
Leading Together Makes Everyone Better: It Takes a Village

Mary Vigneri, Occupational Therapist, Horse Creek Academy



"I am **just** a service provider."

"I am **just** an aide."

"I am **just** a classroom teacher."

As educators, we've all heard this or even voiced this before. I know I believed I was **just** an occupational therapist before I came to Horse Creek Academy (HCA), known as "the Village" by the staff and student community. I have been a school-based occupational therapist for over 25 years. Prior to joining the Horse Creek team, I was often in the background as a service provider even though I witnessed or was an integral part of most aspects of my students' education (general education classes, special education classes, therapies, IEP [Individualized Education Plan] meetings, and more).

Since joining the HCA community, I have been given the opportunity to lead and co-lead on our special education team and most recently on the collective leadership team.

*I have learned so much, but most importantly I have learned that I am not **just** a therapist. I am a therapist **and** a leader.*

I have learned so much, but most importantly I have learned that I am not **just** a therapist. I am a therapist **and** a leader.

HCA is a large school that serves students from 4K–high school. Over four years, we have grown from 500 students to almost 1,400 students. We are a public charter school; therefore, we do not have the large, designated departments from a county district office to depend on for support at the school level. We count on everyone in our building to fill various roles, and we encourage leadership at every level.

Here are just a few of the many leaders that make up our village:

Meet Sandy: Sandy started as a parent volunteer. She was hired to be a custodian and eventually became leader of our maintenance team. Her leadership qualities include attention to detail, organization, and the ability to coordinate responsibilities with people in various departments. She is now our Director of Logistics overseeing maintenance jobs, communicating with contractors, organizing shipments that come into the school, and scheduling our special education meetings.

Meet Katie: Katie started as a volunteer volleyball coach. She then took a position as a 5K teacher assistant while also organizing and scheduling our newly established sports teams. Now she is the Executive Administrative Assistant to Dr. Taylor, our school leader. Katie is also a member of the Vision Team and Athletic Administrative Liaison, and she is a part of the High School Behavior Team. She organizes substitutes, athletics, pictures, and many other events at the school.

Meet Ashley: Ashley started as a special education teacher's aide, exhibiting natural talent and expertise with behavioral interventions. She is now an integral part of our Behavioral Intervention Team. She meets with teachers and students for ongoing elementary behavioral support and assists the special education team and general education teachers by creating behavioral visual charts, visual schedules, and visual picture cards for our nonverbal students.

Meet Jen: Jen started as a proctor for our online lab during the pandemic, then became a teacher's assistant and part of our front office personnel when we returned to in-person learning. She now serves on the Vision Team and High School Behavior Team, helps with the Collective Leadership Initiative, and organizes and runs various programs for our secondary students, including dances and extracurricular events.

Using the collective leadership model, we have often found the best leaders in unexpected people and nontraditional places. We have traditional leaders who began as full-time classroom teachers and moved into leadership roles, and we also have many leaders who began as volunteers or support staff. Sandy, Katie, Ashley, and Jen are just a few of the many in our village who demonstrated a propensity for leadership. Volunteers and employees have been able to share their vision and grow into various roles at our school because at HCA, we believe anyone can (and should) lead.

In our most recent survey (December 2022, see table) 90 percent of the respondents consider themselves to be leaders at our school, a data point that has improved each year since collective leadership practices were put in place at HCA. According to the results, there was also a significant growth in the query areas of job satisfaction with respondents feeling as if they can make a difference with unmotivated students and work well with teachers at our school. All staff, certified and classified, are given opportunities to step up and lead.

Does the administration at your school provide opportunities for **everyone** to lead? Everyone has something to offer and needs to lead to grow professionally and feel valued.

*Does the administration at your school provide opportunities for **everyone** to lead? Everyone has something to offer and needs to lead to grow professionally and feel valued.*

To retain teachers and staff, schools need to find ways to entice their dependable and exceptional employees to stay. Retention begins with feeling fulfilled. Leadership provides the necessary opportunities to develop and grow in different roles and positions. We need school administrators to provide opportunities and school staff to take advantage of these opportunities to lead.

Because leading together makes everyone better, it takes a village.

Author Bio:

Mary Vigneri is in her second year as the occupational therapist at Horse Creek Academy Charter School in Aiken, SC. In addition to serving students with fine motor and sensory needs, she has been given leadership opportunities, including assisting with the Collective Leadership Initiative (CLI) at her school. She received her bachelor's and master's degrees from the Medical College of Georgia. For over 25 years, she has served as a school-based occupational therapist and worked in medical and private practice settings. She is excited to continue to be a member of "The Horse Creek Village" and connect with the staff, students, and families at HCA. She and her husband Tommy share two college-aged children.



This story is published as part of a recent storytelling retreat hosted by the [Office of Educator Effectiveness and Leadership Development](#) (OEELD) within the [South Carolina Department of Education](#). [Mira Education](#), an OEELD partner, facilitated the retreat and provided editorial and publication support. Learn more about this work and read additional stories by following [@EducationSC](#) and [@MiraEducation](#).