

Study confirms value of CPS' learning centers

Written by
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AVONDALE - Lillie Shuford, a Procter & Gamble retiree, and Dedra Robertson huddled over a math textbook in the corner of a classroom at South Avondale Elementary.

Dedra, 9, a fourth-grader, was matched with Shuford this year for tutoring through the schools' Community Learning Center, a network of partnerships in the building. The two meet once a week for 45 minutes.

• **PDF: CPS Community Learning Centers review**

Elsewhere in the building on this day, parents picked up gift baskets to help them through the holidays, students talked with therapists to get help with their mental health issues and after-school programs were in full swing.

Organizers, parents and teachers have long known these services are valuable in helping students succeed in school. But an evaluation released this week confirmed it.

Innovations in Community Research, an evaluation office housed in Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, recently completed a study that provides student-

level analysis that backs up the long-held claims that Cincinnati Public Schools' Community Learning Center services improve academic achievement for the PreK-8th grade students they serve.

Innovations, using a pilot system for data collection, for the first time was able to see specifically which service worked for which child, and how well it worked. In short, the system provided a more meaningful analysis than in past years.

At South Avondale, for example, the study showed that students who had math tutoring like Dedra scored an average of 19 points higher on the state math test last year compared to gains of just 9.5 points for those who didn't have tutoring.

It gave similar comparisons to the mentoring, College Access and after-school programs.

Although Cincinnati is the only local district to operate Community Learning Centers, there are more than 5,000 nationwide.

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This appears to be the first evaluation in the country that has included such specific data for CLCs, said Martin Blank, president of educational leadership and director of the Coalition for Community Schools. The Washington, D.C.-based Coalition is a national resource for community learning centers (called "community schools in other states").

Blank called the report "pioneering."

"We're really excited about the data," Blank said. "Cincinnati is on the cutting edge of having a data system that allows you to put together the information that links individual support and opportunities to individual children."

Proving that CLCs are effective is important because districts, communities and volunteers invest considerable time and money into them. Julie Doppler, coordinator for the district's CLCs, estimates the partnerships bring in millions of dollars in services annually.

Cincinnati Public has set up CLCs at 31 of its 42 elementary schools. The district provides office space in each building for a CLC coordinator and uses grants to help fund that person's salary.

The coordinator recruits businesses, nonprofits, community members and parents to provide programming tailored to the needs of that building. That includes health care, tutoring, after-school programs or English as a Second Language classes for families. None of the money comes from the district's cash-strapped

general fund.

Children's Hospital has done annual evaluations on the CLCs since **2002** which have long showed that students as a group made greater academic gains at schools with CLCs than those at schools without them.

But this study is different. It tracked individual student gains, not just schoolwide gains. It was able to show, for the first time, which services seemed to help the most.

Among the findings:

Tutoring: Students with CLC tutors made 2½ to three times the gains on their state math and reading tests than kids without tutors. This was the most significant impact of any service the CLCs offer.

College Access services: Kids participating in CLC College Access services made slightly more gains in math (but slightly less in reading) than kids not participating in

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those programs.

After-school program: Math test scores of students in CLC after-school programs went up 25 percent more in math than the scores of those that didn't participate. Reading scores were up 37 percent.

The evaluation also found that absences and disciplinary referrals for students at schools with parent volunteers - another focus of CLCs - decreased.

District officials emphasized that their system is still a work in progress.

"The work you're doing is incredible," Cincinnati Public Schools Deputy Superintendent Laura Mitchell told coordinators and partners during a presentation about the study. "We now have the data to show you have a positive impact on kids."

About community learning centers

Community Learning Centers provide an array of services to students and the community. Through CLCs, a school partners with neighborhood groups to bring in services for the community and students - from after-school programs for kids to English as a Second Language classes for whole families. More than 5,000 CLCs exist nationwide in districts serving 5.1 million children. Cincinnati is the only local district to operate CLCs.

Cincinnati Public Schools launched its districtwide CLC initiative in 2001 in response to a growing desire to connect the community with their schools and provide kids and families with the "wrap-around" services they need. The philosophy was that providing just academics wasn't enough. Schools also needed to address the child's physical needs of food, clothing and shelter as well as things like mental health care, tutoring and social service workers.

CPS operates CLCs in 31 of its 42 elementary schools. Cincinnati Public Schools and Innovations in Community Research used a new software tool, "Learning Partner Dashboard," to collect data on each student including their state test scores, attendance and discipline referrals. The Learning Partner Dashboard was created through a unique partnership between the district, Microsoft, Proctor & Gamble and the Strive Partnership.

The dashboard uploads student data and the CLC coordinators add data about what services the student gets. The coordinators then identify and match students with the services they need. If a student failed the state math tests, for example, the student is flagged in the system and the coordinator matches them with a math tutor. If the student has trouble getting to school on time, the coordinator matches them with a social worker to work with the family. Only those with clearance have access to the student-level data.


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About the study

The study cross-referenced the dashboard data to find out, for example, if the math tutor actually did help improve that child's math scores or if that chronically late student's tardiness decreased. The goal is to see whether the services are working.

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