



SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT | SUCCESS STORY

A new district leader uses Balanced Leadership® to launch systemwide improvement efforts

Hamilton County Schools

-  79 schools 
-  2,800 teachers 
-  44,500 students 
-  More than 10% speak a primary language other than English

District partnered with McREL to:

- ◆ Help new superintendent launch and manage change
- ◆ Guide research-based leadership discussions and decisions
- ◆ Launch train-the-trainers capacity-building initiative

Results: Training pays off

- ❖ 90 school leaders receiving leadership training
- ❖ No signs of “implementation dip” stemming from instructional and management changes
- ❖ Graduation rate rose nearly 2 percentage points from 2017 to 2018
- ❖ “Satisfactory” state rating

“Not that we’ve arrived . . . but we saw pretty marked improvement in a lot of areas, and I attribute that to understanding what best practice is and what the research is.”

— Dr. Bryan Johnson, Superintendent,
Hamilton County Schools

“That they saw gains within half a year of implementation is very exciting. When you have a whole group of district leaders participating, that’s when you begin to see results.”

— Mel Sussman, McREL consultant

Balanced Leadership helps new superintendent steer around the implementation dip

The Challenge

One of the scariest aspects of making an organizational change—even when ample evidence suggests it will help—is the implementation dip. That’s the data-churning, stomach-turning period between abandoning the old program and mastering the new one, when any lack of progress can prompt nay-sayers to pop up and question the vision and strategy. And yet there was no implementation dip after new superintendent Bryan Johnson promptly launched instructional and management changes in Hamilton County, Tennessee, a 44,500-student district surrounding Chattanooga, in July 2017. In fact, graduation rate, scholarship dollars, and the number of highly ranked schools all improved during his first year on the job. How’d he do it?

Strategic Solution

Two words: Balanced Leadership.

“I love McREL’s Balanced Leadership program,” Johnson said on the eve of fall break, 2018. “I believe that as a leader, philosophically, you can’t do it alone, and the more you involve and engage those that are part of the team, the more thoughtful, intentional, and effective whatever you’re implementing will be.”

Johnson’s insight that having objectives is not the same as *executing* objectives cuts to the very reason that McREL’s leadership training exists: because sound research-based leadership practices can be taught, learned, and put into action.

Johnson was already a fan of Balanced Leadership when he took the Hamilton County job. He’d experienced it as a rising leader in Tennessee’s Clarksville-Montgomery County School System, even becoming a facilitator via McREL’s train-the-trainers program, which helps districts build internal capacity to sustain the program on their own, without having to repeatedly bring in an outside consultant. One of his first questions when he interviewed with Hamilton County was whether they had a leadership training framework. They didn’t, so when Johnson got the gig, he brought Balanced Leadership with him.

Said Mel Sussman, the McREL consultant who helped implement Balanced Leadership in both districts: “If you look at McREL’s research, the No. 1 finding is that the principal or superintendent cannot do it alone. That’s the key. One leader—I don’t care how great they are—cannot do it alone.”

In addition to helping leaders know how to strategically balance directive versus shared leadership, the Balanced Leadership training and coaching program gives leaders tools for managing change processes, focusing on what matters most for student success, and building a “purposeful” team of educators who share a vision for success and believe in each other’s—and their students’—ability to achieve their goals.

Johnson’s unshakeable belief that leadership quality influences teachers’ and students’ performance led him to require his principals and assistant principals to get started with Balanced Leadership. “Coming into a new school system and looking at what it is we’re trying to build and do, it makes sense to start with the most critical component, which is leadership,” he said.

Example? “We implemented learning targets this year. That’s a classroom-level change and we want to do it districtwide. We want to be sure our teachers can deconstruct standards and, most important, students know what the teacher wants them to know or do by the conclusion of the lesson. The common language that Balanced Leadership provides helps us create a clear focus, always taking it back to: What are the outcomes that matter to us all? We all want our schools to be great, so let’s make sure that understanding our standards is a focus for all of us.”

One specific benefit of Balanced Leadership is that it encourages leaders to pause and reflect on initiatives that *didn’t* work, Johnson said. “That’s where learning is too. Being able to say, ‘This is where we went wrong on this and this is how we have to address it and help people understand it’ has made me more effective.”

The day Johnson spoke with McREL for this story was a pre-vacation Friday, and what was he most looking forward to? A 3 p.m. meeting with his leadership team to talk about—you guessed it—Balanced Leadership. The program’s research base—a hallmark of all McREL professional learning opportunities—provides confidence that each conversation is going to be productive right away, especially when it comes to what Johnson called “the ever-evolving elephant in the room with regards to public education, which is managing change.”

“We’re able to be more thoughtful about leading change,” he added. “We implemented benchmarks this year, and that’s a second-order change: No matter what we do, we know people can feel adversely affected. We want to communicate whatever shifts we need to make before the next iteration, we’re mindful of the culture, and we’re able to be more thoughtful through the framework that McREL has provided with the implementation of any of our initiatives throughout the district.”

Next Steps

“When you teach, you learn,” Johnson said, by way of explaining how he wants to propagate Balanced Leadership throughout Hamilton County Schools via the same train-the-trainers approach that drew him in at Clarksville-Montgomery County.

“Not that we’ve arrived—we have a ton of work to do—but we saw pretty marked improvement in a lot of areas, and I attribute that to understanding what best practice is and what the research is.”