

A Community Re-Captures Its Students

Adapted with permission from the Coalition for Community Schools' profile of Oyler School, Ohio

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Results:

- In only three years the school has re-captured at least 150 students who had dropped out or needed alternative schedules to graduate
- Six years ago, as a K-8 school, 84% of students never made it to 10th grade; as a preK-12 school, staff anticipates an unofficial high school graduation rate exceeding 70%*



The Appalachian community of Lower Price Hill lies in an industrial area along the Ohio River, where homes are interspersed with factories and environmental quality is very poor. More than a quarter of residents are illiterate.

A few years ago, the community's Oyler Elementary School was in danger of closing due to decreasing enrollment and poor academic outcomes. Initially local families were reluctant to intervene to save the school, but by using a variety of community engagement strategies, Cincinnati Public Schools Consultant Darlene Kamine mobilized residents. They created a new vision for a new school—a Community Learning Center. This effort was supported by a district-wide goal set in 2002 to make every Cincinnati school a Community Learning Center.

During their meetings on rebuilding the elementary school, community members realized they had an opportunity to address a persistent concern: high school graduation. For generations, nearly 85% of students would graduate from Oyler in the 8th grade and end their formal education. So a grassroots political group—including the local community council, parents, local business and church leaders, members of Leadership Cincinnati and the Urban Appalachian Council—collected signatures from community youth and convinced the Board of Education to open a high school. These individuals continue to play a strong role in bringing resources to the school. And today Oyler—a diverse pre-K to 12 school where 79% of students receive free or reduced price lunch—leads a hugely successful effort to recover youth from the streets and get them back into the classroom.

Removing Barriers to Learning

Community partnerships play a key role at Oyler. As Principal Craig Hockenberry said when delivering The State of Oyler Address in 2007: "The vision for our school took years of planning and partnerships. We had to tap into resources and experience beyond what we as educators are capable of coordinating."

Oyler Community Learning Center now [shares space] with a Boys & Girls Club and a school-based health center and provide much needed services to students from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. The Boys & Girls Club provides a full-time resource coordinator to manage and supervise Oyler's many partnerships and programs during and beyond the school day and year round. The health center, in partnership with the City Health Department, makes full health services, including dental care and vision screenings, available to all students. Mental health care is also provided, including a psychiatrist from Cincinnati Children's Hospital who comes to the school every other week to work with children and families.



The Boys & Girls Club and the Cincinnati Recreation Center operate after school and evening programs for students and adults at the school site. With help from additional partners, the Boys & Girls Club opened a Teen Center at Oyler, open 2-7 p.m., which offers academic tutoring, job training and college resources as well as access to computers, video games, a lounge and study area. In addition, students can come to the "Kid's Café" for free hot meals in the evening, provided by the Freestore Foodbank.

Focus on Mentoring and College Preparation

Oyler staff recognizes the benefits of individual attention. Through the school's HOSTS [Help One Student To Succeed] Program, more than 350 mentors from 65 different organizations provide

individualized attention and support to Oyler students on a weekly basis. The Cincinnati Youth Collaborative (CYC), for example, matches volunteers with students in grades 3 through 12 for one-to-one mentoring and tutoring. And mentoring begins at a young age at Oyler: The Adopt-A-Class Foundation, started by a local businessman whose company headquarters are around the corner from Oyler, connects dozens of area businesses to every preK-8th grade classroom for a full year of mentoring activities, including a spring outing to the Adopter's business.

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Individualized support from college advisors prepares Oyler students—and their parents—for post-secondary success. This includes a College Access Center and college campus tours for students beginning in the 7th grade. Oyler also partners with Jobs for Cincinnati Graduates, a non-profit that helps develop the social and work skills required for success in school and career.

Personalized Academics

Individual attention has also helped the Oyler high school program thrive. As the high school program was being developed at Oyler, Hockenberry began "re-capturing" students by offering an online program for young people who had either dropped out or needed some type of alternative schedule in order to graduate. Students are able to move at their own speed with the assistance of Oyler faculty and the safety net of support services provided by the school's co-located partners. The first online class had 14 graduates: eight went on to college, all with scholarships. In three years, Oyler has re-captured at least 150 students.

In 2007, Oyler implemented Data Folders, which include current data on how students in every grade are doing on benchmark assessments. Teams of teachers and individual teachers routinely meet with students and their parents to talk about specific strengths and weaknesses. Teachers also use the data to help improve their own instructional programs, part of the school's massive effort to stay aligned with the district's strategic plan.

Results and Lessons Learned

Since the full high school program started, Oyler has not had a single dropout. "This year we are expecting about 15 graduates and then, every year after that, we expect 40-50 students," says Hockenberry. "By [2010], there will be more high school graduates in Lower Price Hill in one year than we think have ever graduated in almost 85 years."

"It's really a Cinderella story," Kamine reflects. "But we could have never done it without the community driving it, fueled by their understanding of the inextricable link between the success of our schools and the success of our city. The repositioning of schools as the centers of community has resulted in the realignment of resources that allow for sustainable partnerships accountable to shared school-community outcomes. Students, teachers, families and communities are setting their own goals, selecting their own partners, and finding their own pathways to success. This has proven to be a much more genuine, embedded transformational approach than the traditional provision of services that are done to and for schools. Together we are leveling the playing field for our children and making graduation, college, and a career a real possibility."



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This story came to LFA's attention after being featured in the August 2009 Coalition for Community Schools publication *The Community Schools Approach: Raising Graduation and College Going Rates: Community High School Case Studies* (p. 9-10).

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*From the [January 9, 2010 Cincinnati.Com](#) story *Three Rivers looks to buck trend; consolidate into one building* by Denise Amos