**Paper One: The Transformational Experience of a Ravenswood Educator**

**Introduction**

The purpose of this paper is to illuminate my experience as an educator in the Ravenswood City School District (RCSD). Specifically, I highlight my transformation from classroom teacher to lead educator and advocate for students, families, and the community-at-large. In addition, I provide a detailed historical context of Ravenswood youth beyond their elementary years to the Sequoia Union High School District (SUHSD) schools. Ultimately, I hope that the historical background and my narrative can be shared with educators in both districts so they gain validation, perspective, and enthusiasm, and to allow us to chart promising next steps as we create a more articulated K-12 vision and program for Ravenswood youth.

My story tells of a transformational experience as I worked with our partner district to support Ravenswood youth as they entered and progressed through high school. All too often, educators feel isolated in their work (Dussault, Deaudelin, Royer, & Loiselle, 1999), and many ultimately suffer from burn-out where they can no longer give 100% (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). During my first year teaching, four different teachers filled the only other teacher position in my grade level. When I participated in collaboration meetings with teachers, professional conversation was typically about particular students, lessons planning, and dissecting curriculum. There was little talk about mindset, philosophy, and our own well being as educators. Yet such conversations are pivotal in supporting educators in the deeply vested work done with children and youth on a daily basis (Yeager & Dweck, 2012). To change outcomes for Ravenswood youth,

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1 Ravenswood is a small community east of Highway 101 in California’s Bay Area. The school district has maintained the name of Ravenswood City School District, and currently serves students residing in the city of East Palo Alto and the eastern portion of Menlo Park. I use the term Ravenswood for the youth in these communities that attend RCSD schools.
discussions must dig deeper and go beyond *when* and *what* to teach. Instead the conversation should shift to *how* to teach, *how* to inspire, and *how* to care about and for children.

Conversations that focus on *how* to do this work will allow bridges to be built from one classroom teacher to another, to create lessons that are culturally responsive, and to play to students’ strengths rather than perceived deficits. Principals in both districts can engage staff in difficult conversations about *who* is left out of lessons and pushed out of schools on suspensions or expulsions. Communication can be strengthened between districts to create a comprehensive approach to support marginalized youth from transitional kindergarten through their high school graduation (and beyond).

As educational leaders in the state of California, it is imperative to act with a lens of equity. Given recent strides forward, it is clear that the new leadership of both districts possesses this lens. RCSD Superintendent Dr. Gloria Hernandez-Goff and SUHSD Superintendent Dr. James Lianides are leading the districts to guide shifts in policy and mindset in a positive direction for Ravenswood youth. There is still a great deal of work ahead, yet I am confident that collectively a vast majority, if not all, educators and children who continue to feel isolated and left out can be reached. Families, students, and community members rely on the collective leadership, vision, and courage of the districts. For the first time in a long time, communication is strong and there is a general willingness to serve students in East Palo Alto and eastern Menlo Park better. There is an incredible opportunity looking ahead to directly impact the life trajectories of youth from RCSD.

**The Transformational Experience of a Ravenswood Educator**

October 2007
It seems unusually colder than it should on an October morning in my portable classroom in East Palo Alto. I’m wearing grey pants that are too long for me, and they sweep the floor as I dash frantically around the classroom to set up for my lesson. Today my mentor is coming to observe my 8th grade Algebra I lesson and he hopes to see an improvement over the lesson he observed a month prior.

Up next is my boys’ class. I am teaching in one of the nation’s first established single-gendered schools, where girls are taught separately from boys. Yet this model is failing our students. The year I start at the school, the Academic Performance Index (API) is 597; in sharp contrast, the same year, the school I attended as a child, and that is only four miles away, has an API score of 961, one of the highest in the state for middle schools this year (California Department of Education, n.d.).

As the bell rings, I give a quick, awkward smile to my mentor before I scold the group of boys who charge into my classroom, “Boys! Boys! Back outside! Re-enter the classroom as though you have some sense!” Well after the final bell rings, there is still chattering and joking going on throughout my class of 18 boys. My class’s capacity, under this model of schooling is 20 students, and although I started with 20, two boys, Niguel and Angel, already left the school. Angel is in juvenile hall, and Niguel is waiting on a court date for his sentence. Both boys earned the highest two class scores on the diagnostic exam I gave the first day of class only five weeks prior. Their empty seats take a toll on me every single day. I imagine how class would be different with their presence; their sense of humor, intellect, and maturity added another level to my class. When I scan the room and take attendance, I try speeding over their names that still appear on my roster; some days it is easier to breeze by than others. Yet, not a day passes that I
don’t think about each of them and his potential to bring value to my class, to his community, to the world.

A week flies by before my post-observation conference with my mentor. I never expected what would come next. Going into the meeting I have several questions about algebraic concepts that are coming up in the unit on which I need clarification (not having a math background and with my only resource a student textbook, I don’t quite feel confident in teaching the subject). But instead of discussing the mathematical content, my mentor opens a laptop, loads a DVD, and says, “Watch.”

As my eyes are glued to his bright Macbook screen, I throw my hands over my face, and start tearing up. I am mortified. The video shows my back to the class while I write some Algebra problems on the whiteboard. In the 40 seconds I was turned around, two students punch each other, the class reacts, and I yell “SHHHHH” all while my back stays towards them. I had no idea the punches were ever thrown – I was too busy making sure I had the right problems written on the board.

Teach For America told its newbie recruits that things would get much better after the holidays. They were wrong. They never did. How could they? Word got back to me that Angel was being deported to Mexico, and one of my girls stopped coming to class because she got pregnant. The 8th grade English teacher would be replaced three more times before the end of the year. I was the only 8th grade teacher that my students had for the entirety of the year. If things weren’t getting any better for my students, then they certainly weren’t getting any better for me.

Niguel isn’t proud of landing himself in juvenile hall, but in a society that expects him to end up there, combined with the stresses he carries at such a young age, it is almost inevitable.
Still, I knew that this wasn’t right; that there was no way the situation my students were in was fair, yet the year continued with business as usual. One day at lunch a group of girls comes into my classroom, “Ms. Patel, how come everyone always leaves us? What did we do?” I cannot remember how I answered, but I know in that moment that any thoughts of quitting or thinking I was failing my students were selfish. I want things to turn out differently for my students, but change needs to start with me – with my expectations and mindset. I have to show them through my actions and commitment that I care – they are just as worthy as my middle school classmates and me. In a nearby community, my classmates and I had endless opportunities afforded to us – my students deserve the same.

**My Initial Understanding of Ravenswood Students**

In this section I describe my experience as a first year teacher in the community, and my attempt at serving children. The well-being and success of children in East Palo Alto has become my life’s work since I began teaching in the community seven years ago. I grew up privileged, only four miles away from the community, in the town of Los Altos. I first became cognizant of the deep inequities and the sheer difference in life experiences between my East Palo Alto YMCA girlfriends and me during my adolescent years. These stark differences didn’t make sense to me as a young girl, and they still don’t make sense to me today. I will do what I can to push boundaries and critique policies and practices that harm children. I will advocate for more inclusive, equitable policies and practices in school systems.

My first year teaching in RCSD was tough, similar to other first-year teachers throughout the country. I was straight out of college, committing two years via Teach For America (TFA) to a community situated only four miles away from my home community. The context in which I worked took a tremendous toll on my mental and emotional well-being; I was exhausted every
single day. In just nine months, I went to the doctor’s office eleven times. I’m sure I wasn’t the only TFA recruit who felt they worked so hard, gave so much, and yet made such small gains and tiny strides with students. I thought I was working hard, and I thought I was giving so much. I had no idea what that actually meant. I fell victim to the marketing and campaigning that organizations all around me touted: help save the children. I felt bad for the children, I knew the children deserved better, and I was there to right all the wrongs in their life. I was wrong. In a matter of months, I was ashamed. I felt like I was set-up, that I was drinking some kind of Kool-Aid that put me in a place of power to save my students with a missionary’s zeal.

I started declining all TFA-related events due to time constraints, and instead, spent my weekends going to my students’ sporting events, or meeting a group of students at the East Palo Alto public library. I definitely needed to work on the content delivery of my lessons, points TFA made clear; yet, in order to teach a lesson from which my students could actually learn, I needed to understand my students individually first, to cater lessons in a way that deliberately engaged them. As much as TFA talked about the need to build relationships with students, I discovered I needed the time and space to actually build them — not because TFA told me, but because I wanted to. I wanted to better understand why Mauricio was so tired in my class and why Valerie never talked about her father. I wanted to know why Juan was called “El Jefe” on the soccer field, and what music influenced Darnell.

When I started connecting with my students on a more personal level, I realized I had to stop feeling sorry. That was the last thing my students needed from me. Instead, they needed a committed and strong teacher who cared about them as individuals. They needed a teacher who saw them as humans first and students second. I learned this from what they shared with me, and
from some veteran teachers in the district who I grew to admire. These teachers not only had students achieving, but also were earning students’ respect.

After my first year teaching in RCSD, my emotions changed. I went from feeling devastated and sad because the situation my students were in. I moved to feeling frustrated and angry with larger societal issues such as poverty in addition to specific school and district policies that burdened students. How could their lives be disregarded? Why were the circumstances that Ravenswood children face tolerated, when it would never be tolerated in my hometown? Why were teachers allowed to quit after only two months? More importantly, why were these teachers hired to begin with? Some of the teachers I had to work with gave me a better understanding as to why some of my Algebra students had difficulty adding and subtracting. Some of my students were victims of poor teaching; not just poor, but really bad, inadequate teaching. I began learning that in addition to some of the worst teachers in front of students, there were also some terrible leaders in charge of schools and district departments. I knew that weak leaders and bad teachers would certainly not have a place in the Los Altos School District, my hometown district, where educators seemed to stay in their positions for a lifetime, literally, a lifetime.

I started understanding all the strikes against innocent youth early on – many were “underprepared” and “underachieving” because of pervasive and systemic issues, such as poor leader and teacher quality. Yet amidst the broad negative press about the community and its constant ties to gang violence and drugs, there was magic happening in some classrooms. Some teachers in the district were truly amazing, inspirational, and motivating. They were incredible in how they taught and how they were able to create a warm, welcoming environment – one could feel it upon entry. On a visit to a classroom, I asked the teacher, “How were you able to establish
such an empowering community of learning?” She replied simply, “My students create our classroom culture; I just help facilitate.” It was clear that she believed so much in her students and expected so much from them, and they, in turn, easily rose to the challenge. Students deserve to have teachers like this every single year of schooling.

This shift in mindset, from feeling sorry for my students to feeling frustrated (yet determined) had a tremendous outcome on my delivery as a teacher, and ultimately my students’ learning. In my first year of teaching, my students’ test scores and overall life skills were shameful. I had not yet learned my craft. My second year teaching, I made sure to get to know my students, connect with them, and spend more time guiding their development as people first and students second. As a result of these authentic relationships, my students earned the highest test scores across the district in three of the four subjects I taught. Over the course of that year, shy students became confident and apathetic students became engaged.

The Deficit Mindset that Harms Ravenswood Youth

Disadvantaged, underserved, low-achieving, underprepared.

These are typically the words used to describe Ravenswood students. In this section I describe my shift in lens and care for my students during my second year teaching. I also show how disadvantaged, underserved, low-achieving, underprepared, and an overall deficit frame of mind by adults serving Ravenswood youth has impacted their educational journey.

After I crossed the hurdle as a first year teacher, I experienced many interactions with educators and non-profit leaders in the community. In my second year teaching, I realized that many people serving in East Palo Alto and eastern Menlo Park describe students and the community-at-large in a deficit frame. However, the undertone was different, deeper, almost overt, when I started to connect with educators from surrounding communities. Repeated
interactions with educators from surrounding communities made me understand the systemic issues even more. People felt sorry for Ravenswood youth, similar to how I had felt my first year.

During my second year teaching, I wanted to make sure that I better understood my students’ experience beyond middle school, and also to see if I could learn from the teaching style of high school teachers to improve my own practice. My mentor scheduled a visit to the different high schools for us to observe classrooms. In each of the high schools, I saw some of my former students who were in advanced courses or college track courses cowering low into their seats. These were the same students that were vibrant, curious, and eager less than a year ago in my classroom – how were they even allowed to not participate? Why wasn’t there a classroom culture established in which the teacher ensured all students felt welcomed and valued? I remember a conversation with one of my shining Algebra students who was in a Geometry class at Menlo-Atherton High School, a school in SUHSD. She entered the class 20 minutes late; when she saw me, I could see her eyes light up with joy, and then suddenly her head lowered and her eyes hit the floor. Even though she was thrilled to see me, she thought being late would disappoint me. I knelt down next to her and asked, “Are you okay?” She said, “Kinda, sorry I’m late,” as if she wanted to ease my disappointment. I responded, “Don’t be sorry, what’s going on?” because I wanted to understand her situation. She explained, “My mom’s car broke down so I had to walk to school, but you know that I have a lot of brothers and sisters so I had to walk them to school first.” I said, “Thank you for being a great older sister, and I’m happy to see you.” In that moment she smiled and she knew that I was not disappointed at all, and that I still cared about her life outside of school. I still don’t know why her own teacher never inquired about her well being that morning.
After my years teaching, I served as a district administrator, and then most recently, as a school administrator. As a district and site administrator, I coordinated several teacher groups from M-A to come to observe RCSD classrooms. At the end of the observations, we met as a group to discuss what we observed. I was dumbfounded when one M-A teacher said that she was surprised to see that all the students were sitting in their seats. I remember thinking to myself, “Sitting in their seats? That’s what you noticed? Of course they do! Why wouldn’t they?” It was in that moment I realized the expectations in Ravenswood for Youth of Color were different than the expectations for the same Youth of Color just over the freeway at M-A. This comment reminded me of my visit to M-A, when I saw classrooms full of Youth of Color, with a new teacher desperate to gain control of the class.

During my observation at M-A I could guess the type of class I was going to observe by just peeking into the classroom. Advanced Placement (AP) and college track classes were mainly filled with White and Asian students, while remedial courses were filled with Youth of Color. My students were being isolated and tracked into low non-college track classes with new teachers, including Youth of Color that had earned the academic merit to be in AP classes. I knew this wasn’t fair, and this isn’t what education experts suggested; instead, researchers assert that the best teachers teach students that need their support the most (Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006). If this was already known, why weren’t school practices at M-A and other schools aligned to these recommendations? I figured it was a matter of lack of courage, and the unwillingness of leaders, teachers and staff members not willing to do whatever it takes to best support students. After all, I experienced this in RCSD, too.

Another M-A staff member chimed in stating that she noticed so many students were participating in class. I also was perturbed that someone noted students participating. I thought to
myself, “Of course students participate; they should be leading the class!” I remembered the advice I got from a superb Ravenswood teacher during my first year teaching, that the classroom should be student-led. The words of some M-A educators continue to haunt me and make me realize that there is a lot of work to be done on the part of adults in order to ensure better outcomes for the youth.

As a site administrator, I became more involved in articulation meetings for 8th grade students. I would do as much as I possibly could to get the most up-to-date information from all the high schools so I could accurately inform parents and students. At times, I had to call the school as an anonymous caller to get particular information. Specially Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) courses were dismantled in SUHSD because the district felt they were not serving students well (a policy I was thrilled to learn about since SDAIE courses created heavy cases of tracking in the schools). During high school registration, I called a school to inquire about SDAIE courses as they related to the following school year. To my surprise, I was told over the phone that although SDAIE courses were no longer technically offered, the bilingual teacher was “hand-picking” students to fill two classes. More recently, after a decision had been reached to offer a regular-track geometry course at all high schools in SUHSD for freshmen, I found out that M-A still had not put this into practice. After reviewing data, having joint meetings for a couple of years, and agreeing on next steps to support students, change was still hard to come by.

A combination of my own experiences, observations, and interactions with other educators within the districts has made me understand that the hardest work is still ahead. The deficit mindset, putting adults’ needs before students’, and sheer lack of courage has kept real change from happening. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell’s (2008) statement clarifies one of the top
issues that continue to plague both districts, “Because the education system in this country has
the knowledge and capacity to provide a quality education to all children and chooses to act as
though it is tirelessly trying to figure out how to do that, we have systemic cowardice” (p. 187). I
started to understand how vast the sense of hopelessness was spread amongst stakeholders.
Ravenswood students’ needs are placed low on the totem pole when non-profits and districts
make resource decisions. The deficit framing of Ravenswood students was so deep and
pervasive; it was as if there wasn’t much reason to make things just since Ravenswood students
would fail anyway. In a recent SUHSD board meeting discussing boundary lines, a community
member from Atherton kept referring to Ravenswood youth as “those children” in a way that
allowed her to keep her own children separate from East Palo Alto and eastern Menlo Park youth.
Despite the negative views on the community and children, I know that the community of
Ravenswood is filled with richness. It certainly is not the same kind of wealth that surrounded
my friends and me who grew up just four short miles away in Los Altos, a community very
similar to that of Menlo Park and Atherton. Yet the assets of Ravenswood are obvious to
community members and educators who have deeply connected to the youth in profound ways.

The Richness of Ravenswood

The way in which Ravenswood students inquire about the world they live in, regardless if
they have ever been on an airplane, or have gone to summer camp every summer, exceeds my
curiosity about the world at their age. I couldn’t see the globe as an interconnected place as a
young teenager, where cultures and traditions collide, even though I was privileged enough to
travel halfway around the globe at my students’ age. My first year teaching in 2007, I was
fortunate to host members of the United States Army in my class. One of my students asked
directly (a question I was dying to hear the answer to myself), “So why are we fighting in the
war anyway? Do you believe it’s the right thing to do?” Although the soldier gave a trivial answer, I was proud of my student for having the courage to ask a question many of us in the room were thinking. I was not exposed to this type of courage growing up in a sheltered community. Many of my classmates and I followed the rules as they were given to us, whether we thought they were fair or not. Thinking outside of the box was not necessarily encouraged in our homes or at school.

Students in RCSD are mostly Latino, with a sizeable number of African American and Pacific Islander students. The demographics of the city of East Palo Alto have shifted significantly over the past 30 years. In the early 1900s, the community was overwhelmingly white, then between the 1960s and the 1990s Black, and now in the past 20 years, it is majority Latino (Edwards, 2001). Although the city has had significant shifts in demographics, the community is vibrant with each culture’s traditions, clothing, and food, which permeate throughout East Palo Alto. On any given day across the different school campuses, you can find a group of students playing Double Dutch, another group cooing to the sounds from their ukuleles, and another calling out “¡Pásale!” on the soccer field. If we tap into this cultural wealth and look at youth through a lens focused on the assets they carry, we may be better able to serve them. An asset-based approach is one that should be shared by educators and leaders from East Palo Alto and its neighboring cities of Palo Alto, Atherton, and Menlo Park. This way, youth are embraced and educators build on their strengths, regardless of their background or their home community.

**Historical Background and Policy Implications for Ravenswood Youth**

In this section I describe the evolution of district policies that have situated Ravenswood youth differently from their peers in surrounding communities for years. I explain my experience
in understanding the plethora of issues students from Ravenswood face when transitioning to high school. I also include comparative data within RCSD schools and between other feeder schools to the SUHSD high schools.

My involvement in high school transition started seven years ago as an 8th grade teacher when I began to identify students who were misplaced in math courses in high school. That is, my former students who received high grades of A’s or B’s in my Algebra class and scored proficient or advanced on the Algebra I California Standards Test (CST) were forced to repeat Algebra I in high school. I wrote teacher recommendations, which were disregarded during the emotionally charged high school registration day. Many high school guidance counselors ignored the recommendations and placed students differently. Not only did counselors place students differently, but at times, literally placed them out of college-ready classes. Instead of encouraging my students to enroll in college-ready classes like Spanish for Native Speakers, they were counseled out of these and placed into courses such as Ceramics. I saw it happen every single year I worked as an educator in Ravenswood between 2007 and 2013.

After I noticed that my former students were being placed in courses below their ability in high school, my concern increased. As I dug deeper into the issue of misplacement of my students in high school classes2, I began to understand the history of practice and policy that has not provided appropriate guidance to youth and families in East Palo Alto. Whereas high school staff members and counselors inspired and challenged me to take more difficult courses when I was in middle school, the SUHSD high school counselors were telling Ravenswood middle school students to back out of classes they wanted to take. Again, I didn’t understand why my support from high school counselors as a middle school student was so different, almost opposite

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2 A full report was issued by the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights of the San Francisco Bay Area (LCCR) with the support of the Silicon Valley Community Foundation addressing math misplacement for Students of Color by Bay Area high schools (Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights of the San Francisco Bay Area, 2013a).
from the support my students were receiving from their high school counselors. I knew I would have to keep pushing to understand the reasoning behind this *counseling down*\(^3\) of Ravenswood students, and furthermore, to see if there were other policies or practices harming Ravenswood youth.

My heightened frustration led me to ask questions, but few were able to give me direct answers. I dug deeper to understand the problem district-wide. After asking teachers and principals at other RCSD school sites about their process to help transition students to high school, I learned that there was not a comprehensive approach to this process. Each school operated on their own, with some schools able to provide much more support than others. Clearly, a more concerted, collective effort on the part of both districts was needed to ensure greater success of students through the transition.

**The divide.**

Students residing in the Ravenswood attendance area are assigned to one of three traditional comprehensive SUHSD high schools via a boundary map adopted in 1986. Through many conversations with RCSD and SUHSD staff, I learned about the rationale behind the boundary map. I got an original copy of the 1986 map, and noticed that the region of East Palo Alto was divided differently than any other community. This is where I began to understand the issues that plagued Ravenswood students at a much deeper level.

Visibly, one can recognize the peculiar boundaries drawn on the eastside of the map (see Appendix A). East Palo Alto, though less than three-square miles, has been assigned boundaries

\(^3\) I use the term *counseling down* to illustrate the process my students endured when working with particular high school counselors. These counselors used their power and low expectations of Ravenswood youth to suggest classes that would not earn them college credit. Often times, *counseling down* occurred even when objective measures such as the California Standards Test (CST) scores showed these students had earned academic merit to enroll in the college-track courses. Essentially, students who earned academic merit to be in particular classes were placed in classes below their ability level based on perceptions and assumptions held by SUHSD staff.
that divide the city to send students to several high schools. The boundary map gives insight to how surrounding neighborhoods are divided in comparison. The map shows the proximity of each high school to corresponding Ravenswood addresses. In a community where the main mode of transportation for many students is a public school bus or walking, proximity to a school plays a pivotal role. The community of Ravenswood, when compared to surrounding areas, is sliced the most. In other words, the community is divided by sending students to three different high schools. Additionally, families in Ravenswood have high mobility rates; many families move multiple times during the course of a student’s elementary schooling. Although they may move within their community and remain at the same elementary school, their high school assignment may change multiple times. M-A is by far the closest high school and only about one mile away, yet some students are assigned to Carlmont, which is about eleven miles away (up to a 45 minute bus ride) from the community.

This boundary map shows that not only are students from East Palo Alto involuntarily bussed to the public high schools in SUHSD, but they are also split up so that a critical mass of Ravenswood students are not attending any single high school. The way students from the eastside are split up and sent to schools far away provides a starting point for understanding the inequities that exist within the district. Because of the divide: (1) students are involuntarily bussed to schools far away from East Palo Alto, and further are unable to attend high school with peers with whom they had been attending school since grade school; (2) parent access to high school campuses is limited; and (3) teachers and principals from across the two districts are unable to effectively collaborate. The policy cycle and context of high school assignment in SUHSD has its roots in a decision made decades ago.

The history.
The saga of the boundary map dates back to the 1970s when Ravenswood High School (RHS), a public high school in East Palo Alto, was still in existence. The school opened in 1958, enrolling students of many different ethnicities including whites, Blacks, Japanese, Pacific Islanders, and Latino. In 1963, enrollment soared to over 1,200 students. More than half the school’s population was Black by the late 1960s, and by 1970, nearly 90% of students at RHS were Black (Jones, 2006). Soon after, student enrollment plummeted. In an effort to diversify the student population and increase student enrollment at Ravenswood High, the SUHSD devised a plan to integrate high schools in the area. In 1971, reforms to create a more robust educational program and introduce two-way bussing brought students of color to the SUHSD schools and white students to RHS. The new and improved RHS lasted only a few years. RHS closed in 1976, citing issues of low attendance and cost savings as its primary considerations. Once the school shut down in 1976, it was determined the children of the Ravenswood community would attend schools in SUHSD by way of a desegregation mandate. Finally, in 1986 the district adopted a boundary map for the entire attendance area of SUHSD. The policy has been in effect for nearly thirty years, and yet the process is still messy and unfair. Coupled with this unjust policy, there were unjust practices from high school guidance counselors that complicated matters even more.

With the advent of the boundary map in 1986, students in SUHSD have been assigned to schools based on their home address. Students and families also have the option to submit a transfer request via the school’s Open Enrollment Policy, which allows them to request placement in any of SUHSD’s traditional comprehensive high schools. Although the Open Enrollment Policy, commonly misconceived as “school choice,” gives the illusion that families

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4 The history of Ravenswood High School is noted by several sources, as its’ opening and eventual closure was a highly politicized affair. Each source, however, cites attendance rates and money savings as primary reasons for the schools’ closure (Edwards, 2001; Jones, 2006; Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights of the San Francisco Bay Area, 2013b).
have the option of attending the high school that they choose, this often is not the case due to enrollment numbers. Approximately 75% of requests are met in SUHSD each year (Lianides, 2014a), though there is no distinction between first, second, and third choice. The SUHSD superintendent revealed at a recent meeting that proximity to a school played a powerful role in family participation in the transfer request process (Lianides, 2014b). Specifically, the majority of transfer requests from RCSD were from families requesting to transfer out of Carlmont, the high school furthest away from the Ravenswood community. In addition, RCSD students who opted to attend East Palo Alto Academy, a Stanford New Schools public charter high school, are mainly students who were assigned to schools other than M-A, which is the closest in proximity to Ravenswood. These trends provide two data points that reflect how Ravenswood parents and students are voicing their concern about Carlmont being too far from home.

**The impact of policy.**

Although SUHSD established the boundary map in response to a desegregation mandate in 1986, this order has had adverse and perhaps unintended consequences on Ravenswood students. Ravenswood, a small close-knit K-8 district, sends about 250 eighth grade students to the SUHSD comprehensive high schools each year (see Appendix E). Ravenswood youth are split across several high schools in predominantly White, affluent neighborhoods vastly different from their own. The freshman class of the 2011-2012 school year attended the following schools by number:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Distribution of Ravenswood 9th grade students in SUHSD, 2011-2012 academic year</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Menlo-Atherton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Few Ravenswood students attend Sequoia High School because this high school is not included in the Ravenswood boundaries (see Appendix B). Those students who attend Sequoia High School are likely to have had their transfer request granted. The following table shows the high school breakdown of each feeder school in RCSD for the 2011-2012 freshmen class:

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elementary School</th>
<th>Menlo-Atherton</th>
<th>Woodside</th>
<th>Carlmont</th>
<th>Sequoia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Belle Haven</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willow Oaks</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chavez</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McNair</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costaño</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>113</strong></td>
<td><strong>56</strong></td>
<td><strong>53</strong></td>
<td><strong>10</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Therefore, even within the same school, Ravenswood students have been assigned (or granted a transfer request) to any of the four district high schools. In sharp contrast, some other feeder districts feed almost entirely into a single high school:

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Dominant HS</th>
<th># of students who attend dominant HS/Total students in district</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Las Lomitas</td>
<td>Menlo-Atherton</td>
<td>71/73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Menlo Park</td>
<td>Menlo-Atherton</td>
<td>132/136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Carlos</td>
<td>Carlmont</td>
<td>168/192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woodside Elementary</td>
<td>Woodside</td>
<td>17/18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given the data from tables 1-3, the treatment of Ravenswood youth is vastly different from any of the other communities within the district. The bussing policy appears, then, to serve the
desegregation mandate of the mainly White high schools in the 1980’s and 1990’s across SUHSD, and not the needs or preferences of East Palo Alto families and youth today.

Aside from the actual division of students, the transition from middle school to high school is a difficult time socially for many students. In Benner and Graham’s longitudinal Los Angeles based study (2007), they found that Black students feel less school belonging than their White peers in grade nine. As a result, students may feel like they do not belong to the new high school community, especially during the transition period, and can become disengaged from school. As a related study by Schmakel (2008) demonstrates, almost half of students who end up dropping out of high school do so because they feel disengaged from their schools. Ravenswood students may feel a heightened level of disengagement and social uneasiness in high school since they are bussed out of their community, they attend school with peers who are socially different from them, and they know very few of their classmates. In addition to the social pressures that Ravenswood students may face, research, for example studies by Mizelle & Irvin (1999), Parrish, Poland, Arellanes, Ernandes, & Viloria (2011), and Cauley & Jovanovich (2006), indicate that making the transition to high school is easier when middle and high schools communicate on a regular basis.

Exceptions to the rule.

Research indicates high schools that provide a successful transition for students streamline a feeder school model (Parrish et al., 2011; Schiller, 1999). That is, students from a particular school (or district) are all assigned to one high school. This is the case for most students in SUHSD; only Ravenswood and parts of Redwood City are exceptions. In WestEd’s (2011) study on transition to high school, the authors point to the following implications for policy and practice:
To simplify cross-school collaboration and transition activities and potentially reduce costs, district administrators should consider streamlining school feeder patterns. Streamlined feeder patterns not only facilitate coordination among staff, but also minimize disruption to cohorts of students as they move through the grades. Respondents in several study high schools reported advantages associated with many of their students having known each other since elementary school. (p. 21)

Continuing to comply with the desegregation mandate established decades ago does not serve the children of RCSD well. The demographics of the East Palo Alto area are vastly different from several decades ago, and the desegregation mandate for this population does not make sense. Even so, it is coming at the expense of Ravenswood youth not being able to successfully transition to high school.

At the same time that Ravenswood students face the adversity of being split up, some students from an affluent community with tremendous social capital are exempted from the boundary map policy. Specifically, students of Las Lomitas are exempt from the district’s high school placement policy, due to strong parent involvement the year the boundary map was released. Therefore, students who attend Las Lomitas need only to fill out a transfer request form and they are automatically granted approval for a high school transfer (Hartwig, 2011). The parents in Las Lomitas made the argument that they wanted all of their middle school children to be admitted together to the same high school, a plausible argument, but one that was only granted for this one wealthier, White, westside community. Although some of the students who attend middle school in Las Lomitas have backyards that border the fence of Woodside High School, these students are afforded the opportunity for an automatic transfer approval to M-A, due to the social and cultural capital exemplified to the board almost three decades ago. (This
exception had not been widely publicized, until recently when a few Ravenswood advocates became aware of the exception.)

If parents from Las Lomitas, and ultimately the school board members, understood the argument for keeping a cohort of middle school students together for their years in high school, why was the boundary map drawn such that it affects Ravenswood students in precisely the opposite manner? This exemption is perhaps the most unsettling aspect of the district’s policies—providing more access and opportunity to a group of students who come from affluent communities and hold strong social capital, while at the same time denying this exemption to students in need. I became even more frustrated learning about this exception, and knew there was something more I needed to do.

**Using My Frustration to Spur Action**

There was no doubt in my mind that there were clear inequities Ravenswood students faced while transitioning to high school. I was frustrated for a long time, but realized my approach would have to be different. If I stayed frustrated without speaking or doing anything, nothing was going to change. I had to take action for my students. For example, several years ago when I worked as the RCSD’s Math Coordinator, I showed specific cases of the misplacement of Ravenswood students in courses below their ability; yet I was ignored. In the fall of 2011, I brought up the issue again, as another class of students was misplaced. This time, the new SUHSD assistant superintendent looked into the matter more deeply. She, too, understood that this was an internal issue at the high school level, though it wasn’t isolated to only SUHSD\(^5\). The *Held Back* (Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights of the San Francisco Bay Area, 2013a) report documents the case of SUHSD misplacing students of color from a particular school district (RCSD) in math classes more so than students from any other feeder

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\(^5\) The LCCR report shares the wide practice of misplacement of Youth of Color in high schools across the Bay Area.
district. Since the release of the report, math placement trends have not been flawless, but there has been a marked difference in more appropriate math placement for Ravenswood youth because of the concentrated effort of SUHSD. It was the willingness of the two districts placing an importance on the matter that ultimately changed practice.

As a teacher, I knew that my former students were forced to repeat content because they would meet with me after school to show me their high school schedules. When I worked as a site and district office administrator, I learned that counseling down and misplacement was characteristic of the entire district. Through my own transition from teacher to administrator, I have channeled my frustration with inequitable and racist practices in SUHSD to foster productive change; after all, the practices in RCSD are not flawless either. The success of Ravenswood youth will depend on the collaborative effort between both districts, and the first step is regular, productive, and honest communication between the two districts, which has started taking place.

On January 15th, 2014, the SUHSD school board discussed a new boundary map that assigns all Ravenswood students to M-A, the closest school to the community (see Appendix C). If this policy passes, the map would go into effect for the 2015-2016 academic year. In the interim, Superintendent Lianides and his team are working hard to try to fulfill all Ravenswood requests for M-A as their home school for the year 2014-2015. The SUHSD board already approved a policy that allows Ravenswood’s Open Enrollment requests to be considered before the general population. The passage of this interim policy leads me to believe that the board sees the issue of the current boundary map as problematic and unjust for the youth of East Palo Alto. I hope this momentum keeps up, as the final vote on a new boundary map awaits the board in June 2014.
There have been several board meetings about the boundary map. Engaged trustees, educators and parents in these meetings have spread the discussion to high school students. Recently, a Woodside High School senior interviewed me for her senior exhibition project on the topic of Ravenswood youth transitioning to SUHSD. Several M-A magazine and newspaper articles have included pieces on the boundary map. Two student reflections from the issue on diversity are included below:

_We have some thinking to do. Our school prides itself on its extremely diverse student body: M-A is a virtual color wheel so vivid that even its motto reflects student demographics. However, the blatant racial and socioeconomic stratification in higher-level classes, at lunch-time, within the staff and administration, and basically every aspect of student life would suggest that diversity makes us weaker rather than stronger._ (Gilles, 2013, p. 27)

_The contrast between Sequoia Union High School students who travel over 11 miles to get to school every day and those who pedal through Menlo Park’s leafy avenues is impossible to ignore. The majority of the district boundaries are unsurprising; many M-A students are here because of their proximity to the school. However, kids living in a small portion of East Palo Alto are sent to schools miles away from their homes, seemingly without explanation._ (K. Weiner, 2013, p. 7)

Students are questioning their peers and staff on the basis of embracing diversity. One student points to many aspects of the campus that lack diversity, though M-A seemingly prides itself on diversity. At the same time, another student realizes that some of the inequities that exist today are given no explanation, showing that these policies and practices are outdated. As a participant
in many board meetings, in addition to many, many individual conversations with adults engaged on the topic, the importance of bringing in the student voices are so important. The students at M-A are beginning to speak up about their opinions, yet at the same time, it may be most important to consult the students that have gone through the rough transition themselves.

Conclusion

As a teacher, district and site administrator, and now as a director in a foundation that supports the Ravenswood community, I have kept high school transition for Ravenswood youth as one of my top priorities. Even if the new boundary map passes, the hard work is still ahead. A greater concentration of Ravenswood youth at M-A is just the first step of many to better support the youth of East Palo Alto. I have confidence that teachers and administrators can collectively find ways to listen to students, and welcome all students. Most importantly, if educators and leaders promise to reconsider any deficit mindsets in relation to youth or each other, the work ahead will become easier.

Changes in policy make little difference if there are no changes in practice or outcomes as a result. If more Ravenswood youth will be attending M-A as early as the 2014-2015 school year, both districts must begin to prepare for this transition. Changes can be made programmatically and perhaps even structurally. However, these may be some of the easier changes. Perhaps the most difficult changes the districts need to face are based on mindset. How do we view the community of Ravenswood? How do we see Ravenswood youth? What are educators willing to do to best support and serve them?

There is an incredible opportunity to move forward with both districts in supporting the youth of Ravenswood; to put the tumultuous past behind, to be courageous and transformative in our practices. Specifically, district and school leaders should act in ways that demonstrate
transformative leadership, in that leaders of schools and districts don’t shy away from conversations of social justice (Shields, 2010). That in fact, these discussions are at the forefront of what the schools and districts prioritize. For the first time in a long time, RCSD is equipped with strong school leaders, and many talented teachers. At the same time, SUHSD staff and school board members understand the plight of Ravenswood students and are willing to have open conversations about equity. There is movement in conversation, and I hope this leads to movement with real actions in the name of equity and social justice.

Finally, I hope that all stakeholders can learn from the experiences and voices of the students. My second paper builds off my Student Voice (2012) study, and includes data from focus groups with former Ravenswood students who are now attending a school in SUHSD high school. The compilation of these voices will allow educators and student peers to better understand their experience. Their stories can impact the way that the districts restructure support services to Ravenswood youth. Paper 3 gives recommendations based on Paper 1 and Paper 2, and charts a specific call to action involving educators, service-providers, and funders.