



Austin's Journey: A Path to Rural Transformation in Ohio

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Meet "Austin". Austin lives in rural Ohio. His mom is a stay-at-home mom, and his dad works for the local heating and cooling company. Both parents are proud, hardworking individuals, but struggle to make ends meet. Austin has always been a smart kid. Since kindergarten, he has done well in school and scored high on state assessments. He also excels in sports, especially track. Austin's parents want him to succeed, but they don't understand how to navigate ACT/SAT tests, FAFSA, or the college application process. They are too proud to admit they don't know, and don't want to ask for help.

Fortunately, through the Ohio Appalachian Collaborative (OAC) Straight A work, Austin was exposed to career pathways early in his school career, and took dual enrollment courses while still in high school. He graduated high school with 33 semester hours of college work that transferred to an excellent university. The work of the OAC Straight A project saved Austin and his family from the burden of college debt, and provided Austin the opportunity to get a jump-start on his college education and earn a degree that will help him break the cycle of poverty.



To succeed as a nation, and for rural communities to thrive in a globally-competitive economy, we must, first, dramatically increase college enrollment and completion."

—Arne Duncan. (October 31, 2013).

RURAL EDUCATION TODAY

With more than 800,000 economically disadvantaged students in Ohio and 450,000 Ohio students attending schools in rural communities (U.S. Department of Education, 2011-12), it is imperative that Ohio's rural students, like Austin, have access to a high-quality education that will prepare them for success in college and careers.

Rural school districts face unique challenges as compared to their counterparts in urban and suburban settings. These challenges include lower educational attainment, greater unemployment trends, and higher child poverty rates. The statistics are convincing:



MORE THAN HALF (52.7 percent) of children in Appalachia received **FREE OR REDUCED LUNCH** through the National School Lunch Program.

(Children's Defense Fund – Ohio, 2016)



ONE IN FOUR RURAL CHILDREN LIVE IN POVERTY IN THE UNITED STATES

Of the 50 United States counties with the highest child-poverty rates, 48 are rural (Fishman, 2015)



The region has a higher percentage of **CHILDREN LIVING IN POVERTY** (26.7 percent) than statewide (22.7 percent) or nationally (22.2 percent). Within Ohio, the top 12 counties with the highest rates of child poverty in the state are within Appalachia. High poverty rates are especially concentrated in the southern section of the state.

(Children's Defense Fund - Ohio, 2016)



In 2000, only nine of the 32 counties in Appalachia had unemployment rates higher than 7 percent. **IN 2014, MORE THAN HALF (18 COUNTIES) HAD RATES HIGHER THAN 7 PERCENT.**

(Children's Defense Fund - Ohio, 2016)



IMPACTING STUDENT LIVES

To help level the playing field for Appalachian students in Ohio, the OAC was established in 2010 as a partnership among 21 rural districts and not-for-profit partner Battelle for Kids. The first four years of the OAC focused on building a strong collaborative, establishing networks for professional development and learning, and joining forces to generate resources. The OAC has matured in membership and focus over the past five years. Supported by a grant from Ohio's Straight A Innovation Fund, the OAC Straight A work is focused on providing personalized learning and adequate resources to assist its 27 rural districts in facilitating improvement that will impact 48,000 students.

The current goals of the OAC are to:

- Overcome the rural opportunity gap by increasing student postsecondary aspiration and preparedness while decreasing postsecondary costs through college credit earned in high school.
- Amplify the local talent pipeline to help fuel the resurgence of the local economy.
- Establish a sustainable collaborative that can steadily increase student achievement, reduce educational costs, and provide more resources focused on personalized learning for students.



The OAC started as a group of small districts coming together so that they would have a voice to be represented. The OAC has developed into a voice to be reckoned with, demonstrating that even though we are rural and are separated, we can work together and get things accomplished.”

—Sharon McDermott, Superintendent, Franklin Local Schools

PERSONALIZED LEARNING PATHWAYS LEAD THE WAY

The OAC's Straight A Personalized Learning Pathways, also known as Career Pathways, integrate rigorous academic instruction with curriculum and real-life work experience, and serve as roadmaps for its students, providing them with direction on how to get to where they want to go. Pathways make it easier for students to connect their interests and strengths from middle/high school to college and/or career, and ensure they acquire the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in life. The OAC pathways are made up of four major components:

1. Course Offerings

At the core of the OAC pathway development is strong academic and technical coursework that can lead students to industry credentials and/or college credit, allowing them to enter college without having to take remedial courses, saving them time and money. These model pathways provide students in grades 6–14 the opportunity to earn 15-hour, 30-hour, and even associate's degrees while in high school. This is accomplished by offering dual enrollment coursework led by credentialed high school teachers—with a master's degree in their content area, and/or 18 hours of graduate instruction in the content area—that also serve as college and/or university adjunct instructors.

2. Personalized Learning

To support the coursework component for the model pathways, classroom instruction needs to focus on each learner in a personal way. Personalized learning is made up of a diverse variety of educational programs, learning experiences, instructional approaches, and academic support strategies that are intended to address the distinct learning needs, interests, aspirations, or cultural backgrounds of individual students. By personalizing classroom instruction, students learn in ways that work for them, focusing on their skills and personal interests. Through this kind of classroom instruction teachers can support students as they complete a pathway.

To help teachers develop and adjust their classrooms for more personalized instruction, the OAC developed six key areas of personalized instruction—blended learning, project-based learning, Ohio's Learning Standards, formative instructional practices and assessment literacy, new learning technologies, and student motivation. Each district chose a key area that best met their current needs, identified their priority method for classroom instruction, and then collaborated on professional development across each of the designated areas. In addition, the OAC uses a virtual platform that serves as a professional learning community (PLC) to share professional resources across the OAC Straight A region.

3. Work-Based Learning

Exposing students to real-life work experiences helps build understanding of career fields, and develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills. It allows students to apply classroom theories to real-world problems, explore career options, and gain job experience. OAC Straight A districts have made connections with community businesses and agencies to generate work-based learning opportunities—job shadowing, internships, virtual apprenticeships, and school-based enterprises—for its students according to the local needs of the region. One of the greatest challenges in rural communities is “brain drain”—a phenomenon where students leave an area in search of better opportunities in other places. The OAC Straight A project is focused on stemming brain drain, and has identified top employers as well as certifications, education, and soft skills needed in the region to pinpoint the workforce needs that students may fill. The goal of the work-based learning component is to build student aspiration and vision for life after high school, especially in the OAC region. Students need to connect their current coursework with future goals so that they can complete their credentials and be prepared to stay in the OAC Straight A region and contribute to building a vibrant workforce.

4. Career Advising and Counseling

Linking students' areas of interest and career preparation through personalized learning pathways leads to higher graduation rates, increased college enrollment rates, and a higher earning potential (Harvard Graduate School of Education, 2014).

Each OAC Straight A student participates in career advising and counseling to help them discover their areas of strength, aspiration, and the world of opportunity around them. During this process, students gain the knowledge and skills needed to make future career and life decisions. OAC school counselors help students find the right fit by exploring career pathways aligned to each student's interests. While these pathways combine specific courses and skills that are necessary in career fields, there is also overlap between them. That overlap provides students with the flexibility to explore a pathway, see how it aligns to their personal goals and interests, and adjust as needed.

Career exploration in OAC Straight A districts begins in elementary school. And while students are not expected to know exactly what career they will eventually choose, this early exposure begins to open students' minds to future job possibilities.



Our Early College and college- and career-readiness initiatives in Crooksville have meant a new elevation of community, school district, and student expectations. It has given our students an equalizing and enabling opportunity to further their education both during and after high school.”

—Alea Barker, Director of Curriculum, Crooksville Exempted Village Schools

WORKING TOGETHER TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The structure and governance of the OAC is one of its greatest strengths, and is made up of teams of district, building, and teacher leadership that oversee the implementation and decision making of the OAC Straight A work. Grounded in research around collective efficacy, the OAC has built a construct to sustain itself. Collective efficacy is a shared belief that by working together “we can make a difference,” and is a much more accurate predictor of student success in rural schools than socioeconomic status of the students (Goddard, 2003; Hoy, Smith & Sweetland, 2002). The OAC is making a real difference.

LESSONS LEARNED: FIVE KEY STRATEGIC STEPS ON THE PATH TO RURAL TRANSFORMATION

The Ohio Appalachian Collaborative did not happen overnight. Begun in 2010, the Collaborative has developed over the course of time, impacting more districts, teachers, and students. Five strategies emerged from this important work and anchored the development of the OAC helping to transform opportunities for educators and students in rural Appalachian Ohio.

1. Building Learning Communities and Collaborative Teams

The Great Seal of the United States, E Pluribus Unum, means “out of many, one.” The OAC Straight A districts continue to build upon that concept, anchoring rural transformation in its collaborative teams and learning communities. These teams are made up of district, building, and teacher representatives where sustainability of all initiatives and projects rests on their cohesive work.

2. Revolutionizing Professional Learning

The face of professional learning has changed in the OAC Straight A project. Professional learning is not limited to face-to-face workshops and/or conferences. By capitalizing on blended learning and virtual collaboration, educators’ professional learning can be targeted and more personalized, much like student learning.

3. Engaging in Cross-District Collaboration and Connecting with Communities

The OAC Straight A project has achieved significant gains due to the simple concept that by working together, districts can accomplish more than they could working on their own. OAC Straight A districts have used cross-district collaboration in a variety of ways, including sharing dual enrollment courses, facilitating and sharing resources for professional learning, joining forces to generate resources to influence education issues at the local, state, and national levels, and leveraging community partners to work together toward a shared vision for transforming education and community prosperity.

4. Focusing, Focusing, Focusing

Failing to plan is planning to fail. The OAC Straight A districts continuously engage in focused district planning with their district implementation teams. These teams choose their priority areas in yearly and long-term planning efforts so that everyone is on the same page. Implementation plans are developed and then posted on the virtual platform, and shared with other teams in the Collaborative.

5. Increasing Student Ownership and Personalized Learning

OAC Straight A districts are moving toward a more personalized approach to learning rather than a “one-size-fits-all” teaching method by focusing on student ownership of learning and new approaches to personalized learning. Involving students in the discussion by co-constructing content and delivery methods with their teachers allows them to move at their own pace, gain deeper mastery of the material, and better engage with, and own, their learning.

IMPACT OF THE OAC

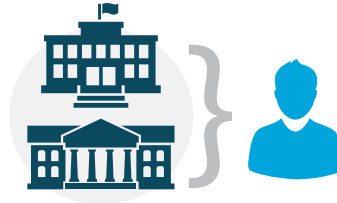
The OAC Straight A districts have forged a successful pathway for rural educators, students, and communities everywhere. In spite of the many challenges of rural life, these districts have collaborated to enable students in the region to build their own successful pathways to their futures. Impact benchmarks met during the 2015–2016 school year include:

DUAL ENROLLMENT & CAREER PATHWAYS



The OAC has created 56 career pathways in:

- Arts & Communication
- Business & Entrepreneurship
- Health & Human Services
- STEM



OAC districts offer **239** dual enrollment courses

More than **2,800** students have taken dual enrollment courses

OAC students are provided with **dual enrollment** opportunities through partnerships with **14 partner institutions of higher education**



78 teachers have been credentialed to teach dual enrollment by partnering institutions of higher education

Number of students enrolled by Pathway:

- 🔧 Arts and Communication: **290**
- 📈 Business and Entrepreneurship: **278**
- 💚 Health and Human Services: **119**
- 🔗 STEM: **339**



The OAC was awarded an additional **\$835,000 grant to credential more teachers**; Forty-two candidates from 19 OAC districts enrolled in spring and/or summer 2016 terms

IT INFRASTRUCTURE/TECHNOLOGY



of districts improved their IT infrastructure improving access for **48,000 students**

Three OAC districts (11 classrooms) identified **blended learning as a top priority** and joined a pilot to focus on creating blended learning classrooms as a model for other districts.



The OAC's professional learning community, powered by Schoology offers professional coursework, groups, networking, and a **platform for collaboration and discussion for more than 3,200 educators**.

Eighty-nine courses have been created by OAC districts on the PLC; with **48 shared courses** created by Battelle for Kids.

COST SAVINGS

OAC students have earned **13,203** college credit hours

Students and families have saved more than **\$2.35 million in college tuition costs**

Technology equipment savings
MORE THAN \$260,000
through pooled purchasing



THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

As a result of the collaboration and hard work of educators in the OAC Straight A project, the road through Ohio's rural education system is now a more robust and state-of-the-art. The OAC is "flipping the script" for students in the Appalachian region and closing the gap for students who have traditionally not had the same hopes as their counterparts in larger cities and suburban neighborhoods. Now, OAC students have a new world ahead of them, and will become shining examples of success ... just like Austin.

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The Ohio Appalachian Collaborative (OAC) is a group of 27 like-minded school districts that have joined forces to implement educational innovations, share and generate resources, influence local, regional and federal education and economic policy, and build a community that encourages rural prosperity in Appalachian Ohio. For more information, visit: www.battelleforkids.org/OAC.

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 learning and ensure the growth of all. Learn how we move education forward at www.BattelleforKids.org.