



Creating a Sustainable Advocacy Engine: How The Ohio 8 Coalition Secured a Seat at Ohio's K-12 Policy Table

In the early 1990s the K-12 education landscape in Ohio looked much different than it does today. This was a time before the widespread expansion of charter schools, before No Child Left Behind, and when school systems had more resources and support. The political culture in Ohio's statehouse was both friendlier toward and knowledgeable about public education. The Ohio 8 Coalition, a strategic alliance of the superintendents and teacher union presidents from Ohio's eight urban districts was formed during this time of relative peace. Understood as the only labor and administration coalition of its kind in the country, they formed with the aim of improving student academic achievement in urban districts, in part by becoming a leading voice in K-12 education policy and practice at the state and local level. Members knew that achieving this goal would be a long-term process, but they soon learned that it would also require a strategic, broad, and sustained advocacy effort.

During the next 10 years, public education, as well as perceptions about it, have changed significantly. As an example, since the 2009-2010 school year, enrollment in charter schools throughout the state has increased to more than 120,000 students—a number approaching the total student enrollment in The Ohio 8 Coalition districts. The perception of public education among Ohioans, particularly in urban areas, has shifted dramatically, and The Ohio 8 Coalition adjusted its advocacy strategy to create a stronger voice in support of public education.

The Ohio 8 Coalition is the only coalition of its kind in the country.

Who:

Superintendents and teacher union presidents of Ohio's eight urban school districts make up the only coalition of its kind in the country. (The Ohio 8 Coalition).

What:

Growing a dynamic and sustainable advocacy effort.

How:

ACS develops a multi-pronged advocacy strategy and helps stakeholders develop strong relationships, focus advocacy messages, and engage the media.

Results:

The Ohio 8 Coalition actively creates a stronger voice in support of public education in Ohio.

“In our earlier years, we did not make the distinction between advocacy and lobbying. We were very focused on meetings with legislators and the executive branch, but didn’t quite realize how activity outside the statehouse would boost our position and our reputation inside it,” says David Quolke, President of the Cleveland Teachers Union and former Ohio 8 Coalition co-chair. “When we first asked ACS to meet with The Ohio 8 Coalition in 2011, they outlined a much broader perspective to help elevate our Coalition priorities and showed us how a range of advocacy and communication activities could advance our work. This combined with their in-house experience as former school district staffers and knowledge about K-12 policy bent the learning curve to virtually zero.”

A Multi-Pronged Strategy

During the five years since that first meeting, ACS has created and implemented an advocacy strategy for The Ohio 8 Coalition that extends far beyond the Statehouse to include a broad set of partners and the media. During the past several years The Ohio 8 Coalition, with the support of the ACS team, has established stronger relationships with Ohio’s State Board of Education, Department of Education, Governor’s office, state policymakers, rural and suburban school organizations, state associations, and the media throughout the state all of which enhance The Ohio 8 Coalition’s connections and reputation.

Developing Strong Partnerships

In addition to aligning with the “usual suspects,” such as the school board association and state teacher’s unions, ACS also worked with the coalition to formally engage relationships with some unlikely partners. For example, The Ohio 8 Coalition identified common ground with the Coalition for Rural and Appalachian Schools (CORAS), particularly around school transportation issues. With ACS’ guidance, The Ohio 8 Coalition conducts regular outreach to other school districts, superintendents, and education associations to build alliances and shared messages. This has led to ongoing dialogue and partnerships with many of those organizations allowing K-12 priorities to be advanced across a broader swath of advocates statewide.

Media Highlights

The Ohio 8 Coalition makes reasonable charter school recommendations

HEADLINE: Make charter reform strong. Effectiveness depends on barring conflicts, enhancing transparency

“The Ohio 8 Coalition, a group representing big-city school districts, sensibly suggests adding a requirement that the names of charter-school board members and treasurers be made available online, along with teacher and administration salary schedules and total expenditures.”

- Columbus Dispatch, March 8, 2015

Ohio 8 Coalition Co-Chairs Lori Ward and David Romick call on policymakers in Columbus to provide real solutions to the academic and non-academic barriers students face

HEADLINE: Addressing educational challenges

“If the state is serious about increasing academic performance the first step is to ensure the involvement of the community including, elected officials, school administrators, educators, parents, community organizations and students.”

- Dayton Daily News, November 20, 2015

Intentional State Policy Discussions

Within the state policy environment, The Ohio 8 Coalition has carved out a rock-solid presence through testimony before legislative committees, conversations among interested parties, and meetings with legislators and their staff and media. In the past three years alone, ACS has participated in or led hundreds of these meetings with and for the coalition. In addition to their established connections with policymakers, The Ohio 8 Coalition streamlines and focuses its advocacy messages—with tools such as [infographics](#) and talking points—so that key audiences quickly understand both the expertise and the value that urban districts bring to K-12 education in the state.

Because every legislative cycle presents unique legislative opportunities and challenges, The Ohio 8 Coalition's advocacy strategy has to be focused yet flexible. Most legislative sessions are fast-paced, which requires ACS and the 16-member Coalition leadership team to be nimble and responsive to various demands. Requests for information and feedback, and building consensus on complex policy and political issues are nearly weekly, if not daily realities. Even in the slower-paced environment, however, The Ohio 8 Coalition's advocacy efforts remained robust. The Coalition uses any quieter legislative sessions to strengthen relationships and enhance its reputation as a subject matter expert among policymakers, staff, and members of the media.

"Each of the 16 members on The Ohio 8 Coalition leadership team is busy running either a school district or local union; ACS has helped us figure out ways in which we can be responsive to complex policy discussions even under the conditions and realities of our everyday demands," said Adrian Allison, Canton City School Superintendent and current co-chair of The Ohio 8 Coalition.

Engaging the Media

Outside the statehouse, The Ohio 8 Coalition has become a relied upon resource among members of the media. The Ohio 8 Coalition regularly engages media outlets around key K-12 policy issues; builds relationships with key reporters and editors; submits letters to the editor and opinion editorials; and supplies background information and resources to targeted media outlets. As a result, The Ohio 8 Coalition continues to frame the conversation about education policy in communities throughout the state. Members of The Ohio 8 Coalition are now a frequent resource for state and local reporters on policy issues that affect K-12 education and are often quoted, mentioned, or published by key media outlets.

"When we started, we were not as well-known and therefore were rarely included in policy

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Media Highlights

Ohio 8 Coalition Co-Chair David Romick providing context and real world impact of complex state transportation funding formula

HEADLINE: Education Oversight Panel Witnesses Push For School Transportation Funding Changes

"Our districts make up this gap with funds that would be better used to support the needs of our students," he said, adding: "We need a long-term sustainable solution for all districts."

• **September 22, 2016**

<http://ohio8coalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Education-Oversight-Panel-Witnesses-Push-For-School-Transportation-Funding-Changes.pdf>

"We know that our Coalition voice must be heard consistently and ACS is persistent in making sure that occurs."

—Adrian Allison,
Canton City School
Superintendent and
current co-chair of The
Ohio 8 Coalition

discussions,” says Cincinnati Public Schools Superintendent Mary Ronan. “Now, The Ohio 8 Coalition is respected as a resource by both policymakers and the media. Most of the time we are invited to the decision making table, and if we are not, ACS helps us find a way to get to that table because we know that our voices must be heard in order for our policy priorities to gain traction.”

Additionally, The Ohio 8 Coalition has experienced the following successes because of its approach to advocacy:

- The Ohio 8 Coalition was assigned two seats on a Senate Advisory Committee on Testing, which delivered recommendations for improving the state’s testing policies —many of which were incorporated into state law.
- The Ohio 8 Coalition was successful in securing a seat on the state’s Dropout Prevention and Recovery Study Committee. The committee was established to review and make recommendations regarding funding and accountability issues.
- The Ohio 8 Coalition was successful in working with a group of bipartisan legislators to ensure a strategic conversation around school transportation funding and policy was included in a recent budget bill.
- The Ohio 8 Coalition regularly meets with the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) regarding the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in an effort to ensure meaningful dialogue between The Ohio 8 Coalition and ODE as they prepare to develop the state’s implementation plan.

In it for the Long Haul

The Ohio 8 Coalition continues to refine its strategy as the K-12 public education landscape changes in Ohio and nationally. Recently the group developed guiding principles and a set of priority next steps to help sustain their advocacy momentum.

“We truly understand the value of sustained advocacy,” says Dayton Education Association President and Ohio 8 Coalition co-chair David Romick. “We understand that our advocacy can’t be a ‘one-and-done’ or a haphazard approach. We understand that the changes we want to see have been, and will continue to be, years in the making.”

Media Highlights

Ohio 8 Coalition Co-Chair Adrian Allison weighing in the impact of value added on teacher recruitment

HEADLINE: Value Added Report Card Measure Could Uncover Best Practices In High-Poverty Urban Schools, Report Shows

“Hiring the next generation of highly qualified, motivated teachers is essential to making an significant impact in our districts”

- **GONGWER NEWS SERVICE, March 11, 2016**

“ACS has helped us create a focused, multi-pronged strategy for the long haul—one that gives us the ability to adapt and evolve as our environment changes. We can take the advocacy practices we’ve honed along the way and apply them to new issues as they arise. Good, effective advocacy is ongoing work, and it’s become our sole strategic focus for The Ohio 8 Coalition going forward.”

—David Romick, Dayton Education Association President and Ohio 8 Coalition co-chair.

