



# Failure Is Not an Option

How Principals, Teachers, Students and Parents from Ohio's High-Achieving, High-Poverty Schools Explain Their Success

Sponsored by the Ohio Business Roundtable, the Ohio Department of Education and The Ohio State University

A REPORT FROM  
 **PUBLIC AGENDA**

**Failure Is Not an Option**  
**How Principals, Teachers, Students and Parents**  
**from Ohio's High-Achieving, High-Poverty Schools**  
**Explain Their Success**

A Report from Public Agenda by Carolin Hagelskamp  
and Christopher DiStasi

Sponsored by the Ohio Business Roundtable, the Ohio Department  
of Education and The Ohio State University

Available online at <http://www.publicagenda.org/pages/failure-is-not-an-option>

Design: Carrie Chatterson Studio | Copyediting: Sona Vogel

Copyright (c) 2012 Public Agenda

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-  
NonCommercial-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. To view a copy  
of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/>  
or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300,  
San Francisco, California 94105, USA

# Failure Is Not an Option

**How Principals, Teachers, Students and Parents from Ohio's High-Achieving, High-Poverty Schools Explain Their Success**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary .....	2
Introduction .....	7
Key Attributes of Nine Successful, High-Poverty Schools.....	10
How Can It Be Sustained? Recommendations Emerging from This Research .....	24
School Profiles: Nine Stories of Success.....	28
East Garfield Elementary School, Steubenville .....	29
Citizens Academy Elementary School, Cleveland.....	32
Grove Patterson Academy Elementary School, Toledo.....	35
River Valley Middle School, Bidwell.....	38
Hannah J. Ashton Middle School, Reynoldsburg.....	41
Northwest High School, McDermott.....	44
Eastmoor Academy High School, Columbus .....	47
Robert A. Taft Information Technology High School, Cincinnati.....	50
MC <sup>2</sup> STEM High School, Cleveland .....	53
Methodology .....	56
Bibliography .....	58
Related Public Agenda Publications.....	59
Our Thanks .....	60
About Public Agenda.....	Back Cover



# Executive Summary

Why do some schools in high-poverty communities produce remarkable stories of success while others fail?

This study, conducted by Public Agenda and sponsored by the Ohio Business Roundtable, the Ohio Department of Education and The Ohio State University, attempts to shed light on this fundamentally important question by talking directly to educators, students and parents from nine high-achieving, high-poverty Ohio schools. Our purpose was to learn more about how principals, teachers, parents and students define the keys to success and to highlight some of the specific strategies and decisions that are used in these high-achieving schools. Moreover, we wanted to understand more about how these schools sustain effective practices and what, in their view, helps them to weather tough times. Our hope is that the insights and ideas that emerge here will stimulate fresh, open and constructive dialogue on K–12 education in Ohio.

## Key Attributes of Nine Successful, High-Poverty Schools

The primary and secondary schools we visited for this study—a mix of traditional public schools, magnet schools and a charter school—face many of the challenges that are often believed to impede high-poverty schools from improving student outcomes: ever-tightening budgets, restrictive regulatory policies and labor agreements, parents whose socioeconomic situation makes it difficult for them to participate in their child's education and a high proportion of students who are not well prepared for school. Yet students in these schools show remarkable academic achievements.

This report summarizes key attributes and practices that educators, parents and students pointed to across these nine schools—attributes that emerged with remarkable consistency. The principals, teachers, parents and students we interviewed talked about them repeatedly—with each group using its own words and images—and they deemed them to be essential to their academic success. Moreover, we heard again and again, it is the well-concerted interplay of all these attributes and practices that produces the school environment in which high academic achievement is the norm.

Here, in brief, is what we heard from administrators, teachers, parents and students in these nine successful schools:

1. **Principals lead with a strong and clear vision for their school, engage staff in problem solving and decision making and never lose sight of their school's goals and outcomes.** In each of these schools, we met principals who envision their schools to be places where all children can learn. For these principals “failure is not an option.” Interviews with teachers, parents and others confirmed that these principals earn trust and respect by engaging and supporting their staff in building the structures, practices and confidence necessary to fulfill this vision. Moreover, these principals take personal responsibility for their school's success, and they hold staff and students accountable to do the same.
2. **Teachers and administrators are dedicated to their school's success and committed to making a difference in their students' lives.** The educators we spoke to expressed great commitment to and compassion for their students and are proud to be working in a school where students can feel safe and supported. Both teachers and administrators are determined to do “whatever is best” for their students—a mind-set that often seemed to make administrative and contractual stipulations less relevant.
3. **School leaders provide genuine opportunities and incentives for teachers to collaborate, and teachers say that collaboration and sharing best practices are keys to their effectiveness.** In all of these schools, teachers reported that they work together to support one another, learn from one another's experiences, develop new strategies and evaluate instructional practices. Applicants for teaching positions in these schools are typically evaluated for their potential to be team players, and teachers currently on the staff are often included in the hiring process to assess whether a potential new colleague will fit in with their team.
4. **Teachers regard student data as clarifying and helpful, and they use it to plan instruction.** The nine schools examined in this study all use test data provided by the state for planning and evaluation, and some also collect their own data through frequent assessments and student surveys. Both principals and teachers told us that looking at student data informs instruction, intervention and planning in these schools, and teachers often talked about the role teacher collaboration plays in spreading the use of data across entire schools. According to principals and teachers, examining student data and talking about how to address the specific problems it reveals often produce further opportunities for staff to work together and learn from one another.

5. **Principals and teachers have high expectations for all students and reject any excuses for academic failure.** In these schools, all students are expected to succeed academically, and all students are expected to do their part. Teachers and administrators frequently pointed out that they accept no excuses for a student's failure to complete his or her work and they make no excuses for themselves when their students receive low scores on a test. At the same time, students know that their teachers are a reliable and eager source of support.
6. **School leaders and teachers set high expectations for school discipline and the behavior of all students.** Teachers repeatedly said that administrators in their schools institute and enforce consistent disciplinary procedures across classrooms and hallways and promote a school climate focused on learning and good student behavior. They consistently reported that setting and enforcing high expectations for student behavior frees both teachers and students to concentrate on instruction and learning.
7. **Schools offer students nontraditional incentives for academic success and good behavior.** These schools do not shy away from motivating students with tangible incentives. Many of the administrators and teachers told us that the promise of more computer time, free food, a class trip, a movie night or even a cellphone can go a long way toward helping students work harder and behave better. Even though resources for such practices vary across schools, each seems to have found its own ways and means to incentivize student behavior.
8. **Students feel valued, loved and challenged. They are confident that their teachers will help them succeed and be at their side if they hit a rough patch.** The students we talked to are well aware and proud of their school's success, and they recognize and value their teachers' and administrators' commitment. Many emphasized the personal connection they feel to teachers, and other staff, and often described these adults as mentors and confidants.
9. **While parent and community support can be an asset, principals and teachers do not see their absence as an insurmountable barrier to student learning and achievement.** Some of these schools, we heard, have developed effective strategies for involving parents in their children's education. Others provide remarkable examples of how business partnerships can benefit public schools. A number of schools, however, are focused almost exclusively on what happens within school walls—on what principals, teachers and students can do even without extensive parent and community support.
10. **School leaders and teachers seek to continuously improve practices and student achievement. They take today's success as tomorrow's starting point.** Despite their schools' successes, teachers and administrators we met do not believe that they have reached the upper limit of academic excellence. Principals frequently said that they use their school's momentum to further challenge their teachers. Similarly, teachers often employ positive results to energize one another and to motivate their students to keep striving to improve.
11. **Each school tells its own story of change and improvement, yet some commonalities exist.** None of the schools examined here followed the exact same path to high achievement. The diverse stories of these nine schools provide encouraging evidence that change is possible and can occur in different ways. Yet in each school, administrators and staff pointed to some form of a fresh start as impetus for change. And nearly all told us that they began seeing improvements once they became willing to experiment with practices, to self-assess and to make adjustments along the way.

## Characteristics of participating schools

- > A majority of the students served by these schools live in poverty—50 percent or more are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches.
- > Each school has demonstrated outstanding academic student achievement in one of three ways:
  1. Received the state of Ohio's *Schools of Promise* award in 2010 and 2011 and in at least one year before that. In 2011, the award required passing grades on state math and reading tests from at least 75 percent of all students, at least 75 percent of ethnic/racial minority students and at least 75 percent of economically disadvantaged students (for exact requirements, see Methodology at the end of this report).
  2. Showed remarkable improvements in students' performance in recent years and fell short of receiving the *Schools of Promise* award in 2011 by only a couple of students.
  3. Have achievement scores on par with schools that received a *Schools of Promise* award but have not yet graduated a senior class (and thus are not qualified for the award).
- > Schools were chosen to make up a geographically diverse sample (rural, urban and suburban schools from across the state) and to represent various types of both primary and secondary schools, including traditional public schools (some lottery based) and one community (charter) school.

## How Can It Be Sustained? Recommendations Emerging from the Research

Throughout this report we present powerful, concrete examples of how nine high-poverty Ohio schools helped their students learn and succeed academically—as told to us by the principals, teachers, parents and students who are directly involved in these schools' success. We collected these schools' stories of success with the hope that they will stimulate constructive conversations and change in other Ohio schools.

In addition, this study sought to explore the equally important question of how already successful schools sustain their success over time and to hear what principals, teachers, parents and students in these remarkable schools believe is needed for them to be able keep their school on an upward trajectory.

Here are the most important issues that emerged in these discussions and which we believe education leaders need to address, both to match the success of these high-achieving schools and to sustain effective practices in schools over time.

- ✓ **Plan for smooth principal transitions.** Staff and parents in these already successful schools believed that to minimize risk to their students' academic success, a new leader must work closely with staff and collaborate with the outgoing principal to learn about their school's culture and practices.
- ✓ **Engage teachers.** Educators in these schools expressed genuine commitment to their school's mission and believed strongly in their school's reforms. They said that they value the active role they have in developing and implementing the practices and attitudes that contribute to their school's success. And they feel that their practices are solidly supported by formal routines and protocols (such as those around teamwork, interventions and discipline) that will help them weather possible leadership transitions.
- ✓ **When hiring, make sure incoming teachers endorse the school's vision and practices.** Administrators in these schools told us they hire carefully and strategically, and we heard that they involve teachers (and often parents) to ensure that new staff will only further—and never disrupt—the school's culture of success.

- ✓ **Leverage a great reputation.** These schools' positive reputations seem to go a long way in attracting and keeping ambitious teachers, motivating students and stimulating community pride and support. We heard that these schools keep a close eye on their reputation and have learned to use it to their continued benefit.
- ✓ **Be careful about burnout.** Administrators and staff in these schools admitted that they often find their jobs exhausting, but they also told us that they thrive on their school's successes, rejecting the idea that their level of commitment and dedication is unsustainable. They shared with us personal strategies for coping with stressful times, and school leaders seem to keep an eye out for when teachers need extra support. But the question remains as to whether these educators can be expected to maintain their energy and passion for years to come and what it may take to prevent them from burning out.
- ✓ **Celebrate success.** These schools routinely celebrate small and large successes. We heard that on their paths to success, celebrations and recognition of hard work by staff, families and community partners helped to win over lingering skeptics. And once a school has achieved excellent results, we heard that such celebrations continue to promote team spirit and pride and also help to energize staff and students to continue the hard work.

### School Profiles: Nine Stories of Success

We urge readers to review each participating school's inspiring story of success in the latter part of this report. For each school, we describe its path to distinction and highlight several concrete practices that seem to have helped improve its students' performance and are crucial—according to the actors themselves—to maintaining success over time.

A photograph of three students in a science laboratory. A young man in the center, wearing safety goggles and a white lab coat, holds a flask containing a red liquid. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. To his left, a young woman with long dark hair and safety goggles is also smiling. To his right, another student is partially visible, also wearing safety goggles. The background is slightly blurred, showing a bright, modern lab environment.

# Introduction

When River Valley Middle School in Gallia County first received the state of Ohio's *Schools of Promise* award in 2009, administrators and teachers felt vindicated. Given that more than half of its students came from economically disadvantaged families, and that the school itself was the product of a consolidation of rival middle schools, neither community members nor state administrators would have bet that within just two years, more than 75 percent of its students would score proficient and above in reading and math—or that River Valley Middle School would further improve its academic performance to eventually land the state's highest performance designation: "Excellent with Distinction."<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup>A school receives the designation "Excellent with Distinction" if it meets 94 percent to 100 percent of the state performance indicators or has a performance index score of 100–120 (a score based on the performance of all students on state tests) and demonstrates above expected growth. See <http://www.ode.state.oh.us>. Also see Methodology at the end of this report for details.

In crucially important debates over the consistently low performance of Ohio public schools, we believe too little attention is paid to schools such as River Valley. Unfortunately, among Ohio schools that serve large numbers of economically disadvantaged students, high-performing schools are rare.<sup>2</sup> However, the existence of shining stars such as River Valley should alert educators, policymakers and the general public that despite the “obstacles” of poverty, success is possible in Ohio.

We therefore set out to learn more about some of Ohio’s high-poverty schools that have shown remarkable academic success in times of ever-tightening budgets. By talking directly to educators, parents, students and community partners, we hoped to highlight what they think sets their school apart and to understand some of the specific strategies and practices that seem to occur routinely in successful high-poverty schools. We also wanted to hear directly from the individuals who make these schools successful what they believe is crucial to sustain high academic performance over time—a question that is sometimes forgotten in discussions on how to best initiate successful practices.

To this end, we conducted qualitative research in nine high-achieving Ohio primary and secondary schools with high-poverty student bodies. From rural Appalachia to downtown Cleveland, we visited a wide variety of schools, including eight that constitute traditional public schools (five of which admit students through an open lottery system) and one community (charter) school. All schools showed consistent improvement and exceptionally high performance over consecutive years: Six received the state’s *Schools of Promise* award for the academic years 2009–10 and 2010–11 and for at least one year before that. Two schools showed great improvements in students’ performance in recent years and fell short of receiving the *Schools of Promise* award in 2011 by only a couple of students. And we included one very new school that has shown remarkable academic achievement since its inception but has not accumulated enough data to qualify for a *Schools of Promise* award. Box 1 provides a brief description of the sample and the inclusion criteria employed in this work.

In each school, we invited teachers, parents and students, respectively, to participate in focus group discussions; and we conducted several one-on-one interviews with the school leadership, support staff and community partners. In these conversations, we asked interviewees about the past (How did success come about?), the present (What makes this school successful today?) and the future (How can this school sustain its success in the years to come?).


Our methodology allowed us to collect rich descriptions and personal stories from the individuals who are directly responsible for schools’ and students’ success and who know what it means to sustain successful practices and high achievement over time. As such, our work sheds light on the human qualities, motivations and behaviors that characterize these schools. As with all qualitative research of this scale, we cannot conclude that our insights and observations are comprehensive or necessarily generalizable to all successful, high-poverty schools. However, the remarkable consistency with which individuals across all nine schools talked about what they believe makes their school and students successful gives us confidence in the importance of the attributes and practices we describe here. Moreover, as summarized in box 2, what we describe in this report resonates with and adds to important previous research on high-achieving, high-needs schools in Ohio and nationwide.

In sum, this report brings together what we learned from nine schools that Ohio can be proud of—whose accomplishments should energize the conversation about what is needed to give all children in Ohio the chance to learn in schools that are bound for success. By sharing insights, ideas and positive stories from these schools, we hope that our work will stimulate fresh, open and constructive dialogues on K–12 education in Ohio.

<sup>2</sup>To qualify for the state’s *Schools of Promise* award, an Ohio school must comprise at least 40 percent economically disadvantaged students—defined primarily by a student’s eligibility for free or reduced-price lunches. Of the 60 percent of Ohio schools that meet this basic requirement, for the 2010–11 school year only 16 percent achieved the performance requirements necessary to receive the award. For the full 2010–11 *Schools of Promise* award criteria, see Methodology at the end of this report.

## Previous research upon which this study builds

- > Ohio Department of Education's 2005 ethnographies of 41 *Schools of Promise*. The current study follows up on this work and extends it to include questions pertaining to the replicability and sustainability of success.
- > Thomas B. Fordham Institute's 2010 study titled *Needles in a Haystack: Lessons from Ohio's High-Performing, High-Need Urban Schools*. Fordham's study focuses on urban elementary and middle schools; and our work suggests that many of Fordham's findings also apply to Ohio's successful high-needs high schools as well as its high-performing primary and secondary schools in low-income, rural communities.
- > Many of our findings resonate with larger-scale quantitative research from across the country. Particularly relevant are Bryk et al. (2010); Clifford (2012); Florian (2000); Kannapel and Clements (2005); Sebastian (2012); and Reeves (2003). For full references, see the bibliography at the end of this report.
- > Finally, this study builds on Public Agenda's long history of opinion studies on education involving school administrators, teachers, parents, students and the public. What we learned in this project resonates in particular with a number of our previous studies, such as "Supporting Teacher Talent: The View from Generation Y" (2009) and "Mission of the Heart: What Does it Take to Transform a School?" (2008), among others. For a list of related Public Agenda publications, see the end of this report.

A photograph of several students in a classroom. In the foreground, a young woman with dark hair is smiling and looking down at a notebook, holding a yellow pencil. Next to her, a young man is also looking down at his work. In the background, other students are visible, some writing in notebooks. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a positive and focused learning environment.

# Key Attributes of Nine Successful, High-Poverty Schools

Here we describe in detail the key attributes and practices that stand out across these nine schools—attributes that emerge with remarkable consistency. The principals, teachers, parents, students and community partners we interviewed talked about them repeatedly—with each group using its own words and images—and they deemed them essential to students’ academic success. Moreover, we heard again and again, it is the well-concerted interplay of all these attributes and practices that produces a school environment in which high academic achievement is the norm.

## #1: Principals lead with a strong and clear vision for their school, engage staff in problem solving and decision making and never lose sight of their school's goals and outcomes.

The importance of high-quality leadership for an organization cannot be overstated. Research, whether on public education or for-profit businesses, has repeatedly linked institutional success to leaders who hold a strong vision for their organization, engage staff with inclusive management practices and always stay focused on organizational goals and outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout this report, we provide many examples of how principals and their leadership teams in these nine high-performing, high-poverty schools demonstrate these leadership qualities with specific actions (summarized in box 3).

There is no one practice that makes these leaders effective. But together, the practices we describe seem to go a long way toward gaining the trust and respect of staff, students and the wider community. In turn, we heard that the school leaders we met are able to leverage the respect they earn to motivate staff and students and to hold everyone accountable for their school's success.

### A strong vision

The leaders of the nine schools we visited defined their schools as places where each child can and will learn, where all staff take responsibility and work together to achieve (and continuously improve upon) this goal and where “failure is not an option.” With this mind-set, all the principals we met squarely exemplify a category of school leaders that Public Agenda has been calling “transformers”—individuals who have an explicit vision of what their school might be, who bring a “can do” attitude to the job and whose routine actions reflect their vision, focus and commitment.<sup>4</sup>

### What do leaders at these nine high-performing, high-poverty schools do?

- Build and maintain a culture of all-around high expectations and no excuses.
- Appeal to greater values: “We do what is best for our students.”
- Inspire others with their dedication and commitment.
- Connect to staff, students and the community on a personal level.
- Take responsibility for consistent, schoolwide discipline.
- Work with staff to improve instructional practices.
- Promote teamwork and collaboration among staff.
- Promote data-driven self-evaluation among staff.
- Respond to staff's suggestions and needs.
- Give staff the autonomy to develop and implement best practices.
- Lead by example; show the same commitment that is expected of staff and students.
- Hold staff and students accountable for student achievement and the school's overall mission.
- Emphasize continuous improvement.
- Hire with care and strategy.
- Build community relationships that will benefit the school.
- Celebrate success.

<sup>3</sup>Anthony S. Bryk, Penny Bender Sebring, Elaine Allensworth, Stuart Luppescu, and John Q. Easton, *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010). See also: Matthew Clifford, Ellen Behrstock-Sherratt, and Jenni Feters, “The Ripple Effect: A Synthesis of Research on Principal Influence to Inform Performance Evaluation Design” (Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, May 2012), [http://www.air.org/files/1707\\_The\\_Ripple\\_Effect\\_d8\\_Online.pdf](http://www.air.org/files/1707_The_Ripple_Effect_d8_Online.pdf); and Davis Jenkins, “Redesigning Community College for Completion: Lessons from Research on High-Performing Organizations” (New York: Community College Research Center, Columbia University, 2011), <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?UID=844>.

<sup>4</sup>Public Agenda, “Mission of the Heart” (2008), <http://publicagenda.org/reports/mission-heart>.

Throughout, we heard leaders emphasize the urgency of their work. Two principals put it similarly:<sup>5</sup>

*The stakes are high. These are kids, these are their lives that we are talking about. If they don't get an education, they're not going to be able to live productive lives. If they don't learn how to be citizens of a democracy, democracy is going to struggle.*

—Principal, High School 2

*It's all about serving these kids. We've got to put productive citizens out of here every year.*

—Principal, High School 1

### Engaging and supporting staff

These leaders realize that a strong vision alone does not ensure that staff will follow wholeheartedly. Across these nine schools, we met leaders who genuinely engage their staff in building and maintaining the structures, practices and confidence to fulfill their vision.

*He put the power in our hands. He is the leader, but he uses leadership to find out from the teachers what would work.* —Teacher, High School 3

In each of these schools, we heard that teachers are included in important decision-making processes. Many leaders consulted with teachers on policies involving discipline and data use. Most schools we visited involve teachers in hiring decisions. In addition, leaders give staff reasonable autonomy in developing and testing instructional practices, in figuring out how to organize their teams and collaborate most effectively and in determining how to best utilize and work with tutors, coaches and intervention specialists.

Moreover, we learned that these leaders make it a point to engage with each of their staff individually. As part of their daily routine, the principals we met observe their teachers' classrooms, provide constructive feedback and find out what their teachers need in order to improve their teaching. Whether it's instructional advice, extra materials or a day off, these principals work to help their teachers succeed.

School leaders' engagement efforts and strong visions gain them trust and respect from their staff. The teachers we spoke to told us they feel recognized by their school leaders as professionals and treated with respect. They sang their leaders' praises and greatly value their leaders' strong guidance and inclusive management style.

*He's trained us to be a family. He models that.*

*He shows a very deep respect and a deep caring for all of the people that he works with.*

—Teacher, High School 2

*If I have a problem, I feel free to go talk to them.*

*I'm not intimidated.*

—Teacher, High School 1

### Holding everyone accountable for student learning

The leaders we met take personal responsibility for their school's success. Most visible to staff and students, these leaders show the same commitment they expect from everyone else in the school.

Teachers and parents told us that their principals are always available and approachable during and after school hours; that they are often the first to enter the school buildings and the last to leave; and that they see them as tireless advocates in the community. Students in all nine schools said that their principals and assistant principals talk to them regularly in the hallways, call them by their names and ask them about their days, their schoolwork and their families.

*She'll ask you how you're doing today in the hallway. She'll say, "Hey, you're doing your work? What's the answer to this problem?" She cares about everything we do. She wants the best for us, and she's like a second mom. She's a school mom.*

—Student, High School 4

In turn, we heard that administrators in these schools do not hesitate to hold their staff and students accountable for their school's mission and success—sometimes doing so with surprising force. The respect and trust their leadership has earned them seem to go a long way in this endeavor.

<sup>5</sup>Quotes in this report may have been shortened from the original or corrected slightly for clarity.

Some of the principals we met are not shy about calling or stopping by their students' homes to remind students and parents that punctuality and preparation are non-negotiable expectations.

*In the beginning of the school year, 7:30, I was giving people wake-up calls: "Hey, this is your dean. Wake up." —Dean of Students, Elementary School 1*

Similarly, in these schools no teacher seems able to fly under the radar. We heard that principals in these schools talk straight with their staff and are certain to remind them of their responsibilities and work ethic.

*"If you're not here for the kids, you're in the wrong building. Here's the door. You need to leave now." That's more or less how I opened up my meeting. —Principal, Middle School 1*

*If you didn't have those IEPs [individualized education plans] done before the last day of school, he would tell you, "You're not getting your last check." —Teacher, High School 3*

*If our data is not great and we're not showing growth, then our principal comes to us in our team meetings and says, "Hey, I noticed this kid's data is slipping; what are you going to do about it?" Then we have to have an action plan for it. —Teacher, Middle School 2*

## #2: Teachers and administrators are dedicated to their school's success and committed to making a difference in their students' lives.

*There are a lot of teachers who really give everything they've got. They spend a lot of hours outside of school getting ready, grading and doing whatever to make things work. —Teacher, High School 1*

*She [the principal] is the bomb at what she does, because she honestly cares. She cares about the school. She cares about the kids. She cares about the city. She cares about football. She cares about it all. —Parent, Elementary School 1*

The educators we met seem to have taken responsibility for students' success and thus the fate of the entire school. In all the schools we visited, leadership is known to frequently appeal to staff by asking: "Are we doing what is best for our students? Will this help our students succeed?" Teachers share these values and evaluate one another and their teams with the same questions. In an environment characterized by common goals, supportive relationships among colleagues, and trust and respect for the school's administration, such accountability is valued.

*If someone needs you after school, no one's sitting there saying, "I'm not going to stay 30 minutes after school, I'm not getting paid for it." —Teacher, Elementary School 1*

Teachers in these schools recognize that what is best for their children is not always exactly what is stipulated in their contracts, but if they feel the need to exert extra efforts—whether it involves their personal time or even their own money—they are often prepared to do so. We routinely heard that teachers work late, or early in the mornings and on weekends, to ensure that their students receive the quality instruction or individualized attention they need. Many teachers have committed to additional duties—such as running after-school programs, coaching sports teams, taking students on college visiting trips, visiting student homes—that they know make their schools a better place to teach and learn.

*You'll see teachers here that say, "I do what's best because that's what the kids need, that's what the parents want." When you're operating under that ideology, you won't fail because you're going to go above and beyond. —Principal, Elementary School 2*

School leaders in these schools lead by example. Across all nine schools, we met administrators deeply committed and connected to students, staff and the wider community. They are known to walk the hallways, call students by name and ask them about their days, their schoolwork and their families. They routinely check in with teachers and try to provide whatever is needed so that teachers can teach effectively and happily. And they make themselves available to parents. They are present and approachable at academic and extracurricular events, and they often pick up the phone to contact individual families to share both good and bad news about students. Overall, the leaders we met are known to dedicate many extra hours to their school.

*At any school function, you will see the principal. You can always count on [his] support. I know from ball games and such, that man is always present.*  
—Parent, Middle School 1

*He gave me his cellphone. You can reach him at any time. That's truly a dedicated person. I appreciate that.* —Parent, High School 2

Across schools, we saw that school leaders' dedication and commitment can motivate staff, as well as community partners, to go the extra mile to "do whatever is best for our students."

*The principal is a great person to work with. He is a fantastic leader. He is so positive. Working with him, you just want to do all these things.*  
—Community Partner, High School 2

*He'll be here until nine, ten o'clock sometimes. When the kids see that, it makes them want to succeed, and it makes us want to work hard. I look at the clock and it's 3:30 and I'm thinking, "Is there anything else I can do before I leave?"* —Teacher, Middle School 1

*If she [principal] looks at us and says, "Can you stay?" we do it.* —Teacher, Elementary School 1

### Beyond academic support

The "what is best for our children" mentality expands far beyond providing academic help. Teachers and administrators at these schools emphasized the importance of connecting to students on a personal level and building relationships with them as friends, mentors and even surrogate parents. At several schools, they spoke of providing for students' basic needs first—especially food, but also extending to additional provisions paid for by donations or by the teachers and administrators themselves. Staff purchase shoes, jackets, clothes and underwear for students out of their own pockets. They emphasized that students can learn properly only after these basic needs are met.

*If a student comes in after a doctor's appointment at 10:00 and says, "I'm hungry," I feed him. If he comes in and he doesn't have a coat at 8:30, by 8:35 I have a coat for him. We meet those basic needs, many times before we even start to teach them.*  
—Teacher, Elementary School 1

These schools also demonstrated awareness that incidental factors may heavily influence student learning. Administrators think about the entire student experience—not just the classroom time. Some district and school leaders spoke passionately about the importance of students' bus rides and lunch periods, both areas in which conscious policymaking has produced a more invested staff, a better student experience and even significant cost savings. At other schools, teachers and administrators make it a point to extend warm welcomes to students upon their arrival at school to ensure their day starts off on a positive note.

### Making a difference

*Many of us grew up within miles of the school. We want to make it better for our kids. We have a vested interest in their success. This, I think, is key to how successful we are.* —District Administrator, Middle School 1

Teachers' and administrators' commitment to whatever is best for the children, regardless of their formal job description, often stems from a sense of personal connection with the children and their situations. Many express a deep desire to make differences in their students' lives, and they are proud to be able to do this at their school. Some teachers consider the school to be one of few places where many of their students feel safety, structure and encouragement. Others are personally familiar with the situations of their students' upbringing and wish to elevate them as far as they can.

*I think the success comes from us knowing the socioeconomic problems of the area. We've lived it, and I think that's why the kids are so important to us. What happens to them when they go home matters to us.* —Teacher, High School 1

*I get these kids. These kids are me. I was these kids. I'm really making sure that they are always kept in the forefront of any decision that's made.*  
—Principal, Middle School 2

### #3: School leaders provide genuine opportunities and incentives for teachers to collaborate, and teachers say that collaboration and sharing best practices are keys to their effectiveness.

*I don't give it a second thought to run into someone's room and say I need help or I created this great lesson, check it out. Everybody's willing to share and help you. —Teacher, Middle School 1*

Teamwork and collaboration are the modus operandi at these schools. Teachers consistently attributed much of their schools' academic successes to the staff's commitment to collaboratively interpret standards and benchmarks, plan and align instruction across classrooms and grade levels, develop curricula, analyze data, evaluate teaching methods and assessments, discuss students' issues and solve problems as they arise. In their own words, teamwork and collaboration are about “sharing,” “helping,” “learning,” “improving” and “succeeding.”

Importantly, the teachers we met not only believe that teamwork and collaboration are important to their success and to the success of the entire school, they also enjoy working together, communicating to us that teamwork is essential to their professional happiness and satisfaction.

*I love the team that I work with. We have such a great rapport. If I have a problem and I'm uncertain, I can turn to anybody here and say, “I need help.” —Teacher, Elementary School 1*

*We all collaborate on ideas. We figured out a way to put our ideas together so that we can enjoy what we're teaching but also share responsibilities with helping the other teachers do what they like to do. —Teacher, High School 2*

#### What do these nine schools do to foster teacher collaboration?

- Craft shared goals and values.
- Foster a sense of collective responsibility for student outcomes.
- Make sure teacher collaboration includes fun and downtime.
- Align instruction across classrooms.
- Designate regular planning times with set agendas.
- Organize in-house professional development to harness teacher expertise.
- Collect, analyze and respond to data on student performance.
- Encourage team teaching among those with overlapping content.
- Provide incentives, monetary or otherwise, to encourage collective responsibility and teamwork.

#### School leaders facilitate teacher collaboration

Teamwork and collaboration did not sprout out of nowhere in these schools. We heard about school leaders who purposely put structures and routines in place that break down silos, foster teamwork and minimize competition. Most schools have designated subject-based and grade-level planning times, thus encouraging both inter- and inner-grade-level collaborations. In some schools, teachers are formally paired together to align instruction across core subjects. Other schools introduced the “professional learning communities” approach, in which teachers meet weekly to discuss their progress, observe one another's classrooms, give feedback and even model instructional strategies for one another. Two of the elementary schools have implemented proprietary reading and math instruction programs that prescribe teamwork among teachers.

We also heard that school leaders have found ways to incentivize collaboration. At one school, all teachers are invited to summer team-building trips during which, among many activities, groups of teachers prepare presentations for one another from a common professional

development book. At another school, teachers are given monetary awards when their entire grade passes an internal assessment benchmark. Teachers told us they are motivated to help pass all kids across the grade level, not just the ones they teach. They are thus encouraged to share strategies and ideas with one another.

When hiring new staff, many of the principals and teachers we spoke to said that a decisive factor is whether a prospective teacher is a good team player, shares the school's mind-set and expresses genuine commitment to collaboration. In most schools, teachers are involved in the hiring of new colleagues in their subject area. In one school, interviewees are asked to teach a class, exposing them immediately to the feedback of their peers. In turn, new teachers exposed to this practice report feeling more confident in their first interactions with fellow teachers.

*[For my interview, I was teaching a lesson in which I had 20 kids in the classroom and 11 adults in my room staring back at me. Now, when I go to a colleague for help, I don't have that feeling of, "What do they think about me?" I already know these people believe in me. They hired me because they believe in me. — Teacher, Elementary School 3]*

### #4: Teachers regard student data as clarifying and helpful, and they use it to plan instruction.

In all nine schools, we heard that data plays a crucial role in the planning of instruction, the design of interventions, the approach to test preparation and more. Although schools vary in the extent to which they develop systematic procedures for preparing and sharing students' data, all of the schools we visited told us that they are experimenting (or are already satisfied) with efforts to make the most of the information they have available. At the beginning of the new school year, these schools set aside time for teachers to study incoming student performance on state assessments. Throughout the year, teachers use short-cycle assessments and weekly grades from tests and homework to monitor student progress. They analyze data on particular test questions and concepts and are ready to intervene immediately if a student falls behind.

*We look at everything about the kid. We look at their Lexiles [reading assessment scores] three times a year. If they only read at a 200 reading level, then we know no wonder they're having so much trouble in social studies and science.*

—Teacher, Middle School 1

*We look at the data and we see, "Oh, my gosh, look at how this kid has grown. He doesn't need to be in [this ability group] anymore. He needs to be in another group now." Or we say, "I don't know what's with this kid, maybe a life event has gone on for this kid, this kid needs a little more support."*

—Administrator, Elementary School 3

Data use is augmented by teamwork and collaboration. Teachers told us that they compare individual student performance across subjects to develop the most effective intervention approach. They use data to work with intervention specialists and to assign effective tutors and mentors. In most schools, a "data person" has emerged—formally or informally—who makes data digestible to all teachers, especially those who are least comfortable with the use of student performance data, and ensures consistent use.

### #5: Principals and teachers have high expectations for all students and reject any excuses for academic failure.

*Failure is not an option. You can go from being an academic emergency to being awarded the presidential blue ribbon. —Teacher, High School 3*

In these schools, all students are expected to succeed academically. Teachers and administrators said that they constantly let students know that they expect them to do well and that they accept no excuses for why a student cannot do work or does not care about grades. Moreover, administrators, teachers and support staff alike do not allow themselves to resort to excuses when their classes do not meet benchmarks or when individual students fall behind. Instead they work continuously toward finding solutions. It is obvious that much of each school's ability to actually meet the high expectations they talk about depends on the

two assets described above: the presence of a determined and respected leader and teachers' readiness to work together and employ data to improve their instruction and plan interventions.

### What do these nine schools do to communicate high expectations to students?

- Communicate and demonstrate that there are no excuses for lack of effort and ambition.
- Organize frequent, personal conversations between individual students and teachers.
- Enact consistent, schoolwide disciplinary rules and procedures.
- Intervene with students directly when expectations are not met.
- Talk to individual students about their short-term (classroom) and long-term (life) goals.
- Ensure that staff remain a reliable source of guidance and support.
- Model punctuality, hard work and respect.
- Demonstrate school pride in academic achievement.
- Make AP and college prep classes available.
- Foster relationships with local colleges and alumni.
- Provide tangible incentives to reward hard work and good behavior.

### Communicating high expectations to students

From what we heard and saw, these schools' high expectations for their students extend far beyond passing the state achievement tests; they are about better grades, greater knowledge, a more developed skill set and more mature and responsible behavior.

Teachers and school leadership express their expectations through constant encouragement and clear reminders. They routinely talk to each student individually about his or her academic progress and needs, developing clear plans and goals. These conversations take place on a regular

basis—formally and informally—so that students cannot fall through the cracks and can be consistently held accountable for their work.

*We do a lot of talking to the students. With some, you have to tell them that a D is not good enough. Then you try to show them their potential by pulling out their positives—their strengths—and working with those. Even for those kids that you think, “Oh, my gosh, what’s going to happen to them?” you find something they’re strong at and emphasize that.*  
—Teacher, High School 1

In addition, teachers and school leadership express their expectations by means of their own behavior and dedication. They spoke explicitly about modeling punctuality, hard work and ambition as well as the collegial, cooperative and respectful behavior they expect to see in their students.

*We’re prepared. We’re on time. We’re here together. We model what is expected.* —Teacher, Elementary School 1

*At the beginning of my freshman class, I let them know where I came from. Then I go on to say, “You can have anything in life you want if you’re willing to work for it. I could have stayed where I came from and done nothing with myself like a lot of my family members, but I wasn’t okay with that. If I can do it, anybody can do it.”* —Teacher, High School 1

Across teacher, parent and student focus groups, we heard that teachers and school leadership routinely make extra time to meet with students before and after class, during lunch breaks and even over the phone, outside of school hours (in many cases sharing phone and contact information with them and their parents), signaling that they are always available to help students with their work.

*I have never had one time that if I wanted to come in and talk to them that they wouldn’t come in early or come in late.* —Parent, Middle School 1

*If you’re having trouble in your classroom, you can always go to the teacher after school or before school. They are willing to help you.*  
—Student, High School 3

Moreover, the teachers and school leaders with whom we spoke did not let students get away with excuses for being late, forgetting homework, not caring for a subject or not being interested in education after high school. They explained that while they care deeply about the family and life circumstance of their students, they do not see those as valid reasons for failure to meet their expectations. In the elementary schools we visited, this could mean instructing children on how to be persistent when trying to get their parents' signatures and to make sure that they are in school on time. In one of the middle schools, students received \$15 each to spend at the end-of-year book fair, leaving them few excuses for not having done their summer reading when they return in the Fall. Guidance counselors at one high school are known to catch up with students in the lunchroom and on sports fields to discuss postgraduation plans.

*We don't let our kids get away with anything, no excuses. We've had kids say, "My mom was passed out on the couch." [I say,] "I don't care that your mom was passed out on the couch. Put a pen in her hand and you make her sign the paper."*

—Teacher, Elementary School 1

*I said, "So what's going to make a difference for you? Would it make a difference if I called you every night? All right, I'm going to call you every night," and I did. I called every night for the rest of the year.*

—Administrator, Elementary School 3

All these practices and behaviors are embedded in larger school cultures that stress the importance of education and focus on instilling college and professional aspirations in all students, from K through 12th grade. In addition to plastering school walls with college flags, displaying charts on the student body's best ACT scores and publicly listing the colleges students had applied to or received scholarships from, the schools we visited maintain personal connections with their local colleges (through tutoring, mentoring or teaching programs), bring alumni back to speak about their college experiences, offer AP and college prep classes, arrange internships with local industries and, more broadly, routinely organize opportunities for their students to personally meet and interact with professional adults, particularly those who share their race, ethnicity and gender.

All of this is not to say that 100 percent of students are successful in these schools. These schools, too, see students fall behind and not catch up. We heard of students dropping out or leaving because they or their parents decided the school was not the right place for them. Overall, however, students at these schools perform significantly better than students at other schools with similar demographics.

## #6: School leaders and teachers set high expectations for school discipline and the behavior of all students.

Discipline, we heard, is an important part of the high expectations and "no excuses" culture we saw in these schools. Leadership and staff, including support staff, follow consistent rules and procedures when responding to negative behavior, and they reinforce positive behavior at every turn. Some schools spend several days or weeks at the beginning of each school year practicing with their students the types of behaviors they want to see throughout the year. Teachers talked about feeling responsible for the behavior of all children at the school; a common disciplinary approach thus means that the language and rules they employ are understood by all students throughout the building. Moreover, we frequently heard that teachers particularly appreciate their principals' concerted approaches to discipline. By instigating shared expectations for students' behaviors and upholding a consistent, schoolwide approach to disciplinary issues, the school leadership we met has cleared the way for their teachers to teach rather than manage their students.

*I work in a variety of schools, and there are a lot of schools I go to and it is frenetic, and you walk in here and it's not. It is quiet. There is a level of organization here so that a kid can sit down and be organized in the morning, get their act together, and so that they can learn that day.* —Teacher, Middle School 2

*It doesn't matter who it is; if a kid is walking down the hall and you tell them they're going to yellow [card], they get it. They know exactly what that means.* —Teacher, Elementary School 1

Consequently, students lauded the safe, respectful and amicable atmosphere among them and their peers.

*We have a family atmosphere. Everyone knows everyone, and if you get in trouble for something, you can go to the principal [and] he won't yell at you.*

—Student, Middle School 1

*Everybody is really strict for a reason. Because in the real world, if we're acting crazy and everything, then we don't get detentions or suspensions—we go to jail, or we have to pay a ticket. They teach us responsibility, respect, loyalty and lots of other virtues.*

—Student, Elementary School 3

*Everybody gets along. There's no cliques or anything like that. You'll be walking down the hallway and just say hi to everybody. It's real nice.*

—Student, High School 1

## #7: Schools offer students nontraditional incentives for academic success and good behavior.

*Something good about our school is when you do all your homework, we get to have Fun Fridays.*

—Student, Elementary School 1

*If we don't get in trouble, we win things. It gives us a goal to strive for and come to school for and learn and try harder for.*

—Student, Middle School 1

In all the schools we visited, teachers and school leadership talked about incentivizing student academic success and good behavior. Incentives range from ice pops for perfect attendance, to laptops and cellphones (sponsored through local business partners) for attaining a high GPA, to gradewide bowling trips for having passed the Ohio state tests. Informally, teachers constantly create new incentives. Several teachers explained that they feel it's important to present students with some immediate, tangible rewards, rather than always deferring to the value of education in the future. Some teachers had used free lunches and homework passes to bargain with individual students for greater academic effort. They feel that these interactions also help them to build rapport and trust.

*And I'm on my way out to lunch one day and one of my students yells out the window, "Get me something to eat." I hopped in my car and I just grabbed her a burger and fries, come back, give it to her, and now she owes me. How is she going to pay me back? I don't care about the money. When I need something academically, she's going to take care of that.*

—Teacher, High School 4

Some of the schools we visited are able to pay for their incentive programs with help from business partners, but others do not have this luxury. Some schools use funds from well-organized parent-teacher organizations or, in the absence of such a group, solicit funds from generous community members. Still others, in the absence of these sources, simply stick to low- or no-cost incentives, which—designed creatively—stick out as strongly in students' comments as any well-funded effort.

## #8: Students feel valued, loved and challenged. They are confident that their teachers will help them succeed and be at their side if they hit a rough patch.

*They can be your friends. You can go to them for advice. They help you individually, too. If you're having trouble learning something, you can just go to them personally, and they will help you to figure out like what your problem is.*

—Student, High School 1

Across all the schools we visited, it is clear that students have internalized the culture of high expectations and that they recognize administrators' and teachers' loyalty to "whatever is best for our children." The students we talked to are well aware and proud of their school's success, and they recognize and value their teachers' and administrators' commitment. Many emphasized the personal connection they feel to teachers and other staff. They often described these adults as mentors and confidants, and many spoke of their schools as families. They feel that there is help when they struggle and additional challenges when they excel. And they are aware of their paths forward, beyond their present school days.

*We all love our school. We're a big, happy family.*  
—Student, Elementary School 2

*The teachers make sure you have an understanding of where you need to be, rather than where you are at.*  
—Student, High School 2

*Our teachers, they push us. I don't know how to explain it, but when they teach us new things, they push us until they know we actually understand it.*  
—Student, Elementary School 3

### #9 While parent and community support can be an asset, principals and teachers do not see their absence as an insurmountable barrier to student learning and achievement.

Conventional wisdom holds—and many research studies support—that involved parents and invested community partners can make tremendous differences for students' learning and a school's overall success. This also was the case in this study, and we highlight remarkable examples of parental and community engagement below. Importantly, however, several schools in this project are clearly successful without such resources. In these schools, school leaders and teachers feel they have little leverage engaging parents and few community resources to draw upon. But they emphasized that this is no reason for them not to succeed with their students. They concluded that they need to be successful without these resources and are indeed managing to do so.

*I do believe that the parents really do want what's best for their children. They just don't always know how to do it, so they expect us to do it and so that's what we do.* —Teacher, High School 1

#### Some schools take parental engagement upon themselves

We saw schools, especially the urban charter and public lottery-based schools, for which parental engagement is an integral part of their success. They have high expectations of parents and follow clearly developed procedures and rules to communicate them to parents. They expect parents

to attend meetings, sign symbolic contracts and complete volunteer hours at the school. They call parents regularly to keep them updated on student progress. And they expect parents to step in when a student does not follow the disciplinary rules at the school or falls behind academically. Holding parents accountable goes hand in hand with providing diverse and structured opportunities for parents to be present and influential in the school (for example, volunteering in the classroom, helping out at events, monitoring recess and so on) and to be able to stay up-to-date and engaged with their students' learning at home (through websites, reading logs, offering personal advice on how to help their children study at home)—so that no excuses can be made.

*[We expect our teachers to] get on the phone and say [to the parent], "If you can't come in at this time, can you come at this time? When can you come? I will be there." There's no excuse for the parent, and it's no excuse for the teacher.*

—Administrator, Elementary School 3

*When parent-teacher conferences come up, our principal calls not once a week, but twice a week telling our parents that there is a conference. She sends out newsletters also, but she mainly focuses on talking to them personally.*

—Student, High School 4

#### Some schools benefit from outstanding community partnerships

We saw in these nine schools that community partnerships can make a tremendous difference in the everyday life of a high-needs school. Most schools have strong working relationships with higher education institutions in the areas, using their premises for events, summer classes and meetings. We met principals who have successfully leveraged their personal relationships and friendships in the community to bring in regular tutors, encourage local philanthropic organizations to fund-raise for them and get donations from local businesses. The most pronounced examples of community partnerships that we encountered are at Robert A. Taft Information Technology High School (Cincinnati), which partners with Cincinnati Bell, and MC<sup>2</sup> STEM High School (Cleveland), which partners with both GE and the Great Lakes Science Center. Through these partnerships, these schools have vastly

increased financial resources, established a large, reliable and effective mentoring program for all students and gained access to a multitude of learning opportunities.

*To me the community offers so many more assets to any school than just money. The access to trained professionals. Our students don't necessarily know what engineers do or look like, and they don't learn that in their school through their "Intro to Engineering" course. Bringing those people in and letting kids actually talk to them and letting kids actually learn from them . . . I'm not just talking about career day, where they come in and talk for an hour about what they do to a group of 100 kids. I mean to really have the kid that doesn't want to ask the question that they think is silly in front of the group, but will ask the question if they have the opportunity to be in more of an intimate conversation with people.*

—Principal, High School 2

We pressed hard to identify difficulties that may arise when bringing non-educators and individuals with no direct personal investment into the school for help and collaboration, but we found little indication of such. Instead, principals, teachers, students and parents only laud community partnerships. They see them as valuable resources when implementing immediate interventions for students who fall behind. They also provide unique opportunities for students to build long-term, stable relationships with professional adults. Moreover, these business partnerships are lifelines when more money is needed for school projects, student incentives and celebrations, as well as to help out individual students in crisis and much more.

*I'm not an educator, but I can give money. If they need money for this and that, just tell me how much and I'll give it.*

—Community Partner, Elementary School 1

*Initially, I really did not believe that they [the corporate partners] were going to do what they said they were going to do. Then, one Saturday, a hundred or so workers came in this building, painted the walls, every locker, everything. When I saw that, then I felt like, "Well, maybe they are going to stick*

*in here and help us out." Then they started their assistance program, then there was an internship program. They have been very, very instrumental in quite a bit of our success because they did what they said they were going to do.*

—Principal, High School 3

Community partners we interviewed echoed all the benefits we heard from schools about the partnerships. They care deeply about the students they serve and enjoy being part of a successful school. Larger corporations and philanthropic partners also talked about benefits these partnerships hold for them, including good PR and the opportunity to collaborate and learn from educators about instructional and pedagogical strategies.

Moreover, it became clear that a lot of what keeps community partners engaged is an admiration for the schools and their leadership. Many said that they personally enjoy working with the principals of these schools and their staff—and that they truly respect and trust their work.

*Everyone in GE is willing to help. They really make connections with the kids here. I think everyone is so willing to help and love these kids.*

—Community Partner, High School 2

*I'll come down and just stay for some of their programs once in a while, just to be involved. It's heartwarming what these kids do and how they feel about their teachers and their staff.*

—Community Partner, Elementary School 1

## **#10. School leaders and teachers seek to continuously improve practices and student achievement. They take today's success as tomorrow's starting point.**

These schools do not think of themselves as having reached the summit of academic excellence. Most of them received the *Schools of Promise* award over a few consecutive years, but we saw no complacency. They are proud of their students' successes but believe they can still do better. School

leaders and teachers could all point to subject areas or instructional approaches they want to improve on in the coming years. Hence, to us, an important characteristic of these schools is that they experience the success they have had as motivation to continue to progress. Principals use the momentum to further challenge their teachers; teachers employ it to energize one another and their students.

*We like success, and once you've got a taste of that, you just want to keep going.*  
—Teacher, Middle School 1

*We had a breakthrough about eight years ago where 70 percent of the kids did very well, and the teachers were celebrating and having a great time. I crashed the party and I said, "This is no time to celebrate. Do you want your kid to be in the 30 percent?" We started talking about 100 percent of 100 percent.*  
—Former Principal, High School 3

*The kids work hard. They have stepped up. Because it was important to us, it seems important to them.*  
—Teacher, High School 1

## #11: Each school tells its own story of change and improvement, yet some commonalities exist.

What is the catalyst for reform? How do schools generate impetus for change? These are important but complicated questions to answer. Among the schools we visited, no two schools have experienced an identical path to high student achievement. Not too long ago, some of these schools experienced serious crises and were considered “in academic emergency” by state of Ohio measures. Others, although never failing, long struggled to bring up their achievement scores. Only one school we visited has been successful from the start.

The range of paths to student success taken by these schools should demonstrate to schools of all varieties that there are many ways forward. In the individual school profiles at the end of this report, readers can learn more about each school’s story of success and the practices and policies that leaders, staff and parents say brought about meaningful change in their schools.

Despite their differences, however, some common themes emerge across these nine schools’ stories of success and change—themes that we believe can be informative in efforts to replicate these schools’ success.

For instance, each of these schools has had some sort of “fresh start”—whether by means of new leadership, a fundamental restructuring of the school day, the adoption of a new instructional regime, the deliberate creation of a defining culture or the construction of a new building, or in some cases because they were formed from scratch. In hindsight, at least, most of the staff and administrators we spoke with believe that their fresh start has been effective because it responded directly to actual problems. It presented a possible solution to something specific that people knew was not going well, such as a lack of discipline and safety, not enough time for special interventions or deficient cohesion among staff.

Moreover, staff and administrators told us that they saw instruction improve and scores go up as they became willing to dedicate themselves to new practices wholeheartedly. This open attitude toward better practices often seemed to stem from schools’ constant efforts toward improvement. Even when reforms proved a poor fit and needed adjustment, these staff members maintained a strong and dedicated attitude toward new and innovative practices. This persistent dedication to improvement kept their minds open to new ideas and provided a powerful, constant push toward excellence.

*Maybe what is pushing us forward is the process of always trying something new, of staying fresh, and even if these things don't work, maybe it just keeps us mentally engaged; knowing that we're trying new things and everybody is pushing in the same direction.* —Teacher, Middle School 1

Reform did not necessarily lead to staffing overhauls; in these schools, many veteran staff members remain and are valued for their expertise. Teachers who can tell the school’s story of change and success from firsthand experience are often admired in these schools. They serve as an important resource for incoming teachers and connect well with parents, especially those who were once students in the same buildings—something we learned was not uncommon.

Notably, veteran teachers reminded us and their fellow teachers of the fact that change rarely comes easy. The effective reforms in these schools often involved tough changes to teachers' timeworn routines. But reform in these schools did not entail fleeting efforts. We learned that these schools sought to stick by their reforms and to critically assess their effectiveness through constant data collection and analysis. Though many teachers mentioned initial skepticism or frustration toward difficult reform efforts, they told us that the ultimate success of their reforms, evidenced in their student data, finally won them over.

*There was frustration, but at the same time you saw the results. Their scores were increasing. Kids that weren't reading before were reading.*

*—Teacher, Elementary School 1*



# How Can It Be Sustained? Recommendations Emerging from This Research

Once achieved, success cannot be taken for granted. Too many Ohio schools that bring up students' academic performance find themselves struggling within a few years or less to sustain their success. Of all the schools that have been recognized as *Schools of Promise* since the program started in 2002 and remain eligible today, three-quarters did not meet the criteria for the 2010–11 list. Although about 20 percent missed the requirements only narrowly, more than half failed to meet the criteria for multiple reasons.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup>Since 2002, exactly 592 schools have been recognized as *Schools of Promise*. Of those, 85 have closed or reconfigured. Out of the 507 *Schools of Promise* that are currently open, 122 made it onto the 2010–11 list (24.1 percent) and 385 did not (75.9 percent). Of the schools that did not make it onto the list, 101 just narrowly missed the criteria (19.9 percent of open schools); 284 missed the criteria for multiple reasons (56 percent of open schools).

One problem high-performing, high-needs schools often face is that their school leaders get offers to leave and bring the magic to other struggling schools. In a Public Agenda survey of superintendents, nearly half (47 percent) said they have moved a successful principal to a low-performing school to turn that school around.<sup>7</sup> If performance is tied too closely to an individual's leadership style or personality, a high-achieving school that loses its principal may find its success in jeopardy. In some of the schools we visited, this concern was real: Their esteemed principals relocated to other struggling schools, were about to retire or were promoted to higher posts in the district. Leaders and their districts must therefore understand how to leave the infrastructure in place to ensure that their efforts to replicate success elsewhere do not undermine success where it exists.

Needless to say, schools in which leadership is stable also grapple with how to sustain staff's motivation and collegiality; the effectiveness of instruction, discipline and intervention methods; levels of family and community support and ultimately student performance and graduation rates. For most schools we visited, these questions were imminent. They had experienced funding cuts that eliminated interventions, programs and positions that they saw as important to their success.

Here we offer some insights on sustainability drawn from our observations and from what the educators, teachers, students and parents we met believed is needed for them to remain successful over time.

### Plan for smooth principal transitions

From what we heard and saw, the esteemed leaders we met are hard acts to follow. Staff and parents emphasized that it would be important for a potential new principal to take over in a respectful way and demonstrate the same dedication and leadership qualities they admired in their outgoing leaders. Even though they expected a new principal to bring in new energy, staff and parents in these already successful schools generally felt that a new leader must first focus on learning about and supporting successful practices that are already in place by working closely with staff and collaborating with the departing principal.

Although this message may contradict the instincts of many new leaders—who may like to put their own stamp on things—we heard it even from successful administrators themselves. One administrator told us that she gained trust and respect when she first started at her school by backing off from some reforms she had originally intended to implement because her staff resisted them. In another school, we heard about a new principal losing support because she abandoned routine procedures that the staff considered essential to their success.

Moreover, we often heard teachers and staff say they hoped any new principal would be just as knowledgeable and in tune with the community as their current principal. Although personal style and rapport with the community may be hard to replicate, new leaders can focus on understanding and protecting the policies and priorities that characterize a successful school, including those that are likely to strengthen their knowledge of and connection to the community they serve.

### Engage teachers

Most teachers and parents at the schools we visited are optimistic that staff can maintain the culture and practices that are helping students in these schools succeed even if a valued principal leaves. Their optimism seems to rest on three interdependent supports. First, teachers told us they are given an active role in developing, testing and redesigning the practices that make their schools successful. As such, we got the sense that these teachers truly “own” the changes and reforms their schools have seen. They expressed genuine commitment to their school's overall mission, and they strongly believe they are doing the right things. In fact, some explicitly said they would fight to keep good practices in place if new leadership challenged them.

*The most successful schools are the schools where the teachers set the example and self-check and move forward. If a new principal comes in to do something that we don't like, then we can say, “This is why we do this. This is what we do—we, who have been here and will be here past the days when you are not going to be here.” —Teacher, High School 4*

<sup>7</sup>Public Agenda, “Rolling Up Their Sleeves” (2003).

Second, the teachers we spoke to felt that a number of formal, routine structures and procedures in the school (for example, teamwork, discipline, interventions) set clear expectations and will help them stay on track even if leadership changes.

*[If the principal left,] I'm not so sure anything would change as far as the staff. We all know what's expected of us. —Teacher, Elementary School 1*

Finally, many teachers said they trust the strength of their collegial culture. They emphasized that their professional and personal bonds will help them weather a hypothetical difficult leadership transition.

*Probably one of our greatest strengths as a staff is that we like each other and get along so well. We can walk into meetings and have some serious disagreements, but walk out of the same meeting friends. —Teacher, High School 1*

Several times, administrators also emphasized that they do not doubt their staff will be able to carry forward their school's success, even if new leadership comes in.

*We had good visionary leadership here with the principals and superintendents, who have come and gone, but this building is a living, breathing entity, and it does its own thing. If [the principal] and I left, we have people in this building who could take this program and run with it. We have our staff, especially our department heads, they run their programs and they know what's best to get our kids to go in the direction they need to go. —Assistant Principal, High School 1*

### When hiring, make sure incoming teachers endorse the school's vision and practices

*And when I came here last year, there was no question about what the expectations were. Every teacher here could name them: "Failure is not an option." —Teacher, High School 3*

These schools, we heard from administrators and teachers, hire carefully and strategically. In order to sustain their schools' and students' success, administrators pay much attention to a new applicant's mind-set and readiness to

endorse the school's mission and practices. As some put it, "We hire people like us." In many schools we visited, this means including teachers (and sometimes even parents) in the hiring process.

Moreover, we learned that these schools make a particular effort to communicate expectations and the school's overall mission to incoming staff. Newcomers are often paired with veterans to learn about the ways a school is run. A number of schools preferred first bringing in teachers as substitutes and hiring them full-time only once they have proven they are the kinds of team players that make these schools successful.

### Leverage a great reputation

These schools have a reputation—in their community and beyond—for serious academic rigor and as great working and learning environments. Such a reputation goes a long way toward attracting (and motivating) ambitious teachers, students and parents and gaining protection and support from district leadership. The schools we visited are aware of their reputations and their benefits, and they take care not to jeopardize them.

From teachers who had been hired since their school gained its reputation for academic rigor and high student achievement, we often heard that they had worked particularly hard to get their positions. They endured classroom reduction and substitute contracts for years in the hope of securing full-time positions. First-year teachers are aware that these schools expect them to perform well, and they prep themselves for the challenge. Established teachers know that it is against their best interest to be the exception to the rule in a school known for its great teachers.

A good reputation also seems to protect a school from potentially disruptive district-level interference. We saw some successful schools that were nurtured as the darlings of their districts and others that seemed to have been left to their own devices. In both cases, once there is success, districts think twice before initiating any changes that may undermine the school's success.

## Be careful about burnout

Some policy analysts argue that given the demands of teachers' jobs, it is unrealistic to expect most teachers to stay in this line of work for 25 or 30 years and that the profession needs to prepare itself to work with younger educators for shorter terms and expect that successful teachers will eventually switch to more lucrative and less exhausting careers.<sup>8</sup>

The nine schools we visited, however, highlighted the pivotal role of teachers' experiences and connections with the community in making a school successful. We also heard from many teachers that they are passionate about working in high-needs schools and do not want to leave the profession.

When asked directly, many of the administrators and teachers we met admitted that their jobs are often very tiring, but most rejected the idea that their commitment and dedication are physically and emotionally unsustainable. Instead, they told us that they thrive on their schools' success and that their students' progress and the quality of their relationships with both students and colleagues are a constant source of motivation.

*No matter how crappy I'm feeling—and some days it's crappy—when I get to that north door and I open the door, it's going to be the same crew of kids there every day, looking at you: “Hey, Mr. XX, what's up?” They expect us to be on. That's a powerful responsibility and a motivation for sure.*  
—Teacher, High School 3

Many shared with us their ways of coping with the stressors of their jobs. They listed a wide variety of personal strategies, including taking sabbaticals, traveling, as well as confiding in friends, exercising and more. And several of the administrators we met told us they purposefully try to alleviate stress among their staff by connecting with them regularly, supporting them whenever possible (including granting them a day off when needed) and organizing occasional outings and staff retreats.

Even though the educators we met did not necessarily bring up burnout as an imminent threat to their schools' success and seemed to take it upon themselves to keep job stress at bay, we believe that discussions about the replica-

tion and sustainability of success in public schools need to take this issue seriously. Instead of expecting to lose the best educators to other professions, discussions may need to focus on what it will take to prevent good administrators and teachers from eventually burning out.

## Celebrate success

These schools do not take their success for granted. They continuously work hard to both maintain their status and achieve new goals. And they make it a point to routinely celebrate success, highlighting small and large achievements in a variety of ways. Achievements are recognized with schoolwide announcements, banners and posters decorating school walls, parties, special events, awards ceremonies and “fun days,” and other celebratory initiatives.

Administrators and teachers told us that along their paths to success, celebrating small and large achievements helped them build self-esteem, form closer bonds and win over lingering skeptics. Today, these celebrations continue to promote team spirit and pride and help to keep staff and students energized.

<sup>8</sup>Terry Ryan, vice president for Ohio Programs and Policy with the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, makes this point in an interview with the Dayton Daily News (August 6, 2012).



# School Profiles: Nine Stories of Success

In the following pages, we describe each of the nine schools that we visited for this study. In each school's profile, we provide a short summary introducing the school and highlighting its path to distinction, followed by descriptions of several concrete practices that seem to have helped improve student performance. These profiles are not meant to be comprehensive, and each may outline practices employed at some of the other schools as well. Our goal is to present, across the nine profiles, a rich variety of practices that, according to the educators, parents, students and community partners with whom we spoke, are crucial to bringing about and maintaining their success over time. We hope that the stories that follow will inspire educators and others to imagine and implement smart and innovative ways to improve schools within their own communities, across Ohio and the nation.

# East Garfield Elementary School

Nestled at the edge of downtown Steubenville, overlooking the Ohio River and a majestic expanse of bluffs on the West Virginia shore, this little school is often overlooked beside its much-lauded sister school, Wells Academy. Yet both—as well as the district’s third elementary school—have a place on the state’s selective *Schools of Promise* list for the academic year from 2010 to 2011.

At East, the administrators and teachers we met attribute these schools’ common academic successes in large part to their shared emphasis on reading and math instruction and their heavy use of data—qualities of the proprietary school reform program Success for All (SFA)—which the district purchases for each school. The introduction of SFA signaled a commitment by the district to academic achievement at any cost. The program fundamentally changed education at East Garfield Elementary School.

*The administration said, when we got Success for All, that they never wanted to hear a teacher ever again say that they didn’t have the materials they needed to teach. They stuck with that.*  
—Teacher

*When Success for All came in, it was a whole new world. We got recognized. We had a program. We had a continuous program.*  
—Teacher

Steubenville City School District’s shared elementary education program, we learned, is but one of the pillars supporting East Garfield Elementary’s success; the school is equally defined by its “tough love” approach to school culture and its enthusiastic community of supporters.

2010-2011 Overall Proficiency on State Tests by Grade	East Garfield Elementary	Steubenville City School District
<b>3RD GRADE</b>		
Reading	100%	99.4%
Mathematics	91.9%	95.3%
<b>4TH GRADE</b>		
Reading	96.9%	98.7%
Mathematics	96.9%	98.7%

## Steubenville City School District, Steubenville, Ohio



- Years as *School of Promise*: 5 (2001–02, 2003–04, 2004–05, 2009–10, 2010–11)
- 2010–11 Report Card rating: Excellent with Distinction
- Average daily enrollment: 354 (White: 39%; Black: 37%; Multiracial: 23%; Economically Disadvantaged: 87%; Students with Disabilities: 24%)
- Teachers with at least a master’s degree: 55.3%
- Grades P–5

### Steubenville City School District

- Average daily enrollment: 2,252 (White: 58%; Black: 28%; Multiracial: 13%; Hispanic: 1%; Economically Disadvantaged: 66%; Students with Disabilities: 17%)
- Teachers with at least a master’s degree: 60.7%

At East, genuine love and affection for students seem to find their complement in unapologetic high expectations. “If you expect it, they’ll do it,” said one teacher. “No excuses,” said another. And community support at East, we heard, takes the form of devoted volunteers and donors from all walks of life who take great pride in their city. From its creation through the present, committed community members have been an integral part of the school.

*There’s a lot more pride in the community than people are aware of. People fought for East to be here. They were going to build one super elementary school which would have been up on the hill. The residents said absolutely not. They wanted an elementary school to remain downtown. Everybody’s very excited that East was not forgotten in the plans. It brought a lot of pride back to the area. —Community Partner*

What follows are some of the key practices that appear to support the three pillars of success we observed at East: a strong academic program, a loving yet challenging school culture and the persistent support of community members.

## Basic needs first

*I had a little boy in my class. His shoes were falling apart. I said [to my colleagues], “So-and-so needs a pair of shoes. It’s going to have to come from us.” The same little guy, I don’t know what happened to his binder, but now I feel like it’s my responsibility to go and get the boy a binder. He’s not the only one that I’ve bought a binder for. —Teacher*

Teachers and administrators at East showed us that they believe in taking whatever steps are necessary to make their students’ academic success possible, and that often entails providing for students’ basic needs first. Across the board, they told us they have, out of their own pockets or by means of donations, provided particular students with additional food, clothes, shoes, jackets, book bags, school supplies, bathing suits and other necessities. Though this practice is not official school policy, teachers told us that they now maintain a closet full of clothes and a drawer that always holds food for needy children.

*We have a closet full of clothes we give them. We give them warm clothes. We give them food. We give them food over the weekend when they’re not going to eat. We take care of them, we do. —Teacher*

Administrators even spoke of involving themselves in students’ lives outside the school building, riding the bus or traveling to students’ homes in response to issues. They are acutely aware of events in the community that might affect particular students’ abilities to learn. They feel it is their responsibility to respond to such events when they might involve East students, at one point telling us, in so many words, that when the police arrive first and the fire trucks second, they are there third.

*I’ve watched her hug the children as they walk in the front door and tell them that she loves them. They’re not only caring about what is taking place here, but [in] their kids’ home lives, because some of them might not have it as well at home. —Parent*

*If a kid doesn’t come to school, she’ll [the principal] get in her car and she’ll go to the house, knock on the door: “What’s up?” Because she knows them and she knows the parents, and they know her. —Community Member*

Finally, teachers and administrators spoke of their school as a place where students can feel safe. The school building, recently renovated, is permanently secured, with all entries occurring either by means of an intercom system and passage through the front office or under the supervision of a staff member. Because East Garfield is located so close to downtown Steubenville, staff reported, these safety measures allow the school day to run more smoothly and give students and staff a sense of security.

## Alignment of instruction and discipline

Owing to the district’s adoption of Success for All, instruction throughout East Garfield and across Steubenville city elementary schools is minutely aligned. The same material is taught by the same means at the same time in every classroom in the district. Teachers say that they have the leeway to adapt their teaching methods to student or classroom needs, but—for the most part—their methods are directed by the program.

Disciplinary procedures at East are also aligned. Using color-coded cards, teachers can discipline any student, not just their own. The punishments assigned to each colored card are the same across the school, and teachers do not frown upon those who discipline students other than their own. On the contrary, they believe this practice fosters a strong, disciplined learning environment.

### Students work in groups

At East Garfield Elementary, students often work in groups. Within groups, each student has a distinct function. Students are given points for completing tasks like homework, and the group gets a point if each member does his or her work. If the entire group's reading homework is turned in, we were told, their accomplishment is announced on the loudspeaker. Teachers said this style of group work creates positive peer pressure that motivates students to complete their work.

### Leadership brings in the community

Community pride does not automatically translate into support for a local elementary school. There is no active PTA at East, but there is a robust morning and after-school tutoring program staffed by volunteers ranging from retired teachers to high-profile community members. Also, donations come into the school from a number of community members willing to respond to regular requests from school leaders. These generous contributions of time and money are linked strongly to East's leaders' long-term personal relationships in the community, which they leverage assertively.

Administrators at East are quick to offer their school as the answer to any relation's expressed desire to "give back" or "help out." Volunteers related stories in which they had told one administrator or the other that they would like to contribute in some way and, before they knew it, found themselves tutoring one or two times a week. Similarly, donors spoke of administrators' willingness to simply call up and tell them what sort of donation they need for each school year. In the end, community members told us, these administrators' intense passion and persistence motivate them to become involved at East.

# Citizens Academy Elementary School

Breakthrough Charter Schools, Cleveland, Ohio



When Citizens Academy was founded over a decade ago, the school struggled to live up to its academic ideals. But after administrators and teachers took a summer to visit successful East Coast schools, they consciously crafted a new school culture out of the proven policies and practices they had observed and deemed suitable for their school. The new Citizens dispensed with its formerly apologetic attitude toward its economically disadvantaged students in favor of a stricter, more structured format. “The CA way,” as the school calls it, puts structure, discipline and high expectations first and leaves no room for excuses when students arrive late, forget homework, don’t pay attention in class or fail a test.

*We made excuses. That in itself was a form of discrimination. We were discriminating against our kids because we weren’t expecting the best for them. We were never going to help them to realize their full amazing potential. We were willing to settle for second best for them. That was not okay. —Administrator*

Today, teachers and administrators told us, discipline and high expectations go hand in hand with a commitment to do whatever is necessary to keep each child on the path to academic success and productive citizenship. This means that teachers stay late after school, come in early and participate in Saturday and summer programming to offer all students the instruction and enrichment opportunities they need to stay on track. Motivated by their students’ appreciation, respect and



- Years as *School of Promise*: 4 (2006–07, 2008–09, 2009–10, 2010–11)
- 2010–11 Report Card rating: Excellent
- Average daily enrollment: 408 (Black: 99%; Economically Disadvantaged: 78%; Students with Disabilities: 12%)
- Teachers with at least a master’s degree: 44%
- 2012 National Blue Ribbon Schools nominee
- Grades K–8

2010-2011 Overall Proficiency on State Tests by Grade	Citizens Academy Elementary School	Cleveland Metropolitan School District <sup>9</sup>
<b>3RD GRADE</b> Reading Mathematics	94.1% 98.5%	55.3% 58.3%
<b>4TH GRADE</b> Reading Mathematics	98.6% 97.1%	60.1% 48.9%
<b>5TH GRADE</b> Reading Mathematics	85.7% 82.5%	43.4% 30.4%

<sup>9</sup> For comparison only. Citizens Academy is a charter school not within a school district.

academic success, as well as by the highly collegial atmosphere that characterizes this school, teachers at Citizens Academy declare they would not want to work anywhere else.

Here are a few key factors that make Citizens a favorite place to learn and teach:

### “The CA Way”

When Citizens Academy reformed its practices, administrators and teachers got together to design what they called “the CA way”—a set of high academic and behavioral expectations. The CA way is designed to teach students personal responsibility and discipline, as well as to cultivate in them a positive, ambitious attitude. It includes requirements as to what students must wear, when they must be at school, how they must act in school—toward teachers and toward one another—and the efforts they must put into their work in and out of school.

The CA way also includes strict consequences for a student’s failure to fulfill his or her responsibilities. Central to the CA way is a “no excuses” policy, whereby every student—not just the “bad kids”—must be held accountable for their misdeeds. Students can be disciplined when their in-school behavior and attitudes do not live up to the CA way, as well as when they fail to complete the tasks required of them out of school—such as getting a paper signed by their parents. Designated administrators oversee discipline, make sure that it is applied consistently throughout the building’s classrooms and hallways and defend disciplinary decisions against occasional parental complaints.

*A parent said, “Well, that was my fault. I didn’t sign it.” I said, “Well, we’re in the month of May. You already know the routine, and so does your child. We shouldn’t even be having this discussion. You know what’s expected of you. Unfortunately, your child did receive a detention. Hopefully, this will remind you to make sure that it gets signed next time.”*

—Parent Coordinator

Despite Citizens’ formal disciplinary structure and strict policy of enforcement, we found some flexibility among teachers, administrators and staff as to its application. Everyone was aware that formal discipline may not be effective in some cases, and they felt that as educators they must make efforts to solve student issues in alternate ways if necessary. One administrator related a story in which detention after detention failed to push two students to finish their homework, so she called the students every night, reminding them to do their homework if they had not.

### In-house professional development

Citizens Academy relies on in-house professional development to socialize new teachers into the school’s cultural norms, to help struggling teachers improve and to keep veteran teachers energized.

Professional development takes place in frequent formal and informal collaborations among teachers. Throughout the year, teachers observe, assist and support one another regularly. During the summer, time is set aside for all school staff to come together and work on issues and practices that teachers and the administration deem important.

As part of the hiring process, we were told, applicants must perform a teaching demonstration that other teachers are invited to attend and review. This experience communicates to incoming teachers that they are expected to be open to, and contribute to, a professional learning community. When new teachers arrive, they receive a formal orientation to the school and are paired with experienced teachers who assist them on a daily basis.

Moreover, Citizens’ administration is made up of educational experts on such topics as classroom management issues, mathematics and English curriculum. Teachers who struggle in any of these areas can rely on personalized support from these leaders.

*I became a better math teacher by working with our math coordinator. No other school that I’ve ever worked at had an expert in reading or an expert in math, who comes into your classroom and does hands-on stuff and assists you. —Teacher*

## Parental involvement

When enrolling their children at Citizens Academy, we were told, parents must vow to be active participants in their child's education. Aside from attending orientation meetings and parent-teacher conferences, this means parents agree to transport their child to and from school every day, to make themselves available throughout the day if teachers need to call them, to support the school's disciplinary decisions, to monitor their child's academic progress and to volunteer at the school or at school-sponsored events for at least eight hours each school year. And the school is not shy about pushing parents to fulfill their obligations. Each month, families receive a note listing how many volunteer hours each parent has completed and the ways in which they fulfilled those hours.

*What I've noticed is that a lot of our parents actually compete against each other. "Oh, they're at 15 hours, then I need to put a little bit more in. Oh, I only have an hour. I think I need to get on the ball." Children, when they see that, they'll say, "Mom, we're the only ones who don't have anything by our names." Once a month that reminder goes home.*  
—Parent Coordinator

Citizens Academy couples its high expectations for parental involvement with active support for families in their efforts to fulfill these expectations. We were told that teachers make themselves available year-round to parents, and at the start of each academic year, pairs of teachers make a home visit to the families of each of their students. During these visits, teachers openly discuss with parents their plans and expectations for the coming year. Staff, teachers, students and parents all told us that they value these home meetings highly and that the meetings largely set the tone for an active and supporting teacher-parent partnership.

To foster parental involvement, Citizens also employs a dedicated parent coordinator. The coordinator assists parents with academic and non-academic questions, helps them figure out their volunteer requirements and explains everything that is currently going on at the school. The coordinator also leads meetings of the Parent Advisory Council, or PAC—Citizens' version of the PTA. In addition to these procedural duties, the coordinator

counsels students on personal problems throughout the school day, calls parents with good and bad news regarding their children and meets with parents when it is determined that issues at school might best be resolved at home.

## Saturday school

At Citizens Academy, school does not necessarily end on Friday: Saturday school serves as a valuable opportunity for academic enrichment, particularly in the months leading up to state tests. On Saturday, students are taught important, testable content—math, reading and science—in an engaging format. Each grade level has tailored activities that follow a theme: a race car derby, cooking, geology and volcanoes, game shows, and others. We were told that as a result of efforts like Saturday school, test scores at Citizens have gone up; and perhaps more important, according to one administrator, the kids love learning in the exciting Saturday school format.

In addition to providing academic enrichment, Saturday school at Citizens serves disciplinary functions. Saturday school is at the top of a pyramid of disciplinary measures, starting, at the bottom, with lunch or recess detention and, in the middle, with in- and out-of-school suspension. Students who have racked up three detentions earn a mandatory Saturday school, to which they must come in uniform from 8:00 in the morning until 1:00 in the afternoon.

Saturday instruction is an integral part of Citizens' high performance on state tests. We were told that teachers are compensated for the time they give to Saturday school, but they are not required to participate in this program. Nonetheless, we heard that in this school's collegial culture, everyone's voluntary participation is a given.

*We sink or swim together. We do a lot of Saturday programming for the children, and we all have to help. If the person who has the children that struggle the most feels that they are the ones who have to work after school alone, and they're the ones who have to come in on Saturdays to help alone, then no teacher will ever want to take those children.*  
—Superintendent

# Grove Patterson Academy Elementary School

Toledo City School District, Toledo, Ohio



Grove Patterson Academy was founded in response to the threat that a for-profit company might take over schools in the Toledo City School District. To prove that a hometown Toledo school could produce high-achieving students, teachers and administrators tell us, the teachers union and the city school district worked together to create a school structured unlike any other in the city, with an extended daily and yearly schedule, a special reading program, autonomy in its hiring choices and mandatory parental involvement. Grove Patterson was created with a vision: to be a school where students' best interests come first.

*You'll see teachers here that say, "I do what's best because that's what the kids need, that's what the parents want." When you're operating under that ideology, you won't fail because you're going to go above and beyond. —Principal*

There is no sense that union support for Grove has declined over the years, but teachers know, given current economic conditions, that they



Reprinted with permission of The Blade, Oct. 2000.

2010-2011 Overall Proficiency on State Tests by Grade	Grove Patterson Academy Elementary School	Toledo City School District
<b>3RD GRADE</b> Reading Mathematics	92.1% 86.8%	69.0% 67.3%
<b>4TH GRADE</b> Reading Mathematics	94.9% 97.4%	71.9% 62.4%
<b>5TH GRADE</b> Reading Mathematics	83.8% 56.8%	55.9% 45.0%
<b>6TH GRADE</b> Reading Mathematics	97.5% 82.5%	71.9% 56.9%
<b>7TH GRADE</b> Reading Mathematics	90.9% 90.9%	62.2% 53.7%
<b>8TH GRADE</b> Reading Mathematics	100% 87.2%	69.2% 46.1%

- Years as *School of Promise*: 2 (2004-05, 2009-10)
- 2010–11 Report Card rating: Effective
- Average daily enrollment: 372 (Black: 49%; White: 37%; Hispanic: 8%; Multiracial: 5%; Economically Disadvantaged: 49%; Students with Disabilities: 8%)
- Teachers with at least a master's degree: 72.7%
- Grades K–8

## Toledo City School District

- Average daily enrollment: 22,277 (Black: 45%; White: 40%; Hispanic: 9%; Multiracial: 6%; Asian or Pacific Islander: 1%; Economically Disadvantaged: 77%; Students with Disabilities: 16%)
- Teachers with at least a master's degree: 55.9%

must maintain high test scores or the district could easily pull the plug on their school. Already, the departure of Grove's founding principal two years ago was followed by cutbacks to some of the school's central programs—a dual hit. Yet in the absence of strong leadership, teachers demonstrated the resilience of Grove's success by taking it upon themselves to maintain their school's distinctive culture and practices, which have become deeply embedded in their habits and expectations.

A new, permanent principal is finally in place at Grove. Though she arrived without an intimate knowledge of Grove's culture and practices, she believes that earning the trust and respect of her staff and the community is of paramount importance to her job—a mind-set that, judging by what we heard from teachers and parents in this study, should help her integrate well at Grove.

*I have to be part of the community. It's very hard to serve a community if you are not part of it. When I was called for this position, I really thought about it. I thought, "Will I be a good fit for that school? Is that what the teachers want? Is that what the community wants? Is that what the parents want?"* —Principal

Here are some of the key elements that, according to the stakeholders we interviewed, are responsible for Grove Patterson's continuous academic progress and which many have worked to maintain through the years.

## Reading at the center

Success for All (SFA), a proprietary school reform program, puts reading at the center of Grove Patterson's instructional program, and parents are well aware of its benefit. They told us how well their children read and concluded that Grove's reading program is one of the key reasons their school stands out against others.

*It's treated kind of like a college environment, where if the children are performing at a higher level, they move them into higher reading groups. What I've seen in other schools is that the pace of the class only moves as fast as the slowest child.* —Parent

*My son is a really great reader, and I saw his teachers really emphasize developing his reading and writing skills from an early age here.* —Parent

One staff member at Grove told us that reading is so well liked by the students that teachers actually have to remind them to look up from their books while walking in the hallway. And, Grove Patterson teachers told us, the positive skills and habits that students gain from a program heavily focused on reading extend beyond English class, benefiting every teacher's efforts and creating an encouraging learning environment.

*I'm teaching math, but the kids ask me, "Have you read this book?" I couldn't get over the conversations that they had about the books they were reading. They're really reading, and then they want to read the second book and the third book in the series.* —Teacher

*I'm a science teacher, and I've found that the children work together in groups on something in science class because they've had Success for All. Because they've worked together and they know how to answer questions together and discuss, they do wonderful in science or any other subject when you put them in groups to do activities.* —Teacher

Success for All structures reading instruction so that all teachers are involved—even math, gym and art teachers—to ensure more personalized instruction in smaller groups. Under SFA, each day starts with 90 minutes of reading instruction. In past years at Grove Patterson, we were told, these 90 minutes were sacrosanct. A student entering school late, even for the most excusable reasons, was not allowed to enter his or her classroom until silent reading time ended.

## Team looping

Successful practices at Grove Patterson extend beyond instruction and into the way teaching is structured at the school. Teachers at the school stay with their classrooms for two years at a time, which they told us allows them to build longer-term relationships with students and better teach to students' individual needs.

*Over a two-year period, I know the kids and their parents. The relationships and the family atmosphere you have with the kids after two years is huge.* —Teacher

This system is called “looping,” a practice that, at Grove Patterson, is strengthened by the pairing of each teacher with another. The paired teachers rotate between consecutive grade levels each year—so that one follows his or her classroom to the subsequent grade while the other returns to the preceding grade and a new classroom. In this system, teachers told us, they provide valuable support for their partners, especially during their common planning time. Moreover, teachers at Grove sit in on interviews with job applicants and are thus able to evaluate new hires as potential looping partners.

*As a teacher in the classroom, sometimes you get a little frustrated. With the looping partner, you have somebody to sit down with and discuss what you're going to do. Even though I teach third and she teaches fourth, we still have the basic concepts and the basic things we need to teach. —Teacher*

### Selective hiring

Many of Grove Patterson's teachers have been at the school since it was founded. And a low level of turnover has given Grove a reputation as a good school in which to teach. As a result, we were told, hiring has become fairly competitive. Staff told us that at Grove Patterson, only the most highly qualified teachers need apply. And this is especially true because, in its district, Grove has a special level of control over its hiring process.

Moreover, at Grove teachers are involved in the hiring process. They told us that they appreciate this responsibility because it allows them to ensure that new teachers will be on board with the school's philosophy that the children's needs must come first—another reason Grove has been able to sustain its successful practices through significant budget and leadership challenges.

### Incentives for good behavior and academic performance

*One thing that I think our school does better than a lot of schools is rewards. Not only “This is your bad behavior that we need to correct,” but “This is your good behavior and we're going to reward you.” —Parent*

Grove Patterson seeks to incentivize good behavior and academic performance by means of consistent, simple rewards. Students themselves told us about three programs in particular: Fun Fridays, “Caught You Being Good,” and end-of-quarter parties. Each provides incentives over different periods of time. Weekly, students tell us, they have the opportunity to participate in Fun Fridays, in which they are allowed some time toward the end of the school day on Friday for free-form activities—but they can participate only if they have not missed homework assignments or received demerits that week. “Caught You Being Good,” students told us, comes around monthly. Nominated students have their names placed in a hat, and the one whose name is picked receives a goody bag. Finally, each quarter, students who have not missed many homework assignments and have few demerits are allowed to attend a recreational event, which may take place on or off the school premises.

*Last semester, we went bowling. We walked around and did bowling. —Student*

*Then before Christmas break, we have the Wii. We bring in a Wii with games, and we play that. We played Michael Jackson Experience [Michael Jackson: The Experience]. —Student*

The students remembered well what was required of them to receive each incentive, and they remembered the times they had received those incentives in the past. They seemed excited about the parties and prizes they received due to their good behavior and academic performance.

# River Valley Middle School

Gallia County Local School District, Bidwell, Ohio

Old rivalries made River Valley's success look like a long shot, according to parents and teachers at the school. When it was founded five years ago, the school's teachers and students were drawn from around the county—from competing schools, which many of the teachers and parents themselves had previously attended. Many in the community assumed that animosity would reign among the different factions. Students would fight. Teachers would not work together. And success would be difficult.

When teachers walked into their new school the day before it opened, their doubts might have doubled. The building was still under construction; their teaching materials were all packed in boxes. “We didn’t have textbooks for a couple of weeks,” one teacher told us. Nobody knew exactly how this little school would work. Ultimately, however, the staff and students came together. In one teacher’s words:

*Everyone thought there were going to be a lot of problems, and they kind of expected us to fail. We had a really good leader. He pulled the staff together and we worked hard. The whole time we’ve set our goals high and we’ve worked hard to achieve them.*  
—Teacher

Today, we were told, River Valley is beginning to crowd with the children of parents who have heard of the school’s success—an inter-district open enrollment policy allows families from neighboring school districts to apply for a spot at the school. The instruction



- Years as School of Promise: 3 (2008–09, 2009–10, 2010–11)
- 2010–11 Report Card rating: Excellent with Distinction
- Average daily enrollment: 375 (White: 95%; Black: 3.4%; Economically Disadvantaged: 54%; Students with Disabilities: 13%)
- Teachers with at least a master’s degree: 57.9%
- Grades 6–8

## Gallia County Local School District

- Average daily enrollment: 2,435 (White: 96%; Black 2%; Multiracial: 1%; Hispanic: 0.5% Economically Disadvantaged: 51%; Students with Disabilities: 19%)
- Teachers with at least a master’s degree: 40.4%

2010-2011 Overall Proficiency on State Tests by Grade	River Valley Middle School	Gallia County Local School District
<b>6TH GRADE</b> Reading Mathematics	87.9% 78.8%	89.6% 84.0%
<b>7TH GRADE</b> Reading Mathematics	89.4% 91.1%	84.3% 87.6%
<b>8TH GRADE</b> Reading Mathematics	93.4% 86.9%	86.8% 81.1%

students receive at River Valley is influenced heavily by professional development and reform efforts initiated at the district level and by a principal whose long experience and unyielding dedication have set the tone for teachers' efforts. A familial atmosphere pervades, and teachers—in speaking of their jobs—frequently return to a belief in doing whatever they have to for the kids. For three of its five years, River Valley has gained a place on Ohio's *Schools of Promise* list; for the 2010–11 academic year, it was the list's only middle school.

### 80-Minute Classes

When River Valley instituted extended class periods, some teachers feared they would not know what to do with all that extra time; but today, they tell us that time is indispensable.

*When they went into these 80-minute periods, I said, "What will I do for 80 minutes? That's twice what it has been." Now I don't think I can make it without the 80 minutes. —Teacher*

During 80-minute classes, teachers not only have time to instruct students on new concepts, they can also assess students' understanding of those concepts, intervene with individual students who are struggling, provide practice materials that replace the need for homework and revisit old content that assessments indicate students do not fully grasp. The longer class periods also allow teachers to fully utilize full-time and seasonal intervention specialists, who help struggling students with difficult content and provide the capacity to split students into small, targeted groups leading up to major tests.

Furthermore, we were told that extended class periods mean students never miss out on a class because of assemblies or other schoolwide events; those events are scheduled to occupy only 40 minutes—half of the class period. The same goes for specials such as art and gym, which are blocked such that they take 40 minutes (that is, half a period) from any given class just once per week. Teachers at River Valley said they appreciate that they have to sacrifice only some, if any, of their instruction time.

### Collaboration in teacher-based teams

At River Valley, teacher-based teams (TBTs) are organized by content area; in them, teachers explained, they meet weekly to review student data, discuss individualized and general teaching strategies and align instruction. Teachers meet monthly in TBTs by grade level. In addition, teachers in a given content area and grade level from across the entire district will meet occasionally to discuss their strategies and experiences.

*We meet by subject, and then that gives us a good opportunity to bounce ideas off of each other or plan testing or whatever it happens to be. —Teacher*

*The TBTs are good at helping us get that communication going. —Teacher*

According to teachers, TBTs received a different reception at River Valley from that of extended class periods. With a brief introduction and an enthusiastic, if vague, commitment to the concept, the school implemented this reform and teachers quickly found they did not know how to make use of it.

*As soon as we had that training, we jumped in it and we didn't really have a model for how to use it. We jumped in it so quick before we really came up with our own plan. Then we kind of made a plan as we went along. We should've taken bits and pieces from it before we just jumped in like it was a gospel because we really didn't know how to use it. —Teacher*

The reform did not readily fit River Valley, where teachers, some of whom teach multiple subjects across more than one grade, would fall into more than one TBT. However, they worked together to adapt the reform to their particular situation, and soon they found it was an indispensable tool.

## A broad view of the learning environment

At River Valley and throughout its district, deliberate attention is paid to the broader context of children's learning and development. District officials and the principal care about students' experiences on the school bus; they care about students' experiences in the lunchroom. As a result, staff in support positions are considered an equal part of the team, and students, whether they notice it or not, inhabit a more comfortable and nurturing environment than they would otherwise.

*A bus driver can set the tone in your building right off the bat. If a kid gets off a bus and that bus driver is grouchy, and they yell at a kid, then that carries over into the school. They play a strategic role, and most of my bus drivers are really pretty good about saying, "Good morning." Just those two little words, "Good morning," when you get on that bus—that makes that kid feel like, Hey, someone cares.*  
—Principal

At River Valley, the district official in charge of food and transportation, we were told, makes a conscious effort to increase route efficiency for those students who live a great distance away, to reduce their time on the bus. Moreover, he created a lunchroom that serves food to students in a way that masks which students receive reduced-price or free food—a reform that recognizes the stigma some students may feel. The invisible payment program and pointed attention to serving foods that actually appeal to students have made the district's cafeteria one of very few in the state to run a profit. It is well-known among parents that the school's food is good.

Also, at River Valley the principal considers it his duty to have a visible presence at sports games and school functions no matter what their distance from the school. He hopes his presence demonstrates to students and parents the depth of his commitment, inspiring them to reach for greater heights; and those are exactly the terms in which staff, parents and students independently told us about this.

## Students as owners of their education

This is another point on which River Valley's principal and its superintendent echo each other: Both speak emphatically about building student capacity for independent decision making among students. This school year, the principal put this philosophy into action by securing for each student \$15 to be spent at the school's book fair on age-appropriate books.

*They can go into the book fair and purchase books on their level. That way, when kids come back and say, "Well, I don't have a book to read over the summer," I can say, "Oh yes, you do. You had an opportunity to buy a book that you wanted of your choice, of your interest." They don't have that excuse to say they don't have books.* —Principal

The administrators' rhetoric is also matched by concrete structures built into the classroom. At the start of each quarter, teachers meet individually with each student to develop a "Student Education Plan." After reviewing his or her data, the student must set three goals and state realistic steps to take to accomplish them. The plan is revisited throughout the year—with greater frequency for struggling students. Together, each student and their teacher evaluate the student's progress and talk about what they can both do to ensure the student achieves his or her goals.

# Hannah J. Ashton Middle School

Until not too long ago, staff told us, the hallways at Hannah J. Ashton Middle School were chaotic and student performance was persistently poor. Teachers, used to focusing on their own classrooms and managing discipline individually, knew that something needed to change.

*We all sat dumbfounded at the table because we all were working hard, but were we working efficiently? That is when we started rethinking, “What are we doing? How can we be working smarter?” —Teacher*

The arrival of a new principal shook everything up. First, she instituted strict behavioral policies aimed at turning chaotic hallways into a safe environment for teachers and students. Then she incrementally expanded data-guided instructional strategies among her teachers and instituted ability grouping within each grade to better target each student’s needs. Test scores started to turn around.

According to staff, not all were convinced of the new principal’s methods at first, but success brought most around. Today, teachers at Hannah J. Ashton speak of their approach to education with intense pride and devotion. They all repeat the same guiding principle:

*We don’t care outside this building what everybody else is doing; but, for what we’re doing here, we always ask ourselves: Is it best for our kids? —Teacher*

The principal under whom Hannah J. Ashton turned around has now left the school. When we spoke with staff members, a new principal had just been announced. Teachers told us that some of their ranks had

## Reynoldsburg City School District, Reynoldsburg, Ohio



- Years as *School of Promise*: 0
- 2010–11 Report Card rating: Excellent with Distinction
- Average daily enrollment: 416 (Black: 35%; White: 46%; Multiracial: 12%; Hispanic: 6%; Economically Disadvantaged: 54%; Students with Disabilities: 16%; Limited English Proficiency: 4%)
- Teachers with at least a master’s degree: 79.2%
- Grades 5–6

### Reynoldsburg City School District

- Average daily enrollment: 5,811 (Black: 35%; White: 51%; Hispanic: 4%; Multiracial: 9%; Asian or Pacific Islander: 2%; Economically Disadvantaged: 42%; Students with Disabilities: 14%; Limited English Proficiency: 5%)
- Teachers with at least a master’s degree: 76.2%

2010-2011 Overall Proficiency on State Tests by Grade	Hannah J. Ashton Middle School	Reynoldsburg City School District
<b>5TH GRADE</b> Reading Mathematics	86.7% 81.4%	82.4% 75.4%
<b>6TH GRADE</b> Reading Mathematics	95.9% 89.3%	93.7% 89.0%

been included in the interview process to ensure that a new principal would fit, and could lead, their valued culture of success. Thus, while some teachers worried that a number of large changes in the coming years might derail their success, others were confident that their own efforts to preserve their school's practices and values would ensure their continued success.

Here are some of the key policies and practices that are ingrained in the way teaching and learning happen at Hannah J. Ashton and which many insiders feel will keep the school on track in years to come.

## Data use

One of the major innovations instituted during the tenure of Hannah J. Ashton's previous principal was intense data use for a wide range of purposes. At this school, data on student achievement is broken down by individual test questions, allowing teachers to pinpoint the specific content with which particular students struggle and track those students' progress in response to intervention efforts. Assessments are administered throughout the year so that teachers can respond to student struggles rapidly and accurately.

Additionally, teachers and administrators told us that aggregated data on particular test questions allows them to recognize when an entire class is struggling with a concept. This keeps teachers accountable for their own teaching methods, demonstrating when their strategies need improvement and often prompting them to seek the assistance of another teacher. Administrators also keep tabs on student data, recognizing when a teacher is struggling and intervening to coordinate a strategy for improvement. Teachers respond well to this level of evaluation because it takes place within a highly collegial culture, where trust among colleagues and a focus on what is best for students trump competition and defensiveness.

*You have to admit your own weakness, but we're all so comfortable with each other that we can do that, and that's so important. Because the only way you would ever grow as an educator and grow to help kids is to figure out what you are terrible at and to help each other out. —Teacher*

Moreover, administrators told us that data gathering and analysis is employed for more than just instructional uses; it also influences behavioral policy. For instance, after gathering data on the times and places that fights occur most often and surveying students as to the locations they feel least safe at school, administration was able to craft targeted preventive policies. Specifically, we heard at Grove that surveys showed students feel least safe in the restrooms, on the playground and on school buses; in response, policies were implemented to limit the number of students traveling to the restroom—or anywhere else outside the classroom—at one time and to close off areas of the playground not monitored directly by a faculty member. We were told that a follow-up survey soon after the implementation of those policies showed a marked upturn in students' feelings of safety in the restrooms and on the playground.

Although data seems to reach into every corner of life at Hannah J. Ashton, teachers told us that they do not trust the data without question. They acknowledged that formal data is a useful tool, but it must only supplement a teacher's personal knowledge of a student.

*We've been trained to know that the data is a photograph of one moment in time; and it's our job as teachers to analyze the video, not the photograph. —Teacher*

## Discipline and structure

The most visible aspect of Hannah J. Ashton's transformation is its common behavioral "procedures," which govern students' movements through the building and behavior in particular places. We were told that there are procedures for arriving and departing from school, traveling from one class to another, going to the library, going to recess, going to the restroom, getting one's breakfast and lunch—even for sharpening one's pencil.

Buy-in from teachers for such a regimen is essential to consistent implementation. Teachers reported that they help to develop the procedures collaboratively, revising them based on their experiences over several years, and that together they focus with students, in the first two weeks of the school year, on intense and repetitive training in the procedures. We heard that some teachers initially felt the

procedures were too draconian, and students expressed to us everything from support for the structures to frustration with their restrictiveness. But according to the principal, even skeptical teachers understand that there is a need, and all seem to acknowledge that the resulting order has produced an environment more conducive to learning.

*They knew the building was not safe. Kids were fighting. It was out of hand, and they knew we needed to do something. That was very clear.*  
—Principal

To complement the school's strict procedures, teachers and administrators employ a system of incentives to encourage students to perform. Students who do not get more than three minuses on their report card, have not been sent to time-out and have not been suspended are eligible to attend quarterly events such as field trips and movie days. Furthermore, every Friday during the month of May, events are held for the students. On the final day of school, the entire student body goes to a local swimming pool. But students who behave poorly are not allowed to attend these special events.

### Ability grouping

The most radical change implemented by Hannah J. Ashton's reform-minded principal is ability grouping across all grades. Today, students at Hannah are placed in teams, of which there are three per grade, called crew, navigators and contenders. Placement is based primarily on students' state test scores, but students are never locked into their teams. Rather, continuing assessment—formal and observational—throughout the year allows students to flow between higher- and lower-achieving ability groups based on their performance.

According to teachers, students in each team are subject to the same curricular standards and quarterly exams. What differs among the teams is the method and pace of instruction. Additionally, the high-achieving ability groups' class sizes are significantly larger than those of the lowest achievers. Teachers at Hannah J. Ashton attribute much of their students' academic success to ability grouping and appreciate the opportunity to work with students with comparable skill levels and needs.

*It's just more efficient. I know where my kids can start, and I can take them way beyond that. It's not like I have three advanced kids and two IEP [individualized education plan] kids who need so much intensive help, and then the advanced kids are just sitting there. They're all around the same ability, so I can just take them and run with it. —Teacher*

Teachers at Hannah J. Ashton continue to evaluate and reevaluate their practices in terms of their outgoing principal's favorite question: "Is what we're doing best for our kids?" As long as this question is asked repeatedly and answered honestly, few teachers, parents and administrators are worried about this school's ongoing success.

# Northwest High School

**Northwest Local School  
District, McDermott, Ohio**

Spanning 126 square miles, Northwest Local School District is home to students who travel far each morning to attend Northwest High School, a place lauded beyond the district for fair play, kindness, integrity and academic ambition. Northwest High School radiates compassion and fun for students of all abilities and diverse talents. A devoted staff models the warmheartedness, sportsmanship and hard work that they expect from their students; and parents vow to support the school and its teams long after their children have graduated.

Academically, Northwest High School has come a long way, from a recurring “continuous improvement” rating to three consecutive years as a School of Promise. Change, we learned, came slowly yet deliberately. While school and district leadership have long had a strong academic vision for Northwest High School, practices were introduced selectively and carefully, in collaboration with valued, long-term staff.

*Everything that’s in place now has been a culmination of that process of change. —Assistant Principal*

Taking lessons from many years of coaching basketball, the Northwest leadership knew that their success depended on the motivation and cohesion of their team. At Northwest, as at many other schools we visited, motivation and cohesion among teachers evolved through opportunities to work together in teams to figure out how to best implement new standards and practices, while being guided by leaders who maintain a clear long-term vision for the school and also respond to the daily needs of their staff.



- Years as *School of Promise*: 3 (2008–09, 2009–10, 2010–11)
- 2010–11 Report Card rating: Effective
- Average daily enrollment: 475 (White: 99%; Economically Disadvantaged: 58%; Students with Disabilities: 20%)
- Teachers with at least a master’s degree: 53.1%
- Grades 9–12

## Northwest Local School District

- Average daily enrollment: 1,719 (White: 99%; Multiracial: 1%; Economically Disadvantaged: 68%; Students with Disabilities: 17%)
- Teachers with at least a master’s degree: 57%

### 2010-2011 Overall Proficiency on State Tests by Grade

### Northwest High School<sup>1</sup>

**10TH GRADE**  
Reading  
Mathematics

91.3%  
85.6%

**11TH GRADE**  
Reading  
Mathematics

92.9%  
88.4%

<sup>1</sup> Because Northwest is the only high school in its district, district data on these points do not offer any meaningful comparison.

Today, staff, teachers and administration at Northwest share the fruits of their labor—happily graduating students with concrete plans for postsecondary education—and they are ready to take on the next challenges: advancing math and science instruction, defending a state-of-the-art wood shop against funding cuts and helping more students and families to view higher education outside their community's boundaries as a viable option.

### Block scheduling and daily intervention period

Moving from a seven-period day to block scheduling over a decade ago is widely recognized by staff as the move that has put Northwest on an upward academic trajectory. This structural shift—resisted at first—not only gave teachers more time for instruction and practice in the classroom, but brought with it a number of serendipitous outcomes: Staff noticed that when students traveled less between classes, opportunities for disruptive behaviors and conflicts were reduced and students were better behaved; and administration concluded that the increased training that staff received in how to make the most of block schedules also helped to build a stronger team spirit and greater cohesion among teachers.

*It was neat to watch how our culture changed through that process [moving from a seven-period day to the block schedule] because the teachers were trained in it. The kids bought into what we were doing. The staff bought into it, and there's a lot more collegiality among staff now. —Assistant Principal*

Moreover, block scheduling at Northwest is designed to allow for a daily 45-minute “intervention period.” We heard that from Monday through Thursday, students go back to meet their first-, second-, third- and fourth-period teachers, respectively, to catch up on class materials.

Teachers also work together to use this time flexibly, so that a student who needs more help in one subject may use all of one week's intervention to meet with the same teacher. On Fridays, intervention time is used for 45 minutes of fun activities: Students sign up to spend this time playing in the gym, working in the wood shop, doing arts and crafts, playing games, reading and so on.

### Individual class scheduling

A few years ago, the guidance counselors at Northwest—admired by parents, students and teachers alike because of their genuine interest in students and their efforts to build personal relationships with each one—felt their students weren't served well in a system in which the majority chose classes and designed class schedules on a computer on their own. Consequently, they implemented a new policy in which each student must meet in person with a guidance counselor to design his or her class schedule and plan classes up to graduation. Through personal contact, the guidance counselors at Northwest found they have a better chance of ensuring that students understand their requirements and options, encouraging them to sign up for classes that may seem challenging at first and ultimately designing their schedules with long-term goals in mind. The guidance counselors also value the structured time with students as an opportunity to build a personal rapport.

### Targeted effort to increase college-going culture

Many of the students at Northwest High School will be the first in their families to attend college. Administration and staff see it as their responsibility to encourage these students to consider studying for a college degree, and consequently many practices are in place to instill an overall college-going culture at the school, from publicizing and celebrating high ACT scores, college application and college acceptances to offering postsecondary enrollment options in collaboration with the local community college. Moreover, guidance counselors keep students and families informed about career days, college application deadlines, scholarship opportunities and the like through a Facebook page, newsletters and a TV screen outside the guidance office.

All these practices are reinforced through the daily conversations guidance counselors strike up with students in the hallway and the lunchroom, questioning them about their plans following graduation. Every Northwest student knows that he or she is expected to apply to some form of postsecondary education before they graduate; and they know that their guidance counselors will give them all the support they need for their applications, leaving no room for excuses.

*He promised me that he would do anything he had to so this would work out for me, and he has. So I think if we didn't have a guidance counselor like him, I probably wouldn't be able to figure out what I need to do to get myself to where I need to be next year. They treat you like you're the only person who matters. When you're in their office, you're the only person that matters at that point. —Student*

### Safe and fun learning environment

At Northwest, academic ambition does not undermine the school's compassionate, fun-loving and integrative culture. A core focus for all staff, we heard, is to make this school a home for everyone. As such, the school has become known for successfully integrating and nurturing its comparatively high percentage of special education students. Furthermore, Northwest offers a diverse range of classes and extracurricular activities, including a broad athletic program, wood shop, arts, quiz bowl and peer listening, among others. And teachers demonstrate their care and interest in their students in many ways outside of the classroom—for example, by participating in the senior video or by lending Kindles and iPads to students to complete a reading assignment. Students and parents greatly value all the activities and practices that make Northwest High School a safe and warm place to learn and be together.

# Eastmoor Academy High School

In 1999, Eastmoor High School, a longtime neighborhood school, set out to become a destination for college-bound students from across Columbus. Renamed Eastmoor Academy, the open enrollment public high school quickly rose in popularity. Its academic rigor distinguishes it from other schools, as does its inclusion of competitive sports and performing arts programs. Eastmoor Academy also continues to attract students whose parents graduated from the former Eastmoor High School. Consequently, Eastmoor Academy's pool of applicants is large and diverse, so even though it has an open enrollment policy, each spring a lottery system must decide who will join the Eastmoor community.

Despite the school's ambitions, it took a few years for Eastmoor Academy to excel academically. Teachers and parents credit a principal who came to the school nearly a decade ago with having created the culture and implemented the processes that put Eastmoor on a solid path to academic excellence. Under this principal's leadership, teachers spend more time collaborating and working in teams to better align curricula, instruction and assessment between classes and across grade levels. To this day, instructional alignment and teacher collaborations are at the heart of Eastmoor's success.

Three years ago, a new principal took over at Eastmoor Academy. Although principal transitions can be traumatic, Eastmoor's staff and parents recalled this transition positively. They saw their outgoing and incoming principals collaborate carefully in an effort to continue the school's success. Today, the school's new principal is loved by staff,

## Columbus City School District, Columbus, Ohio



- Years as *School of Promise*: 5 (2004–05, 2006–07, 2008–09, 2009–10, 2010–11)
- 2010–11 Report Card rating: Effective
- Average daily enrollment: 696 (Black: 92%; White: 4%; Economically Disadvantaged: 72%; Students with Disabilities: 16%; Limited English Proficiency: 2%)
- Teachers with at least a master's degree: 70%
- Grades 9–12

### Columbus City School District

- Average daily enrollment: 49,616 (Black: 59%; White: 27%; Hispanic: 7%; Multiracial: 5%; Asian or Pacific Islander: 2%; Economically Disadvantaged: 82%; Students with Disabilities: 17%; Limited English Proficiency: 10%)
- Teachers with at least a master's degree: 64.1%

2010-2011 Overall Proficiency on State Tests by Grade	Eastmoor Academy High School	Columbus City School District
<b>10TH GRADE</b>		
Reading	90.0%	78.3%
Mathematics	80.0%	68.6%
<b>11TH GRADE</b>		
Reading	94.8%	87.3%
Mathematics	87.7%	78.8%

parents and students alike. The consensus was that she not only maintains the positive school culture and educational quality she walked into, but has taken them to the next level. She successfully challenges teachers and students not to respond to success with complacency, but to take every step as tomorrow's starting point. The school's academic goals have moved quickly from passing state tests to accelerating past them and from simply offering AP classes to ensuring students graduate with AP credits.

Here are a few of the many aspects of Eastmoor Academy's culture that appear integral to the school's continuing success.

## Mission statement

We heard that when the current principal came in three years ago, she felt that despite being a great school, Eastmoor lacked a strong, explicit and guiding mission statement—something that would serve as a daily reminder of the broader goals and values that inform teaching and learning at the school. One of her first initiatives, then, was to bring staff together in a truly collaborative fashion, to work on a statement that expressed their aspirations for Eastmoor students and themselves. They came up with the following:

Eastmoor Academy students are rigorously educated in a nurturing environment, prepared for a lifetime of learning, leadership and service and empowered to be responsible citizens of the world.

Staff, students and parents told us that every morning before the school day begins, teachers and students recite this mission. They also refer to it when they need to encourage one another or when they are asked by outsiders what it is that makes Eastmoor unique.

## Summer reading project

Incoming ninth graders at Eastmoor are confronted with the academy's high academic expectations even before they set foot in a classroom. Every summer, all Eastmoor students, including the arriving freshman class, complete a summer reading and writing project. Freshman students first receive the assignment by email, then over the summer teachers volunteer one unpaid day in which students can

come to school and get help with the assignment. Students hand in their assignment within the first week of the new school year, and their grade makes up 25 percent of the first grading period's report card.

According to staff, the goal of this project is multifold: Although it aims primarily to teach students how to work independently and offset the loss of reading and writing skills that they commonly experience over the summer, it also serves to clearly communicate the school's academic expectations to students and their parents. Moreover, teachers said that the summer project is a highly valuable tool for assessing incoming students' strengths and weaknesses early on in the school year. Because at Eastmoor high expectations are coupled with a commitment to providing whatever is best for students, those who struggle to complete their summer assignment can get extra help from teachers in the first few weeks of the school year.

## Intervention teams

Transitioning into Eastmoor Academy can be a culture shock for even the most ambitious students. However, the school is prepared for the struggles that students experience when they are confronted with greater academic rigor than they had expected—or when they are unable to participate in sports because they don't meet the academic requirements. In these situations, we were told, a designated intervention team—consisting of a teacher, a counselor and an administrator—works closely with the student and his or her parents to help the student stay on track. These “freshman intervention teams” identify struggling students early on, help them consistently and require parents to be a part of the solution. Throughout each grade level, similar high-intensity work is done by “individual assistance teams.” Like parents in other schools, Eastmoor Academy parents who have experience with intervention teams told us that they greatly appreciate their help. These parents feel they are given the professional advice they need and that the school has their best interests in mind.

*When he got here, our son still had an elementary school mentality. It was a big adjustment for him. But the teachers worked with us, and that's what I love about this school. The teachers really work with you. They really want these kids to succeed. —Parent*

## Parental engagement

At Eastmoor Academy, we saw an exceptionally orchestrated approach toward engaging parents in their children's education and, more generally, in the life of the school. Staff told us that they make frequent phone calls to parents at home to keep them informed about their children's progress as well as about activities and news from the school. Often, these are personal phone calls. In addition, each Saturday an upbeat and engaging message from the principal is sent out to parents on their home phone—something that many parents said they look forward to.

*When parent-teacher conferences come up, our principal calls not once a week, but twice a week telling parents that there is a conference. She sends out newsletters also, but she mainly focuses on talking to parents personally. —Student*

Moreover, Eastmoor Academy welcomes parents in the school building and provides plenty of opportunities for them to participate in events that celebrate the school's extracurricular activities—athletics, performing arts and an extensive volunteering program—as well as individual students and the school's academic achievements. At Eastmoor Academy, parents are not only in the audience or on the sidelines—fund-raising and organizing events—they are also right on stage. At last year's graduation, a parent choir, which formed and practiced in secret with the school's music teacher, performed in honor of the graduating class.

# Robert A. Taft Information Technology High School

Cincinnati Public Schools,  
Cincinnati, Ohio



Located in the West End neighborhood of Cincinnati, Robert A. Taft Information Technology High School has been a neighborhood school for many years. Many of the school's current students have parents and older family members who are Taft graduates. However, for a long time Taft was not serving its community well. It had become known as an unsafe place, where fires in the hallways were not uncommon and student dropouts were the norm.

Taft High School's story could easily have been a tragedy, but instead it is a feel-good drama in which good guys succeed against the odds. It's a story of reform that began in 2001, when a charismatic new principal—who was himself brought up in the community and a Taft alum—reenergized teachers, initiated a partnership with a local business, motivated parents and students and reversed Taft's downward trajectory.

Today, Taft High School is unrecognizable. With academic success and community investments came a brand-new, state-of-the-art building. Though it is not the cause of the school's academic achievement, this building symbolizes the school's dramatic reinvention and has become a great source of community pride. Since Taft's turnaround, its reform-minded principal has left for a higher post in the district. Yet Robert A. Taft Information Technology High School remains a destination school, drawing in transfer students from private schools and other districts.



- Years as *School of Promise*: 4 (2007–08, 2008–09, 2009–10, 2010–11)
- 2010–11 Report Card rating: Excellent
- Average daily enrollment: 514 (Black: 91%; White: 6%; Economically Disadvantaged: 73%; Students with Disabilities: 24%)
- Teachers with at least a master's degree: 60.4%
- 2010 National Blue Ribbon Schools award
- Grades 9–12

## Cincinnati Public Schools

- Average daily enrollment: 32,009 (Black: 67%; White: 24%; Hispanic: 3%; Multiracial: 5%; Asian or Pacific Islander: 1%; Economically Disadvantaged: 70%; Students with Disabilities: 21%)
- Teachers with at least a master's degree: 68.6%

2010-2011 Overall Proficiency on State Tests by Grade	Robert A. Taft Information Technology High School	Cincinnati Public Schools
<b>10TH GRADE</b>		
Reading	93.4%	85.1%
Mathematics	93.3%	78.7%
<b>11TH GRADE</b>		
Reading	100%	93.5%
Mathematics	100%	88.1%

## “Failure is not an option”

*Everything trickles down. Nothing trickles up. If there's a strong leadership with a very solid goal in mind, that's going to trickle down to the teachers; and when I came here last year, there was no question about what the expectations were. Every teacher here could name them. Failure is not an option.*

—Teacher

When the school's former principal came to Taft in 2001, he brought with him a motto that we heard again and again: “Failure is not an option.” A rallying cry, a motivator and his own guiding principle, this motto summarizes the cultural shift and leadership methods that brought Taft out of the gutter and into the ranks of Ohio's most successful schools.

Everyone expected the new, reform-minded principal to clean house. But we were told that he did not fire a single teacher. Instead, he spoke with each educator individually and asked whether each one felt okay working for the worst high school in the city. Teachers answered, “No!” Taft, this principal found, had a dedicated and caring faculty, but they were not organized behind a common goal. Along with a core group of educators the new principal brought with him, the entire staff committed themselves to turning their school around together, by whatever means necessary. And their principal held them to their commitment.

He was well-known to use both the carrot and the stick to get people to do what he thought was best for the kids. During his tenure, reliance on contractual protections was minimized. The former principal extracted what he thought was important from teachers by appealing to their sense of what's right and what kids need. In return, we heard, the principal gave teachers flexibility and support by, for example, volunteering to take over their classes when they were having a hard day and supporting them in troublesome exchanges with parents.

All of this functioned to inspire staff to develop shared goals and values, as well as a sense of professionalism. “Failure is not an option” became the motto of the school. And, according to staff, discipline and order—once critical problems—were addressed. With those issues under

control, teachers found themselves in an environment in which they could actually teach. Daily rigor and a focus on writing and reading became the norm. Test scores started to improve, and in 2010 Taft was designated a National Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education.

## In-house professional development

*He would require us to read current trend books. He would give us all copies of those books and expect us to have read them when we came to staff meetings. He would say, “Okay, have this chapter read by the time you get to the staff meeting.” We would discuss it. —Teacher*

Teachers at Taft recounted that their new principal makes them better by expecting more of them—always pushing them to be better. Part of his strategy has been instigating more in-house professional development opportunities. Teachers at Taft, as at the other schools we visited, told us they typically find such opportunities more useful than out-of-house trainings precisely because the former are better tailored to issues they actually deal with in the school and often spark important conversations with colleagues. In particular, Taft teachers appreciate the talk circles their former principal cultivated. In those, faculty read and discuss meaningful books about teamwork and management, among other topics.

*What we started doing was, we would have staff meetings that were book talks. He would introduce motivational pieces for us to read, and we would collaborate and discuss [them] in staff meetings. We would handle school business, then we would move to these texts that we read and do different things about team building. He was really, really big on the concept of relationships. If you want to establish that kind of culture, then you have to be able to connect to make everybody feel like they're part of it. —Administrator*

### Cincinnati Bell partnership: tutoring and incentive programs

During his tenure, Taft's former principal formed a relationship with Cincinnati Bell CEO John F. Cassidy, and together the two forged a successful partnership between their institutions. The partnership, which continues today, consists of two key components: an extensive tutoring and mentoring program and ample incentives to motivate student achievement. Cincinnati Bell also provides internship opportunities for students and generously supports the school's IT needs.

The tutoring provided by Cincinnati Bell is systematic, purposeful and effective. It focuses on getting students to pass the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) by matching the strengths of tutors (for instance, in science, math and reading) to the academic needs of students. It even goes so far as to pair students and tutors who share some common characteristic—a language, an ethnicity, an interest, a gender—anything that will help rapport develop. The tutoring relationship typically lasts two years. We heard that, supposedly, not one Cincinnati Bell employee who has committed to the program has missed a session over the past eight years. Employees are transported from their office buildings to Taft by bus during the workday twice a week. A healthy breakfast is provided. Students take it seriously. And OGT scores go up.

The incentives are substantial. They vary by grade and include such items as cellphones and service, laptops and Internet access, and BestBuy gift cards, all donated by Cincinnati Bell. But they are not easy to get: Students must achieve a high GPA to receive an incentive—and they must maintain a high GPA to keep it. Further, participation in sports and extracurricular activities are tied to GPA as well. We were told that not one student who has received a laptop or cellphone has had to give it back.

Beyond the material benefits, however, Taft High School's partnership with Cincinnati Bell provides youngsters and parents with the feeling that someone important in the community cares about this school and the people in it. A school that was once almost forgotten now matters.

*Things started to change the first year that Cincinnati Bell started offering major incentives. Prior to their involvement, I never heard students talking, really giving a damn about their grades. Suddenly, there was the possibility of having the use of a laptop computer or a free telephone, then the scholarship program they're giving away. They give out ten \$20,000 scholarships every year. Those kinds of incentives said to the kids that people cared about them outside of the school. —Teacher*

# MC<sup>2</sup> STEM High School

**Cleveland Metropolitan School District, Cleveland, Ohio**



The buzzing of interactive museum exhibits, the pounding of kids' feet and their excited cries echo through Cleveland's Great Lakes Science Center. The ground floor of this complex is home to the ninth grade of MC<sup>2</sup> STEM High School, an innovative public school that focuses on science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education. If youthful energy defines the school's ninth-grade site, energy of another sort defines its tenth, housed on the campus of GE's global lighting headquarters in East Cleveland's Nela Park. Each grade at MC<sup>2</sup> is located at one of three sites across Cleveland, and students eventually earn the opportunity to work internships across the city and attend college courses at nearby institutions.

MC<sup>2</sup>'s various locations provide the backdrop for a high school experience fundamentally different from that at more traditional institutions. At MC<sup>2</sup> STEM High School, instruction centers around cross-disciplinary projects, and student work is often completed in groups. Grading is based on any demonstrated understanding of content rather than onetime assessments, and attention is paid to preparing students for professional environments. Teachers emphasized to us that test prep is not a part of their program; administration and teachers believe success on state assessments will come naturally from the school's accelerated curriculum and attention to problem-solving strategies. When students need additional help, community partners provide tutors as well as mentors and experts who enrich and assist in teachers' efforts. And all of this is accomplished at a public school that must function entirely within the city school district, a fact that the school's principal considers essential.



- Years as *School of Promise*: 0 (at the time of our study, MC<sup>2</sup> had not yet graduated its first class)
- 2010–11 Report Card rating: Excellent
- Average daily enrollment: 214 (Black: 74%; White: 17%; Hispanic: 6%; Economically Disadvantaged: 100%; Students with Disabilities: 9%)
- Teachers with at least a master's degree: 50%
- Grades 9–12

## Cleveland Metropolitan School District

- Average daily enrollment: 43,202 (Black: 68%; White: 15%; Hispanic: 13%; Multiracial: 3%; Asian or Pacific Islander: 1%; Economically Disadvantaged: 100%; Students with Disabilities: 23%; Limited English Proficiency: 6%)
- Teachers with at least a master's degree: 50.2%

2010-2011 Overall Proficiency on State Tests by Grade	MC <sup>2</sup> STEM High School	Cleveland Metropolitan School District
<b>10TH GRADE</b>		
Reading	95.0%	67.6%
Mathematics	85.0%	58.7%
<b>11TH GRADE</b>		
Reading	93.8%	81.0%
Mathematics	93.8%	73.6%

*The school was started by the district. So the district can say, “Look: We can do something different, we can be different. Look what you can do.” If we were a charter school, none of that could necessarily be said. —Principal*

The school’s principal hopes the school will provide an example to other public schools that innovation is not the sole territory of independent schools. Working within the system, a public school can indeed bring about profound changes and inspiring results. Despite significant challenges encountered in its first four years, MC<sup>2</sup> is set to graduate its first class. Visionary leadership and an articulated, ingrained mission have kept MC<sup>2</sup> true to its uncommon format. Following are just a few of the policies and practices that define MC<sup>2</sup> STEM High School’s approach to education.

## Project-based learning

At MC<sup>2</sup>, instructional practices are everything. This school’s distinctive curriculum unifies all subjects behind common projects. Each teacher’s lessons, to varying degrees, contribute to each project’s final product, and all material is contextualized in terms of each project’s theme. Throughout the school year, students complete a number of successive projects.

Students must often complete projects in groups, which they are tasked with forming themselves and in which each student performs a distinct function aligned with his or her interests, skills, needs and goals. Students and staff say that group work acclimates students to the way work often proceeds “in the real world,” while also teaching them that they are personally responsible for the team-mates they choose.

Collaboration among teachers is built in to MC<sup>2</sup> STEM’s project-based instructional model. At a common planning session before the beginning of each quarter, teachers across disciplines work together to devise lesson plans that meet the standards of each content area within the theme (“capstone”) of a specific project. We heard that teachers whose content areas contribute to projects in tandem (for example, math and science) will on occasion team-teach.

Furthermore, the small number of teachers in each grade means that teachers constantly interact with one another. At least one teacher commented that she had learned much about her colleagues’ areas as a result of the coordination necessary in the project-based environment. However, teachers noted that because the grades are located on separate campuses, cross-grade teacher interaction is rare.

## A professional environment

Staff at MC<sup>2</sup> aim to create an environment that simulates what might be expected of students in the workforce. The school is in session year-round, with three-week breaks after each quarter, and it has a school day that goes from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Students expressed mild disdain for this schedule, but they were quick to admit that it is positive for their overall education. Some also noted that given the neighborhoods they come from, MC<sup>2</sup>’s schedule keeps them busy rather than allowing them too much time in an environment that could distract them from their academic goals.

*You’re staying in school while other people are out in the streets doing something that they’re not supposed to be doing. —Student*

Class schedules are fluid, configured at the start of each school day depending upon the demands of that day’s work. Each day is split between time for individual classes and time to complete project work, and students move between the two seamlessly, in an environment devoid of bells.

At MC<sup>2</sup>, we found students are expected to dress in a “smart casual” way and act professionally—especially on campuses that are open to the public or subject to stricter behavioral guidelines than at typical city schools, like the Great Lakes Science Center and GE’s Nela Park. Furthermore, students receive instruction in how to talk to potential employers and prepare résumés. Later in their high school careers, they find themselves in internships, interacting with GE employees and possibly attending college classes, all activities that demand—and instruct in—professional deportment.

## Business, academic and community partnerships

MC<sup>2</sup> has strong, formal community relationships with a large number of partner organizations such as GE, NASA, the Great Lakes Science Center, various institutions of higher learning and other organizations—including the Cleveland and George Gund foundations and the Greater Cleveland Partnership, which collectively raised local funds to get the school started. Partners provide content, instructors and tutors for MC<sup>2</sup>'s project-based curriculum. Partnerships also allow seniors at MC<sup>2</sup> to work internships around the city of Cleveland, and some students apply for and attend college courses on local campuses.

In Cleveland, GE has a particularly strong history of supporting education. When the opportunity to organize MC<sup>2</sup> arose, GE was eager to help. Today, the company contributes manpower, expertise and real estate. GE created a full-time liaison position to manage its relationship with MC<sup>2</sup> and the volunteer opportunities that it provides for their employees. Through this partnership, MC<sup>2</sup> places each of its tenth-grade students at the GE campus with a GE employee. The student and his or her adult “buddy” regularly have lunch together, usually in GE's corporate lunchroom. Our conversations with students indicated that the nature of students' relationships with their buddies varies from very professional and school focused to personal, with an emphasis on general life advice. Students might also use their buddy as a reference in job or college applications.

## Mastery system of grading

Instruction at MC<sup>2</sup> is based on “mastery.” Although students receive letter grades on their work, they are not allowed to leave a concept behind until their teacher determines that they have mastered it. Mastery is determined by high grades or by alternative assessments—that is, a teacher may determine mastery by whatever means he or she deems appropriate, not solely on the basis of formal tests and graded assessments.

*The mastery system helps kids not be afraid to fail. Failure isn't the end. Failure is part of the learning process; and if you weren't successful on the first try, let's see what you did well, let's see what you didn't do well and let's find out how we can improve next time.*  
—Principal

In the mastery system, students are allowed to proceed at their own pace. Teachers give advanced students increasingly difficult work or a larger volume of work, while struggling students can take the time they need to demonstrate understanding of the material in whatever way they are most able to do so. Additionally, students are never left behind with a bad grade and little to no understanding of a concept. Teachers stick with students until they have demonstrated a working knowledge of each piece of information.

*A lot of schools are just pushing kids on. Students may be reading at a second-grade level, but here you are in sixth grade. But the students here have to master their projects in every class, in everything in that class, before they're promoted to the next level, and that is something I love.* —Parent

# Methodology

## Sample Selection

A total of nine Ohio public schools participated in this study. These schools were selected to make up a geographically diverse sample (rural, urban and suburban schools from across the state) and to represent various types of both primary and secondary schools, including traditional public schools, community (charter) schools and lottery-based public schools. All schools demonstrated outstanding academic achievement.

Six of the nine schools in this study were chosen from the state of Ohio's 2010–11 *Schools of Promise* list. All six were also recognized as *Schools of Promise* in the previous academic year (2009–10) and at least one additional year. The requirements for the 2010–11 *Schools of Promise* award are as follows:

- At least 40 percent of the student body was “economically disadvantaged”—this designation is linked to a student’s eligibility for free or reduced-price lunches, as recorded in Ohio’s Education Management Information System (that being said, each of the schools selected had a student body in excess of 50 percent “economically disadvantaged”).
- The school met adequate yearly progress.
- The school’s graduation rate<sup>2</sup> was at least 85 percent.
- On the Ohio Achievement Test (OAT) and/or Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) in reading and mathematics:
  - In 2010–11, at least 75 percent of all students in tested grades passed, at least 75 percent of students in the economically disadvantaged subgroup<sup>3</sup> in tested grades passed and at least 75 percent of students in each racial or ethnic subgroup<sup>4</sup> in tested grades passed; and
  - In 2009–10, at least 65 percent of all students in tested grades<sup>5</sup> passed.

- On OGTs, in 2010–11, at least 85 percent of all eleventh graders, 85 percent of economically disadvantaged eleventh graders and 85 percent of eleventh graders in each racial or ethnic subgroup passed.
- If applicable, the school received a “Met” or “Above” for the 2010–11 value-added composite score.

The requirements for the 2009–10 *Schools of Promise* award were identical except that on the OATs and OGTs, passage percentages were required for either reading or mathematics. In 2010–11, requirements included both—not either—of the subjects.

The three remaining schools chosen for this study were not on the 2010–11 *Schools of Promise* list; however, they are all high-needs schools with exceptional academic reputations. Two of these schools have shown remarkable improvements in student performance in recent years and fell short of receiving the *Schools of Promise* award in 2011 by only a couple of students. The remaining school is comparatively new and had not graduated its first class of seniors at the time of the study, but it otherwise exceeded all requirements of the *Schools of Promise* award.

## Procedure

A two-person research team visited each participating school for two to three days in May 2012. In each school, we conducted focus groups with teachers, parents and students, respectively. This methodology allowed us to speak to most, in some cases all, teachers in each school and to a sample of students and parents who represented different grade levels. Participants were recruited with the help of a designated school staff—for instance, an administrator from the principal’s office. Each focus group took place in a room at the school. Conversation lasted about two hours. All groups were audio-recorded, and a subset of groups was also video-recorded. Participants were assured that everything they said would be treated confidentially

<sup>2</sup> The graduation requirement applies only where five or more students were supposed to graduate in the given school year.

<sup>3</sup> Only grades with five or more economically disadvantaged test takers are considered.

<sup>4</sup> The racial and ethnic subgroups tracked are White, Non-Hispanic; Black, Non-Hispanic; Hispanic; Asian/Pacific Islander; and American Indian/Alaska Native.

Only groups with five or more test takers are considered.

<sup>5</sup> The tested grades are 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th and 10th.

and that video recordings would be used for research purposes only. We sought active parental consent from students who participated in the video-recorded focus groups. Participating teachers and parents were paid a small stipend for their time. For participating students, we provided pizza and other snacks deemed appropriate by the school leadership.

In addition, across the schools we visited, we conducted up to 10 individual interviews with school leaders, support staff and community partners. In a few school districts, we were also able to speak to district office representatives. Each interview was conducted either in person or on the phone. Interviews were tape-recorded and lasted up to 60 minutes. Interviewees were thanked for their time, and each participating school received a monetary donation for its participation in this project.

### List of participating schools

School Name	City	District
Citizens Academy Elementary School	Cleveland	Breakthrough Charter Schools*
East Garfield Elementary School	Steubenville	Steubenville City
Eastmoor Academy High School	Columbus	Columbus City
Grove Patterson Academy Elementary School	Toledo	Toledo City
Hannah J. Ashton Middle School	Reynoldsburg	Reynoldsburg City
MC <sup>2</sup> STEM High School	Cleveland	Cleveland Metropolitan
Northwest High School	McDermott	Northwest Local
River Valley Middle School	Bidwell	Gallia County Local
Robert A. Taft Information Technology High School	Cincinnati	Cincinnati Public

\* Citizens Academy is a charter school not within a school district.

## Bibliography

Bryk, Anthony S., Penny Bender Sebring, Elaine Allensworth, Stuart Luppescu, and John Q. Easton. *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.

Clifford, Matthew, Ellen Behrstock-Sherratt, and Jenni Feters. “The Ripple Effect: A Synthesis of Research on Principal Influence to Inform Performance Evaluation Design.” Issue Brief. Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, May 2012. [http://www.air.org/files/1707\\_The\\_Ripple\\_Effect\\_d8\\_Online.pdf](http://www.air.org/files/1707_The_Ripple_Effect_d8_Online.pdf).

Farkas, Steve, Jean Johnson, and Ann Duffett. “Rolling Up Their Sleeves: Superintendents and Principals Talk About What’s Needed to Fix Public Schools.” New York: Public Agenda Foundation, 2003.

Florian, Judy. “Sustaining Education Reform: Influential Factors.” Aurora, CO: Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, December 2000. <http://www.umat.edu/mmsti/docs/resourcesdocs/EducationalReformEfforts.pdf>.

Jenkins, Davis. “Redesigning Community College for Completion: Lessons from Research on High-Performing Organizations.” Working Paper No. 24. New York: Community College Research Center, Columbia University, 2011. <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Publication.asp?UID=844>.

Johnson, Jean, Jonathan Rochkind, and John Doble. “Mission of the Heart: What Does It Take to Transform a School?” New York: Public Agenda Foundation, 2008.

Kannapel, Patricia J., and Stephen K. Clements. *Inside the Black Box of High-Performing High-Poverty Schools*. Lexington, KY: Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence, February 2005. <http://www.cdl.org/resource-library/pdf/FordReportJE.pdf>.

Ohio Department of Education. “Case Studies of *Schools of Promise*.” <http://www.ode.state.oh.us/GD/Templates/Pages/ODE/ODEDetail.aspx?page=3&TopicRelationID=1677&ContentID=4082&Content=115420>.

Reeves, Douglas B. “High Performance in High Poverty Schools: 90/90/90 and Beyond.” Center for Performance Assessment, 2003. <http://www.makingstandardswork.com>.

Sebastian, James, and Elaine Allensworth. “The Influence of Principal Leadership on Classroom Instruction and Student Learning: A Study of Mediated Pathways to Learning.” *Educational Administration Quarterly* 48, no. 1 (February 2012): 1–38. <http://eaq.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/02/09/0013161X11436273>.

Suffren, Quentin, and Theodore J. Wallace. *Needles in a Haystack: Lessons from Ohio’s High-Performing, High-Need Urban Schools*. Columbus, OH: Thomas B. Fordham Institute, 2010. <http://www.edexcellence.net/publications/needles-in-a-haystack.html>.

## Related Public Agenda Publications

### **Education: A Citizens' Solutions Guide (2012)**

*Jean Johnson*

One in a series of six Solutions Guides, this publication is a nonpartisan, unbiased resource and discussion guide which lays out the country's educational issues in alternative ways, weighing and evaluating values, priorities, pros, cons and tradeoffs.

### ***You Can't Do It Alone: A Communications and Engagement Manual for School Leaders Committed to Reform* (2012)**

*Jean Johnson*

This book recaps a decade of Public Agenda opinion research among parents, students, teachers, and the general public, and summarizes the organization's theory of change and public learning.

### **What's Trust Got to Do With It? A Communications and Engagement Guide for School Leaders Tackling the Problem of Persistently Failing Schools (2011)**

*Jean Johnson with Jon Rochkind, Michael Ramaley and Jeremiah Hess*

A resource for leaders seeking to transform the nation's persistently failing schools, this report is a blueprint that offers leaders eight clear and actionable principles to help them effectively communicate with and engage communities facing school turnaround.

### **Convergence and Contradictions in Teachers' Perceptions of Policy Reform Ideas (2010)**

*Jane G. Coggschall, Ph.D., Amber Ott, Ellen Behrstock and Molly Lasagna*

This report asks teachers what they think about educational reformers strategies to recruit, retain, compensate and support effective educators.

### **Teaching for a Living: How Teachers See The Profession Today (2009)**

*Jean Johnson, Andrew Yarrow, Jonathan Rochkind and Amber Ott*

The first in a series of three reports, this research focuses on how to retain the most promising teachers; it asks why people become teachers, what their frustrations are and what reforms they think might improve their work.

### **Supporting Teacher Talent: The View from Generation Y (2009)**

*Jane G. Coggschall, Ph.D., Amber Ott, Ellen Behrstock and Molly Lasagna*

This study, the second in a three part series, examines whether different generations bring to teaching different aspirations, concerns and perspectives.

### **Mission of the Heart: What Does it Take to Transform a School? (2008)**

*Jean Johnson, Jonathan Rochkind and John Doble*

The last of a three part series, this report attempts to understand the best ways to recruit and sustain top leaders in high-needs schools and asks school leaders what traits and skills they consider essential to turning a struggling school around.

## Our Thanks

The authors of “Failure Is Not an Option” would like to thank the following people for their support and assistance during the research for this project and the preparation of this report:

The teachers, parents, students, administrators, community members and partners who lent us their time at each of the nine schools we visited, for graciously welcoming us into their schools and speaking with us honestly and candidly.

Our partners at the Ohio Business Roundtable, especially Richard Stoff, as well as Lisa Gray and Chan Cochran;

Professor Herb Asher at The Ohio State University and Sherry Panizo at the Ohio Department of Education;

Ann Duffett and Steve Farkas of the FDR Group, for their invaluable expertise and help throughout the entire project;

David Lee, for his expert videography at two of our nine school visits;

Jeremy Hess and Lucretia Keenan—from Public Agenda’s research team—for meticulous background research;

Allison Rizzolo and Megan Donovan—from Public Agenda’s communications team—for their efforts to turn our work into an attractive publication and to bring it to the attention of a broad audience;

Michael Rojas—also from Public Agenda’s communications team—for producing an online version of this report;

Public Agenda Senior Fellow Jean Johnson, for her invaluable insights and expertise, and Public Agenda President Will Friedman, for his vision, input and guidance throughout this project.



---

### About Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a national, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to strengthening democracy and improving people's lives. Through research and public engagement, we give divided citizens and leaders the means to build common ground and make progress on critical issues, including education reform, the environment and healthcare. Public Agenda was founded in 1975 by the social scientist and public opinion expert Dan Yankelovich and former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, and is based in New York City.

Find us on Facebook at [facebook.com/PublicAgenda](https://facebook.com/PublicAgenda) and on Twitter at [@PublicAgenda](https://twitter.com/PublicAgenda).

