



The dream season

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In most high schools, spring is the season of hope and dreams. For seniors, it's their last season in high school, and for many, the last match, meet or performance. For parents, it's the final season of nurturing a promising and hopeful high school career before they watch their child begin the next life journey. As our seniors leave Ohio high schools we must ask — are they prepared to fulfill their dreams?

In many cases, the answer is no, we have not prepared them well enough. Forty percent of the students bound for public colleges and universities in Ohio must take remedial or non-credit courses at their own expense. In addition, those entering the workforce are even less prepared because they don't have the skills to be trainable without remediation.

This has been a stagnating trend for decades. But, how did we get here?

When we think about the high school experience in Ohio, for so long it has been primarily about students earning enough credits and passing the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) to graduate from high school. Curriculum and learning expectations were redesigned to meet state and local community requirements. School report cards became the driving force for measuring schools' effectiveness on student success and meeting community expectations.

State ratings of our districts and schools became headlines for the local media. Public perception was shaped by these ratings, which in turn caused educators to focus on important, but marginal "low-bar" standards. Our methods of instructing students and measuring learning

became dependent upon students being proficient on the OGT, rather than growing toward their full potential as learners. This has become evident as some high-achieving high school students have struggled to obtain college readiness scores on the ACT college entrance exam. As the demand for college degrees and advanced certificates expands, we have more students needing remediation.

In education, our school days are structured around issues such as busing, extracurricular activities or contracts. At times, we lose sight of using the school day to support learning and collaboration around student work. This leaves educators feeling overwhelmed.

Now, what can we do to change? Battelle for Kids started a comprehensive high school



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reform effort predicated on the power of value-added analysis, based on ACT end-of-course exams, to improve college and career readiness by changing instructional practice and expectations for all students. Our vision for this reform effort, called Ohio Value-Added High Schools (OVAHS), was straightforward. Forty-five pilot schools were provided with intensive training on understanding value-added analysis, how to use formative instructional practices and how to work collaboratively in teams to impact learning and change the mindset of how they assess students for learning. Throughout this journey we consistently focused on five tenets:

- effective teams and leaders,
- curriculum alignment to more rigorous standards,
- formative instructional practices,
- ACT end-of-course exams,
- value-added analysis.

To improve student learning we had to make sure that the school day allowed for time to focus on student work and instruction. Instead of working in silos, OVAHS focused on effective teams. Each school made the commitment to provide time for teachers to meet so that they could have conversations in real time around learning targets, student work and curriculum issues. Having these conversations only at the end of the quarter, semester or year does not allow enough time to adjust instruction to meet students’ needs.

Decisions were made collaboratively, with a focus on curriculum alignment and whether the curriculum supported students’ achievement and progress. Teachers found that working as a team, especially around curriculum alignment to rigorous standards, was more beneficial than working in isolation.

Working as a unit created vertical and horizontal alignment throughout the high school, instead of pockets of alignment by department. The synergy created from using time to work collaboratively caused each team member to take ownership for setting an expectation of teaching college readiness skills within a rigorous curriculum, instructing intentionally and reflecting on every student’s achievement and progress along the way.

Using formative instructional practices allowed teachers to administer quick, short and immediate checks on students’ progress to determine if they were acquiring each lesson’s knowledge. It helped teachers create learning targets in student-friendly language so students could articulate what they were learning. The formative instructional practices methodology changed the mindset of teachers by having them focus on providing effective feedback instead of evaluative feedback. When providing evaluative feedback, or “just a grade,” the student does not know how to improve or self-assess the progress needed to

OVAHS districts average percentage of students scoring college-ready on ACT college entrance exam

| Math | | All four subjects | |
|------|------|-------------------|------|
| 2009 | 2011 | 2009 | 2011 |
| 49% | 53% | 28% | 31% |

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| | 2009 | 2011 | 2009 | 2011 |
| OVAHS | 49% | 53% | 28% | 31% |
| Ohio average | 46% | 49% | 26% | 28% |
| U.S. average | 42% | 45% | 23% | 25% |

meet the learning target.

ACT end-of-course exams are aligned to a “high-bar” college/career ready rigorous curriculum that far exceeds the expectations of the current OGT. The test previously has served as the measure of success in Ohio.

Value-added analysis data was used as an important source to determine the impact teachers were having on students’ growth and to use that data to make informed decisions about increasing career and college readiness for all students.

The OVAHS reform was hard at the beginning, but over the project’s three years, schools have implemented sustainable change that has led to instruction supporting achievement and progress of all students toward college and career readiness.

The results from the OVAHS pilot schools are impressive and support the success of the vision of increasing career and college readiness for all students.

In addition to improving college and career readiness, OVAHS schools also increased the number of students taking the ACT college entrance exam by more than 15%. According to ACT, typically when schools increase the percentage of students taking the exam, scores initially either stay the same or go down.

Change is hard, but this is the season and time to do it. Are your students ready to go anywhere and be anything they desire to be? ■