Once a year, the teachers at Oakland International High School (OIHS) in Oakland, Calif., become the students. Their students plan the instruction and teach educators about life as part of an immigrant community.

Unaccompanied minor students, for example, lead visits to a shelter or a legal aid agency, and students from Muslim countries have organized a visit to a mosque. Culminating in a gathering at a family’s home, the student-led community walks are an important strategy for creating cultural connections between the school’s immigrant population and the teachers. Such opportunities also teach students that they can have input into the issues that matter to them, whether it’s changing the lunch menu, planning the prom, or even educating younger students about the U.S. electoral system and immigrants’ rights.

Each year, 100 new students learn “the fact that school is a place where you can have a voice,” says Lauren Markham, the community school manager at OIHS, “If students are engaged in something, that is a great opportunity to build their leadership skills.”
Founded 10 years ago, OIHS is part of Internationals Network of Public Schools, a New York City-based nonprofit that works with districts and other partners to create schools serving immigrant and refugee students. All 389 students in the school are English language learners (ELL), and since 2012, the number of students arriving on their own has jumped from only five to at least 60.

In fact, when a math teacher at the school noticed that she had several students with upcoming court dates related to deportation proceedings, Markham and the OIHS Community School Advisory Committee—the site leadership team—did a thorough review of how many students might have open cases. They developed partnerships with nonprofit legal organizations that now meet with students at the school to provide free legal representation. They also applied for and received a grant to hire an unaccompanied minor specialist for the district, since other high schools have students with similar needs.

“There’s so much anxiety, even when they do have a lawyer,” Markham says. “The mental health needs of these students are huge.”

The Oakland Unified School District became a full-service community school district in 2011, but the community schools strategy was part of the mission at OIHS from the beginning so that the school would be “better equipped to support newcomer students.”

“Providing wraparound services for our students and families is a critical precondition for learning,” says Carmelita Reyes, an award-winning educator and the founding principal of the school. “A child who is hungry, or worried about deportation, or in pain, or can’t see well cannot be a productive learner in the classroom. Our community school efforts have made Oakland International into a place of belonging, support, and achievement for newly arrived immigrant students.”

Refugee Transitions, one of the school’s original partners—with expertise in serving ELL students—runs an after-school tutoring program to serve students who
need academic support. Because many students are living with relatives, family friends, or in shelters, they often don’t have assistance with schoolwork. Refugee Transitions teaches daily parent classes in the school’s ACE Learning Parent Center, which creates a welcoming environment for parents who often come from a culture in which parent involvement in school was not the norm.

Teachers refer students to the school’s Wellness Center, which is funded by a city grant and provides mental health and mentoring services. Teachers also refer students to the Coordination of Services Team (COST), which is the primary link between students and community partners. Weekly attendance and other data are reviewed to determine, in collaboration with COST, which students need case management, home visits, or other types of intervention.

Results show that the community school strategy is contributing to positive outcomes for OIHS students. For example, 67 percent of students surveyed in 2015-16 said they are “happy at school,” compared to 52 percent in the district. Students’ growth in English increases each year, and last year’s graduation rate was 72 percent—the highest since the school opened.

Many OIHS newcomers also arrive in the U.S. without healthcare, and some have never even seen a doctor, Markham says. Since the school doesn’t have a clinic, a partnership was created in which students can receive services at a clinic in a nearby high school.

One of the school’s strongest partners is Soccer Without Borders, an after-school and weekend sports program that provides much more than physical activity.

“It’s not just health and wellness,” Markham says, adding that the teams give students a sense of belonging and a constructive way to interact, even when students don’t speak the same language. “It really supports cross-cultural friendship.”
ABOUT THE COMMUNITY SCHOOLS AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE

Since 2006, the Coalition for Community Schools, an initiative of the Institute for Educational Leadership, has highlighted the effectiveness and power of community schools across the country. The Awards for Excellence, distributed every two years, highlight schools and initiatives that have become the hub of their neighborhood, created partnerships for better learning, and responded to the unique needs of their students and families so all young people learn and thrive.

This year’s winners were judged on the strength of their partnerships, ability to align supports and opportunities with the school’s or initiative’s core mission, engagement of families and the community, commitment to equity, creation of sustainable policy and finance structures, and powerful results.

On behalf of the Coalition for Community Schools Steering Committee, the Awards Selection Committee, and Staff, congratulations to all of our 2017 Award winners!


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