WHEN STUDENTS IMAGINE POSITIVE FUTURES

How a large, economically-disadvantaged district guided students

to grasp the power of their education today to create a hopeful tomorrow

Clayton County Public Schools

Atlanta, Georgia

About the Innovative Successful Practices Project

Dear Educator,

Beginning in 2017, the Successful Practices Network (SPN) and AASA The School Superintendents Association, have been conducting a study of innovation best practices in public K12 systems from throughout the United States, with support from global learning company Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH).

Dr. Bill Daggett has led a team of nationally recognized superintendents, researchers and data analysts to identify systems that are using innovative approaches to put students first by expanding and supporting student learning and achievement. Schools and districts were selected for further study based on a national search conducted by thought leaders and experts at HMH, SPN and AASA. HMH supported this effort by providing research and reviewers as part of its work to partner with school districts on improving student outcomes.

From that study, 25 national Innovative Successful Practices systems were identified based on their ability to demonstrate rapid improvement in student learning and preparedness through innovative organizational and instructional practices.

Each of those 25 systems collaborated with SPN and AASA to host an on-site visit, detailed data analysis and development of a case study. These case studies are intended to provide an accessible and nontechnical overview of each innovative approach that is backed up with data-driven results.

The participating systems include a wide range of geographies, demographics, student population and resource levels. In spite of those differences, each of these systems shares a common mindset that innovation can drive public education with a strong focus on serving the needs of all of their students.

We have been inspired by the lessons learned from these courageous leaders that took risks to think beyond their traditional systems and approaches. It is our hope that this work continues to inspire, inform and support public education leaders in their efforts to prepare students for success both in school and beyond school.

"The world that our children will live, work and interact in will be fundamentally different than the world we all grew up in," said Bill Daggett, Founder and Chairman, International Center for Leadership in Education. "To prepare them for success in this changing world our schools need to make fundamental changes as well. These innovative districts are paving the way and showing us how to make the necessary changes needed in our schools."

"At a time when the new school year is beginning across the nation, there is no better time than now to speak out about the value of public education and bring to the forefront the outstanding work being done by our school districts," said Daniel A. Domenech, Executive Director, AASA.

"It's important to be imagining how our classrooms and schools can look and feel different in the next decade," said Rose Else-Mitchell, Chief Learning Officer, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. "We congratulate these change-makers for creating a culture of innovation and the conditions for future-focused learning designs in their school districts to accelerate student engagement, growth, and achievement."

Introduction

In 2008, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools revoked the accreditation of Clayton County Public Schools because of School Board governance issues connected to children. Clayton County Public Schools is a huge and long-challenged district in Jonesboro, Georgia.

In 2012, the district's four-year graduation barely passed 50% and was 16% lower than the state average. Fast forward to the 2019-2020 school year, and you will find 80% of its student ninth graders across the district's 12 high schools enrolled in at least one AP class. The district-wide graduation rate is steadily catching up to that of the state's, and several of the district's high schools have passed it.

How did a district of 55,000 diverse students and 7,000 educators realize such incredible improvement in a relatively short amount of time? At its essence, educators worked tirelessly to make sure all students envisioned a positive future, even one they might have never thought possible for themselves.

The Challenge

Clayton County Public Schools sits on the south side of the greater Atlanta metropolitan area. Its 55,000 students—who attend 67 schools—are predominantly students of color: 70% are African American; 22% are Hispanic; 3% are Asian; 3% are multi-racial; and 2% are white. Ninety-three percent of the district's students are economically disadvantaged.

For many years, the district was plagued by student achievement, governance, graduation rate, and reputation problems. In 2008, when the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools revoked the accreditation of Clayton County Public Schools, the governor also removed several members of the Clayton Country Board of Education for various violations.

In the ensuing years, the district endured a series of leadership and governance changes as its achievement indicators continued to flag. In 2013, district administrators solicited the expertise of the National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) for assistance in developing strategies that had a high likelihood of significantly improving the district's graduation rate. With the support of NDPC consultants, district administrators devised a plan to require teams from all traditional high schools and feeder middle schools to participate in the National Dropout Prevention Center's Diploma Planning Institute. The purpose of the Institute was to educate school teams on best practices to support graduation rates. By the end of the event, each team would be required to develop and submit school-site dropout prevention plans to the central office.

The Innovation

The partnership with NDPC put Clayton County on a different path. It offered the district a cohesive focus and provided schools a framework under which to launch a series of innovations and improvements in the ensuing years. This cohesive focus also helped the district's ready and willing staff to mobilize in service of the students they cared deeply for and were hungry to encourage and empower towards hopeful, positive futures beyond school. Four core beliefs helped transform this massive district and create the circumstances necessary to meet more individual needs and dramatically improve the graduation rate.

Empower Those Closest to Students to Make the Decisions Best Suited to Them

For a district as large as Clayton County, it would have been impossible to identify one root cause to the district's problems and apply one blanket solution. Any solution for a school is only as potent as it is relevant to the conditions and issues of that school. It is for this reason that the NDPC partnership proved a key turning point; central to success in following NDPC's framework is to decentralize decision making and leave root cause analysis and development of a targeted solution in the hands building educators. Also central to success is ensuring that best practices are applied to the targeted solution so that it not only keeps kids in school through graduation but also improves their overall success up to and after graduation.

To the enormous credit of Clayton County's central office, they understood that as the district-at-large began its transformation process, their most important job was to get out of the way. From there, their role was not to micromanage but to provide building educators what they needed to realize their dropout prevention plans and support their success.

When the central office initially conferred with NDPC's consultants, the consultants coached leaders to adopt principles that would guide all traditional high schools and their feeder middle schools through transformation. The ethos of all of these principles was decentralization and empowerment of building educators to act in the best interests of their students. Specifically, the guiding principles were:

- The district would mandate each school to develop a school-site dropout prevention plan.
- School-site dropout prevention teams would develop their plans while participating in the Diploma Planning Institutes and with the guidance of NDPC staff.
- School site plans would utilize NDPC's Dropout Prevention Plan template, which specified school-site measurable objectives, action steps, timelines, persons responsible, and outcome reporting methods.

- Content of school site plans, including objectives and action steps, would not be prescribed and would be left to the discretion of educators from each school site.
- Periodic reporting of progress to the central office would be required; the central office would not, however, judge or evaluate progress.
- Each school, under the leadership of the principal, would be responsible for evaluating its own progress.

Identify the Root Cause First, Then Develop a Solution Targeted to It

To kick-off the NDPC partnership at the school level, the organization hosted two Diploma Planning Institutes in 2014 (two were offered to allow for smaller sessions; school teams attended only one session). The Institute was a two-day working event for the district's traditional high schools and their feeder middle schools. Each school sent teams of six to ten educators. Teams were formed in consultation with NDPC staff and typically included an administrator, a counselor, and several teacher leaders.

Since the purpose of the Institute was for each team to develop a dropout prevention plan, much of the time was devoted to unearthing the root cause of each school's low graduation rate. To do this, NDPC Institute facilitators guided school teams in an analysis of several school data points and factors, such as student demographics, achievement data, and contextual knowledge of challenges and barriers their students face. Teams were also asked to itemize risk factors their students confront, such as issues of homelessness and poverty. In synthesizing data and its insights, schools ultimately determined a bottom-line root cause to their low graduation rate.

NDPC Institute facilitators also asked each team to inventory all current dropout prevention efforts. With an NDPC facilitator, they analyzed their efficacy to date and potential in general relative to NDPC's research and known best practices. With a newly understood root cause in hand, teams were able to discern if current efforts were addressing the right or wrong problems.

The Institutes helped each team develop a new understanding of their students. Coupled with an education in what the research says about dropout prevention as well as strategies that yield the greatest impact, teams were prepared to develop their tailored dropout preventions plans.

The plans each high school developed were varied, creative in their solutions, and reflected targeted solutions to specific identified root causes. High schools throughout the district employed strategies to remove barriers and improve student success. Two schools have been highlighted for their multipronged approach to address graduation rates: Riverdale High School and Perry Career Academy.

Riverdale High School's team determined that the root cause of their school's low graduate rate was the inability for its non-traditional students to address poor choices made in the early days of a course. Thus, course failure was a key indicator of a student in need of early and targeted remediation. In determining the most viable plan to address the root cause, Riverdale's team knew it must be flexible enough to ensure that no student would be left to struggle in any class and eventually fail. To reach every student, the plan included multiple options for remediation that could be further tailored to an individual student. Riverdale High School's success in improving graduation rates can be attributed to progress monitoring; individual academic, social/emotional, and postsecondary counseling; and increased CTAE course options. As Riverdale's dropout prevention work advanced, the graduation team realized the importance of addressing the whole student by directly impacting engagement, grades, course completion rates, and graduation rates. They also worked proactively to change teacher mindsets and practices towards supporting students to make better learning decisions, believing in all students' potential, and thinking of student learning in terms of making progress toward growth rather than merely passing and failing.

Perry Career Academy also experienced marked graduation improvement through its dropout prevention plan. Perry's graduation team determined as its root cause a reality that its students simply needed far more holistic and persistent supports. The school had the highest share of students struggling academically and the lowest share of students graduating in the Clayton district. Relative to the other district high schools, its students also had a disproportionate share experiencing challenges such as homelessness and teen parenthood. To address a breadth of challenges, the graduation team developed a dropout prevention plan that layers traditional academics and school aspects with a case management approach, essentially turning the school into a dropout prevention program itself. Every student is given an individual graduation plan. Every student's performance is closely monitored, and at the first sign of setback, Perry triages a student rapidly, comprehensively, and with whatever supports that student needs. The school also built in as much flexibility to classes as possible in order to be adaptable to any individual student circumstances or need as it arises. As an example, they created mini-mester and hybrid programs that allow students to retake or make up courses far faster than would be possible at a traditional school. The school also secured additional funding to be able to provide the holistic supports they need so that every student can walk across the graduation stage.

Help Kids Imagine a Future After College—and Help Them Create That Future

In 2016, the Chief of School Improvement was promoted to the district superintendent role. He is known for his steadfast commitment to helping students graduate high school. To this end, he saw it of utmost importance to help all students imagine a life not only after high school graduation but also after college graduation. With his encouragement and guidance, all educators developed a practice of discussing future options with students and guiding them to consider a multitude of choices that might align to their talents and interests. The goal was to help students grasp the importance of their education—and the effort they put into it—today and motivate them to

leverage it into future opportunities that appealed to them and prepared them to be self-sustaining, productive members of their communities.

To ensure that students were prepared to meet the challenges of an ever-changing, globally-competitive economic system, Clayton's leadership did something bold and radical. They set a requirement that every single ninth grader enroll in at least one advanced placement course. And every single sixth grader is required to take accelerated math. At the high school level, dual-enrollment in a local community college is open to every student beginning in the ninth grade. The idea behind these initiatives is twofold: It is to expose all students to acceleration, not remediation. And it pushes students to see themselves as learners capable of excelling, growing, and meeting high expectations they might have once never considered for themselves. The idea is to change their self-perceptions as students and people and of what is possible.

Aware that some students will find meeting these innovative requirements more challenging than others, the district offers tailored supports to all students in need and when they need them. For example, the Perry Career Academy's graduation team leveraged student achievement and attendance data to tailor support and meet individual needs. This is inclusive of the site-based supports provided through the different departments represented in the school's Circle of Support. The aforementioned helped to provide students with the additional resources needed through the development of a plan of action for each student.

Bring the Community to the School for True Holistic Student Support

The district has worked tirelessly to improve their relationships with and standing in the community. This stems from the belief that it's not only students who stand to benefit from engaging with members of the community; it's also the community. Georgia—including the larger metropolitan area where Clayton County sits—has a significant workforce gap issue, where several companies struggle to fill roles with Georgia citizens. Clayton's leadership understands their potential to help close this gap, and they understand that this requires educating students with career-relevant skills. But it also requires helping students understand the power of community and grow familiar with the breadth of career opportunities within it.

A core part of appreciating community is feeling cared for by it. Therefore, leadership has helped leverage community assets and resources to support students in a holistic way. Clayton County has collaborated with the Atlanta chapter of Communities in Schools (CIS), a non-profit that provides a range of services and programs aimed at helping students at severe risk to stay in school, succeed in school, and graduate from school. Through deep community relationships and by leveraging various community resources, CIS is able to adapt supports to meet a range of needs for students, their families, and Clayton schools.

As an example, CIS has been able to apply sponsor funds to paying certain district families' rent, gas bills, utilities bills, and so on to help bring more stability to students' home lives and reduce homelessness. CIS has also helped find mentors and match them with students who could benefit from guidance from a caring adult.

The Impact

The state's report of four-year cohort graduation rates for the Class of 2020 determined that Clayton County achieved a district-wide graduation rate of 76.6%, an increase of 3.9 percentage points over the 2019 rate. Nearly every high school, including the Perry Career Academy, reported an increase from their respective 2019 rates. The only exceptions are: Elite Scholars Academy, which matched its 100% graduation rate from the year before; North Clayton County High School, which saw a very small 0.1 percentage point drop from 2019; and Stilwell Performing Arts, which saw a small 0.7 percentage point drop from its 100% rate in 2019.

Clayton's average graduation rate is now only 7.2 percentage points less than the state's average—incredible progress since 2011, when monitoring of the four-year cohort graduation rates began. In 2011, district's average graduation rate was 51.5%, a full 25.1 percentage points less than its 2020 rate. See Table 1 for Clayton County's four-year cohort average graduation rates as compared to Georgia's average state graduation rates from 2011 to 2020.

Table 1.
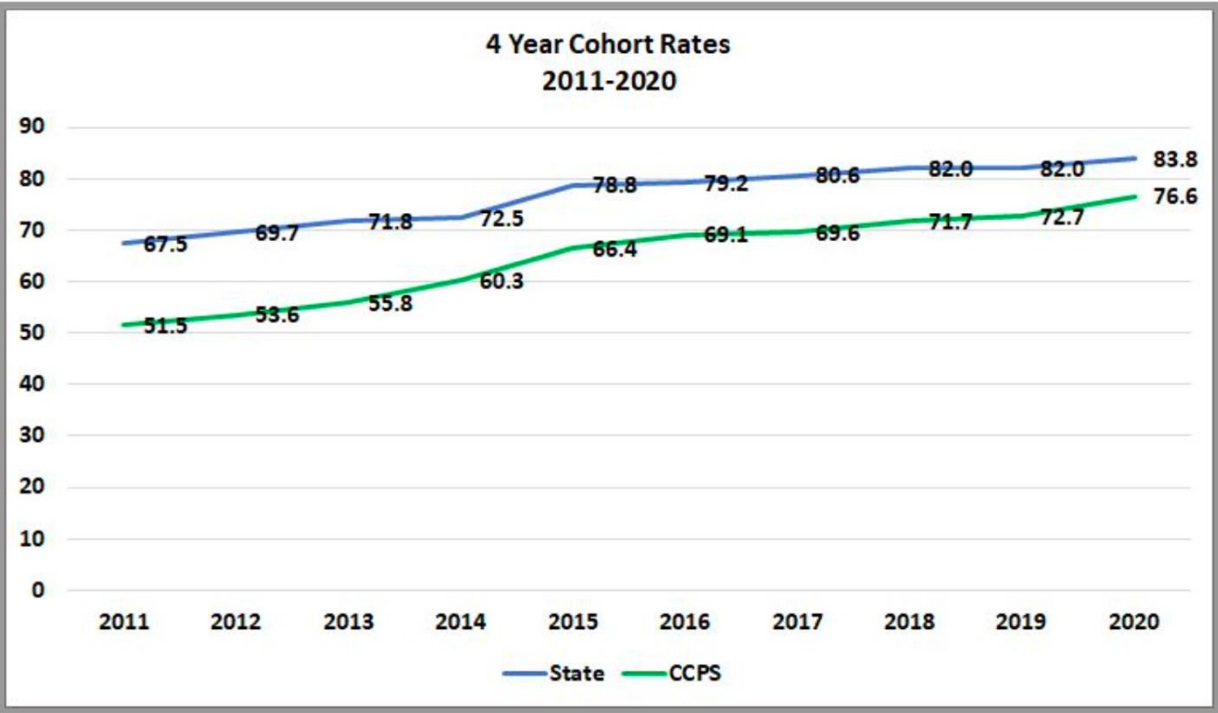
Over five years of utilizing strategies and interventions in conjunction with dropout prevention plan implementation and refinement, each of Clayton County's traditional high schools and the district as a whole have achieved significant improvements in student success and graduation outcomes. See Table 2 for each high school's four-year cohort graduation rate growth between 2011 and 2020.

Table 2.

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Change 2019-2020
State	67.5	69.7	71.8	72.5	78.8	79.2	80.6	82	82	83.8	1.8
Clayton County Public Schools	51.5	53.6	55.8	60.3	66.4	69.1	69.6	71.7	72.7	76.6	3.9
Charles R. Drew High School	N/A	54.3	50.6	63.0	56.8	59.8	62.2	70.3	73.7	75.2	1.5
Elite Scholars Academy	N/A	N/A	N/A	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	0.0
Forest Park High School	42.5	48.7	51.8	47.9	59.4	66.5	63.2	70.2	72	74.7	2.7
Jonesboro High School	58.5	54	64.6	65.2	75.8	74.8	76.8	76.9	78.7	80.1	1.4
Lovejoy High School	61.1	72.7	67.1	66.9	73.5	70.8	68.6	83.2	86	87.2	1.2
Morrow High School	51.3	61.7	59.0	60.6	67.3	72.5	73.6	80.6	80.8	82.4	1.6
Mount Zion High School	56.6	51.3	59.0	66.6	66.1	57.8	71.6	83.2	85.9	87.9	2.0
Mundy's Mill High School	57.9	56.4	58.1	72.3	72.9	78.1	71.9	81.5	84.4	85.8	1.4
North Clayton High School	48.8	50.3	49.6	48.5	52.8	68.2	64.3	71.4	77.2	77.1	-0.1
Perry Center Academy	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	34.2	35.06	50.5	15.4
Riverdale High School	53.6	43.1	48	66.7	77.5	74.2	79.9	80.7	83.3	86.5	3.2
Stilwell Performing Arts	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	100	100	99	100	100	99.3	-0.7

2011-2020 4 Year Graduation Cohort Rates

In its second year of operating as an alternative, non-traditional high school and not a program, the Perry Career Academy reported a 2019 graduation rate of 35.06%, which represents an increase of 0.86 percentage points over its rate for the Class of 2018. One year later, their 2020 graduation rate jumped by 15.44 percentage points to 50.5%. Perry continues to be an important alternative solution to retain students in school who may be dealing with non-traditional personal situations that prevent them from graduating on time.

The combination of strategies that follow have been and will continue to be crucial to the success of Clayton County high school students as the district emphasizes a culture of college attendance, wherein students are prepared for postsecondary options:

- Addressing skill deficits in reading and mathematics that contribute to student academic issues and affect student motivation. Students receive additional reading/literacy instruction and are required to use e-tools towards improving reading and math performance.
- Advancing learning for all students, with all 6th graders taking accelerated math and all 9th graders taking advanced placement and/or dual enrollment options.
- Monitoring/managing of 9th graders to ensure successful completion of all credits.
- Ensuring timely credit recovery, with plans to develop 2nd semester mini sessions for credit recovery.
- Offering 9th grade transition activities.
- Supporting schools with cohort data accuracy and clean-up.

- Enrolling all students in a Career, Technical and Agricultural Education (CTAE) pathway; 95% of students enrolled in a CTAE pathway graduate; enrolling in a pathway was required of all 9th graders beginning fall 2019.
- Providing wraparound support for students identified as in need of such support (e.g., Communities in Schools, etc.).
- Utilizing early warning indicators and a data dashboard for district and school leadership to be more proactive versus reactive when addressing students at-risk or in need of support.
- Supporting high school principals leading faculty conversations and efforts to reverse high failure rates of select courses while increasing content mastery.
- Connecting every student to a caring adult through positive relationships.
- Identifying and addressing attendance issues in a timely manner.
- Mitigating the impact of the district's high mobility rate (31%) on academic and graduation outcomes by working with governments and the courts.
- Using alternative schools to assist with students who are 16 or older and enrolled in the 9th grade or continue to experience a lack of success in traditional or regular environment.

Several significant gains are worth note:

- Over a six-year period, Clayton County's graduation rate rose by 18.1%, while the state rate rose by only 10.9%.
- Over six years, the Clayton County graduation rate rose by 18.1%, while the national average in graduation rate gain was less than one percent per year.
- Seven of Clayton County's eight traditional high schools achieved graduation progress rates significantly higher than that of the state average, and the eight schools continued to maintain an annual graduation rate significantly above the state average.
- Over a six-year period, Clayton County went from one high school having a graduation rate at or above the state rate to four high schools having graduation rates at or above the state average.

Discussion Questions

1. Would we benefit from the guidance, knowledge, and support of an outside organization? Could a third party with a specific expertise targeted to our needs serve as a catalyst to meaningful change and a needed shift in mindset?

2. How centralized or decentralized is our central office? What are the pros and cons of our current position relative to our schools? What would or could change if we gave more power to schools to make decisions for their students, and how could we go about doing that?

3. Do we grasp that our students' self-perceptions as learners can negatively or positively impact their potential to learn? What are we doing, if anything, to proactively ensure all

students perceive themselves as learners capable of achievement and meeting expectations they might have never otherwise considered possible for themselves?

4. Are our students thinking about their futures beyond school? Are we doing enough to educate them about a range of future academic and career choices? From there, are we doing enough to support them to create the futures they want by ensuring sufficient rigorous and relevant learning opportunities?