This brief is part of a series that shares findings from a research collaboration between the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University and Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) focused on understanding implementation of the community school model in the district. Community schools aim to address students’ needs, and promote a positive school climate in which students are ready to learn and teachers are supported to provide quality instruction which, in turn, improves student attendance, behavior, and achievement. Previous research has demonstrated that student and family participation in support services—a key feature of community schools—is often associated with improved student outcomes. Additionally, the structures and systems of community schools—for example, leadership, partnerships, and coordination—may enhance the integration of these services as fundamental components of the life and academic mission of the school, ultimately bolstering their ability to affect student outcomes. This brief focuses on site staffs’ perceptions and experiences of how the community school model supports student, teacher, and school outcomes. In addition, we incorporate analysis of school-level outcomes using OUSD administrative data for these schools and the district as a whole to identify shifts in leading indicators of student academic engagement and performance, as well as school climate.

**KEY FINDINGS**

- The majority of respondents at all schools in this study report that community school interventions have positively affected student readiness to learn, support for teachers, and the school climate.
- School and partner staff reported that community school supports and services addressed important barriers to learning.
- Teachers noted that the system of supports and resources at their schools enabled them to focus more directly on teaching.
- School-level year-to-year student statistical trends are largely consistent with teacher and staff reports obtained during our first phase of interviews, although it is too early to conclude an association between community school interventions and aggregate student outcome trends.
Increased Access to Academic Services and Supports. Staff across the schools discussed seeing significant improvements in students’ academic learning that they traced, at least in part, to increased expanded learning opportunities and the continuum of community school supports. All community schools offered expanded learning opportunities for students, ranging from after-school programs and summer enrichment opportunities to internships and linked learning pathways. At some schools, the majority of the student body participates in afterschool programs. School-day teachers and afterschool staff often collaborate and coordinate curriculum, further enhancing the integration of traditional-day and afterschool learning. In many cases, teachers noticed a difference between students who participated in these enhanced learning opportunities and those who did not. Staff often attributed positive changes in student’s academic performance to students having access to extensive and intensive supports available through strategic partnerships or better organizational systems, structures, and practices.

Improved Attendance. Respondents also noted school- and district-level shifts in disciplinary practices to reduce suspensions and efforts to improve attendance—for example, coordination of services teams and attendance teams—had a direct impact on increasing students’ time available for learning. At several of the sites, school leadership developed systems to increase attendance that involve immediate follow-up with families when a student is absent. Teachers at multiple schools mentioned that they regularly text parents about, for example, whether or not their child completed their homework, or attended class. Staff at most schools mentioned improved student engagement, which some linked to restorative justice practices, better academic supports, and/or clear communication around student expectations and safety. In the words of one teacher: “[Now students] really want to be on-campus. We don’t have students that are, like, ‘Get me off this campus!’ The majority of them, this is where they want to spend their time. So, we… cultivated that culture, which then [allows staff to] hold kids accountable because it’s something they want to be a part of.”

Decreased Disciplinary Issues. Staff in all sample schools described an observable improvement in overall decreased disciplinary issues. Staff in all sample schools described an observable improvement in overall decreased disciplinary issues.
“take some of the weight off you as a teacher.” In the words of one teacher, “[You] don’t have to be social workers or coaches. You don’t have to worry that you don’t have those resources because we have partners.”

More Collaboration Between Staff and Families. Most staff interviewed indicated a positive shift in school culture and climate, among students, adult staff, and often families. In some cases, staff narrated a shift from a “toxic” school environment to one of adult collaboration, teamwork, and engagement. At all schools, we saw evidence of a community school culture in which the adults from the school work together to support students’ needs, and a collaborative school leadership approach extended beyond the principal and teachers to encompass the community school manager, a range of partner agencies at the school, and to some extent families as well. Most schools had teams dedicated to engaging and supporting families, often including the community school manager, at least one family advocate or liaison, and sometimes partners and teachers. Teachers especially highlighted the value of improved communication and collaboration with families to students’ learning.

In addition to interviews with key staff, OUSD administrative data indicate that school-level year-to-year trends in these five schools are largely consistent with staff reports. Overall, the administrative data reflected desirable trends in leading indicators of academic engagement and performance, including decreased chronic absence and suspension rates, and improved student survey responses regarding school climate. The charts on page 4 report four-year trends in chronic absenteeism and student suspension rates for the three schools in our study sample that serve middle school students along with middle school district-wide averages. Consistent with district-wide trends, all three of these schools demonstrate reductions in the percentage of students suspended. Further, in these schools, chronic absence either decreased or remained below the district average. Future statistical analysis will explore these trends and relationships.
Furthermore, school-level year-to-year student statistical trends are largely consistent with teacher and staff reports obtained during this phase of interviews. Future research activities will include more sophisticated statistical analysis in order to better understand the relationship between students’ participation in community school programs and their engagement and success.

**IMPLICATIONS**

By and large, principals, teachers, and community partners report that community school practices have positively affected student readiness to learn, support for teachers, and the school climate. In these schools that had been implementing the community school model for multiple years, we observed evidence of a culture in which the adults in the school work together to support students’ needs, and students and families are more deeply engaged in students’ success and learning. Indeed, community school implementation was often considered by school-site staff to be part of broader improvement efforts to transform school culture and re-align resources to best support more equitable student outcomes.

1 For a complete description of this research collaboration, including methodology, see series overview.


4 These three schools are Coliseum College Prep Academy (CCPA), Urban Promise Academy, and Roosevelt Middle School. District middle school averages include a total of 21 middle schools; 12 community schools and 9 non-community schools. (The two other schools in the sample for this study are Garfield Elementary and Oakland Tech High School.)

The research presented here is based on interviews with principals, teachers, community school managers, community partner organizations, and other key staff in five OUSD schools (elementary, middle, and high), many of which had been implementing the community school model since the district’s community school initiative began in 2010. The Gardner Center would like to acknowledge our OUSD partners as well as the Kaiser Foundation Hospital Fund for Community Benefit Programs at East Bay Community Foundation for their support.