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Beyond Chicago

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[I](#) spent several days of the Chicago strike week 300 miles to the southeast, in Cincinnati, a city of some 350,000. Although it faces most of the same challenges as its bigger neighbor, Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) and its many public and private partners are further ahead in addressing the challenges that poverty brings into our public schools. For the record, Cincinnati's student population is more than two-thirds African American and a quarter Caucasian, with 73 percent of its students on free and reduced price lunch.

The Cincinnati model of community schools or what Cincinnati calls "community learning centers" were on display for the second Community Schools Study Tour conducted this year by the [Coalition for Community Schools](#) at the [Institute for Educational Leadership](#). What I and 20 leaders from across the country observed is a heartening example of what a mature and developed system of community schools can offer to respond to the critical needs of its children, and create more opportunities for them. The Community Learning Centers have since been recognized on NBC's [Education Nation](#), as a case study of innovative solutions to our nation's education challenges.

Cincinnati's Community Learning Centers began in 2000. Former Ohio Governor John Gilligan and former Superintendent Steve Adamowski were key initiators of the effort.

What has made the Cincinnati model work so well? Steve Means, who attended the Study Tour for the U.S. Department of Education, characterized the initiative as having "restored the social compact," and indeed Cincinnati has found a formula that weaves together the resources of many community partners - business, public and private agencies, higher education, neighborhood, and faith-based groups - to design interventions and opportunities that work in alignment with principals, teachers, other school staff, and community members to achieve shared goals.

Darlene Kamine, a former juvenile court judge, has been with the Program since its inception. She now directs the Community Learning Center Institute (CLCI), a leadership organization for the community schools effort funded by private foundations. Kamine notes that Cincinnati Public Schools, the Board of Education, and the Cincinnati Teachers' Union have agreed to develop all of the City's public schools into community learning centers, with a [school board policy](#) undergirding the strategy.

Every Cincinnati public school is now a community learning center, and in each neighborhood these collaborative efforts are accountable to a site-based governing body - the Local School Decision Making Committee made up of parents, teachers, students, and community members. Each learning center is seen as having particular needs. Its local governing committee decides what its students require and selects the community partners -- from a carefully assembled group of organizations who receive "rent" free space in the school. Kamine views the learning centers as "customers" for the community partners and considers this configuration vital to the strength of the program, because it directly commits the school and the partners to one another.

There also is no cost to the host school for the opportunities and supports that community partners bring. Students have access to tutors, mentors, and business partners; health and dental clinics and, vision centers; mental health counseling, nutrition providers, and after school enrichment programs. Community partners are self-sustaining, they either come with their own sources of funding for their own missions, or they can bill for their services through Medicaid or private insurance. Many of these programs -- all conveniently available on site to students and families - also provide services to the faculty and staff, as well as to other members of the community.

A Resource Coordinator works in tandem with the principal to align the work of the partners with the goals of the school through the OnePlan School Improvement Process. The coordinator brings together [partner teams](#) to focus on key needs of students (e.g., tutoring, afterschool, health and mental health). The United Way of Greater Cincinnati, Greater Cincinnati Foundation, Schiff Foundation, Haile Foundation, and CPS finance the resource coordinator positions and serve as the Strategy Group for the Community Learning Centers.

Supporting the work of partners in individual schools is a [cross-boundary leadership team](#) that includes individuals responsible for local partner networks in key arenas including college and career readiness, business partnerships, mentoring, health, and mental health. A data system developed by Cincinnati Public Schools enables educators and community partners to track support for individual students and to ensure accountability for results.

Many cities have cross-sector collaboratives with similar missions; Cincinnati is the only place where these collaboratives come together to support their public schools.

The development of the Cincinnati community schools initiative is ongoing. But, in fact, the citizens of Cincinnati already have encouraging numbers to offer. Through its community engagement, community learning centers have helped more than 34,000 students, who--with their most pressing human needs met--have responded with academic progress that has earned them, for the second consecutive year, an effective rating (the highest of any urban district in the State) from the Ohio Department of Education. District wide, the high school graduation rate moved from 51% in 2000 to 81.9% for the Class of 2010, and its performance index (a composite score of gains on all state tests at all grade levels) has risen from 53.2% to 87.3% in 2010--its highest ever.

A city with a decidedly traditionalist bent, Cincinnati has always been an aggregation of neighborhoods. But, as in many cities, changing demographics and strained financial circumstances have eroded once vibrant communities. Now community schools have begun to restore not only the neighborhood schools but their communities as well.

Moreover, they seem to be restoring the social compact. Cincinnati's citizens have come together to bring up and educate their children, and in the most fundamental sense, they have found a way to honor the social compact and insure for their city an enduring civil society.

Chicago has its own community schools initiative with strong neighborhood roots; it has much to learn from Cincinnati, as do many communities and school districts across the country.

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