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Cover Story: Growing Roots and Wings

Building new schools, creating new communities in Cincinnati

By [Stephanie Dunlap](#)

Dream with us a little. Dream of a school -- your neighborhood school, the one you still attend, the one you attended years ago.

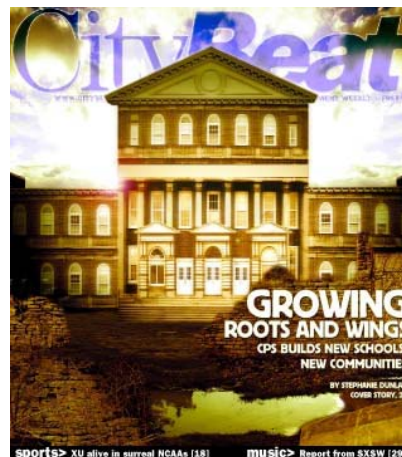
Think of what you'd like there. A bookstore and coffee shop? Adult computer classes, art classes? A YMCA? A community health clinic? A professional theater company to lead student drama classes during the day and mount its own productions at night?

Here's the rub. If you live in Cincinnati, you don't have to wake up. In the next 10 years every school in the Cincinnati Public School (CPS) district will be entirely renovated or rebuilt into a "community learning center" -- an amalgam of school and community center -- that will operate 12-15 hours a day, seven days a week.

These centers are to be focal points in Cincinnati's neighborhoods, the community lifting its children when parents alone don't have the resources, while the promise of youth and change in turn lifts community elders.

CPS Board Member Jack Gilligan brought the idea to Cincinnati from New York, where he saw the revolutionary centers help poor, urban communities pool their strengths to support their children.

An illustration: When students went home with eyeglasses from a school's new health clinic, parents took younger siblings to the school to ask for the same. When they couldn't afford the care, they volunteered in the lunchroom. The community tapped and shared its resources and that, in essence, is what the new centers are all about.



Woodrow J. Hinton and Sean Hughes



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What's even more amazing is that the communities themselves are designing the community learning centers. Residents, teachers, parents, business leaders, social workers -- everyone is being drawn into the process, because everyone has something to contribute.

In turn, the centers will offer something for everyone, from GED and art classes to a more closely-knit community with better educated students. The community engagement process allows people to redesign not just their schools but the way their whole community works.

"The park board, the recreation commission, the board of health, the library board -- all of them are doing things in the neighborhood but not always in a coordinated fashion," Gilligan says. "To get them thinking in terms of not just doing their own thing their own way but coming into a community effort and joining a community effort -- that will make the total impact greater than the sum of the parts."

In fact, everything having to do with the new initiative seems that way -- aspects complementing each other and creating something greater than their sum.

Guiding the community engagement processes is CPS consultant Darlene Kamine, whom Gilligan calls the "mother bee" of the process. She says community learning centers are spreading nationwide; there are already about 8,000.

But Cincinnati is among the very few with a "three-pronged approach" to the new centers, Kamine says. The first prong is the centers themselves; the second is the community engagement process; the third is a facilities master plan that will renovate or rebuild every school building in the district.

Not a minute too soon

And it's a good thing, too. No one's blind to the fact that Cincinnati's public schools, like most schools in urban centers across the country, aren't faring well. Our educational institutions, as well as the students they struggle to serve, are failing many of their tests.

Gilligan, who served as Ohio's governor from 1971-75, has some insight into the decline.

"Urban centers in Ohio, as well as most of the rest of the country, are confronted by the fact that the power and the legislative bodies are concentrated in the suburban areas, because that's where the people are -- the people who vote and pay taxes," he says. "State policies by and large have tended to reflect that political fact."

In fact, CPS will shrink from 69 to 66 schools because of declining enrollment district-wide.

"Too many people in legislative bodies and administrative offices at the state level haven't realized they cannot possibly afford to neglect this big element," Gilligan says. "If these kids aren't educated and motivated and incorporated into the life of the community, they are going to be a great drag on the future of the community."

Half or fewer than half of the kids who enter public high schools in Cincinnati graduate with a diploma, he says. That number's on par with other urban centers around the country.

"The inner city kids quite literally do not have available the kind of support mechanisms that are available to the suburban children, beginning with family structures and home life," Gilligan says.

They don't have "soccer leagues and so on characteristic of middle income children in the suburbs," he says.

In many cases they don't have yards. Or heat. Some kids don't even have homes.



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When they're getting educated by the streets, not school, how are they supposed to catch up?

"Enter a high-tech society without a diploma? Your chances of making the grade are next to zilch," Gilligan says.

They are going to be "virtually unemployable, virtually dancing on the very edges of society."

While the state legislature has trouble coming up with the money to run a proper public school system in Ohio, Gilligan says the number of people in prison has shot up in 25 years from fewer than 10,000 to 43,000 today.

Ohio's in good company. The United States today houses a larger proportion of its population behind bars than any industrialized country, he says. Every one of those imprisoned former students costs taxpayers \$20,000 to \$25,000 a year. Then, after five or 10 years "we dump them out on the street again" having gained nothing but a prison record.

"That's a pretty cockeyed way of running a society," Gilligan says. "This is a way, I think, to get it turned around."

Tax levies and bake sales

Of course, money has always been a problem. Hence the bumper sticker: "It'll be a great day when schools have all the money they need and the Air Force has to have a bake sale to buy a bomber."

But this time there is money, and it's no paltry amount: Nearly \$1 billion will be spent on CPS community learning centers over the next 10 years. The school levy that local voters passed in May 2003 ensured matching funds for state grants that will update all of Ohio's public school facilities.

"This money is not being spent on the riverfront to build stadia, not on Fountain Square in support of chain stores and hotels," Gilligan says. "This money's going to be spent in every single one of Cincinnati's neighborhoods."

What's breathtaking right now is not just the money finally available for schools but the attention the project is attracting from longtime residents and city council. Gilligan says Councilman David Crowley has led council in committing to offer help in any way it can.

But we're not picnicking in Elysian Fields yet, and community learning centers can't bridge all the gaps.

"Of course there are limitations: money, time, energy and so forth," Gilligan says.

Not all communities have the same resources, and CPS can't invent them. Some communities are going to have access to more and stronger residents and partners, more financial investment. CPS has finite time and money.

"Some are going to do better than others," Gilligan acknowledges. "Part of our job, if there is a perceived need, is to see what we can do working from a central point to make those resources accessible in those neighborhoods where they have not existed or at least been adequately developed."

But in this case what's lacking in community financial resources can be made up for by the numbers and energy of community members involved.

"It amounts to the kind of people that we're able to attract and empower," he says.

Some schools have been reluctant to embrace the new community learning centers model because they're already overburdened. Gilligan says they tell him, "We've got enough on our plates. We're swamped. Please don't bring more stuff in here on top of us."

He hopes hesitant school staff will soon see the greener days ahead.

"We hope they'll be ready to learn that no one's imposing burdens on them," he says. "Their jobs can be better and they can have a greater impact on the kids."

Some Clifton residents, for instance, are still unhappy that their neighborhood school is closing while a German-language magnet school, Fairview Elementary, moves in. The school board listened to their concerns but in the end stuck with the decision.

But for the most part the board has honored communities' requests. The Master Facilities Plan released in 1997 first recommended closing the elementary school in East End, then bowed to requests to not only keep it open but make the school kindergarten through 12th grade so the children of this largely Appalachian community would be more likely to graduate (see [East Beginning](#), issue of Feb. 4-10).

CPS soon will consider some Lower Price Hill community members' similar request to make Oyler Elementary School a K-12 facility so kids will continue and graduate. The school board also agreed to rebuild Pleasant Ridge Elementary on its current site instead of moving it closer to Kennedy Heights.

The community engagement process is a "little different in each neighborhood where it's being tried," Gilligan says, so no two community learning centers will end up looking or operating exactly alike.

"There's no cookie cutter recipe for this," he says. "The secret of it is if you get the people of the neighborhood -- the parents, merchants, social workers, everybody else -- get them together and decide what they want to do with their neighborhood, what their neighborhood needs, the resources available, they're going to be as different as the neighborhoods are."

Pleasant Ridge Elementary

"There's never been a network like this," says Chris Reece, a member of the Pleasant Ridge Community Council who has lived in the neighborhood 23 years.

Mary Lennard has volunteered for seven years to sing with kindergartners there. She says she's involved because "we had to make all of the schools (into) schools that we wouldn't mind our children attending."

During the community engagement process, everyone wishing to participate attends a series of meetings in which the community votes on, ranks and narrows down its priorities. The top priorities -- say, "art" or "green" (environmentally friendly) -- are then divided among committees. Committee members brainstorm about exactly what they want and how to find partners to make it happen. They present their findings to an architect, which the community chooses from one of three "pre-qualified" by CPS.

After the school is designed, the community engagement process picks back up to strengthen ties with partners.

Reece and Lennard say Pleasant Ridge has six committees pursuing its objectives for the new community learning center: performing arts, health, after-school programs, adult education, academic enrichment and green.

"We brain-stormed everything we could think of," Lennard says. "What wasn't already in the community as a resource?"



Such options as a public library, post office and police substation were eventually ruled out.

Christy Vonderschmidt's two children are too young to attend the school yet, but she's involved because one day they will. She helps spread word of the community engagement process in her children's play group. Getting young families involved means they're more likely to stay in the community, she says.

Though losing the old building upsets some community members, "the alternative would be to lose the public school," Reece says. There's been a school at that site for more than 100 years; she promises that the school's Rookwood water fountain and other treasures will be preserved.

The construction segments have been arranged so that students in a school under renovation will temporarily move to a school left empty by its own students' move to a new school, so honoring the Pleasant Ridge community's request for the school to stay was no easy task.

"What the board ended up doing was really quite phenomenal," Reece says.

She found that the hardest part was "taking these rather free-form ideas and trying to solidify them into something tangible like partnerships. It was really difficult at first."

"It was like Odyssey of the Mind creativity teams with children," Lennard says. "You find out a lot more about who's here and the talent here."

Shroder Paideia Academy

The conversion of schools into community learning centers is proceeding in four segments of about 30 months each, spread over 10 years. Shroder has found it difficult to catch up after being bumped up to the first segment from a later one.

Even so, the process has whipped up a lot of interest -- a students' focus group requested more honors and advanced placement classes, and some students from the seventh- through 12th-grade academy even serve on the "core group" of the process.

Paideia is an educational model that uses seminars in which students read and then discuss material from many core classes, fostering critical thinking skills.

Developing community relations is especially interesting for an alternative magnet school that draws kids from across the city. Add to that the fact that CPS decided to move the school from Kennedy Heights to Madisonville, and it's been an altogether hectic and unique process.

Even so, "the staff and the students are very excited about our new school and, since everyone has that input, it has made it a wonderful experience," says Principal Sammie Croley.

Though the new building has already been designed, Croley still holds hope for more partnerships with local businesses. She'd like to see a Barnes & Noble bookstore annexed to the school, where students could work retail and everyone could visit in a coffee shop and browse the books.

Nearby Fifth Third Bank and Coca-Cola are other possible partners. Ethicon Endosurgery Inc. is already a primary partner, supplying teachers with paper and paying for field trip transportation.

Talbert House is a Shroder partner already in place. Four staff members work in the school to help provide one-on-one conflict resolution, services for small groups or entire classroom curricula, according to Julie Weikert, coordinator of the social service program for Talbert House.



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Talbert House's Partnerships for Academic Success (Project PASS) provides similar services for a handful of other schools, but since Talbert House has agreed to partner with the entire CPS district its role likely will expand.

Weikert says she's seen PASS make a difference in students' conflict resolution, problem solving and anger management.

"I definitely have seen an improvement in terms of how students handle their problems," she says.

Winton Hills Academy

Located in a community largely served by the low-income housing projects run by the Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA), Winton Hills Academy is one of the schools furthest along in the first segment, Kamine says. Partners from the Winton Hills Medical Clinic and CMHA are already housed in the old school. Now their staff members are as much a part of the school as the school staff.

"CMHA is also one of the few agencies that has the capacity to really understand and take on the role of community resources coordinator," Kamine says.

CMHA had already been doing just that, operating from an apartment before it teamed up with the school, she says.

Gilligan likes to tell this story: As parents gathered to discuss what they wanted, one woman piped up and said, "Well, you know, a group of us, three or four of us, get together from time to time and read poetry. Could we have someone teach us how to write poetry?" That, in Winton Hills, is breathtaking."

Oyler Elementary

The dropout rate in this largely Appalachian community in Lower Price Hill is staggering, edging up on 80 percent. Students often don't finish school because they're reluctant to go to high school in another part of town.

"It's really a remarkable neighborhood when we're trying to restore the concept of neighborhoods," Kamine says. "In other parts of the city, Lower Price Hill is an example of a very strong and cohesive neighborhood. But at the same time they want to do better for their children and for themselves."

One of the few students who made it to senior year is a steady presence at community engagement meetings, where locals have requested adult education, a library, and -- in an urban neighborhood largely founded by factory workers -- a quiet green space to sit in peace, Kamine says.

The elementary school already has a lot of support and interest from potential partners such as the Urban Appalachian Council, the Lower Price Hill Community School, the Boys and Girls Club, the Cincinnati Recreation Commission, a city health clinic, a social service agency, Project Connect and Family Services.

Jake Kroger is director of Lower Price Hill Community School, which offers GED preparation courses, hosts classes through Cincinnati State College and teaches literacy to many in the community, including a number of Latino students.

"I've been impressed with (the community engagement process) and the receptiveness of the public school system to listen to the recommendations of a neighborhood," he says.

Kroger says that a K-12 school close to home would be "culturally appropriate" and reduce the dropout rate. He might then be able to shift his school's mission.

"With the success of the new K-12 school, we would work with many, getting them into college through our connection with Cincinnati State," he says.

But he doesn't expect GED classes to be phased out anytime soon.

"Since the dropout rate has been at this level for a long time, the number of adults close at hand who have not finished high school is quite large," he says.

He'd like to dispel the stereotype of Appalachian communities that says there isn't a great interest in education. In fact, Oylar was founded 35 years ago by people similarly concerned about their children's education, Kroger says.

Clifton/Fairview

Clifton Elementary School is a magnificent building, says neighborhood resident and Fairview parent Bill Gordon. Cliftonites are deeply attached to it and to the idea of having a neighborhood school, so the CPS decision to close it was a blow.

Though it's moving to a site adjacent to the old school, Fairview Elementary can't take its place, because Fairview is a German-language magnet school whose students learn German an hour a day, beginning in kindergarten. School leaders are willing to offer summer classes and tutoring for those wishing to catch up and enroll, but the school's not for everyone.

"Residents really felt like it was a slap in the face," Gordon says. "The neighborhood's wishes were not being respected."

It was a serious issue, he says, and CPS dealt with it seriously, holding three hearings for residents to air their concerns. But, in the end, the decision stood.

CPS did commit to work with the community to at least save the old school building, a prime neighborhood concern.

As Fairview's engagement process has unfolded, meetings between Fairview staff and parents and Clifton residents continue "to ensure a satisfactory resolution of the issues," Kamine says.

Carol Brammer, a Clifton resident and Fairview parent, wants to stress that the community learning center isn't just for the Gaslight District in which it will sit but for the entire Clifton community, including University Heights, Fairview and Clifton Heights. If people understood what was happening, interest would skyrocket, she says.

"If people really understood the impact this could have as part of urban revitalization, bringing urban-quality living back to Cincinnati," there would have been hundreds at the engagement meetings instead of a steady 60, Brammer says.

It's natural that this community, so close to multiple hospitals, didn't choose a health clinic as one of its priorities, as many other communities have. With so many artists and UC professors living in Clifton, it's also natural that the community wants to prioritize the arts in the new school.

Brammer and Gordon try to sneak in some last words.

"I really want to encourage other communities to start as early as you can and pull in as many different constituencies as you can," Brammer says. "Be very open to the process, let it unfold."

"I want to thank Jack Gilligan, whose idea this is," Gordon says.

"I want to thank CPS and the community at large for investing in our public schools," Brammer adds. ©