



# Oakland International High School

A Thriving Community School for  
Oakland's Newcomer Students

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# Executive Summary

Entering Oakland International High School is like walking into a brighter and more welcoming world. Conversations in as many as 35 languages float through the sunny courtyard, where students come from nearly as many countries. Every student at the school is a newcomer, which means they have been in the United States for fewer than 3 years. Newcomers comprise approximately 3% of all California public school students in any given year and are a diverse group who bring a wealth of assets, as well as a set of challenges, with them. Most have a home language that is not English. Some have experienced limited or interrupted formal education, some are refugees, and an increasing number are unaccompanied minors. Many must navigate a new culture and language in addition to complex legal proceedings to establish citizenship.

Oakland International opened in 2007 as part of a network of public schools that exclusively serve newcomers. Since then, the school has grown into a robust community school with structures, practices, and partnerships that support and engage students—from medical care to support their health and well-being to a student-centered curriculum to support their academic success. Community schools leverage a complex web of partnerships and relationships to provide necessary resources for students and families. They therefore can be better positioned to support newcomers as they transition to a new school and country and have been shown to improve outcomes for all students, not just newcomers. At Oakland International, there are just over 310 students in grades 9–12. Seventy-seven percent identify as Hispanic or Latino/a, 97% are socioeconomically disadvantaged, 91% are classified as English learners, 47% identify as homeless or foster youth, and 2% are students with disabilities. Twenty-two percent of students are refugees, and approximately 33% have experienced interruptions in their formal education.

This report examines the structures and practices in place at Oakland International High School that allow students, families, educators, and partners to experience a tight-knit and welcoming school community. This exploration of Oakland International’s student-centered community school approach identifies six key takeaways for practitioners:

1. Relationships are essential and are supported by structures and practices such as cohorts, advisories, parent teacher home visits, and restorative circles.
2. Experiential learning, college-preparatory classes, and language acquisition are synchronized and mutually reinforcing, especially when bolstered by meaningful assessment.
3. Working with all students—especially newcomers—requires a coherent, culturally responsive approach that incorporates cultural humility, an inquiry mindset, and a willingness to adapt to meet students’ needs.
4. Community school supports and partnerships expand the capacity of everyone on campus.
5. Ongoing professional development and dedicated planning time are key to staff learning, effectiveness, and sustainability.
6. A continuous improvement lens, coupled with a commitment to collaborative problem-solving, leads to meaningful innovation.

# A Warm Welcome for All

When a visitor steps onto the campus of Oakland International High School (Oakland International), one of the first things they notice is the warm welcome they receive from everyone—from the students walking to class or hanging out in the bright courtyard, to the community members providing fresh pastries from a nearby panadería, to the teachers balancing cups of coffee while chatting with students. The school serves high school students who are recent immigrants and English learners, often referred to as newcomers. For students who may only have been a few days or months in the United States, this warm welcome is often their first experience with school in their new country, and it sets the tone for their academic experience.

“I had gone to a regular high school in Los Angeles [for a month],” recalled Karen Carranza-Moya, an alumna from El Salvador who is now a case manager at the school. “So, I pictured that [Oakland International] would be like that school. ... I was going to be lost, and I was not going to understand anything. And then I came here, and the community was very different. ... Here, the attention was on me.”

Carranza-Moya’s experience was not unique. Surveys show that most Oakland International students experience a sense of community at the school. Although more than 35 languages—and nearly as many countries of origin—are represented across the student population, 70% of students report feeling close to others at school, 79% experience good teacher–student relationships, and 82% of students report feeling happy to be at the school.<sup>1</sup> Educators employ a variety of structures and practices to cultivate a caring and connected learning environment. These include the school’s small size of roughly 310 students, the use of teaching teams that work with stable cohorts of students, advisory classes, and a language-embedded and project-based curriculum. The school also leverages its many community partners to provide students with the resources they need to thrive.

Oakland International’s high-touch community school model provides the relational glue and comprehensive supports that are key to student success. In 2022, 72% of the school’s students graduated within 5 years, compared to the state average of 73% for English learners.<sup>2</sup> Forty-nine percent had also passed the rigorous courses required for admission to California state universities, which is just below the statewide average of 50% for all students, not just newcomers or English learners.<sup>3</sup> Districtwide, English learners had a graduation rate of 61% and a college and career readiness rate of 41%.<sup>4</sup>

Oakland International staff share what they learn about supporting newcomers through the school’s Learning Lab. This unique initiative was established to improve newcomer education in Oakland and around the state and country by sharing research and lessons learned with educators, policymakers, and others.

## Oakland International at a Glance

Oakland International, part of the [Internationals Network for Public Schools](#), is a community school in the Temescal neighborhood of Oakland. It opened in 2007 to serve the growing number of newcomer students in the district. Today, the school serves 313 students: 77% identify as Hispanic or Latino/a, 97% are socioeconomically disadvantaged, 91% are currently classified as English learners, 47% identify as homeless or foster youth, and 2% are students with disabilities. Twenty-two percent of students are refugees, and approximately 33% have experienced interruptions in their formal education.

Sources: California Department of Education. (2023). [2022–23 enrollment by ethnicity and grade](#) and [2022–23 enrollment by subgroup](#) [Oakland International High School Report 01-61259-0115667]. DataQuest; Oakland International High School. (n.d.). [Our students](#).

## Newcomer Students in California

Students classified as newcomers have been in the United States for fewer than 3 years. Newcomer students comprise nearly 3% of all California public school students in any given year. Many newcomer students speak languages other than English upon their arrival. Although 40% of California’s newcomer students speak Spanish as their primary language, most newcomers speak one of more than 30 other languages. Two thirds of California’s newcomer students are classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged; 62% attend school in one of just five counties: Alameda, Los Angeles, Orange, San Diego, or Santa Clara.<sup>a</sup>

Each newcomer student arrives in the United States with a different history and educational experience. Some have experienced limited or interrupted formal education. Some newcomer students are refugees, fleeing religious persecution or natural disasters. An increasing number are unaccompanied minors.<sup>b</sup> Depending on their immigration or socioeconomic status, newcomer students can face financial and logistical barriers to consistent school attendance. As a result, they may be older than a typical California student in their grade, or they may require more time to complete high school.<sup>c</sup> California’s extended-year graduation rate benefits these students by incentivizing school staff to continue providing support beyond the typical 4-year high school span.<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Oakland International Learning Lab. (2020). *Newcomer students*.

<sup>b</sup> Office of Refugee Resettlement. (2023). *Unaccompanied children released to sponsors by county*.

<sup>c</sup> Kessler, J. (2018). *Four-year graduation rates leave off where the real work begins* [Blog post]. *Learning Policy Institute*.

<sup>d</sup> Kessler, J. (2018). *Four-year graduation rates leave off where the real work begins* [Blog post]. *Learning Policy Institute*.

## Fostering Trusting Relationships

Recognizing that entering a new school can be an intimidating—even hostile—experience for any student, let alone a student who has recently migrated to a new country where they are unfamiliar with the language and culture, Oakland International staff prioritize building relationships of trust and respect across the school community because these relationships are foundational to developing a learning culture at school. Key structures and practices such as peer partnerships and cohorts, student advisories, restorative justice circles, and community walks have earned the school a reputation as “a safe and caring place,” reflected Community School Manager Madenh Ali Hassan. Because of this reputation, she added, even families with students who are not newcomers try to register their students at the school.

## Experiencing Community From the Start

Community building is an essential aspect of a community school, and it starts the first day that a student sets foot on campus and continues over their time at Oakland International. Each new student is paired with a “buddy” from a similar linguistic and cultural background who is well-versed in the school’s norms and has been in the United States for several months or longer. New students’ buddies will be in several—if not all—of their classes and help guide them in acclimating to new cultural, social, and academic norms. This structure supports both newer and more established students in developing a meta-awareness of their learning, a sense of belonging at school, and agency over their learning, which can be essential tools for student learning.<sup>5</sup>

Students develop and deepen their relationships with one another and with their teachers through consistent small-group learning structures. The school is organized in a cohort model, which means that students move through their classes with the same 25 students. Cohorts are heterogeneously selected. Ninth- and 10th-grade students experience multigrade classes that allow 10th-grade students to connect with their younger peers, model behavioral and academic expectations, and provide language support when needed. Students also have a daily advisory period, which is dedicated time that supports students in developing their social and emotional learning and meaningful relationships. Teachers use a framework developed by the school to create consistency. They also loop with their advisories, so that a student has the same advisor for 9th and 10th grade and then another advisor for 11th and 12th.

Students participate in restorative justice circles, where they can surface concerns and talk through issues or just get to know one another better. Circles are community-building spaces that give students opportunities to practice vulnerability and engaged listening. This is part of a schoolwide approach grounded in restorative justice practices. The community school manager and case managers facilitate this effort, with support from other staff and community partners. Circles happen on a consistent schedule, such as during daily advisory time or as part of classes or activities. Circles can happen weekly, biweekly, or monthly, depending on who is participating, and are meant to build a collegiality that helps students transcend some of their language barriers. “Sometimes you know some words, but you can’t talk because you don’t have that confidence,” recent graduate Hillme Alhari reflected. “But when we have a circle and everybody does mistakes, we have no problem. ... And after one circle, two circles, it gets normal.” Students can also join issue-specific circles on such topics as fostering healthy relationships, making new friends, and staying regularly engaged in school.

## **Practicing Cultural Humility Builds Strong Bonds**

A key contributor to the schools’ positive climate is what staff refer to as “cultural humility,” also known as culturally responsive teaching, which is the practice of valuing, celebrating, and integrating students’ languages and cultures into school programming. Research has shown the value of integrating culturally responsive teaching practices on student achievement, their identity as learners, and their sense of belonging in the classroom.<sup>6</sup> Cultural humility is reinforced through community walks, which are student-designed and -led events during which staff visit the neighborhoods where students live as part of the school’s staff development program.<sup>7</sup> Community walks flip the script on who is teaching and who is learning—teachers become the students, and students and families become the teachers, sharing their expertise, resources, and assets.

Community walks typically feature conversations with community leaders who can help staff better understand students’ passions, cultures, and interests. One community walk, facilitated by Yemeni students, featured a conversation with their local imam.<sup>8</sup> Another, led by students from Central America who were unaccompanied minors, highlighted a legal advocate from their local immigration clinic.<sup>9</sup> Often, walks end with a meal in a family home or a community gathering place where staff can get to know families in an informal setting. Community walks have led to productive relationships between staff and community members and have helped to close the distance between Oakland International staff and students’ lives beyond the school.

## The Internationals Approach

Many of the school's relationship-focused structures are in place because Oakland International is part of the Internationals Network for Public Schools, a network of 28 schools that began in New York City. The many school sites in the network are situated within public school districts across the country and serve high school students who are recent immigrants and English learners, often referred to as newcomer students. All schools in the Internationals Network align their work to the network's five core principles:

1. Heterogeneity + Collaboration
2. Experiential Learning
3. Language + Content Integration
4. Localized Autonomy + Responsibility
5. One Learning Model for All

For example, at Oakland International, students from different linguistic, cultural, and schooling backgrounds collaborate in their classes to tackle an experiential, activity-based curriculum that integrates disciplinary content with language learning, and no students are excluded from this learning model.

The Internationals model prioritizes relationships and social and emotional learning. Students experience consistent small-group learning through cohorts and advisories, which allows them to build relationships with their peers. Teachers work with student cohorts as interdisciplinary teams and receive consistent, scheduled time during the week for collaborative planning around content and students' needs.

The principle of Localized Autonomy + Responsibility allows each Internationals school site to tailor its programming and resources to fit the needs of its students. At Oakland International, this means operating as a full-service community school (see "What Is a Community School?") to build on students' assets and meet their social, emotional, and academic needs.

Sources: Internationals Network for Public Schools. (n.d.). *About us*; Roc, M., Ross, P., & Hernández, L. E. (2019). *Internationals Network for Public Schools: A deeper learning approach to supporting English learners*. Learning Policy Institute.

## Building on Students' Strengths for Meaningful Learning

In some schools, students who are classified as English learners are siloed in remedial programs, but at Oakland International, all students learn English language skills along with academic content as part of their college-preparatory courses.<sup>10</sup> Teachers use accelerated language acquisition strategies, including pairing content and language objectives, grouping students heterogeneously, and embedding group work into instruction. They also provide a largely project-based curriculum that centers their students' lives, cultures, and communities. Units culminate in performance-based assessments that allow students to demonstrate new knowledge and skills. These practices and structures enable Oakland International teachers to embody the community school approach in their teaching.

## Combining Content, Language, and Hands-On Experiences to Solidify Skills

Teachers use the metaphor of bricks and mortar to describe how they pair content and language skills. Content goals function like bricks because they are the central building blocks of the subject being studied. The language goals are the mortar, in that they allow students to connect and communicate these ideas. For example, a biology class might have a content objective for students to *explain the relationship between chromosomes, DNA, and genes* paired with a language objective for them to *use descriptive words to explain where chromosomes, DNA, and genes are found*. By integrating English language objectives into each subject, students practice language skills while building and demonstrating their content knowledge. Evidence suggests that this approach can accelerate language learning among adolescent students.<sup>11</sup>

Heterogeneous groupings of students from different grades and linguistic or academic backgrounds support students in both giving and receiving peer support. “I never felt like I received a task that I could not complete,” former student Carranza-Moya recalled of her experience. “Even if [the work] wasn’t in groups, if I didn’t understand something, I felt that I could ask my peers to explain.”

Oakland International’s project-based curriculum is a key component of both the Internationals and the Linked Learning models upon which the school is based. Linked Learning integrates a college-preparatory curriculum with a rigorous career technical education sequence, work-based learning opportunities, and student supports through an industry-themed pathway.<sup>12</sup> At Oakland International, students have access to a Media pathway in which they develop skills in graphic design, video editing, and media production alongside academics. Alumnus Yasser Alwan described the Oakland International approach to teaching and learning this way: “We do experiments ... we do things that are not just concepts, but also things you can touch and hear and experience.”

Carranza-Moya vividly recalled a project that she completed in her 12th-grade government class, in which she compared the government of her home country to that of the United States and one other country and then presented her analysis. “That was a stretch,” she recalled, “because I was already learning something new about this country ... [as well as] a completely different one that I’ve never heard of, and I’ve never lived in.” The experience—which she drew on later as an undergraduate—affirmed her prior knowledge and pushed her beyond her comfort zone, and her teachers and peers supported her in meeting the challenge.

## Building Students’ Confidence and Ability by Centering Their Identities

Teachers also integrate identity-focused and culturally responsive assignments into their lessons to help students feel safe, secure, and connected to school.<sup>13</sup> For example, at the beginning of the 2021–22 school year, 12th-grade reading and English teacher Jennifer Kelly-Dewitt had students create a mind map of their gifts, needs, and purpose—both interpersonally and in a learning environment—which they turned into a comic. She expressed that this activity provided her with “a sense of their own vision of themselves, the things that they’re good at and value about themselves, the things that they feel like they need.”

Students share evidence of their learning through performance-based assessments that allow them to connect their learning to real-world knowledge and skills.<sup>14</sup> While performance assessments can encompass a variety of practices, at Oakland International they take the form of both curriculum-embedded projects at the end of each unit and a portfolio of work that students compile and reflect on at the end of

each school year in front of an audience of peers, alumni, teachers, and community members. Through these projects and portfolios, students demonstrate their progress toward a set of community-developed schoolwide goals—also called a graduate profile—which, at Oakland International, envisions graduates who are community members, written communicators, digital communicators, and critical thinkers.

End-of-year portfolio defense presentations build students' skills in reflecting on their work and communicating it to an audience. In both 9th and 10th grades, students identify a single school project to share. In 11th and 12th grades, students choose two projects and compare their performance and growth. Each year, students also reflect on their learning and answer questions from the audience. Each presentation is scored against a rubric that aligns to the school's graduate profile and is used to determine 12th graders' readiness to graduate.

Through this process, hesitant 9th graders grow into confident 12th graders who are excited to share their progress. "By senior year, they've practiced so many times that they're able to do a 15- to 20-minute in-depth presentation [and] answer questions on the fly," former coprincipal Sailaja Suresh shared. "They're building off of ... 4 years of practice of getting up in front of people and having to really understand [their] content enough to be able to answer those questions."

## **Adapting to Meet Students “Where They Are”**

Newcomer students face unique barriers to academic success—such as navigating school and life in a foreign language, working part-time to help pay rent, or participating in complex legal proceedings about their immigration status. Staff members invest in building relationships with students so they can be aware of these out-of-school challenges and work to mitigate their impact on student success. The school offers credit-bearing courses aligned to students' interests, provides personalized college and career supports, and tailors its schedule to reflect students' responsibilities.

## **Providing Students With Choice and Opportunity**

Students have access to electives and intervention or extension classes and are positioned to take more credits in a single school year than is typical for an Oakland Unified student. A typical student in the district takes six classes per semester, each of which provides students with five credits. At Oakland International, students take seven classes per semester, which allows a student taking a typical course load to complete up to 280 credits over 4 years at the school, significantly more than the 230 credits that the district requires of its graduates.<sup>15</sup> Electives include physical education, graphic design, and a video production class offered through the district's public access television station.

Intervention and extension classes are a way for students to gain academic credit by exercising choice. Recently arrived students can take “Survival English,” an intervention class that helps them gain essential language skills, or they may choose a reading class that provides support with academic language and skills. Students who want more of a challenge may instead choose to take an honors math class during this period. Students appreciate the mix of courses, especially those that help them improve their English. Recent graduate Hillme Almari, who immigrated to the United States from Yemen in 2020, shared that he has learned to speak more confidently in English and has progressed to writing longer essays due in large part to his reading class.

## Supporting College and Career Readiness for All Students

All core classes count toward the sequence of course requirements (called the A–G courses) for admission to the University of California or California State University systems, so all graduates who complete these courses with a grade of C or higher qualify for admission to California state colleges and universities. In the 2021–22 school year, 54% of the school’s students met A–G course requirements, on par with the state average for all students, not just newcomers.<sup>16</sup>

Each student has access to a college counselor who provides resources that can help them apply for admission to a higher education institution. “Students who have already graduated come back for help to fill out their FAFSA application, or because they just want to find their community again,” said one student. She shared that it gives her hope for when she graduates. “I know that later, whether I go to college or if my circumstances change and I don’t go to college, I can always come to this community and receive support.”

Responding to student and family interest, Oakland International added more career-focused programming and supports in 2021, including adding a career specialist position. Through the school’s dual-enrollment option, students can earn both high school and college credits, as well as take career-focused classes offered at nearby community colleges. For some students, such as recent graduate Almari, these classes can be an important bridge to achieving their dreams. “I want to be a mechanic,” he explained. “I like to help people, and there is a lot of people who can’t fix their cars because it’s expensive.” Since Oakland International does not provide classes on automotive technology, Almari could attend classes at a community college while he was enrolled in high school, which put him well on his way to completing the mechanics’ program after graduation.

The school has also expanded its schedule to include “Saturday’s Cool”—a play on Saturday School—during which the school offers English language and reading classes, career counseling, case management, and enrichment activities. The weekend programming responds to the fact that more than 80% of Oakland International students have part- or full-time jobs or are caretakers for siblings or other family members after school. With the Saturday option, students are better able to balance school with their other weekday responsibilities. Saturday’s Cool staff work Tuesday through Saturday, instead of a traditional Monday to Friday schedule.

Jennifer Kelly-Dewitt, who has taught at Oakland International since 2008, sees the school’s commitment to meeting students where they are as both an asset and an indelible part of the culture. “[Oakland International] is a living organism,” Kelly-Dewitt reflected. “It changes based on the people. The Oakland International of one year is never, probably, going to be the Oakland International of another year,” she noted. “Some things will be the same, but a lot will be different.”

## Cultivating an Infrastructure of Student-Centered Supports

When Oakland International opened, founding principal Carmelita Reyes cultivated partnerships with local nonprofits and community-based organizations and shared resources with neighboring schools to meet the needs of students and families. Over time, this collaborative approach led Oakland International to become a community school—that is, a school that prioritizes a deep respect for students, families, and the community in knowing what they want from their school experience and leverages community partnerships to deliver on that vision (see “What Is a Community School?”).

## What Is a Community School?

Community schools offer a place-based strategy deeply rooted in their local context—the needs, assets, hopes, and dreams of students, families, educators, and community partners. They leverage a complex web of partnerships and relationships, like those at Oakland International High School in Oakland, to support and engage students and families. As we saw time and again during the COVID-19 pandemic, these services and supports—provided in the context of trusting and caring relationships—can be life-changing and mean the difference between academic success and struggling students and families.

Community schools typically have a community school manager (sometimes called a community school coordinator or director). This individual is often part of the school leadership team and is responsible for coordinating partnerships and leveraging school and community-based resources to support and engage students and families. Community schools are grounded in an evidence base showing improvement in student outcomes, including attendance, academic achievement, high school graduation rates, and reduced racial and economic achievement gaps. Community schools are also associated with some improvements in school climate and disciplinary rates.

Sources: Partnership for the Future of Learning. (2018). *Community schools playbook*. Learning Policy Institute; Oakes, J., Maier, A., & Daniel, J. (2020, July 7). *In the fallout of the pandemic, community schools show a way forward for education* [Blog post]. *Learning Policy Institute*; Maier, A., Daniel, J., Oakes, J., & Lam, L. (2017). *Community schools as an effective school improvement strategy: A review of the evidence*. Learning Policy Institute; RAND Corporation. (2020). *Illustrating the promise of community schools: An assessment of the impact of the New York City Community Schools Initiative*.

## Sustaining Relationships With Partners and Staff

When Oakland International was founded, the initial partners included International Rescue Committee (IRC), Refugee Transitions, and Soccer Without Borders, all organizations with the resources, expertise, and presence in Oakland to help support the asylum seekers and refugees who made up much of Oakland International's early cohorts. Following the hiring of a community school manager in 2012, the school has developed a web of additional partnerships that reflect the needs of its shifting student population, including legal and immigration services, community health organizations, parent leadership organizations, tutoring services, and providers of arts-based after-school enrichment and a community garden project.

Oakland International's work with Soccer Without Borders is emblematic of many of its long-standing partnerships. The relationship began with a mutually beneficial opportunity—many Oakland International students loved soccer, and Soccer Without Borders—at the time a volunteer-based soccer camp for refugee youth—was looking to attract new players. Sixteen years later, Soccer Without Borders continues to be one of Oakland International's core partners. Its services have evolved to provide a combination of soccer programming, case management, and social and emotional learning for students after school, on weekends, and during the summers.

Early on, school leaders recognized the need for a full-time staff member to cultivate partnerships and establish structures to distribute resources effectively. In the school's fifth year, they hired their first full-time community school manager, Lauren Markham. Former principal Suresh described this move as “transformative.” Markham had previously worked at Oakland International through the IRC, which

streamlined the transition and onboarding significantly, Suresh added. (After over 10 years in the position, Markham transitioned to a new role, as codirector of the school's Learning Lab in 2021. Teacher Medinh Ali Hassan assumed the community school manager position.)

## **Coordinating Resources and Partnerships Through the Wellness Center**

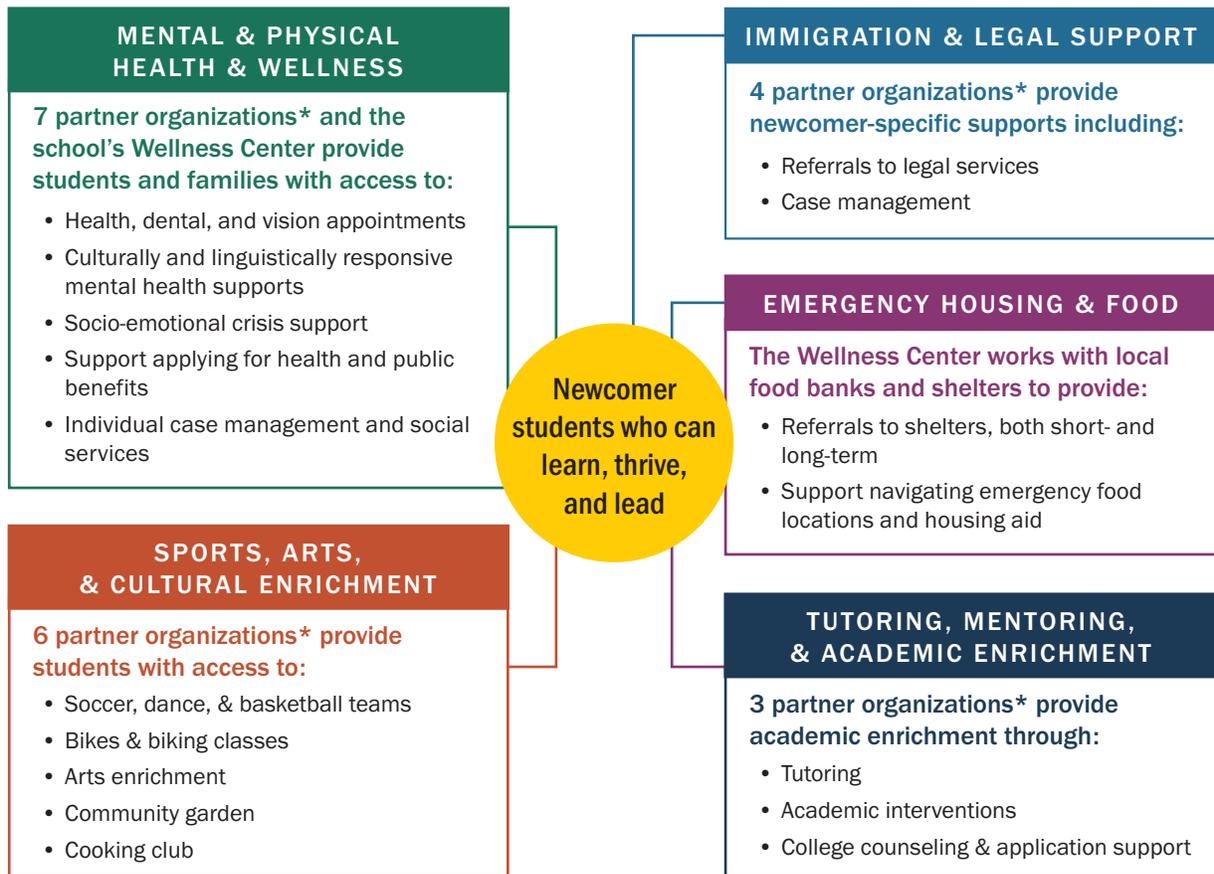
Today, the community school manager coordinates partnerships, funding opportunities, and resources to support students' academic success, health, and well-being. The school's Wellness Center, funded by the district and the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth, provides a centralized infrastructure, dedicated staff, and a structured process for services and referrals. It is open from 8:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. each weekday except Wednesdays. The Wellness Center is also home to two case managers (one of whom was hired as an AmeriCorps member before being brought on full-time); a dean of culture and community (a reimagining of the traditional dean of students role with a focus on creating and maintaining a positive school culture); an academic counselor who is also a clinical therapist; and the school's career and college resources, including a college counselor and a career specialist.

Wellness Center staff meet weekly as the Coordination of Services Team (COST) to identify students newly in need of support, provide updates on previously identified struggling students, and make sure everyone has access to the resources and services they need. Since the spring of the 2020–21 school year, students have also been able to refer themselves for services—another example of the school's commitment to shifting practices to meet student needs. “Our students have crossed borders to get here, so we know that they're capable of scanning a QR code and saying what they need,” reflected Community School Manager Hassan. When a request comes in, she assigns it to a case manager or counselor to coordinate. The result? “Direct services are getting to students quicker,” said Hassan.

The community school manager and case managers also coordinate medical referrals, connect students to immigration and legal services, and orchestrate regular events that meet broader school community needs, such as food drives, COVID-19 vaccinations, and computer distributions (see “Support During COVID-19”). Most medical referrals go through the TechniClinic, which is managed through a partnership between long-standing Oakland provider La Clinica de la Raza and the school district. The TechniClinic is one of the district's 16 school-based health centers. It is located at Oakland Technical High School, located just down the street from Oakland International, and serves students from both campuses.<sup>17</sup> When students have needs not covered by existing partners, case managers spring into action, contact their connections, and find solutions.

Staffed with caring adults who are trained in inquiry-based and trauma-informed care, the Wellness Center is designed to be a safe place where students can go to calm down and get the support they need. “Just the other day, we had a student in here who was kidnapped on their route to the States. [She] heard a loud noise that triggered [that memory],” recalled Hassan. “She just needed a space to sip some tea and calm down before deciding to go back to class.” Providing space on campus for students to take control of their mental health can empower young people and help minimize their time outside of class, Hassan added.

**Figure 1. Oakland International Community Partners**



**Mental & Physical Health & Wellness**

1. La Clinic de la Raza / TechniClinic
2. La Familia
3. Catholic Charities
4. International Rescue Committee
5. Sidra MENA Community Wellness
6. Asian Community Health Services
7. Arab Resource and Organizing Center

**Sports, Arts, & Cultural Enrichment**

1. Soccer Without Borders
2. ARTogether
3. OUSD Family Resource Center
4. East Bay Asian Youth Center (EBAYC)
5. UC Berkeley ACES Program
6. Project Peace

\*Many partners provide services in multiple categories. For example, EBAYC runs both after-school academic and extracurricular programming.

**Immigration & Legal Support**

1. Centro Legal
2. East Bay Sanctuary
3. Legal Services for Children
4. Pangea Legal Services

**Emergency Housing & Food**

1. Alameda County Food Bank
2. OUSD Transitional Students & Families Unit
3. OUSD Family Resource Center

**Tutoring, Mentoring, & Academic Enrichment**

1. Refugee Transitions
2. 180 Degrees Mentoring Program
3. Lincoln Families

Source: Information provided by Oakland International High School staff. (2023).

## Support During COVID-19

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many students at Oakland International—like their peers throughout the country—had difficulty connecting to school both technologically and interpersonally during distance learning. Although the school was eventually able to provide technology to every student, many students were still uncomfortable on Zoom, either due to technological or language challenges.

In keeping with the Oakland International culture of inquiry and humility, staff listened, learned, and adapted to help keep students engaged. The school built an interactive portal that students used to keep track of assignments or access virtual mental health resources; counselors and case managers worked with students and teachers to pare down the work to essential components and to make sure that expectations and directions were clear and reasonable; and teachers implemented a phone tree to check in regularly with a consistent group of students, often those in their advisories. Staff called students on the phone after-hours to provide English practice or tutoring.

Wellness Center staff organized resources for students and families and conducted regular, safely distanced home visits to students who were disengaged from learning to identify and target supports for case management. The school raised over \$100,000 in direct assistance funds, helped families to complete and submit paperwork on anything from unemployment benefits to direct government assistance, held a weekly food pick-up on-site and delivered 70 food boxes per week to families in need, and organized vaccination drives and provided vaccination referrals for students and families.

Recognizing that most students were working or supporting family members during the pandemic, the school shifted its programming to provide additional learning and enrichment activities on Saturdays. It also adapted its internship requirements to include a permanent programmatic change that allowed students with jobs to apply their hours worked to fill some or all of the internship requirement. Staff met with students at their place of employment to check in and discuss career opportunities.

In a state with one of the highest student-to-counselor ratios in the country (527:1), Oakland International is noteworthy for its decision to fund two counselors for the school's roughly 310 students.<sup>18</sup> Each counselor primarily works with a set of grade levels (9th and 10th grades or 11th and 12th grades) so that they get to know students well and develop strong relationships with teaching teams. Additionally, partner Sidra Community Wellness provides targeted wellness resources, including a counselor who provides one-on-one counseling in Arabic and who runs groups for Middle Eastern and North African students and families, who comprise roughly 15% of Oakland International's student population. This partnership with Sidra has also provided the opportunity for a former Oakland International student to intern at the school and other Oakland Unified schools as part of their coursework to become a therapist. The internship is funded through the Alameda County Health Service's Diversity in Health Training Institute.

Building out robust relationships such as those that undergird many of Oakland International's partnerships "just takes time," said Ben Gucciardi, founder of Soccer Without Borders. "You can't get to a place where you have that familiarity ... unless you have those relationships established across teachers and partners." Reciprocity is also key to robust partnerships, he added. "When the school invests in the community partner—when it is really, genuinely a two-way street in terms of resources and space and time—that really motivates the community partner to ... bring their best work and their best people and do whatever they can for the school."

# Nurturing Structures and Practices That Sustain Staff

School leaders at Oakland International recognize that to effectively support students they must value, support, and retain their staff. They do this by offering opportunities for growth and flexible staffing, prioritizing a sustainable teaching schedule, and providing consistent professional development as part of a close-knit community of practice. Teacher shortages have been well documented in Oakland and throughout the country, due in large part to high turnover, and were exacerbated by the pandemic.<sup>19</sup> Despite these conditions, Oakland International has found ways to retain and grow its staff, with many members of staff having been connected to the school for several years, either as employees or staff of partner organizations. The school’s yearly retention rate for teachers, not including broader school staff and partners, is roughly on par with the teacher retention rate throughout the district, both hovering around 80%.<sup>20</sup>

## Retaining Teachers Using Sustainable Schedules

The school’s block schedule (see Table 1) makes teaching more sustainable by maximizing time for teachers to plan, learn, and connect with students and families. The block schedule has an A/B configuration that alternates throughout the week. In each of these schedules, “blocks” of extended class time run for either 55 or 105 minutes and allow deeper learning. Students take four core classes (English, math, history, and science) plus advisory, elective, and intervention classes. Wednesdays are slightly shorter and follow a more traditional schedule to provide teachers with professional learning, with each class running for 55 minutes.

**Table 1. An Example of an Oakland International Sophomore Class Schedule**

“A” Days (Monday, Thursday)		“B” Days (Tuesday, Friday)		Wednesday	
Time	Subject	Subject	Time	Subject	
8:30–10:15 a.m.	History	Math	8:30–9:25 a.m.	English	
			9:30–10:25 a.m.	Science	
10:20 a.m.–12:05 p.m.	Elective (Graphic Design)	Science	10:30–11:25 a.m.	Intervention (Reading)	
			11:30 a.m.–12:25 p.m.	Math	
12:05–12:45 p.m.	Lunch	Lunch	12:25–1:05 p.m.	Lunch	
12:50–1:35 p.m.	Advisory	Advisory	1:10–2:05 p.m.	Elective (Graphic Design)	
1:40–3:25 p.m.	Intervention (Reading)	English	2:10–3:05 p.m.	History	

Sources: Information provided by Oakland International staff and taken from the school website. Oakland International. (2023). *Calendar & schedule*.

Teachers’ schedules have significant time for planning and learning: approximately 90 minutes embedded in each school day and an additional hour after students are released early on Wednesdays (see Table 2). “The schedule is a big thing in making [teaching] sustainable,” reflected 12th-grade teacher Kelly-Dewitt. “We really do have ... time to do things that are not in-the-moment teaching things. We have a lot of time—hundreds of minutes in a week.” By providing teachers ample dedicated time—at least 10 paid hours per week, scheduled during the school day—to focus on improving their practice, calling families, and connecting with colleagues, teaching feels more sustainable, according to Kelly-Dewitt.

**Table 2. An Example of an Oakland International Algebra Teacher’s Schedule**

“A” Days (Monday, Thursday)		“B” Days (Tuesday, Friday)		Wednesday	
Time	Subject	Subject	Time	Subject	
8:30–10:15 a.m.	Algebra 1	Algebra 1	8:30–9:25 a.m.	Algebra 1	
			9:30–10:25 a.m.	Prep period	
10:20 a.m.–12:05 p.m.	Prep period	Algebra 1	10:30–11:25 a.m.	Algebra 1	
			11:30 a.m.–12:25 p.m.	Algebra 1	
12:05–12:45 p.m.	Lunch	Lunch	12:25–1:05 p.m.	Lunch	
12:50–1:35 p.m.	Advisory	Advisory	1:10–2:05 p.m.	Algebra 1	
1:40–3:25 p.m.	Algebra 1	Prep period	2:10–3:05 p.m.	Prep period	
			3:05–4:05 p.m.	Professional development	

Sources: Information provided by Oakland International staff and taken from the school website. Oakland International. (2023). *Calendar & schedule*.

### Affirming Teachers as Lead Learners and Leaders

In providing teachers with autonomy and time for professional learning, the Oakland International leadership team practices the distributed leadership that is central to the community school approach and demonstrates that it trusts its teachers as lead learners. Teachers participate in multiple and varied professional development opportunities throughout the year, including classroom observations, cycles of inquiry, and robust learning experiences. In addition to classroom observations and feedback from Learning Lab candidates, teachers also spend one prep period each week observing a peer and providing feedback in “critical friendship” triads, which feed into shared cycles of inquiry. New teachers also participate in an interactive training entitled “Experiencing the Internationals Approach,” which models the Internationals Network’s more interactive, inquiry-, and project-based teaching approaches.<sup>21</sup> Department teams meet after school for an hour each week, in addition to weekly whole-school professional learning, all of which are included in teachers’ contracted hours.

Oakland International teachers report that these relationships and shared learning opportunities help them stay motivated and energized in the profession, even when the work becomes challenging. “My colleagues make it more sustainable,” said Kelly-Dewitt. “Everyone who works here is interested ... in exploring and challenging themselves. [We are] supportive, and a community of practitioners who are open to each other.”

Since the school’s founding, its leaders have modeled flexibility and sustainability. When founding principal Carmelita Reyes and founding teacher Sailaja Suresh both became new mothers, Reyes named Suresh coprincipal and they shared the responsibility, which made the work more manageable. Multiple teachers, including 12th-grade teacher Kelly-Dewitt and former principal Veronica Garcia Montejano, have transitioned into and out of the school’s long-standing role of instructional coach and professional development organizer for similar reasons.

Through these practices, the school can retain committed and aligned staff. “The most important thing is the continuity of [staff],” Soccer Without Borders founder Ben Gucciardi emphasized. “A teacher who has been somewhere for 15 years is worth I don’t know how many other resources, but you can’t really beat that in terms of knowing the kids, knowing the families, [and] the continuity of relationships.” Former principal Garcia Montejano sees the school’s commitment to continuity as going one step further. “I think the vision ... is the school eventually becomes operated by former students.”

## **The Learning Lab at Oakland International**

Oakland International opened its Learning Lab in 2017, in partnership with the Reach Institute—now accredited as Reach University—to build the capacity of educators, nonprofits, and district personnel throughout the San Francisco Bay area to support the success of newcomer students. Through school site visits, professional development workshops, and research projects, the Learning Lab spreads best practices for serving newcomers—a significant and growing population throughout the state.

The Learning Lab has also supported the preparation of pre- and in-service educators serving newcomer students. In 2017, with the support of private funding, the Learning Lab began providing two pathways for staff to obtain their teaching credential: (1) work as a teacher of record with access to a mentor teacher and coaching while pursuing credential coursework and receiving financial assistance or (2) spend 1 year as a Learning Lab assistant in a mentor teacher’s classroom before becoming a teacher of record in the second year.

The Learning Lab has contributed to the pipeline of educators prepared to support newcomer students throughout Oakland. In its first year, the initiative supported 12 teacher candidates and 1 administrative candidate. Just 2 years later, the number of candidates had grown by more than 200% to include 18 teacher candidates and 11 educators earning their administrator credential. With graduates of the program now serving as teachers at the school, former coprincipal and Learning Lab codirector Salajja Suresh, said that, through the program, “we’ve largely solved our own vacancy problem at Oakland International and we’re building the bench across the district of teachers who are prepared to serve newcomer students.” The Learning Lab has also supported research on newcomer students in California, including a synthesis of state data that describes the newcomer population in greater detail.

Beginning in the 2022–23 school year, private funding for these pathways was scaled back, and Oakland International staff began directing their aspiring teachers toward residency programs funded by the state and district instead. These residency programs provide financial, mentorship, test prep, and placement support for educators, as well as specified pathways targeted toward high-need subjects, such as special education or science, technology, engineering, and math.

Source: Oakland International Learning Lab. (2020). *Newcomer students*.

## Honoring Student and Family Voices

The Oakland International community cultivates a practice of continuous improvement that includes an openness to suggestions and feedback from all stakeholders and partners. Staff say that some of the school's most successful initiatives—second adults in classrooms, creating leadership opportunities for students, and increasing family engagement and leadership, for example—are the result of the school's open and inclusive process. According to school leaders, staff, and partners, working at Oakland International requires an open mindset and a willingness to interrogate and adapt practices to better meet student needs, as is in keeping with restorative justice and culturally responsive approaches. For example, if a student is not attending school consistently or is breaking school rules, staff are coached to lead with questions, rather than blame.

## Finding Creative Solutions Using an Inquiry-Based Approach

The school's inquiry approach jumpstarted one of its most successful initiatives: adding a second adult in every classroom. Recognizing that students would benefit from a smaller student-to-teacher ratio, Oakland International staff considered reducing the size of its classes, but the cost of hiring additional teachers was prohibitive. As they explored other options, staff realized that many of the identified challenges—such as a student not understanding a teacher's directions—could be solved simply by having another adult in each classroom. Their response was to add an instructional aide—now called a Newcomer Learning Lab assistant—to every classroom. Whenever possible, the school hires alumni to fill these positions, a strategy that comes with many benefits: alumni have experienced firsthand what it is like to learn as a newcomer and so can empathize with students; the position can serve as a pipeline for future newcomer educators, creating a pathway to teaching for former students (five Newcomer Learning Lab assistants have been teachers or case managers at Oakland International, and two others went on to teach in newcomer pathways elsewhere in the district); and, finally, the hiring of alumni aligns with and reinforces the strong community ties that are a hallmark of the school.

Staff look to their Wellness Ambassadors program, started in 2019, to empower students as leaders on campus. Ambassadors serve as liaisons between the Wellness Center and advisories, sharing information about important events and communicating with Wellness Center staff about what students need. “We have a meeting once or twice a month where we talk about the changes happening at school,” one Wellness Center ambassador reflected. “I communicate between my advisory and the Wellness Center—if there's a change, I tell my advisory, and I take the voices from my advisory and tell the Wellness Center and leaders what people want.” The student ambassadors leaned into their leadership role and expanded it to

include support for student-organized events, such as graduation and a new Wellness Week, during which they share mental health resources with peers. The program is now almost entirely student run. In fall 2021, students elected to have one ambassador from each of the 32 countries represented on campus.

## Actively Engaging Families by Building Relationships

Events such as the International Festival—an evening program during which students share information and activities related to their cultures with the broader school community—bring families to campus. Family members can take English or cooking classes on campus through the school’s Association for Continuing Education learning center, access the communal garden, or attend monthly “Coffee with Counselors” sessions. Parent–teacher phone calls also provide an informal space for consistent communication. Advisors and Wellness Center staff call families multiple times per semester. In addition, each teacher works alongside six teammates with the same 100 students throughout the whole school year. This team communicates with one another constantly through formal, weekly meetings and informal check-ins, which enables them to coordinate outreach. When possible, staff connect with families in their primary language to meet families where they are, to ensure clear communication, and to demonstrate respect for the rich linguistic and cultural assets that families and students bring to the school.

In addition to soliciting input from parents through their membership in the school site council, Oakland International conducts regular surveys and focus groups with families. Staff also conduct parent teacher home visits, which create an opportunity for teachers and families to meet and build trust in locations outside of the school. Home visits are voluntary for educators and families and do not target specific students, and teachers are trained and compensated for their time.<sup>22</sup> Educators visit families in pairs and frame the visit as the beginning of a relationship, rather than a one-and-done intervention. The first visit focuses on a family’s hopes, dreams, and goals for their student, to establish a shared foundation for their relationship with teachers.

Through these structures and practices, families are invited and encouraged to provide feedback, which might include suggesting areas for improvement. For example, Mohammed Ali, father of recent graduate Bayan Ali, had questions about the quality of Bayan’s science and math classes, which were different from the education Ali received in his home country of Yemen. He reached out to teachers and staff about his concerns, and they worked together to identify a solution: Bayan would attend dual-enrollment courses offered through the local community college, held on-site after the regular school day ends. Although he still wonders how prepared his daughter will be for college, Mohammed Ali was satisfied with this solution. “I reviewed the lessons, [and I found that] these were great lessons.”

Not every family member can take the same approach as Ali. “A lot of our families are just very busy and so they trust us with everything,” Yasser Alwan reflected. “This trust thing, it’s beautiful.” And yet, staff reported that this trust can come with a downside. Along with busy schedules and the logistics of negotiating across language and cultural differences, this trust in staff knowledge and expertise can lead to families not being critical of school decisions or opting out of site leadership opportunities. In addition, an increasing number of students—more than one third—are also unaccompanied minors, living with siblings or other relatives who may be struggling with financial or immigration difficulties that can be barriers to their participation. Staff shared that they have typically felt strong in their ability to provide students with the skills to advocate for themselves and to navigate new systems, and students agreed.

“Our teachers try to make us remember that we have a voice,” one student shared. “They try to give us that power.” Staff are exploring a variety of strategies to increase family engagement and similarly support family leadership.

## Keeping Students at the Center

Oakland International has developed many structures, practices, and partnerships to support and engage students—from medical care to support their health and well-being to a student-centered curriculum to support their academic success. An exploration of Oakland International’s student-centered supports and practices highlights six key takeaways for practitioners:

1. **Relationships are essential and are supported by structures and practices such as cohorts, advisories, parent teacher home visits, and restorative circles.** When staff prioritize relationships, students bring their full selves to the learning experience, families feel comfortable engaging and providing feedback to staff, and staff experience a more stable and sustainable working environment.
2. **Experiential learning, college-preparatory classes, and language acquisition are mutually reinforcing, especially when bolstered by meaningful assessment.** Combining language acquisition with rigorous content-focused instruction can support learners to make meaningful connections and build their English skills across all subjects. Through performance assessments, students demonstrate their learning, reflect on their experiences, and apply real-world skills.
3. **Working with all students—especially newcomers—requires a coherent, culturally responsive approach that incorporates cultural humility, an inquiry mindset, and a willingness to adapt to meet students’ needs.** Staff have the time and resources to enable authentic partnership with students and families, which allows them to collaboratively develop creative solutions to thorny challenges and maximize learning and engagement. Staff honor students’ cultures, communities, and languages as the assets that they are and recognize that learning happens in students’ homes, their classrooms, and the many spaces in between.
4. **Community school supports and partnerships expand the capacity of everyone on campus.** The community school manager coordinates the many partners and services that enable students to show up to school ready to learn and enable teachers to focus on instruction. Wellness Center staff provide everything from targeted case management to a cup of tea to a safe space, depending on what students need.
5. **Ongoing professional development and dedicated planning time are key to staff sustainability.** Teachers participate in multiple professional development opportunities, including classroom observations, peer learning partners, and cycles of inquiry. The school’s block schedule builds in time for planning and professional learning throughout the week.
6. **A continuous improvement lens, coupled with a commitment to collaborative problem-solving, can lead to meaningful innovation.** School staff listen and look for ways to continuously improve their programming and support evolving student and family needs. They seek out the wisdom of all stakeholders when developing sustainable solutions, such as adding a second adult to classrooms or identifying new leadership opportunities for staff.

The strong relationships, structures, and partnerships present at Oakland International emanate from the school's emphasis on inquiry and a willingness to treat students like the young adults—and experts on their experiences—that they are. Staff approach each challenge looking for root causes and collaborative, sustainable solutions. This approach has helped the school implement structures—such as the community school manager position, second adults in the classroom, and block scheduling—that sustain and deepen their work, always keeping at the forefront the changing needs of their students, families, staff, and community. The result is a school where newcomers experience a sense of belonging and receive the opportunities and resources they need to thrive amid significant life challenges.

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## Acknowledgments

This report benefited from the insights and expertise of two external reviewers: Naorah Rimkunas, Assistant Professor at Binghamton University and University-Assisted Community Schools Regional Training Center for Binghamton University Community Schools, and Jorge Ruiz de Velasco, Deputy Director of the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University. The author thanks them for the care and attention they gave the report.

This research was supported by The California Endowment, the Sobrato Foundation, and the Stuart Foundation. Core operating support for the Learning Policy Institute is provided by the Heising-Simons Foundation, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Raikes Foundation, Sandler Foundation, and MacKenzie Scott. LPI is grateful to them for their generous support. The ideas voiced here are those of the author and not those of funders.

Suggested citation: Thompson, C. (2023). *Oakland International High School: A thriving community school for Oakland's newcomer students*. Learning Policy Institute. <http://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/shared-learning-oakland-international>

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