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## Best Practices

### Cross-functional action teams help Fulton County

*Not 'just' another committee, these teams tackle issues with the clock ticking*

Many school districts rely on committees to examine problems and identify solutions, but this approach has pitfalls: Committee work can drag on endlessly, and even when a committee finishes its task, its recommendations can end up on a shelf gathering dust.

Yet that's not a concern in Fulton County, Ga., where school officials think they have found a better tool for such work. It's called a cross-functional action team.

Although not a new concept—nor, for that matter, all that different from a traditional committee—these teams are proving highly successful for the 88,000-student school system, says Superintendent Cindy Loe. One reason is that teams only have a 90-day window to complete their work and make their recommendations.

Issues do not go unresolved because school officials debate them endlessly.

"When people get together to deal with complex problems, the tendency is to say, 'well, this part of the problem is really big, so we recommend a task force be appointed to look at it,'" Loe says. "Well, my experience is that it never happens. I say just go ahead and make your best recommendations. Look at what best practice is."

Recommendations are expected even if a truly cost-effective—or immediately feasible—solution will prove hard to achieve. "At least," Loe says, "everyone is aware of the answer."

Another reason these teams are successful is that their charge is to examine issues from every angle—hence the term "cross-functional." Every angle of a problem is examined, information is gathered across departments, and team members are pulled from every level of the district.

That was the approach used when officials looked into complaints that some children didn't have textbooks when the school year began. The assembled team

included a school board member, central office administrator, principal, teacher, and the manager of the textbook warehouse.

"These cross-functional teams allow school systems to 'drill down' to the actual data and combine the data and the people who are involved with the issue," says Dana McGraw, the district's executive director of continuous improvement, who provides support for the various teams.

Chaired by a senior administrator from the superintendent's cabinet, each team is expected to offer three or four major recommendations for resolving—or at least improving—a problem.

The limit on recommendations is key, Loe adds. "When you put out too many recommendations, nothing gets done. The fewer the recommendations, the more meaningful they are."

On the issue of textbook ordering, for example, the cross-functional team met at first every other week to frame the issues and to plan the investigation. That timetable switched to weekly meetings as it collected and analyzed data and debated solutions.

One recommendation of the team was that the school board approve textbooks weeks earlier than in the past, so that the purchasing department could give the textbook publisher more time to deliver. As the board's previous hesitation stemmed from uncertainties over future state funding, the team recommended using a local sales tax as a more reliable funding source for textbooks.

Another recommendation dealt with the warehouse's use of temp workers, Moran says. A closer look at expenses revealed that, for the time and money spent on hiring and training temps, it was more cost-effective to hire a full-time employee who "knows the job and will be there all the time."

To ensure such recommendations lead to action—and not fall by the wayside—



Members of a cross-functional action team in Fulton County discuss the issues they've been tasked to solve. These teams are a great example of how proper governance and decision-making policies can support improvements in school operations—and, ultimately, in student achievement.

each team is assigned a focused mission where a quick resolution is desired, Loe says. Then it's up to her to take those solutions to the school board, put aside the resources to see the work done, and follow up on implementation.

"It's very important that those recommendations don't sit on a shelf," she says. "As superintendent, I feel a real responsibility to move forward with those recommendations. If they're going to sit on a shelf, there's no need to do the work."

Since using this model, the district has examined the accuracy of its grading system, issues surrounding open-enrollment policies, the feasibility of more online courses, and improvements in the district's insurance coverage, McGraw says.

One secret to success is keeping teams small—no more than 10 members, she says. It's also important to give teams a very specific task. The team looking at the grading system, for example, "wanted to make sure that As earned on one side of the county was the same as one on the other side." And, if a student was earning an A in class, but failing state assessments, "what did that say about our grading system?"

Any school leader that wants to experiment with this committee model should appoint "go-getters" to lead those first teams, Loe advises.

"You want well-organized people who are going to make sure that the rules that you set up are followed to a 't,'" she says. "All the other teams are going to use that as a model for their work, so you want the first one or two teams to be really great."