



Case Study

## Dothan, Alabama: Translating State Graduation Improvement Efforts to the Local Level

Overcoming low tax revenues and old divisions along racial lines, Dothan, a small city of 66,000 in southeastern Alabama, raised high school graduation rates above state increases over the last decade, standing as testimonial to “It takes a village to raise a child.” In Dothan’s case, it took a convergence of effort, commitment and data to make school improvement a reality. The city’s settlement, late in Alabama’s development, brought agrarian endeavors and business—first cotton, then peanuts, followed by shops, hospitals, a U.S. Army base, manufacturing, and more retail. Like all areas of this Alabama-Georgia-Florida panhandle region, Dothan was deeply segregated for most of its history. Enrollment in the Dothan City Schools (DCS) fluctuated between 8,500 and 10,000 students for the last 50 years with about one-quarter of the city’s students still attending private schools. Half of DCS students are African American, an increase from 30 percent in the 1970s; 61 percent are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

If Alabama achieves the Grad Nation goal of a 90% high school graduation rate for just a single high school class, the state would likely see an increase in its Gross State Product of more than



\* Courtesy of the Alliance for Excellent Education

DCS emerged from the court desegregation order in 2007, at a time when key state leaders championed educational improvement and already-started education initiatives deepened their impact. In the last decade, Dothan’s two high schools graduated more students. The graduation rate was up nearly 15 percentage points at Dothan High School and 11 percentage points at Northview High.<sup>103</sup> Reading and mathematics achievement gains by both elementary and middle school students brought recognition from the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama, a “think tank” housed at Birmingham’s Samford University. Dothan students substantially outperformed their counterparts in southeastern Alabama and those in demographically similar districts and schools, despite lower per pupil tax revenues and spending.<sup>104</sup>

Dothan’s emerging success story entails the convergence of diverse efforts, personal commitments and growing community cohesiveness. In 2008, Dothan citizens formed Yes We Can Dothan! (YWCD!) to address education needs. After 47 community conversations, the group developed a strategic plan for improving education with five clear goals: graduate all students prepared for college and life, set high expectations, involve parents, increase financial support for schools, and communicate better to re-engage local citizens. District and high school leaders focused attention on low graduation rates, taking No Child Left Behind and its sanctions seriously. A new Dothan High principal brought stability to a fragile school after four years of administrative turnover contributed to its persistence on the state “needs improvement” list. The district office initiated an Academic Recovery Program targeted to the 100 students most academically (not behaviorally) at risk, based on the state database.



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**With focused leaders, the culture, organization and processes began to shift, to emphasize getting all students to school and giving all students the academic and behavioral tools to succeed. Their elements of successful practice include**

**Greater human capacity for responsiveness.** The district appointed “graduation coaches” at each high school. The district also hired the energetic “dropout lady,” to help the graduation coach, counseling team, teachers and administrators at each school focus on “at risk” students. Parent specialists worked to engage both parents and disconnected youth.

**Accurate data with a purpose.** The “dropout lady” and her colleagues began to live by the names of struggling students, drawn from the state data system that tracked students’ performance on four indicators. Four information audits each year ensured that data’s accuracy and timeliness.

**Relationships that change expectations.** Counselors dedicated a day each week to the struggling students who were doing poorly on two or more indicators. Each counselor saw the same students, building relationships as the first step in helping disengaged youth. Coaches “nagged and nurtured” the struggling students who participated in club or extracurricular activities. Parent specialists had 10 days at the start of school to locate students who had not shown up and to convince them that adults cared and wanted them to graduate. They continued this work when students left during the school year.

**Involved and responsible parents and community members.** The mayor and city commissioners have worked to let parents know that they are needed. The district YWCD! Communications’ coordinator promotes “Better Schools, Better Dothan” by distributing tips for parents and connecting to the 3,000 Facebook friends she has acquired as part of her community outreach efforts. Parent specialists work hard to bring parents into schools (500–600 Dothan High parents now attend Parents’ Nights, nearly triple the number in earlier years). Parent participation has blossomed at the elementary and middle schools. The faith-based community has sponsored standing room only Open Houses, and a January 2012 Education Summit sponsored by YWCD! brought more than 1,000 community members together at a local mall. A neighborhood organization specifically addresses issues in the minority community. By enhancing community efforts, teachers call and now even text parents when students who are asked to “redo” work fail to complete assignments. These outreach efforts have other consequences—district enrollment grew by approximately 100 students a year over the past few years as parents gained confidence in the schools.

**Improved teaching and learning.** Teachers have been re-thinking standards-based curriculum and instruction. Student teachers from nearby Troy State assist struggling students and contribute to on-line enrichment through the state ACCESS program. The Wiregrass Foundation augmented management classes for leaders with a two-year fellows program in which retired educators assist administrators in further developing instructional leadership skills.



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### CLEAR EXPECTATIONS FOR STAYING IN SCHOOL AND GRADUATING.

- The district created a contract that spelled out the personal improvement process for students that the data indicate are struggling. Those who did not show progress in two weeks (which includes a 10- point improvement in grades, no office referrals, no discipline problems in class) were referred to the graduation coach. If further progress was slow, they were referred to the Graduation Team (the principal, the graduation coach, three counselors, and the parental involvement specialist) for additional consultation and parental involvement. Graduation Teams are accountable for outcomes and must review their reports on recommendations and outcomes with district personnel.
- Recovery systems responded to student needs. Credits can be made up during P.E. time, during summers for freshmen and sophomores, or by replacing an elective for seniors. Seniors may also take two math or English courses to fulfill graduation requirements. The district established an Accelerated Recovery Center (ARC) offering three hours of classes for over-age, under-credited youth. In 2010-2011, 46 students graduated from the ARC, which now has a waiting list.
- District-required Dropout Plans made it more difficult for students to drop out, with stronger requirements for an “exit interview” than state guidelines suggest. Potential dropouts meet with an administrator, write an essay on why they want to drop out and what their plans are after doing so, and discuss it with a counselor. Those who persist take the practice GED and meet again with the counselor to review results and implications. Students who still wish to drop out meet again with an administrator and then with the Graduation Team. To date, only one student going through the process has dropped out.

The net result of these efforts is a new culture within the high schools and community. Most adults accept that high school graduation matters, marking a real change in a rural area where jobs and lives did not previously require this. Most have come to recognize that educational accountability systems are here to stay. Most now recognize the intangible importance of students’ relationships with caring adults, especially students who come to high school without the skills to help themselves.

A new challenge is on the horizon. As Alabama moves with all other states to a four-year cohort graduation rate calculation, its graduation rate is likely to fall. The reality will be no different, but how students are counted will change. Administrators have begun discussing that adults within schools will have to build on what they have learned about more students succeeding when expectations and processes don’t let students fall off the path. They will also need to identify struggling students even more rapidly, communicate more frequently, deploy support and interventions more quickly, knowing that with effort, success is possible. Community and parent education work will continue, and efforts to identify struggling students, through attendance, behavior, and course-performance indicators, will move into the early and middle grades so that over time, more students will arrive in high school ready to succeed.