



REDEFINING RESOURCEFULNESS

*When a commitment to equitable
future-focused learning meets
real funding constraints*

Greene County Schools
Snow Hill, North Carolina

ABOUT THE INNOVATIVE SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES PROJECT

Dear Educator,

Beginning in 2017, the Successful Practices Network (SPN) and AASA The School Superintendents Association, have been conducting a study of innovation best practices in public K12 systems from throughout the United States, with support from global learning company Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (HMH).

Dr. Bill Daggett has led a team of nationally recognized superintendents, researchers and data analysts to identify systems that are using innovative approaches to put students first by expanding and supporting student learning and achievement. Schools and districts were selected for further study based on a national search conducted by thought leaders and experts at HMH, SPN and AASA. HMH supported this effort by providing research and reviewers as part of its work to partner with school districts on improving student outcomes.

From that study, 25 national Innovative Successful Practices systems were identified based on their ability to demonstrate rapid improvement in student learning and preparedness through innovative organizational and instructional practices.

Each of those 25 systems collaborated with SPN and AASA to host an on-site visit, detailed data analysis and development of a case study. These case studies are intended to provide an accessible and nontechnical overview of each innovative approach that is backed up with data-driven results.

The participating systems include a wide range of geographies, demographics, student population and resource levels. In spite of those differences, each of these systems shares a common mindset that innovation can drive public education with a strong focus on serving the needs of all of their students.

We have been inspired by the lessons learned from these courageous leaders that took risks to think beyond their traditional systems and approaches. It is our hope that this work continues to inspire, inform and support public education leaders in their efforts to prepare students for success both in school and beyond school.

“The world that our children will live, work and interact in will be fundamentally different than the world we all grew up in,” said Bill Daggett, Founder and Chairman, International Center for Leadership in Education. “To prepare them for success in this changing world our schools need to make fundamental changes as well. These innovative districts are paving the way and showing us how to make the necessary changes needed in our schools.”

“At a time when the new school year is beginning across the nation, there is no better time than now to speak out about the value of public education and bring to the forefront the outstanding work being done by our school districts,” said Daniel A. Domenech, Executive Director, AASA.

“It’s important to be imagining how our classrooms and schools can look and feel different in the next decade,” said Rose Else-Mitchell, Chief Learning Officer, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. “We congratulate these change-makers for creating a culture of innovation and the conditions for future-focused learning designs in their school districts to accelerate student engagement, growth, and achievement.”

INTRODUCTION

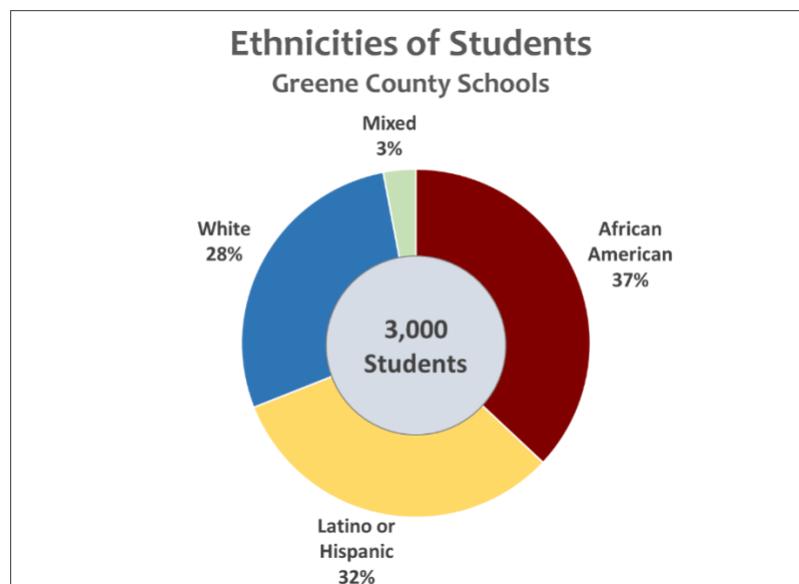
When in the right hands, great challenge can bring great gifts. As a high poverty district in North Carolina, Greene County Schools confronts funding and equity issues constantly. Yet, they have been fortunate to have leadership relentlessly committed to serving *all* students. This fierce promise, when faced with budget constraints, has brought forth an unwavering will to find a way. The spirit of Greene County Schools is one of “together, we can do it” optimism and resolve, as well as one of great inspiration to schools that feel stuck or blocked by resource limitations.

THE CHALLENGE

In 2002, leadership at the Greene County Schools district (GCS) in North Carolina decided to pursue a 1:1 device program for students in Grades 6–12. This was quite visionary; while most schools were, at the time, outfitted with a computer lab, a 1:1 policy was not yet a typical goal. But such outside the box, forward thinking was commonplace in GCS. It had to be.

GCS is a rural, high poverty district with six schools and about 3,000 total students, 78% of which receive free/reduced price lunch. Their student body is comprised of 37% African American students, 32% Latino/Hispanic students, 28% White students, and 3% of mixed demographic groups. GCS has long since had under-funding issues. Because GCS is in a rural area with lower wealth and less tax revenue, it receives less funding from the county commissioners relative to many of its neighboring districts. Yet, this challenge has had its unexpected benefits: it has unlocked in GCS—from leadership all the way to students—an unyielding commitment to and talent for finding a way.

GCS’s culture is built on what they see as a moral imperative: to provide for *all* students an education that prepares them for success in their futures, and to make sure *all* their students have the same or similar opportunities as those in other, more affluent districts. They see equity and future-focused learning as the linchpins of this moral imperative. And in a district as demographically diverse as GCS, the question of equity always has to remain front and center.



The convergence of commitment to equity in future-focused learning and funding constraints demands that everyone in GCS dig deep and be resourceful. Confronting a constraint is no reason to give up; rather, it is an indication to find and forge a different path.

It was GCS's moral imperative to equitably deliver future-focused learning that prompted the drive for a Grades 6–12 1:1 device initiative as far back as 2002. It was the lack of available funding that pushed leadership to find a way; thinking beyond the normal federal, state, and local funding streams was their only option. In the end, the district leased computers from Apple over a four-year term. For funding, they sought and received help in the form of a grant from Golden LEAF, which supported and sustained the program in its early years.

What is so innovative at GCS is their tradition of perpetual innovation. Long before “innovation” was a buzzword, GCS was habitually asking what they could do differently or better to deliver on that moral imperative to ensure *all* students graduate college and career ready. They've long since been looking down the road to see what's coming next in technologies and careers, as they know these things need to trickle back into content and learning tools. Always aware of looming changes has kept GCS always changing.

Yet, it's important to note that this tradition of innovation is distinct from jumping on the “innovation bandwagon.” GCS does not have a history of using innovation in a reactive sense; they are not looking to paper over problems with the latest trend or incorporate the newest technologies simply for the optics of it. Rather, their innovation is proactive and used to meet objectives and adapt to changing circumstances. It is deliberate and thoughtful. Leadership takes care to pursue only those innovative ideas, like strategic partnerships or creative resources, that will advance the district towards its goals.

THE INNOVATION

To GCS, the specifics of any single innovation—while important—take on lesser significance relative to the longer-term objective: to always keep innovating to fulfill their moral imperative.

GCS has a resilient culture and effective teachers and leaders who recognize the importance of their work. Teachers, administrators, and stakeholders committed to success for all students make the difference. With time, trial and error, and invaluable lessons learned, GCS has conjured a powerful mix of district-wide habits and attitudes that coalesce into a spirit of “together, we can achieve anything.”

“I don't know how to do this. But I will find a way.”

At GCS, there is no shame in saying, “I don't know how to do this.” When you routinely run up against budget shortfalls, especially when passionately pursuing the lofty goal of equitable future-focused education, “I don't know how to do this” is bound to happen. In fact, this admission of fallibility and humanity is welcomed. It's only at the point of acknowledging limits that people can get to the part that counts: rolling up the sleeves, brainstorming, pushing thinking far from the box, and eventually stumbling upon innovative solutions.

It's not the “I don't know how to do this” that matters at GCS; it's that everyone makes a habit of following it with, “But I will find a way.”

Educators at GCS say this mindset makes them feel liberated. When they can openly admit gaps in knowledge or knowhow, they find they much more efficiently cut to the useful part—time spent finding a path forward. Less time is wasted on worrying, trying to figure out how to admit a problem, or mustering the courage to ask for help. Since leadership regularly reminds teachers they trust them to find solutions, teachers are empowered to set out doing just that. They feel free to experiment, make mistakes, learn, and try again. All the while, they are reflecting on their own experiences of struggling and growing, culling insights that can then be imparted to students.

The end result is a culture where educators *own their jobs*. They are given full responsibility and autonomy to serve as crucial contributors to the goal of equitable future-focused instruction. They are expected to ask for help when needed. They are consciously aware of their value, motivated by the trust put in them, and empowered in their day-to-day decisions and interactions with colleagues and students.

“What do you need? We’ll do everything we can to support you.”

Admittedly, empowerment, owning your role, trust—these terms can be written off as buzzwords. Largely because while many leaders set out with good intentions to create an environment of empowerment, efforts to this end can fall flat if not met with the other piece. Empowerment is half the battle. Support from leadership is the other half.

The empowered teacher is free to come up with ideas and plans to best serve her students—whom she usually knows better than most others in the district. The empowered teacher is one who will take calculated risks, think boldly, and work harder.

If leaders pay lip service to empowerment but fail to back it up with a clearly articulated offer to support however possible, the empowerment talk is little different from saying only, “I don’t know how to do this.” If empowerment is to lead to meaningful ideas, innovations, and progress, then it requires its interdependent partner: total support from leadership.

Empowerment lip service is a common culprit behind failed attempts to create a culture of empowerment—and one that GCS has wisely avoided. Just as leadership is relentlessly committed to its students, it is also relentlessly committed to its educators. And thanks to their culture of resourcefulness, they are practiced in the art of finding a way. Leadership always strives to meet educators’ needs, often using creative solutions and support from the community.

“We have goals. Who can help us achieve them?”

The district puts enormous effort and time into building relationships with a range of partners. This allows GCS to give teachers what they need to get the job done. This trademark resourcefulness helps GCS overcome barriers that may halt progress in another district. GCS is known to be creative—even bold at times—in order to provide for students and teachers.

Over the years, for as many roadblocks GCS has encountered, they've conceived a unique plan. While their catalog of innovative solutions is vast and varied, there's a consistent strategy behind each: engage all stakeholders.

As a rural community, GCS has an advantage: almost everyone has skin in the game beyond being employees. Scores of staff were once GCS students themselves. At any given time, dozens of their employees have kids matriculating through their schools. In the community at large, most were at least at one point or another GCS students and most of their children are following in their footsteps. People care about this district. People have fond memories of it and want younger generations to be able to have the same.

GCS has cultivated much good will in the community. They view it as one of their most precious resources and are always careful to nurture and protect their relationships. They do this, in part, through their relentless commitment to equitable future-focused education. The district's vision reads, "Educating Greene County's tomorrow today"; the community needs today's generation of students to be tomorrow's productive members of the community. Thanks to this shared goal, the local community is happy to help GCS where it can.

A huge part of GCS's *where there's a will, there's a way* attitude is creating, nurturing and sustaining partnerships. The partnerships forged by the district have led to: equipment and materials, enhancement experiences for students, professional learning for teachers, funding for projects, to name just a few. Some relationships are so strong and productive that partners are willing to invest more with little more than an ask.

"Are they humble, hard-working servants to student learning? Then they'll fit right in."

GCS takes great care to foster, protect, and promote their culture of servant leadership—from district leaders to teachers, and from teachers to students. It takes a certain type of person not just to handle, but also handle with aplomb the responsibility and ownership entrusted to all who work in GCS. For that reason, hiring is of utmost importance. Any potential hire is not only vetted for required skills and certifications, but also for the capacity to thrive in their culture where students always come first.

THE IMPACT

The district mindset of learning from doing, empowering teachers, and engaging partners has stoked constant innovation to prepare students for success in future-focused schools. This mindset has unleashed excellent learning and growth opportunities for all students.

An Always Evolving Education for an Always Evolving World

In recent years since, GCS has been focused on building an exemplar STEM program in all six of its schools. Today, a group of about 200 students in high school and approximately 400 students in middle school are in a hands-on STEM program. For the past six years, elementary students have engaged in inquiry-based learning. The district goal is to further enhance STEM opportunities in all grades through a PreK–12 STEM pipeline.

Students in Grades 6–12 apply to the GCS STEM program annually. Several variables are considered during the program selection process. Students from all ability levels are admitted, and all students must perform well in order to remain in the program. Furthermore, GCS ensures that students in “at-risk” populations make up at least 50% of program enrollment.

All STEM learning is inquiry-based. Working in collaborative teams, students use a range of tools and technologies to solve problems and build products to address the Grand Challenges identified by the National Academy of Engineering.

Grand Challenges are a major component of the STEM curriculum. Students present their products to other students, teachers, and community members three times per year. The top products go on to be showcased at the annual STEM Expo in the spring. Presenting a Grand Challenge product is a gratifying experience for hard-working students. They take great pride in engaging directly with stakeholders. Students use feedback from their presentations to further refine their product.

STEM students also have opportunities to join the STEM Society. Through the society, they are exposed to extended learning opportunities they could not otherwise get during the school day. They gain hands-on, relevant, practical experience in project development, marketing, and leadership. Members have opportunities to present work at various conferences and competitions, such as the regional Employer/Educator (E2) Conference, Regional Manufacturing Days, TSA competitions, and HOSA National Conferences.

The district is proud of their innovative K–5 dual language immersion program known as “Los Puentes.” Parents can choose to put their children in the program, where students spend half the day learning in English and half the day learning in Spanish. Los Puentes benefits both native English speakers and English Language Learners. Students in these classes consistently outperform their peers outside of the program on standardized tests.

Greene Early College High School (GEC), an early college high school program, opened in 2005. This school, in partnership with Lenoir Community College, offers students an opportunity to earn a high school diploma and an associate’s degree in a smaller, more personal setting over the course of five years. GEC is a National Blue-Ribbon School and is consistently ranked by *U.S. News and World Report* as one of the nation’s top high schools for students of poverty. The school has maintained a 100% graduation rate over the past five years.

Students Own Their Learning

When it comes to data, educators at GCS are true believers. They are reviewing data daily to monitor progress, inform instruction, and identify needs. Teachers frequently share performance and standards mastery data with students and parents. Students are in the know about where they’re excelling, where they’re struggling, why they’re struggling, and what they need to do to improve. This sharing of data directly increases students’ sense of ownership over their learning.

Teachers at GCS are rarely found at the front of classrooms lecturing in front of a white board. Their classrooms are abuzz with students collaborating and moving around as they work on projects. Similar to leadership's commitment to providing support when asked, teachers are at the ready to coach and guide their students—while allowing them to grapple with the task, as doing so ensures rigor in the classrooms. To hand such ownership and responsibility over to students, GCS teachers know they must release a degree of control and trust their students.

As part of the ongoing effort to reinforce student ownership, GCS requires that all STEM students reapply to the program every year. This creates a high level of motivation to work hard and excel in STEM classes. It also fosters an incredible sense of responsibility to others; since so much STEM work is completed in groups, students are aware that their performance can affect others. The annual reapplication process makes them feel duty-bound not only to themselves, but also to their classmates and friends.

GCS knows that empowering students through ownership is a powerful way to keep them engaged. They also know that ownership benefits social emotional skill development. Students comment that they feel more confident. Parents remark on how quickly their kids are maturing. Teachers share that as their students grow into more confident, independent learners, they also grow resilient, reflected by the fact that students can take constructive criticism and apply it to improving.

There Is No Ceiling

Motivation is naturally high at GCS. Educators go to work in a climate abounding with creative, solution-oriented energy. As noted by observers, there is no final destination other than continuous improvement. There is no attitude of “we’ve arrived.” When all staff know their teams and leaders will do whatever possible to support them, they are highly motivated to spot issues and opportunities and pursue solutions. It’s not that nothing is ever good enough. It’s that everyone in the GCS community is aware they are educating students in the larger context of a dynamic, always changing world. Therefore, student needs will also be dynamic and always changing. The work, then, to keep that equitable education future-focused is never done—a truth that is exciting to the type of person GCS attracts and hires.

Creative and Ongoing Learning Opportunities for All Teachers

Teachers and administrators also benefit from partnerships. They, too, have access to interesting, unique growth and development opportunities by way of partnerships. If teachers feel they need a specific kind of professional development, all they have to do is ask and trust their leaders will find a way.

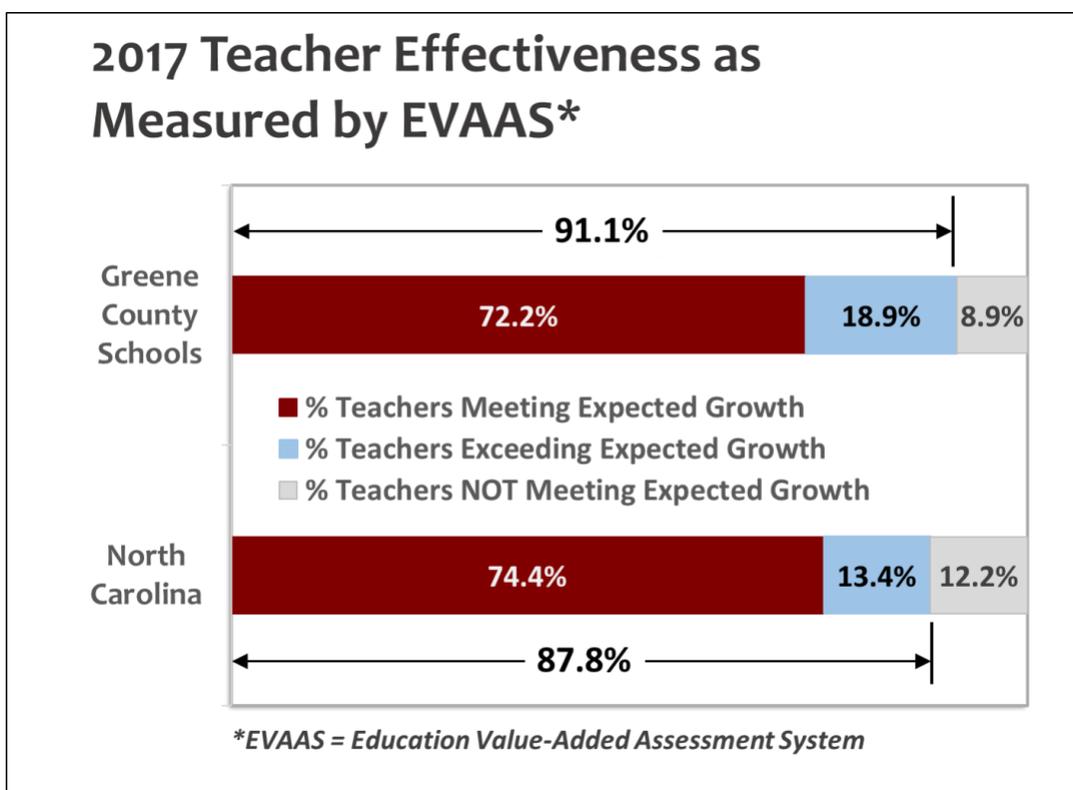
One example is the Kenan Fellows Program. The program centers on a three-week summer internship with a mentor in a research or applied STEM setting. It also includes 80 hours of professional development that builds leadership capacity and promotes curricular design bridging STEM at work to STEM at school.

All GCS teachers have access to ongoing learning opportunities. Since teachers are encouraged and empowered to ask for help, leadership will always do what they can, including reaching out to partners to

provide teachers with the specific growth they need to meet their students' needs as effectively as possible. In essence and in practice, teachers drive their professional development. Technologists create professional development modules, and teachers can complete the modules anytime, anywhere. Recently, digital badging was introduced in the district to great success.

In comparison to state averages, a higher percentage of GCS teachers meet or exceed growth with their students based on state-mandated assessments. In North Carolina, this measure is referred to as "teacher effectiveness."

2017 TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS AS MEASURED BY EVAAS*



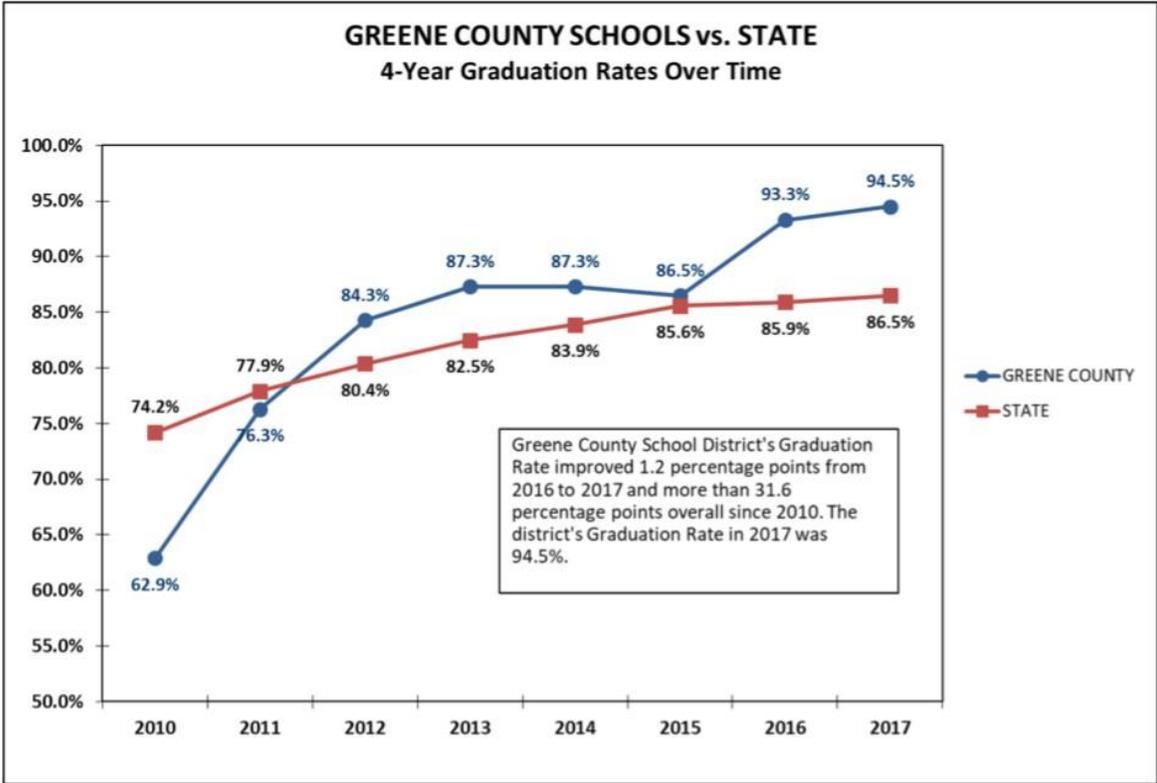
Teachers Love Working in GCS

GCS is a district that champions hard work and success. Leadership is always happy to offer praise and celebrate victories. Teachers love the amount of recognition they receive in the district, and they enjoy celebrating their friends and colleagues, as well.

STUDENT LEARNING RESULTS

High School Graduation Rate

In recent years, GCS has seen dramatic improvement in its high school graduation rate, which has skyrocketed from 62.9% in 2010 to 94.5% in 2017. Since 2015, GCS' graduation rate has surpassed the average state rate, achieving an 8-point lead in 2017.



Los Puentes Immersion Student Test Scores

The K–5 dual language immersion program, Los Puentes, has been incredibly successful helping ELL students work towards fluency and native English speakers increase their overall comprehension. Looking within the district, Los Puentes students routinely outperform their GCS peers not in program.

As shown in the following chart, Los Puentes students' test scores (Grades 3–5) have surpassed those of their peers not in the program all but three times in the past three school years.

Los Puentes		Los Puentes	
Student Scores:		Student Scores:	
% Above/Below		% Above/Below	
Year	Grade	School - Reading	School - Math
3	-0.86	-4.83	
2016–17	4	+8.6	+27.7
3	+22.8	+10.3	
2015–16	4	+2.79	+10.45
3	+13.84	+7.04	
2014–15	4	+17.82	+20.08

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When we confront a roadblock, is our collective tendency to give up or persevere? If the former, how can we cultivate a *together, we can do it* attitude?
2. Do we both empower our teachers and communicate and deliver on a promise to support them however we can?
3. Do our teachers feel freedom to make decisions about what's best for their students' future-focused learning? Are they afraid of making mistakes or encouraged to view them as learning opportunities?
4. Are we nurturing good will in the community? When we negotiate partnerships, do we deliver on our promises to partners?

