

## **MAD RIVER LOCAL SCHOOLS: *Providing Diverse Learning Opportunities to Meet the Needs of All Students (Part I)***

**M**ad River Local Schools, located in the greater Dayton, Ohio area, serves close to 4,000 Pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students with diverse learning needs and interests. Described as tireless, supportive, and dedicated, the Mad River faculty and staff, led by Superintendent Chad Wyen, strive to meet the district's mission: *"to create successful educational experiences for all the students we serve through diverse opportunities."* The district's open door attitude and the intentional development of strong working relationships with parents, community members, business partners, community colleges, and the nearby Wright-Patterson Air Force Base contribute to Mad River's reputation as a family-friendly environment for all families, including the many military families served by the district.



*Part I of this feature on Mad River Schools explores the district's work to gain focus and put structures in place that facilitate meaningful implementation of strategies and actions to meet identified goals. Part II will address, in more detail, how the district has used structures and tools to build the capacity of the faculty and staff, as well as lessons learned.*

### **Focusing the Work: Getting to What Matters Most**

"We're putting programs in place to meet student need, including opportunities to explore different career fields through an emphasis on project-based experiences that emphasize application to the real world," said Chad Wyen, Superintendent of Mad River Local Schools. Wyen described the need for a "deeper understanding of instructional practices to prepare every child for the workforce, whether through postsecondary education, military service, vocational training, or other options."

Mad River provides services through its seven schools: four elementary schools, two middle schools, and one comprehensive high school. Approximately 70% of the student population is characterized as economically disadvantaged; about 77% are white and 23% are a member of a minority group. A mobility rate of 12.4% is documented on the district's Ohio School Report Card.

More than 30 College Credit Plus<sup>1</sup> classes are offered through Mad River's Stebbins High School for approximately 1,500 total credit hours earned annually. According to Wyen, about a quarter of the students

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<sup>1</sup> Ohio's *College Credit Plus* program allows high school students to take college courses from community colleges or universities while earning high school credits at the same time. Courses taken from a public college or university are free. For additional information, go to: <https://www.ohiohighered.org/>.

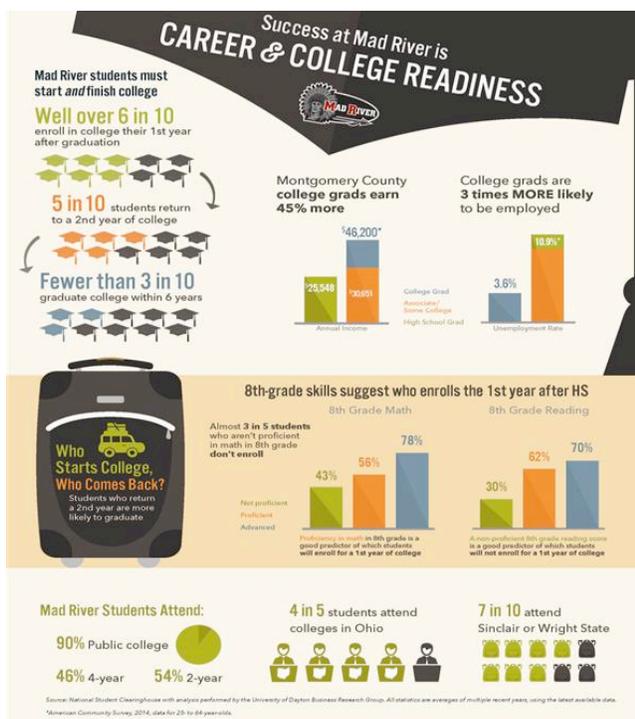
attending the high school (i.e., about 300 students) participate in the program. Mad River is also home to two of the state's 29 STEM-designated schools – one at Stebbins High School and one at Mad River Middle School – a distinction for which the district is proud. “This major accomplishment shows what we can achieve through dedication, hard work, and perseverance,” explained Wyen.

The designation as a STEM (*Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics*) school makes Stebbins – one of only three schools to receive the distinction in Montgomery County – part of the Ohio STEM Learning Network (OSLN), which provides access to a statewide and national network of professionals dedicated to sharing effective practices in problem-based integrated learning methods.

Modeling hard work and perseverance is something Wyen is willing to do as part of building the collective capacity of the faculty and staff to improve strong core instruction across the district.

“We had cookie cutter goals that just didn’t work for us,” said Wyen. “We backed up and reexamined our real needs and how we would define success as a district; our biggest measure of success is high school graduation.”

Mad River spent significant time and energy in developing a plan that was meaningful to both the school community and the larger community, and meaningful for students in the district. After a process involving many stakeholders, the district identified two focused goal areas: (1) improving core instruction, and (2) increasing graduation [encompassing strategies to improve attendance and behavioral expectations through the use of positive behavioral intervention and supports (PBIS)].



**Charting a Course Based on ‘the Why.’** Wyen assumed the superintendency two years ago after having served in various roles in the district. Looking back, he recalls the hard work it took to gain focus based on what he, staff, and the community believed was most important. “In shifting to practices that would support depth of knowledge aligned with the common core, we realized that our practices were all over the place for many different reasons; we had to revisit our mission and answer the ‘why’ before determining the ‘what’ and the ‘how,’” said Wyen.

The administrative team considered the work of ethnographer Simon Sinek, *Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, in identifying the overriding need to provide educational opportunities to learn and diverse experiences to meet the needs of every student. “We’re not completely there yet, but all staff understand that we’re here to serve every kid and here to focus on instruction and graduation,” added Wyen.

Next, the district took steps to develop a shared understanding of strong core instruction and effective instructional practice across all schools and among all personnel within the district. Using the Ohio Improvement Process (OIP) and on-line resources from the Ohio Leadership Advisory Council (OLAC), Mad River's administrative team engaged all personnel in thinking more broadly about the district's mission and the collective responsibility of the staff to help prepare every student for success.

The **Decision Framework (DF)** tool (i.e., the major tool used at Stage 1 of the OIP) was used to make decisions about the most pressing problems faced by the district, and to identify a limited number of strategies and actions to meet identified goals. In addition to the DF, the district team used the *District Self-Assessment Guide for Moving Our Numbers* (see [www.movingournumbers.org](http://www.movingournumbers.org)) to further examine the depth and breadth of implementation of specific areas of practice (e.g., selecting and implementing shared instructional practices) across the district.



The process of sorting through multiple sources of relevant data, not merely for accountability purposes, but more so to assess how well the district was doing in meeting student need, was illuminating according to Wyen. "We'll start working on the DF earlier this year and we'll have two years

of data to use in reviewing our progress in meeting our focused goals; I'm excited about that," offered Wyen.

Mad River's goals have been in place for a little more than a year and Wyen characterizes the 2014-15 school year as a "baseline" year. He personally led the district leadership team's work to improve attendance by modeling the use of the Ohio 5-Step Process (a process used primarily at stage 3 of the OIP) to review data, make refinements in implementation, and monitor the degree of implementation and its effects on meeting the district's goals.

Despite disappointing marks on the most recent Ohio School Report Card, Wyen believes that full implementation of the district's focused improvement plan will lead to improved ratings. Wyen explains: "My message to staff is, 'here's our focused plan, we got focused, we met frequently, we implemented with fidelity, and look what we accomplished in attendance and graduation in only one year.'" "Success is not solely determined by report card results; if we do our job and do it right, graduation rates will rise and that is our most defining measure of success."

**WHY MINDSET MATTERS**

- In K most every student displays a growth mindset – thinking they can learn and be successful – they are enthusiastic and full of promise ready to absorb knowledge. Each grade level beyond that the amount of students with that belief diminishes to the point that in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, only ½ the students have the same belief.

**Challenging Assumptions and Expectations.** The process of using the OIP to determine what constitutes acceptable levels of student progress and performance uncovered assumptions about the expectations some personnel held for students, particularly students from marginalized groups (e.g., students with disabilities). Having served as a special education supervisor in the past, Wyen is especially aware of the effects that low expectations can have on student performance. "We are all engaged in

meeting the needs of every child and have to guard against sending messages that inadvertently destroy a children’s belief that they *can* learn,” stated Wyen.

The administrative team, including all building principals and central office personnel, is studying aspects of growth mindset using Mary Kay Ricci’s work, *Mindsets in the Classroom*. Based on the work of Carol Dweck, the team is working together to develop a PowerPoint presentation that can be used with all staff members. Unlike book study activities undertaken in the past, the team’s creation and use of a shared product is contributing to richer discussions among team members. “In the past, we’d read a book and then go back to our jobs; this is different – it’s beyond a one-year book study; this is ongoing application,” explained Wyen.



### Structuring Meaningful Discourse

Mad River’s goal to implement research-based instructional strategies to provide diverse learning opportunities for all students is dependent, in part, on staff coming together around a shared understanding of what constitutes effective instructional practice. The district used OIP structures [i.e., district leadership team (DLT), building leadership teams (BLTs), teacher-based teams (TBTs)] to facilitate improved instructional capacity across the district, and to provide opportunities for staff to learn from each other. “Until you have a good functional team, you can’t even have the conversation about what strong core instruction should look like,” explained Wyen.

One strategy for reaching the district’s goal in the area of improved core instruction reads:

*100% of Teacher-based Teams will use/implement the PDSA/5-Step Process (documentation of strategy, improve instruction, student learning) as measured by completion of the district-adopted template.*

In addition to instituting TBTs and ensuring that every teacher is participating on a TBT, the district also involved principals in the *Ohio Leadership for Inclusion, Implementation, & Instructional Improvement (OLi<sup>4</sup>)* project beginning in 2014. The OLi<sup>4</sup> project (see <https://www.oli-4.org/> for more information) is designed to support school principals in more effectively leading teacher learning and facilitating BLTs and TBTs. Elementary principals meet regularly as a principal leadership team (PLT) to share what’s working well, get ideas and assistance for specific issues, and talk about how to improve student learning across the district. “We used to have a lot of competition between buildings before. Now, by using the DF, and having principals participate in OLi<sup>4</sup> and teachers work in TBTs, we’re having real conversations about how to support deeper learning,” said Wyen.

Finding time for teams to meet at all levels is a challenge but one that the district is addressing. Elementary schools have one hour daily to work in teams and designate one day per week for TBT meetings. At the fifth – sixth-grade level, six waiver days and six additional early release days are used to support teamwork. The seventh – eighth grade level and the high school are working to identify more efficient and adequate common planning time to support BLT and TBT effectiveness. “We often exist in our own bubble. We’re

working hard to reduce isolation and build in uninterrupted time for teams to truly look at data, reflect on their practice, and plan and implement effective practices,” said Wyen.

*Watch for Part II for additional information about Mad River Local Schools’ work to improve learning for all students and staff.*

## References

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### ***For More Information***

For more information about the **Mad River School District** and its work to improve learning for all children, contact Chad Wyen, Superintendent, at 937.478.3349 or 937.259.6606, or via email at [chad.wyen@madriverschools.org](mailto:chad.wyen@madriverschools.org).

For more information about the **OLAC and OIP** resources, contact Dr. Jim Gay, OLAC Co-director at [jimgay@basa-ohio.org](mailto:jimgay@basa-ohio.org).