

# WHOLE CHILD EDUCATION & COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP

*Community School Lessons from REACH Academy*



When Principal Natasha Moore saw the application for Community School funding from Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) during her first year as principal at REACH Academy, she jumped on the opportunity to apply. East Oakland's REACH Academy serves a student body of just under 400, and is co-located with Cox Academy, a charter school. Ninety-four percent of REACH students are considered socio-economically disadvantaged and nearly 40% are English Language Learners.

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COMPANION BRIEFS IN THIS SERIES FEATURE COMMUNITY SCHOOL LESSONS FROM:

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Over the past four years, REACH has implemented a number of community school strategies to redress some of the barriers to success many of their students face. These strategies—integrated student supports, strategic partnerships, and collaborative leadership—are foundational to OUSD’s community schools approach. They have also allowed REACH leaders to make headway in key school and district priority areas, such as increasing student and family access to health and wellness services, building partnerships to support learning outcomes, and developing inclusive goals and decision-making practices that engage students, families, partners, and staff.

In addition, over the last three years REACH’s ELA and Math scores increased over 20 points each, and suspensions dropped from 3.8% to 1.8%. These positive trends have occurred simultaneous to REACH’s transition to becoming a full-service community school. This brief highlights key lessons from Principal Moore, and Community School Manager (CSM) Camila Barbour, as they reflect on their experiences.

## **PATH TO LEADERSHIP**

Prior to joining REACH as principal, Moore served as principal at a community school in San Francisco’s Bayview-Hunter’s Point neighborhood, where she saw firsthand the potential of integrated student supports to bolster student learning.

Moore started her teaching career in Oakland, and spent a decade in the classroom in Oakland, Travis Air Force Base, and West Contra Costa. She later spent time at Stanford, as a Research Interventionist on a federally funded community health study on health and educational outcomes for girls of color. These collective experiences underscored for Moore the connection between students’ health and wellness with their cognitive development.

Barbour came into the CSM role with a background in Social Work, having served as a licensed clinical social worker supporting children and families in community and district settings. Barbour has worked as a therapist, providing school-based mental health services, as well as served in administrative roles, managing school-home community engagement and partnership programs that supported families whose children were chronically absent. The CSM position blended these prior experiences and allowed Barbour to be back at a school site, having direct outreach with families, students, and key stakeholders.



## FOCUS ON HEALTH & WELLNESS

The community schools approach is rooted in an understanding of whole child development (Maier et al., 2017). OUSD Community schools aim to support student success by offering high quality, culturally relevant integrated supports. For the last five years, the district Office of Community Schools and Student Services (CSSS) has worked with community school sites to increase student access to needed health and wellness supports as a core priority. CSMs across the district have worked to develop strategic partnerships, implement coordinating systems such as Coordination of Services Teams (COST), and engage students and families in community wellness (McLaughlin et al., 2020; Fehrer and Leos-Urbel, 2016).

REACH's educational approach is grounded in a deep understanding of the interconnection between children's physical, emotional, and cognitive development. According to Moore:

*I think a lot about Maslow's hierarchy of needs—food, shelter, and safety at the foundation. With Common Core, and the rigor that comes with it, scholars have to eat to be able to focus on what they're learning for the day. And it's not just those basic physical needs, it's the social emotional needs, and the mental health. There's a tremendous amount of trauma that some of our students and families face, The community schools approach addresses this in a systematic way.*

When Barbour came on board as CSM, she immediately noticed that many of the students were not getting their basic nutritional needs met. Despite most of the student body qualifying for free and reduced price meals, some students would arrive to school without enough time to partake in breakfast in the cafeteria. The others would come to school eating high-fat snack food, or not having breakfasted. "We knew we had to address this right away. If kids are hungry, they're not going to be able to focus on learning," reports Moore.

After discussing many options, one of the first initiatives Moore and Barbour undertook was shifting their school's free and reduced price breakfast from the cafeteria before school into the classroom, at the start of the day. "We went from a cafeteria model of 50 to 75 students eating on a daily basis to over 250 students eating, starting their day out with healthy options and a full belly," reports Moore.

Shifting to breakfast in the classroom required a massive adjustment. Teaching staff were concerned about impact on instruction and the potential unintended consequences of reduced teaching and learning time. Custodial staff were concerned about impact on classroom cleanliness and hygiene. Cafeteria staff were concerned about food safety and logistics. Moore and Barbour worked with the staff to discuss the need.

In her words, the relational trust she and Barbour had built with the staff was critical to ultimately gaining staff buy-in:

*This whole thing wouldn't work with just Camila and I saying, 'This is what we're doing'. The top down hierarchal approach would not work in a community schools model. That's a traditional model, the principal as all saying, all knowing, who pushes mandates top down ... We knew that academics was being impacted or disrupted because students were hungry. So we said, 'Okay, what's tight is we're going to do this because it's what's best for kids. We need our kids eating.' But we had our staff be part of designing what that would look like for them.*

This collaborative leadership model is a hallmark of OUSD's community schools approach, and has been well established in the education literature as a flagship practice in schools that improve (Bryk, 2010; Fehrer and Leos-Urbel, 2016; McLaughlin et al., 2020).

To continue to address student nutritional needs, Moore and Barbour assessed the school's existing partnerships. One of Moore's first priorities was establishing a partnership with the Alameda County Food Bank. "I had experience in San Francisco partnering successfully with the local food bank, and seeing how much hunger was an issue in deep East Oakland, so that was one of my first priorities here," stated Moore.

In addition to the partnership with the Food Bank, REACH has also developed partnerships with No Kid Hungry and Share Our Strength, two organizations working to eradicate childhood hunger. With the new partnerships established, REACH has been able to serve as a hub, distributing food to 200 families every other week. Food distribution includes eggs, milk, grains, and canned goods, as well as fresh produce and meats. REACH also established the Mandela Produce Stand, a farmer's market style stand where families that have CalFresh can get 50% off food using their EBT card.

REACH has helped numerous families enroll in CalFresh, and has worked with the Food Bank to offer a series of healthy living workshops, including managing diabetes, reading food labels, cooking traditional meals with reduced sugar and sodium, and healthful grocery shopping on a budget. According to Moore and Barbour, the overall impact of these interventions resulted in increased student focus and concentration.

As Moore and Barbour looked deeper into the health needs of the school community, they noted that physical health, primarily obesity and related health issues, was increasingly affecting students. They observed that chronic health conditions, especially diabetes, impact students getting to school if they live with a parent or grandparent who is suffering. In response to this perceived need, REACH organized a bike-to-school campaign, and worked with partners to design a diabetes awareness and management workshop to support families.

Another health area they saw impacting student attendance was asthma. In the U.S., asthma has become the leading cause of pediatric hospitalizations and school absenteeism (Landrigan et al., 2010). Black and Latinx children are disproportionately affected by asthma, in terms of both prevalence rates and severity, with prevalence rates highest in low-income households (CDC, 2020). Moore and Barbour noticed that because many families did not have health insurance or access to asthma case management, students ended up in the Emergency Room to address breathing issues. So, Barbour and Moore reached out to establish a partnership with the Breath Mobile. In partnering with the Breath Mobile, REACH Academy brought a doctor to the school site. The Breath Mobile comes to the school monthly to provide case management for all asthmatic students. As Moore stated, “Because of that, we saw attendance improve.”

Partnerships with mobile dental and vision services have also helped more students access learning. Three times a year, a dentist and hygienist come to campus to check students’ teeth. If services are needed beyond what the dental van can offer—for example, a tooth extraction—they provide a warm handoff to a dental office. Additionally, over the last two years, more than 400 students have received vision screenings, and 50 students have received eye glasses.

OUSD community schools strive to offer every student the appropriate services and opportunities they need to thrive.

As REACH leaders have demonstrated, this includes engaging partners every step of the way to support students’ health and wellness needs that, if left unattended, can interrupt their ability to learn.

## **PARTNERSHIPS FOR LITERACY & LEARNING**

Strategic partnerships are a cornerstone of community schools, allowing schools to provide more resources, supports and opportunities to students than they could provide on their own (Meier et al., 2017). School community partnerships can be complex, involving distinct organizational cultures, accountability systems, communications styles, and perspectives. Successful partnerships require strong communication around shared goals and a collaborative culture to make space for new stakeholders in the systems and structures of the school. Families are also essential stakeholders, and engaging families as partners often entails intentional practices and supports to strengthen families’ capacity to contribute (McLaughlin et al., 2020; Fehrer and Leos-Urbel, 2016).

Another priority area for Moore and Barbour was supporting students’ literacy. When Moore started as principal in 2015, the school’s reading scores were more than 120 points below state standards. According to Moore, “Our parents had been crying out for two years, wanting more supports to help their children with reading.”

After much lobbying, REACH was able to obtain a mobile classroom to provide support classes for families. The first classes included ESL and digital literacy training. Moore continued,

*Many of our families don't have robust libraries at home, and we know that reading to children is key for literacy. Working on basic sight words, letter name recognition, blending ... these foundational skills are critical. Getting a book in every child's hand is huge.*

As they narrowed in on literacy as a priority, REACH also established comprehensive partnerships to support student reading and growth. They developed a partnership with Girls Inc., who were able to prioritize reading time, push-ins into the classroom and afterschool support. Moore brought together reading teachers and classroom aides, as well as paid teachers, to stay after 4:00 p.m. for tutoring. The focus on literacy has paid off; over the last three years, REACH's reading scores have risen over 20 points, most notably for Latinx students.

Digital literacy classes for families have also been critical to supporting student learning. According to Moore, "We can't talk about 21st century learning, collaborating, and communicating to develop academic mindsets without talking about technology and how we are supporting our parents around literacy."

REACH began offering digital literacy classes four days a week to parents, teaching basic skills such as Google search and signing up for email.

Parents learned how to navigate the learning platform that their children would use at home and, at the end of the class, parents received computers. This work has been especially critical in the time of COVID. Moore added, "That digital divide, it's real. With the shelter in place due to COVID, ... we saw the gap widen, especially for students of color. This is a social justice issue!" During Fall 2020, partnerships with the City of Oakland, OUSD, and technology giants Twitter and Salesforce (among others) allowed REACH to provide Chromebook devices to all students, supporting access to online instruction across the digital divide.

## **COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP**

Becoming a community school in OUSD entails more than hiring a CSM or offering expanded student support services, though both are essential ingredients. Becoming a community school is about fundamentally shifting the notion of who participates in the school community and how. The district's approach to community schools has cultivated district-wide standards for collaborative leadership, that includes partners, families, students, teachers, and community as stakeholders in school decision-making processes. These cultural shifts take time, and do not happen overnight.

According to Moore. "It starts with a vision. From this vision, we're constantly looking at all types of data. It's not just arbitrary what we're coming up with. It's data-based decisions."

In Moore's case, the visioning work started with a listening campaign, to hear from teachers, staff, and parents about their experience and perceptions of the school. During her first year, Moore made intentional effort to build up her school's leadership teams. That meant, first and foremost, empowering her CSM to function as a school leader—to some extent, similar to an Assistant Principal. As part of this effort, Moore also established an Instructional Leadership Team and a Culture Team. And lastly, she notes, "really building our parents as partners. Much of our progress has come from getting our parents involved, fundamentally. This included amplifying our parents' voices, and establishing our school goals and priorities."

The parent listening campaign brought to bear specific feedback from parents concerned about school safety and interested in restorative practices. The feedback prompted REACH to reconsider their discipline policy, introducing restorative practices and, ultimately, integrating mindfulness practices into the school day. Moore elaborates:

*Being able to deep dive at our data, and to reflect on the number of students who were sent out of class, that even if they were not suspended was a sobering first step. Universal office referrals (URFs) can mimic absenteeism when students are repeatedly sent out of class and there isn't a restorative approach used to return those scholars to class. This trend disproportionately impacted males of color. In order to shift this narrative, we had to fundamentally address our discipline practices, and trauma.*

Subsequently, school staff were trained in restorative practices. The school has also developed a flagship program to practice mindfulness in the classroom several times a day. REACH staff have presented on these practices to colleagues and the state Department of Education, and a fifth grade class collaborated with the nonprofit Mindful Schools to publish a mindfulness guide for youth, entitled Masters of Mindfulness (proceeds benefit students' postsecondary careers). These practices have helped REACH lower its suspension rate substantially.

To ensure that parents' voices continue to be heard, Moore established a partnership with Parent Leadership Action Network (PLAN), a Bay Area social justice organization that trains families to organize and elevate family concerns, as well as partner with schools to develop and implement strategies to foster educational equity. Through this partnership, REACH hired a part-time family engagement liaison, to build relationships with parents. According to Moore, they asked parents "What's working well at REACH? Is this what you want? What do you want to know? What would you like to see?" School leaders received data from about a third of school families. A multidisciplinary leadership team then examined that data to review patterns and trends.

According to Principal Moore, collaborative leadership and relational trust are critical in facilitating the kind of change REACH has experienced over the previous five years.

Moore reflects:

*A lot of times, there's a real disconnect between policies and mandates that impact our schools and communities, especially our communities of color. I think with this role, you have the opportunity and the gift to listen to key stakeholders, so that we're really designing our programs to be responsive, build on the strengths and assets of the community.*

At the core of OUSD's community schools effort is a commitment to engaging students, families, and community-based organizations as partners in student success. For example, a recent donation from the Sequoyah Community Church allowed REACH to purchase instructional materials for at-home "learning kits" for every student, to make sure they have needed school materials for distance learning. REACH's experience underscores the potential of these key stakeholders to contribute meaningfully to shaping school life and, ultimately, student success.

During the public health crisis and ensuing turbulence of 2020, low-income communities have been especially hard hit by job loss, health, and housing crises. The trust and collaboration built over time has supported this East Oakland community during the unprecedented challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moore concludes:

*I think the relationship with our families has become even stronger. They knew they could count on us because of the relationship we established and being a community school. That's carried over into distance learning. We've been able to raise over \$10,000 to support families in our school community. The work of providing students with a high-quality education aligned to rigorous grade-level standards continues, even if we're not at the school site ... I don't know how we could survive, especially through this pandemic, without the collective resources, effort, and responsibility reflected in a community school. If we didn't have strong systems in place, it would have been a different experience.*





## LESSONS & TAKEAWAYS

- Developing a clear vision and engaging stakeholders in the design and implementation process has created a culture of collaboration across the adults at the school, as well as the parent community.
- As REACH leaders dove deeper to understand student and community needs, they uncovered barriers to learning. Strategic partnerships and collaborative planning enabled the new practices, allowing more students to access learning.
- Strategic partnerships focused on health literacy and digital literacy has supported student engagement in learning and families' ability to engage in their children's learning at home, all the more salient in the current context of COVID and distance learning.

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**Photos:** REACH Academy Twitter Feed

## ABOUT THIS RESEARCH SERIES

This brief is part of a series from a research collaboration between OUSD and the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University focused on understanding community school implementation in Oakland schools. The Gardner Center would like to acknowledge the OUSD principals, community school managers, and district leaders who generously contributed their time and shared their professional knowledge and observations as part of this study.

The full series is available at [gardnercenter.stanford.edu](http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu).