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Oakland, California

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Partially unified enrollment system begins.

In-district portfolio office is created to manage school openings, closings, and authorizing.

Small Autonomous Schools policy enacted, leading to nine new schools over three years.

Three-year reform plan "Expect Success" debuts, designed to transform district into model of urban reform.

Forty-nine small autonomous schools created since 2004.

2000

2004

An in-district incubator is created for new schools.

2005

2006

School Performance Management (SPM) and School Performance Framework (SPF) created.

2008

2009

Partial return to local control of schools.

Small school creation paused, autonomies roll back, and district strategy shifts to emphasize schools with wraparound services.

Summary (2000-2009):

- Community organizing spurred the small autonomous schools movement
- Financial crises and loss of local control
- Intermediary organization and philanthropic dollars played important role
- Some racial disparities persisted
- Leadership changes and a move away from portfolio strategy
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Student Achievement Highlights

- The Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) showed the largest improvements in academic achievement of any district in the state between 2004 and 2010, as measured by California's "Academic Performance Index."
- Between 2005 and 2012, OUSD's Latino students closed the state test achievement gap by 18 percentage points compared to white students.
- Most student subgroups in OUSD showed consistent academic improvement on average between 2008 and 2009, except for white and Asian students. Growth doubled among American Indians and more than doubled among Pacific Islanders, English learners, and students with disabilities.

In 1999, Emma Paulino sent her youngest child to Manzanita Elementary School in Oakland, California. Paulino, an immigrant from Guadalajara, Mexico, was excited to finally interact with the American public education system, but what she saw left her frightened and disheartened.

Manzanita was dramatically overcrowded; to make room, kids had to attend in rotating, multi-week shifts. This made childcare during the weeks off extremely difficult for families like Paulino's. Sadly, these conditions were widespread among schools serving Latino communities in East Oakland, also known as the "flatlands." Nearby Jefferson Elementary, for example, served nearly 1,400 students, when the building was only intended to accommodate 500.

These crowded campuses were also failing their students academically. Schools with a score of 500 or lower on the Academic Performance Index (API), a rating based on test scores using a scale of 200 to 1000, were heavily concentrated in the flatlands (800 was the state's goal for all schools). "When I learned that schools were going year-round and thousands of kids in the flatlands were failing, I got really mad," recalls Paulino.

So how did Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) break up these egregious concentrations of low-performing schools and, in 2008, get the title of most improved large urban district in California?

These dramatic changes, marked by 117-point API growth between 2004 and 2010, resulted from deep community organizing efforts to engage families and demand school reform, substantial philanthropic investments, and a financial crisis that simultaneously brought the loss of local control and increased urgency to act.

These unique factors enabled a lot to happen, and quickly — resulting in promising, if at times uneven, results for kids. The primary lever for change in Oakland was the creation of new small schools and charter schools, and the closing or transformation of historically low-performing schools, all in service of giving every child access to at least two high-quality options. Oakland's reform story offers lessons about family buy-in and investment, and withstanding (or, in some cases, failing to withstand) the turmoil of politics and finances.

Emma Paulino

By the time Paulino encountered the conditions at Manzanita, Oakland Community Organizations (OCO), a local affiliate of the faith-based advocacy organization Faith in Action, had already begun rallying parents in service of better — and less crowded — schools. With funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, OCO sent a group of parents, teachers, and OUSD staff to visit small schools in Chicago. OCO had been intrigued by early evidence of small schools' ability to provide individualized attention, form closer relationships, and personalize the curriculum, resulting in better outcomes, especially for low-income students and students of color. Returning home, Paulino felt energized. "[I couldn't] take the leftovers they were giving to my child and thousands in his situation," she says. "We promised ourselves we'd come back and open a school like the one we saw in Chicago."

> "[I couldn't] take the leftovers they were giving to my child and thousands in his situation."

Thus Oakland's small autonomous schools movement was born. In addition to adequate facilities and the return to a traditional schedule, activists wanted autonomy for principals to hire the best teachers and autonomy for teachers to do what was best for their students. Initially, OCO activists and a Jefferson teacher banded together to create a small autonomous school within Jefferson, an effort that failed when school faculty voted against it.

OCO then redirected its energy toward opening small charter schools, since California's charter law, enacted in 1992, created a structure that allowed autonomy. The charter plans brought Oakland's school district, teachers' union, and elected school board back to the table, even though they had all initially opposed the small autonomous schools movement. These groups feared competition from charter schools, but when they saw that several OCO-affiliated families were starting to organize, it spurred them to action. As Paulino describes it, "We created tension so the district realized what we wanted is what they needed to do."

After starting in grassroots efforts, the movement moved into the district: OUSD officially adopted the New Small Autonomous Schools District Policy in May 2000, embraced by then-Superintendent Dennis Chaconas. By the end of 2001, six new schools would open from these efforts, serving over 1,000 students.

Oakland Unified School District
Base Academic Performance Index (API) Score vs. California Average
2002-2013
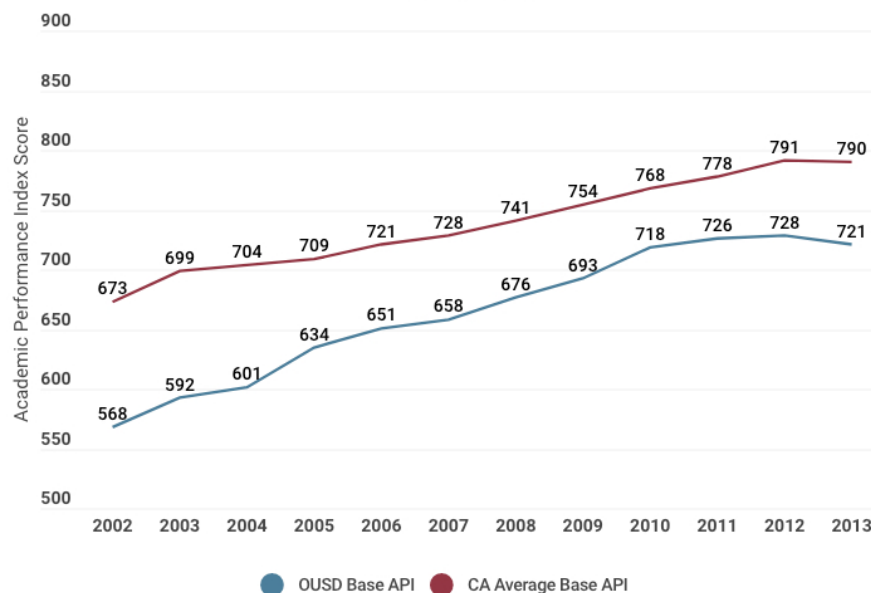
Note: API scores range from 200 to 1000

This remarkable community-driven movement helped create 49 small autonomous schools between 2000 and 2008. An intermediary organization also played an important role: OCO tapped the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES) to help draft the district policy and bring education expertise the activists didn't yet have. BayCES recruited principals and gave them startup grants, training, and coaching to start district and charter schools. Says Steve Jubb, leader of BayCES at the time, "[We built the] capacity of schools to look at the community and be responsive to what they needed."

This massive number of openings included both charter schools (authorized by OUSD) and in-district autonomous schools, and a few different paths to creation: newly created autonomous schools; under-enrolled, failing schools merging into new, "right-sized" schools; overcrowded and/or failing schools splitting into small schools; and national charter models (like KIPP) opening new campuses. Overall, Oakland communities experienced much change in the stock of schools, including several closures.

Not all the new schools were uniformly good — in fact, seven of them eventually closed. Over time, the movement learned that to be successful, principals needed more than just a summer to launch a new school. In 2004, OUSD created an in-district incubator to increase the chances of success for new schools and encourage reform-minded principals to stay in the district instead of going to the charter sector. OUSD's new school incubation process began to integrate one year of planning for new principals in response to the lessons learned.

But academics in OUSD were improving, overall: By 2003, API performance rose dramatically and graduation rates modestly, with hundreds more students across the district now in high-performing schools. Jubb recalls, "When the state scores came out, it was clear we had shaken this tree pretty hard." While change didn't occur overnight, there was renewed energy and closer scrutiny of the conditions that had been allowed to persist.

According to an evaluation from Stanford University, students, parents, and teachers at the new schools were "significantly more satisfied" than those at comparison schools. The evaluation identified several key factors contributing to this success, including "mission-driven principals who are proactively recruited and/or mentored to serve at their schools." Gloria Lee, who co-founded Aspire Public Schools, an early charter management organization launched in California in 1998, explains, "In many cases, [district] principals already had the capacity to do more than the bureaucracy allowed, and now they were given more flexibility [in the small schools]. One flexibility they were given was to hire teachers and staff more aligned to the vision." A culture of high expectations at new schools helped give everyone — parents, staff, and students alike — a shared vision.

Steve Jubb

A substantial infusion of philanthropic dollars helped accelerate this work. In 2000, BayCES received a $12 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to break up large, comprehensive high schools. (Even before promising results in Oakland, Gates had been inspired by East Coast successes to invest in small schools.) Other funders supported the work in Oakland too, including the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation and the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation.

Meanwhile, the district central office was in terrible financial shape. At the end of the 2001-2002 fiscal year, the district was unable to close its books, ending with a $31 million shortfall. Broken finance reporting systems, combined with possible deliberate hiding of costs and deficits, made for a major crisis. But while the crisis may have appeared to come out of nowhere, there had been warning signs. A 1999 state audit revealed widespread financial mismanagement and called for, among other things, "the need for the district to decrease staff when enrollment decreases [and] ... begin to address the 2000-01 budget shortfall that would occur if reductions were not made."

A number of factors meant the shortfall never closed. First, OUSD lost 4,000 students from 2000 to 2004, due to families leaving for private schools or other districts. The reforms were not yet enough to reverse declining enrollment — that reversal would not start until around 2008. District staff blamed out-of-date or nonexistent data systems for these decreases going undetected.

Additionally, one of Chaconas' big reform measures — teacher raises to address Oakland's painfully high turnover rates — was expensive and inadequately financed. A 2003 New York Times article paraphrased Chaconas, who admitted "that as he focused on academics, he paid too little attention to finances."

Regardless of the cause, the district was about to lose its autonomy. Paulino recalls lobbying for a loan without state takeover in January 2003, which then-Governor Gray Davis denied. Instead, in May 2003, Davis approved a $100 million emergency loan and put the district in state receivership. By June 2003, Chaconas was out of a job, the elected school board was suspended, and new state administrator Randy Ward was put in charge. OUSD was now run by the state of California.

The state takeover was a heartbreaking moment for Paulino and many OCO-affiliated activists. "We lost power!" she says. "We couldn't hold our school board accountable anymore."

Others felt that state scrutiny led to more urgency. Indeed, after launching the new in-district schools incubator, OUSD rolled out several

other major initiatives: a weighted student funding formula, a performance management framework, and a central portfolio office. Kimi Kean, a founder and former principal at one of the small schools, says about that period of state control, "We wouldn't have been able to be bold without it."

Oakland District and Charter School Openings and Closings 2002-2017
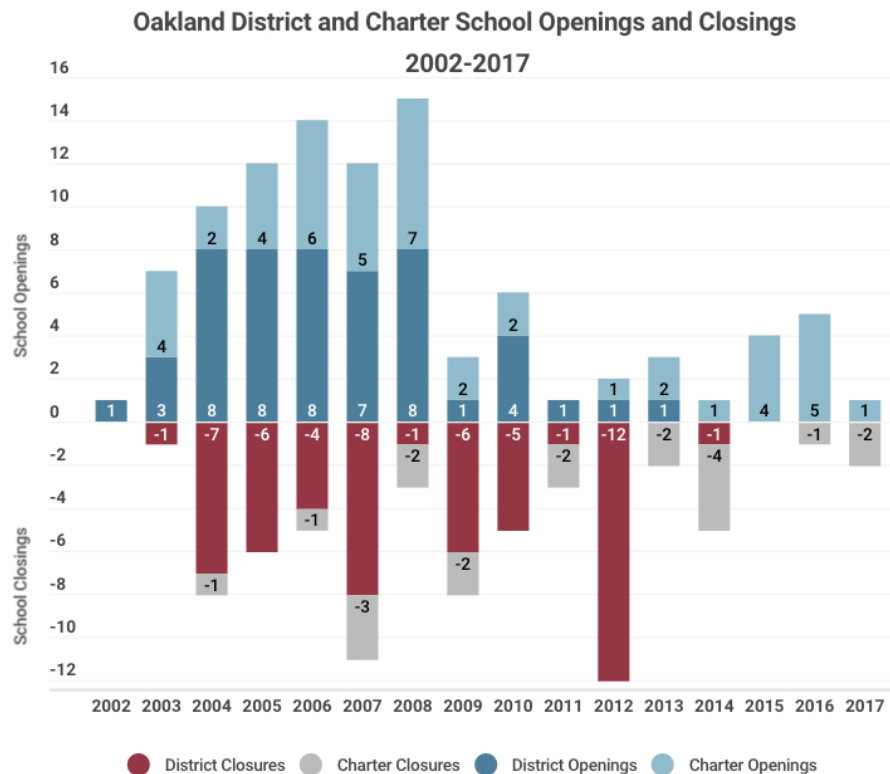
Source: California Department of Education

Despite the political turmoil and loss of local control, one thing remained constant: the small autonomous schools movement. By 2003, the unique partnership between OCO, BayCES, and OUSD was in full swing. Within Randy Ward's first month on the job, the three united to organize a tour of model small schools and successfully persuaded Ward to leave the strategy intact. This three-pronged collaboration — a community and parents who wanted change, a district that supported change, and an intermediary organization that had skills to implement change — played a large role in the movement's sustainability.

The high level of philanthropic support lent durability to the movement, but it proved to be a double-edged sword. Matt Hill, a former OUSD program manager, sees outside philanthropy as necessary: "You had a district that was failing kids … You needed an influx of resources to build up the foundation … It couldn't be done by a district in turmoil by itself."

On the other hand, Hill is painfully aware of the tradeoffs: "You have opinionated leaders behind the foundations who have their views on Oakland. But they don't know Oakland and they're not from Oakland, so there's a lot of resentment." Louise Waters, former associate superintendent of student achievement in OUSD, also experienced this resentment: "The amount of unintentional condescension [from funders] … put off a lot of the people who needed to implement [reforms]."

Complicating matters, progress didn't reach all communities equally. From 2005-2006 to 2011-2012, the gap in API scores between white students and Hispanic/Latino students closed by 18 points. However, the API gap for African American/black students actually increased by 9 points.

How did this happen? OCO harnessed parental dissatisfaction for change, but the organization's primary base was in East Oakland, owing to its connections to Latino congregations. The movement did not engage black families as deeply as it did Latinos. In fact, the first six schools that opened as a result of community engagement back in 2001 were all in East Oakland.

This served to perpetuate other racial disparities, and in some cases, reforms may have concentrated low-performing teachers in schools serving predominantly black students. "Small autonomous schools got the opportunity to hire their own staff," Lee says. "The teachers that were not successful in that hiring process didn't get placed in the 'hills' schools because the affluent (and mostly white) families didn't want them. They got placed in the schools with families who had less power and privilege — especially those serving predominantly low-income black families in West Oakland." These realities meant the movement also lost potential allies in the black community.

Louise Waters (with Marissa Kalu-Thompson, left)

By 2008, some school leaders became disillusioned with working in the district and took their small schools to the charter sector. There needed to be a mission and mindset shift at the OUSD central office to set these principals up for success: to reorient away from compliance and toward principal autonomy. But Waters believes that investments to bring district staff on board and carry out new initiatives were overlooked by outside donors who focused their efforts at the top.

Another crucial problem of design is that small schools are more expensive to run within a traditional district operating under a collective bargaining agreement. Each school, explains the East Bay Express, "must have their own principals and support staff, including secretaries, attendance clerks, and janitors." Explains Lee, "This cost problem is significantly exacerbated by the large fixed costs of a bloated central office," which don't shrink proportionally when district enrollment shrinks.

Additionally, Oakland needed to more consistently evaluate and act on school quality, not just by opening schools but by closing low-performing or under-enrolled schools when demand shifted. While politically difficult, closures were necessary to balance finances and address declining enrollment. Hill actually believes that, in the end, Oakland opened too many schools: "There should have been a tighter look at financial and demographic need. It wasn't financially sustainable." By 2008, some on the Oakland school board signaled their interest in merging small schools back together.

This may have been the undoing. Following partial return to local control in 2009, Superintendent Tony Smith paused small schools creation, citing patterns of race around school closures and performance as one reason, and rolled back autonomies for existing small schools. Existing schools remained, but Oakland shifted its focus to prioritize a Full Service Community School model, where schools include wraparound services to target both academic and social-emotional needs. Lee sees some important and positive results from this approach but also warns, "It's expensive and is inherently not compatible with small autonomous schools, since it requires huge scale at school sites to be financially viable."

Today, Oakland faces yet another fiscal crisis: A 2017 state audit identified more financial distress, and the district had to make midyear cuts. Earlier this year, OUSD's board passed a policy to reduce the district down to a "fiscally sound number of schools" and, importantly, "develop a citywide plan that promotes the long-term sustainability of publicly-funded schools across Oakland." The plan needs to address issues such as facilities, enrollment and transportation, and charter authorization. This time around, the city's elected school board, rather than the state, is driving the effort to create a system of high-quality school options. As it does so, the board should learn from Oakland's history and make decisions that engage all communities, ensure philanthropic investments are put to good use, and

create an enduring governance model.

March 2020 Update

Our story spotlights 2000 to 2009, a period when Oakland's schools were mostly under state control. As we note in the original story, beginning in 2009 the state turned control over schools back to a locally elected school board, which moved away from many of the reform strategies that characterized the first decade of the 2000s.

Since spring of 2017 Dr. Kyla Johnson-Trammell, an Oakland native and longtime educator and administrator in the district, has served as superintendent of the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). There are some positive signs in OUSD in the past few years: For example, graduation rates increased from 67% in 2013 to 74% in 2018, and enrollment has not declined. And the city has invested in talent strategies with the recent launch of the Oakland Teacher Residency.

Nevertheless, fiscal stability and overall improvement strategies for schools in Oakland continue to be a major concern, with sizable budget gaps, several school closures and mergers, and a weeklong teachers strike in 2019. Oakland's "Blueprint for Quality Schools," a five-year plan, makes recommendations to address trends of population growth and decline within the city's neighborhoods, with 11,000 empty seats in OUSD. Enrollment shifts are a major driver of fiscal challenges. It is possible, as OUSD reboots its approach to school strategy and management, that the district might revisit strategies from its recent past, such as a school performance framework, that could help make school performance clearer to families, and make central office decision processes more transparent.

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