

Oakland High School Redesign

How a Community-Centered Campus Created Pathways for Student Success



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Summary

Although Oakland High School (Oakland High) is the sixth-oldest high school in California and the oldest in the city of Oakland, sustained redesign efforts have positioned the school clearly toward the future. Oakland High has integrated its community schools model with six industry-themed Linked Learning pathways and dual enrollment opportunities to create vibrant, engaging, and community-centered learning experiences for its students, leveraging district- and state-level funding to do so. It also has integrated student supports through its on-site Wellness Center, Shop 55. This brief highlights key ways that Oakland High has redesigned its school to center relationships with students and families, increasing achievement, graduation rates, and teacher retention and expertise by providing relevant and authentic learning experiences for students, anchored in the community.

A Historic School Goes Through Redesign

Although more than 150 years old, Oakland High now serves as a harbinger of the future rather than a relic of the past. The school integrates rigorous academics with career-focused pathways, real-world experiences, and comprehensive whole child supports. The on-site Wellness Center, completed in 2010, and the school's partnership with the East Bay Asian Youth Center signaled the beginning of Oakland High's shift. In 2013, it hired a new principal just as the district's full-service community schools vision and commitment to career- and college-focused pathways began to take root, a move that initiated its redesign journey.

Today, Oakland High serves 1,579 students as a comprehensive high school with six Linked Learning pathways built on a bedrock of a strong community schools strategy with an on-site Wellness Center. Students experience integrated, dynamic, project-based learning and aligned, authentic assessments that prepare them for the world beyond high school. They are peer mentors for one another, helping foster a supportive and welcoming school climate while building students' mental health skills. The school is racially diverse, with a higher percentage of students identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged and students experiencing homelessness than the district average of those populations (see [Table 1](#)). Although Oakland High's large student body provides the resources and capacity for traditional comprehensive high school activities, its small learning communities and its relationship-centered community schools approach help support a whole child vision of learning.

Table 1. Demographics for Oakland High School and Oakland Unified School District

Demographic	Oakland High	Oakland Unified
Hispanic or Latino/a	38%	51%
Asian	29%	9%
African American	21%	20%
English learner	21%	32%
Students with disabilities	15%	16%
Socioeconomically disadvantaged	90%	81%
Students experiencing homelessness	7%	5%
Total enrollment	1,579	44,647

Note: This table includes racial demographic categories that totaled more than 10% for Oakland High School students.

Source: California Department of Education. (2025). *2024–25 enrollment by ethnicity and grade* [Oakland Unified report 01-61259]. DataQuest. (accessed 01/02/2026); California Department of Education. (2025). *2024–25 enrollment by ethnicity and grade* [Oakland High Report 01-61259-0135905]. DataQuest. (accessed 01/02/2026).

Integrated Community Schools and Linked Learning

Oakland High prioritizes relationships, enabled by small learning communities and an A/B block schedule. Students begin with their 9th-grade “family” of roughly 85 total students who share four core content teachers (English language arts, algebra, biology, and ethnic studies) and an administrative team composed of an assistant principal, counselor, and case manager, all of whom collaborate during a shared weekly planning period. In 10th through 12th grades, students enter one of the following five industry-themed college- and career-preparatory Linked Learning pathways, each of which has fewer than 250 students:

1. Environmental Science Academy
2. Innovative Design & Engineering Academy
3. Law & Social Justice
4. Public Health Academy
5. Visual Arts & Academics Magnet Program Academy

A sixth pathway, Recent Immigrant Support and Engagement (RISE), supports newly arrived immigrant students, also referred to as Newcomers. This pathway is home to fewer than 200 students and focuses on business management.¹ The community organized in support of a citywide parcel tax—originally

passed as Measure N in 2014 and [renewed in 2022 through Measure H](#)—to provide direct funding for Linked Learning pathways and uses the language of supplementing, not supplanting, funds to ensure that the money is used as intended.

Students move through pathways in grade-level cohorts that allow them to develop strong bonds. Pathway teachers have no more than 160 students in their total course load—the number of students they teach per semester—and teach students multiple times from 9th through 12th grades, enabling strong teacher-student relationships. Students have access to extracurriculars typical of a large comprehensive high school. They can participate in any of the school’s 14 sports teams; a mix of service-, activity-, interest-, and honors-based clubs; orchestra and jazz band; specialized support programs; and elective, dual enrollment, and AP classes. A work-based learning liaison partners with career and technical education teachers and local community organizations to organize field trips, internships during the school year and summertime, guest speakers, and a career day. (See [Linked Learning With Dual Enrollment and Work-Based Learning](#).)

Shop 55, Oakland High’s on-site Wellness Center, provides accessible and comprehensive support services. It has been operated and coordinated by its lead agency, the East Bay Asian Youth Center (EBAYC), since 2007, in partnership with nine other community organizations. The Wellness Center provides medical, dental, and behavioral health services, as well as after-school academic support, youth leadership opportunities, enrichment programs, and peer-to-peer mentoring, and has been expanding its portfolio of resources in response to a 2021 needs assessment. In 2024–25, Shop 55 estimated that it served nearly 70% of the school population, approximately 1,100 students, and made nearly 5,500 mental health-related interventions.

Oakland High is especially proud of its peer-to-peer mentoring program, which emerged from a 2020 retreat for the school’s Student Culture and Climate Committee.² The Director of Shop 55, Rany Ath, explained how the program emerged and how it currently operates:

[The Committee] said, let’s have students help each other because students ... [know] what each other is going through. ... [EBAYC received a grant] to start a program that brought on eight peer mentors who did a lot of the Tier 1 and Tier 2 [interventions]. ... [The program then expanded to] 30 to 35 peer mentors—11th- [and] 12th-grade students. They get 20 bucks an hour, they work during their free periods, and they get trained up on trauma-informed, healing-centered practices to do mentorship for students during the school day and peer tutoring after school.

In addition to the Shop 55 Wellness Center, where peer mentoring and the Culture and Climate Committee meetings take place, all students at Oakland High have access to a Future Center, where the school hosts its college access partners and a full-time college and career specialist who help students chart their postsecondary paths.

Linked Learning With Dual Enrollment and Work-Based Learning

Linked Learning combines college-preparatory coursework with an industry theme to provide students with access to both college and career opportunities after high school. Combined with work-based learning, including internships and apprenticeships, students connect learning happening in the classroom with relevant postsecondary work opportunities and get hands-on experiences with career skills, while also working to solve authentic community challenges.

Many Linked Learning pathways include dual enrollment classes, which provide college instruction and access to college credits right in the high school classroom. Oakland Unified School District has 45 Linked Learning pathways and 118 dual enrollment courses available to its students and plans to continue expanding the number of dual enrollment credits available. Linked Learning pathways have three levels of certification anchored in high-quality standards: candidate, silver, and gold. Pathway administrators and staff work with their Linked Learning coaches to improve programming and decide when to apply for the next level of certification, determined by a set of evidence-based standards used to assess progress.

Some pathways function as small schools in themselves, while larger comprehensive high schools might have several pathways functioning as small learning communities, especially in Oakland, where the district committed to a wall-to-wall approach. One evaluation found that students in certified Linked Learning pathways were more likely to graduate; were less likely to drop out; and, on average, earned more credits than their peers in traditional high school programs.

Sources: Oakland Unified School District. (2024). *High School Linked Learning Office Measure N 2023-2024 annual report* (accessed 07/21/2025); Warner, M., Caspary, K., Arshan, N., Stites, R., Padilla, C., Patel, D., McCracken, M., Harless, E., Park, C., Fahimuddin, L., & Adelman, N. (2016). *Taking stock of the California Linked Learning district initiative: Seventh-year evaluation report*. SRI International (accessed 07/21/2025); Linked Learning Alliance. (2025). *Linked Learning Gold Certification* (accessed 02/17/2026).

Student Outcomes and Teacher Retention

Oakland High has made steady gains since the pandemic in student outcomes, outperforming the district and state in many areas despite serving a higher-need population of students, due in part to the redesign approach that the school has adopted. In 2024, Oakland High had a cohort graduation rate of 86%, above that of the district (at 83%) and on par with the state average. Fifty-nine percent of the school's graduates met A–G requirements, above the statewide average of 52%.³

Oakland High has seen large gains in student performance in recent years, exceeding prepandemic levels in both English language arts and math. In 2024–25, 42% of students met or exceeded the proficiency standard, an increase of 4 percentage points from the previous year, outperforming the Oakland Unified School District average of 37%. In math, 26% of Oakland High students met or exceeded the proficiency standard, a 9 percentage point gain from the prior year, nearing the district average of 27%.⁴ Oakland High staff and leadership want to further improve student outcomes. The school is working to provide additional supports to ensure that more students with individualized education programs (IEPs) can access and succeed in A–G eligible classes. The school also plans to provide professional learning that balances snapshot assessments of students' proficiencies in tested subjects with the school's commitment to project-based deeper learning.

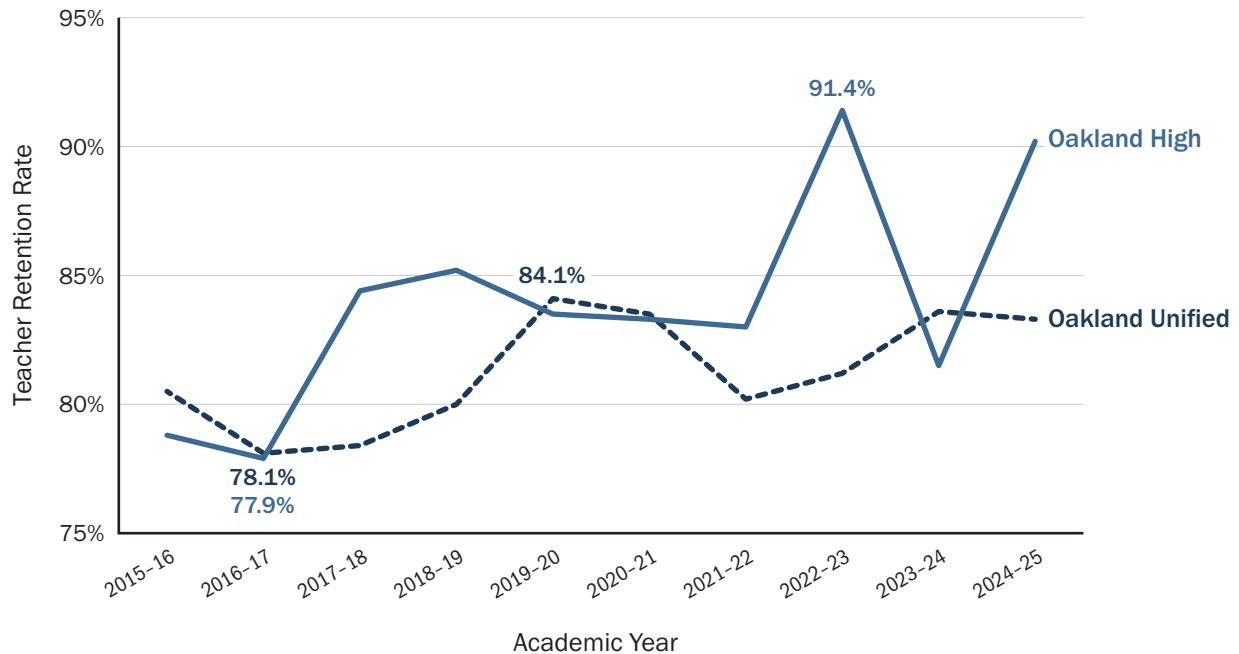
Oakland High has a supportive climate as well. Seventy-two percent of students at Oakland High reported on the California Healthy Kids Survey that adults get along well with students from different cultural backgrounds, and 71% felt that teachers have good relationships with students.⁵ Because relationships take time to build, a relationship-centered approach to teaching and learning requires that teachers remain in the school, which benefits students. High rates of teacher turnover negatively impact student achievement, and students reap the benefits of schools that retain their teachers.⁶ Over the past 10 years, Oakland High has retained 80%–85% of its teachers annually, roughly on par with the district, but in 2 of the last 3 years, teacher retention has topped 90%, signaling the contribution of the new design to the stability of staff (see [Figure 1](#)).

Research indicates that teachers remain in schools in part due to the teaching environment, especially the organizational characteristics of schools. Community schools can create teaching environments that sustain and retain teachers, especially teachers of color.⁷ Oakland High has a variety of on-site partners and complementary initiatives such as community schools and Linked Learning pathways that allow teachers to easily draw upon resources that support students' mental health and well-being, as well as instruction. Retaining educators over time can also strengthen the trusting relationships that sustain productive professional learning communities and lead to high-quality, relevant teaching and learning. Emily Macy, Director of the Law and Social Justice pathway and 18-year veteran of Oakland High, explained:

For classroom teachers, there's a sense of belonging across the school. ... When I first started here, I cried almost every day for a few weeks, because there was nobody [to support me]. ... And now, [our new teachers] ... have such a nice landing. We meet them, and we talk with them, and we [share] how our program runs. ... There's so much more cohesion now that we didn't have before. ... And then for the people who've been here for a long time, it's that you're building relationships across both your pathway as well as your departments. And ... there's actual joy in meeting with each other. And it really helps to want to keep coming back, day after day, week after week.

Gustavo Ontiveros, Co-Director of the RISE pathway and math educator who is in his fourth year at Oakland High, affirmed the value of the school's supportive teaching community, saying, "[The] time that allows us to meet and focus on just [teaching] ... and think about how we can take it to the next level. I think those moments are very valuable."

Figure 1. Teacher Retention Rates at Oakland High School and Oakland Unified School District



Sources: Oakland Unified School District. (2025). *Retention of teachers at school sites, teacher retention at sites over time—Oakland High School* [Dataset]. (accessed 11/06/2025); Oakland Unified School District. (2025). *Retention of teachers in OUSD* [Dataset]. (accessed 11/06/2025).

Enabling Conditions for School Transformation

Four districtwide initiatives—community schools, Linked Learning, dual enrollment, and performance assessments through the graduate capstone—have helped pave the way for Oakland High’s redesign. Community schools provide students and families with resources and structures that support them in thriving, and they anchor teaching and learning in the lived experiences, strengths, and expertise of the surrounding community (see [What Is a Community School?](#)).⁸ Industry-themed Linked Learning pathways allow students to engage in high-quality, authentic, and coherent learning experiences anchored in in-demand careers in fields like architecture and media.⁹ Pathways include dual enrollment courses in which students can earn college credit during the school day. The district’s graduate capstone initiative, in which seniors complete a yearlong sustained research project, provides a North Star for high-quality project- and problem-based learning rooted in authentic, community-based issues.¹⁰

At the school level, a shared vision helps these four initiatives cohere with one another and allows staff to make decisions with clarity and purpose. Alyssa Berkins, a 9th-grade teacher and Director of the Environmental Science Academy, explained how this anchors the school’s decision-making:

We have a shared vision. Having the time to create that and to have folks buy into that and [know] what we are all working towards, whether that be in your freshman family [cohort or] in your pathway, there is a dedication to that shared vision.

What Is a Community School?

Community schools are an evidence-based school transformation strategy that unites the efforts of students, families, educators, and community partners to improve student learning and well-being. They leverage a complex web of partnerships and relationships, like those at Oakland High School, to support and engage students and families and provide a framework for engagement and shared decision-making. Often, community school managers coordinate partnerships and relationships. These relationships can bring to bear resources that nurture authentic, rigorous, community-connected learning experiences and create the conditions for young people to thrive. The evidence base on community schools shows improvement in student outcomes, including attendance, academic achievement, and high school graduation rates, along with reduced racial and economic achievement gaps. Community schools are also associated with some improvements in school climate and disciplinary rates.

Sources: Community Schools Forward. (2023). *Framework: Essentials for community school transformation; Community schools playbook*. Learning Policy Institute; Swain, W., Leung-Gagné, M., Maier, A., & Rubinstein, C. (2025). *Community schools impact on student outcomes: Evidence from California*. Learning Policy Institute.

Authentic Assessment and Demonstration as a North Star for Learning. Oakland High places a premium on creating an authentic, relevant, and coherent learning experience for its students, which culminates in their 12th-grade graduate capstone project. The graduate capstone is part of a districtwide requirement in which students conduct original research, write a paper based on the findings, and reflect upon their learning process. They then present their research and analysis to a panel of judges and an audience of peers and community members.

At Oakland High, teachers provide ample opportunities for extended project-based learning in preparation for this experience. For example, 11th-graders in the Law and Social Justice pathway partner with Y-PLAN, a partnership with the University of California at Berkeley's Center for Cities + Schools. One prior 11th-grade capstone project focused on supporting students' unhoused peers. One group conducted a survey of 177 students and 18 teachers and analyzed federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act policies to generate actionable recommendations for Oakland Unified School District, resulting in the district hiring three new case managers—a true community impact.¹¹ (See [A Deep Dive on Community-Connected Curriculum at Oakland High](#).)

A Deep Dive on Community-Connected Curriculum at Oakland High

By creating learning opportunities that allow students to explore issues of interest to them in school and community settings, Oakland High provides a curriculum that draws on young people's experiences and knowledge. Instruction within the Environmental Science Academy pathway is focused on developing young people's leadership skills through a student-centered and culturally sustaining curriculum. As science teacher M Fields explained:

A lot of our curriculum is focused on student-centered problems and student-centered leadership opportunities to solve those problems. ... That's one of the big things that makes Oakland High a community school. ... The curriculum at Oakland High is almost written as we go, [to] address problems that ... crop up in our neighborhoods and in our communities.

In addition to prioritizing student-centered learning, teachers in the Environmental Science Academy pathway believe that their job is to be culturally responsive and help students understand themselves, what they care about, and how they can positively impact social issues that matter to them. At the assembly welcoming incoming students, a pathway codirector said:

We are the Environmental Science Academy, so obviously we care about the environment. We want all of you to be environmentalists. But, more importantly, we want you to figure out what you care about. So, if you want to be an activist to end the school-to-prison pipeline or fight for racial justice or end homelessness or fight for gender equality—whatever you feel passionately about—we want to help you become an ally, advocate, and activist for that cause. So that’s one of our core missions.

To achieve their instructional aims, Environmental Science Academy teachers prioritize project-based learning as a pedagogical approach, which allows for collaborative engagement in learning as students explore a relevant question or problem. For example, the “lake class” taught by Fields is designed around the ecology of Lake Merritt, a short walk from Oakland High’s campus, and in partnership with the Lake Merritt Boathouse. Students embark on pontoon boats once per week to survey different areas of the lake for various water-quality factors and collect samples for testing, which they use to determine the likely causes of water pollution and contaminants. Students then study potential policy interventions to address the health of their community lake. At the culmination of the class, students develop their own interventions to address water quality, which they present to a mock city board made up of local scientists, advocates, and other industry professionals.

One student’s final project included building a three-dimensional map that, as Fields explained:

identified that the golf course above the cemetery was a likely source of nitrogen phosphate pollution due to the amount of fertilizer that they use, and he pinpointed this by testing the tributaries that come through that area. Below the golf course is a big, open cemetery that has lot[s] of grass everywhere. ... So the student proposed a replanting plan for the cemetery that included a native plant shrub forest that could soak up and absorb the nitrates and phosphates before they got to the lake.

The lake class demonstrates how environmental science can be made relevant and culturally responsive by focusing on the environment as the space in which students live, work, and play. Furthermore, even as it builds science knowledge and research and writing skills, this project-based work requires the use of social-emotional skills, as students must work collaboratively, communicate effectively, and manage and track learning that is important enough to support the hard work and revision needed to achieve mastery.

Source: Klevan, S., Daniel, J., Fehrer, K., & Maier, A. (2023). *Creating the conditions for children to learn: Oakland’s districtwide community schools initiative*. Learning Policy Institute.

Collaboration as a Shared Value. At Oakland High, there is a strong collaborative culture both within and across pathways, as well as with the broader community. Pathway teachers use weekly common planning time to coordinate instructional activities across grade-level and pathway teams; connect on student needs; and identify opportunities for authentic, work-based, and community-connected learning experiences outside the classroom. The Public Health Academy pathway teachers used this time to develop integrated projects at each grade level, including a student podcast, a cross-cultural medicine book, and a senior project poster night—an opportunity for students to show off the work of their graduate capstone to an even broader audience.¹² Staff also use structured collaborative time to connect with Shop 55 staff and identify opportunities to extend and enrich student learning. Pathway Director Macy explained how collaboration works for teachers:

We're a cohort of teachers that teach cohorted students. ... [We] meet [in pathway teams] right during our school day. ... We work really closely with all of our coaches ... to make sure that we're hitting various benchmarks for our students, but also being able to focus on the curriculum and how we're actually trying to build out these experiences.

More than 10 years into the school's redesign effort, staff have developed a shared culture around collaboration. "The culture, it's not a question," Macy stated. "If you're going to be a teacher here, this is how we're going to do things: We're going to give you support, and we're going to show you love, and we're going to have fun together. It's what Oakland High does."

In 2022, Oakland High received an implementation grant through the California Community Schools Partnership Program to bolster its community schools approach, and in 2024, the school received implementation grants for its five career-themed pathways through the Golden State Pathways Program to strengthen its Linked Learning programming.¹³

State and Local Policies That Support School Success

State Policies. Several major state initiatives, building on local investments, have contributed to Oakland High's redesign and supported the turnaround in student outcomes:

- The [California Community Schools Partnership Program](#) has invested \$4.1 billion since 2021 in developing community schools that support family and community engagement, integrated supports for students, expanded learning time, and shared decision-making in settings that support social and emotional learning and restorative practices.¹⁴
- The [Golden State Pathways Program](#), established in 2022, has invested \$500 million in industry-themed pathways that offer integrated coursework and internships that can provide both high school and college credit.
- Investments in dual enrollment opportunities, including an additional \$200 million in 2022, support California high schools and community colleges to establish opportunities for high school students to take credit-bearing college courses during the school day.
- [21st Century Community Learning Centers](#) funding helps to support peer mentoring and peer tutoring after school.

In 2025, the governor of California issued a Career Master Plan that creates a vision for integrating initiatives across the education, labor, and higher education sectors and proposes a Career Passport to recognize competencies. In the 2025–26 budget, the state invested \$10 million in a pilot program to support high school redesign (see [Redesigning High School: 10 Features for Success](#)), which will continue to shape learning for both schools and state policymakers as it identifies opportunities for further innovations in policy and practice.

Redesigning High School: 10 Features for Success

Oakland High School redesigned its structures in a way that reflects the features outlined in [Redesigning High School: 10 Features for Success](#). Redesigning schools requires a shift in mindset related to school structures, practices, and instructional approaches that allow schools to provide instructional experiences rooted in how students learn best. The 10 features are:

1. Positive developmental relationships
2. Safe, inclusive school climate
3. Culturally responsive and sustaining teaching
4. Deeper learning curriculum
5. Student-centered pedagogy
6. Authentic assessment
7. Well-prepared and well-supported teachers
8. Authentic family engagement
9. Community connections and integrated student supports
10. Shared decision-making and leadership

Over time, these features reinforce one another, creating learning environments in which students are cared for, challenged, and supported.

Source: Darling-Hammond, L., Alexander, M., & Hernández, L. (2024). [Redesigning high school: 10 features for success](#). Learning Policy Institute.

Local Policies. In 2014, Oakland voters overwhelmingly passed a parcel tax—Measure N—to fund college-preparatory and career-focused courses, along with opportunities for internships and work-based learning. Measure N helped scale existing career-themed small learning communities into industry-themed Linked Learning pathways across the full district. The same year, California codified a new form of structured dual enrollment that allowed districts to partner with local community colleges and offer credit-bearing college courses to students in high school.¹⁵ In Oakland, this included sharing data between the district and the local community college and coordinating student supports. To oversee the implementation of Measure N funding at each school site, the school board established an independent College and Career Readiness Commission, composed of a broad array of community members who had ownership of the process and to whom high schools annually present their Education Improvement Plans. In 2022, voters reauthorized Measure N—then Measure H—for an [additional 14 years](#).

Authentic, Community-Anchored Learning for All Students

Oakland High embodies the features of redesign through its small learning communities; its dedication to deeper learning and authentic assessment; and its community schools model, which prioritizes shared power, integrated student supports, and family and community engagement. The school's student achievement has slightly edged out the district, even though a higher percentage of its students come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and are English learners. The school also has a higher graduation rate than the district and a higher A–G rate than the state. By providing foundational services through Shop 55 and creating authentic, project-based, and community-engaged learning experiences that prepare students for college and career, Oakland High has worked to grant opportunities for its students so they may thrive.

Endnotes

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