

From courts to communities, Kamine still working for change

Former juvenile magistrate founded learning centers

BY KATHY SCHWARTZ
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Darlene Kamine sees her two careers, first in the courts and now in schools and neighborhoods, not as different acts but a continuum of doing good.

As executive director of the Community Learning Center Institute, Kamine develops partnership networks to ensure that all students in Cincinnati Public Schools have “everything that creates the whole child.” That includes necessities such as clothing, housing and health care, as well as after-school activities and summer camps.

Kamine founded the institute in 2009 after leading CPS’ community learning center initiative as a sole consultant during the 2000s. The centers were introduced in the district’s 10-year, \$1 billion Facilities Master Plan after an Ohio Supreme Court ruling in 1997 decried the condition of many of the state’s schools.

Using private funding, the nonprofit institute continues to implement the plan’s vision.

Changing minds about what public schools should provide their communities takes determination that Kamine’s parents instilled in her early. “What needed to get done, you did it,” she said.

Kamine, 64, remembers that her own elementary didn’t have a library. Her mother and others went door-to-door collecting books and money to create one. “There was no award; it was not a big deal,” Kamine said.

But CPS’ model for making each school a community learning center with an on-site resource coordinator is a big deal that has drawn national accolades. New York City and Philadelphia have adopted the initiative. Australia is taking a look. “We’re the absolute blueprint,” Kamine said.

Since establishing community learning centers, CPS became the first urban district in Ohio to receive an “effective” rating. The graduation rate rose from 51 percent in 2000 to nearly 82 percent in 2010.

As an attorney and then a Hamilton County Juvenile Court magistrate for 17 years, Kamine saw poverty’s effects on



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children. “I was frustrated, outraged by the inequity of opportunity,” she said. In 1981, she founded ProKids to provide court advocates for children affected by neglect and abuse. When Kamine left the court in 1999, the Children’s Defense Fund tapped her to work with CPS.

“Trust between the school district and the community was very, very broken,” Kamine said. Levies were failing. “There had to be a community engagement program.”

► CLOSER LOOK

First act: Hamilton County Juvenile Court magistrate and ProKids founder

Second act: Executive director of the Community Learning Center Institute

Oyler School in Lower Price Hill is one of six “lab schools” where the institute determines types of services needed. The pre-K through 12 school houses a dental clinic and the first self-sustaining in-school vision center in the U.S. Last year the school was the subject of an independent documentary. The institute currently is partnering with Habitat for Humanity to rehab seven houses in Oyler’s neighborhood. “Instability of a home or family can undermine everything that goes on in school,” Kamine said.

Some success stories are personal. A college-bound Oyler senior who is one of 16 children raised by grandparents thanked Kamine for offering help during his next chapter. Then he added, “If I ever fell, I wouldn’t touch the ground, because there’s been so many here to catch me.”

Kamine said her father once told her life has meaning when you can be useful to at least one other person. “As a child, I thought, ‘I have to have a huge impact and help everyone in the whole world,’” Kamine said. She’s learned that making an impact on just her corner of the world matters too.