

The Columbus Dispatch

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Rich-poor achievement gap diminishing at some central Ohio schools

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By **Shannon Gilchrist**

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Ten Columbus-area schools are excelling at helping low-income students achieve as much academically as their higher-income peers, according to a national report released Tuesday.

“Every child absolutely deserves an equal education,” said Carole Morbitzer, administrator for Hamilton Local Schools. “We’d be doing a disservice to those students and their families if we didn’t provide them with a quality education regardless of the situations they have at home.”

Three Hamilton schools — the district’s intermediate, middle and high schools — are highlighted by the group Education Cities for nearly closing what’s known as the “achievement gap” between rich and poor students.

The other seven schools are five charters — the Arts & College Preparatory Academy, Columbus Collegiate Academy, Columbus Preparatory Academy, Horizon Science Academy Columbus and Noble Academy, Columbus — plus Columbus Alternative High School in the Columbus district and North Franklin Elementary School in the South-Western City district.

The group looked specifically at schools where more than half the students come from lower-income households, which means that they qualify for free or reduced-price school lunches. The study created the “education equality index,” which it says is the first national comparative measure of the achievement gap. To see the methodology and the full report, visit www.educationequalityindex.org.

“This is why we exist,” said Andy Boy, founder and CEO of United Schools Network, which operates the Columbus Collegiate Academy on the Near East Side. Nearly all its students, who are in the sixth to eighth grade, are from low-income households. “We are achieving our mission.”

Three factors help the students to achieve, Boy said: finding and training highly qualified teachers, establishing a culture of respect, where “it’s cool to be smart and cool to get good grades,” and helping students beyond the classroom, including with high-school placement and developing character.

North Franklin Elementary, where English is not the first language for nearly one-third of students and 77 percent are from low-income households, has built strong trust relationships with its families, said South-Western spokeswoman Sandra Nekoloff. Lots of planning and early intervention for struggling students also help.



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Hamilton Township High School has been recognized for nearly closing what's known as the "achievement gap" between rich and poor students.

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“It's about taking student data and doing something with it, and not just putting it in a drawer,” she said.

Outside measures show that these schools are on the right track. On the 2014-15 state report cards, Arts & College Preparatory Academy, an East Side charter high school where 51.5 percent of students are disadvantaged, earned a B on its performance index, which is how students did overall on state tests, and an A for how many students were rated proficient or better. Columbus Collegiate Academy middle school got a D on the performance index but an A for “value added,” a gauge of how much students progressed in a year.

Hamilton schools, where 67 percent of students are from low-income households, got an A for how many students passed the 2014-15 state performance tests; for the first time, the district met 32 of the 33 report-card indicators, missing only on gifted students.

The study also ranked 100 cities on bridging the rich-poor achievement gap. Columbus did poorly overall, ranking 81st. Its achievement gap increased by 8 percent between 2011 and 2014. Cincinnati ranked 34th, Toledo 60th and Cleveland 89th.

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