

The History of Withrow University High School
By Sharon Johnson, Principal
2007

District Background

The Cincinnati Public School District is an urban school district of 37,000 students located in Ohio. The median district household income, as reported in the 2000 Census Report, is \$29,493.

In 2002 the Cincinnati Public School District (CPS) revised both the high school selection process and the configuration of the large comprehensive high school learning community. District officials believed that moving from neighborhood high schools to “high schools of choice” and making large (comprehensive) high schools into smaller (program specific) high schools could be the catalyst to increase low student academic performance.

School Background

Withrow University High School is located in Cincinnati, Ohio and is part of the Cincinnati Public School system. WHUS is an urban 9th through 12th grade school with approximately 750 students and is a “High School of Choice”. There is no residence, geographic or entrance test requirement needed to enroll. More than 90% of the student body is minority with over 50% of these students on free or reduced lunch. Consistent with the expectations from “No Child Left Behind”, WUHS has been successfully raising and maintaining high levels of academic performance, particularly among minority and economically disadvantaged students.

Withrow University High School (WUHS) was established in 2002 as one of two “smaller” schools on the historic Withrow High School campus. The goal of this reorganization was to create a nurturing environment where teachers were better able to reach and engage students in meaningful ways by providing for academic rigor and relevance, as well as, positive adult mentoring relationships. Beginning with only a freshman class, funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the leadership of Principal Sharon Johnson, the original low performing school (Academic Watch Rating 2002),

**WITHROW COMPREHENSIVE HIGH SCHOOL
OHIO NINTH-GRADE PROFICIENCY TEST
2001-02**

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Passing Percentage</i>
Writing	41%
Reading	30 %
Math	16%
Citizenship	23%
Science	7%

was transformed into a smaller, more specialized higher performing school with sustainable results :

OHIO 10TH GRADE GRADUATION TEST (OGT)

Subject	2002-03 Passing Rate	2003-04 Passing Rate	2004-05 Passing Rate	2005-06 Passing Rate	2006-07 Passing Rate
<i>Reading</i>	<i>75.0%</i>	<i>93.3%</i>	<i>94.5%</i>	<i>91.4%</i>	<i>93.3%</i>
<i>Math</i>	<i>34.0%</i>	<i>84.7%</i>	<i>87.9%</i>	<i>84.0%</i>	<i>84.7%</i>
<i>Writing</i>	<i>87.5%</i>	<i>98.9%</i>	<i>89.1%</i>	<i>95.1%</i>	<i>98.9%</i>
<i>Science</i>	<i>53.0%</i>	<i>77.5%</i>	<i>69.7%</i>	<i>73.6%</i>	<i>77.5%</i>
<i>Social Studies</i>	<i>67.0%</i>	<i>86.5%</i>	<i>78.2%</i>	<i>83.4%</i>	<i>86.5%</i>

Elements of Success:

Collaborative Leadership

Principal Sharon Johnson is a visionary and strong leader. Principal Johnson teamed with the WHUS staff to develop and implement innovative student support and curriculum instructional strategies. She works with staff, students, parents and community business partners (two companies and two universities) to create a school environment that encourages collaborative relationships and mutual cooperation.

Open communication and accountability are an integral part of Withrow's school culture. During staff meetings, assessment data are openly shared and discussed, and staff members propose strategies for sustained, continuous improvement. Principal Johnson works with her administrative team to develop a schedule that includes time for staff collaboration and articulation. Teachers work together daily in subject and grade level team meetings facilitated by Teacher Team Leaders. Meeting agendas focus on how to improve student performance through teaching strategies and differentiation of instruction (for regular and special needs students), effective selection and use of

instructional materials, discipline policy and professional development. The meetings also provide an environment for personal and emotional support of staff.

Personalization

The Withrow administration and staff believe that providing emotional support and developing personal relationships are critical factors in the academic success of students. The administration and faculty work together to create a school environment that demonstrates understanding, flexibility and caring for students as individuals. The Principal encourages a “family” atmosphere to convey caring and deep concern for the well being of each student. For example, in keeping with the family concept class meetings, called “family meetings”, are held quarterly allowing for increased communication and reiteration of high expectations.

Aware that some students may lack a sufficient support system at home, teachers stress to students that they can succeed with support and determination. Family Forward is a social service agency that supports WUHS students. The agency works specifically with students who are homeless, truant, in need of anger management assistance or have a need for other special support.

Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment

The school motto is, “Withrow University....where every student is college bound” requires that the academic curriculum at WUHS be designed to provide students with the core subject areas needed to demonstrate a standard of academic proficiency essential for high school graduation and for college/university admission and success.

While sensitive to the fact that many WUHS students have home situations that might pose a challenge for academic achievement and cognizant of the difficulties of living and working in an urban environment, Withrow’s administration and staff are adamant in their refusal to accept excuses for poor academic performance. The administration and staff are diligently committed to providing an environment that addresses the unique needs of the WUHS student population.

The WUHS instructional design uses traditional and non-traditional methods to establish supports that enable all students to reach established standards of academic performance as measured by standardized local and state assessments. For example,

- the use of differentiated instruction methodology throughout subject areas.
- regular education and special education teachers and teacher teams meet and collaborate on a consistent basis to provide the best education for all students.
- multiple, timely, criterion-based assessments targeted at curriculum objectives are administered in each subject area and the results are used to inform instruction.

Other examples of curriculum innovations implemented at WUHS are that students are instructed in all core academic subject areas in gender separated classes. Additionally, all freshmen attend a three week summer bridge program where they meet teachers, are assessed in each core academic area that provides benchmark data for on-going data-

based academic progress and attend sessions designed to build their awareness and understanding of the rigors of high school life.