

A Tale of Three High Schools: Using the *High Schools That Work* Key Practices to Raise Student Achievement

Three Georgia high schools are representative of many high schools in the state that are implementing the *High Schools That Work* (HSTW) improvement model to raise achievement. They have been moderately to highly successful in putting the HSTW Key Practices in place to make a difference for all students.

The schools are socioeconomically diverse: One is in a moderate-sized city with a high minority population; the second school draws students from a previously rural area that is rapidly becoming suburbanized; the third enrolls a large number of students, 63 percent white and 27 percent black, in historical southeast Georgia.

All three schools joined HSTW seven to eight years ago and all three were selected in 2008 as HSTW Pacesetter Schools to provide inspiration to high schools nationally that are working to improve students' chances for success in postsecondary education and careers.

These schools have used HSTW as their framework as they have strengthened academic requirements, involved students in modern career/technical programs and created hands-on projects and extra help opportunities to make learning relevant and accessible for students with a variety of interests and talents. All three schools have placed special emphasis on giving ninth-graders the support and encouragement to remain in school and graduate within four years. As a result, graduation rates have remained steady at one school in light of tougher standards and have reached new highs at the other two.

Leaders at these schools were generous in sharing the strategies that have worked and in identifying a "wish list" of actions they believe the state department of education might consider to help their schools continue to make strides and to assist other schools in the state that have not made as much progress.



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— Debbie Freeman
Principal
Dalton High School

Minority School Joins *High Schools That Work* to Improve Achievement and Graduation Rates

The graduation rate at **Dalton High School** (DHS) in Dalton, Georgia, was 56.5 percent in 2002-2003. The needs of many students, including the school's large enrollment of Hispanic students, were not being met. The result was that almost half of students entering the ninth grade were not graduating four years later.

Dalton High School's enrollment is 59 percent Hispanic, 29 percent white, 7 percent black, 3 percent Asian and 2 percent multiracial. Seventy percent of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. The large percentage of Hispanic students has resulted primarily from families seeking jobs in the carpet industry that is centered in the Dalton area.

The new superintendent of the Dalton City School System enrolled DHS in the HSTW national school improvement initiative. A new administrative team at the high school set to work involving the faculty in implementing the HSTW Key Practices, including upgrading academic and career/technical courses, offering extra help and providing adult support to encourage students to stay in school and graduate. The result has been a steady increase in the graduation rate, from 72.6 percent in 2006 to 73.6 percent in 2007 and 77.4 percent in 2008.

The percentage of DHS 11th-graders passing the Georgia High School Graduation Test in mathematics on the first attempt has remained steady — 95 percent in 2005-2006, 94 percent in 2006-2007 and 96 percent in 2007-2008 — while the percentage in science has grown substantially from 76 percent in 2005-2006 to 83 percent in 2006-2007 and 91 percent in 2007-2008.

By setting an example of higher student achievement, Dalton High School has become one of 25 schools in the nation chosen as a *HSTW* Pacesetter School for 2008-2010.

No More Low-Level Courses

“The first thing we did was to eliminate all low-level courses — all at once,” DHS Principal **Debbie Freeman** said. The school requires all students to complete a college-preparatory-level academic curriculum. College-prep completers take four English/language arts courses; four mathematics courses, Algebra I and higher; and four science courses, including biology, physical science and chemistry plus one higher-level science elective. Career/technical (CT) completers take four English/language arts courses; four mathematics courses, Algebra I and higher; and three science courses, including biology, physical science and chemistry. Many CT students take four science courses. Dalton is now an International Baccalaureate (IB) school and offers an increasing number of Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

Eliminating low-level courses in one fell swoop meant the school needed to move quickly to establish a support system to help students meet higher standards. Inclusion has become the school’s largest department to ensure that co-teaching between regular teachers and special education teachers is available in the classroom. This change has required early and ongoing professional development to help teachers master the concept of co-teaching and learn to deliver the most effective instruction.

Teachers are meeting together and using new strategies to get better results. Mathematics teachers participated in professional development to learn how to deliver differentiated instruction. The school adopted a policy of mastery learning that has benefited students by ensuring that they learn the material covered in the first semester before moving on to the second semester.

The Project Lead The Way® engineering program at DHS has served as a model for other programs of how to integrate academic and CT studies to raise achievement. Students complete rigorous mathematics and science courses along with specialized courses that will help them prepare for careers in engineering and other high-tech fields.

Support for Ninth-Graders

Incoming ninth-graders who have failed to meet the standards of the state-mandated Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests in reading and mathematics attend a summer bridge program to increase their academic skills before making the critically important transition to high school studies. A total of 30 students participated in the six-week summer session in 2008. During the ninth grade, students may be placed in a special mathematics class where they get the help they need to move forward with their classmates.

Another program geared specifically to ninth-graders is Dalton High School 101. In the first semester of social studies, a guidance counselor and the school’s graduation coach visit the class once a week to offer survival tips for success in high school and to encourage students to take advantage of extra help and other resources available to them from the school and the community.

Later in the year, ninth-graders participate in a freshman reality check in which they “live and work” in a fictitious town called Realville. Members of the community greet students at 12 stations set up in the school to acquaint students with real-life experiences such as buying a home, paying bills and making educational decisions.

Extra Help to Meet Standards

Students are surrounded by extra-help options to support them in meeting higher expectations.

- Using a computer at school or at home, students receive help in English/language arts and mathematics through the NovaNET® online courseware system. Academic teachers are available to assist students in the NovaNET lab at school. “Students currently are assigned to the lab,” Freeman said, “but we plan to provide 25 minutes in the lunch period next year for any students who want to use the program to improve their mathematics skills.”

- Faculty members from **Dalton State College** volunteer to deliver after-school tutoring for two hours, three days a week. Students from the Honor Society serve as peer tutors to help their classmates. The school provides transportation home for students who attend the tutoring sessions.
- The school schedule has been adjusted to include an extra hour in the morning and another hour in the afternoon for mathematics and other teachers to assist students with their lessons.

Assistant principals and guidance counselors serve as adult mentors to meet with small groups of students and their parents to plan and implement programs of study that will challenge and engage students and prepare them for further education and careers. The meeting time is expected to be 30 minutes weekly in the coming school year.

Career/Technical Education

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— **Larry Murkerson**
*Career/Technical Director and
Assistant Principal
Dalton High School*

Dalton High School has taken a giant step to help students graduate in four years by providing high-quality career/technical studies that add meaning to their lives now and in the future. The 12 career/technical programs offered at the school include new and updated courses that more closely match the employment opportunities available in the community. New courses include culinary arts, graphic arts, video production, criminal justice and marketing. Students can seek industry certification in every career field where such recognition exists.

“We upgraded existing courses by strengthening the curriculum, buying new equipment and materials, and employing better-qualified staff,” said Career/Technical Director and Assistant Principal **Larry Murkerson**. When a new addition to the school is completed, the culinary arts department will have a state-of-the-art facility and the horticulture program will have a greenhouse, Murkerson added.

CT students are encouraged to take a sequence of four courses to earn a dual seal on their high school diplomas. One thousand of the school’s 1,600 students take CT courses, and 60 percent of graduates received a dual seal in 2008. The number earning the dual seal has nearly doubled in recent years.

Every CT completer develops a portfolio of best work, including reports and projects from the past four years, to graduate. One important aspect of the portfolio is an interview with a business or community representative and a teacher. Every senior spends 15 minutes with the adults to review accomplishments, hear recommendations on what he or she could have done better, and receive advice for the future. “Some of our students have received scholarships or job offers on the spot as a result of the interviews,” Murkerson said.

One key to Dalton’s career/technical success is the involvement of students in promoting career/technical education to other students. Marketing students developed a campaign to attract more students to CT studies. Students produced a feature on CT pathways to show on the school’s closed-circuit television system. They also talk with middle grades students about the benefits of taking CT courses in high school.

The best examples of academic and CT teachers working together occur via the Project Lead The Way® engineering program. “The program is based on a strong curriculum, embedded mathematics and science, problem-based learning, excellent teacher preparation and student assessment,” Murkerson said.

“All decisions at Dalton High School are based on data,” Freeman said. “In comparing today with six years ago, we know that teachers are increasing their use of data to guide their instruction.” Another big change is that teachers are hired on the basis of whether their beliefs match those of the school — that expectations should be high and all students can learn.

Freeman would like to see state-level educators and policy-makers focus on redesigning the freshman year to incorporate more programs and practices to help ninth-graders survive the first year of high school. She would also like to see more leeway in the time students are given to graduate. “Some students can complete the work in three years, while others may need five years,” she said. “It is especially hard for English-language learners to come up to speed in a new language while mastering the concepts of high-level courses.”

Contact:

Debbie Freeman
(debbie.freeman@dalton.k12.ga.us)
Larry Murkerson
(larry.murkerson@dalton.k12.ga.us)

School Makes Progress in Meeting Specific Needs of Students With Varied Socioeconomic Backgrounds

Most of the 1,000 students enrolled at **Dawson County High School** (DCHS) in Dawsonville, Georgia, are white (97 percent), but students vary greatly in their socioeconomic backgrounds. The once-rural community is rapidly becoming suburban as the metropolitan Atlanta area expands north.

“We have a growing number of students with both parents commuting to the city every day,” Principal **Wayne Chelf** said. “This provides a challenge to the school in terms of involving parents in guidance and other activities, but we are making changes to meet that challenge.”

When DCHS joined *HSTW* in 2002, a number of issues needed immediate attention: The curriculum was not rigorous enough, the dropout rate was too high and the graduation rate was too low. “School leaders doing research found that the school’s needs could be met by implementing the fundamentals of curriculum and instruction that the *High Schools That Work* 10 Key Practices are designed to address,” said Chelf, who became principal in 2007.

Raising Achievement

The graduation rate at DCHS rose from 68.8 percent in 2004-2005 to 79.2 percent in 2007-2008. Composite scores on the SAT climbed from 1445 in 2005-2006 (the first year the writing test was administered) to 1500 in 2007-2008. The percentages of students passing state end-of-course tests in ninth-grade literature, American literature and physical science grew by several percentage points in each subject between 2005-2006 and 2007-2008. The percentages of students passing the Georgia High School Graduation Test in science increased from 82 percent in 2005-2006 to 92 percent in 2007-2008.

After analyzing the data, school leaders concluded that there is little disparity between students’ course grades and their end-of-course test scores. “Our teachers have become more successful in aligning instruction to state standards,” Chelf said.

DCHS was one of only 25 schools in the nation to be named a *HSTW* Pacesetter School for 2008-2010. The honor is based on actions by the school to set an example of higher student achievement.

Rigorous Requirements

Dawson County High School students meet much higher expectations now than in the past. They are required to complete four courses in each content area — English/language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. The total number of credits needed to graduate is 28. Students hoping to be valedictorian or salutatorian must take at least one Advanced Placement (AP) course to be eligible. The number of AP courses offered at the school has risen from three several years ago to 11 courses planned for the 2009-2010 school year.

Another graduation requirement is three sequential courses in Peach State Pathways — the career/technical programs of study developed by the state of Georgia for students, beginning with the freshman class of 2008-2009. DCHS offers pathways in eight of the 11 program areas designated by the state. The program areas available to DCHS students are agriculture; architecture, construction, communications and transportation; business and computer science; engineering and technology; education; family and consumer sciences; healthcare science; and marketing, sales and services.

“Facilities and personnel are the only reasons we don’t offer all of the state’s program areas,” Chelf said.

Providing Extra Help

Students who need extra help and time have access to a number of programs at DCHS. They can recover credit by using the computer-based NovaNET[®] program available to students at school or at home. They can also participate in a credit recovery program offered by an alternative high school across the street from DCHS. A graduation coach does a lot of one-on-one counseling to encourage students to study hard and stay on course for graduation in four years.

Tutoring for struggling students is available in class, before and after school, and during a “zero” period at the beginning of each school day. National Honor Society members tutor their fellow students in addition to the assistance provided by teachers.

“We are addressing the individual needs of students as aggressively as we can,” Chelf said. “This includes realigning students as they go along to ensure that they are receiving what they need to meet higher standards.”

Helping Freshmen Succeed

The watchful eyes of DCHS administrators and teachers focus on students before they enter high school. Teachers and counselors meet with their middle grades counterparts to review high school expectations, academic programs and Peach State Pathways career/technical programs.

When students enter the ninth grade, they are placed in classes taught by the best teachers. The head of the mathematics department and the most veteran mathematics teacher on the faculty both teach full time in grade nine. “These two individuals actually volunteered to teach freshmen,” Chelf said. Other departments also have placed veteran teachers in the ninth grade. By teaching freshmen, teachers become familiar with students as soon as they arrive in high school, discovering what the new students need in order to succeed and how the school can intervene before students get in over their heads.

Beginning in 2007-2008, DCHS is developing a Teachers As Advocates program to connect students to adults in the school building over the entire four years of high school. Counselors and teachers have developed and are continuing to refine advisement lessons that are shared by teachers and peer leaders. Advisement sessions and club activities take place during the zero period.

Parent conferences are scheduled before, during or after school to accommodate parents’ schedules. Each semester, the school allocates two half-days to conferencing on behalf of all students. Evening meetings for students and parents are held once a year to address course registration procedures, college application information and the Georgia HOPE Scholarship program for students planning to attend college.

Work-Based Learning

The personal attention continues in grade 12, when students can take dual high school and college credit courses at Lanier Technical College and can participate in work-based learning to preview the academic and CT skills that employers expect of new employees. Forty-three seniors served as interns or apprentices in CT areas in 2008-2009. A coordinator is assigned to spend one block with work-based learning students at the school and three blocks with students and employers on the job.

Local businesses look forward to having seniors in the workplace and consider work-based learning a valuable opportunity for students and adults. Business leaders also spend time at the school observing the academic and career/technical education that students receive. “One employer said students ask the types of questions that cause him to stay sharp in his own business,” Chelf said.

Integrated learning is on the rise at DCHS as academic and career/technical teachers work together to make learning real for students. One joint project conducted by DCHS students to build a hovercraft, a vehicle that travels on water as

well as land, inspired other teachers to design projects of their own. “Just this week, a science teacher and an engineering teacher shared with me a plan they are developing to engage their students in authentic learning,” Chelf said.

Active Learning

School leaders and teachers constantly seek ways to involve students actively in learning and to heighten interest in preparing for graduation and beyond. Some examples are the two greenhouses and a barn located on campus, a certified automotive program and a “virtual” school store being developed for online operation by marketing students. All of these activities combine academic and career/technical studies.

To give teachers time to work together, DCHS has set aside one and a half hours every other week for “Wonderful Wednesday.” Teachers look at performance standards, examine students’ progress in meeting the standards, and collaborate on projects to make learning more meaningful for students.

Professional development is another way for teachers to learn ways to work together to increase understanding of content in their classrooms. Successful teachers often share best practices with colleagues participating in small groups at the school.

State Resources

“I’m excited to see the state doing more cross-walking of state resources with the proven principles of *High Schools That Work*,” Chelf said. “It’s a key element that has been missing.”

Chelf believes new *HSTW* sites would benefit from state-funded implementation grants to help them carry out the *HSTW* Key Practices. “The *High Schools That Work* Summer Staff Development Conference is a huge resource for schools,” he said. “If the state could fund travel for teachers and administrators to attend the conference, more educators would have access to best practices presented by schools from across the nation.”

Another way the state could support all high schools in their improvement efforts would be to require each student to complete a senior portfolio for graduation and to provide guidelines and training for schools to implement the requirement, Chelf said. DCHS is beginning the process of having students to prepare senior portfolios for graduation as a way for them to focus on mastering and demonstrating skills they will need in the future. “Colleges and universities, as well as businesses and industries, increasingly are seeking tangible evidence that students have acquired needed academic and career/technical skills that will make them more likely to succeed in further education and the workplace,” Chelf said.

Contact:

Wayne Chelf
(wchelf@dawson.k12.ga.us)

Large School in Transitional Community Provides a Model for Higher Achievement

Camden County High School (CCHS) is surrounded by history in one of the oldest counties in Georgia, but its approach to school improvement is strictly modern. The school has been recognized for using effective, up-to-date strategies to prepare students for success in college and careers.

CCHS is a comprehensive high school in Kingsland. It enrolls more than 2,900 students — 63 percent are white, 27 percent black, 4 percent Hispanic, 4 percent multiracial and 1 percent Asian.

“It is imperative for us to build strong relationships with students so that we can identify problems and find solutions as quickly as possible,” said **Denise Cato**, CCHS deputy principal and freshman academy director. Many of the school’s reform efforts are designed to increase students’ sense of belonging and to strengthen their resolve to complete the 12th grade.

The graduation rate at CCHS has remained consistently above the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) requirements of *No Child Left Behind* and above the state average. The graduation rate was 72.9 percent in 2005, 75.3 percent in 2006, 75 percent in 2007 and 74.5 percent in 2008. “The consistency is especially significant in light of the fact that the number of students graduating has increased each year — from 461 in 2005 to 491 in 2006 to 510 in 2007 and 548 in 2008,” Cato said.

In 2008 CCHS was selected as a *HSTW* Pacesetter School for setting an example of higher achievement.

High Expectations

Academic expectations at CCHS are aligned with the *HSTW*-recommended program of study. CCHS students take four college-preparatory courses in English/language arts, mathematics, science and social studies, plus a career major. Students need 28 credits to graduate — four more than the state requirement of 24 credits. Eighteen Advanced Placement courses were offered in 2008-2009, with the number increasing to 20 in 2009-2010. Many students receive dual high school and college credit through a state program offered at the Camden Center of the College of Coastal Georgia.

After joining *HSTW* in 2001, school leaders began making changes to implement the *HSTW* Key Practices. **Brent Blount**, co-chairman of the *HSTW* steering committee, said every teacher serves on one of 14 focus teams to give feedback to the steering committee. By involving all staff members in reviewing data for decision-making and giving input to curriculum and instruction, the school is ensuring that improvement will continue, regardless of personnel changes.

CCHS has implemented a number of new programs and policies during the past three years. These include hiring a graduation coach; providing additional extra-help programs such as course extension, credit redemption and virtual high school courses; and conducting Georgia High School Graduation Test review sessions for all juniors.

Changes in the 2008-2009 school year have included a new attendance policy, a new attendance focus team and a graduation/dropout and retention team for each of the school’s six academies.

Wall-to-Wall Academies

To improve tests scores, graduation rates and college and career readiness, the school established a freshman academy and five career academies for students in grades 10 through 12. This small learning community approach is designed to increase students’ sense of belonging while encouraging them to develop worthwhile attachments to teachers who care and peers who share similar career interests.

The freshman academy is housed in a separate ninth-grade center with its own media center and cafeteria. Students in the upper grades enroll in one of the following career academies for the remainder of high school: business, engineering and industrial technology, fine arts, health and environmental science, and government and public services.

Faculty members have participated in professional development in the district to learn how to integrate academic and career/technical concepts and to engage students in learning through authentic, hands-on projects and assignments. Teachers regularly examine students’ progress in meeting state standards and take action to address deficiencies.



“It is imperative for us to build strong relationships with students so that we can identify problems and find solutions as quickly as possible.”

— Denise Cato
Deputy Principal
Camden County High School

Large Career/Technical Program

CCHS has one of the largest career/technical programs in the state, according to **Steve Fortier**, coordinator of work-based learning and the youth apprenticeship program. Career/technical education has been shown to promote students' interest in staying in school to earn a diploma. Programs are offered in agriculture technology, automotive technology, teacher internship, JROTC, family and consumer finance, metal technology, health services technology, construction technology and engineering technology.

"More than three-fourths of graduates in 2008 received dual seals on their diplomas," Fortier said. "This means that they completed at least four career/technical courses, including three courses in one of the career pathways." The percentage of students completing dual seal requirements rose from 55 percent in 2005-2006 to 65 percent in 2006-2007 and to 75.7 percent in 2007-2008.

Students at CCHS have many opportunities for work-based learning, including internships and apprenticeships. The school has a cooperative program with the TRIDENT Refit Facility (TRF), which provides support for overhaul and repair of submarines. Fifteen students engaged in work-based learning at TRF hope to move into full-time apprenticeships with the facility after graduation in 2009.

CCHS also participates in the work-ready program that the state created "to ensure that Georgia's workers have the best skills, easy access to training, and world-class job opportunities."

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— Steve Fortier
*Coordinator
Work-Based Learning and Youth
Apprenticeship Program
Camden County High School*

Linking to the Middle Grades

Camden County High School has strong ties with the two middle grades schools in the county to help incoming freshmen make a successful transition to high school. One example is vertical teaching in all four core content areas. High school teachers develop teaching units for middle grades teachers in April that notify them what their students need to know before entering the ninth grade. The units target weaknesses not covered by the state's Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests.

The school plans to expand the summer bridge program that was offered daily for one week in 2008. Students in the program rotate through four core subjects taught by highly qualified teachers. Forty of the 90 at-risk students invited to the program actually attended in 2008. The others were assigned to support classes where they received "double dips" of English and mathematics in the 2008-2009 school year.

Seventy-two freshmen identified as being at risk of failing reading and/or mathematics were assigned to a mentoring program in which adult mentors kept logs of students' grades and behavior. As head of the freshman academy, Cato used the logs to refer students for help in a program that includes assistance as needed from a guidance counselor, a dropout prevention specialist, a truancy officer, a resource officer and a social worker.

"The percentage of students who missed more than 15 days of school was reduced from 22.4 percent in 2007-2008 to only 4.9 percent mid-way through the 2008-2009 school year," Cato said. "We have already exceeded our goal of cutting absences of more than 15 days to 15 percent or lower."

Support for Learning

The school's Planning for Academic and Work Success (PAWS) program allows students to remain with the same teacher-adviser throughout high school. Each adviser works with a group of 20 students to plan programs of study and to recommend assistance as needed.

Extra help at CCHS includes tutoring before and after school and access to the NovaNET® online courseware system for additional skill building in English and mathematics.

The school has adopted a grading policy to allow students to receive an Incomplete rather than a failing grade if they seek assistance and redo the work to an acceptable level within 18 weeks. An *HSTW* staff member delivered on-site training to help teachers implement the Power of I grading policy.

At the beginning of 2008-2009, the Camden County School District contracted with Ombudsman Educational Services to establish a program for non-traditional students needing an alternative way to complete high school. This program was designed and implemented to add support for higher graduation rates. Students in the program may work, have children or bear other responsibilities that prevent them from attending class on a regular basis. The Ombudsman program allows non-traditional students to earn up to eight credits toward graduation by completing computer modules at a choice of three locations in the community. Students participate in the program three hours per day at a time that is best for them — morning, afternoon or evening. As of March 1, 2009, more than 200 students were enrolled and more than 50 students had the opportunity to graduate from high school on time as a result of the program.

State Action

Camden County High School and other high schools in Georgia would benefit from additional funding and professional development, Cato said. One need she mentioned is for professional development to show teachers how to incorporate active learning into the context of standards. “We have so many standards and a limited amount of time,” she said. “Teachers could use more effective ways to make learning real while addressing the standards.”

Another need expressed by CCHS leaders is for the state to accelerate its support for the *HSTW* school improvement model. “Schools need help to send more staff members to the *High Schools That Work* Summer Staff Development Conference,” Cato said. “We also need assistance to continue the *High Schools That Work* initiative long enough to show improvement.”

Contact:

Denise Cato

(dcato@camden.k12.ga.us)

Brent Blount

(bblount@camden.k12.ga.us)

Steve Fortier

(sfortier@camden.k12.ga.us)
