



# Supporting Students and Educators: Whatever It Takes



The Oyler School sits on 2121 Hatmaker Street. Decades ago, workers on Hatmaker Street applied mercury (which was linked to high rates of dementia later in their lives) to top hats—to improve the quality of the hats’ felt and help the hats withstand the rain. Today, that industry is gone and no jobs have replaced those lost. The poverty is as thick as the dignity of the children who today attend the revitalized Oyler and the teachers who teach them.

On a recent November afternoon while the school prepared to close its doors for Thanksgiving break, parents picked up their food baskets, a student had a cavity filled in the school’s on-site dental center, an ophthalmologist finished her examination of a 5th grader’s eyes, 7th graders received expert math instruction, and 43 of 47 seniors exited the building knowing they are on track to graduate.

Oyler—after a long-troubled past—has turned around and become this community’s refuge. It is a crown jewel in Cincinnati’s efforts to transform its schools and help students living in significant poverty beat the odds. Oyler is where all of Cincinnati’s reform efforts converge. It’s the comprehensive supports—not only food and healthcare but also the high expectations for all students to graduate ready for college and careers enabled by expert instruction and professional development—that make Oyler a difference-maker for students.

## From traditional schools to “community schools”

Like many schools in Ohio in the early 2000s, Cincinnati’s schools were crumbling. Oyler was in especially bad shape. After a state Supreme Court ruling on school funding, a law signed by the governor to provide matching funds for school construction, a successful \$480 million local 2003 bond election and several years of construction, Cincinnati consolidated, rebuilt and/or remodeled all of its schools, now totaling 55.

Throughout the city, parents and community partners met with architects and among themselves to decide what each school should look like and how to incorporate partnerships with businesses, the arts community and social service agencies to provide services to students and adults during the school day and beyond. The Oyler community asked for vision and health clinics, an early learning facility, and office space for mental health professionals. It now has all of these. But Oyler is not unique: 42 of Cincinnati’s 55 schools have now participated in a community engagement process in which parents and other stakeholders identified their needs and assets and developed a strategy for rebuilding their schools as community learning centers. At the centers, students and families benefit from mental and physical healthcare, tutoring, mentoring, and after-school activities. It’s not

### Cincinnati Public Schools

Urban District  
2015–16



**55 SCHOOLS**

39 elementary    12 7–12    4 K–12

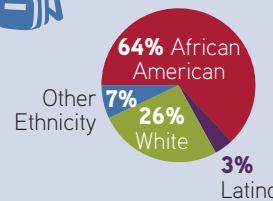


**2,100 TEACHERS    55 PRINCIPALS**

Estimates based on 2013–14 data



**34,000 STUDENTS**



19% special education

5% English language learners

72% free or reduced-price lunch

▲ Cincinnati is the highest-performing district among the “Ohio 8” urban districts.

▲ Nearly all Cincinnati students attend high school for grades 7–12, though there are a few schools configured differently (Oyler is a K–12 school).

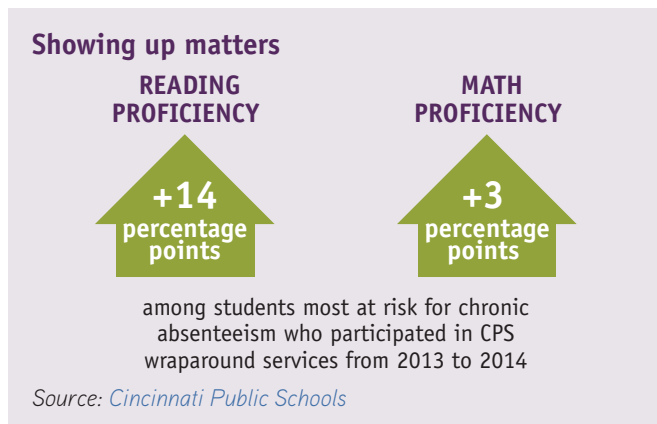
Source: Cincinnati Public Schools

*“A decade ago, fewer than 10 percent of Oyler high school students graduated on time, and 85 percent had dropped out before completing the 10th grade. Today, 43 of 47 senior class students are on track to graduate, 44 have applied to college and 15 have been accepted, as of December 2015.”*

Amy Randolph, Principal, Oyler School

unusual for schools to be flooded with volunteers from across the city who help to ensure that students meet standards. At Oylar, for example, each student has a folder that mentors and tutors access when they meet with their mentees in a beautifully arranged room just for volunteers.

While correlating achievement results to wraparound student services like those at Oylar is difficult, Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) officials report that, among students most at risk for chronic absenteeism, reading proficiency increased by 14 percentage points and math proficiency by 3 percentage points in just one school year (2013–14). Both [New York City](#) and [Philadelphia](#) are considering replications of Cincinnati’s community school efforts.



## Investing in teaching, observing, coaching and leading

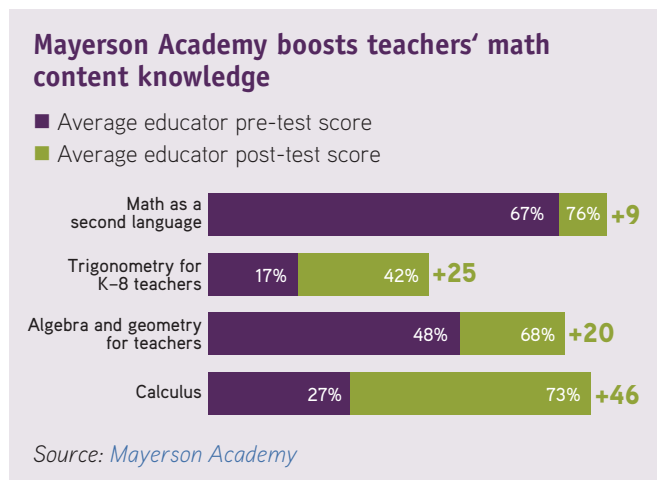
But it’s more than just the community school model that makes Cincinnati and the Oylar School special. The 7th graders at the Oylar School receive expert math instruction from Rachel Tapp, a teacher trained in Cincinnati’s nationally renowned, public-private partnership Mayerson Academy. She originally taught elementary school and, like most elementary school teachers on Hatmaker Street or on any street in America, she didn’t know math well—neither its content nor its pedagogy—and she used to describe herself as “math phobic.”

Tapp spent three years learning math pedagogy and content at Mayerson while teaching in elementary schools—which prepared her to work across the district as a mathematics instructional coach for the next three years. No longer math phobic, she’s now one of the district’s go-to educators in middle grade mathematics—which are often the make-or-break years for students in math. Tapp reports that the “professional development for coaches at Mayerson is phenomenal. They taught me how to be a good math coach.”

Mayerson Academy, CPS’ main professional development source, is housed in the CPS administration building. It operates with its own independent board and is funded through a combination of private donations, school district general operating funds and fees for services. It has the look and feel of a hotel conference center, with large plenary and smaller breakout rooms and quality furniture that you normally wouldn’t find in a school district.

“When I first became superintendent, I didn’t realize how powerful the Mayerson Academy could be. Now I do,” says Superintendent Mary Ronan. “Our strategy is to build skilled math coaches, and so we have used Title money to do this. Rachel was in a cohort of 30 teachers, and they are now spread across the district helping teachers shift their math instruction for the Common Core.”

In 2007, CPS identified the lack of mathematics understanding among its teachers as a barrier to student learning and so developed (with Xavier University) what has become the [MAXUM](#) program. MAXUM is a comprehensive professional learning program offered through Mayerson that builds math content knowledge while emphasizing effective instructional practices that address the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for mathematical content and processes. [Pre- and post-test results](#) for educators who participate in the program demonstrate substantial gains in content and pedagogical understanding in trigonometry for K–8 teachers, algebra and geometry for elementary teachers, and even calculus.



Though she is no longer a coach—CPS’ current contract with its teachers union allows only three-year coaching stints so that great teachers ultimately make their way back to classrooms—Tapp still attends five meetings a year with her original cohort and provides demonstration lessons for math teachers who visit her room. Tapp’s current principal praises her: “I worked with Rachel before I was here. I recruited her back because her mathematics ability is far beyond anybody I’ve seen. She gets students to understand, not just regurgitate.”

Part of what Tapp and her colleagues learned at Mayerson is how to focus their coaching on using data for improvement. Cincinnati has become renowned for its use of data: Each school has what was once called a war room and now is simply a data room. There, teachers meet, sometimes with their principals and coaches, and discuss achievement data and what they can do to help students grow.

Mayerson provides supports to principals as well, teaching them how to be more effective evaluators and training them on how to help teachers implement new standards. For example, Mayerson offers principals training on identifying high-quality instruction as it relates to the teacher evaluation observation rubric.

Like all districts in Ohio, Cincinnati is implementing the CCSS and is deeply focused on preparing students for colleges and careers.



“The new standards were not embraced at first. It was difficult to get our more experienced teachers on board. Now they’re asking, ‘Where to next?’” reports Cynthia Sanders, English language arts curriculum manager.

The district attributes this change in teacher engagement with the standards to CPS’ investment in instructional coaching on how to incorporate the Common Core “instructional shifts” into curriculum and daily instruction, modeled after the coaching that Tapp and her colleagues provide. “Coaches showed teachers why the shifts were good,” Sanders says.

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 Cynthia Sanders, English Language Arts Curriculum Manager, Cincinnati Public Schools

## New evaluation and support system

Cincinnati supplements its commitment to high standards and professional development with a new evaluation system borne out of state legislation and Ohio’s participation in Race to the Top. CPS reports that the revised evaluation and support system is much more rigorous than the previous evaluation system, in part because it now includes student learning growth data in addition to observations. Teachers receive two informal and two formal evaluations each year and are rated as ineffective, developing, skilled or accomplished. The evaluation system is online, so supervisors can monitor the feedback principals are giving teachers and intervene with support when necessary.

According to Yenetta Harper, director of teacher and principal evaluation, “Our current evaluation system is aligned to the Ohio teacher evaluation system. Our evaluation system is research-based and designed to be transparent and fair. It builds on what educators know about the importance of ongoing assessment and feedback as a powerful vehicle to support improved practice. The principals are now engaged in a system that requires more observations, coaching and feedback given to teachers to improve their practice.”

## Moving to tomorrow

“MyTomorrow is brilliant,” says Jane Keller, president and CEO of the Cincinnati Youth Collaborative. “It places the student at the center of everything.” The effort is Cincinnati’s newest big move.

MyTomorrow aims to make college- and career-ready standards real for students; personalize learning; and ensure



that every senior has identified a college, career or military pathway plan by the end of the senior year. This year, the district hosted a career expo, which 400 11th grade students attended. They discussed potential jobs with local employers, and students had the opportunity to interview them about the skills they need to be successful in local careers. Ninety-seven percent of students surveyed after the expo stated they had a better understanding of the careers available in Cincinnati, and 100 percent of employers stated it was beneficial to share information with future employees about the opportunities available within their organizations.

The district also works with the College Board’s Springboard program, using their curricular materials for grades 6–12 that build toward the rigor of Advanced Placement (AP) courses to help students meet the state standards and get ready for rigorous college courses.

As part of MyTomorrow, the district ramped up its efforts to expand AP opportunities for students. In the 2012–13 school year, 50 percent of the district’s high schools had no AP courses. Now 100 percent of schools give students access to at least one AP course. To expand the offerings, the district created a blended learning AP course catalog. Such blended learning courses meet in person with the teacher twice a week; on the other three days, students go through online content in classrooms with support staff. The district also hosts an “AP boot camp” during the summer to prepare students for the AP curriculum and to give them a taste of college life. In summer 2015, for example, 185 students spent time at either the University of Cincinnati or the University of Miami at Ohio learning study skills in the context of either STEM coursework or the humanities.



## Results

Cincinnati's efforts have paid off. Its four-year graduation rate increased from just 52 percent in 2002 to 73.6 percent in 2013. From a bottom ranking of "academic emergency" in 2002, CPS was the only one of the state's eight urban districts to achieve an "effective" rating from the Ohio Department of Education

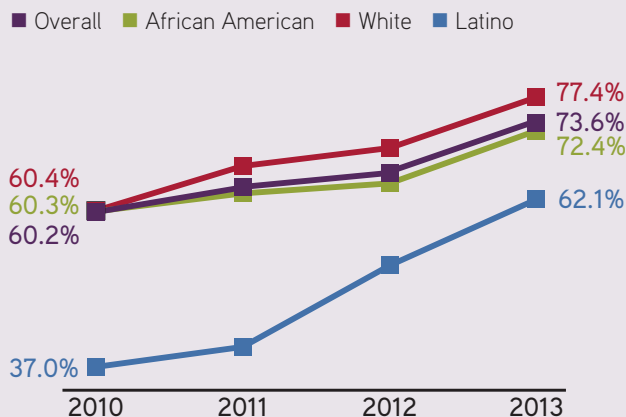
### Cincinnati improved its rating on the state's district accountability system



Source: Cincinnati Public Schools

in 2010. Over the past 10 years, reading and math scores on state assessments increased 10 percentage points. Though it has grown slightly, the graduation gap between African American and white students is only 5 percentage points—which is a smaller gap than many school systems in America. Cincinnati's efforts to close achievement gaps are paying off in the lower grades as well, especially in reading, where gaps in achievement between 2008–09 and 2013–14 have closed between 4.4 and 9.6 percentage points.

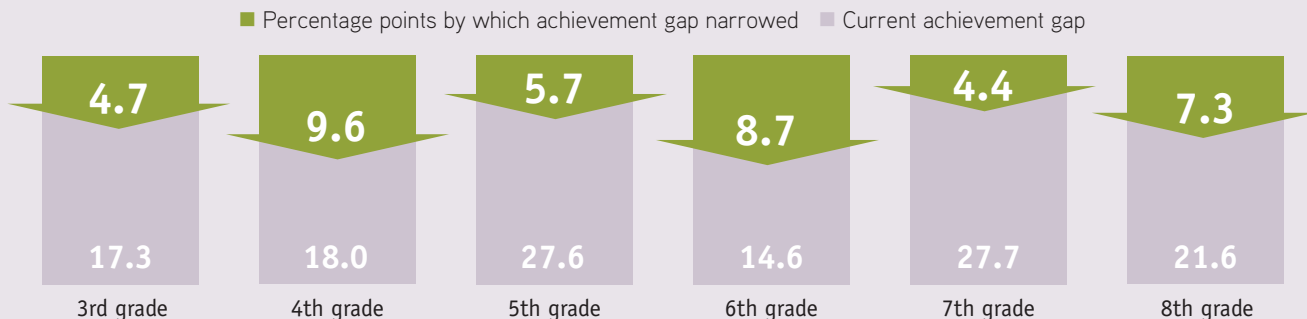
### Graduation rates increasing for all students



Source: Ohio Department of Education Advanced Reports

### Achievement gaps between white and African American students are narrowing in reading

Between 2008–09 and 2013–14, the achievement gap has narrowed by 4.4–9.6 percentage points



Source: Ohio Department of Education Advanced Reports

## Conclusion

In 2008, researcher [Joe Nathan](#) wrote in *Education Week* that "the city's progress in boosting student achievement is historic, and well worth examining for lessons that may be applicable to other school systems nationwide. Cincinnati is, if not the first, among the first urban districts to eliminate long-standing disparities between students of different races in achieving one of the most meaningful educational markers of all: completing high school." In 2011, the [Coalition of Community Schools](#) identified the community school model as the reason for the school district's success. A 2013 article in *Education Week* credits a sharp focus on the district's lowest-

performing schools, including principal training, the creation of data folders for all students, and increased instructional time in reading and mathematics.

**"There is no secret sauce" for Cincinnati's success, says Superintendent Ronan. "It's really the combination of all the things we do that makes Cincinnati special." It's what makes Oylar a gemstone in a place where there is so much poverty—and so much dignity.**



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Photos courtesy of the Mayerson Academy