ORGANIZED
COMMUNITIES,
STRONGER SCHOOLS

A Research-Based Workshop Series

Community Organizing to Transform a School District

The Small Schools Movement in Oakland

A CASE-STUDY JIGSAW ACTIVITY WITH FACILITATOR'S GUIDE AND GROUP READINGS

Developed by Anne T. Henderson
based on *Building a Districtwide Small Schools Movement: Oakland Community Organizations*
by Seema Shah, Kavitha Mediratta, and Sara McAlister

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Organized Communities, Stronger Schools

A research-based workshop series

INTRODUCTION to the Workshop Series

This series of four workshops is based on a six-year research study of the impact of community organizing to bring about improvements in local schools by residents in seven low- to moderate-income urban communities. The study – Organized Communities, Stronger Schools – was conducted by Kavitha Mediratta, Seema Shah, and Sara McAlister between 2002 and 2008. The findings were published in seven case studies by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University in 2009, and in a book, *Community Organizing for Stronger Schools: Strategies and Successes,* by the Harvard Education Press in 2009.

The goal of the study was to answer the question: Does the political will generated by community organizing for education reform enhance the capacity of schools to improve student learning? The researchers concluded that it does. They found that effective community organizing

- stimulates important changes in educational policy, practices, and resource distribution at the system level;
- strengthens school-community relationships, parent involvement and engagement, and trust in schools;
- contributes to higher student educational outcomes, including higher attendance, test score performance, high school completion, and college-going aspirations.

The case studies documented how seven communities (Oakland, Los Angeles, Austin, Chicago, Miami, Philadelphia, and the Bronx) mobilized to identify problems, develop solutions, pressure policy-makers and administrators, and contribute important assets to address the challenges their low-performing school systems faced.

The workshops focus on community organizing strategies in four communities. Through a "jigsaw" reading-and-discussion activity, each workshop helps participants understand the organizing efforts of one community, explore the implications those efforts may have on their own community, and identify next steps they want to take. The four workshops are:

- Oakland – Community Organizing to Transform a School District
- Los Angeles – Youth and Community Organizing to Improve Curriculum
- Austin – Community Organizing to Build Partnerships in Schools
- Chicago – Community Organizing to Rethink the Teacher Pipeline

The full case studies series and the four workshops are available for free download from the Annenberg Institute Web site at <www.annenberginstitute.org/WeDe/Mott.php>.

Community Organizing to Transform a School District

The Small Schools Movement in Oakland

FACILITATOR's Guide to the Workshop

In Oakland, California, a grassroots collaborative of parents and community residents recognized a fundamental inequity in the schools across the district and, through the power of community organizing, they developed and won approval for a new small schools policy to address that inequity. This workshop is designed to help participants understand how the local community organizing group – Oakland Community Organizations (OCO) – brought about a fundamental and dramatic transformation in their city's public schools. In the course of the workshop, participants will

- get an overview of the organizing effort in Oakland,
- become familiar with specific components of the effort,
- construct a composite picture of how OCO accomplished the transformation, and
- consider how OCO's work can inform their own work in their local community.

The materials for this workshop were adapted from a case study on community organizing in Oakland, California, *Building a Districtwide Small Schools Movement*, part of the research study series on Organized Communities, Stronger Schools, published by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

The two-hour workshop consists of four main segments (including time for transitioning):

Welcome and introduction to the workshop	20 minutes
PowerPoint presentation on the Oakland study	
Jigsaw activity	
Understanding a piece of the work (small groups)	40 minutes
Reading and discussing excerpts from the study	
Putting the pieces together (full group)	30 minutes
Reporting out on small-group learnings	
General discussion	20 minutes
Implications for the group's work and next steps	
Comments and closing	10 minutes

IMPORTANT: To be most effective, the full participant group should be at least 10 but not more than 35 people. This will ensure at least 2, but not more than 7, people in each small-group discussion.

Facilitator's Instructions

As the facilitator for this workshop, you will welcome the participants, narrate a PowerPoint presentation that introduces the experiences of Oakland Community Organizations, provide instructions and materials for the jigsaw exercise (small-group readings and discussions of different excerpts from the Oakland case study, followed by report-outs to the large group to gain a fuller understanding of OCO work), and finally a wrap-up discussion pointing to next steps.

Materials provided for this workshop

- ✦ Facilitator's instructions and workshop agenda
- ✦ A short PowerPoint presentation with background on the research study and an introduction to the Oakland story
- ✦ A handout for participants with
  - background on the study of Oakland Community Organizations
  - agenda for the workshop
  - discussion questions for the five small-group reading assignments
- ✦ Readings adapted from the full case study for each of the five small groups

Before the workshop

- ✦ Read the full Oakland case study, available online at <www.annenberginstitute.org/WeDe/Mott.php>.
- ✦ Familiarize yourself with all the workshop materials.
- ✦ Make photocopies for participants:
  - enough copies of "Participants' Handout" for all participants
  - enough copies of each small-group reading for the number of participants in each group
- ✦ Review the PowerPoint presentation and adjust the script as needed.
- ✦ Arrange for the necessary equipment to show the PowerPoint (projector, laptop, extension cords, etc.). Note that there is a short, embedded film clip: you may need sound amplification for a larger group.
- ✦ Assemble materials for poster reports: poster paper, markers, easels, etc.
- ✦ If you are not familiar with the jigsaw exercise protocol, you can find information about it at <www.jigsaw.org/overview.htm>. The activity here is an abbreviated version.
- ✦ Make sure there are suitable spaces for five small discussion groups to meet.

Facilitator's Agenda for the Workshop — Total time: 2 hours

Welcome and introduction — 20 minutes

- Welcome participants and introduce yourself. If participants do not know each other, ask them to introduce themselves briefly.
- Show and narrate the PowerPoint presentation on the community organizing study and the context in Oakland.
- Distribute the "Participants' Handout" to each participant.

Jigsaw activity

1. Small-group reading and discussion — 40 minutes

- Give the following instructions to full group: "You'll be working in small groups, each group reading a different section of the Oakland study. In your groups, you'll read your section, respond to the questions for your group in the Participants' Handout, and develop a poster report on what you've learned. You'll have about 35 minutes for this activity."

  "Please break into five small groups by counting off from one to five."

  "Assemble with the others with your number and pick a recorder for your small group to take notes on the group's ideas." [Facilitator: make sure there are at least two people per group.]
- Hand out copies of small-group readings to each group.
- After 30 minutes, remind groups to begin completing their posters.
- After 40 minutes, call the small groups back to the full group.

2. Small-group report-outs to the full group — 30 minutes

- Give the following instructions to full group: "Now we're going to build a complete picture of the Oakland work by having each group report out on what you learned, using your poster report. Going in numerical order, each group will have 5 minutes."

General discussion and next steps — 20 minutes

- Lead a discussion based on the small-group report-outs. Use the suggested prompts if necessary. (If time is short, skip to the discussion of next steps.)

  "Building political will" is a term often used these days. What did OCO do to build political will for school reform? (Prompts: consensus, capacity, publicizing)

  Educators often think of parent involvement as what parents do at home. How did OCO bring parent engagement into schools? How was OCO's vision of parent involvement different from the traditional PTA/PTO view? (Prompts: design teams, advocacy at district level)

  How did OCO organizing influence the capacity of schools to educate students? (Prompts: stronger professional culture, teacher engagement in decision-making)
- Allow time for the group to consider its next steps.

  What are the implications for your work? What would you like to do with this information?

Comments and closing — 10 minutes

- Invite participant comments on the workshop.
- Wrap up and adjourn.

Community Organizing to Build a Districtwide School Reform Agenda

The Small Schools Movement in Oakland

PARTICIPANTS' Handout

The new small schools movement began as a community movement, and grassroots organizing was essential. . . . We intentionally opened schools only where organizing was occurring in order to grow and maintain a level of energy needed to initiate new reform. This was wildly successful thanks to the tremendous organizing done by Oakland Community Organizations.

— *Oakland Unified School District Web site*

Learning from Oakland Community Organizations

It is not often that a school district publicly credits community organizing for a positive transformation in public schools. But this is what happened in Oakland, California, where years of on-the-ground organizing – community meetings, relationship building, and public actions – led to the creation of forty-eight new small schools, fundamentally transforming the district landscape.

This workshop is an opportunity to learn how Oakland Community Organizations (OCO), a grassroots community organizing group of parents and residents, accomplished this feat.

After a brief introduction to the work in Oakland, we'll do a "jigsaw" exercise that will enable the group to build a deeper understanding of OCO's work. First, five small groups will each read a different excerpt from the research study on OCO and discuss a set of questions designed to help you get the most out of your excerpt. Then the full group will reconvene, and each small group will report on its piece of the jigsaw to construct the whole picture and discover what is relevant to your work.

Background on the Workshop

This workshop consists of short readings and activities based on the research report *Building a Districtwide Small Schools Movement: Oakland Community Organizations* by Seema Shah, Kavitha Mediratta, and Sara McAlister, published by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University in 2009. The report is one of a series of case studies that followed organizing efforts to improve public schools, led by community residents, in seven low- to moderate-income communities throughout the country. The goal of this six-year research study was to answer the question: Does the political will generated by organizing in the arena of education reform ultimately enhance the capacity of schools to improve student learning? The researchers concluded that it did.

The full case studies on the seven sites – Oakland, Los Angeles, Austin, Chicago, Miami, Philadelphia, and the Bronx – are available for download from the Annenberg InstituteWeb site at <www.annenberginstitute.org/WeDe/Mott.php>. The materials for this workshop are adapted from the Oakland case study.

A Vignette on Oakland Community Organizations

In 2000, following months of strategy sessions and research on the problem of overcrowded schools, organizers and parent leaders at Oakland Community Organizations (OCO) undertook a simple, yet profound, task. They sketched a map of their city. On it they charted elementary schools located in the wealthy hills section of Oakland. Then they mapped schools in the low-lying flatlands of Oakland. Underneath each schoolhouse they noted the number of students attending the school and its ranking on the state Academic Performance Index. On a scale of 1 to 10, an API rank of 1 signifies that the school is in the state's lowest decile; a 10 indicates that the school's academic performance falls within the top decile.

The map they generated showed the dramatic disparities between smaller, higher-performing schools in the hills and the overcrowded, low-performing schools in the flatlands. In bold letters, the map's headline asked, "Is this fair?"

As OCO started organizing for small schools in Oakland, the map hung prominently in its office. Universally, the map stopped people in their tracks. Liz Sullivan, a former elementary school teacher and an OCO organizer, explains, "We had structure, but it didn't catch fire until we came up with the research on the map. Once we had done that research and produced the map, people [would] just come in and gasp because it's so blatant."

Excerpted from *Building a Districtwide Small Schools Movement: Oakland Community Organizations*, by Seema Shah, Kavitha Mediratta, and Sara McAlister. Providence, RI: Brown University, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2009.

Agenda for the Jigsaw Activity

Small-group reading — **10–15 minutes**

- ✦ Read your group's assigned reading (see handouts) independently and silently.
- ✦ As you are reading your section, highlight some favorite sentences/phrases/ideas.

Small-group analyzing — **25–30 minutes**

- ✦ Read through the discussion questions for your group number (below).
- ✦ Choose one person to record the group's ideas.
- ✦ As you discuss the questions, ask yourself: What ideas presented in our reading selection would be the most valuable for the larger group to know and understand? How can we communicate these ideas in an interesting way?
- ✦ Design a poster representing the major points or ideas in your section. Use words, pictures, and/or symbols to represent any or all of the major ideas and help others really understand your section.
- ✦ Decide who will report to the full group.

Reporting back to the full group — **30 minutes/5 minutes per group**

- ✦ Summarize the major concepts and learnings from your section to the entire group, using the poster as a guide.

Small-Group Discussion Questions

Find the questions for your group's assigned reading below.

Group 1: OCO's Education Organizing

- What did OCO organizers do to identify small schools as their goal?
- How did OCO organizers research this issue and present it to district officials?
- How did OCO work with teachers and overcome teacher union opposition?

Group 2: The Small Schools Initiative and OCO's School-based Organizing Support

- How did OCO deal with the unstable district environment in Oakland and sustain the priority of creating small schools?
- How did OCO work with principals, parents and staff to build a high-trust relational culture? What is the difference between a relational culture and a bureaucratic culture?
- How did the rapid scale-up of new small schools affect OCO's capacity to support their development?

Group 3: Findings on District Capacity and School Capacity (Climate)

- How did district leaders see OCO? What shifts in district policy resulted?
- In what ways did the district become more accountable?
- Where were the new buildings placed?
- How did teachers at new schools describe school climate, compared to teachers at traditional schools?

Group 4: Findings on School Capacity (Professional Culture and Instructional Core)

- How did the professional culture change in the small schools?
- What did teachers think were important changes in the culture at the new, small schools?
- What did parents think about the differences in instructional core?
- How did students' reports of college readiness change? What other outcomes for students were reported?

Group 5: Influence on Student Outcomes and Reflections on Findings

- How did the gain in student API scores in small schools compare to large schools?
- What are the changes in drop-out rates for students? What did teachers and parents think are the reasons for these changes?
- What alliances were key to OCO's success?
- What complications did the large scale of the reform create? How did OCO respond?

Oakland Community Organizations — Reading for Group 1

Initially involved in creating new charter schools (with mixed success) in the late 1990s, Oakland Community Organizations (OCO) organizers and leaders came to view charters as a piecemeal response to the systemic problems facing the flatlands schools.

With this analysis, OCO shifted its organizing strategy to demand small schools reform as a way to leverage districtwide change. Partnering with the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES), in 2000 OCO developed and won approval for a new small schools policy, leading to the development of nine new small schools in the district within a three-year period. Promising results from the new small schools prompted the district to adopt small schools as the cornerstone of its reform efforts. By the start of the 2007-2008 school year, forty-eight new small schools in Oakland had opened, fundamentally and dramatically transforming the landscape of public education in Oakland.

The report from which this reading is excerpted documents OCO's small schools campaign and describes the impact of OCO's work on influencing district policy, increasing school capacity, and improving student outcomes.

The Founding of OCO

In the early seventies, two young Jesuit priests, John Baumann and Jerry Helfrich, moved to California to begin organizing in Oakland's most impoverished neighborhoods. Their work would lay the foundation for the creation of both OCO and PICO, a national organizing network. For Baumann, who had been trained in Saul Alinsky's model of organizing in Chicago (see Alinsky 1971), organizing provided a natural bridge to the social justice traditions of his theological training. Baumann observed that he was especially struck by the power of organizing to move "people that were in pain … to really make differences in their community."

Using Alinsky's neighborhood-based model of organizing, Baumann and Helfrich organized community members in the Fruitvale and East Oakland neighborhoods to address problems such as vacant housing and neighborhood crime. Their organizing built momentum, and in 1977 they formally founded OCO.

As OCO's work evolved, the organization transitioned from the time-intensive model of neighborhood-based organizing to a congregation- and institution-based organizing model. Today, more than forty congregations, schools, and allied community organizations are dues-paying members of OCO. Through these institutions, OCO represents 40,000 community residents and public school parents throughout Oakland.

Excerpted from *Building a Districtwide Small Schools Movement: Oakland Community Organizations*, by Seema Shah, Kavitha Mediratta, and Sara McAlister. Providence, RI: Brown University, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2009.

Identifying School Size as an Issue

Consistent with its mission of contributing to a "safe and vibrant city," OCO's organizing efforts have targeted a range of community problems over the years, including the dearth of affordable housing, the drug epidemic, and the high incidence of violent crime. By 1989, issues affecting local schools had become one of OCO's organizing priorities.

OCO helped create neighborhood drug-free zones designed to improve safety for students traveling to and from school. On the district level, OCO members led campaigns to expand school-to-work programs and reduce class size. By the late 1990s, parents involved with local organizing committees in OCO congregations had brought complaints about Oakland's overcrowded public schools to the fore.

To understand the depth and nature of the overcrowding problem, OCO organizers and parent leaders began conducting one-on-one meetings with school staff, including everyone from principals to janitors. They learned that overcrowding was a pervasive problem across many flatland schools. Overcrowding had forced schools to operate on year-round, multi-track schedules and contributed to poor teacher morale, school climate, and student achievement.

As former teacher and OCO organizer Liz Sullivan recalls, the combination of chronic overcrowding and large school size created "a dehumanizing environment" for students. A senior OUSD administrator attributed the poor learning environment in flatland schools to a "long history of inequity and distrust, lack of social capital, [and] generally very scarce resources." In contrast, schools in the more affluent hills section of Oakland were smaller, better funded, and higher performing.

Notes OCO executive director Ron Snyder, "The easiest organizing is about opposing something. OCO's work is about building something new." In that spirit, OCO leaders began their campaign to create new small schools. The idea emerged from a book that Matt Hammer, an organizer working with frustrated parents at several OCO congregations, had read. He shared the book, *The Power of Their Ideas* by Deborah Meier (2002), which documents the founding of a small school in Harlem, with a number of parent leaders.

Organizer Liz Sullivan recounts,

> So what happened is that Matt got super-excited about this and the parents got excited about this. … Some of the parents that were involved said, "Well, what if we were able to start our own school, like what Debbie Meier did?" [They started] having these sessions where they visioned this whole thing – basically on Saturday mornings when their kids were in catechism they would be working on this idea, [on what] their own school would look like.

The emerging campaign established its footing through a series of research activities, including an analysis of school size and student achievement data in Oakland and consultation with experts. Based on their research, parents and organizers believed that small schools would boost

student achievement by building a sense of community and a greater sense of mutual accountability among parents, students, and school staff, thus creating an environment in which the status quo of unsatisfactory student outcomes would no longer be acceptable. Indeed, OCO parents and organizers saw the potential of small schools to transform all aspects of school culture and practice.

From Individual Charter Schools to Small Schools Districtwide

In 1998, OCO developed a proposal to open a small school pilot within Jefferson Elementary School, which was over-enrolled by 400 students. Although the proposal generated enthusiasm from many parents and teachers, school faculty ultimately nixed the idea. Faculty were concerned that funding allocations between the large school and the small school might differ, that students not enrolled in the small school would be shortchanged, and that the reform would ultimately be abandoned by the district (as previous reforms had been) (Schorr 2002).

Though disappointed, OCO parent leaders did not abandon the concept of small schools. Instead, they began exploring the feasibility of creating charter schools in the flatlands. As a part of an organizational research process, OCO received a modest grant in November 1998 to visit model small schools in New York City to learn more about small schools as a reform strategy. About twenty-five individuals – parents, organizers, school board members, district officials, and representatives from other community organizations – made the trip. Visiting several schools during a two-day whirlwind visit, the group from Oakland was impressed with the warm and welcoming school culture, as well as data showing strong academic gains made by students in New York's small schools.

Sullivan recalls the visit as a pivotal moment for the organization:

> I can say up until that point, I had been a cynic. … So when I went to New York, I was just amazed, because I realized that in California we just settled for such mediocrity, because those kids look just like our kids, and those kids were doing great. They had wonderful schools.

OCO started collaborating with several charter management organizations to develop proposals for five new small schools, which they intended to submit to the school board for approval. OCO met behind the scenes with school board members and then-Mayor Jerry Brown to seek their support and address their concerns, particularly about the teachers union's strong opposition to the plan. In April 1999, OCO's proposal for five new charters came before the school board, and each was approved unanimously (Schorr 2002).

The first two charter schools, E. C. Reems Academy and Dolores Huerta Academy, opened the next year. The new charter schools gave parents and teachers an opportunity to shape small, intimate school communities. These schools experienced numerous hurdles, including inadequate facilities and staffing challenges, but also demonstrated notable successes, such as rising test scores at Dolores Huerta. More important, from OCO's perspective, the new small charter

schools forced opponents to reconsider the viability of small schools within the district. Because a few model charters would not leverage the scale of change inside the system that OCO deemed necessary to improve educational outcomes for the majority of African American and Latino children attending flatland schools, OCO began its fight for larger-scale district reform.

By this time, OCO had begun meeting regularly with BayCES, a school reform organization affiliated with the national Coalition of Essential Schools. In 1999, the two organizations partnered to craft a proposal for a policy of small schools creation. OCO and BayCES understood from their analysis of small schools research that smaller school size, in and of itself, would not lead to better outcomes. Small schools would be successful only with the appropriate structure and supports. Thus, local school autonomy, along with an emphasis on parent and community engagement, lay at the core of their vision for Oakland's new small schools.

OCO and BayCES met with school board members, district officials, and educators to generate support for their vision of small schools reform in Oakland. In the fall of 1999, OCO mobilized 2,000 community members to participate in a public action on small schools. At the meeting, OCO secured public, verbal commitments from key decision-makers in support of the proposed small schools policy.

OCO's methodical approach of meeting with stakeholders throughout the district to share its data and rationale, combined with the group's ability to demonstrate strong community support for the policy, convinced Greg Hodge, a school board member, that OCO was "well-organized and understood the issues." When the New Small Autonomous Schools (NSAS) policy came to a vote before the school board in May 2000, it passed unanimously. With the ultimate aim of increasing student achievement and narrowing the achievement gap, the policy called for ten new small schools within a three-year period.

Discussion Questions: OCO's Education Organizing

✦ What did OCO organizers do to identify small schools as their goal?

✦ How did OCO organizers research this issue and present it to district officials?

✦ How did OCO work with teachers and overcome teacher union opposition?

Oakland Community Organizations — Reading for Group 2

The Small Schools Initiative: A New Partnership

A new policy, New Small Autonomous Schools (NSAS), heralded the beginning of a three-way partnership among OUSD's Office of School Reform, BayCES, and OCO to spearhead the development of these new small schools. Beyond monitoring implementation of the policy, OCO saw its role as building capacity for community and parent engagement in the new small schools as they developed.

After the first cohort of schools opened, the newly formed Small Schools Initiative continued to solicit proposals for additional schools and to provide support to foster the successful and systematic development of small schools in Oakland. With a $15.7 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, BayCES created a small schools "incubator" to coach design teams of principals, teachers, and parents through a year-long planning process, with the schools' authority to recruit students contingent upon successful completion of the incubation.

The collective effort of all three partners behind the new small schools and early signs of promising results expanded the initial vision for the small schools reform in Oakland. Recalls Ron Snyder, OCO's executive director,

> As we were moving through the opening of the first set of small schools, we began to think that we could actually get to a place where this whole district would look different. … This is not about ten small schools as a policy; this is about a tipping-point strategy that moves to change the district.

That vision became a reality as promising early reports showed higher student achievement, higher parent engagement and satisfaction, and higher teacher quality and satisfaction in small schools. These results convinced the district to make the replacement of large, failing schools with new small schools a cornerstone of its reform efforts (Little & Wing 2003).

Overcoming Challenges and Achieving Results: Forty-eight New Small Schools

In 2003, a massive budget deficit led to a state take-over of the district, resulting in the ouster of Dennis Chaconas, the superintendent with whom OCO had developed a strong partnership. Chaconas' departure jeopardized the future of the districtwide small schools reform.

OCO responded by holding sixty action meetings throughout Oakland, attracting thousands of parents who came out in support of small schools. OCO also held a large action with State Senator Don Perata and State Superintendent of Education Jack O'Connell to get their public commitment to preserve the small schools policy. As a result of these organizing efforts, the state legislation authorizing the takeover of OUSD included language in support of the small schools reform.

Excerpted from *Building a Districtwide Small Schools Movement: Oakland Community Organizations*, by Seema Shah, Kavitha Mediratta, and Sara McAlister. Providence, RI: Brown University, Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2009.

Language in the state legislation, however, did not explicitly mandate the continuation of the policy. To complement their state-level advocacy, OCO and BayCES worked locally with district allies to convince Randolph Ward, the new state administrator, to continue the effort. Early in Ward's tenure, OCO organized a meeting between Ward and principals and parents from the new small schools. Convinced by the data and the widespread commitment to systemic school change in Oakland, Ward agreed to sustain the reform, despite the district's large budget deficit.

By 2004, the OUSD Office of School Reform had morphed into the New School Development Group, a division of OUSD Instructional Services. The New School Development Group took over the incubation of small schools from BayCES and began supporting new small schools in their development from design teams to full-fledged schools. By the 2007-2008 academic year, Snyder's assertion that OCO's organizing was about "creating something new" had come true: the district had opened a total of forty-eight new small schools, all in the flatlands of Oakland.

OCO's School-Based Organizing Support

OCO's district-level organizing for the small schools policy went hand-in-hand with school-level organizing to influence the design and culture of the new small schools. Under the small schools policy, a design team consisting of parents and educators came together to shape the vision and practices of each new small school.

Particularly in the early years of the reform, the work of these design teams was deeply intertwined with OCO's organizing efforts. OCO parent leaders or organizers actively participated in twenty-three school design teams, often with prospective principals and teachers with whom OCO had already developed relationships. In fact, OUSD strategically targeted communities for new school creation where organizing was taking place. They realized that the viability and sustainability of the reform effort would require a high level of energy and engagement from community constituents.

In addition, through its partnership in the incubator, OCO helped create tools guiding principal selection and provided training to school staff on parent engagement and teacher home visits. In this way, OCO indirectly influenced the culture and structure of all forty-eight new small schools.

As new schools opened, OCO organizers worked with principals, parents, and staff to build a "relational culture," in which parents and educators develop a shared sense of connection and accountability. OCO organizer Liz Sullivan believes creating a relational culture in schools serves as a building block for an effective learning environment and induces a transformation in how school constituents work with each other. She explains, "Instead of thinking bureaucratically – I'll call a meeting, I'll send home flyers, I'll do this, I'll do that – the principal thinks about who do I need to have a conversation with."

The concept of relational culture has influenced district leaders' thinking about the kind of relationships, ownership, and sense of commitment they hoped to create in small schools. A district

official involved with the small schools reform described how developing a relational culture helps principals and teachers feel an increased sense of ownership and commitment to students. She states,

> The difference between a traditional principal and a small school principal is that the small school principals own every child. It doesn't matter who they are [or] where they show up, they think, "That's my child." Whereas the large school principals see a child that's trouble and they try to send them off. … And so it's that value that we're going to educate everybody is … taken much more seriously. … And then the relationship between the teachers and the staff and the parents is just very different.

OCO catalyzed this relational culture in schools by staffing each of the first cohort of small schools with an OCO organizer. The organizer brought together parents to form school-based organizing committees to help problem-solve school issues (modeled after organizing committees at OCO member congregations); provided leadership training to parents, teachers, and principals; and linked the school to supportive community members and external resources.

Yet, as the number of new schools increased, assigning an organizer to each new small school became impractical. The realities of scale far outstripped OCO's organizational capacity to provide the kind of intensive organizing support it had originally envisioned. In response, OCO and the New School Development Group agreed to change the nature of OCO's role. Instead of taking an active presence in each school, OCO would help identify and train parent leaders who could take on the organizing function. This shift enabled the organization to maintain an active relationship with a smaller number of the new schools, while continuing to influence the nature and quality of parent and community engagement across the district.

Discussion Questions: The Small Schools Initiative and OCO's School-Based Organizing Support

- ✦ How did OCO deal with the unstable district environment in Oakland and sustain the priority of creating small schools?
- ✦ How did OCO work with principals, parents, and staff to build a high-trust relational culture? What is the difference between a relational culture and a bureaucratic culture?
- ✦ How did the rapid scale-up of new small schools affect OCO's capacity to support their development?

Oakland Community Organizations — Reading for Group 3

Oakland Community Organizations (OCO's) organizing efforts for new small schools in Oakland began with the idea of creating a small school pilot within one overcrowded neighborhood school. Within a few short years, OCO helped develop and win policy that created ten small schools in the district. As the reform gained momentum beyond these ten schools, district officials, organizers, and parents began referring to the districtwide creation of small schools not simply as a reform, but as a movement. With forty-eight new small schools in the district as of the 2007-2008 school year, the small schools movement has catalyzed a dramatic structural reorganization of the district.

Findings: Influence on District Capacity

OCO's organizing in Oakland has resulted in a policy shift – one that has helped create a more equitable distribution of resources to the schools in the flatlands. In addition, OCO's work with the district has led to expanded opportunities for community and parent engagement in the district.

Policies and Resources

District officials, community partners, and school-level educators unequivocally credited OCO's leadership for initiating and sustaining the small schools movement in Oakland. OUSD's own Web site notes:

> The new small schools movement began as a community movement, and grassroots organizing was essential. … We intentionally opened schools only where organizing was occurring in order to grow and maintain a level of energy needed to initiate new reform. This was wildly successful thanks to the tremendous organizing done by Oakland Community Organizations.

District administrators and other education stakeholders identified OCO's sophisticated understanding of power, willingness to stand firm and be the "bad guy" if necessary, and ability to forge strategic alliances with key partners, such as BayCES and OUSD, as critical factors in winning the small schools policy. Interviewees also attributed OCO's effectiveness to its strong community base of parents and community members and the capacity to leverage this base to exert pressure on public officials. The ability to mobilize large numbers of supporters was particularly important during the shift to state receivership, a challenging political transition during which the reform effort was in danger of being curtailed.

In addition to leading the effort to transform district policy, interviewees noted OCO's methodical and tireless advocacy for putting into place the necessary district supports that would undergird the chances of success for the small

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schools policy. Jean Wing, a senior researcher with the New School Development Group, observed that the creation of their office wouldn't have happened without OCO's organizing and represented "a way of institutionalizing the incubation of new small schools as an integral part of the district redesign."

OCO's efforts to support successful implementation of the small schools reform included advocacy for new school facilities. Indeed, the problem of overcrowding that had inspired OCO to fight for reform was due, in part, to the lack of space. Now, three new facilities house five new small schools with a commitment from the district to construct an additional facility that would house two small schools and two child development centers.

Over the years, OCO's advocacy for new facilities included an eight-year campaign to raze an abandoned warehouse to make way for two schools, support for bond measures to pay for four facilities, and securing city, state, and school district commitments to make land available. A senior OUSD administrator reflected,

> We [now] have three shiny new school buildings. There hadn't been any new school building in thirty years in the most troubled neighborhoods. … Our new buildings have all been in the neighborhoods that are the poorest neighborhoods and that's very different.

The study data suggest that OCO's role in stimulating and sustaining the small schools movement was recognized beyond high-level district administrators with whom OCO interacted directly. Teacher respondents on our attribution questionnaire rated OCO's influence on "school organization" (e.g., small schools/smaller learning environments) the highest of any item – 2.33 on a 3-point scale. Because our survey reached teachers in schools where OCO had not maintained an active organizing presence, this suggests that OCO was a highly visible partner in the reform effort.

Accountability to the Community

In 2005 the district institutionalized its commitment to community engagement by creating a Chief of Community Accountability position as a part of the Expect Success! initiative, the district's comprehensive plan to build on grassroots reforms (OUSD 2007). Described by district leaders as "an OCO concept," the position was a top-level post designed to ensure that input from the community was included in all major district plans. In the words of one district official, creating the position pushed the district to "shift its emphasis." Instead of focusing on more traditional types of parent engagement, it moved to thinking more deliberately about engaging parents and community members in increasingly collaborative ways.

The district's increased focus on parent and community engagement and its ties to OCO reaped other benefits as well. One district administrator observed that the district became more successful in leveraging additional grant dollars from philanthropies, which expected to see evidence of authentic parent and community engagement.

Findings: Influence on School Capacity

Any systemic reform occurring at both the pace and scale of the NSAS reforms would be expected to experience growing pains. Oakland has been no different, and many schools opened under less than optimal conditions. Some schools lacked adequate facilities and resources, such as a full supply of textbooks, at start-up. A few of the early schools opened without the full slate of supports offered through the incubation process, considered to be vitally important to the success of a developing new school. Yet the data suggest that new small schools in Oakland are performing better than the large schools from which they emerged, particularly in the areas of school climate and professional culture.

School Climate

One of the benefits of small schools is that they allow for a more personalized learning environment, "where every child is known by name," as OCO's vision for small schools states. The smaller environment allows for deeper, more sustained relationships among parents, students, and staff. Our analysis found that the new small schools are showing promising signs in this area.

- Teachers familiar with OCO's organizing at their schools rated three items relating to their school climate – school's relations with the community, school's relations with parents, and shared decision making between students, parents, teachers, and administrators – as being highly influenced by OCO's work.
- Teachers at small schools rated the following school climate indicators higher than did their counterparts at large traditional high schools: the sense of school community and safety, teacher outreach to parents, and, in elementary schools, parent's sense of influence in school decision making.
- We also found smaller effects on school climate in three other areas: an achievement-oriented culture, knowledge of student's culture, and student influence in decision-making for high school students.

Consistent with teacher reports, parents from small schools rated school climate significantly higher than did parents of students at large schools. In addition, small school parents rated their engagement in their child's learning higher than did parents of students at large schools.

Interview data suggest that educators at the new small schools are particularly attentive to building positive parent-teacher relationships. Larissa Adam, a principal at Ascend Elementary School, observed,

> I think for most people [who] have come from traditional schools, there was more of an adversarial relationship. … Here there's an expectation for there to be constant communication between staff and parents, both positive and negative and neutral. And so I think that people just work more with the parents and see them as allies.

Similarly, a senior district administrator involved in the small schools reform described how the new small schools in Oakland intend to create a qualitatively different school culture, especially in the way that school staff relate to students and their parents.

A parent leader who got involved because her daughter attended the overcrowded classrooms at Jefferson Elementary lauded the emphasis on parent involvement at her child's new small school and described the ways in which she felt it contributed to her child's sense of commitment to school:

> When parents are involved in their kids' education, it's different than just sending them to school. … The kids notice that we participate in the schools, and it makes a difference on how your child thinks of school. You take pride in something, your kids are definitely going to take pride.

Discussion Questions: Findings on District Capacity and School Capacity (Climate)

- ✦ How did district leaders see OCO? What shifts in district policy resulted?
- ✦ In what ways did the district become more accountable?
- ✦ Where were the new buildings placed?
- ✦ How did teachers at new schools describe school climate, compared to teachers at traditional schools?

Oakland Community Organizations — Reading for Group 4

Findings: Professional Culture

The vision for small schools in Oakland included increased supports for school staff (much of which was provided by BayCES and OCO), and a strategy for creating greater collaboration among school faculty and administration. Again, the small schools are making positive strides in this area. In fact, the data indicate the strongest effects of the small school reform were on professional culture.

- ✦ Teachers in small schools rated professional culture items more highly than teachers who taught in traditional large schools. Significant differences were found on several dimensions of teacher collegiality and instructional leadership, including: peer collaboration, teacher influence in school decision making, collective responsibility, peer collaboration, joint problem solving, and teacher-principal trust. We found smaller effects on teacher-teacher trust, school commitment, and principal instructional leadership.
- ✦ The district's *Use Your Voice* teacher survey also showed that teachers at small schools rated their professional culture more positively than teachers at large schools.

These strong effects in the professional culture domain are likely due to the incubation process and the intensive and ongoing professional development support provided through the partnership among OCO, BayCES, and the district's New School Development Group. Specifically, Oakland's vision of small schools emphasizes the importance of establishing a school community in which teachers, parents, administrators, and students work collaboratively toward learning goals.

Maureen Benson, a principal at Youth Empowerment School, observed that teachers "are completely supportive and helpful of each other," and unusually comfortable in offering one another constructive criticism. And as a principal, she noted that being in a small school affords more time and opportunity to support teacher instruction and professional development.

> I get to work intensely with the teachers on their curriculum because that's what I'm most passionate about. For each teacher, we develop a personal plan, we have a conversation that comes back to their goals. It's very comfortable just having a regular conversation about how their classroom is going. I'm in every teacher's classroom once a week, so I know how the teaching is going as opposed to a big school where you just have no idea.

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OCO's role in developing a stronger professional culture was borne out in interviews with principals and teachers. Principal Larissa Adam reflected,

> At my old school, just because of how dysfunctional it was, there was a tendency for all the teachers to hide in their classroom. You stick each day with your one group of kids where you have some sense of control over the quality of instruction you can give.

Similarly, on the subject of his instructional leadership within the school, Rick Gaston, principal of Castlemont Business and Information Technology School, believes working with OCO organizers supported his overall vision for the school:

> I think having folks like them to get with regularly really just helps me shape my vision and my understanding about what we're trying to do here. It's definitely about democracy and community involvement and empowering the full spectrum of voices from across our school community, and that doesn't always come naturally to our district or school culture.

Findings: Instructional Core

Given the relatively short time frame in which small schools have been operating, it is reasonable to expect that differences on measures of instructional core would be less evident.

✦ Teacher influence in classroom decision making was perceived as higher in small schools, but teachers in large schools gave higher ratings for coherent curriculum and instruction. This finding is not surprising, given the autonomy teachers and principals at small schools possess in creating their own curricula.

✦ Teachers familiar with OCO's work did not rate the influence of OCO's organizing on instructional core very highly. This finding may reflect teacher perceptions of OCO's role as a catalyst for parent and community engagement. It is plausible that teachers would not link OCO's organizing efforts to the day-to-day teaching and learning taking place in their schools.

✦ The *Use Your Voice* parent survey showed that parents at the new small schools rated academic rigor more highly than parents of students at large schools. Parent perceptions of increased academic rigor were supported by other data, which showed substantial differences in the curriculum offerings provided in the new small schools and the high schools they replaced.

In 2000-2001, only 21 percent of students in the three large, low-performing traditional high schools in Oakland completed the California college preparatory requirements. By school year 2005-2006, these three large schools did not exist; they had been broken into twelve small schools. Collectively, 33 percent of students in these small schools completed the California college preparatory requirements. Consistent with this finding, both teachers and parents at small schools rated college readiness more highly than did teachers and parents in large schools.

In interviews, principals talked about how small school size promoted increased attentiveness to students' academic goals. For example, principals and teachers repeatedly referred to the strong emphasis on using data to assess students' proficiency in reading and math and using those data

to better support students academically. Other individualized supports, such as advisories, helped sharpen the focus on student academic goals.

Alison McDonald, high school principal of Life Academy, explained:

> I think there's a real culture in the school that we have to academically challenge students. The other side to that is we have a really strong personalization piece here. All of our students are in advisories and all of our teachers are advisors including myself. So we have a group of students that we keep from ninth through twelfth [grades] and it develops a lot of depth because we get to know our parents, and … students that we have each year very well.

A strategy for parent-teacher-student collaboration used in many of the small schools is the personalized learning plan. As McDonald explained,

> Basically, a personalized learning plan is when you sit down with a student in your advisory and you set down on paper some of the information about them – grade point average, reading grade level, how they're doing in math, some of their test scores, things like that. And then talk over some of the goals that they should be pushing for themselves. … We take a lot of data [and] we update them as they improve.

Consistent with our findings, the evaluation conducted by Strategic Measurement and Evaluation (2007) found that:

- ✦ Students at new small schools had higher attendance rates compared to large schools.
- ✦ Students, parents, and teachers at the new small schools were more satisfied with their schools than their counterparts at traditional large schools.

Discussion Questions: Findings on School Capacity (Professional Culture and Instructional Core)

- ✦ How did the professional culture change in the small schools?
- ✦ What did teachers think were important changes in the culture at the new, small schools?
- ✦ What did parents think about the differences in instructional core?
- ✦ How did students' reports of college readiness change? What other outcomes for students were reported?

Oakland Community Organizations — Reading for Group 5

Findings: Student Outcomes

Although the district projects that the reform will need to be in place five to seven years before tangible academic gains in the new small schools can be measured, analyses of Academic Performance Index scores, test scores, dropout rates, and graduation rates show that students at new small schools are making important early strides in academic performance.

In California, the state measures the academic performance of schools through the Academic Performance Index (API). Created by California's Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999, the API uses a formula that integrates results of various state standardized exams, including scores from the math, reading, and social studies tests. Scores can range from a low of 200 to a high of 1000, with a performance target of 800. An analysis of API scores at the elementary, middle, and high school levels shows that though Oakland schools continued to struggle, new small schools were achieving higher API scores than the large schools from which they emerged. Gains are most pronounced in elementary and middle schools.

Additional information about student achievement comes from the external evaluation commissioned by OUSD. Even though the new small schools in this evaluation were compared to large schools with many fewer ELL students and students receiving free and reduced-price lunch, students of new small schools improved at a faster rate in both Math and English.

For example, when Castlemont High School broke into small schools, immediate changes in grades and achievement were not evident. Rick Gaston, the school's principal, noted that Castlemont, for many years, had some of the state's lowest standardized test scores and highest dropout rates. The first year of conversion resulted in only a modest improvement in test scores. However, Liz Sullivan, an organizer familiar with the school, noted, "The tone in the school is completely changed. And for me, that's the first step. You can't learn when you're afraid."

District data show that high school dropout rates were lower in small schools than in the large, low-performing high schools they replaced. Although the calculation of dropout rates is controversial, the dropout rate in the large schools from 1998 to 2004 was 11.5 percent, whereas the dropout rate in the small schools from 2001-2002 to 2006 was 2.9 percent.

At Life Academy, the only small school where we were able to track a four-year cohort, the graduation rate for the class of 2005 was 59.5 percent, and for the class of 2006 the rate was 74.6 percent. In comparison, at Fremont High School, the large school from which Life Academy was created, the graduation rate for the class of 2002 was 30.9 percent, and for the class of 2003 the rate was 34.4 percent. While it is too early to determine the long-term impact of the small schools on graduation and dropout rates, these data suggest promising outcomes.

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Though data on college acceptance rates are not available, a district administrator gives at least one example of gains seen in that arena:

> The high schools at Fremont just had their accreditation visits and Mandela High School has about 50 percent of its high school seniors going to – already accepted to four-year colleges and they're not even finished getting their acceptances. That is dramatically higher than what was in place before. So it's really concrete results.

Reflections on Findings

OCO receives unequivocal credit from district administrators, teachers, and other key education stakeholders for its role in winning the small schools policy and for working tirelessly to ensure that the supports necessary for the successful development of small schools were in place. The trajectory of OCO's organizing offers a powerful example of how organizing around local school concerns led to a larger grassroots organizing campaign focused on large-scale districtwide reform.

While the long-term impact of the reform on student achievement remains to be seen, small schools in Oakland are already outperforming the large schools from which they emerged. Students are completing more rigorous coursework and dropping out at lower rates. In addition, teachers and parents of students at small schools rate critical school capacity variables related to professional culture and school climate significantly more highly than their counterparts at traditional large schools.

One of the most remarkable aspects of OCO's success is that their organizing occurred during a period of significant fiscal and political turbulence. Yet even within this tumultuous context, they were able to achieve significant reforms in their district. Reflecting on OCO's education organizing efforts over the past decade yields several important insights.

Community members and educators must work together to create sustainable reform.

One key to OCO's success was the ability to form a strong and strategic partnership with BayCES and, ultimately, with the district. Each partner brought unique and complementary strengths that helped sustain the reform and weather the storm of the difficult financial decisions that had to be made during the state receivership. At pivotal moments when the reform came under fire, OCO used its political power as an outside partner with an expansive community base to help create the public will to continue the reform. BayCES, in turn, brought policy expertise, foundation monies, and strong technical assistance capacity. By partnering with the district, they were able to gain support on the "inside" among district leaders and central office staff as well, and were able to use the resources and infrastructure of the district to make the reform a reality.

Scaling up presents important opportunities and challenges.

OCO's organizing also tells a powerful story about scale and the complications that accompany it. When OCO began its small schools organizing, it did not imagine that the reform would be adopted districtwide. As the scope of the reform expanded, however, it became increasingly difficult for OCO to maintain the intensity of its school-based organizing efforts in the new small schools.

Jean Wing from the New School Development Group notes,

> OCO has a limited number of organizers who are assigned to education issues. … So I think at a certain point in time, as more and more new schools opened, they have found themselves stretched kind of thin and have had to rethink, how can we support these schools? And so our relationship has had to change. And as this office opened up as part of the district, we've met with OCO to figure out, on a case-by-case basis, how much support they can provide to the design teams for schools that are coming into being. For example, next year we're opening twelve and it's a tall order to say, "Can you support twelve schools, plus the thirty you're already working in?"

Because OCO's small organizing staff could not have an active presence in all the new small schools, OCO and the district's New School Development Group compensated by turning to a train-the-trainer model, with mixed success. The case of Oakland demonstrates that organizing groups need to be attentive not only to the positive effects of scale, but to the potentially unintended negative consequences as well. How do groups anticipate and adapt to the demands of scale? What are the compromises that must be made when reforms go to scale? How can groups buttress their organizational capacity to respond more effectively to the changing landscape scale brings?

Discussion Questions: Influence on Student Outcomes and Reflections on Findings

- ✦ How did the gain in student API scores in small schools compare to large schools?
- ✦ What are the changes in dropout rates for students? What did teachers and parents think are the reasons for these changes?
- ✦ What alliances were key to OCO's success?
- ✦ What complications did the large scale of the reform create? How did OCO respond?