

Maintaining High Student
Achievement While Increasing Student
Growth

Sharyn Briscoe, Principal, Fellow Denise
Bringslid, Instructional Coach, Ally
2019-2020 Cahn Cohort

Mary Lin Elementary School
586 Candler Park Drive
Atlanta, GA 30307
sbriscoe@atlanta.k12.ga.us
dmb bringslid@atlanta.k12.ga.us
ABSTRACT

Mary Lin Elementary School is known throughout our district as a top-tier school with consistently high student achievement. However, with a shift from focusing on achievement to focusing on growth, we recognized that while our students were achieving at high levels year after year, their levels of individual student growth were not on par with their achievement levels. Our project is about empowering teachers with the resources they need to not only ensure that their students achieve academically – but also that their students are growing throughout the year, regardless of their starting level of achievement. As we hold teachers accountable for individual student growth percentiles, we strive to improve pedagogy, increase teacher efficacy, and increase the effectiveness of classroom instruction for all students. By providing intentionally chosen professional development opportunities to help teachers plan for meaningful instructional experiences that engage learners according to their unique needs, we were able to focus on a few high-leverage areas to quickly see gains in student growth – using peer observations to strategically build upon teacher strengths and build collective awareness of best practices in academic ownership, allowing teachers the space to vulnerably attack their internal biases, and providing a roadmap for meaningful reflection that leads to a

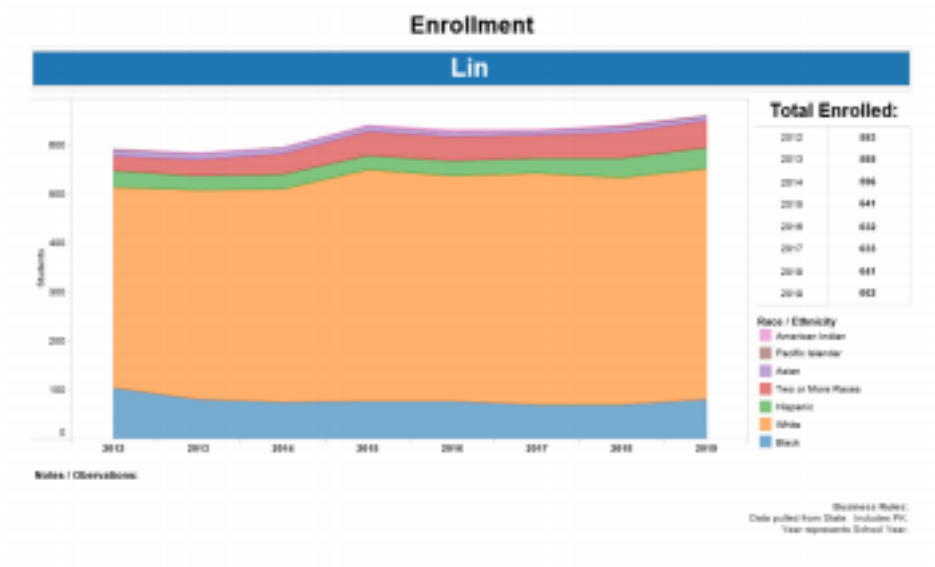
change in mindset.

Prior to the beginning of our project, there was a sense of complacency – teachers relied on other staff to intervene and differentiate for students who either were at an advanced level (gifted) or had persistent gaps in math and reading (early intervention). The competitive nature of teachers rose up once we were brave enough to bring the data to them and they were brave enough to look at it and accept it. During this time, we used “Talk to Me So I Can Hear You” as a starting point to be able to talk through our discomfort. Around this point in our project, we experienced a huge shift in scope and outlook as the COVID-19 pandemic became a reality. During this time of telework and virtual school, we have grown closer together in our time apart because we have had to be more vulnerable and let our guards down in relationship to our skills and our areas of growth. Everyone has been given the space to ask questions, admit their fears, and ban together to get through this crisis. As we gradually move back to in-person schooling, I plan to pick back up where we left off, reevaluating the levels of our students after this unprecedented time at home, and determining how we can hone in on their specific needs which have, undoubtedly, changed since the beginning of our Cahn project work.

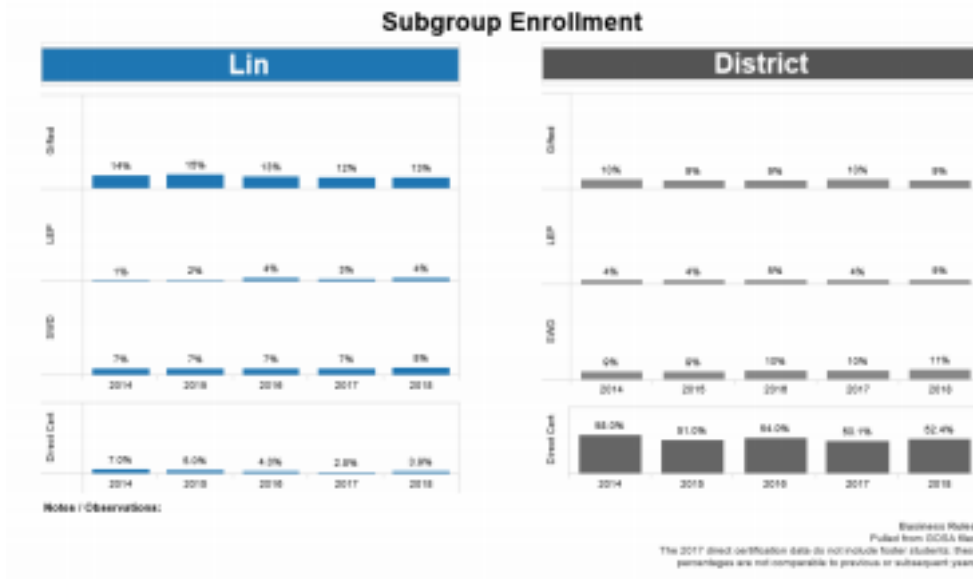
INTRODUCTION

Our Cahn project focused on empowering teachers with the resources they need to not only ensure that their students achieve academically – but also that their students are growing throughout the year, regardless of their starting level of achievement. As we will describe more fully below, we selected this project after analyzing our achievement and growth data and recognizing the imbalance between the two. The project entailed a process of improving teachers’ instructional practices by focusing on student ownership via peer feedback cycles and encouraging teachers to attack their internal biases about student abilities. An important outcome of the project has been an increased sense of community and collaboration between teachers as a result of the reflection needed to make these changes.

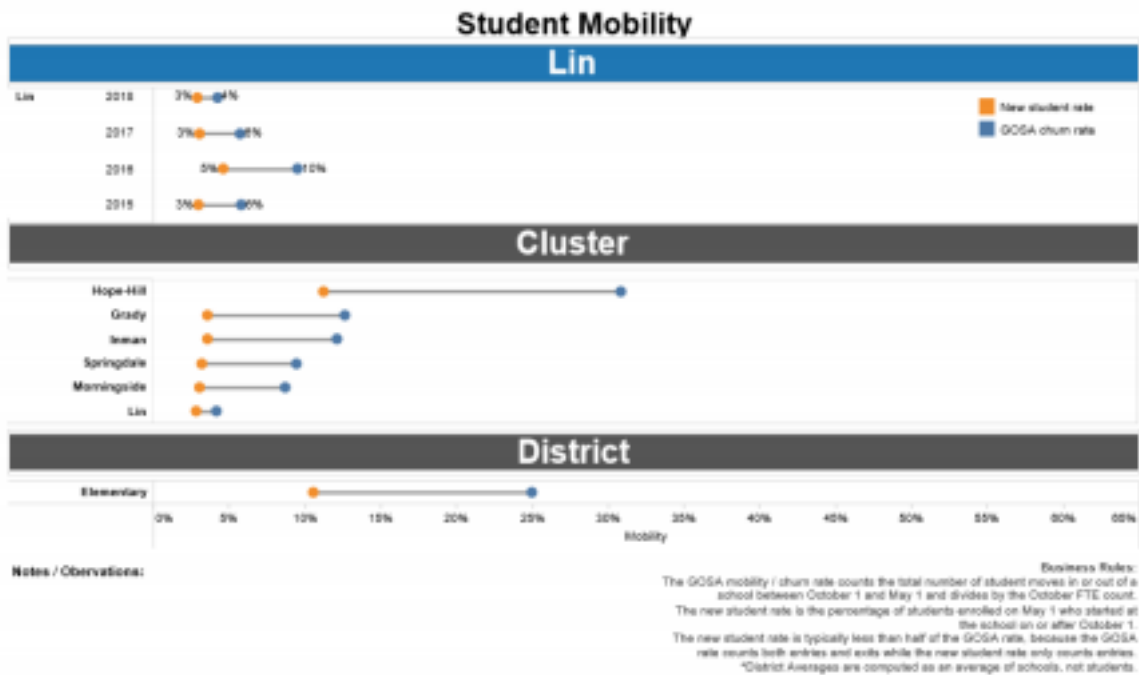
Mary Lin is a non-Title I school located in Candler Park in Atlanta, GA. The school sits across the street from the Candler Park Golf Course and serves families in Candler Park, Inman Park, and Lake Claire neighborhoods. Currently, there are 708 students at Mary Lin in grades Kindergarten through 5th Grade: 72% white, 11% African American, 6% Hispanic, 3% Asian, and 8% multi-racial.



As far as sub-groups go, 13% of Mary Lin’s students receive special education services, 10% of our students qualify for and are served under the Early Intervention Program (EIP), 15% of students have SST/504 plans, 3% are ELL, and 6% are economically disadvantaged, and 13% of students are Gifted.



Mary Lin has very low mobility, with generally less than 5% of the student population seeing movement each year.



The vision of Mary Lin Elementary School is to have our students embrace a learning environment that inspires the best curiosity, compassion and the desire to achieve academic excellence. Our mission is to provide academic achievement for each student by establishing a creative, collaborative and respectful culture where each student's social, emotional and physical well-being is valued.

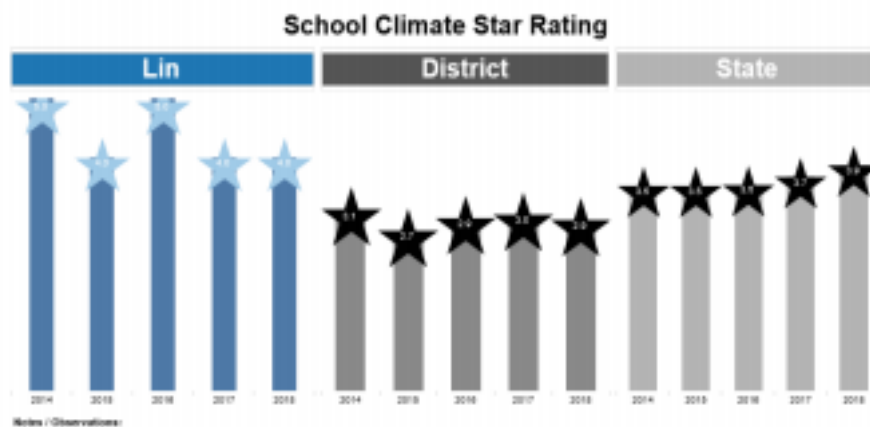
Mary Lin is one of four elementary schools that feed into the Grady Cluster. Our students attend Inman Middle School, which is transitioning into David T. Howard Middle School and then Grady High School. All of the schools are located within the perimeter and are accessible by public transportation. Including Mary Lin, five of the six schools in the Grady Cluster do not receive Title-I funding and are considered high performing schools.

Our school-wide mission and vision are aligned with the Grady Cluster mission and vision - to create a high-performing cluster where educators inspire, families engage, and students love to learn, which, in turn, is undergirded by our district's vision - a high-performing school district where students love to learn, educators inspire, families engage and the community trusts the system - and mission - with a caring culture of trust and collaboration; every student will graduate ready for college and career.

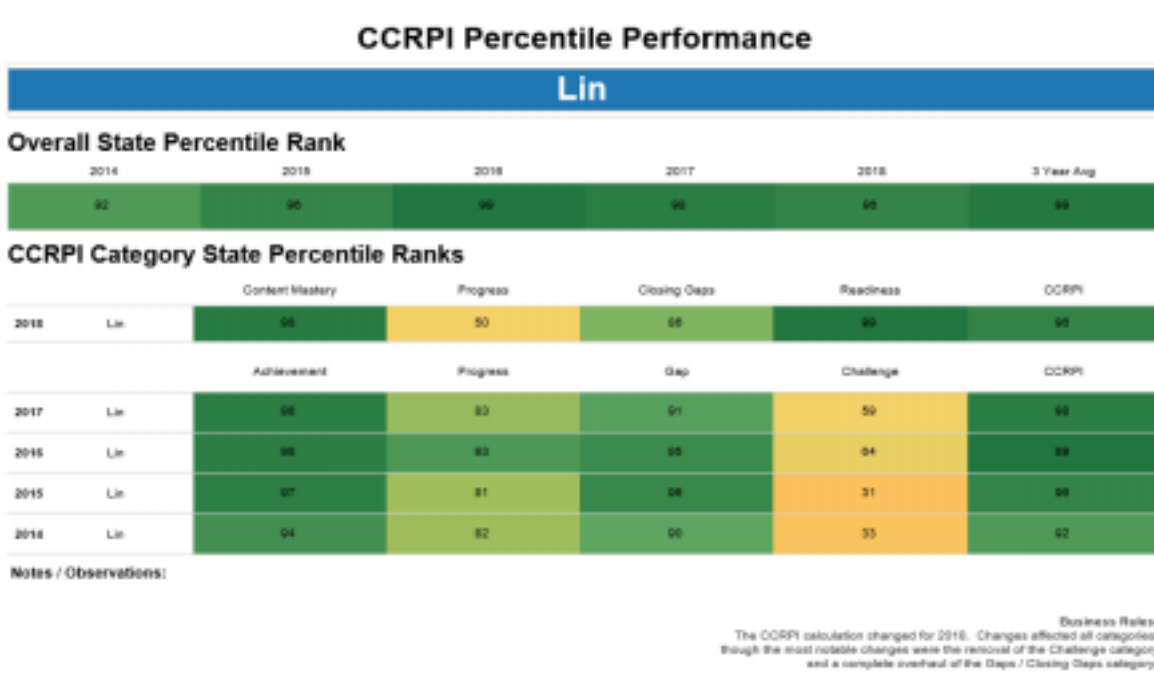
In Atlanta Public Schools, each cluster has selected a Signature Program. While some others have chosen International Baccalaureate or STEM, the Grady Cluster has selected

College and Career Readiness (21st Century Learning) as our special curricular focus. Within this program, each of the elementary schools in the Grady Cluster must offer a standard of service that exposes students to many disciplines and provides opportunities to prepare them for college and career. We offer Spanish exposure for grades Kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade, Band and Orchestra for 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade, and K-5 students take Technology, Art, Music, Physical Education, weekly.

Mary Lin's School Climate rating consistently outperforms other schools in the Atlanta Public Schools district, and only this past year has trended with the state. The School Climate Star Rating is calculated using data from the Georgia Student Health Survey, Georgia School Personnel Survey, Georgia Parent Survey, student discipline data and attendance records for students, teachers, staff and administrators. Each school receives a star rating between 1-5, which is coupled with a comprehensive report which tells schools their areas of growth to help plan targeted student interventions to improve the climate for all students. In the past, we have focused on improving the indicator "Good behavior is noticed at my school" by creating a school-wide positive reinforcement system known as the Model Rocket Club.



For the past four years since Ms. Briscoe has been Principal, we have received silver or gold achievement status from the state of GA. Our Statewide CCRPI Percentile 3-year Average is 99%.

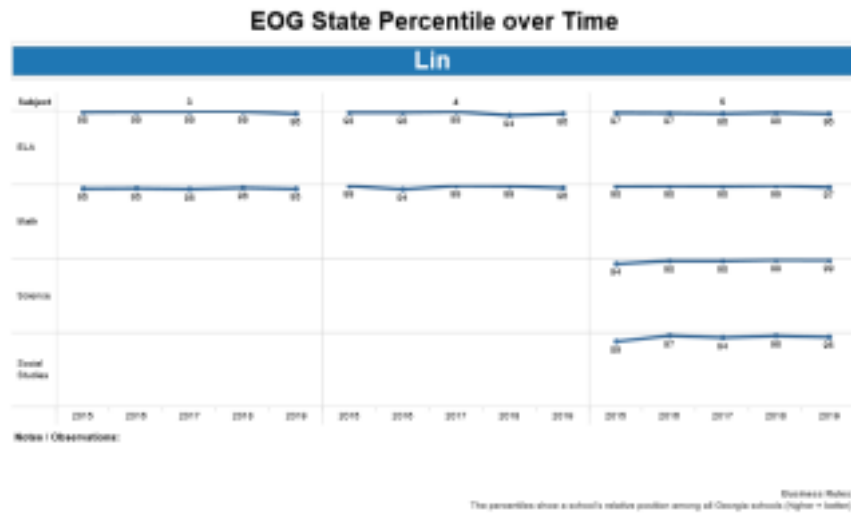
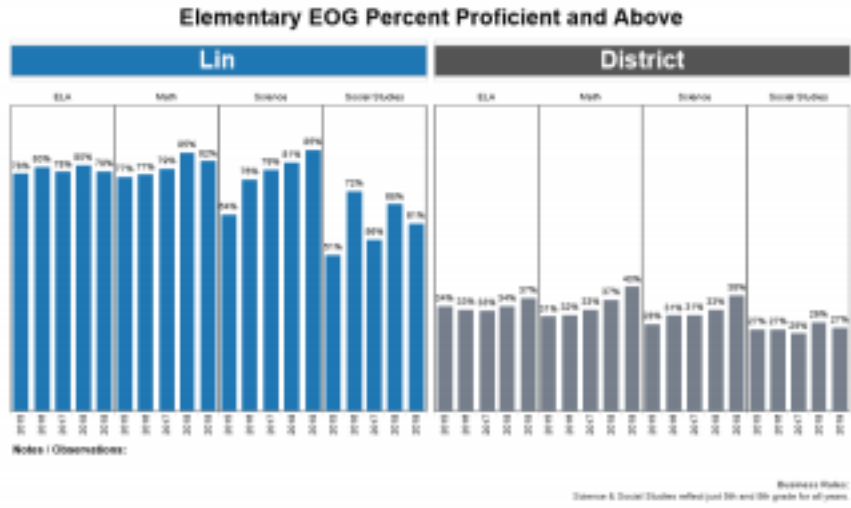


The assessment data that relates to our challenge is our Student Growth Percentiles. The table below represents our present levels of performance. For the 2019 Georgia Milestones Assessment, only 60% of students made typical or high growth in ELA.

SGP Level	1-29	30-40	41-65	66-99

English Language Arts	40.10%	6.76%	24.64%	28.50%
Mathematics	25.12%	10.63%	28.99%	35.27%

Students at Mary Lin are typically high-achievers (see table below), with plenty of students scoring above the Proficient in all subject areas range each year, and our state percentile is consistently in the high 90s.



In the neighborhood, Mary Lin is considered a hub of family activity. There is a very active Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and the Mary Lin Education Foundation is a 501(c)4 organization that raises \$150,000+ per year within the school community to support capital improvements, the procurement of school resources such as instructional technology, and instructional supports such as professional learning for teachers and school-wide initiatives. There is also a GO Team (School Governance Team) that consists of school staff and administrators and community members - this team works to create a school-wide Strategic Plan that drives decisions throughout the year.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problem of practice that we identified at Mary Lin is that students are achieving at

high rates, but not growing at similar rates, based on the Student Growth Percentiles that students receive in grades 4 and 5 in ELA and Math. Additionally, our students are not growing at the same rates as schools in our district with similar neighborhood and student demographics, especially in English Language Arts.

Mary Lin is a high performing elementary school in all content areas for achievement. The progress/growth of individual students does not align with achievement. Currently, our achievement level is in the 97th percentile in the state. Our progress level, in contrast, is at the 35th percentile in the state. The question that we are asking that will drive our inquiry into the problem is, “How can we provide instruction that not only maintains high student achievement, but also increases student growth percentiles? What are the factors that contribute to high achievement and low growth?”

By looking at this problem, Ms. Briscoe will be provided with the opportunity to grow as a leader and build capacity in the school community by being more present in classrooms and being an active participant at the planning table, ensuring teachers are using a backwards design model - especially in English Language Arts. By encouraging teachers to analyze the standards and create an assessment prior to beginning the unit, Ms. Briscoe will build the capacity of teachers to make a deep dive and have a thorough understanding of the level of mastery that is needed for growth. In addition, Ms. Briscoe will give more meaningful and timely feedback - aligned to both the rigor and the content. She will focus on the concept that students should be doing the heavy lifting.

In order to track progress, we will use benchmark data, specifically the STAR assessment, coach/teacher-made (Phoenix 2.0) tests that are standards-based and aligned to higher DOK levels, and Write Score assessment data over three different testing periods in grades 2, 3, 4, and 5.

METHODS

In order to engage the staff and faculty in learning how to more meaningfully engage in giving and receiving feedback, we introduced them to the “Tell Me So I Can Hear You” article by Dr. Ellie Drago-Severson. Staff members reviewed the article and learned about the four ways of knowing - instrumental, socializing, self-authoring, and self-transforming. Teachers discussed with their peers how they felt *supported* when *receiving* feedback, and what felt most *comfortable* when *giving* feedback.

This is important work as we have ongoing Peer Observation Cycles aligned to the Atlanta Public Schools Definitions of Teaching Excellence. This year, our first semester was

focused on building a consistent Culture of Learning - ensuring that school-wide systems/routines and behavioral expectations are consistent with our vision for teaching and learning at Mary Lin. Our second semester, we are focusing on Academic Ownership, as our major lift is to grow students at all levels, since our data from the 2019 Georgia Milestones Assessment showed a significant drop in the percentage of students who experienced high growth in both English Language Arts and Mathematics. It is very important for teachers to understand and intentionally take ownership of high-leverage teacher actions that can increase our students' heavy-lifting, and therefore help them grow as learners.

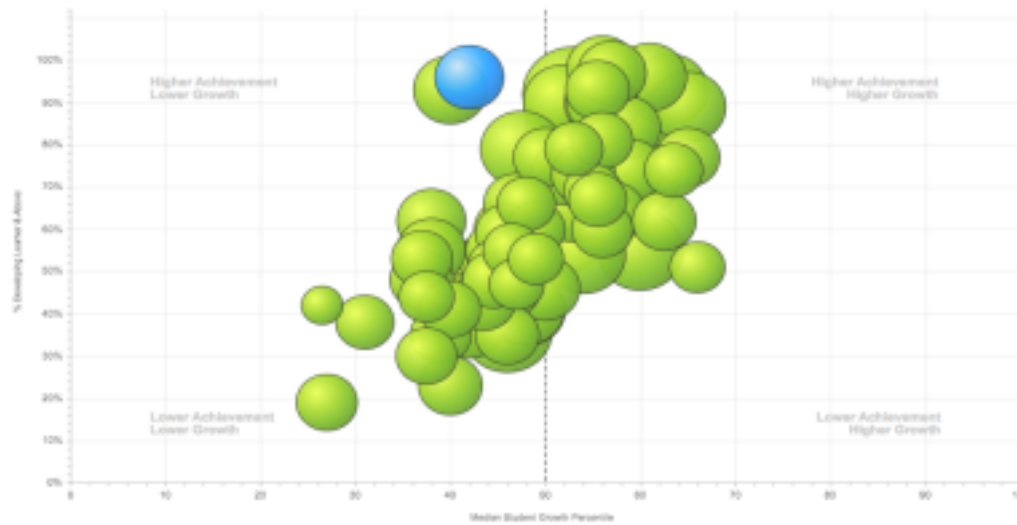
We consistently check in with our teachers during twice-weekly planning meetings regarding the techniques that they should be using to increase the rigor in their classrooms - including various Teach Like a Champion techniques, such as Write First, Talk Second, Ratio, and Right is Right. These techniques are considered when writing lesson plans, and differentiated checks for understanding are intentionally planned so teachers can track student-level achievement on grade-level skills, and above.

While much of the information we are receiving to determine the success of our work in growing students faster is anecdotal and qualitative, our district provides various online data disaggregation tools that are helpful to bring in a quantitative piece. One tool that we have been using is the APS Insights data tool to analyze and reflect on our achievement and student growth data, especially in relationship to our peer schools. Below are three different views that we have shared with teachers to analyze our data and determine goals and checkpoints for increasing Student Growth.

Student Achievement Comparisons to Similar In-District Schools

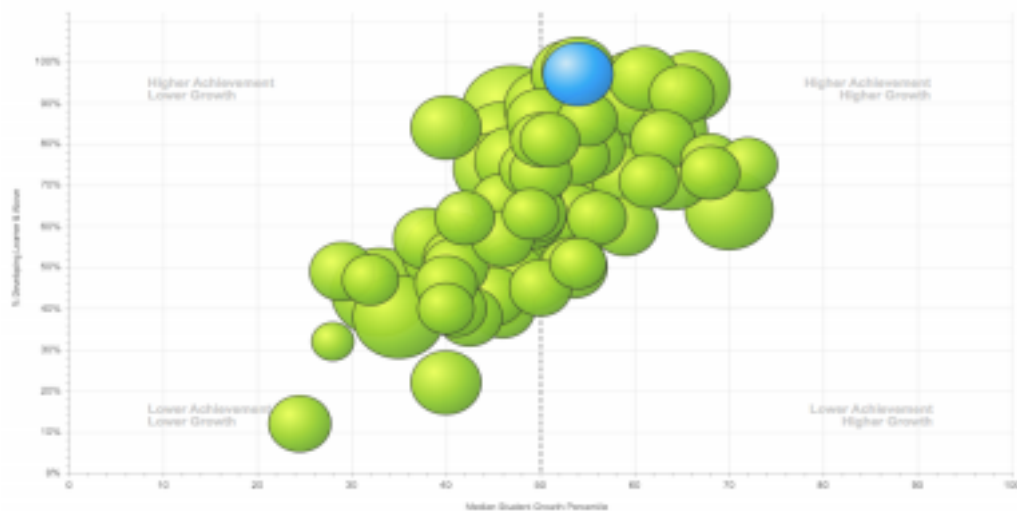
Morningside	2019	5%	14%	38%	43%
Jackson Elementary	2019	4%	16%	41%	40%
Springdale	2019	5%	14%	33%	47%
Lin	2019	5%	17%	42%	36%
Brandon	2019	6%	17%	38%	39%

Student Growth of Mary Lin's Students in Literacy Compared to all District Schools (2019)



Student

Growth of Mary Lin's Students in Math Compared to all District Schools (2019)



In order to gain

a little more insight about why our growth was so much lower than our “sister schools,” the Instructional Coaches, in the company of upper grades teachers, visited local schools that have similar populations to observe their best practices and to discuss similarities and differences in their approaches in comparison to our approach at Mary Lin.

During our weekly staff planning meetings, the Instructional Coaches lead the task of examining student work products and formative assessment data to determine areas of potential growth and immediate needs.

We were able to develop a deeper understanding of our situation as more data came available - we were presented with some very constructive criticism from a parent of multiple

students that required us to look a little bit deeper into the data.

The “big ideas” that we gleaned from our efforts are that our teachers did not realize how rigorous the work that students are doing should be; we are still struggling with teachers doing the heavy lifting vs. the students being fully engaged.

Going through the lens of “Tell Me So I Can Hear You” has been very helpful in conversations between coaches/administrators and teachers. However, we have only scratched the surface because there are many teachers who are still unable to critically reflect on their practice in order to make positive changes that will influence the level of growth their students experience.

Another “aha moment” came with an Implicit Biases training that we held for staff on a teacher work-day. Through conversations led by the facilitator, it became evident that there are still various assumptions being made about what kids can and cannot do. The teachers have to come to terms with who they are, who they identify with, and how they see themselves, because that is what they are projecting on the students.

For example:

- Kinds of books, journal articles, online resources used
- Visits to other schools, consultations with expert practitioners, Cahn study sessions ● Collecting information in your own school by talking with others, observing activities, looking at student work products, examining data, or administering surveys or questionnaires?

In the short-term, our goal was to improve student growth scores, as there is mounting pressure from the district and state-level. In the longer-term, we are looking for more reflective practice and rigorous instruction by teachers. This is the first year using our new literacy curriculum, and it is clear that we had gotten complacent in literacy instruction. As we continue to build teacher leaders in literacy, we plan to sustain our achievement and growth in math by using content leaders in the building to lead professional learning and advance their pedagogy.

So far, the following actions and steps have been taken toward our goals: ● Twice-weekly planning meetings in math and literacy with lesson internalization ● Tri-weekly formative assessments in mathematics and data analysis to get standards based information to remediate and extend

- Staff-wide Implicit Bias Training
- “Tell Me So I Can Hear You” Article Review

- Ongoing local school visits - Instructional Coaches go to nearby schools who have had higher growth scores in recent years along with teachers, and debrief afterwards to see what bite-size, high-leverage action steps we can bring back to the team
- Continuing to revisit CCRPI data with the staff to discuss trends and possible action step
- Videotaping of sessions with Yolonda and subsequent debrief sessions. ● Send additional teachers to visit other schools.
- As a result of the Implicit Bias Training, we have scheduled a follow-up visit. ● In order to stay abreast of our progress thus far, we are having district personnel to review/analyze data with teachers.

RESULTS

On March 13, 2020, Atlanta Public Schools shut down due to COVID-19. At first, we anticipated that schools would reopen after a few weeks and continued to engage students and families as such. Shortly thereafter, it was announced that we would remain closed for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year. With that announcement, our Cahn project, as well as our typical school routines changed drastically.

Our focus shifted to the health, safety, and well-being of our students, staff, and community.

Leading up to the closure, teachers and families became uncomfortable and some started requesting to work from home due to the rising COVID-19 numbers. While I was unable to grant such requests, my leadership strategies changed from results oriented to one of care. I called a staff meeting when the district decision to close was made and mostly focused on ensuring that the staff felt empowered to first worry about their own families. During this time, people all over our city were hoarding cleaning supplies, toilet paper, and food staples. I encouraged the staff to spend the weekend getting the things that they needed before worrying about how to teach virtually. As the saying goes, "Please secure your own oxygen mask before assisting others."

In the three days before school closed, our administrative team worked to make sure each teacher had a Google Classroom and a Google Meet meeting room set-up. This was a coordinated effort with the district and the Technology Department. Our staff came to each other's aid and supported those with less experience with technology. Some of our more senior staff members were nearly inconsolable, as they had no idea how to assign work on line or use a virtual meeting room.

The remainder of the semester basically consisted of the administration communicating with parents and staff, assuring them that we would be ok, and troubleshooting for students who were unable to access class online. We were unable to enter the building and had no access to additional devices for the students to use. In fact, they were unable to retrieve the items left in their classrooms until this current school year.

It seemed that new information about what to do as a district was coming out and changing daily, if not hourly. In addition, Atlanta Public Schools hired a new Superintendent who was trying to transition into the top leadership position without getting the chance to visit schools and meet Principals and other leaders.

One of the immediate challenges to completing our project was that we had no test scores because we were unable to take the GA Milestones. The state of Georgia applied for a waiver to be exempt from standardized testing,

I have had to learn a tremendous amount about myself and my leadership style as a result of both this project and COVID-19. When the project was first starting, I felt discomfort in the topic because I did not want the teachers to feel criticized or feel that I did not have confidence in them. The project actually began as an inquiry into the growth and achievement of students of color as well as those with learning differences. There was quite a bit of heated conversation about implicit bias and how our expectations differ between groups of students. Initially, there was denial and several teachers took offense to the suggestion that our actions and expectations contributed to the achievement gap amongst students. It took gentle pushing and hard data to show them, and allow them to discover for themselves, that we did indeed have a problem at Lin.

After meeting with the Cahn Fellows and Allies to review and get feedback regarding the project, Ms. Bringslid and I decided to dig a little deeper and really look at the overall student growth for our school population. We discovered that the work that we were asking the students to do was lacking rigor and it was not isolated to the minority groups or students with disabilities. That conversation with the staff was even more delicate because now there was the suggestion that we did not have high expectations and what those implications were for them as professionals.

The competitive nature of teachers rose up once we were brave enough to bring the data to them and they were brave enough to look at it and accept it. During this time, we used "Talk to Me So I Can Hear You" as a starting point to be able to talk through our discomfort. In early March, our focus had to dramatically shift to health and safety. As a leader, I became Comforter in Chief and really spent my time focusing on the wellbeing of my staff. To be

completely honest, our Cahn project faded into the background and scrambling to figure out how to teach from home and stay safe took center stage. In light of the pandemic, we decided to wrap up our Cahn project with a series of teacher interviews, in which we gained a unique perspective on how the various facets of our project affected their pedagogy. The questions that were asked can be found in Appendix A.

To date, we still have not returned to the school building, but my actions have impacted the school and staff. We have grown closer together in our time apart because we have had to be more vulnerable and let our guards down in relationship to what our skills are and what we need growth and support in. Everyone has been given the space to ask questions, admit their fears, and ban together to get through this crisis. When I was a young teacher, my principal used to say, "If it's good for children, make it so." And this is exactly what has been getting us through these trying times. We are on the eve of returning for the first time, at the height of the pandemic, on January 25, 2021. As a team, we are bending and showing more patience and understanding for others as possible.

As for our students, I fear that I cannot gauge properly how they are adjusting, outside of conversations with parents and teachers. We provide a morning class meeting every day with videotaped announcements so we can come together as a school and try to keep a sense of normalcy. About 50% of the students will be returning and some of them have never even set foot in the building, so our focus will be on maintaining our school culture. It will also be a challenge to balance face to face and virtual students simultaneously.

REFLECTIONS and FUTURE PLANS

Sharyn Briscoe - Fellow

My participation in the Cahn Fellows Program gave me a boost of confidence as well as renewed interest in the field of Educational Leadership. I am currently in year 27 at Atlanta Public Schools and have been in leadership for at least half of that time. In the beginning of my journey, as a Model Teacher Leader, I spent many hours participating in professional learning. I was able to create and develop learning experiences for the teachers at my assigned schools and also participate in Principals' meetings as an observer and support person. After that, as an Assistant Principal, I was learning how to be an effective administrator including providing quality feedback to teachers, balancing the school budget, interacting with the community, and maintaining the morale of the staff.

During this time, I was also in a leadership program through my district, SABLE. This program focused on leadership styles, the politics of leadership, and interviewing skills. I could feel my brain stretching and was soaking up information like a sponge. After a year of that, I became a Principal for the first time and struggled through “on the job” training, as the reality of sitting in the actual seat was jarring. It had been ten years since obtaining that job and my acceptance into Cahn.

For the first time in years, I felt challenged, reflective, and fortunate to be able to share my experiences with like-minded peers and learn from Principals around the country in the Cahn Fellows Program. I was especially impacted by the NBI and Ways of Knowing because I knew my preferences as a learner and a teacher, but was not able to connect necessarily with how my style was imposed on others. I was able to reach teachers the way they prefer to be communicated with, instead of insisting that everyone adapts to my style.

My Ally, Denise, has grown tremendously as a leader over this past year. Denise has always been a curious learner and a quick thinker. This year, those skills have multiplied exponentially. She has had to put on a brave face for the staff and encourage them, plan with them, and guide them while also expecting a baby.

Denise literally has a hand in nearly all aspects of the school’s operations and is even having to take on some responsibilities of our school secretary, who is out on maternity leave. We have developed a close relationship with six staff members and have dubbed ourselves the Lin Ladies. Through this connection, we talk, text, and meet via Zoom several times a day, including weekends. This support helps us to pick up the ball if it is dropped, gives us multiple perspectives, and helps us divide and conquer our assignments. Our staff has expressed their gratitude and appreciation for Denise many times during this experience and so have I.

Denise Bringslid - Ally

My participation in the Cahn Fellows Program with Principal Briscoe was a transformative experience. In addition to engaging with new areas of study such as the Ways of Knowing, concept mapping, NBI, and Tell Me So I can Hear You, getting to know other leaders and future leaders in the educational leadership field from all across the country was energizing and exciting. Finding common ground with other elementary school leaders from different areas of the county showed me that the barriers that exist for us in Georgia are shared by K-12 educators all over the nation. Talking through ways to break down those barriers with other fellows and allies was a very insightful experience for me. My work at the school level was impacted as I began to think of creative ways to solve problems that were presented as we

analyzed our achievement and growth data - one of the key parts of our Cahn project (before the pandemic).

Ensuring that teachers understood the biases that exist in our society, and giving them the space and tools to reach within and determine how those biases affect their relationships with students and families, was one of the ways that we worked to change the status quo of high achievement and low growth. In addition, understanding how educators give and receive feedback based on their own personality traits and areas of comfort changed my thinking about how to engage in the typical observation/feedback cycle. After learning about Dr. Drago-Severson's methodology of assessing an educator's profile and understanding how they best communicate, I was able to have more effective and meaningful conversations with educators in our school building - whether we were talking about classroom management, instructional planning, or data analysis. I look forward to continuing to hone these skills by working with educators to change and reflect on their practice in the years to come.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the entire Mary Lin Elementary staff for their support in this endeavor. In particular we would like to recognize:

Assistant Principal, Mary Benton

Instructional Coach, Emily Fuller

Media Specialist, Dr. Zenobia Johnson

APPENDIX A

Flip Grid Questions for Teacher Interviews:

1. Think back to the 2019-2020 school year when Ms. Briscoe and Ms. Bringslid introduced their Cahn project. What were your thoughts about being asked to reflect on why student growth did not match student achievement at Mary Lin?
2. Please share your thoughts on the Teacher Peer Observation Cycle. Were you able to

give and receive honest feedback? Was it easier to give or receive feedback? 3. How were you, if at all, impacted by the Implicit Bias training provided at the school? Do you think any of that information was pertinent to the classroom? How so? 4. How has the use of data helped you to realize that students were high achieving but not necessarily growing? When school returns F2F, how will you track your own data to ensure that students are both growing and achieving?

5. On March 13th, when APS closed for COVID-19, how did your focus on school and your classroom shift?
6. What was the major difference between how the school year ended in May and how it began in August? Were you more or less prepared for virtual learning? What do you attribute the change to?
7. Please candidly describe how Ms. Briscoe's leadership style affected the staff during COVID-19.
8. Please candidly describe how Ms. Bringslid emerged as a leader during COVID-19.
9. Based on the original Cahn project of working to increase student growth, how much thought and energy is put into that right now? Are you able to address individual student needs during this time of virtual learning?
10. How do you anticipate your teaching practices changing when you return to school in person? Will there be a shift in your focus?