

NEWS

The education gap: Cincinnati's poorest neighborhoods have the most high school dropouts



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At a community meeting in Lower Price Hill almost 20 years ago, Darlene Kamine spotted a gifted student she'd met through her work at Oyler School.

Kamine knew the boy excelled in his middle school classes, so she approached his mom after the meeting to ask about his plans. She thought he might apply to Walnut Hills High School, the city's elite college preparatory school.

"Where are you planning to send him?" she asked.

The boy's mom looked at her as if she was crazy. Her son would drop out and get a job as soon as he could, Kamine recalled her saying. He could work on his GED later.

Kamine was disappointed but not surprised. At the time, kids in Lower Price Hill were more likely to drop out than to graduate.

That's changed, slowly, over the past two decades, but an Enquirer analysis of U.S. Census data suggests the neighborhood still is paying a price. Four in 10 adults in Lower Price Hill today don't have a high school diploma, by far the highest percentage of dropouts in Cincinnati and almost four times the city average.

Other neighborhoods struggle, too. At least 1 in 4 adults in Camp Washington, Carthage, Winton Hills, East Price Hill, South Cumminsville and Millvale lack either a high school diploma or an equivalent, such as a GED.

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The common thread is poverty. Of the 10 Cincinnati neighborhoods with the highest concentrations of high school dropouts, all but one has a poverty rate higher than the city's overall poverty rate of 26.3%.

Lower Price Hill's poverty rate of 77.3% is almost three times the city's rate, making the small West Side neighborhood both the most impoverished and the least educated in Cincinnati.

Kamine, who now leads the Community Learning Center Institute, said that's no coincidence. Though progress has been made, she said, the view expressed by the mom she met two decades ago isn't unusual among poor families that must weigh immediate needs against the long-term investment of education.

The mom cared about her son and his future, Kamine said. She just couldn't see a better way to solve the problems her family was facing in the moment, such as paying the rent and buying groceries.

"That was the pattern," Kamine said of Lower Price Hill's families. "It's been almost 100 years that the neighborhood has been struggling."

The connection between poverty and dropouts is strong. A 2012 report by the U.S. Department of Education found that students from poor families were five times

more likely to quit school than students from wealthy families.

It's part of a destructive cycle, in which poverty produces higher dropout rates, which then produce more poverty.

The costs can be staggering. High school dropouts earn 20% less and are 30% more likely to be unemployed than high school graduates, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. And they earn half as much and are twice as likely to be unemployed as college graduates.

Even today, as employers scramble to fill many low-wage positions, a high school diploma gives job seekers an edge when it comes to pay and promotions.

“They’ll forgive a criminal record quicker than not having a high school diploma,” said Calista Hargrove, vice president of workforce development at the nonprofit Cincinnati Works. “It is truly a barrier to employment.”

Going back to school isn't easy

Just north of Lower Price Hill, in Cincinnati’s West End, the Aspire adult education program is trying to help high school dropouts tear down that barrier.

The program, run by Cincinnati Public Schools, offers classes, tutoring and counseling to adults who want to finish their high school courses or prepare for GED tests.

Many Aspire students grew up in the city’s poorest neighborhoods, where they encountered some of the same challenges Kamine has seen for decades in Lower Price Hill. Years later, they’re still trying to overcome them.

Robin Stith knows those challenges well. A recent Aspire graduate, Stith dropped out of Western Hills High in the 1970s because she didn’t like school and wanted a full-time job. She got married, had kids and worked low-wage jobs in restaurants and hospitals for most of her life.

Over time, though, Stith wanted more. At 61, she thought she'd found it in a job working with special needs kids. But two weeks after she started last fall, her boss told her the position required a high school diploma and he'd just learned Stith didn't have one.

“It ripped my heart out,” she said.

Stith lost the job and enrolled in the Aspire program a few weeks later. She earned her diploma in February, more than 40 years after her classmates at Western Hills.

The work wasn't easy. Many of the same difficulties she and other Aspire students faced as teenagers – learning disorders, test-taking anxiety, distractions at home – are still there as grownups. And if algebra and anatomy were tough in high school, they're often tougher after years away.

“It's hard to walk into a school building,” said Robbie Thomas, the adult education manager at CPS. “They have mixed feelings about it.”

That's one reason neighborhoods like Lower Price Hill face such persistently high adult dropout rates. Though research on the topic is limited, studies have found that most students who quit high school never return.

Jackie Hartman needed more than a decade before she was ready to go back. For years, she didn't think much about her decision to drop out of Taft High School. At the time, a cheap apartment and a job at Popeye's suited her fine.

But by the time she hit her 30s, she'd had enough. “These dead-end jobs, I was just tired of that,” said Hartman, now 39 and living in Clifton. “I wanted to do something different with my life.”

After finishing work at Aspire and passing the GED in 2018, Hartman went to culinary school at Cincinnati State Technical and Community College. She's now raising three children and plans to launch a catering business.

She's in a good place, Hartman said, but her path was difficult. She didn't understand when she dropped out as a teenager how much time and money that decision would cost her.

"It's OK when you're 17 or 18," said Elissa Bates, Aspire's program coordinator. "But then you have a family, you have children, and you can't support your family."

'You have to change the narrative'

The decision to quit school costs neighborhoods, too. The Enquirer's analysis found high rates of adult dropouts often were accompanied not only by poverty, but by low rates of home ownership and health insurance coverage.

They also create a problem that's harder to measure: A culture that accepts dropping out as a viable choice.

"That's what they see. That's their environment," said Ryan Luckie, director of public benefit services at the Freestore Foodbank. "It is generational. In many instances, their parents were the same way."

In Lower Price Hill, the battle against that generational challenge begins at Oyler, a K-12 school that was rebuilt and reimagined a decade ago as a "community learning center." The goal was to make it a neighborhood hub for both students and parents.

Children go there not just for an education, but also for vision and dental care, meals, tutoring, recreation and counseling. They also are reminded constantly that graduation is now an expectation.

"You have to change the narrative," said Amy Randolph, Oyler's former principal and the current director of innovation and partners at CPS.

In practice, that means a lot of work outside the classroom, from making phone calls to knocking on doors. Randolph and her staff kept a dossier on every student,

tracking their progress inside and outside of school. Did they need a ride? Did they have a job? What problems did they face at home?

“We followed every student, one on one,” said Randolph. “We started making strategic decisions, really focusing on the students at a really microscopic level.”

The holistic approach appears to be making an impact. Graduation rates that hovered around 30% a decade ago now top 90%.

It will take longer to bring down the number of adult dropouts, but Kamine said there also has been progress on that front. Twenty years ago, when she first encountered the mother of that gifted middle school student, more than 60% of adults in Lower Price Hill didn't have a diploma.

She's seen other signs of change, too. Oyler's graduation day has become a neighborhood celebration. Its partnerships with colleges allow kids to visit campuses they otherwise wouldn't see. And its students talk not just about high school, but about college scholarships and careers.

“It's going in the right direction,” Kamine said of Lower Price Hill.

Plenty of obstacles remain. Poverty, housing and health care continue to bedevil the neighborhood, and the adult dropout rate isn't going to fall overnight. But to some, including Kamine, the challenges don't seem as daunting as they once did.

A few years ago, Kamine said, she met the father of another promising student at another community meeting in Lower Price Hill. The conversation could not have been more different than the one she'd had two decades earlier.

The man's daughter, after excelling for years at Oyler, graduated from high school and went on to college. When Kamine asked what he thought she'd do next, the girl's father didn't hesitate.

He told Kamine he thought she'd pursue a PhD, or maybe go to law school.

Almost anything seemed possible.

The Enquirer produced this story as part of its Neighborhood Report Card project, an online database that allows readers to learn more about Cincinnati's neighborhoods. Data from this story was drawn from an Enquirer analysis of the 2020 U.S. Census, the 2019 American Community Survey and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.