knowledge

brief

Teaching and Learning in Oakland Community Schools

This brief is part of a series that shares findings from a research collaboration between the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University and Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) focused on understanding implementation of the community school model in the district.[1] Community schools aim to address students' needs, and promote a positive school climate in which students are ready to learn and teachers are supported to provide quality instruction which, in turn, improves student attendance, behavior, and achievement. Previous research has demonstrated that student and family participation in support services—a key feature of community schools—is often associated with improved student outcomes.[2] Additionally, the structures and systems of community schools—for example, leadership, partnerships, and coordination—may enhance the integration of these services as fundamental components of the life and academic mission of the school, ultimately bolstering their ability to affect student outcomes.[3] This brief focuses on site staffs' perceptions and experiences of how the community school model supports student, teacher, and school outcomes. In addition, we incorporate analysis of school-level outcomes using OUSD administrative data for these schools and the district as a whole to identify shifts in leading indicators of student academic engagement and performance, as well as school climate.

KEY FINDINGS

- The majority of respondents at all schools in this study report that community school interventions have positively affected student readiness to learn, support for teachers, and the school climate.
- School and partner staff reported that community school supports and services addressed important barriers to learning.
- Teachers noted that the system of supports and resources at their schools enabled them to focus more directly on teaching.
- School-level year-to-year student statistical trends are largely consistent with teacher and staff reports obtained during our first phase of interviews, although it is too early to conclude an association between community school interventions and aggregate student outcome trends.

John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities

SUPPORTING STUDENTS

Decreased Barriers to Learning

Most school staff indicated that the availability of health and wellness services were a primary means for removing barriers to student learning through addressing medical and behavioral issues, as well as minimizing the amount of class time students miss. In the words of one teacher, *"….in order for students to learn, I think that they have to be healthy. Too often an assumption is made that a student's… medical, behavioral health, basic needs are being met. And if that's not happening, then I don't think there's a way for them to succeed…. I just think healthy students learn better."* Most community schools offered primary health care, dental care, vision testing, mental health counseling, restorative justice practices, and other services to students and families. According to respondents, through better access to services and improved systems to identify students' needs, community school implementation has helped remove barriers to student learning.

Increased Access to Academic Services and Supports. Staff across the schools discussed seeing significant improvements in students' academic learning that they traced, at least in part, to increased expanded learning opportunities and the continuum of community school supports. All community schools offered expanded learning opportunities for students, ranging from after- school programs and summer enrichment opportunities to internships and linked learning pathways. At some schools, the majority of the student body participates in afterschool programs. School-day teachers and afterschool staff often collaborate and coordinate curriculum, further enhancing the integration of traditional-day and afterschool learning. In many cases, teachers noticed a difference between students who participated in these enhanced learning opportunities and those who did not. Staff often attributed positive changes in student's academic performance to students having access to extensive and intensive supports available through strategic partnerships or better organizational systems, structures, and practices.

Improved Attendance. Respondents also noted school- and district-level shifts in disciplinary practices to
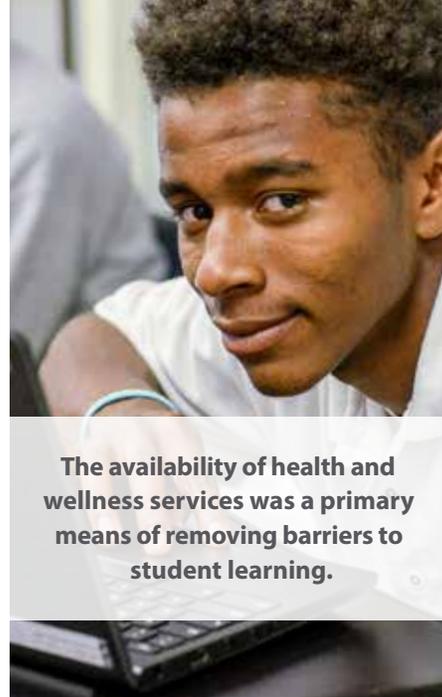
The availability of health and wellness services was a primary means of removing barriers to student learning.

reduce suspensions and efforts to improve attendance—for example, coordination of services teams and attendance teams—had a direct impact on increasing students' time available for learning. At several of the sites, school leadership developed systems to increase attendance that involve immediate follow-up with families when a student is absent. Teachers at multiple schools mentioned that they regularly text parents about, for example, whether or not their child completed their homework, or attended class. Staff at most schools mentioned improved student engagement, which some linked to restorative justice practices, better academic supports, and/or clear communication around student expectations and safety. In the words of one teacher: *"[Now students] really want to be on-campus. We don't have students that are, like, 'Get me off this campus!' The majority of them, this is where they want to spend their time. So, we … cultivated that culture, which then [allows staff to] hold kids accountable because it's something they want to be a part of."*

Decreased Disciplinary Issues. Staff in all sample schools described an observable improvement in overall

Staff traced significant improvements in students' academic learning to expanded learning opportunities and the continuum of community school supports.

student discipline, including significant declines in disciplinary referrals, suspensions, and the disruptive incidence of adult-to-student and peer-to-peer conflict among students. Many teachers and school staff trace this decline to using restorative justice practices, as well as increased family engagement, student engagement, and a more positive school climate. In the words of one teacher: *"I feel like we actually just have a lot fewer disciplinary issues because students just have a sense of purpose in what we're doing and are more focused on academics."* Many staff attributed this to the community school services, supports, and structures that help engage students, families, and foster a more positive school climate.

SUPPORTING TEACHERS & SCHOOL STAFF

More Time for Instruction. Teachers overwhelmingly reported that the services and supports integrated into the school through community school implementation allowed them to focus more time on developing and engaging students in academic content. Teachers often play an important role in screening students for services but do not have to take it upon themselves to identify service providers, given the supports within the community school model. Partners, community school managers, and sometimes family liaisons all become resources for addressing student needs. Teachers reported that community school implementation has allowed them to reduce the number of hats they need to wear, provided additional resources to support student needs, and ultimately,

"take some of the weight off you as a teacher." In the words of one teacher, *"[You] don't have to be social workers or coaches. You don't have to worry that you don't have those resources because we have partners."*

More Collaboration Between Staff and Families. Most staff interviewed indicated a positive shift in school culture and climate, among students, adult staff, and often families. In some cases, staff narrated a shift from a "toxic" school environment to one of adult collaboration, teamwork, and engagement. At all schools, we saw evidence of a community school culture in which the adults from the school work together to support students' needs, and a collaborative school leadership approach extended beyond the principal and teachers to encompass the community school manager, a range of partner agencies at the school, and to some extent families as well. Most schools had teams dedicated to engaging and supporting families, often including the community school manager, at least one family advocates or liaison, and sometimes partners and teachers. Teachers especially highlighted the value of improved communication and collaboration with families to students' learning.

SCHOOL LEVEL TRENDS

In addition to interviews with key staff, OUSD administrative data indicate that school-level year-to-year trends in these five schools are largely consistent with staff reports. Overall, the administrative data reflected desirable trends in leading indicators of academic engagement and performance, including decreased chronic absence and suspension rates, and improved student survey responses regarding school climate. The charts on page 4 report four-year trends in chronic absenteeism and student suspension rates for the three schools in our study sample that serve middle school students along with middle school district-wide averages.[4] Consistent with district-wide trends, all three of these schools demonstrate reductions in the percentage of students suspended. Further, in these schools, chronic absence either decreased or remained below the district average. Future statistical analysis will explore these trends and relationships.


Practices related to discipline and restorative justice helped to improve the quality of instructional time in ways that advance student learning.

IMPLICATIONS

By and large, principals, teachers, and community partners report that community school practices have positively affected student readiness to learn, support for teachers, and the school climate. In these schools that had been implementing the community school model for multiple years, 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. Indeed, community school implementation was often considered by school-site staff to be part of broader improvement efforts to transform school culture and re-align resources to best support more equitable student outcomes.

Furthermore, school-level year-to-year student statistical trends are largely consistent with teacher and staff reports obtained during this phase of interviews. Future research activities will include more sophisticated statistical analysis in order to better understand the relationship between students' participation in community school programs and their engagement and success.

COLISEUM COLLEGE PREP ACADEMY
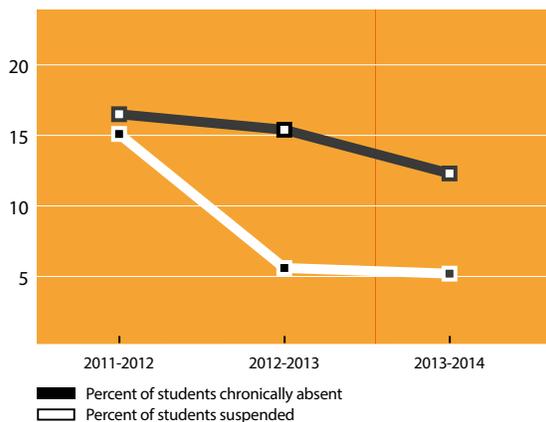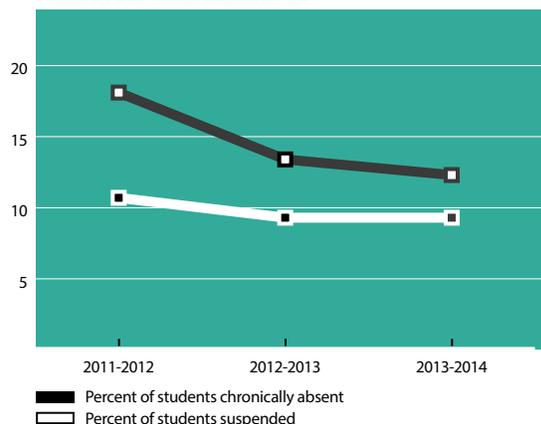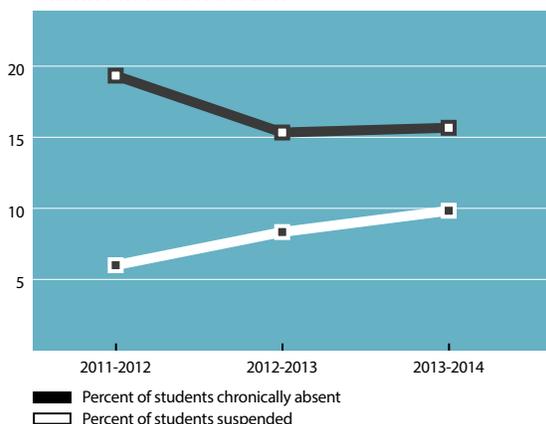
■ Percent of students chronically absent
□ Percent of students suspended

ROOSEVELT MIDDLE SCHOOL

■ Percent of students chronically absent
□ Percent of students suspended

URBAN PROMISE ACADEMY

■ Percent of students chronically absent
□ Percent of students suspended

OUSD MIDDLE SCHOOLS

■ Percent of students chronically absent
□ Percent of students suspended
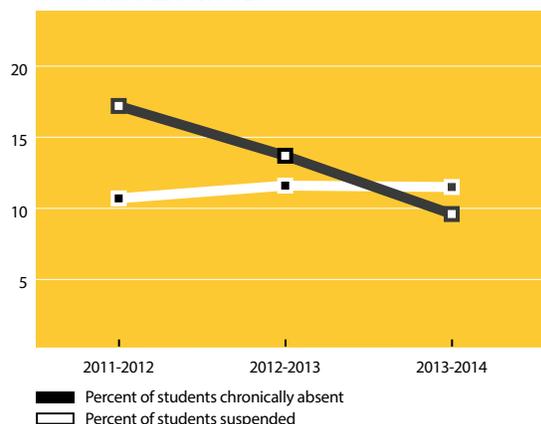
1 For a complete description of this research collaboration, including methodology, see series overview.
2 Biag, Manuelito and Sebastian Castrechini (2014). "The Links Between Program Participation and Students' Outcomes: The Redwood City Community Schools Project." Issue Brief. Stanford, CA: The John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities; Castrechini, S. (2011). Service synergy: Examining the cumulative effects of community school services. Stanford University: John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities; Moore, K. A. (2014). Making the grade: Assessing the Evidence for Integrated Student Supports. Child Trends downloaded from http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/2014-07ISSPaper2.pdf.
3 Moore, K. A. and Emig, C. (2014). Integrated Student Supports: A Summary of the Evidence Base for Policymakers. Child Trends White Paper. http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/2014-05ISSWhitePaper1.pdf
4 These three schools are Coliseum College Prep Academy (CCPA), Urban Promise Academy, and Roosevelt Middle School. District middle school averages include a total of 21 middle schools; 12 community schools and 9 non-community schools. (The two other schools in the sample for this study are Garfield Elementary and Oakland Tech High School.)