

Knox leaders hope conversation continues on community schools

By Lydia X. McCoy

Monday, September 19, 2011

CINCINNATI — While touring one of the four schools in Cincinnati, Jerry Hodges, executive director of Knoxville's Project GRAD, said he was all for the concept.

"I think every community, the center of that community should be the school. I don't care what community you're in," he said. "Now to figure out a way to make that happen is, of course, the trick."

Hodges said the question becomes "Is it the will of the community?"

"Is this something the community really wants?" he asked. "And if so, it ought to be a serious conversation."

On Friday, Hodges was among 20 Knox County leaders who traveled for a day long trip to Cincinnati to see its model of community schools.

Under the concept, buildings are used for more than just teaching students.

With the help of community partners, schools become a hub — staying open in the evenings, on weekends and during the summer for everything from health clinics to sites for yoga classes.

The Cincinnati public school system — which has gone from being in an academic emergency to being the highest-performing urban school district in the state of Ohio for the last two years — has become a national model for the concept.

Darlene Kamine, executive director of the Community Learning Center Institute in Cincinnati, said the most important thing that school district did when it first began talking about the concept of community schools was a change in thinking.

"The danger that many districts have is they try to figure it all out. Our school board set the parameters and set the policy and then trusted the communities enough to say figure it out and we're right behind you and support you all the way," she said.

Buzz Thomas, president of the Great Schools Partnership in Knox County, said one of the things about the Cincinnati model that stood out for him was the use of a third-party biller.

"Medicaid is basically subsidizing this program," he said, referring to federal funds available to the program for students who health or mental health services.

In Knoxville it would be interesting to see if there would be third party partners willing

to support the model, he said.

"We've never done that. We've always referred students out to services," he said.

Thomas said he liked what he saw in Cincinnati, but one of the keys to developing the program is making sure that the school district is on board.

"I'm in a position to say that I can help make this happen," he said. "But it depends on whether (Knox County Schools Superintendent) Jim McIntyre and our school board want to do it and whether the private sector providers in Knox County like this model and are willing to come into the schools and do it. I think they would."

McIntyre said the tour was an opportunity to see the community services provided and how it effects student learning.

"We'll go back and we'll get this group together again and talk about what we learned and what we saw," he said about the next steps. "Are there lessons from this experience that we can apply to our work in Knoxville?"

McIntyre said one of the conversations in Knoxville that can be taken from the Cincinnati trip was how Project GRAD is used in some of the schools and where to go next with the 12-year, public-private partnership that serves 14 center-city schools.

The school system's contract with Project GRAD, which stands for Graduation Really Achieves Dreams, is set to expire in 2013.

Marie Alcorn, vice president for community engagement and mobilization for the United Way of Greater Knoxville, said while her organization could be in the position to help agencies who apply for grant the next step in the process for Knoxville is to raise awareness about the community schools concept.

"Subsequently, if McIntyre and the school board choose to develop this model, then the community will have an understanding of it because we have been sort of the advocates," Alcorn said. "From the United Way side, as those grants come to us, I'm more knowledgeable of what that looks like in the real world because I've seen it."

Lisa Bender, with the Girl Scout Council of Southern Appalachians, said she wanted to go on the trip because her agency wanted to see how it would be able to fit if the conversation got traction in the community.

She believes Knox County will get on board with the model based on some of the work she's already seen taking place, like at Pond Gap Elementary, which has some elements of the community schools idea.

"It's life changing for a child so I can't imagine that Knox County would not want to really pursue this in some form or fashion," Bender said.

Bender's hope is that the thread of conversation continues in the weeks ahead.

"My hope is that the really exciting dynamic between all of us is not lost," she said. "And the next steps are we continue to stay in contact with each other as partner agencies."



© 2011 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online