



Promoting Excellence in Urban Public Education

Through a Strategic Alliance of Superintendents and Teacher Union Leaders

A CASE STUDY PRESENTED BY THE OHIO 8 COALITION



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Capitalizing on the Strength of Superintendent and Teacher Union Collaboration

If there is one thing upon which teacher unions and school districts can agree, it is that their primary objective is to provide the children they serve with a world-class teaching and learning experience. In 2001, the teacher union leaders and superintendents of Ohio's eight largest urban school districts (Akron, Canton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo, and Youngstown) decided that this goal might be most effectively achieved... together. They created the Ohio 8 Coalition and over the past five years, the Coalition has learned a great deal about how to mobilize their collective resources as urban education advocates. They have learned that although many kinds of coalitions are possible, partnerships that bring together superintendents and teacher union leaders from the major urban districts within a state offer unique areas of strength that contribute to the educational achievement of urban schoolchildren. This is the story of their achievements since 2001 and what they have learned along the way. In the final section of this report, the Coalition has distilled some of its most important lessons learned in the hopes these might be useful to other states hoping to create a similar Coalition.

Origins of the Ohio 8 Coalition

BRINGING A UNITED VOICE TO THE CONTESTED TERRAIN OF URBAN PUBLIC EDUCATION

The Ohio 8 initially met in October 2001 at the invitation of the leaders of the Cleveland, KnowledgeWorks, George Gund, and Martha Holden Jennings Foundations. These philanthropic allies and their district partners were concerned with the ways in which Ohio's then-new accountability system might ultimately affect the academic progress of Ohio's eight largest urban school districts. The education leaders and their funder partners quickly realized the state's accountability system was only the tip of the iceberg when it came to recognizing the many points that unify high-poverty, largely minority urban districts. Like many urban school districts nationwide, the Ohio 8 school districts had lost many of their historical democratic allies in local, state and national government to conservative representatives who tended to favor rural and suburban communities and private or market-driven educational initiatives. The Ohio 8 and their philanthropic allies saw the need to form a new common urban voice that could level the playing field by influencing legislators as well as the general public's perceptions regarding the value of public investments in education. They also realized the value of sharing their collective experiences regarding best classroom practices; these efforts not only accelerated the educational quality they could deliver to their students but could also help them be more competitive against the growing number of charter schools increasingly supported by legislators in their communities. Finally, the Ohio 8 and their philanthropic partners realized that while there were a number of very well run state associations in Ohio, none provided a seat at the table for both labor and management and none focused specifically on the problems confronting urban educators.

By the end of that first meeting, Ohio's leaders in urban education realized that a collaborative effort to identify and implement strategies suited to their common character, challenges, and issues had great potential. They unanimously proposed the creation of a long-term coalition that would function as a strategic alliance working to improve academic achievement and graduation rates for the children attending urban public schools in the state.

The Leadership Council of the Ohio 8 Coalition is comprised of the superintendents and teacher union presidents of Akron, Canton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo, and Youngstown, with the Coalition able to draw on the collective commitment to urban education of union and school district personnel in all eight cities. It is currently co-chaired by Dr. Eugene T. W. Sanders, CEO of the Cleveland Municipal School District, and Sam Dorto, president of the Canton Professional Education Association (see Appendix for a full list of participants and past co-chairs). The Ohio 8 cities have a combined population of 2.4 million people, and the districts enroll nearly 250,000 students.

FORMING COALITIONS SUCH AS THE OHIO 8 CAN HELP EDUCATORS:

- Improve teaching and learning by sharing and disseminating classroom practices that meet the educational needs of urban children.
- Enable education leaders to gain “big picture” perspectives by providing a safe space for mutual support and validation.
- Improve business and operating practices by sharing collective experience and wisdom on a variety of critical urban school reform initiatives.
- Provide the voice and view of the classroom at the table where superintendents meet.
- Leverage political support by pursuing a united government relations agenda.
- Build public awareness by pursuing a united communications and public engagement agenda.
- Improve labor/management cooperation by helping labor/management teams learn from the experiences of their counterparts in other districts.
- Provide stability to urban districts by serving as a mentoring network for new superintendents and teacher union presidents.

Organization of the Ohio 8 Coalition

Between October 2001 and March 2002, the superintendents and union presidents, in collaboration with their funding partners, organized themselves into a formalized Leadership Council, articulated an organizational structure, developed a work plan and committed funding from the district/union pairs and the philanthropies to carry out the work plan. The Leadership Council wanted to create a structure and modus operandi that would enable the Coalition to become a place where they could give their undivided attention to identifying and carrying out collective strategies to maximize student achievement in their districts.

Co-chairs comprised of a teacher union president and superintendent from different school districts head up the Leadership Council. The co-chairs are the spokespersons for the Leadership Council and are responsible for driving the group's agenda. They are appointed by the Leadership Council and come from different school districts in order to encourage statewide collaboration.

The Leadership Council defines the strategic priorities of the Coalition, leverages the power of their positions, and puts their resources and staff at the disposal of the Coalition as needed. The Leadership Council brings matters of concern to urban education to the attention of foundations, policymakers and the general public. They also mobilize their constituents as necessary for the same purpose.

THE OHIO 8 COALITION HAS ORGANIZED ITS ANNUAL WORK PLANS AROUND THREE PRINCIPAL STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:

TEACHING AND LEARNING: Identify and share practices and policies that improve academic performance, close achievement gaps and increase graduation rates.

GOVERNMENT RELATIONS/PUBLIC POLICY: Monitor and promote relevant public policies at the federal, state and local levels.

PUBLIC AWARENESS: Promote a broad public understanding of the accomplishments of urban districts, their challenges and their capacity for change.

The Leadership Council chooses strategic priorities that are of mutual interest to all Coalition members. This is key to working as a unified force. From the beginning, the “priority among priorities” was the sharing and dissemination of best practices related to teaching and learning. The more the Leadership Council discussed strides each district was making, the more they realized those strides could be accelerated if they could harness and disseminate their collective wisdom regarding successful teaching and learning practices. They believed this was one area in which they could excel, and one focus – the children – which superintendents and teacher union leaders could agree. Moreover, the Leadership Council realized that the academic excellence urban schools were achieving was still largely an “untold story.” Neither legislators nor the general public were aware of the strides being made in urban school districts and they understood that the dissemination of their ongoing achievements would give them greater leverage with legislators and taxpayers alike.

To ensure continuity in their initiatives, the Leadership Council secured funding to organize a central administrative structure for the Coalition. They sought the services of a former Cleveland schools' executive to serve as a part-time executive director for the Coalition. The executive director and program director execute and implement the Coalition's strategic priorities; maintain the Leadership Council focus on their initiatives, thereby maximiz-



Photo courtesy of Canton City Schools

ing the use of their time and the success of the initiatives they undertake; and organize all of the logistics related to the Coalition's quarterly meetings, as well as additional professional development sessions. The Coalition also uses the services of an outside facilitator to help the group reach consensus and tackle the strategic priorities called for in the work plan.

Quarterly meetings of the Leadership Council are set at the beginning of each year, but ad hoc meetings may be called as circumstances warrant. Participation in Leadership Council meetings is limited to the superintendents and union presidents, and in order to ensure full participation, the leaders

are not permitted to send substitutes on their behalf. The value that members receive from the quarterly meetings is exhibited by the fact that attendance over five years has exceeded 80 percent. The meetings are typically held in the state capital of Columbus and involve a dinner, overnight stay and a full-day work session. These policies work because Coalition members find the meetings so beneficial they do not dare miss out on what is discussed and decided. The Coalition has also engaged key legislators and educational experts in fruitful dialogue at these meetings (see Appendix for a list of participants in Ohio 8 meetings).

Much of the work of the Ohio 8 Coalition is carried out by both standing committees and ad hoc committees that are formed to address specific concerns. These committees address professional development issues, research, curricular and instructional practice, funding, government affairs, school facilities and liaison with the Ohio Department of Education. The committees are chaired by a superintendent and a union president. The committees typically pull in other subject matter experts from the Ohio 8 districts.

The Ohio 8 Coalition is funded through a combination of cost-sharing commitments based on student enrollment made by the union and district teams, as well as the continuing support of the convening foundations. In addition, Chicago-based Joyce Foundation and San Francisco-based Stupski Foundation have provided financial support to the Coalition. KnowledgeWorks Foundation serves as the fiscal agent for the Coalition, and the executive director is responsible for complying with all grant reporting requirements. The Coalition could not have achieved its present level of effectiveness without allies within the philanthropic community.

Significant Accomplishments of the Ohio 8

The Coalition's work in their three strategic priorities of teaching and learning, government relations, and public awareness has been undertaken in an atmosphere of labor/management and multi-city collaboration. Over the past five years, the Ohio 8 has demonstrated the value labor/management coalitions can bring to education reform in states with multiple urban centers.

HIGHLIGHTS OF THE OHIO 8 COALITION'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS TO-DATE INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

TEACHING AND LEARNING: SHARING WHAT WORKS

SHARING BEST CLASSROOM PRACTICES: In 2005, the Ohio 8 presented the first-ever Summit on Urban Education in Ohio as a vehicle for sharing best and promising practices in all aspects of urban education. The summit offered two dozen concurrent sessions on specific strategies that Ohio's big-city school districts are using to improve student performance. Sessions were co-presented by members of labor and management from each city, and focused on such topics as teaching to new state standards, improving teacher quality, collaborative planning time, implementing small schools, building a K-8 learning model, and developing districtwide literacy and math systems. The summit attracted the governor, state superintendent, leaders of the state legislature, education philanthropists, classroom teachers, central office administrators and other key stakeholders. In all, more than 400 people attended this summit on what works in Ohio's urban districts. A second Summit on Urban Education in Ohio is planned for 2007.

SHARING CUSTOMIZED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES. The Ohio 8 has convened the chief academic officers, superintendents and teacher union presidents to share the specific strategies each district is using to align curriculum and content standards to support the state's new Ohio

Graduation Test. The representatives shared specific professional development approaches, and took the lessons learned back to their home districts. In addition, Ohio 8 representatives have worked with Ohio Department of Education officials to develop professional development opportunities specifically geared to urban environments. These included data-driven decision-making, standards-based classrooms and math proficiency. Special education practitioners also have convened to share specific instructional practices and professional development opportunities that they utilize in their classroom settings.

SHARING BEST URBAN SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION PRACTICES. An important component of teaching and learning is assuring that districts get their full share of financial support and that they use their finances effectively. Coalition members have been able to share their experiences and areas of expertise in ways that benefit all member districts. The eight districts jointly filed suit against the State of Ohio for denying the flow-through of Medicaid funding. Districts worked together to understand financial ramifications of the state's accounting for charter school enrollments, they shared strategies for developing an open data management system to better track students, and they have met as a Coalition with the director of the state's school facilities commission (OSFC) to ensure that the OSFC consistently meets the unique needs of urban districts.

GOVERNMENT RELATIONS/PUBLIC POLICY: LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD

STATE ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISM. An early victory for the Ohio 8 was its advocacy for including in state accountability mechanisms a measure that would reflect the progress being made by urban districts. Advocacy included the first-ever joint testimony by urban school superintendents and teacher union presidents before the state Board of Education. The resulting Performance Index and Performance Index Growth measure in the state accountability system better reflects the progress that urban districts are making. As a result, several districts have been able to move up in the state rankings from the state's lowest rankings of Academic Emergency to Academic Watch or Continuous Improvement. While the rankings do not alter the urgency of improving student academic outcomes, the improved rankings do help our communities better understand the pace of progress in urban districts (see also "Public Awareness" below).

BANDING TOGETHER FOR ADVOCACY. The Ohio 8 Coalition brings a shared teacher/administrator voice when it comes to shaping public policy. The Coalition has given testimony before the state Board of Education, the Ohio General Assembly, officials of the Ohio Department of Education, US Department of Education and key state and federal legislators. The Coalition has organized two briefings with members of the Ohio Congressional delegation, and has created an umbrella under which labor and management leaders make joint presentations to their representatives in Washington DC. Since its formation, the Coalition has met with former Secretary of Education Rod Paige; Ohio Sen. George Voinovich; key congressional leaders like John Boehner and Ralph Regula, as well as numerous officials from allied national organizations. Leadership Council members have had three private meetings with then-Governor Bob Taft, and the Council meets several times yearly with State Superintendent Susan Tave Zelman to discuss urban issues. Dr. Zelman has appointed one person on her staff as a liaison specifically for the Ohio 8 districts.

PUBLIC AWARENESS: BUILDING THE CASE FOR URBAN PUBLIC EDUCATION

INCREASING PUBLIC AWARENESS. The Coalition has provided input to news media concerning urban education issues; they have been quoted in newspaper articles concerning enrollment trends, professional development, local report card results, state funding and other issues of state and national importance. Coalition members have appeared on numerous statewide and national media outlets to discuss their strategies and approaches. The Coalition has launched a new website (www.ohio8.org) as an information source for both members and news media.

COMMUNICATING THE COALITION'S COMMITMENT TO GAINS IN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT. The Ohio 8 website includes two studies of progress within Ohio's big-city districts issued by the Coalition. Results showed that big-city students were improving at a more rapid rate than the state as a whole. The Coalition tracked reading and math scores on the Ohio Proficiency Tests for fourth and sixth graders from the 1998-99 school year through the 2004-2005 school year. In fourth grade reading, seven of the eight districts

posted gains higher than the statewide gain. In fourth grade math, each of the districts achieved higher proficiency test score increases than the statewide gain. In sixth grade reading, seven of the eight districts exceeded the state increase, and in sixth grade math all eight surpassed the state gain. In several cases, the districts' rates of improvement more than doubled the statewide improvement. Results of the studies were shared with local leaders, state elected officials, federal officials, the media and others to demonstrate that high-poverty students in Ohio's big cities are making very significant progress. The report underscores the fact that the strategic investments and hard work of students, teachers, parents and administrators are clearly paying off for Ohio's urban students.

DEVELOPING MARKETING STRATEGIES THAT HIGHLIGHT PUBLIC SCHOOLS' AUTHENTIC ADVANTAGES. Charter schools take nearly \$500 million away from traditional public schools in Ohio – with the bulk of that funding coming at the expense of the eight urban districts. Several member districts have shared their specific marketing research and strategies for combating the loss of market share. Several Ohio 8 districts have opened their own internet-based charter schools to compete directly with for-profit online charter schools. Other districts have also begun to sponsor charter schools in order to guarantee the quality of the education received by their students. Districts have also shared strategies for opening specialized schools such as early college, single-gender programs, option schools for over-age students and small schools.



Photo courtesy of Cincinnati Public Schools

LEADERS SUPPORTING LEADERS

Leadership Council members unanimously concur that an important byproduct of Coalition members' work on their strategic priorities has been the dialogue it facilitates among educational leaders whose school districts are similar demographically. They have realized how they are all dealing with many of the same student achievement, political, public relations, professional development, funding, and facilities issues; these commonalities have made the Coalition a powerful learning, mobilization and support network. Council members cite the benefit of "just being able to pick up the phone" and gain direct access to their closest peers across the state. Meetings of the Ohio 8 Leadership Council provide a "safe space," where members can discuss barriers and opportunities freely. The Coalition also serves as an excellent induction mechanism for new superintendents and union presidents, who unanimously identify the Ohio 8 as an extremely useful leadership training resource with a network of experienced colleagues.

ENHANCING LABOR/MANAGEMENT COLLABORATION

An additional core benefit of the Ohio 8 is the explicit and implicit sharing of labor/management relationship models. Members are able to see how their individual labor/management relations compare with those of other labor/management teams. In some cases, members who have successfully negotiated practices such as employee separation plans have shared those with their counterparts from the other cities. Members realize the importance of checking their management or labor "hat" at the door and putting aside any district-related problems when they come to Ohio 8 meetings.

Lessons Learned: Putting Children First

The success of the Ohio 8 Coalition has led other states to express interest in replicating their experience. Some lessons distilled from the Ohio 8 Coalition’s experience follow. Above all, it is essential that the Leadership Council focus its energies on specific, critical initiatives, where the Coalition can most efficiently shore up its financial and intellectual resources to make an impact.

CHOOSE STRATEGIC INITIATIVES CAREFULLY. To achieve maximum collective impact, Coalitions should focus on a few strategic priorities based upon:

- issues of common interest across districts.
- issues that will not divide the group along labor-management lines.
- issues about which labor and management can agree to work substantively together to address.

Although policy issues may come up that require immediate attention (e.g. the Ohio 8 found they needed to immediately respond to NCLB), it may also be worthwhile to decide whether your coalition wishes to focus upon policy or programmatic reform, particularly in the initial stages of coalition formation. In either case, build in a discussion of teaching and learning issues in each meeting.

CLARIFY WHAT ADVOCACY APPROACHES BEST SUIT YOUR COALITION. You may find that Leadership Council members differ in their opinion of what advocacy approach works best (e.g. “gloves on” or “gloves off”). Although your approaches to advocacy may change over time and depending upon the initiative, it will be critical to building an organizational identity for Council members to arrive at some general agreement and also appreciate how their colleagues might differ on this issue.

KEEP COALITION MEETING AGENDAS FOCUSED AND STICK TO THEM. The Coalition will maximize its time at quarterly meetings if members stay focused on agenda items, efficiently sort through options, and set short and long-term priorities. Coalition members will also need to manage potential conflict and build consensus around strategic priorities (see below).

Provide unstructured time during each meeting to foster interpersonal connections. The meals the night before coalition meetings as well as breaks during the meetings provide time for members to get to know one another better and to share issues of concern. The interpersonal bridges that members form during these times will help them resolve conflicts in priorities, strategies or viewpoints in a more constructive manner.

Facilitate conflicts constructively before building consensus. It is important that coalition meetings provide members an opportunity where they can air their divergent opinions and feel that they will be respectfully heard, even if their opinions are in the minority. This is important for two reasons. First, if no consensus can be reached as a result of such open discussions, then the Coalition may need to reconsider if the strategic priority in question is one they can successfully pursue. Second, true consensus results from everyone in the Coalition being vested in a given goal, the strategies for achieving it, and the outcomes at stake. Open discussion of alternative proposals may eventually bring members to a position they can all endorse. Consensus is not the elimination of dissent, and a coalition risks undermining the bonds that sustain it if dissent cannot be expressed constructively.

BUILD CONSENSUS BY FOCUSING ON COMMON GOALS, STRATEGIES AND OUTCOMES. Labor/management coalitions have many potential initiatives in which they can invest their energies. Assume that some of these initiatives are not ones that members will agree regarding strategies or outcomes. Sometimes, conflict will fall along labor/management lines, but more often than not the differences are related to leadership styles or viewpoints. As coalition members discuss potential strategic priorities, focus members on their views regarding the nature of the problem, possible solutions and desired outcomes. A facilitator can be helpful here. As coalition members clarify their positions, eliminate priorities that seem to elicit incommensurable differences and focus on those initiatives where there is broad agreement.

KEEP THE “DIRTY LAUNDRY” AT HOME. Another component of creating an environment in Coalition meetings that puts a premium on collaboration and cooperation involves district labor/management teams leaving any tensions in their work beyond the Coalition at home. Come to meetings focused on creating success for all students, and this will help you work together no matter how tense other work issues may be.

MAINTAIN COALITION MEETINGS AS A SAFE HAVEN where members can speak freely. Maintain an ethos of “what is said here stays here.”

BEGIN BY ASSESSING THE STRENGTHS OF COALITION MEMBERS. Consider the strengths of the Leadership Council, the executive director, and the facilitator and whether additional consultants might be helpful. You may find it necessary to bring on consultants with specific expertise in marketing, media relations, legal or government affairs.

USE MEDIA STRATEGICALLY, particularly while you are trying to “gel” as a group. This will allow Coalition members to speak as one voice when they do address the media.

EXPECT THAT IT MAY TAKE APPROXIMATELY 18 MONTHS TO “INCUBATE” AND GEL AS A GROUP that can effectively move forward as one voice.

SELF-POLICE TO KEEP MEMBERS COMMITTED TO ATTENDING QUARTERLY MEETINGS. It is difficult but it works and is crucial to the success and continuity of the Coalition. This includes no substitutes at Leadership Council meetings.

CLARIFY HOW WILL YOU BRING IN NEW MEMBERS. Founding members of coalitions tend to have a high degree of commitment and sense of ownership because they chose to join such coalitions. Their successors may not share this commitment because they inherited their membership on the Coalition with their appointment. Consider carefully how Coalition members will reach out to new members in order to garner their support and commitment. Consider whether you should expand to other districts in your state, which may share some of the characteristics of your founding members.



Photo courtesy of Columbus Public Schools

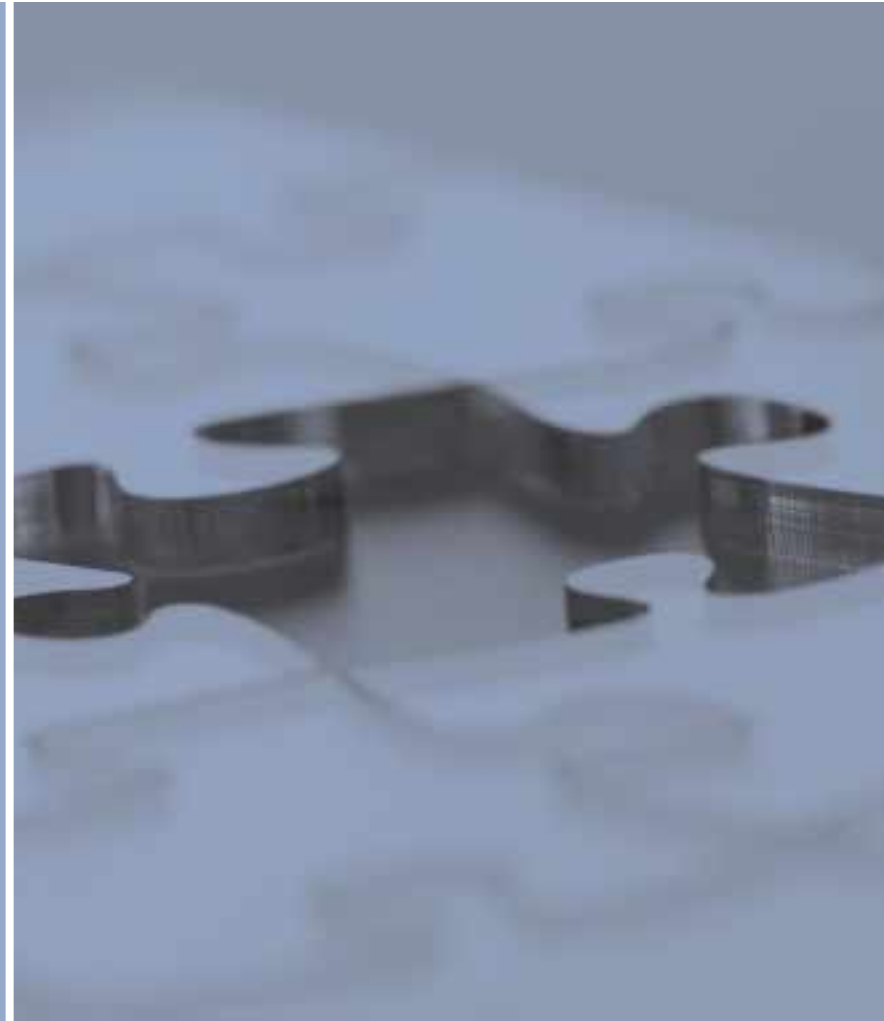
CLARIFY HOW CAN YOU SUSTAIN YOUR COALITION’S EFFORT. Having a central office and a designated staff person to drive meetings and secure members’ commitments to follow through on assignments is essential to sustainability. Using an existing non-profit organization as host or fiscal agent will eliminate the need to establish your own 501(c)(3) organization. Think through the long-term funding requirements. While you may be able to secure commitments from educational philanthropies to launch the coalition, a shared financial commitment from the district/union pairs will go a long way toward demonstrating your commitment. Build work plans that cover a two-year window of activity.

BUILD IN AN EVALUATION PROCESS. Funders and others will want to see a formal evaluation of the organization on a periodic basis. Periodic formative assessments also assist the Coalition document and organize its growing collective experience. Use an external evaluator to measure the organization’s effectiveness. Start by asking members of the Leadership Council how satisfied they are with the organization and their involvement in it. Add in external stakeholders as your organization grows and establishes its identity.

Conclusion

A shared teacher/administrator voice is essential to accelerating the pace of progress in America's urban school systems. True reform is only possible through a shared commitment by both labor and management. An operating coalition like the Ohio 8 has proven effective in helping teacher leaders and superintendents in Ohio jointly pursue an agenda of improving student performance, closing achievement gaps and increasing graduation rates.

For more information about the Ohio 8 Coalition, contact: William Wendling, Executive Director, Ohio 8 Coalition, 1422 Euclid Ave., Suite 1530, Cleveland, OH 44115; phone (216) 241-9400, or visit the website at www.ohio8.org.



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** Served as co-chair of Leadership Council*

**OHIO 8 COALITION GUEST
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Michael Coleman, Mayor,
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Reggie Felton, National School
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Alex Nock, Director, No Child Left
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Joel Packer/Kim Anderson,
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Lynn Readey, Executive Director,
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Mark Real, President, KidsOhio.org

Representative Ralph Regula, Chair,
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David Sherman, American Federation
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Bob Taft, Governor of Ohio

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