



CINCINNATI, OHIO: One Brick at a Time

CINCINNATI, OHIO: One Brick at a Time—How a Facilities Master Plan Enhanced Collaborative Decision Making

Cincinnati's Community Learning Center Initiative (CLC)—a core feature of the Cincinnati Public Schools' (CPS) 10-year, \$1 billion Master Facilities Plan—is built on a shared philosophy among school and community partners: schools are a hub of the community, and their purpose is to revitalize learning and transform the community. According to Darlene Kamine, formerly a consultant to CPS and now head of the **Community Learning Centers Institute**, "Commitment to that philosophy has been laid one brick at a time" through ongoing community engagement and an infrastructure grounded in collaborative decision making.

The groundwork for the CLC began in the late 1990s when leaders of the CPS, the CPS Board of Education, and the community began developing their initial concepts about community schools—motivated by an Ohio Supreme Court decision that found conditions in Ohio schools so deplorable as to fail the constitutional requirement for an adequate public education. Jack Gilligan, former Ohio governor and member of the CPS Board of Education, visited Children's Aid Society community schools in New York City and Local Investment Commission community schools in Kansas City, Missouri, to see how those jurisdictions were using school buildings as centers of the community. Seeing communities' potential for organizing supports for students, Gilligan encouraged the district to adopt a community schools strategy. He said:

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. 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.

Concurrently, then-CPS Superintendent Steven Adamowski was thinking about schools as joint-use facilities. He was inspired by then-U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley's vision of schools as centers of community. Adamowski also understood that reconnecting the community was essential to the school district's successful revitalization; he saw the rebuilding of physical facilities as a catalyst for engagement. The CPS, however, lacked the capacity to lead a neighborhood-by-neighborhood community engagement process in the district's 52 neighborhoods. Therefore, Adamowski and the CPS Board of Education asked the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) in Cincinnati to manage the process. Eileen Cooper Reed, then executive director of the CDF in Cincinnati and now a CPS Board of Education member, secured funding from the KnowledgeWorks Foundation to ensure the independence and integrity of community engagement.

The broad vision laid out by Cincinnati's leaders was refined through years of dialogue, debate, and decision

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making among residents, parents, and school leaders at community engagement sessions in each neighborhood. Ultimately, the system for effective and sustainable CLCs was born.

The CPS and community partners launched a plan to create state-of-the-art learning environments for all students in new or rebuilt schools. The CPS saw schools as public assets wherein community resources could be directed to student, family, community, and economic development. Kamine, a former juvenile court magistrate, developed the initial community engagement strategy while at the CDF and then became a consultant to the CPS. She led the effort to build and implement the CLC Initiative's infrastructure.

In 2001, the CPS Board of Education, motivated by a desire to revitalize Cincinnati, adopted a vision for a district-wide redevelopment of all schools as centers of their respective neighborhoods. Each school would be the neighborhood hub, open to community agencies and community members for health care, recreation, social services, and cultural events during and after the school day. Campaigning on the vision for schools as the centers of community, the CPS approved a \$1 billion levy in 2002. The levy supported a 10-year Master Facilities Plan to construct new schools, renovate existing schools, and provide space for neighborhood activities in all schools.

The CLCs are a joint enterprise of the CPS and community-based public and private partners. Operationally, the CPS's central administration provides core support, but decision making occurs at the site level under the authority of each CLC's [Local Schools Decision Making Committee \(LSDMC\)](#). Each LSDMC and site-level governing body select partners, consistent with the unique vision developed through the community engagement process. To facilitate the equitable allocation of and access to partners and resources, leaders developed CLC Partnership Networks, networks of community partners that brokers and coordinates services to schools requesting a variety of services—health, mental health, the arts, and so forth. These collaborative leadership structures have enabled CPS to rely on community partners and local site teams to improve results for children. For example, when Superintendent Mary Ronan wanted to create an additional month of learning for elementary school students—called the Fifth Quarter—community partners were already organized to support the CPS and its students through the CLCs. They immediately began working with selected schools and the CPS to plan expanded summer learning opportunities by using new and existing resources.

In 2005, Rockdale Elementary School—the first CLC school—opened its doors, reflecting the vision of the entire community in its curriculum, physical design, and enrichment activities offered through a variety of partners. Partnerships that emerged from the community engagement process led to a co-located comprehensive health clinic; daily extended-day programming; a full-time, on-site mental health provider; and year-round programming for students, families, and the neighborhood.

As part of the Master Facilities Plan to build or redesign all 52 CPS schools as CLCs, every school participates in a community engagement process wherein community members and school stakeholders identify their needs and assets and develop a strategy for rebuilding the school as a CLC. The result? Each school has or is developing a new or renovated facility with supports for students, families, and neighborhoods provided by the Cross Boundary Leadership Team (CBLT).

The CPS has come far in its efforts to make every school a CLC. The Louisville Courier-Journal recently recognized the success of the [Oyler Community Learning Center](#). In addition, [Winton Hills Academy](#) was a semifinalist in 2008 for the Richard Riley Award for outstanding schools as centers of community, and the [Ethel Taylor Academy](#) received the [2011 Coalition for Community Schools Award of Excellence](#).

Most significant, the CLC strategy has been integral to the CPS's dramatic success. From a ranking of "academic emergency" and a 52 percent graduation rate in 2002, Cincinnati Public Schools was the only urban district to achieve an "effective" rating from the Ohio Department of Education in 2010. High school graduation rates have soared to over 80 percent and continue to rise.

Currently, 38 schools fund and coordinate after-school programs. Forty-seven have fully implemented mental health partnerships, and 10 operate school-based or linked health centers. Two have co-located full-day, year-round early childhood education centers funded and operated by a private partnership. Two hundred business partners are integrally and consistently involved through a business mentoring program that was an outgrowth of the CLCs. A new museum school, a neighborhood Montessori program, and two pre-kindergarten–12 schools are the product of Cincinnati's direct engagement in the redesign of its schools as neighborhood hubs.

The ideal CLC has a resource coordinator; in fact, 22 schools have created that position, funded by the [Greater Cincinnati Community Foundation](#), [Greater Cincinnati United Way](#), CPS Title I funds, the Community Learning Center Institute, and private donors. Work is ongoing to secure financing for coordinators at all CLCs.

The CLC financing philosophy is unique. While the CPS guarantees the use of its facilities and covers maintenance and overhead costs, funding for partners does not depend on school budgets. That is, to ensure consistency and sustainability, partners are expected to reallocate existing resources and find their own sustainable business models through third-party billing, grants, or other revenue streams.

From the outset, teachers and the [Cincinnati Federation of Teachers](#) (CFT) have been strong CLC partners. Educators were important participants in each school's community engagement process and helped set the direction for the schools' transformation into CLCs. Julie Sellers, current CFT president, used to teach in a CLC and, as an enthusiastic supporter, recognizes that the CLC approach empowers teachers to contribute to schools' overall strategy as they perform their most important job: instruction. Sellers describes the added value of CLCs:

...[O]ne 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... 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... 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.

The CPS and the community are committed to the CLC vision. In 2010, the CPS Board of Education passed [Policy 7500: Community Learning Centers](#), which strengthened the initial guiding principles formulated nearly a decade earlier. The policy states:

The Board of Education believes that each school should also be a community learning center in which a variety of partners shall offer academic programs, enrichment activities, and support to students, families, and community members before and after school as well as during the evenings and on weekends throughout the calendar year.... The Board envisions each CLC as the neighborhood's center of activity.

Policy 7500 has helped make the CLCs a sustainable component of Cincinnati's strategy to improve its schools, its neighborhoods, and the city. Cincinnati continues to address the constant challenge of funding, especially for resource coordinators, who are essential to the successful administration of schools as CLCs. Efforts to help city leaders understand the inextricable link between school success and the success of the city through neighborhood learning centers will further maximize the investment in CLCs.

Cincinnati continues to grow and provide an example for new community schools initiatives. For example, representatives from Cleveland recently visited Cincinnati to learn about CLCs as the Cleveland Metropolitan School District works to develop its own community schools; in addition, Kamine has visited leaders at the state level and in other Ohio cities.

Additional Resources

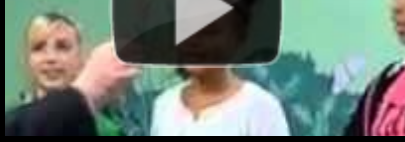
Read more about Cincinnati's Community Learning Center Initiative [here](#).

Read the Cincinnati School Board Policy supporting community schools [here](#).

Watch a video about the Cincinnati story:



See how Cincinnati is helping Knoxville, TN as it considers scaling up its own system of community schools [here](#), and [here](#). Watch a video of Knoxville's visit to Cincinnati below:



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