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**Needles in a Haystack:
*Lessons from Ohio's high-performing, high-need urban schools***

Too often in education we hear “These kids can’t learn” or “We have to deal with poverty before you can fix the schools.” Such sentiments seem to be backed up by bleak data that show almost half of the quarter million students in Ohio’s eight major urban districts attended schools rated “D” or “F” by the state in 2009. But a new study from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute shows that there are some great urban schools helping children in poverty learn at high levels. And, the lessons from these schools show us that with smart public policy at the state and district levels we can help create the conditions for more such high-performing schools.

Needles in Haystack: Lessons from Ohio's high-performing, high-need urban schools (online here: http://edexcellence.net/index.cfm/news_needles-in-a-haystack), profiles eight outstanding schools in five cities and distills their successes. The good news is that these schools are terrific. The bad news is that there are so few of them –hence the title, “Needles in a Haystack.”

“These eight schools prove that it is possible to do right by high-need youngsters,” said Terry Ryan, Fordham’s vice president for Ohio programs and policy. “Further, the people leading these schools and teaching in them are mortals and their successes can be emulated.”

The Needles schools are:

- 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 School District
- McGregor Elementary School, Canton City Schools
- Valleyview Elementary School, Columbus City Schools

To study the schools, Fordham commissioned two researchers. Theodore J. Wallace, a former teacher and school principal, education analyst, and author was joined by Quentin Suffren, a former teacher, literacy specialist, and curriculum coach who is now chief academic officer at the Learning Institute in Arkansas. Wallace and Suffren spent 16 days and several hundred hours in these schools studying and reporting on what makes them successful. They kept their eyes open for commonalities. For example,

they discovered all are schools of choice – two are charter schools; two are district magnet schools; and the remaining four attract a significant number of students via intra-district open-enrollment policies.

All Needles schools have leaders and staff that embody a “no-excuses” attitude when it comes to student achievement. “Staff at Needles schools truly believe all kids can learn, and don’t treat any of them as disadvantaged,” said Wallace.

Teamwork and a culture of shared responsibility are shared traits in Needles schools. “The teamwork and culture of high expectations within these schools is remarkable,” Suffren said. “But it’s disheartening that these schools aren’t being studied or used as places of training for upcoming teachers and leaders.” (For a fuller description of the findings and policy lessons, see the attachment or the full report.)

Fordham became interested in studying high-performing, high-need urban schools after five years of analyzing school and district report card data for urban school districts, and after witnessing the perils of urban education first-hand as a charter school authorizer. “We wanted to understand why some schools stand out when so many struggle, and we wanted to learn from their success,” said Ryan.

The report defines “high-performing” by examining three years of student performance and value-added student achievement data. To be eligible, schools had to attain a score of at least 80 out of 120 on the state’s Performance Index and meet or exceed expected value-added gains. To be considered “high-need,” 75 percent or more of a school’s students needed to be considered economically disadvantaged according to the Ohio Department of Education. Sixteen schools in the “Big 8” cities made the cut, and ultimately eight were selected for this study.

Needles in a Haystack provides six policy recommendations from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute for the state and school districts to create a climate conducive for more Needles-like schools. “Such schools don’t happen by accident. If we want more of them, grownups have to make it happen,” concluded Ryan.

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The Thomas B. Fordham Institute (www.edexcellence.net) is a nonprofit organization that conducts research, issues publicans, and directs action projects in elementary/secondary education reform at the national level and in Ohio, with special emphasis on our hometown of Dayton. It is affiliated with the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. The Institute is neither connected with nor sponsored by Fordham University.