



May 17, 2009

## K-12 schools off to solid start

*By Ben Fischer*  
*bfischer@enquirer.com*

On May 28, East End resident Brian Blum will earn a title that's rare in his neighborhood: high school graduate.

Blum is part of the first graduating class at Riverview East Academy, just a few blocks from his home, marking the end of the first phase of Cincinnati Public Schools' unusual experiment with all-grades schools.

As part of its citywide plan to reorganize high schools, the district created two schools in heavily Appalachian neighborhoods that offer classes from preschool all the way to 12th grade - Oyler School in Lower Price Hill and Riverview East in the East End.

The hope, both then and now, is that the new arrangement would improve those neighborhoods' abysmal dropout rates - more than 50 percent at the time - by allowing students to stay close to home for high school.

Now, with Riverview's first graduating class leaving soon - Oyler graduates its third small group of former dropouts who have completed a special program today - students, educators and neighbors are giving the experiment a tentative thumbs up.

"There are no magic wands that cure all ills in education," said John Bryant, a board member of the Urban Appalachian Council in Lower Price Hill. "But I would say it appears to be moving in the right direction."

In 2005, supporters of Oyler, which then went through eighth grade, successfully lobbied to expand the school one year at a time, up to 12th grade, starting in 2006. Riverview East was a brand-new school, combining McKinley and Linwood elementaries, and then expanding one grade at a time.

Studies showed that students in the close-knit, insular neighborhoods often quit school after the eighth grade rather than head off to large, culturally foreign high schools elsewhere in Cincinnati.

That attitude is changing in the neighborhood, because families are seeing the graduating class experience success firsthand, said Dee Fricker, a parent of former East End students who was instrumental in creating the school.

"These older kids, as they succeed, they're going to inspire younger siblings to be successful for generations to come," Fricker said.

The early data are encouraging. At Oyler, more than 90 percent of the eighth-graders returned for their freshman year in each of the first two years as a high school. At Riverview East, the promotion rate into high school rose dramatically, from 42 percent in 2005 to 72 percent in 2007.

As a whole, CPS' eighth-to-ninth grade promotion rate is about 60 percent.

Several charter schools and private schools use an all-grades-in-one approach, as will the new School for Creative & Performing Arts when it's completed in 2010. But supporters hope that Oyler and Riverview East will fundamentally transform education in those neighborhoods.

It's too early to declare whether that hope has been validated. There are no graduation rates to calculate yet, and the district hasn't compared the new schools' promotion statistics to the students who left the predecessor schools.

Anecdotally, however, many students report success.

Blum, for instance, is certain that many of his friends at Riverview East wouldn't be enrolled at another school. Like him, they saw the appeal of a bigger school, such as Withrow High School, but preferred being nearby.

"I didn't want to be the new guy at Withrow," he said. "A lot of kids from McKinley (Elementary School), like my friend Jeremy, they were already here and I knew them since I was real little. I still had friends here."

Oyler juniors Victoria and Lester Pratchard, also siblings, went to Oak Hills High School for their freshman year, initially skeptical of Oyler's expansion. But that lasted a week before they came back.

## **Pros, cons of K-12**

Running a high school alongside an elementary school has its challenges.

Both schools arrange their space to limit uncontrolled interaction between young children and late teenagers. Oyler Principal Craig Hockenberry gently reminds juniors not to walk through elementary spaces while changing classes.

But when those interactions are controlled - under supervision and with an academic purpose - they open up a new path of academic and social gains for both youngsters and their older classmates, educators say.

To boot, both schools have high numbers of siblings and cousins going to school together.

"It should be a situation that communicates to the younger grade levels that this is a role model, a person who is making a positive impact, so why should I not move in the same direction?" Riverview East Principal Eugene Smith said.

Both high schools are small compared to others in CPS. Oyler has 257 students in grades 9-12; Riverview East has 160.

Because the district budgets on a per-student basis, small schools often have trouble hiring enough staff and teachers to expand beyond core academic subjects. Riverview East and Oyler are no exception, each employing about a dozen exclusively high-school teachers.

However, the schools make up for those shortcomings in other ways.

Both schools have robust "Community Learning Centers" in which outside social-service agencies target students for their services. The Boys & Girls Club operates an after-school room at Oyler, and the Cincinnati Youth Collaborative staffs a college access room at Riverview.

Those services aren't always sustainable, though. Services from those outside agencies are often funded by temporary grants.

Smith said he's confident the collaboration can remain, even after current players move on.

Hockenberry said his school needs to improve its "exit plan" so the collaboration can survive after staff turnovers.

Meanwhile, a growing contingent on the Cincinnati school board is asking questions about the financial wisdom of allowing small schools to operate, sometimes with subsidies, when larger schools offer more efficiency.

Board member Melanie Bates often agrees with that sentiment, but said the K-12 schools are worthwhile because they're opening a new door for a hard-to-serve population.

"(Organ) transplants are so expensive, so is it worth it to save someone's life?" she asked? "Is it worth it to make sure that kid gets educated?"

## Additional Facts

At a glance  
RIVERVIEW EAST

3555 Kellogg Ave., East End

449 students, preschool-12th grade

Expected 2009 graduates: 20

Principal: Eugene Smith

Academic rating, 2007-08:

Continuous Improvement

51 percent white, 44 percent

African-American

67 percent economically

disadvantaged

27 percent special-needs

OYLER SCHOOL

2121 Hatmaker St., Lower Price Hill

722 students, preschool-12th grade (grade 12 is online

dropout-recovery course only; traditional classes expand to grade 12 in August)

Expected 2009 graduates: 16

Principal: Craig Hockenberry

Academic rating, 2007-08: Academic Watch

53 percent white, 42 percent

African-American

79 percent economically

disadvantaged

26 percent special-needs