



# FAITH & OUR SCHOOLS

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## Greater Cleveland Congregations helps rebuild trust in Cleveland schools

CMSD families have a greater hand in their child's education than ever before, thanks in part to a coalition of religious congregations across Cleveland.

Greater Cleveland Congregations has worked to tackle challenges at four CMSD schools using an approach that gives power to parents, teachers and communities. Through the "Listen. Act. Win." campaign, hundreds of students have safer routes to school, more technology in their classrooms and a better academic experience – minus any red tape.

GCC is made up of more than 40 faith communities and partner organizations in Cuyahoga County that work together to build power for social justice. Its members are some of CEO Eric Gordon's closest partners, meeting monthly with Gordon to discuss the District's challenges and successes.

"Together, we serve our city's most precious natural resource – its children," said Gordon. "To do so effectively, the public must believe we can and are doing what's right for kids."

Passage of two levies and a bond issue since the launch of *The Cleveland Plan* showed that Cleveland's voters were willing to give CMSD a chance to fulfill the goals of the plan.

GCC has been a strong advocate for many of the District's campaigns, including the Get2School attendance campaign and the passage of the Issue 107 levy in 2012 that funded *The Cleveland Plan*. They were present in churches, boardrooms and neighborhoods across Cleveland garnering support for last year's renewal of the levy, which passed with 67.8 percent of voter support.

GCC organizer Khalilah Worley said "Listen. Act. Win." is not only the name of the initiative, but also the method GCC and its partners follow. The goal is to help build the public's trust in CMSD schools. The strategy is to listen to the public's concerns and then take prompt, meaningful action.

"Having open, transparent conversations with each other about issues and seeing how those issues can be resolved is the only way that we feel we can get to the issue of distrust that has been plaguing the District for some time," Worley said.

It all started in May with a three-month "listening campaign" at Willow, Case and Riverside schools and meetings with families at the Downtown Education Center, a CMSD school in the Cuyahoga County Juvenile Detention Center.

At Willow school, the community was concerned about the safety of students

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### Why is it important to you, as a religious leader in Cleveland, to support CMSD and *The Cleveland Plan*?

"It's important for me to support CMSD schools because of the young people who need to be educated and have the right things to help them reach their goals. I've been a Clevelander all my life; therefore issues like this are very important to me. I also have children in Cleveland schools who I want to support, and I want them to know that I'm concerned about all of our youth."

— Pastor Leon Thompson, Ph.D.  
Allen Chapel Missionary  
Baptist Church

"Because we are all in this together. Cleveland public schools are an important part of the community, and wherever there is a productive community there is a productive school system, and they work hand in hand. Pastors within the community play an intricate role in the educational structure by keeping the flow of information between its congregations and the school systems. It is vital that our children see this positive exchange."

— Pastor Chelton C. Flanagan  
Holy Trinity Baptist Church

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## GCC helps rebuild trust in schools *continued from previous page*

walking and biking to school. Two-way traffic on roads outside the school made it difficult for cars and buses transporting students to get through. Often, vehicles would pull up onto the sidewalks to make room, making it unsafe for children walking and biking.

GCC teamed up with the District to resolve the issue before school began, working with city officials to make Glazier Road and Nursery Avenue one-way streets during drop-off and dismissal.

Members of Elizabeth Baptist Church helped a committee connect with City Council to make it happen. They also went door-to-door in the neighborhood around Willow to notify residents.

Charlotte Robinson, a member of the church, was inspired to get involved in the project because she had a personal stake in the matter – a seventh-grade daughter at Willow.

Robinson was one of several Willow parents who were worried about the safety of their children around arrival and dismissal. She was the one who drafted the proposal and submitted it to the District. Robinson also worked to get the proper signs for the street.

A few months into the school year, Robinson said she rests easier knowing her daughter is safer walking to and from school. She credits the success to teamwork among the church, the school and the District.

“That’s how you get things done, if you come together as a community,” she said. “If it’s just one or two people coming together, it doesn’t work.”

The campaign also addressed a communication issue that was affecting CMSD students who spent time at the Downtown Education Center.

Parents were concerned about grading discrepancies when students left the DEC and went back to their former schools, so GCC asked CMSD Deputy Chief of Curriculum and Instruction Karen Thompson to look into it. Thompson quickly identified the issue and saw how it affected students. She created a clearer policy for the grading process and assigned a point person for accountability. The fix has ultimately made the process of re-enrollment easier for families, Thompson said.

“Listen. Act. Win.” also helped facilitate a project at Case school to make it safer for students who walked to and from school and addressed technology needs at Riverside school.

Worley said these fixes, both large and small, both simple and intricate, have helped build confidence in the District as families realize that their concerns are being taken seriously.

“We can use our congregations to support people that felt ignored or didn’t lift up the issue because they thought nothing would happen,” Worley said.



“Quality schools make a quality community, and we want to attract more people here to Cleveland. I’d rather be a part of the solution than complaining about and criticizing the problem.”

— *Pastor Aaron Phillips*  
*Sure House Baptist Church*

“I support Cleveland schools 100 percent because I think our schools keep our community together and stronger. I also grew up in Cleveland, and I graduated from West Tech. Through West Tech, I was able to get some skills to further my adult life and my education.”

— *Pastor Wayne Cox*  
*Christ Temple Missionary Baptist Church*

“My support for CMSD is very strong because I believe in what they’re doing, and I believe in the impact that they’re making already with attendance and grades having improved, and graduation rates moving in the right direction.”

— *Rev. Rodney S. Thomas*  
*Imani Temple Ministries*

“We support Cleveland schools and the transformations that are taking place. We’ve seen good things happening where the school administration is trying to work with families and strengthen families. We feel it’s not only important to minister to kids spiritually, but we also need to give them something tangible for their future. Without a tangible thing like education, then all the ministry is kind of wasted.”

— *Pastor Bob Willard*  
*The Meeting Place Church*

## Churches, religious groups offer tutoring services

Churches and other faith-based organizations in Cleveland are taking an increasingly active role in supporting CMSD students, with more than a dozen of them offering tutoring services for over 30 schools.

Hundreds of students each week are getting one-on-one academic help either in school, after school or on weekends from religious groups that volunteer their time and resources. The results can be seen not only in improved academics but also in meaningful relationships that have developed between schools and faith-based organizations.

“We believe in the city of Cleveland, and where else do you start believing than with the children?” said Mary Soirefman, project coordinator for the outreach committee at the Church in the Circle.

Church in the Circle has had tutoring and other reading programs at Mary B. Martin

School for three years. Their members spend time in both individual and group settings with students to promote literacy and help students who struggle with reading.

The one-on-one attention that tutors provide can also benefit students who are reading at or above their grade level. That’s why some schools use tutors from churches and faith-based organizations for enrichment purposes. In fact, the Jewish Federation of Cleveland has an entire program devoted to just that.

The Federation’s Public Education Initiative currently has tutors in six CMSD schools and two of the District’s partner charter schools, focusing mostly on literacy enrichment.

The Federation has been in District schools since 1999, and the program now reaches about 300 CMSD students each year with its 200 volunteers. The volunteers are assigned

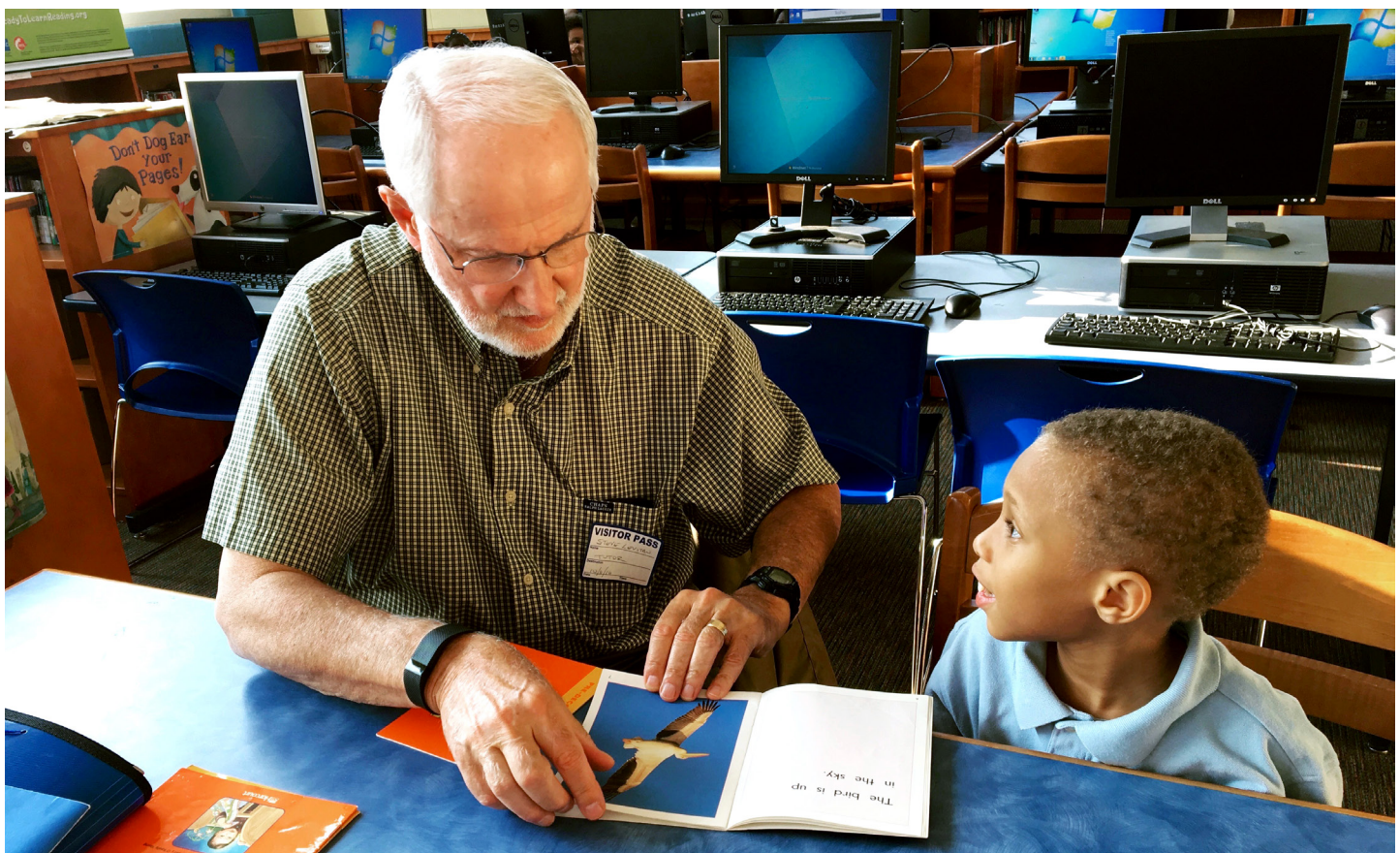
one or two students, and meet with them once a week throughout the school year. The tutors split their time reading to students and having students read to them from books the Federation supplies. They also work on spelling, writing or drawing.

Along the way, the tutors nurture relationships with students.

Steve Levitan has been tutoring with the Federation for several years and has been working with a Miles Park second-grader for more than a year. Levitan, a retired chemist, said the student has improved by leaps and bounds since last year, when he struggled to read even two-letter words. Levitan said the student’s face lights up when he walks into his classroom each week to take him to the library for tutoring.

“We’ve really progressed quite a bit since we first started last year, and that’s why I wanted

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## Tutors build meaningful connections with students *continued from previous page*

to work with him again,” Levitan said. “First of all, because he’s a lovely child and I really enjoy working with him, and I wanted to continue with him and take him as far as I’m able to take him.”

In his tutoring sessions, Levitan uses handmade flashcards that he creates and customizes based on the student’s needs.

“One of the most important things that we can teach children is to become a competent reader,” Levitan said. “And if they can become a competent reader, there may be no limit to what these kids can do.”

Miles Park Principal Tamika Taylor-Ivory said the Federation volunteers, as well as tutors from Triumph Church and St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, have a noticeable impact on her students.

Surveys showed that students felt safer and more supported after spending time with the tutors. Taylor-Ivory saw improved attendance and said parents have transferred their children to Miles Park because of the tutoring opportunities.

And in a building where the average class size is 25, the one-on-one pairings allow students to have individualized lessons without any distractions.

“I appreciate having tutors, but I need to have the right tutors. For this program,

we fit, because they know what my expectations are,” Taylor-Ivory said. “They’re not just picking books at random for the kids to work on.”

On the other side of town, tutors from the faith-based Scranton Road Ministries Community Development Corporation approach their tutoring responsibilities from a holistic perspective. Their volunteers tutor students at Scranton twice a week, and Luis Muñoz Marin students four times each week.

Chad Abraham, who tutors student and directs an after-school enrichment program, graduated from James Ford Rhodes High School and grew up attending Scranton Road Bible Church. He said he tries to build trusting relationships with students while also helping them overcome academic struggles.

“I know for me, as a kid, if I was struggling in a class, it was probably related to something I was going through personally,” Abraham said. “I had people in my life that I could talk to about it, but I don’t know if the kids here always have that.”

Abraham said he uses his own experiences growing up in the same neighborhood where he tutors to relate to students.

“Our main focus is to show them some type of hope, even in this neighborhood

when it doesn’t look like there is,” Abraham said. “And along the day we do a lot of math and reading tutoring.”

Other programs have deep roots in CMSD schools, including the Saturday tutoring program at the Church of the Covenant in University Circle. Linda Wilson was a teacher at John Hay High School when she and her colleagues launched the program in 1990.

Wilson has since retired but now coordinates the tutoring services, which have expanded to schools across Greater Cleveland. Students from about 15 CMSD schools currently get tutoring through Church of the Covenant, Wilson said.

As an educator, Wilson said she’s seen children benefit from support that comes from people in their community.

“It’s important for kids to know that there are other people in their corner in addition to their parents and teachers,” Wilson said.

## Students build resumes, character in faith-based job program

On Wednesday afternoons in the basement of Scranton Road Bible Church, music bumps through a room where CMSD high school students are eating pizza and playing Uno.

But then Luvirt Parker walks in the room, yelling “Here we go!” Students respond, “Hey!” and the conversation shifts to college, careers and life after high school.

Parker is the director of the Youth Jobs

Partnership, a workforce development program operated through the faith-based Scranton Road Ministries Community Development Corporation. The program provides students at several CMSD high schools with job training, professional development and mentoring – all while laying a spiritual foundation.

“The reality is it takes a community to help prepare a student for life, and we’re just the faith arm of it,” Parker said. “We’re

a community alongside the school. We all have the same goal: to help prepare our students for life and give them the skills they need to be successful.”

The Wednesday after-school program, called “Rise Up,” is just one aspect of YJP. The partnership’s programming is also woven into the curriculum for seniors at Lincoln-West, James F. Rhodes, Max S. Hayes and Garrett Morgan high schools. Parker and his team are in classrooms

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## Mentors guide students through academic, personal challenges *continued from previous page*

each week leading senior seminars to teach students skills like resume building, communication, budgeting and interview techniques.

The in-school sessions introduce students to these topics, and those who want a deeper dive can join “Rise Up.”

Despite its focus on serious and often intimidating subjects like college and jobs, most of the students aren’t being forced to attend “Rise Up” by nagging parents. About 25 students willingly and enthusiastically show up each week.

YJP provides free dinner and brings in speakers from organizations like College Now Greater Cleveland. They also take students on college tours, and mix in a few fun trips.

As part of a faith-based organization in a public school system, the career coaches keep religion out of their lessons during senior seminar class. But on Wednesday nights and during one-on-one sessions, the coaches often discuss spirituality and pray with students who are religious.

“The faith piece of it drives everything we do,” Parker said. “Our conviction is that your faith permeates your whole life. That’s what drives us to do all that we do.”

The YJP mentors take a holistic approach to their programs, and often end up forming close bonds with students. This can be anything from talking about family problems to teaching them how to drive.

While the more in-depth discussions take place at “Rise Up,” the majority of students are first connected to YJP in the senior seminars. That’s how YJP career coach Tom Csora met 2016 Lincoln-West graduate Mirika Mpabagona, who was looking for a summer job. Csora got to work immediately, helping Mpabagona consider her options and submit job applications. She eventually landed a job at a restaurant in Ohio City.



“Csora didn’t just put me in any job; he found out what my interests were and found a job that would match me,” said Mpabagona, who hopes to open her own business someday.

Csora was also a source of support when Mpabagona was searching for the right college. She decided on Cuyahoga Community College, where she currently studies business.

Part of Csora’s job is to make connections with local employers to help students get jobs. He acts as a go-between for the student and employers to ensure a good fit. This can mean making sure the students have the right clothes for an interview, driving them to the interview, introducing the student to the employer and checking in on them after they’re hired.

YJP staff members closely monitor how their programs impact students. Ninety-one percent of students who work with YJP get their high school diplomas.

Assessments given to participants in the program also showed notable increases in resume-writing ability, personal finance skills, interviewing skills and conflict resolution.

Students also see meaningful changes in their personal lives. Lincoln-West senior Paul Light said Csora not only guides him through applications, but also through personal challenges.

“Csora talks me through the rough times, like when I got my knee injury in football,” Light said. “He told me I could still be able to play if I get through some rehab, and he helped me get over that bump.”

Lincoln-West senior Jonathan Williams said “Rise Up” has given his self-confidence a major boost.

“I’m more comfortable and more outgoing around new people,” Williams said. “And I feel more self-respect.”

For YJP advisor Ronny Knight, it’s about building trust with students to help them transform into competent, confident college students or workers.

“I see them as our future,” Knight said. “Whether it’s faith-based or not, I think that we need to be in the schools.”