



CHANGING HEARTS AND MINDS IN HART COUNTY

*How a Focus on Community Pride and Tradition
Turned Reluctant Taxpayers into Supporters and
Disengaged Students into Graduates*

Hart County Schools
Hart County, Georgia



Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
The Learning Company™



**Successful
Practices
Network**

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

Hart County Schools, a district in northeastern Georgia, was named a dropout factory in 2005, when just over 50% of its seniors graduated high school. Fifteen years later, the district's graduation rate consistently surpasses that of the state's. In 2017, nearly 97% of the senior class graduated high school, and 100% of the African American student population graduated. The school had historically and consistently been under-funded by a taxpayer base that tended to vote against tax increases that would support schools. Furthermore, students were not provided sufficient compelling and relevant reasons to engage in, care about, and stay in school. To turn their district around, leadership would have to do far more than focus on academic initiatives; they would have to change hearts and minds—of students and the greater community that had long-since felt separate from and disinterested in its schools. Today, almost everyone in the larger Hart County community is emotionally invested in its schools and even supportive of tax increases that benefit students.

The Challenge

Hart County Schools is a single county school system with enrollment of 3,400 students. The school system is comprised of three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. In 2004, Hart County Schools reported a four-year graduation rate of 56%. This was the best graduation statistic, as it was significantly lower for the students with disabilities. Having been historically known as one of Georgia's lowest-performing rural districts, the Alliance for Education labeled Hart County a "dropout factory" in 2005.

Hart County is located on the Georgia-South Carolina line and about 100 miles northeast of Atlanta. Hart County has a population of 26,000, with a per capita income just over \$21,000. The economy of Hart County is based primarily on light manufacturing and agriculture. It was particularly hard hit in 2008 economic crash, when a number of manufacturing facilities closed and left the county with a reduced tax base for school funding and an unemployment rate almost double that of Georgia.

The county's demographics pose interesting challenges for the school system. One border of the county sits on Lake Hartwell, which is largely populated by transplants who have retired to the area or use their lakefront property only part time. By contrast, most of the rest of the population are born-and-raised Hart County natives. In general, the lake residents are people of means who feel less connected to the county-at-large and do not have school-aged children. The local residents are of less economic means and more invested in the county-at-large. This creates a

dynamic where those who pay more taxes have historically voted against their tax dollars going to the school system.

The disconnect between the lakeside retirees/residents and local residents had exacerbated economic challenges for the school system. For example, the district's per-pupil expenditure has been historically low for the region; while it has recently increased to \$9,722, it remains below the Georgia average.

The disconnect includes demographic differences, as well. Thirty-five percent of the district's students are Black, and 60% are economically disadvantaged. By contrast, 24% of the county populace-at-large is Black, and 19% live in poverty.

The district's leaders understood that if they were going to improve student learning outcomes and graduation rates, they had to convince lakeside retirees/residents to care about the community's students. With this goal in mind, the district set out to change hearts and minds and improve students' futures through a range of innovative initiatives and strategic campaigns.

The Innovation

In 2007, a new superintendent joined Hart County Schools. He organized a group of forty community and school leaders to analyze Hart County's school performance and formulate action steps for improvement. The group became known as the "Hart County Summit," a loose-knit group that met monthly to consider issues, look for root causes, and propose solutions. As the Summit took ownership of the Hart County dropout problem, they began to propose and implement a number of small but creative strategies and solutions. While the Summit no longer meets today, their early work put the ball in motion for years of ongoing improvements that laid the foundation for innovative thinking and dramatically improved the district's graduation rate and student outcomes.

Start Small, Start Somewhere—Just Start

The Summit found that one of the root causes of low graduation rates was that there was too little discussion of graduation and too little emphasis of it as a goal for every student. Making every student—no matter how young—aware of the importance of high school graduation became central to their strategy. Small steps to create a culture of graduation were implemented early in the district's graduation improvement efforts, and included:

- The Grad Dog Mascot: Community members on the Summit team recommended that the long-established Hart County athletic mascot, the Bulldog, be replaced with a new mascot that promoted graduation. A student contest produced the “Grad Dog,” a redesigned bulldog wearing graduation attire and holding a diploma with a motto that read “Finish What You Start.”
- Grad Year T-Shirts: Another group of business leaders noted the importance of early-grade goals and elementary school success for graduation outcomes. They offered the suggestion of providing for all incoming first graders t-shirts with Grad Dog image and their twelve-years-later graduation year. The idea was instead embraced for all students so that every last one understood what they were ultimately working towards in their current grade year and education in general. The business leaders pooled resources and designed and funded t-shirts for all incoming students as yet one more way to initiate a conversation about the importance and relevance of their education.
- The Grad Cup Challenge: The Summit came up with the idea of challenging neighboring rival, Franklin County, to a graduation rate competition. Business leaders funded purchase of the “Grad Cup,” a massive trophy that would be awarded annually to and displayed in the lobby of either Hart County High School or Franklin County High School, based on which school had the highest graduation rate. For maximum community impact, Summit members decided that the Grad Cup would be annually awarded at half-time of the season finale football game, with teams, students, school boards, faculties, and bands assembled on either side of the 50-yard line. In 2014, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* featured a story on the tradition.

The constant reminder of graduation as a goal for every student eventually did change the culture. Where graduation was once considered only a possibility for some, it has become a given in the minds of all key stakeholder groups—from students, to parents/guardians, all staff and educators of the district, and even the larger community.

Win the Support of the Community-at-Large—and the Funding Will Follow

With low property taxes in Georgia, Hart County relies heavily on other taxpayer measures specifically to fund schools. For years, the district relied heavily on a penny sales tax to fund many of its school improvement initiatives. One year, the county voted down this tax. The lakeside residents in particular had historically voted against tax measures to fund schools.

The district realized they had to nurture relationships with the community-at-large, chiefly the lakeside residents who had little personal connection to Hart County Schools. An essential goal of the Summit was to educate the community on the importance of student success to the

economic future of the whole county. The Summit and district leaders understood that if they were to win buy-in and support for school tax initiatives from the lakeside residents, they would have to connect school success and student outcomes to the residents' lives.

Select leaders from the district lead a campaign to engage with community members, taking care to “meet them where they were”—they visited to churches and various civic organizations, and wrote articles in several newspapers to reach community members of all ages and demographics. Today, in addition to analog communication efforts, the district leverages multiple social media channels. District leaders spoke (and still do) about the role that strong K-12 education plays in an overall community and how it impacts all citizens, even those without school-aged children. Steadily, even lakeside residents began to understand that strong schools, with strong graduation rates, lead to better economic circumstances for the greater community. District leaders also successfully communicated the link between funding and graduation rates, and the community came around to supporting taxpayer initiatives to fund schools.

The district has also prioritized hosting events open to the community. Not only does this allow ongoing community interaction, but it also indicates the district's seriousness about improving student and community outcomes and intention to serve as a source of pride and resource for all Hart County residents. Such events include:

- The district hosts Hart County Financial Wellness classes for any community member, and they “graduate” with a certificate from the district. Local banks and realtors offer “graduates” of the course a \$500 “down payment” voucher when they apply for and receive a loan to buy a house or property within the community. The program is most popular with young adults buying their first homes.
- Citizens and school leaders formed the Hart County Education Foundation to raise money for low-income student scholarships that are awarded in middle grades but contingent on high school graduation. The Hart County Foundation holds an “adult prom” as a community fundraiser for scholarships. The event is a large draw to the public, even to those who had typically opposed the school system's funding efforts.
- The district holds a Back to School Blast at the start of each new school year. The event is held in the high school gym, where 40+ local businesses and churches set up displays and distribute assigned free school supplies that all students receive. The supplies are intended to replace the traditional back-to-school supply list that is typically the onus of parents to purchase. All students and their families come to the event, circulate through the booths, and network with local businesspeople.

The district leaders' multi-faceted and creative initiatives to engage the community even had an effect on the school board, which grew more involved and invested in campaigning for funding. Where the board once emphasized low taxes and cost cutting, the collective mindset shifted to doing what's best for students and improving the graduation rate. If this required spending money, then it required spending money. Early in this shift, the board decided to take money out of reserves to build a new, state-of-the-art facility. Where the board would have once found this spending frivolous, they now understood the connection between state-of-the-art schools, school pride, community pride, and improved student outcomes.

Central to the district's success in changing hearts and minds around taxes to fund schools is being explicit about what the funds will be used for, delivering on their promises, and then again and again demonstrating intended results. The district has made a point of being highly transparent around funding needs, allocations, and outcomes to constantly nurture trust with the community. Today, residents trust that Hart County Schools leadership are responsible and strategic stewards of their tax dollars. They have repeated evidence that their taxpayer dollars are making a tangible and beneficial difference to students' lives and the community's future.

Eventually, the efforts to prevent any Hart County student from dropping out became—and has remained—a contagious, county-wide movement. Citizens with no attachment to the schools began monitoring school attendance and graduation rates. Some years ago, some of the Summit business leaders created and funded 18-inch car door magnets of the Grad Dog and his motto. They commissioned thousands of them to be produced and gave them away to community members. To this day, the magnet is seen on thousands of cars in Hart County—including those of lakeside residents.

Students Need a Reason to Be at School

District leaders identified early on that students were not grasping the value or purpose of school because educators were not linking student learning to futures, nor were their sufficient offerings that appealed to students' interests and passions. The district launched a full-scale campaign to reiterate constantly to students that working hard in school and graduating from high school is vital to lifelong success and fulfillment; yet leadership understood true and lasting school engagement was unlikely to come from academics alone.

One of the district's first initiatives was to offer a sprawling range of extracurricular activities, accessible to any and all students and at no cost. Some extracurriculars relate to academics, while some do not, such as: Bass Fishing Team, Video Game Design Team, and the Chess Club. The

district saw a direct and positive correlation between expanded extracurricular options and daily attendance, which now averages 97.15%. Disciplinary issues have also dropped significantly.

The district has also taken measures to make the relevance of school to future careers unambiguous and engaging. Educators from the College and Career Academy (Hart County's CTE program) have developed creative ways for their students to apply skills learned in school to a realistic career-related opportunity. For example, educators from the Broadcast Program partnered with local professionals and industry-related businesses to design a pathway for students to earn a paid job of managing the audio-visual program, including the Jumbotron, at all district athletic events. Interested Broadcast Program students apply for an internship with the sports audio-visual programming. Interns contribute to developing film, content, and programming for events. Those who demonstrate commitment and strong skills are selected to run the audio-visual program as professionals would and for an hourly wage. The program has been a huge success, teaching both the value of hard work and the sense of responsibility in one's work quality when receiving pay. This program was made possible with the investment in a state-of-the-art Jumbotron—an example of how investing in schools pays back through enhanced student opportunities and improved outcomes.

This is just one example of Hart County's CTE programs offering real-world relevant opportunities. All such CTE programs are designed in partnership with related business and professionals from the community. Many programs also come with community members' commitment to employ students of the programs they advise.

Create a Culture Rich in Tradition to Foster School Pride

District leaders understand that students will be more inclined to be truant or drop out of school if they feel disconnected from it, and they will be more inclined to attend and graduate if they have pride in their school. In addition to the Grad Dog mascot, leaders have looked for opportunities to nurture tradition and healthy competition to engage students and stoke school pride.

One of the approaches to this end is to apply the tradition and/or competition of sports to all extracurricular programs and certain academic pursuits. Leadership's goal is that every student—especially non-athletes—can be engaged in some type of team activity or competition so that all Hart County students can at some point be celebrated with the same customs and circumstance of sports.

Hart County has a victory bell at the football stadium that had historically been rung when athletic teams won games. Today, the victory bell is rung for all successes and victories in a formal Victory Bell ceremony. Elementary student groups are bussed to the high school stadium for each ceremony whenever there is a victory within their school. Another example of ceremonial tradition is that whenever any student group has a win or victory of any kind offsite, when they return to town or school, they are met at city limits with a police escort that then leads them—with lights flashing and sirens ringing—back to school. Tradition, pomp and circumstance, and celebration for all kinds of achievements makes students feel special, important, and visible and valued in the larger community.

The Impact

Thanks to the creative thinking, tireless relationship-building efforts within the community, and relentless development of student engagement programs, Hart County has seen a constantly improving graduation rate.

Four-Year Graduation Rate Progress

	2011		2017	
	Hart Co.	Georgia	Hart Co.	Georgia
Population				
African American	63.0%	61.8%	100%	79.2%
Economically Disadvantaged	68.4%	61.1%	97.7%	71.4%
All Students	74.9%	69.7%	96.5%	80.6%

Source: Georgia Governor’s Office of Student Achievement

The district and community-at-large have learned several replicable lessons about dropout prevention, school improvement, and improved student outcomes:

- Community concern and involvement can develop and sustain an effective dropout prevention movement over time.
- A community dropout prevention movement is contagious for school personnel and students and can lead to several other in-school dropout prevention and school improvement initiatives.
- A strong community movement for school improvement can sustain long-term efforts over time and through a range of leadership changes.

- A community-led dropout prevention movement can create unity among various community factions that may otherwise work against each other at the expense of the school system.
- A unified community message to students regarding the importance of school success and graduation is critical to long-term improvement of graduation rates.
- A unified community and educator movement to improve school outcomes, enthusiastically adopted by everyone, can close the achievement between ethnic and economic subgroups of students.
- Numerous and varied school-based extracurricular offerings that engage all students in a positive manner can improve graduation rates.

Discussion Questions

1. Do our youngest students understand that their learning today is vital to their graduation from high school and their prospects beyond it? How can we make high school graduation an important goal and feel relevant to students as early as kindergarten?
2. Are our relationships with the taxpayer base helping or hindering our capacity to fund important initiatives and implement measures to improve student outcomes? If they are helping, how can we make them even stronger? If they are hindering, what can we do to cultivate relationships even with those with little to no connection to our schools and students?
3. Do our students have enough reasons to engage in school? Have we stopped short of providing a breadth and depth of opportunities to engage students in a range of interests and through a range of career-relevant opportunities?
4. Do non-athletic students have opportunities to participate in the typical competition, celebrations, and ceremony of sports? Do we have a school rich in tradition that fosters school pride, even at the community level?



