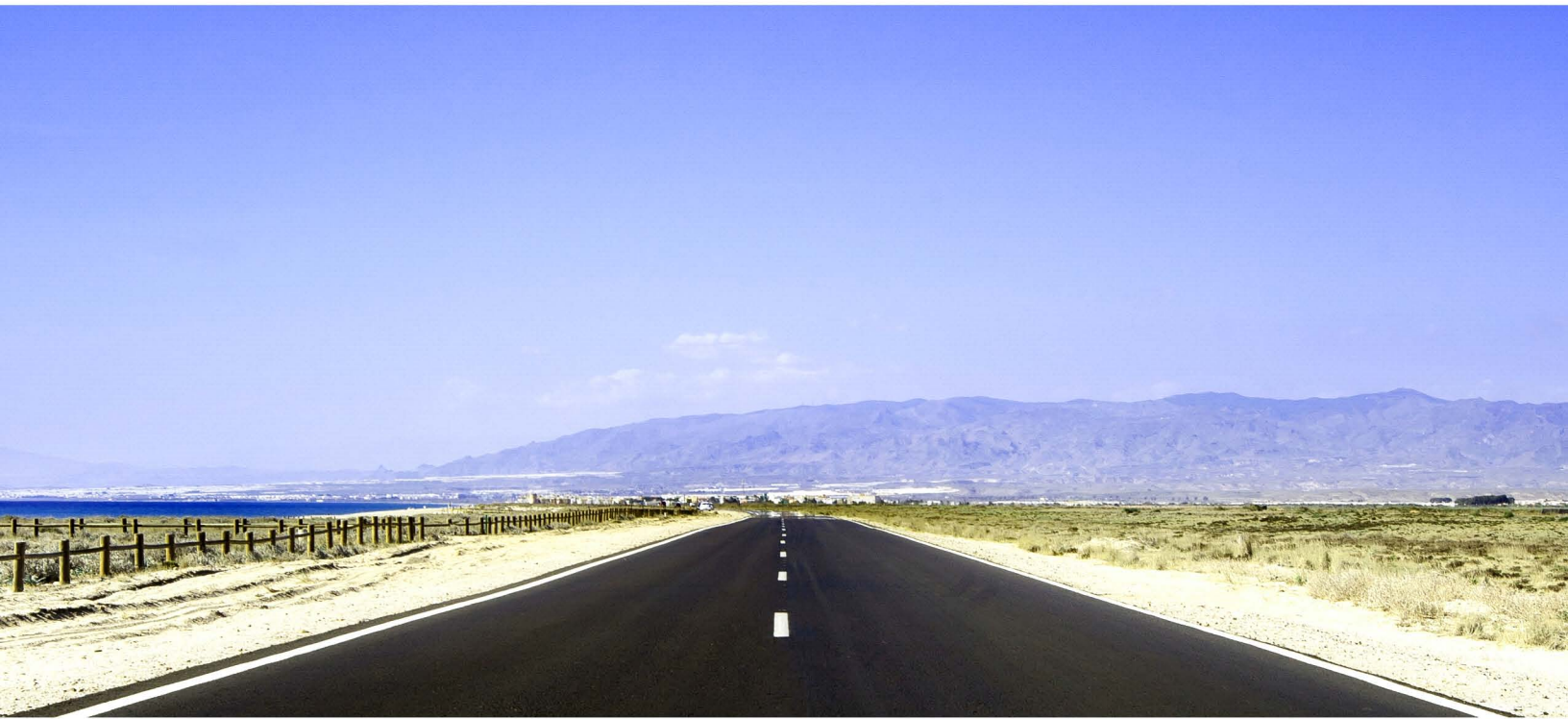


# LIMITLESS

EDUCATION, THE REYNOLDSBURG WAY



BY ELLEN BELCHER  
AND TERRY RYAN

MAY 2013

THOMAS B.  
**FORDHAM**  
INSTITUTE  
ADVANCING EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE



# LIMITLESS

## Education, the Reynoldsburg Way

BY ELLEN BELCHER AND TERRY RYAN  
MAY 2013



37 W. Broad St., Suite 400  
Columbus, OH 43215  
614-223-1580  
[www.edexcellence.net/ohio](http://www.edexcellence.net/ohio)

## Acknowledgments

We sincerely thank Steve Dackin, superintendent of Reynoldsburg City Schools, for welcoming us and supporting the research. We also thank the Reynoldsburg teachers and staff, whose thoughtful and honest insight into how education works on the ground level, made this report possible. Special thanks to KnowledgeWorks, especially Andrew Benson and Lisa Duty (now at The Learning Accelerator), for their generous support. Thanks also to Paul Hill for his comments and encouragement along the way. From the Fordham team, Emmy Partin, Aaron Churchill, Angel Gonzalez, and Kevin Pack all assisted in bringing the report to press. Deion Kim produced the cover and designed the layout.

## About the Authors

**Ellen Belcher** is an award-winning journalist and former editorial page editor of the Dayton Daily News, where she frequently wrote about education issues. Currently, she is a freelance editor and writer and teaches at the university level.

**Terry Ryan** is vice president for Ohio programs and policy at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. A research fellow at Stanford's Hoover Institution, Ryan leads all Ohio operations for Fordham, including charter school sponsorship, grant making, and state policy efforts.

# Introduction

One of the most exciting developments in American education during the last decade has been the reconceptualization of school districts and how they should be organized and managed. Neerav Kingsland, CEO of New Schools for New Orleans, describes this as a movement of “relinquishers.”<sup>1</sup> Relinquishers, according to Kingsland, are superintendents who use their authority to transfer power away from the central office to individual schools – and, most important, to their principals and teachers.

Education researchers Paul Hill, Christine Campbell, and Betheny Gross at the Center on Reinventing Public Education in Seattle have written for more than a decade about “portfolio school districts.” Like Kingsland’s relinquishers, portfolio school district leaders see their role not as running the schools, but rather as creating the conditions for a “tight-loose” system of school management – “tight” as to results, but “loose” with regard to operations. Superintendents are no longer owner-operators of schools, but rather “quality control agents” for portfolios of different types of schools in their districts.

Portfolio school district managers, according to Hill and his colleagues, think like savvy financial managers who build a diverse portfolio to ensure overall financial success even if parts of the portfolio underperform. A successful portfolio manager:

...avoids betting everything on one investment, knowing that some holdings will perform much better than expected and some much worse. This manager is agnostic as to which companies are represented but knows that diversity is key and regularly reviews performance as well as industry and company news. When some stocks make impressive gains, more of these are added, and when some are trending poorly, those are sold.<sup>2</sup>

District superintendents in portfolio school districts think the same way as Hill’s savvy investor. They understand no single school model is right for every student, and that to meet the needs of all of their students, it is necessary to create an array of school options. According to Hill, Campbell, and Gross, leading portfolio districts “don’t control schools by regulation. Instead, they create freedom of action for school leaders and teachers, track and compare schools’ performance, and try to expand the numbers of high-performing schools and reduce the number of low-performing ones. The portfolio strategy is built to create high-quality schools regardless of provider, giving schools autonomy over staff and funding, and holding all schools accountable for performance.”<sup>3</sup>

*Reynoldsburg is the leader in a new trend—innovative suburban districts taking advantage of all the talent available in a metro area, but avoiding big-city gridlock - Paul Hill*

Successful portfolio districts also focus relentlessly on recruiting, developing, and supporting their talent, especially school leaders. School leaders are critical to the success of portfolio schools

<sup>1</sup> Neerav Kingsland, “An Open Letter to Urban Superintendents in the United States of America,” [http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rick\\_hess\\_straight\\_up/2012/01/an\\_open\\_letter\\_to\\_urban\\_superintendents\\_in\\_the\\_united\\_states\\_of\\_america.html](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/rick_hess_straight_up/2012/01/an_open_letter_to_urban_superintendents_in_the_united_states_of_america.html)

<sup>2</sup> Paul T. Hill, Christine Campbell and Betheny Gross, *Strife and Progress: Portfolio Strategies for Managing Urban Schools* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013): 5.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

because they are empowered – either as charters or freed-up district schools – to manage their own budgets, hire and fire the teachers, and make trade-offs between things such as staff salaries, instructional technology, or purchased services. School leaders operate as building CEOs in portfolio districts. District offices are reduced in size and resources pushed out to the buildings.

Big-city school districts have led the way in the movement towards “portfolio management.” Some of the most well-known examples are New York City, New Orleans, Washington, Chicago, and Denver. But, according to Hill, Campbell, and Gross there are now more than 30 school districts in the country that they have identified as pursuing the portfolio strategy to varying degrees.

The Reynoldsburg City School District, just east of Columbus, is far down the “portfolio management” path – further than probably any suburban school district of its size. Reynoldsburg is a district of about 6,300 students, so it is not surprising that few observers outside Ohio know anything about its efforts. But, it is a district with a significant impact on state education policy in the Buckeye State. Ohio’s current superintendent of public instruction, Richard Ross, was Reynoldsburg’s superintendent for 20 years before retiring in 2008. Before becoming state superintendent, he served as Governor John Kasich’s education policy advisor. Lessons from Reynoldsburg are impacting policy across Ohio, and they are lessons worth sharing. Or, as Paul Hill himself said in commenting on efforts in Reynoldsburg during a recent visit, “it is the leader in a new trend -- innovative suburban districts taking advantage of all the talent available in a metro area, but avoiding big-city gridlock.”



Natalie Ball answers questions from a precocious second grader

## Innovating for Results - The Reynoldsburg Way

Natalie Ball’s second-graders at Reynoldsburg’s STEM elementary school couldn’t wait to test their catapults.

All 23 students watched and cheered as one child after another launched miniature marshmallows with devices made from shoeboxes, duct tape, plastic spoons, shish kebab sticks, rubber bands, paper clips, toilet paper rolls, and drinking straws.

The children had built their models – part history project, part science experiment – at home over a month, clearly with the assistance of adult hands. That was by design; the school expects parents to be involved in their children’s lessons. Two children turned in the assignment late, but everyone ultimately completed it.

Ball, 34, is in her first year at Reynoldsburg’s Summit Road Elementary, a K-4 school that focuses on science, technology, engineering, and math. Her husband teaches at the district’s STEM high school on the same 68-acre campus. Although the couple lives in the nearby

Columbus, suburb of Canal Winchester, their two children attend Summit under Reynoldsburg's new open enrollment policy.

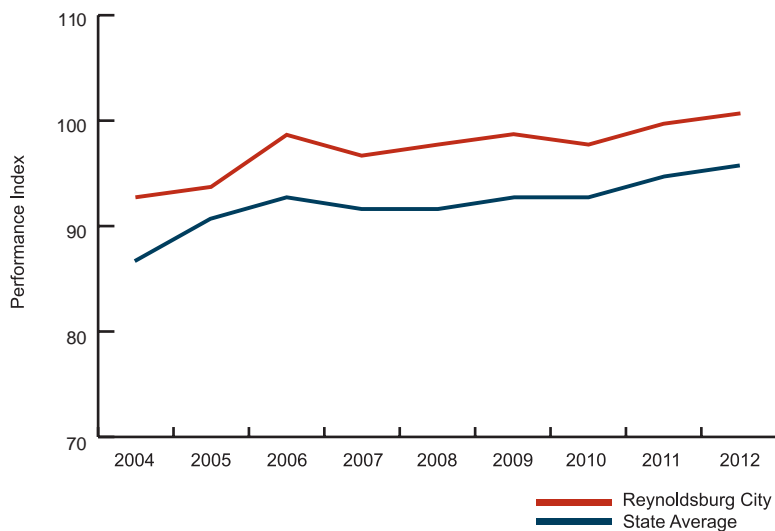
While her students waited their turn to shoot their projectiles, Ball fired away, too. "Did you have to modify and improve your design?" she asked. "Did you do a blueprint?" Then she talked about force and motion, reinforcing an earlier lesson. "I'm making a connection with the maglevs." The students had learned about high-speed magnetic levitation trains in a unit on the history of transportation.

Reynoldsburg's STEM elementary school, now in its second year, is one of a plethora of innovations and uncommon policy decisions that administrators and teachers have embraced out of financial necessity and pursuit of higher student achievement. The school district, which has 6,325 students and is 49 percent minority, has:

- created a STEM pipeline serving every grade level
- developed schools of choice throughout the district
- sponsored five charter schools
- bartered with a ballet company, a preschool, a hospital, and a community college, trading space for services to students
- rejected hard rules about class sizes
- brought in about \$1 million this year by opening its doors to more than 180 students from other districts.

"We're going to innovate for results because we haven't found the Holy Grail for kids yet," said Steve Dackin, superintendent since 2007.

**Figure 1:** Student achievement - Performance index scores, 2003-04 to 2011-12



**SOURCE:** Ohio Department of Education **NOTE:** The Performance Index (PI) is calculated by the Ohio Department of Education. PI measures student achievement on Ohio's standardized tests in grades 3-8 and grade 10, based upon the number of students at each performance level. The PI is calculated by assigning a weighted score to each performance level.

The innovations are paying off. The district is rated “Excellent with Distinction” by the state of Ohio, and all of its 14 schools received a “B” or better on the latest state report card. Eleven schools received an “A” or “A+.” Reynoldsburg’s performance index—an indicator of student achievement—outperforms the state average, and has steadily improved over time. And – for the first time in five years – enrollment is growing.

Reynoldsburg is a model of reform that reflects the best thinking about moving power from the central office and placing it into the hands of the educators closest to students. An equally important driving force is that taxpayers say they can’t keep spending more on education.

In an effort to develop more relevant and more sustainable education models, Reynoldsburg is like a growing number of districts that are creating individualized education plans for every student, slashing central office staff, promoting online classes, requiring students to “dual enroll” in high school and college classes, using charter schools as a part of the district reform strategy, and giving principals carte-blanche authority to design “boutique” schools built around mastery and competency, not grades and credits. They are constantly adapting and working to improve while dropping programs that aren’t working.

## Doing More with Less

Reynoldsburg’s STEM program, which is being watched nationally, is wildly popular with students and parents.

“We’re not trying to create scientists,” said Dee Martindale, a science teacher turned principal. “Science is just our driver.” Teachers use science, technology, engineering and math as the “hook” to interest students in inquiry-based learning, she said. “We use the design cycle. We imagine, plan, probe, and share.”

*Reynoldsburg schools are innovating themselves out of the new normal -  
Lisa Duty*

Next year, the district will open a second STEM program at Herbert Mills Elementary School, where 81 percent of students come from low-income families. In time, the district’s goal is for all buildings to be interest- or theme-based.

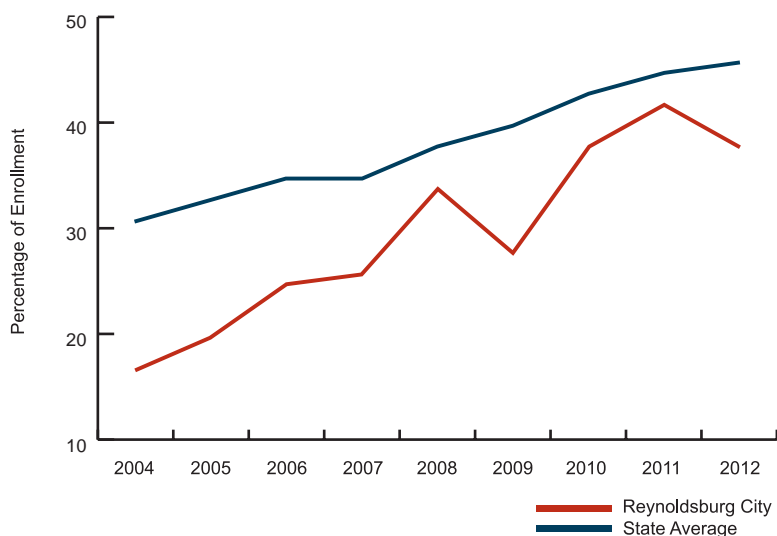
“They (the Reynoldsburg schools) are innovating themselves out of the new normal,” said Lisa Duty, formerly the senior director of innovation at KnowledgeWorks. Duty once worked as a high-school social studies teacher in Reynoldsburg and has helped to design a program at Hannah Ashton Middle School that relies heavily on digital learning. The objective is to marry education in the classroom with educational opportunities in the community.

“We have so many more ways to personalize learning than we did in the 90s and 2000s,” said Duty, now a partner with The Learning Accelerator. “Using your resources differently is the key to the future.”



Reynoldsburg is an economically diverse community of 36,000. Thirteen years ago, the district had just 300 economically disadvantaged children. Today, 38 percent of its students are low-income. As the school system’s demographics have morphed, so have its finances.

**Figure 2:** Economically disadvantaged students, 2003-04 to 2011-12



**SOURCE:** Ohio Department of Education

When the economy collapsed in 2008, Reynoldsburg’s budget was \$57.8 million. Within three years, spending had been slashed by \$5 million. The bottom line is better today – at one time, administrators worried that they might not make payroll – but money is still tight. General fund spending is a half-million dollars less than it was five years ago, and the district ranks second-from-the-bottom in Franklin County for per-pupil spending. In 2011-12, its costs averaged \$9,300 per child.

While Reynoldsburg is cash-strapped relative to the region’s wealthier suburbs, it is space-rich – which was not the plan when the district asked voters for money to replace and renovate its aging and then-crowded schools.

Reynoldsburg passed a bond issue in 2008 to build a second high school and make other major capital improvements. The district was growing and on track to have nearly 1,900 high-schoolers in a building (and adjacent modular trailers) designed for about 1,300. Once the new campus was built, that new construction exacerbated a need for operating dollars.

First in November 2008 and two more times during the next year and a half, voters rejected levy requests, forcing once unthinkable cutbacks. Not counting administrators who left or lost their jobs, Reynoldsburg eliminated 148 positions – almost 20 percent of the staff – between October 2008 and October 2009.

In reaction to the cuts and financial chaos, enrollment fell by 10 percent from 2008 to 2012. Parents were unhappy about the massive layoffs, reduced busing for elementary students and

a \$500 pay-to-play fee. Families, thinking little good was happening in the district, left, said Dackin, 55.

Desperate to save money, the district began marketing its extra space as opportunities for other institutions.

## Partners Make All the Difference

Today Columbus State Community College has a branch inside one of the district's four high-school academies. (Reynoldsburg has just one high school, with four academies situated on two campuses. In community meetings where residents debated how to deal with overcrowding, parents and residents rejected creating two high schools. They argued that having two schools would divide the suburb and result in socio-economic segregation.)



Reynoldsburg superintendent Steve Dackin and Columbus State Community College president David Harrison open the CSCC branch at Reynoldsburg High School

In return for Columbus State's investments, students at BELL Early College Academy – BELL is short for Business, Education, Leadership, and Law – have easy access to free classes from the community college. This year all BELL students are enrolled in Columbus State's "freshman seminar," a required course for all Columbus State students that explains what's expected in college.

With its move into BELL, Columbus State closed its east side branch and offers regular programming for adults at the academy.

BalletMet, Columbus's ballet company, has a studio at Encore academy, which is located in the same building as the STEM high school. In return for free space for its fee-based classes held at night and on weekends, students can take Pilates and yoga classes to earn their gym credits.

At the HS(2) Academy – where the focus is health science and human services – Mount Carmel Health System operates a community health clinic that provides services on a sliding-scale basis. The clinic does not pay rent, but personnel help develop the academy's classes, and students have access to internships.

Thomie Timmons, an art teacher, said of the clinic, "It's the first time some elderly voters come into the high school. It's great from a PR standpoint. They're associating the schools with something that is good for them."

Though voters eventually passed an operating levy in 2010, Treasurer Tammy Miller said about 45 percent of the anticipated \$7.6 million in new money has been consumed by lower property valuations, cuts in state funding and Ohio's elimination of the tangible personal property tax.

"If I give any raises to employees," Superintendent Dackin said, "I have to balance that through attrition and partnerships."

## Principals as Building CEOs

It is parent-teacher conference day, and David Schottner is wearing a lavender shirt and purple bow tie. His 25 first graders move from playing “Stop the Clock,” an exercise that uses an interactive whiteboard to teach the students how to tell time, to worksheets, to quiet reading – without stopping in between.

“The key is changing it up every 10 to 15 minutes,” Schottner said.

Meanwhile, Schottner does not stop talking. “I only call on people sitting in their chair,” he said as he worked the room. “Good job.” “Come see me, buddy.” “Yes, you may put on your lipstick. But I think you mean ChapStick.” “Good job.” “Not quite.” “Where is the little hand on the clock?” “Your wildest dream has just come true.”

Next up is reading. “You have two minutes to build your carpet forts,” Schottner said, anticipating the rush he was igniting. “Ready, set, go.”

The children began propping up the colorful remnants against desks and chairs. “If I see any lack of collaboration, everybody loses the privilege,” Schottner warns. “Now, reading begins.”

Anita Walker, whose daughter is in Schottner’s class, said her child loves Schottner and the STEM school. Her one reservation is that her 6-year-old “is so tired.” “Sometimes I wonder if it’s too hard for her,” Walker said.

A children’s pastor at the Reynoldsburg Church of the Nazarene, Walker is on the design team that is creating Reynoldsburg’s second elementary STEM school. “The people I interact with here are very, very happy,” she said. “There’s a lot of parental involvement ... (But) people who choose a school of choice tend to be involved.”

President of the Reynoldsburg teachers’ union, Schottner, 34, said he can’t imagine working in any other field. He has a law degree in addition to his master’s in elementary education, but he loves the classroom more than the courtroom.

This is Schottner’s second year as union president, and he proudly volunteers that although the district doesn’t have a “fair share” requirement, 96 percent of teachers are members of the union.

By Ohio standards, Reynoldsburg’s contract is atypical. Class sizes are not strictly negotiated, although “every effort should be made” to provide a teacher-student ratio of 1:25. One-year probationary contracts can be given for three consecutive years. Meanwhile, automatic step increases have been cut back. Schottner has taught for 11 years but is paid as an 8-year veteran.



Summit Road STEM Elementary first grade teacher, David Schottner

“Our union was the first that I’m aware of,” Superintendent Dackin said, “that took a freeze in their steps without a make-up year. We’ve never had a make-up year.”

This school year, teachers got a 1-percent raise, with no step increase, and last year they received a 2-percent hike or a step increase. Next year there will be no raises except for teachers who have increased their education.

Teachers accept that the district is financially strapped, Schottner said, but some resent that Dackin was given a \$25,000 raise by the school board to take his name out of the running for state school superintendent last summer. More recently, Dackin’s name has been floated as a possible school superintendent for Columbus City Schools, where a data-scrubbing scandal has rocked the district.

Teachers have agreed to the flexible contract provisions, Dackin said, because “I believe that we’ve never abused the language.” “You don’t have to take care of kids at the expense of teachers,” he said.

Neither Dackin nor Schottner could remember a teacher being fired.

“We’ve had a couple who have resigned, maybe because they knew termination was coming down,” Schottner said.

Meanwhile, in the last five years, Dackin has removed six of 14 principals, moving three of them to other positions while the others left the district. Teachers, he said, “don’t have a fighting chance” if principals are not excellent leaders. Referring to those who were moved out, Dackin said several “were better than average.” “They were just not good enough.”

Teachers and administrators agree that Dackin gives principals tremendous autonomy.

“We don’t have a common curriculum,” Schottner said. Each building looks and feels very different. Teachers’ happiness “depends on what building you’re in,” he said. “Our principals are superintendents in the school.”

Marcy Raymond, principal of the STEM high school academy, said teachers ask themselves, “Where’s the prize? Is it what the union can get? Or is it what the kids can get? We’re working for the kids and the community.”

## Thematic Academies for High-Schoolers

Raymond, 48, has 18 teachers and 496 students at eSTEM – short for environmental science, technology, engineering, and math. A widely respected STEM education advocate, she seemingly knows every student’s name and where he or she is supposed to be at every minute.

On one day in February, she asked a trio of boys who were going outside to shoot “potato cannons” using compressed air – a physics experiment – why they were out of class. Hadn’t

they done that experiment yesterday? The wind threw off their measurements, they earnestly explained.

That evening, Raymond was flying to Washington, D.C., to advise winners of Race to the Top grants on implementing their plans. Reynoldsburg was one of three Ohio districts that made it to the final round of the most recent Race to the Top awards. In December, it tied for 19th place, 1.3 points from the 16th place finish that could have netted the district up to \$19 million over three years.

Raymond, who was the founding principal of Ohio's first STEM school, the acclaimed Metro Early College High School in Columbus, smiled at the irony. "It's like being invited to a beauty pageant as a stylist," she said. "But we'll learn from them (the winners)."

In 8th grade, Reynoldsburg students choose which academy they want to attend the following year, and, Raymond emphasizes, "Everybody gets their first choice." Once they pick, students may not move to another academy during the school year. Raymond said that in two years, only 11 students have left eSTEM. Meanwhile, more than 16 students from the adjacent Licking Heights School District have enrolled just this year at one of Reynoldsburg's STEM schools, according to Licking Heights Superintendent Philip H. Wagner.



Reynoldsburg's eSTEM High School

"If we can hook a kid based on his interest, then he'll do the hard work to perform," Raymond said. "You don't have to major in a STEM field. It's just a way of thinking. We teach them to write white papers, to rapid fail, to make exhibits. We teach physics in art class."

Of the 496 students at eSTEM this year, 106 are taking calculus. Raymond peered into one calc class where some of the 39 students were watching a teacher demonstrate problems on a whiteboard while others worked independently on their computers. "We're a mastery school," she said. "You have to perform at 70 percent effectiveness to receive credit."

eSTEM offers six languages: Chinese, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish. Only the Spanish teacher is on-site. The other classes are offered online, via videoconferencing or through “blended learning” where students complete some work online but also have personal contact with an instructor.

Encore academy is in the same building as eSTEM and students can cross over for classes if they want to take a course that their academy doesn’t offer.

Jasmin is a senior at Encore and moved to Reynoldsburg from Youngstown last year. “My experience could have been better,” she said, complaining that she misses the dance classes she got at her former school.

Encore Principal Katy Myers said she knows students would like more music, art, and dance instruction. But she emphasized that Encore, now in its second year, is not a performing arts school. “We’re a thematically-based high school. Our curricula are designed around performing and visual arts. ... We integrate arts into the core work.”

*If we can hook a kid on his interest, then he'll do the hard work to perform -  
Marcy Raymond*

At Encore, all classes are taught at the “enriched level,” but students choose whether they want to be graded by “enriched” or “non-enriched” standards. Last year, students were all tested according to “enriched” expectations, but the approach “wasn’t working,” Myers said.

“The data were showing that we had to teach to the middle,” in recognition of the gap between high- and low- achieving students. “We wanted to be able to meet the needs of the kids in the best way,” Myers said. “So we tried to break up that gap.”

It was lunch period and Trey, 17, was alone in a classroom practicing a violin arrangement of Coldplay's “Paradise.” Encore is the “perfect academy,” he said. “I relate to the teachers and their personalities. There is no dull time in the classroom.”

Trey, who pointed to his cast photo in the hallway and volunteered that he is playing Lord Dunderary in “Our American Cousin” this spring, said his only disappointment is that Encore students don’t have more music lessons. “I was hoping to get into Juilliard,” he said, adding that without formal training, his chances are slim. “We have some funding issues.”

## Where’s the Tipping Point

Mark Real, president of KidsOhio.org, has visited Reynoldsburg’s schools. He credits Dackin with attracting a long line of talented administrators and teachers who thrive on the latitude he gives them. He said other superintendents have come to expect that Dackin will have “a different point of view” on issues ranging from school choice to arming security staff in the wake of school shootings.

The Learning Accelerator's Duty agrees on both points. "He (Dackin) was providing a teacher ladder before anyone had a name for that concept," she said. "I would imagine that Steve makes it a challenge to be a superintendent in Central Ohio – in a good way."

Reynoldsburg School Board President Andy Swope has been there for the good and the difficult times in Reynoldsburg. A friend of Dackin's, he was appointed to the board in 1999. The board, he said, has been "superintendent friendly" and lets Dackin lead. "If you have a board that stifles your superintendent," Swope said, "you have the wrong superintendent – or the wrong board."

Duty said Dackin is passionate about needing and giving autonomy, trusting and expecting that his principals and teachers will experiment and succeed with new approaches. "Steve is not concerned with improvement," she said. "He is concerned with transformation. He's not just trying to make it better."

Timmons, the art teacher, has a long list of transformative moves the district has tried, some of which initially were denounced as too difficult, even impossible. Now, he said, many of the initiatives are demonstrably helping kids. But he worries new and bigger demands are taking a toll.

"We've done a lot of great things," he said, "and we've cut so much. ... The (high school) academies are our babies. Of course, we're going to put in the extra effort. But teachers are working harder than ever, and at what cost? How many people is this going to burn out?"

Dackin, who says today Reynoldsburg is giving students more opportunities today than when he had 150 more employees, doesn't disagree.

"I can't tell you the magic number of dollars it takes to educate a child," he said. "But I think there is a tipping point."



Reynoldsburg superintendent, Steve Dackin



37 W. Broad St., Suite 400  
Columbus, OH 43215  
614-223-1580  
[www.edexcellence.net/ohio](http://www.edexcellence.net/ohio)

The Thomas B. Fordham Institute is the nation's leader in advancing educational excellence for every child through quality research, analysis, and commentary, as well as on-the-ground action and advocacy in Ohio. It is affiliated with the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, and this publication is a joint publication of the Foundation and the Institute. For further information, please visit our website at [www.edexcellence.net](http://www.edexcellence.net) or write to the Institute at 37 W. Broad St, Suite 400, Columbus, OH 43215. The Institute is neither connected with nor sponsored by Fordham University.