CASE STUDY

Bringing Students Back

Increasing Middle School Attendance at Bibb County School District (GA)

by Sarah Brem

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Bibb County School District (BCSD) in Macon, Georgia, was beginning to see promising results thanks to its various initiatives—achieving a record-breaking 80% graduation rate at its high schools in 2018, and a drop in the rate of chronic absenteeism from 16% in 2019 to 11% in 2020—that is, until Covid-19 hit. Despite the district's best efforts to pivot among remote, hybrid, and in-person modalities to sustain instruction during the 2020-2021 academic year, chronic absenteeism across the district skyrocketed to over 50%; across middle schools, the rate of chronic absenteeism reached 60%.[1]

The district leadership at BCSD was well aware of the importance of middle school attendance. Georgia Department of Education Superintendent Richard Woods had been focusing attention on the state's increasing chronic absenteeism rates in middle schools and the subsequent detrimental effects on student retention and graduation rates in high schools.[2] In a 2016 presentation, Superintendent Woods highlighted that middle school appears to be pivotal for students' attendance rates, as the legal responsibility for their attendance starts to transition from the parents to the students.[3] In many cases, the habits formed during middle school can carry through high school; research indicates that students' attendance from sixth to ninth grade could be a "better predictor of dropping out of school than test scores."[4]

BCSD's leadership was determined to take action. Having successfully partnered with District Management Group (DMGroup) multiple times over the years, BCSD decided to try tackling middle school chronic absenteeism using DMGroup's Breakthrough Results (BTR) approach. This unique approach combines highly focused goals, performance coaching, data analyses, and iterative rapid-action cycles over a period of ten weeks to produce measurable results while building district team capacity.

FAST FACTS

BIBB COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT

20,552 students

- **78%** Black
- **12%** White
- **6%** Hispanic
- **1%** Asian
- **3%** Multiracial
- **100%** Eligible for Free/Reduced Meals
- **10.7%** Students with Disability

Per Pupil Expenditure:

$11,127

Graduation Rate:

80.7%

Source: Report Card, Governor's Office of Student Achievement, State of Georgia (2020-2021): https://gosa.georgia.gov/dashboards-data-report-card/report-card

> " *With the Breakthrough Results approach, BCSD teams were able to reduce the percentage of targeted students labeled chronically absent by 56% in just ten weeks.*

The results achieved by BCSD were extraordinary: with the Breakthrough Results approach, BCSD teams were able to reduce the percentage of targeted students labeled chronically absent by 56% in just ten weeks. Comparatively, for those students who were not part of this effort, the percentage of chronically absent students dropped by less than 1% (*Exhibit 1*).

## Tackling Chronic Absenteeism with the Breakthrough Results Approach

BCSD Superintendent Curtis Jones had established a long-standing, successful partnership with DMGroup: the district leveraged DMGroup's scheduling approach to increase instructional minutes and equity of instruction, had DMGroup conduct opportunity reviews of special education support and delivery models, and partnered with DMGroup on initiatives inventories for strategic budgeting. Upon learning about BTR, Superintendent Jones decided to use this approach to tackle chronic absenteeism at all six middle schools in BCSD during the spring 2022 semester.

Building a Winning Team

Crucial to the success of the Breakthrough Results approach is getting the right people involved to enact change. Working with the DMGroup team, BCSD began by establishing the following teams:

- **Sponsorship Team:** A small group of district administrators was gathered to serve as the managing body of the effort. This team was tasked with focusing on the strategic objective of attendance, engaging the relevant stakeholders, providing resources, and ensuring those engaged with the work were set up for success.

- **Attendance Breakthrough Teams:** DMGroup and the Sponsorship Team understood that to be effective, they needed an all-hands-on-deck approach and had to reach beyond the Student Support Department.

Exhibit 1 **THE CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATE FOR BREAKTHROUGH RESULTS (BTR) STUDENTS COMPARED TO RATES FOR OTHER STUDENTS**

Average Chronic Absenteeism
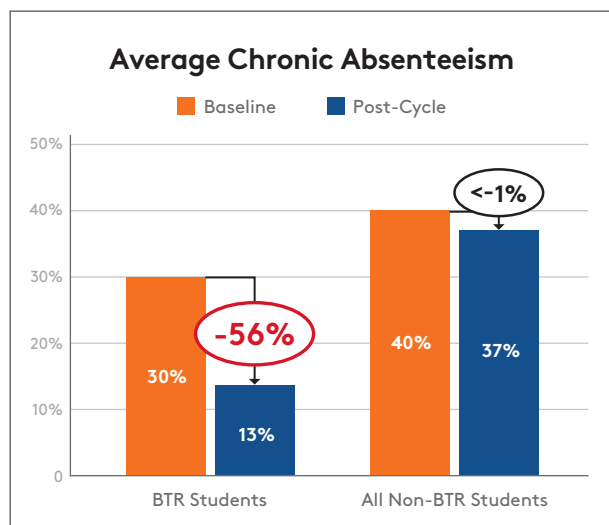
Source: BCDS and DMGroup

So, at each of the six middle schools, a team was created comprising five to nine teachers and staff who were already involved in student attendance and could leverage their existing expertise and relationships to get students into schools. With these teams formed, BCSD and DMGroup felt they had the right members within each school community engaged in the work and aligned to address middle school attendance.

Focused Goals

While the overall goal of BCSD's Breakthrough Results challenge was to reduce middle school chronic absenteeism, each team was tasked with setting a very clear, specific goal that they would achieve at their school over the course of the ten weeks of the BTR challenge.

Each team reviewed attendance data for all students within their school and identified the students who were at risk of crossing into the chronically absent category.

BCSD Sponsorship Team

- Superintendent
- Assistant Superintendent of Student Affairs Chief of Staff
- District Attendance and Transfer Coordinator Senior Analyst

BCSD Attendance Breakthrough Teams
44 team members from 6 middle schools

- 14 Counselors
- 5 Teachers
- 7 Principals/Assistant Principals
- 2 Attendance Clerks
- 2 Coordinators
- 4 Deans
- 5 Coaches
- 4 Family Engagement Managers
- 1 Social Worker

This group of students was referred to as the "target students" for the work. Each team was then charged with creating a goal for their target students. Specifically, they were asked to create a SMART (**S**pecific, **M**easurable, **A**ggressive but **A**chievable, **R**ealistic, and **T**ime-bound) goal. While "SMART goal" has become a familiar buzz-word in many industries, creating a goal that truly meets all the parameters of a SMART goal can be challenging. Each team worked hard with their dedicated DMGroup performance coach to craft a true SMART goal. This process provided the schools with autonomy to create their own goals, and ultimately fostered a sense of ownership, as well as gave team members the opportunity to build upon their own capacities and leverage the resources they had available in their school building.

> " *The DMGroup Breakthrough approach allowed us to connect with our students in a way that we may not have—it allowed us to create relationships with students who otherwise may have continued to fly under the radar.*

Below is an example of one team's SMART goal:

By April 29, at least 31 of the 39 target students who already had 7 total absences will have 4 or less additional absences and thereby avoid the chronically absent threshold.

This SMART goal is highly specific and creates a laser focus on the goal to be achieved. The team with this SMART goal zeroed in on these 39 target students and were determined that each of those students would miss no more than four school days over the course of the ten weeks.

Taking Action and Uncovering Winning Strategies

With the target students identified and the SMART goals established, the teams began their work and came up with strategies to put into action. Each week, DMGroup received attendance records for all target students from the district and prepared the data for each team in a "dashboard" that was user-friendly and readable. The teams then met with their dedicated DMGroup performance coach to review this data and assess whether their strategies had worked. The dashboard allowed the team members to identify students who were missing more classes than others—information that otherwise could be lost in the regular logistics of the school day. In their meetings, the team members would reflect on what was happening each day at school and attempt to uncover the cause of each student's absence. Was the student frequently sick? Were there any changes at home? Were there issues with transportation? Was there an issue with data entry?

What Is the Breakthrough Results Approach?

The Breakthrough Results (BTR) approach is based on the premise that "successful change programs begin with results"* and that tremendous success can be achieved by unleashing the talents and ideas within one's organization.

Why do so many regular initiatives fail?

New initiatives are launched with regularity across organizations, but the vast majority fail to achieve significant tangible results. Why is that? Barriers to success typically cited include:

- Goals are broad and complex, lacking clarity and specificity;

- Success measures are misaligned (the focus is on activities instead of performance outputs);

- Long timelines create a lack of urgency;

- Resource requirements are unrealistic or ill-defined;

- There is no clear owner or too many owners of the objective;

- "Doers" are not well informed or well prepared;

- There are too many competing initiatives;

- Progress is unclear as it often takes a long time to access performance results.

Why the Breakthrough Results Approach Works

The Breakthrough Results approach avoids these pitfalls with its unique methodology that creates focus, builds a sense of urgency, improves transparency, and provides team members with support, while simultaneously maintaining accountability.

- **A Team Approach:** The Breakthrough Results approach begins by assembling multiple teams of motivated teachers and staff who are close to the work. With multiple teams launching simultaneously, a community is built around the goal, creating a healthy sense of both collaboration and competition among the teams.

- **Performance Coaching:** Each team is matched with a DMGroup performance coach, who meets with the team on a weekly basis. During these weekly meetings, the DMGroup performance coach provides structured coaching, supports professional development, helps to eliminate impediments, and encourages the team members to be creative and solution-focused.

- **Actionable Data:** DMGroup gathers data on a weekly or bi-weekly basis and help processes the data to make it easy to interpret. This allows the team to get rapid feedback on their efforts, assess what is working and what is not, and innovate and iterate in rapid cycles.

BREAKTHROUGH RESULTS APPROACH AND FEATURES

- **Highly specific** goal/performance challenge

- **Short timeframe** (8-10 weeks)

- Data captured, analyzed, and reviewed to **measure progress**

- Teams meet weekly to review data, iterate, and **innovate in rapid cycles**

- Just-in-time coaching and **professional development** provided by a dedicated Breakthrough Results performance coach from DMGroup

- **Multiple teams launched simultaneously** create a sense of community, a healthy sense of competition, and the ability to share learnings

With this approach, teams achieve results while building their capacity to lead and effect change. By the end of the cycle, teams are excited by the results they achieve and feel empowered to continue the work.

* Robert H. Schaffer and Harvey A. Thomson, "Successful Change Programs Begin with Results," *Harvard Business Review* (January-February 1992), https://hbr.org/1992/01/successful-change-programs-begin-with-results.

> ## *The teams have been energized by their success and want to continue the work. They enhanced their skills of working together, examining data, and using real-time information to take action, innovate, and achieve results.*

Based on their review of the data, the team members would set out—at times, the very next day—to enact change. Sometimes, this change meant adjusting their strategy or layering in additional strategies, and sometimes it meant abandoning the strategy entirely and trying something new. If the teams identified a roadblock, the Sponsorship Team intervened to remove impediments and enable the team to push forward.
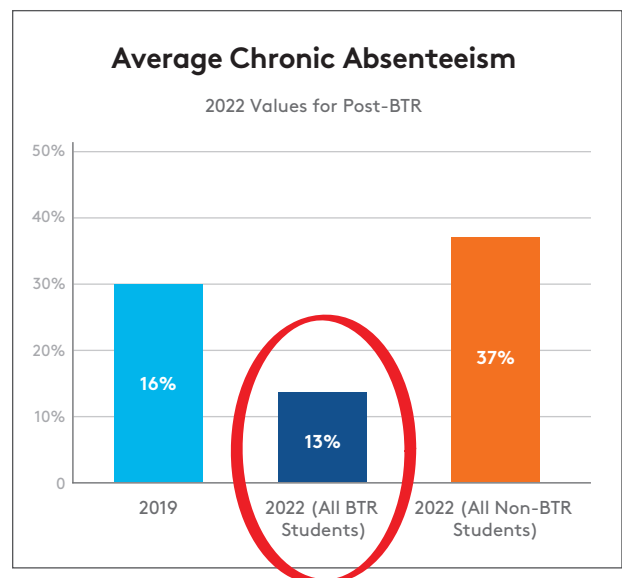
As each school and each student is unique, the strategies used to address absences varied. Many teams chose to focus on refining the process of recording attendance to identify discrepancies. Simultaneously, team members would contact parents and guardians to understand the context behind the absences. When necessary, the teams would collaborate with transportation authorities. Teachers would often offer incentives to students for perfect attendance. Strategies varied significantly based on different root causes, but at the end of the day, the teams were focused on one thing: to meet their objectives by increasing attendance.

"Meaningful relationships, for some students, is paramount to the success they have in the classroom," said Takeysha Lewis, District Attendance and Transfer Coordinator. "As educators, it's important to foster and sustain positive relationships with our students—that alone can encourage them to attend school, even when they may not want to. The Breakthrough [Results] approach allowed for an ongoing assessment of student needs while also fostering deeper relationships. The DMGroup Breakthrough approach allowed us to connect with our students in a way that we may not have—it allowed us to create relationships with students who otherwise may have continued to fly under the radar. These students also began to speak on how school attendance was positively affecting their academic progress. Due to this work, we were able to capture and connect with students to ensure that they came to school feeling confident, ready to learn, and ready to succeed."

Remarkable Results

At the end of the ten weeks, attendance data from before and after the BTR challenge was analyzed and visualized, and the BTR team members came together to review and reflect upon the results. The efforts of the teams led to remarkable results: overall, five out of the six teams met their SMART goals, and they radically reduced the levels of chronic absenteeism in middle schools across BCSD. The BTR target students also had a lower percentage of chronic absenteeism at the end of the challenge than students from the same schools back in 2019; the Breakthrough Results approach enabled teams to bring chronic absenteeism rates **even lower than they were before Covid hit** (*Exhibit 2*). "These incredible results were a result of the intentionality placed on following the processes put in place through the partnership with the DMGroup performance coaches," shared Takeysha Lewis.

Exhibit 2 **THE CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM RATE FOR BTR STUDENTS WAS EVEN LOWER THAN PRE-COVID**

Average Chronic Absenteeism

2022 Values for Post-BTR

- 2019: 16%
- 2022 (All BTR Students): 13%
- 2022 (All Non-BTR Students): 37%

Source: BCDS and DMGroup

Andrew's Story

Andrew (not his real name), a sixth-grade student, was one of the target students included in the BCSD Attendance Challenge. By Week 2, Andrew already had missed four days. If he missed even one more day of school in the next eight weeks, he would be categorized as chronically absent.

Andrew's situation jumped out to the team during the weekly meeting. The team engaged in a discussion about what to do, and concentrated their efforts on making sure Andrew stayed in school. Andrew's teacher had a one-on-one conversation with him, emphasizing why it was so important to come to school each day. The teacher and the whole team deepened their relationship with Andrew, acknowledging his presence and encouraging him to keep up the good work. The team also encouraged him by offering him incentives for perfect attendance; for example, if he made it to school every day that week, he would get to pick out a special snack for snack time.

While these strategies seem simple, the attention and focus made a difference to Andrew. A virtuous cycle was created with Andrew starting to truly internalize the importance of being in class. Over the course of those last eight weeks in the challenge, he didn't miss a single day of school.

"My grades have started to improve since I've been coming to school each day. I'm still working to improve my grades even more. I'm very proud of myself!"

Building Capacity That Endures

Supported by the Sponsorship Team and their DMGroup performance coach, BTR team members felt empowered in their work; they knew that achieving their goals was important district work and that the Sponsorship Team and performance coaches were invested in their success. The DMGroup dashboards provided immediate feedback on their efforts; it helped them to build the skills to examine data and use it to innovate, and allowed for tremendous focus on the goal. The teams developed their skills to collaborate and to lead—skills that endure and will continue to benefit their schools. Finally, the success they achieved has proven to be a substantial motivating factor for teams to continue their attendance work far beyond the Breakthrough Results challenge. One team member expressed their satisfaction with the approach: "Participating in this challenge has given us tools to target our chronically absent students. We definitely will follow this model as we begin the new year. In addition, we discovered an unintended positive ... students enjoyed checking in and [that] gave us an opportunity to engage more with the students."

The Breakthrough Results approach is founded on the premise that successful change programs begin with results. For the BCSD teams, this rang true. The teams have been energized by their success and want to continue the work. They enhanced their skills of working together, examining data, and using real-time information to take action, innovate, and achieve results. Having entered their professional lives to make a difference for students, the team members felt satisfaction in their work and were proud to be celebrating their accomplishments. ◆

Courtney Van Huffel contributed to this article.

NOTES

[1] Report Card, Governor's Office of Student Achievement, State of Georgia (2020-2021), https://gosa.georgia.gov/dashboards-data-report-card/report-card.

[2] In the state of Georgia, "chronically absent students" are defined as students with 10 or more marked absences during the course of a school year.

[3] Richard Woods, "Student Attendance: Changing the Conversation," Georgia Department of Education (2016), https://www.gadoe.org/wholechild/Documents/-Student%20Attendance%20and%20Student%20Achievement%20Updated%20March%202016.pdf.

[4] "Student Attendance Improvement," Office of Whole Child Supports, Georgia Department of Education (2022), https://www.gadoe.org/wholechild/Pages/Student-Attendance-Improvement.aspx.