

Gainesville City Schools and Testgate: A Case Study

The Problem

The administration and school board in Gainesville, Georgia identified that their school system needed to start thinking differently in late 2003. They are a Title I school district, which means their student population has high enough numbers of poor children to qualify for federal funding. In addition their Limited English Proficiency, LEP, population was approaching 50% of the total student population. Students were performing below the state average in every subgroup on state assessments during the 2002-2003 school year. Also, in 2003 the school system began to understand the challenges of making AYP. The leaders of the system knew that if they didn't make a change, someone was going to make one for them, as the penalties of NCLB became more threatening. They identified a need for continuity of instruction and a plan for leaving no child behind. Gainesville was committed to serving every child in their school district and began forming a model that would ensure they did just that.

The Philosophy

Thinkgate entered into partnership with the Gainesville City School System, GCSS, in early 2004. GCSS implemented Thinkgate's flagship product, Testgate, shortly thereafter. Testgate works to supply data to drive Gainesville's achievement model. Gainesville adheres to a four-step model called Making Achievement Gains in the Classroom or M.A.G.I.C. This model is composed of four steps:

- (1) Identify Curriculum Standards by Grade, Subject and Term*
- (2) Pre-Test and Analyze Data*
- (3) Differentiate Instruction and Support*
- (4) Post Test and Analyze Data*

In step one pacing guides were created for each grade and subject area by term. Using this method every teacher across GCSS knows which standards they are responsible for teaching each nine week term. This creates continuity across the system so that the standards can be assessed accurately system-wide. Once these pacing guides were complete GCSS used Testgate to develop 1 pre-test for each grade and subject area. Each pre-test is designed to assess only the standards that are being taught during the nine week term. The pre-tests are then administered and scored system-wide in grades 3-12.

Armed with this data, teachers then create their customized lesson plans for the nine week term. Teachers no longer create long range lesson plans before understanding their students' baseline level of knowledge in each area. Testgate provides student, class, and school and district level reporting by curriculum standard. This enables teachers to differentiate instruction by student and class. After nine weeks of instruction and support, the students are post tested. The post tests contain different questions than the pre-tests to minimize the possibility of just learning how to answer the test questions. After these tests are administered and scored, results are analyzed. Using these results

teachers can quantify how much learning took place and identify remediation needs. GCSS implemented this model with the belief that successful student achievement on state assessments would result, and it has.

The Implementation and Dedication

The M.A.G.I.C model is simple, but it is the veracity with which GCSS implemented the model that has made the overwhelming impact. Both the School Board and the Superintendent knew that providing Testgate as a tool to help teachers execute this model was vital. By implementing the Testgate system GCSS has been able to automate all of the processes behind the model. This takes the busy work off of teachers and allows them to spend their time making productive use of the data that the process provides.

Testgate has been fully embraced by all levels of staff. Everyone at GCSS from the school board, to the central office staff, to the building level administrators, to the classroom teacher is dedicated to the diligent practice of the M.A.G.I.C. model through the use of Testgate. GCSS even provides a dedicated full-time master teacher to each grade/subject area, called a literacy coach. In this seven school system there are 12 individuals sharing nine literacy coach positions. Their job, first and foremost, is to support classroom teachers by providing guidance, resources, materials, and morale support.

The literacy coaches are all Testgate experts and are the creators of all of the pre and post tests and are also responsible for inputting the student results after each test is administered. Most importantly, literacy coaches guide each teacher in interpreting and making the best use of their class' data. They can use this data to identify students at risk, identify standards that are largely a repeat of the previous year, identify professional development needs, and so much more.

The Results

Gainesville has seen unprecedented achievement gains on state assessments since the implementation of Testgate and M.A.G.I.C. The 2005 CRCT was a break-out year for GCSS. Dr. Bull, Assistant Superintendent for Instruction, stated in his report titled "A Celebration of Achievement" that:

- *In 2005 97.7% of all 3rd and 5th graders met or exceeded standards and were eligible for promotion.*
- *Over 90% of African American students met or exceeded standards in Reading on the 2005 CRCT in grades 2, 3, 5, and 7. This is compared to 73% in 2004, and less than 50% in 2002.*
- *Average passing rate across all grades was over 80%.*
- *Hispanic students in grades 1-8 improved from 69% meeting or exceeding standards in Reading in 2004 to 84% in 2005.*

Gains have been so significant that the President of the United States referenced Gainesville Elementary School in his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention, referring to their outstanding performance in achieving 90/ 90/ 90 status. This status means that the school's population is 90% minority, 90% low-income, and 90% are still meeting the state's standards for achievement.

Georgia Governor Sonny Perdue, in an interview this year, also praised Gainesville City Schools for their M.A.G.I.C. program and the "tools" associated with it, making known his wish to have a tool like this available to the entire state. State Superintendent of Schools Kathy Cox, also singled out Gainesville and praised Fair Street Elementary and the school system for its accomplishments.

In addition to all of the accolades that have come Gainesville's way in the last year, the moral in the school system has made huge improvements. Not only are they using Testgate to identify problems, they are also using it for recognitions and celebrations. Teachers now have hard evidence that what they are doing in the classroom is working. Students are hugging each other in the hallways when post test scores are posted. The environment is positive and students feel inspired by the progress they are making.

Now, the M.A.G.I.C. model is in its third school year of implementation and it is still going strong. Gainesville has even higher expectations for their state assessment scores in the 2005-2006 school year. Under the leadership of the new Assistant Superintendent for Instruction, Mr. David Shumake, the system is continuing to apply Testgate with tenacity. He frequently says, "Some go to Home Depot and some go to Lowe's to get their tools, GCSS will go to Testgate to get ours."