Across the country, an increasing number of states are redesigning their accountability systems and implementing growth measures to gauge teacher and leader effectiveness. However, there has not been a corresponding effort to analyze the practices of high-growth schools—an equally important factor in the pursuit of educational excellence.

From research, including work with the largest value-added collaborative (SOAR) in the United States made up of nearly 120 urban, rural, and suburban districts and other districts across the country, we have determined that schools must be improved with a system-wide approach.

We interviewed central office staff, principals, and teachers from many of the highest-growth districts and buildings in Ohio to find out how these schools achieve student growth. During this research over the last year, five high-leverage strategies emerged.

1. **Limit goals and/or initiatives to focus on student learning.**

Buildings and districts with a narrower focus, fewer initiatives, and a strong emphasis on student learning produce far greater gains in student growth than those districts that mistakenly allocate valuable resources, including time and money, over too many initiatives. Doug Reeves (2011) calls this phenomenon “initiative fatigue,” and reiterates the importance of a clear and limited focus to school improvement (p. 14).

“Good to Great” organizations do not start with “to do” lists, but have the discipline to stop doing too many things (Collins, 2001), and the same idea carries over to school districts. In fact, high-performing schools often do audits and create “not to do” lists, temporarily abandoning or suspending initiatives that are not directly related to student learning or where there is little evidence of such a link. Additionally, buildings that more thoroughly implement key initiatives at all levels produce greater student learning gains.

Programs each school district chooses to highlight can vary, depending on the needs of its students, but these goals must be consistently and thoroughly communicated at all levels. **Solon School District**, with the third-highest performance index in the state and a ranking in the top five in the state in value-added composite gain index, also dedicates its energies to a narrow focus and cohesive set of goals. **Solon Schools’** primary goal is to improve student learning. The district does not waste negative time or energy worrying about mandates or chasing initiatives. It has a simple formula for success: ensuring a systemic approach to examining student learning data and responding accordingly.
Olmsted Falls School District also avoids pursuing popular programs or trends. In its goal of ensuring that professional development aligns with the district’s limited goals, the district establishes a common language based on focused instructional pedagogy and works to become the best at it. Over and over again, the highest-performing schools emphasize the importance of communicating a clear focus—whatever it is—to all levels throughout the district. The Miami Trace School District, whose elementary and middle schools have received high growth awards, uses important leadership structures of teacher-based teams, building leadership teams, and a district leadership team to ensure that initiatives are implemented consistently and thoughtfully.

Additionally, Delaware City Schools, Jonathan Alder Local School District, and Mechanicsburg Exempted School District—in an attempt to identify vital behaviors for high-quality instruction—have developed rubrics for reading teachers that are used throughout the district to communicate and model effective instruction. These rubrics also inform teachers and leaders at the level of implementation, so that teachers and grade levels needing additional support can receive coaching. Common rubrics, along with support for their implementation, help these districts consistently provide quality instruction.

2. Establish important structures and routines.

Nearly every high-growth school we examined has implemented structures, procedures, and routines that lead to purposeful collaboration for examining and responding to data, sharing professional practice, providing additional learning opportunities for students, and developing leaders system-wide.

For some schools, these new routines involve redesigning the school day to reallocate resources toward achieving specific goals. When Odden and Archibald (2009) studied districts and schools that had actually “doubled student performance data,” the researchers discovered that these schools used time and resources differently than other schools. Many increased their reading and math instructional time, used flexible grouping for smaller groups, reduced class sizes in grades K–3, found extra time for struggling students during and after school, and adopted professional learning community (PLC) concepts. Districts accomplished this despite limited resources.

The districts we examined encourage teachers to work collaboratively in teams, such as PLCs, data teams, and teacher-based or building-level teams. Teams function at vertical, department, grade, school, and/or district levels. They analyze and align curricula; unpack standards; develop assessments; review student work; identify essential learning interventions, plan interventions, or enrichment activities; and examine school data.
The highest-performing districts and schools believe in identifying times, structures, and outcomes for collaboration. Some of these districts discuss the importance of developing team-building skills, such as collaborative norms, communication, and goal setting. Nearly every district emphasizes purposeful collaboration by creating structures or routines that ensure collaboration time is spent examining student work or sharing instructional or assessment practices.

**Some specific examples of structures or routines include:**

- No new instruction periods for re-teaching;
- Response to intervention (RTI) model, implemented with fidelity, with focus on helping struggling students and stretching students who master material;
- Enrichment periods for stretching students who mastered material;
- Collaboration periods for teachers to share practice and examine student work;
- System to monitor struggling students;
- Student data folders;
- Increased instructional time for reading and math;
- Collaboration time for teachers to review and analyze data; and
- Summer academies/workshops for teachers for additional professional development.

Districts with remarkable growth implement with fidelity RTI models and focus energies on growing proficient students with enrichment and stretch activities.

Districts with RTI models and little growth usually make intervention the responsibility of someone else, and the models are not implemented the way they are designed to be.

For instance, the outstanding student growth of Miami Trace Elementary can be attributed, in large part, to its offering intervention and enrichment to students based on data. Similarly, Lakota Local School District and South-Western City School District—two of the highest-ranking districts in the state for value-added data, despite having great challenges, such as diverse subgroup populations—credit their work and focus on the RTI process as significant factors in their success, as do Groveport Madison Junior High School, Kettering City Schools, and Oakwood Middle School.

The word “collaboration” appears multiple times in the bulleted list of examples above. Collaboration is one of the most important routines a building can establish, if there are structures in place to ensure it is purposeful and productive. Granville High School, whose staff members agree on key concepts, work together to create common assessments and ensure assessments align to instruction, believes that the number one strategy that led the school’s high progress over the past few years was the time created for high-level collaboration.

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* Battelle for Kids (BFK) has developed an RTI Model (Diamond of Success) that stresses high-quality instruction first, and then has a systematic approach to working with both struggling students and students who need enrichment.
Canaan Middle School uses weekly collaboration time in addition to individual planning time for teachers to share instructional strategies, review assessments, and monitor student learning. During this planning time, teachers practice collaborative norms, prepare agendas, and create time for reflection. Harmon Elementary has monthly data collection processes that bring staff together to discuss student needs and progress—what works and what does not. Teachers engage in daily and weekly monitoring of informal data that drive daily teaching decisions. They establish district and building performance targets that give purpose to the monitoring of student and teacher progress.

Collaboration has also lead to success for Circleville High School, where subject matter is vertically aligned. The Plain Local School District utilizes PLCs and offers daily opportunities to discuss student progress. Hillsdale High School has reallocated time for teachers to collaborate and use formative instructional practices and data analysis.

Bloom-Vernon Local School District and New Boston Local School District realized great results through cross-district collaboration. These two districts partner on a professional development day and have their content area experts share about formative instructional practices. Teacher teams expand beyond their districts in order to glean the best practices from one another. Oakwood High School, with the highest ACT scores in the state and high value-added results on end-of-course exams for the 2011–2012 school year, and Jackson Local, one of the highest-growth districts in the state, also credit building in formal structures for professional development as contributing to their success.

The initial work of establishing protocols and structures can be difficult, but high-performing schools like Jackson Local report that the results are worth it.

In other high-performing schools, making changes to the traditional school day is an important part of the schools’ achievement gains. There is no consensus on how to uniformly redesign a school for better performance, but districts continue to innovate from traditional schedules to target improvement. Waggoner Middle School credits the increase of instructional time and reinventing the school day as major contributors to the school’s high growth. Carrollton Exempted Village School District increased the amount of time spent on math and English language arts in grades 3–8 and moved from an accumulative value-added index ranking of 507th in the state to three in one year.

Crooksville, Maysville, Morgan, and New Lexington School Districts have capitalized on school day redesign in creating a Rural Ohio College High School (ROCHS), with the goal to increase access for first-generation college attendees. The schools aligned their schedules during the school day, used blended and distance learning during their first periods, and deliver dual enrollment coursework to students at the seventh-, ninth-, and eleventh-grade levels.

Olentangy Orange High School reinvented its school schedule to provide time for department meetings and collaboration time, as well as to provide time for job-embedded professional development, while Holt Crossing Intermediate School creates time for staff to work in PLCs for reading and math. PLCs also work together to create common pacing guides, determine critical learning outcomes within teaching units, and write common pre- and post-assessments.

But no matter how a school changed its scheduling, the idea of a consistent targeted routine remained important to its success. Westerville City School District’s instructional coach, Christina Goldner, shares, “At the most basic level, classroom structure and routine gives our students a sense of security and helps them develop self-discipline. It is an ongoing reflection process for teachers to establish structure and routine 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.”
Nearly every principal we interviewed stressed the importance of teachers focusing on formative instructional practices as well as developing and using short-cycle/common assessments. Frequent and timely monitoring of student learning is an essential part of every high-growth district we surveyed.

“What gets measured gets done,” is what nearly every district shared about the importance of common, benchmark, short-cycle, quarterly, and/or rigorous assessments. Individual school and teacher teams created many of the assessments. Odden and Archibald (2009) discovered that nearly every school that doubled its performance data had implemented common or short-cycle assessments. Many districts/schools/principals/teams express the importance of posting and communicating targets, and introducing standards in student-friendly language.

High-growth schools focus on, allocate resources for, and embed formative instructional practices. The research is clear: A literature review of 250 empirical studies of classroom assessment from more than 680 published investigations shows conclusively that formative assessment improves learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). No other education intervention has produced more student learning gains than formative instruction, and the payoff is even greater for struggling students. Getting feedback that is both descriptive and specific can produce more educational gains than nearly any other intervention (Hattie, 2009).

Many of the high-performing districts we studied emphasize ongoing review of common assessments, curriculum, and student data. Districts recognize that cohorts of students enter grade levels each year at different stages, and systematically reviewing the rigor of assessments is an important process, particularly for the highest-achieving districts.

For high-performing schools, district- and school-reported information from a variety of assessments drives instruction, intervention, and enrichment during the school year. The importance of knowing the curriculum and standards, and ensuring alignment between curriculum and assessments is essential.

At Centennial High School, which demonstrated some of the highest value-added gains on end-of-course exams in English, student success is linked to a focus on three key areas of instruction: clarity of learning targets, close reading strategies, and recursive assessment practices. Of greatest impact is the school’s use of more regular formative assessment practices, which allows immediate and timely feedback to students.

Franklin Local School district uses professional development in formative instructional practices to build staff capacity and common assessments to monitor student learning. Southmoor Middle School focuses professional learning on formative instructional practices, which it identifies as a vital contributor for school-wide success. As a result, its value-added composite ranking index improved from 1,828th (RED) to 348th (GREEN) in one year.

Norwayne Local School District credited the teacher-created short cycle assessments as a key strategy to its continuous improvement over the years and its becoming a high-growth district. Teachers use the data from assessments to change their instruction and meet the needs of the students. Likewise, the Mt. Healthy School District relies on common assessments and monitoring of student learning to help students through its rigorous curriculum.

3. Develop a balanced assessment approach.
Aligning assessment to instruction, one of the basic tenets of formative instructional practices, contributes greatly to the success of schools like Granville High School, whose staff agrees on key concepts and what they mean, works together to create common assessments, and ensures that assessments align with instruction.

Olentangy Local School District’s Orange High School’s goals include focusing on aligning curriculum, creating quality assessments, and providing quality instruction. Staff spends a significant amount of time unpacking standards and converting them into student-friendly learning targets that are explicitly communicated to all students. Carrollton Exempted Village School District reported that implementing a vendor’s benchmark assessments for grades 3–8 and increasing instructional time in reading and math are two impact strategies that led to its success.

Solon School District was disappointed after not getting the growth data that it expected after the 2010–2011 school year. Instead of reacting to the data, the district systematically responded to it by re-unpacking the current standards, rewriting learning targets with success criteria, revising common formative and summative assessments to align to the revised learning targets and success criteria, revising and modifying instructional activities, and adding more differentiation and spiraling of concepts. The following year, Solon’s building and district ranked in the top five of value-added data in the state.

A group of K–12 math teachers at Rutherford B. Hayes High School aligned curriculum to the Common Core State Standards after committing to identifying gaps in the curriculum to change instruction. It used the ACT QualityCore® end-of-course exams as a benchmark for college- and career-readiness. The Common Core encouraged the school to pay close attention to what was happening mathematically with its students.

A sub-collaborative of more than 90 SOAR high schools, which committed to using end-of-course exams for a number of courses and aligning curriculum accordingly, produced unparalleled success in improving ACT scores when compared to similar Ohio high schools. Dayton Early College Academy saw a 21-percent increase in the number of seniors scoring a 22 or higher in math from 2008 to 2011. Centennial and Washington High Schools all realized more than a 15-percent increase in the number of seniors scoring a 22 or higher during the same timeframe.**

**ACT, Inc.’s research shows a benchmark score of 22 as college ready in math.**
4. Use multiple measures, including growth measures, to inform improvement and accountability.

Nearly all high-growth districts understand the importance of using multiple measures, specifically value-added information. The number one clear differentiator between high-growth districts and other districts is the emphasis placed on using value-added information as a school improvement measure. While no one measure is powerful enough to use by itself, high-growth districts embrace value-added information to uncover, discover, and recover for school improvement.

High-growth districts collect and analyze multiple data sources and use strategic measures from common assessments, assignments, year-end state tests, and value-added information to inform teachers and decision makers. Districts use performance, practice, and perception data for school improvement. When examining performance data, many districts use comparison groups and benchmarks to explore the reasons behind school and district success.

Schools gather and use this data in many different ways. For instance, Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) displays a data dashboard on its website with value-added information. CPS consistently has district value-added data above other urban districts and many surrounding districts. Using a different strategy to achieve the same goals, the Jonathan Alder Local School District uses perception data every year to make sure the schools’ mission aligns with the community’s values. The district frequently surveys students on the rigor of the courses and support they receive in the classroom.

Olentangy Local School District, an exemplary model of using projection data to increase enrollment in rigorous and advanced placement courses, strives to ensure that its students perform at a level that surpasses or is equal to their anticipated level of achievement based on measured ability. Hillsdale High School uses student data to inform instructional practices and shares student/teacher growth information, which is also a feedback source, with stakeholders, while Windermere Elementary of the Upper Arlington School District assesses and benchmarks all students in grades K–5 in literacy/reading three times per year. Miami East School District ensures success through integrating value-added and for-growth data into building action plans.

Reporting one of the highest composite value indices in 2010–11, Lakota Local School District uses performance measures such as AYP and state achievement data, and converts its state achievement results into “raw points” to compensate for the state’s low cut scores to ensure all students needing intervention get support. For instance, Adena Elementary (Lakota Local School District) meets regularly and creates data folders for teachers to continually review the strengths and opportunities of the school data, and builds understanding around annual yearly progress, safe harbor targets, and value-added information. Some schools, like Hannah J. Ashton Middle School, examine teachers’ strengths by using teacher value-added reports, and then assign students accordingly.
5. Empower teachers and develop leaders system-wide.

Creating and leading a high-growth school or district is much too difficult for one leader. Leaders of high-growth districts know this. Teachers want to be part of the process, and allowing teachers to help create the world in which they work will ensure greater levels of ownership.

While it is important to have a high-quality teacher in every classroom, we do not believe we can improve our schools one teacher at a time. We agree with Michael Fullan, who argues that you don’t improve schools by just hiring and supporting individuals, but rather by developing collaborative groups or social capital (Dufour & Marzano, 2011).

Distributed leadership throughout the district and school produces gains in student achievement and growth in nearly every study (Odden & Archibald, 2009; Chenoweth, Chenoweth, & Theokas, 2011; Dufour & Marzano, 2011; Leithwood, Seashore Lewis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004; Wahlstrom, Seashore Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010). In other words, individual success does not guarantee organizational success. High-growth districts create structures and routines for teachers to have the opportunity to lead and contribute.

Olmsted Falls School District’s success comes from the ownership and collaboration that takes place around student learning. Riverside Local School District, too, understands the importance of allowing teachers to help create the world in which they work. District officials stress the importance of creating teacher, building, and district leadership teams during the school improvement journey. A collaborative in the southeast region of Ohio (Ohio Appalachian Collaborative) built a “System of Support” and constructed a shared leadership model. Each district had a Collaborative Learning Leader (CLL) and helped to facilitate district-wide change and embedded formative instructional practices, along with value-added training.

Fairlawn Local School District progressed from a school district on “Academic Watch” 12 years ago to an “Excellent with Distinction” designation by having teachers participate in its process of intentional change. Teachers self-reflected through monthly individual meetings with principals and superintendents and discussed performance and personal goals.

Conclusion

In order to help all schools achieve excellence, we must make information available about best practices as it relates to all aspects of education. This means thinking about not only what teachers do in the classroom, but also what schools and districts do system-wide. Our best guides are others who have been successful. This is why we place such value on the qualitative data provided by high-growth schools in our research.

When leveraged, the practice of limiting goals, establishing important routines, developing a balanced assessment approach, using multiple measures to inform improvement, and empowering teachers and developing leaders can lead to a highly effective system and produce high student growth in districts and schools.
Bibliography


Additional Resources

Limit District Initiatives and Focus


Establish important structures and routines


Develop a balanced assessment approach


Use multiple measures including growth measures to inform improvement, not judgment


Additional Resources, continued

Empower teachers and develop leaders system-wide


Other Great Resources


High-Growth District and School Examples

Adena Elementary (Lakota Local School District)
Bloom-Vernon Local School District
Canaan Middle School
(Jonathan Alder Local School District)
Carrollton Exempted Village School District
Centennial High School (Columbus City Schools)
Cincinnati Public School District
Circleville High School (Circleville City School District)
Crooksville Exempted Village School District
Dayton Early College Academy
Delaware City School District
Fairlawn Local School District
Franklin Local School District
Granville High School
(Granville Exempted Village Schools)
Groveport Madison Junior High School
(Groveport Madison School District)
Hannah J. Ashton Middle School
(Reynoldsburg City School District)
Harmon Elementary School
(Pickerington Local School District)
Hillsdale High School (Hillsdale Local Schools)
Holt Crossing Intermediate School
(South-Western City Schools)
Jackson Local School District
Jonathan Alder Local School District
Kettering City School District
Lakota Local School District
Maysville Local School District
Mechanicsburg Exempted School District
Miami East School District
(Miami East Local School District)

Miami Trace Elementary School
(Miami Trace Local School District)
Miami Trace Middle School
(Miami Trace Local School District)
Miami Trace School District
Morgan Local School District
Mt. Healthy City School District
New Boston Local School District
New Lexington City School District
Ohio Appalachian Collaborative (OAC)
Oakwood High School
(Oakwood City School District)
Oakwood Middle School
(Oakwood City School District)
Olentangy Local School District
Olentangy Orange High School
(Olentangy Local School District)
Olmsted Falls City School District
Reading Community City School District
Rutherford B. Hayes High School
(Delaware City School District)
Solon City School District
Southmoor Middle School
(Columbus City School District)
South-Western City School District
Upper Arlington City School District
Waggoner Middle School
(Reynoldsburg City School District)
Washington High School
(Washington Court House City School District)
Westerville City School District
Windermere Elementary
(Upper Arlington City School District)