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[Nonprofit and for-profit partners help Cincinnati transform its failing schools](#)

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A University of Cincinnati student, Taylor Oakes, center, tutors 4th and 5th graders at Evanston Academy. From left, Evanston students Roseangel Lackey, China Davis, Shantelle Love-Isham, and Lashiyah Adkins.
Credit: Evanston Academy

From Oakland to East Los Angeles, the concept of community schools is starting to [gain ground in California](#). But districts thinking of embracing this “whole child” approach to education might want to look outside the state at a nationally recognized model: [Cincinnati Public Schools](#). Community schools are based on the idea that the school is the hub of a community – a place where students can get all their needs met, including health and dental care, counseling and after-school programs. The theory behind this approach is that when students’ needs are taken care of – whether it’s a toothache or stress in the family – they can focus on academics.

Some districts have been reluctant to embrace community schools, concerned that the costs might prove overwhelming. But Cincinnati has turned all 55 of its schools into community learning centers by relying on partners to provide the services free of cost to the students and the district in exchange for a space at the school and exclusive access to students.

It took leadership, community buy-in, time and patience, but Cincinnati Public Schools went from one of the worst urban public school systems in Ohio 10 years ago to the best today, according to the state’s ranking system, which is based on state test scores and high school graduation rates.

Cincinnati's model could also prove helpful to districts that have struggled to get input from their communities. Cincinnati relied on top-down reforms to generate a grassroots movement, considered essential to developing and sustaining community schools.

District officials used a neighborhood-by-neighborhood planning process to work with the whole community. The approach was successful because of the "time and care the district spent in making sure it had a solid foundation in the community," said Darlene Kamine, executive director of the [Community Learning Center Institute](#), a nonprofit that supports the city's public schools. "There was not a single blue ribbon group anywhere. Decisions on who to partner with were based on performance, not on who liked whom."

Because California's districts, under the new school finance system, now have the ability to determine their own priorities as long as they involve their local communities, the time might be right for such a transformation, said Martin Blank, president and CEO of the [Institute for Educational Leadership](#), a nonprofit based in Washington, D.C. Blank is also director of [Coalition for Community Schools](#), an advocacy group that organized a recent conference in Cincinnati to showcase that city's approach.

"With California's Local Control Funding Formula, the game has changed," he said. "Districts can leverage their resources to achieve their own goals. But you just can't get it done by yourself; you need other partners."

From "on the verge of collapsing" to community hubs

While the impetus for change in California could come from a reorganization of the state's school finance system, a crisis initiated the transformation of Cincinnati's schools and neighborhoods.

Beginning in the 1970s, more affluent residents deserted the city center and moved to the suburbs. In 1970, the school system served 90,000 students, about 70 percent of whom were middle or upper income. By 1999, that number had dropped by about half, and the demographics had flipped, with 70 percent of students living in families with incomes below the poverty line.

"We were looking at a city that was on the verge of collapsing, much like what happened to Detroit," Kamine said.

The school district "had tried a lot of academic reforms," she said. "They would buy this package, buy that package, but nothing worked. The public's perception was that the schools were broken."

Meanwhile, the Ohio Supreme Court in a number of rulings culminating in 1997 found large Ohio cities in violation of the constitutional right of their children to an adequate education because of the physical condition of their schools. The court found Cincinnati's schools in the worst condition of all the urban centers in Ohio, Kamine said. Bond measures to fix or build new schools had repeatedly failed.

In 1999, the district formed a new leadership team that included Kamine, then working with the Children's Defense Fund, and the then-head of the fund, Eileen Cooper Reed; the new

superintendent, Steven Adamowsk, and his assistant superintendent Rosa Blackwell; and John Gilligan, a former governor who joined the school board.

The group held public forums and visited community schools around the nation, noting what worked and what didn't. They connected with advocates for community schools, such as Blank.

At first, Kamine said, "I was skeptical because of the loss of morale and hope for the schools in Cincinnati. I didn't think it could be turned around."

Board of education gets on board

But by 2001, the district's board of education had put together a three-paragraph policy that set the goal of every school becoming a community learning center that would be governed at the site level. All choices of partnerships and programs would be school-based in response to ongoing community engagement. Partners would receive free space in the schools, but otherwise be self-sustaining, requiring no funding from the school or district.

"Nothing was more important than really making sure that the board of education was ready for this transformation," Kamine said. "I don't think pilot programs work. Pilot programs mean there is no readiness for transformation."

The district tried once again to pass a school bond in 2002, this time putting forward the community learning center concept – emphasizing that the goal was for the schools to be open for use by the whole community 12 months a year. The \$1 billion bond passed in neighborhoods that had never supported a bond measure before, Kamine said.

"We passed that levy and off we went," she said. Neighborhoods chose their own architect to redesign the existing school or build a new one.

The effort also required internal support from district and school staff, including the American Federation of Teachers, which has a strong union in Cincinnati.

"The common lore was that we would never be able to do anything with the union," Kamine said. "But the union president was thrilled with the idea that students would have access to nurses, doctors and social workers. The union president said the community learning center approach let the teachers do their job."

Neighborhoods picked their partners, but agreements with the outside agencies and the infrastructure to support them had to be clear and in writing, Kamine said. "It can't be done with a handshake."

There were some non-negotiables with the agencies, she said. For example, health providers had to see every child, whether the child had insurance or not. Children had to be pulled from classes that were not in core subjects and needed to be seen immediately, with no waiting in line for services.

“We pick you,” Kamine said. “You are our partner for everybody. There’s no waiting list, no wrong door.”

The approach worked well for the agencies, she said. They didn’t have to deal with missed appointments because the students were right there. In effect, they also had a monopoly.

California’s decision to implement its new education funding system over eight years might prove to be a wise one based on Cincinnati’s experience.

Kamine said shifting to community schools “was a deep and long process” because it can take many meetings for everyone to agree to the same vision. “In one neighborhood, it took seven years,” she said.

Today, every school has a mental health team, and many have full-blown after-school programs. Each school picks a lead agency to coordinate efforts, whether it’s the YMCA, the Urban League, the Cincinnati Art Museum, or the Boys & Girls Clubs.

Schools attract a wide array of partners



Evanston Academy serves mostly low-income students on the east side of Cincinnati. Credit: Evanston Academy

The schools that have had the greatest academic success, such as Evanston Academy, located in a low-income neighborhood on the east side of Cincinnati, have attracted a wide range of partners. Evanston has a newly built two-story brick school featuring a cheerful yellow interior with splashes of red. The school has attracted 16 primary community partners, including neighborhood leaders on the Evanston Community Council.

Students from nearby Xavier University and the University of Cincinnati offer one-on-one tutoring. General Electric Aviation employees help the kids with hands-on science projects. The boys at the school can join the Cincinnati Boychoir. Counselors from St. Aloysius Mental Health Services are on site every day. The Cincinnati Federation of Colored Women, whose ages range from 75 to 90, are on-site grandmas who tutor the kindergarten students and provide packets of necessities, such as toothbrushes, soap and combs.

An on-site parent center is open daily, providing opportunities for parents to volunteer in the classroom, receive referrals to needed resources, and take classes provided by Beech Acres Parenting Center.

Parents' No. 1 need is financial management, said Monna Beckford, an on-site coordinator for the school whose salary is paid by a nonprofit, FamiliesFORWARD. "Many of the parents are single moms in their 20s," she said. The center also offers workshops on how to interview for a job, write a résumé and help children learn to read and do their homework.

Resource coordinators such as Beckford are privately funded so they are free from political pressures and aren't subject to district budget cuts. They coordinate services, develop new partners and handle problems between schools and their community partners.

Flexibility is key

Although big changes happen every year, "we have the ability to be flexible," Kamine said. "That's the difference between a bureaucracy and these partnerships. Partnerships can be flexible and bureaucracies can't."



Cincinnati students in a summer program line up to participate in Paddlefest, one of the largest canoe festivals in the country. Credit: Community Learning Center Institute

Part of that flexibility relies on a network of partnerships created by the agencies that serve the district. For example, all mental health providers that work with the public schools have their own network with an executive director. The executive directors of these networks then participate in an overall network of providers that also includes representatives from the school board and the Cincinnati City Council.

Creating these networks "was much worse than herding cats," Kamine said. "We were shaking up the status quo."

But the work creating the networks has proved invaluable, she said. For example, in 2009 the superintendent announced that the schools were going to stay open an extra month in the summer and that the district would staff the schools in the morning. But he needed the partners to provide free afternoon activities and he took his request to the overall network. The various organizations worked together to provide an enriching summer day camp that included piano lessons, gardening, tennis, computer courses, environmental studies, ballroom dancing and reading.

At the conclusion, all of the students went to Paddlefest, which is one of the largest canoe festivals in the country, Kamine said. "For many of our students, it was their first visit to the Ohio River and their first time on a boat."

Cincinnati school board President Eve Bolton, who spoke at the recent community schools conference, said that community schools were first envisioned in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 for territory northwest of the Ohio River, where Cincinnati is located. The ordinance designated one square mile in each township as a place where “education forever be encouraged,” she said. The ordinance states that a certain percentage of funds from sales “shall fund our schools so that each child attend schools that were locally controlled for the benefit of the community and for the preservation of our republic.”

“Community learning centers are in our DNA,” Bolton said. “They are our history and our chosen future.”

Going deeper

[“One School, One Year.”](#) Marketplace, National Public Radio, follows Oyler School in Cincinnati for the 2012-13 school year

[“Community schools gaining traction under Local Control Funding Formula.”](#) EdSource, Dec. 9, 2013

[Community Learning Center Institute](#)

[Institute for Educational Leadership](#)

[Coalition for Community Schools](#)

[Cincinnati Public Schools](#)