

Brent Larkin, editorial director for the Cleveland Plain Dealer from 1991-2009 laments the “malign neglect of education funding by the state” using the closing of Collinwood High School as a metaphor for Cleveland’s precipitous decline.

When I started my teaching career in rural Ohio in 1958, we looked to the “big eight” urban school districts as a model for school facilities, curriculum, programs, and services. At about the same time, those urban dwellers with wealth and influence on state government moved to the suburbs. That population transition caused a decline in appropriate resources to serve the children of the low-wealth families left behind. Subsequently, the state’s neglect of the inner-city school systems took a toll on the educational programs and services needed to appropriate programs and services required to serve children raised in a poverty environment.

Brent Larkin’s piece provides an informed perspective of the matter.

Cleveland schools’ cuts a leading indicator of Ohio’s malign neglect of education funding: [Brent Larkin, cleveland.com](https://www.cleveland.com) Updated: Jun. 07, 2026

Cleveland’s Collinwood High School was once one of the largest high schools in the nation with nearly 4,000 students. The current 345,203-square-foot-building sits on 5.4 acres. “Effective at the end of the school year that ended two weeks ago, Collinwood is now closed for good,” Brent Larkin writes today, noting that just 33 students were in the final graduating class. (Photo by Rich Exner, cleveland.com) Rich Exner, cleveland.com

There is no better metaphor for Cleveland’s precipitous decline and the region’s sluggish growth than the central city’s public school system.

For 60 years, well-intentioned attempts to slow plummeting enrollment and student test scores have all failed. Poverty sits atop the blame list, joined by corporate and political leadership, segregationist policies, state government, and a stunning lack of parental involvement that leaves innocent children trapped in a web of multi-generational dysfunction. Repeated attempts at reform, at times hilariously labeled as “transformational” by us in the media, can only be judged by student test scores that repeatedly place Cleveland schools at or near the bottom of Ohio’s 611 public school districts.

Among the state’s 10 largest school districts, Cleveland ranked at or near the bottom in test scores for the 2024-2025 school year. In the most important categories – third-grade and eighth-grade proficiency in math and language (largely reading), the district ranked dead last in three of those four measurements and ninth in third-grade math. It also ranked last in graduation rates. Among eighth graders in the Cleveland schools, only one in four is proficient in reading. Worse yet, the disciplinary issues Cleveland teachers are forced to deal with makes it beyond any reasonable dispute that most of them are underpaid.

Now, faced with a \$514 million deficit by 2028, the district is making deep cuts, [closing 23 school buildings and merging dozens of schools](#). More than 140 teachers have received layoff notices.

Mayor Justin Bibb and schools CEO Dr. Warren Morgan insist some of these cuts and consolidations are designed to benefit students and may improve classroom performance.

The dysfunction of the Cleveland system predates Bibb and Morgan by decades, but these cuts are designed more to head off a state takeover than benefit Cleveland’s youngest citizens. Remember, it has been only 19 months since Cleveland voters approved a costly levy and bond ballot issue.

With 34,000 students, Cleveland schools have lost more than half their enrollment since 2000.

No school is as symbolic of the district’s decline as Collinwood High School. After World War II, the nearly 4,000 students who went there made it one of the nation’s largest -- and easily the largest in Ohio. Effective at the end of the school year that ended two weeks ago, Collinwood is now closed for good. There were 33 students in the 2026 graduating class.

“You can’t close schools near the city’s border and expect kids to remain in the district,” said Cleveland City Councilman Mike Polensek, Collinwood class of 1969. “This is what happens to a school when you strip it of every important program. Most of the good programs are now west of the [Cuyahoga] river. The people running the city and the schools don’t understand or don’t care about the East Side. When mortgage rates drop, the exodus from Cleveland will increase.”

For 30 years, I’ve argued that quality preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds in the city might make meaningful progress towards breaking Cleveland’s four-generation cycle of urban poverty.

In each of his four budgets as governor, Mike DeWine has asked the legislature to make substantial new investments in quality preschool. Four times, Ohio’s worthless legislature has reduced the size of DeWine’s proposed investments.

The damage has been worsened by the tax cuts enacted by the legislature between 2004 and 2024 that resulted in Ohio forgoing between \$71.6 billion and \$102.5 billion cumulatively, with the lion’s share of those tax cuts benefiting the rich. (Those estimates were prepared by the nonpartisan Ohio Legislative Service Commission.)

Had the legislature enacted tax cuts that totaled only half that much, imagine the property tax cuts and investments in deserving children that could have been in place years ago.

Don’t mistake this as claiming the legislature is largely responsible for the decline of performance in Cleveland’s schools. But neither can anyone dispute that this legislature cares far more about handing \$600 million to the Browns as payback for campaign contributions than it does investing in proven education programs designed to help poor kids lead a better life. No legislature in Ohio history has done more to overtly harm Cleveland than this one.

Meanwhile, the cycle in Cleveland of school levies followed by layoffs and deep budget cuts is unsustainable. We should be begging those with the best education minds in the country for a better way to run a troubled school system.

Once, long ago, many in Cleveland thought they had found a man with such a mind. Fred Holiday was a kind, thoughtful, Harvard-educated superintendent who came to Cleveland in 1982 determined to make a difference.

But a few members of the city’s then-elected school board had other ideas about what was best for Cleveland’s kids, so they tormented the soft-spoken Holiday, hoping he would leave. On Saturday, Jan. 26, 1985, Holiday [went to an empty Aviation High School at Burke Lakefront Airport and took his own life.](#) His body was found two days later.

In the next day’s paper, I wrote that “the man who so despised Cleveland politics took the ultimate step to try to change it.” Indeed, consider this from Holiday’s suicide note, written to the people of Cleveland:

“Use this event to rid yourselves of petty politics, racial politics, greed, hate and corruption. This city deserves better. The children deserve better.”

They still do.

Brent Larkin was The Plain Dealer’s editorial director from 1991 until his retirement in 2009.