SOAR
LEARNING & LEADING
Collaborative

Five Strategies for Creating a High-Growth School

Battelle for Kids

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There's an old adage that to be the best, you have to learn from the best. This is also true in education. By mining the practices of high-growth districts and schools, we can improve learning opportunities for all students.

What promising practices are high-growth schools using to accelerate student learning?

For more than a decade, Battelle for Kids has brought together nearly 100 urban, suburban, and rural Ohio school districts to collaborate and innovate around promising practices for student success through the *SOAR* Learning & Leading Collaborative. Through professional learning workshops, innovation labs, and thought leadership seminars, *SOAR* educators explore and share strategies, structures, and priorities that result in high-performing schools.

In addition, we partnered with the Ohio Department of Education during the 2014–2015 school year to sponsor regional workshops featuring the promising practices of teachers and leaders in districts that have had great success in closing achievement gaps and improving student growth.

While much of the discussion across the country has focused on achievement data, we use multiple measures, including value-added information, to identify and study the highest-performing districts and schools. We have also surveyed and held discussions with central office staff, principals, and teachers from high-growth buildings and districts in Ohio to help all educators learn what works to accelerate student learning. Five high-growth strategies emerged from our engagement with these districts.

1 LIMIT GOALS AND/OR INITIATIVES TO FOCUS ON STUDENT LEARNING

One of the most consistent characteristics of high-performing schools is their ability to focus on student learning and limit the number of initiatives they undertake. Our research, which was done over the course of several years, included examining state department of education report cards and databases, and interviews and surveys with teachers and administrators from high performing schools. Many of the schools and districts cited a clear mission and focus on increasing student growth and student achievement as their number one goal. With so much reform across the state, and so many entities vying for attention, these high-performing schools have stayed focused on their core mission, while at the same time remaining compliant with other external accountabilities. Leaders often talk about the importance of filtering out external noise and distractions so that teachers can maintain their focus on student learning. Collins (2001) refers to this process of staying focused and aligning resources to what you are passionate about as the "hedgehog" concept. Similarly, Reeves (2011) warns districts of "initiative fatigue," and reiterates the importance of a clear focus and a limited number of strategic objectives (p. 14).

One of the practices that high-growth schools and districts use is what management guru Peter Drucker refers to as "planned abandonment" (Drucker, 1974). This is a process of regularly reviewing what the school or district is doing and eliminating those efforts that produce minimal return. "Good to Great" organizations not only have the discipline to do certain things well, they also have the discipline to stop doing what no longer works (Collins, 2001). High-performing schools create "not-to-do" lists, and are willing to at least temporarily suspend initiatives that are not directly contributing to improving student learning.

One principal talked about evaluating every practice in her school based upon its impact on student learning. Some examples of practices that schools or districts chose to abandon were:

- collecting or having teachers post lesson plans
- using particular educational software
- exposing teachers to professional development that is unrelated to student outcomes
- allowing teachers to work in isolation

One district leader talked about abandoning professional development that was solely based on teacher interests (not needs) and proactively aligning all professional learning to the district's student learning goals. Our conversations with practitioners consistently revealed that high-growth buildings and districts focus most of their attention on student learning, improving collaboration, and systematically reflecting on the connections between their teaching and what students are learning.

The specific programs and initiatives at each school varied, depending on its students' needs and the district's progress on implementing the new state evaluation system or new standards. Some of the common focal points for several of our high-performing schools and districts were:

- vocabulary acquisition
- numeracy
- personalized learning
- Ohio Improvement Process
- literacy across the content areas

But regardless of the theme, the buildings and districts maintained a focus on student learning, identified a few goals, and aligned resources for professional learning and ongoing support to the pursuit of the identified goals.

While technology, blended learning, and personalized learning are at the forefront of many discussions in improving education, high-growth districts never lose sight of the essential link between teachers and students and the strategic alignment of resources and leadership to improve those connections. A principal from the only Ohio district to rank in the top 10 with performance index and value-added information for three years in a row told *SOAR* educators that his district does not equip classrooms with SMART Boards and that while technology may be fascinating to others, "pedagogy, high-quality instruction, and student learning" are what excite his district. Their staff's secret to success is the discipline they employ to stay focused on high-quality instruction, student performance data, and their response when students do not master material.

SUGGESTED PRACTICES	
☑	Identify five or fewer initiatives for the district; three or fewer for a building
☑	Develop rigorous rubrics, assess performance against the rubrics, and communicate results continuously
☑	Develop an implementation timeline to communicate expectations of new initiatives or practices for staff to understand "what success looks like"
☑	Provide teachers the time and support they need to master new practices
☑	Meet at least once a year to determine if initiatives are producing intended outcomes and if they should evolve, continue, or end
☑	Facilitate conversations with staff about creating a "not-to-do list"
☑	Focus teacher conversations on evidence related to student learning and how the staff will respond when students do not master material

2 STRATEGICALLY LEVERAGE TIME AND RESOURCES

When Odden and Archibald (2009) studied schools that had actually doubled their student performance data, they discovered these schools used time and resources differently than other schools. This finding absolutely squares with what we have learned from high-performing schools and districts in Ohio. The question is: ***How do great schools use time and other resources differently?***

Educators in buildings we examined have redesigned how they use time. Rather than viewing time as a never-ending challenge, they embrace the challenge of time as an opportunity to optimize their strengths and refine their focus. Their most important questions are: ***What are our priorities? How could we use time differently to better reflect our priorities?***

Given their focus on these questions, master schedules often include:

- time for re-teaching in which no new concepts are introduced
- enrichment periods for stretching students who have already mastered material that was taught
- collaboration time for teachers to share practice, examine student work, and review and analyze data
- increased instructional time for reading and math
- collaboration time for teachers to improve their practice by developing their skills and enhancing their mindsets
- extra time for struggling students during and outside of the regular school day

The challenge with time is not just setting it aside to do new things. When time is provided, it must be used effectively. Examples of how districts have used their new time include:

- developing, implementing, and systematically reviewing formative and common/benchmark assessment data
- exploring how to differentiate instruction based on students' needs
- ensuring their Response to Intervention (RTI) model is implemented with fidelity
- implementing a systematic approach to monitor struggling students' performance and respond in a timely manner
- embedding professional learning for staff—aligned to and focused on the district's strategic objectives
- ensuring collaboration time for teachers is purposeful and focused

Effective teacher collaboration, or what Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) describe as high-performing teams, is an essential element in most of these schools. These kinds of teams are so important that even the effectiveness of highly effective teachers is reduced when they are placed on an average-functioning team. Conversely, average teachers can become more effective by simply being placed on a high-performing team. As any great principal knows, establishing and supporting high-performing teams takes work, but in the words of one administrator, "the juice is worth the squeeze." This hard work may include things like:

- developing and using protocols and structures
- finding time within or outside the school day to meet
- paying attention to each team's efficiency and effectiveness

Many high-performing districts are leveraging this understanding of high-performing teams through their implementation of teacher-based teams, building leadership teams, and district leadership teams—all of which are components of the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP). One of the largest and most diverse districts in the state, a district frequently recognized for having high student growth, attributed its continuing success to faithfully implementing the OIP. Another building from a different urban district credited its teacher-based teams for its success in improving instruction and student outcomes. A third school used its building leadership team to routinely monitor subgroups' learning progress within the school. A poor rural district, recognized for being one the most improved districts for student growth in the state, now uses its teacher-based teams, building leadership teams, and district leadership teams to review student data, make decisions, and enact policies that contribute to student academic growth.

OTHER RESOURCES

In terms of leveraging other resources including teacher talent, more schools are moving content-based teachers (literacy and math) to the lower elementary school grades rather than continuing with self-contained classrooms. Other examples include:

- adopting alternate uses of elective and support staff to create common planning time for core teachers
- having school counselors work more with student data
- using classroom teachers' strong personal relationships with students to alleviate some of the demands of the school counselor
- hiring literacy and math content teachers under temporary licenses to fill intervention specialist positions

Regardless of how schools redesign their use of time and other resources, the idea of establishing consistent, focused routines remains essential to success. An instructional coach from a large suburban district shared, "At the most basic level, classroom structure and routine give our students a sense of security and help them develop self-discipline. It is an ongoing process for teachers to establish structures and routines based on their students' academic needs. We are committed to the belief that structure and routine are essential to our student population because different students have different needs, and the support that we are able to offer helps them become more independent and self-reflective in their own learning."

SUGGESTED PRACTICES	
☑	Schedule enough time every week for purposeful collaboration; review student data and share classroom strategies
☑	Create time in the weekly schedule for staff's continuous learning
☑	Create structures and routines that support a school-wide response to intervention to more effectively support students who struggle
☑	Develop structures that support a school-wide response for enrichment
☑	Adopt systems to regularly and frequently monitor student learning

3 DEVELOP A BALANCED ASSESSMENT APPROACH

Nearly every principal we talked to from high-performing schools stressed the importance of focusing the attention of their teachers on formative instructional practices and developing and using short-cycle/common assessments. Frequent and timely monitoring of student learning is an essential part of every high-growth district we spoke to as part of this effort.

"What gets measured gets improved." District leaders often share how their principals are regularly held accountable for updating the central office on the growth of struggling students and underperforming subgroups. In their research, Odden and Archibald (2009) found that nearly every school that doubled its performance data had implemented common or short-cycle assessments. As a part of these assessment systems, it is critical that teachers post and communicate learning targets, and teach standards in student-friendly language.

High-growth schools also focus on, allocate resources for, and embed formative instructional practices into daily instruction. A literature review of 250 empirical studies of classroom assessment from more than 580 published articles shows conclusively that formative assessment improves learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). No other education intervention has produced more consistent student learning gains than formative assessment, and the payoff is even greater for struggling students.

Many *SOAR* high-performing districts emphasize the ongoing review of common assessments, curriculum, and student data. Districts recognize that entering cohorts of students often have different knowledge profiles than previous cohorts. This fact alone necessitates the ongoing use of assessments to better understand where students are, what they know, and what they don't know.

Regardless of the assessments used, high-performing districts and schools tell us that their assessments drive instruction, intervention, and enrichment during the school year. A rigorous, balanced assessment system is the only way to understand the connections between the curriculum, standards, and how those concepts translate into student learning.

One urban high school with high value-added gains in English reported that its student success was linked to a focus on three key areas of instruction:

- clarity of learning targets
- close reading strategies
- continuous formative assessments

The principal shared that his school's regular use of formative instructional practices, which allows immediate and timely feedback to teachers and students, was the primary vehicle for success.

An urban middle school principal also focused his staff's professional learning on formative instructional practices. In conjunction with this focus, he conducted frequent walk-throughs and identified similar strategies as vital contributors for their school-wide success. As a result of this work, his building's value-added composite ranking improved from 1,828th (Below Standard) to 348th (Above Standard) in the span of one year. Another leader from a rural district credited teacher-developed short-cycle assessments as the key driver of her district's continuous improvement over the years and becoming a high-growth district. Teachers from this district use the data from these assessments to guide their instruction and better meet students' needs.

Two of the most remarkable stories came from a poor rural district and from an affluent suburban district. The small rural district moved from 500+ value-added results to number three in the state. The district's assistant superintendent credited success to the implementation of benchmark assessments for grades 3–8, intervention time for struggling students, and increasing instructional time in reading and math.

The suburban district had lower than expected growth data for the 2010-2011 school year in one grade level in math. Instead of complaining about the data, the district systematically responded to it by unpacking the state standards again, rewriting learning targets with success criteria, and revising common assessments to align with the revised learning targets and success criteria for several subjects and grade levels throughout the district. The district also revised and modified instructional activities and added more differentiation and spiraling of the content. Since then, the district has had three consecutive years of being among the highest in achievement and growth across the state.

SUGGESTED PRACTICES	
☑	Allocate resources to embed formative instructional practices
☑	Use frequent common/benchmark/short-cycle assessments—at least every three to six weeks
☑	Have teachers create assessments for learning before developing their lessons
☑	Have teachers know and regularly talk about where their students are in the learning process
☑	Ensure all students understand learning targets and can self-assess where they currently are
☑	Develop and communicate success criteria for each developed learning target

4 USE MULTIPLE MEASURES, INCLUDING GROWTH MEASURES, TO INFORM IMPROVEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Nearly all high-performing districts understand the importance of multiple measures. One of the clearest differentiators between high-growth districts and other districts in Ohio is the emphasis they place on using value-added information. While no one measure is powerful enough to capture everything that happens within a district, high-growth districts embrace value-added information as a key source for improvement. The key emphases is on information. The highest-performing schools do not use value-added data for commendation or to name, blame, or shame, but to uncover, discover, and recover. Value-added data allows teachers and leaders to dig deeper and ask more questions about student learning.

High-performing districts also collect and analyze data from multiple sources, including year-end state tests, perception data from their various constituencies, and data from other districts against which they can benchmark their performance. Nearly every high-growth district has a process in place for reviewing incoming students' data as well as some type of system in place for collecting and examining student data at a district level.

For example, two of the highest-ranking districts in the state, with respect to value-added data, have monthly data collection processes that bring staff together to discuss student needs and student progress. As a result of these processes, district and building performance targets are constructed that give purpose to the ongoing monitoring of student progress. Teachers participate in daily and weekly monitoring of informal data that drives daily teaching decisions.

Schools gather and use these kinds of data in many different ways. There are examples of data dashboards and data displayed on classroom walls, hallways, and even district websites. Districts have used perception or survey data to ensure the schools' current vision aligns with the community's values. These alignments are communicated through newsletters and websites. Most recently, many districts have begun creating Quality Profiles to communicate additional measures that are meaningful to the public that go beyond the State Report Card. Regardless of the measures, high-performing districts always pay attention to data, regardless of the story it communicates, to improve performance and strategically align resources to support that improvement.

SUGGESTED PRACTICES	
☑	Have central office staff and principals monitor implementation of building initiatives
☑	Ensure central office staff and principals use multiple measures to make decisions on how best to leverage time, talent, and resources
☑	Be sure central office, principals, and teachers monitor student learning in a systematic approach by reviewing student performance data
☑	Hold goal setting meetings between central office staff/principals and staff to review formative, summative (state tests), and perception data

5 EMPOWER TEACHERS AND DEVELOP LEADERS

Creating and leading a high-growth school is difficult work, especially when recent research from Gallup reveals that nearly 70 percent of the teacher workforce is not actively engaged in their work. Of the 14 occupations represented in the 2012 survey, teachers had the lowest response to the prompt: ***"My opinion seems to count at work."*** Teachers want to be part of the decision-making process in schools. By allowing teachers to help create the world in which they work, greater levels of engagement and ownership follow.

Great leaders understand this need. They routinely use their teaching staff to help them:

- set the vision
- inspire excellence
- adopt systems to monitor educator performance and student learning

Distributed leadership in districts and schools produce gains in student achievement in nearly every study (Odden & Archibald, 2009; Chenoweth & Theokas, 2011; Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Wahlstrom, Seashore Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010). Organizational success accompanies organization-wide engagement. Leaders in high-growth districts empower, coach, and support their teachers. In addition, high-growth building and district leaders establish ambitious goals and hold high expectations for every staff member. These same leaders are never afraid of having courageous, pivotal conversations with staff when there has been a loss of focus, forgotten commitments, or a decrease in engagement.

It takes courageous and committed leadership to empower and develop leaders across a school system. In discussions with high-performing buildings and districts, Battelle for Kids had the opportunity to witness firsthand strong leadership at the building and district levels.

SUGGESTED PRACTICES	
☑	Develop teacher-based, grade-level, or department teams in the building that analyze student data, monitor student learning, share high-leverage strategies and/or continually review and unpack standards
☑	Develop a district leadership team who analyzes student data to monitor student learning, shares high-leverage strategies, and/or continually reviews and unpack standards
☑	Distribute leadership throughout the district and buildings
☑	Emphasize collaboration and developing social capital
☑	Create and communicate success criteria for each developed learning target

IN SUMMARY

The best way to identify and adopt high-growth practices is to collaborate with and learn from others. The five strategies outlined in this paper have been mined from some of the highest-performing districts and schools across Ohio. We offer these promising practices as a guide to educators across the country for moving education forward and helping all students succeed in college, career, and life.

ABOUT THE *SOAR* LEARNING & LEADING COLLABORATIVE

SOAR is about learning and sharing what works to make schools better. For more than a decade, leaders in *SOAR* districts across Ohio have been working together to stay ahead of the curve by innovating and collaborating; implementing high-growth practices with fidelity; influencing important educational issues to accelerate learning in Ohio; and impacting student learning by enhancing teacher, leader, and organizational effectiveness. Today, *SOAR* represents nearly 100 Ohio school districts and is a centerpiece of successful education reform on behalf of students. The way to *SOAR* to future success is by partnering with engaged, forward-thinking educators and leveraging collective talents and areas of expertise to increase student learning outcomes. To learn more, visit bfk.org/*SOAR*.

ABOUT BATTELLE FOR KIDS

Battelle for Kids is a national, not-for-profit organization dedicated to moving education forward for students by supporting the educators who work with them every day. Our mission-driven team of education, communications, technology, and business professionals provides innovative services, solutions, and products that empower teachers, develop leaders, and improve school systems to advance student-centered education and ensure the growth and success of all. Learn how we move education forward at BattelleforKids.org.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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EXPLORE OTHER GREAT RESOURCES

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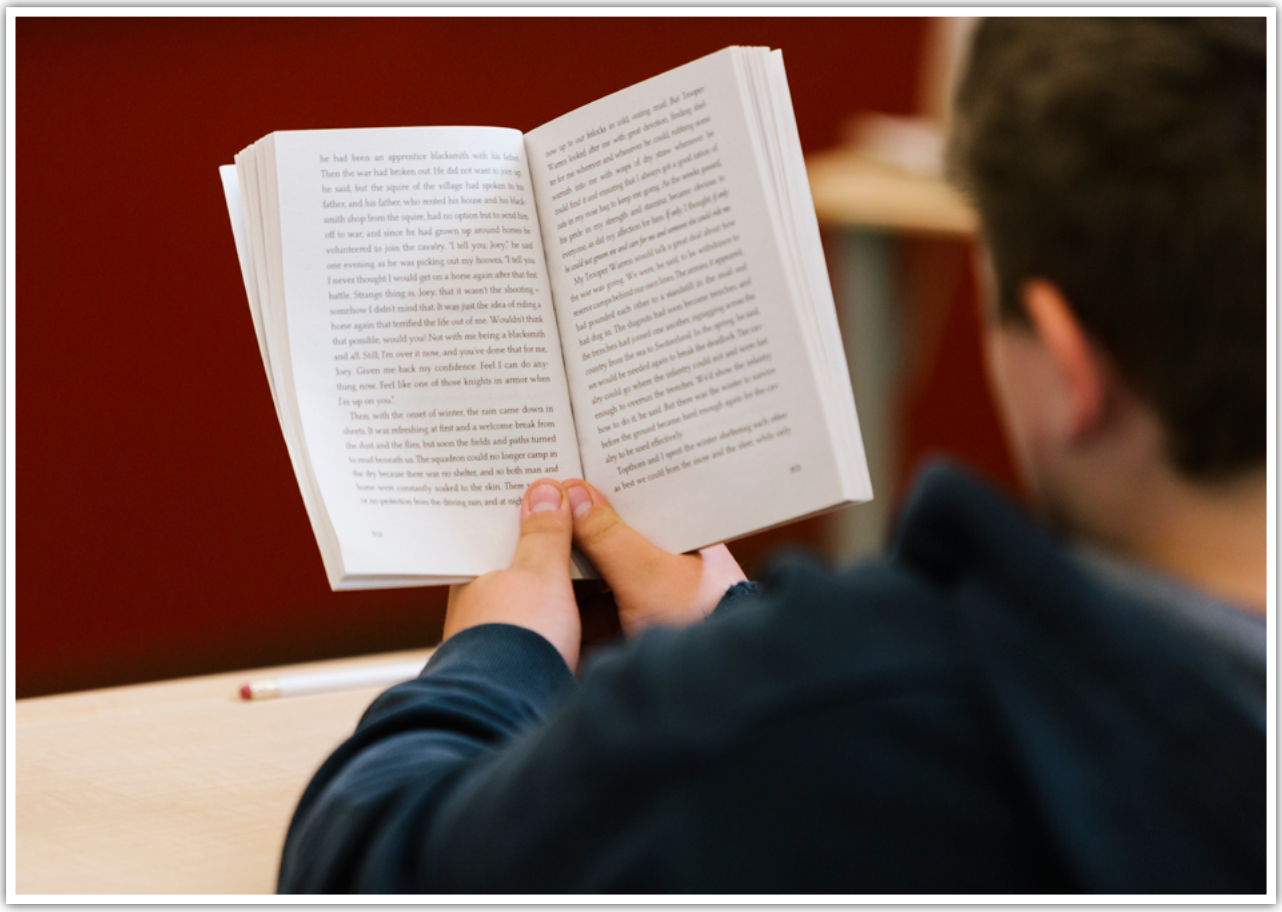

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