

Bigger, Smaller, Better?: the small schools initiative in Oakland and its legacy for the future of successful urban education policy

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INTRODUCTION

Public schools matter. Despite the fact that it may seem to impact only a small portion of the population at any given moment, the quality of the public K-12 school system should be the metric against which a city's overall success is measured. Other projects, like public services, parks, and public safety, may be more visible on the day-to-day, but in order to ensure a city's reputation in both the present and the future, schools cannot be ignored. However, public schooling is generally the last frontier of urban renewal—in an educationally underserved community, those who can afford it will generally send their children to local private schools, simply exacerbating problems of urban inequality. Few are willing to invest the time or energy necessary to promise high-level local public schools, which forms a sort of inescapable cycle—the children of wealthy residents go to private schools and make the kinds of connections necessary to go to college and remain wealthy, while the children of poorer residents continue attending underfunded public schools with fewer opportunities for success. This is the case in Oakland, California where, in the late 1990's, very little was being done to bridge the divide between the lower and higher-income members of the community.

The Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) includes some of the highest and some of the lowest ranked public schools in the state, and recent reforms have attempted to close that gap. Evidence shows that grassroots reform projects targeting neighborhood-by-neighborhood evolution can actually make important strides, a fact which inspired the 1999 Oakland small schools initiative for urban reform. The movement is considered to have taken place over ten years, and was organized primarily by the

Oakland Community Organization (OCO), a group that grew quickly and primarily campaigned for grants (including a particularly prominent one from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) to build new schools focused on smaller class sizes and better performance overall.

This paper will examine the successes and shortcomings of this initiative on both the campus and community levels, ultimately arguing that only very specific parts of the movement should be applied to future reform. It analyzes the movement's success in two ways, first examining quantitative data on students' academic success, then data on community both within the school and on persistent district-wide segregation. The paper will conclude with a section looking forward—considering the results of the small schools movement, what other factors might we consider when trying to guarantee high levels of education across the board? Does the 1999 small schools reform project represent a good example of how to do this, particularly within the context of a rapidly changing community?

LITERATURE REVIEW

While the general assumption is that control of public education policy happens at the political level, this is only true to a certain extent. While the national and state level of organization controls overall requirements and teaching standards (particularly with the recent introduction of the Common Core program), real reform that effects the daily lives of teachers and students takes place largely at the local level. In order to effectively analyze Oakland's experience of school reform, it is important to first examine the current literature on local or grassroots reform, both focused on Oakland specifically and on more general concerns affecting many cities. Current urban change literature focuses largely upon the question of the place of grassroots movements in improving the quality of urban education systems, particularly as related to issues of persistent segregation.

First, public policy expert Erica Frankenberg, as a part of the UCLA Civil Rights Project, plays

an important role in outlining the links between fragmentation in school districts and the segregation that is too often still found at the center of urban school district organizations. Her text, “Splintering School Districts,” examines educational and census data to examine how local control influences the separation and segregation of communities in the decades since *Brown v. Board of Education*. She finds that the result of this segregation is often that new school districts experience high levels of segregation, particularly (in the first years of the 21st century, at least) between districts. The lines drawn between districts, originally in the interest of desegregating, took on far deeper meaning than their initial creation would have intended, both maintaining racial divisions and preventing lower income students from overcoming boundaries to success. It is, in her view, essentially a modern form of de jure segregation.¹ While she specifically examines the communities in Jefferson County, Alabama, she concludes that many of the phenomena happening there are endemic to urban areas around the country.

John Logan, Elisabeta Mina, and Sinem Adar expand Frankenberg’s perspective to the context of a national discussion—entitled “The Geography of Inequality,” their piece identifies which remaining pieces of endemic inequality are the most implicated in the national conversation on modern segregation within schools. It does this in two ways: first, it examines levels of segregation across different types of schools based on poverty, race, and metropolitan location. Second, it “estimates the independent effects of these and other school and school district characteristics on school performance, identifying which aspects of school segregation are the most important sources of disadvantage.”² They conclude that the tying of income tax to school funds creates very serious and unforeseen consequences for the “geography

¹ Frankenberg, E. “Splintering School Districts: Understanding the Link between Segregation and Fragmentation.” *Law & Social Inquiry*, Vol. 34 (2009): 869-70.

² Logan, JR, Elisabeta Mina, and Sinem Adar. “The Geography of Inequality: Why Separate Means Unequal in American Public Schools.” *Sociology of Education*, (2012): 287.

of opportunity,” particularly impacting lower income people of color.³ This information is an important lens through which to view and analyze the situation in Oakland, where open enrollment tries (and consistently fails) to mitigate the problems of educational inequality that arise from this system.

And so, the question is how to remedy these issues in a way that works. Aaron Schutz’ article on school-based community engagement techniques speaks specifically to the enormous challenges involved in urban schooling, considering the environment described by both Frankenberg and Logan, Mina, and Adar. It operates under some of the same political assumptions as much of the other literature on the issue, but directly confronts the harsh reality of how difficult successful community engagement really is. He examines some of the persistent social challenges for this kind of engagement, while highlighting how crucial it is to work to move past these them. In providing several examples of some of the more promising efforts to increase community engagement in other cities, he also provides a litmus test for other reform efforts (namely, the Small School movement in Oakland). Schutz concludes that reformers need to become more informed about “community forces and structures, and more directly involved in efforts to strengthen community organizations.”⁴

In terms of the case of Oakland and the small schools example specifically, one text by Chris Ansell, Sarah Reckhow, and Andrew Kelly provides a foundation for this discussion. In “How to Reform a Reform Coalition,” they manage to both deal with the contemporary case of Oakland and bring up more general concerns as well—the text speaks to the role of *community* coalitions as a force for change, analyzing how cohesive or inclusive these coalitions are. There is an issue of whether reform should focus only on narrow areas for improvement, or attempt to get broad-based support (in which case, goals are

³ Ibid. 297-8.

⁴ Schutz, Aaron. “Home is a Prison in the Global City: The Tragic Failure of School-Based Community Engagement Strategies.” *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (2006): 691.

often more difficult to achieve).⁵ The study finds that Oakland has used a more narrow advocacy coalition tactic, and it uses a “network analysis” to see when and where that coalition could be expanded across individuals, institutions, and issues. Essentially, they break down the way that community organization happens, determining that different techniques are best for different situations, and that Oakland would benefit most from a multi-brokerage approach, linking the core and the periphery of those invested in the issue of educational reform.⁶

Finally, K. Wayne Yang’s text, “Rites to Reform,” explores the small schools movement within the context of the aforementioned larger trends of reform. He speaks generally to the complexity associated with a grassroots reform movement, taking into account a new form of “grassroots cultural power,” which is particularly salient in Oakland.⁷ He argues that, particularly considering today’s new dynamics of information transfer, grassroots organizing can have a bigger influence on urban communities (and their schools especially) than in the past. The reformer now has a certain degree of cultural capital, giving him a greater capacity to make change than he ever has before. This provides a relatively optimistic view of the 1999-2009 small schools movement, while leaving room for both criticism and further progress.

These five texts provide a relatively well-rounded view on modern school reform tactics, illustrating the particular importance of successful tactics of community organization and advocacy. While several of them speak about these challenges in a more abstract way, a focus on the practical, day-to-day challenges of this kind of engagement cannot be emphasized enough. A successful policy must function both on the level of abstract policy work and on the level of family-by-family, street-by-street

⁵Ansell, C., S. Reckhow, and A. Kelly. “How to Reform a Reform Coalition: Outreach, Agenda Expansion, and Brokerage in Urban School Reform.” *Policy Studies Journal*, Vol. 37 (2009): 719.

⁶Ibid. 737

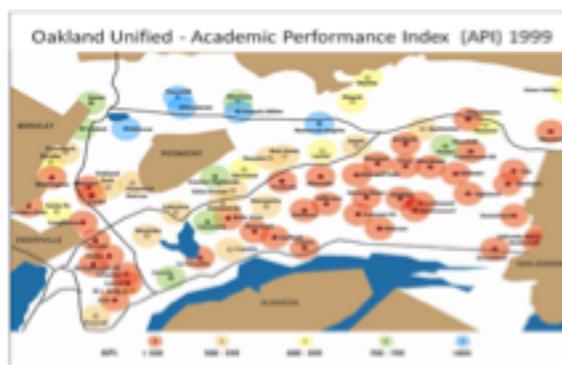
⁷Yang, K. W. “Rites to Reform: The Cultural Production of the Reformer in Urban Schools.” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, Vol. 41 (2010): 146.

change. The small schools movement in Oakland, in order to be regarded as a successful move for change, needs to be analyzed and found successful on both these levels. This can be examined, as mentioned above, using two key metrics. First, how did the movement impact general, quantifiable school achievement? Furthermore, how did it impact community within and outside of the school, particularly considering the discussion of segregation introduced by Frankenberg and Logan? Ultimately, in order to determine how best to move forward, it is imperative to understand the relative success of these key components of such a large-scale movement and consider how to apply this information to today's city.

EVIDENCE: GENERAL SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT

Measuring factors of change in general school achievement in some ways is very easy, and in others is startlingly difficult. The small schools movement began in 1999 with one objective being to decrease school and class sizes in the interest of getting test scores up and preparing students for college and careers. The National Equity Project, which is an organization centered in Oakland aiming to reform the nation's schools, was one of the key community coalitions rousing grassroots support for the program, and their report on the late-nineties education situation in the OUSD speaks to some of their key, quantitative reasons for doing so. Their concerns were many, but two were particularly significant.

First, in 1999 no new school had been built in Oakland for thirty years, which left those that did exist over-crowded and in a perpetual state of disrepair.⁸ Second, the district's schools rankings as compared with the rest of the state were startlingly low. The Average Performance Index (API) score



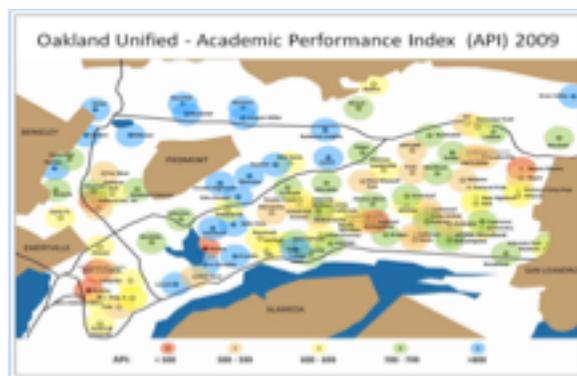
[Figure 1]

low. The Average Performance Index (API) score ranks from 200 to 1,000—the goal is to achieve above an 800 as a composite of students scores on

⁸ "Impact on Student Outcomes: Oakland's New Small Autonomous Schools Movement." *National Equity Project* (2008): 1.

standardized literacy and math skills. As the first map to the right (Figure 1) indicates, Oakland was in dire straits at the end of the 20th century.⁹

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform also published a report with similar concerns, examining how to build a nationwide small schools movement with Oakland as the model. This report illustrates the tangible effects of a school's size on the quantitative success of its students. One map in particular shows how strongly "school size matters," pointing to the disparity between the 2000 scores of Hillcrest Elementary in the Oakland Hills (ranked in the top decile, with 260 total students) and Hawthorne Elementary in East Oakland (ranked in the bottom decile, with 1,447 students).¹⁰ The report then documents how the OCO aggressively pushed to change the status quo, prioritizing finding funding for more schools, more teachers, and smaller class sizes. In the first years of this movement, it gained enormous momentum, citing improved test scores as evidence of success. Also, attendance increased dramatically, particularly in the small, new schools, contributing to improved graduation rates.¹¹ This is



[Figure 2]

visibly reflected in the 2009 National Equity Project map (Figure 2), which shows many more schools with higher overall API scores.

However, despite this very visible success in terms of test and scores, by the end of the ten-year program, it was seen by many (including by one of its main backers, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) as less than successful. Where did it go wrong? Bill Gates, in his 2009 "Annual Letter,"

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Shah, Seema, Kavitha Mediratta, and Sara McAlister. "Building A Nationwide Small Schools Movement." *Oakland Community Organizations, Annenberg Institute for School Reform*. Brown University (April 2009): 9.

¹¹ Ibid 4-5.

first describes the above successes as important parts of the “scientific process” of determining which educational model works in an underperforming urban environment.¹² They found that the new charter schools were experiencing the highest achievement by the end of the ten-year project, with little improvement in the attempts to reform existing schools. While this is valuable knowledge for future reformers, it leaves the large, low-income urban schools with few tangible prospects for improvement. This leads Gates, as well as an enormous community of researchers and policy specialists to question whether the national focus on API scores is the best way of measuring schools’ success and maintain accountability.¹³ Overall, the project succeeded in many of its quantitative, score-based goals, but in doing so uncovered the deeper complexity of what determines success when it comes to educational reform.

EVIDENCE: MEASURING COMMUNITY SUCCESS

As the Gates concluded, and as numerous students have concluded before them, true educational reform has to be built, in no small part, around the teacher-student relationship. This relationship is impacted dramatically by social systems already in place, and for many students, their relationship with their teacher and their overall success is largely determined before they step into the classroom. Ameliorating this problem, despite being an implicit goal of the small schools initiative, was not addressed explicitly enough, which is a large part of why so many of the reforms seemed insubstantial.

The OCO’s efforts improved teachers’ capacity to teach only in vague ways—the Annenberg Institute reports improvements in “school climate,” “professional culture,” and “professional support.”¹⁴ However, as Oakland Education Association president Trish Gorham points out in a recent

¹² Gates, Bill. “Annual Letter 2009.” *Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation* (Jan. 2009). Web.

¹³ Warren, Paul. “California’s Changing K-12 Accountability Program.” *PPIC Publication*. Public Policy Institute of California. Web.

¹⁴ Shah, et al. 1.

interview with KQED Forum’s Michael Krasny, over the course of the last decade, OUSD teachers have been paid at one of the lowest rates in Alameda county, and even in the state.¹⁵ In order to attract the best teachers and incentivize true improvement, it will come down to salaries that are commensurate with the enormous expectations that Oakland has for its teachers. According to the School Redesign Network at Stanford’s report on the success of the small schools movement, one of the most important pieces of information that the movement has given policy experts is the importance of retaining support networks for teachers and other educational professionals.¹⁶ Maintaining a focus on coaching teachers to be better, especially in the more challenging schools and classrooms, is crucial as schools begin to try to reform.

However, teachers are only one piece of a puzzle that stretches far into the demographics of the communities in which they teach—urban educational reform is intrinsically connected to persistent issues of socioeconomic and racial tensions. Segregation is one concern that has been an enormous impediment to the success of Oakland schools—despite the fact that Oakland has open enrollment, white students consistently attend the most highly ranked schools in higher-income areas, while students of color remain in the classrooms of overwhelming, over-crowded, and over-worked low-income schools. Despite the fact that *Brown v. Board of Education* legislation was passed more than sixty years ago, anti-segregation efforts in the Bay Area have stagnated. In fact, “major court decisions in California mandating desegregation that occurred in the 1970s were overturned by the 1990s,” setting the stage for many of the problems facing the small schools movement.¹⁷ In the last decades of the 20th century, the major influx of Hispanic students to California contributed to schools that were even more

¹⁵ Krasny, Michael. “Oakland Teachers and Parents Rally for New Contract, Better Pay.” *Forum*. KQED Public Media. San Francisco, CA, 1 Apr. 2015. Radio.

¹⁶ Vasudeva, A., L. Darling-Hammond, S. Newton, and K. Montgomery. “Oakland Unified School District new small schools initiative evaluation.” *School Redesign Network at Stanford University* (2009): iii.

¹⁷ Orfield, Gary and Jongyeon Ee. “Segregating California’s Future: Inequality and its Alternative 60 Years after *Brown v. Board of Education*.” *The Civil Rights Project, Proyecto Derechos Civiles*. UCLA (May 2014): 3.

segregated and racially-isolated than their 1970s counterparts, but because California was not the focus of nation-wide desegregation legislation, this problem got very little attention.¹⁸

In the wake of the small schools movement, these problems remain— in 2011, despite the fact that the overall district enrollment was 31.5% black, 38.1% Hispanic, 15.6% Asian, and 9.7% white, the percentage of students enrolled in high-level STEM and college preparation classes were consistently dominated by white and Asian students. This phenomenon, which repeats itself to a lesser degree for statistics like SAT/ACT enrollment, illustrates the fact that certain opportunities remain largely closed to certain groups, even when those groups make up the educational majority.¹⁹ Furthermore, the reverse is true of in- and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions—black students find themselves disproportionately on the receiving-end of these kinds of record-impacting disciplinary actions.²⁰ This, argues *New York Times* reporter Nikole Hannah-Jones, is no accident. The school system sets up students of color to fail while their white counter-parts succeed—the small schools movement did nothing to mitigate this phenomenon.²¹

Katy Murphy, in her piece for the Oakland Tribune, sums it up best—“More than 40 new schools later, the Oakland school district is transformed, at least on the surface. But many of its problems — low test scores, high dropout rates, staff turnover — remain.”²² Ultimately, the small schools movement was a Band-Aid for a bullet wound—yes, it raised test scores and made huge improvements in a few new, small schools, but it did little to change the reality of educational achievement on the community-level.

¹⁸ Ibid 25.

¹⁹ United States. “LEA Summary of Facts 2011, Oakland Unified: Oakland CA.” ED.gov. Office of Civil Rights. *Civil Rights Data Collection*. May 10, 2015.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Hannah-Jones, Nikole. “How School Segregation Divides Ferguson—and the United States.” *The New York Times*. Sunday Review, News Analysis (Dec. 19, 2014): 6.

²² Murphy, Katy. “Oakland’s Small Schools Movement, 10 Years Later.” Oakland Tribune. Inside Bay Area (May 6, 2009). Web.

Segregation persists, too few families make use of the open enrollment opportunities, and little of the city's new tax revenue contributes to education. Without the kind of community engagement and innovation described by Ansell and Yang, OUSD will continue to fall short of its potential.

EVIDENCE: LOOKING FORWARD

Looking forward, what is the legacy of the small schools movement? Considering the fact that California is finally emerging from the recession and educational budgets have returned to former levels, which pieces of the movement should be recycled and which pieces should simply be seen as opportunities for improvement in the future? Oakland has seen unprecedented growth in recent years, as more young professionals move there seeking access to San Francisco's booming tech industry. Sam Bucovetsky, in his piece on urban inequality, argues that "inequality in local public expenditure benefits low-income residents" because they are the beneficiaries of a tax base with a higher mean income, ultimately implying that increased wealth in Oakland has the power to make a positive impact on the school district there (which encompasses the entire city, including the high-income Montclair area and the low-income East Oakland area).²³ The OUSD has the responsibility to distribute these resources in an equitable way, ideally mitigating the problems that residents of lower-income areas already face. Ideally, the economic "boom" in Oakland would help accomplish this.

However, as journalists Steven Jones and Joe Fitzgerald Rodriguez explore in their article on San Francisco, the Bay Area's economic prosperity has had little positive impact on those that need it most. In fact, San Francisco's deficit has grown in recent years—they say "revenues are indeed growing, but not nearly as fast as the cost of running the city, a mismatch that has only been exacerbated by tens of millions of dollars in tax breaks given to Twitter and other growing companies along mid-Market Street and those

²³ Bucovetsky, Sam. "Inequality in the Local Public Sector." *Journal of Economic Policy*, Vol. 90, No. 1 (Feb., 1982): 128.

that offer stock options.”²⁴ While the situation is not quite as dramatic in Oakland, the cities are experiencing very similar circumstances—newcomers to Oakland will simply make the gap between wealth and poverty more dramatic, with revenue doing little to increase the education budget in a tangible way. Therefore, working to improve the policies that already exist is a much more realistic and manageable manner of tackling the educational problem.

New OUSD superintendent Antwan Wilson seems ready to accomplish much of this—having started his position in 2104, he recognizes the fact that education is one of the key pieces of a larger social system that can either set students up for success, or not.²⁵ In a recent interview, he speaks to the importance of a good public school system in the goal of an equitable city society, saying “I would like to see families in Oakland choose to not have to spend money to send their kids to (private) schools because they think it’s either not safe or they believe their kids won’t get a great education (in public schools).”²⁶ This understanding is key in being prepared for the kinds of policy changes that need to take places in urban educational reform.

Additionally, he embraces the new nation-wide Common Core curriculum as potentially beneficial, but not in and of itself a solution. While Common Core evaluations will replace API scores in the interest of testing for what is more important on a day-to-day basis, it is still only a quantitative solution.²⁷²⁸ The teachers need to be given the kind of support that was not an explicit enough part of the small schools movement. Whether this means higher salaries, as the teachers union is currently rallying for, or another kind of support, the role of teachers and other educational infrastructure cannot be emphasized

²⁴ Jones, Steven, and Joe Fitzgerald Rodriguez. “Boom for Whom?” *SF Bay Guardian*. (Mar. 25, 2014): 1.

²⁵ Freedberg, Louis, and John Fensterwald. “New Schools Chief: Oakland ‘full of Opportunity’.” *EdSource*. (Sept. 11, 2014). Web.

²⁶ *Ibid*.

²⁷ Warren, Paul.

²⁸ Ellison, Katherine. “Common Core Lessons Aim to Close Persistent Achievement Gap.” *EdSource* (Feb. 19, 2015). Web.

enough.²⁹

The last, and arguably the most important, part of the solution for Oakland schools is finding a better way of addressing segregation. As recent events have illustrated, we are far from a post-racial society—race is tied to lack of opportunity and even hardship time and again, and such a systemic problem needs to be made a priority. Frankenberg illustrates how segregation encourages fragmentation within a city district, and Oakland is perfect illustration of this phenomenon.³⁰ If Oakland wants to have an educational system that succeeds, it will have to make active desegregation efforts, similar to post-Brown v. Board of Education policies. While Oakland has open enrollment, too few students take advantage of this—public transportation makes it difficult to cross the city to enroll in the highly ranked Oakland Hills schools, and often information about educational opportunities is limited. Perhaps the solution is a free school bus system with the explicit purpose of desegregation, or pouring more money into college and career preparation programs in schools that fall at the bottom of API and Common Core rankings. Perhaps, as Bill Gates concluded, fewer restrictions should be placed on charter schools, encouraging more to open and more students to enroll in them.³¹ Regardless, these kinds of efforts should be at the forefront of future urban education reform projects in Oakland, emphasizing the entrenched link between education and the social workings of the rest of city.

CONCLUSION

The small schools movement was a sort of trial run, examining which tactics really matter for urban educational reform, and which are simply short-term fixes for a much larger problem. In the future, focusing on teachers and the connected issue of desegregation in the classroom and in the community will ideally achieve the same results as a focus on superficial fixes like upping test scores and attendance

²⁹ Krasny, Michael.

³⁰ Frankenberg, E., 869-70.

³¹ Gates.

rates. School should be a place where student *want* to engage, and improving the community in which this engagement happens is a crucial piece of that puzzle. Future reform should focus on distributing the budget in a way that will accomplish this in the long-term, with an end-goal of mitigating urban inequality in Oakland. Educational reform should never be seen as an isolated effort—reformers should work within the framework of the existing social system. Ultimately, education is a cog in the larger urban machine, a cog’s whose important role deserves more attention.

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