



Ohio Senate Education Committee Academic Success & Lessons Learned

Canton City School District, Stark County
Jeffery S. Talbert, Superintendent

Chair Brenner, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Ingram, and distinguished members of the Senate Education Committee, I appreciate the chance to testify about the efforts our district made during the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent measures we have implemented to recover.

I am Jeff Talbert and I am in my fourth year as Superintendent of the Canton City School District. If you are doing the math, that means I started in this role in the midst of the shutdown. Before Canton City I served as Superintendent of the Alliance City School District, another urban district located in eastern Stark County.

The Canton City School District is the largest and most diverse school district in Stark County, serving nearly 8,000 students across pre-kindergarten to 12th grade. Our expansive district spans 22 schools and programs located within 21 facilities, encompassing a diverse range of educational settings. This includes a dedicated Early Learning Center, four elementary schools for grades K-3, five for grades K-6, three intermediate buildings, three middle schools, and three comprehensive high school campuses. Uniquely, our district is home to five choice schools, offering families the freedom to select the ideal learning environment for their children outside of traditional residential zones. These specialized institutions provide a broad spectrum of educational pathways, from Montessori and arts-focused programs to STEM education and early college opportunities, ensuring a rich, diverse, and inclusive learning experience for all students.

Upon the pandemic's onset in early 2020, the Canton City School District found itself unprepared for a comprehensive transition to virtual learning that could sustain or enhance our students' academic development. Consequently, during the summer of 2020, district leadership channeled their efforts into crafting an academic plan designed to offer a variety of educational models tailored to each student's unique needs as well as addressing the social and emotional needs of students and families, including providing food and conducting weekly wellness checks for our students.

By September 2020, we achieved a balanced return, with half of our students engaging in face-to-face instruction and the other half participating in virtual learning, concurrently rolling out our comprehensive 1 to 1 technology initiative. Notably, we distinguished ourselves as the only

district among the Ohio 8 to facilitate a return to in-person education that fall. By January 2021, we had successfully transitioned 75% of our students into either a hybrid or fully in-person schooling arrangement, illustrating our commitment to adaptively supporting our students through unprecedented times.

During this time we were also able to complete our strategic planning process which resulted in our “Design for the Future” plan which has centered on fostering a culture of collaboration and trust among our administration, staff, students, families, labor leaders, and the broader community. The successful cultivation of this collaborative environment has been instrumental in our significant strides forward since our rebound from the pandemic, positioning us to not only meet but also surpass state and local expectations. The chart below reflects high level data related to where we’ve been and where we are, understanding we have more work to do.

Percent of students who have scored proficient or higher

		2022-2023	2021-2022	2020-21	2019-2020
Third Grade	English Lang. Arts	35.1%	32.8%	23.9%	36.5%
	Math	31.4%	21.9%	32.8%	37.7%
Fourth Grade	English Lang. Arts	36.9%	28.9%	23%	43%
	Math	35.8%	22.6%	25%	53.9%
Fifth Grade	English Lang. Arts	43.1%	36.6%	35.3%	47%
	Math	28.9%	19.6%	20.4%	39.7%
	Science	30.5%	23.3%	23.1%	33.4%
Sixth Grade	English Lang. Arts	27.3%	31.9%	22.4%	30.1%
	Math	20.8%	20.0%	15.2%	30.3%

Performance Index

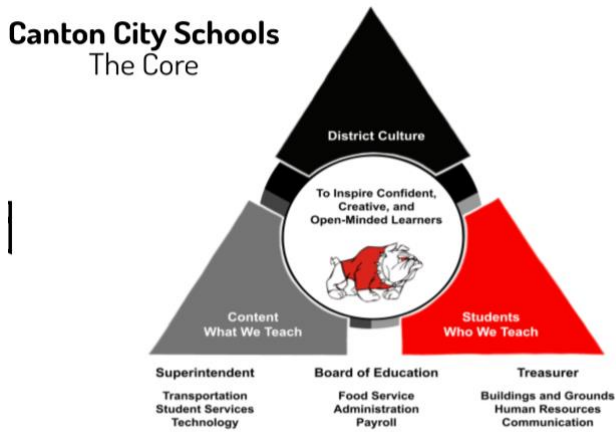
School Year	District PI	PI Percent (% of Max Score)	Max PI Score*
22-23	57.7	53.1	108.79
21-22	53.5	49.7	107.25
20-21	49.5	41.3	120
19-20	50.4	42	120
18-19	64.4	53.7	120

Though we are only at the beginning of this journey, I am here today to demonstrate **how** we are achieving gradual, consistent, and daily progress within: **1) Academic Performance; 2) Teaching & Learning; 3) Students Support; and 4) Culture.**

1. Academic Performance: CORE Strategy

Our academic program has advanced across all areas by adhering to our CORE strategy which guarantees that:

- a. **Staff receives** essential materials, supplies, training, and support, enabling them to deliver the quality of instruction our students require for success.
- b. **Students have access** to the necessary resources to overcome any obstacles that may hinder their engagement with educators and the curriculum.
- c. **A district culture which promotes** collaboration, empowerment, and community building, further supporting our commitment to collective improvement and success.



The model of the Canton City Schools “Core” demonstrates all facets of the organization that are necessary to promote the district mission of inspiring confident, creative, and open-minded learners.

2. Teaching & Learning: CORE Implementation

Successful CORE implementation for teaching and learning has included the following, each of which has contributed to our upward trajectory.

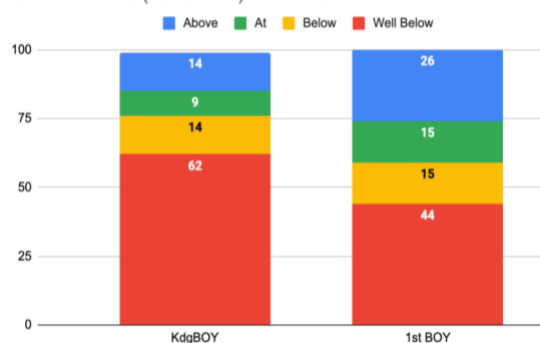
- a. **Instructional Coaches** are in each building for embedded professional development, ensuring that all staff have access to continuous learning. *(Supported by Covid Funds)*
- b. **Literacy numeracy specialist** were added to buildings to reduce class sizes and increase intervention support. *(Supported by Covid Funds)*
- c. **New data and assessment systems** have been identified and put into practice, providing our teaching team with precise, student-specific performance insights, supporting targeted lessons *(Supported by GRF Funds)*
- d. **Software to enable personalized skill development** during intervention periods and at home for students to cater to individual learning needs. *(Supported by GRF Funds)*
- e. **Modifications to building schedules** to enhance collaborative opportunities among staff and the flexibility to offer interventions to students. *(Supported by GRF Funds)*
- f. **Expansion of instructional time** for all students within the academic day, enhancing exposure to core subjects and enrichment activities.
- g. **Special Education Liaisons** to support our intervention specialist with paperwork related to progress monitoring/reevaluations which allowed increased support to students and core subject teachers. *(Supported by Covid Funds)*
- h. **Introduction of aides** in all Kindergarten classrooms *(Supported by Covid Funds)*
- i. **Comprehensive literacy intervention and support** programs across all elementary schools to reinforce and expand upon the 2018/2019 Science of Reading training initiative for every Pre-K through 5th-grade teacher.

3. Student Supports

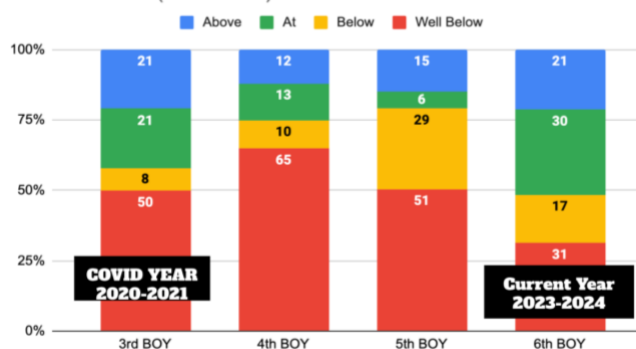
The pandemic had a profound impact on our students, affecting them not just academically, but also socially and emotionally. It intensified pre-existing issues that were already present before 2020. Almost all of our students, nearly 100%, are identified as economically disadvantaged; our rate of chronic absenteeism surged to nearly 50%(which we’ve been able to reduce to 40% in one school year); we experienced a significant increase in our English Language Learner (ELL) population; and certain students have experienced a high rate of mobility. This last point around mobility is under appreciated and its impact, underestimated as most students who stay with our districts over multiple years, improve and experience success. The charts below is an

example. It reflects the same cohort of students who have been consistently enrolled in our district from 3rd grade through 6th grade and then another reflecting Kindergarten & first grade.

Class of 2035 (1st Grade) BOY Trend Data



Class of 2030 (6th Grade) BOY Trend Data



Those who do not have a more difficult time recovering and finding success. All these factors, however, contribute to shaping how our students interact and respond within our school environment. As a result, we've instituted the following supports.

- a. **Deployment of a district-wide communication & engagement platform** to streamline and enhance interactions between schools, teachers, and families.
- b. **Augmentation of English Language Learner (ELL) support** through additional teachers and enhanced translation services, promoting inclusivity and equity.
- c. **Introduction of alternatives to suspension and expulsion**, aimed at minimizing lost instructional time by addressing behavioral issues through constructive interventions. *(Supported by Covid Funds)*.
- d. **Formation of a Trauma-Informed School environment** to provide specialized support for students whose behavior challenges their participation classroom settings, ensuring all students can thrive academically and socially. *(Supported by Covid Funds)*
- e. **Increased afterschool and summer enrichment** programs to provide increased learning opportunities, especially for disconnected students. *(Supported by Covid Funds)*
- f. **Establishment of a Vaccination Clinic** to offer free childhood vaccinations, mitigating the risk of educational disruption due to health compliance issues.

4. Culture

Our emphasis on fostering a culture of trust and collaboration has led to a significant boost in staff morale and efficacy. In partnership with our staff, educators, and labor partners, we've achieved remarkable success this through the following measures:

- a. **Expanded Personal and Team Planning:** Across the district, we enhanced opportunities for both individual and team planning
- b. **Additional Teacher Workdays:** We introduced extra workdays specifically allocated for teachers to develop high-quality plans aimed at bolstering student support.
- c. **Enhanced Professional Development with Options:** Recognizing the diversity in staff needs and interests, we've increased professional development offerings.
- d. **Introduction of Core Building Substitutes:** To ensure continuous learning despite staff absences due to illness, we've introduced core building substitutes.
- e. **Flexible Use of Time and Staff Supports:** By adopting a more flexible approach to time management and staff utilization, we've made it possible for staff to collaborate across different abilities and grades.

5. Next Steps: So Where does Canton City Schools Go From Here?

Since our return from the pandemic, we have made notable progress, yet we acknowledge the considerable journey ahead. We are actively updating our strategic plan to **continue to:**

- a. Expand our successes and intensifying efforts to boost achievement in mathematics
- b. Focus on the downward trajectory of chronic absenteeism
- c. Expand access to preschool
- d. Enhance career development opportunities for all students
- e. Address staff burnout and shortages
- f. Strengthen our support for English Language Learner (ELL) students and their families
- g. Continue and enhance our initiatives to support student mental health

6. State Support Contributed to Our Success

These funds played a significant role in our ability to make progress but equally important was the increased flexibility in multiple areas to implement the work. The ability to navigate our challenges with fewer mandates gave us the ability to be agile and more creative, which increased our staff's willingness to take the risks required to innovate.

I advocate those responsible for shaping education policy to consider ways to increase flexibility while upholding standards for continuous improvement. I also request help with policies that may lead to increased student transiency issues. As our data demonstrate, students who remain in our schools make consistent growth. However, when students transfer between multiple educational institutions with different expectations within the same community, many students end up with significant gaps. This scenario disproportionately impacts our most vulnerable students. Many do not return to the district until middle school or later and these gaps often hinder their ability to benefit from our ever-expanding career training opportunities.

Currently, we are maximizing our existing budget to sustain the programs and support initiated with Covid Funds. Yet, as these resources dwindle, we anticipate a decrease in the level of support we can provide. Therefore, any assistance to provide more financial muscle to these successful strategies would be immensely appreciated.

Despite the privilege of presenting today, it's important to acknowledge that the advancements in the Canton City School District are chiefly attributed to the exceptional dedication and hard work of our over 1400 teachers, administrators, and support staff. They wholeheartedly embrace our core values of Excellence, Leadership, and Building Community, making our achievements possible. It's an honor to continue serving as their Superintendent, guiding and supporting our collective endeavor towards greater accomplishments.

Chair Brenner and members of the committee, thank you for allowing me to share with you today. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.