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## **The District Approach to Building a Full-Service Community School System**

**Assuring Universal and Equitable Access to Learning for College, Career, and Community Readiness**

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The Oakland Unified Schools District's (OUSD) strategic plan commits to ensuring that "every student is able to attend a quality school in their neighborhood (OUSD, 2015)." To operationalize this goal, a growing number of OUSD schools are supported to implement community school strategies.

This brief describes organizational outcomes, with specific attention to the district's efforts to strengthen school capacity by reconceiving how adults use time, organize work, and collaborate to meet student needs. We assess these efforts against four dimensions of organizational effectiveness, drawn from the available literature on district-led reform. Most notably, we draw on research from the Consortium of Chicago School Research (Bryk, et al., 2010) as well as on research that informed formation of the CORE district collaborative of which OUSD is a member (O'Day & Smith, 2016; Fullan, 2011).

### **FOUR DIMENSIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS**

**1**

**Providing Effective District Leadership**

**2**

**Building Site-Level Capacity**

**3**

**Promoting Agency Among All Adults Who Work with Youth**

**4**

**Building a System-Wide Culture of Continuous Learning and Improvement**

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## Providing Effective District Leadership

Schools manage the many day-to-day tasks of teaching and creating the necessary conditions for learning. But district leaders have an important role in articulating a vision, setting priorities, and establishing standards of practice that communicate high expectations for learning and assure positive and equitable student outcomes.

**Articulating a clear mission and vision for full-service community schools.** OUSD is singular among districts across the country in its ambition to become a full-service community school district. In 2011, OUSD engaged community stakeholders in a city-wide strategic planning process that situated a community school approach as a key strategy to redress inequitable student outcomes.

*The district's board-approved strategic plan commits to building "a Full Service Community School (FSCS) District focused on high academic achievement while serving the whole child, [and] eliminating inequity" (OUSD, 2015).*

That mission has endured across eight years and four superintendents, each of whom has embraced a community school approach as a strategic north star. Since 2011, the district-led initiative has grown from 23 (primarily secondary) schools, to 42 FSCS campuses across all grades, prioritizing scale-up in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods.

**Setting district-wide goals to operationalize the vision.** Since 2015, OUSD leaders have mapped core goals to operationalize the district's vision for quality community school implementation (OUSD, 2015; Priority #3).

These core goals are summarized from the full text of the district's strategic plan below (OUSD, 2015).

- Develop comprehensive school, family, and student supports aimed at closing achievement gaps for African-American and Latino youth, English language learners, foster youth, and students enrolled in special education.
- Situate the principal at the center of a distributed leadership governance model. Seek to empower teachers, partners, and community stakeholders to collaborate with principals to improve educational outcomes for all students.

The district's office of Community Schools and Student Services (CSSS) provides centralized guidance for community school development. The CSSS has developed a community school system strategy map that directs attention to four school implementation and capacity-building strategies: engaging community partnerships, coordinating and integrating student supports, promoting collaboration and distributed leadership, and using data to drive school priorities.

In the sections that follow we focus on the CSSS' efforts to build site capacity, agency, and a culture of continuous improvement for effective execution of the strategies identified in the Pathway to Excellence and the more specific community school system strategy map.



## Building Site-Level Capacity

School capacity for effective program implementation is a key driver of student-level results. In addition to financial resources, capacity is founded on the availability, quality, and development of human capital; that is, the people who work directly with youth. Another important aspect of school capacity is organizational coherence—the working conditions, structures, and informal norms that support goal-aligned collaboration among adults (O’Day & Smith, 2016; Bryk, 2010). OUSD district leaders play a central role in developing the financial, human, and organizational capacity of schools.



**Developing human resources to support collaborative implementation of school and student supports.** The Community School Manager represents a key human capital investment in community schools. The CSM is embedded in a full-service community school site and is a critical member of the principals’ site-based administrative team.

District leaders take a proactive role in the supervision and professional development of the CSM. While each CSM’s work may look different based on specific school needs, district leaders provide a uniform framework for the role. CSMs are responsible for introducing the community school model to school stakeholders.

Depending on school priorities, they may focus effort on identifying programmatic gaps, capacities, and assets; managing and maintaining the quality of school site partnerships; promoting service coordination; and supporting youth, family, and staff leadership and engagement. New CSMs receive:

- a checklist to help structure their initial tasks
- tools and guidelines to scaffold a school community needs assessment
- rubrics to use in assessing the quality of existing and prospective partnerships
- a workplan template to help identify priorities in the first year

Across the year, CSSS leaders scaffold the CSMs work in schools through regular professional development—monthly PLCs and ongoing check-ins—focused on promoting coherent site collaboration among key district initiatives. These include attendance improvement, Coordination of Services Teams (COST) implementation, access to health services, and strong community partnerships.

**OUSD takes a proactive role in recruiting, vetting, and developing community partners for all schools.**

**Cultivating community partners for school sites.** OUSD provides a centralized registration process for all school partner organizations. District staff also convene regular topical collaboration improvement meetings of existing partners from all service areas (e.g., afterschool, mental health, literacy) to discuss how they can better align supports to school learning goals. To facilitate the ongoing partnership work, OUSD created a new district-level position, the Community Partnerships Manager, who provides administrative support, and evaluation tools to support quality school partnerships.



**Articulating standards of practice for school partners.** The CSM helps to articulate standards of practice for collaboratively providing school and student supports aligned to the core teaching and learning goals. The CSM, for example, typically works with the district office to develop and maintain MOUs with partners. Additionally, CSMs hold site-level partner meetings to engage with partners on school goals and to share student progress data. In some schools, the CSM facilitates individual partner meetings to elaborate a Letter of Agreement with each partner, which articulates shared goals, measures, communication, and day-to-day logistics for the partnership.

Staff interviews suggest that these partnership meetings—at the district as well as site level—help get everyone on the same page and set a standard of quality school-agency relationships. By setting these expectations, the district office establishes a norm for site-level collaborative engagement. Student support services are coordinated, school and partner staff share leadership, and all adults at the school align resources in support of school goals.

**Supporting a coherent, multi-tiered system of supports at all community schools.** COST teams and restorative practice approaches to school discipline enable local sites to implement a coherent and responsive multi-tiered system of supports for all youth. In prior reports, we have focused on how these organizational structures are adapted and enacted in site-based practice (Fehrer & Leos-Urbel, 2016). Here we note the district role in supporting CSMs to serve as emissaries of district-defined standards of practice for effective COST and restorative practice implementation. Network Superintendents, school principals and instructional staff report favorably on the CSM and, by extension, the CSSS roles in ensuring that these program structures are integrated with afterschool and wellness initiatives, and focus on building teacher’s instructional capacity and increasing access to learning opportunities for vulnerable students.

**Securing financial support for full-service community school scale-up.** Over the course of the initiative, OUSD has garnered tens of millions of dollars in support in the form of federal grants and philanthropic support to scale community schools, and ensure the quality of implementation.

Respondents to our study report that these additional "outside-the-budget" dollars have a multiplier effect at local sites. The grant funding supports the engagement and coordination that enables more community partners and outside public agencies to bring valuable professional resources to schools and vulnerable youth.

## Promoting Agency Among All Adults Who Work with Youth

Human and capital resources create capacity, but they are not sufficient. System leaders must activate school stakeholder’s intrinsic motivation to respond effectively to district goals and ensure that school stakeholders have the authority that empowers them to take accountable action every day (Fullan, 2011). To that end, OUSD has invested in a distributed leadership governance model “that empowers stakeholders [including the CSM] to work collaboratively with the school principal” to pursue common goals and equitable outcomes for all students (Pathway to Excellence, 2015:p.8).



**Empowering site principals.** The District's CSSS provides an orientation to community schools for all new principals and supports the principal's authority to select a CSM and define their work priorities across the school year. The district establishes a standard job description, pre-screens CSM candidates, and refers successful candidates to school sites for selection. In this way, the district and site principal co-design the CSM role. District staff collaborate with principals to plan how the principal will distribute work and how the CSM role will be adapted based on school needs.

This makes clear that the CSM's job is to support the principal in co-implementing the school program—leveraging the expertise of all site stakeholders by identifying collective goals and structuring the day-to-day collaboration of partners, teachers, and families.

Finally, the site principal and district leaders co-assess the CSM. District leaders ask each CSM to report on and to describe the work they are doing to advance innovative approaches to unique challenges in their schools. And, in surveys, school principals express broadly shared agreement that CSMs help them to achieve critical school priorities.

**Empowering teachers.** Community school approaches are designed to alleviate teachers' professional isolation and empower them to support whole-child learning and development (Maier et al, 2017). OUSD teachers report that community school resources contribute positively to their role as teachers, their students' engagement in learning, and to classroom culture/climate (Fehrer, 2019). Most notably, teachers report that the addition of caring adults, who can provide timely interventions to students, builds teacher capacity to focus on instruction (e.g., by removing some of the burdens that distract from classroom activity). Teachers also note that their work with students on academic mastery is supported by the greater alignment of afterschool and co-curricular supports with classroom academic standards.

As well, veteran teachers report that overall conditions for teaching and learning is improved by community school strategies that strengthen family-school ties, build trusting relationships with youth, and expand learning time beyond the classroom (Fehrer & Leos-Urbel, 2016).

**Empowering school partners, families, and youth.** Principals and teachers report that district supports empower partners to engage effectively with schools and to take accountable action in the service of student-centered learning goals. Likewise, school staff report that the CSM's role in family engagement helps to amplify parent and youth voice and facilitates participation in site-based governance—especially among families who face language or cultural barriers to participation.

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## Building a System-Wide Culture of Continuous Learning and Improvement

One of OUSD's signature performance management strategies is to engage in data-driven cycles of inquiry, elevate exemplary services and improve supports to students and stakeholders (Pathway to Excellence, 2015). Within the CSSS, district leaders operationalize the call for continuous learning and improvement by convening a monthly professional learning community for the CSMs.

Within this learning community, CSMs routinely examine the implementation process and use site reports and performance data to interrogate each critical step between inputs (e.g., COST implementation) and student outcomes (e.g., reductions in unexcused absenteeism). In this way, CSSS leaders model data-driven inquiry and bring a continuous improvement mindset to the work as CSMs are encouraged to work collaboratively with stakeholders to search for root causes that challenge their efforts and to use data to inform, adapt, and redesign interventions.

Ultimately, organizational capacity and agency for effective action are both social processes that must be activated through day-to-day adult interaction (O'Day & Smith, 2016). As such they are dynamic and determined by the quality of adult learning and collaboration within a complex ever-changing system. The district's commitment to a culture of continuous improvement will be critical to its on-going efforts to scale a full-service community school approach and to ensure that it remains responsive to community needs and to the diverse students it serves.

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## ABOUT THIS RESEARCH SERIES

This brief is part of a series that presents findings from a research collaboration between OUSD and the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities at Stanford University, focused on understanding the implementation of the community school model in Oakland. The full series is available at [gardnercenter.stanford.edu](http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu).