

SCHOLASTIC EDUCATION



Learning Supports

An Integrated Approach to School Improvement

The Alabama State Department of Education's **Learning Supports Initiative**

A Compendium of Practice and Findings

Acknowledgements

Scholastic Education would like to thank the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) for its partnership and leadership in implementing the Learning Supports Pathway throughout the state from 2013 to the present time. This journey began as part of the vision of Superintendent Tommy Bice and continues today through Interim Superintendent Ed Richardson.

As this compendium will outline, this initiative remains an integral part of the ALSDE's strategic plan. The partnership was led first by Dr. Linda Felton-Smith in the Office of Learning Support; and continued with Dr. Barbara Cooper, Chief Academic Officer; Dr. Jermall Wright, Director of School Improvement; Dr. Tony Thacker, Office of Innovation and Evaluation; and Dr. Jeff Langham, Senior Advisor to the Superintendent.

At the district and school level, we are grateful for the dedication and commitment of the 90-plus districts who have joined the Learning Supports state initiative. This includes superintendents, district leadership, principals, and school leadership. The data in this compendium was provided by the school district leads and verified by the Office of Innovation and Evaluation. A special thank you to Dr. Miranda Bissoo in that office.

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A Compendium of Practice and Findings

Executive Summary

In 2011 the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) undertook an ambitious commitment to implement an education initiative designed to improve academic outcomes for all students. Under the leadership of Dr. Tommy Bice, the ALSDE announced its strategic Plan 2020. Integrated into that vision was an innovative approach to addressing the barriers to teaching and learning that were preventing many students from achieving their potential.

The framework that Alabama implemented was known as the Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports. Based on decades of research from Drs. Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor of UCLA, the model employs a systematic approach to identifying resources and deploying their use strategically to maximize impact.

Alabama made a commitment to provide every district in the state with the coaching needed to implement the Learning Supports framework. The state employed a cohort model, and self-selecting districts have been receiving coaching to implement the approach in ongoing, multi-year phases. To date, 69 districts have joined one of the five cohorts of districts.

Districts identified critical barriers that were delaying their students' learning, and examined the root causes. They established goals ranging from improving attendance to reducing behavioral issues and raising graduation rates. Districts put systems in place to organize their resources and fully integrate Learning Supports with instruction and leadership.

In this compendium, we take a look at the data and examine the efficacy of the Learning Supports implementation in Alabama. We also make recommendations for the ongoing implementation and follow-up by Drs. Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor to address the challenges post-Katrina.

The Alabama Learning Supports Initiative

Where It All Began

In 2001 education in the United States entered the No Child Left Behind policy era of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The educational landscape was marked by an emphasis on accountability, results on state assessments, and comparisons of student subgroup performance, and then designating schools as achieving—or not achieving—adequate yearly progress. Alabama, along with other states, was challenged with data that revealed chronic underachievement of students living in poverty, as well as gaps between identified racial and ethnic subgroups. Across the nation, the lists of “failing” schools became the focus and concern of educational improvement efforts.

As a result, policy and practice during this time became focused on providing additional and differentiated instruction to address underperformance. A new focus on school restructuring to support instructional goals was evident, and many school districts and states reconfigured their organizational and management-leadership functions.

By 2005, the midpoint of the No Child Left Behind era, there was a growing frustration across the United States with the lack of improvement resulting from changes made to schools’ instructional and management practices. The conversation in educational research expanded to explore this question: how do school districts address the pervasive barriers to student achievement, especially when many of the reasons for these barriers are outside of the school’s control?

Answers to that question began to emerge from Mobile, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Following the devastation of the Gulf Coast region, the United States Department of Education (ED) conducted a study of specific communities to determine what support actions improved the ability to restore normal operations and services. Mobile County Public Schools was recognized for accepting a large number of refugee families from the New Orleans area and reopening the schools successfully in the shortest amount of time.

The ED study was shared with many organizations who were looking for ways to help the Gulf Coast area. The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and Scholastic became interested in the response that Mobile provided, the methods used to restore services, and the practices used to reengage students after this devastating crisis.

In early 2006, representatives from AASA, Scholastic, and the ED visited Mobile. They met with Dr. Rhonda Neal Waltman, Assistant Superintendent of Support Services, who led the restoration efforts for the district. Dr. Waltman reported that the Superintendent of Mobile Public Schools, Dr. Harold Dodge, had supported the implementation of the Comprehensive Systems of Learning Supports Framework developed by the UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools prior to Hurricane Katrina.

Where It All Began (continued...)

The experiences in Mobile raised an important question that AASA and Scholastic committed to fully explore: if the use of this framework resulted in families and children successfully reengaging with school after a natural disaster, could it be used to address the crises and challenges that many families and children face in their daily lives?

This question was explored in a formal partnership between AASA, Scholastic, and UCLA. The project consisted of a research study to apply the framework of the Comprehensive System of Learning Supports to school leadership. This approach was considered unique in that it focused on how to address barriers and challenges in a systematic and organized manner. The Learning Supports LEAD Collaborative Project, under the guidance of AASA, provided professional development and coaching for districts in Gainesville, GA; Grant Parish, LA; Stillwater, MN; and Indian Springs, FL.

Simultaneously, Mobile's success in using the framework led to a statewide implementation in Louisiana in 2007. Under the direction of State Superintendent Paul Pasternak, professional development and coaching support was provided through the Office of Federal Programs led by Tavia Crumpler, Director of Safe and Healthy Students. Scholastic provided additional support for coaching and workshops as a contribution from their Community Affairs division. Dr. Rhonda Waltman began working for Scholastic in Louisiana upon her retirement from Mobile County Public Schools.

Through AASA, the Alabama School Superintendents Association became aware of both the Louisiana and LEAD Collaborative Group implementations. Dr. Eric Mackey, Director of the Alabama School Superintendents Association, shared the potential of the framework with Dr. Tommy Bice, then Deputy State Superintendent. Drs. Mackey and Bice attended an institute in Baton Rouge with the Louisiana Department of Education. This event included members of the LEAD Collaborative Districts as well. Dr. Bice saw the positive results and the opportunity to approach school improvement in a different manner. Along with Dr. Mackey, he began to explore possible implementation in Alabama.

In 2011 Dr. Tommy Bice was appointed State School Superintendent in Alabama. He led the development of Alabama's Plan 2020, a strategic initiative to guide the improvements needed in order to graduate students prepared to enter college and the workforce. In order to meet the challenges associated with poverty, rural isolation, and other factors that reduced achievement, he led the design of Alabama's Plan 2020 to include a pillar of support systems. He restructured the State Department of Education to include an Office of Learning Supports and named Dr. Linda Felton-Smith, a former Alabama superintendent, to lead the implementation.



Where It All Began (continued...)

Dr. Bice wanted every district in Alabama to have the opportunity for job-embedded professional development, supported by a coach/facilitator, to implement the Learning Supports framework. He offered this to district superintendents for voluntary participation in a cohort group. The first cohort began in 2013–2014, followed by Cohort 2 in 2014–2015, Cohort 3 in 2015–2016, and Cohort 4 in 2016–2017. The goal was to offer support for implementation over a five-year period.

To guide the work, a design document, “A Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports for Alabama Students,” was collaboratively developed. State partners in the development of the design document included the following:

- ✓ Alabama State Department of Education
- ✓ Alabama Association of School Boards
- ✓ School Superintendents of Alabama
- ✓ Council for Leaders of Alabama Schools
- ✓ Alabama Education Association

Alabama’s work has exemplified the findings of Leithwood, Harris, and Strauss (2010), who examined how successful schools overcome a myriad of challenges. They found that successful leaders transform schools by:

- ✓ Aligning the operational conditions, including implementation plans, policies, and professional development
- ✓ Establishing core processes that guide the work, including widely shared goals, instructional expertise, and use of data and evidence
- ✓ Nurturing collaborative relationships both inside and outside of the district
- ✓ Establishing strong leaders at the district and school levels

Alabama’s pioneering effort to establish a system through the Learning Supports framework has resulted in improvements in attendance, reduced disciplinary actions, and increased graduation rates. It has given Alabama schools a systematic approach to challenges such as poverty, homelessness, hunger, a lack of motivation, and student mobility, grounded in theory that is put into practice. Commitment to sustaining the work gives Alabama the means to fulfill the promise of educating and graduating every child and preparing them to thrive outside of the classroom.

The Learning Supports Pathway

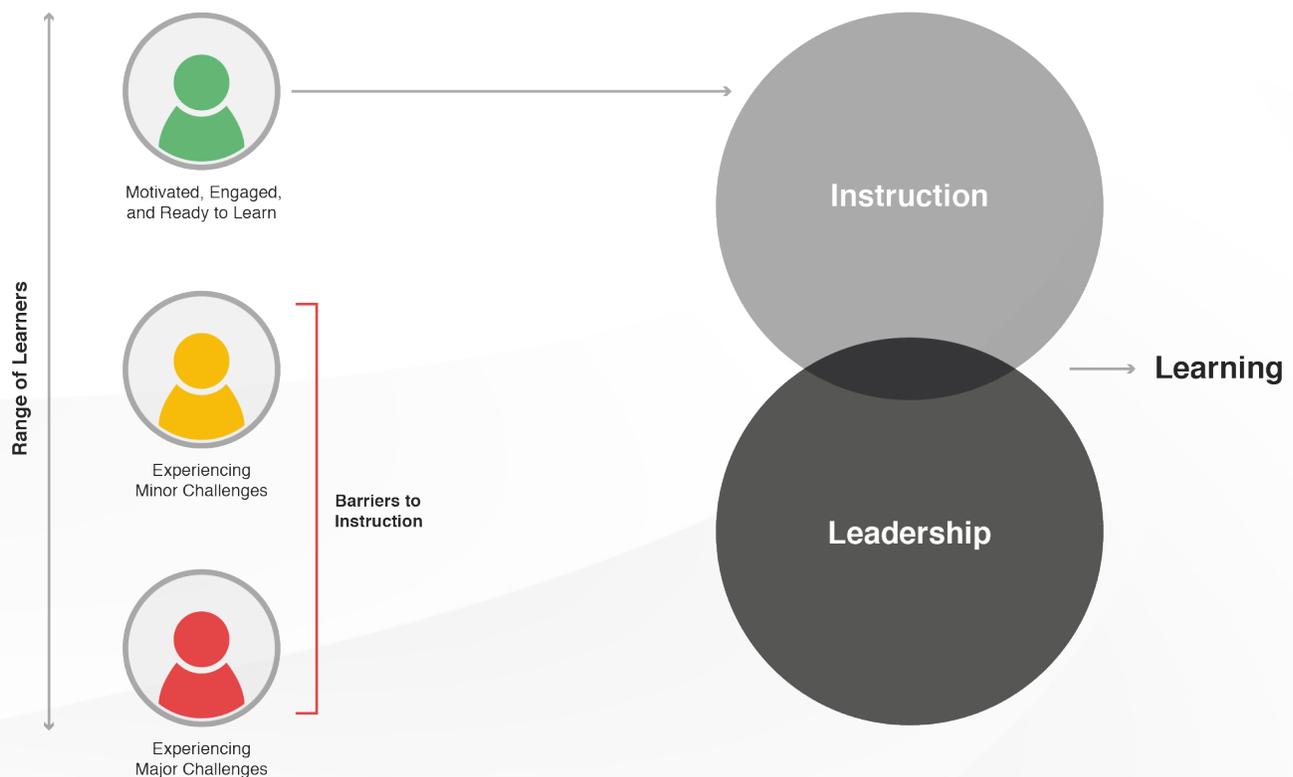
Theory to Practice

Scholastic's Learning Supports Pathway is informed by the Learning Supports framework developed by Drs. Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor from the UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools. Adelman and Taylor created their framework to explain why not all students make adequate academic progress even when they receive quality classroom instruction.

Barriers to Learning

Some students come to school every day ready and willing to learn. These are students who aren't stymied by barriers that prevent them from learning what their teachers have prepared. The percentage of students who are motivated, engaged, and ready to learn varies by building and community. In communities with significant economic and other challenges, this percentage can be very low.

The Case for a Learning Supports Approach



Why not every student is able to benefit from instruction

What Happens to Students Who Are Not Ready to Learn?

Adelman and Taylor organize students along a continuum—from those who experience minor challenges to those who experience major challenges. These barriers take many forms and include social, emotional, and behavioral issues, as well as factors related to poverty, family support, school climate, safety, substance abuse, mental health, community issues, and attendance. Though students may fluctuate along the continuum, those who are not motivated, engaged, and ready to learn do not have the opportunity to benefit from instruction unless schools help them overcome the barriers to instruction they encounter.



While school systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students, when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge.

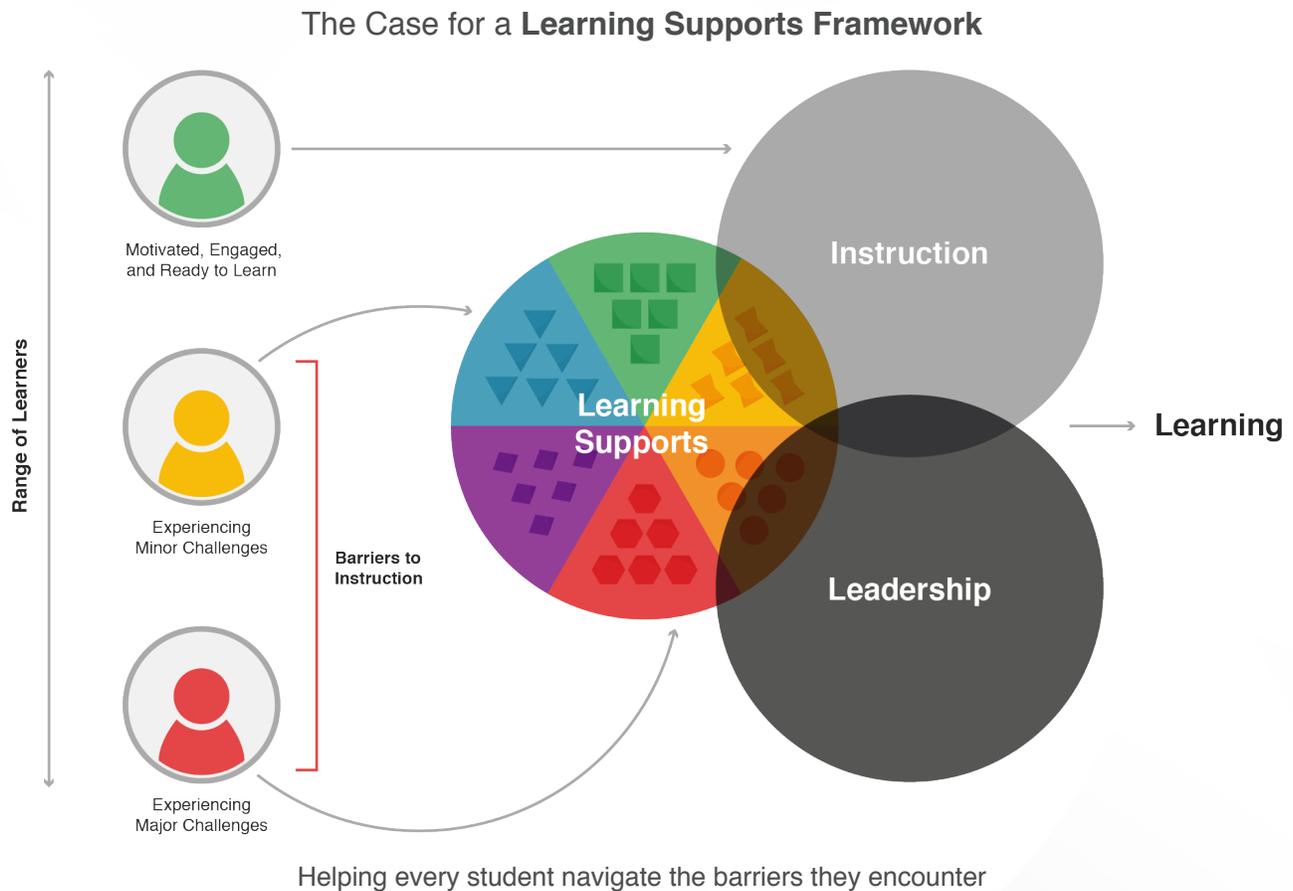
—Carnegie Council Task Force on
Education of Young Adolescents

The Need for Learning Supports

As the Carnegie Council Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents (1989) stressed, “While school systems are not responsible for meeting every need of their students, when the need directly affects learning, the school must meet the challenge.” Adelman and Taylor’s model prescribes that schools provide a range of Learning Supports to enable students to circumvent the barriers they encounter in order to be physically, emotionally, and mentally present. This framework does not place blame on the student or the teacher. Instead, Adelman and Taylor assert that the role of schools is to provide a range of Learning Supports that can help all students gain equal access to effective instruction. If a school chooses only to focus on increased reading instruction, Adelman and Taylor have demonstrated that, though initial gains will be made for some students, many students encounter too many barriers to become proficient. The Learning Supports framework is predicated on the conviction that providing the support to overcome these barriers, in conjunction with effective instruction, is the only recipe for a learning environment where all students have a chance to succeed.

What Are Learning Supports?

Learning Supports are the resources, strategies, and practices that support intellectual, physical, social, and emotional development to ensure student success. Learning Supports are deployed in classrooms and schoolwide to address barriers to learning and teaching, and to reengage disconnected students. According to Adelman and Taylor, the full range of Learning Supports can be organized into six practice areas—classroom-based supports, student and family interventions, transitions, crisis intervention, community collaboration, and family engagement.



A New School Improvement Process: Organizing Services

Most policy makers know that instruction alone is not a strong enough intervention to help all students succeed. Few districts dispute the need for providing supportive services. In most districts, however, the majority of non-instructional services are funded by discrete, categorical funding that often results in a multitude of disconnected activities. This service fragmentation does not allow for supportive programming to be delivered efficiently or cost-effectively. Because the problems that students face are complex, only the creation of a comprehensive, integrated network of supports can elevate “one child at a time” case-by-case approach to a system that meets the needs of all students. An integrated system of Learning Supports identifies, addresses, and removes barriers to learning and teaching so all students can successfully navigate their individual learning pathways.

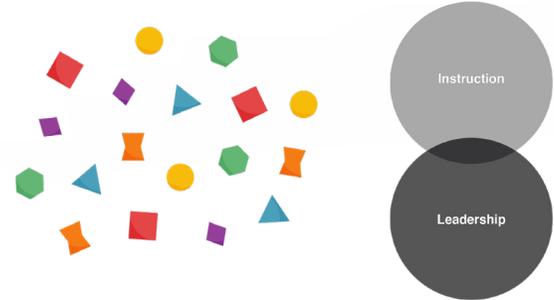
Integrating Components of School Improvement

For most districts, school improvement planning is guided by a two-component approach that includes the systems of instruction (ensuring that all students learn at high levels) and leadership/management (using data to allocate resources and drive continuous improvement to ensure that the district achieves its mission).

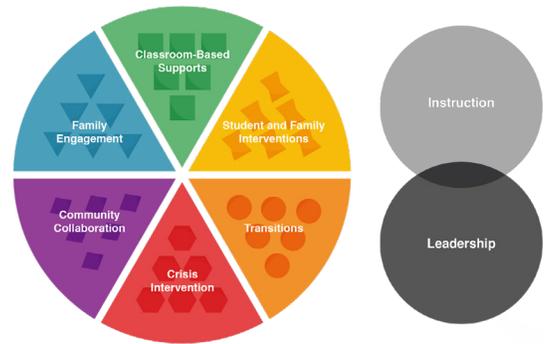
In addition to organizing fragmented Learning Supports into an integrated system of care, the Adelman and Taylor framework shows that, to maximize impact, districts must move from a two-component framework to a fully integrated three-component framework.

By elevating the importance of the system of Learning Supports to a primary component of school improvement planning, districts can create learning environments that are responsive to the wide range of student needs and ensure that all students have the opportunity to become productive, successful learners.

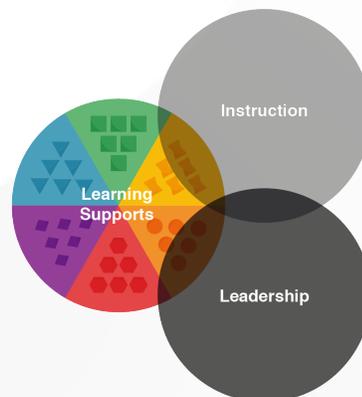
The Path to an Integrated Approach for School



1 Identify Disconnected Support Services



2 Organize Support Services



3 Integrate Services with Instruction and Leadership

Theory to Practice

Using the Learning Supports Framework for Holistic Improvement

Dr. Bice and state leadership sought to apply the Learning Supports framework to a common barrier, or challenge, that was present in Alabama schools. Therefore, Bice asked Dr. Felton-Smith and the ALSDE coaches to focus on improving student attendance. Other areas of focus would be identified from the particular data in each district. Areas of focus included improving achievement, reducing discipline incidences, and improving graduation rates.

The first step of implementation was the commitment from each superintendent and district to apply the framework with fidelity. Superintendents were asked to designate a district staff member to be the Learning Supports lead. The Learning Supports lead coordinated the work of the district, schools, and the ALSDE coach. The important qualities of this position were commitment to student and family supports and positional authority in the district to ensure the quality of implementation. In many cases, this individual served as the federal programs or special education coordinator. However, people with a variety of titles emerged as effective leads. For example, one district's school nutrition coordinator serves as a lead.

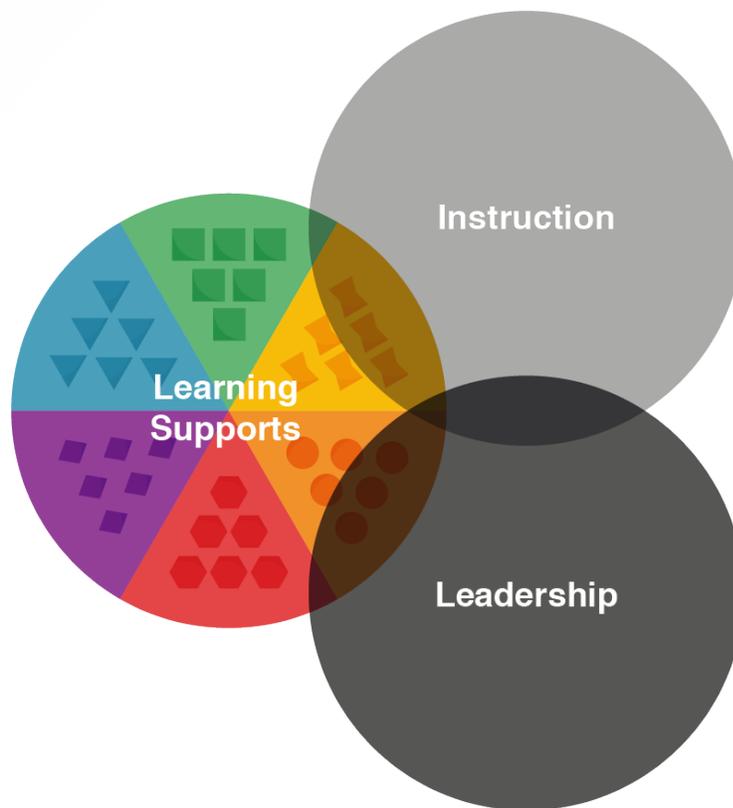
The superintendent and Learning Supports lead attended an orientation in the spring prior to their first year in the cohort. After the orientation, the district Learning Supports leads designated a leader in each school who would participate in the process. The larger districts, like Mobile, Montgomery, and Birmingham, began implementation in school cluster groups while the midsize to smaller districts chose to implement in all schools.

In the first cohort, school-level Learning Supports leads were primarily school counselors. However, as the process progressed, many middle and high schools designated the assistant principal whose responsibility included discipline management as the school leader.

The ALSDE Learning Supports coach visited each district in the beginning of the school year. Individual and group workshop guidance was provided to ensure understanding of the framework and how it could be customized to support the district and school improvement plans.

The Foundation: Organizing the Three Components

Adelman and Taylor found that school improvement efforts often fail for want of a systematic and organized framework that can effect improvement plans. Therefore, the work in Alabama districts began by examining how current leadership was organized and operated. The district analyzed how they could begin working within the three components. District and school leaders found that personnel in support areas, like counselors, parent coordinators, federal programs staff, and special education staff, rarely met to align their work. It was discovered that they often worked separately from those who led instructional improvements.



Integrated with Instruction and Leadership

The Learning Supports coach helped the district reorganize their leadership structures, meetings, and communication flow into a three-component system that brought the Learning Supports area to the center of planning, monitoring, and supporting student outcomes along with instruction and management personnel. This resulted in a shift to prevention and intervention strategies for groups of students who experienced similar barriers, rather than reactive strategies on a student-by-student basis.

The Foundation: Organizing the Three Components (continued...)

Examples of changes seen in districts included the following:

Athens City Schools reorganized so that federal programs, student services, special education, and counselors stopped meeting separately and united as a Learning Supports team. The team met regularly with school staff and the superintendent's management team. The superintendent then organized the district's strategic plan into the three components to unify all efforts.

Chambers County restructured their district staff to add a Learning Supports team and then designed a system of meeting schedules that included the flow of information to principals, grade bands, departments, and school leadership teams.

Boaz City regrouped their staff, meetings, and data organization into the three components.

Boaz City, Athens City, and Lowndes County designed a meeting agenda divided into the three components that is used for all district and school meetings.

Shelby County, a large district, organized systems of communication and meeting flow of Learning Supports teams across a high school cluster pattern.

Jefferson County selected specific school zones to coordinate with the district office Learning Supports team. They developed protocols and systems to ensure that data moved from districts to schools. This resulted in a consistent tiered approach of supports among all schools in the zone.

Lanett City Schools reorganized teams made up of school and district staff into three components to ensure comprehensive data usage and increased benefits to all schools in the district.

Leeds City and **Lanett City schools** turned former problem-solving teams into a Learning Supports team, which still continues to address individual student needs but now includes prevention and intervention for all students. They found that putting strategies for prevention in place for all students reduced the number of children requiring individual assistance.

Selma City and **Talladega City schools** discovered that organizing and unifying the roles and goals of personnel was helpful to new superintendents. It gave them a framework to lead decisions on how to best organize district staff.

Limestone County Schools noted that the use of a common language and framework helped with structural analysis, data usage, and setting goals for improved school attendance.

Resource Mapping

A District and School Analysis of Current Learning Supports

The next step was to examine the resources, practices, and strategies that were currently in place in each district. The purpose of this “taking stock” activity is for a district and its schools to collaboratively identify their existing efforts and the extent to which they are helping to address learning challenges. With the facilitation of the ALSDE Learning Supports coach, the district and schools “mapped” in the six practice areas of Learning Supports as identified by Adelman and Taylor. The resources, strategies, and practices were designated as being for all, some, or few students. This provided a graphic demonstration of how the supports were currently organized in multi-tiers. After mapping what was currently in place, an analysis was done to determine which of the supports were helping to address the particular challenges of the district and which were not. The mapping activity identified ineffective and redundant practices and facilitated sharing among schools. Many of the districts in the ALSDE Learning Supports project continue to map annually and incorporate this into their strategic improvement and budget planning process.

Examples of mapping three of the six practice areas of Learning Supports:



Identifying the Barriers

Root Cause Analysis

The next step was to examine data from the district and schools to identify major areas of concern and the root cause(s) of the underperformance of students. The ALSDE Learning Supports coach facilitated a root cause analysis that often revealed surprising results. For example, many schools identified poverty as a barrier to learning. However, after examining why poverty reduced learning, the schools further revealed reasons such as homelessness, food insecurity, mobility, and other characteristics of high-poverty student populations. By addressing the root causes more directly, the districts and schools were better able to select impactful strategies.

For example:

Jasper City Schools identified poverty in a school serving 98% of their students free or reduced lunch as a barrier to achievement. After an extensive root cause analysis, Jasper City found that lower expectations for these students both behaviorally and academically was the root cause.

Daleville City similarly found that the root causes for underperformance among children in poverty were that they lived with extended family, used drugs and alcohol, and had a lack of structure in classrooms.

Chickasaw City identified a lack of transportation as a root cause for attendance issues.

Russellville City used community and parent surveys to reveal that the root cause was a lack of consistent communication and input from parents and the community to improve achievement in students of poverty.

Fairfield City found that the root cause of underperformance of children in poverty was the lack of leadership knowledge in making decisions about how to address barriers. This resulted in a Tri-City Leadership Academy with neighboring districts designed to improve their competencies to serve children from low-wealth backgrounds.

Hartselle City discovered that a root cause that impeded their efforts to increase achievement was a lack of communication about how student data was used and the impact of homework on elementary students. Parents are now knowledgeable about their children's data and how it guides focused improvement. Hartselle City has increased their graduation rate by three percentage points and continues to improve on the ACT Aspire and ACT WorkKeys assessments.

Talladega City and **Selma City schools** used this process as a way for new superintendents to understand their current resources and lead strategic planning. For example, Selma City Schools' new superintendent and staff used the mapping process to identify the four areas of needed focus for their plans: student engagement, student and faculty attendance, social-emotional learning, and community and family engagement. Talladega City's mapping process revealed specific opportunities for schools and community agencies such as the Boys and Girls Club to collaboratively address academic, attendance, and discipline challenges.

Strategic Actions

Selecting Aligned and Coherent Strategies to Address Root Causes

After the district and schools identified their barriers and explored their root causes, the ALSDE coaches helped them identify promising strategies and develop a research and evidence-based strategy bank during regional Fall and Spring Institutes as well as on individual visits. The coaches helped each district and school select fewer strategies with more positive effects, which their teachers and staff had the capacity to apply.

By aligning the strategies in the six practice areas, a process that is often called “working the spokes,” it is easy to communicate to stakeholders the specific roles that each group plays toward improvement. For example, this graphic illustrates an aligned and unified approach in the six areas to address the barrier of student mobility:



Outcomes of the Use of the Learning Supports System

Improved Attendance

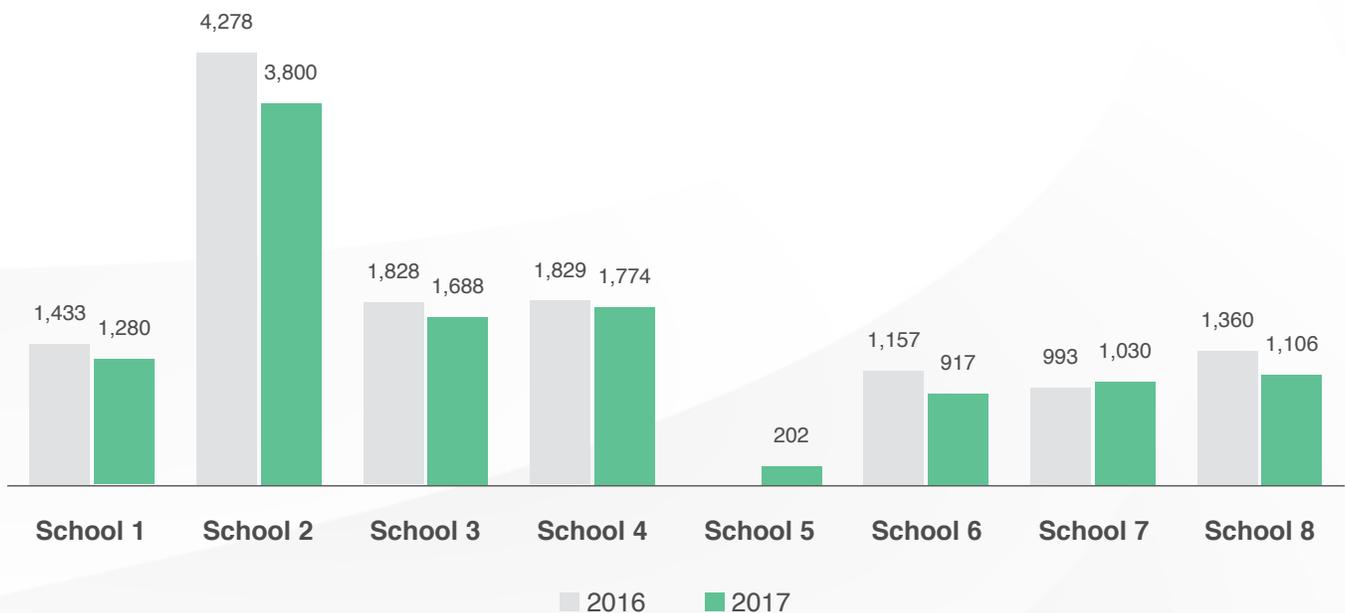
During the first year of Alabama’s Learning Supports project, the mapping process revealed that most districts and schools had reactive strategies in place to address truancy and tardiness. Letters and calls to parents and referrals to a court official were the predominant strategies. Very few prevention strategies were found. By using the strategies in the six practice areas to promote attendance and intervene in a positive manner, there were remarkable improvements in many of the districts and schools.

For example:

Anniston City Schools used school and home visits with parents, mentors from outside the school, and collaboration with local agencies to improve attendance. The results were most noteworthy at the middle school, which reduced absences from 4,617 in 2013 to 2,771 in 2016.

Athens City Schools used mentors for every student, mental health counseling for Grades 5–12, increased collaboration with outside agencies, and increased personal communication with parents to improve attendance districtwide.

Athens City Schools Absence Count 2016–2017



Improved Attendance (continued...)

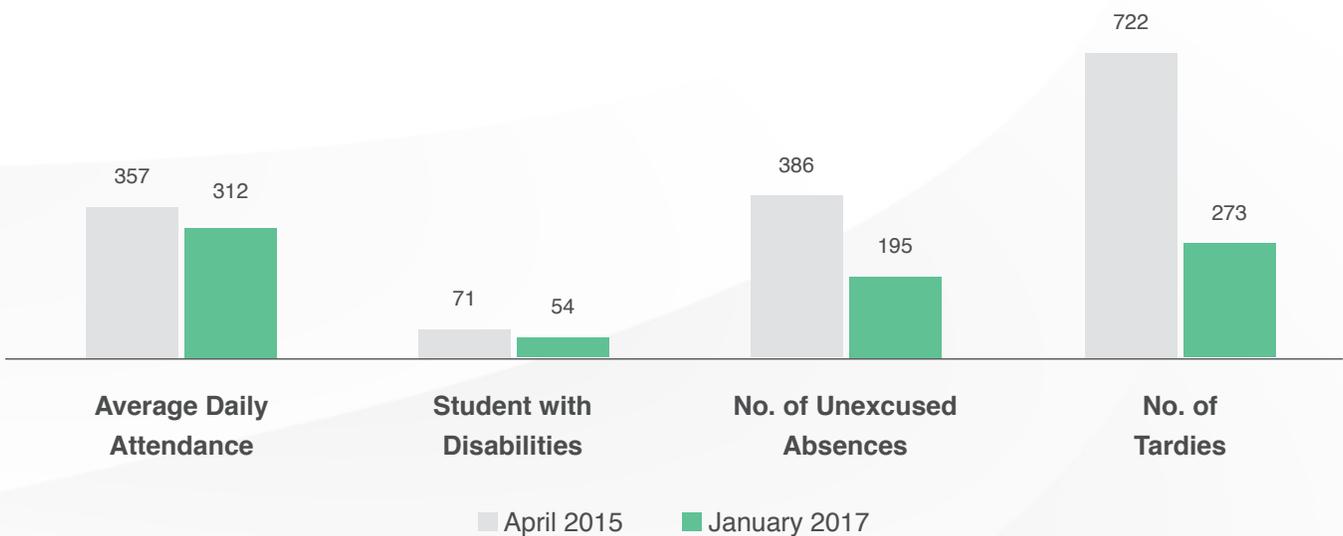
Chickasaw City Schools addressed the barrier of transportation by having their attendance officer work with parents to arrange transportation and supports for the family. They provided classroom incentives and worked closely with parents on a personal basis to help get their children to school. They partnered with the city bus that serves the elderly to transport students to doctor’s appointments, provided a “safe house” in the city for children to take baths or showers, and assigned a “first friend” for students new to the school. The results were an increase of average daily attendance from 88% to 94% in one year.

Daleville City, in their first year of implementation, 2016–2017, focused on improving engagement with project-based learning, addressing military family transitions, and increasing positive communication and interaction with families, including welcoming signage, incentives, and partnerships with churches and local agencies and colleges.

Henry County used face-to-face parent meetings, frequent positive emails and phone calls, recognition and incentives, more engaging classroom activities, and purposeful teacher welcoming of students in the morning to improve attendance. Headland Elementary School has reduced absences in a year from 1,189 to 800. Headland Middle School has decreased unexcused absences from 901 to 277 in a year. Headland High School saw a 58.5% decrease in absences as a result of communication between school and parents along with a personal weekly meeting with students.

Midfield City Schools established monthly truancy meetings in an effort to establish better relationships with families. The meetings included the collaborative development of a plan to improve attendance that gives parents the opportunity to connect with outside agencies and school counseling resources. They post schoolwide attendance data on bulletin boards in the schools. Attendance has improved at each school.

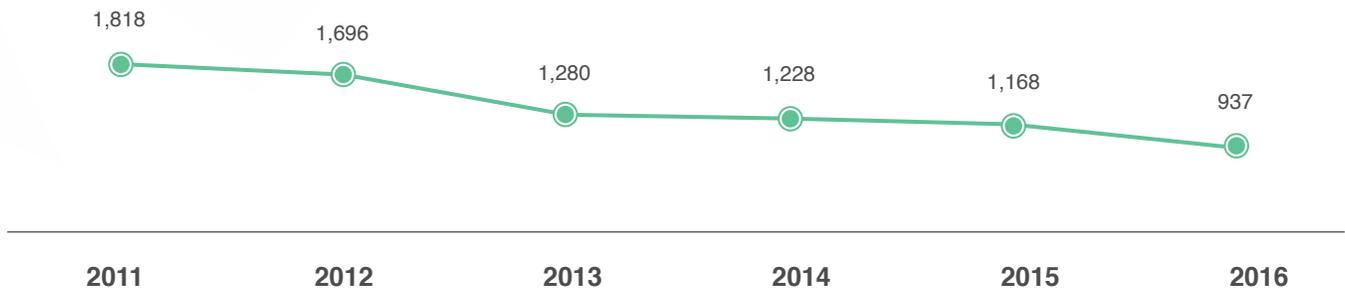
Midfield City Schools Attendance Data



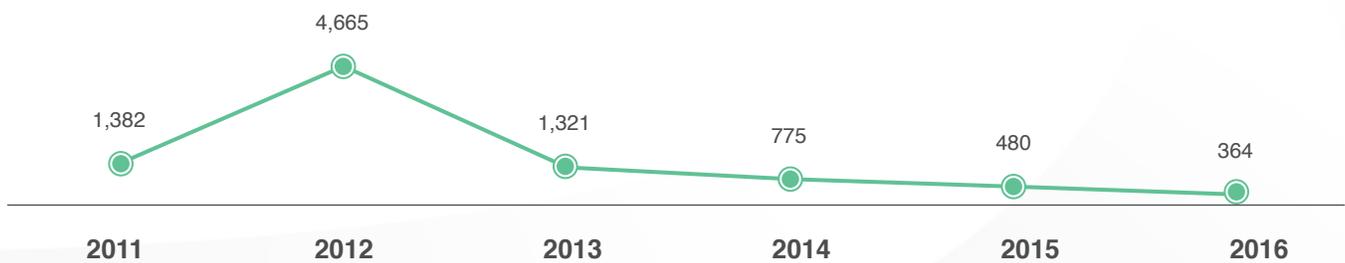
Improved Attendance (continued...)

Talladega County's B.B. Comer High School provided leadership opportunities for students, developed a formal process for student decision-making, provided 5:1 faculty mentors, and used local churches to help address family issues that resulted in children not coming to school.

Talladega County: B.B. Comer High School: Unexcused Absences from 2011–2016



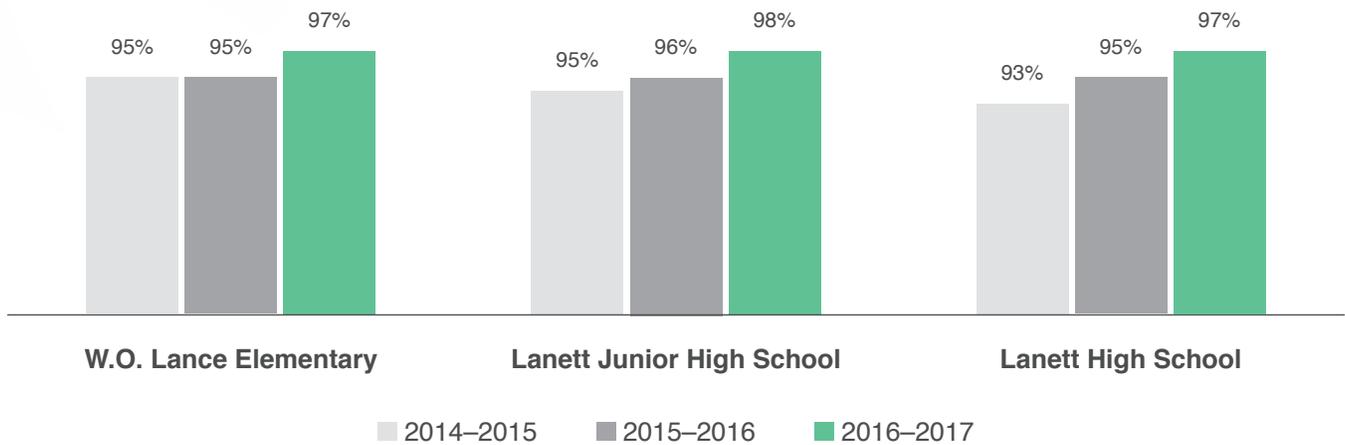
Talladega County: B.B. Comer High School: Unexcused Tardies from 2011–2016



Improved Attendance (continued...)

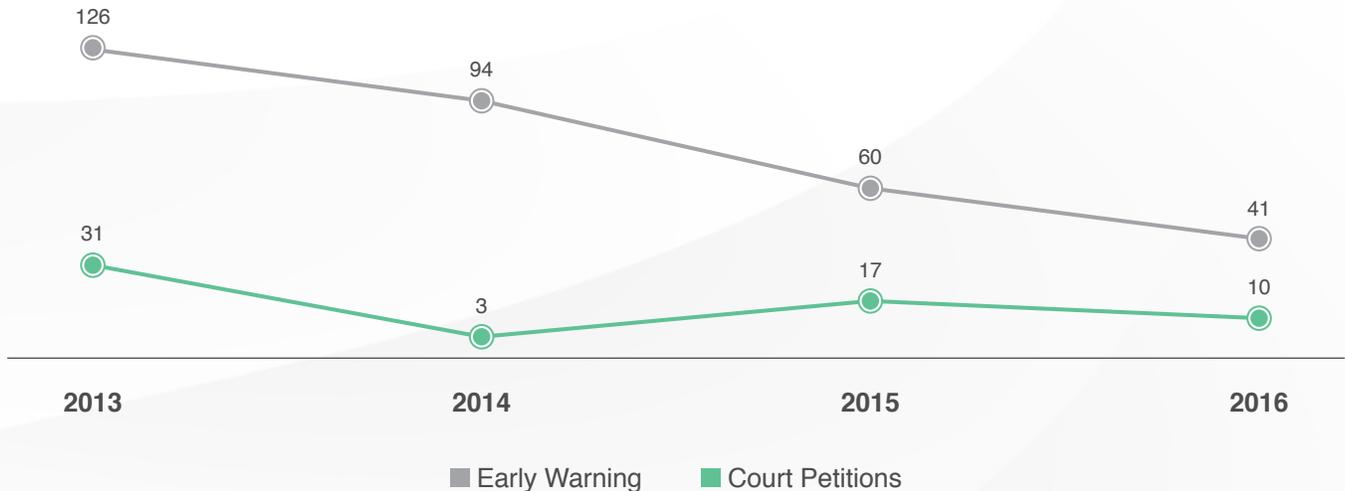
Lanett City Schools focused on increasing classroom engagement to improve attendance. Enrichment opportunities, like a STEM initiative, robotics, arts enrichment, and use of technology, have energized students. Their Learning Supports team has positioned personnel to address areas of need, such as by counseling students in transition and establishing relationships with families. Lanett City is seeing marked improvement, particularly at the high school level. Additionally, they also decreased their disciplinary referrals by 35% through these efforts.

Lanett City Schools: Average Daily Attendance from 2014–2017



Lowndes County used a advisor-advisee program, personal contact with parents, incentives supported by community partners, and improved instructional practices to increase engagement to address their truancy issues. They have seen improvement in every school and particularly at the high school level.

Lowndes County: Reduction of Disciplinary Actions from 2013–2016



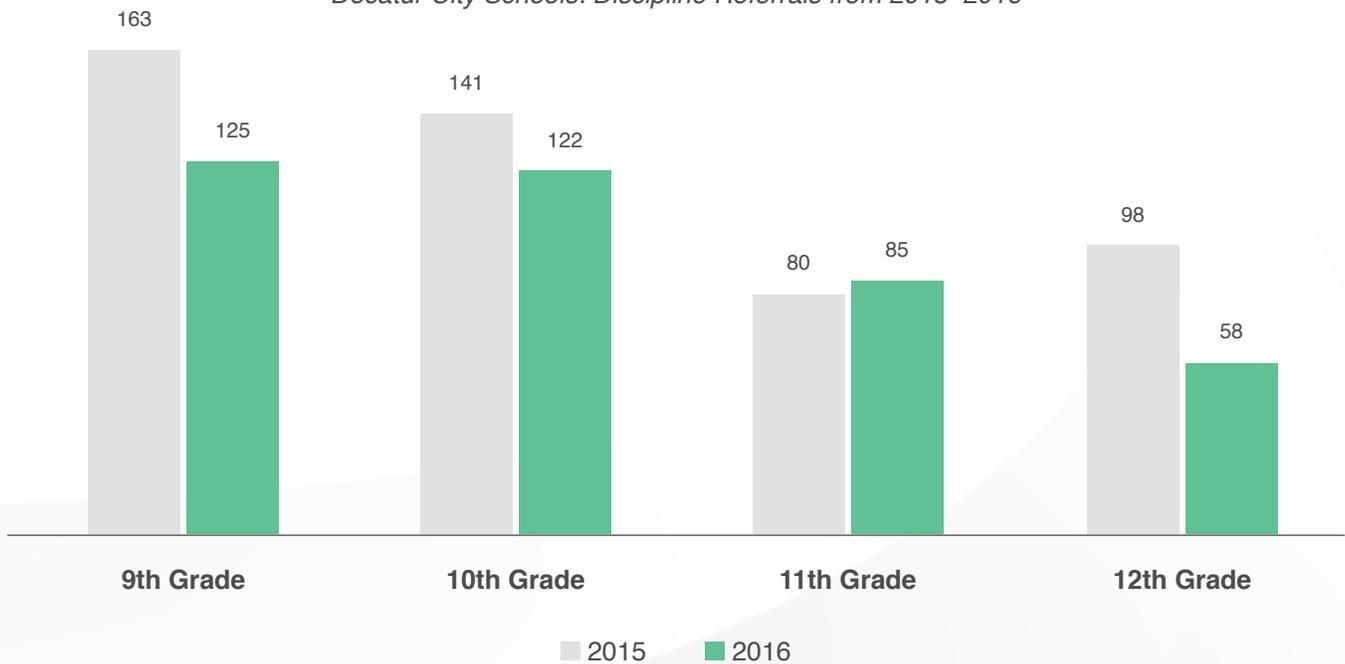
Improved Behavior

The initial mapping activity with districts and schools in Alabama revealed that current approaches to discipline focused on punitive actions toward students and/or parents. Very few schools had examined the root causes of disciplinary issues. By examining root causes, the role that adults play in improving discipline became evident. Therefore, the strategies to reduce disciplinary infractions and suspensions predominantly involved changes to school culture and climate as well as establishing consistent procedures. The majority of schools in the Alabama Learning Supports project have seen improvements in the area of discipline.

For example:

Decatur City Schools identified behavioral and discipline challenges as root causes of poor student achievement. To address this, they focused on promoting students' confidence, vision of success, and relationship building. "Promoting Student Success through Powerful Conversations" was implemented to give students a voice and active role in setting goals, monitoring their progress, and consistent feedback. Student-peer counseling was used in coordination with the program. Other efforts, such as ACT preparation and homeless and social services, were used to respond to particular needs. Decatur City Schools decreased their disciplinary referrals by unifying their strategies.

Decatur City Schools: Discipline Referrals from 2015–2016



Eufaula City Schools, in the first year of implementation, focused on reducing the number of in- and out-of-school suspensions. They addressed policy barriers by revising their student code of conduct to a less punitive and more progressive plan. They realized that their discipline procedures focused on punishment rather than changing student behaviors. This has resulted in a decrease in suspensions.

Improved Behavior (continued...)

Elba City Schools focused on improving student engagement to prevent disciplinary actions. Increased engagement of and relationships with families supported classroom efforts. In their first year in the Learning Supports project, discipline incidences decreased more than 10% at Elba High School.

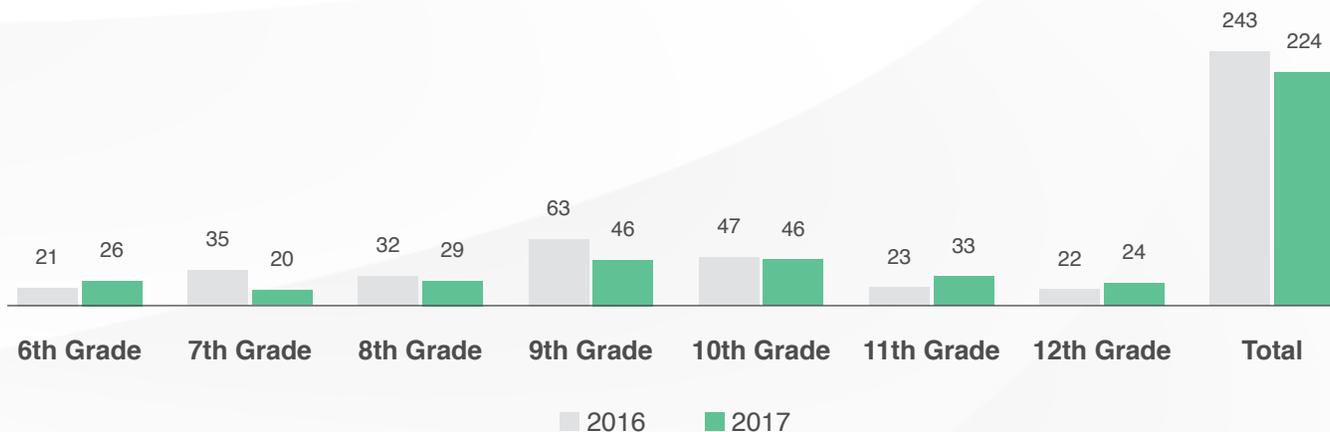
Huntsville City Schools utilized Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS), professional development in cultural diversity and classroom management, and restorative practices to reduce the number of students expelled from school through due process hearings. Their results reflect the success of prevention and intervention with a dramatic decrease in the number of hearings.

Huntsville City Schools Due Process Hearings

Decisions	2015–2016 (as of 2/28/16)	2016–2017 (as of 2/28/16)
Expulsions	72	12
Guilty	15	4
Subtotal	87	16
Not Guilty	12	2
Dropped as per SPED	2	0
Pass	48	N/A
Total Number of Hearings	149	18

Mobile County Schools focused on improving culture and climate, classroom-based supports, and crisis prevention to improve discipline in the Williamson High School feeder pattern. They addressed problem resolution, building partnerships to help provide incentives and mentorships, and counseling initiatives that provided guidance on healthy relationship skills. This resulted in a decrease in suspensions in the feeder pattern.

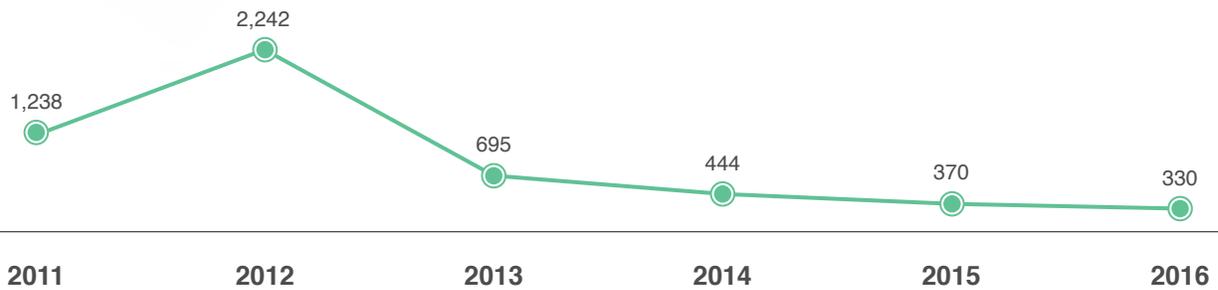
Mobile County: First Semester Out-of-School Suspensions from 2016–2017



Improved Behavior (continued...)

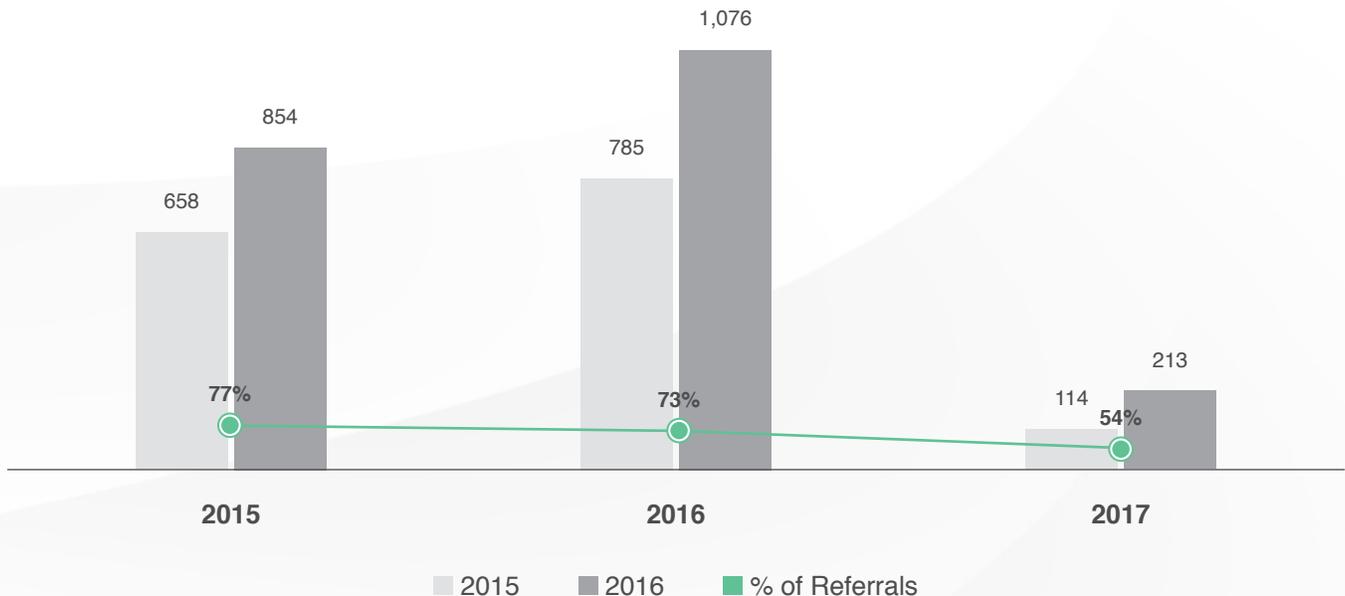
Talladega County Schools focused their efforts at B.B. Comer High School. They emphasized improving student and family engagement as a means to reduce discipline referrals. Strategies included project-based learning, the addition of AP classes, STEAM initiatives, and small-group instruction. Community collaboration assisted with leadership days and other incentive activities. More after-school tutoring and student-led conferences also contributed to increased engagement and student opportunity. The result was a decline in disciplinary referrals since 2012, when they began the Learning Supports work.

Talladega County Schools: B.B. Comer High School: Discipline Referrals from 2011–2016



Montgomery Public Schools focused on improved intradistrict and community collaboration to address discipline and attendance. Within their district, a Learning Supports director facilitates coordination with instructional support services, social services, special education, technology, child nutrition, and other sections that have a role in improving attendance. There is increased collaboration with mental health professionals, particularly to address trauma, and local universities. At Capitol Heights Middle School, the efforts resulted in a notable decrease in disciplinary referrals that benefited their culture and climate.

Montgomery Public Schools: Discipline Referrals from 2015–2017



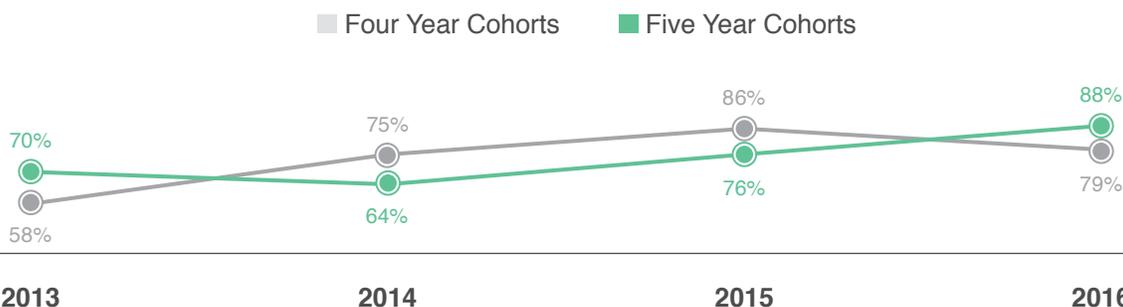
Improved Graduation Rates

Improving graduation rates by ensuring that ninth-graders are prepared to meet the College and Career Standards is an area of focus in Alabama’s Plan 2020 and the ALSDE Office of Learning Supports. Through the application of the framework, school teams analyzed data and found multiple barriers to student completion in four years. The districts and schools that worked on attendance and discipline experienced increased graduation rates. Other districts found that work in other areas was needed to boost their completion rate.

For example:

Anniston City Schools had a 58% graduation rate as they entered the Learning Supports project. They identified the root causes as attendance, a lack of parental support and engagement, and a lack of continuity of employees in the district. The strategies used to address these barriers included STAR assessments for benchmark data and professional development to prepare teachers to increase teacher efficacy. Efforts in communication through school and local agencies were put in place to guide students from PreK to Grade 12 toward graduation. Training for parents and caregivers was offered, and mentors outside of the school were used. Their efforts have produced steady increases in the graduation rate.

Anniston High School Graduation Rate from 2013–2016 for Four-Year and Five-Year Cohorts



Macon County Schools identified generational poverty, a lack of expectations associated with poverty, a lack of knowledge of the resources and opportunities for post-secondary education, and a lack of communication between the home and school as root causes of low graduation rates. The district implemented Operation Acceleration, which increased dual enrollment and participation in gifted and Advanced Placement courses. Parents and school staff collaborated on goal-setting and made four-year graduation plans to follow. By increasing community partnerships, both parents and students learned of employment opportunities for students in the area. Macon County saw a steady increase in its graduation rates, from 88% in 2014 to 90% in 2016.

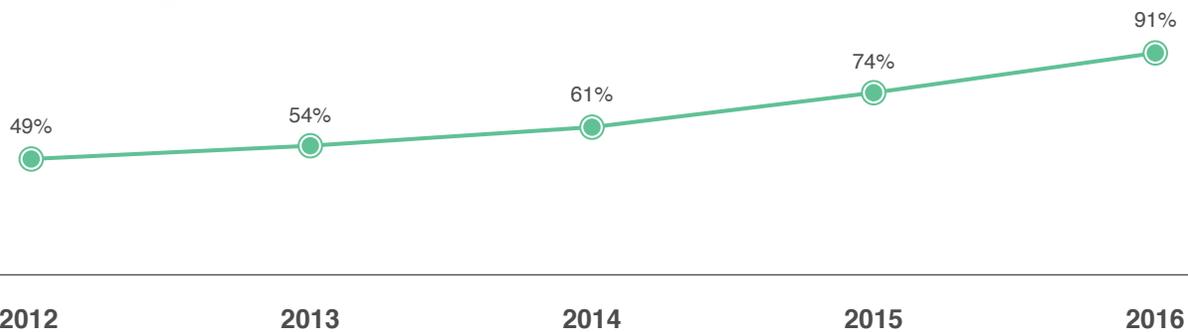
Pike County Schools identified a lack of engagement and motivation, as well as low achievement, as the root causes of low graduation rates. The strategies they used were to accelerate and extend course offerings and provide a flexible course progression. Through partnerships with local and regional universities, college course credits and work-ready certifications could be attained through dual enrollment. The use of blended learning with flexible hours allowed students with family challenges to stay on track. The establishment of specialized academies, including for STEM, finance, and business, advanced and enriched the learning process. The results were an increase in Pike County’s graduation rates from 79% in 2014 to 87% in 2015.



Improved Graduation Rates (continued...)

Fairfield City Schools had a 49% graduation rate in 2012. They identified multiple root causes: attendance, teacher absence, truancy, a lack of transportation, transiency, homelessness, and food insecurity. They began by conducting a comprehensive assessment of the needs of the district through interviews with stakeholders and examination of data sources. Using the Learning Supports framework, they employed credit recovery, dual enrollment, strategic teaching, career coaching, use of a workforce development coach, parent seminars, visits to homes on a “Listening Tour,” collaboration with nearby districts and community partners, and an advisor/advisee program. Fairfield City increased their graduation rate to 91% in 2016.

Fairfield City Schools: Graduation Rate from 2012–2016

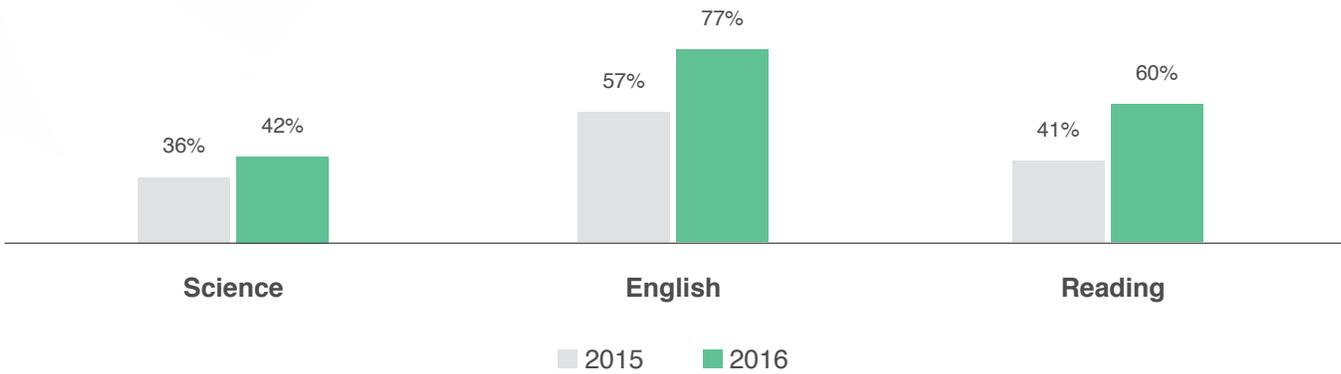


Bullock County Schools also experienced multiple root causes of low graduation rates. Discipline and attendance issues were present as well as low achievement and engagement. The pervasive low achievement had resulted in school staff losing hope. Bullock County addressed these barriers by partnering with businesses to increase the connections available to high school students for career opportunities. Multiple incentives were established to encourage attendance and achievement. Special programs, like Boys to Men and Healthy Schools, helped to support specific needs. An after-school tutorial program was offered, and a partnership with East Central Mental Health supported students needing crisis intervention. These efforts have resulted in an increase in the graduation rate from 83% in 2014 to 87% in 2016.

Improved Student Achievement

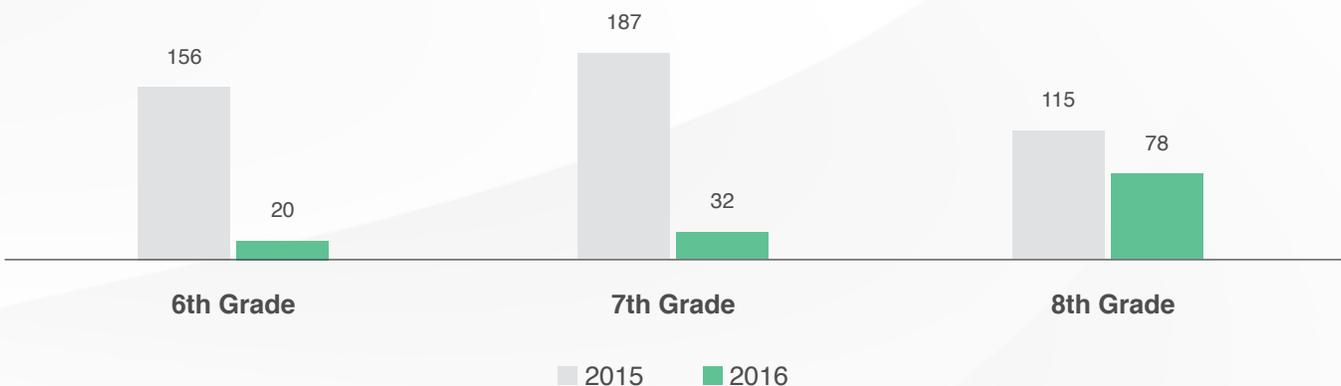
Elba City Schools identified discipline and a lack of engagement as the root causes of underachievement. A particular concern was the transition from seventh to eighth grade. By providing professional development to teachers, strategies were applied to increase engagement and connection with families. Supporting transitions was also important, so Elba City initiated the Tiger Advocacy Program and Kindergarten Jumpstart, and strengthened the Elba Career Academy. Elba City has experienced strong academic gains as a result of these supports.

Elba City Schools: Aspire Proficiency Scores from 2015–2016 by Subject



Mobile County’s use of the Learning Supports system produced academic gains in the traditionally low-performing Williamson feeder pattern. The root causes were identified as a need for a culture of hope and a positive school climate to support growth. They selected strategies to keep their students on campus, develop adult-student relationships, and close achievement gaps. They increased the number of elective courses, implemented PBIS, began a school ambassador program, used the advisor/advisee structure, utilized outside counseling and mental health services, and facilitated more effective parenting. As a result of these Learning Supports, out-of-school suspensions and course failures have decreased, and this is reflected in their benchmark assessments.

Mobile County: Number of Core Course Failures from 2015–2016

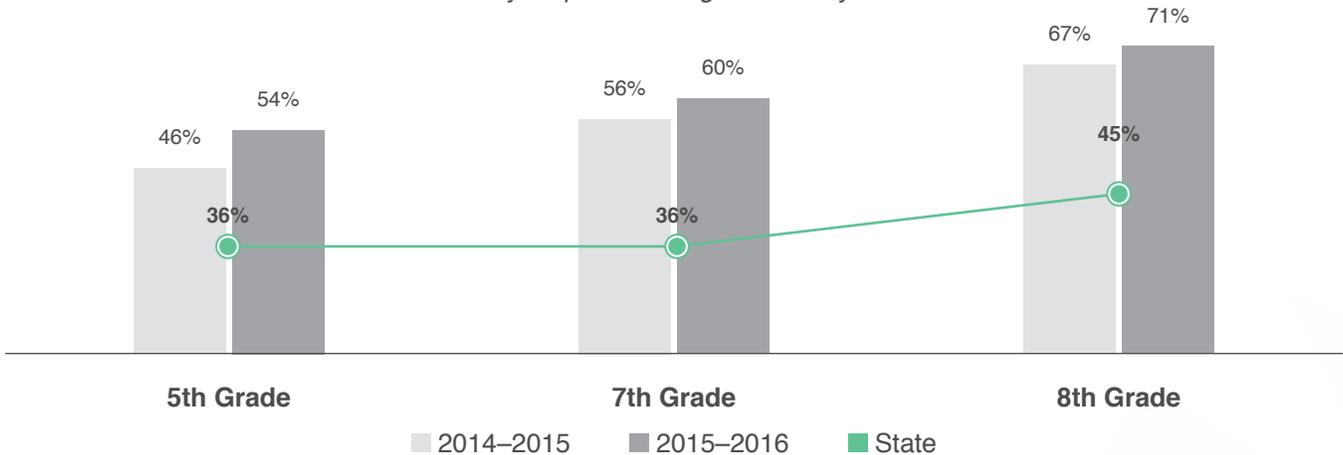


Improved Student Achievement (continued...)

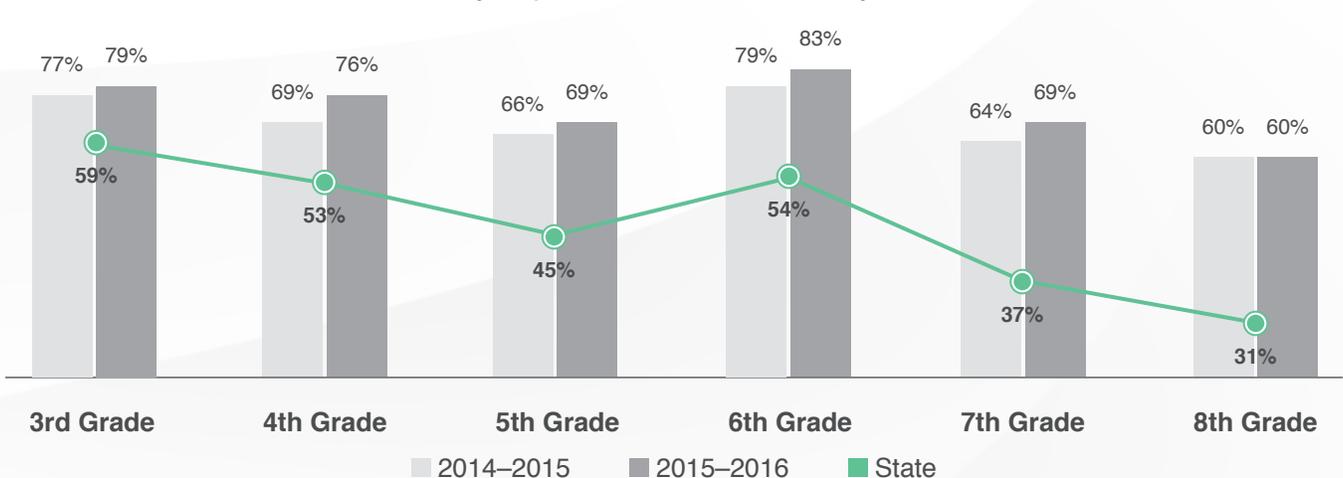
Talladega County’s Central High School identified low expectations, generational poverty fixed mindsets, limited resources, and a lack of parental communication and support as their root causes of underachievement. Strategies used to address these barriers included schoolwide mentorships, relationship-building between parents and school, fostering a sense of community, partnerships with community groups and faith-based organizations, and reducing the number of non–highly qualified teachers. This resulted in a 4.5% overall increase in reading proficiency in one year on the STAR benchmark assessment and a three-point increase in composite scores on the ACT Prep. The STAR benchmark assessments showed an 11% decrease for urgent intervention in math and a 10% decrease for urgent intervention in reading.

Muscle Shoals City, a traditionally high-achieving district, identified a need to ensure rigor to increase the number of students entering college designated as “ready” and not requiring remedial coursework. The root cause analysis identified the need for differentiated and personalized learning in delivery of College and Career Ready standards in order to maximize achievement. Muscle Shoals demonstrated that every district and school, regardless of prior achievement outcomes, has areas in which they can improve.

Muscle Shoals City: Aspire Reading Proficiency from 2014–2016



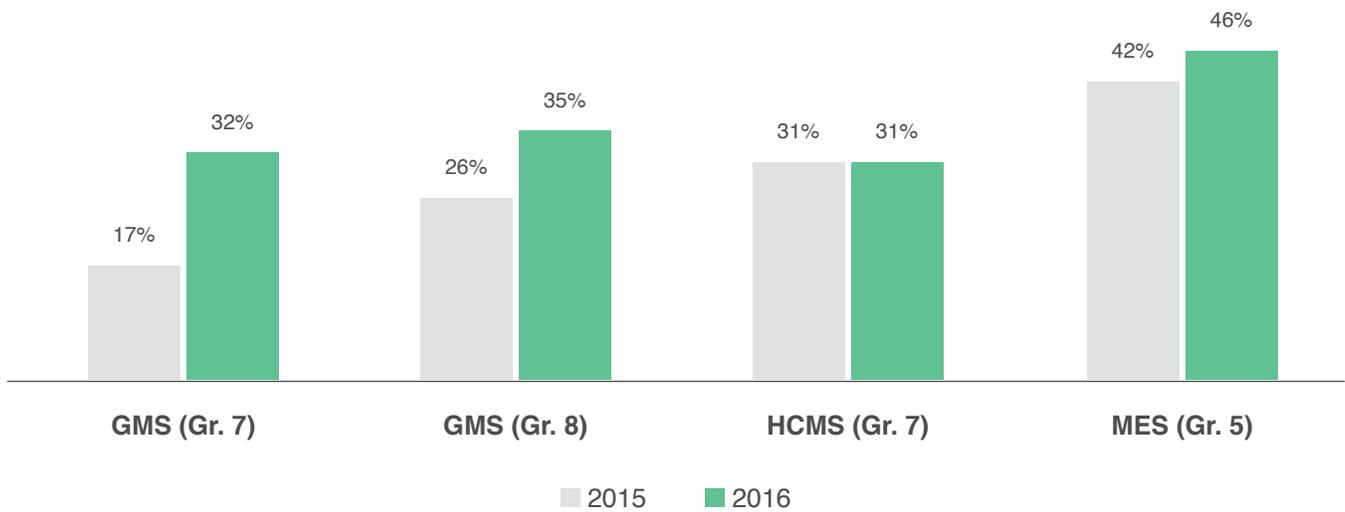
Muscle Shoals City: Aspire Mathematics Proficiency from 2014–2016



Improved Student Achievement (continued...)

Hale County Schools identified their barriers to learning as a disconnect between curriculum and teaching and a lack of student engagement. They selected a Learning Supports strategy with professional development to refocus on Tier I instruction, which included strategic teaching, small group, and instructional rounds. They restructured the master schedule at Greensboro Elementary School and streamlined interventions in both middle schools. Paired with strategies to improve family communication and workshops for parents, this effort resulted in improvements on the ACT Aspire.

Hale County: ACT Aspire Reading Proficient Percentages 2015–2016



As Alabama districts applied the Learning Supports system, they found new and innovative approaches to addressing barriers and challenges in their schools and communities, and dismantled policies that were contributing to learning barriers. By implementing selected strategies, further opportunities were revealed for community-school partnerships. In all districts and schools, the importance of leadership as the driver of sustained improvement became evident.

The Learning Supports Team: A Driver of Innovation

Climate, Culture, and Community Building

Russellville City Schools has experienced a rapidly increasing number of English language learners. In this tradition-rich community, a negative perception of these students' performance potential was identified as a barrier. Russellville City selected strategies that would provide opportunities for increased multicultural understanding, input from all areas of the community, and professional development for school staff. They increased connections with business and industry partnerships. Events for families and the community are now offered in both Spanish and English, as it is particularly important for Spanish-speaking parents to understand academic expectations. The results show that an increasing number of parents participate in survey feedback as well as in training workshops both on and off campus. Russellville City Schools are serving as the leader in their community toward forging strong bonds between “old” and “new” Russellville.

Scottsboro City, in the first year of implementation, followed the resource mapping process with the development of a community resource guide.

Dothan City Schools identified a need for increased community collaboration and parental support. They used a Communities in Schools Grant as the vehicle to strengthen their strategies and better serve students from poverty. The Learning Supports lead and the community school director both worked on the Learning Supports team to leverage the resources together, offer both in-school and after-school supports to families, and improve the culture of that community.

Sylacauga City Schools identified racial tensions and community division as barriers. These divisions had led to negative media attention and an increase in student absence. To repair divisions and increase understanding, the district provided professional development on school climate with a focus on adult-student relationships. This included strategies to address racial tension in school. To focus this as a community approach, they used surveys of students, parents, and the community, a student and community advisory team, improved communication tools, and the use of focus groups to provide time for dialog and listening. This strategic work has yielded increased understanding and positive perception.

Tarrant City Schools identified attendance and behavior as their primary barriers to learning. When examining root causes, a lack of parental support was found. Tarrant City used the opportunity to participate in a partnership with the Alabama Healthy Families Initiative to strengthen families. They utilized the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale to identify specific needs and then included multidisciplinary teams, law enforcement, mental health experts, social service agencies, and community partners to address them.

Climate, Culture, and Community Building (continued...)

Morgan County Schools identified attendance, particularly the number of students who left school during the day, and parental apathy to this problem as a barrier to learning. In examining how to address this, they identified a need for consistent and strong community networks, higher morale among parents, teachers, and students, and more positive feedback from surveys. As a large district, they saw the need for increased connections among schools in the same cluster area. They designed a cohesive parent and community engagement plan that included teacher professional development, teachers' monthly contact with parents, a parent advisory committee to facilitate communication, event planning, and organization of volunteers. This has resulted in a stronger community network, increased parental supports, higher morale among parents, teachers, and students, and increased attendance.

Russell County Schools, in their first year of Learning Supports implementation, identified a lack of connection with schools due to transportation challenges in a large geographic area as the root cause of underperformance, particularly at the high school level. Students come from several small communities and lacked bonds with one another. The Russell County Schools are addressing this through team-building activities, offering extended learning, use of technology, and schoolwide incentives and recognitions. They are looking for increased access to transportation so that students can participate in extracurricular activities. They continue to use the Learning Supports system as a pathway to building a "One Russell" concept.

Bullock County Schools faced a similar challenge with families in smaller communities across the county. To encourage increased family support and engagement, Bullock County teachers and staff took family events out to the different areas of the community. By hosting both on-site and off-site celebrations, workshops, and events, they are increasing the connections in Bullock County.

Jasper City Schools identified one school, which serves a student body that's 98% children from poverty, as an area of focus. Through analysis via the Learning Supports system, they identified the need to examine the structure of their schools. By restructuring the grade progression, this concentration of poverty would be eliminated. They formed a transition team to guide the process. Jasper City is an example of how policy, as well as practice, is an important support for learners.

Developing Social-Emotional Supports

The Learning Supports system is designed to address social-emotional and mental health needs as part of the six areas of practice. Therefore, all districts included strategies in their plans to address these needs. In fact, some districts found that they were the root cause of many issues.

For example:

St. Clair County identified disengagement and disconnection of students to learning as their basic barrier. As a result, they designed plans to address mental health issues that reduced learning. Project C.O.P.E. (Children Overcoming Problems Every Day) offered counseling and therapy for children in need. Prevention strategies were put in place, such as student-centered classroom lessons about character traits, positive behavior supports, journal writing, and art and music therapy. Families were involved via information sessions, the website, and events for both family and community to discuss challenges and find collaborative solutions.

Butler County identified a “punishment gap” as their primary barrier. They reviewed data for issues of disproportionality and lack of consistency. They established a common language throughout schools, revitalized PBIS, created a mental health center, and provided a behavior specialist.

Boaz City addressed the barrier of poverty with a yearlong professional development study of poverty. Activities were designed to change the mental model of what teachers thought children should “look like.” They added extended-day enrichment programs like robotics, STEM, and physical fitness, and developed Camp Boaz, a summer enrichment camp.

Innovative Supports

Lawrence County Schools identified a lack of afternoon transportation as a barrier to high school students attending after-school tutoring and help sessions in order to improve achievement and graduation rates. With the support of the board of education, East Lawrence High School restructured schedules to offer a monthly “iLearning Day.” On that day, students who were on track in their coursework had the option to work independently outside of school, and those who needed additional assistance could attend school for concentrated, and often individual, help.

Clay County Schools and **Talladega County Schools** sought to improve engagement and relationships to improve high school performance. Both Talladega County Central and Clay County high schools restructured the campus into four “houses,” or organized learning communities, in which a student remains throughout their high school years. Each house has a director or coordinator to guide faculty and students in aligning activities around service, social, spirit/pride, and spiritual categories. A point system designated to each House provides incentives and constructive competition for students. This has resulted in a re-energized faculty and student community.

Innovative Supports (continued...)

Shelby County identified a parental lack of knowledge of the curriculum and school procedures as a barrier to achievement. They structured a Family Engagement Academy consisting of four workshop sessions and participation in a service project. The collaboration among families and teaching staff improved adults' civic participation and reduced mental health referrals. Service learning projects included math and literacy nights, a welcome committee for new students, a public relations committee, a "pantry closet" for supplies, clothing, and food, and a STEM education night. By increasing the capacity of both parents and teachers to better support students, achievement in Shelby County increased.

Lauderdale County learned from "Pride Surveys" of parents that cyberbullying issues were present. A teacher group led students in producing a video, "Do You Feel Respected in School?" which featured students describing respectful and disrespectful behaviors.

Dallas County identified a lack of connection between school and home as a barrier. They organized faculty bus tours through the community and family-community nights, provided mental health counselors, and developed a formal elementary-to-middle-school transition process. A history-government teacher led students in collaborative activities to teach civic responsibility.

Tarrant City Schools partnered with the Birmingham Bar Foundation and used their legal expertise to provide 12 peer mediation sessions each year. This resource was used to improve culture and climate as well as problem-solving skills.

Henry County Schools addressed the barrier of low parental engagement by designing family engagement activities, which included the participation of students. These events engaged the whole family and increased the capacity of parents to support their children's academics.

Calhoun County identified leadership as an area in which to address the barriers presented in countywide data meetings. They developed an Aspiring Leaders Academy that prepares future leaders to apply the Learning Supports framework in school improvement and organizational decisions.

Developing Leadership Capacity to Provide Learning Supports

The American Express Grant

At the conclusion of year two of the ALSDE Learning Supports implementation, state leaders examined the critical role of principals in ensuring that a system of supports was put into place. As a result, the ALSDE Office of Learning Supports received a grant from the American Express Company, in partnership with the National Association of Secondary School Principals. Alabama Strong: Principals as Catalysts to School Improvement is designed to increase the leadership capacity of principals and aspiring principals to address barriers to learning.

The program offers a three-year collaborative peer-coaching/consulting model for professional learning, with principals and their leadership teams using an integrated, distributive leadership three-component framework. The framework guides the principal in leading change by using a coherent organizational and operational structure that addresses the overlapping roles and functions necessary for improving schools.

The program has been implemented for 71 principals in six districts that represent all areas of the state and serve high-poverty and/or rural students. The primary goal of the program is to strengthen effective principal leadership and build capacity for leading change while simultaneously developing a pipeline of effective leadership for schools in **Lawrence County, Birmingham City, Selma City, Perry County, Escambia County, and Bullock County** school districts.

Sustaining the **Learning Supports System** in Alabama

The Alabama State Department of Education has supported districts and schools in a multi-year, job-embedded coaching model of professional development in an effort to integrate the Learning Supports framework into their improvement process as a core element of the way a school district operates.

The three-component framework as an operational infrastructure offers an opportunity to provide an equitable educational environment, strengthen families and communities, and help students succeed both in and out of the classroom.

As evidence of success emerged in their data, districts and schools have seen the value of a coherent and unified system. As they continue to work toward meeting the goals of Plan 2020, the Alabama Learning Supports districts now have a system to address their challenges and mitigate the negative factors that many children bring to school. The ultimate promise of this work is improved achievement and future success for families and children in Alabama.

