



SYSTEM IMPROVEMENT | SUCCESS STORY

Input: Leadership training

Outcome: Soaring student achievement

Hamilton County Schools:

Based in Chattanooga



79 Schools



2,800 teachers



44,500 students



Results:

In 2017, the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System gave Hamilton County a level of 1 for overall student academic growth. In 2018, that climbed to 3. And in 2019? Straight 5's out of 5.

District Achieved **Highest** Level of Academic Growth

Literacy & Numeracy

Literacy

Numeracy

Social Studies

Overall

5 5 5 5 5

21 individual schools also earned 5s across the board

Services McREL provided:

-  Balanced Leadership® professional learning and coaching for principals and administrators.
-  Training of select district staff to become Balanced Leadership facilitators, to sustain in-district training and coaching long-term.

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— Dr. Bryan Johnson, superintendent,
Hamilton County Schools

Superintendent Johnson and his team have really taken to heart the importance of instructional leadership and we're inspired by their story and their results. ”

— Bryan Goodwin, CEO,
McREL International

Student success rockets after new superintendent goes all-in on leadership development

The Challenge

When he became superintendent of Tennessee's Hamilton County Public Schools in 2017, Bryan Johnson made the community a promise: to become the state's fastest improving district.

Dr. Johnson had been a district-level leader in another Tennessee system, Clarksville-Montgomery. One thing he liked about his former district was its use of McREL's Balanced Leadership® program to build great administrative and school-level leadership teams, develop a pipeline of future school leaders, and disperse responsibility across empowered teams rather than always relying on individual leaders to enact and manage change. During this time, Clarksville-Montgomery had become one of Tennessee's highest performing districts, and Johnson was convinced that was largely because it gave heed to McREL's research showing that leadership can create the conditions for quality student learning to occur.

Hamilton County, by contrast, was facing some serious issues, including state intervention in some schools. After Johnson entered the district and assessed its strengths and needs, he saw that the lack of a districtwide leadership development program was at the root of its challenges.

Strategic Solution

Johnson determined to bring Balanced Leadership to his new district's principals and central office leaders. He lauds the school board for giving him some flexibility with a five-year improvement plan. Out of all the urgent priorities he could have targeted first, he knew that starting with leadership development would be a long-term investment that would need time to produce results in terms of student achievement. In fact, he steeled himself and the board for a likely implementation dip, a temporary drop in performance that often occurs when any team is learning and beginning to use new skills, tools, and processes.

McREL came to Hamilton County and conducted training and coaching sessions with principals and central office leaders, delivering research-based knowledge and strategies for finding the right instructional focus, initiating and managing change processes well, and building purposeful school communities. After this initial training, Johnson had some of his staff go through additional training to become authorized by McREL to deliver Balanced Leadership themselves, an economical way for districts to sustain their leadership development efforts long-term. Johnson says the district also benefited from McREL's collaborative,

partnership-oriented style of service. For example, when McREL CEO Bryan Goodwin had some appointments in the Southeast, he stopped by Chattanooga just to check in and share some new work on instructional design models that he thought might be of interest and value to the district.

Results

"We just saw some pretty unprecedented things happen," Johnson said after the state education department's 2019 data release. "I've been in the state of Tennessee for all of my education career, including in a pretty high-performing system, and to see our district's results has been pretty amazing."

A graphic full of 5's that the district has been sharing tells much of their success story. The district as a whole scored 5, the highest possible, for academic growth in five areas. (Last year it was at level 3 and the year before that, when Johnson came aboard, level 1.) In addition, 45 schools scored a level 5 for overall growth (up from 17 the previous year). And in addition to *that*, 32 schools earned Reward status, the state's highest distinction.

"Superintendent Johnson and his team have really taken to heart the importance of instructional leadership and we're inspired by their story and their results," McREL's Goodwin said.

Next Steps

When he launched his Balanced Leadership-inspired reforms, Johnson was concerned about an implementation dip. The exact opposite happened; call it an implementation spike. Now the challenge is to maintain.

"We get to have a different kind of conversation now," he said. "How do we keep from being the one-hit wonders?"

Johnson has largely answered that already, in his five-year plan, which names several specific student achievement targets. Another answer could be the above-mentioned work on instructional models, something that Bryan Goodwin feels so strongly about that he co-authored a book about it, with Elizabeth Ross Hubbell, called *Instructional Models: How to Choose One and How to Use One*.

"You can't overstate the importance of consistency, and Balanced Leadership showed us that we're so much stronger if every leader in every school aims for the same goals," Johnson said. "Bringing the same focus to instructional design in the classroom means extending that message of consistency to teachers and students so that everybody's on the same team."