In Ohio, Kenney team finds an 'awesome' school plan

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image: http://media.philly.com/images/20151123-Oyler-School.jpg

Inside Oyler Community Learning Center, a public school in a tough neighborhood in Cincinnatti, are vision, medical, and dental clinics. A food bank. A day-care center and a mental-health wing with five therapists.

by **Kristen A. Graham**, *Inquirer Staff Writer*

CINCINNATI - To Otis Hackney, it felt like a wonderland.

Inside Oyler Community Learning Center, a public school in a tough neighborhood here, were things the Philadelphia principal could only dream of.

There were vision, medical, and dental clinics. A food bank. A day-care center and a mental-health wing with five therapists. Volunteers trooped into the school routinely, part of a rotation of well-trained help that works one-on-one with Oyler's kids.

"I thought," the South Philadelphia High principal said later, "it was *awesome*."

Oyler is a "community school," a phrase about to become much more familiar in Philadelphia, where the mayor-elect has pledged to establish 25 of them in four years.

The idea is simple: Don't just teach kids in schools. Meet their basic needs, concentrating social, health, and other services inside as a way to better reach families, allowing educators to focus solely on instruction. The schools primarily serve students but offer resources to those in the neighborhood, too.

"Schools can't do everything," said Julie Doppler, Cincinnati Public Schools' point person on the issue. "Kids fall through the cracks, but community partners pick them up. This removes the barriers kids are facing in the classroom."

Cincinnati, which is moving to an all-community schools model, credits the movement with boosting academic achievement and graduation rates.

Its model costs schools relatively little, about $65,000 per year per building, with funds usually coming from a mix of federal Title I money set aside for poor schools, and from other fund-raising. It's incumbent on the community organizations that provide the extras to make the model work financially, usually by billing Medicaid or through their own budgets.

A culture shift

Hackney, who this month was named Mayor-elect Jim Kenney's chief education officer, was part of a delegation that traveled to Cincinnati in September to see the city's acclaimed community schools firsthand. Kenney and City Council President Darrell L. Clarke, long a booster of the model, visited Cincinnati themselves Friday; along with teachers' union president Jerry Jordan, they will talk up community schools at a news conference scheduled for Monday.

The building Hackney has spent five years nursing back to health is the closest thing Philadelphia has to a community school.

South Philadelphia High had some partners before Hackney arrived in 2010, but he added more, and has been firm with the ones who stayed - who are you serving, how does what you do match up with school goals, are kids doing better because of your service? It was a real culture shift, he said.

At Oyler, Hackney moved through the hallways with a sense of wonder, asking questions about how this program worked, how staff clear that procedure with the school district. In a quiet, bright room usually used for mentors to meet with students, he described his approach at "Southern," as the school is known: high expectations, high supports, many of them coming from outside the cash-poor School District.

"My school was in a bad state. They said, 'Fix it,' and this is what I did. My building is running constantly," he said.

Darlene Kamine, a developer of the Cincinnati community schools concept, nodded approvingly at Hackney, who built a community school without the label or dedicated staffer to help coordinate it.

"I want to weep," Kamine told Hackney. "That's absolutely magnificent; you just described the model and the philosophy. It sounds like scaling up is the issue."

Then Kamine outlined the Cincinnati history: In the early 2000s, the district was in crisis - bleeding students, judged by the Ohio Supreme Court to be failing its constitutional mandate to provide an adequate education.

"We just kept losing resources and any reason for people to come to the city," said Kamine, now the executive director of Cincinnati's Community Learning Center Institute.

Leaders took a gamble on community schools, investing more than $1 billion in state and local money in repairs and constructing new buildings, allowing communities to choose what they wanted their schools to become. At Withrow High in the city's Hyde Park neighborhood, a school where 82 percent of students live below the poverty line and 15 percent are learning English, the vision was technology and dual enrollment opportunities for all students.

Making it happen

At Oyler, in a neighborhood battered by drugs and crime, neighbors wanted health services they had trouble accessing in their community, and they wanted a high school. Site-based decision-making ensured they got them both; the school is now pre-K through 12.

Hackney very much wants to bring to Philadelphia that ground-up approach: No one in an office should be dictating what any school looks like, he said.

"Everything we saw in Cincinnati was something the community wanted, and they made it happen," Hackney said. "We're going to get a lot of people at the table."

Experts in the model stress it's no quick fix or guarantee of academic success. Oyler's student performance still is relatively lackluster nine years after it began moving toward becoming a community school, and Cincinnati officials say they're still learning.

Philadelphia's model won't be a direct replication of Cincinnati's, officials said. New York and a number of other cities have community schools, each with their own twists.

While the two districts are similar demographically - poor and urban - Philadelphia is a much larger system than Cincinnati's, more than 200 schools compared with just 55. Philadelphia's buildings already need $4 billion in repairs, and the huge sum invested in facilities to get community schools off the ground in Cincinnati seems pie-in-the-sky for the bigger, poorer district.

Philadelphia has a rich university and nonprofit community, but many still are wary about dealing with a district whose bureaucracy has historically made it tough to work with.

Still, Kenney said he saw the model as one way to address the city's poverty problem. He sees a number of city services coming together inside schools.

"If you look at every department in the city, they have some service to offer our citizens which could be programmed through the school-based setting," Kenney said. "It can make schools more of a center in the community."

Kenney said existing city services would be repurposed to work inside community schools, but he wouldn't rule out a need to add personnel. Community partners, such as those used in Cincinnati, also will be key, he said.

Clarke, too, is high on the idea. Take, he said, Spring Garden Elementary, a school in his Council district - all of its children live in poverty, and more than half have spent time in homeless shelters.

"Children in our schools have issues and challenges beyond the classroom, and the School District of Philadelphia isn't providing all the resources they need," Clarke said. And while many of the city's neighborhoods lack a place for residents to access municipal services, they all have schools, the Council president noted.

Clarke said that the University of Pennsylvania, Drexel University, and Temple University all have committed to community schools.

"We asked them to work on strategies that allowed them to deliver this across the city," he said. "They're working on a business model that will allow us to address the entire system."