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# ULTIMATE MAGAZINE

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## Lights! Camera! Cincinnati!

How the Queen City became an  
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# ACCEL Charter School Network

Helping to Turn Around  
Ohio's Underperforming  
Schools.

by Chris Piehler



**ABOVE: Mark Comanducci, Superintendent at ACCEL Schools**

IN 2015, THE EDUCATIONAL landscape in Ohio shifted with the creation of ACCEL Schools (ACCEL). Unlike many educational organizations managing and overseeing charter schools – often called community schools in Ohio – ACCEL did not start with one school and then slowly grow. Instead, the boards of directors of various charter schools across the state asked ACCEL to take over the management of their schools. In just over two years, ACCEL's portfolio has grown from 22 to 37 schools in Ohio.

Among these are nine Turnaround Schools, which before ACCEL were historically underperforming and underserving their students, families, and teachers.

The Turnaround Schools are overseen by Superintendent Mark Comanducci, whose team faced the daunting task of improving schools that had some of the lowest school performance scores, student proficiency rates, and student attendance rates in the state of Ohio. Instead of a single academic model, ACCEL's school turnaround theory of action

is rooted in deeply supporting and coaching its principals and teachers.

Research has been very clear for decades that the greatest school-related impact on student achievement is an effective teacher in the classroom. The second greatest impact is an effective principal in every school, since principals play a critical role in school culture and providing consistent, meaningful feedback to teachers. Coaching has shown to be a key strategy in improving practice for both teachers and principals. "There is no silver bullet in



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*Superintendent of ACCEL Schools*

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**Coaching Is Key**

ACCEL’s intense support starts with all Turnaround School principals participating in a multi-week Summer Institute. During this time, principals get the support they need to re-envision their school’s culture and academic framework. ACCEL’s Turnaround Schools do not have the luxury of implementing a single academic model because the schools all face different and unique challenges. As such, empowering principals to clearly articulate what their ideal schools will look like (as well as having them plan and precisely articulate how they will lead that change) is crucial. Mike Jaissle, the principal of West Park Academy, who took part in the Summer Institute, remembers, “That summer was very intense, very hard, but it pushed me to rethink everything we do at our school. From the way students were greeted in

the morning, to the instructional expectations of teachers, to how students lined up for lunch. We changed almost everything. We had to. We weren’t doing it well enough prior to ACCEL.”

Summer Institute is just the beginning of the principals’ journey. ACCEL attributes the improvement and growth at its Turnaround Schools to the ongoing and embedded professional development and coaching that principals and teachers receive daily. “The first book study we do with our Turnaround School principals is Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck’s book *Mindset*,” Comanducci says. “We need principals to understand that their ability is not fixed and that their growth is not only possible, but required.” This mindset shift is the foundation of the “coaching relationship,” designed not to judge principals and teachers, but to help them do their jobs better.

Principals learn and embrace the difference between coaching and evaluation. To drive this point home, ACCEL has partnered with Insight Education Group, an international educational consulting company that focuses

## School Turnarounds by the Numbers

In the 2016-2017 school year, five of ACCEL’s Turnaround Schools ranked in the top 10 among Cleveland Metropolitan City School District’s 101 schools in the Ohio Department of Education’s Value Added Category:

<b>4</b>	<b>Lincoln Park Academy</b>
	<b>Hope Academy Northwest</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>East Academy</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Hope Academy Northcoast</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>West Park Academy</b>





Move them with sound



on school leadership development, to provide executive coaching to principals, which is in no way tied to their evaluations. This coaching not only increases principal effectiveness, but also exposes them to best practices they can then replicate in their coaching of teachers.

Though high-performing and effective principals are essential to turning around schools, teachers have the biggest impact on student learning. Therefore, ACCEL expects all teachers working at its Turnaround Schools to receive daily support from their principals, as well as a minimum of one coaching meeting per week with the school's principal or instructional coach. This is in addition to the two weeks of professional development teachers receive annually before the school year begins. "Before ACCEL these schools were unfocused, rudderless," says Comanducci. "Making principals and teachers better today than they were yesterday and students smarter tomorrow than they are today is the foundation of all we do."

ACCEL's Director of Instructional Coaching, Emily Vanderplough, adds, "We

believe the work that teachers are doing in our classrooms is extremely challenging and important, and they deserve the support they receive through real-time, job-embedded coaching. This allows us to take struggling teachers and make them good, and take good teachers and make them great. It is the most valuable aspect of our work in turning around schools and putting our students on a new path in life."

### Setting Up Principals for Success

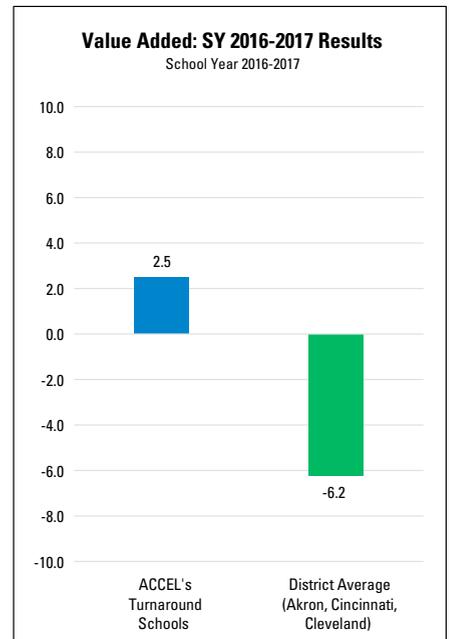
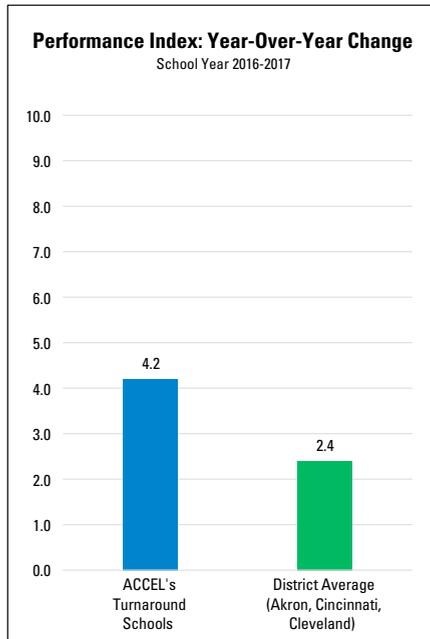
ACCEL's work goes beyond professional support. After a Turnaround School is stabilized and trending in the right direction, ACCEL begins to invest in new resources such as new books, adaptive/online learning programs, and new technologies—all designed to help teachers and students continuously increase learning and results. These investments come after a year of increasing principals' and teachers' understanding, so that the resources are fully utilized and can have the biggest impact on student learning.

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**– Mike Jaissle  
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## ACCEL's Turnaround Schools Compared to Local School Districts



Source: Ohio Department of Education

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To help principals focus on their school's culture and academic growth, ACCEL creates an organization-level team that takes the operational, compliance, and reporting tasks off their plates. As Alissa Clugh, principal at Lincoln Park Academy, puts it, “There is a ton of work expected of principals. The back office support that ACCEL provides has allowed me to focus on our students and on making sure our teachers are helping them as best they can.”

### The Proof is in the Report Card

In Ohio, public schools are evaluated by the Ohio Department of Education (ODE), and this evaluation is made public when the ODE's releases each school's Report Card. As measured by the ODE, since 2015 the Turnaround Schools have improved more than the district public schools in the cities where they are located. The schools showed gains in all applicable categories, with some of the largest increases in Performance Index (which measures students' proficiency levels) and Value Added (which measures students' progress or growth on state-mandated tests).

What makes ACCEL's school performance even more remarkable is the fact that Ohio is a state where charter schools are funded anywhere from 30% to 40% less than their neighboring district public schools. Comanducci says, “We were not daunted by what we were asked to do, nor would we let state funding inequities or the obstacles of serving solely students who live in poverty prevent us from delivering on our promise. We said these schools would improve, and the data proves that they did.”

As the former president of the Wallace Foundation, M. Christine DeVita, cites in her research, “investments in good principals are a particularly cost-effective way to improve teaching and learning.” The good news is that Comanducci's investment in principals so far is already providing a solid return on investment, especially when compared to district public schools. Last school year's data released by the ODE confirms that ACCEL's Turnaround Schools are not only improving, but that they are offering a better educational choice to students and families in the communities they serve.



## Seven Questions for the Superintendent

### 1. What are charter schools?

Charter schools are public schools that are completely tuition-free. They operate under the same requirements as traditional or district public schools, but offer a different choice to families and students. Charters are given more freedom and autonomy to operate and meet students' needs.

However, with those increased freedoms comes increased accountability. If a charter school does not have strong results, it will be closed. Coupled with that, charters are often expected to do more for students with less funding. Most states—including Ohio—have an inequitable funding formula for public charter schools compared to public district schools.

### 2. How did you begin your career in education?

I was not a traditionally trained teacher. I was an Economics and Business major and worked for a pharmacoeconomics consulting firm after college. I then switched careers and earned my teaching license. I started teaching middle school in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, via Teach For America.

From the classroom, I went on to be principal, then oversaw a network of schools for the Louisiana Department of Education, then opened two new schools in Brooklyn, New York, before moving to Ohio in 2015 and joining ACCEL.

### 3. How different are the education systems in Louisiana, New York, and Ohio?

There is uniqueness and there are challenges in each state, county, and neighborhood. Though some of the institutional or systemic challenges differ by location, the work is ultimately the same. Educators are working tirelessly and relentlessly each day to help students learn. No two states, schools, or classrooms are the same, but the goals that all educators are trying to achieve are.

### 4. What is the one thing you wish more people knew about ACCEL Schools?

## Overall Value Added

	School Year 2014-2015 <small>(Prior to ACCEL Management)</small>	School Year 2016-2017 <small>(Under ACCEL Management)</small>
Broadway Academy*	C	C
Chapelside Cleveland Academy*	F	D
East Academy*	F	A
Lincoln Park Academy*	F	A
HOPE Academy Northcoast*	F	A
HOPE Academy Northwest*	F	A
Riverside Academy*	F	A
University Academy*	F	A
West Park Academy*	F	B
Akron City School District	A	F
Cincinnati City School District	A	F
Cleveland Municipal City School District	C	F

\*ACCEL began managing the schools listed in SY 2015-2016. Source: Ohio Department of Education.

ACCEL is doing something few educational management organizations are willing to do, which is take on and turn around historically low-performing schools. We support the closure of schools with chronically poor results and/or other mismanagement issues.

That said, change for change's sake is not beneficial to students. ACCEL is committed to honoring the school choice parents make for their children, by fighting to keep their school open, and ensuring that it gets better each day.

### 5. What is one thing that keeps you energized?

I thrive on competition. The charter movement is rooted in competition, a "my school can do it better than your school" mentality. Knowing that our Turnaround Schools are outgaining their nearby schools, despite all the issues we inherited, makes this very challenging work worth it every day.

### 6. You work closely with schools in Cincinnati, Akron, and Cleveland. How do you manage that schedule?

I would not have taken this job nor could I be successful in this role without Ultimate Air Shuttle. I am lucky to be able to fly from Cincinnati to Cleveland, spend a full day at one of our schools, and be home in time for dinner with my family. I would never have accepted a job where I could not be present at the schools or the monthly board meetings. Ultimate Air Shuttle allows me to do just that.

### 7. If you could tell Ultimate Magazine readers one thing, what would it be?

Our teachers and students are doing great things, and I'd love for you to be a part of our journey. No matter your profession or interests, you—your personal network, your company, or your organization—can help change the lives of our students.

You can be a part of what ACCEL is building, and I am certain there is a way for you to be a part of the ACCEL movement. Just tell anyone at any of the Ultimate Air Shuttle check-in counters that you want to get in touch with me about our schools and they'll know how to get us connected. ■

