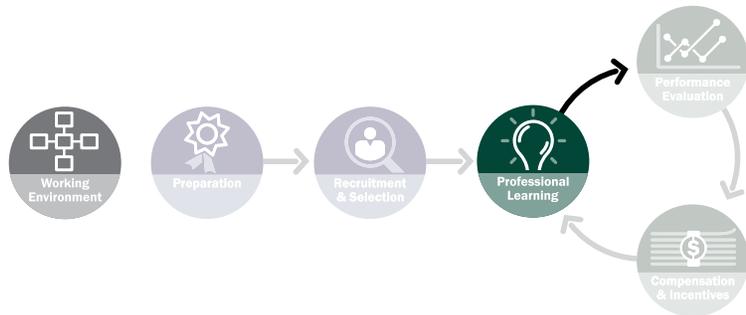


Gwinnett County Public Schools—Quality-Plus Leader Academy



Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS), located in the metro Atlanta, Georgia, area, serves more than 176,000 students.¹¹⁷ The district is a two-time winner of the prestigious Broad Prize, which leadership attributes to a focus on school leadership.¹¹⁸

Practice Overview

GCPS focuses on building educators' skills over their entire careers, creating building blocks of knowledge and competencies at each career level that help prepare the educator for the next career level (see figure on the next page). Rising school leaders build their skills in instruction while serving as teachers, their skills in curriculum and assessment and instructional leadership as teacher leaders, and their administrative skills while serving as an assistant principal. The district calls its professional learning system the Quality-Plus Leader Academy (QPLA). The QPLA is a suite of programs and strategies that GCPS uses to prepare and support aspiring and in-service school and district leaders to excel in their roles. The QPLA includes year-long, cohort-based programs focused on preparing assistant principals, principals, and districts staff with ongoing training and support. We focus here on the ongoing training and support.

Ongoing Training and Support

The district offers the following professional learning supports:

Leadership Development Seminars: These seminars highlight the best practices in school leadership, covering topics such as how to be an instructional leader or work with student data.

Summer Leadership Conference: This conference gives principals an opportunity to come together for an intense three-day learning experience.

Peer and Supervisor Supports: GCPS has developed peer networks within its school "clusters." Cluster meetings are held to coordinate curricula and ensure vertical alignment, as well as discuss common challenges. Assistant Superintendents (AS) directly supervise principals and give additional, job-embedded professional development. Each AP supervises from 10 to 19 principals, depending on the need of the principal.

Evaluation: The performance of schools and school leaders on district evaluations is used to inform professional development in the district.

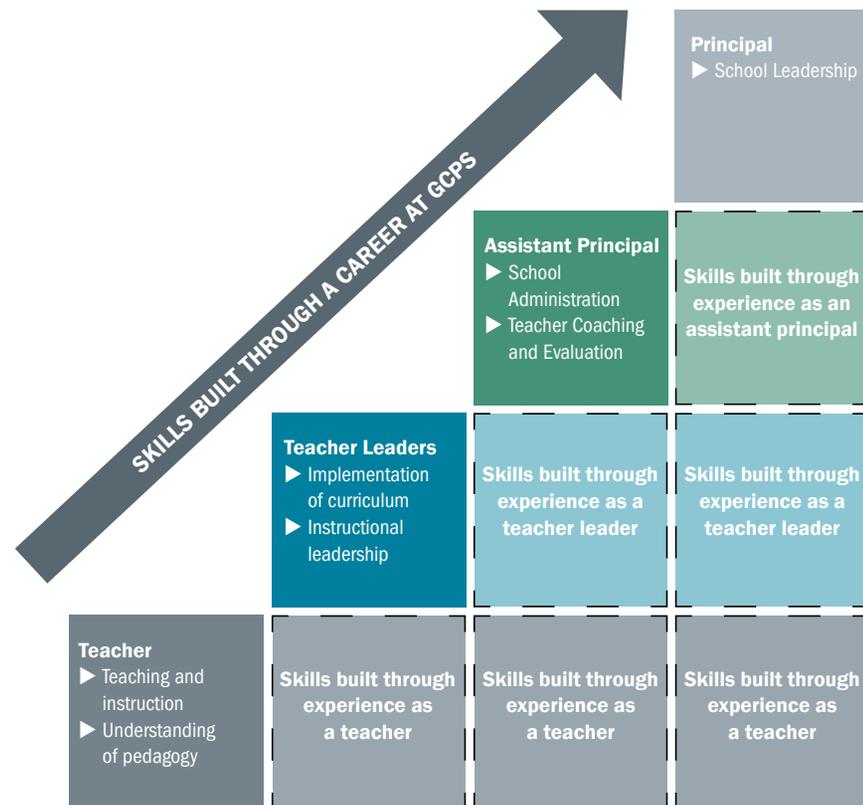
Mentoring: Once principals are on the job, they are assigned a mentor during their first two years. All mentors are retired, successful GCPS principals. The goal is to build school leader independence; therefore, as new principals gain experience in their role, the mentor steps away. But even at the conclusion of the formal two-year mentorship, principals may continue to seek guidance from their mentors when they face new or difficult situations.

¹¹⁷. Gwinnett County Public Schools (2015)

¹¹⁸. George W. Bush Institute (2015a)

Supportive District Culture

A unique aspect of GCPS' professional learning is the district culture that places a priority on professional learning as critical to everyone's joint success. Central office staff members, across all functional responsibilities and at all levels of seniority, view the development and support of school leaders and teachers as a critical part of their roles. The superintendent and his cabinet are frequently found teaching sessions for aspiring and sitting principals. Even when district leaders are not teaching, they frequently attend professional learning sessions, or take on mentoring and coaching roles themselves. It is well understood in the district that every GCPS employee is expected to support teaching and learning—both for students and staff.



Collecting Data to Monitor Success

GCPS spends considerable time and resources measuring their own policies and practices for effectiveness to inform improvement and decision-making in the district. Since the QPLA's inception, GCPS has worked with a team of evaluators from the University of Georgia that conducts annual evaluations. These evaluations are used by GCPS to improve the program, and they indicate that the program is meeting the district's goal of retaining effective principals. For example, participants in the QPLA system tend to stay in the district longer, and teachers are more satisfied with working for them. In addition, graduates from the full QPLA program perform better on Georgia state tests in both math and science than students at schools without a graduate. Although this does not establish a direct link between all the parts of the QPLA and student achievement, it does provide early indication of the program's success.

Working Environment: A System of Balanced Autonomy

GCPS also offers a unique example of a PTM system that developed a strong culture of support that empowers principals to be autonomous leaders. GCPS employees understand that they must first and foremost improve teaching and learning, which they can achieve through supporting school leaders. The district has dedicated significant staffing and budgetary resources to ensure that leadership development remains a top strategic priority over the long run. In turn, GCPS continuously monitors the impact of those investments to ensure that they have the desired effects on school leader placements, job retention, student achievement, and school performance.

Culture of Support

Under the guidance of the district's superintendent, J. Alvin Wilbanks, GCPS has formulated a very clear theory of action: school leadership is an important driver of student success. GCPS' most senior leaders, including the superintendent, spend significant time and energy creating a culture where all district employees, and particularly central office staff, support the district's school leaders. The Gwinnett County Board of Education shares the same vision and plays an important supporting role in the district's approach to school leadership. The Board's belief in the work allows the district to allocate the required financial and human capital resources to support its school leadership work.

Balanced Autonomy

Mr. Wilbanks believes that if principals are to be held accountable for school level results, they should have authority over critical decisions such as personnel management, budgeting, and structuring of the school schedule. The district's Instructional Support Center oversees core and administrative matters, such as data systems, curriculum, assessments, and evaluation processes. Therefore, with this support structure, principals have the time to focus on implementing the instructional programs that can maximize student achievement and success.

To further allow principals to focus on teaching and learning, GCPS manages "core" academic functions that include: the district's curriculum, interim assessments, and logistical and operational functions. In turn, principals have discretion and the bandwidth over use of data, budget, program, schedule, and staffing. This balanced autonomy ensures principals have the power to make critical decisions and increase their sustainable successes over the long term.

These autonomies align with the district's theory of managed performance/empowerment. This theory holds all schools accountable to the same high standards but empowers principals to determine how they reach those standards.

Principal Supervisors

Additionally, GCPS has instituted a coordinated system of hiring, induction, ongoing training, and support to ensure that principal supervisors, known as assistant superintendents in GCPS, are attuned to principals' needs. This also ensures that principals have the resources and autonomy to drive improvements in teaching and learning in their school buildings. GCPS' rigorous evaluation system ties principal performance to school and student outcomes.

The assistant superintendents serve a vital role in guiding and leading principals, providing support at various points in the process; identifying candidates with potential to excel as a principal; leading relevant trainings; and providing coaching and guidance to help principals improve their performance. The district ensures the caseload of each assistant superintendent remains between 10 to 19 principals to allow for the time needed to sufficiently support each principal. AS's also provide invaluable, real-time coaching and practical guidance based on their own experiences as highly effective school leaders within the district. They also can help school leaders effectively engage with central office staff.

Source: Information for this "District to Watch" example was collected from *Gwinnett County Public Schools: A Systemic Approach to Scaling Effective School Leadership*, and via emailed questions with **Craig Barlow, Assistant Superintendent; Erin Hahn, Director, Leadership Development; and Kendra Washington Bass, Director, Quality-Plus Leader Academy.**