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What Happens When a Crack House Becomes an Early Childhood Learning Center?

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This post was guest-authored by my colleagues Helen Janc Malone and Reuben Jacobson of the Institute for Educational Leadership.

Imagine an old, abandoned end unit row house that is tall, slender in build, and neglected in infrastructure. For many years it's been a crack house, filled with needles -- a revolving door of drugs and criminal activity. The back of this house overlooks a local schoolyard, where neighborhood children and youth come to learn and play. The house stands in contrast to a beautiful rebuilt school and is a reminder of the challenges students, educators, families, and the community face daily.

To the community, this house also offered an opportunity to be a part of the amazing transformation of the Lower Price Hill neighborhood in Cincinnati, Ohio.

For years, the community, local leaders, and partners have been working together to revitalize the neighborhood in support of children, youth and families. The focus of their work has been on the reconstruction of a Pre-K-1212 school building, the Oyler Community Learning Center. (Cincinnati calls their community schools "Community Learning Centers." Oyler is part of [Cincinnati Public Schools' district-wide community school strategy](#)).

After successfully transforming the physical school building, these innovators were now looking for additional space and a way to better utilize existing structures. Today, the old crack house is a clean, fully renovated early childhood center that supports the youngest neighborhood residents, complete with a "Mad Hatters' attic" (the name of the school mascot) offering clothing, books and basic supplies for neighborhood families. It even has a community meeting space. The center represents the ways in which the Oyler Community Learning Center is changing Lower Price Hill.

Lower Price Hill is a small, diverse Urban Appalachian community, where most students live in poverty. For decades, over 80 percent of young people did not graduate from high school, and many families were not enrolling their children in local public schools. Young people and families did not have ready access to health professionals, as wait lists for visits to the local clinic extended up to a year. Over 50 boarded up row houses surrounded the school.

Today, a decade into the state and school district's facilities investment, Oyler is experiencing a stable school enrollment and increasing graduation rates.

School as a Community Hub

What makes Oyler a center for its neighborhood? Intentional uses of space, broad and rich partnerships with diverse community partners, and a culture of respect, trust, and support. The architects were guided by community wishes to create an inviting space that balanced history, learning, security, and safety. The community designed the school they imagined. Thus, the school offers functional community-oriented space:

- State-of-the art eye and dental clinics and mental and physical health offices offer students and family's access before, during, and after school, as well as during the summer. The school-based eye clinic -- the first in the nation -- supports 3,000 students annually across 65 area public and parochial schools. The dental clinic brings private practice dentists who volunteer their time to treat the school community. Students are seen during school hours, and families and community members before and after school. The wait time for an appointment at the clinic across the street? Thirty-eight months! The partners, certified health professionals, are self-sustaining and are allowed to use the school rent-free because they are offering services of benefit to the school system and the community. Everyone is part of making the school community thrive.
- A full high-quality early child care center serves children ages 6 weeks to 5 years. In 2014, four Oyler high school students sent their young children to the center, helping them to graduate with a degree.
- A volunteer center and community activities space, with an additional, separate entrance with a common area and a kitchen to welcome outside partners. The space accommodates tutors from the community, some of whom have been volunteering at Oyler for over 20 years. The walls are covered with pictures of students and their caring tutors.
- A separate partner entrance allows community partners afternoon and evening access to shared facilities, like the gymnasium.
- A rooftop deck welcomes high school students during breaks, keeping them on the school grounds and engaged.
- An Art Deco auditorium/theater, used for school and community functions, is an inviting space where community comes to watch plays or celebrate high school graduations. Graduations are a point of great pride for the community, which throws a parade to celebrate when the school reopened, and continues to come out for the graduation ceremonies in full force, complete with flowers and balloons.
- A space for the police on the school grounds to build positive relationships with the community, as officers are members of the community, and deter criminal activity on and around school grounds.
- Not only is the space inviting, but it is also "green." The school, in partnership with local environmental community partners, school architects, and students, co-designed green

spaces. Oyler is now a LEED-certified school. It uses sustainable, green materials and products to ensure a non-toxic learning environment. Considerations like soothing wall colors in the early childhood center or tall windows to promote natural light were intentional and mindful of community. Oyler, as a result, became an inspiration not only for increasing the number of green schools in Cincinnati, but also across the state and the country.

City-Wide Impact

Every child today in Cincinnati can sit in a renovated classroom and building designed to support his/her learning. The change in Cincinnati has had a widespread effect. There are noticeable changes beyond school walls: families are moving back to the city and staying in their neighborhoods, the city is leading in child nutrition and health-based services, new businesses are developing, and the entire city now has a positive image.

Oyler has become a beacon of what is possible when the community, city leaders, families, educators and partners work together. [The Community Learning Center Institute](#), the lead agency at Oyler, is now leading a collaborative of partners to revitalize the housing around the school so that the neighborhood's families have a safe and stable place to live with a thriving community learning center.

Too often, communities aren't included in the decision-making about schools. And lately, many schools are being ripped out of their communities through closure. However, the Oyler story demonstrates that when our communities share ownership for the success of our schools, children and neighborhoods thrive.

For more about Oyler, visit Marketplace, which has been following the school:
<http://www.marketplace.org/topics/wealth-poverty/one-school-one-year>.