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Building 21st Century Skills in Columbus

October 4, 2010 by [Kevin Hart](#)

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By Barbara Moldauer

Suffering from geographic isolation, under-resourced facilities, and mounting discipline problems, Linden-MicKinley High School met just two of the state's 12 indicators for student achievement during the 2007-08 school year. The graduation rate was 52 percent. Students — 90 percent of whom were poor and African American — were departing in droves for local charter schools.

To address these problems, the community formed a task force composed of stakeholders ranging from the Columbus Education Association (CEA) to St. Stephens Community House. The group recommended radical change: introducing a new curriculum built around STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics); emphasizing 21st century skills such as critical thinking and problem solving; and combining middle and high school (grades 7 through 12).

The school district accepted the recommendations, but community members had reservations.

With the support of the NEA's Public Engagement Project, CEA convened a community conversation attended by more than 300 people — parents, business leaders, teachers, district administrators, and local faith-based and political leaders. They responded enthusiastically to a presentation on the new STEM curriculum and its potential to close achievement gaps. On an interactive survey, 85 percent said all students can succeed when families, communities, and schools work together.

“Parents left that conversation asking, ‘Where do I sign up my child?’ We’re going to see students come back to the Linden community from charter schools,” said Rhonda Johnson, president of CEA.

Michelle Mills, CEO of St. Stephens Community House, concurred. “Linden was at a turning point,” she said. “Without that community conversation, parents would not have been involved, enrollment would have plummeted, and the school would probably have closed. Now they believe change is actually going to happen.”

Renovating, expanding, and retrofitting Linden-McKinley is a big investment — \$34 million, according to *The Columbus Dispatch* — but the potential benefits are even bigger. As a group, workers in STEM occupations earn about 70 percent more than the national average, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (*Occupational Outlook Quarterly*, Spring 2007).

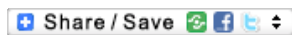
The new facility is scheduled to open in the fall of 2011. It will have separate wings for different age groups, alleviating concern among some families about middle and older high school students mingling in the same building.

The revamped curriculum includes advanced placement and college-level courses, as well as practical advice — for example, on opening your own business. English and social studies courses stress basics such as reading, research, and writing. Math and science are taught together through experiments, demonstrations, and hands-on investigation. Mentors from nearby Nationwide Children’s Hospital and Battelle, the area’s largest employer of STEM-trained personnel, provide information about careers in fields such as medical technology and biomedical engineering.

In May 2009, on the heels of the Public Engagement Project’s success with Linden-McKinley, the city of Columbus received a \$50,000 planning grant from the NEA Foundation — one of only five awarded to urban school districts. The grant is part of the foundation’s signature program, “Closing the Achievement Gaps,” which revolves around union and school district collaboration, family and community partnerships, and quality teaching.

Linden-McKinley is part of the Ohio STEM Learning Network, which is composed of 10 public schools and 26 related K-8 programs. Supporters include NEA, CEA, the NEA Foundation, the KnowledgeWorks Foundation, the AFT’s Cleveland and Cincinnati affiliates, the Ohio Supercomputer Center, colleges and universities throughout the state, Battelle, the Ohio Business Roundtable, and other members of the business community.

NEA’s Public Engagement Project/Family-School-Community Partnerships (PEP/FSCP) is based on this premise: It’s time we take family and community engagement as seriously as we take curriculum, standards, and tests. The project has sponsored more than 125 community conversations in 21 states — catalysts for change driven by local coalitions of families, students, teachers, business people, clergy, and other stakeholders. Together, they identify local causes of achievement gaps, develop and implement action plans, and mobilize to get results. For more information, contact Roberta Hantgan at 202-822-7721 or rhantgan@nea.org.



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