



Joint Summary of Georgia State University's Vision Project Study

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Introduction: The Georgia Vision Project and Georgia State University's Vision Project Study

The Georgia Vision Project represents the collaborative work of two educational agencies: The Georgia School Boards Association (GSBA) and the Georgia School Superintendents Association (GSSA). The comprehensive report that resulted from the partnership between these two organizations serves as a guidance document to inform school improvement efforts and assist in the provision of an equitable education for public school students across the state. The purpose of the work “is to offer a series of recommendations that, taken in total, implemented effectively over our state, and supported by the citizens of the state and policymakers, will transform public education in Georgia” (GVP, p. 2).

The vision for public education discussed in the report includes the assurance that every graduate of Georgia's public schools is prepared to become a contributing member of society and is consistent with input from community and student conversations across the state. Simply stated, the vision maintains that public education in Georgia will provide all children with an equitable and excellent education that prepares them for college, career, and life. This vision ties directly to the value of public education, which according to the project, ensures that all children have the opportunity to be prepared equally for college, career, and life. To date, the recommendations provided by Georgia Vision Project have been adopted by 146 school districts across the state.

The Vision Project lists and critically examines seven components for improving the quality of education for Georgia's public school students. The project report is organized into separate sections, each of which introduces and describes a component; discusses associated guiding principles, relevant key issues, and current practices of promise; and provides supporting

recommendations. In total, the report offers 45 recommendations to support school districts' work across each component. The seven components include the following:

1. Early Learning and Student Success
2. Teaching and Learning
3. Teaching and Learning Resources
4. Human and Organizational Capital
5. Governance, Leadership, and Accountability
6. Culture, Climate, and Organizational Efficacy
7. Financial Resources

In the spring of 2016, graduate-level researchers from Georgia State University (GSU) published seven separate qualitative multiple instrumental case studies designed to determine the degree to which the Vision Project's execution had impacted school culture and student achievement in high implementation school districts. Each study was unique in that the researcher examined a particular issue of education using one or more of the Vision Project's components as a lens through which to frame the issue (see Table 1 below). When considered collectively, the studies serve to provide valuable insight into the statewide implementation and influence of the project's recommendations. What follows is a description of the research methods employed in the group studies and a discussion of the major findings that were common across the collective studies. The report concludes with a summary of the collective project's impact and recommendations for continued implementation of the Georgia Vision Project.

Table 1. Individual Study Topics in GSU’s Vision Project Study

Author of Study	Topic
Dr. Tamara J. Candis	The influence of leadership practices on parental involvement within schools with English language learners
Dr. Karen Humphries Dozier	The impact of math innovations in elementary mathematics classrooms in Georgia Vision Project districts
Dr. Kimberly A. McDermon	Identification of exemplary teacher characteristics as part of Georgia’s Vision for Public Education
Dr. Kelly M. Scarborough	Leadership in high poverty, high English language learner schools, as part of Georgia’s Vision for Public Education
Dr. Sharissa Y. Seymour	Teacher retention: behaviors of principals influencing teachers in schools as part of Georgia’s Vision for Public Education
Dr. Felecia Spicer	School culture, school climate, and the role of the principal
Dr. Christina Smith Wagoner	The Georgia Vision Project: Its impact on leadership, learning, and the promotion of teacher growth

Research Methods

Research Questions

Framing each study were three shared research questions:

1. How have the internal contexts coupled with the implementation of the Vision Project impacted learning and leadership in your school district?

2. What are the features of the Vision Project that specifically impacted learning in your school district?
3. How has the implementation of the Vision Project helped build the capacity of self and others in your school?

In addition to the shared guiding questions, each researcher also included additional questions designed to address one or more topics tied to the Vision Project recommendations and the implementation of those recommendations in the high fidelity school districts. These questions were as follows:

1. What leadership practices are being implemented to influence parental involvement in schools with high ELL populations? (Candis, 2016)
2. How has the Vision Project impacted the use of math innovations in math instruction? (Dozier, 2016)
3. How do teachers and principals describe the impact of the teacher evaluation instruments on student achievement? (McDermon, 2016)
4. What ways are the formal leadership teams in predominately high ELL schools organized? What are the formal leadership teams' perceptions of their practices? (Scarborough, 2016)
5. What are the behaviors of principals influencing teacher retention in schools? (Seymour, 2016)

6. What does the principal do to impact the culture, climate, and organizational efficacy in the school, considering each of these four areas: support for learning, stakeholder engagement, collegiality, and principal leadership? (Spicer, 2016)
7. How has principal feedback during the evaluation process impacted teacher effectiveness? (Wagoner, 2016)

The results of these studies provide practical information about leadership practices related to teacher evaluation, establishing and maintaining a healthy school climate and culture, teacher retention, parental engagement, meeting the needs of diverse learners, and even specific practices that impact the teaching of mathematics. For the purpose of this report, however, the focus is on the findings related specifically to the recommendations and guidance offered in the Georgia Vision Project.

Participants

Georgia State University's study of the implementation of the Georgia Vision Project utilized a wide array of stakeholders including school and district leaders, teachers, parental involvement coordinators, and parents. District level leaders participating in the study included representatives from human resources departments, one superintendent, and one elementary school coordinator. In total, there were 102 participants, all of whom were selected based on an assumed fundamental knowledge of the project's implementation coupled with an understanding of the secondary area of focus for each individual research project.

Data Collection and Analysis

In a fashion similar to the creation of the three shared research questions mentioned above, each researcher designed his or her individual study as a multiple instrumental case study.

This type of qualitative study allowed the researchers to explore two school districts with the same or similar characteristics in order to provide insight into the implementation of the Georgia Vision Project. In order to add rich context to the investigation, primary methods of data collection included individual interviews, focus groups, and an analysis of relevant documents (e.g., descriptions of district initiatives, organizational structure charts, publicly-available test data, observation notes, climate surveys, teacher evaluation documents, school/district websites, and district strategic plans). A thorough review of these documents, including transcriptions of interviews and focus group meetings, led to the identification of categories and themes that addressed each individual study's research questions while simultaneously revealing significant findings related to the implementation of the Georgia Vision Project. These themes and their relation to the implementation of the Georgia Vision Project are discussed below.

Major Themes

The findings that emerged from the studies at Georgia State University aligned with specific components of the Georgia Vision Project and were then categorized into five separate themes. Categorically, the themes that developed from the studies included

1. Teaching and Learning
2. Professional Learning/Professional Development
3. Learning Culture/Learning Environment
4. School Structure
5. Leadership Practices

Professional Development/Professional Learning

The Teaching and Learning component of the Georgia Vision Project acknowledges that the goals of public education cannot be realized without well-trained teachers and that high-quality, job-embedded, ongoing professional learning must be a priority for all educators. The project also notes, “schools and school districts must help faculty and staff and build their cultural competence and cultural proficiency in order to meet the educational needs of a diverse student population” (p. 114). Findings related to professional learning and professional development included the tailoring of professional development to individual teachers’ needs (Candis, 2016); the positive impact of professional learning communities (PLCs) on student achievement (Seymour, 2016); and the provision of district-created professional learning opportunities for teacher candidates in local college’s teacher preparation programs (Spicer, 2016). Each of these findings demonstrate that the school systems closely replicated the recommendations of the teaching and learning standard and placed a high value on professional learning as a tool for continued growth and development.

However, both Dozier (2016) and Scarborough (2016) found that teachers in school districts with high implementation of the Vision Project lacked adequate professional development for teaching diverse populations. Spicer (2016) concluded that professional development should be “focused, clear, and related to the district goals” (p. 73), and in an era when schools are increasingly more diverse, engaging diverse populations certainly qualifies as an important educational issue and one that is ripe for growth throughout the state through the continued and expanded use of the Vision Project as a guiding framework.

Teaching and Learning

Teaching and learning is the core business of the public education system and, as such, should be the central focus of the type of transformational process encouraged by the Georgia Vision Project. Schools and districts must take the time to develop and continually improve upon curriculum so that it is flexible, challenging, and meaningful for maximum student engagement. Assessment, which plays a part in accountability measures for teaching and learning across the state, must be a factor in informing the instructional process and in monitoring students' progress in attaining specific skills and knowledge. These assertions found within the language of the Vision Project make it clear that teaching and learning must be about student achievement. Two significant factors that impact student achievement, according to GSU's Vision Project study, include differentiation and professional learning communities (PLCs).

The Georgia Vision Project presents differentiation as a best practice for planning instruction and defines it as "a wide repertoire of instructional strategies from which [teachers] can select in a mix and match process" (p. 49). Differentiation was evident in several of the study systems and was viewed by teachers as an effective method for increasing student achievement (Dozier, 2016; Scarborough, 2016). Participation in PLCs, which was found to have a positive impact on teaching and learning within school districts (Seymour, 2016), is one way that teachers can build their repertoire of differentiation. It is important to note, however, that the onus for understanding differentiation and capitalizing upon it in order to provide equitable access to curriculum and content standards lies not only with teachers, but also with school leaders. According to the Vision Project,

Teachers and leaders must receive training that enables them to develop a clear understanding of what differentiation entails and how to use flexible groups to structure differentiated activities. In addition, they must have time on the job to practice implementation and to collaborate on evaluating the success of the implementation (p. 54).

One way this evaluative collaboration can be accomplished through the use of professional learning communities, and in keeping with the recommendations of the Vision Project, these PLCs were evident throughout multiple study districts.

Learning Culture and Learning Environment

The Georgia Vision Project calls for the creation of innovative, creative learning cultures that recognize education “as an essential and valued element of a successful, modern global society in which all citizens are life-long learners” (p. 16). Creating and maintaining such a culture begins with active participation from all stakeholders and a shared attentiveness to culture and diversity within the learning environment (McDermon, 2016). Schools implementing the Vision Project’s recommendations recognized and demonstrated respect for diversity in the school community. The efforts and attention to culture and diversity in these schools have led to multiple gains across the study school systems including elements as global as building a stronger culture for learning and as focused as increasing positive attitudes toward mathematics in elementary school students (Dozier, 2016).

The Georgia Vision Project also notes that effective school leaders develop cultures that are supportive, especially during times of change, and that promote continuous growth (p. 42).

Wagoner (2016) highlighted that in order for schools to effectively implement changes and

undertake reform efforts (such as TKES), the building leader must create a culture that is receptive to feedback. The impact of cultivating and maintaining a healthy culture is significant even to the degree that teachers may elect to remain in schools and districts with limited financial resources if they perceive the culture as positive and supportive (Seymour, 2016). A positive culture impacts not only the retention of teachers, but also of students and other district employees as well (Seymour, 2016).

According to parents who participated in the study, the schools researched were found to have cultures that were characterized as safe, positive, and inviting (Candis, 2016). This is important when taking into consideration, the Vision Project's assertion that parents (and others) begin to make judgements about a school's culture as soon as they walk into the building (p. 115). Vision Project recommendation 8.1 aligns directly with this finding and urges educators to "make each school and district an inviting place to be for students, parents, staff, and the larger community" (p. 120).

School Structure

The way that schools are structured can impact school culture, professional development practices, and teaching and learning in general. One structure of the schools explored as part of GSU's Vision Project study was the inclusion of support staff. This inclusion encompassed parent involvement coordinators (Candis, 2016), expert ELL teacher leaders (Scarborough, 2016), and instructional coaches (Wagoner, 2016). Each of these support roles was found to be effective in supporting teaching and learning in a number of ways. A school's parent involvement coordinator, for example, had a role in interacting with parents who were not native English language speakers, which may in turn provide an effective model to reduce one barrier to parental involvement. Additionally, the Vision Project maintains that instructional coaching

supports the professional growth of all members of the school community and recommends that all schools implement expert coaching along with collaborative learning communities. Schools throughout the study that implemented this recommendation saw improvements in both student achievement and school culture by using individuals in these positions to support instructional practices.

Leadership Practices

Quite naturally, the idea of leadership appeared in each of the studies, specifically those actions and behaviors that school and district leaders undertook as they worked to create an equitable and excellent learning experience for students. School and district leaders who participated in GSU's Vision Project study seemed to understand that everything they said and did communicated how they felt about and perceived their work within the school community. Consequently, they were deliberate in saying and doing things that promoted a healthy culture and climate based on respect and positive relationships (Seymour, 2016). These leaders developed open lines of communication (Candis, 2016; McDermon, 2016) and cultivated cultures receptive to feedback by providing teachers authentic feedback that aligned with the school's stated goals (McDermon, 2016; Wagoner, 2016). These were leaders who positively impacted their school's climate (Spicer, 2016), and their communication styles helped to build teachers' understanding of and trust around new processes (Wagoner, 2016).

Building a culture of respect and positive relationships within the school community was important to the leaders who participated in the study, and the development and maintenance of partnerships between school districts, local businesses, community organizations, and local colleges and universities often defined these relationships. Additionally, the principal has a significant impact on parental involvement in schools, especially those with high ELL

populations (Candis, 2016). The effective school leaders studied through this project actively encouraged parental involvement and took intentional steps to reduce barriers that might prevent or reduce opportunities for parents and caretakers to engage in students' educational experiences (Candis, 2016; Scarborough, 2016). The development of these types of partnerships and parent relationships had an overall positive impact on school climate (Seymour, 2016; Spicer, 2016) and was significant because it directly aligns to the Vision Project's goal of preparing students for college and careers.

Conclusion

Together, the GSBA and GSSA gave several reasons for initiating a process of creating a new vision for public school in Georgia. Among these reasons were the assurance of meaningful engagement of communities with their public schools and a response to students' individual needs. Georgia State University's Vision Project study helps to address one of the project's key recommendations, specifically that schools and districts determine stakeholder perceptions (p. 121). By engaging multiple and diverse participants in the study, the university has contributed to the work of determining specific actions needed to improve schools.

The Georgia Vision Project states that high performing organizations recognize, appreciate, and address cultural differences and believe that strength can be derived from the rich diversity of public schools. School and district leaders who include cultural competence as part of the vision are creating cultures and environments that are welcoming to all, but districts must be more intentional in providing professional development opportunities that support the teaching of diverse student populations. In addition to including this type of professional development in the school or district strategic plan, leaders can increase strategies for teaching

diverse student populations by simply being willing to listen to the students in the school as recommended by the project.

Additionally, it is worth noting that the researchers who conducted GSU's Vision Project study generally found that although participating schools and districts had connected either their guiding principles or strategic priorities to the Vision Project and were using those linkages to guide practice and decisions in the districts, individual participants beyond system-level administrators lacked specific knowledge about the project. While these individuals were able to articulate multiple practices that were in place and were aligned word-for-word to the Georgia Vision Project, they did not have an understanding of the project's role in the development or implementation of those practices. In addressing this gap, Wagoner (2016) found professional learning to be especially important when new initiatives are adopted; the clear alignment of the school district's work to the Vision Project provides an opportunity for professional learning related not only to the project itself, but also to its relationship to district improvement strategies and student achievement and should be considered by all of the districts utilizing the Georgia Vision Project to guide practice (Candis, 2016; Dozier, 2016; McDermon, 2016; Wagoner, 2016).

Finally, while each individual study yielded multiple findings that can be of use to the study systems, leaders across the state, and educators who are considering aligning the work of their systems to the Georgia Vision Project, the collective studies yielded global findings specific to the five thematic categories of teaching and learning; professional learning/professional development; learning culture/learning environment; school structure; and leadership practices. These collective findings serve as evidence that the alignment of the work in the study school systems to the work of the Georgia Vision Project has been impactful and has made meaningful

contributions that are directly and positively impacting children. Additionally, they serve as a model for how systemic, research-based structures should be utilized to inform and move the work of educating children forward.

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