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DMGROUP IN ACTION

Raising Achievement and Addressing Equity at Bibb County School District (GA): Instructional Guidelines and Effective Scheduling Pave the Way

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Raising Achievement and Addressing Equity at Bibb County School District (GA):

Instructional Guidelines and Effective Scheduling Pave the Way

Kathleen Choi and Tess Nicholson

When Dr. Curtis Jones Jr. became superintendent of Bibb County School District (BCSD) in April 2015, he was energized to tackle the challenges before him. This large, diverse, urban district in Macon, Georgia, had been wracked with financial scandal during the prior superintendent's tenure. Dr. Jones was intent on putting the district back on solid footing and getting back to the district's work of focusing on the needs of its students. BCSD has approximately 25,000 students, 93% of whom qualify for free or reduced-price meals. Academic achievement had been consistently lagging the state average, and there was a significant gap within the district between its highest- and lowest-performing schools. Upon arrival, Dr. Jones immediately began formulating a strategic plan entitled "Victory in Our Schools," and Goal #1 was to increase academic achievement for all students.

Dr. Jones knew that to have a meaningful impact on raising achievement across this large district, he needed to create district-wide instructional guidelines to bring the practices of all schools in line with best practices. He was specifically focused on addressing the significant

achievement gap that existed between the highest- and lowest-performing schools. For example, some schools in the district were succeeding academically with state Criterion-Related Competency Test (CRCT) scores for ELA above 90%, while other schools' proficiency rates were as low as 67% (*Exhibit 1*). Creating standard guidelines could help the district implement best practices district-wide



BCSD

FAST FACTS



BIBB COUNTY SCHOOL
DISTRICT (GA)

23,134 students

- **72%** Black or African American
- **19%** White
- **4%** Hispanic or Latino
- **3.0%** Multiracial
- **1.7%** Asian

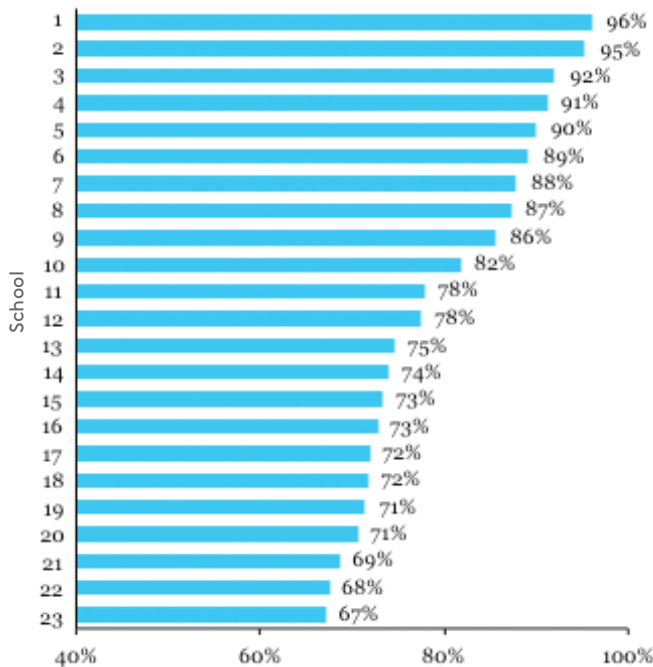
Students Eligible for
Reduced-Price Meals:
(climbing from 72.8% in FY2008)

93.3%

Special Education
Identification:

10.0%

**Exhibit 1 VARIATION IN ACHIEVEMENT
AMONG BCSD SCHOOLS (2014)**



Source: District Management Group and BCSD

and address equity issues by ensuring that each student had access to similar services and instructional practices.

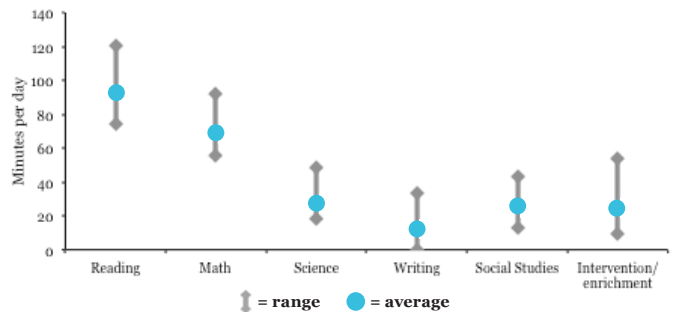
Superintendent Jones and Dr. Tanzy Kilcrease, assistant superintendent of teaching and learning, decided to begin their work by focusing on the elementary level. At the elementary level alone, there were 22 schools and each one had its own way of doing things. Dr. Jones and Dr. Kilcrease decided to engage District Management Group (DMGroup) to work with the district to examine current practices, help define clear district guidelines, and assist their 22 elementary schools in implementing the guidelines so that BCSD could make the most of every minute of every school day for all their students.

The Work Begins

An In-Depth Diagnostic Is the First Step

District Management Group's approach is to begin with an in-depth understanding of district practices and

Exhibit 2 VARIATION IN USES OF TIME AT BCSD ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS BY SCHOOL AND BY ACADEMIC SUBJECT



Source: District Management Group and BCSD

district needs. Only once this is achieved can leadership have a firm understanding of where the district stands, examine the district's position vis-a-vis best practices, and determine the priority of objectives for moving forward.

District leadership and DMGroup therefore began with an in-depth diagnostic to understand the service delivery models for core subjects and intervention efforts. Meeting with the central office team, school leaders, classroom teachers, EIP teachers, ELL teachers, gifted program teachers, special education teachers, and many others, DMGroup conducted a series of interviews and focus groups. In addition, DMGroup used its proprietary technology to gain details on how the work is done by classroom teachers, reading and math interventionists, special education teachers, paraprofessionals, and others.

Key Findings:

Analysis of the data and the qualitative information revealed the following key insights about the district's practices:

1. Variation in how time is spent

- **Variation between schools in how time is spent in the classroom:** Analysis of the data revealed a significant amount of variation between schools in how much time is dedicated to different instructional blocks (*Exhibit 2*).

Classroom Teachers:

1,531

Total Staff:

3,332

Total Expenditure:

\$218,643,302

Per Pupil Expenditure:

\$9,451

Four-year Graduation Rate:

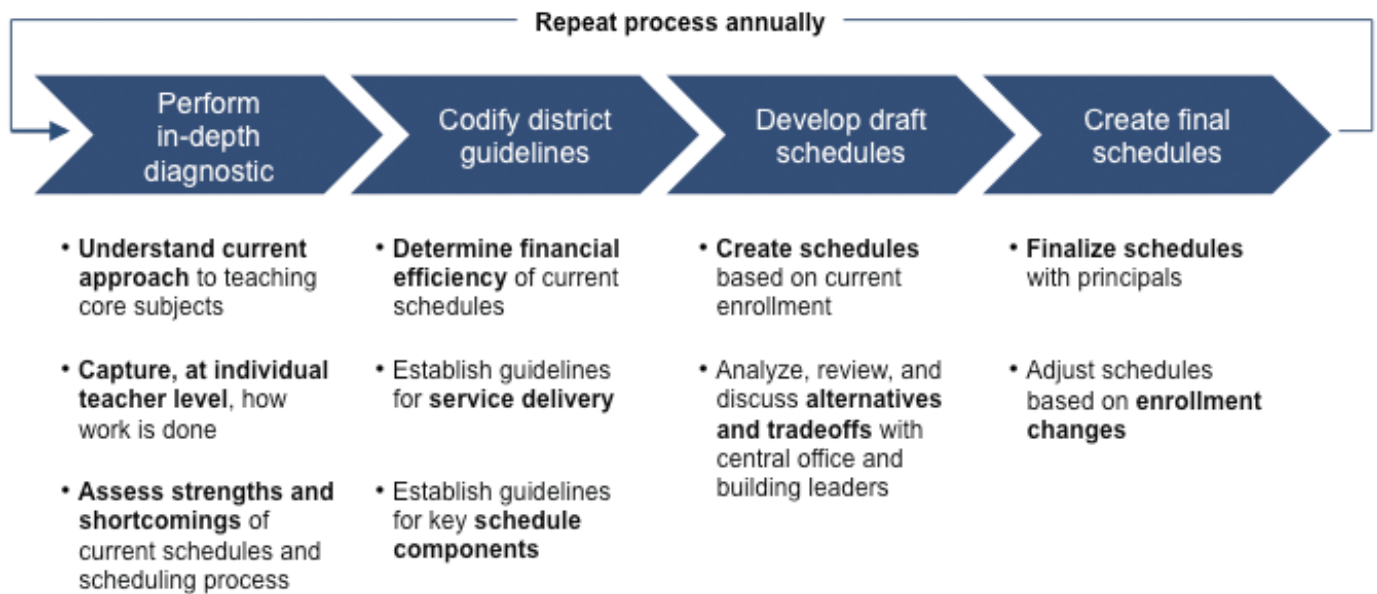
77.1%

College Enrollment:

57.0%

Source: Georgia Department of Education, FY2017

DMGROUP'S PROCESS FOR EFFECTIVE SCHEDULING



- Variation between schools in how teachers' time is spent when not with students: The amount of teachers' time spent on collaborative planning, administrative meetings, personal prep time, and assigned school duties varied significantly by school.

While variation in how time is spent is not in itself good or bad, it is important to ensure that (1) students across all schools are receiving high-quality and equitable core instruction as well as supports aligned with best practices, and (2) all schools have the technical know-how to implement a support model based on best practices.

2. Within core subjects, variation in who provides academic support to whom and for how long

- Variation in the time spent on core instruction: While almost 100% of the schools were teaching at least 60 minutes of math each day, almost half of the schools were teaching reading for less than the 90 minutes a day that is a well-established best practice. In addition, a significant number of schools had an average intervention block of less than 30 minutes.
- Variation in how time is spent within each core block: Within each core block, there was significant variation in instruction across schools and teachers. For example, 100 minutes of phonics each week for grades K-2 is a best practice, but there was quite a bit of variation in time spent on this, and little time was spent on phonics after grade 1.

Central office had been specifying a 90-minute literacy block, but there had been no specific guidance on the number of minutes required for other subjects. Most of the decisions about how to divide instructional time had been left to individual principals and teachers.

3. Students who struggle were sometimes not working with the most relevant staff or receiving services at the appropriate times in the schedule

- Students who struggle were not necessarily matched with the right supports: Students who struggle often received academic support from staff who were not certified or not expert in the relevant content area. Struggling readers need to work with teachers skilled in the teaching of reading, whereas students struggling with academic content need to work with staff who are experts in the relevant content area. In the district, special education teachers and paraprofessionals were often providing academic content support and reading support.
- Pull-out support was often delivered instead of, not in addition to, core instruction: At BCSD, many special education and intervention staff provided support using a pull-out model, which can be very effective. Analysis of the data, however, showed that in many cases pull-out services were being provided during reading and math, meaning that interventions that were intended to provide extra instruction actually replaced the core instruction they were intended to supplement.

Although schools and teachers were trying their best, the structure of the current elementary schedules made it virtually impossible to avoid these situations. To provide all required supports to students, students had to be pulled out during some core instruction blocks and could not easily be matched with the most relevant skilled staff.

Codifying District Guidelines

The findings were reviewed and discussed in depth with district leadership and a cross-functional group of central office and school-based leaders. In addition, DMGroup provided best-practice research and recommendations, and shared research about districts that have been successful in narrowing the achievement gap.

Armed with this information, the BCSD team then compared desired practices to their current practices, and were able to work with DMGroup to create a clearly articulated set of district instructional guidelines. The team set guidelines for instructional blocks (*Exhibit 3*), and determined which subjects should be eligible for pull-out. They also agreed on a minimum number of minutes of each special that a student should receive—regardless of which school they attend.

Exhibit 3 INSTRUCTIONAL GUIDELINES DEVELOPED BY BIBB COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT

Daily Minutes by Grade							
	K	1	2	3	4	5	
ELA	120	120	120	90	90	90	
Math	75	75	75	75	75	75	
Science	30	30	30	45	45	45	
Social Studies	30	30	30	45	45	45	
Intervention/Enrichment	45	45	45	45	45	45	
Specials	50	50	50	50	50	50	
Lunch	30	30	30	30	30	30	
Recess	25	25	25	25	25	25	
Morning meeting	10	10	10	10	10	10	
Dismissal	5	5	5	5	5	5	
Total	420	420	420	420	420	420	

Source: Bibb County School District

Implementing Guidelines for Impact: Scheduling Leads the Way

Because there is not just one best schedule, DMGroup used its proprietary elementary school scheduling software to generate a variety of master schedules for BCSD to consider and review. With DMGroup’s scheduling software, central office was able to input instructional guidelines as default settings, as shown in Exhibit 4, ensuring that any schedule generated would meet these requirements. District leadership and the cross-functional team then worked with DMGroup to discuss the various alternatives and tradeoffs of the various master schedules under consideration.

After many iterations and much discussion, master building and classroom schedules were created for each of the 22 elementary schools. The schedules ensured that each classroom was meeting the newly established guidelines that called for increased time for reading instruction and math instruction, and included a 45-minute intervention period for every grade level as well as 50 minutes of specials at every grade and every school (*Exhibit 5*). What had formerly seemed impossible could now become a reality with the optimized master schedule.

Exhibit 4 BCSD GUIDELINES INCORPORATED INTO DMGROUP’S ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SCHEDULING SOFTWARE							
Daily Minutes by Grade							
Period	K	1	2	3	4	5	
Dismissal	5	5	5	5	5	5	✗
English Language Arts (ELA)	120	120	120	90	90	90	✗
Intervention/Enrichment (I/E)	45	45	45	45	45	45	✗
Lunch	30	30	30	30	30	30	✗
Math	75	75	75	75	75	75	✗
Morning Meeting	10	10	10	10	10	10	✗
Recess	25	25	25	25	25	25	✗
Science	30	30	30	45	45	45	✗
Social Studies (SS)	30	30	30	45	45	45	✗
Specials	50	50	50	50	50	50	✗
+ Add a period							
TOTAL	420	420	420	420	420	420	

This “District Period Allocation” default table becomes the default setting for each new school schedule created in the software.

Source: District Management Group

Guidelines and Scheduling Promise Results

During the 2016-17 school year, all 22 elementary schools successfully implemented the new elementary schedules. During each of the four walkthroughs conducted per elementary school, 91% of teachers were observed to be on schedule. Ensuring that all students

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are receiving the same education across the district will increase equity. The daily 45-minute intervention time is expected to have the biggest potential impact in terms of education achievement.

According to Dr. Kilcrease, principals have been complimentary of the changes made to the schedule. Teachers and administrators appreciated that they had an opportunity to give feedback. Including all of their feedback and that of the focus groups was instrumental not only in determining final guidelines but also in creating support for the work. "I'm excited to see the progress taking shape. Moving forward this year, I expect our focus on scheduling at the elementary level, as well as our continued focus on reading support programs and professional learning for teachers, to impact our students in a positive way," said Superintendent Jones. The district now has consistent guidelines for elementary schedules that are aligned to best practices. And the scheduling tool ensures that these guidelines are being implemented at all 22 of its elementary schools. This is a significant step forward for BCSD, and district leadership is enthusiastic to see the positive impact this will have on student learning and on equity issues in the district in the coming years. ♦

Exhibit 5 USING DMGROUP'S SCHEDULING SOFTWARE, A BCSD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CREATED THIS SCHEDULE THAT MEETS THE DISTRICT'S INSTRUCTIONAL GUIDELINES

