth models gaining popularity around the country. The system is complex, and is based on extensive regression modeling that allows rigorous comparisons to take place. However, the district believes that understanding how the mechanics of the system work in detail is far less important than the application of the insights it generates.

2. Where do we want to go?

Relying on just local standards would give schools credit for beating their baseline, but what if they started with a really low baseline? The second component of the student achievement section—NCLB Standards—moves up a level to set district-wide expectations for performance on key areas, such as closing African-American and Hispanic achievement gaps, meeting AYP targets, and achieving performance gains for all students. Schools that meet the highest number of targets and make the largest gains on each target receive the most points.

3. What does it mean?

Establishing district-wide expectations is still an intra-district rather than an inter-district measure. To fulfill the district's goal of becoming a “system of world-class schools,” internal results have to be placed in a broader frame. The last component of the student achievement section—National/World Class Standards—seeks to

precisely this: it compares Gwinnett's performance to 25 national peer districts on national norm-referenced results as well as graduation rates and AP and SAT scores. To make the comparison more robust, the results are leveled for differences in the schools' percentages of students on free or reduced-price lunch. This acknowledges, but does not surrender to, the unavoidable influence that poverty exerts on student achievement.

Balancing Achievement with Practice

As states and districts adopt more detailed evaluation rubrics, they face a critical decision over how much weight to assign to student achievement versus measures that evaluate the practice of school leadership. Student outcomes obviously reflect the end result and definitive value of a principal's work. But, what principals do on a daily basis and how they manage the organization in which learning takes place can serve as leading indicators of ultimate student performance. In many states and districts, these more encompassing measures of a principal's job account for over half of the evaluation. In Gwinnett, they occupy the 30% not explained by student achievement.

Gwinnett's experience in achievement-based evaluations over the past 15 years may thus offer a road map for districts now structuring new protocols to define and evaluate school leadership.

Here, too, quantitative rigor infuses Gwinnett's approach. The Customer Satisfaction sub-score, for example, is a point value equaling the average of parent and staff perceptions. The School Management section awards points for indicators of data quality, financial audit, school cleanliness and maintenance, staffing, and physical asset inventory. As an example of how precise these indicators can get, consider the one for data ▶

quality, which is a score computed from total data checks, validations, and corrections.

The only part of the system that relies on a traditional behavioral assessment is the Initiatives to Improve Student Achievement. To evaluate principals' performance in areas like continuous quality improvement, data-driven decision-making, and staff development, area superintendents use a rubric that ranges from 0—"inconsistently developed"—to a 2—"clear and compelling evidence." This more amorphous component may seem slightly anomalous in such an otherwise tightly numeric system, and indeed the best way to introduce subjectivity into the system has been a topic of ongoing debate. Some favor discretion to preserve a human element in the system. Others, however, have been driving toward a more standardized protocol in this area of the assessment as well.

Seeing performance expressed as clearly and succinctly as it is in the histogram generates dialogue, elicits collaboration, and motivates improvement.

Incentivizing Results through Recognition & Resources

Evaluating hard-to-define areas like academic initiatives remains an ongoing discussion, but it centers on a relatively small slice of the evaluation. Again, at 70% of the overall score, student achievement dwarfs any other component. If modern economics is right that people respond rationally to incentives, then Gwinnett's weightings make a crystal-clear statement. To motivate behavior, however, incentives must be not only unambiguous, but also attainable. Ambitious goals that cross the line into being unrealistic can demoralize rather than galvanize.

Gwinnett's system is carefully designed to balance aggressiveness with achievability. By setting district-level goals for gap closure and performance gains,



Superintendent Wilbanks is the longest-serving leader of a large school district in the U.S.

Gwinnett holds its principals to a high bar. But, this bar is customized to the individual school. The combination of basing projections off a school's previous-year results and controlling achievement for poverty makes it mathematically possible for every school in the district to perform above their benchmark and earn the full possible points.

Human nature dictates that any system that evaluates multiple individuals on one standardized assessment is bound to raise questions of comparison. In Gwinnett, two factors accentuate this tendency. First, because Gwinnett is already a high-performing district, the spirit of continuous improvement can take precedence over the need for basic proficiency. Second, the district intentionally fosters an atmosphere of healthy competition. Each year, the elementary, middle, and high schools that fall in the top 20% of RBES performance receive one year's additional funding in an amount equivalent to one teacher FTE. Though the dollar amount of this bonus is not massive, the fact that schools have full discretion on how to use the money—from staff to professional development to technology—does create a valuable performance incentive.

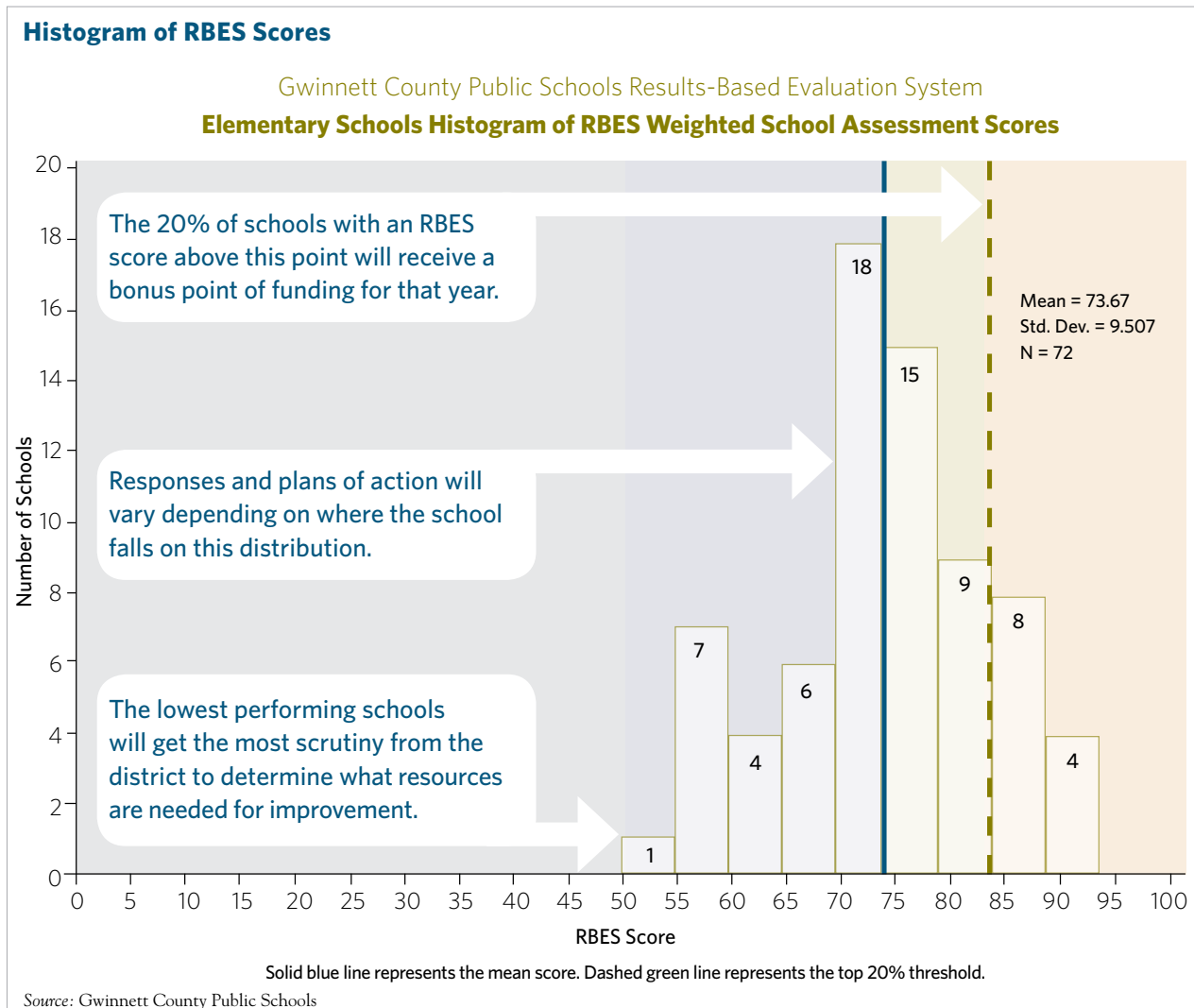
For these reasons, principals track where they fall on the district's histogram of school performance. Non-technically, the histogram, shown in Exhibit 2, is simply a bar graph of schools plotted by their RBES score. This document, in a reflection of the district's commitment to the principle of identifying and

communicating strengths and weaknesses, is shared with all principals but is not released to the general public.

Because of the culture the district's leadership has imbued, the principals who receive the histogram understand that it is not a tool for punishment or embarrassment, but a statement of the facts and a baseline for progress. Seeing performance expressed as clearly and succinctly as it is in the histogram generates dialogue, elicits collaboration, and motivates improvement. A principal's specific reaction will depend on where his or her school falls on the performance distribution. A principal whose school scores in the

top 20% and therefore gets additional funding will strategize how to earn a similar or even higher score relative to other schools the next year. A principal whose school just missed the threshold for a bonus may lobby his or her area superintendent to reconsider the more debatable rubric-based scores. This search for extra points can become a valuable back-and-forth in which the area superintendent pushes for concrete evidence to warrant a higher score. A principal whose school falls just below the bar of median performance may converse with a colleague whose school scored just above the bar: "How did you score a 3? Is that something I can replicate on my campus?" >

EXHIBIT 2



Brokering Support

The pivotal question then becomes how do the principals who fall at the bottom of the histogram react? The short answer, the district acknowledges, is that it depends. Some, perhaps especially those closer to retirement, might see a low RBES score as a sign to accelerate their exit. They might not feel up to the task of handling the inevitable scrutiny that the district will cast toward low-performing schools or of crafting the necessary long-term plan for school improvement. They might feel that it will take new blood to generate the momentum and build the buy-in for a turnaround.

The score is like an intervention, reinforcing in the most concrete ways that things have to change.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, some principals appreciate the clarity that a low place on the RBES histogram brings to the need for improvement. The score is like an intervention, reinforcing in the most concrete ways that things have to change. Gwinnett's associate superintendent for school leadership and operational support, Dr. Steve Flynt, recounted the story of one principal who confronted low results but resolved to the district, "I want to stay and turn this around." Through an improvement plan negotiated with his area superintendent, the principal propelled the same school to the top 30% of the histogram.

At the end of the day, having more principals react to a low RBES score by seeking the central office's assistance in improving reinforces the district's theory of action. Figuring out what can be left autonomous versus what needs to be centralized is where RBES comes in. A low place on the histogram is a sign that a school needs central support.

The support would follow a general sequence:

1. Drill down to the root cause.

A principal would work with his or her area superintendent to analyze what specific component(s) of the weighted assessment caused the low RBES score.

2. Categorize the problem.

Familiarity with the individual school and scrutiny of the precise calculations enable the area superintendent to characterize the problem as, say, a "C&I" issue or a "school management" malfunction.

3. Channel support.

The area superintendent serves as the conduit through which the district's centralized resources are directed to the identified school. By resources, Gwinnett generally does not mean money: the district feels that shifting funding toward high-need schools would raise questions of equity without solving the underlying issue. Rather, targeted support takes the form of time and energy. For example, to help a school with a problem in math curriculum and instruction, the area superintendent would counsel the principal to work with the district's math curriculum director, who might then assign math coaches to the school.

A system in which the central office plays this role of clearinghouse—directing support to where it is needed—is predicated on trust. To work constructively with the area superintendent in addressing problems that RBES clarifies, a principal must feel confident in what the data is telling him or her, safe in asking for the district's help, and optimistic that change is possible. Instilling this faith in the system has been a gradual but constant part of the evolution of RBES.

A Process of Raising Understanding and Deepening Buy-In

As Gwinnett has a 15-year history of administering the RBES system, including ongoing tweaks and revisions, the change management aspects of the program yield important insights for other districts to consider. When discussing RBES, with remarkable consistency Gwinnett leaders refer to the district's core principles, which they refer to as the "givens." The "givens" are:

- Fairness
- Continuous improvement
- Identification of strengths and weaknesses
- Accountability
- Communication

As mentioned previously, the notion of fairness garners special attention when discussing RBES. Especially with increased accountability and identification of strengths and weaknesses, a focus on fairness is a critical element driving the overall structure of RBES, and helps balance the messaging to all stakeholders. The RBES system is not now and never was a “gotcha” system.

An important element that drove the original RBES design and continues to enable its ongoing updates is a group of leaders known as the RBES Advisory Team. Assembled through a nomination process, the RBES Advisory Team consists of approximately twenty principals and Dr. Colin Martin, executive director of research and evaluation. Team members were selected to balance “gung-ho” supporters of the new system and anticipated opponents. The team has helped make RBES a dynamic document. For example, the first cut did not give points for AP performance, an update that was suggested and implemented through the team’s work. The team has been a critical element for generating broad acceptance of the program throughout its history.

Communication is also bolstered through the RBES Advisory Team. Especially considering the complex technical elements of RBES, raising confidence in a system where all the details may not be broadly understood is a very important consideration for change management purposes. Trust levels are high in Gwinnett, and the team plays a key role in sustaining this. More broadly, the RBES system is slowly reaching other audiences beyond the district’s principals, and communication again plays a key role. Gwinnett built the RBES system out gradually, allowing understanding and appreciation to grow over time. Principals were first encouraged to keep RBES documentation confidential, and then share key issues with staff only when the data was well understood. Further, as more staff members become acquainted with the data, it is inevitable that the data will become more public. To date, this has not manifested itself through visible community misunderstandings or media attention, perhaps due to the measured rollout and the trust-building that has occurred over the past 15 years.

Conclusion

As more and more districts and state education agencies respond to the national trend toward higher accountability of principals, the Gwinnett RBES model stands out as a tested model with an impressive track record of driving positive change. As other school districts and states develop their own customized evaluation systems, DMC encourages attention to several key factors highlighted in the Gwinnett model. First, a strong focus on student achievement outcomes is an important basis on which all of the associated incentives and messages should build. Gwinnett’s experience shows that these incentives, both tacit and explicit, can drive real behavioral change across the district. Second, a clear process for measurement, support, and recognition is needed to “make the incentives real” and to drive the cycle of continuous improvement for which all school districts should aim. Finally, an implementation and management process that pays attention to both content and structure, but also change management over time, is critical for short and long-term success. Principals need to be an integral part of this process. Gwinnett’s impressive results speak for themselves. The Results-Based Evaluation System has served the district well in driving student achievement.

¹ Jeffrey Scott, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 10, 2010, <http://www.ajc.com/news/gwinnett-is-now-a-546461.html>.

² The Broad Prize-Gwinnett County Public Schools, 2010, <http://www.broadprize.org/asset/1579-tbp%202010%20gwinnett%20fact%20sheet.pdf>.



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