

afterword:

WHAT POLICY LESSONS CAN OHIO LEARN FROM THE NEEDLES SCHOOLS?

THESE SCHOOLS DEMONSTRATE THAT ALL CHILDREN, NO MATTER HOW DISADVANTAGED, CAN LEARN IF THEY ATTEND SCHOOLS THAT FOCUS RELENTLESSLY ON STUDENT SUCCESS, HIRE AND RETAIN GREAT TEACHERS, AND ARE RUN BY LEADERS WHO KNOW HOW TO BUILD AND PROTECT SUCCESSFUL SCHOOL CULTURES.

Unfortunately, America has far too few (and Ohio far fewer) great urban schools—schools that do a solid job of educating disadvantaged students to high levels of achievement year-in and year-out. Everyone agrees that the country and its children would be much better off if we had more such schools. Therefore, it is important to discern what we can learn from Needles schools that may have actionable implications for education policy in the Buckeye State and beyond.

We recognize that implementing the policy lessons that we have distilled from our study is fraught with challenges. Controversy always accompanies recommendations to widen school-choice options, alter traditional leadership training programs, redesign school funding, or exempt schools from laws, regulations, and contract provisions. Pushback will also greet proposals to rely less on traditional education schools, to disempower district bureaucracies (in order to empower school leaders), and to alter Human Resources shibboleths such as seniority preference.

Yet these struggles must be confronted, for they can help create the conditions for more Needles-like schools.

We have already described 10 key traits of Needles schools that seem to be keys to their educational

success. These are no smorgasbord, however, from which to take a taste of this and a bite of that. The most important thing we learned about Needles schools is that *all of them do all of these things* in an integrated fashion. What they produce is more like a single complex dish than an assortment of ingredients. That doesn't mean the schools are identical. Each cooks from its own recipe and creates its own distinctive flavor. But every one of them incorporates all 10 of the ingredients (except, of course, for the two non-union schools that aren't relevant to finding 10).

—● *Precisely because Needles schools do not follow the exact same recipe, district leadership and policymakers should not try to clone them.*

Precisely because Needles schools do not follow the exact same recipe, district leadership and policymakers should not try to clone them. Rather, state and local policymakers should embrace policies that create the conditions in which more such schools can develop and thrive. But that won't happen by following just one or two of the six policy lessons that follow, for the truth is that all of these conditions are essential. The lessons are inextricably entwined, meaning that if Ohio wants more such schools to serve its neediest youngsters successfully, it must go about the hard work of creating all six of these conditions.

Needles schools are *rare* and creating more of them is no simple matter. But one thing is certain—what's currently in place *isn't working* for the vast majority of students in Ohio's urban schools.

Are we willing to consider a new course of action? From this study of high-performing, high-need urban schools, we believe there are six actionable lessons for policymakers, educators, and others in the Buckeye State.

1 Encourage and expand school choice to ensure that poor youngsters have real access to quality schools.

It is hard to imagine where Needles students would be academically if their parents or guardians had not opted to enroll them in one of these high-performing schools. If, that is, the adults who care for them had been unable (or unwilling) to exercise school choice on their behalf. While Ohio's school districts have taken some steps toward open enrollment (at least 34 percent of children in Ohio's "Big 8" cities now attend a school other than their assigned neighborhood school), few have developed and promoted choice options outside their normal offerings.

—● *Districts could sponsor more charter schools or work with other authorizers to do so, create more district magnet programs, expand open-enrollment options, or consider removing neighborhood assignments altogether.*

The students at Needles schools benefit from their parents' or guardians' decisions to enroll them in these high-performing schools of choice. Policies should be crafted to encourage Ohio's urban communities to offer more quality school options to more youngsters. Besides affording better educational opportunities to youngsters who lack them today, these strategies will restore trust with parents, retain students who might otherwise leave the district, and reverse the drain of families from the urban core.

Districts could sponsor more charter schools or work with other authorizers to do so, create more district magnet programs, expand open-enrollment options, or consider removing neighborhood assignments altogether. Districts can go even further, by doing the following: requiring middle-school students to choose their high school, rather than assigning it to them; experimenting with online courses and hybrid models of schooling (a mix of traditional schooling and online coursework); and improving transportation options so that alternative schooling options are accessible to all Ohio students.

—● *It is hard to imagine where Needles students would be academically if their parents or guardians had not opted to enroll them in one of these high-performing schools.*

State lawmakers could further expand quality choice options (especially for low-income families) through several means. To improve the charter sector, for example, they should: lift the current geographic restrictions for start-up charters; relax the moratorium on charter e-schools; recruit high-quality charter networks to the state and enact policies to support these models; and encourage more district-charter collaboration through sharing of services, facilities, and funding opportunities. Key to assuring that charters work as a quality alternative is to strengthen the performance of the state's charter-school authorizers. The state should continue encouraging districts to expand and scale up other promising choice models, namely Early College Academies and STEM schools. Both have shown success delivering high levels of academic achievement to disadvantaged youngsters and preparing them for college. These models deserve the same level of funding and support as traditional district schools.



2 Encourage school-based principal training programs.

Principals and leadership teams in Needles schools are highly effective in running successful academic programs, managing student behavior, and ensuring that all students learn. Why aren't they also training others in such competencies? Our school observers were stunned to find that while Needles schools have highly effective leaders, nobody is “understudying” them so as to become leaders of more effective urban schools. That's because most school leadership training in Ohio takes place not in high-performing schools but in university classrooms.

—● *If Ohio is to develop more such leaders, they need the opportunity to learn from the best of today's leaders via residencies in highly successful schools.*

This is a missed opportunity, as highly effective school leaders are in great demand in Ohio and across the country. In early 2010, the Ohio Department of Education identified more than 65 persistently low-performing schools eligible for federal School Improvement Grants. Replacing the leadership of such schools is one of the four school turnaround strategies supported by the grant guidelines. Besides those 65, hundreds more Ohio schools have been identified for “corrective action” under No Child Left Behind and are in dire need of strong leadership to dramatically improve student achievement.

But as one district official observed, the bench is shallow when it comes to top-notch school leaders who can run an effective school for high-need students. If Ohio is to develop more such leaders, they need the opportunity to learn from the best of today's leaders via residencies in highly successful schools. The knowledge, lore, and skill sets of Needles leaders, which are what make their schools effective, are diffi-

cult to impart via coursework, lectures, or textbooks. But by observing and learning alongside successful school leaders, much like doctors in training, neophyte and wannabe principals can arrive at a deeper understanding of the pillars of leadership that drive schools to consistently achieve at high levels.

3 Adopt a “tight-loose” approach to accountability by setting clear, data-specific goals for schools, then directing funds to schools, relaxing mandates, slashing regulations, and cutting strings so that school leaders have the control and operational freedom to meet those goals using strategies that work for them, their teams, and their students.

No “magic bullet” solution for successful urban education emerges from studying Needles schools. Though there are common traits among these schools, there are also important differences in how they operate. One essential factor that Needles schools share is the freedom to do what works for their students. Such freedom is sometimes a matter of right (as in the charter sector), and sometimes a matter of experience and deft navigation. But it is never easy to get and keep, even for charters.

The state should not be in the business of telling individual schools how to operate. Rather, it should set clear standards and goals, put in place accurate, timely and transparent systems for monitoring performance against those goals, and then provide the support and resources to help schools attain them in ways that may differ considerably from place to place. For example, a well-designed system of weighted student funding permits school leaders to determine how to spend the money—essentially all the money—that accompanies their pupils to their schools. This resembles the fiscal autonomy already accorded charter schools.



Many Needles school leaders indicated that their schools receive fewer resources than lower-performing schools in their districts, despite their large numbers of economically disadvantaged students. Several school leaders noted that their students faced mental health challenges, yet they lacked the power to hire school psychologists or readjust their budgets to prioritize interventions over administration. At the onset of the student-based budgeting (a form of weighted student funding) era in Cincinnati, College Hill's principal was able to forgo the hiring of another administrator and instead opted to add a school psychologist to meet the growing mental health needs of her students. The result was a more robust intervention system that helped to avert challenges and set the conditions for improving student achievement. Unfortunately, College Hill no longer has this level of budgetary autonomy.

4 Discourage administrative churn in high-achieving schools.

Consistency and stability are hallmarks of Needles schools. District leaders and state policymakers should heed this and invest in strategies to retain and reward talented school leaders. This could include offering financial bonuses for principals to stay in their posts. Moreover, strategies to equitably distribute principals—a key priority of the federal Race to the Top program and the Obama Administration—should be devised so that highly effective principals are not uprooted abruptly from their schools without a transition plan.

If a principal transfer is necessary, a strategy should be in place that would put up-and-coming deputies in schools to train alongside successful leaders and take charge when the veteran principal leaves. This form of principal mentorship would require thoughtful succession planning by school districts, but it promises to expand the pool of talented principals capable of running successful high-need schools.

Districts should also think imaginatively about how to move beyond pure financial incentives to retain top-notch leadership talent. For example, school leaders may value opportunities to travel, enroll in coursework, or visit other high-performing schools. Hence, districts might consider awarding study grants, travel grants, or mini-sabbaticals to principals.

Finally, districts (and state leaders) should consider alternative management structures so that successful principals can have the opportunity to lead a second or third school, or even a “mini-district.” Additional responsibilities would be matched with commensurate compensation, as well as a new form of career mobility that many school leaders may seek. With enrollment declining in many of Ohio's cities, consolidating leadership so that principals can work across multiple schools makes good fiscal sense and maximizes existing leadership talent.

5 Empower schools to hire and retain the best talent available.

Needles school leaders have developed ways to select the teachers they think will best fit their schools. Some can do this by right, as in the case of charter schools. Others, namely district schools, have to learn how to “work the system.” The two charter schools featured here enjoy near-total autonomy over hiring and firing (by circumventing issues of seniority, forced transfers, etc.), although they are still constrained by Ohio law prescribing strict certification standards for charter teachers. Meanwhile, district-operated Needles schools rely on their reputations for going above and beyond the required workload, as well as rigorous interviewing processes, to hire talented staff that can meet their students' needs.

All of these schools, however, still face obvious roadblocks on the Human Resources front. In the Akron Public Schools, for example, teachers are placed—frequently based on their own preferences—into schools

without any input from the school's principal. The principals have to take what they get. Fortunately, King Elementary has a reputation for hard work that tends to deter applicants who wouldn't be a good fit there. But not having staffing autonomy threatens to scuttle any school's serious efforts at improvement—particularly when faced with a disadvantaged student population that needs extraordinary teachers.

—● *Not having staffing autonomy threatens to scuttle any school's serious efforts at improvement—particularly when faced with a disadvantaged student population that needs extraordinary teachers*

To help principals form unified teaching teams and select the kind of talent they need, districts should implement mutual hiring policies (where both principal and teacher must agree to the teacher's assignment). This flexibility is especially important for low-performing or low-income schools that need more freedom to successfully recruit, hire, and retain needed talent.

Finally, it is time to rethink “last hired, first fired” policies that reward seniority without regard to teacher effectiveness. As many Ohio districts face declining enrollment and shrinking budgets, it is all the more critical to have safeguards against forced hiring and transfers, and layoffs based only on years of experience. As of writing this report, at least five of the “Big 8” districts—Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo, and Youngstown—have announced hundreds of teaching position cuts for next year. Ensuring that schools (especially those serving our most disadvantaged students) have a reasonable degree of autonomy over who they hire and dismiss is critical to having the right teacher talent in place to improve student performance.

6 Reduce bureaucratic barriers and regulatory constraints through “innovation zones,” contract waivers, regulatory waivers, and other strategies that free schools to succeed.

The Needles schools all have distinctive programs, missions, and operational structures, put into place by school leaders and their teams to meet the unique needs of their students. Yet most districts adopt a “one-size-fits-all” approach. The result is that some of the most challenged schools in Ohio operate under contractual and regulatory restrictions that make wholesale improvement extremely difficult.

We noted earlier that Needles teachers generally treat the collective bargaining agreement as the floor of their responsibilities, and it no doubt plays a prominent role in their schools' ultimate success. But what about schools, leaders, and staff that view the collective bargaining agreement as the ceiling? Especially in the most challenging schools, where improving student performance is a matter of urgency, it is difficult for even the most dedicated and talented teacher to go the extra mile if the contract bars it and the school culture discourages it.

—● *It is difficult for even the most dedicated and talented teacher to go the extra mile if the contract bars it and the school culture discourages it.*

Fortunately, there are ways to overcome the “one-size-fits-all” approach. Converting truly troubled district schools into charter schools, which enjoy a greater degree of autonomy than their traditional counterparts, is one way to empower schools leaders and teachers and grant them the freedom to do what works. But other mechanisms could be applied to traditional districts and schools—mechanisms that have the potential to broadly impact student achieve-



ment by increasing autonomy. For example, Ohio could designate academically and fiscally troubled districts as “innovation zones,” granting waivers from various regulations or bargaining contract provisions to schools within those zones.

—● *Districts should consider loosening the regulatory vise on schools as they demonstrate greater performance, granting ever more freedom in areas that matter most to schools.*

To be sure, greater school-level autonomy should be tightly linked to heightened accountability as it relates to student performance goals. Districts should consider loosening the regulatory vise on schools as

they demonstrate greater performance, granting ever more freedom in areas that matter most to schools—such as determining the calendar and schedule, adjusting curriculum and programs to meet student needs, controlling the school’s budget, and making personnel decisions.

As the experience of Needles schools suggests, educators might be more willing to go the extra mile when they are immersed in a staff culture that encourages and supports it. Further, teachers and leaders develop a greater sense of efficacy when, through combined efforts, their hard work has a tangible impact on student achievement. Finding ways to minimize bureaucratic barriers is an important step toward engendering Needles-like cultures in more schools for the benefit of more students.