



HAMILTON
LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICT



Flipping the Script with Attention to Retention and Flexibility with Accountability

How an Ohio School District Fought Back from the Threat of a State Takeover to Become a Lesson Worth Learning

With its red-brick façade, stately white columns, and windowed cupola, Hamilton Township High School in Ohio was built to impress. But a decade ago, there were cracks in the educational foundation across the [Hamilton Local School District](#). There was even talk the state would take over operation of the 3,300-student district located south of Interstate 270 in Columbus.

Now this symbol of the Hamilton Local School District is graduating more than 96 percent of its students in four years. The district's levels of achievement began as Academic Watch and climbed as high as Excellent by the state. And a cultural transformation that continues today has made the Hamilton Local School District one of the [Columbus area's Top Workplaces](#).

There is still more to do. The district faces the hard realities of its section of central Ohio: the area's lowest tax base, a very transient population due to varying personal factors, and a high percentage of students who are economically disadvantaged. But there has been real progress from those dark days a decade ago.



“We were bad,” recalls Assistant Superintendent Mark Tyler. “The numbers were all there. Our state assessment numbers were awful. We all knew it. Our teachers knew it. But that actually helped us, because everybody understood if we didn’t fix this, the state might have to come in and take us over. So everybody understood we had to get better. We had to improve.”

These days Tyler gives presentations about the turnaround alongside Vince Payne, the district’s director of public relations, and several other district leaders. Together they describe how the district addressed retention issues with its teachers, how its brand of employee empowerment combined flexibility with accountability, and how collaboration has impacted even evaluation. They talk about how they develop employees to bolster continuity and how they protect the culture they have helped create.

Tyler said, “People always ask, ‘What was the key to the turnaround?’ And we have these chicken-and-egg conversations: ‘Was it this? Was it this? Or was it this?’ I think there were really five factors that went into it.”

1. Retention: Making the Commitment

While most workplace transformation stories start with hiring, Hamilton Local’s begins with retention. “Finding great teachers wasn’t the problem; it was keeping great teachers,” Tyler said. “Because we couldn’t afford to pay teachers very well, they didn’t feel successful here. Surrounding districts could pay a lot more, so we were a training ground. We had to find a way to be competitive salary wise.”

He said, “We did that by making some good budgetary decisions. We cut some of the programs that weren’t necessarily critical to academic success and reinvested that money back into our salary structure.”

Tyler said the 300-plus-employee district that used to replace 40 or 50 departing teachers every summer now has to hire just a handful.

+5%
RETENTION

"I have not considered searching for a better job in the past month."

Hamilton Local School District scored 5-percentage points higher than last year's survey. They also scored 8 percent higher than the Primary & Secondary Schools Top Workplaces benchmark.

Source: 2016 [Workplace Survey](#)

2. Empowerment: Flexibility with Accountability

Better pay came alongside empowerment to make teaching decisions so educators could most effectively convey the state's curriculum and reach its goals.

"The State of Ohio provides for us the outcome," Tyler said. "But our teachers are absolutely in control of how to best to reach that outcome. They have the ability to make decisions on how they're teaching." With that flexibility came accountability.

"We made a shift from teachers saying, 'Well, I covered that material,' to 'Did my kids learn the material?' We started to really pay attention to what they were learning instead of what we were teaching and holding ourselves accountable to that better standard."

3. Collaboration: Even in Assessments

With accountability often comes competition. Here the Hamilton Local School District leadership team emphasized collaboration, even in connection with the sometimes-sensitive subject of teacher assessments.

"We were one of the very first to begin doing common assessments," Tyler said. "Every four-and-a-half weeks, we would assess every kid who took a particular class. The teachers would all see the same assessments; and each one was coded to one of the standards that we have to meet with the state test. Those teachers would sit down and do an analysis of how their kids scored compared to those taught by their colleagues.



“At first, this was difficult because the process by its nature is somewhat contentious. People felt like we were going to make employment decisions. But after building some trust on that, we got to the point where teachers would look at that data and share ideas about how they could each improve.”

“Once we started to have some success and improved our results on the state test, the collaboration created camaraderie. Teachers started enjoying that process. Now they feel it’s a necessary part of their instruction.”

4. Development: Promoting from Within

Teachers are vital to the Hamilton Local School District beyond the classroom: They are a well-mined source of leadership talent.

Tyler said, “Of our administrative team, the overwhelming majority came in as something else. Most of us came in as teachers and have had that promotion opportunity. We almost never make an external hire for administrative purposes.” He noted that of the 22 people on the district-wide staff, just two joined Hamilton schools in their current role.

Payne, who is one of those two, added that, “We’ve maintained continuity by identifying leaders in the classroom. Those teachers have become principals and assistant principals. Those principals have now become senior leadership. Mark has risen through the ranks from a teacher to becoming our assistant superintendent.”

Payne added, “We feel hiring from within is very important in establishing a run of success and maintaining happiness with employees. They have to know that if they work hard they can have an opportunity for advancement.”

5. Protection: Making Expectations Clear

Prospective employees, Tyler said, hear loud and clear that academic progress will continue and the district’s workplace culture will be defended.

“In the hiring process, I advertise our workplace environment,” he said. “I use the Top Workplaces designation a lot. I keep one of the trophies right on my desk to showoff during the whole interview process.”

And when it comes to culture, Tyler is matter-of-fact: “I tell them, ‘We’re very, very protective of our culture. If you come in and you’re positive, and you jump in, and you work well with others and those kinds of things, we’re going to have a long, happy career together. If not, it might be a short road’.”

Flipping the Script

Public education is stuffed with numbers, and the ones for the Hamilton Local School District are headed higher. Tyler said more students are graduating and they have more skills for whatever comes next in their lives. But what matters almost as much is, “the abstract, the attitude, the anecdotal stuff.”

He said. “It’s difficult to describe. But that to me is absolutely the biggest difference. Somewhere during this process, kids began to see themselves as academically successful and academically prepared. In our athletic league, we went from the worst in academic preparation to the best. We absolutely flipped the script.”

Mike Morbitzer, a Hamilton Township High School graduate and one of the district’s current administrators, usually closes their presentations reflecting on when he was a student more than 25 years ago and says people used to say matter-of-factly, “‘Well, what do you expect? I went to Hamilton.’ Now, with pride and conviction they say, ‘Hey, I went to Hamilton!’”

Morbitzer says, “That inflection difference is the best thing about this entire situation. It’s a feeling of self-worth, and an emotion that validates everything we continue to do as a district.”

