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What are community schools?

April 10, 2014 12:00 AM

Thirty people from Pittsburgh — school, union and civic leaders, among others — are attending a national community-schools conference in Cincinnati this week to gather ideas that might work in Pittsburgh. The Post-Gazette asked the coordinator of Cincinnati's program, one of the most extensive, to explain what's happening there.

CINCINNATI -- Sadie, a personable second-grader with vivid red hair and a winsome smile, struggled to make out math problems and lines of type on the papers in her class at Oyler School. So she visited the One Sight Vision Center at her school, one of Cincinnati Public Schools' community learning centers. Sadie was diagnosed with extreme far-sightedness, fitted with bright pink glasses and now sees her schoolwork clearly.

Nhyaire has been bursting with pride since scoring in the highest category on the Ohio Third-Grade Reading Test last October. Who would have thought this was possible the previous year, when, as a second-grader at Hays-Porter School, he had scored so low on his initial literacy assessment? Nhyaire's volunteer tutors — part of the school's community learning center — have helped to build his skills and confidence as a reader.

Sandra, her younger sister, mother and father have been striving to improve their lives for the past three years. All were limited English speakers until the whole family became involved with Roberts Academy's Community Learning Center and school-based International Welcome Center. While Sandra is learning in her classroom, her parents and younger sister are active in weekly coffee-hour activities, English classes, working in the center's community garden and assisting others. Through their involvement, they have become leaders in the community and are helping other families access resources. Sandra's father has acquired a good job and has begun a music group, her mother still volunteers at the school and Sandra continues to demonstrate academic and social growth.

Three students at three schools with different backgrounds and needs. The common thread? All have benefited from a concept Cincinnati Public Schools calls community learning centers — often known as community schools elsewhere — around which our taxpayers, community partners, elected officials and district leaders have rallied.

Cincinnati is proud to be the host district for the National Coalition for Community Schools conference this week, which has attracted representatives from Pittsburgh and other cities to investigate the model and evaluate whether it's a good fit for them.

While we are still learning and evolving, independent evaluations suggest that Cincinnati's community learning centers have contributed to our district becoming the highest performing urban school system in Ohio. Data consistently show that students targeted for community-learning-center services show performance gains.

A reinvention of an old idea — schools as hubs of their communities — Cincinnati's community learning centers got a boost in the early 2000s as Cincinnati Public Schools embarked on a \$1 billion, 10-year facilities master plan to rebuild or fully renovate schools for all students. When voters were asked to approve a local bond issue to support the plan, they were told it would be about more than bricks and mortar — it also would be an opportunity to engage communities in a way that would transform their schools and revitalize their neighborhoods. The idea resonated, and the bond issue was approved.

Today, a community-by-community engagement and visioning process remains central to assembling partners for each school's community learning center. Also central is the position of school resource coordinator, whose role it is to attract and manage partners and ensure they are aligned to a school's goals and improvement strategies. At this point, 36 of Cincinnati's 55 schools have full-time resource coordinators, funded by private donations and some of the district's federal Title I funding.

More than 600 partners now support Cincinnati's community learning centers, greatly leveraging the resources our district can provide for students, especially supports that are indirect to classroom instruction. Examples include health services, counseling, after-school programs, nutrition classes, parent/family engagement programs, early childhood education, career and college-access services, youth development activities, tutoring, mentoring and arts programming.

Nothing of this scope that involves such a complex network of relationships is without glitches, and we certainly have learned along the way. Among the things we have learned is the importance

of:

- Unified, ongoing leadership support. Cincinnati's community learning centers are a long-term commitment. Championed by the late Ohio Gov. John Gilligan, a former Cincinnati school board member, they are written into school board policy and have been a priority of a succession of school superintendents, including current Superintendent Mary Ronan, under whose leadership they have greatly expanded.
- Good data. Student outcomes are the fundamental measure of success, so it's essential that the effectiveness of both school and partner services be measured. In Cincinnati, an online Learning Partners Dashboard has been developed to track both aggregate and individual student data for each service delivered.
- Continuous improvement. Regular professional development sessions for resource coordinators and meetings of key funders and provider groups inform best practices. A manual has been developed to guide schools through the improvement process, including practical tools such as checklists and partner-agreement memoranda.

No school, neighborhood, district or city is exactly like another. In Cincinnati, we celebrate these differences, which is why each of our community learning centers has its own "look and feel" that responds to local student and community needs.

Similarly, we understand that other districts and cities must make their own decisions about whether the concept is right for them. We only know that, in Cincinnati, community learning centers are helping to transform schools, revitalize neighborhoods and boost student achievement.

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