



# College Hill Fundamental Academy

Cincinnati, OH

Principal: **Barbara Gordon**  
Superintendent: **Mary Ronan**  
School type: **District magnet**  
Grades served: **K-6, pre-k**

- 501** Student enrollment
- 77.9** Percent economically disadvantaged
- 96.6** Percent non-white
- 18.4** Percent of students with disabilities
- 20** Teachers' average years of experience
- \$65,777** Average teacher salary
- \$9,696** Total expenditure per pupil

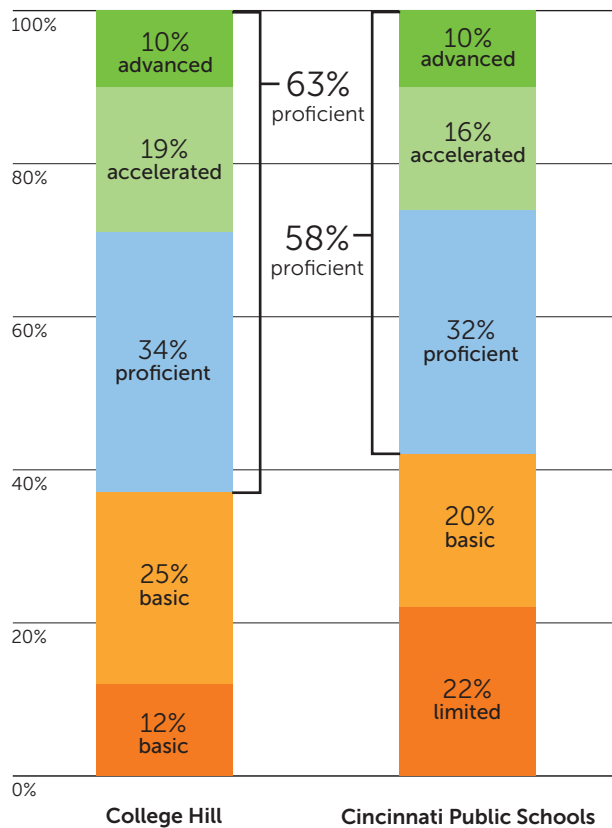
## “We Teach!”

Ms. Koch’s third-grade math classroom was quiet apart from the feverish tapping of pencils on paper. Having recently finished a fast-paced math lesson on division, students were now completing a timed routine called “hot pencils.” For this exercise, Ms. Koch distributed different multiplication problems to the students, based on their daily progress with math. Each student’s problems were tailored to his or her current level. Several students finished quickly and turned their papers over while others were studying their problems intently or every so often glancing up at Ms. Koch, who walked around the classroom eyeing both student work and the timer in her hand.

“Time’s up,” she announced finally. Most students had finished while a couple sighed and

SOURCE FOR CHARTS: Ohio Department of Education interactive Local Report Card, 2008-09; reading and math calculations performed by Fordham Institute, see endnote 11.

## Reading



Percent of students by reading proficiency level, 2008-09 (College Hill vs. district)

turned their papers over slowly, not wanting to let the challenge go uncompleted. Papers were quickly collected and students moved on to the next task, making it evident that time and routine were precious commodities.

—● *“I know I’m going to get smarter here.” – Destiny, third grader*

Ms. Koch later explained that each night she graded the hot pencils exercise. These progress markers allowed her to see who had mastered certain concepts—and who needed additional help or tutoring.

And of course, there would be a new hot pencils problem for students the next day based on their daily progress. For some students, this level of focused instruction is a departure from their previous experiences in school. Destiny, a third grader in Ms. Koch’s class who recently transferred to College Hill Fundamental Academy, noted, “I know I’m going to get smarter here.”

This efficiency and attention to detail are two aspects that set College Hill apart from many other schools. College Hill’s test scores rank far above the district average and have earned the school a rating of “Excellent” from the Ohio Department of Education. Ms. Koch’s expertise is shared by teachers throughout the school—and seemingly at every level. The school itself is described by almost everyone as “safe and orderly.” And everyone, from the principal to the teachers and even the school psychologist, agrees that expectations for students are higher than at most other schools.

—● *“We teach!” – Principal Barbara Gordon*

When asked what accounts for the school’s success, Principal Barbara Gordon answered with a hint of impatience and surprise: “We teach!”

This simple statement was echoed by teachers and even students at almost every grade level. Indeed, ingrained in the culture of College Hill are the expectations that students come to learn, and teachers come to teach.

## Fundamentals and “Stubbornness”

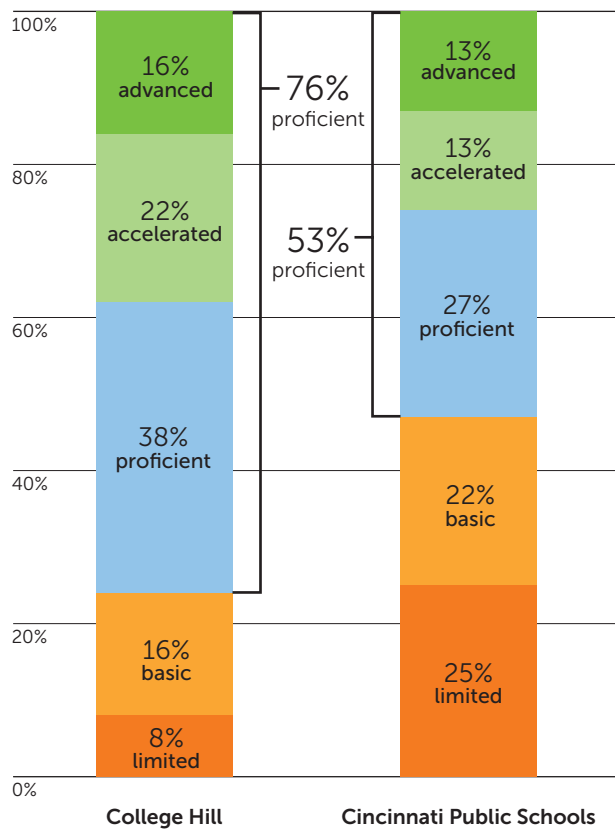
One of more than a dozen magnet schools in Cincinnati Public Schools, College Hill is a “fundamental” school, meaning that it focuses on the core academic

subject areas and key values (e.g., citizenship) students need for success in life. Established just over 30 years ago, the school still clings to its original mission statement and set of values—a fact that faculty, some with very long tenures at the school, are quick to point out.

As a magnet school, parents must apply and then interview with Principal Barbara Gordon before their child may be enrolled. While this may sound more like a private school, the application process at College Hill is really about laying the foundation for parents and students in terms of school expectations for both behavior and academic work. As one



## Math



Percent of students by math proficiency level, 2008-09 (College Hill vs. district)

teacher remarked, “not one kindergartner has ever been turned down.” What’s more, College Hill has been designated a “choice” school for parents under accountability measures under the No Child Left Behind Act. This means that parents whose children attend perennially low-performing schools in the district may transfer them to the higher-performing College Hill.

Regardless of how students enroll, Principal Gordon makes it a point to interview the parents or guardians of every student. To her, it is paramount to establishing and maintaining the school’s culture, which she describes as one of high expectations, self-discipline, and intrinsic self-worth. Gordon has been at the school for 15 years (two years as assistant principal and 13 as principal). She spent a couple of years as a district-wide “lead” principal, one who trains and supports building principals. Finally, when the former College Hill principal retired 13 years ago,





the leadership committee petitioned for her to come back to lead the school.

For her, it wasn't a difficult decision. Since then, she's been able to oversee the school's continuous progress as well as protect it from what she describes as "trends"—those capricious affinities that schools and districts have with new programs or the latest fads. She and the teachers have been adamant that if a program or strategy doesn't work, they don't use it. Consistency of staff and student expectations and program rigor represent the bedrock upon which College Hill's culture of success rests. As a first-grade teacher noted, "There are very clear expectations for us here—expectations that are both consistent and fair."

This consistency has become all the more important in the past few years with the additional enrollment of transfer students, most of whom come to College Hill far below grade level and unaccustomed

to its rules and strict behavior expectations. With these transfer students often come additional mental health issues, depending on their home situations. Principal Gordon echoed the latter as a particular matter of concern. "Parenting, you can work with that," she noted. "Discipline, you can work with that. But the mental health issues are a real challenge."

Some teachers openly worried about the effect that these students might have on College Hill's academic performance. However, no one showed any signs of letting up. And all teachers had confidence in the school's well-crafted student behavior policy: a step program that articulates specific consequences for student behavior along with a wide range of positive incentives for good behavior (i.e., "caught being good" awards).

Yet Roseanne Bays, the school's psychologist, put it more bluntly. When asked what accounted for the

school's continued success with low-income students, she simply said, "Stubbornness." This stubbornness is paying off. Despite the challenge of a new influx of students, in 2009, College Hill moved from a state academic rating of "Effective" to "Excellent." College Hill students also outperformed those in Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) in both math and reading proficiency.

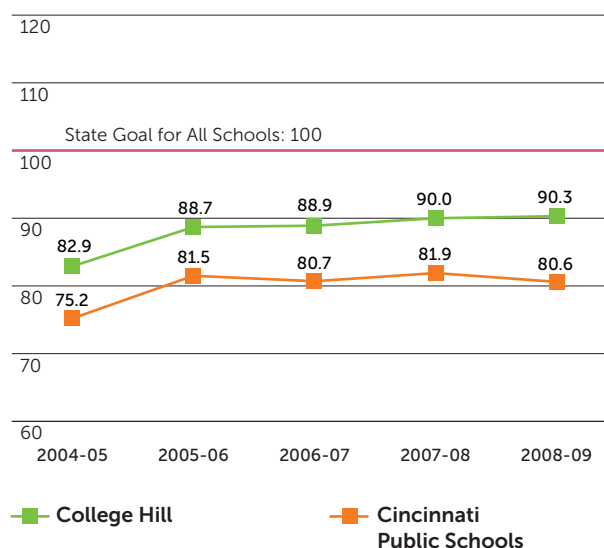
### *An Isolated Island*

Considering the low number of schools that ultimately met this report's achievement criteria, along with the continued success of College Hill, it was surprising to learn that College Hill's role in the district was not more prominent. In fact, rather than being a model for strong leadership, effective instruction, and positive school culture, College Hill functions more as an isolated island. "People at other schools don't think we face the same problems they do," Principal Gordon suggested.

—● *"Children will do the right thing because that's what we've taught them to do." – Vicky Davidson, fifth-grade math/science teacher*

Yet many College Hill teachers shrugged off the notion that their students are somehow less difficult to teach. More than 77 percent of College Hill students in 2009 were economically disadvantaged, compared to 68 percent district-wide. As third-grade teacher Kathy Koch said, "The kids are the same kids. They just act differently here." Other teachers agreed and contended that the longevity and strength of the school's academic program allows them to successfully reach even the most challenged students. Vicky Davidson, a fifth-grade math/science teacher, stated it very clearly: "Children will do the right thing because that's what we've taught them to do."

### Performance Index



Performance index scores over time (College Hill vs. district)

As for the school's relationship to the district, it was difficult for CPS's administration to find the time to come to the school to offer congratulations when its academic rating increased from "Effective" to "Excellent." Such public gestures would mean a great deal to the teachers and staff at College Hill, whose work in lifting student achievement deserves recognition. The district's lack of attention to College Hill stands in contrast to the amount of attention it must pay to the district's lower-performing schools (in terms of both time and resources).

College Hill's teachers have been frustrated by the programs and special grants given to lower-performing schools, especially as College Hill serves an increasing number of disadvantaged students. Unfortunately, while the district's focus on its most troubled schools makes sense on one level, the resulting lack of focus on College Hill prevents the district from learning and sharing lessons from its success.



## *Teamwork and Intervention*

A serious benefit of both the school's stability and Principal Gordon's careful hiring practices is the close collaboration among staff, both within and across grade levels. Many teachers stressed that this collegiality and cooperation were vital to the success of the school and its students. Principal Gordon explicitly named these traits as an expectation of the teachers she hires for College Hill. For instance, the primary grade teachers regularly meet with the intermediate grade teachers to discuss student outcomes at all grade levels and to ensure that instruction is aligned across the grades. Similarly, the fourth-grade reading/social studies teachers team up with their math/science counterparts to offer small-group instruction (students are grouped by ability) in one or more subjects. This allows the teachers to spend more time addressing students' different needs and skill levels.

—● *“When I came here, I was able to teach the way I always dreamed of.”* –  
*Steve Hayes, librarian*

One of the most powerful examples of collaboration at College Hill involves student intervention. With so many students needing additional help with their academic work, the school has enlisted all teachers to help in the process of intervention. A team of intervention specialists works with groups of students at all levels, and engages the classroom teachers in these sessions and in assisting with the development of their students' individual education plans. Principal Gordon makes it a priority that all students with special needs are identified for interventions.

Such intense teamwork helps to create a positive environment for both teaching and learning. Librarian Steve Hayes, a veteran of other CPS schools, articu-

lated his experience at College Hill this way: “When I came here, I was able to teach the way I always dreamed of.” Also different from his previous schools are the ever-present, people-oriented leadership and the simple fact that the teachers “seem to like and respect the students.”

## *“Same End Product in Mind”*

Though the recipe for school success is complex and not always easy to identify, one basic ingredient is consistent, high-quality instruction. At College Hill, teamwork and shared responsibilities make this all the more possible, and every teacher interviewed was unequivocal about teaching to standards—a good harbinger for those seeking to improve standards. “We stick to the standards...and enrich them to help students go a step beyond,” fourth-grade teacher Kathy Damron said. Even the intervention specialists noted their goal was to help students do grade-level work. Intermediate-level Intervention Specialist Kathy Seider gauges her success and effectiveness by the extent to which her students can thrive in a regular classroom.

—● *“We stick to the standards...and enrich them to help students go a step beyond.”* –*Kathy Damron, fourth-grade teacher*

While many teachers might make excuses for students based on their backgrounds, home life challenges, or learning difficulties, none of the faculty at College Hill even broached the topic. Their expectations are high and their goals for continual improvement explicit. As the primary-level Intervention Specialist Thelma Dorn said, “We all have the same end product in mind.”