

# The Cincinnati Enquirer

## School model catches on in New York

Feb 5, 2013 |



Written by  
**Jessica Brown**



Volunteer Bryna Bass talks with sixth- through eighth-grade students from Evanston Academy Elementary School during a meeting of the "Young Ladies at the Top" self-esteem group for young girls. / The Enquirer/Joseph Fuqua II

About two years ago, a steady stream of out-of-town educators – school leaders, nonprofit agencies, education groups – started visiting Cincinnati.

They weren't here for the chili or the sports teams, though those may have been an added bonus.

They were here to see the schools. Specifically, a network of Cincinnati Public Schools dubbed "Community Learning Centers."

These schools – there are 34 full-fledged examples at CPS so far and counting – hold more than the kids, teachers and extracurricular activities associated with public schooling. They also hold full-service health clinics, eye centers, dental clinics, mental health counselors, tutoring programs and after-school programs on everything from ballroom dancing to construction classes.

These services are accessible to both the students and their families. They were designed to fit the unique needs of each community and operate on a self-sustaining funding model, meaning they don't cost the district – or its taxpayers – a dime in levy dollars.

Community Learning Centers aren't unique to Cincinnati. More than 5,000 exist nationwide. But Cincinnati's model, devised in 2001 and improved in the years since, has garnered the attention of visitors as far away as Hawaii and Australia. Its most recent claim to fame came in September when the nearly 1 million-student New York City school district announced it would pilot its own Community Learning Centers based primarily on what it saw in Cincinnati.

And in January, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced replication of the models statewide as part of his education agenda.

Knoxville, Tenn., and Toledo are also looking at the CPS model in crafting similar programs in their schools.

Superintendent Mary Ronan said she's "delighted" but not surprised. "It's a business model that works," she said.

### **A community hub model**

Community Learning Centers are a network of partnerships that provide "wrap-around" services within a school. The idea was born here in in 2001 when CPS came up with a vision to make its schools "hubs" for the community. The goal: improve academic achievement at its poorest, lowest-achieving schools.

Organizers asked neighborhood councils, parents and businesses about barriers preventing their kids from succeeding. Then they found partners and nonprofits to address those out-of-school issues like health care or mental health or a hot meal after school.

Cincinnati's hallmark is its self-sustaining funding model. Big funding partners like the United Way pay the salaries of a resource coordinator for each school to oversee the programs. Each school then partners with nonprofit agencies like the YMCA or Central

Clinic to operate the programs at no cost to the district. The school-based health centers eventually become self-sustaining because they have enough patients that federal Medicaid reimbursements fund staff salaries.

At the time, the district was also kicking off a decade-long, \$1 billion rebuilding plan so it incorporated spaces in the designs to house these clinics and offices.

A dozen years later, the model is working well.

A 2011 study by Innovations in Community Research, an evaluation office housed in Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, found that CPS students with Community Learning Center tutors made 2 1/2 to three times the gains on state math and reading tests than kids without tutors. The study also found increases in math scores and a decrease in disciplinary referrals and absences among students at Community Learning Centers. The state academic ratings of these schools also rose.

For Evanston Academy sixth graders Donasiah Oglesby and her cousin, Jerica Nicholson, the after-school programs provide social support, too. At their girls club, "Young Ladies at the Top," they discuss everything from leadership to community service to bullying.

"We talk about high school," said Oglesby. "We make friends. If I'm going through something I know I can talk to them."

Cincinnati, ironically, based its first Community Learning Center model after New York's versions, the Children's Aid Society and the Harlem Children's Zone. However, although those models were successful, they weren't economically self-sustaining.

So CPS improvised, planned, tested and eventually crafted a new way to operate. Major funders like the United Way and the Greater Cincinnati Foundation stepped up and the schools set up a system to leverage health care dollars, volunteers, nonprofits and business partners so the effort wouldn't cost the district.

Today it's a well-oiled machine. And New York is now borrowing some of the ideas back.

“Children need to be ready to learn. Cincinnati got it,” said Cuomo during a recent hearing of the New NY Education Reform Commission Hearing.

### **School visits aplenty**

Of Cincinnati’s 42 elementary schools, 34 operate as Community Learning Centers. Several have become magnets for education tourists.

Oyler school, a K-12 school in Lower Price Hill, has been ground zero for much of the outside Community Learning Center attention and tours. They have it down to a science.

“They want to see the vision clinic. They want know how it’s funded. Then they ask about roadblocks and challenges,” said Craig Hockenberry, principal.

Hockenberry and his staff recall visits from Toledo, Louisville, KY... Denver, Knoxville, Alabama and the national Coalition for Community Schools.

The New York effort brought several tour groups to Cincinnati. Their most recent tour included visits to the Mount Washington, Western Hills, Oyler, Ethel Taylor and Roberts schools.

The 5,000 Community Learning Centers nationwide use various models to bring wrap-around services to kids. But “Cincinnati is a step ahead” when it comes to integrating all these services among multiple partners, said Martin Blank, director of the national Coalition for Community Schools, housed at the Washington D.C.-based Institute for Educational Leadership.

“People have learned how Cincinnati has organized itself,” he said.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, is a big fan, too.

“The rate of return on investment is huge,” she said. “I’m a big believer that you have to address the whole child. Child poverty is something you have to address. This is part of the solution.”

## **Why now?**

So after 12 years, why is CPS' model suddenly catching on?

Local organizers say it's because it's now considered a "tested" model. It works and it's stood the test of time. That's very important in the world of education.

"As in so many things, when you have reform, people typically expect it's the 'reform of the day' so the idea that this has really had longevity shows you this really is successful," said Darlene Kamine, head of the local Community Learning Institute, which pioneered the work in Cincinnati.

"When you have something that steady and strong and sustainable ...it really begins to have sufficient credibility that earns this kind of response and respect."

She said the tours help communities visualize how it could work.

The model may even catch on with other local communities one day. Kamine is in talks with the Princeton and Winton Woods school districts about the idea of crafting similar models there.

## **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, serving 5.1 million children. Cincinnati is the only local district to operate CLCs.