

# Collaborative Nature

## Cincinnati Public Schools' community learning centers turn schools into neighborhood resource hubs

BY GERMAN LOPEZ · FEBRUARY 12TH, 2014 · NEWS



*Photo: Jesse Fox*

When Cincinnati officials and Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) leaders on Feb. 6 announced plans to work closer together and align policy goals, it was under a notably positive environment that might not have been possible just 10 years ago. And many local officials say the school system's innovation with community learning centers is largely to thank.

It's not just local leaders crediting the model, either. Education experts now tout Cincinnati as a workable example of educating low-income populations. A few hundred miles away, newly elected New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio is looking to Cincinnati as a model to build up community learning centers in the biggest city in the country.

The model effectively transforms schools into hubs of services that neighborhoods can rely on for the basic needs of modern life — not just education, but also food, health care and college and job preparation.

For example, Oylar School in Lower Price Hill hosts a health center, dental clinic, vision care, mental health services, tutoring, college preparation, post-graduation tracking and aid, and an early learning center, on top of myriad after-school activities. That's far above the traditional nurse's office and loose coalition of after-school activities most schools offer.

Some of the programs, particularly medical services, come at no extra cost to the schools — beyond the free space provided — and are funded by their own nonprofit models. Other programs rely on federal grants and more traditional funding sources to stay open.

The idea is to remove serious distractions, such as health problems, while fostering better educations than traditional institutions. In [impoverished neighborhoods](#) like Lower Price Hill, a community learning center can also provide resources the neighborhood would otherwise go without.

“Since there’s a lack of resources down in this area, the school brings all the necessary resources in-house so that the people who live down here still have access to them,” says Jami Luggen, resource coordinator at Oyler School.

But does the model work?

It’s difficult to find anyone who says it doesn’t. The mayor of New York City is so impressed he wants to take the model to his city

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. City officials — particularly Councilman P.G. Sittenfeld, who also serves as assistant director for the Community Learning Center Institute — credit community learning centers with turning CPS around. Cincinnati Board of Education members seldom pass up an opportunity to tout the success.

The renewed positivity is relatively new for a school district that, like many urban districts, struggled for years.

To this day, nearly three-fourths of CPS’ student population is classified as economically disadvantaged. Some schools, such as Oyler School, serve socioeconomically segregated populations. Others, such as Roberts Academy in East Price Hill, serve large immigrant populations that need extra help learning English.

Even with community learning centers, much of the student population struggles compared to other Ohio schools. In the new, more stringent Ohio report cards, CPS got six F’s, one D and two C’s, with failing grades for state test results; closing gaps related to income, race, culture and disabilities; progress among gifted students; progress among students with disabilities; and both categories for graduation rates.

To be sure, the grades came under a more stringent school evaluation system that Ohio adopted in the 2012-2013 school year. No Ohio school district earned straight A’s, according to StateImpact Ohio.

The evaluation also falls under a system that some claim is rigged against impoverished schools. By comparing the state’s urban schools, Policy Matters Ohio concluded in a Jan. 22 report that the worse performers tend to have higher levels of poverty, more minority students and more students with disabilities than better-performing schools.

But given the unfavorable demographics, Sittenfeld argues it’s also important to look at where the school started. Tracking improvement is a lot more important than judging the school’s scores in a vacuum, he says.

In that sense, a 2013 review from Innovations in Community Research indicates community learning centers certainly help.

In the 2007-08 school year, only 30.8 percent of community learning center schools were graded “continuous improvement” or higher under the old state evaluation system. In 2011-2012, 69.7 percent of community learning center schools earned the grade — a 38.9 percentage point increase.

The report’s explanation: Students in tutoring, mentoring, after-school and youth leadership programs ended up making greater improvements in math and reading tests compared to students who didn’t participate in the extra programs. Students in college access programs correlated with lower improvements in reading test scores, but they also improved their math test scores much more than those outside college access programs.

On the ground, school officials credit community learning centers’ expansive health services for helping as well.

Melissa Marshall, a registered nurse at Oyler School, argues that the health, vision and dental services help students focus on their schoolwork. After all, a student isn’t going to be able to concentrate if he can’t see the chalkboard or a toothache is distracting him.

“We want them to focus on school,” Marshall says. “That’s the whole point of us being here. We want these kids to do well and succeed.”

As an example, Marshall cites a student that came to her with a toothache at Aiken High School, where she also works. The student complained she could no longer focus on anything but the pain. Marshall took the student to a dentist outside school grounds. At Oyler School, she could have walked across the hall to the dental clinic.

For all the praise, CPS still tries to continuously improve the model. Luggen, of Oyler School, acknowledges the school previously did a poor job following up with graduates to make sure they actually succeeded in meeting their goals. A new follow-up program will try to alleviate that concern, she says.

On the city’s side, Sittenfeld says the new city-school collaborative, dubbed the Alliance for Community and Educational Success (ACES), will try to align the city and schools in five policy areas: population growth, workforce development, safe and livable neighborhoods, wellness and access to technology.

“While the city and school system are separate entities, we all know that our schools are the most powerful tool for growth that we’ve got,” he says.

That’s also the goal of community learning centers: By uniting available resources together, different agencies can bring their growth ambitions under a comprehensive wing. ©