



## Learning Communities Support Student Achievement

By Jennifer Klein on behalf of Fulton County Schools, Atlanta, GA

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### Results:

- **The graduation rate is up 7%, with some schools seeing even greater gains**
- **Overall test scores are up - for example, Tubman Elementary posted an 8% increase in reading, 13% increase in ELA, 14% increase in math, 12% increase in science and a 19% increase in social studies on the 2014 GA CRCT**
- **At Westlake High School, SAT scores increased 130 points in one year among the students taking new SAT prep classes**



The South Learning Community (SLC) group of schools in Fulton County Schools in Atlanta heard the same old song – increased number of students, poverty up, and greater accountability – but now has a different second verse: “Graduation rates are up 7%, more 9th graders are on track to graduate, and we’re seeing big gains in SAT scores,” says Dara Wilson, area executive director, who works alongside Dr. Donald Fennoy II, area superintendent, to support this group of 27 schools (4 high schools, 5 middle schools, and 18 elementary schools) in south Fulton County, all but one Title 1 with high poverty. These gains are being realized as part of Fulton County School’s district-wide goals of 90% graduation rate, 85% college readiness, and 100% career readiness by 2017.

“We’ve learned that the number one influence on student outcomes is the teacher, and the number two influence is leadership, so we knew we needed some changes,” says Wilson. “In the last two years we have made adjustments in school leadership in 55% of the schools, seeking the right fit between principal and school. Getting the right leader who can do the hard work of transformation in an impoverished school, but maintain positive morale and culture, and project a positive narrative about the school in the community is the key.”

“In a school system with 100 schools, it’s difficult for a centrally based staff to support all the needs. We needed proportionally more support staff in this community with its greater needs, allowing us to have the right balance between pressure and support. You can’t get results with just pressure.”

### The Solution:

Fulton County Schools in Atlanta is organized into smaller learning communities that allow for more support on the ground for local schools. Fennoy describes the structure as follows: “Each learning community has 4 program specialists (Humanities, STEM, Special Ed and Behavior). The SLC has an additional 5 specialists which are funded through the Title I program – two data support specialists, two math specialists and one ELA specialist. The additional staff builds the capacity of school leadership teams and teachers. This allows the Area Superintendent and Executive Director to coach and develop principals and assistant principals, specifically in leadership and the execution of strategic academic plans in each school.”

Fennoy, a former high school principal, says the Learning Community model informs the discussion at meetings of executive staff for the district. During these discussions, the area superintendents and executive directors bring

first-hand knowledge of the needs of their learning communities to district level decisions. No longer are cabinet and executive staff members making decisions based on assumptions from an outside perspective of what is happening in schools. Instead, the area superintendent and executive director understand immediate needs and culture, and what will work with their schools. As a result they are much more willing to secure resources to support programs aligned to individual school needs that meet the strategic plan.

“The staff of the South Learning Community is here to help, and say ‘what do you need from us?’” says Wilson. “We tell the principals to increase the SAT and graduation rate, and we create support around them, left and right. The principal is accountable to the area superintendent and also responsible for his or her assistant principal and curriculum support team; this has sharpened their hiring lenses.”

Support includes professional development for teachers and leadership, provided on site by the South Learning Community team. “We don’t just ask afterwards ‘how was that class?’ but we monitor and follow up. We have seen double digit gains in many schools with all this support. Giving professional development to the leadership groups means we have experts right there in the building who can monitor and help.” The principals in all 27 schools have also become a true professional learning community, sharing best practices and vertically aligning strategies K-12.

Innovations such as virtual labs in each high school have allowed the schools to figure out what works, offering credit recovery classes during the school day. Wilson points out that it is very hard to get these students to come before or after school. Now the schools can allow students to re-take courses virtually during school hours for credit.

During the summer the South Learning Community focuses on the ‘floor and the ceiling’, bringing in kids for credit recovery, and also targeting average to high-average students for a 1/2 credit study skills course that readies them for more rigorous courses. “Maybe they’ve never been engaged in TAG (talented and gifted) or honors courses,” says Wilson. “With this preparation they’re not behind, and are pulled up to the task. We create a culture with the students that you DO belong in this class. We’re creating access to engage in rigorous courses.”

### **The Result:**

“We’re seeing gains in the SLC we’ve really never seen before,” says Wilson. Westlake, one of the four high schools in the SLC, hired all new assistant principals to support the principal, and the school began offering SAT prep during the school day for elective credit. SAT scores increased 130 points in one year among the students taking the SAT prep classes, and Westlake saw a 12.5% increase in the graduation rate among a 4 year cohort group. Langston Hughes High also had a tremendous 11.6% gain in the graduation rate.



“Now we’re focusing on moving to ‘exceeds’ instead of just getting up to standards. Our Georgia End of Course Test (ECOT) is up in all content areas for the percentage of students meeting standards, while the exceeds category continues to increase as well.” Tubman Elementary, one of the target schools for this professional development, posted an 8% increase in reading, 13% increase in ELA, 14% increase in math, 12% increase in science and a 19% increase in social studies on the 2014 GA CRCT.

### **The Lessons Learned:**

Dr. Fennoy, Wilson and their staff are also going after grants for culture and climate, sensing the schools need to be a more comprehensive service providers, with mental health and supportive services. “We also want parents to understand what a good school should look like and what is okay to be agitated over and what they should demand from schools and teachers.”

“We have lots more to do, but we’re moving the needle in right direction. Also enrollment is up in these south Fulton schools, as families are coming back from private schools and choice options. Our goal is for their neighborhood school to be their choice.”

Reference: [State of Our Schools Fall 2013](#)