Incorporating Match and Fit Into Postsecondary Advising

Lessons from Achieve Atlanta

Nick Allen and Jeff Schulz

> In August 2018, Achieve Atlanta received a grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to incorporate match and fit best practices into their postsecondary access efforts. This report summarizes the progress Achieve Atlanta and its partners have made to date, with lessons and recommendations for other schools, districts, and collaborators.

Context

Achieve Atlanta is an intermediary organization whose mission is to help students in Atlanta Public Schools (APS) access, afford, and earn postsecondary credentials. Since 2015 Achieve Atlanta has partnered with APS and its 17 high schools, along with two nonprofits, College Advising Corps (CAC) and OneGoal, to address low college completion rates among APS graduates. By the summer of 2018 their ongoing collaboration had yielded strong results across a range of critical indicators: the percentage of seniors taking college entrance exams had increased by 24 percentage points, from 60% to 84%; the percentage of seniors applying to three or more colleges had grown from 46% to 67%; FAFSA completion rates had risen from 51% to 71%; and seamless college enrollment had increased from 51% for the class of 2015 to 62% for the class of 2018.

In early 2018, Achieve Atlanta identified "postsecondary match" as the next critical issue to address. Despite strong progress across a number of indicators of postsecondary access, Achieve Atlanta was not seeing similar gains in rates of college persistence and completion. As the team dug into root causes, they saw that many of their scholars were undermatching; that is, they were attending less selective institutions than what their hard-earned GPA and ACT/SAT scores would otherwise allow. National[1] studies[2] have shown that undermatching often leads to lower persistence and completion rates. Achieve Atlanta knew that scholars who undermatch may struggle, in part, because

Table of Contents

BELLWETHER EDUCATION PARTNERS

they attend institutions that don't provide the academic, social-emotional, and financial supports that low-income and first-generation students frequently need. It had also heard from students and counselors that undermatching at APS may be driven, in part, by a lack of understanding of the importance of match and fit — that students ought to prioritize postsecondary options that best *match* their academic qualifications and *fit* their personal, social, and financial needs. The team believed this issue could be mitigated through stronger advising to support students to make informed decisions about their college choice.

Figure 1 > ## What Do the Terms "Match" and "Fit" actually Mean?

MATCH

QUANTITATIVE

The term "match" typically describes the degree to which a student's academic credentials match the selectivity of the college or university in which they enroll. Match encompasses the **quantitative** elements of choosing a postsecondary option; it is more science than art.

Institutional Selectivity
- Barron's Selectivity Index

Student Qualifications
- GPA
- ACT/SAT
- AP/IB/Honors

FIT

QUALITATIVE

"Fit" is a more nebulous concept that refers to how well a prospective student might mesh with an institution once on campus: socially, emotionally, financially, and otherwise. Fit encompasses the **qualitative** elements of choosing a postsecondary option; it is more art than science.

Institutional Offerings
- Financial Aid/Net Cost
- Campus Culture
- Geographic Location
- Grad Rate
- Academic Offerings
- Support Services

Student Attributes
- Family Income Level
- Desired School Attributes
- Desired Proximity to Home
- Emotional/Social Needs
- Anticipated Major
- Race/Ethnicity

Note: While there is general consensus that match and fit describe the quantitative and qualitative components of postsecondary choice, there is no standard definition of these terms. We use the definitions above for the purposes of this case study.

Achieve Atlanta also learned from research and conversations that one of the primary reasons students undermatch is because they simply do not apply to a college that would be considered a good match. This pushed the team to consider options for improving the college application process for APS students. Over time, Achieve Atlanta determined it needed to support high school students to create stronger college lists so that more students would apply to and ultimately enroll in institutions that are a strong match and good fit.

With this in mind, Achieve Atlanta applied for and received a Networks for School Improvement (NSI) grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in August 2018. The focus of the grant was to understand the role of postsecondary match and fit as a predictive indicator for student success; develop a tool to support APS graduates to identify and apply to match colleges; and use continuous improvement methods to build capacity in schools to better support APS students in researching, applying to, and ultimately enrolling in postsecondary institutions that are both a strong match and good fit.

In February 2020, Achieve Atlanta and APS officially launched the Match & Fit List Builder, an online college advising tool designed to support students to build a list of postsecondary options that best match their academic qualifications, and fit their personal, social, and financial needs. This tool is the most tangible manifestation of broader efforts to incorporate match and fit concepts into college advising practices across APS. At the time of this writing, nearly 1,000 high school juniors had used the tool to create a list of postsecondary options, even amid a

School counselor Marc Genwright uses the Match & Fit List Builder with a high school student.

semester interrupted by COVID-19.[3] Early feedback on the listbuilder has been very positive and, more broadly, students and counselors have indicated their enthusiastic support for incorporating match and fit strategies into college advising practices across the district. While it is too soon to declare mission accomplished — the long-term goal of this work is to increase postsecondary completion by reducing rates of undermatching — these initial signs are promising and indicative of the effective collaboration that has taken root in Atlanta.

Now, as Achieve Atlanta nears the end of its two-year grant term, this report summarizes the progress Achieve Atlanta and its partners have made to date, and highlights several lessons they have learned along the way. The lessons are distilled into seven recommendations for other schools, districts, and would-be collaborators who are interested in incorporating match and fit best practices into their postsecondary access efforts.

Lessons Learned

The following lessons learned represent the most prominent themes that have emerged from the work covered by the two-year grant, including the incorporation of match and fit concepts into college advising practices across the district, and the design and launch of an online college list building tool. These lessons are framed as recommendations, and are intended for other schools, districts, and nonprofits who are interested in incorporating match and fit best practices into their postsecondary access efforts.

Seven Recommendations for Incorporating Match and Fit into College Advising Practices

1 **Start by learning from others.** Invest time up front to learn from others who are further along in incorporating match and fit into their postsecondary access work. This will keep you from reinventing the wheel and help you get further faster.

2 **Define key terms and adapt to your local context.** Leverage match and fit concepts to develop a common vocabulary for discussing postsecondary options. Be intentional about establishing clear definitions for key terms, and be prepared to tailor best practices to fit your particular circumstance.

3 **Focus on the "why" behind the work.** Deeply understand the underlying issue you are seeking to address through match and fit before designing any specific interventions. Explicitly connect this work to educational equity so that all stakeholders see the connection between stronger college advising and student success.

4 **Engage critical stakeholders from the start.** Identify which stakeholders need to be involved in your efforts and develop a plan to solicit feedback, secure buy-in, and cultivate champions for the work across organizations and seniority levels. This likely includes students, counselors, and representatives from the relevant data and communications teams.

5 **Develop a robust communications strategy.** Prioritize marketing and communications in your approach to change management. Differentiate key messages based on audience, and utilize every channel at your disposal to ensure the right people have the right information at the right time.

6 **Align around a shared definition of success.** Set an ambitious long-term vision for your match and fit efforts, and develop shorter-term goals aligned to that vision. Consider piloting solutions before committing to full adoption, and prioritize authentic engagement over compliance-driven accountability.

7 **Keep the solution simple.** Focus first on incorporating the most fundamental aspects of match and fit into your work. If designing a technical solution, prioritize features that drive student behaviors. Don't let perfect be the enemy of good; start simple and be prepared to iterate over time based on user feedback.

① Start by learning from others.

Going into this work, the Achieve Atlanta team knew they had a lot to learn about match and fit. This "learn first" orientation is baked into the DNA of Achieve Atlanta: One of the organization's core values is Continuous Innovation, which requires a strong learning mindset. "We understand to get different results we have to try new things," reads the Achieve Atlanta website. "It's important we always remain driven, humble, and nimble enough to pursue promising ideas." In this case, match and fit seemed like a promising idea, and the team demonstrated the drive to learn more, the humility to acknowledge they didn't have all the answers, and the nimbleness to pursue the idea wherever their research took them.
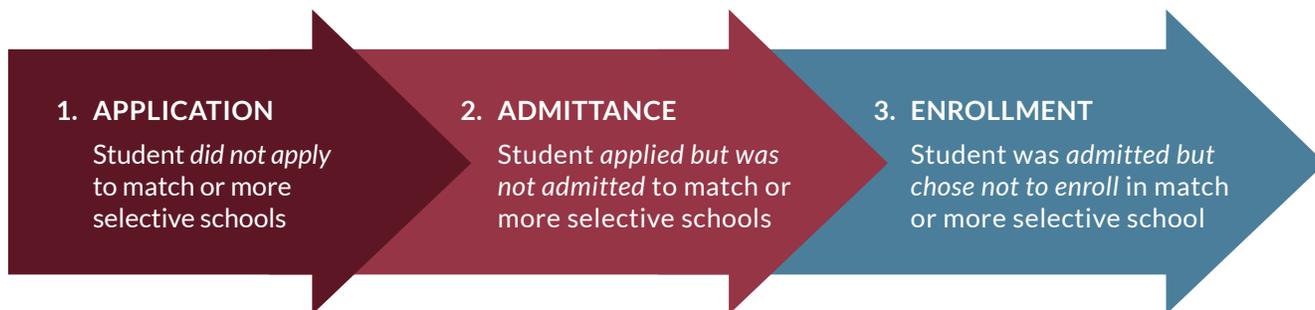
To get up to speed, Achieve Atlanta contracted with Bellwether Education Partners to conduct a landscape analysis on match and fit tools and best practices. Over the first few months of the grant, the Bellwether team completed a thorough review of existing research on match and fit, and conducted over 20 interviews with thought leaders, researchers, and practitioners across the country. Achieve Atlanta and its partners — leaders from APS, CAC, and OneGoal — discussed the resulting fact base[4] at the kickoff meeting in November 2018. "We wanted to understand what everybody else in the field is doing," says Korynn Schooley, vice president of college access at Achieve Atlanta and the point person for the NSI grant. "Everyone brings different ideas and experiences to the table, so it was helpful to start with a shared set of facts before thinking about what comes next."

Investing time up front to learn from others paid immediate dividends, as the landscape analysis unearthed key insights that shaped the group's early thinking about match and fit. For example, the research indicated that undermatching, not overmatching, is the primary issue impacting postsecondary success for lower-income students. This can seem counterintuitive, as many people assume students who attend more competitive institutions (i.e., overmatch) would struggle with the coursework and stop out at higher rates. In fact, the research shows just the opposite: Students who undermatch by attending less selective institutions have lower persistence and completion rates. "Our hypothesis was that undermatching was the issue, but we had also heard anecdotally that overmatching may be an issue at APS," says Schooley. "What we heard really clearly from the field is that undermatching is the big problem to solve, and that helped us narrow our focus."

Students who undermatch by attending less selective institutions have lower persistence and completion rates.

According to Schooley, another early insight proved equally influential. "One thing that sticks out to me to this day is the graphic showing where in the college-going process students undermatch," she says (see Figure 2). "The fact that so many students undermatch simply because they never apply to a match or more selective school was really eye-opening. That's one of the reasons we chose to focus on creating strong college lists, to really target our intervention in the application phase of the process."

Figure 2

Three Steps of the College-going Process in Which a Student Can Undermatch

1. APPLICATION
Student *did not apply* to match or more selective schools

2. ADMITTANCE
Student *applied but was not admitted* to match or more selective schools

3. ENROLLMENT
Student was *admitted but chose not to enroll* in match or more selective school

❷ Define key terms and adapt to your local context.

After gathering key insights and promising ideas from across the country, Achieve Atlanta began adapting what it learned to fit its specific needs in Atlanta. "I know that some learnings from elsewhere can be applied to our context," says Yarbrah Peeples, senior regional director for College Advising Corps. "But I think there is a limit to the applicability of those learnings because the college landscape is so different in Georgia." Achieve Atlanta took this message to heart and got to work. "We talked about local context a lot," says Schooley. "After we learned all the different ways the field talks about match and fit, we knew we needed to come to a shared understanding within our own network so that we could effectively communicate and stay aligned."
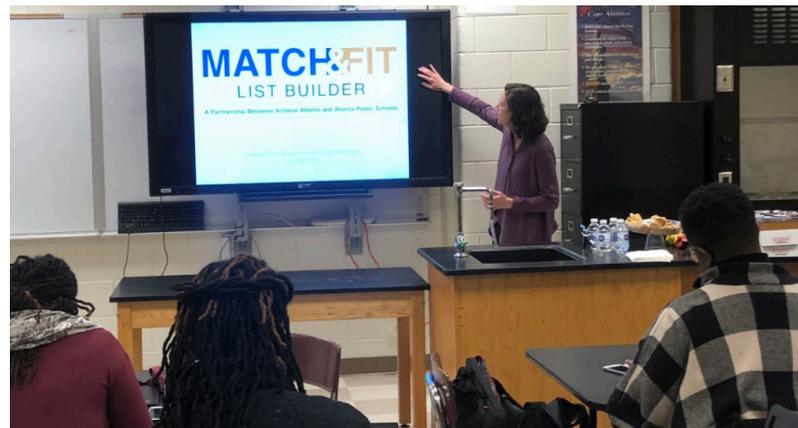
As a first step, Achieve Atlanta spent time carefully defining key terms related to match and fit. "In education, a lot of language ends up being used interchangeably," says Schooley. "We knew we needed consistent, shared definitions grounded in our local context." For example, the team chose to define match as "how well a student's academic profile (GPA and college entrance test scores) aligns to a college's academic profile." To increase the likelihood of enrolling in a college that is a strong match, Achieve Atlanta advises students to apply to multiple colleges in each of three match categories: Target, Reach, and Likely. Simple though it sounds, arriving at this shared definition and piece of advice took time. "We wanted to be careful about the terminology we use to describe match categories for our students," says Sam Rauschenberg, vice president of data strategy at Achieve Atlanta. "We talked a lot about whether to use the term likely or safety to describe schools that were less selective for a given student. We heard from advisers and counselors that safety may have negative or inaccurate connotations. We chose likely because it is more aligned with what we want to communicate: You are likely to be admitted to the school, but it's not a guarantee."

In addition to defining key terms, Achieve Atlanta took time to carefully determine how it would measure postsecondary match. "At some point, you have to get into the weeds of how you will calculate something like match," says Rauschenberg. "The specific thresholds you use really matter — if you have a student with a certain GPA and test scores, which colleges should be considered target, reach, or likely for that student? The answer to that question really depends on your local context." Ultimately, Achieve Atlanta relied on a mix of data analysis and stakeholder feedback to determine how it would measure match for APS students. "We

Achieve Atlanta VP of College Access Korynn Schooley leads a training with counselors, college advisers, and others on how to use the Match & Fit List Builder.

wanted to make sure our match designations pass the sniff test from high school counselors," says Rauschenberg. "We did some in-depth analysis with local college admittance and postsecondary data to set our initial thresholds, and then we made adjustments based on feedback from counselors. We were able to tap into the expertise of counselors and advisers who deeply understand the nuances of the colleges where the majority of our students attend, and that's made a huge difference in terms of getting buy-in for these definitions."

Local partners have appreciated Achieve Atlanta's emphasis on definitions and alignment. "Getting aligned on key terms has been huge," says Peeples, the CAC senior regional director. "Most people with college degrees think they can give you advice about college, but that leads to conflicting guidance that can be confusing for students. It's been extremely helpful to level-set around messages."

Achieve Atlanta's tailored approach to defining key terms and measurement standards had important implications once it began considering tools that would support APS students to build strong college lists. Initially, Achieve Atlanta explored purchasing off-the-shelf options or partnering with other organizations; however, as they got deeper into the work, the team realized they would need to build their own unique tool. "If you opt for a more general definition and overall approach, you may be able to use an off-the-shelf tool," says Rauschenberg. "But if you want to have a customized approach tailored to your specific definitions, you will probably need to build internally."

Achieve Atlanta's decision to build a custom solution helped drive early adoption among partner organizations. This year, OneGoal Atlanta opted to use the Match & Fit List Builder instead of a similar tool used in other OneGoal regions across the country. "One of the main reasons we chose to use the Match & Fit List Builder is because it is customized to our local context," says Rohini Muralidharan, director of teacher support for OneGoal Atlanta. "The list builder pulls in APS student data, and it aligns with how the district is thinking about match and fit, which makes our work easier."

③ Focus on the "why" behind the work.

There is an old adage that applies equally well to software startups and education entrepreneurs: fall in love with the problem, not the solution. For Achieve Atlanta, this meant focusing first on deeply understanding the underlying issue it was seeking to address before designing an intervention. "You have to contextualize why this work is important," says Tina Fernandez, executive director of Achieve Atlanta. "For us, that meant digging into the data on undermatching and students stopping out of college."[5] Fernandez says analyzing data on undermatching at APS and then sharing school-level data with each high school team was particularly crucial in building early buy-in. "We had all this information about undermatching as a national issue, but it doesn't sink in until you actually show individual schools their own data."

With this in mind, Achieve Atlanta and its partners led a full-day training on match and fit in the spring of 2019. Over the course of the day, College Access Teams consisting of counselors, CAC advisers, and OneGoal staff from all 17 high schools in APS worked through a series of discussion protocols to unpack data showing rates of postsecondary match at their specific school campus. "When I think of successes so far, the first thing that comes to mind is the training we did over a year ago," says Corey Sheffield, the college success project manager at APS, a position funded through the NSI grant. "Everyone walked away with a really strong understanding of why we are focused on match and fit and why it matters. You have to have that deep understanding first, and that leads to buy-in to adopt certain practices or use a tool."

Although Achieve Atlanta had planned from the outset to incorporate a tool into its eventual solution, it focused first on building the case for why such a tool would be important. "We knew we couldn't rush straight to the tool without first creating the demand," says Rauschenberg, Achieve Atlanta's vice president of data strategy. "I look at that training we had a year ago as a real turning point. Having all the counselors and advisers move through the protocols together led us to a 'now what?' moment that galvanized us into action. That was a really important springboard for the rest of the work to come." Deeply understanding the problem of undermatching also informed the tool design. "Over time, our idea of what the tool needed to do changed based on our understanding of the problem," says Schooley. "We were able to narrow our focus to design a solution tailored to the specific challenge we identified, which we eventually defined as building strong college lists."

Achieve Atlanta's partners appreciated the time spent unpacking the 'why,' and point to the training in March as a critical moment in the project. "The messaging around why we are doing this work together has been really strong," says Muralidharan, the OneGoal director. "A tool can be great, but you have to understand why it is important. [At the training] we started by reviewing data showing students at APS are undermatching. That message around the prevalence of undermatching really stuck with folks. Without that context, there would be less buy-in and the list builder would just be another tool." Taking a full day to train stakeholders on match and fit required a significant time investment, but it's proven fundamental to the early success of this work. "Taking the time for the training was critical," says Peeples, the CAC senior regional director. "If we are talking about how to do this work elsewhere, you really can't skip that step."

④ Engage critical stakeholders from the start.

Achieve Atlanta entered this project as a trusted partner of Atlanta Public Schools; as such, the organization was able to leverage strong relationships and structures for collaboration it had built since its inception. Even with this head start, Achieve Atlanta was careful to create a stakeholder engagement plan that described how it would work with key groups over each phase of the project (see Figure 3 for overview). Thoughtful planning and consistent engagement enabled Achieve Atlanta to solicit feedback, secure buy-in, and cultivate champions for the work across organizations and seniority levels.

Figure 3 > **Stakeholder Groups**

Group	Composition	Purpose	Cadence
College Access Working Group (CAWG)	District-level group comprised of mid- to senior-level district staff representing high schools, counselors, and data & research, along with leaders from Achieve Atlanta, College Advising Corps, and OneGoal.	Drive the overall strategy and collaboration across all stakeholders. Review data, prepare for upcoming district or school events, and determine which schools need additional support.	Monthly
College Access Teams (CATs)	School-level group comprised of high school counselors, College Advising Corps advisers, OneGoal Program Directors, and other college-focused staff.	Implement the bulk of the college access work. Drive progress against specific, measurable goals on key indicators of college success.	Monthly
Network Ambassadors*	Network-level group comprised of select counselors, CAC advisers, and OneGoal Program Directors	Act as on-the-ground change managers. Champion the importance of match and fit; promote best practices and tool usage; and disseminate relevant resources to students, parents, and appropriate school staff.	Monthly
College Success Project Manager*	Full-time position based in Atlanta Public Schools.	Liaise with district/school staff and Achieve Atlanta. Directly support and gather feedback from school teams; build practices and relationships required for sustainable change.	—

*Groups and positions created to support implementation of NSI grant; importantly, all other groups predate this grant.

"Achieve Atlanta has been awesome about making sure all the right stakeholders have a seat at the table," says Peeples, the CAC senior regional director. "They've done an amazing job facilitating a collaborative process. And it's about more than just who shows up at meetings: it's about actively seeking others' perspective and ensuring there is continuous alignment across all these different organizations."

Importantly, Achieve Atlanta worked to ensure alignment not only across organizations, but also across the various departments within the school district. "Strong collaboration involves not just external groups, but also internal stakeholders," says Maria Grovner, coordinator for school counselors across APS. "At the district level, you have to make sure you have people from the practice side, but you also have to have someone on board who really understands the data side of the work. For us, having representatives from our data team engaged from the beginning has really helped." Indeed, the Data & Information Group at APS has been an important collaborator and thought partner throughout the project, supporting Achieve Atlanta on everything from providing student-level data to reviewing methodology to thinking through how to integrate the list builder with the data systems already in place at the district. "The APS data team has been a critical partner," says Rauschenberg, Achieve Atlanta's vice president of data strategy. "On a rubric gauging a school district's readiness to do this sort of work, one metric would be the capacity of the in-house data team. I really can't overstate how important the APS data team has been to this work."

> *At the district level, you have to have someone on board who really understands the data side of the work*

In addition to leveraging existing structures and stakeholder groups, Achieve Atlanta also used funds from the NSI grant to recruit a group of high school counselors, CAC advisers, and OneGoal teachers to serve as 'ambassadors' throughout the project for an annual stipend. "The ambassadors are a really key group," says Schooley. "They are the ultimate stakeholders because they are interacting directly with students. They need to understand the challenge, engage with the tool, and be champions for the work at their schools. We had a small group of them with us the entire journey, and their feedback has been critical."

Thoughtful stakeholder engagement became particularly important as Achieve Atlanta began designing the list builder. "We really listened to counselors, ambassadors, administrators, and students," says Sheffield, the project manager at APS. "The tool wasn't designed in a vacuum — it was a true collaboration." For example, Achieve Atlanta met regularly with its ambassador group to discuss early iterations of the list builder. "We would talk about a hypothetical student's GPA, test scores, and interests," says Rauschenberg. "And then we would give the ambassadors two lists of potential colleges for that student: list A and list B. From there, we would vote on which list was stronger given the student profile, and have a conversation about different assumptions and perceptions people brought to the table. We learned a lot from those conversations."

❺ Develop a robust communications strategy.

Strong stakeholder engagement formed part of a broader communications strategy, which built momentum toward a successful launch of the Match & Fit List Builder. "By the time we launched the list builder, there were already lots of people who knew about it, were bought in, had contributed to the design, and could be champions of the work," says Fernandez, the executive director of Achieve Atlanta. "The change management piece went really well, and part of that is the comprehensive communications plan we had in place. We got news coverage; I wrote a blog; the superintendent wrote a blog; we released a really high-quality video — the list goes on. Together, it generated a ton of buzz and helped build credibility around this initiative."

Achieve Atlanta Executive Director Tina Fernandez in an interview with the local news station.

As part of this work, Achieve Atlanta collaborated with the communications team at APS. "Our goal was to help get the word out," says Ian Smith, executive director of communications and engagement at APS. "We wanted to find a way to use every channel at our disposal to support this message. It wasn't just a news story or a blog post or a video — we went through all our channels and teased it throughout the year, so by the time the counselors got the tool, they were waiting for it." Smith emphasizes this last point as a key indicator of success: High school counselors were ready to begin using the tool with students when it officially launched. "Counselors weren't surprised," he says. "They didn't come in one day and have to attend a training on some tool. We really rolled this out."

Differentiation was another key aspect of the communications strategy. "We developed key messages for different audiences," says Smith. "For counselors, it was about how the tool would support and expand the work they are already doing. For students, we wanted them to know this tool would open the door to other opportunities they hadn't thought about. And we had key messages for parents, the media, and other stakeholders throughout the district." Using targeted messaging, Smith and his team were able to build support for the match and fit work at all levels of the district, including staff in key leadership positions. "Buy-in from leadership goes a long way," says Smith. "There's nothing worse than a counselor getting information about a new initiative and then talking to their principal who doesn't know anything about it. It's like bobbling a baton pass — that just kills it right there."

❻ Align around a shared definition of success.

Achieve Atlanta and its partners share a long-term vision for this work: APS students will earn postsecondary degrees at higher rates by enrolling in options that are a strong match and good fit. The more immediate task has been to align stakeholders around a set of shorter-term goals that will propel the work forward toward that shared vision. "We thought a lot about what kind of targets we should set," says Schooley. "We believe in setting targets because it pushes you to keep track of your progress and ensures that you don't look up six months later and realize you've been spinning your wheels. At the same time, we know that setting numeric targets can lead to a compliance-driven orientation to the work that can be detrimental over the long haul." The team decided that a vital early indicator of success is the extent to which students, counselors, and advisers authentically engage with the list builder. "This is not a checklist," says Schooley. "We were concerned that a student could just go into the list builder, make a list in two minutes and it would mean nothing. We definitely didn't want that."

To build buy-in for short-term goals, Achieve Atlanta solicited input from counselors to set a target for the number of students who would use the tool in the 2020 school year. "We asked our ambassador group what they thought would be achievable for this year," says Peeples, the CAC senior regional director. "The goal was not to stress people out or create another mandate — we really want there to be genuine excitement to use this tool. Part of that is making sure the tool meets compliance requirements from the state, so that counselors see this as helping their existing workload." Based on feedback from counselors, the team decided to treat this school term as a time to pilot the list builder. "We set a target for each of our 10 ambassadors to get 40 students to use the list builder," says Schooley. "But the primary objective for this year was to build excitement and iron out any kinks in our solution." By framing this year as a pilot with relatively modest goals, the team has created space to focus on learning over compliance. "We're using this semester to learn," says Peeples, the CAC director. "Right now we want to get a subset of juniors at each school to use the tool so that we can see how it works."

While the short-term goals of this project may be more modest, Achieve Atlanta and its partners have an ambitious vision for how this work can evolve in the future. "Over time, we want to push college-going conversations even earlier in high school," says Schooley. "One of the benefits of focusing on college list-building is that students can start that process early, whereas other milestones like FAFSA completion and college applications all happen during senior year." Achieve Atlanta's partners at the district share this vision. "Eventually, I want students as early as 10th grade utilizing the tool," says Grovner, the counseling coordinator at APS. "Once students develop their lists, the plan is for counselors and advisers to begin engaging with students and making postsecondary plans based on their list. The quality and consistency of those conversations is so important, and definitely something we will continue working towards."

For now, the team is monitoring the initial rollout of the list builder, celebrating early wins, and planning for the road ahead. "We've had nearly 1,000 unique users so far despite having to transition to virtual advising due to COVID-19 — no small feat in a junior class of 3,000," says Rauschenberg, the vice president of data strategy. "At this point, we've engaged the first third of students, but we know engaging the next third will require different strategies, and engaging that final third will require something else."

❼ Keep the solution simple.

As the Achieve Atlanta team began designing the Match & Fit List Builder, they leaned into one of the core principles of <u>human-centered design</u>: simplicity. At a basic level, Achieve Atlanta wanted to make sure students could easily access the list builder. The team knew that all APS students have a personalized virtual "backpack" where they can access frequently used school files and apps through an online portal. So the team worked with a developer to design a tool that would be available to each student through their online backpack, ensuring easy access and a direct connection to student data. "Linking directly to a system the district already uses has been a huge win," says Rauschenberg, the vice president of data strategy. "When students access the list builder, their GPA and test scores are automatically populated, which removes another barrier and makes the tool that much easier to pick up and use."

Another tool feature Achieve Atlanta prioritized was the prominence of institutional graduation rates: Once a student enters their personal information into the list builder, college options are displayed in list form, in descending order by graduation rate. By presenting schools with higher graduation rates at the top of the list, the tool reinforces the idea that students should strongly consider graduation rates when deciding where to apply to college. Although the team had hypotheses about which features to prioritize, they also proactively sought feedback from counselors and students to sharpen their thinking and surface additional needs. "The current default is for the tool to sort lists by graduation rate," says Rauschenberg. "But we heard from counselors that they also wanted to have the option to sort alphabetically and by net price, so we included that functionality as well."

In fitting with its broader stakeholder engagement plan, Achieve Atlanta placed a premium on user feedback throughout the process, which allowed it to test early versions of the list builder and zero in on key features over time. "Make sure you have counselors in the room with you to pressure test design choices along the way," advises Rauschenberg. "We leveraged tons of feedback to improve our algorithm and the user experience of the tool." Looking back, the team can point to several instances in which design decisions were made in direct response to feedback. "For example, counselors can view the colleges on students' lists to help prepare for college rep visits and campus tours," says Schooley. "They can also quickly pull a list of students who are a 'target' (or reach or likely) for a college and then encourage those students to attend the college rep visit or tour, even if that student hadn't put that particular college on their list. It's a feature that enables intentional planning around rep visits and tours, and it helps encourage students to learn about colleges they might not have otherwise."

To accommodate a steady stream of constructive feedback, Achieve Atlanta worked closely with an in-house developer at APS. "It was really helpful that the whole team was comfortable with constant feedback loops before we launched the list builder," says Peeples, the CAC senior regional director. "The developer was really good about incorporating feedback quickly so that we could test new iterations of the tool with students and counselors." Initial user feedback has been positive and the team will continue to refine the tool design over time. "We've really thought of this as version 1.0 of the list builder," says Schooley. "We considered lots of bells and whistles along the way, but our thinking has been to not let perfect be the enemy of good."

Conclusion

Achieve Atlanta, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and in partnership with Atlanta Public Schools, College Advising Corps, and OneGoal, has made strong progress over the past two years. Through authentic collaboration, the team designed and launched the Match & Fit List Builder, and began incorporating match and fit strategies into college advising practices across the school district, directly influencing college-going decisions for thousands of students across 17 high schools. This work is ongoing, and Achieve Atlanta will continue to seek feedback from the students, families, and organizations with whom it collaborates in order to innovate and improve over time.

The seven recommendations outlined in this case study are intended for other schools, districts, and nonprofits that are interested in incorporating match and fit best practices into their postsecondary access efforts. Our hope is that leaders and organizations across the country can learn from Achieve Atlanta's work and apply these recommendations to their own efforts to ensure equitable access to postsecondary education for all students.

Acknowledgments

For questions about this document, please contact:

Nick Allen
nick.allen@bellwethereducation.org

Jeff Schulz
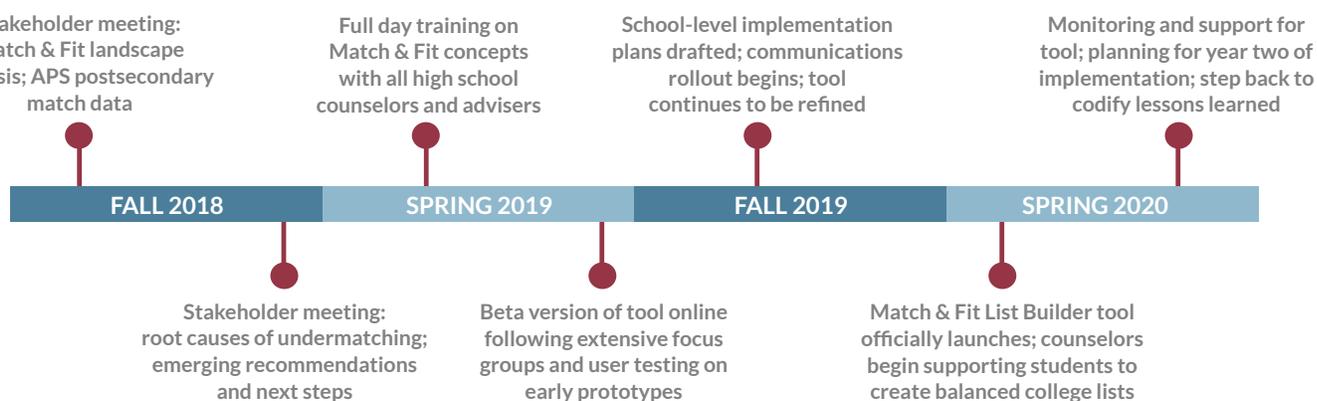jeff.schulz@bellwethereducation.org

Appendix: Summary of Activities to Date

From the outset, the project in Atlanta was structured in four phases (see figure 1A for an overview of the project plan). The first phase unfolded over the fall of 2018, during which time Achieve Atlanta assembled their network of partners, hired key staff, and completed a thorough landscape analysis of match and fit best practices. The team facilitated two significant meetings during this time; the first, in early November, brought together key stakeholders from the district and two nonprofit college access organizations — College Advising Corps and OneGoal — to align on the project scope, review the landscape scan of match and fit best practices, and discuss initial data on rates of postsecondary match within APS. This same group met again in late December to dig deeper into potential root causes of undermatching within APS, discuss emerging recommendations, and agree to a set of next steps to carry forward into the next phase of work.

The project's second phase began in the spring of 2019 and continued into the fall semester. During this time, Achieve Atlanta and its partners introduced match and fit concepts to key stakeholders throughout APS, developed a web-based tool to support students to build strong college lists, and planned for the rollout of the tool the following school year. In mid-March, Achieve Atlanta planned and co-facilitated a full-day training on match and fit for high school counselors, College Advising Corps advisers, OneGoal staff, and other stakeholders from across the district. Separately, the team worked with an in-district developer to design the tool, facilitating focus groups with students, counselors, advisers, and other school staff throughout the spring and fall to gather feedback on early prototypes.

The third phase of work began in the fall of 2019 and is ongoing. Over the past several months, Achieve Atlanta further refined the list builder tool, developed plans for school-level implementation of match and fit best practices, and prepared for the rollout and launch of the tool. The Match & Fit List Builder officially launched in February 2020, and early returns have been very positive. Entering into the fourth and final phase of work, Achieve Atlanta is working to summarize the lessons it has learned so far, disseminate its findings to the broader field, and collaborate with its partners to sustainably embed match and fit strategies into college advising practices across Atlanta Public Schools.

Figure 1A > Timeline

Stakeholder meeting: Match & Fit landscape analysis; APS postsecondary match data

Full day training on Match & Fit concepts with all high school counselors and advisers

School-level implementation plans drafted; communications rollout begins; tool continues to be refined

Monitoring and support for tool; planning for year two of implementation; step back to codify lessons learned

FALL 2018 — SPRING 2019 — FALL 2019 — SPRING 2020

Stakeholder meeting: root causes of undermatching; emerging recommendations and next steps

Beta version of tool online following extensive focus groups and user testing on early prototypes

Match & Fit List Builder tool officially launches; counselors begin supporting students to create balanced college lists

Endnotes

1   Scott Jaschik, "The Missing Students," *Inside Higher Ed*, December 11, 2012, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/12/11/study-says-many-highly-talented-low-income-students-never-apply-top-colleges.

2   Chungseo Kang and Darlene Garcia Torres, "College Undermatching, Degree Attainment, and Minority Students," presentation, AERA annual meeting, 2018.

3   As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, APS closed its school buildings and canceled in-person instruction in mid-March.

4   A publicly available version of this initial fact base can be found at https://bellwethereducation.org/sites/default/files/AA%20Match%20and%20Fit_vShareable.pdf.

5   "Stopping out" refers to when a student withdraws from college temporarily and reenrolls at a later date.