

It Takes a Village

Collaboration in Cincinnati Public Schools

Written by Celeste Taylor
Photo by Wes Battoclette

Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) is one of the city's most valuable resources. It is within the walls of schools that children are molded into citizens who will contribute to the Cincinnati community. However, running a school system as large and diverse as CPS is no easy feat. It takes time, effort, and teamwork to keep CPS students equipped with the resources for success.



Pictured left to right: Mary Ronan, Eve Bolton, and Julie Sellers

Mary Ronan, superintendent of Cincinnati Public Schools, says that CPS "have a history of collaboration." Stemming from a history of successful collective bargaining agreements, collaboration has been institutionalized into the way Cincinnati's public schools are run.

"If you are going to have collaboration, it has to be structured, and it has to be intentional," says Julie Sellers, president of the Cincinnati Federation of Teachers. Though "collaboration is very time-consuming and sometimes very difficult because it is a compromise ... If you can get to that point where you have everybody working towards the final end goal, you will have a more successful end product."

According to Eve Bolton, president of the Cincinnati Public Schools Board of Education, "in collaboration, there's a couple different levels. There's the intellectual level, and then there's also the operational level. Usually you can come to terms on the intellectual level, but operationally, on a daily basis, sometimes it takes a lot of time."

Luckily for those in Cincinnati, Ronan, Bolton, and Sellers are dedicated, passionate, and knowledgeable about using collaboration to leverage important resources to help Cincinnati's students.

"We have many structures district-wide that we work on together for initiatives or just day-to-day discussions of how things are operating. We also have, at each building site, strong collaborative structures. We have teams of teachers that work together with a team leader, and their team leader is representing them on their instructional leadership team at the building level," Sellers says.

There are also teacher representatives on the Local School Decision Making Committee, each of which is composed of individuals from the community, parents, teachers, and other school staff. Such structures help with "discussions and collaboration all the way from the classroom level to the top decision-makers, and going out into the community." Each LSDMC works to find individualized solutions for the problems schools are facing. Because the CPS system covers such a large and diverse area, it is important to assess the needs of each individual community since "it would be difficult to have some sort of monolithic way of doing things forced upon everybody," Bolton says. Other structures, such as the Family and Civic Engagement Team and Community Learning Centers, also work to provide detailed and personalized solutions for issues faced by CPS.

Working more closely with the City of Cincinnati is also a key issue for the future of CPS. "We already worked with the Health Department, but now we are trying to work with City Council ... I think we'll both be struggling with our budgets. It certainly makes sense to talk about shared services," Ronan says. By working with the city to provide services such as health clinics in schools and safe walking routes for children, Ronan says, "I think we're making the best use of scarce resources."

Corporations are also playing an increasingly important role in CPS classrooms. The Adopt-A-Class program, in which corporations 'adopt' a classroom and provide resources and activities to the children, has been quite successful. "Nearly every class (in our elementary schools) has been adopted, usually by a small business group," Bolton notes.

Especially notable has been the assistance provided by General Electric Aviation and the GE Foundation, who have played an instrumental role in Evanston Academy and Aiken High School through providing career and college readiness resources, as well as enlisting the Smithsonian Institute to provide distance learning opportunities. "The partnership begets partnership. It begins to be a way of leveraging resources and expanding the support for our children and our staff, which is invaluable. We couldn't afford to do all of the things that are being done with us and we appreciate that," Bolton says.

Ronan adds, "They were very helpful in providing both monetary and technical assistance in the form of staffing and individuals who work with us ... They brought professionals to us that we could not have found on our own, or we couldn't afford."

"That's been crucial. Not only in the operation of the district, or building those relationships, or finding partners to help us, but it has been particularly helpful in beginning to redesign what we need to look like in the future," Bolton says.

Of course, much of what Ronan, Bolton, and Sellers work for wouldn't be possible without the involvement of the community. With the rising availability of technology and the popularity of social media, more people than ever before are seeking to express opinions and become involved in their local school system. Bolton says, "I think there's now a sense that there needs to be this shared dialogue which can be quite a challenge ... Every few years, the general public holds us accountable (at the ballot box) ... The vast majority are our neighbors, and they pay the taxes, and they expect us to do the best that we can," Bolton adds.

Despite the time-consuming and often challenging nature of thorough collaboration between CPS and the Greater Cincinnati community, Sellers notes, "We are the highest-rated urban district in the state ... So, I think whatever we're doing is working ... When you're collaborative, you make less mistakes because it does take time, but it slows people down to really think through the processes and pay attention to the focus and goals ... Things are more intentional when you have collaborative structures."

Cincinnati Public Schools is located at 2651 Burnet Ave, Cincinnati, OH 45219. You can reach them at 513.363.0000. Visit their website at www.cps-k12.org