

# CPS success may become national model

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At Cincinnati Public Schools, the school day doesn't end after the math and reading classes are finished. Students stay for dinner. They get help with their homework. They participate in activities like theater or karate. Between classes they visit in-house clinics to get their teeth cleaned and their eyes checked.

These "wrap-around" services are critical to helping students succeed in the classroom, advocates say. And this week, more than 1,500 educators and community leaders from across the country converged on the Queen City to see the strategy for themselves.

Cincinnati's community learning centers are used as a model for districts around the country because of their staying power and the difference they have made in the district's most impoverished neighborhoods.

Created more than a decade ago, they aim to bridge the academic gap poverty creates when families can't afford or get access to basic services. The premise: If a student can't read the white board because she's nearsighted or can't concentrate on her math assignment because of a toothache or empty stomach, she's much more likely to fall through the cracks. The school gets her glasses, fixes her teeth and feeds her. It's an idea now reaching beyond cities into the suburbs – suburban poverty has grown by 64 percent in the past decade, according to a national study by the Brookings Institution.

Advocates see these services as pivotal. "That blanket of support is lifting up students. It's accelerating the academic piece," said P.G. Sittenfeld, assistant director of the Community Learning Center Institute in Cincinnati and a Cincinnati city councilman.

The hundreds of attendees at this week's conference toured 17 of Cincinnati's 35 community learning center schools and participated in workshops on everything from school discipline and parent engagement to academic standards. They heard speeches from national and local advocates. Speakers included Mayor John Cranley, school leaders at CPS as well as national voices like Christopher Edley, co-chairman of the National Commission on Equity and Education, and Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers.

Groups from 36 states and a handful of other countries came to share their schools' stories and take back lessons to expand and improve their own community learning centers.

"There's a very intentional effort to allow people to network and learn from each other so you're not starting from scratch," said Peggy Samolinski, who works for the Department of Human Services in Multnomah County, Ore. She is a manager for the SUN Service System, the county's community learning center program. It started in 1999 with eight schools and now has centers in 70 schools across six school districts, including Portland.

"We get to come and learn and network with people, as well as tell our own story," she said.

### **'We like to go to places where people can see success'**

So why did the organizers choose Cincinnati?

CPS has a track record, having pioneered its first community learning center in 1999. It's proven its model can endure multiple city and district administration changes and remain financially self-sustaining. It partners with nonprofits and uses Medicaid reimbursements. That's allowed it to survive even when budgets are cut and administrative priorities change.

"We're here because Cincinnati is among the leaders in bringing community schools to scale," said Martin Blank, president of the Institute for Educational Leadership and director of the Coalition for Community Schools. "We like to go to places where people can see success. We always go to a place where they are doing community schools, doing it well and where participants can see the work on different levels."

The idea of community learning centers is to make the school the hub of the community. It is the place where kids get health care and after-school help. They often serve families, too. Some teach English as a second language.

The Cincinnati model operated quietly for years without much hoopla. But recently it started catching the attention of some big players in the education field. Individual schools, and the district as a whole, began winning national awards. Word spread. Delegations from as far away as Australia started making treks to Cincinnati to learn more. New York brought a group last year, which led to that city's espousing the concept and the governor's including it in his statewide agenda.

Although Cincinnati is still working to expand – the centers are not yet in every school – conference-goers liked what they saw.

"These forums every two years set new energy for us. They stimulate our thinking," said Jan Creveling, senior planner of community schools for the Tulsa Area Community Schools Initiative.

The Tulsa group said that, even though they already have well-established community learning centers, they always take away good tips.

Jose Munoz, who heads Albuquerque's community learning center model, came because he knows firsthand how vital these programs can be. He grew up in poverty in south Chicago, and school was the place his family would go to get help.

"I remember playing tag around the government cheese line that was held at my kindergarten," he said. "So for me it's much more personal."

It's difficult to measure the exact academic impact of the community learning centers in Cincinnati. Overall, the district has improved by leaps and bounds since the centers opened. It's the highest-rated of the large urban districts in Ohio on state tests, and its graduation rate rose from 52 percent to 82 percent over 10 years. But it's difficult to quantify how big a role the community learning centers played. Individual school results vary. Some still struggle.

Darlene Kamine, executive director of the Cincinnati Community Learning Center Institute, said there's no way the district could have come so far without these supports in place. She credits community learning centers with drawing families back to the district. "If we were doing all these things and weren't getting positive outcomes, it'd be different." □

### **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. They target students who are struggling academically or who come from low-income homes.
- More than 5,000 CLCs exist nationwide, serving 5.1 million children. Cincinnati is the only local district to operate CLCs. Some districts in Northern Kentucky offer similar programs.