

Commentary: Leaders must take right steps for community schools

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by **Chinara Bilaal & Amber Felton**

WHILE MAKING education a central platform of his mayoral campaign last year, Jim Kenney joined dozens of ACTION United parents, teachers and staff and community members at Comegys school last spring to announce ambitious and exciting plans to open 25 new community schools in his first term. Council President Darrell Clarke also is talking about community schools as part of the solution to our education crisis.

We applaud Kenney's goal of trying to redress decades of underinvestment in minority communities with community schools, but he and Clarke, along with Schools Superintendent Hite and the School Reform Commission, should take the right steps to ensure the schools are truly transformational for students and the community.

For at least a decade, the dominant idea about how to improve outcomes for children and youth has focused on control and compliance, but this approach has proved least effective for our most vulnerable students. Community schools, whose integrated approach to education includes in-house health services and community engagement, have been gaining traction across the country as a powerful alternative to public schools.

One city that has shown spectacular results with turning public schools into publicly run community schools is Cincinnati. In 2003, before introducing community schools in Cincinnati, only 51 percent of all students graduated. However, in 2014, when 34 out of 55 schools had adopted the community-school strategy, 82 percent of all students graduated.

Cincinnati also shows how community schools can effectively combat racial inequality in our nation. In Cincinnati, the black/white achievement gap dropped a whole 10 percent over the 11 years, following the adoption of the community-school strategy. Similar results are seen in New York, Baltimore, Kentucky, Ohio, Minnesota, and other places where community schools have been prioritized.

How did Cincinnati achieve those results? It made sure its community-school strategy included these six key research-backed elements: 1) culturally relevant and engaging curricula; 2) an emphasis on high-quality teaching, not on high-stakes testing; 3) wraparound supports such as health care and social services; 4) positive discipline practices; 5) authentic parent and community engagement, and; 6) inclusive school leadership.

Introduced in the 1970s, the community school strategy has been adopted by more than 5,000 public schools across the country but only a fifth of those have succeeded in uplifting the community. The schools that didn't succeed did not incorporate all six pillars of the community school approach outlined above.

Putting someone in charge of executing on these elements is crucial. We know that schools that form strategic partnerships with businesses, non-profits, local and federal governments, universities, hospitals, and other organizations to meet core unmet needs are usually successful over time.

In most strapped schools, a principal doesn't have the time to find the appropriate partners, let alone conduct a comprehensive analysis of their needs. This leaves schools with a random partner strategy, which is no strategy at all.

The community-school strategy puts one person in charge of determining the ever-evolving needs of a school. This strategic coordinator finds the appropriate partners to fill the school's needs and tracks the school over time to ensure improvement.

Various studies have confirmed that the costs incurred to create this position, as well as the work it supports - around \$150,000 - pays for itself and then some. Some studies say the benefit of this position has a 14 to 1 benefit. Another way of thinking about it is that most public schools are leaving a lot of potential cash and other forms of assistance on the table.

Recently, the Center for Popular Democracy released the report "Community Schools: Transforming Struggling Schools into Thriving Schools," using Cincinnati as an example of a truly transformational community school strategy.

Importantly, the report gives city officials and school administrators such as Kenney, Clarke and Hite key tools for opening community schools that have the potential to transform their communities.

Leaders across the country can, as Philadelphia and many others have, make an informed and smart decision on behalf of their minority communities, who still suffer from decades of underinvestment and whose children have thrived in community school settings.

Philadelphia can join Cincinnati in setting a high bar for how community-schools can transform the lives of students and the communities in which they live.

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