Paper 3: Recommendations for an Articulated K-12 Vision Between Sequoia Union and Ravenswood Districts

Introduction

The purpose of the final paper of this project is to suggest policy and program recommendations for leaders and educators in Ravenswood City School District (RCSD) and Sequoia Union High School District (SUHSD). I include ways for philanthropists, foundations, and service-providers in the immediate area to engage in productive work supporting Ravenswood youth to and through high school. My experience as an educator, the historical context of the community, and most importantly the voices of students who courageously shared their thoughts with me, have guided the action steps for both districts. In order to better align practices and resources across the districts, the intended audience for this final paper is district leaders, philanthropists, and service providers.

First, I will summarize Paper 1 (my transformational experience as a Ravenswood educator), summarize Paper 2 (a student voice study), and circle back to my research question. Then, I will recommend policies and practices for the districts. Finally, I hope to encourage all stakeholders to think about how to use resources more equitably in the districts. By equity, I mean putting resources where the need is greatest, not to be confused by equality, that is, using resources in the same way across the board, regardless of need.

Overview of Findings

As an 8th grade teacher in East Palo Alto, I became aware of practices and policies in RCSD and SUHSD that served as barriers to students for a successful transition to and through high school. In Paper 1, I expose my transformational experience as an educator in Ravenswood through the different positions I held. I also include historical context about the community,
specifically about process and policy involved with Ravenswood students transitioning to high school. The intended audience is mainly teachers in RCSD and SUHSD to validate their own experiences and offer a way to navigate through various emotional stages, though the paper could also serve as a guide to educators more broadly working in a similar context. Historical context is shared as a way to understand the community’s past as it affects the present and future. In the 1980s and 1990s, East Palo Alto was a city riddled with crime, gangs, and drugs. Even though recently the community has made positive strides forward, it still struggles with negative connotations that unfortunately also impact the youth. The demographics and life experiences for Ravenswood youth are vastly different from many of their much wealthier peers in high school, affecting their transition to the SUHSD schools.

The impetus for Paper 2 came from conducting an initial study in the summer of 2012 for the districts. I learned that students were very willing, and some were almost desperate, to tell their stories. Though I had worked on the initiative of high school transition for several years, I had not considered the voices of students in a systematic way. The conversations I had had were mostly with my former students who shared anecdotes when they came to visit. After gaining their valuable perspective during the pilot study, I realized there was a need for a more robust study design that would allow students to explain their stories more fully. I wanted to capture their experiences and learn from them. I wanted their stories to guide how adults, programs, and services could better support them in their transition to and through high school. The intended audience for Paper 2 is those who support youth from Ravenswood academically, socially, and emotionally. This group may include but is not limited to teachers, after school program providers, and counselors. Therefore, the research question that frames this study has been: What
are the experiences of former Ravenswood youth to and through their transition to a Sequoia Union High School District school, and what policies and programs can best support them?

In Paper 2, I described the outcomes that arose from conducting three focus groups with former Ravenswood students now attending high schools in SUHSD. I discovered there were aspects of their transition that were validated across all the students, such as the sheer jolt of transitioning from the small district of RCSD to the large high school district, and the burden of carrying that experience throughout their entire high school experience. My findings demonstrated that navigating the social scene in high school was a hurdle for students that caused high levels of stress. Related to these struggles to fit in, a prominent theme was the relationships students had with peers and adults. The vast nature of high school in a new district drew some students closer to their middle school friends, developing a sibling type of love. Others continued to struggle to make new friends in high school, and consequently needed to rely heavily on family for support. Students who were first in their families to attend high school in America, which is common for Ravenswood families, shared that their entire family was also adjusting to the transition. Finally, all participating students who are still enrolled in high school noted either a particular consistent and reliable person in their lives, or a supportive program as imperative to a successful high school transition and ultimate success through high school. Some students pointed to their families’ hardships as motivation, because growing up experiencing the stressors of poverty have shown them that they should work in school to try to attain a different lifestyle as adults. Other students highlighted programs such as College Track and MyLife as

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MyLife is a program through the Boys and Girls Club of the Peninsula that offers support mainly to students residing in East Palo Alto, eastern Menlo Park, and the North Fair Oaks area of Redwood City. I include this program’s overview and budget because it is the only comprehensive program that currently exists at Menlo-Atherton High School as a direct response to help students transition to and through their first couple of years of high school. For funders interested in supporting East Palo Alto youth into high school, this is an ideal program to fund. See Appendix D for more information.
sources of encouragement. Still others noted that their strongest support came from individual teachers, some from high school and others from middle school. Students seemed very grateful for their middle school teachers who continued to stay engaged in their lives, even after they had moved on to high school.

Through their experiences, students openly discussed what was working for them and what wasn’t. Students honestly admitted their faults, too, saying, for example, that they were just “not getting the job done.” Listening to them share their experiences humbled me. In each focus group, I remember becoming overwhelmed by a feeling of great pride for my former students. Despite describing hardships at home coupled with struggling to fit in at high school, their discussions remained positive, showcasing their resilience. They described themselves as hopeful and willing to work so that they could gain substantially from their high school experience. Educators and service providers have a lot to learn from what these students demonstrate. Students spoke honestly, took responsibility, and talked about their frustrations in a productive manner. They steered me in a direction to look internally to see what I can do to improve in my duty to serve youth. Even though they had a lot to say about their physical surroundings and relationships, they were extremely self-reflective in their stories. It was truly inspiring.

Broadly, educators in RCSD may only be privy to high school graduation rates in the SUHSD schools. However, most teachers are not aware of the detailed data provided in Paper 1, especially during students’ transitional years. Some students have academic and social challenges that begin before their transition to high school, while others face challenges that are sparked by the transition itself. While I served as an educator in RCSD, I had many conversations with leaders from both districts. The tumultuous history discussed in Paper 1 was due in part because of Ravenswood educators feeling as though the high school district was not
supporting Ravenswood students in high school. At the same time, high school educators felt as though RCSD was not adequately preparing students before entering high school. As seen in exit and entry data\(^2\), there is truth to both sides of the debate. However, this finger pointing within both districts has resulted in few actionable steps, and a continued story of struggle on the part of the students. To move forward and truly serve the youth, we must move decisively to promote improvement in the academic outcomes of Ravenswood youth.

**Policy and Programmatic Implications**

There is broad research literature addressing the middle to high school transition (Bateman & Karr-Kidwell, 1995; Cauley & Jovanovich, 2006; Ding, 2008; Heck & Mahoe, 2006; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Kowal, 2002; J. B. Smith, 1997); however, my experience as an educator and researcher in the immediate context can provide specific recommendations for practice in our communities. I provide appendices to which leaders and philanthropists may refer for consideration. Throughout this section, I include footnotes to provide more information for the appendices to which I refer.

Specifically, this paper is designed to describe and outline seven recommendations. The first recommendation needs to be addressed by the SUHSD Board of Trustees, and in fact, is the only recommendation I give that is strictly policy based. The other six recommendations are programmatic in nature. They address issues of staff collaboration and development and of direct student support services and programs. The intended audience is primarily both district leadership teams, and specifically the superintendents, whereby these recommendations may serve as a practical guide to changes in the districts’ current systems and programs. Furthermore, philanthropists and other funders can use these recommendations to identify how monies can

\(^2\) Refer to Appendix E.
best be spent to support students in RCSD as they transition to and through the Sequoia Union high schools.

**Recommendation #1: Pass the new boundary map proposed on January 15th, 2014.**

As discussed in Paper 1, the antiquated boundary map established in 1986 should be replaced. Under the leadership of Superintendent James Lianides, a new proposed boundary map was shared with the public and school board at the January 15, 2014 meeting (Appendix C). At this board meeting, four of five SUHSD school board members noted they are in favor of the proposed reform, in large part because of the new boundaries drawn for students attending Ravenswood schools in East Palo Alto. According to the proposed map, all Ravenswood students will be assigned to Menlo-Atherton High School (M-A) as their home school, a marked shift from previous board policy. M-A is the high school in closest proximity to the community of East Palo Alto and eastern Menlo Park. M-A also has the highest success rates for Ravenswood students, as compared to Carlmont, Sequoia, or Woodside (A. Weiner, 2014). During the focus groups in my student voice study, and consistent with the 2012 pilot study, students described the inconvenience and additional roadblocks to success of attending a high school far from home. Due to its proximity, attending M-A versus other SUHSD high schools partially addresses the challenges facing students from East Palo Alto.

As mentioned in Paper 1, students in the Las Lomitas district who attend La Entrada middle school are divided between Woodside and M-A high schools under the current boundary map. However, when the boundary map was adopted over thirty years ago, the SUHSD School Board granted those La Entrada students assigned to Woodside the automatic right to transfer to M-A. This boundary map exception exists to this day, and the majority of affected La Entrada

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3 Ravenswood City School District serves the communities of East Palo Alto and eastern Menlo Park. A majority of students that attend schools in eastern Menlo Park are already assigned to Menlo-Atherton High School. The proposed map would allow access to *all* students attending the eastern Menlo Park and East Palo Alto schools.
students continue to take advantage of this exception. Notably, La Entrada serves students in one of the wealthiest communities in the nation\(^4\). Exceptions to the current boundary map continue to give preferential treatment to students at La Entrada, as noted in the board policy below:

2. Students at La Entrada living in the Woodside attendance area will be allowed to transfer to Menlo-Atherton upon request as established with 1986 boundary change.

(“Sequoia Union HSD Administrative Regulation: Intradistrict open enrollment and adjustment transfers,” 2013, p. 3)

As an interim policy, the board passed several other stipulations for the 2014-2015 school year that finally gives Ravenswood students preference – although not the automatic right enjoyed by La Entrada students – in Open Enrollment. On October 9, 2013, the following was added into the original 1986 policy:

4. For the 2014-2015 academic year or until such time that new school attendance areas go into effect, students residing within the geographical boundaries of Ravenswood City School District are within a special attendance area. As such, students in that area will be assigned to high school campuses pursuant to the District’s current school boundary map. However, such students who are not within the Menlo-Atherton High School attendance area who desire to attend that school may request a transfer to Menlo-Atherton High School, and the Superintendent may grant such requests to the extent that there is

capacity at the school to accommodate them.\(^5\) (“Sequoia Union HSD Administrative Regulation: Intradistrict open enrollment and adjustment transfers,” 2013, p. 4)

Many Ravenswood advocates, including myself, questioned specific language around the exceptions, such as “may grant to the extent there is capacity at the school” in reference to the Ravenswood transfer requests actually granted. La Entrada students are “allowed to transfer” no matter what. As explained by the Las Lomitas superintendent in a 2011 letter to his parents, “Even if M-A is declared ‘full,’ at a future date, LE students … will be admitted to Menlo-Atherton High school for 2012-13 under existing SUHSD Board Policies.”\(^6\) In sharp contrast, Ravenswood transfers *may* be granted at the discretion of the Superintendent only if there is room at M-A – a school that has already been deemed over capacity. These contrasting policies, even in 2013, serve to highlight the systemic issues of inequity imbedded in our system.

However, in recent community meetings, Superintendent Lianides has stated that he is working hard to get every single Ravenswood students’ transfer request granted for the 2014-2015 academic year (see Appendix F for the full report made to the board on March 26\(^{th}\), 2014 on transfer requests).

I urge that the SUHSD Board of Trustees adopt the proposed boundary map that was presented on January 15, 2014, as soon as possible. Paper 2 demonstrates that Ravenswood students continued to voice their concerns over long bus rides to high schools far away from their homes, their unfamiliarity with the high school campuses and their staff, and the hardships of establishing new friendships. Students shared how the MyLife program, currently only at M-A, has helped them transition into high school. Generally, students cited the lack of access to an

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5 The materials for the October 9, 2013 SUHSD school board meeting that include the Administrative Regulation can be referenced online (“Sequoia Union HSD Administrative Regulation: Intradistrict open enrollment and adjustment transfers,” 2013).
6 The entirety of this letter from the Las Lomitas Superintendent can still be found online (Hartwig, 2011).
academic counselor as a contributing factor in their difficulties, but compared to the other high schools in SUHSD, M-A currently has the lowest student-counselor ratio. If the exact map presented in January 2014 is not on the docket for review again, I strongly encourage the board to approve a map only if the entire RCSD attendance area is assigned to Menlo-Atherton as the home school for the reasons outlined above. In addition, as of the date of this document, although the map has yet to be voted on, the policy as written has no exceptions. The proposed boundary map does not only address issues of equity, but also the projected population explosion expected for SUHSD. Along with the passage of the map, SUHSD is spearheading the efforts to pass a multi-million dollar bond for necessary capital improvements and expansions to accommodate the booming student growth over the next decade.

Although the passage of this new boundary map will be historic and heroic, it is only a first foundational step to a long-ongoing process to better support Ravenswood students in the SUHSD schools. Based on open discussions at board meetings and community feedback from meetings held throughout SUHSD by Superintendent Lianides, combined with online conversations via media posts, the M-A community (school, students, parents, community members) must figure out how to embrace this shift and welcome a slightly different student demographic. Given that a majority of Ravenswood students already attend M-A, and data shows that Ravenswood students are faring better at M-A than any of the other comprehensive high schools, this policy recommendation should not be a surprise to M-A or the district as a whole. (Although Ravenswood students may be faring better at M-A than any other SUHSD school, the students are still not doing well enough due to ongoing barriers that still persist at all the schools). Yet many adult community members from Menlo Park, Atherton, and East Palo Alto remain

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7 Students attending La Entrada in the Las Lomitas district are all assigned to Menlo-Atherton as their home school in the proposed boundary map.
doubtful of this shift, citing racial-tension from the 1960’s at M-A\(^8\). Yet students have not remained silent on the issue. I explain students’ reaction and involvement later in this paper.

Whether the proposed boundary map passes or not, it is imperative that the districts work together to showcase the great potential that rests if they are able to coordinate their efforts to serve Ravenswood youth. There are many stakeholders in the schools and community who doubt positive changes can occur. If the adults who lead and work in the districts doubt a better M-A with more Ravenswood students, carry low expectations of improving the middle-to-high-school transition, and lose hope that the school experience will be enhanced for all students, they send a message to youth to expect the same. Instead, leaders ought to act with certainty, high expectations, and a renewed sense of hope. Adults, educators and community members alike, can be more productive if they are willing to let go of frustrations held onto from decades ago that still act as barriers to working together. If the districts cannot move to a productive service-oriented approach for all students, the schools will have failed yet another generation. This is not an option.

If the Sequoia Union school board adopts the new boundary map, many of the hurdles educators, parents, and students have been facing for years can be eradicated only if we take the necessary next steps. As discussed in Paper 2, students have clearly voiced their struggles in feeling comfortable at their high schools, depending largely on their relationships with peers and staff. In addition, staff members find it frustrating and difficult to connect meaningfully when students are spread out across the schools as discussed in my narrative in Paper 1. Without the successful passage of a new boundary map, the recommendations will be more difficult to implement universally for all stakeholders. Nonetheless, these next steps are critical in

\(^8\) Racial tensions were exacerbated so much so that the school was forced to shut down for four days in 1967 (Boyece, 2002).
considering, planning, and allocating appropriate resources to better support students and see better student outcomes.

**Recommendation #2: Increase educators’ cultural awareness, history, and background of the community of Ravenswood and its children.**

Throughout the focus groups, students talked about their relationships with teachers. For example, one student describes his struggle with teachers in high school saying that teachers, “*just don’t care about you.*” Another student described the challenge she faced when high school teachers required assignments to be turned in via the Internet stating, “*some libraries close at six so people don’t finish and they have to turn their assignment in late.*” In addition, students felt as though the expectations for the use of technology were too low in middle school, and did not prepare them adequately for the transition to high school in the SUHSD. To better understand students’ situation, Ravenswood middle school educators ought to have a joint professional development with M-A staff before the start of each school year.

The content of such sessions should focus on providing an historical context of the Ravenswood community. The film *Dreams of a City: Creating East Palo Alto*9 can be used as a catalyst to engage educators in meaningful discussion about current affairs in the community. Paper 1, or selected parts from it, can be used to help give perspective and validate the emotions teachers may feel as they support youth. Students and parents can talk directly about their experience, successes, and struggles in navigating the K-12 education space to inform educators on how to support students during the upcoming year. For example, in one of the focus groups, a student suggested that middle and high school staff ask students directly how they can be

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9 The film was created in 1996 and gives an historical account of the community of Ravenswood, and then also spotlights the duration of Ravenswood High School (Levin, 1996).
supported, and then added, “like you’re doing right now,” in regards to the nature of the open-ended questions of the focus group for Paper 2’s data collection.

Learning about the history of the community and hearing directly from parents and students is not enough. The most difficult work rests in the hands of educators and direct service-providers in terms of mindset. Is there a fundamental belief that all children, regardless of their ethnicity, or background, can succeed at high levels? The easy way to answer this question is to say yes and move on. However, when we look at the suspension, expulsion, and achievement rates in RCSD and at M-A, our practices show otherwise. Perhaps inviting a third party to facilitate this session would be best, so that assumptions some educators make about each district can be addressed. It is also important to have conversations relating to race and social justice. For example, topics that have been raised in the past behind closed doors, such as low achievement rates of many Ravenswood students and the heavily tracked classes at M-A, need to be addressed openly face-to-face instead of only with close colleagues on the way out of meetings. The use of data that has been released by SUHSD of incoming Ravenswood freshmen achievement rates, and their subsequent achievement rates throughout the SUHSD schools can help surface these conversations. Collectively, all stakeholders must be willing to address these suppressed issues head-on if the ultimate goal is to see an increase in achievement for all students across both districts. The undertones of racist gestures, notions, or practices cannot be tolerated, and the leaders of the schools and districts need to take a more dominant role in striking these views down, even if it means dismissing a staff member. At the same time, teachers can use the power of their collective to demand the leaders of schools and districts to lead in a transformative way, one that places social justice and equity at the top of the priority list.
Once these conversations are had openly, and all stakeholders can reach a shared goal (i.e. increasing the achievement rates of Ravenswood youth in RCSD schools and in SUHSD schools), educators from both districts ought to work together to devise a plan to support youth throughout the year. For example, they can create a timeline of parent/student visits to the high school and a calendar of dates and times to collaborate regularly, teacher-to-teacher. District or education foundation funds can be used to support teacher pay for this extra time dedicated to coordinating efforts on behalf of Ravenswood students and their families. To build this in as part of the regular structure and programming of professional development in the districts, it will be necessary to engage all educators in the process for several of years. Once educators from both districts have gained a deeper understanding of the community, then this kind of development work can be moved to part of the New Teacher Orientation in each district (and perhaps this would be a joint endeavor, too, so that new teachers in each district can connect). The table below provides an example of how this professional development could be structured so that educators from both districts gather together in thinking about how to serve Youth of Color from RCSD better.

Table 6

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<th>Location</th>
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<td>Aug 2014</td>
<td>RCSD</td>
<td>Understanding Ravenswood’s</td>
<td>• Watch <em>Dreams of a City</em></td>
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<td>History</td>
<td>• Read &amp; Discuss sections of Paper 1</td>
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<td>• Panel discussion and questions (panel members: city/district/community</td>
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<td>leaders with institutional memory)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aug 2014</td>
<td>M-A</td>
<td>Understanding Students’ Needs</td>
<td>• Student &amp; parent panel</td>
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<td>(Day 2)</td>
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**Recommendation #3: Increase expectations and standards in RCSD and M-A for all students.**

People in and outside the community often describe the Ravenswood community and its people in terms of deficits – underachieving, underprepared, disadvantaged. This perspective leads people to hold low expectations and standards of students from the Ravenswood community, and has an internal affect on students, too. Educators and community members alike should instead approach supporting Ravenswood students with an asset-based approach. Educators should look to students’ strengths, such as their curiosity, ability to think outside the box, and resilience, and then build from these capacities. Together, teachers can try to strike a better balance of high expectations, based on an understanding of the youths’ situation. That is to say that even though circumstances may be difficult for youth living in East Palo Alto and eastern Menlo Park, educators should not lower expectations of them. Instead, educators can continue to set the bar high, demanding of students what is demanded by schools on the west side so that academic rigor isn’t compromised. At the same time, however, Ravenswood youth mostly live in vastly different situations than many of their wealthier peers at M-A. Lack of access or opportunity to particular supports should not serve as a barrier in their schooling experience. Schools and its educators, and to the extent appropriate, community organizations, should help fill this gap by offering time, resources, and services equitably. In other words, students who lack access at home or outside the school environment to technology or private tutors should be provided this access at school or programs based in the community. In this way, expectations can still be high, while simultaneously supporting students’ needs.

Educators should take the students’ advice, as described in Paper 2. For example, Yolanda and Moala (currently sophomores at Woodside High School) suggested that middle
schools should teach and expect students to turn in assignments online. They added that high schools should provide more access to computer labs and should host workshops on how to better use the Internet to research and submit assignments. This recommendation heightens the expectation of Ravenswood students in middle school, while also calling for high schools to provide expanded support. Indeed, there are a myriad of ways to raise the bar in RCSD schools to better prepare students for their eventual transition to high school, and this suggestion in terms of better use of technology is simply one example. Using the knowledge gained from the ongoing faculty development outlined in recommendation #2, educators in both districts should come to have a deeper understanding of the context of Ravenswood youth and be willing to hold them to high expectations, while at the same time, understanding their situation and providing more individualized support where needed.

There are pockets of improvements that are popping up in both districts. For example, under the leadership of RCSD’s STEM Coordinator, Robert Provonost, he has helped create access to a learning lab in which students starting in their transitional kindergarten year can be exposed to making, tinkering, and problem-solving through his pilot program MakerSpace. The goal is to have MakerSpaces launched at every school site in the district as soon as possible, so RCSD students can begin to explore and think about the STEM field early on, instead of waiting until middle school. Of course, in order for this to happen, there needs to be buy-in and flexibility on the part of funders to help financially support this type of program, even if it may not directly tie to academic outcomes in the first few years. The mere exposure to and joy from these MakerSpaces have completely changed recess time for some of the most vulnerable students on campus. Another example to help fill the gap in access to technology is the work of community volunteer Sue Kayton who has made it a personal mission to get computers in the
homes of all M-A students. Instead of operating as an individual, she could use the support of a structure that is tied to the school system more intimately to get more families involved in the free service she provides. With the proximity of the Ravenswood community to corporations such as Facebook and Google, it’s deplorable that the youth in the community are years behind their wealthier westside peers in the technology space. Though corporations are beginning to partner with the community at an increased level, the pace is much too slow. There ought to be a more deliberate service delivery on part of the corporations that are situated so close to an alarming opportunity and achievement gap.

Recommendation #4: Increase Ravenswood student and family familiarity with the M-A campus and staff.

Ravenswood students and their families can benefit from getting to know the high school campus and its staff before becoming high school students. With a clear majority of Ravenswood youth currently attending M-A, and the likelihood of almost all Ravenswood students attending M-A in the near future, creating more opportunities for students to connect with the campus will allow greater comfort at the start of the transition to high school. In Paper 2, most students expressed that they didn’t feel connected to the staff in high school. Students reported that they felt lost on a much larger campus. During the middle school years, M-A staff should come to the schools in RCSD to meet families and answer questions at high school information sessions, and this should take place multiple times throughout middle school. In May of 2014, RCSD has arranged for a “Dream Big” workshop for all 7th and 8th grade students to expose them to professionals from different walks of life and in different fields. While this is a great first step, there can be a more concerted effort in helping them deliberately plan out their middle and high school years to better prepare them for college. For example, high school guidance counselors
should come visit Ravenswood students during their 7th and 8th grade years to help them make plans towards high school completion. A high school guidance counselor and a Ravenswood staff member can work to create an articulated seven-year plan that includes a roadmap of grades 6-12 that will place all Ravenswood students on a trajectory towards college or career.\(^{10}\)

As another way to connect, Ravenswood students should visit M-A for non-academic school activities, such as a home football game or a rally. Preview Days were established several years ago for 8th grade students to provide them with exposure to the high school before they attend. Students mentioned activities like Preview Days as helpful in understanding what high school would be like. Preview Days should continue, yet this recommendation suggests that they go deeper by having students sign up for certain interests (e.g., sports, school clubs, AVID) and M-A staff can then follow-up with youth during the summer to help them to connect with these organizations. Further, to increase visibility and acknowledge the importance of this introduction to high school, Preview Days should be formally calendared into each school’s schedule before the start of the next academic year. In one of the focus groups, a student suggested that the district ask the students directly where they need support in their transition. Preview Day would be a good opportunity to begin to address these concerns with eventual follow-up in the fall.

Additionally, students need access to adults on campus who can help guide them through their academic and social pathways. Students talked about not feeling connected to their counselor because of the low number of contact points. Whereas many students attending M-A have a myriad of resources outside of school to help them navigate high school and prepare for

\(^{10}\) RCSD does not currently have a staff person designated to help coordinate all the efforts in regards to preparing middle school students to and through their high school transition. That is, there are no current guidance counselors in RCSD. The Ravenswood Education Foundation, in partnership with RCSD, has started a fund to be able to support two positions solely focused on this work. I envision these staff to work with M-A staff intimately in coordinating many of the activities laid out in the recommendations. A list of duties and programs attached with hiring a high school transition coordinator and counselor are listed in Appendix G. For funders looking to close the opportunity and achievement gap for Ravenswood students as they transition to high school, this would be a great way to support both districts to create processes and structures related to transition.
college, Ravenswood students do not have the same access to these resources outside of school. It would behoove M-A and these students if the district were to allocate certain staff to help fill this gap. Currently, although the ratio of student-to-counselor is the lowest in the district, it still does not allow for sufficient guidance for students, a pattern that most strongly impacts students who most need this support. Students in the focus group recognized that getting to know their guidance counselor is important, while at the same time they talked about not having enough interaction with them. Counselor time should be allocated to students who may need to rely on their services, since many M-A students have access to other services outside of school such as private tutoring, private college counseling services, and other external activities and supports. Access to psychological counseling, community sports leagues, and family members who can provide guidance based on their own experiences in higher education are some examples of additional external supports wealthier students have who attend M-A. Structuring counseling services so that students who need a range of supports have access should result in an increase of students from RCSD feeling they have the appropriate support from the school, and ultimately impact student outcomes. One of the greatest supports RCSD students currently have at M-A is the coordination of services Miki Cristerna provides at M-A to help connect students and families to resources. However, she could definitely use more support, especially if there are an increased number of Ravenswood students attending M-A soon.

**Recommendation #5: Joint and ongoing collaborative opportunities for RCSD middle school staff and M-A’s staff.**

This recommendation builds from recommendations #2 and #3, yet is distinct because it provides middle and high school teachers the time they need to apply their learning from the joint professional development. Typically, schools use a one-time professional development
experience, in which momentum is lost. Instead, teachers and staff need a structure for continuous and meaningful conversations so that they can learn from each other. Teachers from across the two districts should connect with each other before each school year starts, and then regularly thereafter. Every year that I worked in an RCSD K-8 school, we devoted time at the beginning of the school year for teachers to connect about certain students who may need to be challenged more, or who may need intense support in a particular area. Unfortunately, this kind of consultation doesn’t happen between the 8th and 9th grade teachers, yet the middle to high school transition is arguably one of the most important for our youth. Sharing such information can go a long way in providing individualized support for students.

As a district and site administrator, I served on the high school transition team’s homework expectations committee. In this role, I researched the difference in homework assignments from middle school classes as compared to high school classes. Teachers in both districts made assumptions about students: having or not having access to a family’s ancestry to complete a school project, or having or not having access to the Internet were some examples of implied assumptions. If middle and high school teachers have established a regular schedule of meeting with each other, they would gain a better understanding of what was expected of students in the lower grades and what will be expected in the upper grades. In addition, assumptions could be corrected based on each other’s experiences with students. Principals should also connect with one another on a regular basis, a structure that has already been implemented this year between the districts. Most of the time during scheduled meetings should be allotted for principals and school leaders to discuss practical matters and immediate action steps, with regular time set aside for long term planning. The most important aspect of this recommendation is that these kinds of interactions between principals and teachers from each
district should be on-going throughout the school year, and should restart at the start of each school year so that new staff members will be integrated into these discussions. As I noted in Paper 1, these discussions need to move beyond when and what to teach, and move to a conversation on how to teach and engage all students in a way that is culturally responsive.

**Recommendation #6: Community organizations and programs must provide deeper and better access and services for students.**

There are several organizations in the community and schools that provide support to Ravenswood students. Many of them, however, are competing for the same students. At the same time, a majority of students are not benefitting from any programs, or at least not at a level that keeps them on-track for the duration of high school. First, there seems to be a general gap in academically rigorous programs and organizations that serve children in the Ravenswood community. In grades 4-8, most students attend after school programs on their school campuses, either run by the district or by the Boys and Girls Club of the Peninsula. In high school, however, while the demand is high, budgets for after school programming largely rely on grant money or private donations.

Through my experience as an educator in Ravenswood and as a staff member at a foundation, I realize that there are particular reasons why a plethora of organizations support the community (i.e. issues of poverty, violence, drugs, and the ostracization of the community by its surrounding neighborhoods steeped in wealth). Yet little progress has been made in terms of long-term educational outcomes for youth. First, there needs to be a general understanding of what types of data should be collected by each organization to track youth across their educational years. Then, a common data system that can be used by each organization in the community would track and manage important data points across the organizations, including
measurement of educational outcomes. The John W. Gardner Center for Youth and their Communities is an organization that helps districts and communities answer researchable questions related to improving the lives of youth. The Gardner Center has partnered with One East Palo Alto, a non-profit community organization that works to improve the lives of the residents of East Palo Alto. Together, with a number of other organizations, progress has been slow in collecting data for all agencies working with youth in the communities of East Palo Alto and eastern Menlo Park\textsuperscript{11}. In a recent One East Palo Alto meeting, the Gardner Center presented on the data points all agencies should be collecting so the next time the Gardner Center tries to pull data across organizations, the data set is clean and can offer more sound conclusions. Organizations in the community need to build capacity in this area, and need to have access to a data tracking and management system, which would need the support of funders to help implement. However, not all community organizations are part of One East Palo Alto for one reason or another. Perhaps the district and city can jointly host a meeting, invite the Gardner Center as presenters, and invite \textit{all} community-based organizations to participate in a short informational and development exercise on how to collect and analyze data so that it can be useful to implement programmatic changes. Once there is a broader set of community organizations (at least 80\% participation rate of all organizations supporting youth in the community), then collectively, this group can create a simple proposal to a funder collective for funding a data management system.

In addition to data tracking and management, there needs to be sufficient communication. In my pilot study and as mentioned in Paper 2, students voiced their praise for programs that

\textsuperscript{11} About 40 organizations have signed on to be a member of the Youth Empowerment Strategies for Success (YESS) collaborative. Yet, with nearly 100 organizations in the community, there has not been an accurate and up-to-date mapping of service providers and the youth in which they serve (Castrechini, 2010).
have supported them to and through the transition to high school. Certain programs such as AVID have established a great presence on the M-A campus as each is a particular class in which students enroll and have listed on their transcripts (BUILD will be another program at M-A starting in the fall of 2014 that will be part of the school system as a class). Other programs such as MyLife may not be as well connected to the school’s student and data management system; however, several students spoke highly of the program, and so it makes sense for programs like MyLife to be more integrated into the student schedule, as AVID and BUILD already are. Providing outside agencies a “read-only” version of the student management system once parents and students have signed data contracts could help with the data access issue. This reform will allow all teachers to be aware of these programs, which will make them more likely to refer students as necessary. In addition, each of these programs should be well connected to the RCSD schools. Currently, individual programs reach out to individual schools and ask for time in the school day to present to students. This approach can engage the interest of some students, but many are missed, for example, because not all programs are presented at every school, or because the programs are presented in a piecemeal way so students don’t fully process their options. The schools in RCSD and the organizations in the community should instead hold a high school program fair and invite all students and parents. Families would then fill out all needed paperwork right at the fair. Such an organized event would provide students and parents across the district access to the information, as well as lessening the barriers to admission by allowing them the space and time to ask questions and a structure to apply in-person.

Finally, organizations should find more intentional ways to work together. Too often there is a desire to claim one’s unique niche in the educational space. Many of the programs operating in East Palo Alto or supporting students from the community are more similar than
they are different. These similarities ought to be embraced, and instead of spending double the resources, for example, on recruitment, organizations should work together to create coordinated pipelines. For example, if middle school students attend the Boys and Girls Club programs, as they transition to high school, the organization should work directly with College Track or BUILD to help place students into the program based on what they learned about the students. This way, fewer resources are spent on recruitment and materials, and more can be spent on direct service delivery to students. During my role acting as a school administrator, I was not aware of all the programs and services available to students and their families. Even if I heard of a specific agency, I was not sure how to assist families to receive services. What were the requirements? Whom do they serve? What information would the family need to provide? Some students in the focus groups are taking part in particular programs. I wonder why some are involved while others are not. Is there a difference in interest? Or is there a difference in access? A coordinated effort to link students and families to programs and services is needed. M-A’s foundation has already poured resources into a professional who does just this, yet this kind of coordination is still lacking in RCSD. The school district and the organizations hold joint responsibility on this gap in access. A solution would be to include this responsibility (the coordination of services from middle school to high school) in the high school transition fund for the Ravenswood Education Foundation (see Appendix D).

Recommendation #7: Focus on the transition.

In Paper 2, students were able to remember vividly their transition to high school. Students chimed in about their transition’s continued impact throughout their high school experiences. In the student data shared in Paper 1, it was noted that even many of Ravenswood’s top-performing youth in 8th grade begin failing within the first semester of their freshmen year.
Indeed, the broad educational research literature cites the importance of focusing on students’ transition from middle to high school. Thus, RCSD and SUHSD, including organizations that partner with the districts, should keep a keen eye on this transition. During the focus group, one student said that there wasn’t anything she could think of that would truly prepare her for this first day of high school. Yet later in the interview, she said that her family and the support from College Track helped ease her transition. Given that transitioning to high school is stressful, even shocking according to the Ravenswood students interviewed, there are contributions that all organizations should make to ease this experience. Recommendations 1-6 will help to strengthen the structure of the transition, align the curriculum between middle and high schools, and understand student needs before entering high school. However, without a concerted effort to focus on the transitional experience for students, the student outcome data may remain dismal.

To address this challenge, the districts should collaborate to implement a comprehensive transition program that better serves all incoming Ravenswood students to M-A.

To begin, I recommend a comprehensive transition summer program, open to all students from RCSD entering M-A the following fall semester. Currently, summer programs exist in both districts for middle school students and rising 9th grade students. However, space is limited to mainly Honors students, or students who need intervention and are served in the Compass program. Students in the focus groups noted that the Compass program felt a little awkward because they didn’t know too many of the other enrolled students. A transition program open to all incoming freshmen at M-A from RCSD could allow for students to meet other Ravenswood students, and also feel comfortable by having their peers from middle school attending the program with them. In addition, it would allow access for all new students from RCSD to interface with their teachers at M-A before school starts. A high school in San Jose has
drastically shifted its summer transition programming in the last few years to better reach students (the school is nearly all Youth of Color living in poverty). They enroll, much more deliberate than invite, all incoming freshmen into one of the four strands of their summer transition program. The program runs for five weeks, with about seven hours of programming each day. The morning consists of academic programming based on skill level in math and/or literacy, and the afternoon is heterogeneously grouped for the college readiness component. The high school hires twelve former students from that particular high school who have gone on to college to teach the afternoon college readiness, and team-building portion of the program – an ideal way to engage youth. This is a model that M-A ought to consider for its summer programming.

Recently, there have been talks in RCSD to assign each RCSD student to one summer program, to ensure that between the district and community organizations, every student is involved in some sort of programming over the summer to keep their mind engaged and prevent summer learning loss. I strongly recommend RCSD leadership to take this idea seriously, as all youth could benefit from the access to a high-quality summer program.

Along with a summer program, districts can focus on the transition by planning for the challenges students experienced as discussed in Paper 2. Broadly, students face academic, social, and procedural challenges during their transition. If transitional components are delivered piecemeal, disconnected from a larger vision of transition, then the districts will face the real risk of seeing little improvement in the academic achievement of Ravenswood youth. Cauley and Jovanovich (2006) demonstrate the importance of addressing all aspects of student challenges, including the involvement of parents and school staff, if student outcomes are to be significantly affected.
A comprehensive transition plan will help funders understand that, for example, a summer experience or a single after school program that a particular organization is able to fund is not sufficient by itself, but is part of an integrated picture. Both RCSD and SUHSD should craft this comprehensive plan, but the full delivery will need to be supported by community partnerships, including community based service providers and foundations that can provide monetary support.

A robust transition program paired with transition activities is only part of the larger picture in supporting Ravenswood youth. For example, if the structures are in place for more comprehensive programming, but the mindset and cultural awareness of educators (as discussed in recommendation #2) are not addressed, then students will not be able to benefit fully from these structural and programmatic changes due to the delivery or pedagogy in these programs. I ask district leaders, philanthropists, and community-based service providers to strongly consider all seven recommendations so that the problem of dismal success rates of Ravenswood students as they transition to and through the SUHSD schools does not continue to be an ongoing issue. The academic outcomes of Ravenswood youth can be drastically increased, if the problem is addressed comprehensively and collectively.

Reflections

I began this journey years ago, as my personal narrative in Paper 1 reveals. Since my first year teaching to gradually discovering the inequities students residing in East Palo Alto and eastern Menlo Park face simply because of their geographic location, I grew more passionate about seeking justice. In this dissertation, my primary focus has been to uncover and share policies and practices that harm students, whether intentional or not, coupled with showcasing
the voices of the youth. Even more importantly, I give recommendations based on these inequities and the brilliant ideas shared by youth.

Hosting focus groups with my former students was humbling because of their sheer strength, perseverance, and willingness to share their experiences, regardless of their successes or failures. At the same time, there were multiple times throughout each focus group that I had to chant mantras in my head to remain calm, and do my best not to show my true emotions. I didn’t want my emotions to affect the dynamics of the conversation. I wanted the spotlight to remain on students and their experiences rather than my emotions. The hardships some students continued to experience and their raw accounts of how some staff members made them feel pierced my ears and heart in a way that I’ll remember for my lifetime. There were many days where listening to and dissecting the audio recordings became too overwhelming. I had to pause, wipe my tears, and continue the following day. However, the conversations with these students gave me reason to stay hopeful as they offered countless suggestions to educators and community members at-large for what they can do to better support students. Throughout this process I was reminded at how courageous Ravenswood students are as they are undergoing a schooling experience that isn’t currently meeting their needs. I also collected multiple examples of how they look to, and in most cases, rely upon adults on middle and high school campuses for guidance and support. It made me think about why I loved teaching in East Palo Alto. The connections I made with students from Ravenswood are for life. Even though I no longer work directly in the schools, former students still rely on guidance and support from me. I attribute this to a willingness on both of our parts – to connect to one another as humans, and care for each other’s well being. Educators that are able to create this bond with their students remain important figures in students’ lives.
Conclusion

Students in East Palo Alto and eastern Menlo Park are full of ideas and intellect. It is the duty of community leaders, parents, and educators to cultivate their strengths. The community of East Palo Alto is less than 3 square miles and Ravenswood City School District sends about 250 8th grade students to Sequoia Union High School District each year. That is the total yearly number of Ravenswood students to SUHSD schools: only 250 young people. Menlo Park and Atherton, situated in some of the wealthiest areas in the nation, are saturated with resources; these towns neighbor the city of East Palo Alto, a community that lacks access and opportunities, yet remains strong in culture and intelligence. Together, the communities of Ravenswood and Menlo-Atherton can work together to tackle a very solvable problem that has plagued youth for decades. In order to jump-start this process, I provide a call to action.

CALL TO ACTION

1. Given the high number of transfer requests of Ravenswood students to attend M-A in the 2014-2015 academic year, the SUHSD Board of Trustees should pass the proposed boundary map, or a map that shows all Ravenswood students matriculating to M-A as their home high school, as soon as possible, and no later than June 2014.

2. District leaders in the area of curriculum, instruction, and teacher support should collaborate throughout the summer and fall of 2014 to determine a schedule of collaboration between both districts. Specifically, Principal Matthew Zito and Instructional Vice Principal Steve Lippi of M-A can meet directly with Assistant Superintendent of RCSD, Lorena Morales-Ellis, and RCSD principals. The outcome of the meeting should focus on a schedule of regular meetings between these two groups for the entire 2014-2015 school year. In addition, there should be a clear schedule of events
including Preview Days for students, high school information nights at M-A and at RCSD schools for students and their parents, and teacher collaboration and observations days.

3. RCSD Superintendent Dr. Gloria Hernandez-Goff and Ravenswood Education Foundation Executive Director Renu Nanda should host a meeting with a group of funders. Specifically, they should demonstrate a focused need on high school transition to more effectively target donors. In addition, they should demonstrate the 2014-2015 academic road map of priorities as it relates to a K-12 vision, as well as a longer five and ten-year plan. Along with the plan, both Dr. Hernandez-Goff and Ms. Nanda can focus on the top two or three funding priorities as it directly relates to higher student academic outcomes. Similarly, Principal Matthew Zito of M-A and Cindy Folker, Executive Director of Foundation for the Future (M-A’s education foundation) should host a meeting delineating the funding needs to better support Ravenswood youth at M-A. The outcomes of each meeting should focus on a commitment on the part of funders to see an initiative through, as it links to what students have voiced are needs, and what the data indicates as needs. These meetings should be hosted three to four times a year to update funders on priorities and see where funders are willing to work together to fund entire initiatives in collaboration with the district and education foundation.

4. The city of East Palo Alto, under the leadership of Mayor Laura Martinez, who is an educator in the community, and the RCSD Board of Trustees should host a gathering of service-providers in the community in the summer or fall of 2014. A third party can facilitate it, perhaps experts in the collective impact field such as FSG. Using the information gained from the work of the Gardner Center (Castrechini, 2013), the mayor
and board members can directly ask some organizations to consolidate (to reduce costs and conflicting messages to families), and to willingly work together to fill grade level and geographic gaps that exist within the community, as they also relate to students in eastern Menlo Park. Instead of competing for student attendance for out-of-school time programs, organizations can work together more closely under the direction of the city. With close to 100 community organizations working to serve youth, gaps of service can be lessened only if there is a deliberate plan to do just that. The outcomes of this gathering can focus on a direct ask of all organizations working with youth in the city and/or RCSD schools to agree to a data collection memo so that future data collection and analysis can be streamlined. The mayor and school board should identify a data system before the meeting so that organizations can immediately sign-up and participate in a brief training. In addition, the mayor and board can ask all service providers to identify one or two core strengths of the organization or program as it results to serving youth (e.g. high school transition, early literacy skills, access to music and art, college readiness). From this identification process, programs can be grouped together under these categories. Once a group is established, on the part of the group, they can find ways to reach more students in a deeper, more impactful way. This may include consolidating programs or giving up some other areas of focus to narrow down on the program or organization’s strengths. This full process may reveal some areas where there are gaps (e.g. the area of one-on-one mentoring may be one in which no organization feels strong).

12 East Palo Alto and eastern Menlo Park are two distinct communities that Ravenswood City School District serves. East Palo Alto is its own city, whereas eastern Menlo Park is part of the city limits of Menlo Park. Two Ravenswood schools, Willow Oaks and Belle Haven, are geographically in eastern Menlo Park.

13 Although One East Palo Alto and the Gardner Center started this important work, there are many organizations that are not part of this collaborative; the city and the school board can be seen as an objective body looking to close the loop for service-providers in the community in an effort to improve efficacy in supporting East Palo Alto and Ravenswood youth.
When gaps are identified, community leaders can decide which organization has the capacity and structure to take on this need, perhaps even with added resources per the city or district. The goal of a gathering of this type is to establish a unified goal (e.g. to develop and support engaged youth on a life pathway that affords them maximum choice). Once all stakeholders can agree upon the unified goal, then they can begin to work and plan together in a deliberate way to provide deeper services to a broader youth community. Finally, follow-up to this process is important; similar to the action item for schools, everyone should leave this gathering with a calendar of scheduled meetings for the 2014-2015 school year. This work could result in a bi-annual Support Services Fair held in the community for students and families. At the fair, students and families can learn about the different offerings and sign up for programs on the spot that fit their needs.

The problem at-hand is finite and tangible. RCSD is only a district of 3,600 K-8\textsuperscript{th} grade students, a size smaller than many high schools in California. If district and community leaders work together, they can increase educational outcomes of all students through these enhanced support structures. The leaders of both districts ought to make the issue a top priority, devise a comprehensive transition plan, and act on the seven recommendations listed in this work. Once the plan is crafted, district leaders can collectively engage community organizations to help fill service gaps, and ask funders to help fill monetary gaps. Again, the most difficult work rests in the mindset of those serving students in classrooms, schools, and programs.

One may glance over the recommendations and think these things are already being done. However, I question to what extent, and how whatever is being “done” actually results in greater access and opportunity for Youth of Color that can ultimately impact life outcomes. The work shouldn’t be considered “done” until Youth of Color from Ravenswood are afforded the
opportunities that lead to a life of choices that most of their White and Asian peers in the same high school have. As noted in Paper 1, students are beginning to voice their opinion around the matter, too. An outspoken M-A student published this article in M-A’s school newspaper, giving a strong message to parents who oppose the proposed boundary map. He states,

_The truth is that the ‘rationale’ (I use that term loosely, as it implies logical decision making) behind the fear of M-A going downhill is a fear of racial integration at the school._ Before you take offense from my bluntness, understand that this is a racially charged issue, and to sweep race under the carpet would only add to the problem. And we have had a tendency to do exactly that for far too long.... While not overt, these prejudices still dominate parts of the area. Ungrounded concern over crime or drugs and irrational fears over ‘urban’ or ‘ethnic’ cultures are poisoning M-A as an academic environment. (J. Weiner, 2014).

He gives one final comment to the parents that have labeled Ravenswood students as “those kids”: “If you are one of these people who feels the need to send your child to a private school to avoid the racial diversity M-A has to offer, please, as a favor to all of us, do exactly so,” (J. Weiner, 2014). If young people are willing to hold adults accountable, adults need to hold each other accountable. Just like this student alludes to sending kids to a different school, educators who are not serving in the best interest of all students, should also be asked to leave.

A shift is desperately needed for all stakeholders to put the past behind us and envision a brighter future for the Youth of Color in East Palo Alto and eastern Menlo Park. Collectively, then, we can tell our young people and their families who have not been served appropriately for decades that we are going to work harder and smarter, because they are worth it.