

2012 Urban Education Study Tour

Oakland, California

Recent education reform efforts in Oakland have been shaped by a local culture that embraces community organizing as a tool for creating change, a commitment to addressing educational disparities linked to race and socio-economic status, and a process of rebuilding trust between the district and the community. Changes to the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) have also been driven by dedicated leadership willing to engage in difficult conversations about race and class, frame reform conversations through the lens of equity, and develop a shared sense of collaboration and partnership around aligned goals.

Since 2009, after regaining control over its finances from the state, OUSD has made significant progress in strengthening its strategic direction. Stable district leadership combined with a strong and unified board of education has paved the way for a balanced budget and the implementation of a five-year strategic plan. Community and consensus building efforts have resulted in improved relationships between community and district leaders, an increase in philanthropic support, and district support for the full-service community school model designed to address the economic, social, and educational needs of the whole child.

In 2012, three years into the seven-year strategic planning process and having once again been named California’s most improved urban district (for eight consecutive years), OUSD still had ample work ahead to realize its vision of a more equitable and holistic approach to education and achievement.

PLACE, CONTEXT AND HISTORY

A port city in the San Francisco Bay Area, Oakland is one of the most ethnically diverse in the US and has a rich history of community organizing and political activism

The East Bay area opened to American settlers in 1842 and began attracting immigrants from across the United States and from around the world. Following the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848 and the discovery of gold that same year, the population grew quickly as those in search of opportunity and prosperity flocked to the region. The City of Oakland was incorporated in 1852, and the first school was established in July, 1853, with 16 students.

Study Tour Learning Objectives

- I. Explore methods for *building effective partnerships* among funders and between funders, school districts, and other local partners to improve outcomes for all learners
- II. Identify specific, high-leverage strategies to *support students of color and English language learners*, preK through graduation, and to position these students to be college and career ready and to achieve post-secondary success
- III. Understand the challenges of and approaches to *system alignment*, with particular focus on ensuring successful transitions between preK and K-12 and between K-12 and postsecondary institutions
- IV. Learn about successful investments in *human capital*, especially those that support teachers and education leaders
- V. Understand the range of *roles education grantmakers* can play as external change agents for urban school systems, the tensions that arise in these roles, and strategies grantmakers can employ to help resolve these tensions

The tour was guided by three of GFE’s priority themes

- I. Closing achievement and opportunity gaps
- II. Strengthening the education pipeline
- III. Supporting more high quality teaching and leadership

During the 20th century, Oakland grew to become one of the most diverse cities in the country, placing issues of diversity and equity at the center of social debates about opportunity, access, and inclusion. With a population of nearly 400,000 today, the city is 35 percent white, 28 percent black, 25 percent Latino, and 17 percent Asian. However, like many American cities, it has struggled with issues of segregation and inequity in its economic, social, and education systems.

Given these disparities, community and advocacy groups have historically had a strong presence in Oakland, including the establishment of the Black Panther Party in 1966. In the 1990s, the community grew increasingly frustrated by an unsafe, segregated, and underperforming school system and local activists drew public attention to the failing schools. By the spring of 2000, they secured the New Small Autonomous Schools Policy that created the conditions to establish new small public schools as well as influence the direction of district strategies for the coming decade.

Oakland remains a city with, as Angela Blackwell says, “limited opportunities for some, and limitless opportunities for others.” In recent years, the downtown area has begun to thrive, housing prices have soared, and the city has seen an increase in economic activity and tourism. At the same time, poverty rates remain uneven across racial groups and are more severe among people of color. Student achievement follows a similar pattern, with students of color trailing in achievement and access to high quality schools. The city encapsulates the complexities of creating lasting education reforms. But it is also a city with local leaders who understand the need for partnership and the benefits of collaboration across education, economic, government, and social sectors.

LEARNING FROM OAKLAND

Community Organizing as a Tool for Reform

Oakland has many organizations dedicated supporting advocacy and organizing efforts. Oakland Community Organizations (OCO), founded in 1977, is an alliance comprised of community-based organizations and schools that represents thousands of families in the city and was established to draw attention to and address local issues and concerns. Collectively, OCO advocates for improving a range of conditions in Oakland, from education and civic engagement to citizenship and healthcare. The Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (renamed the National Equity project in 2010) worked closely with OCO and OUSD to design and implement the small schools policy in 2000. PICO (People Improving Communities through Organizing) California is active in more than 70 cities in California, including Oakland. A grassroots network, PICO California leverages the power of congregation-based organizations to highlight the needs and concerns of working families in shaping state policy. The Parent Leadership Action Network works to engage parents in the education of their children while encouraging advocacy and participation. Education for Change is a charter management organization built on a partnership between the district and the education reform community that advocates for curriculum development and teacher quality. The Great Oakland Public Schools Leadership Center (GO) is a nonprofit organization that works to unite families, educators, students, and leaders around a shared vision for Oakland’s public schools. A supporter of OUSD’s strategic plan for the district, GO continues to engage in how the vision unfolds while holding the district accountable for implementation.

OCO advocated for changes to the education system and, in the 1990s, was instrumental in organizing thousands of people to support the New Small Autonomous Schools Policy, approved by the school board in May 2000. Organizers successfully worked to draw attention to the inequities in the school system where high-performing schools were smaller than low-performing schools and located in well-resourced neighborhoods with primarily white students and families. That year, OCO worked with the district to open nine new small schools. By 2007, a total of 49 new small schools had opened across the city, solidifying the small schools strategy within the district and, as the Annenberg

Institute for School Reform suggests, “fundamentally and dramatically transforming the landscape of public education in Oakland.”

By 2011, Academic Performance Index (API) scores had improved dramatically for many schools in Oakland’s working-class neighborhoods. In 1999, 45 schools had API scores below 500; by 2011 only seven remained. In 1999, only five schools recorded an API of 800 or higher; by 2011 40 schools had done so. Additionally, organizing and relationship-building efforts helped create a culture that expects and requires high achievement, attracts philanthropic investment to the community and the school system, and supports reform efforts geared toward long-term, systemic, and sustainable change.

Equity-Focused Strategies

Strategies that embrace equity are prevalent in many of Oakland’s school reform efforts and have been developed and supported by community-based partners. The Urban Strategies Council focuses on developing strategies and conducting research to improve social conditions in low-income communities by engaging a range of stakeholders and partners. The Council developed an equity framework to clarify the definition of equity for schools, in particular for full-service community schools and Promise Neighborhood Schools. The Council’s basic definition of equity is “...fairness achieved through proactive measures that result in equity for all.” The expanded definition reads: “Fairness

achieved through systematically assessing and addressing disparities in opportunities and outcomes so that all students experience high quality instruction and receive effective individual and family supports and services they need to succeed in school and in the community.”

The work at the Urban Strategies Council is closely related to the work of PolicyLink, a national organization based in Oakland dedicated to promoting social and economic equity. PolicyLink’s 2012 report, *America’s Tomorrow: Equity is the Superior Growth Model*, outlines the links between our nation’s demographic changes, economic opportunity and growth, and education, while describing how equity-driven strategies can support educational and economic prosperity. A key message from both PolicyLink and the Urban Strategies Council is that the benefits of equity across all social systems are supported by a body of research, and equitable education is the key to unlocking the broader impact on our larger society.

In 2010, based on the research from the Urban Strategies Council, OUSD launched an equity-driven program to support achievement for African American boys and created the Office of African American Male Achievement (AAMA). Supported by a host of philanthropic partners including the Stuart Foundation, Atlantic Philanthropies, California Endowment, and the Kapor Center for Social Impact, the strategy aims “to make explicit and systemic attempts to improve the fortunes of African American males who have been historically underserved academically and consequently get absorbed in the school-prison pipeline at much higher rates than their school

Oakland Statistics

- OUSD serves a student body that is 38.5 percent Latino, 31 percent African-American, 14 percent Asian, 11 percent White
- Total enrollment in OUSD is 36,180 at 87 schools
- Thirty-four district-authorized charter schools serve 10,118 students
- More than 32 percent of OUSD students are English learners
- Some 69 percent of students enrolled in OUSD are eligible for free and reduced lunch
- The district opened its 15th school-based health center in the spring of 2013
- The poverty rate in Oakland is 17 percent. For African Americans it is 24 percent and for Whites 6 percent.

counterparts.” The initiative has given OUSD the opportunity to improve the academic achievement and lifelong success of African American boys with strategies that address suspension rates, attendance, healthcare access, and afterschool engagement. This approach recognizes that place, race, and neighborhood impact student success and influence opportunity and achievement as boys transition to adulthood.

Leadership and Oakland’s Vision

Recognizing that nearly every element of a child’s life impacts their ability to thrive academically, Oakland’s leadership has supported the full-service community school model to support the needs of the complete student. The effort is designed to address structural inequalities in the community related to socio-economic status, home and family environments, health and nutrition issues, and safety. OCO’s influence in Oakland is widely recognized as instrumental in shaping school district policy and movement toward the full-service community school model. The work of engaging parents, political will-building for small school initiatives, shaping staffing structures within the district, and attracting philanthropic support to the community was largely the result of long-term, community-based efforts led by OCO.

Tony Smith, Oakland’s former superintendent, was also a central figure in directing the district’s transformation beginning in 2009. His approach as a community leader was to engage a wide array of stakeholders in the process of transforming the school system while intentionally developing a “deep bench” of supporting leaders who complemented and reinforced his vision. He was willing to lead on critical issues, and where others were not, such as making explicit efforts to have honest, difficult conversations to examine the impact of institutional racism and white privilege on communities, education systems, students, and leaders. Under Smith’s direction, the district was able to prioritize addressing real, but often hidden, issues such as the link between suspension rates for black males and rates of incarceration—the school to prison pipeline. The AAMA, in an attempt to improve the lives of black males, is a district-based initiative that also aims to improve the community on a more comprehensive scale.

OUSD’s strategic planning process, initiated in 2009, led by Tony Smith and influenced by the work of OCO, is an example of a community working together to create alignment around a vision for change and a new path forward for the city. The process engaged more than 5,000 stakeholders and created alignment and consensus about how to implement changes through the lens of equity and bring effective programs to scale for the entire district. Through this process, stakeholders in Oakland worked to rebuild trust to develop a shared sense of collaboration and partnership with aligned goals. The strategic plan is structured with five core goals: (1) Safe, Healthy and Supportive Schools, (2) Prepared for Success in College and Careers, (3) High Quality and Effective Instruction, (4) Building the Full-Service Community, and (5) Accountable for Quality. The central feature of the plan, however, is the full-service community school model that locates schools in the center of the community, focuses on serving the whole child, and embraces a systemic approach to understanding the needs of children so that the community shares responsibility for students. Today, OUSD remains in the implementation phase of the plan that extends to 2016.

Strong Philanthropic Partners

Many philanthropic organizations have had, and continue to have, a presence in Oakland supporting programs, projects, and initiatives. Overall, the grantmaking strategies and investments that appear to have had the greatest positive impact carefully considered local context, community dynamics, historical initiatives, resources, past and potential partners, complementary funding initiatives, and the unique needs of students and families.

In Oakland, the small schools and full-service community school movements have shaped how grantmakers engage with the community for more than a decade. Investments from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation, and the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation helped build momentum for the small schools strategy in Oakland. Those investments, combined with support from many local funders, helped create a diverse mix

of philanthropic support that helped sustain momentum for the full-service community school model embraced by the district today. Local leaders—such as former Superintendent Smith and OCO—attracted local and national funders in supporting students, the district, and the community, in part because of their commitment to improving the community as a whole and establishing strong local networks to sustain aligned reforms. This commitment to the reform strategies developed by and for the community created a funding climate structured around aligned, strategic goals that are relatively insulated from political and staff transitions. Additionally, durable relationships were established between philanthropy and community-based organizations, further reinforcing long-term commitments to reform.

Oakland continues to benefit from support by local and state grantmakers. The Zellerbach Family Foundation has been a consistent partner in supporting organizing efforts in the city for more than 10 years and is recognized for understanding the time it takes to achieve long-term, systemic goals. The East Bay Community Foundation focuses on early childhood success in the education system and enhancing economic opportunities for adults and has supported dozens of organizations and programs, including those focused on literacy, community development, research, and delinquency prevention. The California Endowment provided direct support to OUSD to launch initiatives such as the Office of African American Male Achievement, in addition to supporting community-based organizations that reach and support African American youth in education and health. The San Francisco Foundation has supported OUSD's implementation of the full-service community school system with grants to the Bay Area Parent Leadership Action Network, in addition to supporting many initiatives focusing on education, health, and equity. Kaiser Permanente has made significant investments in the district's push to open school-based health centers, while also supporting strategic planning, the Office of African American Male Achievement, and youth development and leadership programs.

THE LEARNING CONTINUES

The complexity of education reform in Oakland underscores some of America's most demanding challenges when it comes to creating education systems that offer equitable opportunities and generate equitable achievement. Addressing those challenges requires dedication to long-term, sustained efforts that consider community engagement, college and career preparedness, academic achievement, and the impact of socio-economic conditions on educational success.

Oakland offers an example of a community dedicated to long-term success by insisting on partnership and collaboration across sectors and driving education reform framed by existing social, health, and economic issues. The strategies adopted by the district for the future direction of learning in Oakland, directly informed by community-based organizations with deep roots in the community, have been transformative for the district, the city, and the community as a whole.

Additionally, the rich mix and long history of education grantmaking in Oakland demonstrates that persistence, collaboration, and communication are essential for funders interested in supporting long-term strategies meant to initiate lasting improvements to education and community. It also demonstrates that funders can play a central role in the process of transforming a community and a district, serving as advocates for change, supporting community-based nonprofit organizations, fostering dialogue and relationship-building, supporting organizing efforts, leading discussions on equity, and reinforcing collaboration and partnership.

2012 URBAN EDUCATION STUDY TOUR

Grantmakers for Education's 2012 Urban Education Study Tour provided rich, place-based learning experiences for funders seeking to explore effective grantmaking strategies that support student achievement, constructive partnerships, and systemic improvements. Focusing on students of color, English language learners, the P-20 education system, and productive relationships between districts and education philanthropy, participants had the opportunity to review and discuss data, research, lessons, and future plans to inform grantmaking strategies linked to promising educational models. More than 40 grantmakers participated in the tour's Oakland stop, engaging with local administrators, funders, politicians, students, and the superintendent of the Oakland Unified School District. As the tour's final stop, Oakland provided contrast to the El Paso and Newark experiences and set the stage for a continued exploration of the complexity of education reform, the role of philanthropy in communities across the United States, and the impact of race and class in discussions and strategies intended to build equitable opportunities and results for America's children of color.

CITIES AND DATES

El Paso, TX—April 2012

Newark, NJ—May 2012

Oakland, CA—November 2012

While the study tour visits took place in 2012, this report was finalized in 2013 to include a current assessment of circumstances and conditions impacting education and grantmaking.

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