

Why do schools fail? Marietta asked the students



Credit: Hyosub Shin

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April 20, 2017 Marietta - Leigh Colburn (right), director of the Graduate Marietta Student Success Center, talks to Jose Mena, student behavior program specialist from Fulton County Schools, at the Graduate Marietta Student Success Center in Marietta High School on Thursday, April 20, 2017. Leigh Colburn has earned plaudits for her work with at-risk students at the 2-year-old Graduate Marietta Student Success Center, an experiment housed inside the city's high school. Educators from across Georgia have made pilgrimages to the center, hoping to find ideas they can copy. HYOSUB SHIN / HSHIN@AJC.COM

Marietta may have found answers to a riddle that has perplexed some Georgia schools for generations: what will it take to improve poor student performance?

It found the answers by asking students a simple question: How can we best support you?

Students said they wanted academic help, sure. But when Marietta High School's then-principal, Leigh Colburn, saw the results of the interviews and surveys she did starting in 2014, she realized that many were crying out for the kind of help a school does not typically provide: food, rent money, drug addiction treatment, help with domestic violence.

Yet, unaddressed, those problems can be a root cause of failure.

Colburn's questions led her to resign as principal in 2015 and start a new center to support students. Her work is turning heads as Georgia embarks on a statewide effort to improve its lowest performing schools.

It also has earned the gratitude of Kim Carter, a Marietta mother who could not keep both herself and her son fed after breaking up with a man who had helped cover the household expenses.

Rent gobbled what Carter and her fast-growing 6-foot, 1-inch teenager needed for food. With too little on the table for both of them, he would refuse to eat a full dinner, unless she ate more, so they both went to bed hungry. He skipped lunch, since her job working telephones paid just enough to disqualify him for free school lunches. The high school junior neglected homework to make money, cutting grass, sweeping a barber shop and helping at an oil change business. His grades, and his dream of studying architecture in college, suffered.

Then Carter heard about a new center in the school — Colburn's. Among the many things it offered was a food pantry. Carter's son often stops to pick up food on his way home and has quit his side jobs. His grades have improved, and he has more time for credit-recovery courses, Carter said. "He is excited about school again."

Struggling moms are not the only ones who say Colburn's [Graduate Marietta Student Success Center](#) is onto something.

More than 200 schools and organizations have made a pilgrimage to look and learn. The center earned Marietta schools, at best a tenth the size of the typical metro Atlanta district, an [innovator of the year](#) award last summer from the Georgia Charter System Foundation. Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle, a top contender to succeed Gov. Nathan Deal, hosted the ceremony and [touted](#) the "one-of-a-kind" program. Sen. Lindsey Tippins, R-Marietta, chairman of the state Senate Education and Youth Committee, was a judge on the selection committee, and calls the center's work "exemplary."

Tippins said he considers it a model for the rest of the state, as Georgia looks to implement the justapproved First Priority Act. [The act details](#) how the state will identify and turn around the lowestperforming schools, which could be removed from local control and placed under nonprofit operators.

>> [Read more about Georgia's First Priority Act on myAJC.com](#)

And state school board member Scott Johnson, who is among those in charge of the turnaround effort, said the center "is certainly the kind of thing I'd like to see repeated around the state."

There's been a long-running ideological debate about the degree to which poverty affects schools. "Reformers" criticize schools with low test scores, saying poverty is no excuse and more money is not a solution. Traditional school supporters draw a direct line between financial need and poor performance, and say schools shouldn't be judged for the problems that follow students through the doors. The First Priority Act, unlike the attempt to take over schools that preceded it — the Opportunity School District referendum rejected by voters last year — recognizes schools don't control what happens off campus. It requires state and local officials to determine the "root causes of low performance" and tackle contributing "personal and community conditions," like poverty and the disadvantage it entails when it swamps a community.



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April 20, 2017 Marietta - R'moni Clark-Hudson (second from left), 17, shows the Graduate Marietta Student Success Center's Clothing Closet and Laundry area to visitors in Marietta High School on Thursday, April 20, 2017. Leigh Colburn has earned plaudits for her work with at-risk students at the 2-year-old Graduate Marietta Student Success Center, an experiment housed inside the city's high school. Educators from across Georgia have made pilgrimages to the center, hoping to find ideas they can copy.

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Education leaders may be wondering what, if anything, they can do about obvious problems like bare refrigerators that have stomachs grumbling when algebra homework beckons, or gunfire that disrupts study time, let alone the mental chaos that results from the unaddressed trauma of, say, a rape.

Colburn's team can't solve all those problems, but they are addressing many of them. These services typically exist already in a community, but in a disjointed way. What's novel here is that Colburn has brought them to the students, by putting them in a wing of Marietta High.

A state child protection case worker has a desk. The juvenile court sends its probation officers. An organization sends young adults who are recovering addicts to talk with and screen the students.

There's a clinician for sexual abuse and domestic violence and four others for mental and emotional issues. There are social workers, too.

The center is too new to show an effect on test scores or other academic measures. But Colburn said in its first three semesters it offered more than 9,000 tutoring sessions and helped more than 150 students recover close to 500 days of classroom time lost to suspension. Suspended kids can come to the center instead of running loose in the streets. It has cemented partnerships with more than 50 local agencies, organizations, churches and institutions of higher learning and has distributed about \$1.6 million in money, resources or services, nearly all of the money coming from the partners. The district added only Colburn's salary; four others were already district employees and are doing what they were doing previously. The majority of workers, 10 people, are provided by the partner agencies and organizations.

On a recent morning, two behavior specialists from a nearby metro Atlanta school district were getting a tour that started around a table in a room with college pennants on the wall and a big photo of students lofting their mortar boards skyward. Three female students picked by Colburn were talking about the challenge of getting other students to come in for help, something they do after having gotten help there themselves.

"I had all Fs and now I'm making straight As," said one. "They didn't give up on me."

Another said students go off track when something bad happens and they "block" their emotions about it instead of getting counseling. "That's what causes other things like anger and then smoking weed and stuff like that," she said.

Colburn started the center after interviews and surveys made it clear the teens were struggling in school because they were struggling in life. Parents were imprisoned, friends were talking suicide, babies were in need of daycare, or a landlord had just evicted them. Many were turning to drugs to deal with the stress because, as she explained in a raw presentation to a group of rapt lawmakers this spring, "in my community, if you're stressed, it's much easier for my kids in poverty to find a Xanax than it is a yoga class."

Of the roughly 1,600 responses in one survey, 110 students circled "sexual abuse" and 167 chose "suicide prevention," when asked what kind of support group they would consider joining. Later interviews determined that some of them were interested not for themselves but because someone they knew was struggling. In other cases, though, it was the students themselves who were in a dark place.

Colburn said one girl returned a survey with "anger management," "stress release," and "cutting/selfharm" circled. She hadn't circled sexual abuse, but in a blank space she'd written, "I guess it all started when I was raped."

Samuel Taylor, a former principal who now manages metro Atlanta school improvement for the Georgia Department of Education, said Colburn has been "leveraging" outside groups to bring money and services into the school, "and I think that's what needs to be replicated."

Deal has allocated just over \$2 million to implement his First Priority Act, about as much for the whole state as Colburn has harnessed for her center.

She may have an advantage. Marietta is a tight-knit community that goes back generations. People have deep ties to the school, and seem eager to help it.

Beverly McAfee, a local philanthropist and one of the center's biggest supporters, said one of the best places to raise money is in the local grocery store aisles, where she bumps into longtime friends and persuades them to part with time or money. The founder of [Marietta Mentoring for Leadership](#) mentors students at the center and credited Colburn with a unique vision and singular passion.

Still, she believes there are people across the state who could rally similar efforts at other schools. “I bet I could go in every community and I could find that person,” she said.

Carter, the mom who has gotten food from the center, cautioned that any similar effort must be sincere, or the students won't trust it.

Besides the food pantry, Carter has used the clothing dispensary and the washing machine, and said the center staff “never made me feel like I was a loser, or less of a person, because I needed help.” She has a message for the state's educational leaders.

“Put it in as many schools as you can.”