

Oakland Community Organizations

BUILDING A DISTRICTWIDE MOVEMENT FOR SMALL SCHOOLS REFORM

The new small schools movement began as a community movement, and grassroots organizing was essential... We intentionally opened schools only where organizing was occurring in order to grow and maintain a level of energy needed to initiate new reform. This was wildly successful thanks to the tremendous organizing done by Oakland Community Organizations.

— Oakland Unified School District Web site

It is not often that a government entity publicly credits community organizing for a positive transformation in public schools. But this is exactly what happened in Oakland, California, where years of on-the-ground organizing – community meetings, relationship building, and public actions – led to the creation of forty-eight new small schools, fundamentally transforming the district landscape. From its initial organizing effort in the late 1990s to convince the district to create ten pilot small schools through the present day, the work of Oakland Community Organizations (OCO) played a critical role in sustaining the small schools movement in the midst of a fiscal crisis that led to a state takeover and multiple transitions in district leadership. Yet the story of OCO cannot be summarized in a single quote or accolade. Community organizing for school reform is deeply entwined in the complex dynamics of communities, politics, and schools.

To capture this context, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform followed the OCO small schools campaign over six years, collected data from multiple sources, and analyzed these data alongside data from six urban districts around the nation. This study of OCO utilizes extensive document analysis; student outcome data; and interviews and surveys from parents, teachers, district administrators, and the organizers in an effort to understand what it takes to produce change through community organizing and what that change looks like for students. The study team's research showed that OCO helped to foster school-community relationships, improve student educational outcomes, and build systemic changes to improve equity across the system.

Community organizing in Oakland builds school-community relationships that contribute to improved schools

OCO's community organizing efforts resulted in it being viewed as a key partner in the city for creating change for students – it garnered real results in the present and established currency for future work in the community. OCO received unequivocal credit from district administrators, teachers, and other key education stakeholders for its role in winning the small schools policy. OCO worked tirelessly to ensure that the supports necessary for the successful development of small schools were in place and to create the political will to sustain the reform within a turbulent political environment.

The organization helped integrate more nuanced and meaningful forms of parent and community engagement into district and school practices. Parents have been at the front and center of the small schools reform, involved in every step of the process, from advocating for the small schools to participating in design teams and leading school-based organizing committees.

As a result of these new relationships built through OCO's advocacy work, new school facilities have been built, new school district departments and staff positions created, and philanthropic spending in the school district has increased.

OCO's community organizing contributes to improved student educational outcomes

OCO has influenced the capacity of schools to educate students successfully through its small schools reform movement. Small schools in Oakland are outperforming the large schools from which they emerged. In particular, students are completing more rigorous coursework and dropping out at lower rates, compared to the large schools.

Both teachers and parents report that school climate (especially school safety), parent-teacher relationships, and shared decision making have been positively influenced by OCO's work.

A stronger professional culture for teachers has also emerged in the new small schools. Here, teachers report greater input in school decision making, a stronger sense of collective responsibility, and higher norms of collaboration and joint problem solving than teachers in large schools.

As a result of OCO's organizing efforts, teachers and principals in Oakland report that small schools are providing students with more individualized academic supports, thus enhancing prospects for better educational outcomes.

Community organizing stimulates change at the systems level that expands school capacity and equity in Oakland

The trajectory of OCO's organizing offers a powerful example of how persistent organizing – especially the intentional development of relationships between parents, community members, teachers, and administrators – can result in equitable districtwide reform. Grassroots pressure and subsequent public will to address overcrowding in Oakland schools was as essential as the participation of parent leaders, teachers, and administrators in design meetings and day-to-day implementation of creating the forty-eight new small schools. Remarkably, even though this organizing took place in a period of significant fiscal and political turbulence, OCO's persistent focus on equity and outcomes helped to protect and sustain the small schools reform.

OCO's organizing yields important lessons about how communities and educators can come together to generate reform efforts, the challenges and opportunities associated with reforms when they are scaled up, and the importance of community engagement in sustaining reform over time.