

Co-Teaching Academy: Using a Coaching-Feedback Model for Co-Teacher Training

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No additional funding was necessary for this project.

Project Description:

The Co-Teaching Academy is different than simply providing information and instruction on co-teaching strategies. I have attended several “sit-and-get” trainings and, personally, did not feel this method of training alone was effective in improving instructional practices within the classroom. A vast amount of research supports this theory as well. To create change, research tells us that there needs to be an opportunity to implement the practice and receive feedback for it to be implemented effectively. Teachers need more than only hearing about a strategy; they need the opportunity to practice it, receive feedback and analyze the outcome. Research tells us that this *coaching* model is most effective for success with any initiative.

Therefore, I wanted to create a training model for co-teachers that offered opportunity for implementation, allowed for observation, and offered practical feedback support if it were to make a positive impact on the co-teaching process.

Using the vast amount of research that supports the coaching model coupled with my own personal experience as a co-teacher and administrator in a public high school, with the help of one of my co-workers, I developed the Co-Teaching Academy framework to include instruction, observations, and feedback. Using this model, we provide training on co-teaching strategies to teachers (both special education and general education teaching pairs) across all grade bands to improve access to the curriculum for students with disabilities. The goal is to improve the co-teaching process within the classroom which positively impacts the students’ overall performance in the course. This, in turn, has a positive impact on graduation rate for students with disabilities. The cyclical pattern of improving the instructional process to improve classroom performance to further improve graduation rate is a process going on state-wide across all public-school systems in Georgia. The specific needs in our state are as diverse as the systems we serve. Our office seeks to support districts as they uncover the needs that are specific to their schools. The Co-Teaching Academy we developed came out of one district expressing one such need in the area of co-teaching. The Co-Teaching Academy includes one day of instruction which ensures that all teachers have the same foundational knowledge of co-teaching principles and understand their responsibilities as co-teachers, both legally and as part of their teacher evaluations. This is followed by three separate days of classroom observations intermittently dispersed over the course of two to three months. With each observation, a face-to-face feedback session is held the very next day that includes both teachers.

Staffing Pattern:

One of our program specialists at Northwest GLRS, Ray Hammett, and I conduct the co-teacher trainings. Together, we are able to model some of the strategies of co-teaching as we share them with teachers. Working in tandem, we can show teachers what some strategies look like “live” by demonstrating it for them. Since GLRS is an entity specific to Georgia, it may be helpful for me to explain how GLRS functions to support students, teachers, schools, and districts. The Georgia Learning Resources System (GLRS) is a network of 17 regional programs that provide

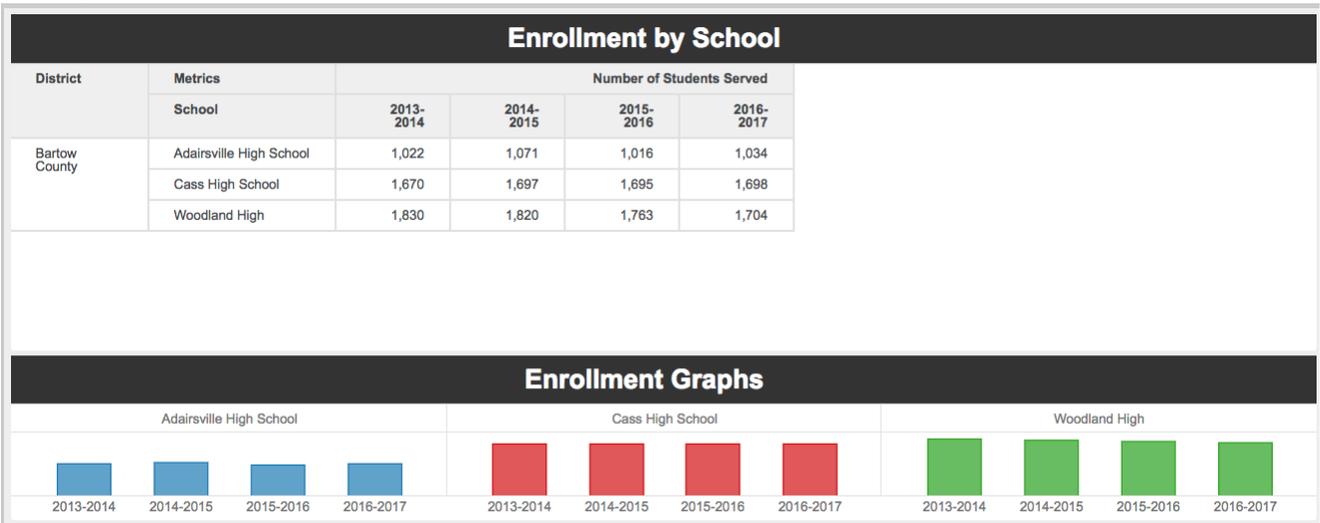
training and resources to school district personnel, parents of students with disabilities, and other interested individuals to support the achievement, graduation rate, and post-secondary success of students with disabilities. The programs are funded by the Georgia Department of Education, Divisions for Special Education Services and Supports, and are operated in collaboration with Regional Educational Service Agencies and local school districts that serve as fiscal agents for the programs. GLRS programs are funded entirely with federal discretionary funds made available through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA). GLRS staff members are specialized in providing professional learning, technical assistance and coaching for school systems on a variety of topics related to students with disabilities.

Population Served:

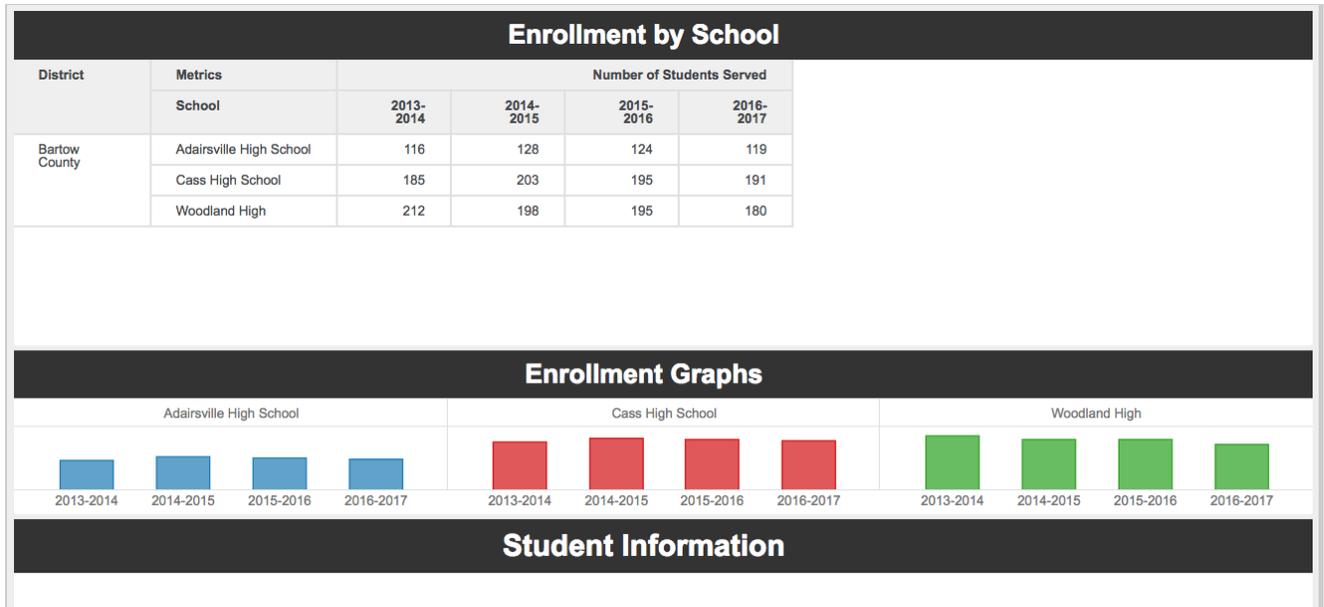
Since the Co-Teaching Academy involves co-teaching pairs, it impacts both special education and general education students in all academic areas. The data presented in this report is based on the Co-Teaching Academy training conducted at one high school in our region in the school year 2015-16 (Adairsville High School in Bartow County). The student population for 2015-16 is described in the charts A and B below:

Chart A: Enrollment for all three public high schools in county system for 2015-16 school year:

ALL Students



**Chart B: Enrollment for all three public high schools in county system for 2015-16 school year:
For Students with Disabilities**



Project Origination:

This project came about in a somewhat unusual way. Typically, a special education director, through review of data, will contact our GLRS for any support their district may need. This project was formed at the request of an assistant principal at Adairsville High School in Bartow County, Georgia. Based on school-level data and classroom observations/evaluations conducted by the administrators, the administrative team determined there was real need for co-teaching support in their school. The assistant principal of curriculum and instruction called our office and shared the group’s concerns with me. Having been a high school assistant principal over curriculum and instruction as well as having been a general education teacher as part of a co-teaching team, I understood the situation very well from several different points of view. As a GLRS director, it was refreshing to see school leadership concerned with an issue that is often viewed as a “special education only” issue. This administrative team was different than most. They understood that co-teaching is not merely a concern of special education. Since school-level leadership was concerned enough to reach out to me, I felt we were in a good place to make a positive difference.

Based on my personal experience as a teacher and administrator as well as the research on effective training models, I felt an on-going framework that involved coaching and feedback would best serve this school. My colleague and program specialist, Ray Hammett, was (and continues to serve as) my partner for co-teacher training. Mr. Hammett is a seasoned, veteran educator serving in many positions at the school and district level in both Alabama and Georgia school systems. For five years, Mr. Hammett served as graduation coach at the high school where I served as assistant principal for curriculum and instruction. Because of our professional knowledge and background and our previous personal work experience, Mr. Hammett and I felt

that we could provide high-quality co-teacher training since we have the unique perspective of both scholar (data researcher, outside perspective) and practitioner (teacher, co-teacher, inside perspective).

The Co-Teaching Academy framework is a coaching-model type training that incorporates classroom instruction training, observations, feedback sessions, follow-up coaching, and self-reflection through multiple meetings that span a two to three-month time frame (a semester). It consists of:

- *Meet with school-level administration for input.* To better understand the school's needs, Mr. Hammett and I first meet with school administration to determine the specific needs of the school. In the case of the high school whose data is used as part of this project, we met with the assistant principal and the special education department chair. Through this meeting, we gathered information about school operations (schedule, courses, number of classes, type of schedule, length of classes, availability of substitutes, etc.) to get a better logistical understanding of the school to determine what would work best for them. Good training begins with understanding that the trainer is an invited guest who is providing a service at the school's request. In this case, the school was not obligated to make use of our services, but we were certainly glad they asked! Therefore, we want to continue to involve administrators in developing what they need since they will be supporting the work once the training has ended. For progress to continue, we need to involve the administrators from the outset. Additionally, the purpose is to genuinely meet their needs not to force them to fit into some pre-developed training package. We always start with the same basic framework that contains the necessary elements to address co-teaching in the coaching format, but we seek the administrators' input regarding the finer details. They talk; we listen and then make the appropriate adjustments.

- *One day of classroom instruction for the co-teaching pairs (both general education and special education teacher).* With the many routes available by which one can become a certified educator and the different program requirements at various colleges and universities, it has been my experience that not all certified educators are exposed to the same content regarding special education in general. Often teachers in the same school do not share the same basic understanding of what co-teaching is and what their responsibilities are regarding special education students. The purpose of having one day of classroom instruction is to make certain that every participant hears the same accurate, current information regarding co-teaching. From types of strategies to the legal aspects, all participants hear the same information. We use this time to discuss, collaborate, and gain a better understanding of the relationship between the two teachers as well as to help them become comfortable with us as trainers and observers.

- *Three classroom observations and three feedback sessions as a co-teaching pair.* Intermittently, over the course of a two to three-month time frame, we schedule three separate observations. Using a rubric we created (which we share with the administrators during our initial meeting), we observe co-teaching pairs on three separate occasions and then provide feedback after each observation in a face-to-face meeting with both teachers, typically the following day after the observation. This way, feedback is timely making it relevant and useful.

Additionally, each teacher is provided a copy of the rubric which we go over during our classroom instruction. The teachers also receive a copy of their individual rubric containing our observation notes during the feedback session. In sum, we give teachers feedback in multiple formats – verbally and written. Regarding the classroom observation rubric we use, we stress to teachers and to administrators, that we are merely observers – trained, veteran educators who are simply offering suggestions, ideas, and support. We are by no means evaluators. As teachers, they are not required nor obligated to accept or entertain any of our suggestions. They are free to do what they wish with the feedback and information they receive. Thus far, we have not experienced any notable reluctance from teachers in participating in the observations and feedback sessions which is somewhat surprising. Perhaps it is our diligence in presenting ourselves in a non-threatening manner reminding teachers that we are simply resources of support and *not* superior educators who somehow surpass them in all school-related knowledge and expertise. That certainly is not true and we make every effort to dispel any thought of such. We make it quite clear that we simply have a wide variety of experience and have invested the time in both scholarly research of the practice of co-teaching as well as invested the time in actually doing it (co-teaching). We remind teachers that as former administrators, we have also spent many hours observing co-teachers, analyzing school-level data from co-taught classrooms, and scheduling teachers and students in the co-taught classrooms. Therefore, we have an idea of what practices are successful and why they are successful. Simply stated, our purpose is to offer teachers support based on what we know and our experiences. That is all. Additionally, we remind teachers that besides the obvious added benefit of improving instructional practices to help students with disabilities succeed, there are other added benefits for them through their participation as well. As part of the teacher evaluation process in Georgia, standard 9 in the Georgia Teacher Assessment on Performance Standards (TAP) is *professionalism*. Specifically, standard 9.5 is “*participates in professional development activities*”. Therefore, if they wish to take advantage of this opportunity, they may choose to use our rubric and feedback as evidence/documentation of their participation in professional learning (TAP standard 9). The choice is strictly up to them. Georgia TAP evaluation also includes accountability for student growth, a standard for planning, instructional strategies, and differentiation. We remind teachers that good co-teaching encompasses all of those and that, through our observations and feedback, we can support them by offering strategies to assist in those areas in a “no-threat” environment. In a way, they could use our support and feedback as a type of “formative assessment” for the teacher evaluation process. As for our observation rubric used during our teacher observations, we are completely honest with teachers and principals regarding the rubric we designed. Mr. Hammett and I explicitly state that our rubric is only a rubric; it is not to be considered an evaluation instrument. It is in no way a researched-based measurement. In fact, no such thing exists for measuring/evaluating the co-teaching process. I know because I have searched for one many times. Our Co-teaching Observation Rubric is simply a rubric that we created which contains elements that, according to research and our own personal experience as co-teachers and public school administrators, are necessary elements of quality co-teaching. We simply make notes on what we observe based on our expertise, professional opinion and experience as

scholarly practitioners. We are completely transparent about this from the outset. Furthermore, we intentionally refer to this several times during our one day of classroom instruction. By being transparent, honest and open about it, we have not experienced any disinclination to its use. Having been teachers ourselves for a very long time, Mr. Hammett and I are very cognizant of teachers' hesitation to having others conduct observations. Therefore, we go to great lengths to develop a rapport with them, earn their trust and respect, and remain supportive, respectful, and non-threatening.

- *An analysis of their own co-teaching practice.* Knowing that self-reflection is important, but also knowing that teacher time is extremely limited, I incorporate the use of technology to allow teachers the opportunity to reflect upon their own practices. We ask the co-teaching pair to video a live segment of the classroom instructional period. Then watch it (preferably together) and make notes as to what they saw using the same Co-Teaching Observation Rubric that Mr. Hammett and I use when we observe them. We ask that they share their thoughts with us as well. The goal is to get them to be mindful observers of their own co-teaching practices and improve upon them.

This is the basic outline/framework for the Co-Teaching Academy I created and have facilitated with Mr. Ray Hammett since the fall of 2015. Depending upon the school, grade level, teaching pairs, years of experience, and other such details, we have changed a few basic points to better fit the needs of the population with which we have been asked to work. However, the basic framework remains the same: meet with administration for input, one day of basic instruction, scheduled observations and feedback sessions.

Issues Addressed:

[Note: Although we have conducted several co-teacher trainings throughout our region using the Co-Teaching Academy framework, the specifics of this project (data detail, specific issues, needs, etc.) are from our work at one specific high school in our region.]

- Varying levels of understanding of co-teaching roles and responsibilities
- Lack of strategies to support differentiation at the high school level
- Conflicts in lesson planning and communication among co-teachers due to unavoidable scheduling constraints
- Issues from differing teacher personalities and teaching styles

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives:

Desired Outcomes:

- Enhance and support the entire co-teaching process for the improvement and success with student course completion, and ultimately, improving the graduation rate for students with disabilities.

Measurable Objectives (as indicated by teacher/administrator surveys):

Improved teacher understanding and/or capabilities in the following areas:

- Differentiation
- Co-Teaching Strategies

- Personality Types and Effects on Teaching Styles
- Strategies for Planning and Communication in Co-Teaching

Results (Outcomes and Achievements):

We conducted two Co-Teaching Academy sessions at the school during the 2015-16 school year. The first session was conducted first semester with primarily math and ELA co-teaching pairs (most taught 9th/10th graders). The second session was conducted second semester and included science and social studies co-teaching pairs. We collected survey data from the teachers in both groups. Teachers overwhelmingly responded that they felt the program was helpful in assisting them to be more proficient and efficient in their co-teaching practices. The administrators at the school shared with us that they had noticed a positive change in lesson planning, instruction, and overall attitude of the teachers towards co-teaching and co-teaching practices. In fact, they scheduled additional training with us for the following school year (2016-17) on the topics of formative assessments and progress monitoring practices. (A copy of an emailed letter of thanks from the assistant principal is included with this project’s submission as well as applicable teacher survey data.) However, the most impactful result is shown through student data. The graduation rate for students with disabilities at the school increased 6.67 percentage points from 2015 to 2016 – the largest increase for any subgroup across all three high schools within this district. This gain was also above the state average. Regarding improvements on state standardized assessments, the scores for all students increased 13.37 percentage points on the state assessment for 9th grade literature from 2015 to 2016. The school also experienced an increase of 5.87 percentage points in their Algebra I state assessments from 2015 to 2016 for all students. The improvements on these tests were the largest gains for these state assessments across all three high schools within the district and were also above the state averages for both tests. (See data charts C, D, and E below.)

Chart C: 2016 4-Year Cohort Graduation Rate:

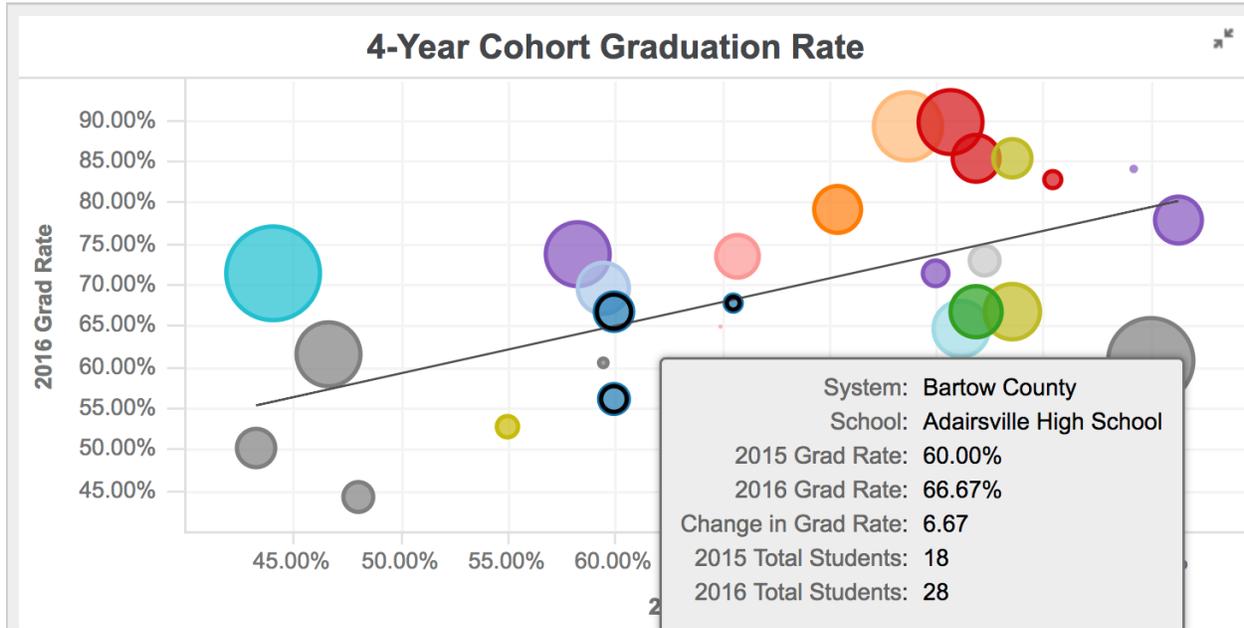


Chart D: CCRPI Indicator 1: State Assessment - 9th Grade Literature

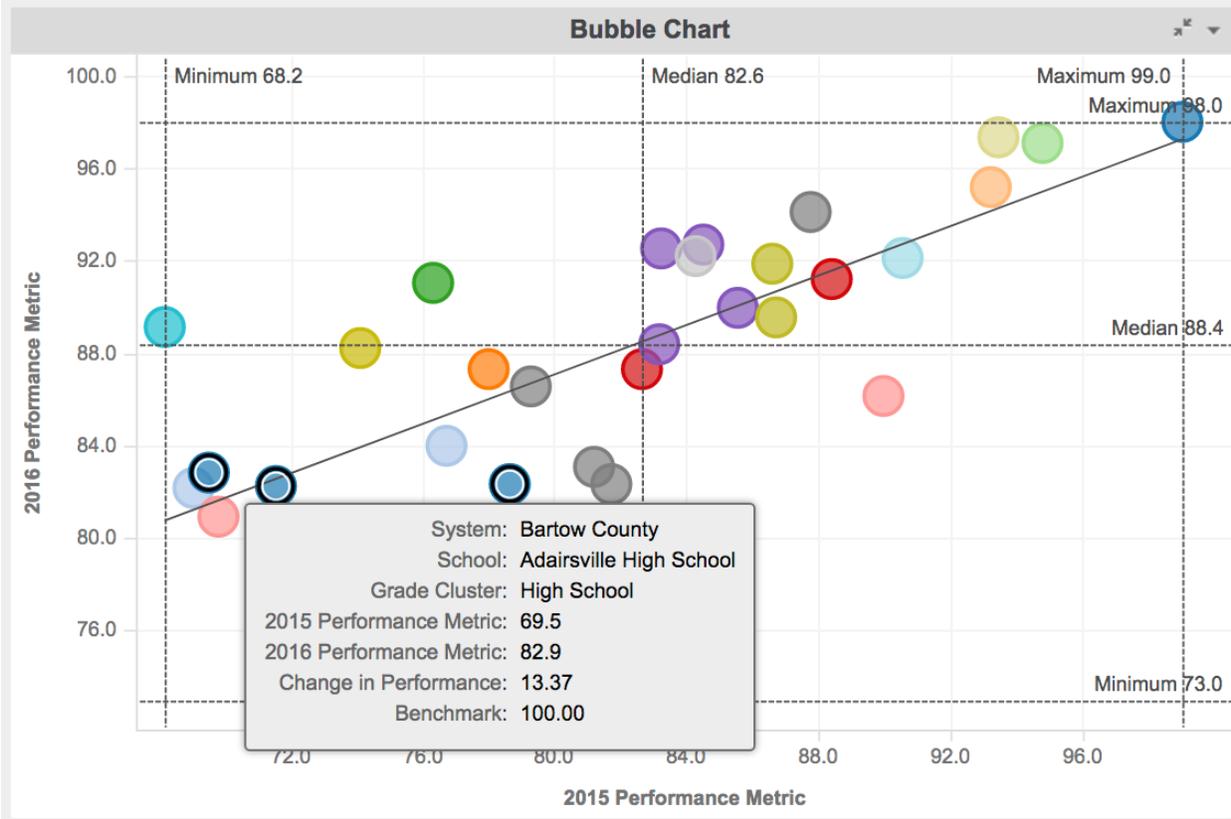
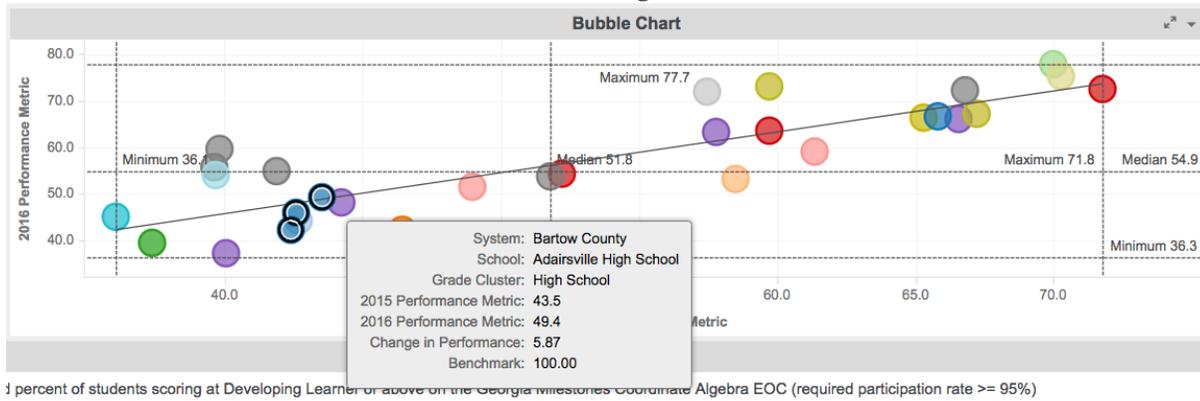


Chart E: CCRPI Indicator 3: State Assessment – Algebra I



1 percent of students scoring at Developing Learner or above on the Georgia Milestones Coordinate Algebra EOC (required participation rate >= 95%)

Strategies and/or Interventions:

- Personality Types – *True Colors* Personality Inventory
- Co-Teaching Roles, Responsibilities, and Requirements
- Specially Designed Instruction (SDI), Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and Differentiation

- Co-Teaching Models, Strategies and Effective Methods
- Co-Teaching and Professional Evaluations (Georgia TAPS, TKES, LKES overview)
- Working and Planning Collaboratively for Co-Teaching
- Necessary Conversations for Co-Teachers (includes addressing differences, student behavior, classroom management, school/home communications, grading, classroom expectations, student rewards/incentives, etc.)

Project Timeline:

School year 2015-16

First Semester Teacher Group: September – November 2015

Second Semester Teacher Group: January - March 2016

Special Conditions and/or Expertise Required to Carry Out the Project:

- Training and experience as a co-teacher at the high school level
- Experience as an administrator having conducted countless teacher evaluation at the high school level having been formally trained and certified to use various teacher evaluation instruments in Georgia (GTOI and TAPS)
- Training and experience in scheduling courses (particularly co-teaching) at the high school level
- Scholarly research of the co-teaching process which includes but is not limited to: legal requirements (i.e., IDEA, FERPA, ADA), strategies, differentiation, UDL, and SDI
- Training and experience as director of the state agency responsible for teacher training and support in special education.
- Experience in organizing effective training programs for teachers

Outcomes Related to School Completion, Dropout Prevention, and/or Graduation Rates:

The purpose of the Georgia Learning Resources System network (GLRS) is to support schools and districts in our specific regions with quality training and professional development to their staff for the purpose of improving the graduation rate for students with disabilities. Every training, professional development, initiative, or method of support that comes from our office can be tied back to improving the graduation rate for students with disabilities. It is our sole purpose of the GLRS network. The trainings and support each GLRS office offers are dependent upon state initiatives as well as individual districts' needs. District special education directors determine the type of training needed by their district through an extensive data analysis process. This data analysis process, which our office offered training for, is required due to the various reporting mandates from the state. By doing extensive data analysis, districts can determine gaps and areas for improvement within their district based on real-time data which is paramount to improving the success of students. Once barriers are identified, our office seeks to help districts address those barriers (staff trainings, resources, etc.).

The school that contacted me requesting co-teaching training had identified co-teaching as a barrier to successful course completion and standardized test performance for not only students with disabilities but for their at-risk population as well (multi-tier systems of supports, tier 2 and 3 in Georgia RtI). Without successful course completion, students cannot earn the credits needed for graduation. In fact, course completion is one of the state identified barriers to graduation in

Georgia by the Georgia Department of Education (DOE) Office of Special Education Programs. Therefore, this school's need directly mirrored the state's own data research.

Current Status of Project:

The Co-Teaching Academy at this specific high school ended on March 31, 2016. However, since that time, we have conducted many other Co-Teaching Academies across all three grade bands (elementary, middle, and high) and in various other schools and systems in our region. As of the writing of the report, we are currently conducting three Co-Teaching Academies at three different elementary schools in our region.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant:

With assistance and input from my colleague, Ray Hammett, we created and facilitated this entire project as a collaborative team. I was directly involved in every aspect of this project from inception to completion. This includes delivering instruction, observing teachers and providing feedback, meeting with administrators, creating presentations as well as other teacher resources, etc.

Lessons Learned:

- Administrator support is the key to this training's success. If the school leader does not see co-teacher training as being important, impactful, and necessary for their school's improvement, then the training will fall flat. In this instance, the administrative team had done their own homework and saw an opportunity for professional staff development with co-teacher training. They were already "in" before they ever called me.
- Identifying with the target audience can greatly assist in creating buy-in. Having had a great deal of personal experience as a co-teacher seemed to immediately create buy-in from the teachers. Teachers were very receptive to our instruction, observations, and feedback due to our previous work experience at the high school level. Several of them shared with us that they felt like we had a better understanding of co-teaching because we had recent first-hand on-the-job experience. I was part of a co-teaching team in a public high school math class for many years and my training partner had also spend many years in a high school as a graduation coach and principal. Since I understood the theory and had the experience of actually co-teaching with another educator, they felt like the information I shared was genuine and based on authentic experience and not just research theories.
- Provide feedback that is professional, but honest. The purpose of the training is to provide honest information and feedback, not to try and tell them how to "fix" anything. We can professionally make suggestions, but we must maintain a constant attitude of support and partnership, not an air of judgement.

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners about the Project:

It is worth noting that the principal of the high school involved in this project contacted me again in August of last year (2016) just before the start of the school year. The principal stated that during their previous leadership team meeting, the administrators and leadership team members analyzed school level data to determine a professional development focus for the coming school year (2016-17). It was determined that there was a need for a greater emphasis on formative assessments and progress monitoring. The principal said when it was presented to the staff as to the training that was needed, several teachers who had been involved in the co-teacher academy

spoke up and requested that he contact our office again for support. He went on to share with me that the participants in the academy were overwhelmingly positive about the quality training they received, the helpful support and feedback they were given throughout the process, and that they respected our work and valued our opinions as fellow educators! Wow! As indicated earlier, I was in constant communication with the administrators throughout the Co-Teacher Academy so they could stay abreast as to the progress. I also shared the results of the survey data collected with them. Therefore, he was aware that the teachers felt positively towards the Co-Teacher Academy training. He also knew, through teacher observations and school level data, that the training had made a difference in co-teaching and differentiation strategies with teachers. However, I am not sure he nor I fully realized the extent of the positive impact we had made until they asked him to contact us and ask us to come back! Furthermore, the principal indicated that he had been in a principal's meeting at their district office and had highly recommended our training to his colleagues – once specifically was his own wife who is principal of an elementary school in their district. He shared that he was highly pleased with the training his staff received on co-teaching practices and would love to have us return to deliver formative assessment trainings. Mr. Hammett and I were completely astounded. To have a group of chosen participants in a training that lasts several months to request the same group to come back and deliver more training speaks volumes! Then to have the administrator give his personal recommendation to the quality of our work and the positive impact it had made with his teachers is simply mind-blowing and incredibly humbling. It is the height of all compliments and, in my opinion, more telling of the positive impact made than any survey data. Therefore, through meetings and lots of research, we went back to this same high school this school year to deliver additional training regarding formative assessments which we specifically tied back to elements of co-teaching process. For this year's training, the principal included every certified teacher – both academic and elective, special education teachers and general education teachers.

The following texts were used as personal resources for the Co-Teaching Academy:
Aguilar, E. (2013). *The Art of Coaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
Tomlinson, C.A. (2001). *How to Differentiate Instruction in Mixed-Ability Classrooms 2nd Edition*.
Alexandria, VA: ASCD.