District
Management
Group

DMGroup's Accelerating Learning Institute

Reflections from Gwinnett School District and Community High School District 117

by Tess Nicholson Powers

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DMGroup in Action

DMGroup's Accelerating Learning Institute

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Tess Nicholson Powers

Last spring, DMGroup launched the Accelerating Learning Institute (ALI), a program to support districts in developing plans for the coming academic year to make up for the missed learning opportunities caused by the pandemic. Over 100 district leaders and staff from 17 district teams across the country participated in this program, delivered over a three-month period. The Accelerating Learning Institute, as with all of DMGroup's institutes, is organized around a problem of practice — in this case, accelerating learning after interrupted learning due to the pandemic — and supports districts in addressing the challenge through professional development

J. Alvin Wilbanks Instructional Support Center

sessions combined with coaching sessions and cohort-based learning opportunities. The institutes build leadership and management capacity while tackling real problems of practice and getting results.
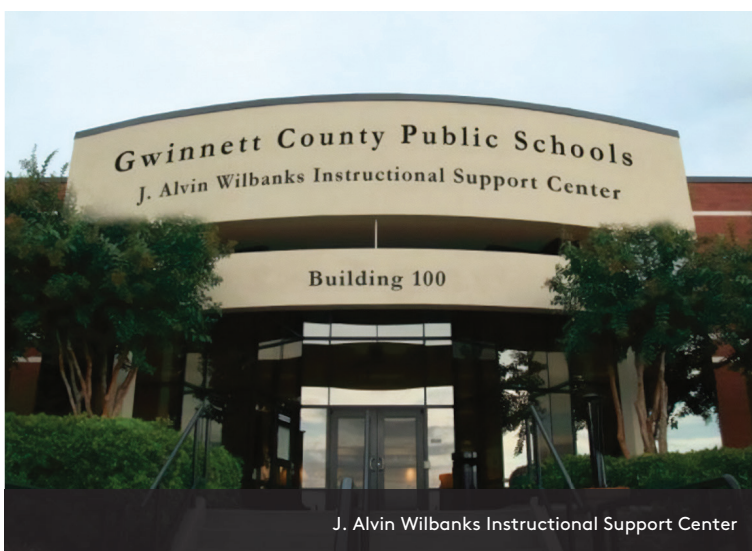
Participating districts valued the professional development sessions providing actionable research, the focus ALI brought to the work, and the ability to share ideas and engage in meaningful dialogue with other districts. "On the recommendations of DMGroup, we assembled a team that ensured we had the right people at the table," shared Superintendent Jim McKay of Community High School District 117 (IL). "ALI provided us with just-in-time actionable solutions — not just cognitive articles and ideas — and we took many of the recommendations and implemented them. And we got a lot of value from the peer feedback sessions; during the ALI peer review, we connected with a peer superintendent and actually have been continuing to connect with him offline to share experiences."

FAST FACTS

GWINNETT COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
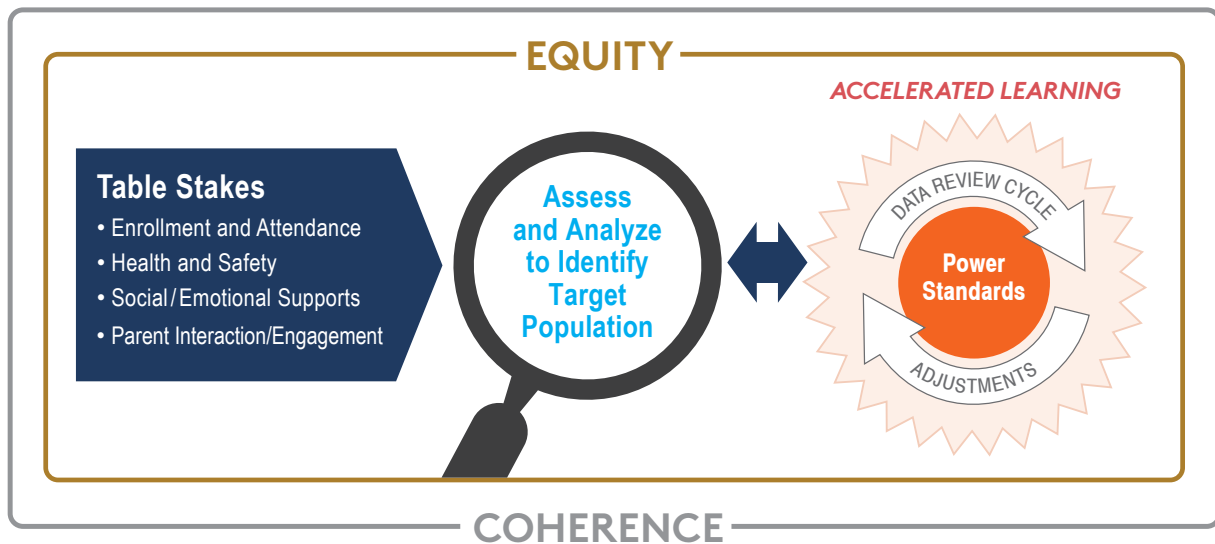GEORGIA

Total Schools:
141

179,581 students

- **33%** Black
- **33%** Hispanic/Latinx
- **18%** White

- **11%** Asian
- **50%** Economically Disadvantaged

Per Pupil Expenditure:
$10,253
(FY2022)

Source: Georgia Governor's Office of Student Achievement.

Exhibit 1 **DMGROUP'S ACCELERATING LEARNING FRAMEWORK**

EQUITY

ACCELERATED LEARNING

Table Stakes
• Enrollment and Attendance
• Health and Safety
• Social / Emotional Supports
• Parent Interaction/Engagement

Assess and Analyze to Identify Target Population

DATA REVIEW CYCLE

Power Standards

ADJUSTMENTS

COHERENCE

Source: DMGroup.

Here we share some reflections from Gwinnett County School District (GA) and Community High School District 117 on their experiences participating in ALI.

DMGroup's Accelerating Learning Institute: How It Worked

Launched in April 2021 and continuing through the end of June 2021, the Accelerating Learning Institute provided a structured approach to planning for the upcoming academic year. The institute combined a series of professional development, peer review, and coaching sessions organized according to DMGroup's Accelerating Learning Framework (*Exhibit 1*). For a full discussion of DMGroup's Accelerating Learning Framework, please see "Accelerating Learning to Address Learning Loss: DMGroup's Approach and Framework" in *District Management Journal*, vol. 29 (Spring 2021).

Guiding Principles

The approach to the work of accelerating learning was grounded in the following guiding principles:

- Current teachers and staff are able to successfully address the gaps in learning and accelerate learning for all students if school and district leaders create the conditions and provide the support to both empower them and build their capacity.

- Existing instructional materials and curriculum are adequate for the majority of districts and schools; rolling out new curriculum and instructional materials is unlikely to be a wise use of time and resources for most schools.

- Resources need to be leveraged wisely to provide sustainable supports.

- A consistent focus on equity and coherence must frame all the work.

FAST FACTS

COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT 117
ILLINOIS

Total Schools:
2

2,635 students

• **3%** Black
• **12%** Hispanic/Latinx
• **78%** White

• **3%** Asian
• **14%** Economically Disadvantaged

Per Pupil Expenditure:
$18,060
(2019-2020)

Source: Illinois Board of Education - Report Cards.

Phase 1 - Table Stakes

The work at the institute began by focusing the district teams on "table stakes" — the minimum requirements that need to be addressed to get back to school and get the year kicked off successfully. DMGroup focused on providing research and supports on the following critical topics:

- Enrollment and attendance
- Health and safety
- Social/emotional supports
- Parent interaction/engagement.

The institute kicked off with a virtual professional development session presenting research and specific strategies to address these table stakes. The district teams were then tasked with developing plans for each of the table stakes in preparation for their one-on-one coaching session with a DMGroup expert to help review and refine their strategies. After that, each district team was paired with a peer district to share approaches, gather feedback, and allow for cross-fertilization of ideas.

Increasing Enrollment in Gwinnett County Public Schools

In spring 2021, enrollment at Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS) was slightly lower than in previous years. District leaders were concerned that due to the ongoing pandemic, families would still be feeling uneasy about their children returning to school in the fall. Based on the district's experiences during the 2020-21 school year, there were specific concerns regarding kindergarten enrollment for the fall of 2021.

The team therefore put particular focus on developing plans for enrollment and parent engagement during this phase of the work. The district team embraced DMGroup's recommendations to take a "distributed" community-led approach to tackling enrollment and attendance, leveraging trusted sources, and leveraging behavioral science.

With these recommendations in mind, the Gwinnett team got creative about how to reach families. The team empowered elementary school leaders to engage in rolling out the following strategies:

- **Social media:** The district ran social media campaigns, including contests and incentives for early registration, to reach parents about getting kindergartners enrolled in schools.

- **Community partnership:** Schools connected with their local community organizations to build excitement and arranged to post flyers at local community centers to create visibility among the parent community.

- **Grassroots approach:** Schools took a grassroots approach to publicizing information about kindergarten registration, posting and sharing information in their buildings to get those parents who were already engaged to spread the news to other families and friends.

- **Expanded kindergarten registration dates:** Rather than having a one-day event for kindergarten registration, the district expanded its registration period.

- **School-level focus on the enrollment data to push the enrollment efforts on a community-by-community basis:** Schools were provided with real-time access to their enrollment data, including how many kindergarten registrations were in process but not completed.

> **" DMGroup gave us so many strategies, like leveraging social media, advertising, getting out in the community, engaging our schools and local leaders to help us tackle enrollment — being proactive instead of reactive.**
>
> – Pam Williams
> Chief of Staff, Gwinnett County School District (GA)

CHSD 117 – Antioch Community High School

By the first day of school in fall 2021, kindergarten enrollment was up by over 3,000 students compared to the previous school year. "We exceeded our enrollment goal!" said Gwinnett's Chief of Staff Pam Williams. "DMGroup gave us so many strategies, like leveraging social media, advertising, getting out in the community, engaging our schools and local leaders to help us tackle enrollment — being proactive instead of reactive. And giving elementary schools the opportunity to try these new strategies themselves, without everything coming from the district, made schools feel empowered and ultimately helped us get results."

Strengthening Social-Emotional Supports in Community High School District 117

For Community High School District 117 (CHSD 117), providing social-emotional supports was the priority table stake. One best-practice strategy they took from the institute was prioritizing student-adult relationships so students felt connected to someone in the building and felt excited to attend school every day. In the student culture survey conducted the previous year, the district had not seen the results they wanted in response to the sentence, "I feel connected to an adult in the building." Traditionally, student-adult relationships had been strongest between classroom teachers and students, but the district understood that classroom teachers would not be able to do this alone and that a structure needed to be put in place to create the opportunity and time for

genuine relationships to form between students and a broader range of adults in the building.

Superintendent McKay shared that his district's participation in ALI helped their team focus on prioritizing student-adult relationships. New promising practices discussed during ALI led CHSD 117 to decide to implement a tutoring structure. The tutoring not only would support academics, but would create opportunities to build a relationship between each student and an adult. The district's ALI team proactively took action to set this plan up for success:

- **Protected time:** District and school leaders made a plan to provide tutoring during and after the school day to ensure students could do what worked for them and not let time be a barrier to implementation.

- **Support staff:** The district identified guidance counselors and social workers who could be available to students during this time to provide opportunities to develop additional connections.

- **Parent engagement:** Schools invited parents to afterschool sessions so they too could build relationships with staff to reinforce their student's relationship.

CHSD 117 made these resource adjustments (time and people) to match their priority to build strong student-adult relationships.

Phase 2 - Assess and Analyze to Identify Target Population Through Power Standards

Once districts had solid drafts of their table stakes plans, the district teams came back together to explore how they would address learning loss and missed instruction. There was widespread agreement that districts would be facing a wider distribution of students' skills and proficiencies and that they urgently needed to address the needs of those students furthest behind.

"If everything is important, nothing is important," DMGroup emphasized. Prioritizing standards would be critical to accelerating learning. DMGroup's presentation focused on the importance of identifying power standards and identifying student populations needing targeted efforts. DMGroup outlined a process to help each district tackle this work (*Exhibit 2*). Some districts had already started this work and were simply refining their choices, while other districts were starting from scratch. During this phase, district teams worked through the steps outlined in the process, refined their plans during a coaching session with a DMGroup expert, and met with peer districts to get feedback and share ideas.

Focusing Content in Community High School District 117

It is no easy task to review content and determine what to teach — and especially what not to teach. Districts were in different places in the process of identifying power standards. A Gwinnett team had been working on the
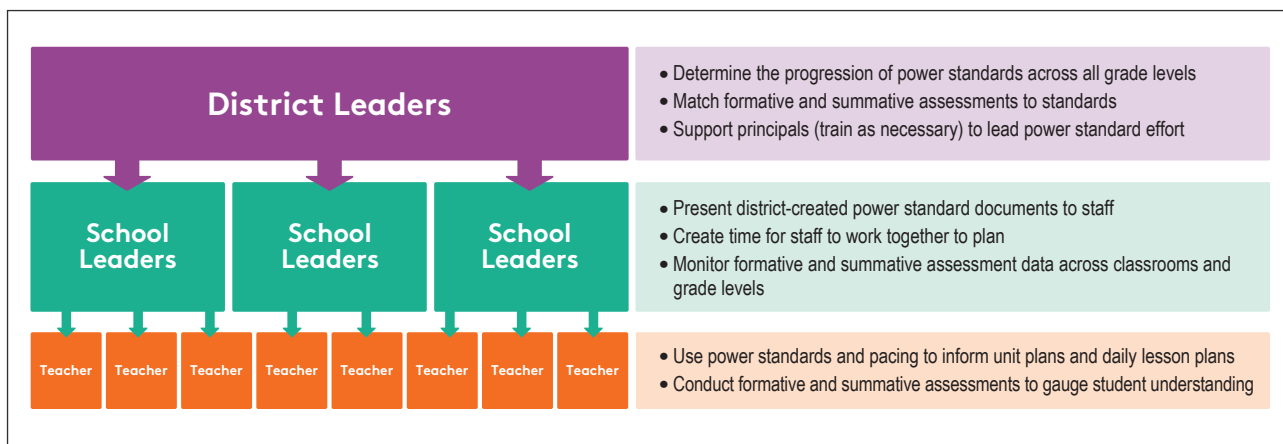
process during the 2020-21 school year, while CHSD 117 had not yet started identifying specific power standards. CHSD 117 leaders took the guidance on how to identify power standards and brought district and school leaders across their two high schools to start this process. Over the course of spring 2021, CHSD 117 district leaders worked with school leaders to look across grades and subjects to determine the progression of power standards.

District and school leaders knew that getting teachers to understand that they shouldn't teach everything in the curriculum would require a significant mindset shift for teachers. District and school leaders met with teachers and staff to explain that they understood there would be a lot on teachers' plates and therefore knew that priorities needed to be set. Superintendent McKay shared that this approach helped teachers feel validated and empowered, which set them up to do the nitty-gritty work of narrowing down the curriculum to specific power standards to prioritize and how to pace them. The district reports that they have already revisited the power standards this fall, and will continue to do so throughout the year. This approach brought a new level of focus and energy to the work.

Phase 3 - Accelerating Learning

In the final phase of the ALI, DMGroup presented a plan outlining how to monitor progress on power standards. Many districts typically wait for summative assessments or tri-annual testing, but in order to accelerate learning in the coming year, DMGroup explained that it would be critically important to review data regularly and frequently, and make rapid adjustments to approaches to learning

Exhibit 2 **PROCESS TO IDENTIFY POWER STANDARDS TO PRIORITIZE INSTRUCTION**

District Leaders
- Determine the progression of power standards across all grade levels
- Match formative and summative assessments to standards
- Support principals (train as necessary) to lead power standard effort

School Leaders
- Present district-created power standard documents to staff
- Create time for staff to work together to plan
- Monitor formative and summative assessment data across classrooms and grade levels

Teacher
- Use power standards and pacing to inform unit plans and daily lesson plans
- Conduct formative and summative assessments to gauge student understanding

Source: DMGroup.

based on the data. District teams worked on plans, met for coaching sessions, and shared with each other their ideas for accelerating learning.

Data-Driven Rapid Adjustments

The Gwinnett team used this phase of the ALI program to examine their data systems and processes. Rather than build something new, they spent time determining how to leverage their existing data systems and refine the data platform to provide schools and teachers with a view of various cuts of data. This fall, teams were being trained and starting to use a Multi-Year Acceleration Plan (MAP) which provides intermittent (e.g., teacher-led differentiated small-group instruction), strategic (e.g., technology-based individualized support), and intensive (e.g., 1:1 tutoring) supports for all students as needed.

Leaders focused their efforts on tailoring existing data systems to get quick, actionable information to adjust instruction. During ALI, the instructional leadership teams worked to anticipate needs that would arise in the 2021-22 school year, and simultaneously prepared themselves to pivot to respond to unexpected needs. Elementary principals shared that by being proactive in their planning, teachers and staff have a toolbox of strategies to support student needs. This fall, unanticipated needs have indeed arisen, but because teachers had developed a plan for rapid adjustments, they are well positioned to respond to those needs on a weekly, even daily, basis.

Setting Goals to Accelerate Learning

Once CHSD 117 identified power standards, they turned to examining the continuity of instruction and being able to meet students where they are while still accelerating learning. They already had tutoring supports in place for additional help, so they focused on how each department would play a role in acceleration.

District and school leaders provided teachers time at the beginning of the year to set specific goals to focus their instruction and accelerate learning. Later, teachers were able to revisit these goals and assess progress every three weeks. This quick cycle allowed staff to think about what was and was not working, and make adjustments as needed. While the majority of the goals were year-long, frequent monitoring ensured progress was being tracked. Superintendent McKay said that as CHSD 117 built their acceleration plan, they were able to guide staff to drill deeper and more frequently make adjustments to meet students' needs.

Accelerating Learning Institute Propels Progress

The work of accelerating learning will not just be a "Covid thing." Many of the participating districts acknowledged that some students had been behind for years and the Accelerating Learning Institute work would serve as a foundation for any school year. The Gwinnett team shared that the ALI work provided valuable structure to their planning, while CHSD 117 Superintendent McKay said, "The granularity of actionable strategies that were provided during ALI and the 'just in time' options for us to implement allowed us to drill down to what was most important."

Beyond appreciating the core content of ALI, the districts reflected on the valuable support of the district-specific coaching and the benefits of collaborating with peer districts. Both CHSD 117 and Gwinnett shared that they valued the opportunity to work with an external coach, gained insight hearing about what other districts were doing to accelerate learning, appreciated being prodded on their plans, and gained energy from knowing firsthand that all of these districts were in it together. Reflecting on the DMGroup Institute experience, Gwinnett Chief of Staff Pam Williams stated, "the DMGroup Institute structure — best practices, individual coaching, and peer collaboration — enabled our district work to move forward at the accelerated pace needed to begin this school year right." ◆