

executive summary

FOR TOO LONG, YOUNGSTERS IN OHIO'S MAJOR CITIES HAVE BEEN ILL-SERVED AND ILL-EDUCATED BY THEIR PUBLIC SCHOOLS. In the 2008-09 school year, almost half of these quarter million students—in district and charter schools alike—attended schools rated “D” or “F” by the state.

Yet this bleak picture has some bright spots—schools with challenging pupil populations that beat the odds and show real and persistent academic achievement. Such schools are few, but they are worth finding, highlighting, and scouring for lessons. By understanding what makes these rare “Needles in a Haystack” schools successful, lawmakers, educators, and district leaders become better able to shape policies and practices that will create the conditions for more such schools.

The findings and lessons reported in these pages are gleaned from the study of eight high-performing, high-need urban public schools across Ohio:

- Citizens' Academy, charter school, Cleveland
- College Hill Fundamental Academy, magnet school, Cincinnati Public Schools
- Duxberry Park Arts IMPACT Alternative Elementary School, magnet school, Columbus City Schools
- Horizon Science Academy – Cleveland Middle School, charter school
- King Elementary School, Akron Public Schools
- Louisa May Alcott Elementary School, Cleveland Metropolitan Schools
- McGregor Elementary School, Canton City Schools
- Valleyview Elementary School, Columbus City Schools

10 TRAITS OF NEEDLES SCHOOLS

1. They are schools of choice.
2. Their administrators and teachers exhibit strong leadership and ownership over school policies and practices.
3. Teachers and leaders make no excuses for what they or their students “can’t do.”
4. Expectations for teacher performance are data-specific—and teachers have the autonomy they need to meet performance targets.
5. Behavioral management policies are clearly articulated and consistent, feature positive incentives as well as consequences, and are deeply embedded in the school culture.
6. Teamwork defines these schools; they have few if any “independent contractors.”
7. There is little turnover among administrators and teachers.
8. Staffing is a function of meticulous recruitment and a culture of high expectations that attracts and retains talent.
9. These schools strive to engage parents and develop relationships with them.
10. In unionized Needles schools (six of eight), staff regard their collective bargaining agreements as the floor of their teaching responsibilities, not the ceiling.



Learning from the best: Policy lessons gleaned from Needles schools

The Needles schools display 10 common traits and conditions that seem to be keys to successful urban education. 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—and integrate them inseparably from one another. What they produce is more like a single complex dish than an assortment of ingredients. That doesn't mean the schools are facsimiles of one another. Each has its own recipe and own distinctive flavor. But every one of them incorporates all 10 of the ingredients (except, of course, for the two schools that are not unionized and aren't relevant to finding 10).

—● *By understanding what makes these rare “Needles in a Haystack” schools successful, lawmakers, educators, and district leaders become better able to shape policies and practices that will create the conditions for more such schools.*

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 of these sorts of schools can develop and thrive. Likewise, they should not settle for 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.

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

The students at Needles schools benefit from their parents' or guardians' decision to enroll them in one of these high-performing choice schools. 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.

Ohio lawmakers can facilitate this development through several means. Specifically to improve the charter sector, recommendations include: lifting the current geographic restrictions for start-up charter schools; relaxing the moratorium on charter e-schools; recruiting high-quality charter networks to the state and enacting policies to support these models; and encouraging more district-charter collaboration through sharing of services, facilities, and funding opportunities. Key to assuring that charters work as a quality alternative is improving the quality of the state's charter school authorizers.

But school choice can be expanded within traditional districts as well. Districts could sponsor more charter schools or work with other sponsors to do so, create more district magnet programs, expand open-enrollment, or consider removing neighborhood assignments altogether. They can go even further: requiring middle school students to choose their high school, rather than assigning it; experimenting with online courses and hybrid models of schooling (a mix of traditional schooling and online coursework); and improving transportation options through district consortiums, so that alternative schooling options are accessible to all Ohio students.

● *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 leadership traits that drive schools to consistently achieve at high levels.*

2. Encourage school-based principal training programs.

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 themselves. That’s because most school leadership training in Ohio takes place not in high-performing schools but in university classrooms. This is a missed opportunity, as highly effective school leaders are in demand in Ohio, and the bench is shallow. 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 leadership traits 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 resources and operational freedom to meet 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. The state should not be in the business of telling individual schools how to operate. Rather, it should set clear standards and goals, put into 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 be very different from place to place.

4. Discourage administrative churn in high-achieving schools.

Consistency and stability are hallmarks of Needles schools. District leaders and state policymakers should take note of this and invest in strategies to retain and reward leadership talent. 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 competition³ 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 transfer is necessary, a strategy should be in place that would position up-and-coming assistant leaders in schools to train alongside successful leaders and take ownership of the school once the principal leaves. This form of principal mentorship would require thoughtful transition planning by school districts, but it promises to expand the pool of talented principals capable of running successful high-need schools.

● *The state should not be in the business of telling individual schools how to operate.*

Districts should also think innovatively 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. Thus, districts might consider awarding study grants, travel grants, or mini-sabbaticals to principals. Finally, dis-

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.”

—● *Districts should think innovatively about how to move beyond pure financial incentives to retain top-notch leadership talent.*

Additional responsibilities would be matched with commensurate compensation, as well as a new form of career mobility that many school leaders may seek. With roughly half (49 percent) of Ohio’s districts serving 1,700 or fewer students,⁴ and 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.

The majority of Needles school leaders have developed ways to select the teachers they think will best fit their schools by knowing 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 inhibited by Ohio law prescribing strict certification standards for teachers.⁵ Meanwhile, district Needles schools rely on their reputations for going above and beyond the required workload, as well as rigorous interviewing processes, to hire right. Yet there are still obvious roadblocks for these schools in terms of getting the teachers they need.

To help principals build unified teaching teams and select the kind of talent, characteristics, and competencies they need for specific slots on those teams, districts should implement mutual hiring policies

(where both the school principal and the 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.⁶ 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.

—● *It is time to rethink “last hired, first fired” policies that reward seniority without regard to teacher effectiveness.*

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.⁷ 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 teacher contract restrictions and district rules



and regulations that make wholesale improvement extremely difficult.

Fortunately, there are ways to overcome the “one-size-fits-all” approach. Converting truly troubled district schools into charter schools, which inherently 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 several other mechanisms could be applied to traditional districts and schools—mechanisms that have the potential to broadly impact student achievement by increasing autonomy. Ohio could designate academically and fiscally troubled districts as “innovation zones,”⁸ granting waivers from various regulations or bargaining contract provisions to schools within the zones.

Of course, increased autonomy should be tightly linked to heightened accountability as it relates to

student performance goals. Districts could loosen the regulatory vise on schools as they demonstrate greater performance, granting freedom in the areas that matter most to schools—determining the school calendar and schedule, adjusting curriculum and programs to meet student needs, acquiring more control over the school’s budget, and making all personnel decisions.

—● *Increased autonomy should be tightly linked to heightened accountability as it relates to student performance goals.*

Finding ways to minimize bureaucratic barriers—whether embedded in district rules and regulations, state mandates, or collective bargaining agreements—is an important step toward engendering Needles-like cultures in more schools for the benefit of more students.