

Gotham Schools

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[UFT tours get mayoral hopefuls weighing “community schools”](#)

by [Geoff Decker](#), at 9:00 am



All four of the likely Democratic candidates for mayor, seen here with Republican Tom Allon during an education policy discussion in November, have traveled to Cincinnati with the United Federation of Teachers to view "community schools."

Among the thousand visitors from across the country who streamed through Cincinnati's Oyler School in the last year were all four of New York City's likely Democratic candidates for mayor.

They made the trip at the invitation of UFT President Michael Mulgrew, who has been touting Oyler as the epitome of a school model that he hopes New York City's next mayor will promote.

The trips [have been held up](#) as evidence that the candidates are all trying to win the union's endorsement. But just as significant as why the candidates made the commute is what they saw when they got there.

Cincinnati has turned all of its more than 50 district schools into "community schools" that rely on partnerships with businesses and non-profits to provide an array of services. The school buildings stay open until late into the night and on the weekends, providing early childhood centers, adult education, access to gyms, translation services, tutoring, and food banks to the general public. Local hospitals embed nurses in the schools full-time to provide free health, dental, and vision services.

As one of the first schools in Cincinnati to make the evolution, a decade ago, Oyler is seen as an anchor for the model.

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“It’s an amazing thing to walk into a school and to see so many different services, seamlessly aligned,” Mulgrew said of his visits to Oyster [in May](#), when he announced that the union would fund a six-school pilot community schools program in New York City.

Drawing on their campaign funds, Public Advocate Bill de Blasio and former comptroller Bill Thompson joined UFT officials at the school last spring. Comptroller John Liu and City Council Speaker Christine Quinn made the trip with the union in October, paying their way with money from their public offices. (Principal Craig Hockenberry, who has been at the school for 14 years, said Quinn’s visit stood out among the 60 he hosted this year because she brought police protection.)

The union’s efforts to promote what has happened in Cincinnati are starting to pay off. In his State of the City speech in December, Comptroller John Liu proposed turning each of the city’s school buildings into a community center after school hours.

“Earlier this year, along with Speaker Quinn, and many of our city’s teachers, I visited the school system in Cincinnati,” he said. “I was very impressed by what I saw there.”

Other candidates have also expressed support for the idea. Even before visiting, Quinn mentioned Cincinnati in her own State of the City address last February. Then, joining city and union officials to kick off the six-school pilot in June, she said, “Look, we’re in New York, and we hate to say that anyone else has a [better] model than we do, but occasionally we just have to swallow our pride and admit that there are some other places in the world that come up with good, interesting, and effective models of how to do this.”

And Thompson told GothamSchools that he agreed to visit because he supports having “wraparound services” at schools. “To see it in practice, I thought it was great,” he said. “It’s making the community school more attractive again.”

The four candidates are competing for the UFT’s endorsement — and the financial support that would accompany it. But backing Cincinnati’s model could be attractive for other reasons. Since Cincinnati’s schools were transformed into community hubs, the city’s high school graduation rate increased from 51 to 82 percent. Officials in that district have said the conversion didn’t cost much, because the model calls for services to be coordinated, not created. And, in an extra bonus for New York City mayoral candidates, creating community schools is seen as easier with a strong executive in charge.

“I see this as the promise of mayoral control — harnessing the power of city agencies,” [said](#) Mulgrew’s predecessor at the UFT, Randi Weingarten, in 2009. Weingarten launched a sustained push for community schools when she was elected president of the American Federation of Teachers, a national union, in 2008.

The UFT has continued to press the issue. An [article praising Oyler Elementary in the union's newspaper](#) in May described “growing frustration that New York City has not taken more advantage of the potential to concentrate services at schools and strengthen community ties.”

A union official who had already visited Oyler multiple times, Vice President Karen Alford, told the newspaper, “We’re doing a lot of what they’re doing — clinics, tutoring — but each is a separate program.”

When the law granting mayoral control of city schools was last up for reauthorization, in 2009, [the union asked lawmakers](#) to give parents more control over the way schools are run. If the city’s next mayor uses his or her authority over the city’s schools to execute the UFT’s visit, the union could be less likely to push for changes to the school governance law.

Although it joined the union’s community schools pilot after Mulgrew told union members that he would move forward [with or without the city’s help](#), Bloomberg’s Department of Education has shown less interest in Oyler. Chancellor Dennis Walcott has met with Cincinnati officials at UFT headquarters, but he has so far declined an invitation from the union to accompany Mulgrew on one of his visits to the city, a union official said.

State Education Commissioner John King, on the other hand, did make the pilgrimage with the union.

King’s participation could prove crucial. With an eye on 2014, UFT officials have been working to line up support for community schools from more than just mayoral candidates. Testifying before Gov. Andrew Cuomo’s Education Reform Commission in October, Mulgrew called on state government to help push the model forward, something that he said Ohio did not do for Cincinnati and would be necessary for the model to work at an even larger scale.

“New York is not Cincinnati. Fifty-two schools aren’t directly comparable to 1,700. We’re not blind to the difficulties,” Mulgrew said. But, he went on, “Our mind is fixed on meeting the needs. Cincinnati represents what’s possible when we park egos and the bureaucracy at the curb.”

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