

PATHWAY TO SUCCESS

Near West
Intergenerational
School emphasizes
relationships and
rigor to ignite
lifelong learning

By Lyman Millard





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One of the central ideas behind the charter school model is to allow community members an opportunity to develop public schools that fit their unique vision of a quality education. Located just minutes from downtown Cleveland, Near West Intergenerational School is a perfect example of a charter school born from a community's desire for something different. As author Lyman Millard describes in the following report, community members were drawn to the school's distinctive model that intentionally connects its students to adults in the nearby area who serve as mentors and tutors. The school appropriately bears the name "Intergenerational," along with two other charters located in the Cleveland area. Furthermore, Near West serves an "eclectic" urban neighborhood that regards diversity and inclusion highly. The school itself reflects those values, educating a 41 percent African American, 28 percent Hispanic, and 24 percent white student population in 2016-17. In a state where most inner-city schools serve primarily students of one race, Near West is one of just a handful of racially diverse urban schools.

We wish to thank longtime Cleveland resident Lyman Millard of Bloomwell Group for his topnotch work shining a light on Near West Intergenerational School. Not only does he provide details on the school's formation, but he also shares with readers a compelling real-life story about how Near West has deeply impacted one Cleveland family who was once at their wit's end trying to find the right school for their son. Quality school options like Near West do indeed revitalize communities—and families alike. We extend our deepest gratitude to Fordham-Ohio staff, including Chad L. Aldis, Madison Yoder, and Jeff Murray who provided feedback on drafts and helped bring this work to press, and to Stephanie Henry for designing the report and Pamela Tatz for copyediting it. Special thanks to former Fordham-Ohio staff member Jamie Davies O'Leary, who helped launch this project, and to the staff of Near West for opening their school to us; without their support, this report would not have been possible.

— AARON CHURCHILL
Ohio Research Director
Thomas B. Fordham Institute



Gino and
Cassandra Hinton
with Gino Jr.

Two weeks into their son’s fifth-grade year, Cleveland parents Cassandra and Gino Hinton knew they’d made a mistake. Their son, Gino Jr., was struggling in a new learning environment—a neighborhood-based public school—having previously spent kindergarten through fourth grade attending a Montessori school that ultimately didn’t meet his academic needs. Cassandra and Gino were beginning to lose hope.

Things weren’t always that way. When Gino Jr. started kindergarten, his parents thought they had done everything right. They spent months researching schools in their community and talking with other families. They thought they had found a good fit: a school with a strong reputation, not too far from home, and with a Montessori curriculum that sounded exactly like what their son needed to thrive.

But the school never lived up to its promise. Montessori schools are intentionally unstructured, giving children the freedom to learn by exploring the world around them. They also feature multiage classrooms that can be a powerful tool for focusing instruction on individual students’ needs rather than a “one-size-fits-all” approach to grade-level curriculum. Over the years, it became increasingly clear that their son’s school wasn’t offering a well-implemented Montessori program.

The more time Cassandra and Gino spent in their son’s school, the more chaotic it felt. As Gino Jr. grew older, they began to hear about frequent fights. They assumed this was just something that went with the territory—after all, this was supposed to be a good school—but Gino Jr. also started to fall behind academically. Cassandra and Gino Sr. were engaged parents who wanted to be partners in their son’s education, but they grew increasingly frustrated with his teachers. “We kept asking them what we needed to do to help him catch up, but they didn’t give us any options,” said Gino Sr.

Things finally came to a head in Gino Jr.'s fourth-grade year. His new teacher decided to simply divide the multiage classroom of nine- and ten-year-olds into two groups and teach them separately. Gino Jr. was only getting instruction for half of the day and spent the other half doing worksheets. His parents noticed he needed a lot more help at home, especially in math. As his grades continued to drop, so did his feelings about school. He began to loathe school and look for any excuse to stay home. His parents pleaded with the school to give him more help, but the only solution they offered was holding Gino Jr. back a year.

Cassandra and Gino had been trying to make the school work, but it was time for a change. Although it didn't have as strong of a reputation as the Montessori school, they decided to move Gino Jr. to his neighborhood school and hope for the best. Almost immediately, they realized they'd made a terrible mistake. "It was total chaos, with kids roaming the hallways, teachers hollering at the kids, and fights almost every day," remembers Cassandra. Even though the new school year had just started, she was desperate to find a better school for her son.

A fresh start

They found their answer in an unlikely place. Gino and Cassandra have a small cleaning business and had recently taken over the night cleaning duties at a public charter school in the area: Near West Intergenerational School. As they went about their cleaning duties, they saw an amazing school.

In 2010, Near West Intergenerational School opened its doors in an eclectic community known as Ohio City. The neighborhood's brick-paved streets are lined with old trees, beautiful Victorian homes—both newly renovated and in various states of disrepair—and public housing projects. It's one of Cleveland's most racially and socioeconomically diverse areas, with an active arts community and some of the city's best restaurants.

For years, a group of Ohio City parents had seen their friends follow a well-worn path to the suburbs as soon as their children were old enough

for kindergarten. They wanted to continue to build their vibrant community but didn't think the neighborhood schools were providing a high-quality education. Conversations at parks, over beers, and through a babysitting co-op coalesced around recruiting a high-quality school to open in their neighborhood. After months of research, they asked the leaders of The Intergenerational School to bring their proven public charter school model to Ohio City.

The original Intergenerational School was founded in 2000 by educator and developmental psychologist Cathy Whitehouse, world-renowned neurologist Peter Whitehouse, and Stephanie Fall Creek, the head of Fairhill Center for the Aging. They imagined a school that would bring older adults into the learning community to work as mentors and tutors to help students build the skills and knowledge necessary for success in high school, college, and beyond. They understood

The Intergenerational model focuses on mastery, helping each child progress along a developmental scale at his or her own pace. When children meet academic benchmarks, they move to the next set of skills.

that each child is a unique learner, and learning is most effective when tailored to individual needs. Instead of placing students into age-based groups, the Intergenerational model focuses on mastery, helping each child progress along a developmental scale at his or her own pace. When children meet academic benchmarks, they move to the next set of skills. Students who master a benchmark quickly don't have to wait for the rest of their class to catch up before moving on. Conversely, students who are struggling are given extra time and support.

Because each student has her own academic plan, the multiage classes spanning two or three years are limited to seventeen students or fewer.

Near West launched in 2010 with the support of a national funder, the Charter School Growth Fund, and the Cleveland-based charter network Breakthrough Schools. The community insisted that Near West be located in Ohio City, but initially, finding a suitable facility in the neighborhood proved to be a huge challenge. Fortunately, the Cleveland Metropolitan School District provided a temporary location in one of its high schools, creating Ohio's first district-charter co-location. When Near West had outgrown the space a few years later, the school district offered the school a long-term lease at one of its unused elementary schools located on the same block. Over the past eight years, Near West Intergenerational School has become an integral part of this thriving community while mirroring the neighborhood's racial and socioeconomic diversity.



Gino Jr. and classmates

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CASSANDRA HINTON

When Gino and Cassandra first came to Near West in 2016, they were just excited to have a new client. But over the first few months of cleaning the building, they grew more and more impressed by what they saw. “The science room was like one of those classrooms you see on T.V., not in real life,” said Gino. “They were doing real experiments, like something out of Mythbusters.” Cassandra was especially moved by the way Principal Molly Toussant and the staff treated the students and each other. “Walking through the building with Molly, she knew all of the kids by name. You could see she took the time to really know them and care about them.”

Molly understands the power of calling people by their names. The school culture she and her staff have built comes from forming deep relationships with students and families and is critical to the school's success. “What keeps

people coming is a sense of community, so you have to work really hard to create that community,” added Molly. She and the staff at Near West build community by encouraging families to attend monthly community meetings celebrating students' learning stage promotions, frequent social events in their gym or at the park across the street, and through an active social-media

connection with families. “The research is clear on the impact of family engagement, but beyond that, it's just really important to make everyone feel welcome here.”

Because of Molly's habit of working late, Cassandra frequently had to work around her to clean her office. One day a few weeks into the school year, Cassandra gathered up the courage to ask, “What would it take to get my son in here?” Fortunately, there was no wait list for fifth grade at the time and Near West had an opening for Gino Jr., and his parents decided to enroll him in the school right away.

Adjusting to high expectations

Because Gino Jr. was so far behind, he struggled at first to adjust to his new school. “He couldn’t clown anymore,” said his father. “The teachers cared enough to take the time to correct him.” Molly wasn’t worried, though. “We expect our kids to engage and participate in conversation, especially given our small classrooms. It takes new students a while to adjust to our expectations.” Cassandra remembers how hard Gino Jr.’s teachers worked to help catch him up. “His language arts teacher [Karol Goodman] stayed after school to work with him while we were cleaning, and his science teacher really lit a spark in him.”

Science teacher Emmet O’Melia beams with pride when he talks about Gino Jr. making a year’s worth of growth in the last five months. When asked about his approach, he starts in an unusual place: relationships. “Gino came in with a traditional teacher/student mindset, thinking, ‘What can I get away with?’ So first, we had to spend a lot of time building our relationship.” Emmet insists everyone in his class treat each other with kindness. His students describe Near West as “feeling like a family, where everybody cares about you.” In Emmet’s case, the analogy

takes on even greater meaning: he’s not just a Near West teacher, he’s also the father of a Near West student.

Gino Jr.’s parents have seen a tremendous turnaround in their son. “He comes home so excited to tell us what he learned that day,” says Gino Sr. “He talks to me about organisms and what’s living in pond water. He never used to do that.” Gino Jr. also sees the contrast, too. “At my old school, there were fights almost every day. Even the little kids were fighting. But here, everyone gets along.” He speaks with enthusiasm about Mr. O’Melia and their science experiments: “It’s a lot of fun, but you get as much fun as the time and effort you put into your work.” As for his language arts teacher, Mrs. Goodman, “She’s got tough shoulders and can handle a lot of things. She tells us, ‘The more questions you ask, the more you know,’ so she gets a lot of questions from us.”

Third time’s the charm

On their third try, Gino and Cassandra Hinton finally found a school that is igniting a lifelong love of learning in their son. They refused to accept a school with a good reputation that wasn’t working for their son. They recognized early on that his neighborhood school was even worse. Now they are part of a school community that understands the importance of personal relationships, individualized learning, and hard work. Thanks to the innovative founders of the Intergenerational Schools, a community effort to push quality schools, local and national partnerships, a supportive learning community—one fostered by Molly Toussant, Emmet O’Melia, and Karol Goodman—and parents who refused to accept anything less for their child, Gino Jr. has finally found the right school in Near West Intergenerational School. It’s a school where he is known, challenged, and valued. For Gino Jr., that is making all the difference.



Gino Jr. with Karol Goodman

