

OAKLAND, CA: Lifting the Vision of Community Schools Across a District

In July 2010, Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) joined the ranks of school districts that have declared the full-service community school strategy as a core part of their school reform agenda. Community schools are becoming such an important focus to OUSD that visitors to the district's website are greeted by the tagline, "Oakland Unified School District: Community Schools, Thriving Students." OUSD reached this point through decades of community organizing efforts, strong nonprofit partners, assistance from a local community foundation, a committed group of local funders, careful planning in partnership with the community, and the vision of its new school leader, Superintendent Tony Smith.

In 2001, Tony Smith was working for the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES) as Director of the Emeryville Citywide Initiative. The state of California took over Emeryville Unified School District (EUSD), a small district with less than 1,000 students that borders Oakland, Berkeley, and the San Francisco Bay, and is the home of PIXAR, for low performance in 2004. BayCES was charged with helping EUSD and Smith introduced the community school strategy as one element to turn around the district. It worked. EUSD got off the state receivership list faster than any other district had at that point and the school board hired Smith as its superintendent. Smith convinced the Emeryville Board of Education and the City Council to adopt the community schools approach as a means to disrupt the predictive power of race and demographics on student achievement.

After seven years at Emery, the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) hired Smith as the Deputy Superintendent for Innovation and Social Justice, where he continued to advocate for the community school strategy in a number of different ways. First, San Francisco included a network of community schools as part of its 2008-2012 Strategic Plan. Further, Smith helped write a successful New Day for Learning grant for the Mott Foundation which incorporated the community school strategy. After over five years of state receivership, nearby Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) hired Smith as their first post-receivership, locally selected superintendent in May 2009. (SFUSD Superintendent Carlos Garcia, continues the vision for community schools across the district by using federal School Improvement Grant (SIG) monies to fund 10 community school coordinators as part of the district's strategic plan.)

Over this same period, Lisa Villarreal, Program Officer for The San Francisco Foundation (TSSF) and Vice-Chair of the Coalition for Community Schools, had been having regular discussions with Smith provided seed funding in each of his previous districts to support the community school strategy, and provided some of the earliest grants to support the full service community schools planning in Oakland. Smith first met Villarreal while attending a National Community Schools Forum during his tenure at Emeryville and wanted to learn more about community schools. The relationship between these two leaders led to years of discussion about the power of community schools to transform communities.

As he had done before in SFUSD, Smith brought his passion for community schools to his new role in Oakland. Oakland's children, like those in many urban areas, face numerous disparities. Smith, citing data from a 2008 Alameda County report often says that an African American child born in West Oakland, two miles away from Oakland Hills, a predominantly white area, is:

1.5 times more likely to be born premature, seven times more likely to be born into poverty, two and a half times more likely to not be vaccinated when they enter kindergarten, four time less likely to read at grade level by grade four, and six times more likely to be pushed

out or to drop out of school before they graduate....That basically ends up with African Americans born in West Oakland having 15 years less life expectancy than white kids two miles away.

Oakland has a number of assets, including many different CBOs, on which to build a community school strategy. OUSD had already created the Department of Complementary Learning to better coordinate supports and partnerships in schools. As part of the Department's efforts, they raised the number of children being served by summer school from 800 to 8,000 and the number of schools with after school programs from 32 to 90. They also increased the number of partners working with the schools and expanded the number of school-based health clinics through a \$26 million school bond. The school board was attracted to Smith's focus on the whole child which was aligned with these existing activities. He was a natural fit for the community.

As one of his first acts as superintendent, Smith spoke with community members to discover which strategies were improving the lives of children. According to Smith, people saw "a lack of coordination, no alignment of services, and we weren't able to leverage the incredible resources that were available for all the kids." He saw that there were a number of organizations that were using elements of the community school strategies and an array of other partnerships, but he characterized their efforts as "hit and miss, or in pockets." Smith committed to taking these efforts to address children's myriad needs to a new, more coordinated level. He said:

We all have to come together in terms of children and families, particularly for those kids who have been least well served by the system. We just think that being a full-service community district or a district of full-service community schools is the way to go.

Smith included the community school framework as a central part of the district's strategic plan to improve schools and communities which he proposed to the Board of Education. Smith acknowledged the importance of having a Board that is committed to improving outcomes for children. The Board voted unanimously to adopt the plan to make Oakland a full-service school district and incorporated the framework into its five-year strategic plan. Gary Yee, President of the Oakland School Board explains, "When the child comes to school, he should be getting cues from the neighborhood that says 'we all care and support you!' That's why I think this full service community school is so important."

Smith's vision and the Board of Education's support paved the way for a scaled up system of community schools across the district. Smith stated:

That's who we are [a full-service community school district], and what we're about now. With the passage [by the School Board] of this content, this work plan, it is now the sole work of the [Oakland] Unified School District. We are in the process of becoming a full-service community district that engages deeply with family and the communities we support.

Unique in Smith's framing is the concept of creating a full community schools district complete with the policies and practices that support community schools on the ground

One of OUSD's first steps was to change its tagline to "Community Schools, Thriving Students." This new tagline is displayed on their website, business cards, and official documents, communicating the district's new strategy and message into the community.

The district has taken part in unprecedented steps to engage the community and plan thoughtfully. To design its community school initiative, OUSD organized a full service community schools task force comprised of 25-30 people from OUSD and the community. It included representatives from

the Oakland Community After School Alliance, East Bay Asian Youth Center, the Oakland Unity Council, among others (a full list of the Task Force is presented on the website), and met weekly for over seven months. To engage the community, the Task Force visited existing FSCS sites to understand lessons learned, consulted with key stakeholders to capture their perspective on what a FSCS district should look like, and held numerous community gatherings to listen to people's ideas about community schools. The Urban Strategies Council, a local highly respected community intermediary facilitated the development of the FSCS plan.

Community organizations and businesses support the district's efforts. According to Joseph Haraburda, President, Oakland Chamber of Commerce, "The business community is completely behind the idea of full service schools and supports the district's effort to accomplish that." Nicole Taylor, President and CEO, East Bay Community Foundation adds, "Tony is really galvanizing a great cross-section of folks in the city. Not just folks within the school district, but business leaders, non-profit leaders, parents and families." Taylor and the East Bay Community Foundation organized funders in Oakland to rally behind the community school strategy. Numerous funders now support the community schools work including Bechtel, Chevron, Kaiser Permanente, Rogers, and more every quarter.

OUSD also launched a website, www.thrivingstudents.org, dedicated to communicating how the district is working towards becoming a full-service community school district. The website a list of task forces, highlights work that is being done along the way, presents meeting times, documents, and summaries, and provides ways for visitors to contribute to the design of the initiative through email, Facebook, and Twitter.

OUSD is planning to merge the offices of Complementary Learning and Family and Community into the Department of Partnerships for Families, Schools, and Community, thereby institutionalizing FSCS within the district, buttressed by district staff and funding. It is aligning its departments to support the FSCS strategy. Human Resources; Leadership, Curriculum and Instruction (LCI); and, Facilities are examples of some departments that are exploring how they can support the FSCS vision. For example, LCI is going to provide professional development to principals on how to share resources, develop trust, and lead in a FSCS. The Task Force is also working with Facilities to resolve issues around custodial staff working during the expanded hours required of FSCS.

The Full Service Community School's Task Force completed its work and timeline and the work of this and all the other task forces rolled up into a draft strategic plan which was unanimously approved by the Board of Education in June 2011, with implementation starting in fall 2011. Like many other developing initiatives, they will start in the schools that already have the culture of partnerships and integration in place and will work with other schools to prepare them for partnership, increased supports, and community involvement. The Oakland work represents one of the most complete plans for creating a scaled up strategy for community schools that has yet been developed. The challenges of implementation await. Go to www.thrivingstudents.org to see the task force working documents and videos about the Oakland FSCS initiative.

The Bay Area has become an area of incredible growth of the community school vision. Nine local school districts are watching what Oakland is doing and hope to develop similar plans for community schools to present to their boards of education.

Excerpted from the Coalition for Community Schools Scaling Up Guide: Case studies.
2011. www.communityschools.org//resources/part_four_case_studies_overview.aspx.