

ALABAMA'S **BIG** GROWTH

IN 2012, OUR NEW STATE superintendent, Dr. Tommy Bice, and our state board of education stood at a crossroads. Our graduation rate for 2011 was 72 percent, and our 740,000-plus students had had more than 1,900,000 unexcused absences in 2011–12. Dr. Bice knew, as did district and local school personnel, that teachers alone could not be responsible for improving these numbers and building momentum in Alabama. But how should we move forward?

In 2012, Dr. Bice asked me to join his team at the Alabama State Department of Education as the director of the Office of Learning Support—a new office created to concentrate on the elimination of barriers to teaching and learning. Dr. Bice (who just announced his retirement) had a vision for leading the state education system through major transformations that included an equal and strategic focus on student support systems to ensure that barriers would be addressed in a comprehensive, sustainable manner.

I was fortunate to have served as a teacher, principal, and superintendent in Alabama for more than 29 years, and I and my colleagues recognize not just the crucial need to focus on instruction but also the importance of developing better ways for schools, families, and communities to support student success by addressing barriers. To that end, this goal requires that everyone works collaboratively to provide safe and supportive environments in which children can live, learn, work, and play. Improved instruction alone cannot address the wide range of barriers that interfere with schools reaching their goals.

Dr. Bice was interested in replicating and bringing to scale a model that was already working in a handful of locations in Alabama through a partnership between Scholastic and the state DOE. Between 2011 and 2015, Montevallo High School in Shelby County improved graduation rates from 68 percent to 92 percent. Since working with Scholastic to implement what's called an integrated learning supports (ILS)

A dedication to removing learning barriers has resulted in dramatic improvements in some of the state's most troubled districts.

framework, Montevallo High School recorded the following:

- 42 percent fewer out-of-school suspensions
- 55 percent fewer in-school suspensions
- 20 percent reduction in absences (recorded in 2013)

Under the leadership of Superintendent Randy Fuller and Shelby County learning supports leader Melissa Youngblood, Montevallo has worked with Scholastic coach

Rhonda Neal-Waltman to develop a systematic approach that aligns instruction, learning supports, and leadership decisions. The continued impact emphasizes the critical need for schools to have a unified and comprehensive system of supports in place to address the barriers to learning and teaching that districts are facing.

So, what are learning supports, and why will focusing on them move the needle? The most common approaches to school improvement focus on either instruction or manage-

ment and governance. What's often missing is a plan for addressing barriers to learning and creating a system of learning supports.

The integrated learning supports system that we adopted is a process by which schools, families, and communities facilitate learning by working together to alleviate barriers, both external and internal. ILS doesn't just focus on an individual student's challenges but on a school-based learning supports leadership team that works on the mechanisms needed for overall cohesion and ongoing development of programs and systems. It puts the responsibility on all staff to ensure that teaching and learning are successful.

It is about putting a system in place to catch students before they fail, before they drop out, before they fall through the cracks. Rather than just address the problems "kid-by-kid," the ILS system looks at trend data and creates a systems solution. This process includes identifying the fragmentation that exists within services and increasing the effectiveness and efficiency by which the services operate. ILS guides school improvement through a framework to address the specific student, school, and district needs. If we keep encountering the same challenges in our schools, why are we approaching them each year as if it were the first time? If we already know what barriers we are going to hit, then we should have systemic procedures in place to address them head on.

In June 2013, 10 districts volunteered to be part of the pioneering group to lead the learning supports work in



Alabama. Dr. Bice mandated that every district in the state be trained on the ILS system by 2018. Currently, we are partnering with Scholastic to work with 51 districts across the state, and we will continue to build statewide capacity through webinars; district, regional, and state training sessions; and on-site coaching.

In the fall of 2015, the Alabama DOE received a grant funded by American Express, in partnership with the National Association of Secondary Principals, to support the work of school leaders. The grant was awarded to the DOE's Office of Learning Support, which created Alabama Strong, a three-year, job-embedded project that offers customized services to 73 principals and aspiring principals in Alabama. This work will continue to build the capacity of school leaders by leveraging a three-component ILS system to address the barriers to learning identified by data and student needs.



"IN FOUR YEARS, Alabama has been able to up its graduation rate in some schools from 72 percent to

89

percent while greatly decreasing unexcused absences, thanks to a program that works actively to remove barriers to learning for students."

Districts across the state using integrated learning supports have already seen a rise in student achievement and have been removed from Alabama's failing schools list. Impact indicators can be identified by our state's cohort graduation rate increase to 89 percent for 2015 and our truancy rate decrease to 117,175 for 2014–15.

This is just the beginning of what can happen when implementing a system for learning supports. Dr. Bice reminds us that it's about the children sitting at those desks. If we always focus on what's best for the child sitting in the chair, how can we make the wrong decisions? We're here to serve students. ■

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