knowledge
brief

Oakland Unified School District Community Schools: Supporting Students, Teachers, and Families

INTRODUCTION

Oakland is home to one of the most demographically diverse populations in the country, with residents of different racial, ethnic, national, linguistic, and other cultural groups. Amidst this diversity exist considerable disparities in opportunity and outcomes, especially for Oakland's children. Those born in some neighborhoods are, for example, much more likely to suffer from poor nutrition, be subject to violence, and lack adequate healthcare. Compared to a white child of the affluent Oakland Hills, an African-American child born in West Oakland is 7 times more likely to be born into poverty, 4 times less likely to read at grade level by grade 4, and 5.6 times more likely to drop out of school. Additionally, as an adult that same African-American child will be at least twice as likely to die of heart disease, stroke, or cancer.[1]

In response to these vast disparities, in 2010, Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) launched an initiative to transform all district schools into full service community schools. OUSD's efforts are consistent with broader trends in education reform to improve student outcomes. Nationally, as research has shown that students living in poverty face numerous obstacles to educational success, community schools are increasingly being utilized as a strategy to address educational inequities.[2] The community school model is characterized by well-coordinated partnerships between schools and community-based organizations to deliver integrated services designed to improve the well-being of children and families and promote student academic success.

This document, along with a series of accompanying briefs, present findings from the first year of a planned three-year study of Oakland community schools. As OUSD continues to increase its number of community schools, leaders aim to document and assess their current efforts with an eye to improving policies and practices that will help all schools reach the initiative's goals. To this end, OUSD engaged the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (Gardner Center) at Stanford University in a collaborative partnership to assess these early efforts and distill key lessons to support scale-up. During this first study year, the Gardner Center, together with OUSD, identified five community school sites, representing a range of elementary, middle, and high schools, for in-depth research. These schools, considered by district staff as relatively mature community school sites, were selected to offer lessons regarding implementation of the complex constellation of services that community schools offer, the organizational structures that sustain these services, and the implications for teaching and learning in schools. During Spring 2015, Gardner Center researchers interviewed the principal, teachers, partner agency staff, and the community school manager at each site. We also analyzed administrative data for each of the five sites to examine school-level trends over time.

OAKLAND'S COMMUNITY SCHOOL DESIGN

Oakland community schools provide an array of integrated services intended to remove students' barriers to learning by, for instance, addressing health issues, expanding the amount of time for learning, implementing alternative disciplinary practices, and engaging families in student learning and school improvement. Importantly, the community school model also includes organizational strategies for leveraging community resources and partnerships, coordinating services, and integrating services and partners into the operation and mission of the school. Ultimately, community

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schools aim to address students' needs and promote a positive school climate in which students are engaged learners and teachers are supported to provide quality instruction, contributing to the goal that all students graduate college, career, and community ready. To achieve these goals, the OUSD community school design includes three key features: 1) *integrated services and supports* that offer students and families resources and opportunities including, for instance, health services and afterschool activities and learning opportunities; 2) *organizational structures and systems* such as partnerships with community-based organizations and a dedicated community school manager to ensure services are seamlessly coordinated and integrated to align with school learning goals; and 3) a focus on community schools as a framework for supporting *teaching and student learning outcomes* through high quality instruction, increased student engagement, and positive school climate. Each of these elements is featured in one of the companion briefs to this overview.

KEY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The Oakland community schools

in this study offered a number of supports, services, and opportunities to students and families, ranging from health and behavioral health, expanded learning, and family engagement. Our research found that *many of these mature community school sites have made considerable progress toward deep integration of supports and services* with the academic life of the school. For example, in some schools, teachers and afterschool program staff actively aligned lessons and activities; and, in some, health and mental health services had become a regular part of what students do at school. Staff described the organizational structures identified in the community school design— collaborative leadership, strategic partnerships, and coordination—as key conditions to foster integration and alignment. *School principals and community school managers in particular are critical to developing strong relationships with partner organizations and with families*, and adopting a school leadership approach that encompasses and acknowledges the role of multiple stakeholders in student and school success. As OUSD continues its scale-up efforts to expand the community school model to more sites, these strategies may merit sustained investment. Our research also suggests that *community school interventions have positively influenced teaching and learning in schools*.

Specifically, teachers and principals reported improvements in student readiness to learn; student attendance, behavior, and engagement; support for teachers; and the school climate.

This research offers guiding lessons and examples illustrating how community schools can be more than a collection of school-based services, but rather, a web of supports and partnerships integrated into the academic life and mission of the school. In mature Oakland community schools, we observed evidence of a culture in which the adults in the school work together to support students' needs, and students and families are more deeply engaged in students' success and learning. Community school implementation was often considered by school-site staff to be part of their efforts to transform school culture and re-align resources to best support more equitable student outcomes; indeed, the district has emphasized that school culture transformation and resource alignment are an integral piece of community school implementation. Together, these findings indicate that the strategies built into Oakland's community school model are key to successful implementation, and warrant continued support in both emerging and developed community schools.

OAKLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT
Community Schools, Thriving Students

1 Alameda County Public Health Department (August 2008), Life and Death from Unnatural Causes: Health and social inequity in Alameda County. http://www.acphd.org/media/53628/unnatcs2008.pdf
2 http://partnerforchildren.org/storage/documents/13-CommSchool-LevelingReportNew.pdf