

A map of Ohio is shown with a magnifying glass focusing on the Wooster area. The map includes various cities and towns such as Wooster, Mansfield, Shreve, Orrville, and Wadsworth. The magnifying glass is positioned over the Wooster area, highlighting it. The text 'NEEDLES in a HAYSTACK' is overlaid on the map.

NEEDLES *in a* HAYSTACK

**Lessons from Ohio's high-performing,
high-need urban schools**

May 2010

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Theodore J. Wallace

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foreword

NOBODY IS SATISFIED WITH THE EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE OF OHIO'S POOR, URBAN, AND MINORITY YOUNGSTERS—OR THE SCHOOLS THAT SERVE THEM. And nobody should be. In the 2008-09 school year, almost half of the 258,000 students in the state's eight major urban districts attended schools rated "D" or "F" by the Ohio Department of Education.¹ Academic achievement has been stagnant in these schools for the last five years. Just 60 percent of their students score proficient in reading on state tests, and only about half score proficient in math. And that's not counting the tens of thousands who fall by the wayside, drop out of school, and vanish from the achievement statistics.

— We hope that by uncovering the secrets of their exceptional performance we can suggest district and state policies and practices that will foster more such schools—without making it harder on the few we now have.

This near-perfect education storm pours down on both the district sector of public education and the

charter sector. Yet a few glimmers of sunlight manage to shine through. Every year we see a handful of schools that buck these bleak trends and show significant achievement for disadvantaged youngsters from depressed inner-city communities. Such high-performing outlier schools have tantalized us since we first noticed them in the data. We undertook this study in order to understand and highlight the reasons for their success.

We hope that by uncovering the secrets of their exceptional performance we can suggest district and state policies and practices that will foster more such schools—without making it harder on the few we now have. Even if the ingredients of success turn out to be no secret at all—perhaps they are even familiar to education analysts—transforming that understanding into widespread practice remains a challenge for Ohio educators, policymakers, and commentators.

The good news is that these outlier schools are terrific. The bad news is that there are so few of them—hence the title, "Needles in a Haystack." We started by identifying public (including charter) schools in Ohio that were high-performing during all of the last three school years (see more about our selection

SCHOOL	CITY	TYPE	ENROLLMENT	GRADES SERVED
Citizens' Academy	Cleveland	Charter	320	K-5
College Hill Fundamental Academy	Cincinnati	District magnet	501	P, K-6
Duxberry Park Arts IMPACT Alternative Elementary School	Columbus	District magnet	187	P, K-5
Horizon Science Academy – Cleveland Middle School	Cleveland	Charter	121	6-8
King Elementary School	Akron	District	377	K-5
Louisa May Alcott Elementary School	Cleveland	District	236	K-5
McGregor Elementary School	Canton	District	372	P, K-6
Valleyview Elementary School	Columbus	District	364	K-5

methodology in Appendix A) – 816 schools met that performance threshold.

—● *But such schools don't happen by accident. If we want more of them to serve more kids successfully, grown-ups have to make it happen.*

Next, we looked among them for schools serving a low-income pupil population (75 percent or more are economically disadvantaged—see Appendix A for the state's definition of disadvantaged). That shrank the pool dramatically, down to 55 schools statewide. Of these, we chose to focus on Ohio's "Big 8" cities,² and ended up with just 16 schools (out of some 450 schools) that were both high-performing and high-need. This study features highlights from eight of these truly exceptional schools, six of them district-operated and two of them public charter schools.

They aren't the *only* such schools in Ohio. Because we used value-added data as part of our selection process, we were limited to elementary and middle schools. We know there are successful high schools, too, as well as rural and suburban schools whose successes with high-need students are just as noteworthy. But in order to put limits around our project, we focused on those schools serving the state's neediest urban children and delivering truly uncommon results over multiple years.

Knowledgeable readers will observe that many of our findings mirror those of earlier studies. Several excellent books have uncovered lessons from high-performing schools, including Samuel Casey Carter's *No Excuses: Lessons from 21 High-Performing, High-Poverty Schools*, Stephan and Abigail Thernstrom's *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*, Karin Chenoweth's *How It's Being Done: Urgent Lessons from*


Unexpected Schools, and David Whitman's (Fordham-published) *Sweating the Small Stuff: Inner-City Schools and the New Paternalism*.

Those, in turn, built upon an earlier generation of "effective schools" and "best practices" research going back at least to Ronald Edmonds and Michael Rutter in the 1970s. Many of our findings in Ohio in 2010 reaffirm traits common to effective schools, including solid leadership, excellent teachers, stability among staff, rigorous expectations for academics and behavior, and data-informed decision-making, to name a few. But our goal is not simply to echo earlier findings about what makes some schools effective. It is to help Ohio develop more such schools.

To study these schools and report on what makes them tick, we called on two seasoned educators who share our curiosity and passion for this work. Theodore J. Wallace, a former teacher, school principal, education analyst, and author, was joined by Quentin Suffren, a former teacher, literacy specialist, and curriculum coach who is now chief academic officer at the Learning Institute in Arkansas. Both have experience working in Ohio, working with Fordham, and working in high-need urban schools.

Wallace and Suffren braved brutal winter weather and countless travel delays in February and March to spend 16 days in eight schools in five cities. They spent more than 100 hours observing classes and interviewing district administrators, school leaders, teachers, parents, and students. They also scoured public sources of information and vetted dozens of documents about each school provided by the Fordham research team.

They've done an outstanding job. These schools provide important insights into how to make education work for our neediest children. At the end of this report we share six policy lessons that emerge



from their analysis and that can help us in the quest for more outstanding urban schools. These eight schools prove once again that it is possible to do right by high-need youngsters within the framework of American public education—and give the lie to defeatists and excusers who assert either that “these kids can’t learn” or that “schools can only do so much with kids like this until society fixes their families and their communities.”

But such schools don’t happen by accident. If we want more of them to serve more kids successfully, grown-ups have to make it happen.

Terry Ryan,
Vice President for Ohio Programs & Policy

Emmy L. Partin,
Director of Ohio Policy & Research



acknowledgments

Many people and organizations helped to make this study possible. We are, of course, appreciative of the time, energy, and thought that Theodore Wallace and Quentin Suffren have poured into it. But sincere thanks are also owed to the administrators, teachers, staff, students, and parents at the eight Needles schools. They gladly opened their doors for us and offered a behind-the-scenes look both at what is critical to their success and at the challenges they face. They were frank, honest, and hopeful and this report would not have been possible without them.

For financial help with this study, we're lastingly grateful to the Ohio Grantmakers Forum, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and our own our sister organization, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

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The Thomas B. Fordham Institute is a nonprofit organization that conducts research, issues publications, and directs action projects in elementary and secondary education reform at the national level and in Ohio, with special emphasis on our hometown of Dayton. It is affiliated with the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, and this publication is a joint project of the Foundation and the Institute. For further information, please visit our website at www.edexcellence.net or write to the Institute at 1016 16th Street, NW, 8th Floor, Washington, D.C. 20036. The report is available on the Institute's website. The Institute is neither connected with nor sponsored by Fordham University.

executive summary

FOR TOO LONG, YOUNGSTERS IN OHIO'S MAJOR CITIES HAVE BEEN ILL-SERVED AND ILL-EDUCATED BY THEIR PUBLIC SCHOOLS. In the 2008-09 school year, almost half of these quarter million students—in district and charter schools alike—attended schools rated “D” or “F” by the state.

Yet this bleak picture has some bright spots—schools with challenging pupil populations that beat the odds and show real and persistent academic achievement. Such schools are few, but they are worth finding, highlighting, and scouring for lessons. By understanding what makes these rare “Needles in a Haystack” schools successful, lawmakers, educators, and district leaders become better able to shape policies and practices that will create the conditions for more such schools.

The findings and lessons reported in these pages are gleaned from the study of eight high-performing, high-need urban public schools across Ohio:

- Citizens' Academy, charter school, Cleveland
- College Hill Fundamental Academy, magnet school, Cincinnati Public Schools
- Duxberry Park Arts IMPACT Alternative Elementary School, magnet school, Columbus City Schools
- Horizon Science Academy – Cleveland Middle School, charter school
- King Elementary School, Akron Public Schools
- Louisa May Alcott Elementary School, Cleveland Metropolitan Schools
- McGregor Elementary School, Canton City Schools
- Valleyview Elementary School, Columbus City Schools

10 TRAITS OF NEEDLES SCHOOLS

1. They are schools of choice.
2. Their administrators and teachers exhibit strong leadership and ownership over school policies and practices.
3. Teachers and leaders make no excuses for what they or their students “can’t do.”
4. Expectations for teacher performance are data-specific—and teachers have the autonomy they need to meet performance targets.
5. Behavioral management policies are clearly articulated and consistent, feature positive incentives as well as consequences, and are deeply embedded in the school culture.
6. Teamwork defines these schools; they have few if any “independent contractors.”
7. There is little turnover among administrators and teachers.
8. Staffing is a function of meticulous recruitment and a culture of high expectations that attracts and retains talent.
9. These schools strive to engage parents and develop relationships with them.
10. In unionized Needles schools (six of eight), staff regard their collective bargaining agreements as the floor of their teaching responsibilities, not the ceiling.



Learning from the best: Policy lessons gleaned from Needles schools

The Needles schools display 10 common traits and conditions that seem to be keys to successful urban education. These are no smorgasbord, however, from which to take a taste of this and a bite of that. The most important thing we learned about Needles schools is that *all* of them do *all* of these things—and integrate them inseparably from one another. What they produce is more like a single complex dish than an assortment of ingredients. That doesn't mean the schools are facsimiles of one another. Each has its own recipe and own distinctive flavor. But every one of them incorporates all 10 of the ingredients (except, of course, for the two schools that are not unionized and aren't relevant to finding 10).

—● *By understanding what makes these rare “Needles in a Haystack” schools successful, lawmakers, educators, and district leaders become better able to shape policies and practices that will create the conditions for more such schools.*

Precisely because Needles schools do not follow the exact same recipe, district leadership and policymakers should not try to clone them. Rather, state and local policymakers should embrace policies that create the conditions in which more of these sorts of schools can develop and thrive. Likewise, they should not settle for following just one or two of the six policy lessons that follow, for the truth is that all of these conditions are essential. The lessons are inextricably entwined, meaning that if Ohio wants more such schools to serve its neediest youngsters successfully, it must go about the hard work of creating all six of these conditions.

1. Encourage and expand school choice to ensure that poor youngsters have real access to quality schools.

The students at Needles schools benefit from their parents' or guardians' decision to enroll them in one of these high-performing choice schools. Policies should be crafted to encourage Ohio's urban communities to offer more quality school options to more youngsters. Besides affording better educational opportunities to youngsters who lack them today, these strategies will restore trust with parents, retain students who might otherwise leave the district, and reverse the drain of families from the urban core.

Ohio lawmakers can facilitate this development through several means. Specifically to improve the charter sector, recommendations include: lifting the current geographic restrictions for start-up charter schools; relaxing the moratorium on charter e-schools; recruiting high-quality charter networks to the state and enacting policies to support these models; and encouraging more district-charter collaboration through sharing of services, facilities, and funding opportunities. Key to assuring that charters work as a quality alternative is improving the quality of the state's charter school authorizers.

But school choice can be expanded within traditional districts as well. Districts could sponsor more charter schools or work with other sponsors to do so, create more district magnet programs, expand open-enrollment, or consider removing neighborhood assignments altogether. They can go even further: requiring middle school students to choose their high school, rather than assigning it; experimenting with online courses and hybrid models of schooling (a mix of traditional schooling and online coursework); and improving transportation options through district consortiums, so that alternative schooling options are accessible to all Ohio students.

● *By observing and learning alongside successful school leaders, much like doctors in training, neophyte and wannabe principals can arrive at a deeper understanding of the leadership traits that drive schools to consistently achieve at high levels.*

2. Encourage school-based principal training programs.

Our school observers were stunned to find that while Needles schools have highly effective leaders, nobody is “understudying” them so as to become leaders of more effective urban schools themselves. That’s because most school leadership training in Ohio takes place not in high-performing schools but in university classrooms. This is a missed opportunity, as highly effective school leaders are in demand in Ohio, and the bench is shallow. By observing and learning alongside successful school leaders, much like doctors in training, neophyte and wannabe principals can arrive at a deeper understanding of the leadership traits that drive schools to consistently achieve at high levels.

3. Adopt a “tight-loose” approach to accountability by setting clear, data-specific goals for schools, then directing funds to schools, relaxing mandates, slashing regulations, and cutting strings so that school leaders have the resources and operational freedom to meet goals using strategies that work for them, their teams, and their students.

No “magic bullet” solution for successful urban education emerges from studying Needles schools. The state should not be in the business of telling individual schools how to operate. Rather, it should set clear standards and goals, put into place accurate, timely

and transparent systems for monitoring performance against those goals, and then provide the support and resources to help schools attain them in ways that may be very different from place to place.

4. Discourage administrative churn in high-achieving schools.

Consistency and stability are hallmarks of Needles schools. District leaders and state policymakers should take note of this and invest in strategies to retain and reward leadership talent. This could include offering financial bonuses for principals to stay in their posts. Moreover, strategies to equitably distribute principals—a key priority of the federal Race to the Top competition³ and the Obama Administration—should be devised so that highly-effective principals are not uprooted abruptly from their schools without a transition plan.

If a transfer is necessary, a strategy should be in place that would position up-and-coming assistant leaders in schools to train alongside successful leaders and take ownership of the school once the principal leaves. This form of principal mentorship would require thoughtful transition planning by school districts, but it promises to expand the pool of talented principals capable of running successful high-need schools.

● *The state should not be in the business of telling individual schools how to operate.*

Districts should also think innovatively about how to move beyond pure financial incentives to retain top-notch leadership talent. For example, school leaders may value opportunities to travel, enroll in coursework, or visit other high-performing schools. Thus, districts might consider awarding study grants, travel grants, or mini-sabbaticals to principals. Finally, dis-

districts (and state leaders) should consider alternative management structures, so that successful principals can have the opportunity to lead a second or third school, or even a “mini-district.”

—● *Districts should think innovatively about how to move beyond pure financial incentives to retain top-notch leadership talent.*

Additional responsibilities would be matched with commensurate compensation, as well as a new form of career mobility that many school leaders may seek. With roughly half (49 percent) of Ohio’s districts serving 1,700 or fewer students,⁴ and with enrollment declining in many of Ohio’s cities, consolidating leadership so that principals can work across multiple schools makes good fiscal sense and maximizes existing leadership talent.

5. Empower schools to hire and retain the best talent available.

The majority of Needles school leaders have developed ways to select the teachers they think will best fit their schools by knowing how to “work the system.” The two charter schools featured here enjoy near-total autonomy over hiring and firing (by circumventing issues of seniority, forced transfers, etc.), although they are still inhibited by Ohio law prescribing strict certification standards for teachers.⁵ Meanwhile, district Needles schools rely on their reputations for going above and beyond the required workload, as well as rigorous interviewing processes, to hire right. Yet there are still obvious roadblocks for these schools in terms of getting the teachers they need.

To help principals build unified teaching teams and select the kind of talent, characteristics, and competencies they need for specific slots on those teams, districts should implement mutual hiring policies

(where both the school principal and the teacher must agree to the teacher’s assignment). This flexibility is especially important for low-performing or low-income schools that need more freedom to successfully recruit, hire and retain needed talent.


Finally, it is time to rethink “last hired, first fired” policies that reward seniority without regard to teacher effectiveness.⁶ As many Ohio districts face declining enrollment and shrinking budgets, it is all the more critical to have safeguards against forced hiring and transfers, and layoffs based only on years of experience.

—● *It is time to rethink “last hired, first fired” policies that reward seniority without regard to teacher effectiveness.*

As of writing this report, at least five of the “Big 8” districts—Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo, and Youngstown—have announced hundreds of teaching position cuts for next year.⁷ Ensuring that schools (especially those serving our most disadvantaged students) have a reasonable degree of autonomy over who they hire and dismiss is critical to having the right teacher talent in place to improve student performance.

6. Reduce bureaucratic barriers and regulatory constraints through “innovation zones,” contract waivers, regulatory waivers, and other strategies that free schools to succeed.

The Needles schools all have distinctive programs, missions, and operational structures, put into place by school leaders and their teams to meet the unique needs of their students. Yet most districts adopt a “one-size-fits-all” approach. The result is that some of the most challenged schools in Ohio operate under teacher contract restrictions and district rules



and regulations that make wholesale improvement extremely difficult.

Fortunately, there are ways to overcome the “one-size-fits-all” approach. Converting truly troubled district schools into charter schools, which inherently enjoy a greater degree of autonomy than their traditional counterparts, is one way to empower schools leaders and teachers and grant them the freedom to do what works. But several other mechanisms could be applied to traditional districts and schools—mechanisms that have the potential to broadly impact student achievement by increasing autonomy. Ohio could designate academically and fiscally troubled districts as “innovation zones,”⁸ granting waivers from various regulations or bargaining contract provisions to schools within the zones.

Of course, increased autonomy should be tightly linked to heightened accountability as it relates to

student performance goals. Districts could loosen the regulatory vise on schools as they demonstrate greater performance, granting freedom in the areas that matter most to schools—determining the school calendar and schedule, adjusting curriculum and programs to meet student needs, acquiring more control over the school’s budget, and making all personnel decisions.

—● *Increased autonomy should be tightly linked to heightened accountability as it relates to student performance goals.*

Finding ways to minimize bureaucratic barriers—whether embedded in district rules and regulations, state mandates, or collective bargaining agreements—is an important step toward engendering Needles-like cultures in more schools for the benefit of more students.

findings from the field:

COMMON TRAITS ACROSS NEEDLES SCHOOLS

WE OBSERVED 10 NOTABLE TRAITS IN ALL EIGHT OF THE SCHOOLS WE PROFILE IN THIS REPORT, THOUGH THESE TRAITS INTERACT DIFFERENTLY IN EACH SCHOOL. This point is key: each school shares the commonalities we highlight, but each mixes these ingredients in its own unique way to ensure the academic success of all its children. Our findings do not lead to a “one-size-fits-all” best practice formula for creating or replicating great urban schools. Instead, they highlight the traits and conditions that are needed for great schools to thrive using their own unique formulas for success.

These traits also turn out to be interrelated and interdependent. Success in one area enables and amplifies success in another. For instance, the “strong school culture” trait (finding 7) enables Needles schools to attract and retain great teachers (finding 8). Both of these traits, in turn, rely on effective student behavioral (aka discipline) policies (finding 5). And so on. Put simply, while the findings represent common characteristics of successful schools, in Needles schools their interplay is what leads to educational success.

1 The Needles schools are schools of choice.

In the high-performing urban schools profiled here, school choice is the rule, not the exception. One shouldn’t underestimate the importance of this finding, especially because the selection of schools for inclusion in this report was based entirely on their academic performance and student demographics, and did not take into account their status as schools of choice.

The two charter schools—Citizens’ Academy and Horizon Science Academy—represent the most

straightforward form of parental choice. These schools are open to all students across the Cleveland school district and families make a conscious decision to enroll their children in them. In opting to send their children to Citizens’ Academy, for instance, parents “buy in” to a model that features a longer day and year, and a rigorous and well-enforced discipline policy. This choice requires parents to forgo the option of busing for their children—no small sacrifice for parents/guardians who work long hours or may not have easy access to transportation. Similarly, at Horizon Science Academy, parents sign a contract that declares that they understand the school’s academic and behavioral expectations.

Among the district schools in this study, every one turns out to be an “open-enrollment” or “choice” school within its district. College Hill Fundamental Academy and Duxberry Park Arts IMPACT Alternative Elementary School fall under the “magnet school” category. Here, too, parents must proactively choose to enroll their children, and in doing so, they commit to the school’s program.

The other four schools (King Elementary, McGregor Elementary, Louisa May Alcott Elementary, and Valleyview Elementary) are district-operated open-enrollment schools, and many parents/guardian have selected them from a host of district options. For instance, almost half (45 percent) of the students at King in Akron enter the school through open enrollment. Alcott in Cleveland enrolls a wide range of students from across the district—particularly those with special needs (about 35 percent of Alcott’s pupil population). At McGregor in Canton, the principal noted that his school has more open-enrollment students than many neighboring schools.

Although some critics assert that school choice in whatever form simply amounts to “creaming,” the schools profiled in this report refute such claims. Their pupil populations are at least as needy as comparable neighborhood schools. Several Needles schools serve large percentages of students with disabilities, while others face obstacles in terms of highly mobile students transferring into the school, which brings its own set of unique challenges.

The only conceivable evidence of “creaming” in Needles schools is the fact that parents made a conscious decision to enroll their students in them. This may indicate higher levels of parental motivation or a stronger commitment to their children’s education than what may be encountered in a typical urban public school. Yet, rather than viewing this as an argument against school choice, it actually suggests just the opposite: that low-income parents who exercise choice wisely obtain for their children the crucial advantage of academic achievement. Further empowering parents by ensuring that all have choices (and information about them) and that all schools of choice are truly effective would be a huge benefit to America’s disadvantaged youngsters and their futures.

2 Administrators and teachers exhibit strong leadership and ownership over school policies and practices.

Common impressions about what constitutes effective school leadership are often misinformed. They tend to be based on clarion calls for “super-principals” who function simultaneously as top-notch instructional leaders, crack disciplinarians, savvy building operators, astute adult psychologists, adept public relations gurus, and adroit politicians, all rolled into one. Some such individuals may exist but they’re never likely to be numerous. Thankfully, though Needles schools benefit from great leadership, they also provide a more realistic and compelling picture of what that means.

Yes, it begins with the school principal. He or she sets the tone, establishes clear expectations for staff and students, ensures consistent application of policies, and encourages collaboration among staff and involvement by parents. Above all, Needles school leaders are passionate about their jobs and will do what it takes to improve student achievement.

—● *“Our students need all of us on board for them to achieve.” – McGregor’s intervention coach*

Yet leadership in these schools is also team-based. At McGregor, the principal leans heavily on his intervention coach for instructional expertise. When together, they literally finish each other’s sentences and it’s evident that they thrive by working out ideas and problems as a unit. At Citizens’, the principal is only one member of a leadership team that includes the school’s founder, an assistant principal, and others. Citizens’ strategy is to distribute the responsibilities of leadership so that the school’s longevity and success will not depend solely on one person’s talents.

Teachers at Needles schools also exhibit strong leadership skills and ownership. The grade-level chairs at Horizon act as instructional leaders—analyzing data and targeting student strengths and weaknesses for enrichment or remediation. They also take students on field trips (a requirement for working there) and are involved in students’ lives both inside and outside of the classroom. At Duxberry Park, the onus for curriculum creation rests on the shoulders of the core academic and arts impact teachers. They meet regularly to plan the full integration of arts and academic coursework. Duxberry Park’s principal oversees program quality and fidelity to the arts impact mission, yet regularly depends on the teachers for curriculum leadership.

Amazing—and disheartening—to us, however, was the realization that districts—and other charter schools—were not using Needles schools as objects of study and places for training. Districts are not placing future principals in these schools to learn how to foster, manage, and maintain such comprehensive leadership systems. And while many people visit these schools, no principal-preparation programs are using them as “residency” or “internship” sites. In sum, while those inside Needles schools are busy maintaining and improving their records of strong performance, nobody outside them is using them as places to incubate leadership for other schools.

—● *“Continuous effort—not strength or intelligence—is the key to unlocking our potential.” – Quote on McGregor principal’s office wall*

3 Teachers and leaders at Needles schools make no excuses for what they or their students “can’t do.”

“The state doesn’t provide enough funding, the district has too many regulations, the union is obstructionist, the kids can’t learn, parents don’t care enough, the students were way behind when we got them and their home situations limit what we can accomplish with them.”

Sound familiar?

Such sentiments might be commonly voiced in many urban school settings, but not among Needles staff. In these eight schools, a positive attitude toward learning—and teaching—serves as the foundation for nearly everything. Teachers and leaders don’t perceive the usual obstacles as insurmountable, but rather as challenges that can be overcome with creativity, teamwork and fortitude. This mindset builds and sustains a culture of high expectations. Little or nothing—not even district regulations or neighbor-

hood and family factors—deters teachers at these schools from going the extra mile for their kids.

No culture of victimization excuses doing less or suggests to students that they cannot achieve at high levels. The no-excuses commitment at Needles schools is grounded in team psychology. As the intervention coach at McGregor said, “Our students need all of us on board for them to achieve.” These teams of adults fundamentally believe that all students can learn, so they don’t treat any students as disadvantaged—regardless of their family or economic circumstances.

When a staff vacancy opens up at a Needles school, the applicant pool is smaller than usual because it is widely known that the workload there has no bounds, and that the staff consists of a group of highly dedicated people who are hard to satisfy when it comes to student growth and academic progress. People who put artificial boundaries around what is possible or how hard they want to work, and who spend time blaming non-school circumstances for why disadvantaged students can’t achieve high levels of success, seldom seek employment in a Needles school.

So whether it requires pitching in with after-school tutoring, helping out during summer programs, getting involved with Saturday sessions in preparation for state testing, or showing up early and staying late, Needles teachers, staff, and administrators are driven to do what it takes to ensure pupil success. They refuse to give up on a child who isn’t behaving or getting his or her work done, or on parents who show little initiative in their child’s education.

At McGregor, a Winston Churchill quote hanging on the principal’s office wall reflects the school’s mindset: “Continuous effort—not strength or intelligence—is the key to unlocking our potential.” Staff at the school live by this creed and often referred to one school-wide goal: “1.1 Away from Excellence.”

This is the number of points on the state’s rating system that would move the school from a rating of “Effective” to “Excellent.” Teachers and leaders at Needles schools don’t just put in extra work for their students; they can articulate what the end goal is, why they want to get there, and how their hard work is tied to accomplishing it.

4 Performance expectations are data-specific and teachers have the autonomy they need to meet targets.

Educators at Needles schools aren’t satisfied with just doing more or trying harder. They constantly measure the impact of their efforts against specific performance goals to be sure their efforts contribute directly to student achievement. At Citizens’, bulletin boards display state testing data prominently and serve as a reminder to the school community that continuous improvement is more important than just meeting proficiency goals on state tests. The school doesn’t just compare itself with the district or with other charter schools (it outscores both by wide margins); it compares its own performance to past school performance and makes growth in every subject and grade level an annual goal.

Once clear, data-informed goals are developed, teachers and support staff are trusted to use their expertise to meet them. To help them gauge whether instructional strategies are effective, most Needles schools utilize student achievement data regularly—in the form of DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) progress monitoring, benchmark assessments, classroom formative assessments, short-cycle assessments, and other tools.

At McGregor, for example, teachers and the intervention coach track ongoing reading progress using DIBELS. Each week during the common planning

period, they discuss student progress and plan remediation or enrichment, depending on student needs. At Horizon, staff and parents use the school’s online data system to track student progress on quarterly benchmark assessments and in-class work. Each week, the grade-level chairs meet to discuss the data and to develop instructional strategies in response to it. When results are poor, it’s expected that instruction will change.

—● *At Needles schools, expectations for teacher performance are directly tied to expectations for student performance, and both are data-driven.*

The relentless focus on achievement data and the creation of clear, specific performance goals doesn’t apply only to student achievement. We asked Needles teachers about their own evaluations, and how they know they are successful. Needles teachers didn’t have much to say about formal evaluations, but they did note that test scores matter. If their children are making gains on the state tests, then they know their efforts are making a real impact.

Just as Needles schools collect a variety of ongoing student data to inform instructional strategies and make changes day-to-day and week-to-week, Needles teachers receive ongoing feedback from principals that improves their instruction and classroom practices. Constant feedback and interpretation of data from principals and peers lets teachers know what they are doing right, and identifies areas where they can improve or change practice. Informal feedback mechanisms build teachers’ confidence and renew their focus on meeting performance metrics that are aligned to specific academic goals. At Needles schools, expectations for teacher performance are directly tied to expectations for student performance, and both are data-driven.

5 Behavioral management policies are clear, well-articulated and consistent, feature positive incentives as well as consequences, and are deeply embedded in the school culture.

How do Needles schools create safe and orderly environments where students can thrive academically? Why is it that new teachers marvel that they “have never seen anything like this before” when it comes to student behavior? Why did we hear so many teachers respond with “We can teach!” when asked why their school was on such a short list of high-performing urban schools?

—● *“Many of our kids are not used to being disciplined consistently so they have to learn that we mean what we say.” – Duxberry Park teacher*

At Needles schools, high expectations permeate not only academic programming but also behavioral management strategies and structures. Teachers admitted that maintaining clear and consistent policies governing appropriate student behavior—including but not limited to conventional “discipline”—is not easy; in fact, it requires a relentless daily commitment by all adults in the building.

Further, principals and teachers commonly employ treats and prizes to reward and encourage good behavior and achievement. But at the top of the list of effective discipline strategies is buy-in and consistency among all teachers. As one Duxberry Park teacher said, “many of our kids are not used to being disciplined consistently so they have to learn that we mean what we say.” Further, these teachers believe that many parents are appreciative of the rigorous behavioral expectations and support them when necessary. Students acknowledged that teachers don’t yell

at them but frame positive behavior as a goal for all, and as a critical part of ensuring that they reach their academic goals.

Teachers we interviewed often compared their Needles school with previous experiences. In less disciplined environments, they worked with teachers who undermined colleagues by being lax on discipline in order to be “popular” with their students. In contrast, Needles teachers address student behavior issues in the hallway or cafeteria even if the students are not assigned to them because they are firmly committed to a collaborative culture that values an orderly learning environment. They also gave credit to their administrators for being responsive when a student is disrupting class time, and said they could count on administrators to manage student discipline and give teachers the opportunity to focus on instruction and learning.

6 Teamwork defines these schools; they have few if any “independent contractors.”

Among the questions posed to principals and teachers at Needles schools was whether they believe their success is replicable elsewhere. While most responded with an emphatic “yes,” they also indicated that it would take two to five years to turn around a low-performing school because of the time and effort it takes to build a school culture with aligned expectations and dedicated staffers.

Any teacher who applies to work in a Needles school already knows that the workload is heavy. Instructors seek out these schools not only because they want to be able to *teach* (not just manage a classroom), but also because they want to be part of the extensive collaboration, individual freedom, and shared expectations that characterize these schools. Simply put, they want to be associated with success.

Needles schools build in time every week for teachers to plan together. Principals at the six district schools acknowledged that most teachers commit far more time than their contracts call for—and do so voluntarily and willingly, mindful that it will result directly in improved student achievement. One teacher at Alcott described the high level of collaboration and respect among staff at her school when noting that paraprofessionals are treated as the equals of teachers, and thus are equally respected by students.

This collegial attitude even filters into lunchroom conversations. During breaks, teachers discuss challenges that individual students are facing and how best to meet their needs. In stark contrast to the “break room gossip” and negativity that occurs in many public schools, the contagious culture of “we can” stands out at Alcott and other Needles schools.

Many teachers in Needles schools lauded their principals for involving teachers and staff in the school’s critical decisions and in genuinely valuing their input. Teachers who work in several schools per week (mainly “specials” or non-core subject teachers) say that the rigorous expectations and deep collaboration at their Needles school is exceptional.

Administrators describe how much deliberation and energy go into filling a vacancy at their schools as they screen every candidate for evidence of flexibility, teamwork, creativity, and the commitment to go the “extra mile.” In hiring, they consider the potential impact of the new teacher on the school’s culture and team dynamic front and center, and they seek talent that can fit well into the team.

A Duxberry Park teacher described one impressive example of teamwork and shared commitment: Last year, the teachers observed all of their colleagues in the classroom and each teacher received anonymous

constructive feedback from his/her peers. According to the Duxberry Park staff, this level of collaborative, voluntary feedback doesn’t happen elsewhere in the district. They believe their staff is rare in welcoming that level of scrutiny of their work as educators.


7 There is little turnover among administrators and teachers.

Stability and longevity within the school community are hallmarks of Needles schools that contribute significantly to their academic performance. What’s more, stability characterizes the entire school community. Needles schools are led by principals who have been there for at least several years; and staffed by a corps of teachers and support staff who have long tenure in the building and are leaders inside and outside the classroom.

—● *In stark contrast to the “break room gossip” and negativity that occurs in many public schools, the contagious culture of “we can” stands out at Needles schools.*

In the leadership ranks of Needles schools, “churn,” or frequent turnover, is less common than in typical urban public school settings. All of the schools have profited from multiple years of steady principal leadership. For example, College Hill’s principal has been leading the school for 13 years. The same goes for the leader of McGregor. The principal at Duxberry Park has been at the helm for eight years. And Citizens’ has created a leadership team that includes the school’s founder and original staff members, who have been with the school since 1999. This consistency in leadership at Needles schools is notable and certainly contributes to their academic success.

Stable school leadership is mirrored by the staff, many of whom have been deeply involved in shap-



ing the school's program. At Horizon, after five years, the original staff members represent the heart of the school. At Citizens', the director of academics has been on the job for nine years and has valuable institutional knowledge about the school. She is able to guide new teachers and articulate the school's mission in a way that no first-year staff member can. Longevity among teachers at Needles schools also has the added benefit of creating valuable opportunities for rich mentoring between staff experienced in the school culture, and new hires.

The implications of this finding shouldn't be understated. Schools need a stable core among school staff, yet there are many challenges to ensuring this stability. Staff in Needles schools repeatedly indicated that establishing and maintaining an effective school culture takes much nurturing and time.

8 Staffing is a function of meticulous recruitment and a culture of high expectations that attracts and retains talent.

All Needles schools do an excellent job of recruiting teachers. This makes sense, considering that teacher talent is one of the most influential factors that determine student achievement.

The staffing process is meticulous. When vacancies arise at College Hill in Cincinnati, the principal scrutinizes applicant files and taps into outside networks to size up potential hires. Citizens' puts applicants through a rigorous application process that includes multiple interviews, model teaching, and an assessment of the candidate's educational values. At Alcott and Duxberry Park, hiring teams interview candidates to ascertain whether they have the passion and talent required to meet the schools' high expectations. In all cases, staffing is a careful, thorough process that ends only when the right person is found—regardless of his or her credentials or tenure in education. For

these schools it is more about finding the right fit for their children than about paper credentials or seniority.

Yet not all Needles schools have the leeway to hire exactly as they please. For instance, the Akron Public Schools' collective bargaining agreement requires that teachers be placed according to availability and their own preferences. King Elementary in Akron relies on its reputation for high expectations and rigorous school culture to attract talent and deflect those who cannot perform or do not care to put forth the requisite time and effort. Can this factor alone continue to yield quality placements for the school? As King's principal noted, "We've been lucky."

Another factor relevant to staffing policies at Needles schools is how funds are allocated. At College Hill, the principal described the advantages of student-based budgeting (also dubbed weighted student funding). Several years ago, Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) implemented a budgeting process that distributed funding to schools based on individual students' needs and characteristics, and then granted principals authority over how those funds were spent.¹⁰

At College Hill, this allowed the principal to eschew hiring an assistant principal in favor of a full-time school psychologist. While no guarantor of quality, student-based budgeting gave her the ability to staff the building in the way she judged to best meet the needs of her students. This kind of control over spending decisions at the building level is an advantage that both Needles charter schools prize and utilize fully.

Unfortunately, Cincinnati's student-based budgeting system has been attenuated in recent years. While CPS budgeting is still student-based, and the district is more progressive than other Ohio districts in the area of school funding, changes have been made that

inhibit school leaders' ability to use their money in ways they deem best for students. This is a freedom that only Ohio's charter schools presently enjoy.

9 These schools strive to engage parents and develop relationships with them.

Much like their relentless pursuit of academic gains for students, Needles schools are never fully satisfied with the extent or intensity of their parental involvement. They seek a relationship with *every child's* family because they recognize the value of partnering with parents and guardians on behalf of their children. Even when school events may be “standing room only”—as is often the case at Duxberry Park, Alcott, and Valleyview—the staff at these and other Needles schools seeks tirelessly to reach those remaining parents who don't participate in their children's education.

Parents at Needles schools expressed gratitude for the welcoming tone set by school administrators and teachers, which they had not experienced in other schools. They commented favorably about the home visit required for admission to several Needles schools. A Horizon parent in Cleveland described her initial discomfort with this visit, until the principal and teacher arrived and it turned out to be so enjoyable that the mother “kept them for two hours.” This first step to building an informed home-school relationship suggests the extent of Needles schools' commitment to engaging parents and shows what sets them apart from typical urban public schools.

10 In unionized Needles schools (six of eight), staff regard their collective bargaining agreements as the floor of their teaching responsibilities, not the ceiling.

In all Needles schools (district and charter), teachers emphasized their willingness to do whatever it takes for their students—especially since their work is producing exceptional academic gains for traditionally underserved children. For teachers in unionized district-operated schools, this typically entails going above and beyond the duties and time constraints written into their contracts. Some may stay late to complete a planning meeting or parent conference, give up planning periods to tutor students or cover another teacher's class, and participate in staff meetings and professional development opportunities that extend beyond the time limits outlined in their contracts. In practice, many Needles school teachers ignore the limitations set forth in their contracts when it comes to promoting the ongoing success of their students.

Needles teachers were also wont to acknowledge the value of their union and the contracts that it negotiates. Yet it was evident that the collegial relationship between principals and teachers in Needles schools reduced the number of potential problems related to those contracts and minimized conflicts associated with work rules. Several teachers noted that when issues do arise, their union's building representative usually settles matters directly with the principal—and without taking it to district union leadership. Others simply noted that working harder or longer was part of their determination not to let their teammates down.



challenges

DESPITE THEIR REMARKABLE SUCCESSES, ADMINISTRATORS AND STAFF IN NEEDLES SCHOOLS ADMITTED THAT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IS A CONSTANT STRUGGLE. External challenges make continuous improvement doubly difficult, especially considering the needs of the student populations they serve. We asked Needles educators to share their views on barriers that threaten to undermine their track records of success. Here are some of the most common responses.

- Raising the level of parent involvement and support (this includes getting parents to understand the importance of regular student attendance);
- Meeting the needs of a growing number of special-education students or students needing interventions;
- Maintaining the school's culture of high expectations;
- Establishing a process for assuring continuity in leadership so that the school's program and performance can flourish over the long term;
- Holding on to critical school-level decision-making authority in the face of increasing district centralization (i.e., how to resist or navigate around micromanagement from the central office);
- Resisting the district's penchant to mandate the latest fads in curriculum and instruction in place of what works—and has been working for many years;
- Garnering more funding from the state/district to meet student needs;
- Convincing the legislature and governor that high-performing charters should be equally funded (currently, most of them struggle or rely on external fundraising to make ends meet);
- Recruiting high-quality teachers, a challenge especially for charter schools that have fewer public dollars to spend than district schools;
- Addressing students' mental health challenges, especially if a school doesn't have much decision-making power over the hiring or use of school psychologists, or if the rising number of troubled students at the school isn't matched by the level of mental health assistance; and
- Trying to educate impoverished students on outdated school calendars that are inadequate for students needing more instructional time.



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Citizens' Academy

Cleveland, OH

Principal: **Jennifer Taylor**
Superintendent: **Perry White**
School type: **Charter**
Grades served: **K-5**

320	Student enrollment
83.0	Percent economically disadvantaged
>98.0	Percent non-white
15.5	Percent of students with disabilities
10	Teachers' average years of experience
\$39,847	Average teacher salary
\$10,902	Total expenditure per pupil

SOURCE FOR CHARTS: Ohio Department of Education interactive Local Report Card, 2008-09; reading and math calculations performed by Fordham Institute, see endnote 11.

First Impressions

A sense of order, efficiency, and purpose immediately stands out at Citizens' Academy. The principal and staff greet students and chat with parents as they drop off their children; a Citizens' staff member even opens the car door for students during this morning ritual. Inside, there is remarkably little horseplay among the more than 300 tidily uniformed students as they hustle to get to class.

"I was astonished at the interaction between teachers and students, the order, and positive behavior. I was sold immediately," said parent Shamika Clark, recalling her first impressions of Citizens' from an unannounced visit to scope out the school she had heard about from friends. A staff member said that upon arrival, new teachers to Citizens' are "floored" by the order, respect, collaboration,

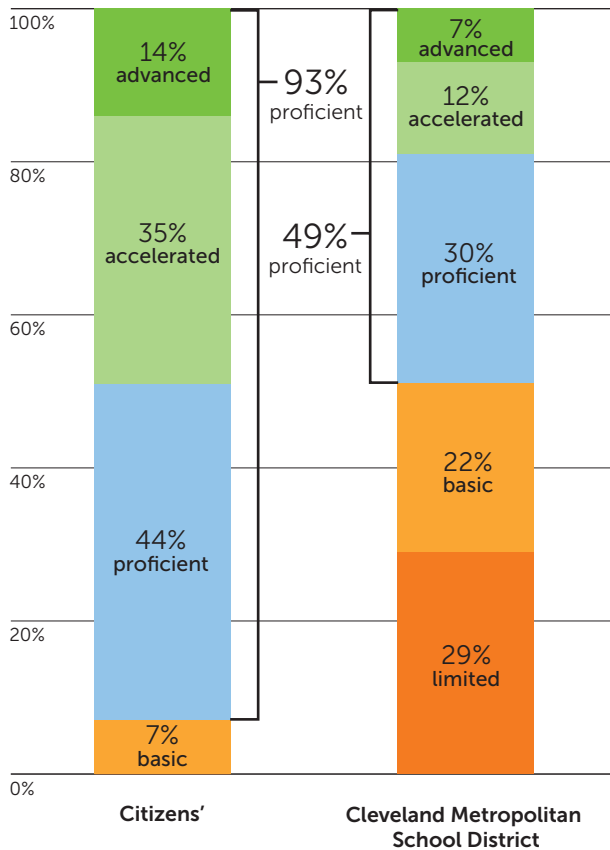
and positive interactions between students and staff compared to previous school experiences.

— *“I was astonished at the interaction between teachers and students, the order and positive behavior. I was sold immediately.”* –Shamika Clark, parent

Maintaining this order requires careful teacher recruitment. The comprehensive interview process (which includes teaching a full lesson) was “severe,” said Intervention Specialist Kim Peterlin, but “I liked



Reading



Percent of students by reading proficiency level, 2008-09 (Citizens' vs. district)

it, so I knew if offered a position I would jump at the chance to come here.” Instructional Assistant Alan Pratt, a long-time social servant of older youth with serious behavioral issues, also has vivid memories of his first impression of Citizens’. “I had never seen so many kids behave so well without force or sedation,” he said. Because of the good behavior he witnessed, he wasn’t sure initially that he was needed at this school. He has since grown fond of his role and realizes he is part of a tremendous team sharing a common commitment to kids.

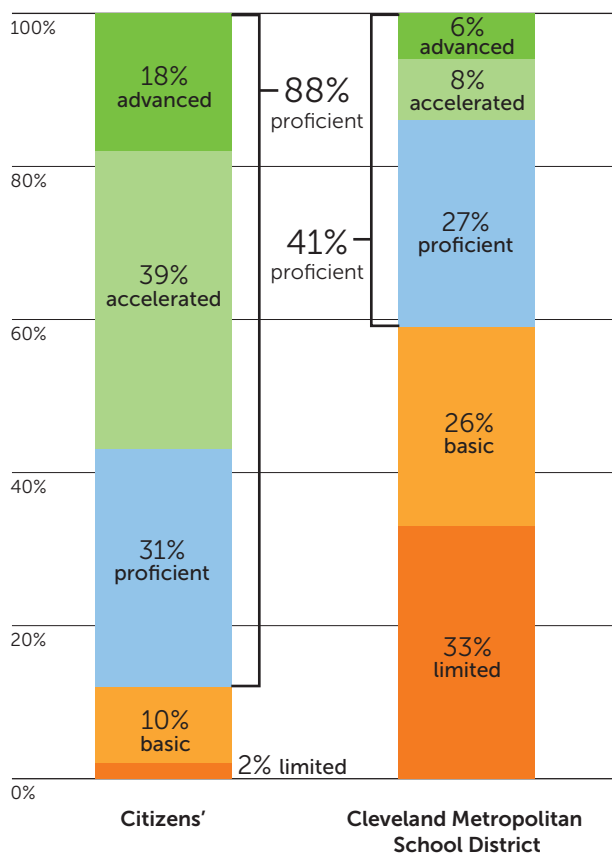
So what exactly are the key ingredients to this remarkable success story that generates such distinct first impressions? School founder and Executive Director Perry White emphasized that “we are not excuse makers—the first excuse in any situation leads quickly to the next excuse.” He also noted that the school works hard to avoid apologetic or limiting attitudes that lead to lower goals and expectations.

From Chaos to Excellence

The story of this 10-year-old charter public school in Cleveland includes its ascent from the state academic rating of “Academic Emergency” in its dismal first year, to its current lofty rating of “Excellent.” In fact, Citizens’ no longer compares itself with the Cleveland Metropolitan Schools or the ratings of the state’s eight largest urban districts, as it vastly outperforms them. In 2009, 92 percent of Citizens’ students scored proficient or higher on the state reading test, dramatically outperforming the district, where only 49 percent of students achieved proficiency. The school does equally well in mathematics: 88 percent of Citizens’ students scored proficient, compared to just 41 percent of students in the district.¹¹

While the school’s launch in 1999 was not terribly auspicious, the leadership was quick to make big changes. “At first, we didn’t understand the fundamental importance of structure. But in time we imagined a culture of high expectations into life-giving existence,” Mr. White explained. In doing so, faculty and staff scrapped their lax approach to discipline and quickly realized that improving student achievement was going to require continuous

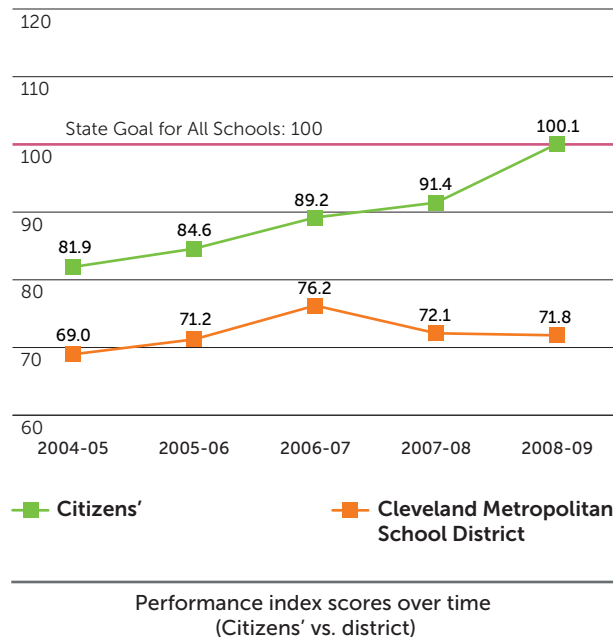
Math



Percent of students by math proficiency level, 2008-09 (Citizens' vs. district)



Performance Index



improvement and tweaks to the school's operations and curriculum.

—● *“The first excuse in any situation leads quickly to the next excuse.” – Perry White, founder and executive director*

Another change Mr. White made was adding more learning time. Early on, Citizens' leadership gambled and decided to discontinue bus service from the local public school districts in exchange for full control of the design of their school day—one that included an extra hour for instruction. Their hope was that parents, most of whom have limited financial means, would be willing to bring their children to Citizens'. Even on a snowy, slick day during the February school visit for this project, student attendance was as high as ever—proof positive that parents at the school are willing to make whatever sacrifices are necessary for their children to benefit from added learning time.

The Mission

The mission of Citizens' Academy is straightforward: “To produce learners who exemplify academic excellence and responsible citizenship.”

In practice, the mission has required faculty and staff to be relentless in their pursuit of daily, weekly, and yearly student progress. For instance, the school's curriculum includes two hours per day of both literacy and mathematics. Short-cycle assessments provide regular achievement data to help ensure that students are on track and to help teachers make needed adjustments to flexible learning groups (students grouped by ability). To winnow the numbers of students needing remediation, Citizens' has focused significant resources on the earliest grade levels. For instance, a speech therapist spends time with kindergartners in order to help build their literacy, and a K-1 “bridge” classroom was created for kindergartners not quite ready for first grade.

Teachers demonstrate an ongoing effort to individualize instruction and minimize any waste of precious class time. For instance, in a first-grade math class, Megan Brickweg's students practice double-digit addition using small whiteboards. Every student has one, raising it high in the air to show his or her answer. With the individual white boards, Ms. Brickweg can instantly see who has answered correctly or who may need more help. And as Citizens' Director of Academics Margie Hirschfeld explained, this method is quick and effective. In a typical classroom, all students wait while one student answers a problem. “That's a waste of time for the other students,” she said.

The CA Way

An outgrowth of the school's mission and the staff's ongoing efforts are the high expectations for everyone. Formally, these expectations are dubbed the “CA



Way.” For students, that means the expectation that they will attend top-notch middle and high schools upon leaving Citizens’. It also includes encouraging all students to believe that college is a realistic goal. “Emphasis early and often is a good thing,” said the mother of Khalil, a fourth grader. The college pennants of every teacher’s alma mater(s) are featured on their classroom doors, and the hallways are festooned with pennants from dozens of colleges and universities. Mr. White said it took about three years for this focus on college to really catch on but claims it is now a “palpable” focus for students and their families.

For teachers, the CA Way is embodied in the pursuit to improve the quality of their teaching. Instructional coaches and administrators spend ample time in classrooms—at least one day *per week*. Coupled with the quick pace of the day, Ms. Hirschfeld explained, Citizens’ is a more challenging place to work than

many schools. “It requires teachers to be on their game all the time,” she added. Even so, teachers at Citizens’ clearly appreciate working at the school. Second-grade teacher Alyson Gilbride pointed to the collaboration among staff as a major advantage. A block schedule, grade-level teams, and frequent feedback from administrators both encourage and require lesson-sharing and teamwork. “I don’t know what I’d do if I was working alone,” Ms. Gilbride said.

—● *“It requires teachers to be on their game all the time.” - Margie Hirschfeld, director of academics*

Teamwork is also evident at the administrative level. Mr. White and his leadership team are working hard to create a sustainable leadership structure—one that does not depend on the charisma or abilities of one



person. Instead, Citizens' leadership team includes Mr. White, interim Principal Jennifer Taylor, an assistant principal, and a few others. The idea is to create a leadership system that is both self-perpetuating and insulated (as much as possible) against turnover and external factors.

All Kids Are Our Favorites

The CA Way is most evident, however, in the classrooms—in the firm yet nurturing interactions among the teachers, staff, and students. Fourth- and fifth-grade teacher Allison Lentz, who worked at

another charter school before Citizens', noted that such consistent expectations were not in place in her previous school. Part of the secret to maintaining those expectations involves reaching out to parents. Teachers are expected to communicate with parents regularly in order to meet the goal of 100 percent attendance at parent-teacher conferences. The sense of close-knit community that results from this type of effort makes it easier for both her and her students to succeed.

—● *“We do what we say we are going to do.”* —Principal Jennifer Taylor

Finding teachers to meet the high expectations at Citizens' is not easy. The rigorous teacher interview process signals to all who inquire that they will never work harder than they will at Citizens' and that a major part of the school's success lies in the intentional formation of a growing core of adults who do everything in their power to make sure that their students excel. “We don't have problems here, we only have challenges,” Instructional Assistant Pratt said, summing up the “no-excuses” culture of the school. This mindset also is evidenced by teachers' outreach to parents and their desire to “seek optimal professional closeness rather than optimal professional distance” from one another, Mr. White explained.

Citizens' Academy has traveled a revealing path in its decade-long history, emerging from plenty of trial-and-error to rank among the few elite urban public schools in Ohio. It consistently achieves remarkable success because, as Principal Jennifer Taylor said, “we do what we say we are going to do.”



College Hill Fundamental Academy

Cincinnati, OH

Principal: **Barbara Gordon**
Superintendent: **Mary Ronan**
School type: **District magnet**
Grades served: **K-6, pre-k**

- 501** Student enrollment
- 77.9** Percent economically disadvantaged
- 96.6** Percent non-white
- 18.4** Percent of students with disabilities
- 20** Teachers' average years of experience
- \$65,777** Average teacher salary
- \$9,696** Total expenditure per pupil

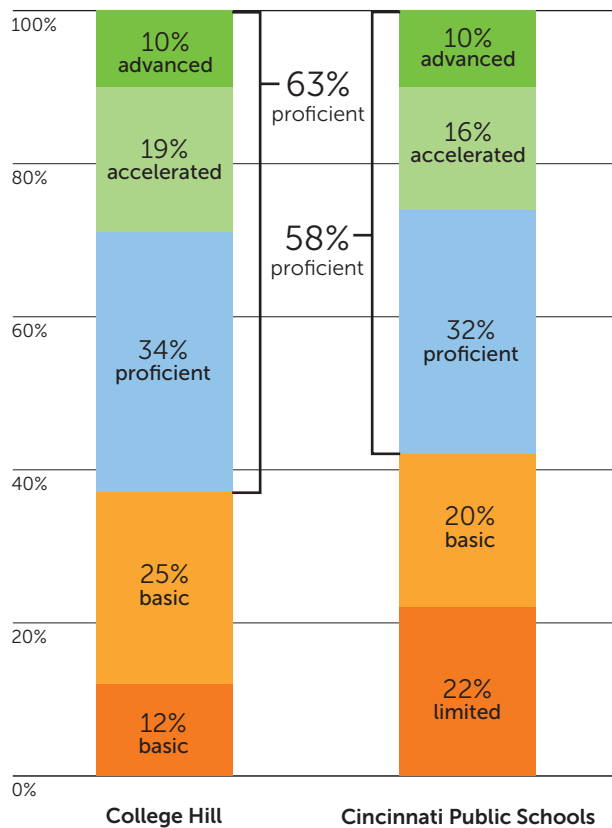
"We Teach!"

Ms. Koch's third-grade math classroom was quiet apart from the feverish tapping of pencils on paper. Having recently finished a fast-paced math lesson on division, students were now completing a timed routine called "hot pencils." For this exercise, Ms. Koch distributed different multiplication problems to the students, based on their daily progress with math. Each student's problems were tailored to his or her current level. Several students finished quickly and turned their papers over while others were studying their problems intently or every so often glancing up at Ms. Koch, who walked around the classroom eyeing both student work and the timer in her hand.

"Time's up," she announced finally. Most students had finished while a couple sighed and

SOURCE FOR CHARTS: Ohio Department of Education interactive Local Report Card, 2008-09; reading and math calculations performed by Fordham Institute, see endnote 11.

Reading



Percent of students by reading proficiency level, 2008-09 (College Hill vs. district)

turned their papers over slowly, not wanting to let the challenge go uncompleted. Papers were quickly collected and students moved on to the next task, making it evident that time and routine were precious commodities.

—● *“I know I’m going to get smarter here.” – Destiny, third grader*

Ms. Koch later explained that each night she graded the hot pencils exercise. These progress markers allowed her to see who had mastered certain concepts—and who needed additional help or tutoring.

And of course, there would be a new hot pencils problem for students the next day based on their daily progress. For some students, this level of focused instruction is a departure from their previous experiences in school. Destiny, a third grader in Ms. Koch’s class who recently transferred to College Hill Fundamental Academy, noted, “I know I’m going to get smarter here.”

This efficiency and attention to detail are two aspects that set College Hill apart from many other schools. College Hill’s test scores rank far above the district average and have earned the school a rating of “Excellent” from the Ohio Department of Education. Ms. Koch’s expertise is shared by teachers throughout the school—and seemingly at every level. The school itself is described by almost everyone as “safe and orderly.” And everyone, from the principal to the teachers and even the school psychologist, agrees that expectations for students are higher than at most other schools.

—● *“We teach!” – Principal Barbara Gordon*

When asked what accounts for the school’s success, Principal Barbara Gordon answered with a hint of impatience and surprise: “We teach!”

This simple statement was echoed by teachers and even students at almost every grade level. Indeed, ingrained in the culture of College Hill are the expectations that students come to learn, and teachers come to teach.

Fundamentals and “Stubbornness”

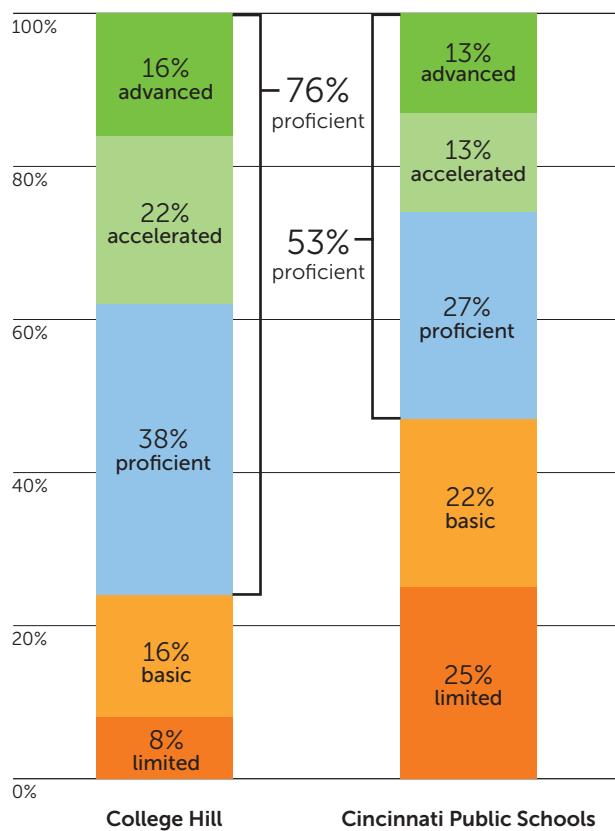
One of more than a dozen magnet schools in Cincinnati Public Schools, College Hill is a “fundamental” school, meaning that it focuses on the core academic

subject areas and key values (e.g., citizenship) students need for success in life. Established just over 30 years ago, the school still clings to its original mission statement and set of values—a fact that faculty, some with very long tenures at the school, are quick to point out.

As a magnet school, parents must apply and then interview with Principal Barbara Gordon before their child may be enrolled. While this may sound more like a private school, the application process at College Hill is really about laying the foundation for parents and students in terms of school expectations for both behavior and academic work. As one



Math



Percent of students by math proficiency level, 2008-09 (College Hill vs. district)

teacher remarked, “not one kindergartner has ever been turned down.” What’s more, College Hill has been designated a “choice” school for parents under accountability measures under the No Child Left Behind Act. This means that parents whose children attend perennially low-performing schools in the district may transfer them to the higher-performing College Hill.

Regardless of how students enroll, Principal Gordon makes it a point to interview the parents or guardians of every student. To her, it is paramount to establishing and maintaining the school’s culture, which she describes as one of high expectations, self-discipline, and intrinsic self-worth. Gordon has been at the school for 15 years (two years as assistant principal and 13 as principal). She spent a couple of years as a district-wide “lead” principal, one who trains and supports building principals. Finally, when the former College Hill principal retired 13 years ago,



the leadership committee petitioned for her to come back to lead the school.

For her, it wasn't a difficult decision. Since then, she's been able to oversee the school's continuous progress as well as protect it from what she describes as "trends"—those capricious affinities that schools and districts have with new programs or the latest fads. She and the teachers have been adamant that if a program or strategy doesn't work, they don't use it. Consistency of staff and student expectations and program rigor represent the bedrock upon which College Hill's culture of success rests. As a first-grade teacher noted, "There are very clear expectations for us here—expectations that are both consistent and fair."

This consistency has become all the more important in the past few years with the additional enrollment of transfer students, most of whom come to College Hill far below grade level and unaccustomed

to its rules and strict behavior expectations. With these transfer students often come additional mental health issues, depending on their home situations. Principal Gordon echoed the latter as a particular matter of concern. "Parenting, you can work with that," she noted. "Discipline, you can work with that. But the mental health issues are a real challenge."

Some teachers openly worried about the effect that these students might have on College Hill's academic performance. However, no one showed any signs of letting up. And all teachers had confidence in the school's well-crafted student behavior policy: a step program that articulates specific consequences for student behavior along with a wide range of positive incentives for good behavior (i.e., "caught being good" awards).

Yet Roseanne Bays, the school's psychologist, put it more bluntly. When asked what accounted for the

school's continued success with low-income students, she simply said, "Stubbornness." This stubbornness is paying off. Despite the challenge of a new influx of students, in 2009, College Hill moved from a state academic rating of "Effective" to "Excellent." College Hill students also outperformed those in Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) in both math and reading proficiency.

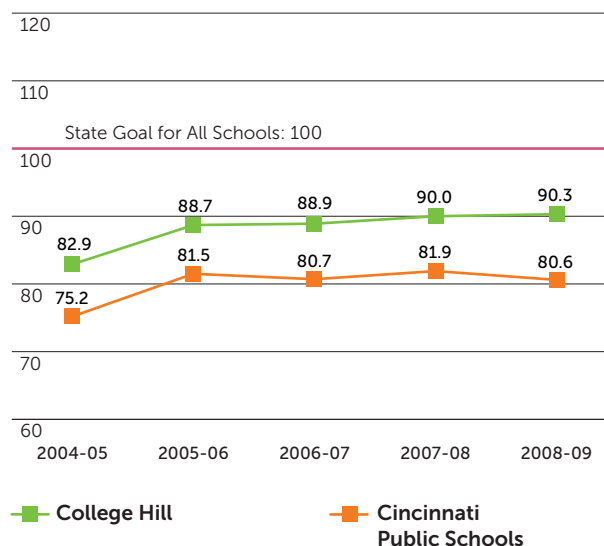
An Isolated Island

Considering the low number of schools that ultimately met this report's achievement criteria, along with the continued success of College Hill, it was surprising to learn that College Hill's role in the district was not more prominent. In fact, rather than being a model for strong leadership, effective instruction, and positive school culture, College Hill functions more as an isolated island. "People at other schools don't think we face the same problems they do," Principal Gordon suggested.

—● *"Children will do the right thing because that's what we've taught them to do." – Vicky Davidson, fifth-grade math/science teacher*

Yet many College Hill teachers shrugged off the notion that their students are somehow less difficult to teach. More than 77 percent of College Hill students in 2009 were economically disadvantaged, compared to 68 percent district-wide. As third-grade teacher Kathy Koch said, "The kids are the same kids. They just act differently here." Other teachers agreed and contended that the longevity and strength of the school's academic program allows them to successfully reach even the most challenged students. Vicky Davidson, a fifth-grade math/science teacher, stated it very clearly: "Children will do the right thing because that's what we've taught them to do."

Performance Index



Performance index scores over time (College Hill vs. district)

As for the school's relationship to the district, it was difficult for CPS's administration to find the time to come to the school to offer congratulations when its academic rating increased from "Effective" to "Excellent." Such public gestures would mean a great deal to the teachers and staff at College Hill, whose work in lifting student achievement deserves recognition. The district's lack of attention to College Hill stands in contrast to the amount of attention it must pay to the district's lower-performing schools (in terms of both time and resources).

College Hill's teachers have been frustrated by the programs and special grants given to lower-performing schools, especially as College Hill serves an increasing number of disadvantaged students. Unfortunately, while the district's focus on its most troubled schools makes sense on one level, the resulting lack of focus on College Hill prevents the district from learning and sharing lessons from its success.



Teamwork and Intervention

A serious benefit of both the school's stability and Principal Gordon's careful hiring practices is the close collaboration among staff, both within and across grade levels. Many teachers stressed that this collegiality and cooperation were vital to the success of the school and its students. Principal Gordon explicitly named these traits as an expectation of the teachers she hires for College Hill. For instance, the primary grade teachers regularly meet with the intermediate grade teachers to discuss student outcomes at all grade levels and to ensure that instruction is aligned across the grades. Similarly, the fourth-grade reading/social studies teachers team up with their math/science counterparts to offer small-group instruction (students are grouped by ability) in one or more subjects. This allows the teachers to spend more time addressing students' different needs and skill levels.

—● *“When I came here, I was able to teach the way I always dreamed of.”* –
Steve Hayes, librarian

One of the most powerful examples of collaboration at College Hill involves student intervention. With so many students needing additional help with their academic work, the school has enlisted all teachers to help in the process of intervention. A team of intervention specialists works with groups of students at all levels, and engages the classroom teachers in these sessions and in assisting with the development of their students' individual education plans. Principal Gordon makes it a priority that all students with special needs are identified for interventions.

Such intense teamwork helps to create a positive environment for both teaching and learning. Librarian Steve Hayes, a veteran of other CPS schools, articu-

lated his experience at College Hill this way: “When I came here, I was able to teach the way I always dreamed of.” Also different from his previous schools are the ever-present, people-oriented leadership and the simple fact that the teachers “seem to like and respect the students.”

“Same End Product in Mind”

Though the recipe for school success is complex and not always easy to identify, one basic ingredient is consistent, high-quality instruction. At College Hill, teamwork and shared responsibilities make this all the more possible, and every teacher interviewed was unequivocal about teaching to standards—a good harbinger for those seeking to improve standards. “We stick to the standards...and enrich them to help students go a step beyond,” fourth-grade teacher Kathy Damron said. Even the intervention specialists noted their goal was to help students do grade-level work. Intermediate-level Intervention Specialist Kathy Seider gauges her success and effectiveness by the extent to which her students can thrive in a regular classroom.

—● *“We stick to the standards...and enrich them to help students go a step beyond.”* –*Kathy Damron, fourth-grade teacher*

While many teachers might make excuses for students based on their backgrounds, home life challenges, or learning difficulties, none of the faculty at College Hill even broached the topic. Their expectations are high and their goals for continual improvement explicit. As the primary-level Intervention Specialist Thelma Dorn said, “We all have the same end product in mind.”



Duxberry Park Arts IMPACT Alternative Elementary School

Columbus, OH

Principal: **Deborah Carter**

Superintendent: **Gene Harris**

School type: **District magnet**

Grades served: **K-5, pre-k**

187	Student enrollment
84.0	Percent economically disadvantaged
91.6	Percent non-white
<5.0	Percent Limited English proficient
15.5	Percent of students with disabilities
11	Teachers' average years of experience
\$58,793	Average teacher salary
\$15,831	Total expenditure per pupil

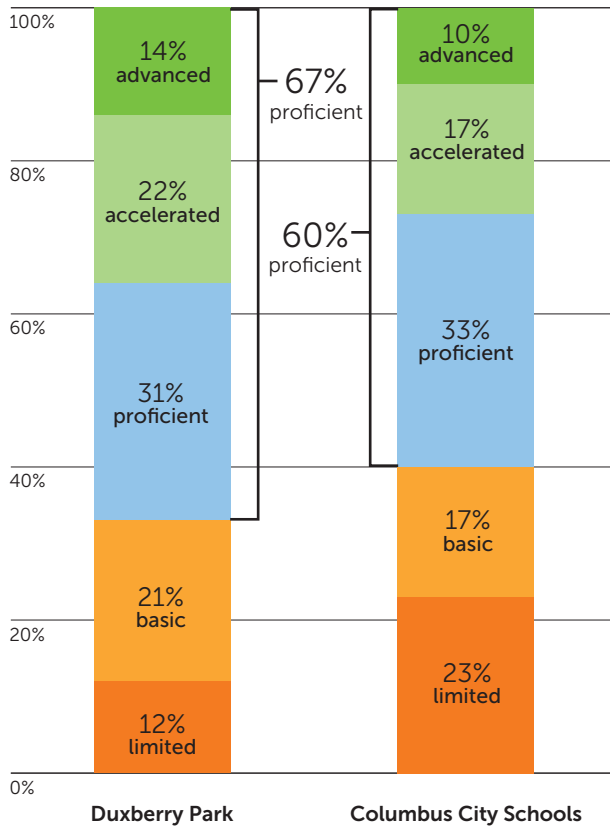
SOURCE FOR CHARTS: Ohio Department of Education interactive Local Report Card, 2008-09; reading and math calculations performed by Fordham Institute, see endnote 11.

How Great Thou Art

Duxberry Park is an arts-integrated school that offers dance, art, music, and drama in a most unique way for its nearly 250 students.¹² Located in a tough neighborhood on the northeast side of Columbus, this school doubles as a veritable art museum, drama theatre, and music and dance studio. Despite having been an arts impact school since the 1980s, changes in staff and students over time ensure that the challenge of determining how best to teach children at multiple grade levels utilizing extended exposure to the arts is a constant struggle.

Student performances play to packed houses of parents and extended family members while student academic results exhibit steady growth in achievement. The school regularly outperforms its district

Reading



Percent of students by reading proficiency level, 2008-09 (Duxberry Park vs. district)

peers in both reading and math. And it excels academically despite serving a student population that is 84 percent economically disadvantaged, slightly higher than the district average of 81 percent. How does the school maintain its integrated arts concept while also delivering strong academic results? According to Duxberry Park’s teachers, it requires every teacher to be flexible, to be willing to learn from their peers, and to accommodate what traditionalists would likely judge to be a chaotic—maybe even unnerving—beehive of student movement and noise.

Parents voiced their love for the variety of ways their children can learn, made possible through the com-



mitment of teachers who emphasize group dynamics and individual creativity. Parents believe their children are comprehending concepts more deeply through the daily use of multiple intelligences. Teachers claimed to have never experienced such a successful and intentional integration of classroom learning with the arts. They explained that at their previous schools teachers took a break or did some planning when their students went to their music or art classes. Not at Duxberry Park, where the arts and academics are one.

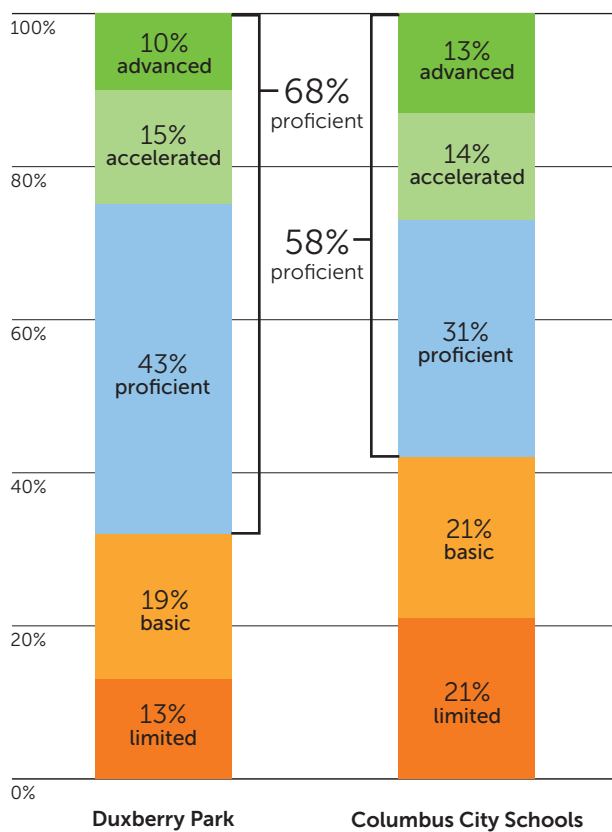
Where Venn Diagrams and Art Collide

In one class, the art instructor asked his students to work in small groups to “frame” snapshots of key

points in a story by freezing themselves in various scenes. The classroom teacher was also present, and she joined the art teacher in instruction when the small groups were turned loose to begin working together. Collaboration between the art instructor and the classroom teacher was immediately apparent, as was the overlap between the art lesson, which used a mix of drama and drawing, and skill sets the students were working on in their regular classroom—understanding Venn diagrams. Students used Venn diagrams, plotting commonalities and differences between their small group work, and enjoyed marrying art and drama in order to master the content in a creative way.

This level of integration can be found in core subject areas as well. A recent Duxberry Park project focused on the story of the Underground Railroad and how people in Columbus helped the northward-bound slaves. Students learned how escaping slaves were pursued by bounty hunters and ultimately had to seek refuge in Canada. What started as a social studies project for one grade level soon turned into a dramatic art production involving the entire school. Students took on the roles of escaped slaves and operators of Underground Railroad safe houses,

Math



Percent of students by math proficiency level, 2008-09 (Duxberry Park vs. district)





using drama to enliven the tale of the arduous and often dangerous journey undertaken by those seeking freedom.

Uncertain Future

It was only a few years ago that dwindling enrollment landed Duxberry Park on the district's closure list. But thanks to the staff, parents, and at least one central office advocate, enrollment has grown to such a level that the school was not even considered in the current round of school closings. However, the school may encounter a significant challenge as students who currently attend the nine district schools scheduled to close in 2010 secure assignments to other schools, including Duxberry Park. In fact, the only other arts impact elementary school in the district will close this year and its students will get priority if they choose to move to Duxberry Park. This new wave of students could bring enough change to

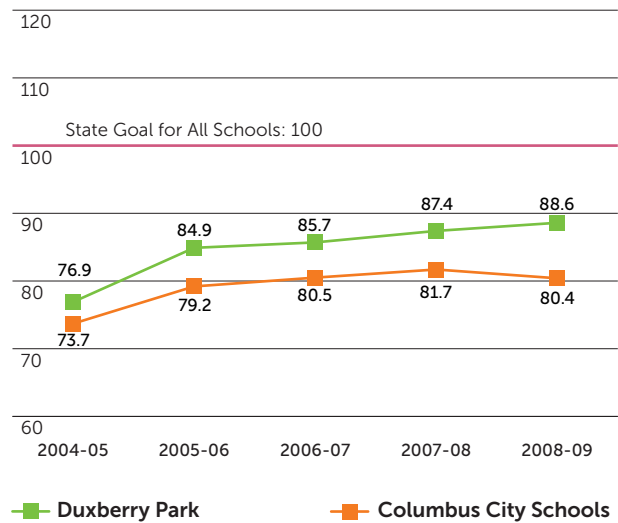
the school in one year to present a real challenge to its culture and tradition of academic success.

— *“Beyond the important achievement test scores, if I establish trust with my peers, my kids’ desire to learn increases, and more parents get involved—then I know I am successful.”*
 —Natalie Faeth, third-grade teacher

This Is Where I Want To Be

The success for which teachers and students strive at Duxberry Park is an ongoing but challenging goal. Third-grade teacher Natalie Faeth, now in her third year at Duxberry Park, said, “It is very rewarding teaching here despite the demanding expectations of staff and students.” When asked how she knows whether she is personally successful, she replied, “Beyond the important achievement test scores, if I establish trust with my peers, my

Performance Index



Performance index scores over time (Duxberry Park vs. district)




kids' desire to learn increases, and more parents get involved—then I know I am successful. This is where I want to be.”

Other teachers echoed Faeth's perspective by acknowledging that daily planning time is at a minimum, but no one is clamoring for that to change. They prefer the extensive cooperation and flexibility that comes with this school's modus operandi. Everyone must be a co-teacher and an engaged model for his or her students. The arts faculty takes a week away from teaching each quarter to meet with teachers from every grade level, and together they prepare future lesson plans. They also meet for shorter stints each week to make sure their lessons are aligned across all classrooms. These meetings explain how the dance teacher decided to map out a grid depicting the x/y axis when teaching the latest dance movements, and why the drama teacher had students act out a key battle from the Revolutionary War.

— “*This type of commitment and cooperation can only happen where a culture exists free of excuses and blame.*” — *Melissa Wengerd, counselor*

In a clear response to Principal Deborah Carter's oft-repeated urging of teachers and staff to go above and beyond the norm to help students, teachers conduct their own internal review of the curriculum and teacher methodologies by visiting each other's classrooms and offering feedback to lessons. As a result, all teachers gather a trove of ideas about how to make their classroom sessions even more successful. Not many teachers are confident enough in their own abilities to open themselves up to the scrutiny of their peers on a regular basis. But at Duxberry Park, teachers believe this professional interaction makes a meaningful difference as they seek to improve student performance.



Counselor Melissa Wengerd, who splits her week at Duxberry Park with another school, acknowledged that teaching at Duxberry Park was truly hard work because every second of every school day is focused on performance. She said teachers spend a tremendous amount of time thinking through minutia, such as how to conduct transitions between classes in order minimize the loss of instructional time. Wengerd believes, “this type of commitment and cooperation can only happen where a culture exists free of excuses and blame.”

“Getting Us Ready for the Real World”

The benefits of a Duxberry Park education are evident to students. As Caleb, a fifth grader, explained, the teachers at Duxberry Park are “getting us ready for the real world. The teachers take good care of us and work us hard.” Other students echoed Caleb’s

views. They added that they liked being rewarded for good behavior and effort in classes.

—● *“The teachers take good care of us and work us hard.” – Caleb, fifth grader*

Staff at Duxberry Park use positive incentives to create an achievement-focused school culture. The school is unique in the extent to which students actually understand the connection between the school’s culture and their ability to meet real achievement goals. Consider Duxberry Park’s “Superhero Club,” in which first- and second-grade boys learn that they can achieve all things. For those students who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, it’s never too early to set such high expectations and to make evident to students how academic lessons, behavioral policies, and extracurricular activities are related to achieving real goals and dreams.



Horizon Science Academy – Cleveland Middle School

Cleveland, OH

Principal: **Aydin Kara**
 Superintendent: **Murat Efe**
 School type: **Charter**
 Grades served: **6-8**

121	Student enrollment
97.7	Percent economically disadvantaged
>91.0	Percent non-white
4	Teachers' average years of experience
\$31,246	Average teacher salary
\$11,382	Total expenditure per pupil

No Frills Zone

Horizon Science Academy – Cleveland Middle School sits between its elementary and high school facilities on a small, nondescript “campus” setting. It is a single modular building that consists of one long and relatively narrow hallway, a small cafeteria space that doubles as a physical education facility, and just enough classrooms and offices to serve the 150 sixth, seventh, and eighth graders. No space goes unused.

But even the stark simplicity of Horizon’s facility can’t mask the powerful learning taking place inside the school’s classrooms. The school’s atmosphere is both serious and nurturing. Students smile and seem relaxed as they move between classes, yet this ease is undergirded by a sense of purpose and efficiency. In this no-frills environ-

SOURCE FOR CHARTS: Ohio Department of Education interactive Local Report Card, 2008-09; reading and math calculations performed by Fordham Institute, see endnote 11.



ment, it becomes clear very quickly that the people and the mission matter most.

The school's mission is as simple as its space: to engage kids in a rigorous college-preparatory curriculum. (The Horizon High School, into which most of the middle-school students matriculate, boasts 100 percent graduation and 90 percent college-acceptance rates.)

—● *“Students work really hard here, but the teachers really help us.” – Selena, seventh grader*

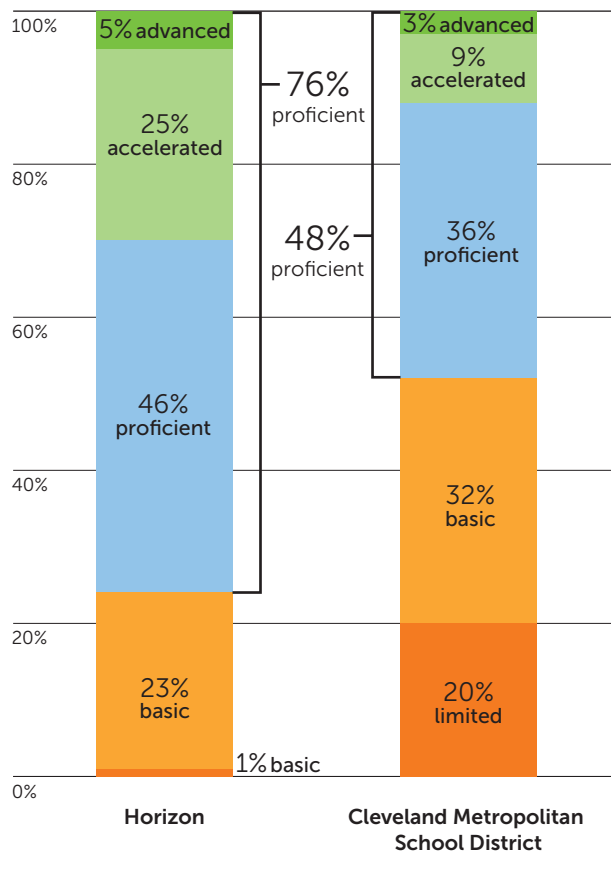
Seventh grader Selena shared that more than in her previous school, “students work really hard here, but the teachers really help us.” Essie Nash, a parent of an eighth grader, said, “I don't want my daughter coddled,” and appreciates that teachers have created

an excellent balance of being strict and demanding while also making it clear to students that the teachers really care about their success.

Proactive Approach

The relationship between home and school at Horizon begins with a home visit by teachers and administrators, to get to know the families and procure formal commitments to Horizon's program from both the parents and students. For parents, the commitment letter expresses their willingness to co-educate their children through a shared partnership. For instance, according to Executive Director Aydin Kara, if any student needs remediation to move the student to grade-level competency, parents must agree to after-school tutoring and Saturday school by signing an academic contract. Tonya Castleberry, parent of three Horizon students, shared, “the children are

Reading



Percent of students by reading proficiency level, 2008-09 (Horizon vs. district)

really challenged here,” and especially appreciates the mandatory after-school tutoring.

The school staff orients the Horizon parents with the school’s data network so they can monitor the daily progress of their children. Mr. Kara said that Concept Schools,¹³ the nonprofit charter management organization that runs all Horizon schools (they have 16 schools in operation statewide that collectively serve about 4,000 students), provides an online tool to make it easier for parents to follow their children’s academic progress. The data are used by teachers during their regular grade-level

meetings. As a result, there is much transparency at Horizon—both in terms of expectations and student achievement.

— “The kids here have a mission: to prepare for college.” – Aydin Kara, executive director

There is good reason for such transparency. Expectations for student achievement are high at Horizon. The school will not promote a student to the next grade if he or she fails one core subject for the year or fails to perform at grade level on the Ohio Achievement Test. Rather, they must repeat the grade entirely. While some parents protest, noted Mr. Kara, most understand that these expectations ultimately represent what is best for students, not adults.





Another unique feature of the Horizon experience is that all students study either Turkish or Spanish every year. Horizon’s founders are Turkish and numerous staff members are bilingual, so they support the language instruction provided to all students. During the summer, students studying Turkish are even offered the opportunity to travel to Turkey.

Secrets to Horizon’s Success

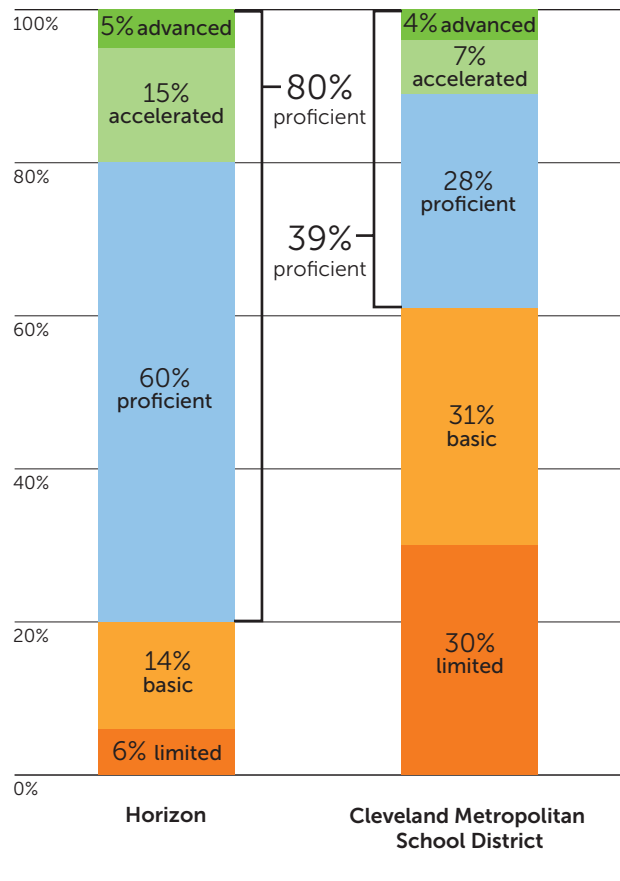
Horizon’s academic achievement shows on state achievement tests. Seventy-five percent of students scored proficient or better on the state’s reading tests, compared to the 48 percent of students in the Cleve-

Proactive policies centering on orientation, commitment letters, aggressive intervention requirements, and high expectations are recognized as the most effective combination to ensure that every student has the fullest opportunity to achieve academic success. As Mr. Kara said, “The kids here have a mission: to prepare for college.”

Reinforcing the Daily Curriculum

Horizon offers an extensive array of extracurricular activities that include a regional robotics competition. Students are offered an eclectic package of teacher-led field trips that include visits to the Rock & Roll and Pro Football Halls of Fame, as well as science and art museums, bowling outings, and an annual trip to Chicago. Eighth graders Brandon and Lamont described these field trips as a great way to bond and learn at the same time. Most impressive to the students are the participation and enthusiasm of their teachers in helping them to explore their city and region. “These opportunities are offered as rewards for good grades and behavior, so most of us try really hard to be included,” seventh grader Jahari said.

Math



Percent of students by math proficiency level, 2008-09 (Horizon vs. district)

land Metropolitan School District. More strikingly, 80 percent of Horizon students were proficient in math, compared to only 39 percent of district students.

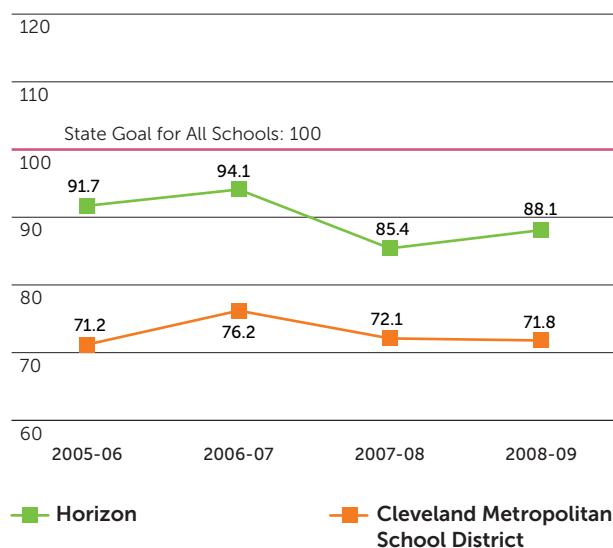
So just how does this middle school accomplish so much with relatively little in the way of resources and facility? Central to its success are the teachers and administrators. Much credit for the school’s annual growth goes to a core of five teachers that have been at the school since its founding in 2005. Despite little to no salary increases over the past three years, teachers say that what really motivates them is seeing the difference they are making in their students’ lives. Eighth-grade English teacher Ms. Kline explained, “We’re able to give these students a chance [at success].”

Teacher dedication combined with the no-frills, no-excuses approach helps students realize that their teachers really care about them—even if it does mean extra work and strict behavioral expectations. Tonya Castleberry said, “my two sons were bored at their previous school, yet got straight As,” but thanks to the demanding and dynamic teachers at Horizon, these young men have been challenged beyond what they had ever experienced.

—● *“We’re able to give these students a chance [at success].” – Ms. Kline, eighth-grade English teacher*

Preparation is a key to the school’s success. During the summer months all teachers report two to three weeks before students arrive for the new school year. They spend this time in professional development and departmental planning sessions. In order to stanch learning loss, the school offers math and science camps during holiday breaks and over the summer.

Performance Index



Performance index scores over time (Horizon vs. district)

Throughout the regular school year, each grade-level chair hosts weekly teacher meetings that are deemed so important that teachers seldom miss them. As teacher April Maimone says, “the continuity of the original core staff and the commitment of everyone to collaboratively maintain a culture of high expectations” is what sets Horizon apart from so many other schools. As classroom teachers, she and her colleagues appreciate the data that are constantly shared with them by the school’s director. The data provide insights into how she and others can adapt lessons to ensure students are grasping the appropriate concepts while also developing critical thinking skills.

Other practices that have contributed to the school’s success include: mandatory Ohio Achievement Test preparation sessions that are held from 8:00 a.m. until noon for eight Saturdays before the April tests, a “Hands to Themselves” disciplinary emphasis, and a high quality arts program.



King Elementary School

Akron, OH

Principal: **Mary Dean**
Superintendent: **David James**
School type: **District**
Grades served: **K-5**

- 377** Student enrollment
- 100.0*** Percent economically disadvantaged
- 39.9** Percent non-white
- 4.3** Percent of students with disabilities
- 28** Teachers' average years of experience
- \$69,612** Average teacher salary
- \$8,704** Total expenditure per pupil

King Elementary School, located on the west side of Akron, has a long history of academic success. It handily outperforms other schools in the Akron Public School district, with the vast majority of students scoring at or above the state proficiency bar of 75 percent. In 2009, 93 percent of King's students scored proficient or above in reading on state achievement tests, while 85 percent scored proficient in math. Compare that to the district's 2009 averages of 65 percent proficiency for reading, and 58 percent proficiency for math, and King's success becomes glaringly apparent.

King's historic brick building sits among some of the more affluent, even majestic, homes in the city. This might lead some to expect a group of similarly affluent students populating its class-

SOURCE FOR CHARTS: Ohio Department of Education interactive Local Report Card, 2008-09; reading and math calculations performed by Fordham Institute, see endnote 11.

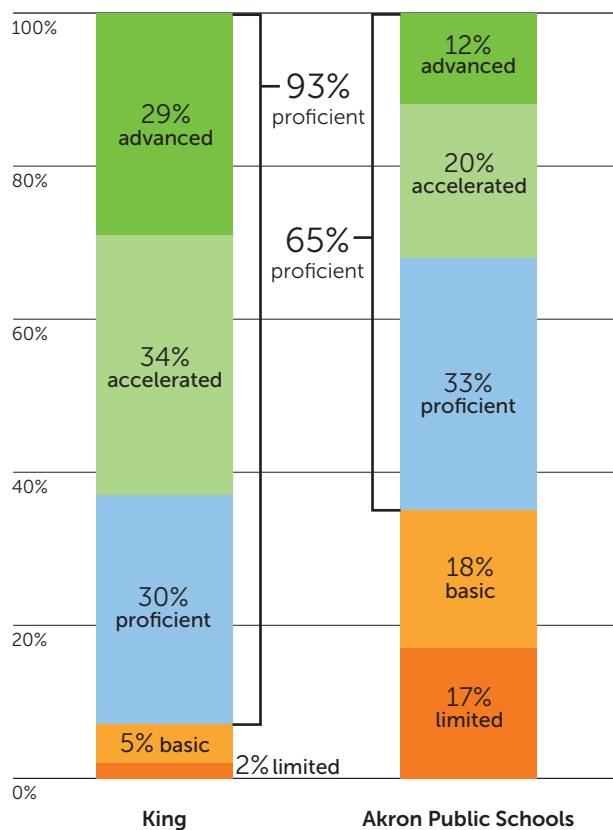
* See endnote 14.

rooms. Yet a closer look inside reveals that King is surprisingly diverse—almost half of its students (45 percent) enroll through the district-wide open enrollment policy. The result is a diverse population of students that defies the neighborhood school tradition. Even so, tradition is readily apparent at King. Though students hail from across the city, the staff and leadership have remained stable. Teacher turnover is very low.

“Like Family”

Talk to enough people about King and a common theme emerges: “It’s like family here.” In practical

Reading



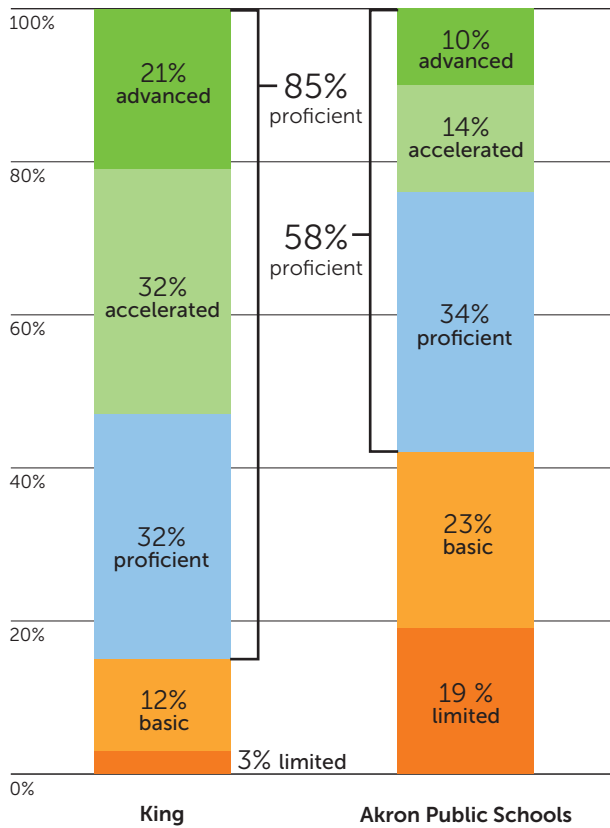
Percent of students by reading proficiency level, 2008-09 (King vs. district)



terms this means that the leadership and staff are united in purpose and unabashedly open about their desire to see all students succeed. “Students are successful when everyone’s on the same page,” explained Debbie Hendryx, who taught for 24 years at King and now is a regular substitute teacher. That goes for the school’s culture, too. When new students arrive at the school, they are assimilated quickly into its culture. And roughly half of all King’s fifth-grade students did not start at King in kindergarten. “Peer pressure here is a positive thing,” said first-grade teacher Laura Howard.

— “Students are successful when everyone’s on the same page.” - Debbie Hendryx, former teacher and current substitute teacher

Math



Percent of students by math proficiency level, 2008-09 (King vs. district)

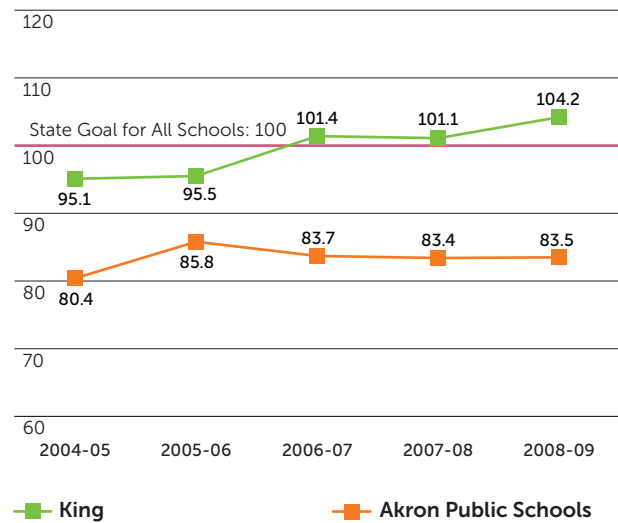
The same can be said for faculty. New teachers quickly realize that the expectations are high at King, but the leadership is extremely supportive of teachers and support staff. Principal Dean, who seems omnipresent to staff and students, provides regular feedback to teachers about what she's seen. "Ms. Dean is constantly in classrooms," said first-grade teacher Julie Buzzi, "and she works hard to build relationships." Another veteran teacher remarked, "[Principal Dean] is my colleague, not my boss." But Principal Dean explained that there is "a lot of pressure to do well [at King]...and that helps teachers work with students to perform."

Among the teachers, fourth- and fifth-grade teams are one example of collaboration at King. While teachers at many urban schools function as "independent contractors," King's team approach across grades provides time for collaboration among the math, reading, science, and social studies teachers.


Deeper Content Knowledge

An advantage of the team mindset is that the intermediate grades are structured so that teachers are able to focus on the grade-to-grade progress of both the curriculum and the students. In other words, fourth- and fifth-grade teachers "loop" with their students in the academic subjects. Principal Dean noted that this arrangement was a choice made jointly by the teachers and herself, and that the result has been greater ownership of subject-area knowledge.

Performance Index



Performance index scores over time (King vs. district)



—● *The move to departmentalize has allowed teachers to narrow their focus and develop expertise in their content areas.*

Fourth-grade math teacher James Adkins agreed. The move to departmentalize with Principal Dean’s support “has allowed us to narrow our focus and develop expertise in our content areas.” For Mr. Adkins, that means delving deeper into the state standards and creating lessons that bridge the often considerable gap between what the standards expect and what most textbooks provide. Fourth- and fifth-grade science teacher Deb Deidrick echoed this, adding that it allowed her to turn her initial strengths in science into real expertise.

For students, the benefit of teachers’ increased subject-area expertise is instruction that is both engaging and relevant. For instance, the school’s PTA president Valerie Stutler noted that her daughter, a fourth grader, had been playing a game of “Life” that asks students to use math in a real-world context. “For her, that makes the class so much more interesting,” she added. Likewise, Ms. Deidrick has incorporated hand-held computers into her science class. Her fifth graders use technology to learn about and chart the different phases of the moon. In both cases, the teachers’ subject-matter knowledge enabled them to offer students another “way in” to the content that was both challenging and engaging.



Louisa May Alcott Elementary School

Cleveland, OH

Principal: **Eileen Mangan Stull**
 Superintendent: **Eugene Sanders**
 School type: **District**
 Grades served: **K-5**

236	Student enrollment
100.0	Percent economically disadvantaged
55.8	Percent non-white
34.3	Percent of students with disabilities
16	Teachers' average years of experience
\$70,036	Average teacher salary
\$12,980	Total expenditure per pupil

When educators hear the word *collaboration*, they immediately think of lesson-sharing, open discussions about curriculum and instruction, and (if optimistic) a common educational vision that their colleagues embrace. Yet at Louisa May Alcott Elementary in Cleveland, one only has to observe the school's approach to reading instruction to realize that here, collaboration goes at least one step beyond the pale.

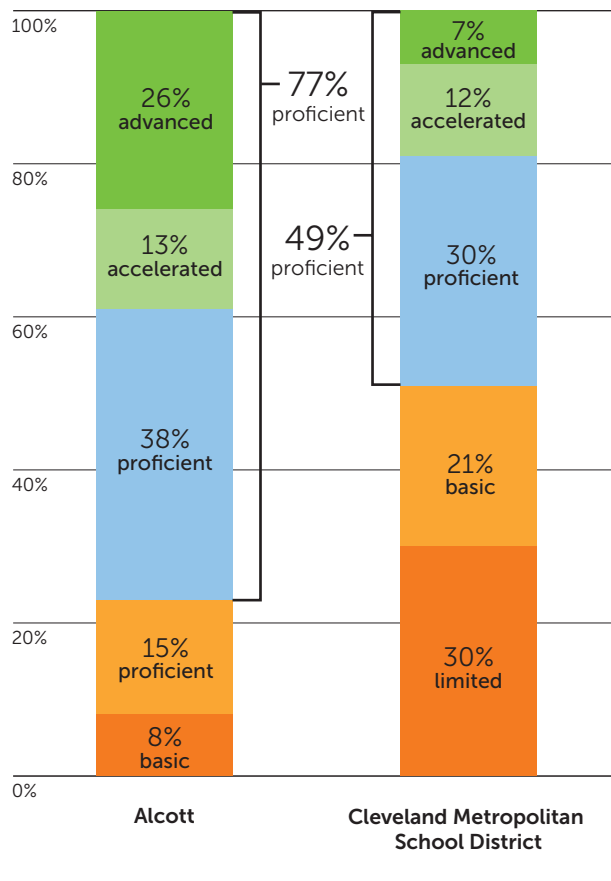
Alcott teachers use the Direct Instruction (DI) reading program, a curriculum that groups students by reading ability and then provides consistent, highly scripted lessons for systematically improving reading skills and comprehension. During Direct Instruction time, teachers and instructional aides fan out amongst small groups

SOURCE FOR CHARTS: Ohio Department of Education interactive Local Report Card, 2008-09; reading and math calculations performed by Fordham Institute, see endnote 11.

of students (who are assigned to groups according to their reading progress) and lead them through the prescribed lessons. Hallways, conference rooms, classrooms, and any other available space become havens for these flexible reading groups. Each teacher and aide is assigned a reading group, sometimes made up of students from different grade levels. For the block of time allotted to DI, the school's faculty is united both within and across grade levels to ensure the program's effectiveness.

This level of teamwork—as well as the shared vision that accompanies it—has paid dividends in terms of student achievement. Alcott's scores on the Ohio

Reading



Percent of students by reading proficiency level, 2008-09 (Alcott vs. district)



Achievement Tests far outpace the Cleveland Metropolitan Schools average—by double-digit percentage points. On the 2009 tests, 77 percent of Alcott's students were proficient in reading and 75 percent in math, compared to the district averages of 49 percent in reading and 41 percent in math. Principal Eileen Mangan Stull credits the hard work of the staff for the success. "These teachers don't sit down—they're constantly working."

An Evolution

Alcott occupies an historic building on the west side of Cleveland near Lake Erie. Though it has existed since the 1920s, the school's current configuration dates back to 1997 (Alcott housed a vocational center for many years). Many of the staff members have worked at Alcott since the school's reopening, and remember that its success wasn't immediate.



—● *“Once the school got a taste of success, we wanted more.” – Ryan Head, fourth- and fifth-grade math teacher*

“It took a good two to three years before we saw it [success],” noted Ryan Head, a fourth- and fifth-grade math teacher. According to Mr. Head and other original staff members, Alcott’s first principal (Principal Stull is only the second) tightly managed the staff—and was exacting about curriculum choices and instruction. The school employed Direct Instruction for reading and the equally prescriptive Saxon Math. “We needed that structure and toughness at first,” said Head. “Once the school got a taste of success, we wanted more.”

Alcott’s story, like that of several other schools profiled in this report, supports the notion that success breeds success. When Alcott’s first principal retired and Ms. Stull took over, the school’s environment evolved. The intense, early management was no longer necessary as staff members had progressed professionally, turnover remained low, and the positive yet demanding culture was firmly established. Principal Stull allowed the staff to develop curriculum pieces on their own. Saxon Math was later replaced by a blend of materials that focused on higher-order problem solving skills as well as the basics.

Yet the high academic expectations for students and the expectations for staff collaboration remained. In terms of academic achievement, Principal Stull noted

the school's goal to raise its Performance Index from 95.1 to 102.2 – an increase that would also earn the school an “Excellent” rating under the state’s accountability system (of 144 schools in Cleveland, only nine have an “Excellent” rating). As for collaboration, all of the staff interviewed remarked on the continuous dialogue regarding instruction that takes place at Alcott. Principal Stull has an “open door” policy and works hard to create consensus about major decisions at the school. The district’s regional superintendent for Alcott, Cliff Hayes, Jr., described the school as having adopted a “culture of ‘we.’”

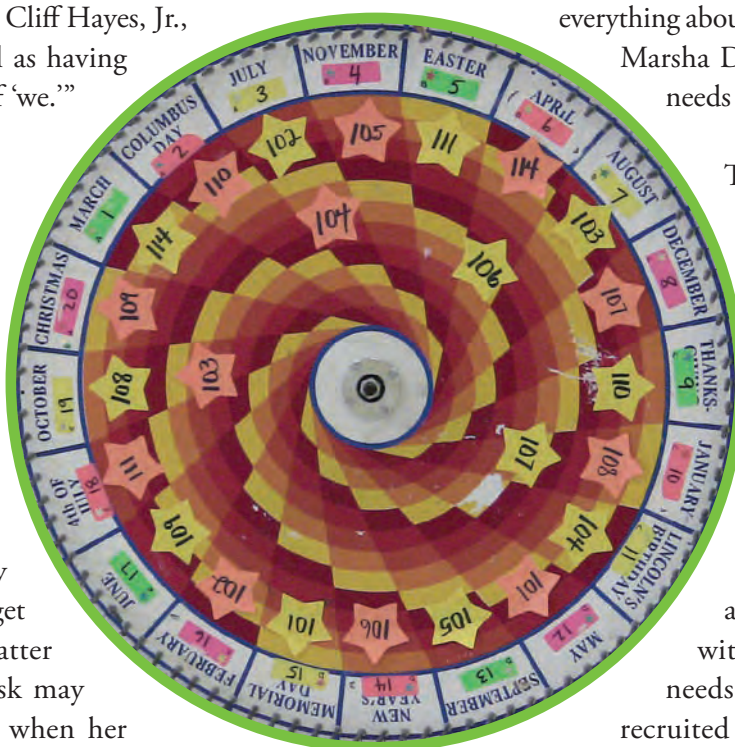
Leading by Example

It doesn’t take long to see what a critical factor leadership plays at Alcott. A former Catholic school leader, Principal Stull exudes both a positive energy and a willingness to get things done no matter how difficult the task may seem. For instance, when her staff needed updated (and expensive) Direct Instruction materials outside her budget, Principal Stull recognized the staff’s investment in the program and negotiated a deal with the publisher to obtain the materials. That deal even included her traveling across the state to pick up the materials, in order to save shipping costs.

Similarly, it is likely that parents of students with attendance issues will find Principal Stull at the door of their house or apartment. She has been known to go and pick up absent students for school herself.

Neighborhood families (Alcott enrolls a mix of intra-district choice and neighborhood students) will also get a visit from Principal Stull—just to touch base and build those ever-important relationships. And more than a couple of parents interviewed marveled at her knowledge of and care for the students.

“This principal pulls kids aside if they’re not having a good day,” remarked Maurice Sledge, a father of triplets attending Alcott. “Ms. Stull knows everything about every student,” added Marsha Dumas, Alcott’s special needs bus driver.



The results of this type of proactive leadership are twofold. First, Alcott benefits from high levels of parental and community engagement, and second, the efforts of staff members are simultaneously recognized and encouraged. To help students with additional reading needs, Principal Stull has recruited several retired nuns, who meet one-on-one with targeted children. Parents, too, are present and welcomed at Alcott—whether they are talking with staff or helping with the morning assembly. As for staff, instructional aide Gail Anderson perhaps stated it best: “We all work as a team in this building. If we see a child who needs help, we help her.”

Special Needs at Alcott

One component of the federal No Child Left Behind Act insists that schools be held accountable for the



achievement of special needs students. Thus, it's not unusual for many educators to view these students as a liability when it comes to school performance. Such educators would not fare well at Alcott, where one-third of students (34 percent) have a disability. Yet Alcott's faculty and staff are emphatic that a student's special needs are just that, and not an excuse for low expectations. Driving this point home is the incredible success Alcott has in educating its special needs students. In 2009, 59 percent of students with disabilities at Alcott achieved proficiency in reading and 54 percent in math on the state tests. In comparison, just 23 percent of district students with disabilities were proficient in reading, and only 19 percent were proficient in math.

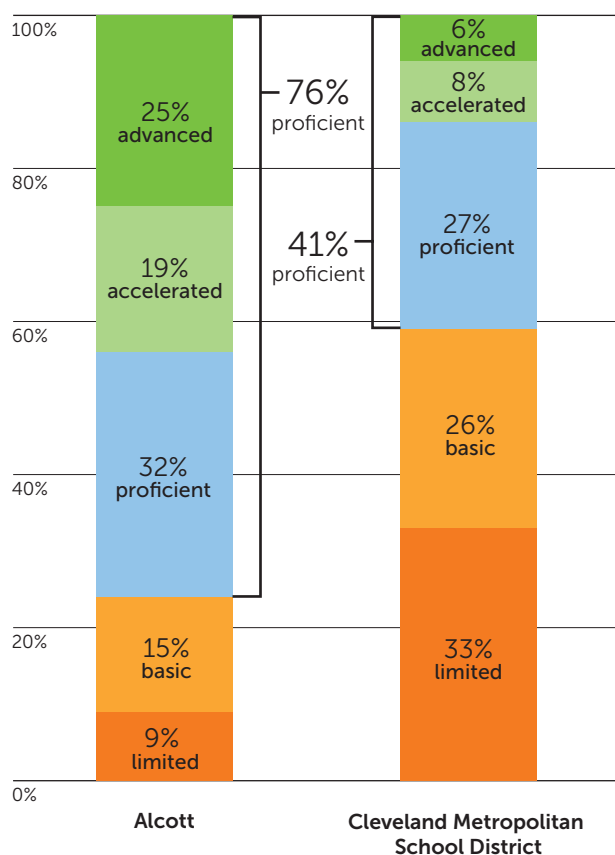
The large population of special needs students at Alcott plays an important role in focusing the faculty's efforts to deliver individualized instruction. Most special needs students attend inclusion classrooms,

which are staffed with an inclusion teacher to help the traditional subject area teachers. The emphasis on small group work helps both the regular and special education teachers attend to all students. "In this setting, you can barely even tell who the special needs students are," Principal Stull pointed out during a class visit.

— *"In this setting, you can barely even tell who the special needs students are." – Principal Eileen Stull*

Parents of special needs students at Alcott can attest to the school's success in educating their children. Lisa and Tom Teti, whose son is a second grader, cited the learning environment and constant communication with teachers as two factors that set Alcott apart from other schools. Principal Stull was another. "I feel like I could trust Eileen with anything," said Lisa

Math



Percent of students by math proficiency level, 2008-09 (Alcott vs. district)

Teti. During the interview with the Tetis, Principal Stull burst in and called everyone into the hallway: a boy with severe disabilities at the school was walking in a gait for the first time with the help of a physical therapist. Lisa Teti smiled and added, “That’s what makes this school special.”

Low-Income, Not Inner-City

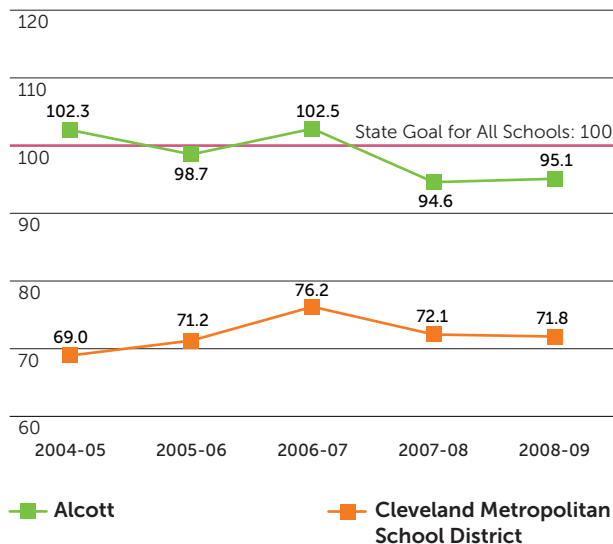
Like the other schools profiled in this report, Louisa May Alcott educates predominantly low-income students (in 2009, 100 percent of its student population was “economically disadvantaged”), a fact that makes it all the more impressive. Alcott is not what one would

describe as an “inner-city” school. The neighborhood in which it is located isn’t completely impoverished. Some parents are homeowners, most hold jobs.

However, the challenges students bring to Alcott are no less difficult to tackle than at other urban schools. Many students bring problems from home, arrive behind grade level academically, and enroll lacking basic social or emotional coping skills. However, the strength of the school’s culture—along with a core of stable students and faculty—enable new students to be quickly assimilated into the routines and way of life at the school. As more than a few teachers noted, newly enrolled or transfer students who misbehave are quickly corrected by both teachers and students. Achievement, respect, and self-discipline are the standards, not aspirations.

Chantelle, a fourth grader who recently transferred from another local school, explained it this way: “There was too much talking [at my old school]. This school is more educational.”

Performance Index



Performance index scores over time (Alcott vs. district)



McGregor Elementary School

Canton, OH

Principal: **Victor Johnson**

Superintendent: **Michele Evans**

School type: **District**

Grades served: **K-6, pre-k**

372 Student enrollment

90.2 Percent economically disadvantaged

26.2 Percent non-white

14.9 Percent of students with disabilities

16 Teachers' average years of experience

\$60,917 Average teacher salary

\$10,204 Total expenditure per pupil

“There’s no school like McGregor.”

McGregor Elementary occupies one block in southwest Canton, in a mostly working-class neighborhood with small houses and neat yards overshadowed by the nearby Timken plant. Each day during the morning drop-off, the new, dusty-brown brick school opens its doors to students and parents alike. Indeed, the morning ritual is best described as a bit of ordered chaos. Students are escorted by their parents through the double-door entrance and immediately met with streams of people—staff members welcoming families, other parents catching up with each other, and kids heading toward the gymnasium before being dismissed to their classrooms.

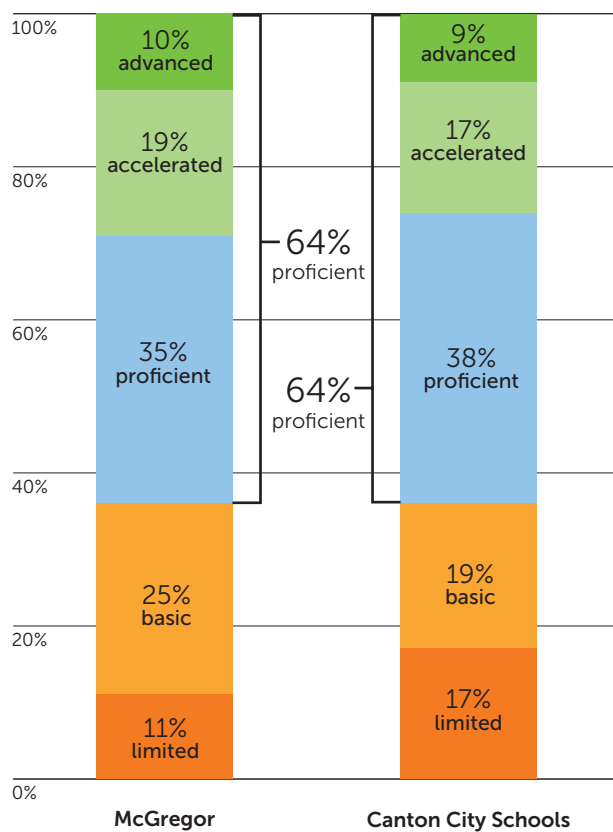
SOURCE FOR CHARTS: Ohio Department of Education interactive Local Report Card, 2008-09; reading and math calculations performed by Fordham Institute, see endnote 11.

While not exactly orderly, there was no threat of *disorder* in the scene. In fact, amidst the throng of people it was clear this sight was unusual for an urban school educating over 90 percent low-income students. Most parents drop students off inside the building. Adults aren't dour or quiet—they talk and laugh with the staff members and each other. And teachers use this casual atmosphere to chat with parents about their children.

Darting in and out of the front doors and working the crowd is Victor Johnson, the 16-year veteran principal who has spent 13 of those years at McGregor. Principal Johnson moves quickly through



Reading



Percent of students by reading proficiency level, 2008-09 (McGregor vs. district)

the mass of parents and students—directing some, greeting most, and smiling at everyone. He knows these parents. And they know him.

Of the schools visited for this report, McGregor is closest to being a “neighborhood” school. That’s part of what accounts for the family atmosphere and comfort parents feel within its walls. Some parents are even proud alumni of McGregor. The history and level of stability at McGregor clearly help parents and faculty alike feel they are part of something special. Principal Johnson and his staff go to great lengths to make parents and students feel welcome. (Parents explained how other schools would only allow them to drop off or pick up their children outside the building or curbside.) Besides, a growing number of McGregor students come from outside the neighborhood. Like



most of Ohio’s urban school districts, Canton City allows parents to choose their preferred school.

—● *“If I didn’t have McGregor, I’d be home-schooling my son.” – Francis Thomas, parent*

According to Principal Johnson, the open atmosphere at McGregor is all part of relationship-building (a common theme in Needles schools). “We want folks to know that we believe in their kids.”

Parents seem to notice this, too. Francis Thomas, father of a third grader, noted his confidence in the staff: “They let me know if there’s a problem... and the staff always treats you with respect. If I didn’t have McGregor, I’d be home-schooling my son.” Such sentiment was echoed by Tony Lackey, a parent of three McGregor students. “Academics are no-nonsense,” he

said. “And Mr. Johnson and staff do a lot to make you feel welcome. There’s no school like McGregor.”

Parents aren’t the only ones that notice the different environment at McGregor. Dr. Michele Evans, Canton City’s superintendent, remarked that McGregor doesn’t have any of the typical traits of an urban school. “It feels like a more affluent suburban school. The staff members enjoy the kids and each other—and the kids enjoy being at school.”

“You don’t want to let your teammates down.”

Good feelings aside, McGregor’s success stems from a relentless drive to improve. A case in point is the school’s approach to early reading. Led by intervention coach Annie Arvidson, who is in many ways a de facto co-leader at McGregor, the reading initiative targets all students in kindergarten through third

grade, and select students in grades four through six. Using handheld computers and the DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) assessment, Ms. Arvidson and her staff periodically descend upon classrooms to assess students, collect data, and monitor progress. Data gleaned from the sweeps are then crunched and individual students' progress charted and categorized for different levels of intervention.

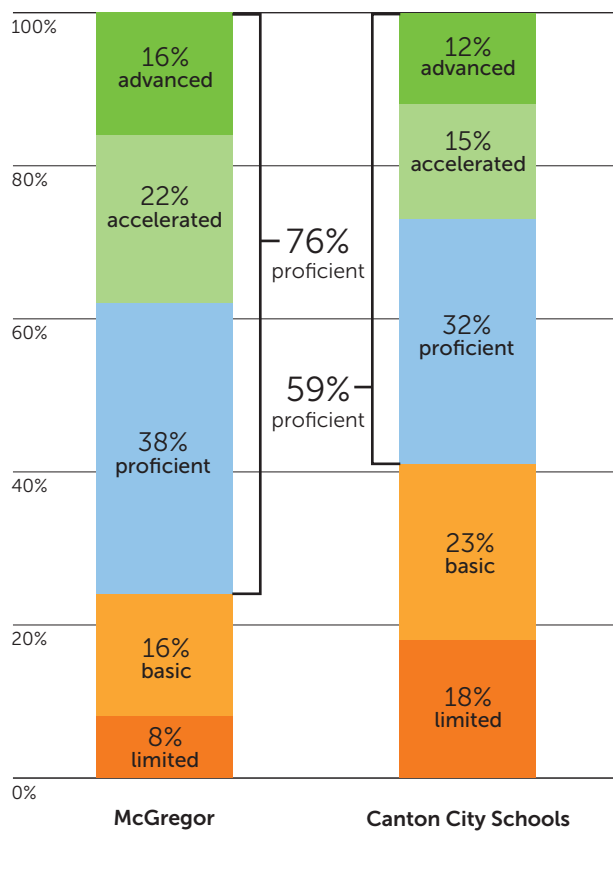
—● *McGregor's success stems from a relentless drive to improve.*

From there, it's a team effort to improve students' reading. Grade-level teachers meet with the Title I team during a weekly 80-minute collaboration session. Using these data, together they discuss individual student needs, brainstorm strategies and interventions, and revisit the data to create reading groups based on student progress. (Title I teachers go back into classrooms to assist in guiding these groups.) "We focus on all students this way, not just struggling readers," Ms. Arvidson said.

It is this comprehensive approach at the lower levels that helps students prepare for the more difficult work at the intermediate level (grades four through six). There, teachers work in pairs (one math/science and one reading/social studies) to provide students with consistent expectations across classes and individualized instruction that meets their needs. Meanwhile, Annie and her Title I team also provide interventions for any struggling intermediate level readers.

The curriculum is not necessarily unique, nor is weekly collaborative time. In fact, they are the same across the district. But more than a few staff members agreed that these just really work better at McGregor. Principal Johnson credits Annie and the teachers. "[They] go above and beyond their assigned duties," Principal

Math



Percent of students by math proficiency level, 2008-09 (McGregor vs. district)

Johnson said. "I ask a lot of them and they rarely ever say 'no.'" When asked about the time and hard work they put in, teachers agreed. But no one seemed to think it was too much. In fact, most cited the needs of their students and the dedication of their colleagues. "You don't want to let your teammates down," explained Barb Jialanella, a first-grade teacher.

That sentiment was shared by most of the teachers at McGregor. And Principal Johnson noted that it helps to maintain a positive school culture. To be sure, he hires selectively to create a core of strong faculty, but he also relies on the school culture to help folks along. The expectations are clearly high for



everyone. “You need the right people,” he explained. “Once you get a majority, those people who aren’t [right] become outcast.” The school’s faculty and staff take ownership of the expectations placed on both students and those who work at McGregor.

It is attitudes such as these that contribute to McGregor’s academic success. While educating a high percentage of disadvantaged students, McGregor is able to keep pace with or exceed the district’s test scores. For example, on the 2009 Ohio Achievement Test, 76 percent of McGregor students were proficient in mathematics, while the Canton City Schools average was 59 percent.

“We’re problem solvers here.”

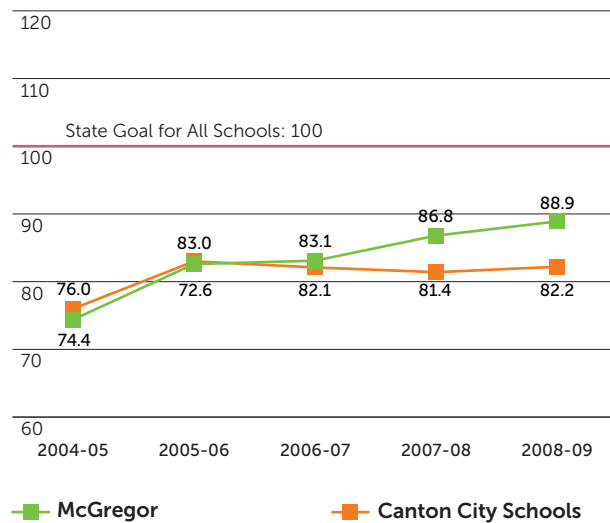
Principal Johnson often compares relationships at McGregor to a marriage. Deninne Cap-Brown, a fifth-grade reading/social studies teacher, echoed that metaphor. Teaching with her math/science partner lets “students see a mutually supportive team in

action.” It models how students will need to collaborate and cooperate in order to be successful in school and beyond.

These relationships are a critical element in the chemistry at McGregor. Certainly, they foster collective ownership of the students and the school’s broader mission. Yet strong relationships among the staff members also facilitate risk-taking and innovation. “We have the ability to try new things—to experiment,” fourth-grade teacher Michele Milano said. Call it the freedom to innovate, or as many teachers said, “the freedom to teach.” In either case, it really amounts to articulating expectations clearly, and then being flexible in how people meet them.

The expectations, though established in part by the state, also take the form of individual student data profiles. Teachers and students chart goals and progress together. “The bar is set,” explained one teacher. “How you get students to meet it doesn’t matter.” Talking to staff members, the approach to every new

Performance Index



Performance index scores over time (McGregor vs. district)

venture is open and positive. At McGregor, it seems that the risks come not in trying and failing, but in failing to innovate. As Ms. Arvidson said more than once, “We’re problem solvers here.”

Breaking It Down

Discipline at McGregor—as in most of the Needles schools—consists of both positive incentives coupled with clear consequences for infractions. Students earn privileges for good behavior and work habits. For instance, the sixth graders took a ski trip to Mansfield, Ohio as a reward for good behavior. For most, it was their first experience skiing. Yet there were also students who did not go on the trip. They had to stay behind and complete school work instead. Samia, a sixth grader at McGregor, put it this way: “They [the teachers] lay down the law.”

—● *“We don’t look at the kids as disadvantaged. They’re just our kids.” - Barb Jialanella, first-grade teacher*

Yet students were also quick to highlight the support they’ve received from McGregor staff. Allison, a fifth grader, described teachers at the school as easy to talk to and always willing to help. Madyson, a fourth grader who has attended McGregor since kindergarten, said she liked the school because the teachers “help you understand things when you need help.” And almost in the same breath that Samia talked about the law, she was quick to observe that teachers at the school “help you with your work...breaking it down so you can understand.”

Teachers caring for students is not the exception, but rather the rule. What seems to make a difference at McGregor (as opposed to many other schools educating similar students) is that teachers not only care for their students, but also refuse to make excuses for them.

“We don’t look at the kids as disadvantaged,” first-grade teacher Barb Jialanella said. “They’re just our kids.”

Lack of “Churn”

It is common in many large district schools for principals to move frequently—particularly those who have been successful. The logic behind such moves is that the most able principals should be matched with the most challenging schools. In other instances, successful principals are quickly snatched up by the district’s central office for broader administrative duties. McGregor’s success calls these practices into question. After all, based on the findings in this report, leadership is but one component of terrific schools.

An equally important component is stability; particularly for folks in the business of relationship-building. Principal Johnson has been at McGregor for 13 years, which is a long time for an urban principal to stay in one building. He contrasted his tenure with another, more troubled school in Canton City that has had four principals in five years. With that level of administrative “churn,” he said, it’s hard to develop a good team and a common culture.

Canton City’s superintendent, Dr. Michele Evans, agreed. “Administrative churn is hurting schools. We know that,” she said. Dr. Evans cited McGregor’s stable staff and leadership as one reason the district is making a commitment to building and maintaining successful teams in schools. “We want to give building leaders the charge and support to grow.”

At McGregor, this charge is carried every day. “Annie and Vic [Principal Johnson] are united in a core set of beliefs,” said Dr. Evans. And the teachers and students embody those beliefs—namely that kids at McGregor will achieve and that the school will continue to improve. As fourth-grade teacher Sharon O’Donnell said, “Everyone believes that these kids can do it.”



Valleyview Elementary School

Columbus, OH

Principal: **Dewayne Davis**

Superintendent: **Gene Harris**

School type: **District**

Grades served: **K-5**

364 Student enrollment

86.3 Percent economically disadvantaged

33.1 Percent non-white

5.1 Percent Limited English Proficient

11.3 Percent of students with disabilities

14 Teachers' average years of experience

\$65,302 Average teacher salary

\$10,159 Total expenditure per pupil

Maxim: The Five "Bs"

Valleyview Elementary's nondescript and tired facility, encased by numerous modular units, hides a culture of high expectations for students and teachers alike. The school gets its name from the community on the near west side of downtown Columbus where it is located. The school benefits from the presence of a core of families that reside in the neighborhood surrounding the school and enjoy the opportunity to have their children enrolled at Valleyview.

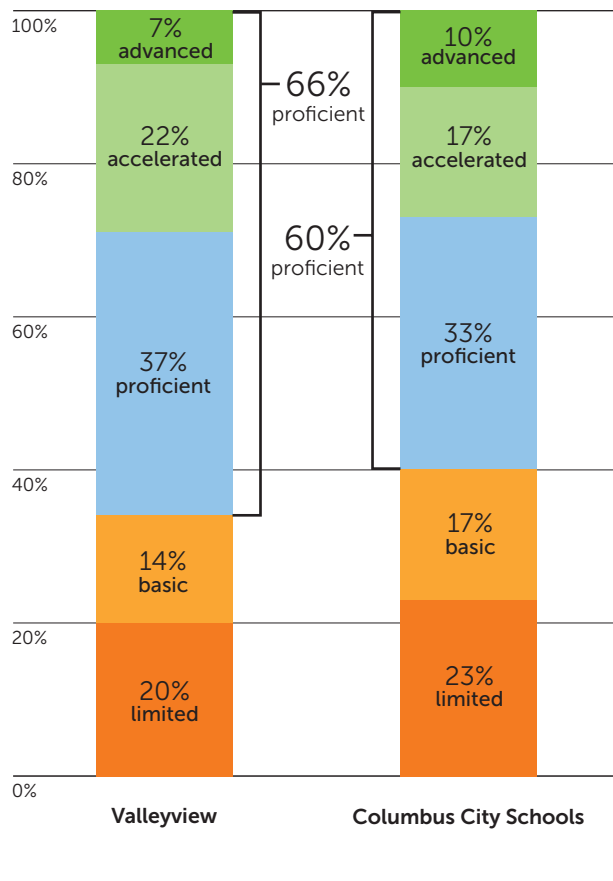
Permeating the school's routines and daily activity is the school's mantra, known as the "five Bs," which was displayed on posters throughout the school:

BE: here, responsible, respectful, focused, and caring

SOURCE FOR CHARTS: Ohio Department of Education interactive Local Report Card, 2008-09; reading and math calculations performed by Fordham Institute, see endnote 11.

There was plenty of evidence that these “Bs” are alive and well at Valleyview. An up-and-coming, first-time principal named Dewayne Davis leads the school, bolstered by parent “consultants,” whose daily presence provides a positive ethos for staff and students alike. A tight-knit faculty teaches more than 350 students who are making steady academic progress. Eighty-six percent of Valleyview students are economically disadvantaged, but as in all Needles schools, this does not prevent them from achieving far above their peers. Sixty-six percent of Valleyview students achieved proficiency in reading that year, while 72 percent did so in math. This compares to

Reading



Percent of students by reading proficiency level, 2008-09 (Valleyview vs. district)



60 percent of district students scoring proficient in reading in 2009, and 58 percent scoring proficient in math.

Struggling through a period marked by a revolving door of principals—five in six years—Mr. Davis arrived four years ago fresh from participation in the Columbus City Schools’ principal internship program. Although he was prepared informally by his mother’s example of serving as a school administrator, Davis clearly had no honeymoon period, because the staff had deteriorated into exclusive cliques that frequently butted heads with each other. Some teachers preferred being independent while others sought extensive partnerships. Thankfully, parents and teachers say, Mr. Davis has been able to affect a growing core group of teachers for whom teamwork and the kids’ best interests combine to make a powerful influence on the daily school culture.



So how did such a transformation of faculty occur these past four years? The short answer is by raising expectations for teachers. Some teachers who did not want to work in the more rigorous environment created by Mr. Davis left. These vacancies provided an opportunity for him and his leadership team to interview and hire replacements that were receptive to the culture of high expectations they were building. In addition, Mr. Davis hosted a summer retreat to help build staff cohesion. He gave teachers more authority to determine how to most effectively teach their students. An extensive discipline program has helped to create an environment in which teachers can prepare effective lessons. The resulting school culture of camaraderie, respect, and high expectations has turned a troubled school into one on the rise.

Of Purple Lines, Stars, and Valleyview Bucks

Discipline is one element of Valleyview that Mr. Davis scrutinizes. Essential to the school-wide discipline policy is an extensive reward system for students “caught being good.” Students earn “bucks” that can be cashed in at the school’s “store” to purchase school supplies. In addition, stars are coveted rewards for good group behavior that, once amassed, will turn into the “price” of admission to pizza and popcorn parties and can earn students monthly recognition.

The most visible strategy addressing student behavior is the narrow purple lines on the hallway floors intended to guide students to pass through in an

orderly fashion. This hallway order is reinforced by a staff-wide emphasis on curbing students' inappropriate language, ensuring that children keep their hands to themselves, and paying attention to practices that ensure a safe and orderly environment. Indeed, staying on the purple lines is symbolic of the broader focus on positive behavior at Valleyview.

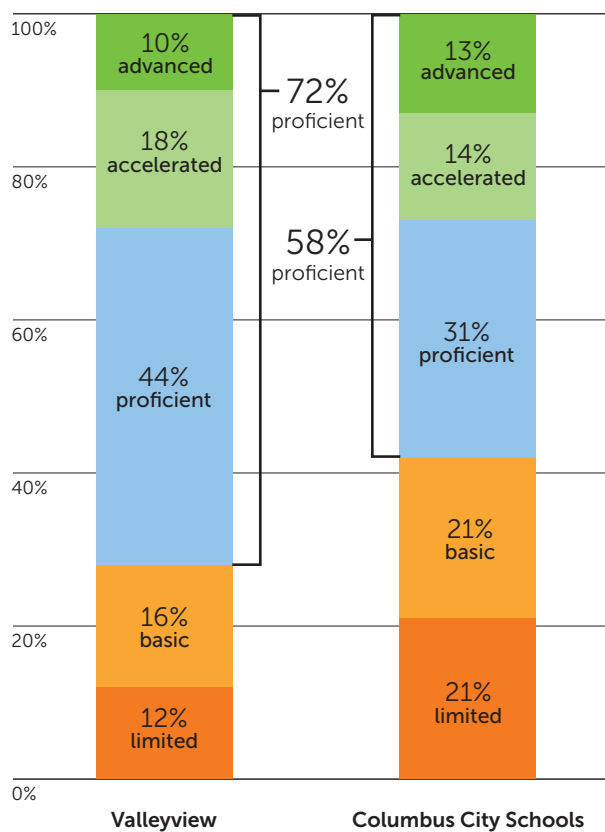
—● *The goal to raise student scores well beyond the minimal passage rate for each subject tested explains why the staff has agreed to use differentiated instruction.*

This emphasis on a consistent standard of behavior is especially necessary considering that while many students hail from the Valleyview neighborhood, a significant number of students travel to the school each day from across the district. Much like the comprehensive effort to transform the staff into a highly effective team, the geographic and ethnic variety of students requires very structured, unrelenting standards for student interaction.

Current Results Aren't Enough

Given that Valleyview is on a very short list of Ohio's schools included in this study, one would think that teachers would be satisfied with a job well done in recent years and rest on their laurels. According to students who were asked what they would change if they were "Principal for a Day," it is no surprise that fifth grader Juliana said, "I don't think the school can get better than it already is. It's a great place to go to school." Others nodded in agreement. Yet that is not what the school's teachers and administrators say. Their goal is to raise student scores well beyond the minimal passage rate for each subject tested, which explains why the staff has agreed to use differentiated instruction more thoroughly this year. In their

Math



Percent of students by math proficiency level, 2008-09 (Valleyview vs. district)

classrooms the teachers are unrelenting in focus and lose very little time in instructional transitions.

Looming Challenges

Teachers described a primary concern that as the district closes nine more schools, students will be redistributed among those left open. News of the school closures broke on the front page of *The Columbus Dispatch*¹⁵ on the first day of our visit. Because Valleyview is already considered overcrowded and the district wants to cut costs by eliminating its modular units, it is likely that about 50 Valleyview students will be sent to other schools in the 2010-11 school year.



Valleyview has less student churn than other district schools, and teachers are reluctant to see such a large number of students leave as they have built strong working relationships with them and their families. Some teachers expressed the concern that they themselves will be reassigned to other schools as well.

Another concern for faculty at Valleyview is that their effective approach to discipline is being undermined by the growing number of parents that seek intervention from the district office when they don't agree with the school's strict discipline policies. Teachers are noticing that it is taking much longer to remove a student from the classroom for chronically disrupting their lessons.

Ms. Ortega, the school's part-time counselor, shared another prominent concern. She noted that the more families she gets to know, the more time it takes to connect them with appropriate social services. While she made clear that this additional workload is a posi-

tive result of the school's ability to engage parents, there is pressure to extend her time at the school while current budget constraints prevent that commitment from being made.

“Never Seen a School Like This”

The unique nature of Valleyview's growing success is not lost on parents. Parents Tina Wharton and Enrique Deckard (who have three students at the school) said they've never seen a school like it, or had a principal like Mr. Davis. They said everyone is a part of each other's lives at the school. Their perspective is particularly important because they have six children attending three different schools, including one child with special needs. Asked about whether such success could be reproduced elsewhere, they expressed doubts that Valleyview is easily replicable. Responses from other parents centered on wondering whether additional schools could be staffed with Valleyview-like teachers, all of whom embrace teamwork and encourage parental involvement.

—● *“Valleyview is a place where teachers and families want to come and very few ever want to leave.” – Stephanie Kidwell, parent consultant*

Teachers' attitudes on this issue varied. One teacher posited that due to the effects of intensifying poverty on their current students and families, Valleyview is constantly reinventing itself. Thus, in a way, it is already “replicating” what has worked there in order to meet the growing challenges facing its students. Yet she underscored just how important it is for staff to partner in these efforts.

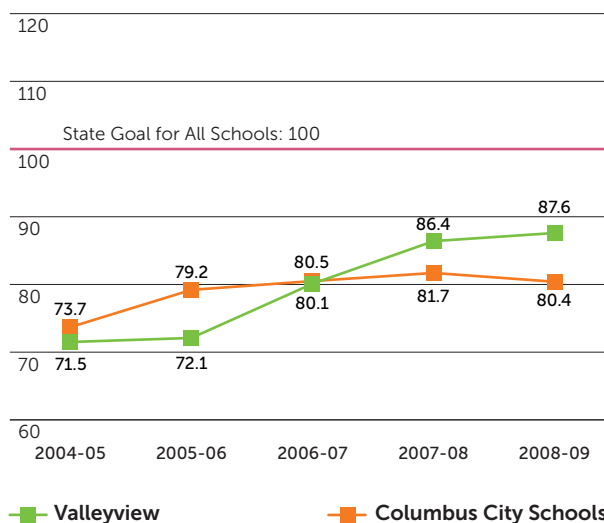
Music teacher Jennifer Cooper confirmed the latter sentiment. She works at four schools each week,

including Valleyview. Ms. Cooper appreciated that she was immediately accepted and welcomed by its staff. Unfortunately, several experiences elsewhere have not proved to be as positive. She described some schools where the “adults are constantly at each others’ throats and also contending with serious student behavior issues.” She insisted the success at Valleyview could be replicated but it would require “formation of a strong core of teachers willing to go above and beyond to establish order, respectful relationships, and enough parent involvement to make it work.”

Making a Difference in Students’ Lives Every Day

As in the other Needles schools, the Valleyview staff members genuinely enjoy their work. Apryll Schweitzer, an office assistant who provides a myriad of administrative support functions, said that you can tell that its staff is “making a little bit of difference in the lives of our students every day and it makes you feel good.” One of the parent consultants, Stephanie Kidwell, said that “Valleyview is a place where teachers and families want to come and very few ever want to leave.” She added that even though most parent events at the school are well attended, the staff is not satisfied and works on strategies in hopes of attracting even more parents. The successful expansion of

Performance Index



Performance index scores over time (Valleyview vs. district)

parent events at Valleyview has been fostered by both the principal and staff. This, she noted, is not always the case at other schools.

Regardless of the significant challenges ahead for schools like Valleyview, the staff at this school is resolved to uphold their keys to success—teamwork, parent involvement, and high expectations for student achievement and behavior.

afterword:

WHAT POLICY LESSONS CAN OHIO LEARN FROM THE NEEDLES SCHOOLS?

THESE SCHOOLS DEMONSTRATE THAT ALL CHILDREN, NO MATTER HOW DISADVANTAGED, CAN LEARN IF THEY ATTEND SCHOOLS THAT FOCUS RELENTLESSLY ON STUDENT SUCCESS, HIRE AND RETAIN GREAT TEACHERS, AND ARE RUN BY LEADERS WHO KNOW HOW TO BUILD AND PROTECT SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL CULTURES.

Unfortunately, America has far too few (and Ohio far fewer) great urban schools—schools that do a solid job of educating disadvantaged students to high levels of achievement year-in and year-out. Everyone agrees that the country and its children would be much better off if we had more such schools. Therefore, it is important to discern what we can learn from Needles schools that may have actionable implications for education policy in the Buckeye State and beyond.

We recognize that implementing the policy lessons that we have distilled from our study is fraught with challenges. Controversy always accompanies recommendations to widen school-choice options, alter traditional leadership training programs, redesign school funding, or exempt schools from laws, regulations, and contract provisions. Pushback will also greet proposals to rely less on traditional education schools, to disempower district bureaucracies (in order to empower school leaders), and to alter Human Resources shibboleths such as seniority preference.

Yet these struggles must be confronted, for they can help create the conditions for more Needles-like schools.

We have already described 10 key traits of Needles schools that seem to be keys to their educational

success. These are no smorgasbord, however, from which to take a taste of this and a bite of that. The most important thing we learned about Needles schools is that *all of them do all of these things* in an integrated fashion. What they produce is more like a single complex dish than an assortment of ingredients. That doesn't mean the schools are identical. Each cooks from its own recipe and creates its own distinctive flavor. But every one of them incorporates all 10 of the ingredients (except, of course, for the two non-union schools that aren't relevant to finding 10).

—● *Precisely because Needles schools do not follow the exact same recipe, district leadership and policymakers should not try to clone them.*

Precisely because Needles schools do not follow the exact same recipe, district leadership and policymakers should not try to clone them. Rather, state and local policymakers should embrace policies that create the conditions in which more such schools can develop and thrive. But that won't happen by following just one or two of the six policy lessons that follow, for the truth is that all of these conditions are essential. The lessons are inextricably entwined, meaning that if Ohio wants more such schools to serve its neediest youngsters successfully, it must go about the hard work of creating all six of these conditions.

Needles schools are *rare* and creating more of them is no simple matter. But one thing is certain—what's currently in place *isn't working* for the vast majority of students in Ohio's urban schools.

Are we willing to consider a new course of action? From this study of high-performing, high-need urban schools, we believe there are six actionable lessons for policymakers, educators, and others in the Buckeye State.

1 Encourage and expand school choice to ensure that poor youngsters have real access to quality schools.

It is hard to imagine where Needles students would be academically if their parents or guardians had not opted to enroll them in one of these high-performing schools. If, that is, the adults who care for them had been unable (or unwilling) to exercise school choice on their behalf. While Ohio's school districts have taken some steps toward open enrollment (at least 34 percent of children in Ohio's "Big 8" cities now attend a school other than their assigned neighborhood school), few have developed and promoted choice options outside their normal offerings.

—● *Districts could sponsor more charter schools or work with other authorizers to do so, create more district magnet programs, expand open-enrollment options, or consider removing neighborhood assignments altogether.*

The students at Needles schools benefit from their parents' or guardians' decisions to enroll them in these high-performing schools of choice. Policies should be crafted to encourage Ohio's urban communities to offer more quality school options to more youngsters. Besides affording better educational opportunities to youngsters who lack them today, these strategies will restore trust with parents, retain students who might otherwise leave the district, and reverse the drain of families from the urban core.

Districts could sponsor more charter schools or work with other authorizers to do so, create more district magnet programs, expand open-enrollment options, or consider removing neighborhood assignments altogether. Districts can go even further, by doing the following: requiring middle-school students to choose their high school, rather than assigning it to them; experimenting with online courses and hybrid models of schooling (a mix of traditional schooling and online coursework); and improving transportation options so that alternative schooling options are accessible to all Ohio students.

—● *It is hard to imagine where Needles students would be academically if their parents or guardians had not opted to enroll them in one of these high-performing schools.*

State lawmakers could further expand quality choice options (especially for low-income families) through several means. To improve the charter sector, for example, they should: lift the current geographic restrictions for start-up charters; relax the moratorium on charter e-schools; recruit high-quality charter networks to the state and enact policies to support these models; and encourage more district-charter collaboration through sharing of services, facilities, and funding opportunities. Key to assuring that charters work as a quality alternative is to strengthen the performance of the state's charter-school authorizers. The state should continue encouraging districts to expand and scale up other promising choice models, namely Early College Academies and STEM schools. Both have shown success delivering high levels of academic achievement to disadvantaged youngsters and preparing them for college. These models deserve the same level of funding and support as traditional district schools.



2 Encourage school-based principal training programs.

Principals and leadership teams in Needles schools are highly effective in running successful academic programs, managing student behavior, and ensuring that all students learn. Why aren't they also training others in such competencies? Our school observers were stunned to find that while Needles schools have highly effective leaders, nobody is “understudying” them so as to become leaders of more effective urban schools. That's because most school leadership training in Ohio takes place not in high-performing schools but in university classrooms.

—● *If Ohio is to develop more such leaders, they need the opportunity to learn from the best of today's leaders via residencies in highly successful schools.*

This is a missed opportunity, as highly effective school leaders are in great demand in Ohio and across the country. In early 2010, the Ohio Department of Education identified more than 65 persistently low-performing schools eligible for federal School Improvement Grants. Replacing the leadership of such schools is one of the four school turnaround strategies supported by the grant guidelines. Besides those 65, hundreds more Ohio schools have been identified for “corrective action” under No Child Left Behind and are in dire need of strong leadership to dramatically improve student achievement.


But as one district official observed, the bench is shallow when it comes to top-notch school leaders who can run an effective school for high-need students. If Ohio is to develop more such leaders, they need the opportunity to learn from the best of today's leaders via residencies in highly successful schools. The knowledge, lore, and skill sets of Needles leaders, which are what make their schools effective, are diffi-

cult to impart via coursework, lectures, or textbooks. But by observing and learning alongside successful school leaders, much like doctors in training, neophyte and wannabe principals can arrive at a deeper understanding of the pillars of leadership that drive schools to consistently achieve at high levels.

3 Adopt a “tight-loose” approach to accountability by setting clear, data-specific goals for schools, then directing funds to schools, relaxing mandates, slashing regulations, and cutting strings so that school leaders have the control and operational freedom to meet those goals using strategies that work for them, their teams, and their students.

No “magic bullet” solution for successful urban education emerges from studying Needles schools. Though there are common traits among these schools, there are also important differences in how they operate. One essential factor that Needles schools share is the freedom to do what works for their students. Such freedom is sometimes a matter of right (as in the charter sector), and sometimes a matter of experience and deft navigation. But it is never easy to get and keep, even for charters.

The state should not be in the business of telling individual schools how to operate. Rather, it should set clear standards and goals, put in place accurate, timely and transparent systems for monitoring performance against those goals, and then provide the support and resources to help schools attain them in ways that may differ considerably from place to place. For example, a well-designed system of weighted student funding permits school leaders to determine how to spend the money—essentially all the money—that accompanies their pupils to their schools. This resembles the fiscal autonomy already accorded charter schools.



Many Needles school leaders indicated that their schools receive fewer resources than lower-performing schools in their districts, despite their large numbers of economically disadvantaged students. Several school leaders noted that their students faced mental health challenges, yet they lacked the power to hire school psychologists or readjust their budgets to prioritize interventions over administration. At the onset of the student-based budgeting (a form of weighted student funding) era in Cincinnati, College Hill's principal was able to forgo the hiring of another administrator and instead opted to add a school psychologist to meet the growing mental health needs of her students. The result was a more robust intervention system that helped to avert challenges and set the conditions for improving student achievement. Unfortunately, College Hill no longer has this level of budgetary autonomy.

4 Discourage administrative churn in high-achieving schools.

Consistency and stability are hallmarks of Needles schools. District leaders and state policymakers should heed this and invest in strategies to retain and reward talented school leaders. This could include offering financial bonuses for principals to stay in their posts. Moreover, strategies to equitably distribute principals—a key priority of the federal Race to the Top program and the Obama Administration—should be devised so that highly effective principals are not uprooted abruptly from their schools without a transition plan.

If a principal transfer is necessary, a strategy should be in place that would put up-and-coming deputies in schools to train alongside successful leaders and take charge when the veteran principal leaves. This form of principal mentorship would require thoughtful succession planning by school districts, but it promises to expand the pool of talented principals capable of running successful high-need schools.

Districts should also think imaginatively about how to move beyond pure financial incentives to retain top-notch leadership talent. For example, school leaders may value opportunities to travel, enroll in coursework, or visit other high-performing schools. Hence, districts might consider awarding study grants, travel grants, or mini-sabbaticals to principals.

Finally, districts (and state leaders) should consider alternative management structures so that successful principals can have the opportunity to lead a second or third school, or even a “mini-district.” Additional responsibilities would be matched with commensurate compensation, as well as a new form of career mobility that many school leaders may seek. With enrollment declining in many of Ohio's cities, consolidating leadership so that principals can work across multiple schools makes good fiscal sense and maximizes existing leadership talent.

5 Empower schools to hire and retain the best talent available.

Needles school leaders have developed ways to select the teachers they think will best fit their schools. Some can do this by right, as in the case of charter schools. Others, namely district schools, have to learn how to “work the system.” The two charter schools featured here enjoy near-total autonomy over hiring and firing (by circumventing issues of seniority, forced transfers, etc.), although they are still constrained by Ohio law prescribing strict certification standards for charter teachers. Meanwhile, district-operated Needles schools rely on their reputations for going above and beyond the required workload, as well as rigorous interviewing processes, to hire talented staff that can meet their students' needs.

All of these schools, however, still face obvious roadblocks on the Human Resources front. In the Akron Public Schools, for example, teachers are placed—frequently based on their own preferences—into schools

without any input from the school's principal. The principals have to take what they get. Fortunately, King Elementary has a reputation for hard work that tends to deter applicants who wouldn't be a good fit there. But not having staffing autonomy threatens to scuttle any school's serious efforts at improvement—particularly when faced with a disadvantaged student population that needs extraordinary teachers.

—● *Not having staffing autonomy threatens to scuttle any school's serious efforts at improvement—particularly when faced with a disadvantaged student population that needs extraordinary teachers*

To help principals form unified teaching teams and select the kind of talent they need, districts should implement mutual hiring policies (where both principal and teacher must agree to the teacher's assignment). This flexibility is especially important for low-performing or low-income schools that need more freedom to successfully recruit, hire, and retain needed talent.

Finally, it is time to rethink “last hired, first fired” policies that reward seniority without regard to teacher effectiveness. As many Ohio districts face declining enrollment and shrinking budgets, it is all the more critical to have safeguards against forced hiring and transfers, and layoffs based only on years of experience. As of writing this report, at least five of the “Big 8” districts—Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo, and Youngstown—have announced hundreds of teaching position cuts for next year. Ensuring that schools (especially those serving our most disadvantaged students) have a reasonable degree of autonomy over who they hire and dismiss is critical to having the right teacher talent in place to improve student performance.


6 Reduce bureaucratic barriers and regulatory constraints through “innovation zones,” contract waivers, regulatory waivers, and other strategies that free schools to succeed.

The Needles schools all have distinctive programs, missions, and operational structures, put into place by school leaders and their teams to meet the unique needs of their students. Yet most districts adopt a “one-size-fits-all” approach. The result is that some of the most challenged schools in Ohio operate under contractual and regulatory restrictions that make wholesale improvement extremely difficult.

We noted earlier that Needles teachers generally treat the collective bargaining agreement as the floor of their responsibilities, and it no doubt plays a prominent role in their schools' ultimate success. But what about schools, leaders, and staff that view the collective bargaining agreement as the ceiling? Especially in the most challenging schools, where improving student performance is a matter of urgency, it is difficult for even the most dedicated and talented teacher to go the extra mile if the contract bars it and the school culture discourages it.

—● *It is difficult for even the most dedicated and talented teacher to go the extra mile if the contract bars it and the school culture discourages it.*

Fortunately, there are ways to overcome the “one-size-fits-all” approach. Converting truly troubled district schools into charter schools, which enjoy a greater degree of autonomy than their traditional counterparts, is one way to empower schools leaders and teachers and grant them the freedom to do what works. But other mechanisms could be applied to traditional districts and schools—mechanisms that have the potential to broadly impact student achieve-



ment by increasing autonomy. For example, Ohio could designate academically and fiscally troubled districts as “innovation zones,” granting waivers from various regulations or bargaining contract provisions to schools within those zones.

—● *Districts should consider loosening the regulatory vise on schools as they demonstrate greater performance, granting ever more freedom in areas that matter most to schools.*

To be sure, greater school-level autonomy should be tightly linked to heightened accountability as it relates to student performance goals. Districts should consider loosening the regulatory vise on schools as

they demonstrate greater performance, granting ever more freedom in areas that matter most to schools—such as determining the calendar and schedule, adjusting curriculum and programs to meet student needs, controlling the school’s budget, and making personnel decisions.

As the experience of Needles schools suggests, educators might be more willing to go the extra mile when they are immersed in a staff culture that encourages and supports it. Further, teachers and leaders develop a greater sense of efficacy when, through combined efforts, their hard work has a tangible impact on student achievement. Finding ways to minimize bureaucratic barriers is an important step toward engendering Needles-like cultures in more schools for the benefit of more students.

appendix

A: School-selection methodology

Identifying the “needles”

Using data from three consecutive school years (2006-07 through 2008-09), we identified public elementary and middle schools in Ohio where:

- Performance on state assessments is consistently moderate to high (a “performance index” score of 80 or better – more on this, and all of our metrics, below);
- Students are making annual academic progress, as measured by the state’s value-added system; and
- The student population is predominantly low-income (75 percent or more of the school’s students are “economically disadvantaged” – again, see more on this metric below).

Statewide, 816 schools met our academic performance criteria (points one and two above). After factoring in the poverty level of their students, however, *just 55 schools* remained eligible for the study. Thirty of them are located in Ohio’s “Big 8” cities (Canton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo, and Youngstown), which was our final determining factor for inclusion in the study. However, as we began to look more closely at the schools and their data, the number of eligible schools continued to shrink.

For example, one charter school turned out to just draw 35 percent of its students from the urban district in which it is located. The majority of its students hail instead from neighboring suburbs. We couldn’t fairly characterize the school as “urban” the same way we could schools that draw all, or very nearly all, of their students from a Big 8 district.

In another city, it initially appeared that 15 district schools met our criteria. However, after consulting district officials about the poverty data, we learned that the percent of students who were economically disadvantaged had been reported incorrectly for multiple years for nearly all of those schools.

Based on these criteria, we identified 16 “needles” in a haystack – those high-performing, urban schools that serve a high-need population. A few schools opted not to participate in the study. For logistical reasons, a few others were not able to be included. Ultimately, we settled on the eight schools profiled in these pages.

About the data


The Performance Index

The Ohio Department of Education summarizes a school’s achievement using a “Performance Index”—a weighted average of student performance in all tested subjects and grade levels. Scores range from 0 to 120. The higher a school’s score, the better its students are performing across the board on the state’s annual assessments. A score of 80 or better (our minimum bar for this report) indicates, on average, school-wide proficiency in all tested grades and subjects.

Value-Added Progress Measures

Ohio rates the “value add” of a school by the academic progress its students make from one year to the next in reading and math in grades four through eight. Though these data have limitations, they provide important information about which schools are helping their students continue to improve academically and which are not. To be eligible for our study, a school needed to meet or exceed the state’s annual value-added expectations each of the three years.

Note: By including this measure in our rubric for



identifying high-performing schools, we were restricting ourselves to schools that serve some mix of grades four through eight. Therefore, no high schools or early elementary schools appear in our report.

Determining Poverty Levels

The Ohio Department of Education provides demographic information about Ohio public schools, including the percent of students who have disabilities, are economically disadvantaged, and are Limited English Proficient, as well as the racial composition of the student body. The percent of a school's population that is considered economically disadvantaged is guided by rules in the Education Management Information System (EMIS) used by districts to submit these data.

There are four factors that districts can use to identify a student as economically disadvantaged: student eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch; resident of a household in which a member is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch; receiving public assistance; or Title 1 application. These data also rely on self-reporting by schools, so are subject to data entry discrepancies. Based on discussions with staff at the state education department, we considered as eligible schools that served a population that was 75 percent or more disadvantaged for two of the three years. We also verified the data with the schools (and throughout this report you will see instances where the data reported by the schools to the state differ from what the school provided to us).



B: Researcher biographies

Theodore J. Wallace, Ph.D.

President, The Paremos Group

Dr. Wallace served as a school teacher and administrator for 20 years across Ohio. During his 12-year leadership tenure as principal and later president at Chaminade-Julienne Catholic High School in Dayton, Ohio, the school was recognized as a National School of Excellence by the United States Department of Education.

He taught secondary school principalship to public and private school master's degree candidates at the University of Dayton for eight years. Theodore has presented at numerous state and national education conferences and has published articles and chapters on school leadership. He was the co-editor of the book *Catholic School Leadership: An Invitation to Lead*, Falmer Press, 2000.

In succeeding years, he was the founding director of the Center for Catholic Education at the University of Dayton and of Parents Advancing Choice in Education (PACE) in Dayton. Most recently, Theodore was the Program Director for Education at the Mathile Family Foundation in Dayton and since 1996 has been the President and Founder of The Paremos Group, a consulting firm for education and other nonprofit organizations with a focus on “helping others to inspired leadership.”

His program and consulting projects have included work with the Dayton Public Schools, Vandalia-

Butler Public Schools, and numerous public charter schools in Ohio. Finally, he has served as a reviewer several times for the United States Department of Education's innovative schools program and as a site visitor for the National School of Excellence “Blue Ribbon Schools” project.

Quentin Suffren

Chief Academic Officer

The Learning Institute

Quentin Suffren is chief academic officer at The Learning Institute (TLI) in Hot Springs, Arkansas. TLI provides assessment, data, and curriculum services to 80 school districts (educating over 250,000 students) in Arkansas and Louisiana. At TLI, Quentin leads the curriculum and professional development teams that directly support school administrators, program coordinators, and classroom teachers. Before assuming this role, he served as a literacy curriculum specialist and managed a comprehensive K-12 English Language Arts curriculum and assessment program. He was also the lead writer/editor of TLI's online publication, *The Learning Curve*. Previously, Quentin has worked as a project manager for the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, as a curriculum coach at Hot Springs School District, and as a humanities instructor at the Arkansas School for mathematics, sciences, and the arts. He has also taught English at the secondary and postsecondary levels in Memphis, Tennessee. Quentin holds a Master of Fine Arts in writing from the University of Memphis.

C: Student demographics of Needles schools, 2008-09

	PERCENT OF STUDENTS BY RACE*	PERCENT ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED	PERCENT LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT	PERCENT WITH DISABILITIES
Citizens' Academy	Black = 98.5	83.0	NC	15.5
	Multiracial= NC			
	White = NC			
Horizon Science Academy – Cleveland Middle School	Black = 91.4	97.7	NC	NC
	Multiracial = NC			
	White = NC			
Louisa May Alcott Elementary School	Black = 37.4	100.0	NC	34.3
	Multiracial = 8.6			
	White = 44.2			
	Hispanic = 9.9			
CLEVELAND METROPOLITAN SCHOOLS	Asian = 0.6	>95	5.3	21.8
	Black = 69.6			
	Hispanic = 11.7			
	American Indian = 0.3			
	Multiracial = 2.7			
	White = 15.2			
College Hill Fundamental Academy	Black = 92.9	77.9	NC	18.4
	Multiracial = 3.5			
	White = 3.4			
CINCINNATI PUBLIC SCHOOLS	Asian = 0.8	67.8	3.1	20.0
	Black = 68.8			
	Hispanic = 1.9			
	American Indian = 0.1			
	Multiracial = 4.6			
	White = 23.7			
King Elementary School	Black = 26.6	100.0*	NC	4.3
	Multiracial = 10.2			
	White = 60.1			

	PERCENT OF STUDENTS BY RACE*	PERCENT ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED	PERCENT LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT	PERCENT WITH DISABILITIES
AKRON PUBLIC SCHOOLS	Asian = 2.5	82.4	2.4	18.0
	Black = 47.7			
	Hispanic = 1.5			
	American Indian =0.1			
	Multiracial = 6.6			
	White = 41.6			
McGregor Elementary School	Black = 13.5	90.2	NC	14.9
	Multiracial = 12.2			
	White = 73.8			
CANTON CITY SCHOOLS	Asian = 0.2	75.3	0.6	16.6
	Black = 35.1			
	Hispanic = 1.2			
	American Indian =0.3			
	Multiracial = 13.1			
	White =50			
Duxberry Park Arts IMPACT Alternative Elementary School	Black = 82.2	84.0	<5	15.5
	Multiracial = 8.6			
	White = 8.4			
Valleyview Elementary School	Black = 12.1	86.3	5.1	11.3
	Multiracial = 10.7			
	White = 66.9			
COLUMBUS CITY SCHOOLS	Asian = 1.9	81.1	8.3	16.9
	Black = 60.9			
	Hispanic = 5.9			
	American Indian =0.2			
	Multiracial = 3.7			
	White = 27.4			

Source: ODE Interactive Local Report Card

*Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

NC = Not Calculated

D: Student mobility, attendance, and out-of-school suspension rates at Needles schools, 2008-09

	STUDENT MOBILITY – PERCENT OF STUDENTS IN BUILDING LESS THAN FULL ACADEMIC YEAR	STUDENT ATTENDANCE RATE	OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS, PER 100 STUDENTS
Citizens' Academy	3.2%	95.7%	21.5
Horizon Science Academy– Cleveland Middle School	1.5%	100.0%	56.2
Louisa May Alcott Elementary School	22.0%	93.7%	0.8
CLEVELAND METROPOLITAN SCHOOLS	24.1%	90.7%	44.4
College Hill Fundamental Academy	13.2%	95.3%	0.2
CINCINNATI PUBLIC SCHOOLS	16.7%	>95.0%	2.6
King Elementary School	5.5%	96.2%	2.9
AKRON PUBLIC SCHOOLS	12.2%	93.2%	84.4
McGregor Elementary School	17.3%	94.5%	1.1
CANTON CITY SCHOOLS	15.1%	93.7%	30.3
Duxberry Park Arts IMPACT Alternative Elementary School	11.9%	>95.0%	10.2
Valleyview Elementary School	35.0%	93.8%	8.8
COLUMBUS CITY SCHOOLS	20.2%	94.3%	58.1

Source: ODE Interactive Local Report Card

E: Teacher-related variables at Needles schools, 2008-09


	PERCENT OF TEACHERS WITH A MASTER'S DEGREE	PERCENT "HIGHLY QUALIFIED"	TEACHER ATTENDANCE RATE	AVERAGE YEARS OF TEACHER EXPERIENCE	AVERAGE TEACHER SALARY
Citizens' Academy	44.0%	77.8%	N/A	10	\$39,847
Horizon Science Academy – Cleveland Middle School	25.9%	100.0%	96.9%	4	\$31,246
Louisa May Alcott Elementary School	45.0%	100.0%	92.3%	16	\$70,036
CLEVELAND METROPOLITAN SCHOOLS	43.8%	86.6%	91.5%	5	\$65,575
College Hill Fundamental Academy	42.5%	100.0%	94.8%	20	\$65,777
CINCINNATI PUBLIC SCHOOLS	66.9%	91.6%	95.2%	17	\$64,959
King Elementary School	97.2%	100.0%	97.8%	28	\$69,612
AKRON PUBLIC SCHOOLS	67.9%	99.2%	94.9%	18	\$58,792
McGregor Elementary School	76.2%	100.0%	94.8%	16	\$60,917
CANTON CITY SCHOOLS	66.6%	98.8%	95.0%	13	\$55,249
Duxberry Park Arts IMPACT Alternative Elementary School	42.9%	98.6%	92.8%	11	\$58,793
Valleyview Elementary School	77.8%	100.0%	94.3%	14	\$65,302
COLUMBUS CITY SCHOOLS	60.0%	99.1%	94.0%	14	\$64,680

Source: ODE Interactive Local Report Card



endnotes

- ¹ Thomas B. Fordham Institute and Public Impact, “2008-09 Ohio Report Card Analysis,” (August 2009). Available online: <http://www.fordhamfoundation.org/template/page.cfm?id=349>.
- ² Akron, Canton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo, and Youngstown.
- ³ Details about the federal Race to the Top competition, available online: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop/index.html>.
- ⁴ Ohio Department of Education’s Interactive Local Report Card, available online: <http://ilrc.ode.state.oh.us/>.
- ⁵ Dana Brinson and Jacob L. Rosch, “Charter School Autonomy: A Half-Broken Promise.” Washington, DC: the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, (April 2010). Available online: http://edexcellence.net/index.cfm/news_charter-school-autonomy-a-half-broken-promise.
- ⁶ Ohio’s “last hired, first fired” policy is written into Ohio Revised Code, available online: <http://codes.ohio.gov/orc/3319.17>.
- ⁷ Thomas Ott, “Hundreds of Cleveland teachers, principals to lose jobs; innovation schools would be particularly hard-hits by layoffs,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, (April 21, 2010). Jennifer Smith Richards, “District cuts 164, mostly teachers,” *The Columbus Dispatch*, (April 24, 2010). Margo Rutledge Kissel, “Dayton school board OKs cutting 70 jobs,” *Dayton Daily News*, (May 5, 2010). Christopher D. Kirkpatrick, “Poor revenue may add \$4M to TPS deficit; property-tax delinquency rising,” *The Toledo Blade*, (May 6, 2010). Harold Gwin, “Youngstown schools plan to chop 18 positions,” *The Youngstown Vindicator*, (March 11, 2010).
- ⁸ Ohio Grantmakers Forum, “Beyond Tinkering: Creating Real Opportunities for Today’s Learners and for Generations of Ohioans to Come,” (January 2009).
- ⁹ “Creaming” is a common criticism against charter schools. Specifically, many choice opponents argue that charters enroll the “best” students from the district and therefore comparisons between the district and the charter school aren’t valid because they contrast two fundamentally different groups of students (the charter group is alleged to be less disadvantaged than the district peer group). The term “creaming” comes from the analogy of “cream skimming.”
- ¹⁰ Description of student-based budgeting in Cincinnati Public Schools, available online: <http://www.cps-k12.org/general/finances/StudBaseBdgt/StudBaseBdgt.htm>.
- ¹¹ Fordham staff used achievement data from on the Ohio Department of Education’s Interactive Local Report Card to calculate the overall average achievement of students in Needles schools and the average achievement of students in the district where the school is located. Average student achievement at Needles schools encompasses each school’s tested grades (for example, Citizens’ average is based on its results in grades 3-5); the district performance average used as a comparison encompasses the *same* grades for an “apples-to-apples” comparison (for



example, the average for Cleveland Metropolitan Schools, when compared to Citizens', is also based on grades 3-5). This methodology is used throughout the report for all achievement comparisons between Needles schools and the districts in which they are located.

¹² In some instances throughout the text, the estimated student population may not match the figure listed in the chart on the first page of the school profile. Data for the charts are from the 2008-09 school year, and enrollment as listed in the text may reflect a change in enrollment during the current school year.

¹³ Concept Schools' website: <http://www.conceptschoools.org/>.

¹⁴ During the course of the research for this report we discovered that Akron Public Schools designates all of its elementary schools as "100 percent economically disadvantaged." In speaking with the King Elementary's principal we discovered that the actual poverty rate may be closer to 40 or 50 percent, but no precise data currently exists at the district level.

¹⁵ Jennifer Smith Richards, "Jobs of some city teachers in doubt: Columbus expects 2,500 students to leave, reducing needed ranks of educators," *The Columbus Dispatch*, (March 2, 2010).

¹⁶ List of Ohio schools eligible for the School Improvement Grant, available online: <http://education.ohio.gov/GD/Templates/Pages/ODE/ODEDetail.aspx?page=550>.



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