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The Cincinnati Example

By Joe Nathan

Powerful progress in Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) may help efforts to improve Minneapolis and St. Paul Public Schools. Despite its problems, CPS grew from a four-year, 51% high school graduation rate in 2000 to a four-year, 79% graduation rate in 2007. It also ELIMINATED the graduation gap between white and African American students. Graduation rates for all students increased. Cincinnati appears to be among the first, if not the first major urban district to eliminate this gap.

No one is satisfied with 79% graduation rate. There are differences among Cincinnati, St Paul and Minneapolis (including higher funding in Minnesota schools, and a higher percentage here of limited English speaking students). But having represented the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in Cincinnati for the last seven years. I've learned lessons that may be useful locally.

1. Visit urban schools with significant achievement that closed or dramatically reduced achievement gaps. CPS students, parents and educators visited many schools. Conversations changed from whether major progress was possible, to how it would be done.
2. Set a few explicit, ambitious goals: 7 years ago, the Superintendent and Gates Foundation agreed that within 5 years, the district would aim for a 75% graduation rate and cut the racial gap in half. Both ambitious goals were exceeded.
3. Create small schools at several large high school buildings, along with a few new small schools in separate facilities. CPS used research about benefits of small schools, open to all students.
4. Focus workshops for teachers in three areas: reading, math, and ways to work with urban youth. Respect and encourage faculty. Gates and other funds paid for workshops that building teachers and principals helped select. Training was done in pleasant surroundings, often during the summer. As schools made progress, they received additional money, and public recognition.

5. Empower schools to select faculty. Teams, including a building principal, faculty and sometimes parents, selected staff. Seniority did not guarantee a job.

6. Create focused partnerships. For example, Cincinnati Bell donated hundreds of hours of tutoring, along with free cell phones for students who excelled at perhaps the district's most troubled high school as on 2000 (this and other factors produced huge gains). Xavier University provided free summer classrooms and other assistance to 9th graders at another school, helping convince students that they belonged in a college classroom. Families Forward placed social workers at several schools to help strengthen families and serve students. KnowledgeWorks Foundation provided grants, advocacy and technical assistance.

7. Union leadership should help develop, lead and encourage the changes, as they did in CPS.

8. Support chartered public schools. Competition helped encourage and sometimes inform improvements.

9. Superintendents (3 of them in the last 7 years) gave principals authority to and held them responsible for results. They encouraged effective principals and removed several who it appeared were not up to the task.

10. Expand service – learning to help students see connections between classroom and community. This also helped convince students they could make a difference with others and themselves.

Cincinnati faces typical urban challenges. Although gains are encouraging, much work remains.

But Cincinnati, like Minneapolis and St. Paul, has many talented, committed people. The right strategies, with open-minded, collaborative people, will produce major, measurable progress.

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