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Background: On October 28th OFT hosted an event with the Cincinnati Community Learning Center Institute, CPS Board, CPS staff and Julie Sellers CFT President to promote community learning centers the original intent of HB 70. School districts from Ashtabula schools, Cleveland Heights University Heights, Columbus, ODE, and community and statewide organizations attended the event. Each group ended the day developing next steps for implementing what they had learned.

### **Conference Showcases Community Learning Centers**

The Ohio Federation of Teachers brought together educators and other professionals from around the state Wednesday for a tutorial on spreading the community learning center model, which embeds a host of services in a school to overcome barriers to student education.

"While poverty is never, ever an excuse for our students not achieving well ... it also can never, ever be overlooked as a factor for our children," said Melissa Cropper, president of the federation.

While the roots of the community learning center model are in one of Ohio's biggest urban districts, Cropper said she noticed the same complications of poverty in her home schools in the Brown County village of Georgetown, particularly when she began working more with younger children as a districtwide librarian.

"It was really when I started in the elementary school that I started noticing a lot of issues that our children were facing ... partially because high school students are better at hiding what their home situations are," Cropper said.

The program focused heavily on Cincinnati and its Oyler School, the model's poster child, and some of the discussion highlighted educators' bifurcated views on HB70, the new law enabling broader adoption of community learning centers, which also created new state oversight powers for troubled districts under an Academic Distress Commission. The conference was titled, "Improve Academic Achievement with Community Partners: Stop Academic Distress."

"The reason why we're having this event, this conference, is not to get there. Our goal is not to get to the endpoint of distress," said Darold Johnson, legislative director for the federation. "We know that this [model] has the ability to change communities, but more important, to give kids hope. Right? That's the future of the community."

The conference's morning session focused on high-level discussions of the model's use with Cincinnati officials who helped to spread it from nine original district sites to more than 40 schools today. Afternoon sessions looked at the nuts and bolts of community partnerships that bring services into the school, particularly for medical and mental health needs.

Conference attendees came prepared to make the kind of community connections that are integral to the model. For example, Ashtabula school officials traveled down to Columbus in the company of leaders from the local educational service center, community action agency, mental health centers, the city manager and a lawmaker, Rep. John Patterson (D- Jefferson).

Eve Bolton, a member and former president of Cincinnati's Board of Education, said while people talk of community learning centers as a new model, they're essentially a throwback.

"What we promised people we would do is return to what a lot of the older folks in the community remember, which was, the school is the center of the community," she said, referencing the board's pitch to voters for a \$1 billion-plus school construction campaign that required local funding to cover most of the costs.

"Most things that are brand new are rooted in things that used to work that we lost along the way," Bolton said. Julie Sellers, president of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers, said engaging school faculty early is a key part of the model's success, since they're the ones who'll recognize and identify what issues students face. "Sending an email is not engagement," she said.

Annie Bogenschutz of the Community Learning Center Institute, one of the original school resource coordinators for Cincinnati's first crop of centers, said local decision-making is crucial to success, and imposing a cookie-cutter model for all a district's schools won't work. "For those of you who have been in Cincinnati, or in your cities or towns, every neighborhood is different," she said.

She and other Cincinnati representatives also urged against viewing centers simply as "a shopping mall of services," saying the school and all its partners need aligned, common goals.

During question-and-answer sessions, conference attendees expressed interest in the funding and sustainability of the model, as well as how to measure its successes.

Julie Doppler, community learning center coordinator for the district, said Cincinnati has used a variety of funding sources over the history of the model but now uses Title I funding in concert with a couple private funders, which together salaries and benefits for each school's resource coordinator.

Bolton said state report cards are not particularly suited to adequately measuring the "whole child" effects community learning centers seek, but she said the district in the past three years has started to see declining dropout rates and increasing retention rates. She said she thinks the district will also be able to show indicators of neighborhood stabilization in the demographics of areas surrounding the community learning centers.

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