

# Rebuilding for **LEARNING**<sup>TM</sup>

**Addressing Barriers to Learning and  
Teaching, and Re-engaging Students**

**Case Study:**  
Gainesville City Schools, Georgia

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SCHOLASTIC



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For more information about the Lead District Collaborative and AASA's Educating the Total Child initiative, visit: <http://www.aasa.org>

To participate in the Rebuilding for Learning Online Institute, visit: <http://rebuildingforlearning.scholastic.com>. For more information about Scholastic's professional development for a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports, contact Windy Lopez at [wlopez@scholastic.com](mailto:wlopez@scholastic.com) or 212-343-6554.

# Introduction

How to ensure that all students have the opportunity to succeed in school and beyond is a core question for school improvement policy makers and leaders. Nationally, there is great concern and debate about how to raise student achievement, reduce dropout rates, address disparities among children from different socio-economic backgrounds, close racial and ethnic achievement gaps, serve transient students and immigrant populations, and increase the level of expectations of—and support for—all children. Improved instruction alone can not address the wide range of barriers to teaching and learning that interfere with schools reaching their improvement goals. It is critical for school districts to provide comprehensive systems of learning supports that address barriers to learning and teaching and ensure that students are engaged and re-engaged in learning.

Created by Scholastic and Drs. Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor from the UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools, the *Rebuilding for Learning*<sup>™</sup> initiative is designed to help further assist school leaders in their work around systems of learning supports. As part of the initiative, Scholastic, American Association of School Administrators (AASA) and UCLA have formed a unique Lead District Collaborative aimed at expanding leaders' knowledge, capacity, and implementation of comprehensive systems of learning supports. This effort further supports AASA's flagship initiative, *Educating the Total Child*, which is aimed at advocating for an education approach designed to effect real change by addressing key factors that determine children's academic achievement.

The Lead District Collaborative brings districts together to undertake the creation of comprehensive systems of learning supports as part of a supportive professional community. Guided by the work of Drs. Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor, educators, researchers and national leaders from UCLA who have worked with numerous state departments, districts, and schools to design and implement comprehensive learning supports systems, the districts receive valuable supports and technical assistance to help them move forward in this process. The Lead District Collaborative seeks to help inform and engage education leaders and districts by building understanding about comprehensive systems of learning supports and how such systems transform public education; creating policy and practice framework documents that can be shared among critical stakeholder groups; and working to design and implement learning support systems.

**Researchers from the Education Development Center (EDC) were invited to document the experience of the participating districts and to develop case studies. This report presents that process and outlines the successes of Gainesville City Schools (Gainesville) as they created their own comprehensive system of learning supports. Over the last two years, Gainesville has created new policies and modified or expanded existing strategies, policies and practices to develop a system of student supports that enables learning.**

# High-Poverty District with a Diverse Population

Although they had been academically successful, the Superintendent of Gainesville City Schools wanted to build a stronger system that would be able to reach out to the 20% of students who were still under performing. Gainesville is a small town, charter school district about an hour northeast of Atlanta. According to statewide reports, in the 2009–2010 school year, all but one school in the district met Adequate Yearly Progress measures set by the State of Georgia. These schools were designated as “Distinguished” schools by the state education department and one school even received the Bronze award with the highest percentage of “Students Meeting and Exceeding Standards” in the state.

But Gainesville is a high-poverty district with a diverse student population and there are pockets of students who are under performing. In 2010, of 6,296 students enrolled in the school district, 78% were eligible for free or reduced price lunch. Three of its eight schools have more than 90% of their students living in poverty. Gainesville’s student population is divided between white (20%), black (19%) and Hispanic (55%) students. In particular, Gainesville has been dealing with the challenges presented by adequately serving the growing Hispanic community.

Dr. Merrienne Dyer, the Superintendent of Gainesville City Schools reported that another challenge was to build the capacity of the whole district system, so that the departure of any individual staff member would not deeply impact any one practice, program or policy in the district. Developing a comprehensive system of learning supports has allowed Gainesville to build the collective capacity of the whole district as well as to sustain reform efforts.

So that the district would be able to sustain funding for their school programs, they also wanted to develop further the cohesiveness of their school programs, and thereby reduce costs and increase efficiency. Therefore, the Gainesville team sought to address costly inefficiencies in services, especially during unstable budget periods that schools and districts experience due to their dependence on public financing. The leadership found value, especially as a high-poverty district, in having consultancy partners, who would help the district address a wide range of issues.

**“We can see the power in the coherence. It’s like putting a machine together and getting it to work more effectively.”**

*—Dr. Merrienne Dyer, the Superintendent of Gainesville City Schools*

# The Schools

## High schools

Gainesville has two secondary institutions. The first, Gainesville High School is a traditional high school. This school won the Bronze award with the highest percentage (95.39%) of Students Meeting and Exceeding Standards in 2010 based on the Georgia State Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT) in Reading, English/Language Arts, Math, Social Studies, and Science.

In 2010, as part of their alternative program, Gainesville opened another secondary institution, the Wood's Mill Non-Traditional High School. Wood's Mill is an important component of their system of learning supports. Dr. Dyer explained:

Before, the alternative program was only for middle school students who had behavioral difficulties and/or had unusual behavior issues; it was staffed by some of the least qualified teachers and enrolled the most at-risk kids. Students missed instruction and most often those students were behind on state tests—and left even further behind the next school year. Now the blended-learning, computer-based instruction allows for individualized work at each student's own pace. The teachers [in this program] are [now] our most effective.

The school uses a blended model of online or computer-based instruction combined with personalized teacher-directed instruction to customize a curriculum for each student. Seat time requirements are flexible, allowing students to tailor schedules that accommodate their circumstances. There are two components of the alternative program, Dr. Dyer explained:

One component is for temporary students and students with behavioral difficulties. They have the same type of [blended] instruction, but have a regular school day and are supervised. The other component, the high school, is an open learning situation where seat time is not compulsory and students have staggered hours. Students must take all mandated assessments.

For entrance into this high school program, students are interviewed by the teachers and evaluated based on their capacity for self-management. Jarod Anderson, LMSW, Director of Learning Supports, Gainesville City Schools stated:

Traditional high schools require 28 credits. [At the alternative school] Teachers instruct classes but with non-traditional components. Twenty-three credits are required. Learning is computer based. The school day is flexible and [although] students must progress at a certain pace, seat time is not required.

## **Middle school**

Gainesville Middle School is the only middle school for the district with an enrollment of 1,353. It serves students from Grades 6 through 8. The percentage of Students Meeting and Exceeding Standards in 2010 was 77.15%.

## **Elementary schools**

There are five elementary schools that all serve children from pre-Kindergarten to Grade 5. Centennial Arts Academy has a mostly Hispanic and white enrollment and 54% live below the poverty line. Twenty-eight percent of students spoke English as their second language and were classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP). The percentage of Students Meeting and Exceeding Standards in 2010 was 87.72%.

Enota Multiple Intelligences Academy has a more diverse enrollment with black, white and Hispanic students, with 61.72% living below the poverty line. Twenty-eight percent of students were classified LEP. The percentage of Students Meeting and Exceeding Standards in 2010 was 84.38%.

The next three elementary schools serve mostly students coming from families living in poverty. Almost all Fair Street International Baccalaureate World School's students (92%) come from families who live below the poverty line. The student body is mostly Hispanic and black. Fifty-two percent of students were classified as LEP. The percentage of Students Meeting and Exceeding Standards in 2010–11 was 65.66%.

Gainesville Exploration Academy has mostly Hispanic students and 91% live below the poverty line. Fifty-six percent of students were classified LEP. The percentage of Students Meeting and Exceeding Standards in 2010–11 was 76.43%.

New Holland Core Knowledge Academy's student body has mostly Hispanic students enrolled in Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 5, of which 94.71% live below the poverty line. Thirty-four percent of students were classified as LEP. The percentage of Students Meeting and Exceeding Standards in 2010–11 was 77.64%.

# Previous Policy Initiatives in Gainesville

## Charter school district

Gainesville received their charter system status in 2008. Dr. Dyer felt that being in a charter district made the development of a comprehensive system easier: “The flexibility that comes with being a charter opens you to different ways of using time, people and resources. For instance, in Gainesville, there were structural changes regarding scheduling that supported the development of learning supports. Without becoming a charter, I would not have been able to make those changes.” For example, the high school and middle school now have built in a 35–45 minute block of time in the school day when students can get any extra help they need, such as getting tutoring or retaking a test. She added, “I would not have been able to incorporate that as easily if this wasn’t a charter school system.”

## Wallace Foundation Project

Gainesville was involved in the Wallace Foundation Project Partnership for Leadership that introduced principles of good project and process management supporting the redistribution of organizational leadership for sustainability. Dr. Dyer called this “flattening the leadership of the district office, so that no one team member could disrupt the sustainability of the district by leaving.” As she transitioned into her position as Superintendent, she decided that since Gainesville was already implementing new ideas and strategies at the time of her appointment, the Wallace Foundation program might benefit the district in its transition process. She came to realize that:

*Our work around creating a comprehensive system of learning supports is not a project; it is several projects within a project, so principles of project management are also applied to the work...I don’t know that we would have had a structure...a process to get things done, if it weren’t for the Wallace Foundation work. I hope we would have had, but I’m not sure.*

Through the foundation project, the district focused on aligning their local goals with the state’s goals. The Learning Support work groups and committees were set up in fall of 2009 according to the alignment with state agencies realized through the Wallace Foundation work, but then refined throughout the 2010–2011 school year, as Gainesville district leadership learned more about what was involved in creating a comprehensive system of learning supports. During her participation in the Wallace Foundation program, Dr. Dyer came to understand that state education agencies work in silos, driven and aligned to federal policy, and can create considerable wasted effort for the schools. If the infrastructure of the local agency (i.e., her district) were not systematized and aligned, there could be a great deal of redundancy but also gaps in service simply because “the left hand doesn’t know what the right hand is doing.”

# Gainesville's Path to Creating a Comprehensive System of Learning Supports

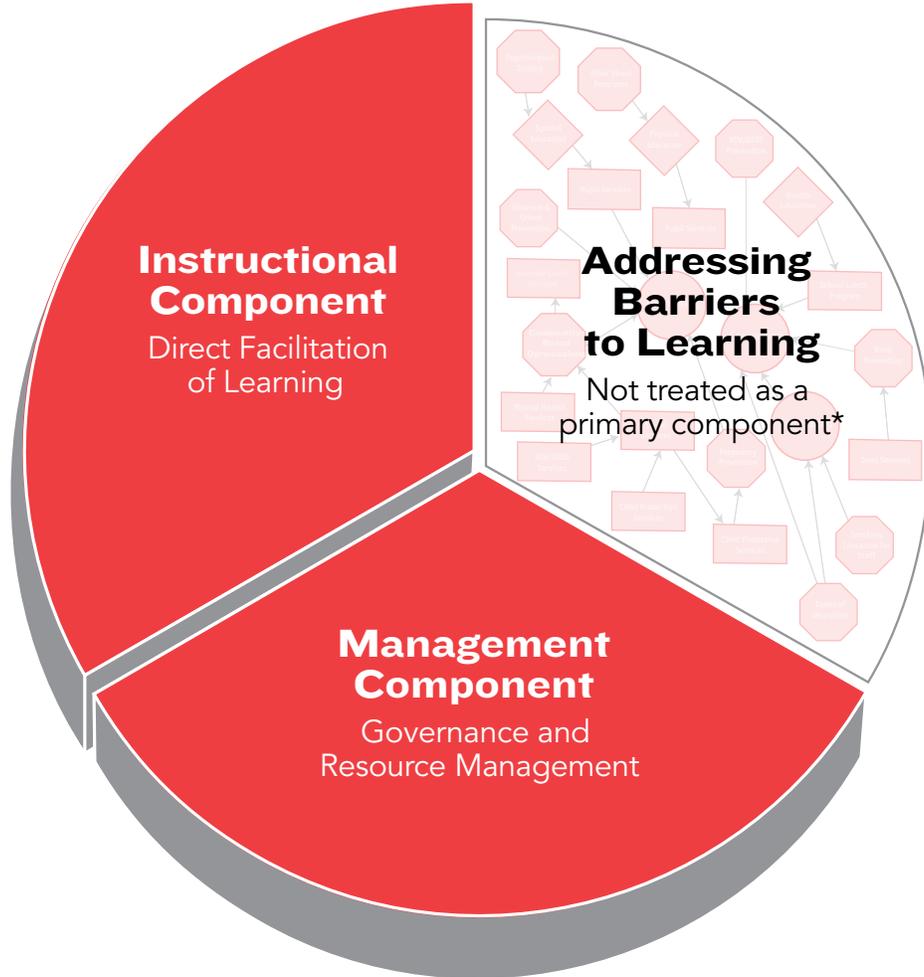
Through the Lead District Collaborative, Gainesville had access to resources including: *Rebuilding for Learning™: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching*, and *Re-Engaging Students* (Adelman and Taylor, 2008), Scholastic's *Rebuilding for Learning™* Online Leadership Institute as well as the toolkit and additional resources on the UCLA Center's website. In addition, Gainesville received technical assistance in the form of site visits led by Drs. Adelman and Taylor and other experts from Scholastic and AASA. During the technical assistance site visits, the Lead District Collaborative partners provided strategic facilitation and feedback regarding the district's team-based approach to developing a comprehensive system. Drs. Adelman and Taylor also engaged and informed community leaders and stakeholders about potential outcomes that could be supported by a system of learning supports. In addition to the consultation of Adelman and Taylor, Gainesville had technical assistance support from Dr. Rhonda Neal-Waltman, former Assistant Superintendent of Student Support Services in Mobile, Alabama. Now a lead consultant and partner in the Lead District Collaborative, Dr. Neal-Waltman led the process of building a comprehensive system of learning supports in Mobile. Dr. Neal-Waltman made multiple visits to Gainesville, providing support to different groups. For example, she worked closely with the high school team offering them the insight and strategies that came directly from her own practical experience.

## **Comprehensive system of learning supports**

Most of the common approaches to school improvement and reform focus on two major policy components: enhancing instruction and curriculum; and restructuring school governance (Adelman and Taylor, 2006, p. 34). Adelman and Taylor argue for the importance of a third key component of the school system that targets removing the many barriers to learning and creating a supportive context for teaching and learning. As the third policy and practice pillar, a learning supports component enables schools to develop a unified and comprehensive system of student and learning supports for addressing barriers to learning and teaching, and for re-engaging disconnected students.

Unifying student and learning supports into a third component is considered to counter the continuing marginalization in schools of student and learning supports. This unifying strategy also provides leverage for full integration into school improvement policy and practice. This component is designed to enable academic, social, emotional, and physical development and to address learning, behavior, and emotional problems in ways that yield safe and caring schools.

In operationalizing the third component, the intervention framework encompasses both (1) a continuum and (2) a set of content arenas that are designed to play out cohesively in classrooms and school-wide. The continuum ranges from the promotion of healthy development and the prevention of problems by responding as soon as problems emerge, all the way through to treating established chronic and severe problems. The emphasis on re-engagement recognizes that efforts to address interfering factors, provide positive behavior support, and prevent disengagement and dropouts must include a focus on re-engaging students in classroom instruction, or they are unlikely to be effective over time. Furthermore, the overlapping nature of the three-component framework provides major opportunities for student support staff to play a significant role in enhancing classroom and school-wide programs to promote student, family, and community healthy development, well-being, and engagement with schools.



\* While not treated as a primary and essential component, every school and community offers a relatively small amount of school-owned student "support" services and community-owned resources – some of which are linked together. Schools, in particular, have been reaching out to community agencies to add a few more services. All of this remains marginalized and fragmented.

The primacy and value placed on developing a supportive environment to facilitate learning was a key attraction for Gainesville. During a professional development session, Dr. Dyer told her staff that she became interested in a comprehensive learning support system because the approach helps schools target and improve a fundamental aspect of schooling that gets scant attention from other reform models:

*We focus on the kids who are not doing well, the 20–30%, when rather, we should think that we are doing something right with the 70–80%, and there are those students that have different needs that have to be addressed. We are here to build on what we are doing right. Curriculum and management alone cannot get us to 100% proficiency.*

A comprehensive learning supports system also stresses developing intrinsic motivation for learning. Engagement in the learning process is a prerequisite for student achievement. Adelman and Taylor emphasize that school improvement is “not about controlling behavior;” it’s about engaging and re-engaging students in school through enhancing their intrinsic motivation by enabling students to be motivated to learn.

## **An intervention framework for creating a comprehensive system**

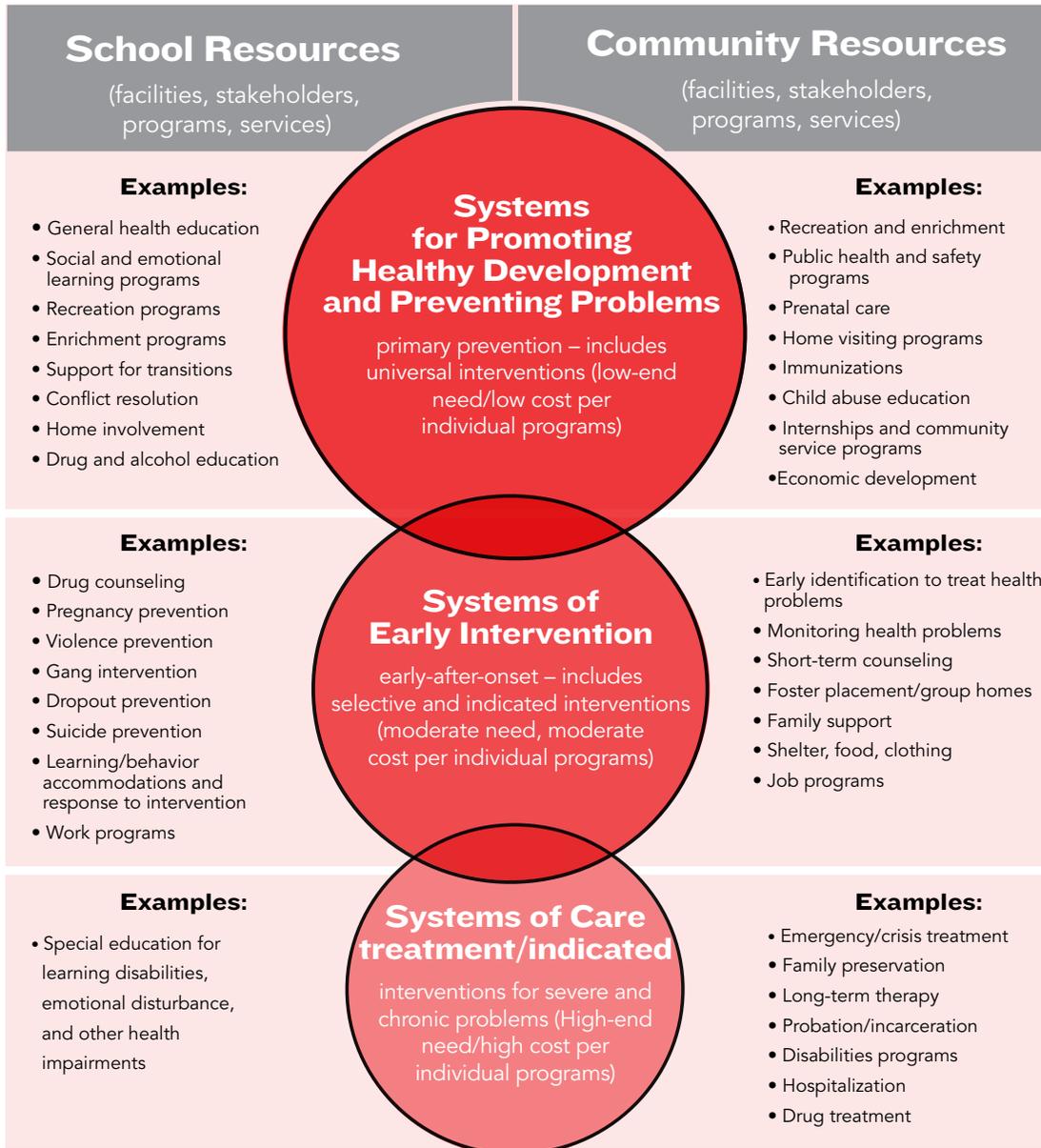
As presented to Gainesville, developing a comprehensive system of student and learning supports involves working on four fundamental aspects of school improvement: (1) revising policy, (2) reconceiving student and learning supports interventions, (3) reworking operational infrastructure, and (4) facilitating major systemic changes at district and school levels.

Policy revision focuses on establishing a three component framework so that a comprehensive system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching is fully integrated into school improvement policy and practice as primary and essential, and is no longer marginalized. Moreover, the emphasis is on unifying policies, strategies, and practices that promote healthy development for all students and prevent negative outcomes such as chronic attendance, behavior, or achievement challenges.

With specific respect to reconceiving student and learning supports interventions, and as noted above, the framework encompasses both (1) a continuum and (2) a set of content arenas that are designed to play out cohesively in classrooms and school-wide. The continuum is conceived as integrated subsystems for:

1. Promoting healthy development and preventing problems
2. Intervening early to address problems as soon as feasibly possible
3. Assisting those with chronic and severe problems

## Levels of Intervention: Connected Systems for Meeting the Needs of All Students\*

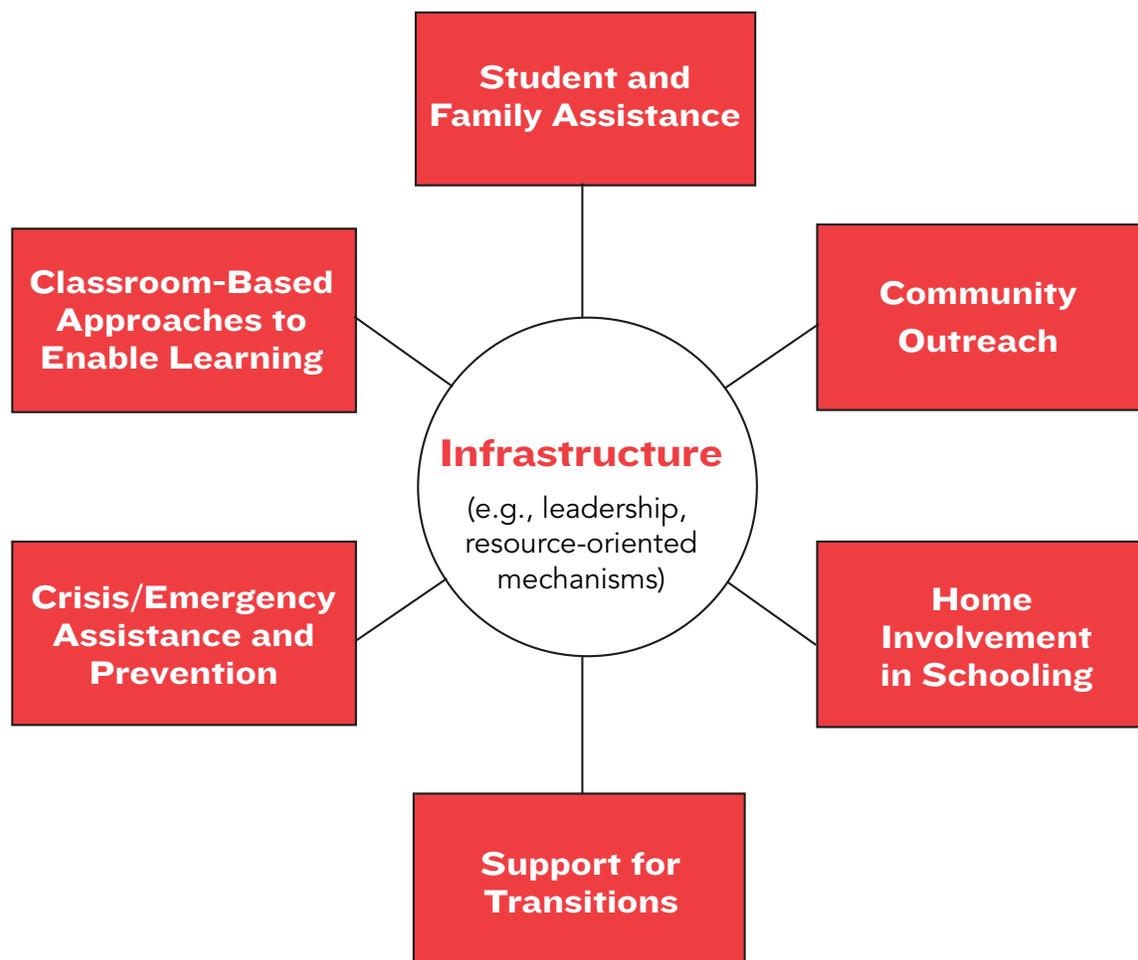


Note that the intent is to weave together school resources and strategically braid in a wide range of available community resources to meet the needs of all students, and to significantly reduce the number of students requiring individual assistance.

\* Systemic collaboration is essential to establish interprogram connections on a daily basis and over time to ensure seamless intervention within each system and among systems for promoting healthy development and preventing problems, systems of early intervention, and systems of care. Such collaboration involves horizontal and vertical restructuring of programs and services:  
 (a) within jurisdictions, school districts, and community agencies (e.g., among departments, divisions, units, schools, clusters of schools);  
 (b) between jurisdictions, school and community.

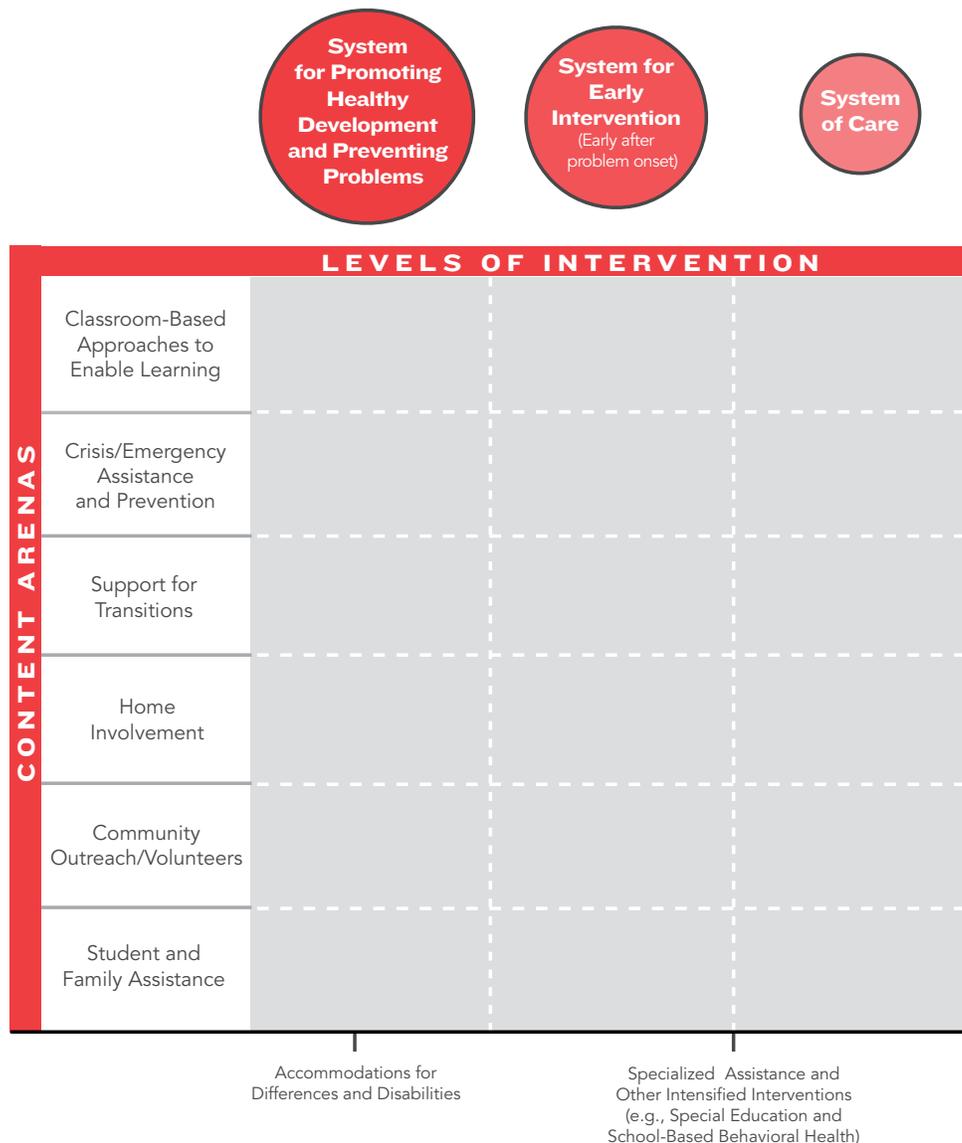
## Six Content Areas

Operationalizing the continuum calls for organizing programs and services coherently at every level. To enhance efforts across the continuum, programs and services are coalesced into a multifaceted and cohesive set of content arenas. Doing this transforms a laundry list of initiatives into a set of defined, organized, and fundamentally essential intervention domains. The prototype provided to Gainesville defines the six content arenas as follows:



## Combined Continuum and Content Arenas Provide the Framework for a Comprehensive Enabling or Learning Supports Component\*

It is both the continuum and six content arenas that constitute the intervention framework for a comprehensive system of learning supports. It is represented as a matrix. Such a framework can guide and unify school improvement planning for developing the system. The matrix provides a tool for mapping what is in place and analyzing gaps with respect to high priority needs. Over time, this type of mapping and analysis can be done at the school level, for a group of schools (e.g., a feeder pattern), at the district level, and at community level.



\*Note: Various venues, concepts, and initiatives will fit into several cells of the matrix. Examples include venues such as day care centers, preschools, family centers, and school-based health centers, concepts such as social and emotional learning and development, and initiatives such as positive behavior support, response to interventions, and the coordinated school health program. Most of the work of the considerable variety of personnel who provide student supports also fits into more than one cell.

# Recounting the Story in Four Phases

The *Rebuilding for Learning™: Addressing Barriers to Learning and Teaching and Re-engaging Students* handbook (Adelman and Taylor, 2008) lays out the process in four overlapping phases. These four phases offer a simple way of understanding Gainesville's process. The four phases are:

- 1. Creating readiness**—increasing a climate and culture for change through enhancing both the motivation and the capability of a critical mass of stakeholders.
- 2. Initial implementation**—change is phased in using a well-designed infrastructure for providing guidance and support, and for building capacity.
- 3. Institutionalization**—accomplished by ensuring there is an infrastructure to maintain and enhance productive and real changes.
- 4. Ongoing evolution and creative renewal**—through the use of mechanisms to improve quality and provide continuing support in ways that enable stakeholders to become a community of learners who creatively pursue renewal.

# Previous Model of Student Support Services

Prior to embarking on the process of developing a comprehensive system of learning supports Gainesville, like every school district, offered student services that addressed many of the same issues but the approach was very focused on individual students already in a state of crisis. Jarod Anderson, Director of Learning Supports reported that before their involvement with the Lead District Collaborative they “were putting out individual fires.” Gainesville was treating each case as it arose using an Attendance, Behavior and Curriculum (ABC) model that focused on an analysis of the individual student. This approach meant they were mostly working at providing specialized interventions. The ABC model did not provide the district with a framework that would allow them to look pro-actively at all students’ needs and might prevent many students from even reaching a crisis state. In an interview, Dr. Dyer reported that because the district approached each situation individually and did not have a big-picture concept of all their programs, they were also duplicating services for families who were then burdened with the additional responsibilities of dealing with multiple agencies for multiple children’s issues.

After using the comprehensive intervention system matrix to map and analyze their current student and learning support activity, Dr. Dyer realized there were few prevention systems. She said, “There is now a realization even at the classroom level that prevention has the most significance in controlling how barriers prevent learning. If we can prevent kids from falling behind they are less likely to have barriers [to learning].” Mr. Anderson added:

We are just understanding what the issues were before... Just the main things that learning supports address...the fragmentation, the duplication of services, communication, a framework to operate by, not looking at the “at-risk”...daily operations, and moving from putting out each fire. This has caused us to change perspective on the work that we do, and collaborate better to get things done. We are now doing things more from a systemic level and less from an individual level.

## Creating Readiness Phase

Dr. Dyer learned about the Lead District Collaborative through her relationship with AASA and got the district involved. Gainesville’s leadership already knew of Drs. Adelman and Taylor from some of the social agencies the district had previously worked with. The first step in creating readiness is to begin building the leadership teams that will guide the process as it unfolds. Gainesville has two guiding layers at the very top.

## **Steering committee**

The Superintendent, Associate Superintendent of the district, and the new Director of Learning Supports worked together to do the work of guiding reforms. By including administrators who were responsible and accountable for promoting the district vision, the Superintendent ensured that new policies would be integrated into the overall district strategic plan. This steering committee attended the initial meeting of the Lead District Collaborative held in fall 2009.

## **District-wide learning supports team**

As Director of Social Work at the time, Jarod Anderson was already connecting different community resources to schools, and Dr. Dyer saw in him the qualifications required to manage the process of building a comprehensive system of learning supports. She offered him the position in fall 2009. Although she knew he would have a lot of questions about the job, she knew that the role was “a good fit for him.” He had faith in her vision and became the Director of Learning Supports who would direct the actual work of developing the learning supports and ensuring that policy commitments would be carried out for establishing the new component (Adelman and Taylor, 2008). In October 2009, as the newly named Director of Learning Supports, Mr. Anderson began developing a strategic plan for creating a comprehensive system of learning supports that would be integrated into the district’s strategic plan.

The District Wide Learning Supports team guides and monitors development and implementation of all district programs that are part of the system of learning supports. The team meets monthly “to identify barriers to learning and align learning supports systems to address those barriers and, thus improve student performance.” The team includes assistant principals, social workers, parent involvement coordinators, graduation coaches, and the special education director and guidance counselors, and is led by the Director of Learning Supports. A school board member also sits on the committee.

The Learning Supports team functions to directly support one of the goals (Goal 3: “To improve organization and instructional effectiveness”) of the Gainesville strategic plan. Three other district-wide teams support the other three goals of Gainesville’s strategic plan. Leaders from each of the four teams meet periodically to update each other about what is going on in their work teams. This overlap in communication is key to a system of learning supports because then no party or project is isolated, and there is an awareness of the system as a whole.

## **School-level work teams**

School-level work teams did the work required to support the learning supports in each building. These teams were responsible for determining barriers to learning, evaluating programs and services, mapping resources, developing resources and marketing the system to school faculty and staff, thereby making them aware of the resources available. School-level work groups included assistant principals, counselors, parent coordinators, graduation coaches and social workers. They met to contribute to the development of the district’s plan. Frequency of meetings varied from weekly to monthly depending upon what the work team felt was necessary.

## Building Board approval

While the steering committee team worked through the materials provided for understanding a comprehensive system of learning supports as they developed the first iteration of the strategic plan, Dr. Dyer kept the Gainesville Board of Education members informed. In fact, a school board member now sits on the Learning Supports team so that the board can stay abreast of the process directly.

Dr. Dyer worked hard to keep the board informed about how learning supports feed into academic success. A board member commented on how appreciative they are that she comes prepared with a thorough understanding of whatever she is proposing, how it will impact other policies, and what research supports the changes. Many people commented that “she always does her homework” when referring to the superintendent.

The Gainesville board has been very supportive of the incorporation of learning supports. The school board’s role is to provide oversight and guidance on the policy structure for the system. The board has been concerned with meeting NCLB requirements, and they see the learning supports as a key component. In an interview, a board member reported that the learning supports framework had not been at all controversial commenting that “the district needs to do whatever it can to remove any barrier that distracts children from learning.” Through working with Dr. Dyer, the board came to realize that Gainesville already had many programs that acted to remove barriers to learning, but that a comprehensive and systemic approach really would bring the district to a new level of coordination, logistical efficiency and careful alignment of programs. In addition to increasing the impact and efficiency of existing programs, this would help to remove redundant or unneeded programs.

As part of the work with the Lead District Collaborative, Adelman and Taylor visited Gainesville to meet with the board. They provided an overview and prototype frameworks, and district leaders discussed with the board some of the barriers identified by the schools and how current resources mapped on to those concerns.

District leaders also used the opportunity to collectively identify goals for community-school collaboration in developing the system of learning supports that will “help students maintain a sense of hope and ensure success in school and beyond.” Then the group decided that they would convene regularly as the Community Resource Council, and continue meeting to address community resources that could enhance the district’s comprehensive system.

# Incorporating learning supports into district policy

Georgia is a Race to the Top state. Gainesville has integrated its efforts to create a system of learning supports into the strategic plan they had previously adopted to meet Georgia's Race to the Top initiative. Although the district's existing strategic plan was aligned to the state's Race to the Top initiative, the district was able to find a common point around which to build the learning supports, thus allowing for the easy integration of a learning support component alongside the existing management and instructional components. The strategic plan contained four goals for on-going systematic improvement:

**Goal 1:** To improve student achievement and learning outcomes;

**Goal 2:** To improve stakeholder involvement and satisfaction;

**Goal 3:** To improve organization and instructional effectiveness;

**Goal 4:** To improve financial performance.

There is a district team working on each goal, but Goal 3 is the driver for the system of learning supports. As stated in the district plan, the main task of the learning support teams is to "support students by addressing barriers to learning. We will identify barriers to learning and align our support systems to address those barriers and, thus, improve student performance." The district strategic plan is also aligned to the federal framework for school improvement, which facilitates the district's ability to comply with federal requirements.

The work of the Goal 1 team ("Academic Standards, Assessments and Data") is directly aligned to the learning supports. These are the core teams to improve learning. As Dr. Dyer noted:

The work that impacts change comes out of groups 1 and 3. These teams have overlapping functions. The work that each team does supports and influences the work of other teams. This is the learning supports model. The overlapping is needed to ensure that no work is isolated. The better we get at this, the better we will all function in all three [components]. The overlap better develops the system of learning supports. I believe that this is the key factor that makes you cognizant of the team and not a hierarchy.

# Barriers to Learning in the Gainesville City Schools

As the district moved towards integrating a learning supports approach into schools, they decided on a strategy of starting with practical activities at the school before going deeply into the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of how a system of learning supports would improve instructional effectiveness. In Gainesville's experience, the movement into the school was a mix of the "creating readiness" and "implementation" stages.

The first task was asking school-level administrators and educators to identify the barriers to learning that their students face. This task also served to establish greater buy-in and consensus at the school level. During a Lead District Collaborative meeting in July 2010, Dr. Taylor mentioned that allowing individual school leaders to share in the work, such as leading the identification of barriers and strategies to address them, "creates better individual school buy-in and also better implementation at the school level."

To begin identifying barriers, Mr. Anderson led the school work teams in a preliminary process using school-level discipline and achievement data, and then the school work teams continued on their own. Barriers to learning in Gainesville, like all school districts, included a myriad of contextual issues that were identified at the school level (see Table 1). Barriers at the high school level included limited basic skills as well as related behavior issues, teen pregnancy and issues stemming from experiences related to the transition from middle school to high school. In the middle school, the work team identified barriers that included the following: cultural/language differences between students; cultural/language differences between teachers and students; students not having organization and time management skills; and bullying. In the elementary schools there were other factors. In addition to some of the barriers mentioned above, we noted the following barriers to learning: lack of parent involvement for various reasons; families who have not had positive experiences with school; health issues (physical/mental well-being); external issues, such as gangs and drugs; and no sense of belonging among families and students. Finally, in the Alternative program for at-risk students, in addition to ongoing barriers, such as teen pregnancy and lack of parental involvement, these students also had self-esteem issues related to being in an alternative school.

**Table 1: Barriers to Learning Identified by the School Work Teams**

<p><b>High School</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·limited basic skills</li> <li>·behavior issues related to limited basic skills</li> <li>·teen pregnancy</li> <li>·issues stemming from the transition from middle school to high school</li> <li>·bullying</li> <li>·bus incidents</li> </ul>
<p><b>Middle School</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·cultural/language differences between students</li> <li>·cultural/language differences between teachers and students</li> <li>·students not having organization and time management skills</li> <li>·bullying</li> <li>·bus incidents</li> </ul>
<p><b>Elementary Schools</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·families who have not had positive experiences with school</li> <li>·health issues (physical/mental well-being)</li> <li>·external issues, such as gangs and drugs</li> <li>·lack of sense of belonging among families and students</li> <li>·limited basic skills</li> <li>·behavior issues related to limited basic skills</li> <li>·cultural/language differences between students</li> <li>·cultural/language differences between teachers and students</li> <li>·bus incidents</li> </ul>
<p><b>Alternative Program</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>·teen pregnancy</li> <li>·lack of parental involvement</li> <li>·self-esteem issues related to their alternative school environment</li> <li>·families who have not had positive experiences with school</li> <li>·health issues (physical/mental well-being)</li> <li>·external issues, such as gangs and drugs</li> <li>·lack of sense of belonging among families and students</li> <li>·limited basic skills</li> </ul>

In 2011 a new concern emerged for many students when Georgia passed legislation that prevented the hiring of people with illegal status and requires deportation of undocumented workers. Many of Gainesville’s students and families are affected by these laws. One teacher said:

Immigration issues are sucking the motivation from students. To many students, the State is saying that although you’ve been in this school system since you were a child, when you graduate your diploma means nothing.” She added that it means, “They can’t get a job, can’t get a license, can’t go to college, can’t even go to vocational school if they wanted.”

Another teacher noted that:

This is so much on top of all the other barriers that they have. This law has affected the schools so much that even taxis are afraid to take children’s parents to the school, so then some parent relationships with the school are suffering.

# Initial Implementation Phase

The District's Learning Supports Team used concrete conversations about the barriers to learning as a bridge into implementation. The district also asked schools to think about existing resources that might address those barriers. The identified interventions were organized onto the prototype intervention as a matrix framing a comprehensive system of learning supports.

## Identifying the gaps

Applying this framework to match existing programs to current barriers was a key moment in the process because it both generated buy-in at the school level and pointed the way to next steps. The gaps that stand out in the matrix are where the system needs to develop learning supports. Mr. Anderson said that the matrix:

*Gave us a framework on which to organize the work we were doing. After listing all our interventions, the tools were helpful in allowing us to better articulate the organization of our interventions and thus able to see where gaps in services were in terms of what type of support we had in place. We were also able to see where there were gaps in early prevention and preventative supports as opposed to interventions. When the schools saw this...they were also able to see where they needed to be able to help a larger percentage of the student population versus the usual 15–20% of the students that they had been spending their time with. So the tools have been have been very helpful.*

Gainesville also realized that constant communication among schools was crucial. Mr. Anderson said that a sharing session helped him see that schools were not aware of each other's resources. He realized that to improve implementation, communication had to "be enhanced" between the schools. To accomplish this enhancement, he incorporated time for sharing during the monthly district-wide Learning Supports Team meetings, which have a representative from each school's work team. This is an example of how overlapping committee membership was important to the success of the entire system.

# Examples of Learning Supports

## Support for Transitions

The initial district-wide mapping efforts found that the most prevalent gaps in services were in the arenas of Support for Transitions and Home Involvement in Schooling. With respect to Support for Transitions, Gainesville considered all transitions, especially transitions between schools and grades; transitions between classes; and transitions of newcomers into the district (Adelman and Taylor, 2008 p. 41). District leadership decided to focus their 2010–11 efforts on enhancing supports for students in transition between schools and for newcomers transitioning into the district.

During the school-level mapping process, the middle and high school teams both began to identify that many problems started for their students in Grades 6 and 9, and that problems just followed these students into the higher grades. On further reflection about the problems, how they emerged in Grades 6 and 9, and considering the issue of student motivation to learn, the school work teams began to consider that perhaps many students in Grades 6 and 9 were not adjusting well to the environment and expectations of the new school. Mr. Anderson established two working groups made up of volunteer teachers and support staff to address these issues. One working group included Grades 5 and 6 faculty and staff and the other included Grades 8 and 9 faculty and staff. These committees developed programs and strategies to help students adjust to their new schools as they moved into a higher level. For example, to reduce students' anxiety and fear the district organizes a Grade 5 visit to the middle school and a Grade 8 visit to the high school so students can learn about their future campus, hearing from teachers, counselors and students. The high school transition team, divided the visiting Grade 8 students into small groups, and each group had a high school student tour guide to show them the building and to answer their questions from a "student perspective." The schools have also developed other practices to prevent common problems.

In the middle school, the teachers realized that many students simply do not yet have the organizational skills needed to handle middle school where they have a different teacher for each subject and are expected to complete assignments and projects on their own. These students often lose assignments, get behind and then lose motivation. The middle school counselors felt that disorganization was a particular problem for the boys. Since all students—even the high performing ones—can benefit from better organizational skills, the school now organizes school-wide "Drop everything and organize" events during the enrichment period when students learn how to label and organize their notebooks, and get the time to do so. The middle school also uses the enrichment period to teach students how to take notes and how to study.

The high school has identified a number of problems that can emerge in Grade 9 and is trying different strategies. For example, the high school found that they often had to deal with arguments and fights among the Grade 9 girls. So, the Freshman Academy now includes conflict resolution workshops that are targeted towards young women.

Another challenging transition that Gainesville identified was for newcomers into the district. While reviewing their data with Dr. Neal-Waltman, consultant with the Lead District Collaborative, the high school work team found that 53% of their at-risk students were new to the district. This started a conversation with the district Learning Supports Team. It turned out that the other schools eventually found similar statistics among their most problematic students. To address this finding, the district tasked the Transition Supports committees with developing programs to help incoming students integrate into the culture and community of each school. For example, the middle school developed a peer-buddy system for new students, and the high school organized orientation events at school and even hosted a "welcome-to-Gainesville" picnic for new students and their families.

## Home involvement in schooling

Gainesville has been particularly challenged with meeting the needs of its growing Hispanic population. This community has grown quickly in recent years and is now quite large, and the schools have had little experience bridging the cultural and language divides. One Board Member commented that Hispanic parents do not always know how the schools work, nor do they trust the schools to welcome them. In order to bridge this divide, each school now has a bilingual (Spanish/English) Parent Involvement coordinator. Most of the parent coordinators are from the Hispanic community and they have been very successful at reaching out and building trust with the Hispanic community. The Board of Education member we interviewed was very excited by the fact that the schools are now able to directly engage Hispanic parents in supporting their children's education. In the past, the schools' involvement had been limited to the families of students in crisis, or had been mediated through Hispanic churches.

Now, the use of Scholastic's Read and Rise strengthens and leverages efforts by all parties. Read and Rise is a family and community engagement initiative designed to empower families to help their children's literacy development. The program's adaptability and strength-based approach was a natural fit. Read and Rise serves as an anchor to help further connect and strengthen home, school, and community collaboration. The Read and Rise Family Conversation workshops are being offered both at the school and in community settings such as the Gainesville Housing Authority. In addition, partners such as Boys/Girls Club, Head Start, Georgia Bright from the Start have been trained on the program and are working with the district. In pre- and post-surveys of the first pilot implementation of the program, more than 92% of participants reported an increase in supporting their child's literacy development within the home.

## Other Examples of Learning Supports

While Support for Transitions was the central focus for 2010, Gainesville also implemented several other policies and practices as they developed a comprehensive system of learning supports. We have attempted to highlight at least one example of this in each of the other content arenas.

### Student and family assistance

After mapping learning barriers and programs, Gainesville realized that many of the existing student services were in the arena of Student and Family Assistance. However, this did not mean that Gainesville did not make changes to the services provided. Mapping and reviewing programs across schools helped them realize that there was a lot of redundancy with different programs targeting similar issues. In a move that added coherency and also made better use of funds, the district reduced and streamlined program offerings. All schools directed students with similar needs to the same

agencies, for example, students and families dealing with substance abuse problems were directed to the Drug Free Coalition. Gainesville also streamlined the referral process; teachers now refer crisis cases to one person in the building who then takes action. For example, the high school has an assistant principal and counselor who head the learning supports team and now coordinate all learning supports. In the past, all counselors handled their own student services. According to the assistant principal, the goal—in relation to crisis assistance—is to help teachers, who should not need to deal with providing these supports in the classroom. Now, if teachers identify a problem, they can easily and quickly get that student some help. The district has worked to keep teachers informed with trainings on the referral process and internal contact sheets identifying the learning supports available.

## **Crisis assistance and prevention**

This arena encompasses school and classroom-based approaches to either prevent crisis or to provide immediate responses when a crisis arises. Issues that require longer-term support would be handled by specialized external agencies under the Student and Family Assistance arena. Like most schools, Gainesville has a certain level of behavior issues with students fighting and bullying each other. During the mapping process, the school work teams spent some time exploring this problem by thinking about which students exhibited conflictive behavior, and when. Then, on a hunch, one school sent a para-professional out to ride the buses and do field work. They began to realize that many conflicts would start on the bus into school and come to a head later in the day. This was a concern for the Learning Supports team not only because the students might end up in a fight, but students who had argued or been bullied on the morning bus, might not be able to focus in the classroom, or they might develop anxiety about coming to school each morning. Inappropriate behavior on the bus is a problem the district can work on, and it is working on better monitoring and improving the rules to emphasize expectations for better student behavior on buses.

## **Classroom-based approaches to enable learning**

For 2011–12, Gainesville has made expanding and improving classroom-based learning supports their focus, but they have already started a number of policies that exemplify their approach to understanding the issues and providing comprehensive learning supports. As mentioned above, Gainesville’s preventative approaches seek to develop student motivation and engagement in learning. In reflecting on the factors that promote motivation, the Learning Supports team began to realize how low grades can often be a de-motivating factor. Dr. Dyer noted, “If students get bad grades they just give up... they get to a point when they can never recover.” In response, Gainesville instituted a radical policy change by adopting a “no zeros” grading policy. The policy allows students to re-take any internal test (or an equivalent test) to improve their score on that test; thus no student has to accept a “0” score as a measure of their learning. The district acknowledges that some students take longer to master content than others, so why should those students be penalized? This new policy was met with mixed reactions from parents. Parents of students who are struggling but dedicated have been very supportive of the policy because it respects their children’s efforts to learn and improve. The resistance initially came from parents of high performing students, but they too have come to realize that benefiting the lower performing students does not undermine their own children’s learning.

## **Community outreach for involvement and support**

A comprehensive system of learning supports also provides the nexus for strengthening and expanding the schools' efforts to involve community organizations in supporting students. Although the schools already had community groups involved, they have become more strategic about how they use these resources. For example, the middle school works with a local organization, Center Point (2011) that provides mentors for their students. As part of their learning supports approach, the school now gives priority to students who are missing a parent to give that child access to a caring adult. This is often an important support for boys growing up without a father or other adult male role model.

## **Realigning Old Programs and Creating New Ones**

The district used the mapping process mentioned previously to better organize and coordinate interventions by eliminating duplicated efforts, or ending ineffective programs and redeploying these resources to fill gaps in existing supports (e.g., related to prevention). Throughout the district, the educators we spoke to were of one mind that a comprehensive approach resulted in greater synergy and better organization of supports to help students, and most were impressed with how important that coordination was to improving outcomes. The high school assistant principal we spoke to said that "the Learning Supports were not more work, but better organization," and that this led to more effective programs.

## **Institutionalization Phase**

The sustainability of the district, including a well-integrated system of learning supports, has been a central concern of Dr. Dyer from the very beginning of the initiative. She is very conscious that a comprehensive system cannot be dependent on her leadership and presence in the district. As a framework, a comprehensive system needs to become an integral part of how district and school administrators and educators do their job. A number of strategies have been built into the effort to institutionalize the system of learning supports including succession and leadership planning, financial management strategies, and strengthening community connections.

### **Succession and leadership**

With sustainability of established processes in mind, Dr. Dyer wanted to build a core of new leaders throughout the district who could not only direct the transition process but who understood the value of a comprehensive system and would consider learning supports as an integral part of the schools' mission to educate children. The idea was to use the structures needed to drive the transition process as opportunities to cultivate leadership abilities in younger staff. The district leaders created school learning support

work teams that would meet regularly to monitor learning barriers and react by planning sustainable process strategies. The team membership is also carefully selected to mix established leaders with younger staff, thereby cultivating new leaders and embedding the learning supports approach more deeply into the school culture. Typically, veteran administrators are facilitating day-to-day tasks while training young leaders to manage the school district.

## Financial management

Funding is a constant challenge for all school districts, and the leadership at Gainesville points to two strategies that they feel will help them sustain their learning supports system. Gainesville schools moved to zero-based budgeting just before they started with the Initiative. Under the guidance of the state education department, Gainesville had undergone a finance review at the end of the previous superintendent's tenure. When Dr. Dyer assumed leadership, her primary charge had been to address financial issues that the district was experiencing. Working with outside experts and State level officials, she came to view the district's financial issues as a blessing in disguise. As a result of the district's financial review, Gainesville adopted the zero-based budgeting method to handle their finances.

In zero-based budgeting, every budget line item is reviewed and evaluated each year. Dr. Dyer felt that a zero-based budgeting approach lent itself well to the systemic approach, which calls for a yearly review of all the learning supports to identify new needs, remove redundant programs, etc. In one sense, the barrier-mapping process is about justifying which programs are needed and why. So, zero-based budgeting should help the district ensure that ineffective or unneeded programs are removed and those funds freed up for more-needed programs.

Another funding strategy that Gainesville has considered is one they learned from another district participating in Lead District Collaborative. "Braided funding" is a strategy of using multiple funding streams to fund one program instead of creating a distinct program for each funding stream. For example, this might mean combining Title I funding with a state initiative, thereby potentially making it easier to keep programs going if one funding stream dries up.

## Community connections

Community connections arise from the collaborative actions of students, parents, community agencies and the school system. Community engagement is not merely a program; it's a **result** of trust and mutual respect built over time. It is an intricate relationship that takes a system of continual care – and an ongoing dialog.

Gainesville works closely with external agencies as a key component of the comprehensive system of learning supports. They identify community organizations to fill gaps in services that are left empty due to a lack of district resources. To this end, the district formed a relationship with the United Way at the beginning of the process and has since put together a coalition of several agencies that provide learning supports for students and their families. For example, Boys and Girls Clubs run an after-school program, the Center for Mentoring, which provides counselors and psychologists for

schools, and the Drug Free Coalition provides support for substance abuse and its prevention. In 2011, the district initiated a relationship with the Georgia Campaign for Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention (G-CAPP), an organization that provides pregnancy prevention, prenatal and birthing services, as well as support for young mothers.

To build a network of community agencies to partner with, Mr. Anderson reported researching available area services. In addition, organizations like G-CAPP contact principals or other administrators, who in turn pass the information on to the Learning Supports Team. Additionally, he also invites a different community agency to the monthly Learning Support meeting to inform the district team about their available resources. Mr. Anderson added that community agency staff members in specialized areas also served as members on the district Learning Supports Team. The district leadership hopes that strong community support and involvement should provide continuity for the comprehensive system of learning supports even when there are changes in the district leadership.

To this end, the following are some examples of ongoing community connection that are maintained at various levels (Learning Supports, schools, Superintendent) across the Gainesville School District.

-The Director of Learning Supports serves on the Hall County Commission on Children and Families to share information and link resources.

-The school district coordinates with six college-universities in Professional Development School collaborations to promote literacy initiatives.

-The Superintendent serves on the Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors, Economic Development Council, and Issues Committees.

## Ongoing Evolution and Creative Renewal Phase

From the very beginning of her tenure, a key concern for Dr. Dyer was to ensure the sustainability of the reforms and improvements the district has put in place. The Superintendent's initial interest in learning supports and the *Rebuilding for Learning™* initiative was as a possible answer to the district's needs. In fact, she notes that a learning supports approach "is not a program, [but] a framework for how we do things." The continuance of the policies and practices in her absence would be crucial to sustaining the system. If the district were to establish a comprehensive system, those changes would in fact continue even if she were to leave the district because the comprehensive learning supports would already be built into the district's day-to-day policies and practices. She believed that comprehensive learning supports were different from other reform models because they actually brought something new to the table—learning supports for all children. Most other reform models target the two areas that schools already address—management and instruction—with the potential prospect that the old problematic ways of doing things could always return, even within the framework of the new "model." But comprehensive learning supports get districts thinking about a

new area and how the supports within that area relate to (and can improve) the job their schools are already doing. Once the broader school and district leadership sees learning supports as part of how the district functions, and once parents and the community expect the schools to use a comprehensive learning support framework, it becomes more difficult for the district to abandon the approach.

In education, where there are constantly new issues emerging, many of the educators and leaders we spoke to at Gainesville felt that renewal of the system of learning supports came naturally and included both new emerging issues as well as the challenges and problems that every school encounters on an ongoing basis. In their view, the comprehensive learning supports offer a system that allows the schools to respond to both the old and the new issues. District leaders continuously evaluate and reflect on program effectiveness and needs by setting aside a time during every meeting of the Learning Supports Team to review how current programs are addressing targeted learning barriers from a comprehensive learning supports framework. In addition, the district goes through a mapping process every year to evaluate current programs, as well as identifying new barriers.

# **Conclusion: Gainesville's Experience and Outcomes**

The district tracks its own progress in developing a system of learning supports through monitoring a number of metrics that should be affected by the implementation of the comprehensive system of learning supports. As Gainesville students had already been scoring well on the standardized tests so the district had looked beyond the test scores to evaluate progress. The district has been tracking a number of indicators from behavior and discipline data, to graduation and pass rates, to test scores and parent or community feedback. According to statewide reports, in the 2009-2010 school year, all but one school in the district met Adequate Yearly Progress measures set by the State of Georgia. These schools were all designated as "Distinguished" schools by the state education department. In fact, one school even received the Bronze award with the highest percentage of "Students Meeting and Exceeding Standards" in the state. 2012 achievement scores showed an increase in the number of students exceeding expectations on state required tests. As of January 2013, benchmark monitoring indicates that the district is on-track to improve in every area by 4%.

As of mid-year January 2013, the district is still maintaining its focus on discipline data, such as numbers of referrals, detentions, suspensions, etc. to track the ongoing progress of their comprehensive learning supports approach. First, referrals for disciplinary action for the middle and high schools have dropped from 91 disciplinary tribunals in 2008-09 to 47 in 2010-11, and the elementary schools saw a 75% decrease in such tribunals. Overall, the number of discipline referrals at the schools at the end of 2012 was 5,260, and the mid-year number as of January 2013 was 1,939. On a related note, the percent of students absent 10+ days would seem perhaps to be decreasing, with the percent at the end of school year 2012 being 15%, and the mid-year percent as of January 2013 at 5.2%. The district believes these consistent improvements over a number of years are a positive result of their learning supports because they developed the Woods Mill Non-Traditional High Schools as a learning support for those students who needed flexible scheduling and diverse options because their life-situations made a traditional school day impractical (i.e., teen mothers). Previously, these students had gone to the alternative school, which was actually designed for students with behavioral and cognitive challenges.

As regards graduation rates\*, data shows that as of mid-year 2012-13, 85.3% of students are on track to graduate as measured by the federally required cohort calculator. Correspondingly, the drop-out rate seems on-track to continue decreasing: the 2011 rate was 12%; for 2012 it was 9%; and as of mid-year January 2013 it is at 2.7%. The district continues to carefully monitor those numbers because they do not want the numbers to decrease simply because schools are under-reporting incidents. So the district looks for patterns in what the suspensions are for, or which students receive them, etc. Even though each year to date has shown positive improvement on the previous years, Gainesville knows that system reform is an ongoing process and is resolute in not taking its existing gains for granted by continuing to implement a comprehensive system of learning supports that will offer all children an equal opportunity to succeed at school and in life. It will be interesting to continue to watch the progress of Gainesville as it embeds this "framework for how [they] do things" into the very fabric of the district.





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