



Coaching is the key to systemic improvement for growing Tennessee district



The Challenge

Clarksville, Tennessee, is one of the fastest growing midsize cities in the nation—and nowhere has that growth been felt more than in the Clarksville-Montgomery County School System (CMCSS). In the past several years, the district has averaged about 500 new students a year and opened six new schools. With high rates of student mobility, administrator turnover, increasing numbers of low-income students, and the ever-increasing complexities of addressing the needs of special education students—while simultaneously implementing more rigorous standards and assessments—CMCSS was looking for systemic ways to improve achievement across the board and narrow gaps among subgroups of students.

As the district began to research and analyze the root causes of test score variance within and among its schools, it realized there were inconsistencies in the quality of instruction and curriculum access. With a background in McREL's Balanced Leadership Framework® (BLF) dating back to 2007, district leaders knew that the best way to address these inconsistencies was to build on school-level leaders' knowledge of BLF and equip them with proven strategies to reduce this variability.

Strategic Solution

When the Tennessee Department of Education (TDE) solicited applications for its Tennessee Lead (TNLEAD) program, CMCSS partnered with McREL to put together a proposal to improve the effectiveness of nearly 200 of its current and aspiring leaders, including instructional supervisors, principals, assistant principals, and teacher leaders.

When they were awarded a \$784,280 TNLEAD grant in 2013, CMCSS and McREL began work on an ambitious plan to establish frameworks and structures in three key areas: shared leadership, coaching, and collaborative planning. Underscoring all three areas was an emphasis on improvement and innovation through 90-day test cycles and the principles of high reliability organizations.

The coaching model included *executive coaching* for CMCSS' Senior Leadership Team and key staff; *coaching of coaches* for principal supervisors; and *individual coaching* for principals, assistant principals, and teacher leaders. A particularly unique aspect was the High-Potential Assistant Principal (HPAP) program, which included additional, one-on-one coaching and focused PD for a select group of assistant principals.

Results

The TNLEAD project gave the district an opportunity to connect the dots between CMCSS' leadership, curriculum, and instruction, but it was the coaching aspect that “brought it all to life,” says Director of Schools Dr. B. J. Worthington. While the district already coached leaders on an as-needed basis, the McREL training helped them become more intentional about reducing variability in instruction.

“Now,” says Worthington, “all current and aspiring school leaders have a deeper understanding of the district's goals, have created internal processes to reach these goals, and are challenging themselves to go further to ensure that every student has access to high-quality learning experiences.”

This approach appears to be paying off for the district and its students. In the 2014–2015 school year, CMCSS led the state in student academic growth in overall literacy and numeracy for grades 3–12 and received a “5,” the highest score possible, on all 12 state-measured literacy and numeracy targets, including those for career technical education. The district also recently received District of Distinction recognition from *District Administration* magazine for its leadership development program.

In addition, to date, 12 assistant principals out of the 30 who participated in the HPAP program have become principals—a success rate that has led the district to continue the program beyond the life of the grant, which ended in December 2014.

Other successes include a high school where students went from being the lowest performing in the district in one content area to the highest in just one year, based on end-of-course test results. One elementary school with a first-year administrator had one of the biggest jumps in student achievement in the district and was named a Title I National Distinguished School.

Next Steps

The district continues to find ways to embed shared leadership, collaboration, and coaching into almost all that it does—including professional learning for staff, action planning, monitoring, and strategic planning.

It has also continued to explore and implement high reliability principles, which further supports the district's ultimate goal, says Worthington—“for staff to work collaboratively to reduce the variability of curriculum delivery so that all students receive a high-quality education and reach their potential.”