



Creating a Full-Service Community School District

Interview with Tony Smith, Superintendent of Oakland Unified School District

You don't just differentiate instruction; you differentiate supports so children are able to benefit from high quality instruction. And if we start thinking not about what the kids don't have but what they need, and what we can offer them, I think we can take some big steps as public institutions to take responsibility for the whole child.

-Tony Smith, Superintendent, Oakland Unified School District

In July 2010, [Oakland](#) Superintendent Tony Smith joined the ranks of select superintendents that are beginning to use the full-service community school strategy district-wide. School and political leaders in Cincinnati, Evansville (IN), Ogden (UT), Tulsa and [others](#) have already declared that a district-wide community schools strategy is vital to their education reform agendas. Smith even changed the tagline for the [Oakland Public Schools](#) to “Community Schools, Thriving Students.” Smith received some [national attention](#) for this strategy in the *New York Times* this summer. Coalition staff spoke to Smith about his plans to make every school a community school, his collaboration with the school board, and how he expects community schools to transform communities in Oakland.

A few of the great challenges in Oakland, as in many urban areas, are disparities in supports and opportunities available for children. As Smith told us, an African American child born in West Oakland, two miles away from Oakland Hills, a predominantly white area, is

1.5 times more likely to be born premature, seven times more likely to be born into poverty, two and a half times more likely to not be vaccinated when they enter kindergarten, four times less likely to read at grade level by grade four, and six times more likely to be pushed out or to drop out of school before they graduate....That basically ends up with African Americans born in West Oakland having 15 years less life expectancy than white kids two miles away.

These are among some of the challenges Smith encountered. When Smith became superintendent in of Oakland Unified School District in 2009, he spoke to members of the community to discover which strategies were and were not improving the lives of children. According to Smith, people saw “a lack of coordination, no alignment of services, and we weren’t able to leverage the incredible resources that were available for all the kids.” He saw that there were a number of organizations that were using community school strategies (e.g., [Beacon Centers](#)) and an array of other partnerships, but he characterized their efforts as “hit and miss, or in pockets.” Recognizing the devastating impact of the economic crisis on children and families, Smith committed to addressing the growing need of children in a comprehensive way. He said,

We all have to come together in terms of children and families, particularly for those kids who have been least well served by the system. We just think that being a full-service community district or a district of full-service community schools is the way to go.

Smith worked with existing, but fragmented, initiatives to create a framework and a narrative to illustrate a coordinated district-wide system of services and opportunities. He worked with community and political leaders, including Mayor Jerry Brown, to develop the initiative. Smith made the community school framework a central part of the district's [strategic plan](#) which he brought to the Board of Education for their consideration. Smith presented the Board with a solid plan for how to improve schools and communities. As Smith said,

You have to have the details worked out and the ability to map out for people how actually this is going to come into reality so it's not just ethereal feel good stuff. You actually have to prove that you've got a good plan, compassionate, and that you're ready to do just whatever it takes and be relentless.

Smith acknowledged the importance of having a Board that is committed to improving outcomes for children. He said that the School Board is "frustrated with our inability to meet the needs of all the kids." The Board voted unanimously to adopt the plan to make Oakland a full-service school district and incorporated the framework into its five-year strategic plan. Smith characterized the importance of the Board's support:

That's who we are [a full-service community school district], and what we're about now. And the fact is this is the power of a school board...With the passage of this content, this work plan, it is now the sole work of the unified school district. We are in the process of becoming a full-service community district that engages deeply with family and the communities we support.

When we asked Smith about what results he hopes the initiative will achieve, he responded that he expects to improve outcomes for social, emotional, physical and civic development as well as academics. He made it clear that he saw these outcomes as intertwined. Smith explained that Oakland has made gains in California's Academic Performance Index over the past five years. But he added that while performance was increasing,

We had twenty of our children die of violence last year. Eighteen were shot to death, one, one run down and one stabbed to death. So it's one thing to talk about, you know, this incredible academic test score trajectory, you to also talk about the human lives and experience of most of the kids and families.

As a result, he sees the full-service community school strategy as addressing both academics and family and community issues. He said,

We're talking about having kids who enter kindergarten be vaccinated and ready for kindergarten, and eliminating those disparities. We're talking about not just the need to ensure better attendance, but to eliminate the disparities in suspension rate between ethnicities. We're talking about cutting in half the incarceration rate for children under eighteen. We believe that if we connect deeply, and well, and have the schools taking responsibility for creating a culture of calm within the school, but then extending that out, and with community based organizations and families and business that we can see a significant change in lots of areas including academic participation and academic achievement, and also community service and employment.

Smith expects the community school initiative to have an impact in the classroom, in the school, and even in the community. He said,

For us, we're talking about altering these patterns of inequity in the city... Right now parts of Oakland are near 20% unemployment rate. We've got many, many kids who are not in good housing situations. We honestly think that the ability to improve engagement and academic performance where kids are well known and well cared for has the potential to have a massive effect on the well being of the city.

Smith acknowledges that challenges await: there's the continuing trouble in the California and national economies, there's also the task of convincing the public that this is the right strategy for children, families and communities. Smith acknowledged,

There are still folks who feel like if these kids and these families really wanted it, they could do it, and that the problem is still located in the children. We have to continue to be good about creating spaces, time, and opportunity, to deepen understanding, among practitioners in the school district and, quite frankly, in the City of Oakland...to deepen their consciousness of how we got where we are, and why this strategy is the way to respond to alter these patterns.

Now that the Board of Education has directed Smith and his administration to make Oakland a full-service community school district, Smith, his staff, and community partners will take the next year to develop an implementation plan for the initiative. Thoughtful planning will be critical to implementing the strategy with fidelity and in achieving the outcomes the children and families of Oakland require. They're fortunate to have a leader in Tony Smith who understands what is needed to turn around a school and an entire community. The Coalition for Community Schools applauds Smith and the Oakland community and looks forward to seeing their progress at the 2012 National Forum in the Bay Area.

To listen to the entire interview, please visit our website at www.communityschools.org

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