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Insight

## 2012 UFT Spring Education Conference

# Cincinnati community schools: A model for New York?

by Maisie McAdoo | published May 24, 2012

Community mentors work with Oyer students in the library.

The Oyer School proudly announces its health clinic.

The Oyer School in Cincinnati, with 650 pre-K through 12th-grade students, used to average 120 emergency-room trips a year for mental health crises. Students would act up to the point that no one at the school could handle them.

It was symptomatic of the city's gut-wrenching decline. A once prosperous Ohio River town voted the nation's "most livable city" in 1993, Cincinnati had suffered a surge of middle-class flight in the 1990s. Mired in racial hostility, by 2005 Cincinnati was deemed the 20th most dangerous city in the country.

By 2001, its schools were in "academic emergency," the state's worst designation. Its student population of 35,000 was half of what it had been in the 1970s. The Ohio Supreme Court ruled the condition of the schools unconstitutional.

At Oyer, students suffer every academic and social ill. Two-thirds are white, but they are what is termed "urban Appalachian." Their families fled destitute mining towns in the Appalachian Mountains, the region with the highest illiteracy rate in the United States, seeking nonexistent jobs.

"No high school graduation to speak of, 93 percent at poverty, 35 percent at extreme poverty, drugs, prostitution, lots of 'couch surfing,' you name it," said Oyer Assistant Principal Amy Woods in describing the school's population to a workshop at the UFT Spring Education Conference on May 12.

## Hitting bottom, heading up

But things have changed at Oyler. Thanks to the implementation of an innovative community schools model, the rescue squad is not called to the school anymore — at all. Oyler now has two mental health providers on-site full time. In fact, 49 of Cincinnati's 56 schools now have mental health services available on-site.

Thanks to a recent City Council vote, Oyler also has a full-time nurse. So does every other Cincinnati school.

The district has moved from academic emergency to “academic watch” to “continuous improvement” to “effective” as of 2010, the only urban district in the state with that distinction. Cincinnati's public schools graduation rate has climbed from 51 percent to 82 percent. And the achievement gap between African-American and white students has been eliminated.

It's a story with many parts, but one central one is that Cincinnati schools now have a whole range of social, academic and economic wraparound services to help its children and their communities and allow its teachers to teach.

## **Rebuilding and creating ‘hubs’**

After the Supreme Court ruling in the late 1990s, when taxpayers were hit with a \$1 billion invoice to repair their schools, the city struck a bargain of sorts with its citizens. Rebuilt schools would become community “hubs,” open day and evening, where local businesses, nonprofits and city agencies provide services and resources that the community — students, parents and non-parents — needed.

That could be translation services or computers for adults. It could be tutoring, dental clinics or discounted sneakers for the kids. Local School Decision-Making Committees, chaired by a community partner, not the principal, meet monthly at each school to determine what resources will be provided in the building. A community resource coordinator in every school signs up community partners selected by the committees to provide the services. The coordinator acts as the “glue” to ensure delivery and assess the needs. The Local School Decision-Making Committee, in turn, is the school's direct link to the central school board.

At Oyler, the services include a mentoring program, a jobs program and “Gear Up,” a college-readiness program. Using student achievement data to make its point, the school's committee got rid of the large national organization that was running its after-school program with untrained tutors and brought in a new group that works closely with the teachers. The city's director of adolescent health, Dr. Marilyn Crumpton, recounted with tears the transformation of a once-impossible 2nd-grader who finally settled down to learn after the dental clinic that serves Oyler cured her chronic toothaches.

Shalon Price, a community resource coordinator at another Cincinnati school, Rockdale Academy, says she's created 150 different partnerships with local businesses, nonprofits, community organizations and city agencies to deliver the services students need under contract with the committee. Before coming to the school, Price worked on locked psychiatric wards in the city. “I saw the kids who hadn't gotten services,” she said.

As in the district, achievement has been climbing at Oyler. The school is now in “continuous improvement,” the step before “effective.” The 2010 graduation rate rose to 82 percent. Daily attendance is at 94 percent.

## So what might this look like in New York City?

After a decade of mayoral control, there is growing frustration that New York City has not taken more advantage of the potential to concentrate services at schools and strengthen community ties.

“We’re doing a lot of what they’re doing — clinics, tutoring — but each is a separate program,” said UFT Vice President Karen Alford, who has visited Oyler more than once.

“Cincinnati has a seamless integration between day and afterschool, between teachers and community-based organizations. You can’t tell the difference,” she said. “The resource coordinator frees teachers to teach — not what we’re doing a lot in our classrooms, which is triage.”

And so the UFT has just issued an invitation to schools to try out the Cincinnati model, with a start-up grant from the UFT and the City Council. “We want to replicate their best practices,” Alford said. This means grassroots community building, reaching beyond the schoolhouse door to fold in health services, job resources, translation services, help navigating city bureaucracies — whatever the community identifies as its needs.

Why, after 10 years of mayoral control, is it the UFT that is initiating this coordinated, commonsense approach? Where has the city been?

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