

From the Ground Up

Cincinnati Is Rebuilding Its Schools and Revamping Its Student, and Family, Services



Top left, Donald, a student at Oyler, and tutor Bill Moss are finding places discussed in a book they are reading. Top right, nurse Christina Tarter tends to Ashley, a student at Taylor. Center, Winton Hills student Nah'Zerrie meets Cincinnati Bengals safety Marvin White during a visit to Xavier University.

There are many ways to develop a community school. Working with an experienced partner is one option (see article on page 8). Another is to bring together local organizations, community members, and resources to craft a homegrown strategy. That's what Cincinnati is doing with its "community learning centers." Although the effort only has been under way for a few years, students already can access a wide array of health services, afterschool programs, social services, and summer enrichment activities previously unavailable to them. To find out how these community learning centers got started, why they're important, and how they support student learning, *American Educator* sat down with four key players: Annie Bogenschutz, resource coordinator at Ethel M. Taylor Academy, a prekindergarten through grade 8 school; Darlene Kamine, consultant to the Cincinnati Public Schools for the development and management of community learning centers; Julie Sellers, president of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers; and Joe Wilmers, social worker at Winton Hills Academy, a prekindergarten through grade 8 school.

—EDITORS

Editors: What are community learning centers (CLCs)?

Julie Sellers: CLCs are schools that have been opened to the community and that have formed partnerships with community organizations to provide a wide variety of desperately needed services during the school day, after school, on weekends, and over the summer. For example, CLCs offer students medical, dental, and vision care. From my perspective as a classroom teacher and as president of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers, one great benefit of the CLCs is that they increase attendance because students are getting their health needs taken care of at the school instead of staying home.

Most of the services CLCs offer exist in the community already. The CLCs just bring those services to the students. A lot of our families do not have transportation to go to the clinic, the doctor, the free store, or the food bank. This really is an easy way to provide needed services.

The CLCs also build community connections, even in simple ways like keeping the gym open so the community can form a vol-

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Right, students in Oyler's alternative education program work toward their diplomas. Middle, after school, Oyler becomes a Boys and Girls Club, with activities for students like Kameron. Bottom, college access advisor Sam Stupak helps Oyler students Tonly and Lester make their postsecondary plans.

leyball or basketball league. With the interaction between community and school, the community feels ownership of the school.

Joe Wilmers: I believe that schools should be used as much as possible by people in the community; they should not close when the last student leaves. The facilities and some programs should be available to the community at large. This is especially true in my school, Winton Hills Academy, which is surrounded by a huge federal housing project. Since becoming a CLC, Winton Hills is open seven days a week. During the week we have afterschool programs until 5:30, and then the building stays open for the neighborhood to use the gym or hold a community council meeting.

Editors: Why are CLCs needed?

Joe Wilmers: Economically, we have a large population that really struggles. From helping families fill out paperwork for scholarships and grants, I know that many of our families make less than \$10,000 per year. In addition, we have as many homeless students as any school in the city. Every week we have at least one new homeless family, and many weeks we have two or three or four. A big part of my job is to refer them to shelters, make sure they have some emergency food, and tell them where the food pantries are.

Darlene Kamine: The demographics of the Oyler School, another CLC, are similar: very poor and isolated. Oyler serves primarily an urban Appalachian population in an industrial area near the Ohio River called Lower Price Hill. About 25 percent of the adult population is functionally illiterate, and more than 60 percent did not graduate from high school. The school is right next door to one of the city's most active homeless shelters. The school building, which is roughly 100 years old and about to be completely renovated, is the hub for the whole neighborhood.

Annie Bogenschutz: Ethel M. Taylor Academy is located in the Millvale neighborhood. It's in the middle of a housing project, though we also get students from the surrounding neighborhoods. This used to be a highly industrial area; today there are some abandoned warehouses, but not much else. No post office,

no grocery store, no library. There is a recreation center with a city-run health clinic inside, so when Taylor was rebuilt a couple of years ago it was moved a few blocks to place it right in front of the rec center. As in Winton Terrace, there is violence and drug trafficking, many single-parent families. Before the CLC initiative, Taylor opened at 7:30 a.m. and closed at 2:15 p.m. Now the school and rec center are like one big campus.

Julie Sellers: The CLC becomes an important part of our students' lives. Many of our students don't really have anything to go home to. A large percentage of our parents work second shift or multiple part-time jobs, but live below the poverty level. If





Left, Tonya and Elizabeth enjoy the computer lab as part of Oyler's afterschool Boys and Girls Club. Below, Briana gets a wellness exam by Dilruba Rahman, a nurse in Oyler's health clinic.



students go straight home after school, no one is there. The children can't play outside because their neighborhoods are not safe. The most they can do is watch TV or play video games. In contrast, the CLCs offer afterschool programs with structured activities and supportive adults. The kids are happier; they are doing fun things that enrich their education. And, they see the school as a place where they feel secure and where they want to be. The parents also feel more secure because their children are in a safe and structured environment so they don't have to worry.

Joe Wilmers: As a former special education teacher and a former administrator, I can speak to how it has been a real godsend to have an afterschool program as part of this CLC. Instead of kids leaving at 2:10, many now stay until 5:30. It not only allows our parents to have full-time jobs and know that their kids are safe, but our students have extra learning opportunities. We have a couple of teachers who also work in the afterschool program, which is run by the YMCA, and they ensure that our study sessions after school reinforce what students are learning in the regular school day. More than half of our children are reading below grade level, and we have a number of special-needs students, so every extra minute they spend in a learning atmosphere really helps. Usually the first hour of the afterschool program is academic. But the program is a little over three hours per day, Monday through Friday, so there is also time to be on the computer, do crafts, etc. We have rotating enrichment and recreation activities. About 95 kids, or 20 percent of our population, attend the afterschool program—and about 100 more would attend if the YMCA had the money to accommodate them.

Editors: When and how did Cincinnati start developing CLCs?

Darlene Kamine: In the 1990s, a United States Government Accountability Office study found that Ohio had the worst public school buildings in the U.S.—and that Cincinnati's buildings were in the worst shape of any in Ohio. That was one of the factors prompting a court case in the late 1990s in which the Supreme Court of Ohio found that the condition of the state's public school buildings was so poor as to be in violation of the state's constitutional guarantee of an adequate public education.

As a result, the state legislature organized the Ohio Schools

Facilities Commission to direct the renovation or rebuilding of school buildings all around the state. Some of the construction is fully funded by the state of Ohio, and some is funded partially by the state and partially by the district, depending on the valuation of real estate in the school district. In Cincinnati, 23 percent of the funding comes from the state.

Many Ohio districts were uneasy about asking taxpayers to fund an entire district renovation; they targeted a few schools or planned to do the construction in phases. Cincinnati Public Schools created a comprehensive plan to provide state-of-the-art learning environments for all students. But before asking the taxpayers for support, the board of education developed this vision of creating CLCs through a community engagement process. When we went to the taxpayers in 2003, the levy to support the \$1 billion plan passed. According to the pollsters, the district's commitment to build the schools as CLCs was very important.

In each neighborhood, the process of community engagement starts with identifying a core team of the people who are leaders, officially and unofficially, of that community. We develop those core teams through conversations in people's living rooms, in the coffee shops and bingo halls—wherever people feel comfortable meeting. It is unlikely that people would have responded to me passing out fliers or the principal sending home a note inviting everybody to a meeting. The planning is completely dependent upon developing that core team in each neighborhood that then takes responsibility for bringing together their friends, neighbors, and networks. Many of our community engagement teams involved a committed group of more than 100 people working together for years.

The community engagement process remains the fundamental bedrock for the development of this whole CLC infrastructure. Everyone in the community—parents, teachers, staff, students, neighbors—creates the shared vision; they map assets, assess

Left, many Winton Hills students head home at the end of the school day. But about 20 percent, including Braniya (below), stay for the afterschool program run by the YMCA.



needs, develop priorities, and ultimately select their CLC partners. Even the design of the building is developed by the community planning team working with the architects and the district's construction team. In some cases, the community engagement process drives changes in the academic program, as when Oyler added high school grades to create a pre-K-12 program and another community transformed its struggling school into a thriving Montessori program.

To do all this, Cincinnati Public Schools built my position into the funding for the facilities plan, and KnowledgeWorks provided some additional funding for us to work with the Children's Defense Fund and the Community Building Institute at Xavier University.

From the beginning, our model included a resource coordinator in each CLC. This was intended to be a kind of chief operating officer who could continue the ongoing community engagement, develop and manage partnerships and resources, ensure alignment with the school's academic goals, and track accountability. We felt it was important that the resource coordinator be employed and funded outside the district's operating budget to ensure sustainability despite the budget cuts that are typical to public school systems. Two private foundations, United Way and the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, committed to funding nine pilot sites for four years. Meanwhile, the district repurposed other funding to increase the number of resource coordinators to 20, putting us well ahead of our goal to grow to 20 sites by the end of five years. Now we hope to have a resource coordinator in every building in the next couple of years.

Editors: Please describe a few of your partnerships in detail. What services do they offer and how do they help meet the students' and community's needs?

Joe Wilmers: One of our good partnerships is with the Winton Hills Medical and Health Center, which we call WinMed, across the street from the school. WinMed implemented a Fast Track program in which parents can permit the school nurse to take a child to the health clinic. That way kids get the care they need and parents don't have to take time off from work. We work closely with the health clinic staff; doctors, nurses, and therapists

come to our school to meet with the principal, resource coordinator, and me. WinMed also does some health education. For example, they ran a fair in which they gave out nutritious food and taught the community about good health.

We have a wonderful new program that started last year, Adopt A Class, created by a successful local businessman. He convinced businesses around town to develop an ongoing relationship throughout the year with one class. Currently, every class but one has been adopted; various organizations are involved: Procter and Gamble, our local television station, a construction firm, a law firm, a life insurance company, a graphic arts company, a real estate firm, a police precinct, etc. The classes and outside groups write letters to each other, and a few times a year the groups bring food and talk to the kids about what they do. In December, there's a holiday party and they bring small gifts for the students—and we make sure the students write thank-you notes right away. Some of those groups, like Metropolitan Life, send people every Friday to tutor kids. Everyone is encouraged to come to events, especially when we have awards assemblies. Last year one class visited Procter and Gamble; they saw an experiment going on in the laboratory and had lunch in the company lunch room.

Before, if you asked the students what they want to be when they grow up, they would say basketball player, rapper, or hairdresser. Now, they say they want to work for Procter and Gamble or one of the other Adopt A Class partners.

Some of the Adopt A Class people have really gotten attached to their students and become mentors. Almost half of our mentors have come from this program, and I'm trying to recruit more. These are successful people who can do so much for our students, whether it's taking them to a museum or helping them think about college.

All of these ongoing programs are there to support our main mission, which is to raise the academic level of all children, to get all children learning, graduating from high school, and going on to college.



Top, through a partnership with Xavier, Winton Hills students visit the university's campus and enjoy games with college athletes like soccer player Mason Kelly. Middle, Dr. Yvette Casey-Hunter does a follow-up exam with Winton Hills student Dre'Quan. Bottom, Emanuel does his homework during Winton Hills' afterschool program.



lots of arts, including theater.

Since developing the CLC, our community has changed. Now, even parents are becoming partners. One parent came up to me earlier this year and suggested we have a job fair. I said I thought that was a great idea, but I couldn't plan it right now. She offered to plan it. She contacted nine businesses and we sent out fliers, which the Cincinnati Metropolitan Housing Authority helped with by offering to walk door-to-door together through the housing project. When we opened the doors for the fair, 60 people came flooding in. They were dressed up. Some were parents, some were community members. It was the first time we had 60 outside adults in the building at once. The parent who organized the fair followed up with the companies afterward—a little more than half of the people who applied for jobs received them.

This parent also saw that people often came to the school to ask for help with basic things like food and clothes, and that I was always referring to four different community directories to help them. So she compiled one directory that the parents could use. All of this was done by a parent who wouldn't have been active in the school before; she would not have even walked in the building.

Editors: Does the tutoring offered through the CLCs reinforce what's being taught during the school day? If so, how?

Annie Bogenschutz: You could have a thousand tutors in the building, but if they're not working on what the teachers need them to be working on, it's a waste of everyone's time. So we have a full-time tutor coordinator who works in the school building but is employed by the YMCA. The tutor coordinator finds appropriate tutors, trains them, and ensures that they are supporting the teachers' work. The tutor coordinator

also looks at the benchmarks and practice test scores to ensure that students are getting targeted help. Some teachers give the coordinator the week's homework packet every Monday. Some teachers stop by every day to talk about certain students. Most of the tutoring is in reading and math, but one of our Adopt A Class partners is an architectural firm that does a lot of science with the kids. Some of the teachers conduct their own tutoring after school as well, so we coordinate the kids' schedules. Most of the kids are tutored twice a week, but some come every day. And most of the tutoring is after school, but we do have some school-day tutoring too. So that kids don't miss class time, the tutor comes into the classroom and offers one-on-one help.

Annie Bogenschutz: We have partnerships similar to those Joe described. For example, our afterschool program offers students many opportunities they may not otherwise have. It is provided by a local mental health organization called Central Clinic, which hired a full-time afterschool coordinator. In addition to tutoring and computer time, the program has great enrichment activities—some contracted and some volunteer. So far this year, our kids have gotten to do drumline, African dance, DJ class (in which they learn to spin records and make CDs), Signing Safari (sign language), karate, Mad Science, and

Right, Dave DeWeese tutors Taylor student Breaysha to improve her automaticity in reading. Middle, as part of the community learning center initiative, Taylor was moved a few blocks so that it would share a campus with the rec center. Bottom, behavioral health counselor Tiffany Zeigler helps Taylor student Rasean work through anger issues.

Editors: The community engagement process sounds time-consuming. Is it worth the effort?

Annie Bogenschutz: It's absolutely worth the effort. I've found that the ongoing community engagement is just as important as that initial engagement. For example, in planning our after-school program, one thing we discovered was that parents felt comfortable with the sixth- through eighth-graders going to the rec center, which is a drop-in facility, on their own after school. So we tailored our afterschool program to the younger kids, up to fifth grade. If we had created an afterschool program for the older kids, it would have been a waste of time and money.

Here's another example: I thought, from the demographics of the neighborhood, we should have some GED classes. After talking to parents and other community members, I learned that they wanted something else—a library and Internet access. So we decided that at night, after the afterschool program ended, we would keep the computer lab open another hour for the community. Now we're trying to create a library for the adults. We even have some Eagle Scouts building the bookshelves for us.

These are just a couple examples. The point is that we can bring in lots of different services, but if they are not what the people in that neighborhood need and want, then they are a waste of everyone's time and resources.

Darlene Kamine: At Oyler, we've been engaging the community to prepare for the building renovation, but we aren't waiting on the construction to add partners and services. For example, we learned that many parents would have their children drop out rather than go to a high school outside the community, so the community worked for several years to convince the district to add high school grades to the pre-K–8 school. Now we have a regular high school and an alternative program for students at risk of dropping out.

Dozens of partners and programs extend the activity in the building until almost 11 p.m. every night. Even in the old building, the Oyler CLC truly is the programmatic, spiritual, service, and cultural hub of the community. It has made a big difference

in the climate of the school.

I was a juvenile court magistrate for 18 years, and I recently had the pleasure of taking the chief magistrate of the juvenile court on a tour of the school. He used to have a lot of "customers" in that school; since he hadn't had many lately, he wanted to see what was going on. Walking down the hall, he said, "There is real learning going on in this building now." I think that's how I would best describe it. There are a lot of activities and partnerships, but the core of this is all about how we support learning.

Julie Sellers: Once a CLC is established, the neighbors, parents, and students feel a greater connection with the school. The new schools are clean and attractive. You don't see trash or graffiti.





Left, Taylor students have dinner as part of the afterschool program. Below, with good behavior, Taylor students earn credits that they can exchange for cameras, iPods, T-shirts, and more at this mobile store, made possible by a partnership with the University of Cincinnati.



It's welcoming to the community and builds community respect for the school.

As a teacher at a CLC, you see the parents in the building more often so you can develop a better connection with the family. As parental involvement increases, students become more successful. The parents build relationships with the teachers through the CLC's community activities. Then, when a teacher calls, they already have a relationship and parents are less intimidated and more supportive of the school.

Editors: Here's a practical question: to what extent are you using the classrooms after school and how is it that the school is ready for academics again the next morning?

Annie Bogenschutz: The CLC has required a shift in thinking at Taylor. For instance, the cafeteria used to be cleaned right after lunch. Now we have the afterschool program that has dinner at 5 p.m., so schedules had to be changed. Space is also an issue, but since we are in a building designed to be a CLC, we have the luxury of five open spaces called extended learning areas. Picture an open pod in the middle and the classrooms off of it. This has been helpful for the afterschool and community programming. There have been times when we have had to go inside classrooms because we needed more space. But, for the most part, we've used the extended learning areas, cafeteria, gym, and library.

Darlene Kamine: The district has always had a janitor or plant operator in each building until at least 10 p.m. In the past, they cleaned the building on their own schedules. Now their schedules are coordinated with the afterschool and evening activities. The resource coordinator is very helpful in managing it all, including the development of relationships with the cleaning staff, the lunchroom staff, and the front office staff.

While all of the partnerships and programs must provide their own funding, the district does provide office space and furnishings, janitorial services, and other basics such as Internet access and phone service for the resource coordinator, afterschool coordinator, health providers, and other colocated partners. The new and renovated schools have air conditioning so that we can continue to serve the community during the summer. Reducing the costs of utilities was one of the incentives that prompted the

district to adopt green and sustainable design policies, which have earned the district recognition as one of the greenest in the United States.

Editors: Community schools often operate year-round. What are you able to offer during the summer?

Annie Bogenschutz: This summer, Taylor and 15 other schools identified as low performing are having extended learning time, called fifth quarter, during June. The morning is focused on math and reading, and the afternoon is enrichment. For instance, our seventh-graders asked for ballroom dancing. They are also doing CPR training. Sixth-graders wanted Spanish classes and to learn about different weather patterns—specifically tornadoes and lightning. So a meteorologist from one of our local news stations is coming once a week. These enrichment programs go until 2:30. But the parents said they needed a program until 4:30, and we wanted to partner with the rec center, which has traditionally served these kids over the summer. So at 2:30, the kids go to the rec center, which has a pool, lessons like knitting, and other activities. In addition, the tutor coordinator is ensuring that students have access to tutoring throughout June.

In July, we've partnered with the rec center for all-day programming, then in August school starts again. Throughout the summer, our mental health partner is continuing to work with certain students and groups. Our nurse is full time, and is also doing some health education that she hasn't had time for during the school year.

Editors: How do the CLCs affect teachers' work?

Julie Sellers: The teachers are thankful that the services are in the building because they know that the students' needs will be met. For example, for students whose families don't have enough food over the weekends, there are some CLCs that give out bags of food—called Power Packs—every Friday. All of the food is nutritious and child friendly. That not only meets a dire need, it

makes the students feel more secure, which leads to better behavior.

Annie Bogenschutz: Developing a CLC could be overwhelming at first, but the partners—especially the health and mental health partners—address the needs of the kids. Therefore, they free the teachers to focus on academics. The kids, in turn, are ready to learn.

Joe Wilmers: We have one partner in particular that is a huge help to teachers: St. Aloysius. It serves kids throughout Cincinnati with serious mental health and behavioral problems—it even has a hospitalization program. We have six therapists (three of whom are part time) from St. Aloysius at Winton Hills. One runs the antibullying program, and the others see individual students on a weekly basis. They also are available to do crisis intervention as needed. In addition, a psychiatrist from Cincinnati Children's Hospital comes to the school; he meets with parents and prescribes medicine. I work hand in hand with everyone from St. Aloysius. As a school social worker, part of my job is to be out in the community, particularly to contact parents who don't show up to sign papers for their children's medicine or ongoing therapy. Also, I'm our point person for abuse and neglect, and contacting child protective services. All of us work together and consult each other constantly.

Editors: What have you learned from this community engagement and partnership process?

Annie Bogenschutz: I've learned the importance of community engagement. I could have come into Taylor with programs already established, but they would only be successful if they were what the community wanted. Community engagement is the only way to meet community needs.

Darlene Kamine: As a society, we just say to teachers, "Here, do it, fix it." We drop kids and all their problems off at the teacher's door. I think that when we started this process, teachers, parents, and community members were very skeptical. They thought we were asking them to work with us in designing all this, but that their input would not alter what we were going to do. The way Cincinnati Public Schools

has given communities, teachers, parents, people without children, and children themselves an opportunity to take ownership of their school buildings has created a tremendous sense of community. This is reflected in the fact that we are increasing enrollment, adding jobs, and passing levies. The idea behind all these partnerships is to create the conditions for learning. The partnerships add new supports and enrichments; they do not replace existing jobs. What makes this work is that every community has wonderful resources and people, whether it's a small neighborhood or citywide.

Julie Sellers: Before we had CLCs, many students went without services. They went without counseling, without afterschool options. Many students were home alone or, as they got older, were hanging out on the streets.

With CLCs, there is more guidance for the students. They have more positive adult role models, and they learn how to interact with one another. During the school day, we don't have a long enough recess for children to learn appropriate interaction and sportsmanship. But they can learn these things in the afterschool activities. In addition, we have specific programs for the older students to pull them off the streets. For instance, we have boys' and girls' groups that build leadership. The kids love it. Even older kids would rather be in a structured club than on their own.

The times are changing, and we need to change with the times. Families are stressed, trying to get the services—the tutoring, child care, counseling, and medical care—their children need. With CLCs, communities are better able to meet families' needs and, because those needs are met, schools are better able to educate students. It is a great model.

Joe Wilmers: This is my 35th year working with kids and my 30th year in Cincinnati Public Schools, so I'm an old-timer who has been around. It's a shame that most schools are only open for seven hours a day. In my previous school, several of us voluntarily got the keys to the building and had activities like a chess club and a band. It has always been my personal dream that all schools would be more than a seven-hour-a-day phenomenon. Tax-

payers should have a right to the school after hours.

In my experience, the key for anything working is having buy-in. The principal has to believe fully in the importance of having a wide array of people get involved with the school. The principal has to articulate that to the whole staff and also has to designate somebody to coordinate all of the partners and schedules. You don't want a partner to arrive when the students are on a field trip.

With the buy-in firmly established, the other key is to make it easy for parents and community members to get involved. Groups often start small—like bringing pizza for our monthly attendance awards. They have lunch with the kids and tell them what a great job they've done getting to school every day. Once they do that, they fall in love with the kids and offer to do more. I think schools sometimes put up barriers that make it difficult to get involved. We always welcome people, and we let them know that we appreciate them.

I've always felt that I am blessed to have the opportunity to work with kids. If you want to make a difference, there's no better place to be. □