

NDPS Certification Program Field Project Report

Using a Unified System of Learning Supports to Boost High School Completion

Dr. Merrienne Dyer
Lead Consultant/Facilitator for the
Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE)
Scholastic Learning Supports Project
2433 Northbanks Cove
Gainesville, Georgia 30506
770-539-0678
dyer2@bellsouth.net

Key words: **systemic approach, professional development, school-community collaboration**

Funding Sources

Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) Office of Learning Supports and Scholastic Education Group: FACE-Learning Supports

Alabama State Department of Education
Dr. Linda Felton-Smith, Director of the Office for Learning Supports
50 North Ripley Street
PO Box 302101
Montgomery, AL 36104
<https://www.alsde.edu/ofc/ols>

Project Cost and Budget Narrative

The Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) Learning Supports Project is a five-year project in partnership with Scholastic Education's Family-Community-Engagement and Learning Supports division. Funding for the project from the ALSDE Office of Learning Supports is \$300,000 annually for service to all participating districts. In addition, Scholastic Education offers in-kind services to support the project. There are currently 58 districts in the project.

Cost per district annually:

Monthly coaching contacts/ 2-3 site visits	\$2,357
Fall and Spring Regional Institutes/materials	\$2,000
Webinars (6) for use in schools	\$1,000
Scholastic In-Kind FACE Symposium/materials	\$1,000
TOTAL	\$ 5,357 (ALSDE Funding) \$1,000 (Scholastic In-Kind)

Scope and Setting

The project examines three high-poverty, rural Alabama school districts. The project describes their application of a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports, based on the work of Dr. Linda Taylor and Dr. Howard Adelman of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). The districts in this project are three of the 58 districts in Alabama participating in a state-wide initiative.

The districts participating in the project are:

- Lanett City, AL - located in eastern central Alabama in an economically depressed area which has lost industry and manufacturing
- Pike County, AL - located in south-central Alabama serving four rural communities
- Lowndes County, AL - located in south Alabama serving seven small town communities

Staffing Pattern

Support for the district and schools was provided by an appointed Learning Supports Coach from the ALSDE-Scholastic team, Merrienne Dyer, who worked under the supervision and support of Dr. Linda Felton-Smith at the ALSDE. The district Superintendent and an appointed Lead for Learning Supports served as the liaison from the district. Each school had a Learning Supports lead that worked with the District Lead and Coach. Principals and school leadership teams worked collaboratively with the Learning Supports Coach and the district Lead and Superintendent. A team of six Coaches serving Alabama provided services for the Fall and Spring Institutes and Webinar offerings.

Population Served

District	# Students	Caucasian	African-American	Hispanic	Asian	Native American	Pacific Islander	Other	Two or more races
Pike County	2,100	56.3%	36.5%	2.2%	2%	.59%	.01%	1%	1.4%
Lanett City	1,001	9.33%	85.2%	1 %	0 %	.45%	.11%	.89%	3.02%
Lowndes County	1,492	1%	97%	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%

Students qualifying for free or reduced meals when entering Provision 2 Meals and Actual 2014-2015 rates:

Pike County	77.10%	Actual: 96.0%
Lanett City	86.40%	Actual: 91.7%
Lowndes County	77.10%	Actual: 98.6%

Participants were selected on the criteria of:

- Serving low-income populations
- Experiencing rural isolation, under-resourced

Project Origination

How do school districts address pervasive barriers to achievement that students have when many of the factors reside outside of the school? This project derived from an effort to find answers to this question. As a participant in the implementation study, the answer was revealed.

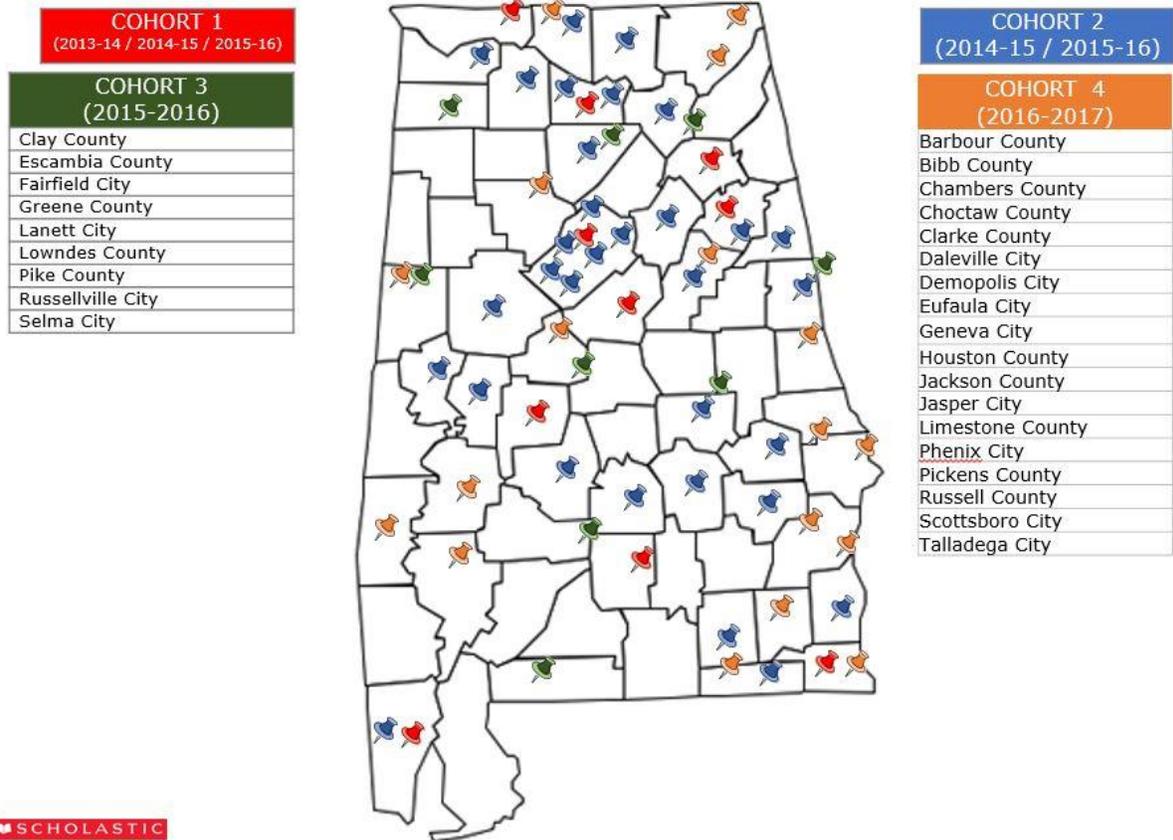
Applying strategies and programs to help individual students after they fail will never get the outcomes desired. The following project describes the process that yields positive outcomes and “moves the needle” on those pervasive areas of underachievement.

The project lessons are as follows:

- (1) District and schools must have an operational infrastructure in place, i.e., system of planning, communicating, meeting, and aligning resources and practices to PREVENT and INTERVENE in the areas that data shows is a challenge.
- (2) Support strategies and programs should be fewer, stronger in effect, focused, and aligned in an organized and unified manner to get the greatest impact.
- (3) The project's roots were planted in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Following the devastating impact of this storm, Mobile County, AL schools used the work of Dr. Linda Taylor and Howard Adelman of the UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools (2008) to restore operations while providing support for refugee students from New Orleans as well as their own students who had experienced trauma and crisis. The US Department of Education subsequently studied the recovery success in Mobile. From 2007-2009, the State Department of Education in Louisiana began implementation of this framework in selected districts. In response to the US DoE study and the work in Louisiana, the School Superintendent's Association [American Association of School Administrators (AASA)], supported a project to pilot the UCLA framework to determine its potential of improving learning outcomes for children who had barriers to learning from their life situations. Districts in Minnesota, Louisiana, Florida, and Kentucky were selected for the study. Dr. Rhonda Waltman, former Assistant Superintendent in Mobile, AL Public Schools, served as the Coach for the pilot districts.
- (4) Gainesville City Schools, GA, was the formal research site among the four districts. Light, Meade, and Ferguson (2012) found that the implementation of the Learning Supports System resulted in improved attendance, reduced disciplinary referrals, and increased graduation rate. Subsequently, Dr. Thomas Bice, then Deputy Superintendent in Alabama, led an effort to offer the professional development and coaching experience to every school district in Alabama.
- (5) When Dr. Bice became State School Superintendent, he named Dr. Linda Felton-Smith to lead the state implementation. It was decided that every Superintendent and district would have the opportunity to voluntarily participate over a five-year period. In 2013-2014, Cohort 1 began, followed by Cohort 2 in 2014-2015, Cohort 3 in 2015-2016, and Cohort 4 in 2016-2017. **The three districts and their schools selected for this project are members of Cohort 3. Therefore, this project is focused on their work in school year 2015-2016 with some information and data from the on-going, current school year, 2016-2017.**

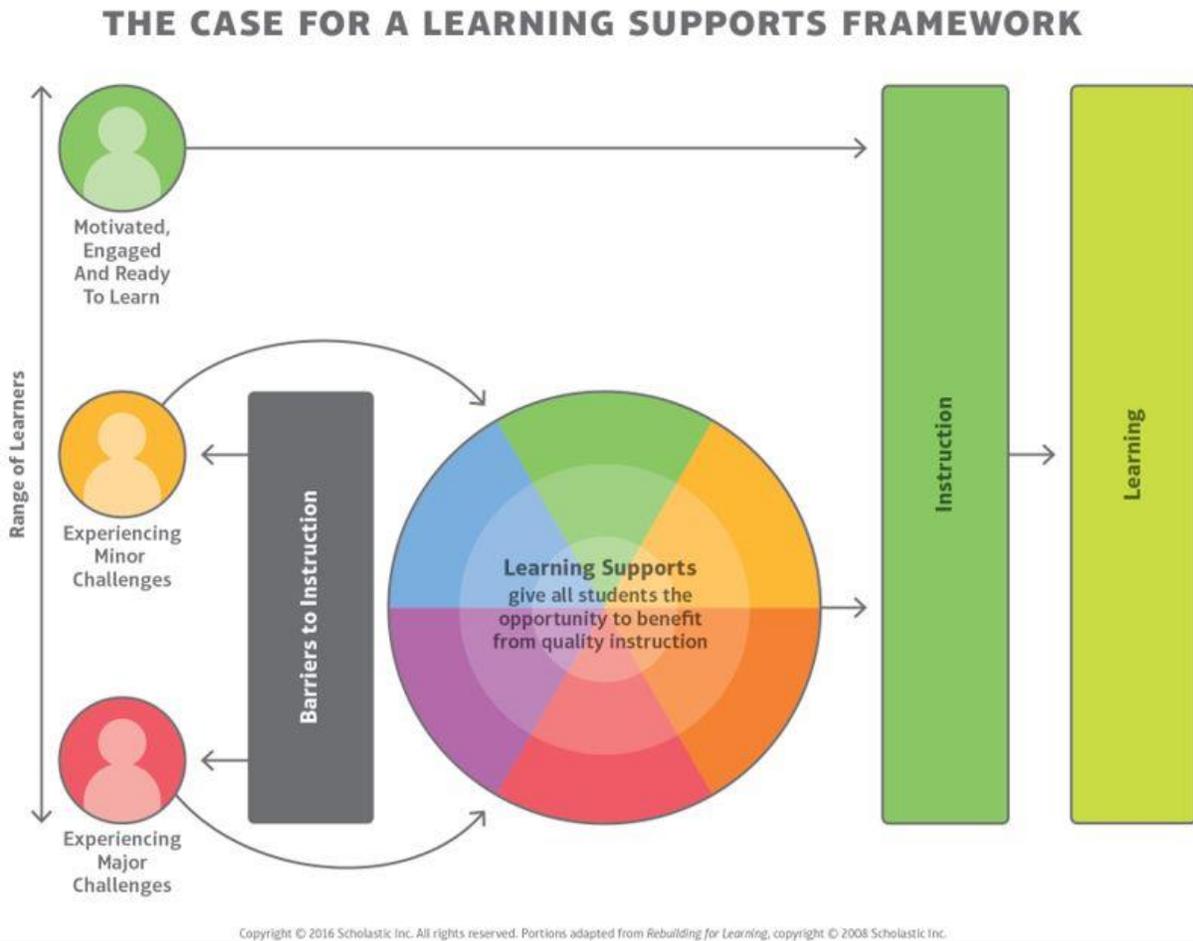
FIGURE A: Alabama Statewide Rollout Map

ALABAMA STATEWIDE ROLLOUT



The research analysis of Drs. Adelman and Taylor (2006) found that instruction and management alone are not able to re-engage a disconnected learner or a learner in crisis. Therefore, it is imperative for districts/ schools to create and design the **operational conditions, or infrastructure**, that unifies the work of instruction, management, and learning supports in planning and implementation of all functions. Their research indicates that schools traditionally operate in two components: **instruction** and **management**. They found that students who are motivationally engaged and able to learn are highly successful in response to effectiveness of these two components. However, students who are experiencing barriers, such as poverty, homelessness, mobility, and other challenges, will not be successful without **learning supports** being placed at the center of planning along with instruction and management decisions.

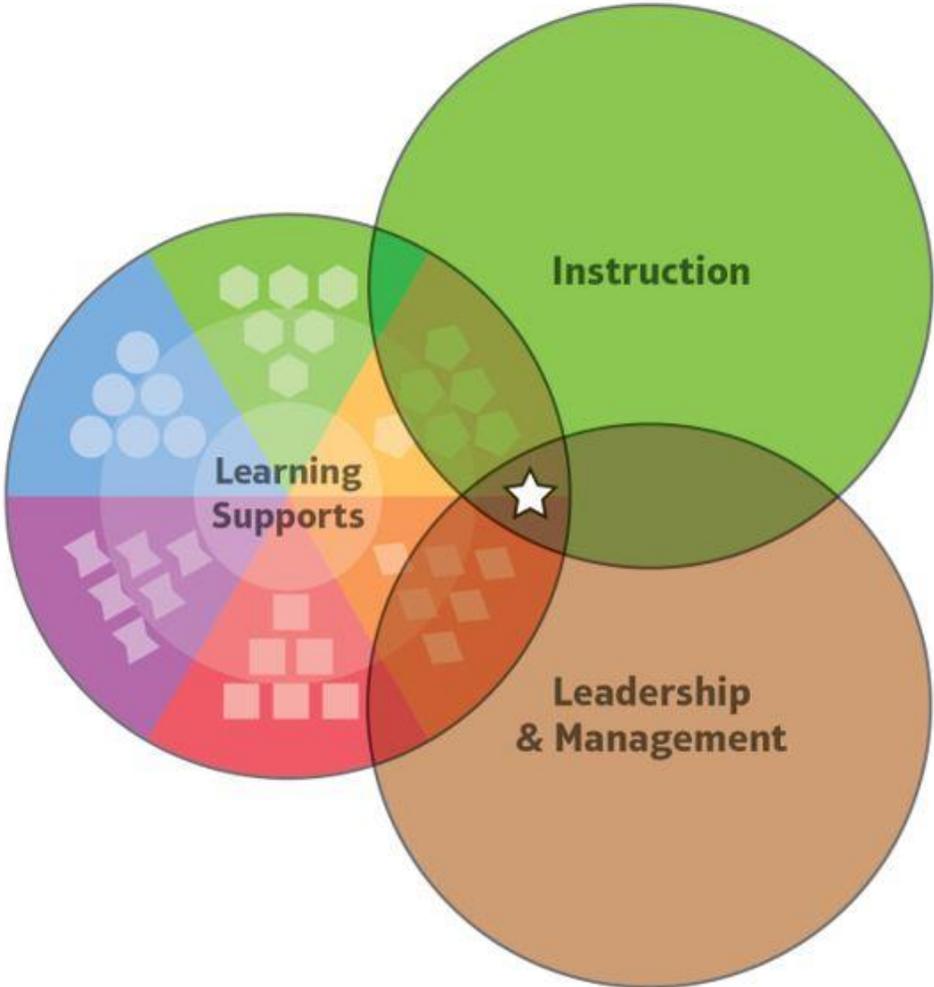
FIGURE B: The Case for a Learning Supports Framework



Step 1 of Project: The Superintendent and Principals restructured the district and school leadership teams to ensure that those that work in the learning supports areas were systematically included in the meeting, planning, communication, and monitoring cycle along with instruction and management. District and school leadership team meetings were set to cascade in a systematic manner, common meeting agendas divided into the three components were used, and a formal means of communicating the minutes of meetings and any decisions/outcomes was established. (Timeline: May- June 2015)

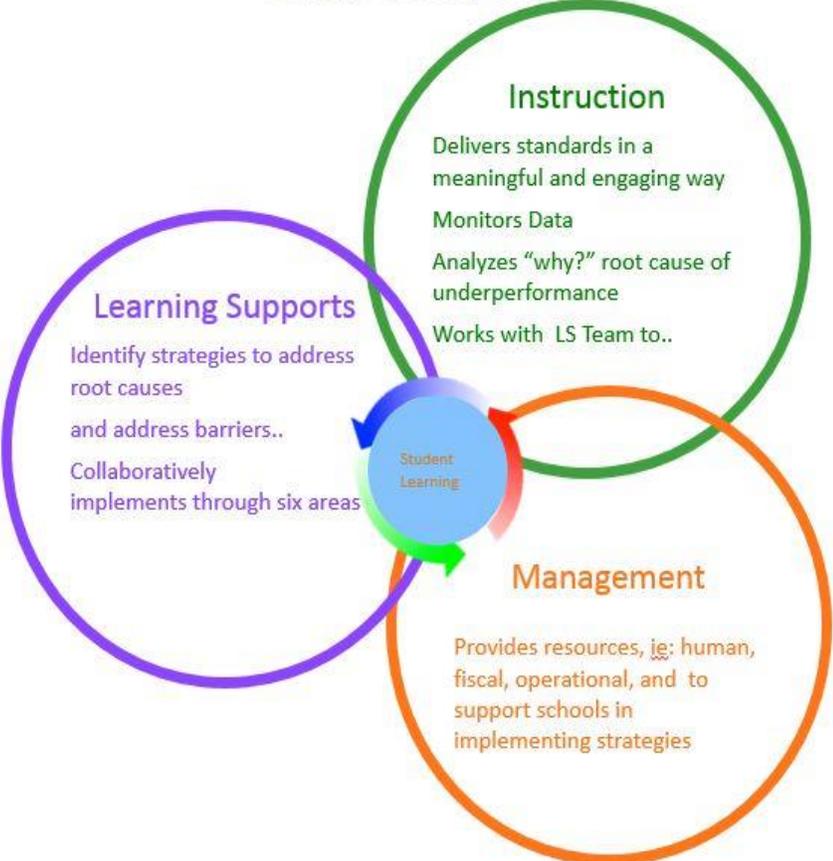
FIGURE C: A Fully Integrated Infrastructure (The Three Components)

A FULLY INTEGRATED INFRASTRUCTURE



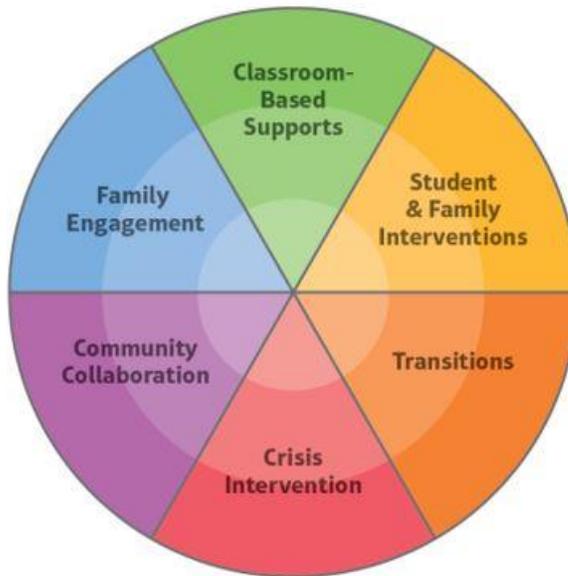
Copyright © 2016 Scholastic Inc. All rights reserved. Portions adapted from *Rebuilding for Learning*, copyright © 2008 Scholastic Inc.

THE SYSTEM: ORGANIZE TO SUPPORT ON-TIME GRADUATION



Issues

LEARNING SUPPORTS PRACTICE AREAS



What are learning supports?

Learning supports are the resources, strategies and practices that support intellectual, physical, social and emotional development to ensure student success.

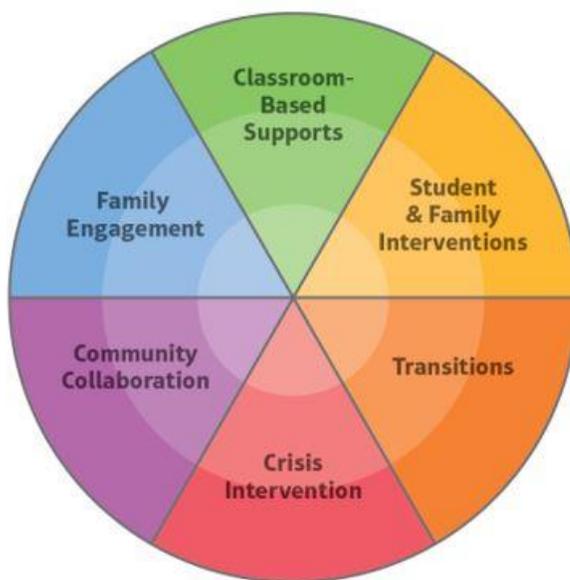
Where are learning supports?

Learning supports are deployed in classrooms and school-wide to address barriers to learning and teaching, and to re-engage disconnected students.

Random Acts of Learning Supports



LEARNING SUPPORTS PRACTICE AREAS



What are learning supports?

Learning supports are the resources, strategies and practices that support intellectual, physical, social and emotional development to ensure student success.

Where are learning supports?

Learning supports are deployed in classrooms and school-wide to address barriers to learning and teaching, and to re-engage disconnected students.

Step 2 of Project: The district and school leadership teams conducted a resource mapping exercise of the six practice areas to fully inform everyone of what learning supports were currently in place. The resource mapping included an analysis of what was in place for ALL students, SOME students, and FEW students. This analysis enabled the district/ schools to identify gaps or redundancies in their multi-tiered supports. The use of annual resource mapping serves as a review of how effective the strategies and programs used are/were in helping the school achieve the graduation goals. It also serves as a tool to prioritize budget and improvement planning areas. (Timeline: August- September 2015 and again in May 2016)

FIGURE H: Mapping Exercise to Analyze Learning Supports



Step 3 of Project: The district and schools analyzed data sources: achievement, attendance, discipline incidences, participation, Career Pathway completion, Work Ready certification, promotion/retention and perceptual data gathered through parent, student, and teacher surveys. (Timeline: September 2015, January 2016, March 2016 and June 2016. On-going analysis of benchmark and formative data.)

Step 4 of Project: From the data sources, the district and each school identified the top three to four barriers, or challenges, that needed to be addressed as priority in the Alabama Continuous Improvement Plan.

Step 5 of Project: The Learning Supports Coach provided a “Strategy Bank” of research and evidence-based practices to address the identified areas of need. The Coach, district staff, principals, and school leadership teams worked collaboratively to select evidence and/or research-based, high-impact strategies to place in improvement plans and to begin implementing. (Timeline: March- June 2015 and 2016)

Step 6 of Project: The district and school learning supports leaders used the systematic process to use data to monitor progress and effectiveness of the strategies. (Ongoing through district and school meetings 2015-2016 and 2016-2017.)

Issues Addressed

Improving the graduation rate was the priority need for all three districts and their schools. Improving attendance and reducing disciplinary referrals were areas of need to address so that the goal of improving graduation rates could be attained.

The districts identified their specific challenges/ barriers as follows.

- Lanett City identified chronic absenteeism, lack of basic needs being met, and lack of parental involvement as the root cause of their fluctuating graduation rate.
- Lowndes County identified absenteeism, and lack of motivation, often exhibited in discipline problems, as the root cause of their graduation challenges.
- Pike County identified lack of motivation, absenteeism, and number of discipline referrals and out-of-school suspensions for their on-time graduation challenges.

Desired Outcomes and Measurable Objectives

Each district/ school set the goal of improving their graduation rates. They focused on addressing barriers by:

- Improving attendance - Measurable Objective was attendance rate
- Decreasing disciplinary referrals and suspensions - Measurable Objective was student incident reports
- Graduation rates were measured by the percentage of four-year completers.

Strategies and/or Interventions Lanett, Lowndes, and Pike Counties used strategies aligned in the six practice areas from the following Strategy Bank developed for this project. Strategies were applied in the context of their communities. Strategies included the findings and recommendations of Darling-Hammond (2010), Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew (2007), and Robertson, Smith, and Rinka (2016).

FIGURE I: Strategy Banks: Strategies Used in Six Practice Areas for Prevention and Intervention



Classroom-Based Supports

- Ensure that all faculty understand the course requirements, standards to be taught, and align teaching and learning in the classroom to the required outcomes (end of course, ACT, etc.)
- Identify specific students for need of acceleration; use blended learning technologies to offer courses in accelerated time;
- Use a non-punitive grading that features classroom assessment as the practice for high-staked tests, ie: end of course, summative tests;
- Schedule enrichment blocks of 40 minutes in middle and high school to use practice assessment tools to re-teach;
- Use technology and after school programs to prepare for summative assessments.



Student and Family Interventions

- Identifying specific students at-risk and engage parents/families to develop a graduation plan;
- Personal communication with parent/families/student to implement strategy to reach on-time graduation; enlist their support
- identify any health issues, ie: prior vision or hearing issues;
- Involve student in tracking their own progress;
- Commend parents for being sure their children are attending school;
- Ensure that all interaction toward improvement is non-threatening and non-punitive;
- Keep up the personal communication through the year.
- Refer to tutoring, ie: Boys and Girls Club or YMCA; help on use of Khan Academy or other on-line resources.



Transitions

- Use benchmarking tools to identify academic gaps of students moving into the district;
- Gather information, transcripts, and benchmark data before placing students in a grade level or course- example: place in an 8th grade coded class until you have data on the student;
- Consider an 8th grade class placement at the high school facility where students can accelerate coursework before placement in grade 9;
- Use the Enrichment Block or flexible groupings to scaffold learning to “patch” the gaps;
- Personal contact with families in transition and referral to after school programs and/or tutoring opportunities.
- Non-traditional programs/ schools for acceleration of coursework can be developed as a “school within a school” or separate space.



Crisis Intervention

- Place in alternative setting or other opportunity to accelerate coursework through blended and virtual learning;
- Develop 504 Plan or IEP for Special Needs to ensure all modifications and acomodations are in use;
- Plan for regular and on-going tutorials and/or reading supports are in place.
- Coordinate supports with Juvenile Justice authorities.



Community Collaboration

- Present to business and community groups the data and what actions you will take to address graduation rate;
- Enlist community organizations and churches by providing specific actions they could take to link at-risk students with prospective employers, awareness of job-market;
- Engage, integrate and sustain community partnerships for critical supports such as mentoring and extended day programs;
- Intentionally link school and community efforts to promote a strong sense of social connectivity and foster resilience, ie: make improving grad rates a community initiative.
- Look for opportunities for dual enrollment in technical colleges.



Family Engagement

- Create and use ongoing systems for “two-way” communication and connection to develop graduation plans;
- Empower and validate families as the most important source of support;
- Begin graduation track workshops in elementary school and continue through middle school;
- Use surveys and focus groups to enlist students and parents in developing strategies to accelerate grad rate;
- Extend practice materials and workshops to the home through the Housing Authority, churches, agencies, etc.;
- Identify and build on family strengths that can support the child toward graduation;
- Engage families to strengthen school and community connection;
- Build capacity among all school staff to ensure relevant, effective and strength-based communication with families.

Project Timeline

The project reflects the first year of implementation of Learning Supports in Lanett City, Pike County, and Lowndes County Schools, Alabama, for academic year 2015-2016. The first year began with an orientation in May 2015, and the on-site work with schools began in August 2015 and continued through June 2016. These three districts are continuing their work as part of Cohort 3 of the ALSDE Learning Supports project.

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

This project required the support and commitment of the Alabama Department of Education in providing professional development that was job-embedded and supported in a coaching model. Furthermore, the alignment from the State Department of Education to the districts in collaboratively using a unified system of learning supports is unique and contributed to the support and success of Lanett City, Lowndes County, and Pike County Schools.

The expertise and skills associated with the role as a Coach were obtained through the AASA-Scholastic LEAD Collaborative. The Collaborative included training and guidance from Dr. Howard Adelman and Dr. Linda Taylor from the UCLA Center for Mental Health in Schools. In 2015, The Collaborative enabled five school districts to regularly meet and operationalize the Framework to a leadership model. As the Superintendent of one of the four districts, the expertise and skills I developed was through leading my own district and schools and working with Dr. Adelman and Dr. Taylor. The skills associated with dropout prevention and supporting graduation were obtained through the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network and application of evidence- and research-based practices.

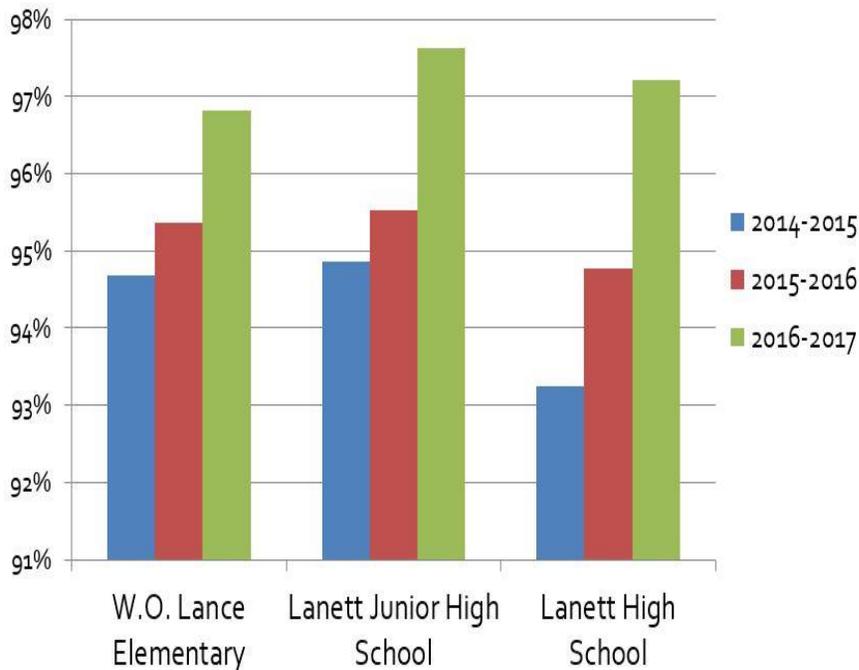
Finally, the on-going professional development and partnerships provided by the Scholastic Company inform, validate, and strengthen the work of supporting schools and districts in using a unified and comprehensive system of learning supports. Notably, the resources of AASA, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and, most recently, the National Dropout Prevention Network/Center have enriched and improved the implementation work.

Outcomes and Achievements

Lanett City, AL Schools achieved the following outcomes:

- Disciplinary referrals decreased by 35%
- Graduation rate increased from 64% in 2013 to 88% in 2016.
- The percent of students who met or exceeded the college-readiness benchmark on ACT increased by 5% in math and 7% in reading.
- Attendance has improved as indicated in the following chart.

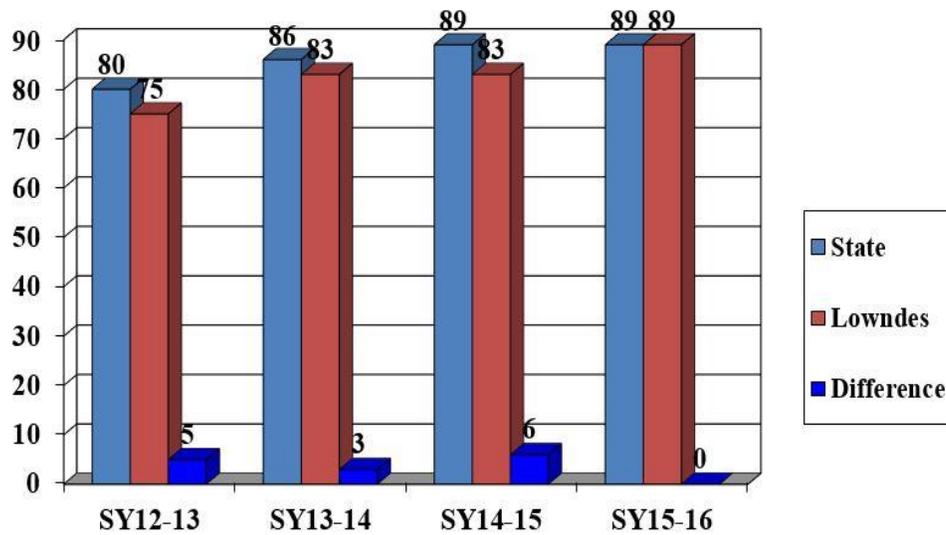
Average Daily Attendance Lanett City Schools



Lowndes County, AL Schools achieved the following outcomes:

- Graduation Rate has increased as indicated in the following chart.

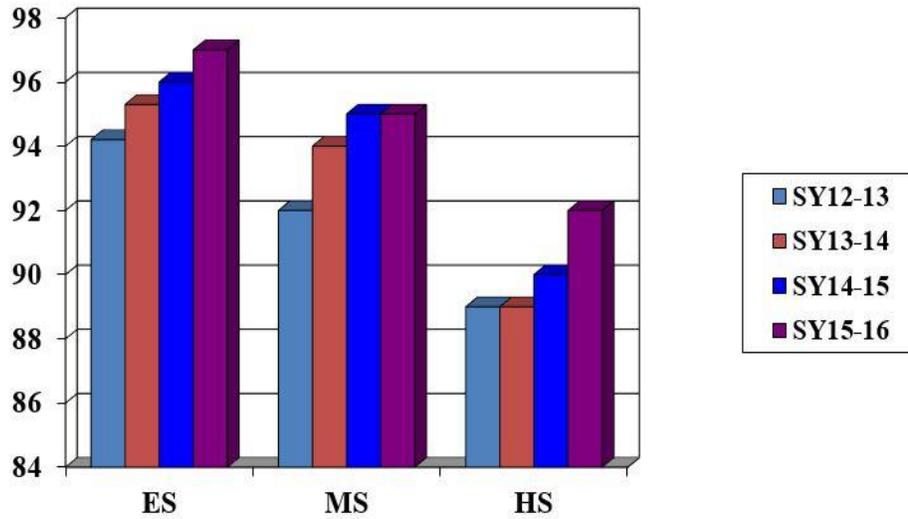
Lowndes County Graduation Rate



Source: [Chalkable](#) Data Management System and Director of Instruction (Darryl Washington)

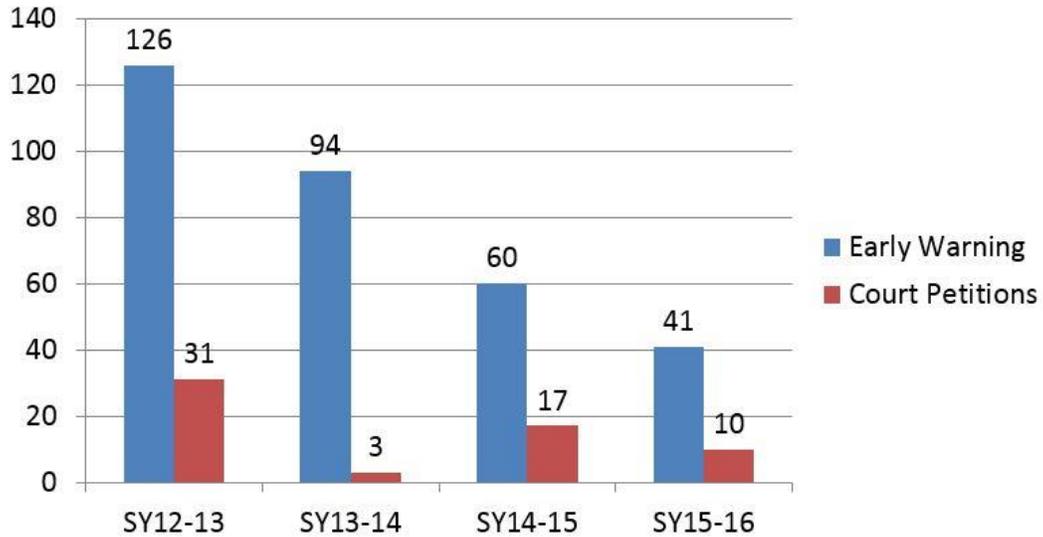
- Attendance has improved as indicated in the following chart.

Lowndes County Attendance Rate by School Classification

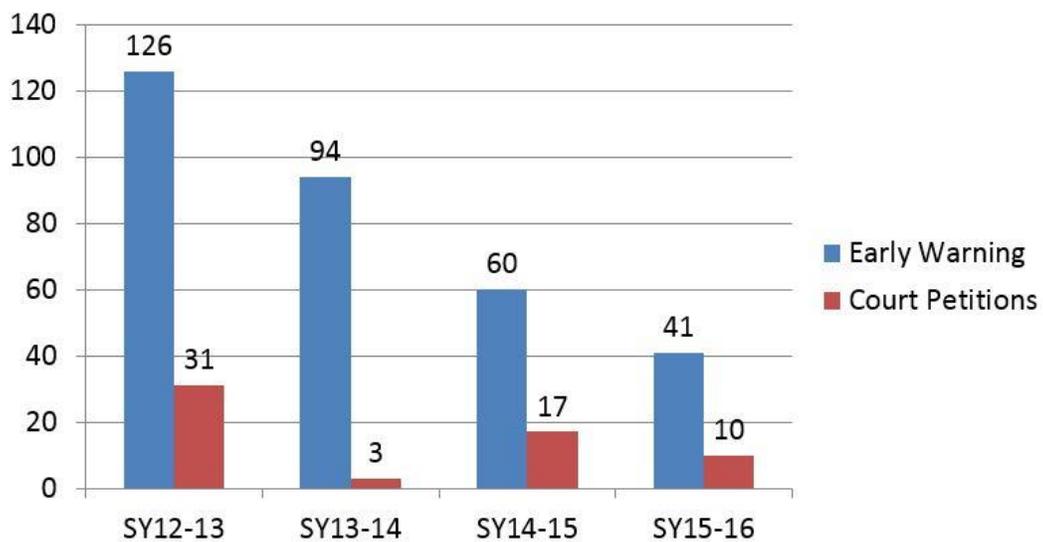


Source: [Chalkable](#) Data Management System

Lowndes County, AL Truancy Program Data



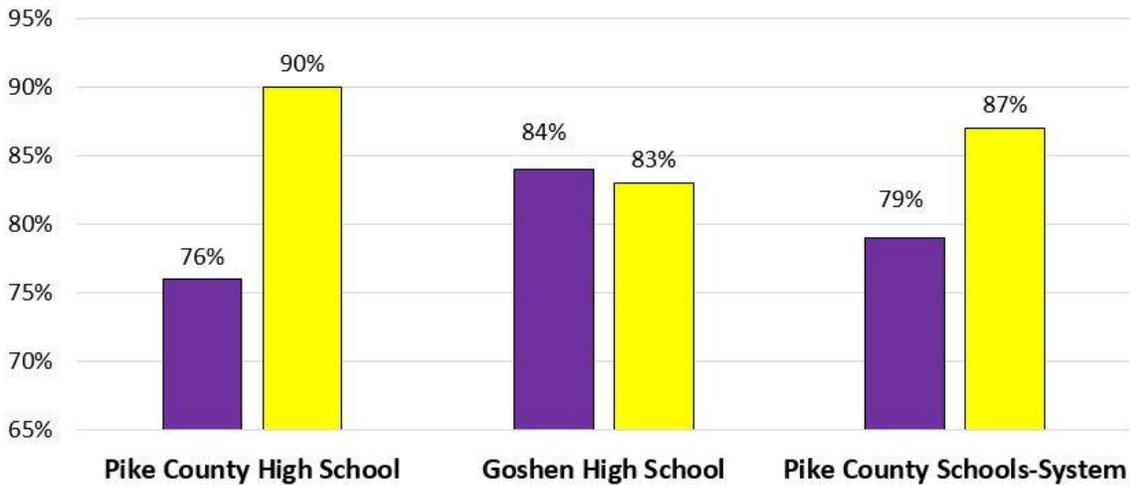
Lowndes County, AL Truancy Program Data



Pike County Schools, AL achieved the following outcomes:

- 3% decrease in overall disciplinary actions
- 3% decrease in drug offenses
- Reports of fighting/assaults decreased 28% between 2014 and 2016
- State Accountability reports the Learning Gains overall at 91.75%
- Graduation rate has improved as indicated in the following graph.

Graduation rates



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

The three districts and their schools addressed the challenge of improving graduation rates in a **systematic process**. They created the **operational conditions** that would support a **systematic and effective implementation of strategies** and programs to support on-time graduation. The districts identified the **root causes** of students not graduating on time, i.e., attendance, discipline issues, lack of motivation, lack of basic needs, and applied their resources to address those root causes.

One of the most important outcomes is the shift to a growth mind-set among all school, district, and community partners. By working together systematically with a framework to guide them, they now believe that the school can impact those barriers that children face as a result of their life experiences.

Current Status Project

Lanett City, Lowndes County, and Pike County continue their work toward fully implementing and sustaining a learning supports system in their district and schools. Their work continues to be supported through June 2018 from the Alabama State Department of Education. It is apparent

that all three districts are incorporating the Framework as part of their working culture. Through excellent Superintendent and District Learning Supports Leads, the use of this system promises to yield continuous improvement.

Role in Project as a NDPS Certification Program Participant

My role in the project was/is to serve as the Implementation Coach for Lanett City, Lowndes County, and Pike County Schools. I will continue to serve as Coach with the ALSDE through June 2018. The professional development that I obtained through the NDPS program expanded my knowledge and skills to better serve in a coaching role.

Lessons Learned

This project demonstrated the capacity of high-poverty, rural districts with limited resources to design an effective system to address their barriers to graduating their students.

The experience of these districts demonstrates that the application of a Unified and Comprehensive System of Learning Supports develops the characteristics of high performing districts and schools of which Fullan (2014) and Leithwood (2010) identified in their studies. They are:

- Large-scale success will occur only when the members of a system act from a shared, coherent mindset. Fullan (2014) stated that this is developed through purposeful and continuous interaction and learning over a period of time.
- Supporting conditions, or operational infrastructure, must be in place. This includes implementation plans, alignment of policies, and professional development.
- Core processes guide the work. This includes widely-shared goals, instructional expertise, data, and evidence.
- Relationships both inside and outside of the district assure collaboration.
- Leadership at the district and school level is critical to success.

Advice for Dropout Prevention Practitioners About the Project

For those educators, communities, and families who strive to graduate every student prepared for college and careers, it is important to realize that schools cannot accomplish this alone.

To implement and design a vibrant, systems-based approach, the guidance and leadership of a Coach/ Facilitator is a key to success.

Aligning school-family-community resources in a strategic framework yields the most power.

Commitment from the Superintendent and district leadership results in immediate improvement and is also critical to the long-term success of the initiative.

References

- Adelman, H. & Taylor, L. (2008). *Rebuilding for Learning: Addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging students*. New York: Scholastic.
- Adelman, H. & Taylor, L. (2006). *The school leader's guide to student learning supports: New Directions for addressing barriers to learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to Equity will determine our future*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Fullan, M. (2014). *The principal: Three keys to maximizing impact*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hammond, C., Linton, D., Smink, J., & Drew, S. (2007). *Dropout risk factors and exemplary Programs*. Clemson, SC: National Dropout Prevention Center.
- Leithwood, K. & Harris, A. & Strauss, T. (2010). *Leading school turnaround: How successful leaders transform low-performing schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Light, D., Meade, T., & Ferguson, C. (2012). *Integrated learning supports: Addressing Barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging students*. New York: Education Development Center & Scholastic.
- Robertson, R., Smith, R., & Rinka, J. (2016). How did successful high schools improve their graduation rates? *Journal of At Risk Issues, Vol. 19 (1)*.