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How Cincinnati's historic progress happened by Joe Nathan

Despite many problems, Cincinnati, Ohio Public Schools (CPS) increased its four-year high school graduation rate from 51% in 2000 to 79% in 2007. Equally important, as of 2007, CPS ELIMINATED the gap in high school graduation rate between white and African American students. This occurred as Ohio was increasing standards, making students pass more challenging tests to graduate than prior to 2000.

While no one is satisfied with 79% graduation rate, Cincinnati's progress is worth considering. It is one of the first, if not the first, urban district to eliminate high school graduation gaps between students of different races.

How did it happen? Cincinnati had a number of partners over the last seven years, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The Foundation asked me to work with the district, beginning in 2000. The Cincinnati effort was one of the most significant and successful in which I've been involved since entering the profession in 1970. Here are ten key lessons that others might consider:

- 1. Visiting highly successful urban public schools is extremely valuable. Cincinnati educators, parents, students and community leaders visited public high schools in New York and Kansas that were producing excellent results with students from low income, limited English speaking students. It became clear that these results were possible. Conversations shifted from whether progress was possible, to how it would be done.
- 2. Setting a few clear, ambitious goals was vital: In 2000, the CPS Superintendent and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation agreed that in the next five years, the district would try to increase the graduation rate to 75% and cut the racial graduation gap in half. Both ambitious goals were met and exceeded. High goals and focus seem very important. Each high school developed yearly work plans reflected these goals, along with one or two goals that each school developed for itself.

- 3. Creation of new small schools within larger buildings was a central element of this effort. We built on extensive research showing the value of small, focused schools. Several high schools with four year graduation rates of less than 40% in 2000 were subdivided into small schools of choice, open to all, no admissions tests, and their own principal. Another low performing, somewhat smaller high school was divided into small learning communities that involved students for several hours each day.
- 4. Professional, development for teachers focused in three key areas: reading, math, and working effectively with urban youth. Gates and other funds were used to help pay for these workshops. These were not "one shot," late afternoon sessions, when faculty were tired. They were often held in the summer, and sometimes at pleasant retreat centers. The workshops were sequential and indepth, with faculty asked to try techniques discussed and modeled between the time sessions were held.
- 5. Teachers were treated with considerable respect. The CPS superintendent and school board agreed that teachers at the lowest performing schools would be allowed to select curriculum and professional development that would help them reach goals. At one point a national organization with its own curriculum convinced a senior district official that there should be a district wide adoption. When some of the faculty and I questioned this, an official of the national organization told a Gates Foundation official, "We want Joe Nathan out of Cincinnati." After examining the situation, the Gates Foundation said it would stay in Cincinnati if the district agreed to continue building level decision–making. Senior district administrators and the school board chair decided to honor the original commitment. The Foundation and CPS officials asked me to stay (I did).

Teachers also were taken to a nearby state park for some workshops, and treated like professionals in other fields. Periodically we purchased ice cream or sandwiches for faculty meetings in schools showing considerable progress. We told the news media about progress, and to praise educators in buildings showing significant growth.

Many senior faculty and young educators, responded with a genuine openness, willingness to learn, and a growing belief that major progress was possible.

- 6. Union leadership helped lead and encourage teachers. The last two Cincinnati Federation of Teacher presidents had been high school teachers. They strongly endorsed, encouraged and supported the change efforts. I'd encourage any urban district trying these strategies to invite either or both to meet with folks in their district.
- 7. Partnerships were extremely valuable. Among the most important involved Cincinnati Bell, Xavier University, Families Forward and KnowledgeWorks Foundation, as well as the Gates Foundation. Cincinnati Bell provided thousands of tutoring hours at one high school, and cell phones for students at the school who excelled. Xavier provided summer classrooms and other services to 9th graders from Withrow University, helping them feel that they DO belong in college classrooms. Families Forward, a local service agency shared space with one of the high schools. Their staff helped strengthen families and counsel students facing deep challenges. KnowledgeWorks provided grants and technical assistance to several CPS high schools, along with district and community advocacy.
- 8. Competition from charter public schools helped encourage improvements. CPS board, administrators and faculty were very aware of growing competition for students.
- 9. District administrators did not just talk about accountability for results. Superintendents Steve Adamowski and Rosa Blackwell, both dedicated, talented leaders, gave authority to principals and held them responsible. They encouraged effective principals and removed several when there was little progress. A number of excellent principals emerged.

Several of these principals, including Anthony Smith (Taft) and Sharon Johnson (Withrow University) should be asked to help train the next generation of Ohio principals. They are superstars.

10. Many of the schools created or expanded service-learning programs. These programs helped youngsters see themselves as people who can accomplish important, valuable things NOW. A new more positive self-image helped produce academic goals. Service learning programs also helped students see connections between the curriculum and community.

Unquestionably, CPS faces challenges. Enrollment has declined (especially at the elementary school level), and the district faces significant financial problems. The current superintendent has resigned, after more than 30 years in the district. Beginning in the 2008–09 school year, Cincinnati will have its fourth superintendent in 8 years. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation helped pay for a new district strategic plan including proposed next steps.

Cincinnati educators, students and the broader community have more work to do. For example, a higher education, district community partnership is developing to increase the high school graduation rate, plus the number of students entering and graduating from some form of post–secondary education. However, the faculty, families, students and broader community have made important, historic progress in the last seven years. They recognized that no one approach would produce the gains they sought. So they used some of the best available research, including the strategies cited above. Their openness, courage, persistence and results should be acknowledged and honored.

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