

THE PERFECT MIX

Infusing leadership into a program that gives high school students a head start in business has paid dividends for Corey Mohn and the Blue Valley CAPS program.

By:

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Corey Mohn's personal mission is to help people get aligned with their passions. As executive director of the Center for Advanced Professional Studies (CAPS) in the Blue Valley school district, he attempts to live his mission every day, all the while blending in leadership ideas that have greatly influenced him with the opportunity to give students a head start in lending their skills to the workforce.

Launched in 2009, CAPS is a partnership between education and the community. But it's not a typical partnership in which businesses provide just funding. It's a hands-on experience in which students collaborate on projects with business partners who in turn mentor the students.

"It's them providing work that's on a real to-do list somewhere that's real-time and relevant," says Mohn. "At CAPS, every student is on a self-discovery journey."

The program has grown dramatically in the past two years, with a 50 percent increase in the number of students. But even success creates challenges.

"Scaling a program like CAPS is more adaptive than in a traditional classroom," says Mohn. "We cannot simply order more textbooks; our curriculum involves partner projects. Keeping up with demand and ensuring quality custom experiences for students is our primary focus."

An example of the kind of projects that students get the opportunity to work on is C.H.A.S.E. (Community Help for Autism Spectrum Everywhere) in Olathe, a nonprofit that works with children with autism. CAPS students worked with C.H.A.S.E. on some graphic design and branding help.

C.H.A.S.E. founder Amy Wilkinson says she was impressed with the quality of work the students were able to deliver. "The lead designer was a senior, but the manner in which she worked and managed tasks, you would have thought she was in the real-life workforce," Wilkinson says.

Wilkinson was surprised that the student was so engaged. "I think it can be challenging to find a high school student that not only possesses the talent, but also the management side of things. This student exhibited both amazing leadership and project skills," says Wilkinson.



Corey Mohn, director of the Center for Advanced Professional Studies in the Blue Valley school district, aims to provide high school students with a head start by helping lend their skills to the workforce.

She also had students working on a promo video and was pleased with how it worked out. No one in her organization has video experience, but she says a student was able to take thoughts and sketches and turn them into video. "He was willing to take the lead on the project and even shot video outside of his school hours," she says. "He went the extra mile for our video, and the end product was superb."

In addition to dealing with rapid growth, another challenge for the program is helping clarify the scope of the students' projects, so they're something that can be accomplished using their available time. Mohn says the process creates a great dynamic. Businesses are getting real tasks completed, and students are getting an experience they couldn't have otherwise. "To see them become confident and empowered – you can't put into words how amazing that is," says Mohn.

Wilkinson says her experiences with the students illustrate the point. "I often tell people CAPS students conduct themselves better than some I have seen in my professional career. It is refreshing to see young adults care about their projects, go the extra mile for clients and truly deliver a quality product. In addition, I feel the staff at CAPS cultivates that type of mentality.

They have trust in their students, and it shines through when the students deal with their clients."

Mohn loves having a chance to work with students at such a formative time in their lives, helping them explore and discover what they enjoy. "My experience is that when people are aligned to passion, they don't see work as work. They are driven, and the end result is that they are very productive in whatever they do," says Mohn. "The world becomes an amazing place if everyone is aligned to passion."

It has certainly worked for him. "I can't remember a time when I thought, 'I hate to get up and go to work today,'" he says. "This is where I want to be."

INSTILLING THAT LEADERSHIP IS AN ACTION

Mohn has been with CAPS since the 2014-15 school year. When he applied for the job, he was contemplating how the program could be expanded. A veteran of Kansas Leadership Center training, Mohn began to think about introducing KLC competencies to students. He asked the question, "How do we instill in students that leadership is an activity? That anyone can lead from anywhere at any time?"



Once he started working at CAPS, Mohn realized many of the principles were already in action, but the language just wasn't there. "They didn't have the validation of divorcing leadership from authority," says Mohn.

That was the case for student Isaac Rominger. "Most of the competencies ... diagnosing situations, managing self, intervening skillfully and energizing others, were behaviors I already did before my work with KLC," Rominger says. "I just was not conscious of them. KLC gave them a name, and gave me something to be aware of when going about my daily life."

Mohn says KLC leadership ideas impact the way students work with businesses, too. "Once students see themselves as people that can lead from anywhere at any time, our work with business partners becomes much more meaningful and enriched. Students learn to diagnose situations, manage themselves, intervene skillfully and energize others on their project teams and with their business clients. The only way to make progress, expand their learning and deliver quality products to clients, is to grow together and take initiative. Putting language to the challenges they face is powerful," says Mohn.

To get the program started, KLC representatives spoke to Blue Valley staff and students at the invitation of Mohn. They began to develop the idea of incorporating leadership principles into the CAPS program. "What's the harm in trying?" Mohn says. "We experiment all the time. We tell our students to learn from failure. We should do the same thing."

Mohn says the concepts have merged into the program well. CAPS is about giving students an experience, not just learning from a book, and leadership principles help create a full understanding.

"Leadership is an all-encompassing value," says Mohn. "While many schools create separate courses and tracks for leadership curriculum, we see the principle that 'leadership is an activity, not a position of authority' as a key approach to life regardless of career field. If anyone can exhibit leadership, why confine it to one course? This presents an opportunity to experiment on new ways of embedding the KLC competencies and strategies."

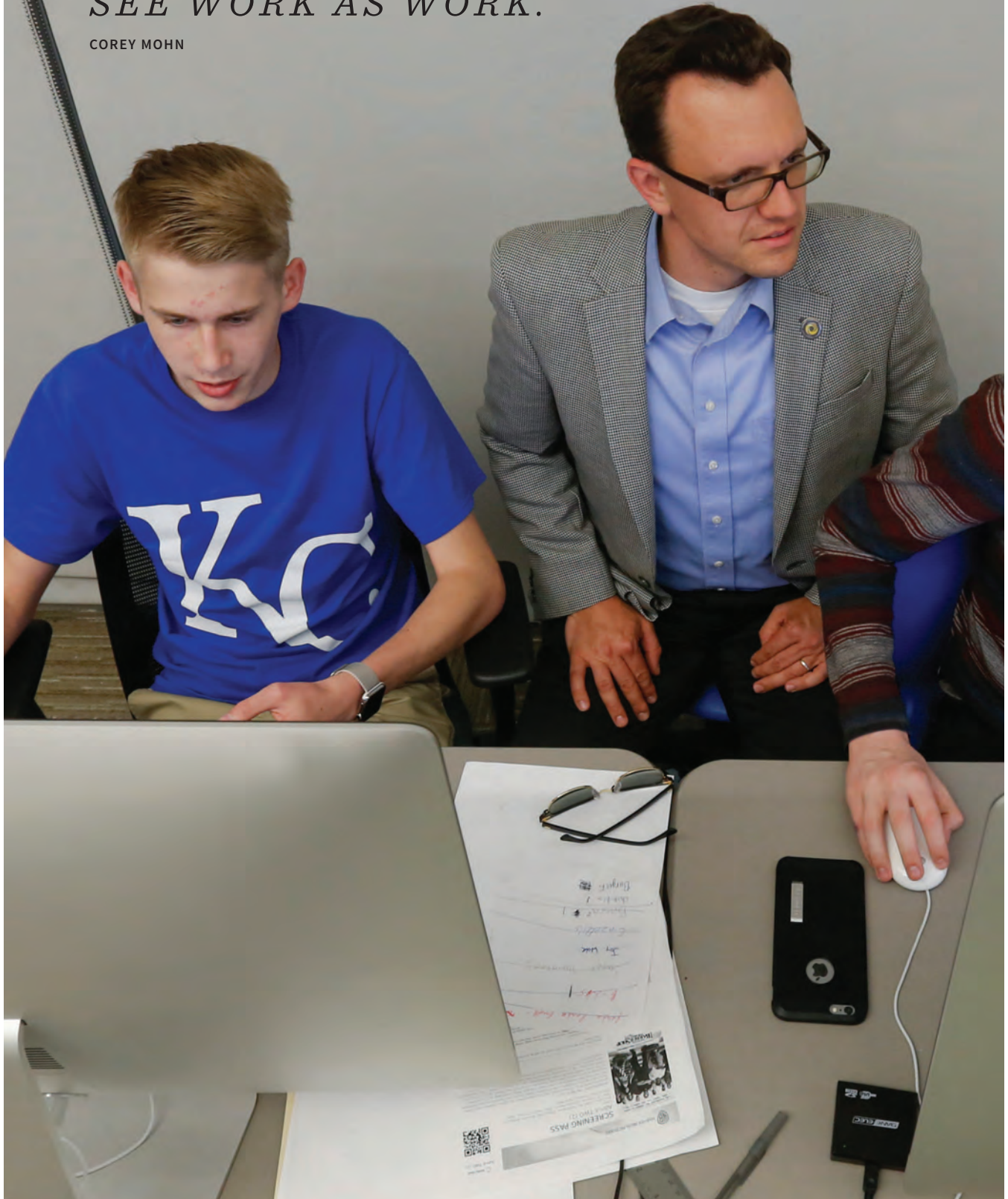
Some students embraced the idea immediately, including Chloe Orbals, who became the



FAR LEFT: The Blue Valley school district launched CAPS in 2009. The center's impressive home will serve 550 students per semester from the district's five high schools in 2016-17, up from 125 per semester in 2009-10. LEFT: CAPS instructor Scott Kreshel, here with student Robin Bajpai, was an early adopter of using KLC ideas with students.

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COREY MOHN



Corey Mohn has been able to successfully merge leadership concepts with the CAPS program, benefitting students such as Ethan Osterhager (left) and Shane Logwood (right).



student liaison in the program's first year. "Most students don't see themselves as leaders and would rather look up to one person," says Ortvals.

It's not only students who have that challenge, but faculty and staff as well. Schools are built on a hierarchy. "I have a master's degree in school leadership," says Scott Kreshel, a CAPS instructor. "I was taught leadership was an authority trying to solve all the problems."

But he was an early adopter of the leadership principles. He says it came at the right time for him. "Recent situations I've been put into are more demanding, and I'm realizing I don't have all the answers. I needed more than just me," he says. "Maybe earlier in my career I didn't realize that."

He presents the principles to the students when possibilities surface for hands-on experience. "I've tried to formally teach it. I have a great lesson plan put together, and we have great tools," he says. "But they don't hold a stick to the moment of informal teaching when they really need it." He integrates the KLC curriculum when students have issues with group projects or other difficulties.

Mohn says the KLC competency cards are frequently in use by students and staff. Although some staff were slow to accept the ideas, Mohn says change is happening. "We're at the very beginning of this. By no means do we have it all figured out. But we've started to see signs that it's really starting to get embedded into our culture."

The pilot program has pointed out this is not a one-size-fits-all situation. "Pushing the KLC principles and competencies down to youth taught us that language matters and format matters," says Mohn. "While materials like the KLC Quick Guide may work well to synthesize learning for older generations, students need resources that speak to them."



Medicine and health are among the six strands Mohn's center offers students such as Olivia Swyers (left) and Hannah McCarthy (right).

This year's student liaison, Jenna Felsen, created graphics for the school's video monitors that put leadership principles into a design that would appeal to students. "I strongly believe that KLC's lessons should be integrated into the CAPS curriculum because it applies to every student," Felsen says.

It keeps the principles in front of the adults, too. Everyone being engaged is essential, says Kreshel. "If this is going to work with students, it has to work with role models."

It takes time to apply the ideas in a new way. Although he was a veteran of KLC training, Mohn realizes in retrospect that when he first began trying to incorporate KLC principles into CAPS he wasn't thinking properly about it.

"It's ironic and funny to me now that I hear myself say it. We were trying to embed a leadership framework based on the idea of making sure that you identify adaptive challenges, and we were applying a technical solution to an adaptive challenge. We were falling into the trap on our

own." Mohn is looking at the next steps. CAPS is now in 17 school districts in eight states. It's possible KLC principles could be offered as part of the CAPS programs everywhere. The model might also be used in other schools.

But they're still working on it. "We continue to learn and grow through experimentation," says Mohn. "There are many discoveries yet to be made. For example, we still do not know how to provide consistency across all students in showcasing the application of resources around the KLC frameworks. This is our adaptive challenge: to build the KLC work as an overarching professional development strategy and embedded part of our culture at CAPS."

A side benefit of the KLC training has been some unexpected growth opportunities for faculty and staff, Mohn says. He says as the adults and the students all learn the language of leadership, it becomes second nature to use it. "When you get a building full of people doing that, it's naturally going to become part of the culture," says Mohn. "It's like Jedi language."

ALIGNING PEOPLE WITH THEIR PASSION

Leadership Lessons from Corey Mohn and Blue Valley CAPS

1.

ANYONE CAN LEAD, ANYTIME, ANYWHERE.

Sure, the students who participate in Blue Valley CAPS are top-notch. But adults often don't give even the best high school students enough credit for being able to exercise leadership on what's important to them. Here, students have readily embraced KLC leadership ideas. They practice them on a daily basis, and they have added to their learning.

2.

START WHERE THEY ARE – AND LET THEM SHAPE THE WAY FORWARD.

Early efforts at the center showed that youth needed leadership resources that spoke to them. In response, students such as Jenna Felsen have taken the lead in putting leadership principles into designs that would appeal to students.

3.

ALWAYS BE MINDFUL OF YOUR BLIND SPOTS.

Even people who know a lot about leadership make leadership mistakes from time to time. Corey Mohn readily admits that CAPS officials fell into a trap of seeking a technical solution to the adaptive challenge of embedding a leadership framework into the curriculum.

4.

EMBRACE EXPERIMENTATION.

Mohn and CAPS face plenty of unanswered questions going forward in terms of how leadership fits into the program and whether the KLC framework will be implemented in other CAPS frameworks across the country. These are questions that can only be answered through continued learning and growth.

Discussion Guide

1. What challenges does Blue Valley CAPS face in adopting a shared language of leadership?
How has it responded to those challenges?
2. What difficulties have you faced in trying to explain KLC principles and competencies to others?
How have you responded to those challenges?
3. What benefits do you see in being able to communicate with a shared language of leadership?
Are there any downsides to having a shared language that must be overcome?