findings from the field:

Common traits across Needles schools

WE OBSERVED 10 NOTABLE TRAITS IN ALL EIGHT OF THE SCHOOLS WE PROFILE IN THIS REPORT, THOUGH THESE TRAITS INTERACT DIFFERENTLY IN EACH SCHOOL. This point is key: each school shares the commonalities we highlight, but each mixes these ingredients in its own unique way to ensure the academic success of all its children. Our findings do not lead to a "one-size-fits-all" best practice formula for creating or replicating great urban schools. Instead, they highlight the traits and conditions that are needed for great schools to thrive using their own unique formulas for success.

These traits also turn out to be interrelated and interdependent. Success in one area enables and amplifies success in another. For instance, the "strong school culture" trait (finding 7) enables Needles schools to attract and retain great teachers (finding 8). Both of these traits, in turn, rely on effective student behavioral (aka discipline) policies (finding 5). And so on. Put simply, while the findings represent common characteristics of successful schools, in Needles schools their interplay is what leads to educational success.

1 The Needles schools are schools of choice.

In the high-performing urban schools profiled here, school choice is the rule, not the exception. One shouldn't underestimate the importance of this finding, especially because the selection of schools for inclusion in this report was based entirely on their academic performance and student demographics, and did not take into account their status as schools of choice.

The two charter schools—Citizens' Academy and Horizon Science Academy—represent the most straightforward form of parental choice. These schools are open to all students across the Cleveland school district and families make a conscious decision to enroll their children in them. In opting to send their children to Citizens' Academy, for instance, parents "buy in" to a model that features a longer day and year, and a rigorous and well-enforced discipline policy. This choice requires parents to forgo the option of busing for their children—no small sacrifice for parents/guardians who work long hours or may not have easy access to transportation. Similarly, at Horizon Science Academy, parents sign a contract that declares that they understand the school's academic and behavioral expectations.

Among the district schools in this study, every one turns out to be an "open-enrollment" or "choice" school within its district. College Hill Fundamental Academy and Duxberry Park Arts IMPACT Alternative Elementary School fall under the "magnet school" category. Here, too, parents must proactively choose to enroll their children, and in doing so, they commit to the school's program.

The other four schools (King Elementary, McGregor Elementary, Louisa May Alcott Elementary, and Valleyview Elementary) are district-operated open-enrollment schools, and many parents/guardian have selected them from a host of district options. For instance, almost half (45 percent) of the students at King in Akron enter the school through open enrollment. Alcott in Cleveland enrolls a wide range of students from across the district—particularly those with special needs (about 35 percent of Alcott's pupil population). At McGregor in Canton, the principal noted that his school has more open-enrollment students than many neighboring schools.

Although some critics assert that school choice in whatever form simply amounts to "creaming,"[9] the schools profiled in this report refute such claims. Their pupil populations are at least as needy as comparable neighborhood schools. Several Needles schools serve large percentages of students with disabilities, while others face obstacles in terms of highly mobile students transferring into the school, which brings its own set of unique challenges.

The only conceivable evidence of "creaming" in Needles schools is the fact that parents made a conscious decision to enroll their students in them. This may indicate higher levels of parental motivation or a stronger commitment to their children's education than what may be encountered in a typical urban public school. Yet, rather than viewing this as an argument against school choice, it actually suggests just the opposite: that low-income parents who exercise choice wisely obtain for their children the crucial advantage of academic achievement. Further empowering parents by ensuring that all have choices (and information about them) and that all schools of choice are truly effective would be a huge benefit to America's disadvantaged youngsters and their futures.

2 Administrators and teachers exhibit strong leadership and ownership over school policies and practices.

Common impressions about what constitutes effective school leadership are often misinformed. They tend to be based on clarion calls for "super-principals" who function simultaneously as top-notch instructional leaders, crack disciplinarians, savvy building operators, astute adult psychologists, adept public relations gurus, and adroit politicians, all rolled into one. Some such individuals may exist but they're never likely to be numerous. Thankfully, though Needles schools benefit from great leadership, they also provide a more realistic and compelling picture of what that means.

Yes, it begins with the school principal. He or she sets the tone, establishes clear expectations for staff and students, ensures consistent application of policies, and encourages collaboration among staff and involvement by parents. Above all, Needles school leaders are passionate about their jobs and will do what it takes to improve student achievement.

"Our students need all of us on board for them to achieve." – McGregor's intervention coach

Yet leadership in these schools is also team-based. At McGregor, the principal leans heavily on his intervention coach for instructional expertise. When together, they literally finish each other's sentences and it's evident that they thrive by working out ideas and problems as a unit. At Citizens', the principal is only one member of a leadership team that includes the school's founder, an assistant principal, and others. Citizens' strategy is to distribute the responsibilities of leadership so that the school's longevity and success will not depend solely on one person's talents.

Teachers at Needles schools also exhibit strong leadership skills and ownership. The grade-level chairs at Horizon act as instructional leaders—analyzing data and targeting student strengths and weaknesses for enrichment or remediation. They also take students on field trips (a requirement for working there) and are involved in students' lives both inside and outside of the classroom. At Duxberry Park, the onus for curriculum creation rests on the shoulders of the core academic and arts impact teachers. They meet regularly to plan the full integration of arts and academic coursework. Duxberry Park's principal oversees program quality and fidelity to the arts impact mission, yet regularly depends on the teachers for curriculum leadership.

Amazing—and disheartening—to us, however, was the realization that districts—and other charter schools—were not using Needles schools as objects of study and places for training. Districts are not placing future principals in these schools to learn how to foster, manage, and maintain such comprehensive leadership systems. And while many people visit these schools, no principal-preparation programs are using them as "residency" or "internship" sites. In sum, while those inside Needles schools are busy maintaining and improving their records of strong performance, nobody outside them is using them as places to incubate leadership for other schools.

"Continuous effort—not strength or intelligence—is the key to unlocking our potential." – Quote on McGregor principal's office wall

3 Teachers and leaders at Needles schools make no excuses for what they or their students "can't do."

"The state doesn't provide enough funding, the district has too many regulations, the union is obstructionist, the kids can't learn, parents don't care enough, the students were way behind when we got them and their home situations limit what we can accomplish with them."

Sound familiar?

Such sentiments might be commonly voiced in many urban school settings, but not among Needles staff. In these eight schools, a positive attitude toward learning—and teaching—serves as the foundation for nearly everything. Teachers and leaders don't perceive the usual obstacles as insurmountable, but rather as challenges that can be overcome with creativity, teamwork and fortitude. This mindset builds and sustains a culture of high expectations. Little or nothing—not even district regulations or neighborhood and family factors—deters teachers at these schools from going the extra mile for their kids.

No culture of victimization excuses doing less or suggests to students that they cannot achieve at high levels. The no-excuses commitment at Needles schools is grounded in team psychology. As the intervention coach at McGregor said, "Our students need all of us on board for them to achieve." These teams of adults fundamentally believe that all students can learn, so they don't treat any students as disadvantaged—regardless of their family or economic circumstances.

When a staff vacancy opens up at a Needles school, the applicant pool is smaller than usual because it is widely known that the workload there has no bounds, and that the staff consists of a group of highly dedicated people who are hard to satisfy when it comes to student growth and academic progress. People who put artificial boundaries around what is possible or how hard they want to work, and who spend time blaming non-school circumstances for why disadvantaged students can't achieve high levels of success, seldom seek employment in a Needles school.

So whether it requires pitching in with after-school tutoring, helping out during summer programs, getting involved with Saturday sessions in preparation for state testing, or showing up early and staying late, Needles teachers, staff, and administrators are driven to do what it takes to ensure pupil success. They refuse to give up on a child who isn't behaving or getting his or her work done, or on parents who show little initiative in their child's education.

At McGregor, a Winston Churchill quote hanging on the principal's office wall reflects the school's mindset: "Continuous effort—not strength or intelligence—is the key to unlocking our potential." Staff at the school live by this creed and often referred to one school-wide goal: "1.1 Away from Excellence."

This is the number of points on the state's rating system that would move the school from a rating of "Effective" to "Excellent." Teachers and leaders at Needles schools don't just put in extra work for their students; they can articulate what the end goal is, why they want to get there, and how their hard work is tied to accomplishing it.

4 Performance expectations are data-specific and teachers have the autonomy they need to meet targets.

Educators at Needles schools aren't satisfied with just doing more or trying harder. They constantly measure the impact of their efforts against specific performance goals to be sure their efforts contribute directly to student achievement. At Citizens', bulletin boards display state testing data prominently and serve as a reminder to the school community that continuous improvement is more important than just meeting proficiency goals on state tests. The school doesn't just compare itself with the district or with other charter schools (it outscores both by wide margins); it compares its own performance to past school performance and makes growth in every subject and grade level an annual goal.

Once clear, data-informed goals are developed, teachers and support staff are trusted to use their expertise to meet them. To help them gauge whether instructional strategies are effective, most Needles schools utilize student achievement data regularly—in the form of DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) progress monitoring, benchmark assessments, classroom formative assessments, short-cycle assessments, and other tools.

At McGregor, for example, teachers and the intervention coach track ongoing reading progress using DIBELS. Each week during the common planning period, they discuss student progress and plan remediation or enrichment, depending on student needs. At Horizon, staff and parents use the school's online data system to track student progress on quarterly benchmark assessments and in-class work. Each week, the grade-level chairs meet to discuss the data and to develop instructional strategies in response to it. When results are poor, it's expected that instruction will change.

At Needles schools, expectations for teacher performance are directly tied to expectations for student performance, and both are data-driven.

The relentless focus on achievement data and the creation of clear, specific performance goals doesn't apply only to student achievement. We asked Needles teachers about their own evaluations, and how they know they are successful. Needles teachers didn't have much to say about formal evaluations, but they did note that test scores matter. If their children are making gains on the state tests, then they know their efforts are making a real impact.

Just as Needles schools collect a variety of ongoing student data to inform instructional strategies and make changes day-to-day and week-to-week, Needles teachers receive ongoing feedback from principals that improves their instruction and classroom practices. Constant feedback and interpretation of data from principals and peers lets teachers know what they are doing right, and identifies areas where they can improve or change practice. Informal feedback mechanisms build teachers' confidence and renew their focus on meeting performance metrics that are aligned to specific academic goals. At Needles schools, expectations for teacher performance are directly tied to expectations for student performance, and both are data-driven.

5 Behavioral management policies are clear, well-articulated and consistent, feature positive incentives as well as consequences, and are deeply embedded in the school culture.

How do Needles schools create safe and orderly environments where students can thrive academically? Why is it that new teachers marvel that they "have never seen anything like this before" when it comes to student behavior? Why did we hear so many teachers respond with "We can teach!" when asked why their school was on such a short list of high-performing urban schools?

"Many of our kids are not used to being disciplined consistently so they have to learn that we mean what we say." – Duxberry Park teacher

At Needles schools, high expectations permeate not only academic programming but also behavioral management strategies and structures. Teachers admitted that maintaining clear and consistent policies governing appropriate student behavior—including but not limited to conventional "discipline"—is not easy; in fact, it requires a relentless daily commitment by all adults in the building.

Further, principals and teachers commonly employ treats and prizes to reward and encourage good behavior and achievement. But at the top of the list of effective discipline strategies is buy-in and consistency among all teachers. As one Duxberry Park teacher said, "many of our kids are not used to being disciplined consistently so they have to learn that we mean what we say." Further, these teachers believe that many parents are appreciative of the rigorous behavioral expectations and support them when necessary. Students acknowledged that teachers don't yell at them but frame positive behavior as a goal for all, and as a critical part of ensuring that they reach their academic goals.

Teachers we interviewed often compared their Needles school with previous experiences. In less disciplined environments, they worked with teachers who undermined colleagues by being lax on discipline in order to be "popular" with their students. In contrast, Needles teachers address student behavior issues in the hallway or cafeteria even if the students are not assigned to them because they are firmly committed to a collaborative culture that values an orderly learning environment. They also gave credit to their administrators for being responsive when a student is disrupting class time, and said they could count on administrators to manage student discipline and give teachers the opportunity to focus on instruction and learning.

6 Teamwork defines these schools; they have few if any "independent contractors."

Among the questions posed to principals and teachers at Needles schools was whether they believe their success is replicable elsewhere. While most responded with an emphatic "yes," they also indicated that it would take two to five years to turn around a low-performing school because of the time and effort it takes to build a school culture with aligned expectations and dedicated staffers.

Any teacher who applies to work in a Needles school already knows that the workload is heavy. Instructors seek out these schools not only because they want to be able to *teach* (not just manage a classroom), but also because they want to be part of the extensive collaboration, individual freedom, and shared expectations that characterize these schools. Simply put, they want to be associated with success.

Needles schools build in time every week for teachers to plan together. Principals at the six district schools acknowledged that most teachers commit far more time than their contracts call for—and do so voluntarily and willingly, mindful that it will result directly in improved student achievement. One teacher at Alcott described the high level of collaboration and respect among staff at her school when noting that paraprofessionals are treated as the equals of teachers, and thus are equally respected by students.

This collegial attitude even filters into lunchroom conversations. During breaks, teachers discuss challenges that individual students are facing and how best to meet their needs. In stark contrast to the "break room gossip" and negativity that occurs in many public schools, the contagious culture of "we can" stands out at Alcott and other Needles schools.

Many teachers in Needles schools lauded their principals for involving teachers and staff in the school's critical decisions and in genuinely valuing their input. Teachers who work in several schools per week (mainly "specials" or non-core subject teachers) say that the rigorous expectations and deep collaboration at their Needles school is exceptional.

Administrators describe how much deliberation and energy go into filling a vacancy at their schools as they screen every candidate for evidence of flexibility, teamwork, creativity, and the commitment to go the "extra mile." In hiring, they consider the potential impact of the new teacher on the school's culture and team dynamic front and center, and they seek talent that can fit well into the team.

A Duxberry Park teacher described one impressive example of teamwork and shared commitment: Last year, the teachers observed all of their colleagues in the classroom and each teacher received anonymous constructive feedback from his/her peers. According to the Duxberry Park staff, this level of collaborative, voluntary feedback doesn't happen elsewhere in the district. They believe their staff is rare in welcoming that level of scrutiny of their work as educators.

7 There is little turnover among administrators and teachers.

Stability and longevity within the school community are hallmarks of Needles schools that contribute significantly to their academic performance. What's more, stability characterizes the entire school community. Needles schools are led by principals who have been there for at least several years; and staffed by a corps of teachers and support staff who have long tenure in the building and are leaders inside and outside the classroom.

In stark contrast to the "break room gossip" and negativity that occurs in many public schools, the contagious culture of "we can" stands out at Needles schools.

In the leadership ranks of Needles schools, "churn," or frequent turnover, is less common than in typical urban public school settings. All of the schools have profited from multiple years of steady principal leadership. For example, College Hill's principal has been leading the school for 13 years. The same goes for the leader of McGregor. The principal at Duxberry Park has been at the helm for eight years. And Citizens' has created a leadership team that includes the school's founder and original staff members, who have been with the school since 1999. This consistency in leadership at Needles schools is notable and certainly contributes to their academic success.

Stable school leadership is mirrored by the staff, many of whom have been deeply involved in shap-

ing the school's program. At Horizon, after five years, the original staff members represent the heart of the school. At Citizens', the director of academics has been on the job for nine years and has valuable institutional knowledge about the school. She is able to guide new teachers and articulate the school's mission in a way that no first-year staff member can. Longevity among teachers at Needles schools also has the added benefit of creating valuable opportunities for rich mentoring between staff experienced in the school culture, and new hires.

The implications of this finding shouldn't be understated. Schools need a stable core among school staff, yet there are many challenges to ensuring this stability. Staff in Needles schools repeatedly indicated that establishing and maintaining an effective school culture takes much nurturing and time.

8 Staffing is a function of meticulous recruitment and a culture of high expectations that attracts and retains talent.

All Needles schools do an excellent job of recruiting teachers. This makes sense, considering that teacher talent is one of the most influential factors that determine student achievement.

The staffing process is meticulous. When vacancies arise at College Hill in Cincinnati, the principal scrutinizes applicant files and taps into outside networks to size up potential hires. Citizens' puts applicants through a rigorous application process that includes multiple interviews, model teaching, and an assessment of the candidate's educational values. At Alcott and Duxberry Park, hiring teams interview candidates to ascertain whether they have the passion and talent required to meet the schools' high expectations. In all cases, staffing is a careful, thorough process that ends only when the right person is found—regardless of his or her credentials or tenure in education. For these schools it is more about finding the right fit for their children than about paper credentials or seniority.

Yet not all Needles schools have the leeway to hire exactly as they please. For instance, the Akron Public Schools' collective bargaining agreement requires that teachers be placed according to availability and their own preferences. King Elementary in Akron relies on its reputation for high expectations and rigorous school culture to attract talent and deflect those who cannot perform or do not care to put forth the requisite time and effort. Can this factor alone continue to yield quality placements for the school? As King's principal noted, "We've been lucky."

Another factor relevant to staffing policies at Needles schools is how funds are allocated. At College Hill, the principal described the advantages of student-based budgeting (also dubbed weighted student funding). Several years ago, Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) implemented a budgeting process that distributed funding to schools based on individual students' needs and characteristics, and then granted principals authority over how those funds were spent.[10]

At College Hill, this allowed the principal to eschew hiring an assistant principal in favor of a full-time school psychologist. While no guarantor of quality, student-based budgeting gave her the ability to staff the building in the way she judged to best meet the needs of her students. This kind of control over spending decisions at the building level is an advantage that both Needles charter schools prize and utilize fully.

Unfortunately, Cincinnati's student-based budgeting system has been attenuated in recent years. While CPS budgeting is still student-based, and the district is more progressive than other Ohio districts in the area of school funding, changes have been made that

inhibit school leaders' ability to use their money in ways they deem best for students. This is a freedom that only Ohio's charter schools presently enjoy.

9 These schools strive to engage parents and develop relationships with them.

Much like their relentless pursuit of academic gains for students, Needles schools are never fully satisfied with the extent or intensity of their parental involvement. They seek a relationship with *every child's* family because they recognize the value of partnering with parents and guardians on behalf of their children. Even when school events may be "standing room only"—as is often the case at Duxberry Park, Alcott, and Valleyview—the staff at these and other Needles schools seeks tirelessly to reach those remaining parents who don't participate in their children's education.

Parents at Needles schools expressed gratitude for the welcoming tone set by school administrators and teachers, which they had not experienced in other schools. They commented favorably about the home visit required for admission to several Needles schools. A Horizon parent in Cleveland described her initial discomfort with this visit, until the principal and teacher arrived and it turned out to be so enjoyable that the mother "kept them for two hours." This first step to building an informed home-school relationship suggests the extent of Needles schools' commitment to engaging parents and shows what sets them apart from typical urban public schools.

10 In unionized Needles schools (six of eight), staff regard their collective bargaining agreements as the floor of their teaching responsibilities, not the ceiling.

In all Needles schools (district and charter), teachers emphasized their willingness to do whatever it takes for their students—especially since their work is producing exceptional academic gains for traditionally underserved children. For teachers in unionized district-operated schools, this typically entails going above and beyond the duties and time constraints written into their contracts. Some may stay late to complete a planning meeting or parent conference, give up planning periods to tutor students or cover another teacher's class, and participate in staff meetings and professional development opportunities that extend beyond the time limits outlined in their contracts. In practice, many Needles school teachers ignore the limitations set forth in their contracts when it comes to promoting the ongoing success of their students.

Needles teachers were also wont to acknowledge the value of their union and the contracts that it negotiates. Yet it was evident that the collegial relationship between principals and teachers in Needles schools reduced the number of potential problems related to those contracts and minimized conflicts associated work rules. Several teachers noted that when issues do arise, their union's building representative usually settles matters directly with the principal—and without taking it to district union leadership. Others simply noted that working harder or longer was part of their determination not to let their teammates down.