

# Oakland Unified School District Case Study ACORN Woodland Elementary



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This case study is one of six conducted for the report, *Oakland Unified School District: New Small Schools Initiative Evaluation*. The report and case studies can be downloaded from <http://www.srnleads.org/resources/publications/ousd/ousd.html>.

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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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Photo: Courtesy of ACORN Woodland Elementary

# Introduction

**A**CORN Woodland Elementary (AWE) represents one of the most remarkable academic turnarounds of any school in the state of California. In 2000-01, its first year open, AWE scored a 345 on California's Academic Performance Index (API)<sup>1</sup> making it one of the lowest scoring elementary schools in the state and the lowest performing elementary school in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). In 2007-08, AWE bested its initial score by over 400 points, earning an API of 774<sup>2</sup>. AWE is unique not only for its spectacular API growth, but as one of the first new small schools in OUSD, it provides a unique perspective into the history of the district's new small schools initiative. AWE showcases the important community role in launching and supporting a school, and demonstrates the promise of "re-incubation" as a strategy for helping schools to overcome tremendous challenges and to "re-vision" themselves for long-term academic success.

Section One of the case study describes AWE's academic trajectory and development story, highlighting the school's steep ascent on the California API: from 345 in 2001 to 774 in 2008. After leadership challenges plagued the school's first year of operation, subsequent academic gains reflect strong school leadership, stable principal transitions, and a "re-incubation" process that helped staff build on, extend, and supplement the school's literacy curricula to improve student achievement.

Section Two of the case study describes four critical attributes of a school's academic functioning: the school learning climate, instructional program, professional capacity, and parent and community relations. By discussing these four attributes and the district policy supports that contributed to their development, the case study is designed to inform, improve, and strengthen understanding and connections between OUSD's central office and local schools.

This section focuses on AWE's efforts to develop and reinforce a positive learning climate by regularly celebrating students' academic success and to create a coherent instructional program that supplements district curricula to meet the needs of diverse

learners. These modifications include, for example, active-learning strategies such as "reading buddies" (older students reading to younger students), and using locally developed benchmark assessments to monitor student progress.<sup>3</sup> AWE has further strengthened its instructional program through an extended learning program that ends at 6:00 p.m. each day.

Its investment in teachers has played a critical role in the school's success. Using the autonomy provided by Results-Based Budgeting,<sup>4</sup> AWE's principal has made sustained investments in coaching and teacher collaboration time. These investments, combined with refined teacher-hiring practices that include panel interviews, demonstration lessons, and writing samples, have helped strengthen AWE's professional capacity.

Community support and involvement inspired AWE's inception, and the school continues to be seen as a sanctuary in an economically depressed neighborhood. While parent and community leaders remain key supporters of the school, AWE is now focused on finding ways to engage them in ways that support students' academic achievement.

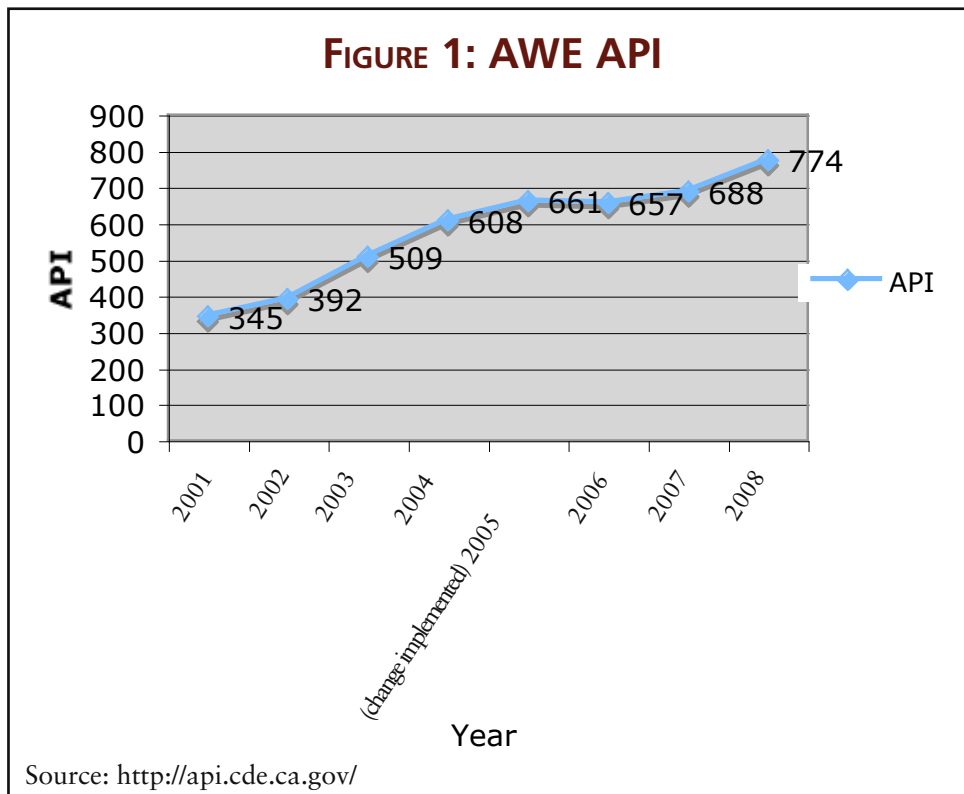
# Section One: AWE's Academic Trajectory and Development Story

**A**CORN Woodland Elementary has consistently improved student outcomes on state tests in each year of its operation, although it started near the bottom. Improvements over this time span are represented in Figure 1, below. The trends indicate that AWE experienced a large portion of its academic growth during its first 4 years as it rose from the bottom of the scale, with more moderate but substantial growth over the past 4 years.<sup>5</sup>

AWE has achieved these gains while maintaining relatively similar demographics (see Table 1, page 3). AWE currently has a waiting list for student enrollment, and although some students come to AWE from outside the Elmhurst area, according to school officials the majority of students continue to come from the local neighborhood. Therefore the shift in school demographics mirrors the changes in community demographics. Over the

past eight years, the neighborhood served by AWE has shifted from predominantly African-American to Latino, and AWE's recent enrollment trends reflect this change.

The most striking feature when looking at enrollment and API trends is the sharp increase in the percent of English language learners in the 2007-08 school year, the same year in which AWE earned its high-



**Table 1: AWE Enrollment Trends**

Year	School Size	% African American	% Latino	% English language learner	% Free and reduced lunch
2007-08	246	19%	75%	70%	91%
2006-07	250	17%	75%	60%	92%
2005-06	258	22%	71%	56%	77%
2004-05	241	25%	71%	57%	n/a
2003-04	251	28%	69%	60%	87%

Source: <http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/> accessed 11-18-2008

est API score. Given that the California Standards Tests (CST) are in English, AWE’s growth is even more notable. Many school leaders attribute this recent increase in scores to changes in the school’s curriculum, assessments, and instructional practices.

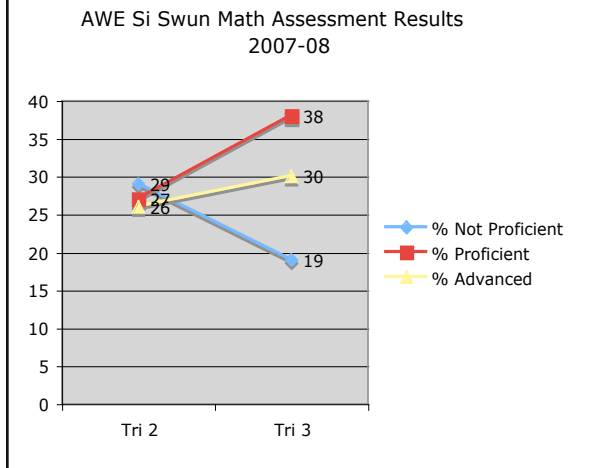
As a result of the somewhat flat scores over the preceding 3 years, school leaders had made important changes in their instructional program aimed at reaching their goal of an 800 API score. One important change in 2007-08 was the development of interim assessments for English language arts (ELA) based on the New Leaders for New Schools<sup>6</sup> assessments. The interim assessments in ELA were also more closely aligned to the CST providing teachers better data on areas where student learning is strong, areas where students are struggling, and areas where more or different classroom instruction may be needed. Specifically, the ELA interim assessment results showed that students were not receiving enough active learning opportunities to independently understand what they were reading. This information pointed the teachers toward making changes in their classroom teaching practice as

the year progressed that fostered student engagement.

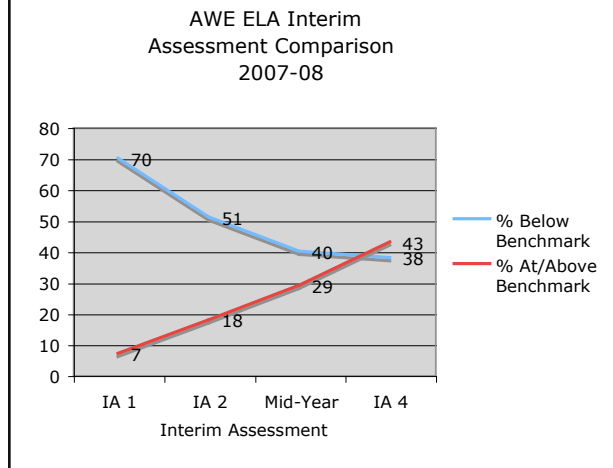
Another important change was the implementation of the Si Swun math program.<sup>7</sup> The Si Swun math program provided the school with assessments better aligned to the end-of-year CST in math, and was more closely aligned to the school’s active learning philosophy. Both Si Swun and the New Leaders assessments are key components of the district’s move toward standards-based classroom assessments, as 20 schools will implement the Si Swun program in 2008-09, and 11 schools piloted the New Leaders assessments in 2007-08. The initial scores on the ELA and math assessments show students making significant progress over the course of the year (see Figures 1 and 2, page 4).

The 2008-09 school year is the first year that these assessments were used at the school, and the final administration of the tests correlated almost exactly with the CST scores. On the ELA assessment, 43% of students were proficient or advanced, compared to 44% on the CST; on the Si Swun math assessment, 67% were proficient or advanced compared to 65% on the CST math test.

**FIGURE 1: AWE Si SWUM MATH ASSESSMENT RESULTS, 2007-08**



**FIGURE 1: AWE ELA INTERIM ASSESSMENT COMPARISON, 2007-08**



Source (both figures): AWE internal document. The results do not add up to 100% because the graphs do not include the number of students who fell into the category of “approaching” or “partial” proficient, given that API scores will be based only on proficient or not proficient.

Underlying AWE’s impressive academic trajectory is a development story that features initial struggle and conflict, followed by rebirth and success. Opened as then-superintendent Dennis Chaconas’s pilot small school, before the OUSD board officially passed the New Small Autonomous Schools district policy, AWE has a unique history in the district’s pantheon of small schools. In particular, AWE’s development shows that it is possible to improve a struggling school through strong leadership and a re-visioning process that, in this case, yielded a more coherent instructional program and a commitment to investing in quality teaching.

Members of the East Oakland community consider AWE’s opening an important achievement for their neighborhood. In the late 1990’s, the community was unhealthy for families. According to an ACORN community leader,<sup>9</sup> the surrounding area “was in blight, it was referred to as dope haven, drug haven, or prostitu-

tion haven.” ACORN community leaders wanted to begin restoring their neighborhood, and identified a vacant site to begin the revitalization process. They initiated a door-knocking campaign to see what the community wanted on the site, and after numerous home visits and community meetings, it was agreed upon that site should house a new school.

The group continued meeting with parents, culminating in a forum at Castlemont High School that drew school board members, the school district superintendent, City Parks and Recreation officials, and members of the Oakland City Council to determine the necessary steps for building a school on the vacant site. Approval was granted for the school, pending the passage of a bond measure for purchasing the property. After this bond measure was passed in 1999, the City Council used the process of eminent domain (the state’s right to take over private property for public



use) to garner additional property for the school.

Securing the resources to build a school was an important achievement for community residents. As a school administrator commented, “This community has been historically underserved compared to the Fruitvale community. There are no open spaces or community centers here. It’s liquor stores and churches.” Generating the commitment and resources to build a new school in this part of East Oakland was a critical lever for developing the community’s resources.

In addition to playing a key role in securing capital for the school, ACORN also played an instrumental role in the design of the school. ACORN members worked with staff members from the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES) and met with teachers and administrators to decide school governance, curriculum, and community connections. Despite this advance work, the project was stalled until Dennis Chacones was hired as superintendent in 2000. Upon his hire, he agreed to work with the group to push the school forward. The group targeted September 2000 for the opening of the new school. The date was met with some resistance by the district, but amidst pressure from the community, Chacones visited the school site in the summer of 2000 and, according to one parent, “took off his suit, got in his jeans and tennis shoes, began working and opened the school in portables in September 2000.”

Despite all the energy put into the founding of AWE, the first few years of operation were fraught with problems. The school was designated by Chacones as one of several schools piloting the Open Court elementary reading and literacy curriculum, but many teachers and com-

munity members were more interested in a focus on social justice. In practice, the competing visions resulted in the school effectively implementing neither the Open Court Reading (OCR) program nor a social justice program. According to one district leader, the school had difficulty implementing the Open Court curriculum because the school was given the curriculum and materials at the start of the school year without any professional development for teachers regarding its use. The school struggled implementing the social justice program because, according to one founding teacher, there was never a clear vision of what social justice looked like in practice in the classroom. Then teacher and now principal, Kimi Kean, reflected on the problems faced during the school’s first year:

[There was] lots of turmoil and no coherent vision. Everyone wanted to lead the school in a different way. There were lots of conflicts and many people left at the beginning. We started K-5, and the fifth graders were kids that were underserved for 6 years. The kids were off the hook.

In addition to being under-prepared to implement the Open Court curriculum or a social justice program, much of the incoherence was attributed the disagreements among staff and school leadership. The founding principal — who was selected by the superintendent and was new to the principalship as well as to the community — clashed with faculty over the direction of the school, and at the conclusion of AWE’s first year, it emerged as the lowest performing elementary school in the city.<sup>10</sup> According to one school official, “All the energy around change did not produce increases in achievement.” Insufficient professional development for teachers, combined with

competing visions, created considerable upheaval, which the first principal was unable to overcome.

The school's second principal, Helen Duffy, was an experienced principal from the San Francisco Unified School District and had worked with ACORN, although she was new to this East Oakland neighborhood. She brought stability to AWE and mentored Kean over the next 4 years. In 2004, Duffy announced her pending retirement and agreed to stay until Kean finished her administrative certification program. Kean received a fellowship to participate in the New Leaders for New Schools certification program, which she credits as playing an essential role in her development as principal. After her residency year in 2004-05, she assumed the principalship for the 2005-06 school year, with the promise of three more years of leadership support and coaching from New Leaders for New Schools.

The story of Kean's rise to the principalship is widely known throughout the school. Kean grew up in Oakland and dropped out of Skyline High School at age 15. After a few years of renting an apartment with friends and working at a delicatessen, she completed her high school equivalency diploma and enrolled at Laney Community College. She transferred to the University of California, Berkeley, and later earned her master's degree and teaching certificate at Columbia University's Teachers College. After working as a student teacher at a school in New York that had converted to a small school, Kean returned to Oakland as a first-year teacher at ACORN Woodland Elementary<sup>11</sup>. Prior to naming Kean principal, Helen Duffy created a coaching position that allowed Kean to visit different schools and look at the different programs throughout the district. This process informed Kean's subsequent decision to pursue a school re-

visioning process (to create a new vision, mission, and theory of action for the whole school), focused primarily on developing the school's instructional program.

Academic issues, accompanied by a troublesome school climate, sparked the decision to place the school on a path toward re-incubation. In 2004-05, Kean was allowed to join the district's new school incubator program, and led the school through the re-visioning process. She described the OUSD incubator as "what should happen to all schools first."

The program was built on a 12-part curriculum designed by the OUSD New School Development Group. The process began by forming a community-based design team, creating a school vision and culture, and then developing a strategy for improving student outcomes. After those areas had been addressed, the design team of teachers and parents worked on developing an aligned instructional program and implementation plan. As part of the re-incubation, Kean toured other schools with AWE family members, and these observers began to generate a list of ideas they saw at other schools that they wanted implemented at AWE. Kean also wrote grants that brought in approximately \$200,000 in additional funding to provide coaches for leaders and staff to guide them as they underwent the change process. Kean sees the re-visioning process as supporting the school in developing four key areas: the school's instructional program, its academic goals for students, its school culture, and its vision for family partnerships. According to Kean, the school is beginning to see progress in achieving its vision in each of these respective areas. She says, "After 3 years, I see substantial evidence that we are realizing what we set out to do."



Photo: Courtesy of ACORN Woodland Elementary

## Section Two: Academic Functioning and Supports

### SCHOOL LEARNING CLIMATE

Even before stepping onto the campus of ACORN Woodland Elementary, one is struck by the contrast between the school and its surroundings. Situated between a weed- and debris-infested vacant lot and a cookie factory, the AWE campus is often referred to as a sanctuary in the community. The two-story, \$22 million facility it shares with EnCompass Academy is nearly 4 years old, but still looks brand new. Students and staff move throughout the campus with a sense of purpose that affirms and reflects the school's vision of helping young scholars reach their full potential through dedication, high expectations, and excellent teaching.

After its tumultuous beginning, AWE has made much progress in creating and supporting an academically focused school

climate. Much of the strides made in improving the school learning climate are attributed to small school size and the staff's

relentless attention to college readiness, public celebrations of academic achievement, and strong parent-community relationships.

All students are expected to leave AWE with the skills and determination to successfully pursue a college education, and it is apparent that AWE staff members have worked diligently to use meaningful symbols and events to create a school climate focused on achieving this goal. For example, the staff make it a point to refer to their students as “scholars.” These scholars attend classes named after universities and constantly celebrate their academic achievements. The hallways are filled with examples of student work and pictures of students who have achieved high levels or who have made significant progress in improving their scores on the school’s interim assessments in math and language arts.

Public celebration of academic success is also the focal point of the school’s culture: AWE builds its academic learning climate by regularly convening members of the school community to recognize academic success in the weekly culture assembly. During one assembly, students, dressed in their school uniforms, gathered outside in the amphitheatre for announcements and recognition of academic success. The principal, teachers, and the school’s student leadership team led the assembly. With many parents in attendance, the assembly is an on-going opportunity to involve parents in the culture of the school. Most of the assembly time was spent recognizing students who met the school’s standards for proficiency or growth.

Students receive certificates for learning growth and medals for meeting or exceeding the learning benchmark score. Principal

Kean explains the reason for differentiating the awards — certificates for growth, and medals for proficiency. “We want to recognize growth, but we don’t want to confuse it with meeting the standard.” Students are well behaved and take great pride in their awards, as many run off to show their parents their medals at the conclusion of the assembly. The culture assembly also provides a measure of transparency and accountability for teachers. A teacher commented that:

We give awards for growth, and we’re going to look at the results, but try not to take it personally. We don’t all have the same kids. It’s been hard. Each time I’ve had a lot of kids [recognized] and the other class hasn’t. I’m at 80% and they’re at 20%, and the kids say ‘I’m glad I’m not in that class.’ They don’t necessarily see that the teacher was out and then came back. It does put pressure on [teachers]. It’s a double-edged thing. We need to acknowledge and reward change and movement forward, but it’s still a hard one.

Although the culture assemblies may cause tensions that teachers must navigate daily, it is clear that these practices foster a sense of academic purpose and identity for the majority of the students. As one fifth grader said, “The students at ACORN don’t fool around as much as the students at other schools, [and] the teachers have high expectations to do their work.” Other students have a similar perspective, as they described the school as “good,” “aspiring,” and “fantabulous.”

In addition to a clear focus on college readiness, the school has also improved its climate by taking advantage of its small

school size to foster supportive relationships between students and parents. As one parent says about the relationships built in the small school:

It is so important that this school is small and all the parents and kids know each other by name and they smile and they greet each other. It's very important that this school stay small. As a parent, it helps because we can help kids from other families. Race doesn't matter — brown, black, white, Asian — they all are welcome, and parents too.

Many parents value the strong personal connections they and their children have developed with the principal and her staff. These relationships are particularly helpful in fostering the safe and orderly campus valued by parents. Another parent commented on the importance of a safe school in a violent neighborhood:

The number one concern here is safety. I don't even feel safe to walk to school with my children. I feel scared. Two weeks ago, they killed a child next to the school. The children at ACORN are not affected, we have security and a motorcycle police, they know when they are in here they are secure; the crime doesn't really affect them. I really like the school because of the connections with the staff and teachers. I feel the kids are safe because the classes are small and the teachers are excellent, but I worry about going to a big middle school.

Not only does AWE seem to provide parents with a safe option for their children, the climate is such that parents describe

changes in their children's attitudes about school once they began attending AWE:

For my children, being at this school is a good thing. They didn't like preschool, but once we fought and got them here, they love it, and they don't miss a day. Even if they're sick, they don't miss a day; they love the after-school curriculum. They enjoy it; two of them received medals. We're very happy with what is going on here at ACORN Woodland.

The strong sense of school community is a sharp contrast to AWE several years ago and to the neighborhood schools these students would have attended prior to AWE. By some accounts, "The climate at the neighborhood school was horrible. The school was overcrowded, with teachers packing their materials around in carts."<sup>12</sup> The founding of AWE immediately alleviated many of those conditions of overcrowding, but it did not automatically engender a strong learning climate.

Many of the improvements in school climate are directly attributed to the work Kean did in re-visioning the school with her team of parents and teachers. According to many teachers, in the initial years of operation, the school was "all over the place in terms of expectations for students and parents." The substantial growth in school cohesiveness is attributed to bringing parents and teachers together to establish what the school wants from its students academically when they leave AWE. They want a rigorous curriculum that prepares students to be college-ready from the beginning of their school experience.

## Instructional Program

During its 8 years of operation, AWE has experienced much variation in its instructional program and the curricular autonomy it is been given by the district, particularly in the area of English language arts (English language reading, writing, and speaking). The school has moved from an instructional program in which teachers exercised significant informal curricular autonomy, to strict adherence to the Open Court curriculum, to the current program based on adapting the Open Court curriculum to facilitate active learning opportunities and student mastery of key learning standards.

Teaching methods varied greatly in AWE's first 2 years. Teachers fought for and exercised curricular autonomy with little agreement on best practices. One district leader described the instructional program this way: "Although the school was supposed to be implementing the Open Court curriculum, they really just did their own thing."

After two years of API scores below 400 (out of a possible 1,000), the district took a stronger role in AWE's curriculum by holding them more accountable for implementing the Open Court curriculum. The district provided a coach to provide support and ensure compliance with the Open Court curriculum, and after two unsuccessful years focusing on social justice and a project-based curriculum that looked different in every classroom, the school finally began to focus on successful implementation of Open Court. After demonstrating to district officials that they could successfully implement the Open Court curriculum, the teachers began to develop methods for expanding Open Court in response to somewhat flat test scores in ELA. As Kean

put it, "After showing the district we could do Open Court, we explained how we were interested in expanding it. We did what we were asked to, did it well, and then they let us breathe." In spite of some teacher resistance to AWE's shift toward the prescribed Open Court curriculum, many now acknowledge that it was a necessary intervention for developing instructional coherence and consistency at the school site.

Today teachers at AWE use Open Court, but they have made adjustments in how it is used. Teachers deemed it necessary to supplement Open Court to better accommodate the needs of the diverse learners at the school. Literacy coach, Vanessa Flynn described the reasons and process for supplementing Open Court:

We flattened out in our reading scores, it's like 20% of kids were proficient. We weren't seeing a lot of growth; it was pretty dismal. We needed to rethink things instructionally. When you walk into a classroom, it is the teacher who is doing the reading, who is doing the thinking, not the student.

Teachers have to work so hard to make meaning of the text for the student. So that translates to when you sit a kid in front of test once a year, and it's the first time all year they've actually read on their own and been asked to make meaning of text — they aren't going to do well. To ensure that students are making meaning of text, we have to release that responsibility to them. I created a schedule that allowed for using Open Court as the base, and would fold in instruction to meet the students where they are.

The school's schedule calls for a blend of whole class and small group work. For 2 days per week, explicit teaching and modeling takes place using the OCR anthology of stories. In the whole class reading and discussion of the stories, reciprocal teaching strategies are utilized.<sup>13</sup> The teacher explicitly teaches and models the key reading skills/standards for the week, so the whole group reading instruction additionally provides an explicit scaffold for small group reading later in the week.

The literacy program also maintains continuity between whole group instruction and small group instruction by continuing to focus on the same skill while varying the teaching strategies. For example, if the objective of the week is for students to know and be able to compare and contrast two pieces of non-fiction text, then during whole group instruction, the teacher will use the Open Court story and a Venn diagram to model and lead students in guided practice in the skill "compare and contrast." During small group reading instruction, students apply the reading skill, "compare and contrast," to what they are reading at their reading level. Small group reading instruction occurs at least three times per week, using different reading strategies based on student grade level.<sup>14</sup>

All planning, delivery of instruction, and assessment is geared toward mastery of grade-level standards utilizing a depth-over-breadth approach. Each week, a grade-level reading skill is taught for mastery.<sup>15</sup> Teachers model the reading skill with text that the whole class is reading; then teachers engage students in guided practice with the same reading skill; then students apply the skill to what they are reading in small groups with their reading level text. As teachers instruct for a particular reading

skill to be taught to mastery, this reading skill is practiced in reading application as well as small assignments geared at written application. For example, if the reading skill for a particular grade level in a week is to compare and contrast two characters, explicit modeling, guidance and application occurs when students write a short essay comparing and contrasting two characters from what they are reading.<sup>16</sup>

Now, when one walks into classrooms at AWE it is evident that students are actively engaged in learning. When observing a fifth grade classroom, we observed all students in small groups working on the same skill — drawing conclusions — but using different texts depending on the reading level of each small group. The teacher visited every group and encouraged them to follow a protocol for reciprocal teaching. The next day, each student read a book at his or her own level, so that a particular student was working on mastering a fifth grade language arts standard in a third grade book. The teacher rotated throughout the class and helped students when necessary. Upon completion of the book, the teacher had the students take an Accelerated Reader<sup>17</sup> test.

AWE teachers also use a reading buddy program to promote students engaging with texts in meaningful ways. In this program, older students are assigned a buddy in a lower grade with whom they read each week. Both the younger and older students feel this program helps improve their reading skills, as the older students are motivated to master the text to explain it to younger students, and the younger students understand the text better after receiving instruction from the older students. Many students identified the reading buddy program as one of their favorite aspects of the ELA program at AWE.

Student learning is assessed primarily through site-developed assessments, based on the New Leaders for New Schools (NLNS) assessments. These assessments are primarily paper and pencil multiple-choice tests that have been aligned to the California language arts learning standards for each grade level. After each administration of standards-based interim assessments, the school principal and instructional coaches meet with individual teachers (or grade levels as appropriate) to analyze and reflect on test results in order to create action plans to address the needs of learners who are struggling with certain standards. Teachers align their curriculum to NLNS assessments using the NLNS-developed ELA Standards Maps to backwards map<sup>18</sup> their instruction in 6 to 8 week cycles. The standards maps have also helped narrow the focus of instruction each week, so that skills and strategies can be taught in a way that moves students toward mastering the content rather than just being exposed to the content.

School leaders and staff strongly contend that using the quarterly assessments they have created has played an instrumental role in their ability to improve student outcomes on the end-of-year California Standards Test (CST). The shift is universally described as the shift from curriculum-embedded assessment to standards-based assessment. One teacher describes the shift this way:

I like standards-based assessments. Last year, I did [curriculum-embedded] assessments, and if you can't read, you can [still] pass the test because of all the other projects we do around the story. When it comes CST time, the students didn't have experience doing it on their

own. Standards-based assessment has shown me where the kids are on the standards. The test actually tests what the kids can do on their own, rather than remembering everything we did all week.

School leaders feel similarly enthusiastic about the new approach to literacy instruction and assessment:

I hope more schools can start making this move toward having more of a standards-based approach: having expectations of kids to be the ones who are the thinkers and the learners and the readers. It's been really exciting, the shift we've seen here at AWE, where kids are sitting in groups, they're crying about books, they're talking about books, they're laughing about books — that just doesn't happen, usually. For whatever reason, there has been a loss of trust in students' ability to do that, and I'm not sure what it would take, but I really deeply hope we can regain that trust in our students' capacity to be high-level thinkers, and to not be so dependent on the teacher to make meaning of the world for them.

It is important to note that the AWE staff has not been randomly experimenting with different approaches to literacy instruction and assessment. Shifts in the learning program are based on looking at the school's achievement data and adopting practices and assessments that have been proven successful in meeting the gaps in the school's instructional program.

Staff members have worked particularly hard to implement teaching practices to



meet the needs of their English language learners. In order to ensure that English language learners (ELLs) receive targeted language instruction, the daily schedule maintains a 30-minute English Language Development block that includes students at all grade levels. Students in kindergarten through third grade use the district-adopted ELL curriculum, Language for Learning. Due to the specific needs of fourth and fifth grades to have cohesion between the ELA block and English Language Development for students who are learning English, instruction does not include the district-adopted Language for Writing. Rather, targeted English language development instruction occurs through three strategies:

- 1) front-loading of key vocabulary words;
- 2) front-loading of grammar and reading comprehension skills and strategies;
- 3) applying grammar lessons in speaking, writing, and reading during both whole group and small group instruction.

A similar refinement process is occurring in the math curriculum.

In the school's search for curriculum and assessment that align to the California standards and for teaching strategies that turn over the learning to the students, AWE was one of eight schools using the Si Swun math program for the 2007-08 school year. As mentioned in Section One of this case study, the Si Swun lessons proved well aligned to the CST. The Si Swun lesson design uses the following for-

mat: 1) doing a spiral problem of the day (from old content that wasn't mastered); 2) stating/writing of the lesson's objective; 3) writing new vocabulary in a math journal; 4) direct instruction by the teacher; 5) structured guided practice (students work in small groups to solve problems; and 6) presentations (a few students are randomly selected to solve a problem/explain their strategies on board). The other main component is Math Facts, a systematic teaching of math facts such as multiplication tables, and daily applications of those math facts.

The change in the school's math curriculum was initiated mid-year based on data analyses indicating that AWE students were unlikely to achieve proficiency on the CST's. As Kean said, "Data is a very big part of the school. We looked at the data and said we have hard-working teachers who are trying hard, so why aren't students learning? We needed to figure something out, so we tried Si Swun. The goal of Si Swun is to turn the learning back to the kids and make the kids in-charge and accountable." The general consensus among teachers is that Si Swun has a very specific structure that is helpful in moving the school in the right direction. Si Swun math aligns well with the guiding instructional philosophy at AWE: using data to drive curriculum decisions, and an instructional philosophy that emphasizes active learning processes.

As AWE teachers re-envision their students as active learners, the original social justice mission of the school has begun to re-emerge, but with a slightly different take on the meaning of social justice. One leader describes it this way:

We haven't surfaced the social justice in a while because we're just moving out of the compliance mode. But in

terms of the work and the shift from teacher-centered to student-centered, it is really about social justice, because if kids are reliant on the teacher for the answers, then that has major political ramifications for who they become as adults. If children can pick up a book on their own and make meaning and ask questions and apply what they learn in really effective ways, that has a more positive impact on who they become as adults — they're the agents in their own learning, and that's huge, when it comes to social justice.

Students also gain other educational opportunities through the Extended Learning Program (ELP). The ELP, which runs from the end of the school day until 6:00 p.m., serves 170 of the 260 students on campus, with 120 of these students attending until 6:00 p.m. Although the school contracts with the Oakland Youth Chorus as its lead agency for the program, the program is co-created with the AWE staff and effectively becomes an extension of AWE rather than an unrelated add-on at the end of the day. While the program provides valuable opportunities for students, many parents and school leaders also acknowledge it plays a valuable role in keeping the students safe. As one school leader said, "Who knows what these kids would be doing during this time." The program is a combination of required academics, choice academics, and recreation. On one afternoon, we observed that after a brief snack time, students rotated through sessions in one-hour increments that ranged from art, drumming, dance, and chorus to required and choice academics. All students in grades 2-5 have individualized, required, extended learning academic schedules that included small group tutorials or additional classes. One

student indicated that she was in the ELP for support in science because she had fallen behind when a long-term substitute teacher taught her science class. While all of these programs effectively complement the instructional program at AWE, the leadership class illustrates the AWE instructional philosophy particularly well.

The leadership class is one of the "choice academic" classes. It is a combination of fourth- and fifth-grade students who are taught leadership skills and are given specific responsibilities in running the school, such as planning and facilitating assemblies, and managing the school recycling program. In the leadership class, students are held to high expectations and develop skill sets, such as public speaking and creating agendas, with an eye toward future leadership positions. The class makes the vision into a reality by training young scholars to transform the world around them while they are still in elementary school.

AWE has developed a data-driven instructional program that couples high expectations with providing the supports necessary to work with students at all levels of knowledge and skill. The program is rooted in knowing the students well and investigating effective curriculum and teaching methods to produce high student learning results. By focusing on creating an instructional program based on multiple forms of student data (e.g., CST scores, interim assessments, teacher observations), AWE has leveraged its small size to improve academic outcomes. As Kean says, "Small schools can be transformative because we can personalize our support and provide more academic opportunities for the kids who need it. We can be transformative because we are small. If we had 500 kids, we couldn't do the things we do."

## Professional Capacity

As noted earlier, AWE has a tradition of strong community support and spirited ideas about instruction, but it has not always had the professional capacity to implement a robust program. Much of the success of AWE is often attributed to the considerable increases in the capacity of the adults at the school. AWE's theory of action is that when teachers collaborate, reflect upon their own practice, partner with families, and empower students, then student outcomes will improve. The school's hiring process and school structures reflect these values.

Although AWE, as the lowest performing elementary school in the district, struggled to find teachers in its initial years, its leaders now feel they have a much stronger teacher applicant pool and a more rigorous selection process. There were ten applicants for the most recent job opening, with the finalists required to engage in multiple panel interviews, teach demonstration lessons, and submit writing samples. As a veteran teacher who sought out AWE says, "I was impressed by the selection process, it was very in-depth, thoughtful. It involved teachers, parents, data coaches, and administrators. It was kind of refreshing that there were really high standards to offer kids in this community. So many kids in communities like this don't get high quality." Like many new small schools, AWE struggled initially in attracting teachers, but this has changed as the school has begun to realize its vision and develop its reputation.

Despite the rigorous selection process at the site level, teachers and Kean stated it can still be difficult to get the right staff in place because of human resource policies at

the district level. Kean feels that, over time, she has learned to navigate the system more effectively, but teachers continue to express concern with human resource practices.

One teacher commented that although she has been at the school for almost a year, she is still going through the Human Resources Department's hiring process and has yet to receive her retroactive pay. Another teacher says, "The amount of energy it takes to get what you deserve is unbearable, and then people wonder why we don't have teacher retention." Others echoed similar stories of lost files and unanswered voice mails and emails. Because the Human Resources Department is often a teacher's first interaction with the district office, these experiences contribute to a feeling of "I avoid the district office whenever I can" among teachers.

AWE has not only improved its selection process, but it has also developed powerful systems rooted in collaboration and coaching that build teacher capacity. Much of the system is founded on Kean's ability to use the resources allotted to the school through the Results-Based Budgeting process to create a system aligned with improving teacher capacity. In 2007-08 she hired a literacy coach, a full-time instructional coach, two part-time family coordinators, one part-time prevention specialist, and paid for full preparation time for the 12 full-time teachers who serve the school's 240 students.

The principal makes all hires with an eye toward improving teaching and learning in the classroom. She has also hired personnel, such as the specialists and coordinators listed above, who can take on administrative tasks, such as planning parent outreach activities, thus freeing

her to focus more on instruction. It is also important that Kean has been able to pay for full preparation periods for the teachers, which provides them with time to work with the coaches. In 2008-09, the number of coaches is pared down, but the coaches played an instrumental role in leading change this past year. For example, the staff relied heavily on its literacy coach, Flynn, to move the instructional program of the school toward using standards-based assessments.

Flynn has been focused primarily on aligning AWE's instructional program to the CST's. Flynn was formerly a member of the AWE staff and had moved to Lighthouse Community Charter School as part of her administrative internship for the NLNS program. At Lighthouse she worked with a grade-level team to increase the number of students proficient in ELA. She worked with two teachers who were responsible for 40 students and increased the number of proficient students from 19% to 59%.

Kean invited Flynn to return to AWE to play a similar role as a literacy coach. Spurred by the impressive results of her "test case" at Lighthouse, Flynn conducted a workshop for teachers focused on surfacing what it means to be a proficient reader and what students should be doing by the end of fifth grade. Many teachers were inspired by the workshop and felt a sense of relief at being released from strict adherence to district curricula, but there was also resistance. As Flynn recounts:

As a result of being in compliance mode, teachers had become decapitated about their own learning about how to teach reading, so we couldn't just take that away. It took a lot of work on my part, being in

classrooms, modeling, giving feedback, and providing them with the materials they needed to make it happen. We tried to match up expectations with support; nonetheless, this first year was very stressful.

Teachers agree that the change has been a lot of work, but feel that Flynn's coaching has enabled them to implement the necessary changes in their curriculum and instructional practice to supplement Open Court.

The literacy coach is also credited with organizing effective professional development activities and facilitating useful sessions during the weekly teacher collaboration time. Flynn organizes the professional development sessions around the gaps she notices in teacher practice during her observation time, her assessment of their instructional plans, and the documents teachers create. She estimates she spends 70% of her day observing teacher practice. She and Kean are currently working to create a framework for a professional learning community that allows teachers to identify strengths and challenges and elicit teacher support.

Although much success is attributed to the site-based coaching, Kean also highlighted a session led by OUSD Chief Academic Officer Brad Stam that was particularly useful in moving the school in the right direction. Stam and his colleagues visited the school to hear and observe what the school was working on. After observing the instructional practice throughout the school, Stam facilitated a fish bowl activity about the observed practice that was especially effective. The activity provided an opportunity for probing questions that fostered deep discussion around effective instructional

practice. Staff members felt this was much more powerful than “coming in with a bunch of checklists,” and contend that the process was extremely helpful in advancing their thinking.

AWE has improved not only its instructional capacity through the strategic use of coaches, but many feel that coaching has played an important role in developing the leadership capacity of the school. Many teachers celebrate Kean’s leadership style, as it is characterized as “very positive, focused on instruction, collaborative, relying on different groups and structures and coaching” but acknowledge that her style has changed slightly over the years. Teachers feel that Kean is reflective and open to growing, and the BayCES coaching has helped her see where she can improve. Kean made a similar observation about her own practice:

I’ve always had tremendous coaching. I had a data coach, a New Leaders [New Leaders for New Schools] coach, and a BayCES coach. The BayCES coach forced us to think about how the system must work to create equity. If we said we were about equity they would question me how come there were always three African-American boys sitting in the office each visit.

For 2008-09 the BayCES coach will be a half-time position, and Kean noted the importance of the district finding personnel who were thought partners for school leaders, given the reduction in BayCES coaching.

Kean has also imparted the lessons she has learned from her coach to the team of instructional coaches at her site.

Acknowledging that coaches often need coaching, she has developed a protocol that she uses with her coaches. During the sessions the coaches sit together and think through dilemmas and challenges and possible responses. This is another key structure for collaborative improvement and sharing expertise. Many coaches find this activity useful in their own professional development.

Kean’s investment in teaching has created a cadre of coaches who worked to make significant changes in the curriculum last year. All teachers accessed coach expertise in particular focus areas: ELA instruction and English Language Development. Where these subjects overlap, integrated coaching was provided to teachers. Coaching was differentiated based on need, with newer and/or struggling teachers receiving more intensive support and more experienced teachers asked to share best practice. In addition to implementing coaching cycles, all instructional coaches, including the principal, are directly involved in teaching small reading and/or intervention groups on a weekly basis.

AWE teachers use a results-driven collaboration model. Collaboration is built into the school day and takes place one hour per week. It is structured each week for teachers to collaboratively plan units, analyze data, and engage in protocols for the purpose of adjusting instructional practice. Essential to the collaboration hour is a focus on students, their learning experiences and achievement. An instructional coach is present at all circuit collaboration meetings. In addition to collaborative planning, all teachers receive the benefit of a focused-peer observation cycle in which they get feedback on practices from at least one teacher colleague.

Coaches have facilitated many changes at AWE by increasing individual and collective capacity, but not all coaching experiences have been positive. Several teachers suggested that their Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) coaching was too impersonal and focused on compliance. For example, one teacher complained that she had to spend all her preparation periods filling out paperwork and figuring out what classes counted for her BTSA program. Others thought their BTSA coach was stretched too thin, with too many teachers to support, and that the BTSA workshops were far removed from the issues they were working on in their respective classroom BTSA experiences were not all negative though, as one teacher felt she had a positive experience when she was paired with a coach who was still working as a teacher.

AWE has been able to effectively build the capacity of its teachers to make significant changes in its instructional program primarily through the use of coaching and teacher collaboration time. Although the school has developed a rigorous selection process that helps move high-capacity individuals into the school site, there is a need to cohere these efforts with district-level human resources policies and personnel.

### **Parent & Community Relations**

The larger East Oakland community has changed considerably over the past 8 years, and the staff at AWE has worked hard to build a strong relationship with the community in a time of shifting demographics. A community that 8 years ago was 50% African American and 50% Latino is now approximately 75% Latino and 20% African American. Many

school leaders acknowledge that these changes have created a sense of loss for the community. As one leader put it:

Generations have grown up in this neighborhood. Now both groups feel like they're scrapping over a tiny piece of the pie. We've worked hard to build bridges with the community. Eight years ago, African American parents would say 'Don't let my children play with those Latino students' and vice versa. We've worked hard on deconstructing stereotypes.

AWE has fostered a sense of community by reaching out to parents, and developed a common sense of purpose around the academic mission of the school: preparing children for college. This sense of common purpose was evident when a group of African-American parents contacted a bilingual teacher at AWE about offering Spanish classes for parents, so they could communicate more effectively with parents who spoke only Spanish.

As one might expect in a school founded on the grassroots efforts of community organizers, AWE continues to be a welcoming place for parents and community members. School leaders work hard to build connections with families and continue to utilize community resources for supporting students in the school. All parents feel welcome at the school and convey the importance of that environment. Parents appreciate the quality of the instruction the school provides for their children and comment on the commitment of the teachers. Parents also appreciate the personalization strategies built into AWE's instructional program. They appreciate both the individual attention their children

receive and the small group work that occurs in the classroom.

Many parents have witnessed firsthand the impact of these instructional practices because of the school's open door policy. The principal and teachers encourage parents to observe the instructional practices at the school, and make it widely known that parents can observe instruction any time, with no appointment necessary. As a parent observed, "It's always a good thing when the parents and school work together. My children were in other schools and I would go to the school and not feel welcome. It's totally different here; the teachers don't have a problem with you sitting in the class."

In addition to inviting parents into the school, the staff makes a concerted effort to reach out to families. Using site funds, the school pays all teachers to make home visits. After several years of paying teachers to visit parents before school starts, the school is beginning to develop deep relationships with families. As the trust between the school and families has increased, teachers are now using home visits to set academic goals for families and explain how the instructional program works. This is a pivotal shift. As Kean explains, "Before home visits, the main interactions with parents were when parents were upset, so home visits acknowledge the system has failed and it is empowering to have the teacher come to you." Home visits play an important role for community leaders as well. Parent Fannie Brown, considered by many as the unofficial founder of AWE, explains the importance of home visits in improving the experience of the students at AWE:

We don't just have kids come to school to learn, we take care of the whole total need of the child. Because the school is small, we are able to do two home visits a year, sitting down with parents, getting to know them, seeing what parents want for the school year. When a child is acting up, we go out to the home when we can't get the parent into the school. If he needs medical help, dental help, even if he needs an IEP [individual education plan] and doesn't know how to get it, we help the parent.

Staff at AWE has been able to realize the vision of partnering with parents by creating a welcoming environment for parents at the school and actively reaching out to parents to build supportive networks around the student.

The school also utilizes community resources to support children and families through a series of measures that avoid district office constraints. School leaders turn over the funds they receive to run the Extended Learning Program to the Oakland Youth Chorus (OYC) to avoid bureaucratic hurdles. The school also works with the East Bay Agency for Children (EBAC) to provide one full-time and one part-time mental health counselor. Students at the school suffer from grief, violence, abuse, and neglect, creating the need to address these issues in order to make academic growth possible. EBAC is reimbursed through Medi-Cal, but not all students are covered by Medi-Cal.

Kean explains the importance of working with outside agencies to deliver services to the school: "A school psychologist is very capable but prohibitively expensive,

at approximately \$100,000 per year with benefits. It's better to have the dollars and partner with the community, but the district also needs to be real and bring in another whole level of support. We need the resources for a full-time counselor.”

AWE welcomes parents to the school and brings the school to the parent's home. Teachers envision themselves as one of many community members who must play active roles in delivering to the children of East Oakland the education they deserve.

AWE plays an important role in the OUSD school portfolio. It offers proof that a school that began with considerable turmoil, through a combination of a thoughtful strategy and effective leadership, re-visioned itself to create a strong instructional program. Unlike reconstitution, OUSD's re-visioning and incubation process helped AWE staff focus on making progress toward key outcomes without losing the institutional knowledge gained during their early years of operation.

Important human capital and curriculum issues are also surfaced by AWE. The AWE

experience shows the intense supports provided by school staff to supplement and enrich the district's literacy curriculum.

AWE also provides a template and illustrates the importance of keeping the community involved in the operation of the school as the OUSD reform strategy matures from a grassroots movement to one that is centered at the district level. The case highlights how connections and commitments between district and community leaders can help launch a new school, and how strong leaders can leverage this strength to support the school's academic mission. AWE also illustrates the power of the small school structure in building community. As one parent says:

Small schools make a family. We don't have a lot of fights, not a lot of battling, not a lot of racial slurs. Kids are understanding it. They've been able to experience different cultures and backgrounds.... They can still come here and maintain a friendship with kids [from other backgrounds].





Photo: Courtesy of ACORN Woodland Elementary

## Endnotes

1. The Academic Performance Index (API) is a single number, ranging from a low of 200 to a high of 1000, that reflects a school's performance level, based on the results of statewide testing. Its purpose is to measure the academic performance and growth of schools. The information that forms the basis for calculating the API comes from the results of the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Program and the California High School Exit Examination (CAHSEE). The API is calculated by converting a student's performance on statewide assessments across multiple content areas into points on the API scale. These points are then averaged across all students and all tests. The result is the API. 2007-08 Academic Performance Index Reports Information Guide Prepared by the California Department of Education <http://www.cde.ca.gov/api/>
2. AWE website and <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ta/ac/ap/apireports.asp> Accessed May 2008.
3. Curriculum-based assessments refer to the assessments that accompany the Open Court Reading (OCR) program.
4. Results-Based Budgeting is a site-based funding formula that "distributes dollars to the schools on a per-pupil basis, rather than allocating it in staff positions, programs, or other resources." University of California, Berkeley, Haas School of Business. (2007). *Results-Based Budgeting: The challenge of autonomy*. (The Education Leadership Case Competition). Berkeley, CA: Author.
5. The state has set 800 as the target API score for all schools. A score of 800 indicates high levels of proficiency in both language arts and math. Thus, even as growth has slowed in terms of raw numbers, the increases over the past 4 years are significant because the school is nearing the benchmark set by the state.

6. New Leaders for New Schools is a non-profit organization that partners with districts to recruit, train, certify, and place principals. One part of the principal training programs focus on developing standards-based assessments.
7. Math program used by the Long Beach School District. The Si Swun Lesson design is as follows: 1) spiral problem of the day (from old content that wasn't mastered); 2) stating/writing of the lesson's objective; 3) writing new vocabulary in math journal; 4) direct instruction; 5) structured guided practice (students work in groups to solve problems); 6) presentations (students randomly selected to solve a problem/ explain strategies on board).
8. The new small schools were among the first to pilot many of the new assessment, such as Edison/ Tungsten ELA assessments, Action Learning, Si Swun, and New Leaders assessments now being offered to more schools district-wide.
9. Associations of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) is the grassroots community organization that led a struggle to improve the neighborhood, including a new elementary school for neighborhood residents.
10. New School Development Group Matrix, OUSD Leadership Matrix.
11. Johnson, C. (2005, September 2). Ex-dropout, now school principal. *San Francisco Chronicle*.
12. The multi-track, year-round schedule used by the large neighborhood school to alleviate overcrowding necessitated teachers packing up their rooms and then unpacking every couple of months. In a year-round multi-track school students were divided into four tracks with only three tracks, attending the school at any one time.
13. In reciprocal teaching, students are trained to have group leadership roles that include "Monitoring/ Clarifying," "Predicting," and "Summarizing." Students are able to take academic leadership roles during discussions, and therefore develop more ownership of reading goals.
14. AWE varies its ELA program by grade levels as well. In grades K-3, students read text that is at or slightly above their reading level, and then they receive consistent feedback and instruction according to their different reading needs. This is done primarily through guided reading methods. In Grades 4-5, reciprocal teaching is used more widely.
15. Students requiring extra support to reach mastery receive additional time during the after-school Extended Learning Program.
16. AWE curriculum flexibility application for 2008-09.
17. Accelerated Reader is a computer-based program in which students read a book and then take a test on a computer to determine their level of understanding of the text. Students are then awarded points based on their performance on the test and the difficulty of the text.
18. Backwards mapping begins with teachers identifying the desired student results and the assessments used to measure learning. Teachers then implement lessons designed with the end product and assessments in mind.



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