



CASE STUDY

Changing the Culture of Teaching: Hamilton County's Project COACH Teacher Evaluation System

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Originally published in *District Management Journal*, v.10, Spring 2012

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Changing the Culture of Teaching: Hamilton County's *Project COACH* Teacher Evaluation System

In a span of under two years, Hamilton County Department of Education (HCDE) in Chattanooga, Tennessee, has gained national attention for its new teacher evaluation system, Project COACH. Now halfway through the first full year of implementation, Project COACH has already had a profound and expansive impact. The focus of teacher evaluations is shifting from procedural considerations, such as documenting compliance, to substantive reflections, such as connecting teaching to student learning. The shift in focus is evident throughout the organization. It has reshaped not only how teachers and principals interact but also how the district works as a collective team to reinforce effective teaching through curriculum management, professional development, and school support.

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originally profiled in the Spring 2011 issue of *The District Management Journal* (see “Hamilton County Department of Education: Rethinking Teacher Evaluation through Project COACH”

by Scales and Atkins), HCDE’s Project COACH initiative emerged as a first mover in responding to Tennessee’s receipt of a Phase One Race to the Top grant. The initiative helped the district to leave behind a system where too few evaluations were given, too many of those that were given indicated consistently high performance, and too few of those that did not indicate high performance resulted in real action. The evaluation system has moved from a binary rating system in which 98% of teachers received a satisfactory rating to a four-level rating system more reflective of student outcomes. In a testament to Project COACH’s success and influence, the state of Tennessee is currently undergoing an examination of its own evaluation system by reviewing the effectiveness of models like

Project COACH, for which HCDE had been granted a waiver from the state system.

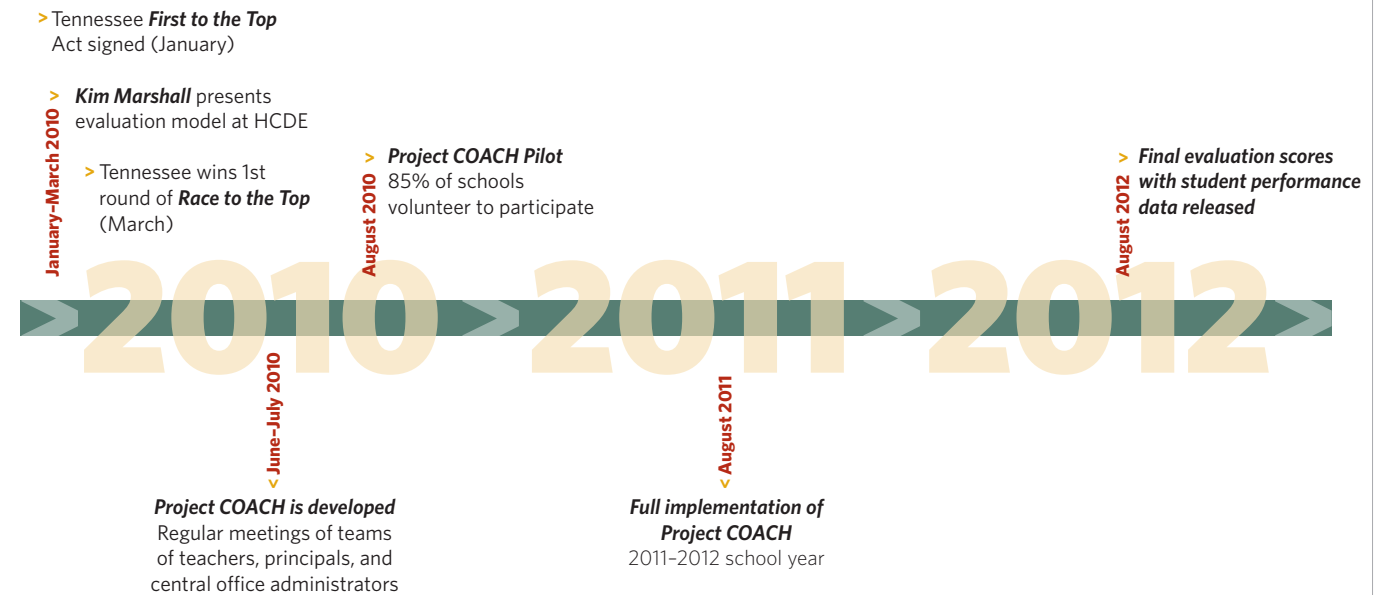
The Story of Project COACH: A Road Less Traveled

In early 2010, HCDE’s administrative and instructional leaders knew that significant education reform efforts were on the horizon in Tennessee. The state’s First to the Top Act, passed in February 2010, was designed to position Tennessee as a leading candidate for federal Race to the Top funds, and it did just that: Tennessee was one of two states to receive first-round Race to the Top funding in March 2010. Among the various reforms it introduced, the First to the Top Act stipulated that districts needed to conduct teacher evaluations yearly. In conjunction with this requirement, the act granted districts the option to create their own new evaluation systems.

Seeking to be proactive and perhaps to influence the eventual state-wide teacher evaluation system,

EXHIBIT 1

Timeline of Project COACH



Source: HCDE

the district and the Chattanooga-Hamilton County Public Education Foundation organized a retreat in February 2010 to consider the future of teacher evaluation. The team drew inspiration and energy from a presentation by Kim Marshall, a well-known education consultant and author of *Rethinking Teacher Supervision and Evaluation*. Marshall described a four-part model consisting of: (1) mini-observations, (2) team-based curriculum unit planning, (3) a team-based interim assessment, and (4) a summative evaluation rubric. With support from The District Management Council (DMC), the district subsequently formed a team of principals, teachers, and central office administrators, who started charting out a structure and implementation plan for a new evaluation system. Work commenced in the spring of 2010. By the start of the 2010–2011 school year in August, the plan was ready to pilot.

Eighty-five percent of the schools in the district chose to participate in the pilot program. The 68 schools (out of 78 in the district) that opted into the

pilot agreed to test the new evaluation system while concurrently continuing to use the old system. The swift launch of the pilot and its high participation rate were accomplishments that warranted pride, but they also placed pressure on the district to create a pilot plan that effectively resembled a full implementation plan. Doing so meant each administrator had to accept some uncertainty and to take ownership of making the system work in their individual school. Though developing a new evaluation system in-house requires substantially more work, Superintendent Rick Smith notes that “the commitment to make it our own model has paid significant dividends in teacher and administrator buy-in and satisfaction.”

For the central office, implementation implied more than merely monitoring whether building administrators were conducting observations; it also required a structural shift in the way things worked. Each department now had to align around supporting administrators and schools as they successfully unveiled the new evaluation process. ▷

Project COACH

How it Works

The design of Project COACH centered around three features:

- **Instilling a common definition of effective teaching**
- **Frequently observing teachers and providing immediate feedback**
- **Ensuring teachers had meaningful development opportunities**

The new system required administrators to conduct “mini-observations” of each teacher’s classroom ten times per year, and to hold verbal feedback conferences within 48 hours of each observation. Mini-observations consist of unannounced classroom observations, each lasting a minimum of five minutes. The verbal conferences that follow are quick, usually lasting less than five minutes, but they give the administrator an opportunity to provide specific and actionable feedback on both strengths and areas for improvement.

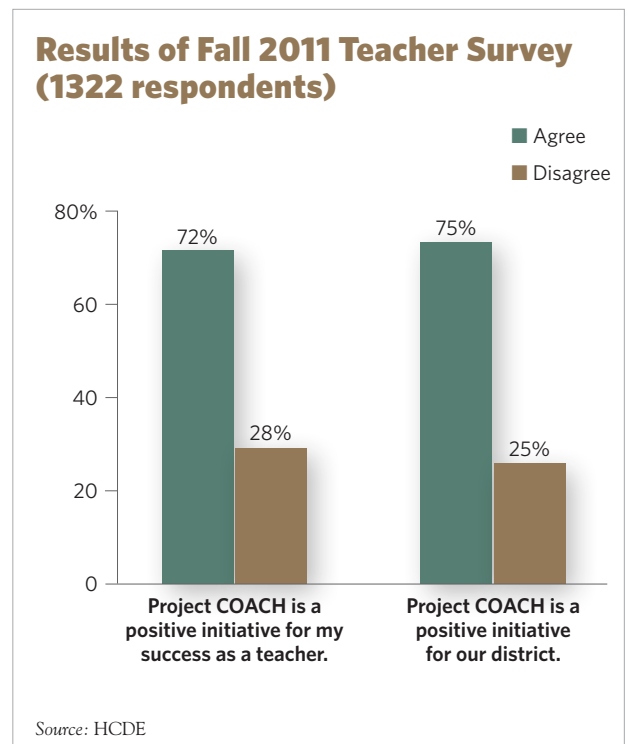
In addition to the mini-observations, each administrator provides a summative evaluation for every teacher at the end of every year. The summative evaluation is based on the rubric and involves a verbal conference. This is an opportunity for principals to review the progress of each teacher and to provide feedback on overall performance and prospects for continued improvement. A significant change from the old evaluation system, this demanding process resulted in a laser-like focus on advancing teacher performance from both building administrators and central office administrators.

How Is It Working?

Now over halfway through the 2011–2012 school year—the first full year of implementation for Project COACH—over 75% of teachers and 100% of administrators believe that it is positively impacting teaching practices. This marks an increase from the already impressive figures at the end of the pilot year, when 69% of teachers and 98% of administrators reported satisfaction with Project COACH. Despite the many implementation challenges and cultural barriers to change, the initial signs of success have strengthened.

In fall 2011, HCDE welcomed a new superintendent, Rick Smith. A long-time veteran of the Hamilton County schools, Smith has incorporated Project COACH into his overall strategic approach of having the central office put a greater focus on supporting principals and teachers. As Smith stated: “Building upon our progress last year, the district is currently conveying to every department and every district employee the message of continuous improvement in the name of better supporting our teachers, and, ultimately, our students.”

EXHIBIT 2



Fostering a Culture of Dialogue and Teamwork

One of the goals of Project COACH was to support and help develop teachers. The efforts in this area benefited from both the Project COACH structure as well as the collaborative support administrators provided in rolling out the new system. In terms of structure, the frequent mini-observations allowed teachers to receive timely, insightful, and actionable feedback from principals and other administrators. This year, two-thirds of teachers and nearly all principals agreed that instructional conversations have increased as a result of Project COACH. The mini-observation and feedback process is meant primarily as a developmental tool. Because the mini-observations are not individually rated, teachers are able to focus on improvement based on the feedback rather than dwelling on a score.

In terms of collaborative team-based support, school administrators often utilize the help of central office administrators and curriculum and instructional staff to conduct observations for teachers. These observations both give teachers a varied perspective on their practices and allow principals to view feedback from multiple

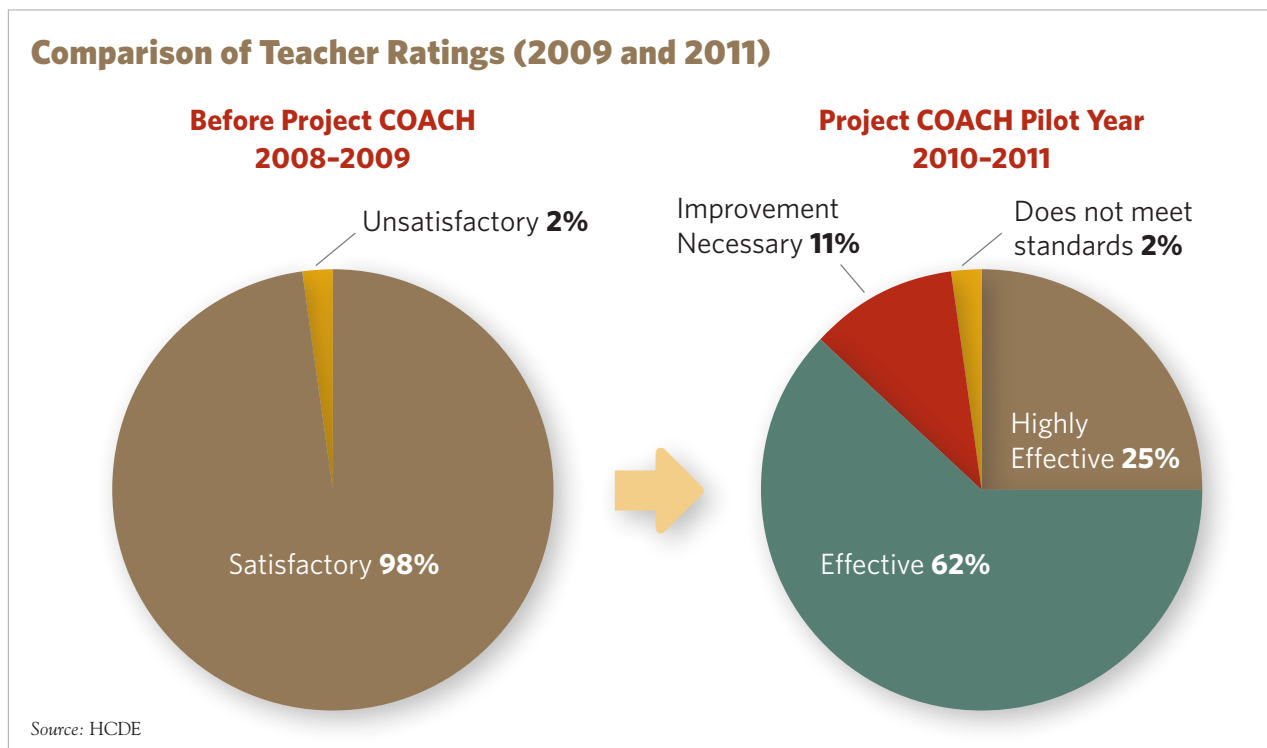
observers. Indeed, 91% of teachers believe that the verbal feedback initiated under Project COACH has helped to improve classroom instruction. A culture of dialogue and teamwork is growing between principals and teachers, who often continue to discuss teaching practices well beyond the verbal feedback session.

Improving Differentiation of Teacher Performance

Project COACH has improved the differentiation of teacher performance. HCDE's former teacher evaluation rated 98% of teachers as satisfactory and only 2% as unsatisfactory. In place of such homogeneity, Project COACH implemented a four-level rating system from "Highly Effective" to "Does Not Meet Standards." Under the new rating system, only 25% of teachers were rated "Highly Effective," while over 13% of teachers fell in the bottom two categories (Exhibit 3).

Though these results point in the right direction, further improvement remains necessary. One area of work will be increasing the consistency in ratings. The distribution of ratings last year varied significantly between schools. Some schools rated nearly 95% of >

EXHIBIT 3



teachers as “Highly Effective” while others gave this rating to less than 1%. Though HCDE made significant investments in evaluator training at the outset, the issues of inter-rater reliability and ensuring standards are applied consistently across buildings continue to be at the forefront.

Beginning in 2011–2012, Tennessee will require 50% of each teacher evaluation to be based on quantitative student achievement scores. Of the 50%, 35% will come from individual student growth data on the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System (TVAAS) and 15% will be based on a teacher-selected achievement score. Basing half of the evaluation on student achievement stems from research indicating the importance of using student achievement data to gain an objective view of how much teachers have impacted student learning. While the debate around how to use student achievement data continues, strong consensus has already emerged that including achievement data as one of multiple measures is critical in order to differentiate teacher performance rigorously.

Though developing a new evaluation system in-house requires substantially more work, Superintendent Smith notes that “the commitment to make it our own model has paid significant dividends in teacher and administrator buy-in and satisfaction.”

With the inclusion of outcomes data, HCDE leaders knew they would gain a more accurate picture of teacher effectiveness. Perhaps the greater challenge is to ensure that the other 50%, based on mini-observations and a summative evaluation, aligns with the outcomes data and informs a system of support for teachers.

Differentiation is not an end in itself, but a path to provide more specialized support. The mini-observations gave principals the opportunity to identify less effective teachers early in the school year and to implement

growth plans and tailored professional development prior to the summative evaluation. On the flip side, teachers had plenty of time to improve their teaching practice and demonstrate improvement by the end of the year.

Encouraging Team-Based Collaboration

The high expectations set by Project COACH helped to establish a new “team mentality” in the district. To comply with the increased requirements for the new evaluation, school administrators sought assistance from each other as well as from the central office. During the design phase of Project COACH, the number of mini-observations that needed to be conducted had been a concern; an unintended but positive consequence was that meeting the demands of Project COACH has required collaboration and teamwork within schools as well as with the central office. In an effort to provide consistent support, central office staff began to realign their work to help make sure principals were able to evaluate and support teachers effectively. Superintendent Smith describes this shift as a core part of the change that occurred in the district: “central administrators had to focus in on and prioritize their role to support and understand the needs at the school level.”

Collaboration between schools and departments engendered broad-based support of the system. Rather than becoming the sole province of Human Resources, Project COACH shaped the daily work of every curriculum and instruction administrator, every principal, every instructional coach, and nearly every teacher. School administrator teams work together to schedule mini-observations at the beginning of the year in order to guarantee that each teacher receives the requisite number of observations. Principals often seek support of central office administrators to conduct mini-observations for teachers. Through increased



Superintendent Rick Smith, Hamilton County Department of Education

principal-level training opportunities, school administrators are able to share best practices in identifying effective teaching and giving constructive feedback. The Superintendent and district leadership view weekly reports on observation counts by school to see which schools may need additional support in conducting observations. Superintendent Smith is leading a strategic planning process to further this initial effort by ensuring Project COACH has ownership by each school administrator and every district administrator.

Creating a Clear Vision

“We knew Project COACH couldn’t be about the way teachers are scored; it had to be about improvement,” noted the Superintendent about the vision of the new evaluation system. That vision continues to be communicated throughout the district. HCDE’s rubric that defined effective teaching established the standards by which every teacher would be evaluated and supported. Ensuring that those standards were meaningful meant every central office department had to align with the new system. The curriculum and instructional staff is using the common definition of effective teaching to outline how new curriculum standards would correspond to the rubric standards. Professional development is being tied to development opportunities for teachers based on their performance on the rubric. Human resources is even beginning a process to evaluate potential teachers on how they might perform against the evaluation standards.

The clear vision for Project COACH fostered energy that sustained the change process in the district. Many administrators and onlookers worried that it would not be practical to impose the high expectations of the new teacher evaluation system on already busy administrators. Yet the energy and buy-in developed by principals in the pilot year revealed that high expectations were indeed possible. Most buildings were able to meet the mini-observations requirement for every teacher—and many buildings exceeded the requirement. This year, HCDE provided iPads to every school principal to assist with conducting observations faster and with less stress. The support for Project COACH evinced through the investment of time and resources furthered the energy at the school level.

The Work Ahead

The work to improve support and management systems for teachers continues with the full implementation of Project COACH this school year. The school administrators are now launching the other two components of the Kim Marshall evaluation plan: team curriculum planning and team interim assessments. Critical to a sustained, thorough, and consistent implementation has been the formation of informal and formal teams between schools and between schools and the central office.

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As the first year of implementation comes to an end, HCDE is planning to undertake two broad tasks.

TASK 1: Evaluating the alignment to student data

This first task starts with an analysis of the alignment of Project COACH ratings to student data outcomes. Pockets of divergence between the Project COACH and student data ratings may imply that observers are not equipped to know which practices lead to the greatest student gains. The district may target those Project COACH observers for additional training on how to look for and examine effective teaching practices that lead to high student outcomes. The district is also analyzing the content of the Project COACH rubric itself to assess how it may or may not correlate with student outcomes. It recently ran a study to compare which of the indicators in the rubric have the greatest impact on student learning. Understanding which indicators are the most important may lead to even further refinements of the Project COACH model. ▷

TASK 2: Making evaluations matter

A second area of work for the district is to ensure that Project COACH is recognized and reinforced by Human Resources, Curriculum and Instruction, and other central departments. Under the directorship of Stacey Roddy, the Human Resources team took on the task of creating a clear growth plan process embedded in Project COACH for teachers in need of additional support. Human Resources laid out a timeline, process, and guidelines for administrators to complete and monitor progress on the growth plans. Setting clear expectations around growth plans is vital in order

for teachers to know their responsibilities to improve. Moreover, it lays out a platform for administrators to monitor and track their struggling teachers. The Human Resources team is also planning a career ladder for teachers consistently rated as top performers to become coaches and mentors under the Project COACH model. Meanwhile, the Department of Curriculum and Instruction is focusing its attention on implementing the other two components of the Marshall model with the goal of creating a coherent structure to gather data, provide feedback, and target the right support. The task ahead for every department in the central office will be to

EXHIBIT 4

High-Level Overview of Project COACH Implementation

District and school level collaboration

- Team-based planning and oversight
- School-level implementation support provided by central office
- Teacher and principal ownership of increasing effectiveness in every building

Principals as instructional leaders

- Principal and administration team visit every classroom regularly
 - 6 mini-observation for professionally licensed teachers
 - 8 mini-observations for non-professionally licensed teachers
- Principal conducts annual summative conferences with teacher to discuss performance and development plans

District-wide definition of effective teaching

- Rubric is not a checklist but a guide on how to improve
- Classroom teacher rubric has 6 domains and 40 total indicators
- Multiple rubrics created and tailored to teacher type

Tailored development opportunities

- Regular feedback for teachers provided by multiple observers
- Professional development on new curriculum tailored to evaluation
- Career ladder for high performers to take on leadership roles
- Development opportunities to support struggling teachers

Source: HCDE

work with principals to tie each component into one cohesive system to evaluate and develop teachers.

Beyond these specific initiatives lies the heart of any continuous improvement process: the acknowledgement of how the system and the process can be perpetually revisited, revised, and enhanced. The HCDE team maintained a running list of challenges and obstacles during the pilot in order to re-evaluate the evaluation system. Is the system too tedious? Is the feedback meaningful to teachers? The team tackled these questions honestly without lessening the value of the system overall. Recommendations from principals reduced the mini-observation requirement from ten per teacher to six for professionally licensed teachers and eight for teachers without a professional license. Feedback also led to additional rubric revisions, including a reduction in the number of indicators and the creation of specialized versions for certain teaching staff. The curriculum and instructional team took the lead in tailoring the rubric to evaluate instructional coaches in the district. The district is now examining additional training opportunities for principals and teachers based on the feedback and results of Project COACH.

Conclusion

The fervor around new teacher evaluation systems can at first pose a daunting challenge. Implementing a new evaluation system across a district requires a significant shift in the work of many departments. Yet the challenge is also an opportunity. Launching a new evaluation system, in particular, brings the chance to change the mindset and culture of the entire district around increasing the effectiveness of teachers, which research has established to be a key driver of student outcomes. Collaboration and teamwork at all levels, then, work as the catalyst to drive change.

Hamilton County Department of Education used both the design and the implementation process of their new teacher evaluation system to change the way every person and department interacted with one another. Principals are now engaging in regular dialogue about what's happening in a teacher's classroom. Central office administrators are thinking about how their department can increase teacher effectiveness and better support school administrators. Teams of administrators and teachers are striving to identify effective practices and improve teaching.

Taking this to the next level, the district will work with DMC to undertake a strategic planning process to build strategies around advancing student achievement. Of central importance in that work will be utilizing the collaboration that Project COACH galvanized to continuously support and advance teaching and learning.

The high expectations set by Project COACH helped to establish a new “team mentality” in the district. To comply with the increased requirements for the new evaluation, school administrators sought assistance from each other as well as from the central office.

In thinking about Project COACH, what lessons can be learned? Though developing a new evaluation system in-house required substantially more work, it also created a higher degree of buy-in and ownership that have been important factors in Project COACH's success. Involving principals from the outset has also been critical to a successful design and implementation. Moreover, HCDE's experience affirms the value in setting and maintaining a high bar despite concerns about how principals could possibly execute so many mini-observations. The very high challenge of meeting this high bar had the unintended benefit of pushing collaboration within schools, between schools, and with the central office to an unprecedented level. Finally, Project COACH is a powerful testament to the scale of transformation that can occur in a short amount of time. The district moved quickly to launch a large pilot, is committed to tweaking the program in the spirit of continuous improvement, and is embedding a robust evaluation system as a pillar of its strategic plan for long-term success.



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