



Smart INVESTMENTSSM IN MINNESOTA'S STUDENTS

Cincinnati School District Raises High School Graduation Rates for All

By Amelia Cruver & Matt Kane
January 2011

The experience of Cincinnati Public Schools proves that major district-wide gains in high school graduation rates are possible for all students.

Education leaders committed to progress and implemented strategies that produced a 30 percentage-point increase in graduation rates from 2000 to 2009 – strategies that included teaching teams in the schools, student-based budgeting, more autonomy at the school level, and closer working relationships between students and teachers.

Cincinnati's African American students now graduate at about the same increased rate as white students, a notable accomplishment for an urban school district.

The positive impacts of these reforms include increased college attendance by Cincinnati Public Schools graduates, and college readiness and retention also have improved.

The Goal

In the year 2000, the high school graduation rate for the Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) was 51%. Faced with this dismal figure, Cincinnati's superintendent of schools set out to increase the overall graduation rate to 75% by 2005 and cut the racial graduation gap in half. These goals were met and exceeded.

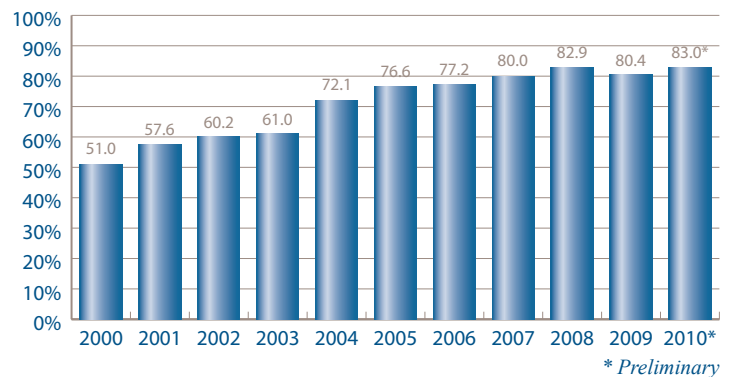
Dramatic Progress

The high school graduation rate for the CPS increased from about 51% in 2000 to 80% in 2009. Preliminary data indicate an 83% rate for 2010.

From 2000 to 2009, the graduation rates increased for African American students from about 47% to 80% and for white students from about 59% to 84%. For years 2002 to 2009, the rate for low-income students rose from about 54% to 76%.

In 2006 and 2007 the graduation rate for African American students exceeded that of white students by several percentage points. The rates have remained close since 2006.

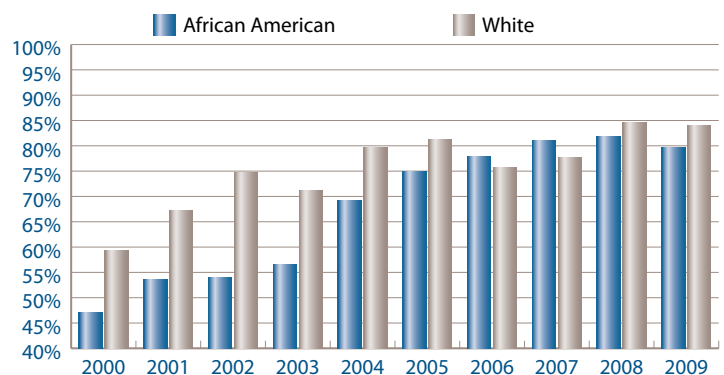
Overall Upward Trend in Graduation Rate



Graduation rate represents the percentage of ninth-graders who graduate within 4 years

Source: Cincinnati Public Schools

Graduation Gap Narrows Between African American and White Students



Gap represents percentage-point differences between groups

Source: Cincinnati Public Schools

Achievement on test scores also increased dramatically from 2000 to 2009 for the CPS district as a whole. From 2001 to 2006, the district's average score on Ohio's performance index for schools increased by about 24 points, from 57.7 to 81.5, and it stood at 83.1 for 2010.



Who Helped Drive the Positive Changes?

- *Superintendents* – A number of leaders acknowledged failures, set big goals and welcomed reform.
- *Principals* – Principals were given a leadership role in the greater autonomy for their schools, with student-based budgeting and more school-based decision-making.
- *Teachers and teacher unions* – The Cincinnati Federation of Teachers worked with district leaders to craft policy that sets high expectations for all teachers and all students.
- *Teams in the schools* – Cincinnati implemented a team approach to both instruction and budgeting. Teams of teachers across subject areas discuss student progress and develop strategies and interdisciplinary lessons. For budgeting, school-based control is handled cooperatively by teams that include the principal, teacher leaders, parents and others.
- *Students and families* – The success in Cincinnati's high schools came about because of hard work and dedication by students and their families.
- *The business community* – Business leaders have been actively engaged on reform since CPS embraced recommendations from a business-led commission regarding inefficiencies and a lack of accountability.
- *The Center for School Change and the KnowledgeWorks Foundation* – The Minnesota-based Center for School Change played a key role in the reform effort, working closely with the district, the schools and the broad array of players on changes, including more decision-making at the school level, the transition to small and specialized schools, and the establishment of a limited number of clear goals. The Cincinnati-based KnowledgeWorks Foundation focused on transforming education through system reform and changes to the schools.
- *The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation* – The foundation provided grants to help support reform efforts but also actively encouraged innovation and vision.
- *The Strive Partnership* – Since 2006, Strive has brought CPS together with many others to lay a foundation for continued improvement at all levels from pre-kindergarten through to post-secondary success.

Student-based budgeting

The dramatic improvement in CPS graduation rates may not have been possible without a switch to student-based budgeting. With student-based budgeting, per-pupil funding goes to whichever school a student attends, and this has increased the control that schools have over budget decisions. CPS also provides extra funding for students with higher needs – English language learners, students with disabilities, gifted students, and students in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty.

Other Key Elements

- *The school board set big goals and welcomed change* – The *Students First* plan, adopted by the board in the 1990s, helped advance the alignment of curriculum with educational standards, the decentralization of power to schools, and the move to city-wide high schools with open enrollment.
- *Data-driven instruction* – CPS has made it a high priority to use data to drive instruction for students in its high schools and at all grade levels. The teaching teams use student achievement data to guide their instructional strategies. The Strive Partnership helps support data analysis.

The Payoff: Higher Education

The percentage of CPS high school graduates enrolled in college went up 10 percentage points to 68% from 2005 to 2008.

Smart InvestmentsSM in Minnesota's Students

Some of the reforms and approaches used to boost high school success in Cincinnati link with the proven strategies for educational improvement identified by Growth & Justice for its initiative on *Smart InvestmentsSM in Minnesota's Students*. For more information about this Growth & Justice work, click [here](#). For a longer, more detailed version of this Cincinnati case study, click [here](#).

GROWTH & JUSTICE

2324 University Ave. W., Suite 120A
Saint Paul, MN 55114
Phone: 651-917-6037
info@growthandjustice.org
www.growthandjustice.org