Ashling Coffey stands before her classroom at North Star Academy College Preparatory High School in Newark, NJ, “show-calling” one of her students. Only the student isn’t there. None are, actually. Instead, her instructional coach and fellow English teacher Matthew McCluskey sits in the front of the class, acting the role of student as he helps the first-year teacher practice a part of her lesson that was giving her trouble. He’s observed her class the day prior, and now is time for the debrief.

He watches, then interrupts. “I’m sensing this is going to take too long,” McCluskey says, and she nods. “If you have time, definitely dig in like you are, but I think you can do this in a minute.” Together, they draft a plan for how to slash excess words and questions, to get to the heart of her lesson. Their conversation is honest and collaborative. They don’t skirt around her weaknesses; both attacking them head on.

It’s this constant process of fine-tuning teachers that helps North Star and its predominantly African-American, low-income students compete with students at the state’s wealthiest prep schools. That, and the uncompromising vision of the head of school, 2014 Ryan Award winner Michael Mann, whose laser-like focus has resulted in nearly every North Star student under his direction moving onto college. With Mann as head of the high school, 94 percent of students from the classes of 2010 forward are either still in college or have graduated. Compare that to the rest of Newark, where roughly three percent of eighth-graders are expected to earn a four-year college degree by the time they are 26. The progress the staff has made toward closing the achievement gap is impressive: North Star students in the Class of 2014 outscored white students nationally on the math and writing portions of the SAT.

The game plan is atypical. Mann hires people who are experts in their subject area, then uses the constant observation and feedback process to fill in the gaps they have in classroom management and instructional technique. “We’ve been able to attract and retain really great teachers who are brand new, inexperienced, and we just train the heck out of them,” explains Mann.

An operations staff and two disciplinary deans help clear any distractions for teachers so they can focus on instruction. In classrooms, lessons are timed and teachers move quickly, all lending to the urgency that pervades the building. Their movements are paced this way because of the goals they have for every student to graduate college.

“Newark is a very difficult place to grow up,” Mann says. “A lot of students can’t go anywhere, and the places they can go aren’t safe, or they’re potentially fatally distracting in terms of who else is there... so for a lot of our students, it’s either church, home or North Star.”
they can rely upon us and they do," even long after they’ve graduated, he says. Expectations are clear to students for every moment of the day: Turn in homework during the morning assembly. If you don’t have it, prepare for detention.

Mann says it takes minutes to get the school culture right, with the right systems, structures, mission, and vision in place. Maintaining that culture is incredibly difficult. “Starting it is instantaneous because we’ve thought it all through even before (students) enter the building. When they are overwhelmed by that, when they see the design of this thing and that every adult in the school has the same vision and knows exactly what to say and what to do every instant of the student’s experience, they become habituated to that very quickly,” Mann says. “That’s what we start with, then we go at academics very hard and very fast. And it turns out when you do those things, and you have a very well-designed, economic program—and you have a school culture that is very designed and structured—then students of color, regardless of whatever happened to them before, can perform at very high levels relatively quickly.” He says many Americans don’t seem to think these results are possible on the public dollar, and grasp at reasons why this can’t be true. “This is not just possible—this should be normal,” he says.

A Harvard alum who earned both his undergraduate and master’s degrees in education there, Mann discovered the original North Star school while searching for a place with great leadership, which he found lacking in many schools. Intrigued by the leadership and the ideas behind North Star, he decided to relocate to Newark to teach and coach at North Star. He later was tapped to start the network’s second middle school, which was the first replication for the organization that would eventually develop into Uncommon Schools. He ran that school successfully until 2009, when he was asked to take on the network’s struggling high school. Mann says he was motivated to take the job because the students graduating from his middle school were high-achieving and he wanted to make sure they were moving on to a high school that would challenge them.

One Vision

When he took over the high school, there wasn’t a clear vision for what it should be. “We had a high school that was kind of aimless and also had people with very firm beliefs about what high school was, and twelve different versions of what that was,” Mann says. Plus, the staff culture was toxic and the student culture undisciplined.

His first step was to divide the staff into three categories: The top third who would become the leaders of the new version of the high school, a middle group who were on the fence about the changes, and a bottom third who had to go right away. He met with the two remaining groups and listened to their concerns and ideas, but also did not renew any contracts for the middle group of teachers who had not fully embraced the changes.

The second and most important part of turning the school around was choosing a vision. “We chose an athletic one,” says Mann, who loves coaching sports as well. “I believe in the athletic metaphor. It’s very clear to students about hard work, achievement, having a definite goal and not letting other stuff get in the way of that.”

The students took to the vision, even though a new discipline system came crashing down on them in the fall. The parents of the senior class had the hardest time accepting the changes, and their feelings erupted at school meetings. “They were mad and loud and angry. They accused us of not having good motives, of firing the wrong people and assigning too much homework,” he says. Mann listened and took notes, but told parents nothing was going to change because the staff was focused on maintaining really high standards for their children so they could succeed in college and beyond.

He reminded parents that students at high-performing schools in the suburbs were doing just
as much homework, and those were the people North Star students would be competing against. “I know it’s painful and annoying. North Star is highly annoying. That’s because we’re demanding,” Mann says.

As for enrolling the students in the vision, Mann didn’t have to worry about the freshmen because most of them were students from his own middle school and they knew how things worked. He created a research class to give him the opportunity to develop a rapport with the 10th-12th grade students he didn’t know. He continues to teach every year, both because he enjoys it, but also because it keeps him in touch with the students. “That gives me control of the school in terms of the students, and also teachers are able to see what the expectations and standards are, and how to address a student who’s not doing what you want,” he says. “For me, that’s really important to be able to model teaching and to be able to model the tone and the relationship we have with students.”

What Can We Do Better?

Juliann Harris, dean of curriculum and instruction, says Mann’s focus on improvement helps propel the school forward. “He’s always looking with a critical eye at what we’re doing here, so we recognize our success but keep coming back to figure out what we could do better,” she says. “Even though we are a really successful school—ask anyone here—there’s always something else we’re working on, always room to grow.” Every Friday, students are dismissed at 12:35 p.m. to create built-in time for professional development for the whole staff.

As part of Uncommon Schools, North Star has been a lab of sorts for school leaders thinking outside of the box to develop practices that can be scaled across the country to close the achievement gap. Some of the practices of Mann and his staff are used as examples in the books “Driven by Data,” and “Leverage Leadership,” written by Uncommon Schools’ leaders. As such, the entire North Star staff is focused on using data to keep the school on track, to course correct, and to hold each other accountable.

From the main office to classrooms, systems throughout the building let everyone know where to be, and what to expect. Hanging inside every classroom door is a lesson plan that outlines every moment of classroom instruction. Teachers use a common format that prompts them to detail their daily objective, Do Now, the “heart of the lesson,” the We Do, Check for Understanding, and exit ticket with monitoring strategies infused throughout. Each part of the lesson is allotted a certain number of minutes, and teachers are expected to keep time.

Green Teachers

In his hiring process, Mann is looking for people who hold up well under an aggressive debrief after a guest lesson at the school. He’s looking for people who can be self-critical and participate in the reflection necessary to make improvements. “We need to see if they can follow us down this path of looking really closely at student work and being held accountable for it,” he says. School leaders are looking to see how the person reacts...
to that degree of accountability,” because that’s their whole life here as teachers. Because we have to hire people with zero experience, we have to develop them into what we need from the ground up, and so if they can’t participate in this analysis with us, then they can’t be here,” Mann says.

Candidates’ reactions range from insistence that the lesson was a success to immediately admitting failure. One current teacher, when asked how his guest lesson went, responded with: “I don’t think they learned a thing.” When the teacher said that, Mann’s reaction was: “This is our kind of person!”

Of the eleven people hired last year, ten had no experience at all. Teachers have to be primed for frequent observations by instructional leaders, followed by a feedback meeting. Praise is the first step of the feedback meeting. “We’ve just found people are more open-minded that way,” Mann says. But the praise should be precise, not vague, he says. Next comes a “probing question” designed “to get the teacher to the conclusion that we’ve already reached about what they need to do,” Mann explains. “We’ve found people don’t really make changes unless they’ve gone through the thinking process about why the change needs to be made.” After this discussion, the teacher and coach design the next action step for the teacher, then they practice. They will troubleshoot through any obstacles. Say a teacher could benefit from a clipboard to hold their lesson plan—the teacher and coach will retrieve a clipboard from the supply closet. “It sounds like minutiae, but it often adds up to practice that’s either efficient or haphazard,” Mann says.

While teacher turnover is a challenge at North Star, teacher Julia Addeo says she continues at North Star because she feels valued and supported. “It’s more than a job to our staff. To a lot of us, this is our life, and we connect over that idea,” she says. For example, earlier in the school year, a few teachers had to resign for personal reasons, which was stressful. But it was helpful to hear Mann’s honest recognition of all those things, she says. “We’re not going to sweep it under the rug. It’s affecting us; we’re all picking up slack in ways we weren’t necessarily prepared to,” she says. “But it helps going back to that praise, regrounding us in why we even do this, and making sure our community is strong.”

The school’s discipline system is clear and non-negotiable. The staff uses the PRIDE system, which revolves around the values of Professionalism, Reflection, Integrity, Determination and Enthusiasm. Teachers can both award and deduct PRIDE points, tracking student totals throughout the week. Dean of students Mikal McDaniel brings the right level of strictness and warmth to the school’s discipline system, which allows other leaders to focus on instruction, Harris says. “Depending on what the student issue is, it could consume your whole day, so you’re not observing, you’re not giving feedback, you’re not thinking about instruction,” Harris says.

**College. College. College.**

The students’ focus is centered on college throughout their time at North Star. In addition to the core classes, students take a college readiness class, which culminates in them completing college and financial aid applications. To make sure all the hard work that North Star students do in high school isn’t in vain, two full-time staff members travel around the country helping alums...
organize their schedules, plan their free time, stay on top of financial aid paperwork, and problem solve any issues in their social life. Through the effort, which is mostly backed by private funders, each student receives at least one visit a semester. “Students are academically prepared when they go off to college,” says Anna Taylor, alumni liaison. But they struggle more with time management, accountability, and handling difficult social interactions.

Every minute of class time at North Star is planned to maximize instruction, as evidenced in Addeo’s Accelerated Algebra class. She sets the timer for three minutes then stands by the door to greet students. “Go right to the pencil sharpener, sit down, and work on your Do Now,” she says. Over their shoulders, she surveys their papers, which are topped by the line “Education is Freedom.” The timer beeps. “Do Now away. Homework away,” she says, her clip is quick, her tone firm as she launches into a lesson on quadratic equations. “You have ten seconds to identify two roots of the graph and a point on the graph,” she snaps her fingers. Almost every student raises their hand to answer the first question. “Nice,” Addeo says as she scans the room. Keeping this quick tempo is important, says Addeo, because historically people have dismissed students like hers based on their zip code. “But we feel an urgency to make sure that doesn’t happen,” she says.