

## PROLOGUE

### *Why This Book Now?*

Districts across the country struggle with persistent student achievement gaps by race, income, and residence. Increasingly, educators and researchers recognize that factors outside the classroom—largely associated with social and economic disparities—account for much of the variation in learning and school outcomes. Many agree that students’ successful learning and ability to achieve full and productive lives depend on a range of resources and opportunities in addition to quality classroom instruction: students can’t learn if their basic needs are unmet. This perspective that schools need to serve the whole child must also acknowledge that they cannot do it alone. Schools need partners in providing comprehensive supports for students’ personal and academic development.

This book is about the nearly decade-long effort by the community of Oakland, California, to reorganize its schools and school district, collaborate with community leaders, national philanthropists, and others to serve its children in a comprehensive way. In 2011, the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) adopted the nation’s first district-led full-service community school (FSCS) initiative. Today, Oakland’s plan arguably stands as the nation’s most ambitious community school initiative. It sought to transform an entire district system in serving its students with a whole-child approach rather than proceeding on a school-by-school model. Oakland operates as a community school district, not a district with some community schools.

Community schools represent a promising strategy for addressing the barriers to learning, especially those associated with poverty and inequitable resources. Twenty-five years ago, only a handful of community schools existed; today, more than seventy-five hundred community schools serve children and their families in the US, and the community school movement continues to grow. While community schools across the country differ in how they go about constructing a positive climate and supports for students' development, they all represent an expanded vision of schooling. Community schools move outside traditional school structures and routines to include attention to factors such as physical and mental health, safety, positive adult connections, expanded learning time, social supports, and family engagement.

Disparities in the resources and opportunities available to youth growing up in concentrated poverty represent structural problems—such as food insecurity, insufficient social and medical care, and homelessness in their lived contexts that are not amenable to quick-fix, adopt-a-program responses. These inequities require structural solutions to the patterns and underlying, reinforcing structures associated with the problem. It requires a system change to lead to significant, enduring change in students' school experiences and outcomes. System change calls for diagnoses in cause-and-effect terms, rather than just looking at a symptom such as enduring gaps in student achievement as “the problem to fix.” Yet few community school initiatives approach their mission in terms of system change, instead focusing on transformation of individual schools. But without transformation in the underlying, reinforcing structures associated with the inequities students' experience, the long-term trajectory and sustainability of individual schools remain unpredictable, dependent on individual leadership and commitment. Further, while a community schools approach centered only on schools may successfully promote better outcomes for its students, students facing similar challenges elsewhere in the district miss out.

What does system change look like in an urban school district? What factors enable or constrain it? This book explores these questions, taking the OUSD full-service community schools initiative as a case of system change.

## OAKLAND: A CASE OF SYSTEM CHANGE

From the outset, Oakland leaders focused on *system change* at both central office and school levels as necessary to disrupt inequities in the resources and opportunities available to students, and to establish a comprehensive, whole-child model as a way of “doing school.” Oakland’s strategic plan, *Community Schools, Thriving Students*, framed its warrant in terms of equity and invested in schools serving the most under-resourced neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup> From the start, OUSD’s strategies integrated community schools’ resources and academics, in contrast to a “co-location” model, in which external service providers operate more or less independently from the schools. OUSD reformers also pushed for central office supports to foster integrated site-level work.

More than nine years into *Community Schools, Thriving Students* implementation, Oakland shows significant change in systemic factors underlying inequities and positive implementation of a whole-child community school model. Several of Oakland’s full service community schools components have been recognized as national best practice models: among them, tools for working with community-based partners; youth leadership and family-engagement policies; restorative justice programs; social-emotional learning trainings for educators and integration into academic work; and the African American Male Achievement (AAMA) program.

The FSCS initiative reports positive student outcomes, especially in behavioral domains. Oakland data indicate reduced suspensions and high-risk behaviors, improved school climate and culture, increased family and youth involvement in site-based decisions, and perhaps most notably, higher rates of high school graduation. OUSD’s 2019

graduation rate increased by more than 13 percentage points over the past four years, giving the district its highest graduation rate (and lowest cohort dropout rate) since 2010. Oakland also counts positive student health and wellness outcomes associated with community schools' mental and physical health resources. The FSCS story is ongoing and shows that students need *both* academic and personal supports to address their school experiences and outcomes.

Since 2011–2012, the initiative has expanded in scope and scale. In the 2019–2020 school year, 42 of the 86 district-supported schools operate with a full-time community school manager, students made 36,000 visits to OUSD'S sixteen school-based health centers, the district's 75 afterschool programs involve 8,000 participants daily, and 215 community organizations partnered with Oakland schools. Furthermore, *all* of the district's schools incorporate core elements of a FSCS model such as social-emotional learning strategies and Coordination of Services Teams (COST). Moreover, remarkably, Oakland's FSCS initiative has persisted even in the face of significant leadership turnover and repeated budget crises.

This book draws on two related research projects focused on OUSD's *Community Schools, Thriving Students* initiative—one at the system level, and one at the site level. Milbrey McLaughlin's system-level research began in 2011 as OUSD rolled out its FSCS plan. She focused on understanding how the district went about organizing for and implementing the initiative, conducting more than ninety recorded and transcribed interviews with OUSD educators, administrators, and community partners and civic leaders several times annually, establishing a detailed longitudinal account of implementation issues, decisions, and outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Kendra Fehrer and Jacob Leos-Urbel began their school-level documentation and evaluation of FSCS in 2014, as researchers at Stanford University's John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities ("the Gardner Center"). Their research involved a multiyear collaboration between OUSD and the

Gardner Center to support efforts to assess, enhance, and scale their community schools work.<sup>3</sup> The research included extensive interviews with district leaders, site visits, conversations with a range of school stakeholders, and statistical analysis of longitudinal district data. Fehrer and Leos-Urbel conducted their site-level interviews and observations in nine schools—three elementary schools, four middle schools, one high school, and one “span” school serving both middle and high school students.

This book takes Oakland as a case of systems change and explores how OUSD successfully built a FSCS district despite an extremely challenging economic, political, and social context and constant leadership change. Evidence from Oakland’s almost ten years of system- and site-level implementation provides a unique opportunity to consider how a community school model plays out in terms of whole-district system change, how a community school provides integrated academic and social services to enable a whole-child approach, and how a community school mindset becomes incorporated throughout a district system.