



A NEW DIRECTION

**The best evidence for
Youngstown City Schools'
academic improvement**

July 2016

INNOVATION 
OHIO

INNOVATIONOHIO.ORG

A NEW DIRECTION

The best evidence for Youngstown City Schools' academic improvement

BACKGROUND

The day the Ohio General Assembly was to recess for the summer of 2015, the legislature dropped a bombshell on the education policy world – a plan to create an all-powerful CEO for Youngstown City Schools in a back-room dealⁱ to improve the system's struggling academic performance.

The plan, which hijacked a well-received idea to expand the Integrated Student Services (ISS) model that had turned Cincinnati into the state's highest performing urban district (and among the highest performing urban districts nationally), was met swiftly with outrage and condemnation. In fact, the sponsor of the original bill voted against her own bill in this form.

However, the plan did pass and is in place for this coming school year. And while Innovation Ohio is greatly concerned about the way the bill passed and its long-term impact for districts around the state, it is also important that the Academic Distress Commission and its newly appointed CEO Krish Mohip implement reforms that **research, not ideologues**, demonstrate will help children achieve academic success.

As the CEO develops his plan, Innovation Ohio has scoured the available research on effective district turnaround strategies and has come up with several ideas that, if implemented, would go to great lengths to improve Youngstown's overall academic outcomes. The solutions have been broken into three segments. The first part will consist of classroom level reforms. The second section discusses ISS. And the final part will warn against non-research based reforms that, while popular with ideologues, have little evidence of success, especially in Ohio.

CLASSROOM LEVEL REFORMS

SMALLER CLASS SIZES

There is clear evidence that having small class sizes, especially in the earliest grades, can have dramatically positive effects on students' educational attainment. The evidence that a low student-teacher ratio, especially in early grades not only benefits kids, but saves money down the road, is very strong.ⁱⁱ

One brief published by the American Education Research Association found that “[a]t each grade level, kindergarten to third grade, a controlled study was conducted to test whether small classes of 13 to 17 students had a positive impact on student achievement (relative to regular-sized classes of 22 to 26 students). STAR [a Tennessee longitudinal study done in the 1980s] data indicated that small classes led to statistically significant improvements in reading and mathematics, and benefits were greatest for students who started in small classes early (full-day kindergarten or first grade).”ⁱⁱⁱ

Another study, published in the peer-reviewed Journal of Educational Psychology found that **small classes in K-3 increased the likelihood of graduating high school by 80% for all students and more than doubled the chances for at-risk kids.**^{iv} The research is strong that smaller classes in early grades would have a significant impact on Youngstown's dropout problem.

And while some researchers, led by Eric Hanushek of the Hoover Institution, suggest this evidence is overblown, the Educational Psychology researchers concluded that their study “... contradicts the argument that 1 year in a small class is sufficient to realize all the noteworthy benefits (Hanushek, 1999). **Three or 4 years of small classes are needed to affect graduation rates, and 3 or 4 years have been found necessary to sustain long-term achievement gains (Finn et al., 2001).**”^v

The American Educational Research Association put smaller class size's benefits this way: “Changes in student and teacher behavior are believed to be a major reason why small classes work.”^{vi} Teachers in small classes pay greater attention to each pupil. Students in these classes experience continuing pressure to participate in learning activities and become better, more involved students. Attention to learning goes up, and disruptive and off-task behavior goes down. **Just placing another adult in the class does not achieve the same results, however ... an aide in the classroom has no positive impact on student achievement or behavior.**”^{vii}

SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCE OUT-OF-SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS AND EXPULSIONS

Youngstown has by far the highest rates of discipline cases of any major Ohio urban district. The discipline issues are especially concerning because there is significant research suggesting that even a single disciplinary referral can make a student twice as likely to repeat a grade or drop out^{viii}. A West Virginia Department of Education study found these striking findings:

- “Students with one or more discipline referrals were 2.4 times more likely to score below proficiency in math than those with no discipline referrals; math proficiency among these students exhibited a 40 percentage point deficit (29.7% vs. 70.3%).
- As the number of discipline referrals increased so did the odds of poor academic performance.

- Students with 2 to 4 referrals were 2.7 more likely to score below proficiency; students with 5 or more were 4.6 more likely. Students with a single discipline referral saw a 25 percentage point proficiency gap, while 2 to 4 referrals added another 20 points and 5 or more referrals added yet another 20 points.
- When the disciplinary consequences take the form of in-school or out-of-school suspension, the risk of scoring below proficiency increases and proficiency gaps widen.
- Students with disabilities who had a single discipline referral were no more likely to score below proficiency than students with disabilities without discipline referrals. However, when they received 2 to 4 referrals they were 3.7 more likely to score below proficiency; with 5 or more discipline referrals they were 12 times more likely.
- Low income students with a single discipline referral were 1.48 times more likely to score below proficiency than low income students with no referrals; those with 5 or more were 3.25 more likely.
- While previous studies showed Black students to be at greater risk of receiving discipline referrals and suspensions, no interaction was found between disciplinary involvement and race relative to academic performance.”

Given the research findings in West Virginia and elsewhere^{ix}, it is difficult to imagine Youngstown’s academic performance turning around without a serious change in its disciplinary policy and structure. It also makes it all the more remarkable that despite this rise in disciplinary problems, Youngstown only saw its Performance Index drop by the second-lowest percentage of any of the Big 8 over the last four years (despite having the Common Core and PARCC exams), and saw its graduation rate improve by 16%. The district’s biggest drop off was in attendance rate, where it registered the second-largest attendance drop among the Big 8.¹

UNIVERSAL, QUALITY PRESCHOOL OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL 3 AND 4 YEAR OLDS

One of the most successful and widely agreed upon education reforms is high-quality preschool, especially for at-risk youth. One study done by the Rand Corporation found^x that universal preschool would generate \$2.62 per child in benefits for every dollar invested. Among the benefits found in other studies were:

- Better reading scores as late as age 14
- Decreased rate of grade retention through age 15
- Reduced need for special education interventions throughout their primary and secondary years
- Lower rates of child abuse and neglect
- Lower chances of running into the juvenile justice system
- Greater chance of graduating high school by age 20

The benefits are most profound with one year of preschool. However, there are benefits for a second year. It’s clear that investing in more quality preschool programs will have a profound, long-term impact on Youngstown students.

¹ The Big 8 Urban districts are Akron, Canton, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Dayton, Toledo and Youngstown

INTEGRATED STUDENT SERVICES

Integrated Student Services (ISS), or wraparound services, have shown profound positive effects in Cincinnati, which is now the state's highest-performing urban district. Prior to the ISS introduction into Cincinnati, the district had been among the state's lowest performing urban districts.

Because of that success, State Rep. Denise Driehaus, D-Cincinnati, introduced House Bill 70, which would apply the Cincinnati structure and model to all districts that are placed in the Academic Distress Commission – currently only Youngstown, but could include more districts in the future.

Even though her bill was hijacked by back-room legislative dealings, the Commission and its CEO could still implement the spirit of HB 70. ISS has shown many positive benefits to academic achievement.^{xi}

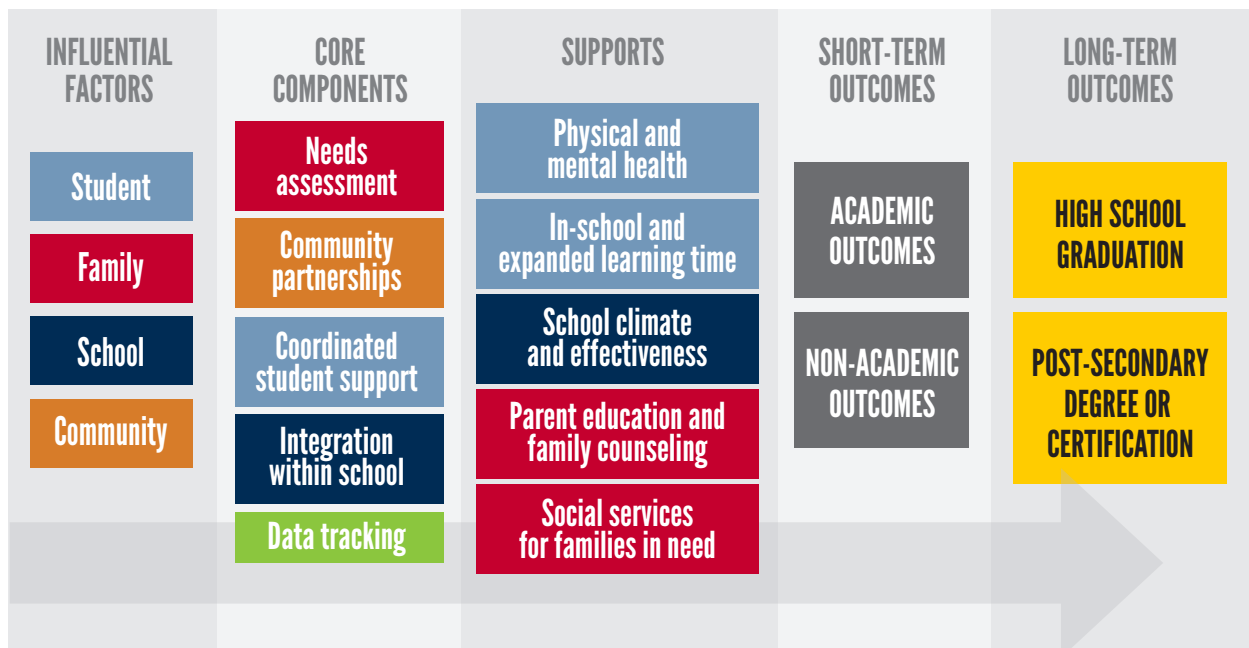
Generally, ISS has the following set of five guiding principles:

- 1) Needs assessments
- 2) Supports coordination
- 3) Integration in schools
- 4) Community partnerships
- 5) Data collection and tracking

Within each of those guidelines, several different supports are adopted, depending on the assessed need in part one. So, for example, a need may be identified for one neighborhood school that may be different from another neighborhood school. One size will likely not fit all.

What ISS attempts to do is mitigate non-academic factors in student success.

The ISS Theory of Change is best shown in this graphic from *Child Trends'* examination of the ISS results and research:



Source: <http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/2014-07ISSPaper.pdf>

There are several ways to implement different elements of the model, including:

- Health services
- Nutrition changes
- Substance abuse prevention
- Mental health services
- Pregnancy prevention
- Violence and gang prevention
- Services for pregnant students and students in legal trouble
- Recreation programs
- Family crisis support
- Legal aid
- Child care
- Parental involvement in school
- Parenting workshops
- Family resource centers
- Professional development for teachers
- School pride activities
- Developing better relationships between students and educators

Some buildings may need all of these services, some may need only a few, and others will need even more. The key is utilizing public input and a robust needs assessment throughout the district so the needed services can be delivered to the correct places in the community.

This approach will involve work at the grassroots level, as well as a leadership team that listens to the community, its students and families to make sure all student needs are met. It is important to get this right because the impact can be profound. Studies have shown a benefit of between about \$5 and \$15 for every dollar spent, depending on program and ROI analysis.

It's clear that ISS will have a positive impact, but the overall impact will be best felt if the needs assessment gets it right, the district implements the strategies effectively and the state meets its constitutional obligations to significantly help with the cost so the local taxpayers aren't overly burdened with the program's cost, or the program's implementation is limited by finances.

WARNING AGAINST IDEOLOGY

There have been several indications – including statements in the state's controversial \$71 million charter school grant^{xii} – that ideologues at the state level will try to turn Youngstown into a privatization experiment along the lines of New Orleans. In New Orleans, the major reforms have turned schools into privately-run charters and expand vouchers, funneling more public dollars to religious, private schools. This year, the state Louisiana legislature reversed course on this privatization push and has returned much of the control back to the community.

What's clear is that even in Youngstown, Ohio's charter schools are no better, and are often worse academically. Unlike Cleveland, Youngstown does not have a ready-made, high-performing group of charter schools that can be upscaled. Youngstown's charters are generally not as good as its public schools. The district loses \$22 million a year to charter schools, which means Youngstown is left to fill that state funding hole. It would be one thing if students had better outcomes in those charters, but they typically perform worse than their public school counterparts.

In addition, Ohio's voucher program has recently come under scrutiny^{xiii} by pro-school choice groups^{xiv} for producing worse outcomes than the local public schools that lose the voucher money. And while the data is limited, it appears that Ohio's voucher programs are not providing the better options for students and parents that they were promised.

Innovation Ohio would **strongly caution** the Commission to **not** simply hand over money to Ohio's nationally ridiculed charter school system, or offer more vouchers to private, religious schools when there's evidence that would end up being a worse option for many students. The Commission should stick to what the evidence demonstrates will improve student outcomes – the in-class and wraparound service options described in the two earlier sections.

CONCLUSION

Youngstown's reform plan was done shiftily in the middle of the night, under the noses of unsuspecting taxpayers. However, there remains an opportunity to do good things for the Youngstown community. If the Commission follows the evidence, it can provide meaningful education reforms that can turn around children's lives and begin raising up a struggling community. However, if the Commission chooses to follow the ideologues that have for too long harmed Ohio's education system, it is highly unlikely the improvement Youngstown kids deserve will be realized. And the state's power grab will be nothing more than a naked conversion of public functions to private profits.

CITATIONS

- i http://www.cleveland.com/metro/index.ssf/2015/07/gov_kasich_signs_controversi.html
- ii Achilles, C. (1999). Let's put kids first, finally: Getting class size right. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press; American Educational Research Association. (2003). Class size: Counting students can count. Research Points: Essential Information for Education Policy, 1(2); Gerber, S., Finn, J., Achilles, C., & Boyd-Zaharias, J. (2001). Teacher aides and students' academic achievement. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 23(2), 123-143.; Grissmer, D. (1999). Class size: Issues and new findings. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 21(2). [Entire Issue]; Mishel, Lawrence & Rothstein, R. (Eds.). (2002). The class size debate. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute; Nye, B., Hedges, L.V., & Konstantopoulos, S. (2002). Do low-achieving students benefit more from small classes? Evidence from the Tennessee class size experiment. Educational Evaluation & Policy Analysis 24(3), 201-217.
- iii Educational Research Association. (2003). Class size: Counting students can count. Research Points: Essential Information for Education Policy, 1(2)
- iv Finn, J., Gerber, S., & Boyd-Zaharias, J. (2005). Small Classes in the Early Grades, Academic Achievement, and Graduating From High School. Journal of Educational Psychology. 97(2), 220. "These findings are consistent with research showing that the immediate academic impact of small classes is greater for minority students and low-SES students (Finn & Achilles, 1990; Krueger & Whitmore, 2001) and that the percentage of minority students taking college entrance exams is increased by small-class participation (Krueger & Whitmore, 2001)."
- v Ibid at 221.
- vi Finn, J.D., Pannozzo, G.M., & Achilles, C.M. (2002). "The 'Whys' of Class Size: Student Behavior in Small Classes." Review of Educational Research, Vol. 73, pp. 321-368.
- vii Educational Research Association. (2003). Class size: Counting students can count. Research Points: Essential Information for Education Policy, 1(2)
- viii <http://wvde.state.wv.us/research/reports2014/TheAssociationBetweenSchoolDisciplineandMathematicsPerformance2014.pdf>
- ix <https://csgjusticecenter.org/youth/breaking-schools-rules-report/>
- x <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=NzNHvr1mbXMC&oi=fnd&pg=PP2&dq=universal+preschool+benefits&ots=bXmcHMVYgh&sig=a6hVcUcaME3BEuRUcmeRmQfX01E#v=onepage&q=universal%20preschool%20benefits&f=false>
- xi Child Trends. (2014). Making the Grade: Assessing the evidence for integrated student supports. Child Trends. Bethesda, MD.
- xii <http://www.ohio.com/news/break-news/federal-government-approved-71-million-charter-school-grant-knowing-ohio-wasn-t-truthful-on-application-1.637959>
- xiii <http://www.dispatch.com/content/stories/local/2016/07/17/performance-data-on-voucher-students-in-ohio-private-schools-hard-to-find.html>
- xiv <https://edexcellence.net/publications/evaluation-of-ohio%E2%80%99s-edchoice-scholarship-program-selection-competition-and-performance>



35 E. GAY STREET, SUITE 403, COLUMBUS, OHIO 43215 | 614-220-0150



INNOVATIONOHIO.ORG

