

A culture of coaching

Mark Comanducci * August 14, 2019 * [Education](#) * [Connected Teaching and Learning](#)



As executive vice president and superintendent of schools for ACCEL Schools, I've had the challenge and opportunity of guiding nine historically underperforming schools -- a portfolio we've dubbed our "turnaround schools" -- as they re-envisioned how they serve their students and not only got back on track, but in some cases became top performers in their cities.

The key to our success has been our three pillars to turnaround. The first two pillars are academics and culture. I think any educational organization is going to say those are basic foundations, but our third pillar is coaching, and I don't think that's quite as common. We've developed an all-encompassing culture of coaching -- beginning with leadership coaching for our principals and flowing down to instructional coaching for our teachers and even coaching for our school office managers.

Unique Challenges Facing Ohio Charter Schools

Charter schools in Ohio can only operate in certain cities, which prevents the creation of charter schools in high-performing suburban districts. As a result, all the charters are

local to low-performing districts, with the vast majority concentrated in Northeast Ohio. Our turnaround schools are all urban, and they all serve a largely socioeconomically challenged demographic.

The percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced lunches at these schools ranges from 97-100%. The racial and ethnic diversity varies more across the schools. In some of our turnaround schools we have no English language learners and in others we have as many as 10 -15%. In terms of students with disabilities, our schools range from 12-24%.

Demographically speaking, then, pervasive poverty is the only near-universal trait of the student bodies across these schools.

Those economic challenges are mirrored to an extent in the schools themselves, with funding being the number one challenge we faced in turning them around. Charter schools in Ohio are funded at 30-40% less per student than traditional public schools.

Another big challenge: reputation. Ohio has a very challenged reputation when it comes to charter schools, or as they're called, community schools. That has had an impact on not only student enrollment, but also teacher recruiting and retention.

Outside of that, we are consistently working to stay ahead of the regulatory changes in regard to charter schools that individual traditional public schools don't have to deal with in our state. Those regulations may come from the Ohio Department of Education directly or from each school sponsor. Additionally, each school operates as its own district, which means they are responsible for a substantial list of regulatory items that they are required to submit for each individual school. It's a very large volume and quite a burden. Ensuring that doesn't take away from resources that would otherwise be directly impacting student learning is a challenge.

Finding Solutions in Coaching

One of the fundamental tenets of our school turnaround theory of action is ensuring that, starting with principals, the work is laser focused on those who they are there to serve, which is students, families, and educators.

Charter school principals in Ohio have a lot on their plate that isn't directly focused on serving those people. To ease their burden, we work hard every day to take that off their plate. For example, we've built out a central office team that works largely on operations, compliance, and reporting on behalf of our schools.

With those nuts-and-bolts issues out of their way, we then ask our principals to re-envision their school community. That's done through a summer institute during which, over a few weeks, principals focus on the academic and cultural framework of their

schools. Throughout that process, they receive intensive support and coaching, both internally and through an external partner.

When we first started working with these turnaround schools, I was a bit surprised to find out that very few of our school leaders had ever worked in a high-performing school before. When you're asking a school leader to do things fundamentally differently than what they've been exposed to, the learning curve becomes very steep.

Our coaching partnership provides an external reference point for what high-performing schools look like, along with a thought partner for our principals. As a superintendent, I made a conscious choice to have no line of sight into what was happening in this outside coaching of our principals. They can be more vulnerable with outside coaches because they're not their boss or some other authority figure. And the length of the partnership -- we've been working with them since 2015 now -- offers a stability and a deep working relationship our principals can count on.

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

I think one of the more important things we've learned over the last few years is that coaching works, not only for principals but for teachers. Our principals did not have deep experience with coaching prior to our model, but they have taken what they were living through with their executive coach and used it as a framework for their coaching of teachers.

Another lesson stems from the fact that we are not trying to replicate a model. Our schools look, feel, and sound vastly different not just from traditional schools, but from one another. To allow for that, we've given our principals the autonomy to determine their own path and what their schools will be like through their summer institutes. What we weren't expecting is that there are times when our principals just want a blueprint. Some of them just did not feel strongly about a particular school model, but I think there's value in having principals struggle through that and wrangle with it for a while. But it was eye-opening to learn that autonomy in all areas is not necessarily universally valued by our school leaders.

We've come a long way, but there are definitely areas where we want to keep moving the needle. For our first cohort of turnaround schools, we're continuously trying to improve our student outcomes, and we'd also like to start thinking a little more broadly, looking beyond the academic and social emotional growth of students with experiences like student government, sports, band, cheer, dance—the sorts of things that are often overlooked in charter schools in Ohio.

We also want to keep growing those schools. As a charter school organization, we're very aware that full enrollment brings in funding and allows us to do a lot more for teachers, students, and families than we could if we're under-enrolled.

For our second cohort, which we just started working with this year, we're expecting the rate of improvement to be accelerated owing to our experience.

Like this article? Sign up for [SmartBrief on EdTech](#) to get news like this in your inbox, or check out all of [SmartBrief's education newsletters](#), covering career and technical education, educational leadership, math education and more.