

**A Declaration of
Community Beliefs and Visions
for Oakland's Public Schools**
June 2009 – v5.0

To greatly improve the education opportunities available to Oakland students, we, the members of *Great Oakland Public Schools*, commit ourselves to continuing the work to bring about a fundamental change, reform, and improvement of public education in our city.

We acknowledge the effective work of thousands of talented, dedicated teachers, administrators, classified personnel, and other educators who have made Oakland Unified School District the most improved large, urban school district in the state over the last four years. We believe, however, that our city's public schools have tremendous untapped potential, and that they can and must become truly excellent.

The effectiveness of our schools affects everyone living in Oakland, now and in the future.

Community leaders must share a clear vision and strategy to improve student learning and achievement in our city, and city leaders must hold consistently high expectations for *all children to graduate and to be prepared to succeed in life, college, and career*. Our responsibility is to prepare students for work, citizenship, and family life in a democratic community – and foster their independence with the skills and habits of life-long learners. We must see the examples of excellence in our public schools as the standard to which we should aspire throughout the system.

We believe that:

- It is our responsibility to equip all students with the skills and knowledge they need to graduate ready for success in life, college, and career based on international standards of excellence and mastery;
- Family income is not a barrier to learning at high levels;
- Children learn best when they feel physically and emotionally safe, and when families are deeply involved in their education;
- It is the job of schools to reach out to all families and welcome them as allies and partners;
- Diversity of teaching styles and strategies should be encouraged, as long as students are successful;
- Equity is about ensuring that all students have the skills and desire to achieve and attain (graduating from four-year colleges) at equivalent levels;

The most promising path forward for public education in our city is to build on recent progress, reflect on our mistakes, and continue to be guided by the fundamental ideas that have helped make Oakland Unified the most improved school district in the State of California.

As a community, we have developed the following outline of our strategy for improved public schools in Oakland.

In short, public education in Oakland should:

- (1) give schools and school site leaders autonomy in return for accountability for student achievement;**
- (2) attract, develop, and keep excellent, effective teachers;**
- (3) attract, develop, and keep excellent, effective school-site and district-level leaders;**
- (4) ensure personalized educational experiences that prepare all students for life, college, and career;**
- (5) promote and ensure diversity and innovation in school programs including charter public schools; and**
- (6) treat families and community as allies and partners in the work of educating Oakland students**

Our hope is that every member of Oakland's public education family will have an understanding of this vision, beliefs, and strategy, and act accordingly.

Creating and maintaining a system of great public schools is a continual process that involves our whole city. By putting these ideas into daily practice, all of us can help create conditions for teachers and schools that best support student learning and achievement.

It is our belief that this declaration should be used as a resource for district leadership as it creates and maintains a consistent strategic direction and vision for many years to come.

MANDATE FOR CHANGE

Oakland's public schools exist to provide our children with the highest-quality elementary and secondary education available anywhere. Positive school outcomes for children, in turn, strengthen our city's social and economic foundation and promote a healthier future for all Oakland residents.

Above any other priority, stakeholder, or policy, our school system's top priority must be to increase student learning and achievement.

Our community believes that the following six conditions are fundamental to creating needed improvements in our public schools and gains in student learning and achievement:

1. Autonomy for Accountability

We need a system of schools where principals are responsible for managing the most important decisions affecting their schools, including personnel decisions, so that schools are the unit of change. Decisions should be made by those who are closest to children – principals, teachers, and families. Resources should be distributed equitably and follow students to schools. Adults should be held accountable for gains in student learning and achievement.

Our emphasis should be on performance rather than compliance with rules and regulations. Therefore, innovation must be more than grudgingly allowed – it is to be encouraged. In the event that sustained growth in student learning does not occur, the accountability system should be based on collaboration and intensive support.

Autonomy for accountability will be assured when...

- The Board of Education has set high standards for student achievement and adult job performance, and has a system for monitoring school and adult performance.
- What schools need is what determines central office services, with central offices supporting increased flexibility and advocating for schools to county, state, and federal authorities.
- District leaders expend energy advocating for removal of barriers and constraints rather than focusing on compliance and accepting current state and federal regulations as givens.
- Principals are selected according to high, community standards and supported and expected to build professional learning communities and make decisions about staffing, budget, strategy, and curriculum in return for accountability for student learning.
- The OUSD Central Office provides support when schools are not making sustained growth – and has a robust performance management system for all employees with clear rewards and consequences for results.

2. Quality Teaching

We must focus on recruiting and keeping an effective teacher in every Oakland classroom. Current studies confirm that among in-school factors, *teacher effectiveness is the single most important factor in student learning*. Further, effective teaching can close achievement gaps and overcome the impact of poverty on student learning and educational attainment.¹

¹ Kati Haycock, director of the Education Trust, summarized the current research in her 2007 testimony before Congress:

- Having a high-quality teacher throughout elementary school can substantially offset or even eliminate the disadvantage of a low socioeconomic background.
- Having a top quartile teacher rather than a bottom-quartile teacher four years in a row would be enough to close the black-white test score gap.
- A teacher's influence on student achievement scores is 20 times greater than any other variable, including class size and student poverty.

Linda Darling-Hammond, professor of education at Stanford University, wrote in 2000: In all cases, the proportion of well-qualified teachers is by far the most important determinant of student achievement: it is highly significant in all equations for both subject areas in all years and at all grade levels.

We want our children to graduate with strong mathematical reasoning skills, a sound grasp of science and the arts, strong writing skills, world-class capacity for creativity and innovation, and strong understanding of civics and leadership. But all this is impossible unless their teachers have the knowledge and skills we want our children to have.

Quality teaching will be assured when...

- Community and educational leaders have a shared understanding of current research on effective teachers, and are committing to uncompromising high standards for the adults we offer the privilege of serving our children.
- School sites make their own decisions about financial resources, time, and staffing. This enables schools to create working conditions that treat teachers as professionals.
- Teachers are: provided time and compensation for collaborating with each other and for participating in relevant professional development; recognized, accountable, and rewarded for their impact on student learning and achievement; and provided opportunities for professional growth.
- Teachers use multiple data sources to assess and adjust instruction, student interventions, professional development, and curriculum decisions.
- Teachers consistently review student work against student learning standards, and assess and adjust teaching practice to better serve student needs.
- Principals have the authority and support to recruit, select, develop, and keep or dismiss teachers and other school staff. This ensures that all schools have high-performing staffs that are committed to that school's vision and approach.
- School sites are provided with budgets, resources, training and tools to build the capacity of their staffs, ensuring that all are focused on high performance student outcomes and standards of work.
- We have a higher base salary for teachers, as well as incentives to retain and reward effective teachers and those who choose to teach in high-needs communities, that is, teachers are paid more!
- Teacher salaries are competitive with those of surrounding districts and communities.
- The teacher recruitment program is powerful enough to attract and recruit the strongest candidates, and effectively induct them into the system; Oakland leaders collaborate with those organizations that have shown that they can recruit and train teachers who positively impact student learning.

3. Excellent Leadership

Strong site leadership is a critical factor in an excellent school, and we must attract, recruit, support, and retain excellent principals for every school. A good principal inspires, motivates, and empowers dozens of teachers. Conversely, a bad principal can demoralize an entire faculty, even the high-performers. The leaders we seek should thrive in challenging circumstances, be strategic problem-solvers able to maintain perspective, desire autonomy for accountability, be able to connect with families and inspire trust, and lead and inspire a staff and students to excel.

Excellent leadership will be assured when...

- Every school has an excellent principal who feels respected as a professional and whose working conditions include quality professional development; collaboration time to support and learn from other principals; and operational and compliance support that enables them to maintain a focus on school climate and instruction.
- Our city's culture around public education encourages principals to innovate instead of labeling every deviation as noncompliant.
- Principals are relieved of the burdens created by a compliance-oriented bureaucratic system, making it possible for them to prioritize instructional leadership.
- The Board of Education and district leaders work at the state level to reduce the compliance demands made of schools.
- Principals' pay is competitive with surrounding districts. A higher base compensation system and performance incentives will go a long way in keeping our strong principals.
- School and Central Office leaders and staff share responsibility for educating all Oakland youth.

4. Personalization and Individual Student Success

Education needs to be personalized to engage every child and family. Smaller, personalized learning environments help ensure that *all* students feel safe and well known at school, and have the opportunity to achieve. In the history of the Oakland public schools, smallness has been the privilege of a small portion of our students. If smallness is an effective prerequisite that supports student learning, as research and our own community's recent work indicate, we must be sure that it continues to be an option for all students.

Personalized educational experiences for every student will be assured when...

- Teachers routinely develop strong relationships with students for the purpose of empowering them as learners and motivating them about learning and about going to college.
- Adults routinely create the conditions in which students are inspired to be academically successful.
- Students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate standards mastery including exhibitions, performances, independent and group projects, and school- and teacher-created assessments.
- Student proficiency is shown on multiple standards-based measures such as state assessments including the California Standards Tests, California High School Exit Examination, and California English Language Development Test, their completion of high school courses for state university admissions ("A-G" courses), SAT scores, high grades, and college acceptance, enrollment, and graduation.
- The OUSD central office and every school sets the expectation that every school, regardless of size, is one in which the unique gifts and talents of every child are fostered by an adult that community.
- Individualized Education Plans are not an intervention for those students falling through the cracks or with special needs but an approach to personalizing and differentiating every child's learning experience to ensure maximum academic success.
- Schools use robust standards- and curriculum-aligned assessments and data reports so that teachers have timely information about what individual students have mastered and what students still need to learn, and parents have access to information about how their child and other children at the school are doing.

5. Diverse School Choices

Families in every neighborhood should have choices about where to send their children to school. All schools in Oakland's "portfolio" of public school options – including charter public schools – must be high quality schools.

When school quality becomes our top priority, community leaders and policy makers will no longer need to make a distinction between district and charter public schools that families do not make when choosing a school. Oakland should become a student-outcomes oriented center for innovation and achievement in education.

We understand the importance of continuously monitoring school "life cycles" – intervening and supporting schools that are struggling, regularly celebrating school and student successes, closing schools for under-performance or excessively low enrollment, or opening new, innovative programs to attract students and offer more options.

Diversity of school options will be assured when...

- The Board of Education ensures the implementation of a robust school quality review process for both district and charter public schools.
- District public schools operate with flexibility and autonomy to allow for exciting, innovative programs like those provided at many charter public schools and private schools.
- The OUSD central office incubates innovative models and schools that attract families.
- The school options process is clear, accessible, transparent, and efficient, helping families make informed choices to enroll in programs that best meet their child's educational needs.
- Information about schools – such as the educational approach and programs, their staff profiles, how families can participate – is easily available in multiple languages.

6. Family and Community Partnership and Accountability

Families and community must be seen as allies in the work of educating Oakland students. It takes a village to raise a child, and Oakland is a robust and strong village that is being underutilized. We must commit to work together to create strong and purposeful partnerships for positive change and improvement.

Families need to trust the commitment of the district to educate their children well. Establishing a culture of openness and collaboration is essential. Ultimately, it is to the families and the community that all school and central office employees are accountable.

Family and community partnership and accountability will be assured when...

- The central office is required to prove that their strategies and expenditures are getting results.
- The community has easy access to budgets, strategic plans, and performance data, and these data are presented regularly to school communities.
- School and district-wide advisory councils encourage participation and proactively seek community input.
- Community and families are trained in how to partner and collaborate effectively with school people.
- Families feel welcome at school sites, invited to participate on active school site councils, and participate in the decisions affecting their child.
- Parents and caregivers take responsibility for fulfilling their critical roles in supporting student learning and supporting one another.
- Community partners such as business, labor, non-profit, and faith organizations align their financial, human, and community resources toward supporting student academic success.
- School and district staffs demonstrate culturally competent behaviors and practices.

THE CHANGE PROCESS

As citizens of Oakland, we pledge ourselves to work openly with board members, administrators, teachers, classified staff, parents, students, and community leaders to implement these changes.

We believe that in order to have the greatest effect on student outcomes, effective school reform makes schools the unit of change and accountability and puts teachers, principals, and families at the center of improvement efforts.

The reality is that school leaders need training and support to operate effectively in our decentralized system of schools. Teachers need professional development and time to collaborate in order to meet even higher standards of what students are expected to know and be able to do. And families need timely, accurate information about the performance of students and schools to support student learning, make informed school choices, and hold the system accountable.

Our hope is that the Board of Education and other leaders will embrace these community beliefs and visions for Oakland public schools as their own and collaborate with the community to lead our schools toward this vision.