



Expanded Learning Opportunities in Cincinnati



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By Darlene Kamine, Executive Director of the Community Learning Center Institute

Over the past ten years, through a neighborhood-by-neighborhood planning process and sustained community engagement, traditional elementary schools, magnet schools and high schools in the Cincinnati Public School (CPS) system have each developed their own customized set of partnerships with community organizations and resources that are selected by each school's site-based governing committee. The transformation of the schools into community learning centers (Cincinnati's term for community schools) is supported by CPS Board of Education policy stating that all schools become centers of their neighborhood with extended-day and year-round programming. The community learning center model for all CPS schools is a significant contributor to student success achieved for 2009-2010 with the designation of the district as the highest performing urban school district in Ohio – a long climb from the "Academic Emergency" status at the starting point for the community learning center initiative back in 2001.

The sense of parent and community empowerment, created through their engagement in the development of community learning centers, has brought families back to the public school system and reversed the dramatic decline in enrollment that preceded the community learning center initiative. Middle class families, eager to return to or remain in urban neighborhoods, are choosing to become part of a socio-economically blended school family. Customer satisfaction is also evident among the taxpayers whose property values are supported by higher achieving schools and who are, in turn, passing school levies.

But the demographic of Cincinnati's public school system is still overwhelmingly poor in most of our schools. Graduation rates have soared from 51% in 2000 to 80.5% in 2009 and the passing rate on the state graduation tests is high. Even with good grades and sufficient achievement on state tests, the transcript of a low-income student graduating from a high poverty school is often not level with the transcript of a similarly talented student from a socioeconomically integrated school. One of the most glaring differences is in the record of after-school extracurriculars. As one high school junior, first generation college-bound student at a school with a 92% poverty rate lamented,

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Leadership Message

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Expanded Learning Opportunities: Community School Examples from England and Australia

Extended Learning Time and Expanded Learning Opportunities at the Mirabal Sisters Campus, a Children's Aid Community School

Partnership Press - Fall 2010

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"My grades are good and I want to go to college, but I know there is supposed to be more on my transcript. Kids at suburban schools have choir and drama and horseback riding and all kinds of things that make them stand out. We know that colleges are looking for those things. We'd like to have the chance to put on school plays. We'd like to have yearbook and a school newspaper and job shadowing. We don't want to be second class citizens!"

Federal funding and their companion mandates were well intentioned efforts to help low-income students do better academically. Tutoring and testing are key components of the heavily funded programs like SES tutoring and special turnaround initiatives. These services and supports are usually limited to students who qualify by being economically disadvantaged. Funding for programming intended to level the playing field is perpetuating socioeconomic segregation.

While seamless, integrated after-school programming is necessary to promote the academic goals of the school, adding more time on task only for economically disadvantaged students in low-performing schools through an extra period of homework help or individual tutoring is not likely to be as engaging or effective as promoting literacy through a student-run online newspaper or a poetry workshop. Ballroom dancing or marching band can teach fractions, social skills and self-discipline in a way that will be internalized more enduringly than an extra period of practice proficiency tests. As public school districts are unlikely to be able to bear the cost of extending the official school day against the backdrop of constant budget shortages, after-school programming will continue to be voluntary. How likely is it that students will choose to stay after school to spend extra time in their seats receiving direct instruction as opposed to hand-on, genuine learning opportunities?

University admissions officers are clear that a big part of the decision to accept a student is based upon their personal qualities as evidenced by the kind of interests, talents, and accomplishments they have achieved outside of class. Middle class students have a long head start by becoming involved in activities in elementary school. Becoming an outstanding soccer player or chess champion or demonstrating a record of meaningful community service requires the time and opportunity to develop that talent. Eight-week rotating classes in after-school programs that satisfy required grant mandates but lack the opportunity for deeper study and advancement will do little to enhance the personal qualities reflected on a student's college application.

Our vision for the redevelopment of public schools as community learning centers is to create the kind of schools each of us would want for our own children and the kind of neighborhoods in which we would want to live. A key element is to ensure that after-school educational opportunities help to create a level playing field for all children. As the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously held in *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, "... in the field of public education, the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place."

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