

CSBG SPOTLIGHT: Partnering for Outcomes in Ohio

by Jovita Tolbert

When the Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC), the Community Action Agency of Clark County, Ohio, which has been providing youth services for over 20 years, discovered that they were serving a growing number of youth who had dropped out of high school, they sought to find out why. Interestingly, the OIC found that most of their constituents had dropped out of high school not because they were educationally challenged, but instead because they had social, emotional and economic conditions that prevented them from remaining in school. Realizing that education plays a vital role in helping people become self-sufficient, OIC wanted to do more than provide them just the basic classes. They wanted to provide them the opportunity to remain enrolled in high school, work toward graduation on their individualized competency-based pathways, receive the needed support services and feel confident enough after graduation to move on to post secondary education or full time employment.

The Opportunities Industrialization Center knew it would take a joint effort with local high schools to provide the extra support that those Clark County children who faced emotional and financial barriers to education needed to remain in school and graduate. Thus, in the fall of 2000, they partnered with their city school district to respond to a Clark County Request for Proposal (RFP) and received Clark County Workforce Investment Act dollars to tackle the early high school drop out rate within the city high schools.

OIC then established an alternative high school, The OIC Learning Opportunities Center (LOC) that worked with local school districts to identify low-income children who were credit deficient and needed a stable support system to help them reach graduation. Those children were referred to the LOC program, which helps to service not only the children but also the children's families.

Importantly, 95 percent of the children served in LOC are at 110 percent of the federal poverty level and are unlikely to be living in an intact or stable household. Moreover, those enrolled face two or more barriers to completing their education in a traditional high school. These barriers range from having a parent offender to aging out of foster care or being severely behind in their education. What's more, 75 percent of the LOC students are in danger of dropping out when they come to the OIC high school and 25 percent have already completely dropped out.

The OIC alternative high school has enrolled and served 206 students since inception and remarkably, 70 barrier-ridden students from households at or below the poverty level have successfully graduated from the Learning Opportunities Center alternative high school with a home high school diploma. This can be attributed in part to the quality time and effort the OIC puts into customer analysis. Ongoing customer analysis allows OIC staff to assess the changing needs of the youth they serve on a monthly basis and modify their program to better fit the youth's needs. Furthermore, once the students have obtained their diplomas, the LOC program continues to follow up with them for a year and a half to assist them with college opportunities and available scholarships, vocational school research, finding jobs, or enlisting in the military service. Support services continue to be offered to both students and their families during this follow-up period.

Notably, the OIC not only partnered with their local school district to tackle the problem of increasing high school drop out rates but also with other entities that wanted to assist in solving the problem. Some of these partners include the Turner Foundation, The Springfield Foundation, other local foundations, 5 surrounding county school districts, Clark County Department of Job and Family Services, The Clark County Workforce Investment Act Board and Youth Council, and the Community Services Block Grant Office of Community Services in Columbus.

The benefits of this program are first and foremost for the students. The LOC program addresses the needs of the students that have “*slipped away*” from the traditional educational pathway. Many of them have adult responsibilities - such as working to provide family income, caring for siblings, becoming very young parents, facing probation issues - that interfere with attending school. Others have personal barriers that have been unaddressed or they fail to see how the school system is relevant to their lives. LOC is one way to re-engage these young people back into an educational structure and environment that facilitates both their academic and personal progress.

The Opportunities Industrialization Center is a 34-year-old private, non-profit community based organization located in Springfield, Ohio. In addition to the alternative high school, OIC has historically provided services for the educationally and economically disadvantaged adult population of Clark County as well. These services include job readiness, on-the-job training and employment programs for youth, adults and ex-offenders coming back into the community, technology and vocational education, pre-employment screening for local employers and administering the Home Energy Assistance Program. In addition to being one of 52 Community Action Agencies in Ohio, OIC is also an affiliate of OIC’s of America founded in Philadelphia in 1964 by the late Rev. Leon Sullivan. OIC currently has thirty employees and operates on a budget of \$1.6 million. For more information on the OIC and its programs, please contact Ellen Waid, Director of Operations, by email ewaid@oicofclarkco.org or by phone (937) 323-6461.

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