

Oakland Unified School District

Implementing New Small Schools to Accelerate Student Achievement

The Small Schools Movement began in the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) almost 10 years ago as a parent-led and community-based initiative to address severely overcrowded and low performing schools in the flatlands neighborhoods of Oakland. The grassroots movement for small schools was led by parents organized primarily by Oakland Community Organizations. Parents in large numbers demanded new, small, safe schools of choice, leading to the Oakland School Board's unanimous passage of the New Small Autonomous Schools district policy in May 2000, calling for the creation of up to ten new small schools in the most densely populated communities of East Oakland.

Nine new small schools were opened under this policy, and in 2003, OUSD began moving to full implementation, opening 48 new small schools to date, and converting three of its large, underperforming high school campuses into ten new small high schools sharing those three campuses. New school creation has evolved as one of six foundational strategies for Expect Success district-level reform. Small school incubation and creation targets the communities with the highest proportion of low-income and immigrant families, whose neighborhood schools have long been over- or under-enrolled and underperforming in terms of academic achievement.

From 2000-2004, most new small schools in OUSD were incubated and supported by the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES), a prominent school reform organization, which also continued to incubate the large high school conversion process. Beginning in 2004-05, OUSD brought the incubator inside the district.

The one-year district Incubator process, developed by the OUSD New School Development Group, is divided into a two-semester curriculum of formal sessions and design team work that takes place during the year prior to opening of the new school. During the first semester, the focus is on building background knowledge about the nature of the work and the school community, and on conducting research and school visits toward developing a thoughtful School Design Proposal that has a very explicit vision and an articulated theory of action that addresses the needs of and ensures equitable outcomes for all children. Design teams address fundamental questions, including: Who is walking out of your doors? Who is the child walking into your doors? What is your theory of action to bridge the gap between the child walking in the door and the child walking out?

The second semester focuses on implementation planning, based upon the community analysis, vision, and theory of action developed in the 1st semester. This includes developing the overarching instructional program, recruiting students through the Options process, recruiting and selecting teachers, budgeting, supporting and training teachers, supporting students, community and family engagement, governance, and district operations. July and August are spent with parents and teachers getting the school ready to open.

The effort has been primarily funded through Expect Success-generated foundation grants, as are some start-up year costs for the new schools emerging from the Incubator.

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