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## Mayoral Candidates See Cincinnati as a Model for New York Schools

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CINCINNATI — In search of a cure for ailing schools, educators and politicians from around the world have descended on this city's poorest neighborhoods, hearing of a renaissance.

They are told stories of schools that escaped years of dysfunction by becoming “community learning centers,” replete with dental clinics, mental health therapists and mentors from local banks and churches. They hear of sparkling new libraries, over-the-moon teachers and too many volunteers to count.

Among the many visitors have been several candidates for mayor of New York City, who walked away so impressed that they have made replicating Cincinnati's model a centerpiece of their campaigns.

“It makes so much sense,” **Christine C. Quinn**, the City Council speaker, said.

“Endless potential,” **Bill de Blasio**, the city's public advocate, said.

Even before New York reported a **drastic drop in reading and math scores** last week on new exams aligned with tougher standards known as Common Core, the candidates were promoting the Cincinnati model on the campaign trail.

But what has gone largely unsaid is that many of Cincinnati's community schools are still in dire academic straits, according to an analysis by The New York Times, despite millions of dollars in investment and years of reform efforts.

The Ethel M. Taylor Academy, for example, which was one of the first schools to adopt the model, ranked 3,218th out of 3,456 public schools in Ohio in overall academic performance last year. Nearly three-quarters of its fifth-grade class did not pass state reading exams.

“We're far from where we want to be,” **Sean McCauley**, the school's principal, acknowledged. “It's a struggle.”

Despite its relatively small size, Cincinnati, with roughly 30,000 students, has become a lodestar for big-city school systems across the country. Superintendents and union leaders looking for an alternative to a high-stakes, data-

driven movement in education have showered the community schools model with praise, noting that it has expanded access to health care and social services, tackling problems thought to be causes of academic failure.

The Obama administration has championed a similar approach with a program known as [Promise Neighborhoods](#), an effort to better coordinate education and services in high-poverty neighborhoods throughout the country.

As a whole, after years of poor performance and an exodus of middle-class families to the suburbs, Cincinnati has made some of the greatest gains in test scores in Ohio in recent years, even though it lags behind state averages. School officials here credit the city's embrace of the community-schools model, which is now fully in place in 34 of 55 schools in the system.

But testing data show that at eight schools that were pioneers of the model, and that have the longest track record with it, students' scores have improved but still trail that of other Ohio children, even poor ones.

Last year, for example, 48 percent of seventh graders from low-income backgrounds at the schools, which adopted the model in 2006 and serve large numbers of disadvantaged children, passed state exams in reading, according to a Times analysis of state testing data. Across Ohio, 80 percent of students passed the exams; among poor children statewide, the average was 68 percent.

School officials said it was difficult to compare poor students in Cincinnati with their counterparts across Ohio, noting that students in rural areas faced different challenges.

Mary A. Ronan, superintendent of the Cincinnati school district, said she was considering shuffling principals at some low-performing schools. But she warned against focusing too narrowly on academic results, saying the model had done wonders to revive a struggling school system.

"It's a win-win," Ms. Ronan said. "We have made a world of difference."

Community schools are often praised for substantial turnarounds in attendance and graduation rates, and in Cincinnati, the schools that first embraced the model have shown modest progress. Attendance rates were already relatively high among poor students — around 93.6 percent — when the schools adopted the model in 2006; last year, the rates climbed above 95 percent. Four-year graduation rates have been more volatile, though several schools have shown modest increases.

In New York City, the Cincinnati model is praised by a diverse circle, including business executives, union officials and hospital employees, who all see it as a cost-effective way to combat poverty and turn around struggling schools.

Four Democratic candidates for mayor — Mr. de Blasio, Ms. Quinn, John C. Liu and William C. Thompson Jr. — visited Cincinnati last year at the invitation of the United Federation of Teachers, New York City's teachers' union. For

years, antipoverty organizations like the [Harlem Children's Zone](#) and the [Children's Aid Society](#) have operated forms of community learning centers at a small number of New York City schools, but some candidates are hoping to extend the idea to hundreds of them.

Ms. Quinn said city leaders were looking at successful community schools throughout the country, not just in Cincinnati, as they designed a plan for New York. "You're never going to have a model out there that's going to be 100 percent perfect," she said.

Mr. de Blasio said it would take time to improve academic results. "There are no panaceas," he said.

Last year, the teachers' union partnered with the City Council and the Partnership for New York City, a coalition of businesses, to test the model at six New York schools. This fall, 10 more will join the endeavor. Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo has pledged \$15 million to help start community schools in the state.

In New York, supporters of the model said that test scores alone should not determine the success of community schools, and that the public needed to judge them on their effectiveness in improving student health, attendance and parental engagement.

"If you tell me a kid comes to school hungry and we feed them, I don't need a database to tell me that's a good thing," said Michael Mulgrew, president of the teachers' union.

In Cincinnati, teachers and principals enthusiastically endorsed the model, calling it an effective way to mitigate the effects of poverty in the classroom.

"I can't teach science to a kid whose father went to jail the night before," said Carolyn Powers, a teacher at Taylor Academy. "Sometimes you have to let some of the academics go and focus on social and emotional needs."

At Oyler School, which serves mostly poor families with roots in Appalachia, hundreds of students have benefited from an on-site vision clinic. The school also offers evening classes for adults and has an army of more than 400 volunteer tutors.

"What's the alternative?" asked the former principal, Craig Hockenberry, who has just taken a job as a schools superintendent in a rural Ohio district. "We should just sit back and watch these families deteriorate?"

In the past, Mr. Hockenberry said, schools were all too happy to accept help from any nonprofit organization, only to see programs deteriorate and disappear after a few years. Now, he said, principals can pick programs tailored to their goals, like a class to help prepare students for college.

Unlike other big cities, Cincinnati has the advantage of having designed or redesigned its schools with community schools in mind, beginning more than a decade ago, when it embarked on a \$1 billion effort to renovate its schools. Oyer recently completed a \$21 million renovation. Another community school sits on a 22-acre plateau and has plans for a football field on its front lawn.

The Cincinnati school district has also made a point of mandating that partner organizations pay for their programs; the district offers only facilities. Many health providers are eager to take the district up on the offer, gaining a steady stream of clients eligible for Medicaid. That model could prove to have stumbling blocks in other cities, including New York, where space is scarce and securing health care reimbursements can be more difficult.

Several schools in Cincinnati have begun collecting private donations as a buffer in case public or private groups reduce funding. Oyer has cultivated a network of donors who have given hundreds of thousands of dollars in recent years. Taylor Academy is looking to do the same.

At Taylor, which serves a prekindergarten through eighth-grade population of mostly low-income African-American students, educators are celebrating victories in improving attendance (it rose to 94.5 percent among poor children last year from 93.6 percent in 2008) and reducing asthma.

The staff keeps track of student progress in a war room with green, yellow and red posters to indicate which children are likely to fail state exams. After school one day this past spring, parents said they were pleased with the school's approach. "It's one of those schools with high expectations," said Roberto Campbell, a sound engineer and father of two boys at the school. "Things are getting better."

A short while later, a student was reported to have fired a gun not far away, and families scattered to their homes.