

Dr. William Coats: The man behind Leona Group

BY JOURNAL STAFF

His company has made significant inroads in Toledo but William "Bill" Coats, Ph.D., wants to see greater expansion into other Ohio cities. His Leona Group, L.L.C. has 11 schools in the Buckeye State, eight in the Toledo area. Two are in Columbus and the other in Cincinnati.

"I believe Ohio has more need for us ... than even Michigan," said the chief executive officer of the East Lansing, Mich.-based school management company. "There are more people in Ohio and more urban areas.

"We think Ohio has great potential," Dr. Coats added. "We haven't hit our stride there by any means. ... We're powering up and we're going to give it our very best shot."

Started in 1996 by the career educator, Leona Group today manages nearly 70 schools in five states: Arizona, Florida, Indiana, Michigan and Ohio. The company, which operates "almost exclusively" in urban areas with mostly children of color, has held fast to its core philosophy during its 13 years of operations.

"We believe almost anyone can learn almost anything if it's relevant," Dr. Coats said. "If young people believe that what they're studying is relevant to their lives, we think they're going to learn it."

And that education has to occur in an atmosphere of love and caring at every Leona school.

"We think it's important for all of our people - school leaders, staff, everybody - to know every child by name, by face, by family, to build relationships with them," Dr. Coats said. "It's important to legitimately care about children and love children. They need to know that the school really cares about them."

Further explaining the Leona philosophy, the CEO said that the company never has and never will have a "cookie-cutter approach" to its schools.

"Each of our schools is designed to meet the unique needs, hopes and aspirations of the communities they serve, and every community is different," he said.

Dr. Coats' views on education were shaped by an impressive background in that field. He worked with the W.K. Kellogg Foundation as coordinator for youth programs, and was a public



Dr. William Coats

schools superintendent in Fort Wayne, Ind.; Anchorage, Alaska; Grosse Pointe, Mich.; and Kalamazoo, Mich.

He was chairman of the Department of Educational Leadership at Western Michigan University and served as full professor in the College of Education at the University of Michigan.

It was at U-M that Dr. Coats earned his doctorate in research design and data analysis in education. Earlier, the Lima, Ohio, native and 1957 high school graduate earned a master's degree in educational psychology.

His focus on schools in urban areas resulted from his life experiences. He found he enjoyed running the school systems in Kalamazoo and Fort Wayne more than he did the schools in Grosse Pointe, a wealthy enclave outside Detroit.

And he witnessed discrimination and a lack of opportunities for African Americans while growing up in Lima, where his father was a high school principal with 90 percent black enrollment.

"There was not one single - not one single - African American employee in the whole school system," Dr. Coats said. "Not a coach, not a teacher, not a custodian, not an administrator. That just really wore on me as I grew a little older and reflected on my youth.

"One of my best buddies [an African American] couldn't even go back and teach there."

And while he is a sup-

porter of traditional schools, those schools "have traditionally and historically not met the needs of children."

"We think we can go into those areas and do a better job," he said. "That's where we go. That's where the need is."

"Frankly, it makes us [at Leona] feel better about contributing to society, to improve life chances for a lot of young people and literally save lives in many cases."

The Leona Group, which is named for the CEO's mother, got its start in Detroit when a group of residents wanted to reopen an old Catholic grade school. They contacted the Michigan Partnership for New Education, which was receiving support from the Kellogg Foundation.

"They wanted us to literally put a school in there and manage it [and] report to them as a board," Dr. Coats said. "That's what got us into the management business."

Today, that school has grown to four campuses - Cesar Chavez Academy Lower Elementary, Cesar Chavez Academy Upper Elementary, Cesar Chavez Academy Middle School and Cesar Chavez Academy High School - located within a three-mile radius in Southwest Detroit and enrolls about 2,000 students.

Dr. Coats, who likes to attend graduation ceremonies at Leona high schools, recently saw about 200 students receive their diplomas at

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Cesar Chavez Academy High School. Among them were about 15 grads who had been with Leona since they were in kindergarten.

"To see those kids go all the way through our system and graduate was really fulfilling."

Leona Group was formed as a for-profit full-service school management company. For-profit companies have been the target of criticism, including from Ohio Gov. Ted Strickland, but Dr. Coats says it's "more a matter of semantics than anything. All schools, traditional public, charter and private, contract with service providers to handle school functions - janitorial, maintenance, lunch service and so on. This relationship is no different.

"If you're a not-for-profit, you still have to generate more revenue than you spend or you're not going to be in business very long."

He said some critics of for-profit management

companies are really trying to bring an end to the charter school movement.

"If you didn't have management companies in the charter school business, you wouldn't have enough impact on the broader [education] system."

He is pleased that President Obama is "making it very clear" to state leaders that his administration supports charter schools. That will help Leona and other management companies across the country, he said.

"They really want choice and competition to operate [in the education field]," Dr. Coats said about the Obama administration. "We think that's going to deter some states from turning back the clock and basically shutting down the charter school movement."

With a long career in education behind him, the Leona leader said his most satisfying experience is something that re-

occurs every year - high school graduation.

"To hear the stories of these graduating seniors, it's hard not to get a little misty-eyed," he said, referring to those students for whom traditional public schools didn't work. "Just to be able to talk with these young people at the end of the year is really heart-warming. That's the most fulfilling part of this business of education."

Dr. Coats has no intention of slowing down. He has about 2,000 employees and 20,000 students in the schools that he is committed to - and he's thoroughly enjoying pursuing his passion of offering alternative education to urban youth.

"I feel as healthy and as energetic, maybe more, than I ever have in my life," he said. "I'm filled with fire in the belly, I'm having big fun and we think we're doing a lot of good - and I have no intention of doing anything else."

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