

Cincinnati School District Raises High School Graduation Rates for All

Rate for African American Students on Par with Rate for Whites

Amelia Cruver & Matt Kane
January 2011

GROWTH & JUSTICE

Growth & Justice is a non-profit, non-partisan organization that researches and recommends public policies to make Minnesota's economy simultaneously more prosperous and fair. We support fair taxation and smart public sector investment — fiscally responsible, accountable investment that advances prosperity for all Minnesotans. Growth & Justice is a leading progressive voice on state issues.

Remarkable Results

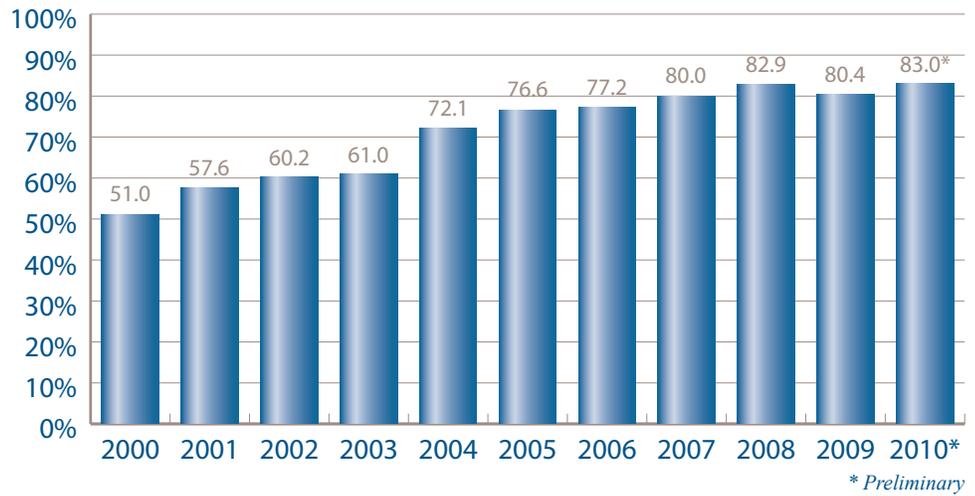
The experience of the Cincinnati Public Schools proves that major district-wide gains in high school graduation rates for all students are possible. Education leaders in Cincinnati committed to progress and implemented a range of important strategies that produced a 30 percentage-point increase in graduation 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. These improvements have benefited all students in Cincinnati, but especially low-income students and students of color. 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 do not stop when students leave high school with their diplomas: College attendance by Cincinnati’s public-school graduates has also increased, along with college readiness and retention.

The Goal

In the year 2000, the high school graduation rate for the Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) was 51%.¹ The rate for African American students that year was 47%, compared to 59% for white students.² Faced with these dismal figures, 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.

In 2005, the graduation rate was 77%, and in 2006 Cincinnati became a standout urban public school district by eliminating the stubborn gap in graduation rates between white and African American students.³ The overall graduation rate has remained above 75% – reaching as high as 83% in 2008⁴ and 2010 (preliminary estimate).⁵

Overall Upward Trend in Graduation Rate



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

Source: Cincinnati Public Schools

1 Ohio Department of Education, Interactive Report Card database, <http://ilrc.ode.state.oh.us/default.asp>.

2 The categories used for the data are white non-Hispanic and black non-Hispanic. Because Cincinnati Public Schools has had such a small percentage of Latino students, the data trends are difficult to assess with certainty for this group, and this analysis does not cover data regarding Hispanics.

3 Ohio Department of Education, Interactive Report Card database.

4 Ohio Department of Education, Interactive Report Card database.

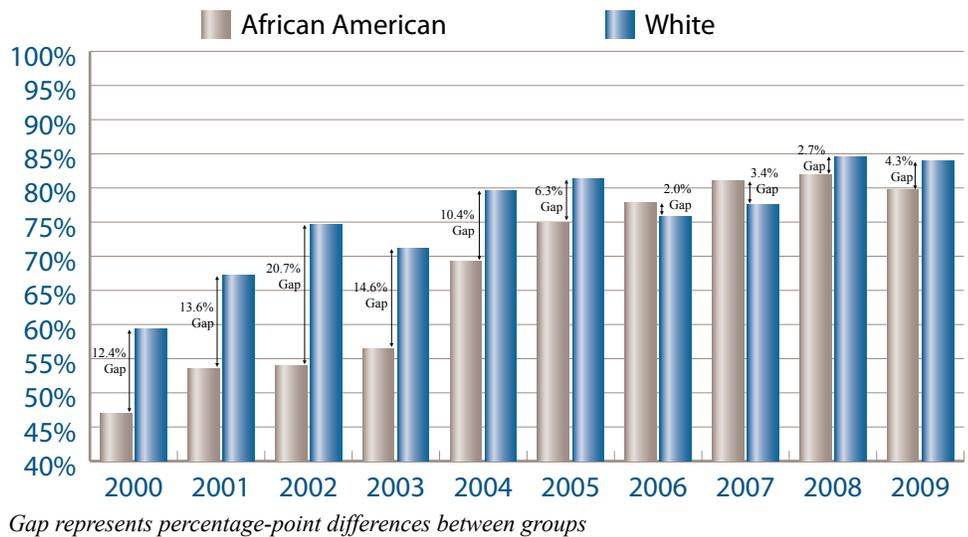
5 Cincinnati Public Schools, “Districtwide Graduation Rate Data Review,” January 2011, <http://www.cps-k12.org/home/GradRate.pdf>.

Measures of Dramatic Progress

As of 2010, the Cincinnati school district has more than 30,000 students, and operates 16 high schools. Graduation rates from the high schools in Cincinnati increased from 51% in 2000 to 80% in 2009, based on the percentage of ninth-graders who graduate within four years. The graduation rates for African American and white students are close and have been since 2006.⁶ In 2000 the gap in graduation rates between white and black students in Cincinnati was 12 percentage points, but by 2006 the graduation rate for African American students exceeded that of white students by about two percentage points (78% and 76% respectively), and it was above the rate for white students in 2007 as well.⁷ Years 2008 and 2009 brought small shortfalls for African American students compared to white students (gaps of about 3% and 4%).⁸

Academic outcomes have improved for students of all backgrounds in Cincinnati. From 2000 to 2009, CPS graduation rates increased for white students by about 25 percentage points from about 59% to 84%, and the rate for African American students increased by about 33 percentage points from about 47% to 80%. For years 2002 to 2009, the rate for low-income students increased about 22 percentage points from about 54% to 76%.⁹

Graduation Gap Narrows Between African-American and White Students



Source: Cincinnati Public Schools

6 Cincinnati Public Schools, "Districtwide Graduation Rate Data Review."

7 Ohio Department of Education, Interactive Report Card database.

8 Cincinnati Public Schools, "Districtwide Graduation Rate Data Review."

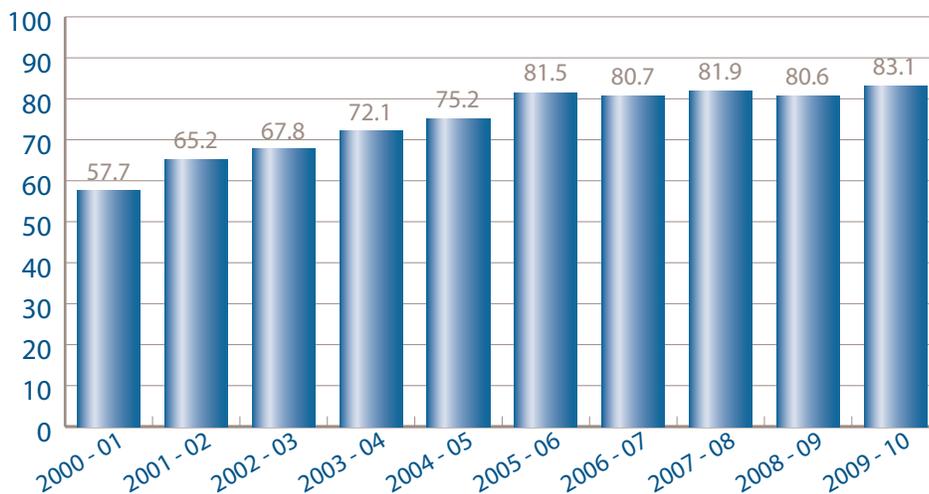
9 Ohio Department of Education, Interactive Report Card database.

Achievement on test scores also increased dramatically from 2000 to 2009 for the Cincinnati school district as a whole. To measure trends in overall academic achievement in Ohio's districts and schools, the state uses a performance index that is a weighted average of the test scores from all grade levels. In Cincinnati from 2001 to 2006, this performance index increased by about 24 points, from 57.7 to 81.5, and it stood at 83.1 for 2010.¹⁰ In 2010, Cincinnati Public Schools were rated "Effective" by the state, becoming the first and currently only urban school district in Ohio to reach that level¹¹ All this is evidence that the rise in graduation rates is tied to real increases in the academic outcomes for Cincinnati's students.

Academic gains, not a lowering of standards or a change in graduation policies, seem to have fueled the success. The graduation requirements actually increased in difficulty over time.¹² Between

2003 and 2006, several challenging tests were added to the requirements for graduation, pushing Cincinnati's public high school students to reach an even higher bar.¹³ Demographic shifts in the district were not dramatic over the period. Economically disadvantaged students accounted for 63% of the school population in 2002-03, and in 2009 they made up 70% of the total.¹⁴ The racial makeup of the district in 2009-2010 remained similar to what it was in the early 2000s, with whites accounting for 24% of the students in both the 2002-03 and 2009-10 school years, and African Americans accounting for 71% of the students in 2002-03 and 68% in 2009-10.¹⁵

Ohio's Performance Index Scores for the Cincinnati Public Schools



Source: Ohio Department of Education

Who Helped Drive Positive Change in Cincinnati?

Superintendents – Cincinnati Public Schools has had a number of leaders who acknowledged failures, set big goals and welcomed reform. Between 1990 and 2000, the district completely overhauled its central office, redesigned its system of high schools and changed how it funds its schools. Superintendents pursued reform efforts by reaching out to unions and the business sector for support and guidance throughout.¹⁶

Principals – Principals were given a leadership role in the greater autonomy for their schools, with the implementation of student-based budgeting and more school-based decision-making aimed at reaching ambitious goals. Principals were also charged with implementing a team-based approach to instruction. Some principals were not up to the task and left. Some were removed from their positions.¹⁷ Many rose to the occasion and embraced collaborative leadership and greater school autonomy.

10 Ohio Department of Education, Interactive Report Card database.

11 Cincinnati Public Schools website, <http://www.cps-k12.org/home/introduction.htm>.

12 Joe Nathan, director of the Center for School Change and a leading practitioner of education reform, comments, Dec. 20, 2010.

13 Nathan, comments.

14 Ohio Department of Education, Interactive Report Card database.

15 Ohio Department of Education, Interactive Report Card database.

16 Ellen R. Delisio, "School Reform in Cincinnati Yields Progress," *Education World*, Dec. 13, 2001, http://www.educationworld.com/a_issues/issues246.shtml

17 Joe Nathan, "How Cincinnati's historic progress happened." *Education Week*, Jan. 9, 2008. Available via <http://www.centerforschoolchange.org/additional-newspaper-columns-re-cincinnati/index.html>.

Teachers and teacher unions – The Cincinnati Federation of Teachers (CFT) has long embraced reforms and worked with district leaders to craft policy that sets high expectations for all teachers and all students. The late Tom Mooney, CFT president from 1979 to 2000, was known nationally for co-founding the Institute for Teacher Union Leadership in 2004, an organization whose mission it is to work with teacher unions in leading reform efforts in public schools.¹⁸ Sue Taylor, the former CFT president and current president of the Ohio Federation of Teachers, played a central role in carrying out reforms in Cincinnati.¹⁹ In a 2005 article in *Rethinking Schools*, Taylor states, “The union needs to be concerned about the rights and working conditions of teachers, but it also needs to be the impetus for professionalizing teaching.” This mindset has led to the creation of a rigorous training program for new teachers – both those with traditional certification and those with alternative certification – and a career ladder for all teachers in the Cincinnati Public Schools.²⁰

Teams in the schools – Cincinnati’s high schools implemented a team approach to both instruction and budgeting. For team teaching, groups of students are assigned to the same teachers for math, for science, for English and for social studies – and special education teachers serve on the teams in some cases. Those teachers have a common planning time to discuss student progress and develop strategies and interdisciplinary lessons. With support from the schools’ administrators, teachers can work collaboratively to review data on student achievement, set learning outcomes, and design interventions and implementation strategies. For budgeting, school-based control of the decisions is handled cooperatively by Instructional Leadership Teams made up of the principal, designated teacher leaders, and representatives of the schools’ parents, community and support staff. Taylor identifies these team approaches as the biggest factors in boosting student achievement at the high schools in Cincinnati.²¹ Both were negotiated in the district’s collective bargaining agreements.

Students and families – The success in Cincinnati’s high schools came about because of hard work and dedication by students and their families. Students progressed in part because of more effective working relationships with teachers and increased confidence in their ability to achieve. A new focus on service learning in many high schools provided students with an effective demonstration that they have a positive impact on their community, and it encouraged them to work hard in school.²²

The business community – In 1991, in the face of large deficits, the district recruited local business leaders to form the Buenger Commission. The commission’s goal was to report on inefficiencies and give the district suggestions for improvement. They found overspending on central office operations and a lack of accountability for student achievement. The recommendations of the commission were embraced by Steven Adamowski, CPS superintendent from 1998 to 2002, and business leaders have been active promoters of school reform efforts in Cincinnati ever since. In direct response to the report’s findings, the school district’s central office staff was cut by nearly 60%, and the district instituted a ratings system for schools that allows bonuses for staff members at high-performing schools and interventions and support for schools failing to meet standards. All this was done before the federal No Child Left Behind Act made these approaches more common nationally.²³

18 The Tom Mooney Institute for Teacher and Union Leadership, “About Tom Mooney,” <http://www.mitul.org/about-tom-mooney>.

19 Nathan, comments.

20 Barbara Miner, “Cincinnati’s Teacher Union Tackles Quality,” *Rethinking Schools*, winter 2005/2006, http://www.rethinkingschools.org/special_reports/quality_teachers/unio202.shtml.

21 Sue Taylor, former president of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers and current president of the Ohio Federation of Teachers, comments, Jan. 19, 2011.

22 Nathan, comments; and Nathan, “How Cincinnati’s historic progress happened.”

23 Karen Hawley Miles, Kathleen Ware and Marguerite Roza, “Leveling the Playing Field: Creating Funding Equity through Student-Based Budgeting,” *Kappan Magazine*, October 2003, p. 2. Available via <http://www.educationresourcestrategies.org/documents/MilesKappan10-03.pdf>.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation— The Gates Foundation was instrumental in part because it provided grant funding but also – and perhaps more importantly – because of its vision. In the early 2000s, the foundation played a role in assistance and funding for the redesign of the district’s high schools into small schools – a key strategy.²⁴ The Gates Foundation also encouraged innovative principals to implement creative and bold reforms within their own schools in order to meet the specific needs of their students. By partnering with Cincinnati Public Schools to set the clear goal of a 75% graduation rate in 2005, the foundation helped create momentum for reaching that target.²⁵

The Center for School Change and the KnowledgeWorks Foundation – With funding from the Gates Foundation, the Minnesota-based Center for School Change played a key role in the reform effort from 2000 through 2007, helping to focus efforts on a limited number of clear goals and assisting with the transition of Cincinnati’s high schools from ineffective to small and specialized.²⁶ Drawing upon years of experience and a 10-point strategy, the center worked closely with the district, the schools and the broad array of players throughout the period of change and advocated for decision-making at the school level. In addition, the KnowledgeWorks Foundation, a Cincinnati-based organization focused on transforming education, used Gates Foundation funding to assist Cincinnati Public Schools with system reform and change.

The Strive Partnership – Founded in 2006 as an affiliate of the KnowledgeWorks Foundation, Strive brought CPS and other area school districts together with a vast network of colleges and universities, education-focused non-profits and advocacy groups, local government officials, and businesses in Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky for mutually reinforcing initiatives. The group aims for continued improvement in educational achievement at all levels from pre-kindergarten through post-secondary success. Strive takes a three-pronged approach to ensuring an excellent education for all of Cincinnati’s children – data driven decision-making, sustained and coordinated action, and the alignment of funding around what works.

Financial Resources

Student-based budgeting – In 2000, Cincinnati Public Schools made a dramatic shift in how it funded schools. Traditionally, districts calculate how many teachers will be required at a school based on the number of students attending and then allocate funding necessary to support the different staff members. Then some schools with specialized programs – for example, an arts focus or a magnet program – are provided with additional funding for more staff and supplies to support those programs. This makes the per-pupil spending for schools in some districts very unequal, with discrepancies at times tied to historical patterns and political pressures. By contrast, student-based budgeting funds the child instead of the teacher – the money goes to the school that the student attends. Additionally, students with different needs – and therefore different costs associated with teaching them – receive different weights in the calculation of the per-student allocations. Schools receive extra funding for students who don’t speak English fluently, students with disabilities, gifted students, and students living in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty. The Cincinnati district also has used the student-based budgeting system to be strategic about its investments in students. For example, Cincinnati Public Schools acknowledges that the first and second grades, as well as the transition to high school, are crucial points in a student’s academic career and backs this belief up with added funds for students in those stages.

24 Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, “Education,” *Annual Report*, 2003, <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/nr/public/media/annualreports/annualreport03/HTML/education.html>

25 Nathan, “How Cincinnati’s historic progress happened.”

26 For more information about the Center for School Change and the Cincinnati initiative, see Nathan, “How Cincinnati’s historic progress happened,” *Education Week*, Jan. 9, 2008, available via <http://www.centerforschoolchange.org/the-cincinnati-example-by-joe-nathan/additional-newspaper-columns-re-cincinnati.html>; and Joe Nathan, “The Cincinnati Example,” *Minneapolis StarTribune*, Oct. 29, 2007, available via <http://www.startribune.com/opinion/commentary/11150746.html>.

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Since schools no longer receive money for specific staffing positions, they have much more freedom regarding how they spend their money. This has been the impetus for a shift of decision-making power from the central office to Cincinnati's schools. As noted above, Instructional Leadership Teams have been established at each school to make budgeting decisions. Under student-based budgeting, each of Cincinnati's new small high schools is able to find its specialty and make its own decisions about how best to ensure that students reach their full potential. By funding schools based on each student and in the amount that the students need to be successful, Cincinnati has a more equitable system that gives greater power to local schools and brings greater efficiency to the school budgeting process.²⁷

Gates Foundation grants – Two grants from the Gates Foundation in 2000 and 2001, totaling between \$3 million and \$4 million,²⁸ helped fund work for converting Cincinnati high schools into small, innovative schools.²⁹ The Gates grant money enabled in-service training, visits to outstanding schools around the country, other “startup” and retraining expenses, implementation of the best practices, and a quicker transition to the small high school model, with much of this led by the Center for School Change.

Other Critical Elements

The school board set big goals and welcomed change – In the 1990s, the school board adopted a bold strategic plan entitled *Students First*. The plan was centered on four themes:

- Establish standards for student performance.
- Decentralize resources and decision making to the school level.
- Hold schools accountable for results.
- Provide professional development and support for schools.³⁰

The school board and district leaders are still implementing strategies and approaches based on these themes and finding new solutions to challenges as they emerge.

Data-driven instruction – Cincinnati Public Schools has made it a high priority to use data to drive instruction for students in its high schools and at all grade levels. Data for every student is tracked and reviewed by school staff.³¹ The teaching teams use this data on student achievement to guide their instructional strategies, and the data can be compiled for the different teaching teams to track overall progress.³² Strive has played an important role in data efforts, tracking trends, providing data analysis, and offering training on data-driven continuous improvement.³³

27 Miles, Ware and Roza, p. 7.

28 Nathan, comments.

29 Interestingly, funding small school redesign in urban school districts was a major focus for the Gates foundation in the early 2000s. Some districts, such as New York City, have had limited success with such overhauls, while many other districts and individual schools have had mixed results. Because of this, the Gates foundation adjusted its strategy for high schools to focus less on school size and more on teacher quality and college preparation. While high school redesign was an important factor in Cincinnati's success, it was not the only factor for improvement in high school graduation rates there. For more on the issue of high school conversions, see *Leading the Conversion Process: Lessons Learned and Recommendations for Converting to Small Learning Communities*, prepared for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation by Fouts & Associates in September 2006. Available at <http://www.spu.edu/orgs/research/Leading%20the%20Conversion%20Process%2010-6-06.pdf>.

30 Miles, Ware and Roza, p. 7.

31 The Strive Partnership, <http://www.strivetogether.org/our-priorities-2>.

32 Taylor, comments.

33 The Strive Partnership.

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Students First approach led to key changes –The following key changes to district and school practices were implemented based on the four *Students First* strategies of the Cincinnati school board and helped drive the dramatic rise in graduation rates in Cincinnati:

- *Curriculum alignment and instructional methods* – High schools combed through their curriculum and amended it to ensure students were receiving rigorous instruction that was aligned to state standards.
- *Student-based budgeting* – Again, this brought equity to school funding levels and gave schools more freedom to spend money on the programs and staffing that met the needs of their students.³⁴
- *Decentralization of power* – When the business-led Buenger Commission in effect held a mirror up to the Cincinnati district, the district overhauled its overstuffed and inefficient central office. Staffing dropped from 600 in the 1991-92 school year to 200 by the 2000-01 school year. Instructional Leadership Teams were set up in the schools to handle key decisions.^{35 36}
- *City-wide high schools* – All high schools became open-enrollment schools, available to students throughout the entire district. Each eighth-grade student in Cincinnati can choose from a list of specialized, high-quality high schools to attend. High schools in Cincinnati now boast programs in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math), performing arts, and information technology, and Cincinnati has the nation’s first public Montessori high school. Most of the high schools offer Advanced Placement classes or dual enrollment at the high school and the local community colleges. Students from low-income neighborhoods are no longer concentrated at large, failing high schools. Students who live more than a mile away from their chosen school receive a transit pass that gives them deep discounts on bus fare to and from school.³⁷
- *Partnerships* – Given greater autonomy, principals were free to pursue their own partnerships to supplement the services provided to students. Businesses such as Cincinnati Bell, organizations like Families Forward, and Xavier University have provided tutoring, after-school programs and socio-emotional development services to students in Cincinnati high schools.³⁸

Promising Strategies to Boost Reform

Student-based budgeting – Use of student-based budgeting is being adopted in a number of districts around the nation. These districts should be watched closely for more evidence that this strategy can produce better outcomes for students. In Cincinnati, the reforms leading to the dramatic improvement in graduation rates likely would not have been possible without a switch to student-based budgeting. Interestingly, the St. Paul Public Schools currently uses an approach somewhat akin to student-based budgeting but in a scaled-back form.³⁹

Visits to highly successful urban public schools – Visits by Cincinnati school officials to small, high-performing high schools in New York and Kansas kick-started reform efforts in Cincinnati. Seeing low-income students – the majority of whom also were students of color or English language learners – achieving at high levels in public schools convinced principals, teachers and community members that Cincinnati’s ambitious goals were attainable.

34 Miles, Ware and Roza, p. 7.

35 Taylor, comments.

36 Delisio.

37 Cincinnati Public Schools website, “Metro,” <http://www.cps-k12.org/general/Transportation/Metro/metro.htm>.

38 Nathan, “How Cincinnati’s historic progress happened.”

39 Saint Paul Public Schools website, “Pupil Funding Process” http://businessoffice.spps.org/Community_Guide_School_Finance.html.

Respect for teachers – Principals have embraced a collaborative leadership approach and have adopted other reforms, too, that depend upon mutual respect with teachers. Teachers are consulted before school-wide decisions are made. The school district’s Career-In-Teaching program has created a career ladder for teachers, allowing those who have proven their effectiveness in the classroom to apply for lead teacher roles.⁴⁰ These roles give the lead teachers about half the class-load of other teachers and allow them to act as coaches to their teacher colleagues, as well as advisors to school leaders.

Engaged union leadership – Union leaders were solid supporters of reform in the Cincinnati Public Schools. The Cincinnati Federation of Teachers and CPS worked together on collaborative team structures in the schools. And CFT leadership was involved in the creation of the teacher evaluation program introduced in 1999, which involved rigorous preparation for new teachers, as well as in the establishment of career ladders for experienced teachers.⁴¹

The Payoff: Higher Education

The Strive Partnership tracks higher education enrollment at institutions in and around Cincinnati and has found that not only has enrollment in college increased for students from Cincinnati Public Schools, but retention and readiness also has improved.

The percentage of Cincinnati’s public high school graduates enrolled in college went up 10 percentage points to 68% from 2005 to 2008.⁴² Area colleges and universities also have seen an increase in the number of local students entering college without deficiencies in math and reading. In terms of local students enrolled and ready to take college-level math and English courses, Northern Kentucky University, for example, recorded a 6 percentage-point increase and the University of Cincinnati main campus tracked a 17 percentage-point increase, based on years 2005 to 2009.⁴³

When high school graduates are unprepared for college, they often leave college before earning their degrees. For a number of Cincinnati area colleges, the retention rates from year one to year two for students from the local area has trended upward. With regard to local students in two-year programs for associate’s degrees, data for the main campus of the University of Cincinnati show a 17 percentage-point increase in retention for the 2008-09 period compared to the 2004-05 period, and data for the university’s Walters College show a 10 percentage-point increase over that same time frame. For other colleges in the Cincinnati region, retention rates for associate-degree programs for that time frame have not increased or have not increased as dramatically. With regard to local students pursuing bachelor’s degrees, data for Northern Kentucky University show a 6 percentage-point increase in retention from year one to year two over the stretch from 2004-05 to 2008-09, and the data for University of Cincinnati show a 9 percentage-point increase.⁴⁴

40 Susan Barone and Kathleen Ware, “Growing Great Teachers in Cincinnati,” *Educational Leadership*, May 2001, Vol. 58 Issue 8, p. 56

41 Miner.

42 Strive Cincinnati, *2010 Striving Together: Report Card*, <http://www.strivetogether.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/2010StriveReportCard.pdf>.

43 Strive Cincinnati, *2010 Striving Together: Report Card*.

44 Strive Cincinnati, *2010 Striving Together: Report Card*.

Smart InvestmentsSM in Minnesota's Students

Growth & Justice, a non-profit, non-partisan organization that researches and recommends public policies to make Minnesota's economy simultaneously more prosperous and fair, has issued [evidence-based recommendations](#) for improving education. Like many players in the Cincinnati efforts, Growth & Justice has emphasized the importance of improvement throughout all stages of education, from early childhood through the post-secondary level. A number 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. The recommendations that relate to the Cincinnati successes include the following:

- High school reforms and improvement initiatives that establish small learning communities within the schools, increase the rigor of the courses, offer academic support when needed, and better connect teachers with students and schools with parents.
- Rigorous coursework to ensure progress toward increased knowledge, high school graduation and opportunities for higher education.
- Tutoring assistance targeted to increase the academic success of low-performing students as they take rigorous coursework.
- Academic offerings that allow students to earn college credits while in high school through challenging courses like the Advanced Placement Program and dual enrollment initiatives with area colleges.

For more information about the Growth & Justice initiative on *Smart InvestmentsSM in Minnesota's Students*, visit this [webpage](#). For two-page briefs on the different education stages and listings of Growth & Justice recommendations for each stage, visit this [webpage](#).

Growth & Justice gratefully acknowledges support for this Cincinnati case study from the F.R. Bigelow Foundation, the Blandin Foundation, The Saint Paul Foundation and the Travelers Foundation. Growth & Justice also thanks the following individuals for their comments and for reviews of an early draft version of this case study report: Robert J. Jones, Senior Vice President, University of Minnesota; Jennifer Godinez, Associate Director, Minnesota Minority Education Partnership; Joe Nathan, Director of the Center for School Change; and Sue Taylor, former President of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers and President of the Ohio Federation of Teachers. While their suggestions and insights contributed greatly to this report, responsibility for the content – including any errors, omissions, oversights or missteps – rests with Growth & Justice.

GROWTH & JUSTICE

2324 University Ave. W., Suite 120A

Saint Paul, MN 55114

Phone: 651-917-6037

info@growthandjustice.org

www.growthandjustice.org