

Extra resources lift performance of impoverished schools

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From the outside, Providence Cristo Rey High School looks like a school that's struggling.

Located just south of Haughville, in one of Indianapolis' poorest neighborhoods, the 107-year-old brick building wears its age, with the white trim flecked by paint chips. There is no grand sign announcing the presence of the school, only a jammed parking lot.

Inside, more than 90 percent of the students are minorities and more than 90 percent come from families with incomes low enough to qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. The private Catholic high school receives an average of just \$253 per student in tuition.



Providence Cristo Rey High School spends \$16,000 per student, far more than the \$11,500 average for schools statewide. (IBJ photo/Eric Learned)

But Providence Cristo Rey is spending \$16,000 per student each year—significantly more than the \$11,500 average among schools statewide. That pays for a longer school day, a longer school year, more teachers per student and an extraordinary year-long internship program for every student in every grade.

That extra spending is getting results. Providence Cristo Rey is graduating nearly 90 percent of its students, in line with the state average. And all of its graduates go to college.

"I'm going to be a doctor," said Sa-Mone Ray, 17, who quit the volleyball team this year so she could work an evening job at a Kroger store, where her mom is a supervisor. She works there until 10 most nights, yet still finds a way to do her homework and is mulling a run for student body president.

Providence Cristo Rey is one of a handful of Indiana schools with overwhelming numbers of low-income students that is achieving results at least as good as or better than the state average. In other words, these schools are eliminating the achievement gap between low-income and minority students and their white, middle-class peers.

Those schools include charter schools Phalen Leadership Academy, Avondale Meadows Academy and Christel House Academy South in Indianapolis, as well as 21st Century Charter School in Gary. In addition, the predominantly low-income students at Indianapolis Public Schools No. 79 and 99 have posted good pass rates and even better rates of improvement.

All these schools have strong cultures, high expectations and a commitment to having quality teachers. But in addition to that, they have all figured out ways to bring in more resources to get students more personal time with the adults trying to help them learn.

The success of these schools indicates that it takes more resources than are made available by the state of Indiana to overcome the barriers to education faced by impoverished children. It also shows the schools that succeed are the ones most motivated to find the extra resources they need wherever they can.

“I do think that they have to have more money,” state Sen. Luke Kenley, R-Noblesville, said of public schools with high percentages of low-income students.

Indiana includes a complexity factor in the school funding formula, which is a big reason Gary Community School Corp. receives the most state funding per student and Zionsville Community Schools receives the least—29 percent less than the Gary schools.

But in the most recent legislative session, lawmakers tried to give larger increases in funding to charter schools and suburban schools, in part through performance-based funding grants.

Kenley said lawmakers are trying not only to give more money to schools with lots of low-income students, but also to create incentives to improve their performance.

“Part of the equation” for schools’ success, he said, “is that they are highly motivated to make it work.”

‘It’s a blitz!’

At 7:30 each morning, all 240 Providence Cristo Rey students are at school eating breakfast. They won’t go home until 4:45 in the afternoon.

Overcoming obstacles

A handful of schools is posting academic performance at or near state average even though the schools have student bodies that are far poorer than the norm.

High schools	Percent students low income	Graduation rate
21st Century Charter School (Gary)	100	94.3
Providence Cristo Rey High School	91.2	88.9

Elementary/middle schools	Percent students low income	ISTEP pass rate
Avondale Meadows Academy	75.1	72.5
Christel House Academy South	91.6	71.0
IPS School 79/ Carl Wilde Elementary	89.7	67.0
IPS School 99/ Arlington Woods Elementary	89.8	63.0

Source: 2014 data from the Indiana Department of Education

Providence Cristo Rey also is in session 186 days each year, instead of the 180 typical at most schools.

To compensate its teachers for their extra work, Providence Cristo Rey has found extra resources in the more than 95 corporate partners it has signed up to offer internships to all its students in all four years of high school.

The MJ Insurance brokerage has Providence Cristo Rey students stock supplies, sort mail, prepare conference rooms for meetings. The students go on vendor lunches, which gives them practice at speaking up, looking adults in the eye, and saying please and thank you.

Tricia Everhart, MJ's administrative manager, sometimes delegates responsibility for helping the students to other people on MJ's staff, which she says has helped the staff develop leadership skills.

"I have been able to coach them up to a leadership role with the students," she said. "You would think that we're here to help [the students], but they're actually helping us."

Each corporate work-study partner "pays" the students, with their wages going to the school to reduce their tuition bill.

The school also gets money from the state-funded voucher program for private schools, and from scholarships from the state government and private individuals. The rest it covers via its own fundraising, from individuals, foundations and its corporate work-study partners.

The extra dollars help pay for transportation to take one-fifth of the students each day to their various work-study assignments. It also helps pay for extra staff members who provide academic and personal counseling every day to small groups of students.

"They come from sometimes pretty tough backgrounds," said Joe Heidt, Providence Cristo Rey's president. "The things that are going on outside the school walls have a big impact on what's going on inside the school walls."

IPS School 79, also known as Carl Wilde Elementary, has tried something similar. Because more than 60 percent of its students are not native English speakers, the school already receives extra federal funding. It also has won grants for teaching students still learning English.

Carl Wilde has used those extra funds to hire 10 additional staff members—five teachers and five teachers' aides—to teach English as a second language. Throughout the day, they float around to different classrooms to provide special instruction to small groups of students.

In addition, Carl Wilde uses every instructional staff member it has every morning for a 30-minute Success period. The students are divided into groups based on what reading skills they are struggling

with (or, if they're not struggling, what skills they can push further).

Then each group is paired with an adult. The administrators, the music, art and PE teachers, even the school's social worker—all of them take a group.

"It's a blitz!" said Carl Wilde Principal Joyce Akridge. "Everybody is involved."

'Whatever they need'

Carl Wilde was failing when Akridge arrived as principal 10 years ago. It now sees two of every three students pass both parts of the state standardized ISTEP test.

And, even more impressive, students are growing their test scores faster than their peers statewide. In 2014, Carl Wilde's growth in math scores was in the 72nd percentile statewide and its growth in reading scores was in the 59th percentile.

Largely because of high poverty rates, IPS' schools are some of the highest-funded in the state. The district spends \$13,714 per student, according to the most recent figures from the Indiana Department of Education.

But Akridge has found ways to bring in even more resources—mainly from the students and their parents. She focused Carl Wilde's culture on reading—requiring all students to read 30 minutes every day.

The first year Akridge instituted that program, she noticed 30 to 40 parents weren't following through. So she called a meeting, and brought in a translator, to tell them it had to change.

"We're cheating the children if we're not reading to them," she recalled saying. "And I haven't had any problems since."

Akridge motivates students via rewards and her own example. Every time students do their reading for 50 days, they get a medal. And Carl Wilde has special honors, such as most-improved reader.

Students at Carl Wilde read books while standing in line to get lunch—and sometimes have to be nudged so they stop holding up a line.

When last summer IPS had yet to release funds to buy informational reading books for Carl Wilde's younger students, Akridge bought the materials herself—putting \$9,000 on her credit card. She was, 10 months later, finally reimbursed.

But she keeps buying books on her own dime—she estimates she's spent \$2,000 just this summer buying books to read with Carl Wilde's teachers and to give other IPS principals she's mentoring.

“Whatever they need, I’m going to make sure they have it,” Akridge said from her office, which looks out on West 34th Street from Carl Wilde’s one-story brick building.

One of Akridge’s protégés, Tihesha Guthrie, is the principal at IPS School 99, called Arlington Woods Elementary. That school has blossomed in recent years. Even with 89 percent of its students categorized as low-income, 63 percent of them are passing both parts of ISTEP and seeing their scores grow faster than average.

Now IPS is trying to replicate the Arlington Woods model at some of its other schools.

Charter schools get creative

Some charter schools also have found ways to provide and pay for students to have more time with teachers in small groups. Charter schools are publicly funded by the state just like traditional public schools, but are operated by private entities.

Phalen Leadership Academy puts both a teacher and a teacher’s aide in every classroom—and also has students do some of their learning via computer programs. That allows each of the adults in the classroom to work with just eight students at a time.

“That really does allow for a kind of private-school educational experience,” said Phalen CEO Earl Phalen. “That piece makes a huge difference.”

Phalen’s charter school model costs about \$14,000 per student—which includes 200 days of school each year. Phalen relies on grants—such as the \$1 million it received from the Indianapolis-based education reform group The Mind Trust—and community partners to make its model work financially.

“We still want all children to excel. And in order to excel, you need to put more resources into children that start school behind,” Phalen said. “I think you could probably get there with efficiencies, but it’s possible it needs to be efficiency plus some.”

Avondale Meadows has tapped community partners to provide more services to its students. For example, Cummins Behavioral Health puts a mental health counselor in its school every day.

The counselor works with about 30 students who have the most severe emotional problems, even doing family visits at students’ homes once a month.

“We recognize that where we’re located, many of these families need these extra supports,” said Kelly Herron, principal of Avondale Meadows, which is northeast of Keystone Avenue and East 38th Street. “It ranges from something as small as ADHD to children who have [post-traumatic stress disorder] from something they’ve experienced in their life.”

Those efforts, combined with extra teachers and efforts to engage parents, are making a difference. Avondale Meadows had nearly 73 percent of its students pass both parts of the ISTEP exam in 2014, even though roughly the same percentage comes from low-income homes.

The 21st Century Charter School in Gary, which is run by the Indianapolis-based GEO Foundation, has taken full advantage of Ivy Tech Community College, which offers dual-college-credit courses to high school students.

That allows 21st Century to skip extra costs for foreign languages and special classes, such as robotics, because Ivy Tech has those things. It instead uses that money to pay its teachers more—\$44,000 as a starting salary—so it can compete against the schools in nearby Chicago.

The dual-college credits also give 21st Century's students a reason to graduate, said Kevin Teasley, CEO of the GEO Foundation, because they already have shown the ability to do college work. The graduation rate at 21st Century is 94 percent—compared with the state average of 90 percent.

The graduation rate for black students in Indiana, who make up most of 21st Century's student population, is just 80 percent.

"Parents said, 'I didn't go to college, my parents didn't go to college, my kids don't need to go to college.' To battle that attitude, you have to prove to the parent that the student is capable of going to college," Teasley said. "That is our chief goal, to beat poverty. And to do that we have to do more than just talk about going to college."