Bulloch County in the southeastern coastal plains of Georgia is one of the state's educational hubs, and Bulloch County Schools plays a central role. Half of the county’s population is students, including almost 10,000 at the district’s elementary, middle and high schools and another 20,000 at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, the county seat. The population has swelled in recent years, increasing by almost 40% in the last decade.

Fifteen schools comprise the Bulloch County School District, including nine elementary schools (pre K-5 or K-5), four middle schools (6-8) and three high schools. Seventeen percent of their students live at or below the poverty line, and 58% receive free or reduced price lunch. All elementary and middle schools in the district have Title I status. The student population has grown in recent years and funding has been reduced, but the district is consistently high-achieving. In 2011 Bulloch County Schools was recognized as one of only 20 Georgia “High Flying School Districts” based on student academic performance.

Focusing on growth for every student
To maintain high learning levels at a time of reduced resources, district administrators needed reliable data showing precisely what was working in their schools and where there was room for improvement. Central to this effort was the adoption of NWEA Measures of Academic Progress® (MAP®) assessments and reporting, which were first used in Bulloch County elementary and middle schools in 2007, and expanded in subsequent years to include 9th and 10th graders as well. The information they’ve gained from MAP has fueled decision-making throughout the district, and enabled growth on both sides of the student-teacher dynamic.

“We want a year’s growth for every child in the district no matter where they are,” says Dr. Lewis Holloway, Superintendent of Bulloch County Schools. “And that gets at the heart of why we are involved in MAP. Through MAP we’ve been able to pinpoint what skills are needed to make sure they get that year’s progress.”

Creating a culture of differentiated instruction
The first step in instituting MAP in Bulloch County was for school leaders to help their faculty understand that it was a tool to help them better understand student needs, and a means to improve their instruction. At Brooklet Elementary School, principal Marlin Baker introduced MAP in small group sessions and faculty meetings, and watched their skills with data analysis grow. “Having them bring data to these meetings and discuss it,” he says, “and being able to access their students’ data, see the changes and identify the needs – that’s been very powerful,” Baker says. “That data analysis piece has been critical and enlightening for teachers, and it’s extremely important.”

“And it’s been very powerful in the classroom,” Baker continues. “One of the strongest points of MAP is the ability to inform instruction. I don’t know of another instrument that is as detailed in providing relevant information for teachers moving forward as MAP has been for us.”

To formalize the practice of informed instruction, the district instituted scheduled “intervention and enrichment” time based on MAP data, and all Bulloch County elementary schools now incorporate that time into their day. Dr. Jody Woodrum, Assistant Superintendent for Teaching and Learning, Pre-K–5 Programs, explains, “It used to be that we talked about differentiation but we didn’t really provide a lot of
time or resources or focus for that. And MAP has given us a way to focus on the different needs of different students.” Now, based in large part on students’ MAP data and NWEA DesCartes learning statements, “Teachers have a plan for how they use time for either intervening with students that need it, or providing enrichment to challenge those higher level students,” Woodrum says.

**Evaluating programs for optimal gains**

For Bulloch County Schools, with a tightened budget and growing student population, MAP data has become a key component in assessing the impact of specific programs. A summer school project conducted with 66 of their lowest performing students led to enormous gains, as evidenced by MAP math scores, with half of the participants gaining a full year’s equivalent in achievement in math. Because MAP scores show conclusively that it works, a special reading program has been in place at Bulloch County Schools for the past several years. And when a math program was instituted, the accuracy of MAP data allowed them to see precisely how much math growth had occurred with participating students.

“It’s refined what we’re doing,” says Holloway. “We are doing a better job of looking at what makes a difference with students. And if we have a program that’s not showing results on MAP, then we’d get rid of it. It helps us utilize our resources better.”

**Empowering students to own their academic success**

Ultimately, success with MAP depends on the students’ interest in owning their academic success, and at Bulloch County Schools enthusiasm is high. “In individual student conferences they look at goal setting,” says Baker. “The student can see how much they need to grow in each area, and that adds a lot to the ownership.” He adds, “We do try to set expectations, and we encourage intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. And after a child finishes they can see their test results immediately, so that in turn helps that student take part in the whole process because it’s right there for them.”

“I get excited about this,” Holloway says. “When I go into school, especially when they’re taking MAP tests, every kid will have his target MAP score taped to his desk. And he knows if he’s got to make a 220, he’s focusing on a 220. So when they punch ‘done’ and get their score back, and they made their target growth, it’s high-five time.”