INNOVATION IN PRACTICE:
A REVIEW OF GEORGIA CHARTER SYSTEMS
This study was commissioned by the Charter System Foundation through support from the Georgia Department of Education. The study was conducted by Greenway Strategy Group; report authors Martha Taylor Greenway and Sherrie Gibney-Sherman. March 2017.
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innovation in practice
GEORGIA’S CHARTER SYSTEMS

A charter system is a local school district that operates under a charter contract with the Georgia Department of Education. Under this contract the school system gains flexibility to innovate in exchange for increased academic accountability. This flexibility includes the ability to waive state laws and rules (with certain exclusions.) Charter system contracts emphasize school-level governance and decision-making that includes parents, teachers and community members. Charter system status may be revoked if district performance does not meet expectations set forth in the charter contract.

Georgia’s first charter systems were approved in 2008. By June 2015, all Georgia local boards of education had to select and approve one of three operating systems: charter system, strategic waiver school system, or status quo. While the strategic waiver option allows flexibility, school-level governance is not required and accountability consequences may affect individual schools. The status quo option does not permit any waiver flexibility from state rules.

There are now 42 approved charter systems in Georgia representing 29% of Georgia’s K-12 public school student population.

Table 1: 2016-17 Georgia Charter Systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Atlanta Public</th>
<th>Dawson County</th>
<th>Liberty County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Banks County</td>
<td>Dougherty County</td>
<td>Madison County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barrow County</td>
<td>Dublin City</td>
<td>Marietta City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baldwin County</td>
<td>Fannin County</td>
<td>Morgan County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calhoun City</td>
<td>Floyd County</td>
<td>Peach County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candler County</td>
<td>Fulton County</td>
<td>Putnam County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carrollton City</td>
<td>Gainesville City</td>
<td>Randolph County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartersville City</td>
<td>Gilmer County</td>
<td>Stephens County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catoosa County</td>
<td>Glascock County</td>
<td>Terrell County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Of Decatur</td>
<td>Gordon County</td>
<td>Tift County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffee County</td>
<td>Haralson County</td>
<td>Union County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarke County</td>
<td>Hart County</td>
<td>Vidalia City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colquitt County</td>
<td>Jasper County</td>
<td>Warren County</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce City</td>
<td>Lumpkin County</td>
<td>White County</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2: Map of Georgia’s Charter Systems
METHODOLOGY

The Georgia Department of Education prepares an Annual Charter System Report that compiles data on standard indicators for charter systems, including the following measures:

- Schools within the charter system that outperform comparable schools on the state accountability system, the College and Career Readiness Performance Index (CCRPI)
- Demonstrated proficiency or improvement on the CCRPI
- Comparison to the state average on the CCRPI
- Climate ratings
- Economic sustainability
- Implementation of school-level governance
- Performance of the charter system against its charter contract performance targets.

It is not the intent of this report to replicate the performance indicators published by the Georgia Department of Education, but rather to enlighten understanding of Georgia’s charter systems by describing several key areas that make charter systems unique, specifically:

- Which waivers to state laws and rules are most commonly utilized?
- What innovative practices have been fully implemented using those waivers?
- How do charter systems use the supplemental funding provided from the state to support innovation?
- What have charter systems accomplished through use of waivers and innovations? For this last question, this report looks beyond the standard measures to understand how instructional processes and practices have changed, and examines the qualitative and quantitative student benefits that have been achieved in the near term.
OVERVIEW OF CHARTER SYSTEM PRACTICES

Use of Waivers
The following chart indicates the waivers reported by the 42 approved charter systems in their annual report to the Georgia Department of Education. Waivers utilized by more than 50% of charter systems are indicated in red.

Table 3: Use of Waivers to State Laws and Rules

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Program Flexibility</th>
<th>Number of Charter Systems</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational Programs: General programs, Early Intervention Program (EIP), Remedial Education, Alternative Education, and English Learners</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of Schools; Middle School Programs; Schedule</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competencies and Core Curriculum, Online Learning</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion &amp; Retention</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduation Requirements for the purpose of substitution of equivalent or higher level requirements which will assist students in acquiring the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful as they continue their education at the postsecondary level and/or enter the workforce</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health &amp; Physical Education Program except as prohibited by O.C.G.A. §20-2-82(e)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Attendance, Compulsory Attendance as it relates to the attendance protocol</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Human Resources Flexibility                                                                  |                            |            |
| Class-size and Reporting requirements                                                        | 39                         | 93%        |
| Personnel Required                                                                           | 22                         | 52%        |
| Employment, Conditions of Employment as it relates to Duty Free Lunch                        | 13                         | 31%        |
| Salary Schedule Requirements                                                                 | 11                         | 26%        |
| Certification Requirements                                                                   | 31                         | 74%        |
| School Day and Year for Students and Employees                                               | 20                         | 48%        |

| Financial Flexibility                                                                       |                            |            |
| Direct Classroom Expenditure Control                                                         | 22                         | 52%        |
| Scheduling for Instruction/Program Enrollment & Appropriations (except to the extent it relates to funding) | 22                         | 52%        |
| QBE Financing except to the extent it relates to funding                                     | 16                         | 38%        |
| Categorical Allotment requirements, Article 6 of Chapter 2 of Title 20                       | 16                         | 38%        |

The term QBE refer to the state funding formula for Georgia's schools (the Quality Basic Education Act.) This formula is dependent upon a report of student FTEs (or full-time equivalents.) Students are weighted in the formula based upon various characteristics such as grade level and special program requirements. This report also includes the term “FTE” and “FTE reporting”, which refer to the basis by which the funding formula is determined.
INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

Of particular interest are those innovations that have been fully implemented, and that would have required a waiver to state law or rule without charter system status. While charter systems are generally innovative by nature, the “bargain” in the charter system contract is flexibility from state law with the theory that this will lead to improved student achievement. The following table provides several examples of fully implemented innovations that charter systems indicate would have required a waiver.

Table 4: Example Innovative Practices Fully Implemented in 2015-16 Requiring a Waiver to State Law or Rule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human Resources</th>
<th>Flexible Program Delivery</th>
<th>Additional Opportunities for Credit Attainment</th>
<th>Creation of New Courses and Learning Opportunities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compensate all employees at competitive rates while valuing prior non-teaching responsibilities associated with an employee’s teaching or support assignment</td>
<td>Allocate staff based on student needs rather than program qualifications</td>
<td>Enhance executive soft skills through credit earning internships and community cooperatives with local businesses</td>
<td>Emphasize 21st Century essential skills throughout the classroom and work experiences from expert speakers, on-site tours, work experiences, and internship/apprenticeships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilize non-certified experts in areas such as art, drama, music, electricity, and welding to provide hands-on learning opportunities</td>
<td>Provide blended learning opportunities for more self-paced differentiated instruction that will cause students to move forward in curriculum acquisition through the use of station rotation, flipped classrooms, STEM labs, and the Innovative Learning Center</td>
<td>Create a regional career academy to allow neighboring districts to pool resources with the technical college to offer students more career pathways</td>
<td>Specialized science, technology, and math programs including robotics in elementary, middle, and high school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implement teacher and leader evaluation instruments (using electronic platform and 1:1 devices)</td>
<td>Utilize flexible scheduling to meet individual learners’ needs</td>
<td>Incorporate a 45-minute pullout segment targeted at remediation, acceleration, STEM focus, and other areas of interests for students</td>
<td>Implement Microsoft Industry Certifications at middle school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Create Junior Fire Fighter Program with the city, students are taking courses from firefighters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Implement a Reading Transition Course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Expand postsecondary partnerships to include academic and vocational opportunities for all students based on the needs of the student population and the regional economic community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Integrate computer coding in math</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Grading and Graduation Requirements**

- Implement criterion-based grading
- Create three K-5 schools that will each have a unique academic theme to involve students in project based learning to learn performance standards
- Modify graduation requirements to allow credit for math support
- Implement Fifth Grade Academy at middle school
- Enhance leadership programs and career pathways at middle and high school
- Operate and continue to build and implement programs at the College and Career Academy
- Broader graduation requirements to ensure students are fully prepared for the world of work and post-secondary education and students provided alternative ways to earn credit
- Adjust graduation requirements to focus more on individual student needs and interests

**SCHOOL-LEVEL GOVERNANCE**

By law, Georgia charter systems are required to “maximize school level governance,” which is defined by state rule as decision-making authority in personnel decisions, financial decisions, curriculum and instruction, resource allocation, establishing and monitoring the achievement of school improvement goals, and school operations. The theory of charter system governance is that those closest to the students have the best sense of how flexibility can meet student needs, as well as how resources can best be utilized. All charter system schools must elect School Governance Teams (SGTs), which are sometimes called School Governance Councils (SGCs.) SGTs must include parents, teachers and community members and sometimes include other school staff, school administrators, or students.

The Georgia Department of Education provides charter systems with a list of possible areas of school autonomy, and asks that they indicate the proportion of schools with autonomy in those areas. The chart below is based upon 32 charter systems that were fully operational in the 2015-16 school year. Of particular note are those systems that allow all SGTs or no SGTs autonomy in each area, as this indicates the general willingness to delegate decision-making authority in these areas. Those charter systems that did not select None or All stated that some of their SGTs had such autonomy, but not all.

**Table 5: 2015-16 Charter System School Autonomy**
Percentage of 32 active charter systems reporting that None or All of their charter system’s School Governing Teams/Councils either directly or indirectly made or affirmed such decisions.
Numbers in red = greater than 50%

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control Over the People in the School</th>
<th>No SGTs</th>
<th>All SGTs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Selection of principal</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development requirements and planning for staff</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection of professional development vendors and resources</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of staff</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issuance of annual employment contracts from the non-profit governing board</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control Over What Occurs in the School</td>
<td>No SGTs</td>
<td>All SGTs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection of curriculum, including any changes in curriculum as needed to improve student achievement</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose instructional delivery model(s)</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection of courses and programs offered</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice of textbooks, technology, and instructional materials</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish additional graduation requirements</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set course and credit requirements</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish seat time</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set student technology and physical education skill requirements</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create or modify Career Pathway curricula</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose dual enrollment options</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose credit recovery options</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utilize on-line learning platforms (e.g., Georgia Virtual School)</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish additional mastery level requirements for performance</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Select additional formative and/or summative assessment to determine student levels of mastery and growth</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish delivery model, scheduling, staffing, and supplemental services for EL, SPED, gifted and remedial programs</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish curriculum maps, pacing charts, and methods for monitoring the curriculum</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish lesson plan requirements for teachers</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set school calendar, including length of school year, holidays, early release days, etc.</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity Description</td>
<td>No SGTs</td>
<td>All SGTs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set daily/weekly school and/or class schedules, including length of school day</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Select co-curricular and extracurricular activities</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish after school and Saturday programs as needed</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set enrichment and/or advisory periods as needed</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish field trips including locations, date</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish placement and promotion criteria</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set class size/student : teacher ratios</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set staff-to-student ratios for non-class times (i.e., lunch, recess, specials, transitions, etc.)</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set grading and reporting policies, plans, process, schedules, and formats</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manage curriculum and instruction affairs independent of the central office, including curriculum and instruction policies, procedures, and handbooks</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A non-staff member serves on the school improvement planning team</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Control Over the School’s Finances & Budget

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity Description</th>
<th>No SGTs</th>
<th>All SGTs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Set budget priorities with funds received and exercise discretion over expenditure for all state and local funds, and as permissible, federal funds</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manage fiscal affairs independent of the central office, including financial policies and standard operating procedures</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring that the school receives all the per-pupil funding to which it is entitled and raising additional funds through fundraising efforts</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain a reserve fund</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Control Over the School’s Operations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity Description</th>
<th>No SGTs</th>
<th>All SGTs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Determine how the school uses the facility</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishes school partnerships for school growth</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selects vendors aligned with needs of the school</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manages transportation decisions, including authority to contract for transportation service</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manages food service decisions, including authority to contract for food service</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selects information systems (i.e., Student Information System, financial information systems)</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishes school size</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishes school grade span different from typical primary, elementary, middle and high school public school models (i.e., 4-8, K-8, K-12)</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority over attendance policies</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establish student code of conduct and behavior policies, plans, processes, and formats</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manage operational affairs independent of the central office, including operational policies, standard operating procedures, and handbooks</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority over fundraisers and the use of these funds</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Unlike start-up charter schools, independent autonomy for many of the areas listed above is considered problematic for charter system schools, as local boards of education are still legally and fiscally accountable for their operations. This concern is reflected in the proportion of charter systems that do not allow any of their SGTs autonomy in several of these areas. In addition to issues of legal and fiscal oversight, charter systems are part of an inter-connected group of schools within a district, making many operational decisions dependent upon the requirements of other schools and the district as a whole.

**USE OF SUPPLEMENTAL CHARter SYSTEM FUNDS**

Georgia charter systems receive an additional state funding allocation, which varies based upon the size of the student population. The purpose of these funds is to support innovative practices, school improvement plans, and governance. Many charter systems allow local SGTs to create innovative proposals for the use of these funds, and then distribute the funds through a grant process to local schools.

Charter systems also utilize the funds at the district level to support innovations that require additional resources. Some examples of innovations that have been fully implemented using such funds are included in the table below.

**Table 6. Districts Use of Charter System Funds**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Additional Staffing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching staff for new courses and subjects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New positions to support areas of innovation such as digital media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional tutors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff Development and Growth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional development related to innovations, such as blended learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher leader program with additional compensation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viable employee recruitment and retention program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mini-grants to teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership training for administrators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Additional time for student learning, including before and after school sessions, summer bridge programs, credit recovery and Saturday programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternatives to retention for students who have not mastered the grade-level standards by the end of the traditional grading period by bridging students across grade levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructional Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technology to support instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equipment and supplies for new courses and project-based learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternate use of facilities, off-site lab spaces to increase instructional access</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Additional Programs and Interventions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehensive literacy initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended and hybrid learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert speakers and on-site tours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry-recognized credentialing instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magnet and theme programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Partnerships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early learning collaborative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partnerships with community organizations to support student needs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A REVIEW OF GEORGIA CHARTER SYSTEMS 13
ACCOMPLISHMENTS

One of the concerns expressed by many charter system leaders is that the formal methods of assessing charter school performance focus on standardized state tests that are lagging and take years to influence. Additionally, many of these indicators are influenced by factors other than school district practices, such as changing student demographics or state assessment methods. While there is no question that such measures are important and should be used to monitor progress, if considered exclusively such measures can mask significant interim progress.

Charter system leaders identify numerous interim indicators of success such as enhancements in teacher practices, parent involvement, and community resources. Charter systems also report tangible student outcomes including improvements in engagement, behavior, grades and interim assessments. Several charter system schools have been identified as Highest Performance or Greatest Gains among Title I schools. The following table includes examples of self-reported accomplishments beyond state test results that charter systems considered significant for the 2015-16 school year.

Table 7: Illustrative Charter System 2015-16 Accomplishments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Engagement and Partnership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recruited over 1,000 stakeholders who are interested in service on an SGT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Established PK-12 cluster plans and signature programming for all high school clusters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large increase in parent engagement noted across the district (Examples: 385 parents attended English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Parent night; Academic Parent Teacher Team nights had as many as 80% of parents participate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secured board approval for significant School Turnaround Strategy including rolling out contract management by high-performing school management organizations to 5 low-performing schools in 2016-17 through 2018-19 school years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school’s Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) Summer Internship Program in partnership with local businesses has grown from 12 in FY13 to 41 in FY16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All five district schools received a 5-star Climate Rating</td>
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<tr>
<td>College and Career Academy and Mohawk Industries were named Business Partnership of the Year</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grants and Awards</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Awarded the Striving Readers Grant for a total of $3.3 million to focus on literacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Awarded a Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) grant for $450,000 to focus on STEM at the middle school level</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recognized as one of six school districts in the state and one of 476 school districts in the U.S as the best communities for music education</td>
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<tr>
<td>High school recognized by U.S. News and World Report as one of America’s Best High Schools</td>
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<tr>
<td>Future Farmers of America teams win multiple state titles</td>
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<tr>
<td>High School Recognition by Washington Post Ranking as one of America’s Most Challenging High Schools</td>
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### Academic Achievement

- First group of 8th graders earned high school credit for Spanish I and Honors Algebra I; 81% of middle school students scored Proficient or Distinguished on the Algebra I end-of-course test
- High school obtained AdvancED STEM Certification
- High school was named an Advanced Placement (AP) STEM Achievement School
- AP enrollment has grown from 139 in FY13 to 229 in FY16 with 27 AP Scholars and 3 National AP Scholars
- Elementary school, formerly a school deemed an "Opportunity" school, has earned removal from the Opportunity School List due to their increase in student achievement
- All Georgia Alternative Assessment (GAA) students at elementary school performed at level 4 on GAA
- 43% of seniors demonstrated college-readiness in all four areas of the ACT College Readiness Benchmarks, an increase of three percentage points
- 67.6% of English Learners (EL) made progress toward English proficiency on the ACCESS test, exceeding the state target of 54% 
- 81% of students taking the ACCESS grew one or more grade bands
- 85% of Freshman earned enough credits to become Sophomores in 2015-16 compared to 70% in 2014-15
- 71% of students taking AP exams scored 3 or higher
- 100% of grade levels exceeded the national norm (50th percentile) by school National Percentile Rank (NPR) on the Measures of Academic Performance in Reading.
- 67% of grade levels exceeded the national norm (50th percentile) by school NPR on the Measures of Academic Performance in Mathematics.
- Recognized by GOSA for highest DIBLES scores in Kindergarten of all schools working with GOSA’s early reading initiative

### Credit-bearing and Certification Program Participation

- Dual enrollment courses taken by students have grown from 139 in FY13 to 706 in FY16
- 125 Microsoft Industry Certifications at middle school
- Opened the Academy of Film Production and the Academy of Aviation Sciences, a new Career and Technical Education expansion
- Increased participation in Move On When Ready (40% of juniors and seniors participated in one or more MOWR courses)
- Created an additional pathway based on community economic development feedback, resulting in 42 students enrolled in the Energy Pathway
- Began a new pathway, "Unmanned Aerial Systems," the first in the state
CASE STUDIES

Many Georgia charter systems have only recently been approved for charter system status. In order to more fully understand charter system innovations and the benefits for students, five Georgia school districts were identified for in-depth profiles. These five school districts have been active charter systems for at least five years. All have been recognized for their innovative practices and have demonstrated considerable increases in graduation rates over the past five years, as demonstrated in the graph below. Their achievements represent the potential of mature and pervasive charter system implementation.

Graph 8: Georgia and Selected Charter System 4-Year Graduation Rates

While the innovative practices deployed in these five charter systems are extensive and varied, a limited number have been profiled for each district in order to demonstrate a diverse array of programs and beneficiaries. These case studies illustrate many of the interim student outcomes resulting from innovation and flexibility that will ultimately lead to higher graduation rates, as well as increased opportunities for post-high school success.

The leaders of each of these charter systems have also shared some lessons learned and examples of innovations that did not work as planned. While replication of success is a benefit of innovation, learning and continuous improvement is equally beneficial.

All five of these charter systems have well-functioning SGTs that are supported through sophisticated district processes. While not necessarily unique, the structures and supports provided to these SGTs represent best practice. Elections of SGTs are well organized and inclusive. SGT members are formally trained and prepared for their roles. SGT meetings are appropriately structured and communicated to all stakeholders. Several of these school districts have formal processes for convening SGT leaders across schools throughout the year to share experiences, and others have regular interactions between SGT and board of education members. These five districts all provide SGTs a role in developing innovative practices at their schools.

Superintendents and district leaders in these charter systems describe the tremendous benefits gained by having SGT members, who represent teachers, parents and the larger community, more involved with the work of district schools. This involvement benefits the schools by bringing stronger partnerships and broader perspectives, and serves to create advocates and ambassadors for the school district within the larger community.
**DISTRICT PROFILE**

**Student Enrollment:** 4,174, 22% of students reside outside of Calhoun City and pay a small amount for tuition.  
**Schools:** 1 Primary, 1 Elementary, 1 Middle, 1 High, in addition to a Pre-School/Pre-Kindergarten program and an online learning academy.  
**Starting Year of Charter Implementation:** 2011

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**Student Demographics**

- White: 54%
- Hispanic: 34%
- Black: 7%
- Other: 4%

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**Student Needs**

- Free/Reduced Lunch: 60%
- English Language Learners: 65%
- Students with Disabilities: 70%

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**4-Year Graduation Rates**

- Graduation Rate 2012: 70%
- Graduation Rate 2016: 90%
As the county seat of Gordon County, the City of Calhoun is located one hour north of Atlanta, Georgia and 45 minutes south of Chattanooga, Tennessee. The city population is approximately 15,650. Calhoun lies in the valley that was the heart of the Cherokee Nation. Today it is the center of northwest Georgia's textile industry and sits in the middle of “Auto Alley.” Gordon County ranks in the top third of Georgia’s 159 counties economically.

**GENESIS AND HISTORY OF CHARTER SYSTEM**

Calhoun City Schools initially applied for charter system status in 2011, and is now in their second charter system contract. When asked about the benefit of becoming a charter system, Superintendent Taylor replied, “We want to find a way to say yes to the things we know can help our students.” In the past, teachers and administrators were taught to follow the rules defined by the state. Dr. Taylor stated, “We needed to find a way out of the box. People see the light bulb go on when they figure out they can do things they want by not being tied to seat time and class size.” Through the charter system, the district has created a culture of innovation. Over the course of the charter, the district has seen an increase in students wanting individualized education based on their post-secondary goals. The charter system status allows the district to respond to this.

Calhoun City Schools continues to participate in state innovations. They were the first to pilot the integration of AdvancEd accreditation and charter system renewal, serving as a testing ground and identifying opportunities for future refinements. Through the strategic planning process, Calhoun engaged SGTs, leadership teams, students, teachers, parents and the community to define what it means to be a school system of excellence focused on continuous improvement. The AdvancED External Review Team, along with the Department of Education Charter division, commended Calhoun for its strong leadership throughout the process.

They are currently one of a few pilot school districts that are consolidating state, local, and federal funds, which they view as a tremendous advantage to meeting the needs of students. While planning for the pilot program has been time consuming and arduous, the district is committed to doing whatever it takes to merge federal, state, and local funds during these economically challenging times with the end goal of creating a process for all systems in Georgia to replicate. Calhoun is also piloting a data dashboard developed through the GaDOE, including not just CCRPI results but data for school improvement processes. In addition, they have assisted the GaDOE in the pilot of the TestPad assessment system. While devoting their time, effort, and expertise, they have created paths for other systems to follow.
Through their charter system, they are now seeking to move innovation into the individual classroom level by building capacity and empowering teachers to lead and design innovative approaches. During recent superintendent “Fireside chats,” teachers identified instructional resources they needed for their classrooms. The teachers did not realize they had the ability to define what they needed for their classroom and simply order the materials, rather than waiting for district approval. Moving the “Yes” mind-set into the classroom is the next challenge. In the words of Superintendent Taylor, “I know I would be a better teacher if I were in this environment.”

SIGNIFICANT INNOVATIONS

A. Calhoun Online Learning Academy (COLA)
This is the fourth year of the district’s online learning academy. Initially, there was some uncertainty over the design of the program, but Dr. Taylor and the Chief Academic Officer had a vision of what they wanted for their students and allowed it to evolve based on feedback from students and parents. This theme of continuous learning and adjustment is key to Calhoun’s charter system success.

COLA serves a variety of students for a variety of reasons. The district is able to serve students with outside interests that would make traditional school difficult, such as students who are training for professional tennis or modeling aspirations. Home school students can also enroll in specific classes, and are then considered enrolled in Calhoun City Schools for purposes of extra-curricular participation. (While some districts have a separate school code for the virtual school, Calhoun registers virtual students in a program of the middle or high school.) In addition to full-time enrollment in COLA, traditional high school students can attend for part of the day based upon their learning preferences, need for credit recovery, or course requirements.

In addition to voluntary participation based upon student interest, COLA is the preferred placement to meet the needs of students who have been suspended from the traditional school environment. COLA allows students to stay on track during their disciplinary period. If students placed for disciplinary reasons demonstrate positive behavior, attendance, and grades during their time at COLA, they are permitted to return to the high school after a semester or a year based on the recommendation of a review committee. Some of these students prefer to stay in the online environment part time, using a hybrid schedule.

In the past four years, enrollment in the COLA has grown 400%, to about 100 students. The district expects enrollment to continue to grow as the demand for virtual environments continues to increase.

COLA is physically located with the district central office. Having a physical location is important, as certified teachers assist with questions and support, as well as providing some supervision for special education students. Teachers rotate in and out during the day. The district was intentional not to let it grow too fast. There is an application process, including an interview with the parent and student, to ensure that students are a good fit for the virtual learning environment. During the interview, there is also discussion about the work environment at home that is required for success.
Generally, COLA uses courses on a variety of platforms developed by other organizations such as the Georgia Virtual School and Odysseyware.

The biggest challenge with COLA has been transportation, as the building is some distance from the high school. Next year it will open in a newly constructed facility right across the street from the high school campus so that students can walk. Originally, there was concern that if it were physically part of the high school, COLA would develop a stigma as an “alternative school” for those who had been assigned to the program. The separate location prevented that stigma and has allowed COLA to be viewed as a viable learning option for students to meet a myriad of learning needs and objectives, whether for acceleration, remediation, flexibility or access to coursework the district cannot provide internally. Charter, funds were used to support COLA through the integration of technology to create a 21st century learning environment.

**B. Summer Health and Physical Education Option**

In line with their commitment to reach a 100% 4-year graduation rate and meet the individual needs of students, Calhoun City Schools created a unique opportunity for students to complete their Health and Physical Education requirement in the summer prior to 9th grade. This provides an additional class period during the regular school year for remediation, acceleration, or coursework of interest to the student such as a career pathway. Since the inception of the program in 2014, approximately 220 students have taken advantage of this opportunity.

Rising 9th graders were invited to attend a one-week summer health session from 8:30am – 2:30pm each day. Students participating in this course were also required to document 30 hours of athletic activity in one of several school-sponsored sports or activities under the direction of a certified Calhoun City Schools coach/instructor. Upon completion of the weeklong health course and the 30 hours of athletic activity, students earned one half unit of health and one half unit of personal fitness. This met requirements for their 9th grade year and allowed them to participate in an alternate course as chosen during the 9th grade registration process.

Completion of the 30 athletic hours resulted in the grade of 100, or an A, for the state course requirement of Personal Fitness on the student’s permanent transcript upon approval by the CHS counseling department. Those school sponsored sports/activities approved for credit are: Baseball, Basketball, Cheerleading, Cross Country, Football, Golf, Soccer, Softball, Swimming, Tennis, Track, Volleyball, Band Camp, Choreography Camp, and Wrestling.

Calhoun continues to do more with less. No Charter funds were utilized in this innovative practice. Staff members already on extended day contracts maximized their time to provide more opportunities for students.

**C. Flexible Use of Instructional Time**

Calhoun City School’s “Yes” mind-set extends to the use of time during the school day. Waiving seat time and class size opens the doors to many different scheduling opportunities, allowing the district to better meet student needs. Rather than stressing over FTE requirements and reporting, the district and school leaders plan the instructional schedule that is best for their students. While still being certain to maximize funding for students by providing the required amount of service and support, they are able to use judgment and make decisions about how best to allocate staff during the school day – and even beyond the school day to before, after, and during summer.
1. Kindergarten through 5th grade
Through innovative use of teacher time, Calhoun City’s EL students are actually getting more instructional time than required. The Primary and Elementary School Summer Camp for EL students ran for six weeks in the summer of 2016. The program was staffed through flexed days with staff from the regular school year, as well as make-up for snow days. Teachers had to identify a number of days to “flex” from the regular school day to the summer. School administrative leadership and teacher leaders examined the school calendar and activities to determine the appropriate amount of flex days, being sure to add this as a supplemental service for EL students.

The program served rising 1st and 3rd graders. The school intentionally selected the students who participated—focusing on moderate students who did not have other significant learning challenges.

Not all teachers were ESOL endorsed. Most of the teachers were special program teachers rather than regular classroom teachers, due to their increased ability to take flex days. The district managed the variability in teachers by focusing the summer program on literacy and utilizing a purchased program with scripted materials, which teachers received in advance. Students rotated through reading, writing, listening and speaking centers. There was an intentional effort to assign the strongest teachers to the reading segment. Students could also use adaptive technology to support literacy acquisition.

The ESOL team participated in the development of the program using charter funds. Charter funds were also used to support transportation to the program. Additionally, the school nutrition program provided breakfast, lunch and a snack.

Almost all of the students who participated returned to Calhoun City Schools for the 2016-17 school year. The district plans to repeat the program in the summer of 2017 and will expand to eight weeks.

As an additional model of flexible scheduling, the primary and elementary schools have implemented a morning tutorial program. Bus riders arrive at 7:00, but instruction starts at 8:00. By allowing non-instructional staff to flex their schedules during the day, they can assume duties normally held by teachers between the 7:00 and 8:00 time, such as breakfast and bus duty. This allows these teachers to provide small group tutorials during this before-school time, four days a week. The program is focused on students in the Student Support Team (SST) process. Students are assigned to the program on a fluid basis, based on their current performance levels. The program is very individualized and focuses on reading fluency and high-frequency words. This innovative approach allows students to participate in supplemental reading instruction without missing grade-level instruction during the regular school day. The schools are seeing positive growth for students who are participating, as monitored through interim assessments. In the future, they are hoping to extend the weeks the program is available by giving days off during the school year for the non-instructional staff, in addition to allowing flexible daily schedules.
2. Middle and High School

Flexibility in scheduling has allowed both the middle and high school to move to a modified block schedule, using four daily 75-minute periods, rather than 90-minute periods as with the typical block schedule. The schools’ teachers were confident they could effectively teach the required curriculum within the 75-minute periods. The 75-minute periods allowed them to add a 5th period each day that includes credit-bearing courses as well as some non-standards based education. This allows students to expand and enrich learning, or access extra support. Course offerings extend beyond state approved courses. Each student participates in two, 5th-period courses each semester.

As an additional benefit, many of the 5th period classes are larger than the core courses on the block schedule. Some teachers are assigned the 5th period as a planning period. This makes more teachers available for the core block-scheduled classes, allowing a reduction in class size for targeted classes.

While all 5th period classes are graded, not all are credit-bearing. Only credit-bearing courses are averaged into the students’ GPAs, although all are shown on the report card and the transcript.

The non-standards based courses feature innovative program- ming such as swim class, combination math/yoga class, Men of Distinction – designed for at-risk students, and Odyssey of the Mind. Clubs such as Future Business Leaders of America and Future Farmers of America meet during the 5th period. Through charter funds, teachers submit proposals to create new courses and lessons. One example of a charter innovation grant led to an advanced drama course during the school day utilizing a choreographer and other experts to assist with instruction. Previously, students would have had to participate in such programs after the school day.

In other examples, the 5th period is used to allow extended time for dual-enrollment and AP courses where students need additional time for the course material or to complete labs. Other students may use this time to take credit-bearing support courses, or career technology courses such as graphic design. Students can also participate in dual enrollment courses and work-based learning during the 5th period, which has significantly increased participation in those programs.

Students with disabilities who have teachers assigned as their case manager are able to meet with that individual during this period for individualized support. At the middle school, one of their 5th periods is for intervention related to students in the SST process, as well as others who are struggling. Because of the fluidity of the 5th period and non-standards based curriculum, they can move students in and out of the intervention classes based on needs. Through iterative assessment and intervention, students assigned to the intervention segment are constantly changing.

Other students may return to work with their classroom teacher during the 5th period for extra help and support. One teacher each 5th period is assigned to a “study hall” where students who have missed tests or assignments can make them up in a supervised setting, rather than having to schedule a time before or after school with their regular classroom teacher.
In the words of a high school administrator, “We need to have flexibility to move students around based on needs. Every student has an unofficial IEP. We have to accommodate needs of students. We don’t do what’s easy, we do what is right. We do what is best for kids.”

The 5th-period is now in its second year at the high school and first year at the middle school. Because the schools are on the same schedule, teachers teach across 6-12. The schools have seen benefits in attendance and discipline, with a slight increase in overall attendance and an over 30% decrease in discipline referrals. Even though the 5th period allows a great deal of movement of students around the building, there are very few disciplinary incidents. Administrators and teachers report that students are more engaged while they are at school. Detention is served during 5th period, which serves as a deterrent, as students do not want to miss it. Administrators also report qualitative feedback from students that they have more time to spend with family or just “be a kid,” because the 5th period provides time at school to get things done.

By allowing students the flexibility to take additional courses and have greater course choices through COLA, the summer health and P.E. opportunity, and the 5th period, Calhoun City Schools is achieving an increased percentage of students completing at least one career pathway with many students completing two. During their first year as a College and Career Academy, 20 students completed a pathway, while in 2016, 300 completed coursework and took a career pathway assessment. In addition, approximately 90% of the 2016 high school students completed a pathway in the areas of fine arts, academic rigor, and/or college and career.

This greater flexibility and choice has also driven ever-higher four-year graduation rates.

**OTHER BENEFITS AND LESSONS LEARNED**

Flexibility in course design has allowed Calhoun City Schools to develop career pathways based on needs in their community, as these needs evolve over time. They are in the process of designing a STEM related pathway, which is in its first year of implementation. They have found that in many cases, the state career pathway curriculum does not fit their community needs, particularly in the area of manufacturing. They are now trying to integrate manufacturing into all of their career pathways, such as graphic design. Career Technical labs are located throughout the campus to avoid the “vocational” stigma. The district had to advocate with the state to attain this flexibility when designing their high school.

Calhoun City Schools' apprenticeship programs place more than one hundred, 11th and 12th grade students in the community. As part of the state’s Great Promise Partnership, students who are challenged to graduate for various reasons are engaged in work with mentors who make sure they are successful in their classes. Through the block schedule and flexible learning options, these students have structured their school days so they can work one day and then go to school one day. These students generally need to work, and could potentially drop out otherwise.
In future innovations, Calhoun City Schools is considering using blended learning to create some courses with larger numbers of students. Students could choose a regular class size or a 250-student seminar environment with online support. They are also considering methods to reach children in their community at one and two years of age. In one pilot program, they are utilizing teachers and high school students in the early childhood pathway to work with children in a neighborhood behind the school. They are in the process of converting a bus into a mobile learning lab to take students into the community to work with young children.

Calhoun officials stress the importance of continuous learning and responsiveness in implementation. Sometimes innovations need to be modified mid-stream. A major lesson learned was that some changes were required in administration because there were a number of traditional thinkers, even after early attempts to bring them on board. While there is a need to recognize the positive aspect of tradition and culture, a different mind set is needed to lead in a charter system. Leaders cannot be afraid to innovate. Key to this is a supportive system administration and board of education. In the words of a district administrator, “We build the plane as we are flying it and we are fortunate to have the support from all stakeholders to take risks in order to create learning environments where students can fulfill their potential.”

Moving this innovative mind-set to the classroom level is also a continuing challenge. As an example, initially the middle/high school administration had a struggle with 5th period. If teachers were not delivering with fidelity, students did not take it seriously. Some teachers were viewing the 5th period as another planning period. It was critical to find subject matter tied to both teacher and student interests. When teachers were engaged in designing 5th period courses, to offer their ideas and create courses they championed and thought best for students, they began to buy in. As a result, the level of instruction and student engagement improved.

There has been a culture shift while at the same time continuing the tradition of excellence set forth by Calhoun City Schools. Now the charter system means flexibility and possibility to teachers. In the past, teachers were very standards-driven. Now they are thinking about moving beyond. They are also thinking “outside the four walls” and realizing it is okay to leave the classroom. In the words of the middle/high school principal, “I want our kids to be prepared for life. Teaching is about teaching and learning. Learning is fun. Sometimes what our kids need goes beyond the standards.” The goal of Calhoun City Schools is to prepare lifelong learners by educating the student to be successful in all aspects of life.
FULTON COUNTY SCHOOLS

DISTRICT PROFILE

Student Enrollment: 96,500
Schools: 59 Elementary, 18 Middle, 17 High, 10 Other
Starting Year of Charter Implementation: 2012

Student Needs

Student Demographics

- White: 30%
- Black: 43%
- Hispanic: 15%
- Asian: 10%
- Other: 3%

4-Year Graduation Rates

- Graduation Rate 2012: 60%
- Graduation Rate 2016: 70%
Fulton County, located in metro Atlanta, is the largest Georgia school system in geographic area – more than 70 miles long – and the fourth largest Georgia system in student population.

**GENESIS AND HISTORY OF CHARTER SYSTEM**

An aggressive community and staff engagement process was used to review the charter system option over a two-year period. Seven community forums were held to collect feedback on the charter system model. In that process, the vision of an ideal school was defined. Fulton County Schools transitioned to the charter system model over a three-year period. Three cohorts of schools were formed, with one cohort moving to the charter system model each year. Each cohort received training and support to establish a school governance council (SGC) and to create a school-wide strategic plan. Schools were then able to request flexibility through waivers and apply for seed fund grants, supported through charter system funds. In the first year of implementation the central office was reorganized to form a support structure for the charter system model.

**SIGNIFICANT INNOVATIONS**

Schools within the district have utilized waivers and funding to support several school-based, strategic innovations as part of the charter system process, including the creation of an alternative media center design at Centennial High School, initiatives leading to STEM Certification at Woodland Elementary School, and the establishment of a dual immersion program at Oakley Elementary School.

**A. Media Center Re-Design – Centennial High School**

Centennial High School used Fulton’s charter system funds to transform the media center in 2014-2015. The media center was transformed into a 21st Century Learning Commons with new learning spaces – including a unique designated maker-space area called “The Space” – that encourages use of technology, provides support for personalized learning opportunities, and creates a hub for future innovations. The Learning Commons is a progressive learning environment and a place for mentoring, informational technology, tutoring, collaboration, content creation, meeting, reading, and study. Every student has access to his or her own device, and students are tasked with providing professional development for other students and staff. Students are encouraged to create and build objects using hands on activities with new technology.

In order to use “The Space,” students have to meet certain requirements, including passing a safety quiz, describing the purpose and requirements of the project, and reserving a time for The Space area. A student leader (Space Cadet) helps supervise and support fellow students in the lab. Student leaders receive academic credit for their leadership roles.
Several YouTube videos have been posted featuring Centennial’s Learning Commons.

Students love these new innovations. Students describe their experience through statements such as:

• “I come in here (Learning Commons) every morning. I love having a good charging station and having a good place to sit. My favorite, favorite part of the media center is the new sunroom. Different friends come in for study sessions.”

• “Everyone is talking to each other. There is a more progressive learning environment in Learning Commons.”

• “Learning Commons is a place where students can come to learn in their own way.”

• “The Space (special room in The Learning Commons for students to create hands-on projects) is a place for students to create and see their ideas become a reality”

• “There are now many more ways of completing an assignment.”

Comments from parents have also been overwhelmingly positive:

• “The School Governance Council members worked hard to create Learning Commons. We researched the best practices. We shopped for the best materials and design. We actually pulled up the carpet off the floors.”

• “Students can now use The Space and Learning Commons to complete school projects. Having this space empowers students to be in charge of their own learning.”

• “We are preparing students with a skill set for the 21st century.”

Teachers have echoed these remarks, adding:

• “Having the Learning Commons and other labs located in each academic department is changing how we are teaching.”

• “Students can write on the walls, we can check each other’s work, students get instant feedback. They get information where and how they need it. The design of the building is revolutionizing the way we teach.”

• “Students really wanted the new design. They get very frustrated if they go into a room and a teacher is not using technology. They are really leveraging the space.”

• “Education does not need to be stuck in one sort of mode. We can adapt as rapidly as industry and the world changes around us.”

The school principal noted that, “My role is to execute the vision. The SGC works well together to plan and support students. You have to stay loyal to the process, make sure the stakeholder’s voice is heard.” School parents expressed their appreciation; one noted that, “It is important to have a principal who is open to ideas. The principal’s attitude sets the tone… All the furniture, the design of the school, and other learning areas support personalized learning which is the focus of our strategic plan… The universal response from parents has been, Wow!”
Centennial’s success in the media center has had a wide-ranging impact within the school and beyond. Learning spaces have changed throughout the school building. The graduation rate has increased from 76% to 90%, and the school’s SAT scores are now among the top 25 in the state, with 100% of all seniors taking the SAT. Most dramatically, the redesign was transferred to all high school media centers, as all 17 Fulton high schools were allocated funds from the district to redesign their media centers using the Learning Commons model.

B. STEM Certified School – Woodland Elementary School

At Woodland Elementary School, the SGC focused on providing students opportunities for real life experiences in the community and in their own lives. Teachers and staff were committed to project-based learning. They examined the district’s strategic plan and the required standards and collectively determined that the STEM concept – Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math – would be a good fit for the school. In 2015-2016, Woodland submitted an application to the GaDOE to be approved as a certified STEM school. Seed Fund dollars were requested by the SGC and approved by the district to create a STEM environment, including an indoor aquaponics classroom, coding and robotics programs, after-school STEM clubs, and additional equipment for the school. The school was awarded STEM certification in 2016.

New partnerships were formed to support STEM. For example, Woodland has joined the Dunwoody Nature Center (DNC) on a major initiative to help protect the Monarch butterfly and raise awareness of the decline of the Monarch population. Woodland is helping by planting and harvesting milkweed. Woodland offered curriculum feedback on newly designed milkweed lessons. First grade classes germinated additional milkweed plants distributed throughout the building. A data collection chart was placed near the butterfly garden where students can tally the number of Monarch butterflies they see around campus. The DNC has supported teachers by creating curriculum, conducting classes, and participating in the family and community STEM night.

STEM after-school clubs were developed and offered at no cost to students including:

- Lego WeDo: LEGO® Education WeDo is an early robotics club for 1st and 2nd graders that enables students to learn, construct, and then bring their Lego models to life.
- Science Olympiad: Students in grades 3-5 are given an opportunity to compete for one of the limited spots on the Woodland Science Olympiad. Students who are chosen for the Olympiad meet weekly to prepare for this science competition, which provides rigorous, standards-based challenges for students.
- Gardening and Culinary Arts Club: Offered to students to engage in, and learn about the world of gardening. Students learn how to cultivate food from beginning to end and prepare dishes with their harvest.

Professional development at Woodland was redefined to support the school’s STEM efforts. The SGC applied for Seed Funds, in partnership with their regional schools, to fund four days of professional development. This time allowed teachers to work collaboratively to plan units, learn content, unpack standards, and become comfortable in their new way of teaching. Teachers were engaged in such content topics as: Intentional Integration of Math and Science; Genius Hour; Rigor and Relevance Framework; Higher Order Questioning; STEM Expectations and Lesson Development; Integrated Lesson Planning; Transformational Technology; Adding Rigor to Your Math Stations; Patient Problem Solvers; Nanotechnology – Understanding a Nanometer; and Teaching STEM through Art (in partnership with The High Museum of Art). These “STEM Planning Days” allowed for feedback and reflection throughout the year, not only on the process toward certification, but also on integrated lessons that worked and ones that did not.

Our STEM focus has pushed teachers to be more creative in integrating the parts of STEM education.

- Teacher
Woodland Elementary School
Teachers developed units of study, in partnership with community members, that were relevant to real life. For instance, one class designed a 9-hole putt-putt golf course after interviewing a golf pro, visiting golf courses, and studying the physics of hitting a ball. In another instance, the school wanted to address a situation where birds were flying into windows and dying. Students worked with the STEM coordinator to record data about these birds to determine why and what they could do to prevent this from happening.

Students have responded with great enthusiasm to this new way of teaching and learning. One student noted, “I love that the Engineering Design Process (EDP) we use is cyclical, with no beginning, middle or end. This way, if I want to make changes or improve along the way, I don’t have to start all the way over. My favorite part of the EDP is the improve part because you can constantly make adjustments and changes to improve what you are working on. This is like life, that’s how you learn, by making mistakes and it’s a good thing to make mistakes because you can learn from them and make improvements. I can use what I am learning in the classroom to connect to my own life outside of school.”

One Woodland teacher reflected on the changes at the school: “Our STEM focus has pushed teachers to be more creative in integrating the parts of STEM education. In the fall of 2014, Woodland sent a small team of STEM teachers to the National Science Teacher Association conference, a professional development opportunity funded by a charter grant. We came back from that conference with an idea for a large-scale project: create, engineer, and build a 9-hole putt-putt indoor golf course that could be used to teach students about force and motion. We integrated several math concepts into this design (area, perimeter, angle measurement), and had students budgeting expenses for the project, as well as charting/graphing both aspects of the build as well as their scores during play. This project brought our students together as problem solvers, too, an invaluable real-world project-based learning experience from which we would launch others.”

The Woodland principal agreed with these sentiments, noting the great changes seen across the school community: “Kids now understand how things connect. They are not learning content in isolation. They are solving real world problems. Parents have become more involved in student progress monitoring to make sure our students are mastering content along with these great units. We have just started having student-led parent conferences where students are able to explain their progress and areas of need. We are doing more planning and communicating with our feeder schools. STEM work done at elementary schools will support future work in middle and high schools.”
The STEM approach at Woodland has yielded impressive results. Teachers changed the way they planned and delivered instruction, and the school developed stronger connections with feeder schools in the region. There were also major gains in the Georgia Milestones scores, with significant increases in the number of students scoring at “Proficient” or above in the areas of English Language, Arts, Science, and Social Studies. The largest gain was in the area of Science, which is directly impacted by the Seed Fund and the Request for Flexibility (RFF) professional learning days. For example, for the 2016 Milestones exams:

- 5th grade students achieved a 2% increase in the “Developing” level and above;
- 5th grade students achieved a 3% increase in “Proficient” and above;
- 4th graders achieved an 8% increase in the “Developing” level and above; and
- 4th graders achieved an 11% increase in 2016 GA Milestones Science of students scoring “Proficient” and above.

As a result of these efforts, in 2017 Woodland was nominated and named as a finalist in three categories for the Technology Association of Georgia TAG-ED Awards: Elementary School Program, STEM day activities, and STEM After-School Activities. All three are directly aligned to the Seed Fund award the school received.

Commenting on all of this, a teacher noted that, “Woodland Elementary School received STEM certification in 2016. This milestone is due in large part to the flexibility and resources available as a charter system. At least three years ago, Woodland sought necessary buy-in from its certified and classified staff to the rigorous path to STEM certification. The school administration proposed four RFF (Request for Flexibility) days so that the entire staff could receive training, education, and professional development on everything from general requirements for the certification to detailed planning sessions on integrated lesson units that would cross-cut the Humanities and STEM curricula. These ‘STEM Planning Days’ allowed for feedback and reflection throughout the year, not only on the process toward certification, but also on integrated lessons that worked and ones that did not. Without these workdays dedicated to STEM planning, Woodland would not have achieved its STEM certification as soon as it did.”

C. Dual Immersion Program – Oakley Elementary School

The principal at Oakley Elementary School heard about the “Dual Immersion” program and the impact it could have on student achievement. She brought this idea to the SGC and her staff. They reviewed the program, checked for alignment to the school’s strategic plan, studied the model, observed the model in neighboring counties, and prepared a RFF to present to the Fulton County superintendent. Their proposal was approved along with funding to develop project-based learning. The parents of Oakley Elementary selected Mandarin Chinese as the language of focus.

The SGC decided to roll out the program in a cohort model. In 2015-2016 they started with 50-kindergarten students who were selected by lottery. These students were assigned to two teachers – one social studies/reading, and language arts teacher for half of the day, and a second teacher, providing instruction in mathematics and
science – using Mandarin only – the second half of the day. Two sets of 25 children rotated between the two classes. In 2016-2017 the kindergartners went on to the first grade with the same structure while another set of 50 kindergarten students were introduced to the immersion program.

In this model, students learn academic content and Mandarin Chinese, at the same time. Fifty percent of the day is spent in a Chinese classroom. The students do not work on learning the language, but rather are immersed in the language to learn math and science. No direct language instruction occurs. Oakley now has two elementary teachers with Georgia teaching certificates in Mandarin.

One grade level is to be added each year. By the time students leave Oakley, they will be eligible to take high school courses in Mandarin while in middle school. At the high school level, the students will be eligible for a dual enrollment program. To support these efforts, and other efforts highlighted in the school’s strategic plan, Seed Funds were used to develop a parent resource library in their school.

Parents are very pleased with this arrangement: “I feel like they listened to our voice. We said we wanted our students to have technology and learn Chinese and that is what we got.”

Teachers have added such comments as, “I think it is great to have all of these resources and extra support from the community helping us teach our students. It takes a village. Teachers love working in this school. There are great resources. We like the direction this school is headed. Great staff. Great administration.”

The Oakley principal added, “Knowledge is available anytime. The challenge is how to find the answers. We are working to challenge thinking outside of answers that can be found on Google. We are opening the door for our students in our community and world in order for them to be able to compete globally in the workforce. After parent conferences, we bring parents down to the parent resource room to show them the technology and other instructional resources they can checkout and use at home in order to support their child’s academic success. The Parent Resource Library has really made a difference.”

The Dual Immersion Program has led to many new and exciting partnerships with the Confucius Institute, Kennesaw State University, and other community partners. The relationships through these partnerships provide support to our staff and students as well as scholarship opportunities for our students when they graduate from high school.

Selection into the program is very competitive. Families are now moving into the Oakley attendance zone in hopes that their child will be selected in the lottery process.
As part of this initiative, a series of parent support sessions, titled Parent University, was established to help parents know how to support their students with school assignments. Sessions are held once a month on school-related topics. The establishment of the Parent Resource Library provides parents with access to supplies, Internet connection, and computers. Parents and students can check out technology for home use, and the Resource Library continues to grow and increase in usage.

**OTHER BENEFITS AND LESSONS LEARNED**

In implementing the charter system model, Fulton received a grant from the state and worked with consulting firms to create resources and training for SGC members and principals. Training included in-depth orientation for principals, information sessions for school communities prior to SGC elections; seven hours of required training for all SGC members, executive coaching and leadership workshops for all principals, and additional resources. Central staff facilitators were assigned to individual schools to oversee governance implementation and provide guidance. Fulton also designed an electronic process to manage SGC elections through a secure, online portal.

SGCs manage the process for requesting Seed Fund grants, from ideation and development of the application, to the defense of the request to the Fulton Education Foundation. These grants are awarded to support innovations at the school that align with the school and district strategic plan and support the vision and mission of the school. Seed fund grants are supported through charter system funds.

SGCs also apply for Requests For Flexibility (RFF) to support innovations at their school through waivers from state law or rule, or from district policy. These requests are vetted by an administrative group of district content experts and a final decision is made by the superintendent.

Many lessons have been learned from this work. The process for transitioning into a charter system will not necessarily look the same as a fully-functioning charter system. At the onset, there was a focus on local school autonomy and innovation. While that focus remains, the district is also placing focus on school strategic plans and the use of waivers and flexibility to solve problems and improve student achievement.

Additionally, while there was a strong training regimen provided to principals and SGCs during the transition, Fulton has recognized the need for ongoing training and coaching in the areas of shared governance and change management – skills that are critical now that each of the 93 schools has a working SGC with decision-making authority. Recognizing that these skills of shared governance and change management aren’t taught in education programs, Fulton plans to provide continuous support to their principals by embedding these trainings into their annual schedule.
DISTRICT PROFILE

Student Enrollments: 4,786
Schools: 5 Elementary, 1 Middle, 1 High
Starting Year of Charter Implementation: 2012

Student Demographics

- White: 75%
- Black: 8%
- Hispanic: 10%
- Asian: 2%
- Other: 4%

4-Year Graduation Rates

- Graduation Rate 2012: 60%
- Graduation Rate 2016: 80%

Student Needs

- Free/Reduced Lunch: 30%
- English Learners: 10%
- Students with Disabilities: 10%
The Madison County School District serves a rural, agricultural area located in the northeastern part of the state of Georgia, 15 miles from Athens and the University of Georgia, and 10 miles from Athens Area Technical College.

**GENESIS AND HISTORY OF CHARTER SYSTEM**

Madison County took more than 18 months to develop and complete the charter system application process. Prior to beginning the application process, the board of education developed a strategic plan that defined Charter System status as a means to allow staff the flexibility to create solutions to better meet the instructional needs of students. Many meetings were held with civic organizations and other interested stakeholders both in and outside of the school district to explain and develop the Charter System option.

A planning team of school and community members was formed to research and visit other charter systems in the state. Surveys were administered to students, parents, staff, and community members to help determine the best focus of the application.

Madison County renewed their AdvancEd accreditation at the same time that the Charter System application was developed. Information from both applications was aligned to provide focus and support to the district’s strategic plan.

**SIGNIFICANT INNOVATIONS**

**A. State Program Modifications: Serve by Need, Not by Label Model**

As a key part of the process of improving student achievement, communicating with all stakeholders, and working towards the charter system model, Madison County staff began forming and using teacher data teams in 2012. The team’s purpose was to understand student progress and instructional needs, and to communicate to students, parents, and colleagues about the progress of each student. In this process, teachers began to realize that many of the resources that were needed to serve students were not available due to restrictions found in state program requirements.

The process of using real-time formative assessment data to group and regroup students has matured over time, and is now central to the way that Madison County does business. It is referred to as the “Serve by Need, Not by Label Model.” This model means that, based on results of data analysis and review of student work, teachers are able to regroup students based on their individual academic needs. Students may be placed for as long as needed in a different group within the classroom, in another classroom at that grade level, or even in another grade. Once mastery is achieved the student may move back to the original group after a data team cycle is complete.

To ensure fluid use of the data team efforts, a central office coordinator was hired to facilitate the process and to help with accountability measures. An electronic tool was purchased so that teachers could easily grade and communicate data team results to
students, parents, and colleagues. This coordination with, and support of, the district office was key to the success of this new approach to increasing student achievement and communicating results to all stakeholders.

As a new charter system, Madison took advantage of the increased flexibility to waive program requirements in many programs, including the Early Intervention Program (EIP), English Learner, gifted program, students with disabilities, and Remedial Educational Program (REP). For example, gifted classes were no longer limited to students with the gifted label. If a student needed a higher-level instructional setting, he or she could receive this instructional placement without a funding penalty to the school. This same logic holds true for students with disability, English Learners, EIP and REP students.

State FTE reporting remained the same with the required program qualifications and course numbers. What was now different was the service delivery. The district is still required to use state procedures for program identification of students. However, once they are identified, the program delivery is adjusted to meet the needs of students. The data collections staff had to anticipate “red flags” during state data collections and to respond with “charter system flexibility” as the response. No FTE-based state funds were lost or gained as a result of this flexibility.

According to one principal, “The whole school improved as we used the data team process and took a hard look at each child. Now every child gets the support that they need when they need it… Students no longer have to be pulled out of the classroom for service. The stigma often associated with pull out is gone.” Another principal added, “Most teachers now have dual certification and skills so that they can serve a variety of students in their classroom.”

A teacher stated that “Tier I instruction has gotten stronger and better. All students receive Tier I. Tier 3 and 4 are getting better… Response to Intervention (RTI) is now a whole school effort. There are many more resources available to help students. There is a lot more flexibility to make these teacher resources work for students. All of the students belong to all of the teachers.” A principal also noted: “Parents know what we are doing with the Serve by Need Not by Label Model. They are much more accepting of our changing schedule and student placement because they know it is based on the student’s skill level and that it is fluid.”

All 4,700 Madison County students continue to be impacted by this innovation. This work led to changes in the state required Student Support Team and RTI processes. Staff now have stronger data that can lead to better, more focused instructional recommendations and, more importantly, delivery. Changes were made in program delivery.
at all three school levels once meaningful data became the focus. Program recommendations could be implemented immediately and assessed for impact. Students and staff no longer have to wait for failure before taking action – they make the changes that are necessary and serve all students.

This new approach – the Serve by Need Not by Label Model - and all of the new practices that came with it – has yielded significant gains across the board.

The local school board has taken notice. One board member said, “Every student can get something that they need. Students are more prepared and more students seem to like school. Being a charter system is a lot of work. Many people are working above and beyond. I hope that we can keep it up.”

**B. Partnerships**

A key component of Madison County's work as a charter system was forming new and exciting partnerships. These partnerships were developed out of the county’s need for external participation, along with the significant interest of others to get involved and participate in the education of Madison County students. Partnerships were formed and grew stronger as stakeholders were increasingly involved in the development, planning, and implementation of various district initiatives. They were no longer bystanders and recipients of innovations. The new partners were now necessary in order for the programs to work.

One of the highest profile and most successful partnerships began in 2012 with Caterpillar, located in the Athens area, 30 minutes from the Madison County campus. Caterpillar was looking for workers, specifically welders, who continue to be in short supply. At this time, Madison County was creating its College and Career Academy. They reached out to Caterpillar as a partner in this effort and they were most eager to become a part of the planning process.

As a part of the development process, Caterpillar provided valuable input into the planning of the new welding labs at the Career Academy, to make sure that they met the training needs of future Caterpillar workers. Caterpillar also gave input into the course of study for future welders. Caterpillar staff reviewed the GaDOE course of study and found that it did not have all of the standards necessary for successful future welders. Madison County used its Charter System flexibility to change the program of study, and to create a new pathway to better meet the actual jobs that Caterpillar was offering. In addition, students gained authentic experiences in completing job applications and participating in the interview process.

I got to work with Caterpillar and learn what the management expected. I feel like I am ready to apply for other jobs when the time comes after college.

- Student
Madison County Schools
Perhaps most exciting, Caterpillar set up a program where high school students could work at Caterpillar, earn a wage, and earn high school credits.

Madison students can work at Caterpillar four days a week, from 1:00-7:00 PM. Students are eligible to earn a scholarship that will pay for college. After completing the internship program, they are eligible to move much more quickly to the next tier of welder qualification. All of this means increased responsibilities and higher pay.

The response to all of this has been very positive. One student intern said, “I got to work with Caterpillar and learn what the management expected. I had no idea. I feel like I am ready to apply for other jobs when the time comes after college.” A school board member noted that, “There is such a sense of pride in young people who complete the interview process and are then hired for an intern job. This is a valuable life lesson.” An SGT member added, “Internships complement the classroom. Now that the teachers have opened their classrooms more, the community can better see how they can support student learning. We have about 12 different options for internships on the farms – students can work, they can shadow a farmer or they can come for a longer period and earn credit. Whole classes can visit for a particular lesson. Now partners are asking, ‘How can I participate?’ We are touching the non-traditional student.” A Caterpillar representative echoed these comments, noting that, “Caterpillar wants to hire and train local talent. It starts in high school. It is rewarding to see students do well and to make contributions. This partnership benefits all of us as a profession and as a company.”

Over time, more partnerships were formed. Kubota, another manufacturing company in Athens, wanted to join the Madison County College and Career Academy efforts. Starting in 2016, high school students have the option to work at Kubota, earn a salary, and earn high school credits.
Local farmers also got on board. There are more than 700 farms in Madison County, and the farmers were most eager to be a part of the College and Career Academy application and, more importantly, the program. Many farmers developed opportunities for students to work on their land during the summer, earn high school credits, and apply content that students learned in science classes. This program continues to grow with various other opportunities in the areas of cattle, poultry, and crops. Indeed, farmers are participating in a real way in the education of the students of Madison County.

One Madison High School graduate earned National Proficiency rating from Future Farmers of America with an environmental project, the first of its kind in the state of Georgia. This student said that the partnership with farmers changed her life. She was able to take the content of her advanced-level science classes and see how it worked on the farm. Farming was new to her. Her interest grew, and she participated as an agricultural student intern. Today, she attends the University of Georgia. Her experiences with the Madison County partnership changed the direction of her studies. She says, “I am now an ag communications major. I want to make a difference not only in my community but in communities across the globe.”

Athens Technical College (ATC) also came on board as a partner and this collaboration included the joint hiring of an adjunct faculty member. The ATC faculty member teaches one period each day at Madison County High School and spends the remainder of the day at ATC. Moreover, certification requirements were waived, and resources were pooled to allow both agencies to reap savings. Madison pays for just one segment of time, with ATC covering the rest. This course allows students to have access to a pathway of instruction that they otherwise would not have, as students are taught by instructors with real industry experience.

-Every student can get something that they need. Students are more prepared and more students seem to like school. Being a charter system is a lot of work. Many people are working above and beyond. I hope that we can keep it up.
-Board Member
Madison County Schools
The Madison County School District was also approached by Chinese representatives to form a partnership. In 2016, 10 Madison County High School students and three staff members visited China. Twelve Chinese students and four staff members visited Madison County. In 2017, a second tour is planned when additional Madison County staff and students will visit China as part of this growing cultural exchange partnership.

OTHER BENEFITS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Madison County has joined a pilot for consolidation of state, local and federal funds. This opportunity has now been extended across Georgia with many other systems looking forward to learning from Madison and others. This collaboration and consolidation led to the development of new programs and opportunities that were not previously available, including: a parent engagement specialist to work with and support the Karen population at one school; a behavior specialist hired at another school to address those needs; and a non-traditional after-school option for students at yet another school. Students are the ultimate recipients of these new opportunities and services. The district’s Chief Financial Officer notes that, “Funds consolidation is a more effective way of getting resources to help students. It has been a lot of work, but students win. Program is guiding the budget process instead of the reverse.”

Madison County is a low wealth district. The state-allocated charter system funds allow schools to have financial support that might not otherwise be available. The flexibility allowed for class size and state programs makes it possible for the district to keep in place or expand programs that would otherwise have been lost.

All of these changes have created some challenges to traditional governance. On several occasions, governance teams had to be reminded of their boundaries as new governance team members were elected. Orientation for new members outside of the annual training is important to avoid these misunderstandings.
One SGT member stated that “A comprehensive needs assessment needs to be conducted so that we can be clear about what academic pathways are needed for students. Meetings need to be formal and organized. We need to find more ways to get opinions from non-SGT parents and community members. SGT members want to know the impact of their input – was the person hired? Did the innovation take place? Communication is key. We need to do a better job advertising the meetings so that others know what is going on in the SGT.”

Still, many are very excited about these changes. One SGT member noted that “(We are) involved in many decisions. Community involvement is strong. The needs of all students are considered. SGT is wonderful. We have been able to learn more about the school.”

In all cases, communication is critical. It is important to make sure that staff and other stakeholders understand what is going on within the district and across the state with other charter systems. Superintendent Allen indicated that it is important to move slowly – it is better to slow down innovations and the use of flexibility until everyone understands the purpose and the results. As one board member remarked, “Transparency is important. People have to remember that there is a chain of command to follow if there are questions or concerns. As a Charter System, more people are involved in how the school operates. No one person is greater than the whole.”

Another board member added, “It is nice getting accolades at the state and national levels. We are embracing the victories like our graduation 2016 rate at 91%. In 2003 it was 45%. We have come a long way.”
DISTRICT PROFILE

Student Enrollment: 8,843
Schools: 8 Elementary, 2 Middle, 1 High, 1 Other
Starting Year of Charter Implementation: 2008

Student Demographics

- Black: 40%
- Hispanic: 35%
- Asian: 2%
- Other: 3%
- White: 19%

4-Year Graduation Rates

- Graduation Rate 2012: 60%
- Graduation Rate 2016: 65%

Student Needs

- Free/Reduced Lunch: 60%
- English Learners: 65%
- Students with Disabilities: 70%
Marietta City Schools is a city school district located within Cobb County. At 23 square miles, Marietta is one of Georgia’s most populous cities, with 56,579 residents calling the city home. Established in 1834, Marietta is located along the dramatic backdrops of the Chattahoochee River and historic foothills of Kennesaw Mountain, 18 miles northwest of Downtown Atlanta.

The city of Marietta maintains a small-town feel despite being in the metro-Atlanta area. A historic town square serves as the city center, and many local businesses operate in the city. School district events, such as Homecoming, are community-wide events involving community leaders and citizens of all types. Many Marietta City residents are graduates of the high school, creating a community spirit that enfolds the school district within the city itself. The district had a long-serving superintendent, Dr. Lembeck, who retired in December of 2016 following 28 years of service in the district, with over 11 as superintendent.

GENESIS AND HISTORY OF CHARTER SYSTEM

Marietta City Schools was among the first four school districts in Georgia to convert to the charter system model, gaining approval in 2008. They are now in their second charter system contract.

The entire community has embraced the charter system implementation, with resources from the local Kiwanis, Chamber of Commerce, Marietta Schools Foundation, and numerous nonprofit and government organizations committed to supporting innovative practices. Marietta has also attracted state support for innovation, including a grant from Georgia Race to the Top funds to create new methods of rewarding and recognizing teachers.

SIGNIFICANT INNOVATIONS

A. Teacher Recognition and Incentives
For the past eight years, Marietta has awarded school-based educators grants for innovative program ideas, using charter system funds. Individual Marietta educators may apply for up to $10,000 and educator teams may apply for up to $20,000 for materials and other associated implementation costs. Upon completion, individual participants receive a $2,000 stipend and members on a team receive a $1,000 stipend.

To further recognize and reward the participating educators, the awarded innovation projects are featured in an annual publication called Innovations and Inspirations. The publication is professionally designed, and serves not only as a mechanism to transfer learning about the innovation, but also as a means to highlight and recognize the teachers.

Recent examples of innovation projects that have had tremendous benefits for students include an International Baccalaureate (IB) Chemistry teacher who had her students design chemical experiments for elementary school students. The high school students then visited the elementary school to teach the lessons.
In another example, a group of teachers worked with special education students who were non-communicative to use iPads to communicate daily tasks. The technology allowed students to communicate their own progress and experience success in ways they could not have before.

Teachers who have been awarded the innovation grants report a variety of benefits for students. In some cases, student engagement and completion of assignments has improved. In other cases, academic gains in math and science have been demonstrated. The district values multiple types of student outcomes through the innovation projects however, and acknowledges that achievement can be measured in a variety of ways, even beyond standardized test results. Teachers also report that having their classroom innovations featured in the district publication is a benefit to students, who feel proud and valued for what they have accomplished.

Teachers who have been awarded the grant reported that the individual financial incentive was not an important factor in their decision to apply. In fact, many did not even know the individual incentive was available when they first applied. In the words of one of the award recipients, “There is not any teacher who would do this just for the incentive. This is a way to get resources in the classroom.”

The Innovation Award and resulting publication encourages others to apply for grants and explore different ways of doing things. Teachers implementing the projects also share with others in their school through regular PLCs as well as additional mechanisms. The program also affects the way teachers feel about working in the school district. One teacher stated, “There are a lot of innovative things as a district – this brings it down to you as an individual teacher.” Another said, “It would be easy for the school district to take the money and decide how to use it, instead they provided an opportunity for the educators to use the money.”

In 2016 the district utilized charter system funds to launch the Inspire Award. The purpose of the Inspire Award is to annually recognize and reward outstanding educators for producing high levels of achievement among their students. Award recipients are recognized through the annual Marietta Innovations and Inspirations publication and are rewarded with a bonus check of $1,500 by the Marietta Board of Education. The district views this as a form of merit pay that is less complex and more flexible than many other approaches.

Marietta certified employees who have earned a ‘proficient’ or ‘exemplary’ score on their summative evaluation and are serving in a non-administrative capacity are eligible to apply. Applications must clearly show data/information
detailing student achievement outcomes and/or program accomplishments. These data points include standardized or formative testing data, awards achieved, partners established, events produced, etc. The Inspire Applications are reviewed by an evaluation committee including district and external members, using a rubric based upon the following criteria:

- Award Qualification – Inspires and is a model for others
- Student Outcomes / Supporting Data
- Best Practices Implemented
- Correlation to District Initiatives / Marietta Strategic Plan.

In the first year, 12 teachers applied and nine received the award.

**B. Graduate Marietta Student Success Center**

Utilizing waivers of seat time and certification, Marietta has created an innovative program that supports a myriad of student needs during, before, and after the school day. This program was designed in direct response to issues identified by Marietta High School students as barriers to graduation.

During the two-year research and planning phase for the Graduate Marietta Student Success Center (GMSSC), thousands of surveys and interviews were conducted with Marietta students, parents, and staff. As a result of this research, students identified the following conditions as significant barriers to their achievement and graduation: transiency, family changes, poverty, immigration, substance use, and compromised mental and emotional health.

Students also identified academic challenges and truancy as barriers to graduation, but in general, students referenced these conditions as by-products of the six adverse conditions listed above.

In addition to the research identifying the primary six barriers to learning and graduation, research was conducted on student motivation and resiliency. This part of the research and planning phase included book studies, visits to other schools, and hundreds of hours speaking with the district's students, families, staff, and stakeholders. Marietta came to the conclusion that academic initiatives alone – practices such as tutoring, credit recovery, on-line learning, flexible scheduling, dual enrollment, extended day, extended year, and more – would never allow them to reach their goals of academic and life success for all students. The research yielded a need to address the six identified barriers through a framework of resiliency.

“The Center is a place I go for help, mentoring, and tutoring. It’s made a big difference in my life and without it, I don’t think I would be a senior.” - Student

Two years later, GMSSC is revolutionizing the way high school students are being supported within the educational environment. As a result of the action research, 37 local and state agencies have partnered with the GMSSC to
provide wrap-around services for students and families within the school setting. The innovative, integrated, and replicable student support model built at Marietta High School is gaining state and national attention and it has the potential to become a new model for educating today’s teens.

Core GMSSC services provided include:

- academic assistance
- career and life skill development
- college, work force, and military services
- educational classes for parents
- assistance with basic needs such as housing, food, clothing, and employment
- a comprehensive diversion program offsetting the negative impact of suspension and probation
- support and recovery groups and
- clinical mental and emotional health therapy for students and their family members.

Located within the high school, the GMSSC houses 15 staff members, 10 of whom are being provided by agencies such as the Juvenile Court of Cobb County, Department of Family and Children's Services, Georgia Council on Substance Abuse, Communities in Schools, four different mental health providers, and the YWCA. Organizations such as United Way and other local non-profit agencies provide mentoring services, as well as food, clothing, crisis housing, and other basic needs for our students and families. The center has extended daily hours (7am – 6pm) and a second tier of buses assures that all students have access to transportation home if they stay after school for programming, services, or tutoring.

In the words of a student, “In the center, I have people who want to help me, and they do not judge. You never know about people’s challenges if you don’t have the right people to ask them and the right people to help them. I was always defined as a problem child, but now I understand that I may have problems but that does not mean I AM a problem. Because of this center, I will graduate ON TIME.”

The physical location of the center contributes to its success. Located within the high school, the center is housed on a well-traveled wing of the school, with the most sensitive and
confidential services provided in an area that is on a private hallway. This allows the program to be accessible and viewed as part of the school, while creating a private and confidential space for services that require such a setting. The selection of the director, who is a former Marietta High School principal with close, positive relationships with students, also contributed to success as it immediately created acceptance and trust for the program. Many students described how the program director sought them out and encouraged them to participate because she had a personal understanding of their situation.

In addition to services for those “at-risk,” the GMSSC has a café, decorated by the visual arts students, where the culinary arts students sell healthy food options during and after school. The Center also offers other programs of interest to all students. This helps to avoid stigmatizing the center as a place for “problem students” and makes it more accessible when students do need support services. A licensed clinician from a partner agency made the following observation, “The GMSSC is a ground breaking and unique way to provide services to students in need who otherwise may be unable to access them. Schools are a cornerstone of their community, and this collaborative approach is innovative, but also makes sense.”

Since starting their research and individualized follow-up four years ago, 4-year graduation rates have increased 13%, and 5-year graduation rates have increased 20%. Additionally, program administrators report a significant number of added instructional days in lieu of out-of-school suspension. Because of the seat time and certification waivers, the district earns funding for the days students spend in the tutorial area of the center in lieu of out-of-school suspension. Other services keep students in school by addressing issues such as substance abuse, depression or homelessness that might have previously led to extended absences. In the words of an administrator, “Before the GMSSC, discipline was handled mainly with in-school and out-of-school suspensions. Both of these consequences failed to address the actual behaviors or put any strategies in place to keep the behaviors from happening again. The GMSSC has allowed the administrative team at Marietta High School the ability to truly impact students’ lives by giving us the resources to: determine the root-cause for behavioral issues and provide supports to address these root-causes; provide direct academic support to students during a time that would have separated the student from school; and provide the students with the opportunity to receive social/emotional counseling during the day.”

Students report that the quality of tutoring is extremely helpful, especially in math and science. Those who attend the tutoring sessions report that having someone other than their classroom teacher explain content in a different way in a smaller group setting has allowed them to raise their grades, in some cases enabling them to pass a course they were failing.
The GMSSC is a community collaborative non-profit supported financially by the school district, the alumni foundation, local businesses, grants, varied educational agencies, non-profits organizations, and personal donations. In the first year of operation, the GMSSC provided resources and services valued at an estimated $1 million dollars to the students and families of Marietta City Schools through donations and community partnerships.

To date, the district has provided approximately half of the financial resources needed for the start-up and first year of the GMSSC. The majority of district funding was reallocated from other areas to the GMSSC. Eight pre-existing positions were moved to the center: four social workers, one school counselor, one graduation coach providing college and career services, and two Title I funded parent and community strategists. District funds also support a new position to serve as the center director. Local school funds are used to support tutors and after-school buses three days a week. Charter system funds were utilized for the start-up renovation of space as well as additional contracted programming and instructional services (SAT/ACT prep, college and career seminars, and mentoring). Students, parents and teachers all report positive benefits from the center.

“I go to the center for tutoring, mentoring, and support groups and I have been there instead of going home when I was suspended. The best thing about it is that there are multiple solutions for any situation a child might be going through and the folks there aren’t big on blame. Because it seems like there are options for everything, problems don’t seem like such a big dead end. It has helped me take some necessary steps, and I really think it’s a helpful place for children who feel alone.” - Student

“I want you to know that I truly appreciate all you have done for me and my family! Without the center, we would now be on the streets. It isn’t just that you helped us, it’s that you made me feel like I was worth helping. You all really are making a difference for the students and the families. I hope other schools and communities will start something like this for families.” - Parent

“As a retired math teacher, I am in awe at the wrap-around opportunities that the center affords our students. Students that serve part of their suspension or ones that come for tutoring express a true appreciation of the one-on-one help to get caught up. This is the best program that I have seen in my 31-year tenure as an educator and is my most rewarding teaching experience as well.” - Retired Teacher, tutor
OTHER BENEFITS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Marietta City Schools also allows SGTs to propose school-level innovations, and convenes SGT chairs twice per year to share what they are doing. The proposed innovations were originally very operational in nature, and frequently involved requests for more staff. The SGT innovations have evolved to a focus on student achievement and creative use of existing resources.

One of the Marietta innovations will be discontinued this year. The district shifted some ESOL instructional time from the school year to the summer, with the intention of preventing the “summer slide” among students who did not experience much English language at home. Charter system funds were used for transportation to the summer program each day. However, attendance at the program was inconsistent. The average class size was 13.4, but the average daily attendance was 8.5, with a quarter of the students attending fewer than half of the program days. It was also difficult to find teachers who were able and willing to work in the summer due to their own family schedules, resulting in sufficient teachers for only 5 classes. Finally, due to significant transiency among the Marietta ESOL population, fewer than half of the students served through the summer program returned to Marietta the following school year. With the spirit of innovation in mind, the district is using these lessons learned to form new ideas to serve this academically vulnerable population. One such example includes leveraging a take-home Chromebook initiative where ESOL students extend their learning beyond the school day with the use of researched-based English acquisition software.

Among other lessons learned, Dr. Lembeck feels that the measures used by the state do not always reflect the benefits of charter system innovation. For example, Marietta has seen improvement in students exceeding standards, 5-year graduation rates, and parents participating in conferences. She believes there is a need for flexibility in how the state measures charter systems – that they should not all be measured on standard goals when their issues and their innovations are not standard.

It is essential to build buy-in throughout the school for innovations such as the GMSSC. A few students described teachers hesitant to permit them to visit the center during class time, even though they have a documented need. It is critical that such innovations be viewed by all as integrated with the overall goal of the school, and not a competing or standalone effort.

In retrospect, the district leadership would have begun the charter system implementation by educating school leaders, to help them overcome what Dr. Lembeck described as being “glued in their box,” because it takes time to find their way out. The district must work hand-in-hand with school leaders to achieve innovation, and district leaders need to take the time to understand the reasons for resistance.
**DISTRICT PROFILE**

- **Student Enrollment:** 2,722
- **Schools:** 2 Elementary, 1 Middle, 1 High
- **Starting Year of Charter Implementation:** 2010

**Student Demographics**

- White: 44%
- Black: 39%
- Hispanic: 12%
- Asian: 1%
- Other: 4%

**4-Year Graduation Rates**

- Graduation Rate 2012: 60%
- Graduation Rate 2016: 80%

**Student Needs**

- Free/Reduced Lunch: 60%
- English Learners: 65%
- Students with Disabilities: 70%

PUTNAM COUNTY SCHOOLS
Putnam County is located in central Georgia, bordered by Lake Sinclair and Lake Oconee. The county and school district have had a significant housing boom and population increase in the past decade. The county seat is Eatonton, home of the well-known Rock Eagle 4H Center, which draws visitors from all over the state.

**GENESIS AND HISTORY OF CHARTER SYSTEM**

Planning for charter system status began in 2008 through a series of community conversations and the development of a strategic plan focusing on student achievement and using flexibility to best meet the needs of students. The local Board of Education was supportive from the beginning. Three different superintendents were in place during the development and implementation phases; throughout this time, the board of education remained focused on being a charter system and creating the best learning situation possible for students.

**SIGNIFICANT INNOVATIONS**

**A. Summer Inspirations**

The Summer Inspirations program started in summer 2014 as a way to extend learning during the summer for students in PreK-12. The six-week program provides a continuous learning environment for students while they attend summer camps that enrich their lives and connect curriculum to students’ and teachers’ passions for learning. The program has also sent students out to participate in real-world projects and experiences built around learning and community engagement, in such locales as Sapelo Island and New Orleans. Teachers and staff submit camp ideas based on their personal skills and interests to share with students. Each camp is developed for appropriate age ranges and provides six days of activities centered on a specific topic. More than 100 camp topics are offered each summer, and more than 50% of Putnam County students participate. The charter system funds support this initiative. Nearly two dozen high school students are employed to help run the program, and transportation, breakfast, and lunch are provided.

As a result of the Summer Inspirations initiative, teaching innovation and student engagement are promoted. New leaders are found as teachers assume responsibility for their specific camp teaching areas. Through the Summer Inspirations program, Putnam has brought in University of Georgia faculty and graduate students, a professional artist, and an award-winning playwright. In addition, approximately two dozen community groups volunteer their time and expertise to the program, including Master Gardeners, auto mechanics, Lake Oconee Youth Alliance, Georgia Power, and the Boys and Girls Club. Non-certified teachers from
the community who worked in Summer Inspirations were able, due to the flexibility offered by the charter system, to become certified teachers during the school year, offering new expertise they had gained as chemists, historians, welders, and auto mechanics. In this way, the Summer Inspiration camps have become a catalyst for instructional strategies and programs offered during the rest of the school year. These innovations are driven by the interests of students, parents, teachers, and the community.

B. Georgia Virtual History: Multidisciplinary Engagement

From the 2014 Summer Inspirations experience a new program was developed called Georgia Virtual History, enabling a high school history teacher to team with a University of Georgia historian in developing a program of study using interactive technology tools, community members, onsite visits, historical buildings, original documents, and other firsthand materials. The program has grown and includes new cohorts of students each year and additional disciplines of study in the sciences, mathematics, and arts.

Through this program, professionals from Georgia Military College, Central Technical College, Mercer University, and the University of Georgia worked with the project to create experiences for students and staff. Faculty and students have been brought in to support the program from Athens Academy and the Savannah Country Day School. Middle School Project partners from the Monroe Country Day School were part of the program as well. One teacher noted, “The Georgia Virtual History Project is changing the way courses are taught in Putnam. Students are learning to give back to their communities by honoring the past, recording the past, and sharing the past.” Another added that “This is just a better way to teach. There has not been a drop in the state assessment test scores.” A professor from the University of Georgia concurs: “We were able to provide unique opportunities for students.”

Students have high praise for the program as well. A recent Putnam County graduate who is now working in the schools 2-3 days a week as a peer mentor, said that, “I love music and working with students. The experiences students have with history help them to grow. History is your own, like music. Understanding history helps you to form a bond with the past.” Other students have echoed these comments: “Looking at graves helps to make history personal. We talk about how people from the past died trying to make the past real. Feel the wind. Feel the sun. Nature does not change. Nature was the same for those in the past. It is like voices coming from the ground.” “History used to be a big book that I used as a pillow on my desk. I had to memorize facts. Now I can put a face to historical records. I have seen slave cabins and plantations. It kind of helps you to make history personal. History has a way to give a voice to those in the past. People who may not have had a voice now have a voice through history.” “I have learned that history is not set in stone. You can look at events from different angles.”
In short, the Virtual History Project has expanded the role of the teacher from delivering knowledge to facilitating learning. It has also redefined the role of the partnership with the University of Georgia. Students have presented at both national and international academic conferences, and high school students have become mentors to 8th grade students, exposing them to real historical experiences rather than merely reading about it. High school students are also building lesson plans for middle school students, preparing them for this new way of studying history. In addition, a dual enrollment course in history was established. All of these efforts have been recognized by and awarded with a National Endowment for the Humanities grant in partnership with the Wilson Center for Humanities and Arts at the University of Georgia.
C. College and Career Academy

Putnam County’s College and Career Academy (CCA) opened in 2015, serving Pre-K through 12th grade students. Fourteen Career and Technology Pathways are offered. The College and Career Academy also developed partnerships with many businesses, education agencies, and community stakeholders. Partnerships and internships were established with the Ritz Carlton, the Performing Arts Society, Central Georgia Technical College, and Georgia College and State University, among others.

Through the College and Career Academy, 161 students are currently participating in dual enrollment courses. A CCA teacher states that “30% of 10th-12th grade students are in dual enrollment. We have been able to create experiences for students to ensure that they are successful after they leave us. They are truly prepared. Many of these students are first generation college students.” Putnam is proud of the fact that it now has the highest percentage of students participating in college courses in the state.

OTHER BENEFITS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Through this ongoing process, district staff and SGT’s understand that they need to ensure that decisions go up the chain of command before requests come to central office staff.

As one of the early charter systems, there were many barriers that had to be addressed. District leaders worked hard and engaged in a number of conversations with state legislators, to determine how best to apply for and implement the flexibility they sought. As a result of such conversations, for example, the Georgia Senate ultimately approved legislation allowing college level courses taken by dual enrollment high school students to count towards graduation without penalty. In this same way, Superintendent Arena believes that charter system status can enable school systems to become incubators for innovation in such areas as summer programs, experiential learning, assessments, and teacher evaluation, among many others. In his words, the “charter system status should be a safe environment that allows local systems to be incubators for innovation.”
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The Charter System Foundation, Inc. was founded on the belief that meaningful change in education can occur only if principals, teachers, parents, and community partners are empowered with the authority and flexibility to make decisions at the school house level to best meet the individual needs of each student.

The Foundation supports charter systems with the following initiatives:

- Serve as a conduit for innovation
- Training for local boards, superintendents, and School Governance Teams
- Advocacy
- Collaborate with other education support groups.