Oakland Unified School District
New Small Schools Initiative Evaluation
Executive Summary

The School Redesign Network at Stanford University

This report can be downloaded from http://www.srnleads.org/resources/publications/ousd/ousd.html. Individual case studies conducted for this study of seven Oakland schools can also be downloaded at the above URL.

This study was conducted by the School Redesign Network at Stanford University.

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The School Redesign Network at Stanford University engages in research and development to support districts and schools that are equitable and enable all students to master the knowledge and skills needed for success in college, careers, and citizenship.

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Oakland Unified School District operates with the goals of universal college and workplace readiness, quality public schools in every neighborhood, clean and safe learning environments, service excellence across the district, and equitable outcomes for all students.

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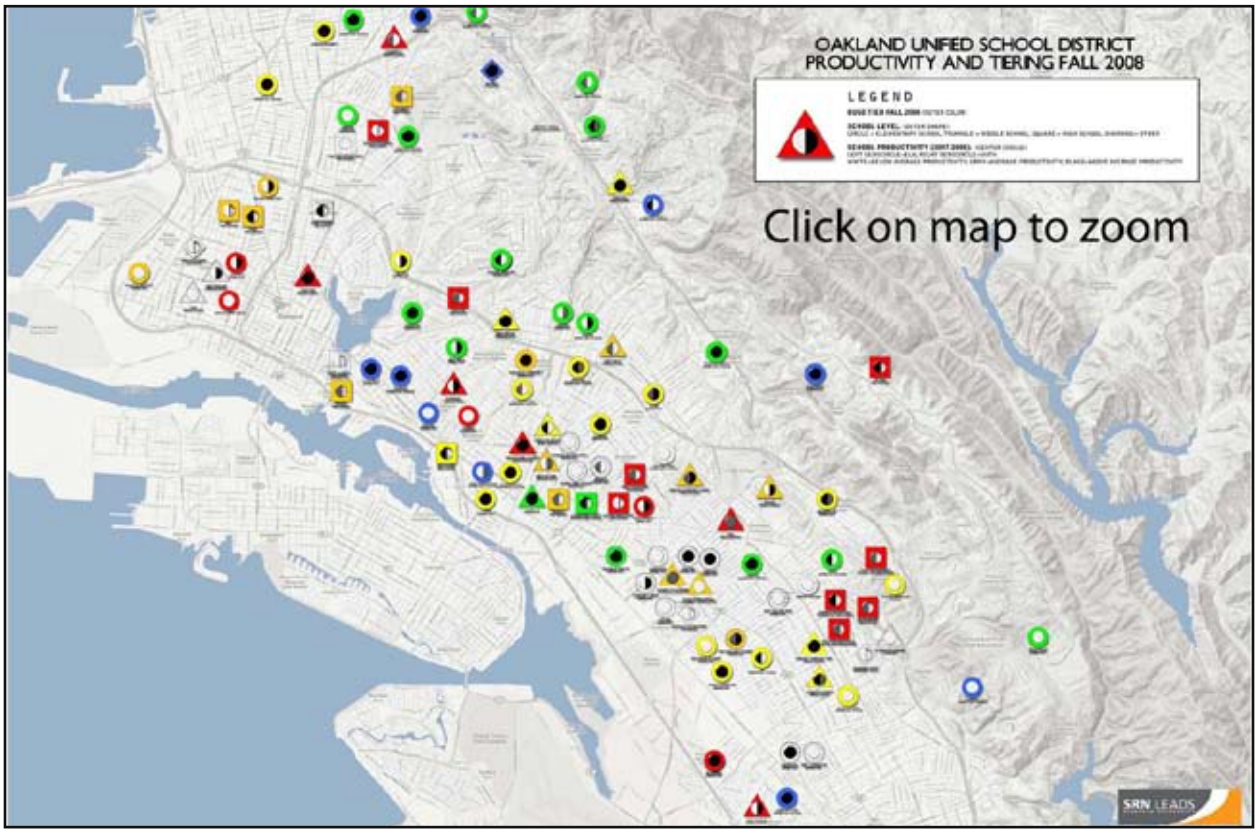
Cover photo: Leadership Prep Graduates. Courtesy of Expect Success! Oakland Unified School District

Oakland Unified School District 2008 Productivity and Tiering



School level is indicated by shape:
● = elementary school, ▲ = middle school, ■ = high school, ◆ = other

Overall tier is indicated by outer color:
From highest to lowest = blue, green, orange, yellow, red.

2007-08 productivity in English language arts and mathematics is indicated by the inner circle: From highest to lowest = black, gray, white.

A larger and easy-to-read version of this map can be accessed at
http://www.srnleads.org/resources/publications/ousd/art/ousd_map_web.jpg
(click on url to navigate to the online map).

Executive Summary

This final report by the School Redesign Network at Stanford University (SRN) completes a Phase II evaluation study of Oakland Unified School District's (OUSD) New Small Schools Initiative[1] from 2000 to present. The Phase II evaluation study follows a Phase I study completed in September 2007 by Strategic Measurement and Evaluation, Inc. The Phase II study takes a deeper, longitudinal look at the 45 new small schools in operation during the 2007-08 school year and addresses questions raised by the Board of Education; district administrative leadership; community partners; and school principals, teachers, and parents based on the findings of the Phase I evaluation. These questions were incorporated into and informed three overarching research goals for this study:

Research Goal #1

To understand how well new small schools and existing schools in OUSD are performing over time, taking into account the students they serve and their process of start-up and development.

Research Goal #2

To understand what factors influence schools' achievement and their improvement trajectories over time.

Research Goal #3

To recommend policy strategies that can build on current successes and address identified needs and issues.

SRN conducted quantitative and qualitative analyses to address these research goals. Quantitative analyses of student achievement on California Standards Tests (CST) were used to understand school performance on key measures of success while controlling for student characteristics, stage of school development, and grade levels. Through statistical modeling, SRN developed estimates of academic productivity, a value-added measure of student performance that controls for students' demographic variables and prior achievement. SRN estimated the productivity of all OUSD schools and compared the productivity of new small schools with other schools.

Qualitative methods were used to develop case studies of seven new small schools that had shown strong value-added growth for students. We examined the schools' design features, developmental history, instructional characteristics, and capacity. The seven schools were purposely selected to address issues of policy interest and to provide a cross-section of new small schools by type (e.g., elementary, middle, high), years of operation, and neighborhood. Individually, the cases provide valuable lessons; collectively they form the basis of a cross-case analysis used to provide district policy considerations. The seven case study schools are shown on the following page. (Two schools, EXCEL and BEST, are covered in one case study, as they were converted from a comprehensive high school into two small schools that share a campus.)

Based on the quantitative and qualitative research conducted and on interviews with OUSD school and district leaders, the following key findings, policy considerations, observations, and extensions of positive ex-

Case Study School	Level	Year Opened	Neighborhood
ACORN Woodland	Elementary	2000	East Oakland
EnCompass Academy	Elementary	2004	East Oakland
ASCEND	K-8	2001	Fruitvale Community
Elmhurst Community Prep	Middle School	2006	East Oakland
BEST	High School	2005	West Oakland
EXCEL	High School	2005	West Oakland
Oakland International	High School	2007	North Oakland

isting teacher development policies emerge from the Phase II evaluation.

Evaluation Key Findings

- Over the period 2003-04 to 2007-08, new small schools have been, on average, more productive than older schools at the elementary and high school levels.

- Over the period 2003-04 to 2007-08, new small middle schools have been, on average, about equally productive as older middle schools in English language arts (ELA), and less productive in mathematics. However, two-thirds of new small middle schools had only 2 years of data at the time of this study, suggesting that these schools were in the early stages of becoming more academically productive.

- New schools become more effective and productive as they mature.

- New schools are helping increase student achievement and contributing to the district's overall academic productivity.

- At the high school level, particular school design features are positively associated with academic productivity. These features include:

  ~ Project-based learning
  ~ Interdisciplinary courses
  ~ Block scheduling
  ~ Career/technical education
  ~ Advisory

- Across school levels, school staffing strongly influences academic productivity. On average, having a greater proportion of less experienced teachers (i.e., those in the first or second year of teaching) significantly reduces schools' academic productivity.

- A cross-site analysis of case study schools suggests key characteristics that may contribute to effective school functioning and productivity. These school characteristics are:

  ~ Mission-driven principals who are proactively recruited and/or mentored to serve at their schools;

  ~ Faculties that are "balanced" with experienced and new teach-

ers who are committed to the school's mission;

~ Extensive use of personalization strategies;

~ Clear, coherent instructional programs that are focused on authentic, hands-on instruction;

~ Analyses of student learning that are used to promote an academic culture, improve the instructional program, and inform teacher professional development;

~ Commitment to parent and community outreach and engagement.

Policy Observations

OUSD has developed policies and practices that benefit new and existing schools, and SRN suggests that the district continue to:

- **Encourage district administrators and coaches to serve as thought partners and problem solvers.**

Teachers and leaders of small schools highly valued administrators and coaches that help them solve problems rather than focus on managing mandates. Principals praised their key administrative supervisors, the network executive officers, when they helped strategize solutions to challenges rather than catalog compliance with regulations. Similarly, elementary principals and teachers appreciated coaches who went beyond monitoring implementation of the district's literacy curriculum and helped faculties develop a broad set of effective literacy practices to improve student learning. Small school faculties also benefitted from district efforts to develop Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to support instructional improvement.

- **Continue the supports that were provided to new schools and leaders through the OUSD incubator.**

The successful OUSD incubator — in existence from 2004 to 2007[2] — provided a process for design teams to clarify their school vision and explore best practices. The district may wish to consider keeping in place many of the structures that helped teachers and administrators develop school visions and coherent instructional programs. This is particularly important for the most recent cohort of new small schools, as they often struggle with staff turnover and need to redevelop a strong vision and mission with their faculties.

- **Look to small schools as sources of innovation and effective practices.**

The new small schools have not only raised district productivity, they have also helped spur the development and implementation of innovations such as Expect Success,[3] Results-Based Budgeting, and curricular flexibility policies. The autonomy granted to the new small schools, combined with the entrepreneurial ethos of many of the small school principals, can continue to be an important source of inspiration for innovation across OUSD as it develops its portfolio of schools.

Policy Considerations

As OUSD develops and adjusts its school portfolio, district leaders should consider the following:

Roots International Academy. Photo: Mindy Pines, courtesy of Oakland Unified School District

- **School productivity and achievement change over time and, thus, school development should be considered when deciding whether to expand, merge, or phase out schools.**

New schools generally grow more productive over the first few years. District officials should consider the current and potential trajectory of the school when considering continuation or phase-out.

- **Consider academic returns on investments and costs of student failure as well as immediate fiscal costs.**

Although the current balance sheet demands attention, and closing or merging schools may result in a quick reduction of operating costs, school officials must also consider possible increases in other costs in the near future, which may more than offset any immediate savings. Closing a successful school can increase remediation and dropout-prevention costs, and result in students choosing other schooling options outside the district.

- **Consider expanding successful school models that are too small by proactively recruiting more students to these campuses.**

In many cases the district has developed schools that are considerable improvements over the previous school options. Although some new schools are near capacity, other successful schools are undersized and could serve more students if district officials mounted concerted efforts to recruit students to these campuses. In expanding enrollment in successful OUSD schools, consideration should be given to the benefits generated when larger schools became small schools. Current policy should seek to preserve recent advances without recreating the large unproductive schools that preceded the small school reform strategy.

- **Beware of undefined mergers that merely combine campuses.**

Combining two small schools into a larger school forces the combined school to develop a new identity. Undefined mergers that merely join campuses risk creating a dysfunctional, less productive school. Where a successful school model exists, it should provide the template for the expanded school that results from a merger. District leaders should enable strong, focused school leadership and design as part of any campus merger. Some important supports for many of the new small schools included a year-long incubation process to clarify designs, a network for newly opened schools, a process to carefully match leaders to start-up designs, and a commitment to allow teacher staffing autonomy for the first year. Providing similar supports and autonomy would increase the likelihood for successful school mergers.

Policy Extensions

OUSD has worked to develop policies that support teacher workforce development. We suggest building on and extending these supports in the following ways:

- **Continue to build local pipelines into teaching.**

The district has been developing a "grow your own" program for bringing local young people and paraprofessionals into teaching and has been strengthening its relationships with local universities as well as its capacity to hire promising student teachers trained in Oakland. These initiatives should be continued and strengthened to build the teaching pipeline in OUSD.

- **Continue to move up hiring to earlier in the spring.**

OUSD has made important strides in filling teacher vacancies earlier in the year. However, many schools report that they are unable to offer teachers contracts until August, losing promising candidates and leaving little time for effective induction. Steps taken to ensure that vacancies are filled early in the year would improve the quality of hires and the support given to teachers new to the school site.

- **Refine the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) induction model.**

Some teachers report a very positive BTSA experience and others feel the BTSA process was not particularly helpful. Steps should be taken to improve the consistency of the BTSA model and to select BTSA mentors from within the school to assist new teachers in sustaining coherence with the school's vision and instructional practice.

- **Continue working with the teachers association to reduce teacher turnover.**

Some schools struggle more with teacher retention than others, and it is important that all stakeholders work together in developing a strategy for targeting schools with low retention. This means working together to undergo a close examination of the leadership, working conditions, and mentoring practices, beginning with the neediest schools. District officials should continue to work with the teachers association to evaluate areas for improving the collective bargaining agreement to help streamline the hiring process.

- **Continue efforts to project teacher demand and avoid unnecessary layoffs.**

  Part of the district's current retention plan is to take measures not to lay off teachers in the spring based on preliminary budget estimates. In the past, OUSD lost many teachers to other districts due to this process, but the district has taken measures to project its actual hiring needs and retain more teachers.

SRN's key findings and policy observations, considerations and extensions — and the final report and school case studies from which they are drawn — are designed to facilitate an ongoing, results-based inquiry process for all district stakeholders, including teachers, parents, OUSD administrative leadership, and the OUSD Board of Education. This study is designed to contribute longitudinal research on the district's small schools initiative, provide an informative, research-based framework for examining district policy, and communicate empirical findings that are accessible to a broad audience of educators and laypersons.

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1. References to "new" schools refer to the schools started in OUSD since 2000 as part of the district's New Small Schools Initiative, and "old" schools are all other schools. Charter schools are not included in this evaluation.

2. The OUSD incubator was in existence from 2004-07. A more limited set of supports were provided by OUSD instructional services coaches from 2007-2008; currently there is no incubator.

3. Expect Success refers to the broad district reform strategy launched in fall 2005. Expect Success contained six initiatives: 1) Create two organizations within one district – one focusing on the educational side of accelerating student achievement, and another organized around providing the support schools need to realize academic goals. 2) Empower schools with more flexibility and an increasing share of funding. 3) Create small, personalized learning communities. 4) Provide at least two quality school options in every neighborhood. 5) Support the skills and talents of employees and hold them accountable for meeting high standards. 6) Invest in technology and build smart business practices. Statham, K. (2007). *Expect Success: Making Education Work for Every Oakland Student*. Oakland, CA: Oakland Unified School District. Retrieved from http://webportal.ousd.k12.ca.us/docs%5CES%20Making%20Education%20Work%205.07.pdf.

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