

Oakland Unified School District Case Study EnCompass Academy



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This case study is one of six conducted for the report, *Oakland Unified School District: New Small Schools Initiative Evaluation*. The report and case studies can be downloaded from <http://www.srnleads.org/resources/publications/ousd/ousd.html>.

This study was conducted by the School Redesign Network at Stanford University

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The School Redesign Network at Stanford University engages in research and development to support districts and schools that are equitable and enable all students to master the knowledge and skills needed for success in college, careers, and citizenship.

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Oakland Unified School District operates with the goals of universal college and workplace readiness, quality public schools in every neighborhood, clean and safe learning environments, service excellence across the district, and equitable outcomes for all students.

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Photo: Minh-Tram Nguyen, courtesy of EnCompass Academy

Introduction

EnCompass Academy is located in East Oakland, which many describe as a high needs area plagued by violence. The community has also experienced profound demographic changes, as the neighborhood has shifted from a predominantly African American community to a Latino, mostly Mexican, community. In the beginning there was much community mistrust around the new school, but this dissipated through the work of school staff and the district's commitment to build a new state-of-the-art facility in the traditionally underserved East Oakland community. The facility made a powerful statement about the district's commitment to serving East Oakland and the importance of the school's success.

EnCompass Academy opened in 2004 in portable classrooms on the Webster Academy campus in the community of East Oakland. Since its opening, EnCompass has implemented a unique approach to education, grounded in “the four life spirals” (see Appendix A). The life spirals elements are:

Power of Knowledge, Power of Right Action, Power of Courage, and the Power of Stillness.¹ These elements have served as the basis for a school culture and an instructional program that have made considerable progress in improving the academic outcomes of its students.

Section One of the case study describes EnCompass Academy's academic trajectory and development story, highlighting the school's successful launch and its steep ascent on the California Academic Performance Index (API) and subsequent plateau. After tremendous gains in the school's first 2 years, scores plateaued, with decreases in the percentage of students scoring proficient on the California Standards Test (CST) in 2008. This reflects the success the school achieved in performing what many described as "academic triage" in the initial years, and the challenges involved in creating a rigorous learning program to propel students to higher gains as the school matures. The successful school launch is largely attributed to the network of supports developed by Principal Minh-

Tram Nguyen, both in the educational community and in East Oakland. Nguyen used this network to lead the design of a school that has stayed true to its vision of serving the community.

Section Two describes four critical attributes of a school's academic functioning: the school learning climate, instructional program, professional capacity, and parent and community relations. This section focuses on EnCompass Academy's efforts to develop and reinforce a positive learning climate that "honors the mind, body, and spirit of the whole child"² coupled with an instructional program that is standards-based and culturally relevant. EnCompass has capitalized on district policies that allow for curricular flexibility by developing an instructional program based on educating the whole child.

Section One: EnCompass Academy's Academic Trajectory and Development Story

By all accounts, EnCompass has positively influenced the academic achievement of its students. Scores have grown steadily since the opening, and in 2007, EnCompass Academy's API score was almost 200 points better than the local school from which EnCompass draws its students. Scores have leveled off recently, with a dip in 2008. As illustrated in Figure 2, the plateau in scores has coincided with a growth in the number of students tested, as the school has added a grade level each year.

EnCompass Academy opened in 2004 as a K-2 school and has added a grade level every year. In 2007-08 EnCompass was a K-5 school serving 236 students (see Table 1, page 4). During this time the proportion of English learners and students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch has remained relatively stable, suggesting that as EnCompass Academy has added grades it continues to serve the same students.

Teachers at EnCompass Academy stated that they have always felt intense accountability pressures. At the onset, when school staff perceived there was little district support for new schools, they felt they needed to have high test scores or the district would close the school. A

teacher said, "There was a lot of pressure to perform almost immediately. There was a lot of pressure that first year to do the miraculous and get the kids up to grade level very quickly." The principal indicates that their immediate success in raising scores gave them some breathing room, but she felt anxious about the 2008 test results. According to Nguyen, "[Our test scores] grew really quickly our first 3 years because we were so low, it inoculated us the first 3 years. This will be our plateau year. The bar [for proficiency] has increased by 15%. We [now] have fifth grade, and the fifth grade test is a much harder test." Some of Nguyen's apprehensiveness about the test scores were realized, as the school's API score decreased in 2008.

FIGURE 1

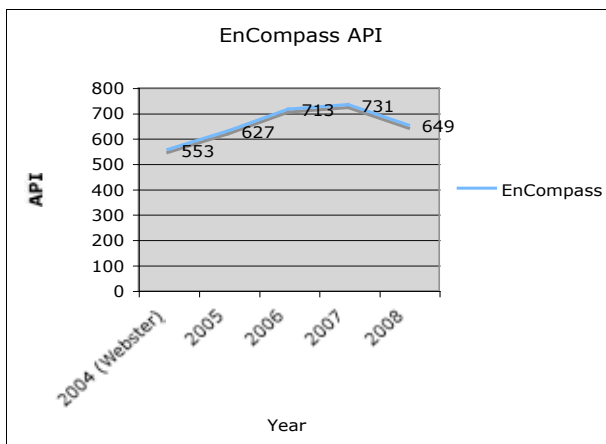


FIGURE 2

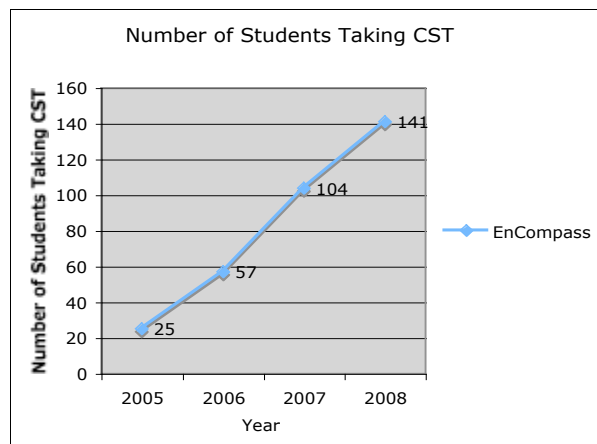


Table 1: EnCompass Academy Enrollment

Year	Total Enrollment	%EL*	%FRL**
2007-08	236	56%	91%
2006-07	198	59%	92%
2005-06	152	60%	77%
2004-05	108	57%	84%

*Students classified as English learners

**Students who qualify for free- or reduced-price lunch

Nguyen attributes the API score decline to a confluence of events that significantly influenced the school’s instructional program. One issue was an influx of new teachers. In 2007-08, the school had six grades with two teachers per grade. Three of the grades had teachers that were new to the grade, with one of the teachers being new to teaching and another new to the school. Two of these three “new” teachers had only two students each achieve proficiency in English language arts (ELA). All of these teachers either left the classroom or the school staff. The school also had to find a replacement teacher midway through the school year, when a staff member was reassigned out of the classroom because of health reasons. As illustrated in Tables 2 and 3, EnCompass experienced sizable decreases in the percent of students scoring proficient and advanced in math and ELA, much of which was correlated with the aforementioned changes in staff. Consistent

with larger district findings about the correlation between teaching experience and student achievement, the first-year teacher taught third grade, which experienced the most substantial decrease in achievement scores from 2006-07 to 2007-08.

Another factor Nguyen linked to the decrease in test scores had to do with assessment decisions. Based on the school’s own data analysis, EnCompass leaders have found that the district benchmark assessments are only loosely coupled to student performance on the end-of-year California Standards Tests (CSTs). Given this finding, the school has been experimenting with different assessment programs to find one that accurately predicts student performance on the CSTs and gives teachers useful data to inform instruction. In 2007-08, EnCompass piloted the Tungsten assessments, a standards-based assessment created by Edison Schools.⁴ The Tungsten assessment is a

Table 2: EnCompass English Language Arts Scores — Percent Proficient and Advanced* and 2007-08 Teacher Changes

Grade	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
2	3%	54%	22%	16% (health issues, reassigned out of classroom)
3		20%	35%	15% (first year teacher)
4			28%	38% (new to school, new to grade)
5				17% (new to grade, low expectations for students)

*<http://data1.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/> Accessed December 5, 2008

Table 3: EnCompass Academy Math Scores — Percent Proficient and Advanced and 2007-08 Teacher Changes

Grade	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08
2	30%	69%	36%	18% (health issues, reassigned out of classroom)
3		40%	55%	38% (first year teacher)
4			54%	48% (new to school, new to grade)
5				32% (new to grade, low expectations for students)

computer-based assessment given monthly to students in math and reading. Each assessment has approximately 20 multiple-choice questions designed to be given over a 40-minute time period. Although the assessments are tailored to state learning standards, EnCompass teachers stated that the assessments did not provide enough data about student mastery of the key California State Standards targeted by the school. Many indicated the assessment emphasized breadth over depth at the expense of key standards. Teachers also determined that the assessments were given too frequently to adequately inform instructional practice.

Nguyen also indicated that there was a gap between the Tungsten assessment program and the school’s larger instructional program. The Tungsten assessments called for a cycle of planning and pacing every 6 weeks based on the results of the assessments. This type of planning was a departure from the instructional unit planning previously used by the school. As a result the school decided to move back to instructional unit planning and find a new assessment program. She describes the situation this way:

We didn’t spend enough time thinking about how these assessments will influence instructional practice. We have since moved to the Action

Learning System assessments and put in supports for teachers. Now every teacher has a coach, and there are no first year teachers,⁵ so we will be better prepared to align the assessment program with our instructional practice.

The Action Learning System (ALS) assessments differ from the Tungsten assessments in several ways. The ALS were purposefully designed to measure student progress in mastering focus standards⁶ and provide results aligned to student CST performance. The ALS assessments follow a format similar to the Tungsten assessments, but are administered only four times per year. The assessment also aligns with the Open Court elementary literacy curriculum, in use at elementary schools throughout Oakland. EnCompass staff feel this alignment is important because teachers use the Open Court curriculum as the basis for developing standards-based lesson plans. Teachers at EnCompass will also use the ALS pacing guide⁷ and standards map⁸ to synchronize the curriculum with the assessments.

EnCompass Academy has made substantial changes in its staffing, assessment, and support for the current school year. Nguyen is hopeful that these changes will improve the school’s API scores for the 2008-09 school year.



Photo: Minh-Tram Nguyen, courtesy of EnCompass Academy

Section Two: The Design of EnCompass Academy

EnCompass Academy's birth reflects both a strong dedication to an educational vision and a concerted effort to engage community members. Nguyen, then a teacher from Whittier Elementary School in Oakland, led the design team. Prior to her work in Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), Nguyen taught in Boston and in San Jose, California. Through her graduate studies at Harvard University, a principal from a Boston pilot school mentored her.⁹ She returned to the San Francisco Bay Area for family reasons and then moved to Oakland.

Looking for a way to continue working in an innovative program similar to Boston's pilot schools, Nguyen attended a Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES) small schools conference. Nguyen felt the group needed more diversity and was inspired. She reached out to contacts in Los Angeles, Boston, and the Bay Area to begin thinking about

a possible school. The group met primarily over the phone, and Nguyen began a door-knocking campaign in East Oakland to assess community needs and recruit parents for a design team.

Once formed, the design team felt that deep East Oakland was a good choice for a new school for several reasons:

- 1) It was a very high-need area with several schools that were overcrowded and had chronic underachievement.
- 2) Opening a small school in the area would reduce the size of the overcrowded neighborhood elementary school, Webster Academy, and give that school a chance to make changes.
- 3) Compared to other Oakland neighborhoods, this part of East Oakland also had blighted land potentially available for a school.

It was a priority for Nguyen to do this work as part of the district reform to impact the larger system, instead of operating outside the system as a charter school. She wanted to illustrate that a school can be effective within the district system and influence the system to make important changes. Nguyen described the process this way:

We focused on Webster Academy. It was a school that had been burdened with unsustainable overcrowding, violence, and was in PI [program improvement]¹⁰ status for several years. I invited the principal to be a part of the meeting about the idea, but didn't get an affirmative, so I didn't feel comfortable coming onto the campus without having her explicit consent. We went to the grocery store, went to the park, community recreation center, community events, community-based agencies, and door to door, building support for the school and understanding community needs. During this time, we had some guiding principles, which are the same guiding principles we have

now, that resonated. When we did the interview as part of the request for proposal, we did a group interview; there were eight of us at the time before we grew.

After the interview, BayCES invited the design team to begin the planning process and Nguyen, funded by a Gates' Foundation grant, was assigned by the team a position as a Teacher on Special Assignment to officially head up the design team work. Although some parent team members turned over because of housing evictions, community violence, and family poverty, Nguyen credits the team's commitment to the vision of educating the whole child as the driving force behind the school.

During the process, the design team remained committed to a collaborative school design process. This meant reaching out to Nguyen's personal network and actively seeking community participation. While this had tangible benefits, such as one of Nguyen's friends, who offered a beach home in Santa Cruz for a design team retreat, the most important benefit was being able to create a school that represented multiple viewpoints rather than the vision of a single person. In seeking broad input, the design team began by soliciting local apartment complexes for community representatives, but this resulted in high transience on the design team. The design team then developed another strategy to support community involvement. Using money from a Gates grant, the team hired a person to do parental outreach focused primarily on the school's largely African-American community. All of these outreach efforts were essential to making sure that the design team had African-American participation and remained focused on meeting the needs of families in the community. Nguyen

discuss the collaborative design efforts this way:

I didn't make the vision statement by myself. After creating the vision, we came up with the name. A teacher on the team designed the visual logo on his desktop publisher. We asked ourselves, how does it look to build a school that has a transformational approach? Sometimes, in organizing efforts, it can become about the change itself and then it becomes ideological and not about the needs of the families. We needed to make sure we didn't replicate that dynamic.

From the beginning, EnCompass was designed to meet the needs of children in a high-needs community. The school created a process rooted in the idea that to effectively meet community needs, the school must actively engage community members. Much of this founding philosophy shapes current school practices, such as teacher and principal home visits.

Although EnCompass used a deliberate design process that incorporated many stakeholders and grew the school incrementally by adding one grade level each year, the school still experienced an uneven start-up, characteristic of many new small school start-ups. The demands of starting a small school contributed to teacher turnover and an unstable teaching force. As the school has matured, the staff size has increased and turnover has decreased. A founding teacher reflects on the growth of the school this way:

We had 50% turnover the first year, which was four to six teachers at

that time. Second year we had less turnover, but it was 40%, then stabilized the third year, one teacher left. The fourth year has been more stable. Each year we have also been growing a grade, so we needed more teachers, and now we have 12 teachers, which helps. Before, it was: who was going to be the science lead, and that was the same person who was trying to figure out the lunch schedule — it was definitely overwhelming.

Growing the school one grade level per year allowed the school to refine its program and focus on the intense remediation of a small number of students, but it also placed demands on the small staff. As Chief Academic Officer Stam says, “The CDE¹¹ does not care if you have 100 or 1,000 kids in your school. They're still going to demand the same compliance documents from all schools, and as the district has improved in meeting the state compliance requirements, small schools have felt this as an increased burden.” According to one EnCompass teacher, the first year was particularly difficult:

Working in a small school that is just starting up is very intense; you have to do everything that a regular school has to do and establish all the procedures and figure out how it is going to work, and think about being part of the leadership. It didn't help that we started off with younger teachers. The school feels much different now than in our first year.

Throughout the school's start-up process, OUSD provided strong support for the school's facilities, but teachers did not

perceive strong classroom support. Initially EnCompass was in portable classrooms on the Webster Academy campus, but later, EnCompass moved into a brand-new facility that it shares with ACORN Woodland Elementary. A founding teacher described the first-year supports:

As a classroom teacher, I didn't see [district staff] that often, and when I did see them, I wouldn't call it support. It was more pressure to perform almost immediately. The person I saw as a classroom teacher was our BayCES coach, who did a little bit of everything. BayCES gave us support in planning and in thinking. During the first year it was all

hands on deck. They did what needed to get done; they went to the warehouse to get books, it was that kind of a deal.

Although BayCES worked closely with OUSD, the teacher did not associate BayCES with district support. Despite these issues, characteristic of many small school start-ups, the EnCompass experience was relatively smooth, which contributed to the test score gains discussed in Section One. Much of this success can be attributed to a combination of support for facilities, incremental growth, and a commitment to engage stakeholders around a unique educational vision.

Section Three: Organizational Supports

SCHOOL LEARNING CLIMATE

Although the facilities are modern and pristine, perhaps the most striking feature of the school learning climate is the way the physical environment has been made explicitly student-centered. The school space is designed with children in mind, and the physical features of the school leave little doubt about the expectations for both student and adult behavior on the campus. Student work is posted throughout the hallways, accompanied by child-sized couches and armchairs and water fountains throughout the campus. Every classroom has a library with child-sized couches as well. Teachers are encouraged to make their own posters for the walls, rather than buying pre-made ones. In one classroom, a poster describes independent learners who “ask a friend, read the room, get a book, do your best.”

The facility reflects the deep commitment to the school’s vision of affecting the whole child in a high-needs area. Nguyen says:

I am not negotiable about surrounding children by beauty. You have to upkeep it. Our children are racialized and how poverty is identified, so we must constantly be vigilant about holding out a notion of who they are to build pride and self-love. We have to help the children think about “what does it mean to be a scholar?”

In addition to the striking physical features of the school, the commitment to the vision runs much deeper. Teachers and staff at En-Compass have developed a positive school learning climate that supports academic improvement and makes substantial efforts to include other dimensions of the child and his or her experience in life. Nguyen says:

I want to bring the cultural piece into the whole child approach. It is not importing our approach into the community. For people of color, when we go to an institution, we

leave a part of us out. The spiral is a way to honor it. It was important to speak to spirit in a secular context. In Western culture it is only in the religious context. The character-building piece is a survival piece — it is a fundamental way that our community is healing. We need to prepare them to be healing warriors, salves in our community. When families see what their kids can do, they start seeing themselves differently.

When family members have stress and conflict that they bring to the school and direct it at staff, it can be hard. However we move through it together by keeping the needs of their child at the center. It deepens the relationship. When we have struggle, we come back better. We earn that level of respect and trust with each other. For some families in such a high-stress community, we need to provide face-saving opportunities for them to keep coming back to the table and engage and not be judged. We can still hold people to the guiding principles of the commu-

nity, but not make it a personal judgment. The intensity is just another way that some family members can show their love. I'll take that over disengagement.

Nguyen believes strongly that traditions play an important role in the school's approach to the whole child, and she uses a monthly community meeting as one of the school's primary ceremonies. Throughout the meeting, the principal has many routines she uses to get students focused. Much of it is delivered as a call and response. She also has a chime she hits, then students raise their hands above their heads and then down at their sides as they take a deep breath to help them remain calm and focused during the meeting. Nguyen leads this and models it. The principal says, "I use the community meeting to model culturally responsive teaching," adding that teachers do not teach holidays in traditional ways. Instead they try to bring culture into their school through the meetings.

The community meetings help the school build a strong culture that supports a sense of community, a commitment to kindness, and an appreciation for academic achievement. The community meetings possess an aesthetic quality that is representative of the school. Students sit with their grade levels wearing their color-coded uniforms: K-1 wear red shirts, 2-3 wear green shirts, and 4-5 wear yellow shirts.¹² Music is a major part of the community meeting as well. At one community meeting, we observed, the fifth graders stood on the stage and sang "Rockin Robin" and "Three Little Birds." The school music teacher led all music, while the principal sat on the stage facing the rest of the students. The principal reminded the fifth graders to be on their best

behavior. She told them, "You are a mirror to younger students." A few students were invited to the front of the group to talk about what friendship means to them. The second-grade students sang a Brazilian song and the Beatles tune, "All Together Now." As they sang, the rest of the children started to clap spontaneously. Then the principal called up a student from each class to "catch someone being kind." The child stood in front of the school and said the name of the student and what they did. The whole school then chanted, "(Name of the student), we caught you being kind," and pointed at the student.

The next activity recognized students who were proficient in math and ELA in each grade, based on benchmark assessments. The children lined up and walked to the principal who gave them a medal. Students who had 50 points or more of growth on the 2007 CST tests were also recognized. One student who, in the past, had tremendous behavior problems was recognized for a huge 100-point growth on the CST. The students were obviously proud of their medals and wore them all day. The principal then led the students singing a song that included the lines, "From East to West, we will have test success." It was sung in a call-and-response style. The meeting ended with everyone who had birthdays that month standing in front of the school and singing and dancing to a song as the whole school sang along.

It is clear that students have bought into the culture of the school. As one fifth-grade student says, "We learn how to act, how to be nice. I learned to tell the truth; you get in less trouble." Another fifth grader describes the school in a similarly positive way: "The whole school is full of good people — we get to know each other."

INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM

The instructional program at EnCompass Academy embeds a standards-based approach, necessary for success on state tests, within a larger framework that addresses the needs of the whole child. EnCompass Academy views an educated child as one who achieves excellence in all standards by developing an active, reflective, and disciplined mind; a healthy and physically fit body; a centered spirit; and just, caring, and courageous self-conduct. In the first 3 years, the school focused on raising the performance of the lowest students, as they worked toward developing a coherent instructional program for all students. As Nguyen says:

We do academic acceleration with the lowest achieving and most disenfranchised with schooling. This is because when kids are low academically, they often act out. Teachers have behavioral challenges, but lifting the lowest kids helps calibrate the classroom to a higher bar instead of letting challenging behavior set the culture.

The instructional theory of action at the school is that in order to accelerate students academically, teachers must do instructional double-duty. Teachers must provide access and instruction to students in their grade-level standards, while accelerating their progress to help them catch up. This results in what the school has termed “academic triage” for the lowest performing students. In addition to instructional double-duty, academic triage consists of proactively partnering with parents to share strategies to move the child forward, working individually with students to provide hands-on support, and identifying the strengths of

underachieving children to build their confidence. In a review of EnCompass priorities, the staff wrote that “these strategies combined with the whole-child approach have resulted in noticeable behavioral turnarounds and accompanying academic growth. Many of our academically low and explosive children had hidden and powerful leadership potential and now provide the most inspirational model of change and transformation for others.”

Although the focus on academic acceleration has remained consistent from the beginning, the school has made several changes in its instructional program. In the first year, the school had a Spanish/English bilingual program, which was discontinued in the second year because of a lack of success serving students in their home language (Spanish). According to Nguyen, “We didn’t have the capacity to do it well. I took a lot of heat for that; several families left the school, but many of them came back.” The school also slowed down the process of adopting an Expeditionary Learning/ Outward Bound (ELOB)¹³ approach after the first year, but has taken steps to integrate principles of ELOB back into the school as instructional coherence and teacher capacity have increased. A founding teacher described how the changes have gradually allowed the school to develop a coherent approach:

The curriculum has become much more focused and tighter. The first year, our ELOB coach suggested that we get much better at basic literacy instruction before we went on with ELOB. The next year there was much more focus on building coherence, and implementing literacy strategies. We now focus on a couple of different strategies

each year. The first year, we were not coherent at all, not in anything. We've moved much more toward coherence, especially with our basic literacy practices.

In addition to discontinuing ineffective programs, the school is in the process of making other important changes in its instructional program.

In its fourth year, the school focus has shifted toward building teacher capacity for supplementing the Open Court Reading Curriculum. EnCompass now has a staff person who coordinates all aspects of professional development, and her primary focus is on developing useful assessments of student learning and supplementing the Open Court curriculum with other materials. EnCompass teachers have always used the Open Court curriculum for ELA and the school has developed a continuum of practice that supplements and extends Open Court curriculum.

In the three-step continuum, teachers may use different materials and practices based on their experience, training, and professional development. The first step of the continuum focuses on Open Court implementation. It includes what the school refers to as the “foundation” of the EnCompass ELA program¹⁴ plus the Open Court Reading Curriculum stories, themes, and reading comprehension strategies, and essential vocabulary. Teachers on step two use the foundation and Open Court Reading Curriculum materials described above, plus supplemental reading materials chosen by the teacher.

The third and final step is thematic integrated curriculum. This includes the foundation, but relies more on the teacher's

judgment around developing standards-based ELA units of instruction. A teacher at this stage also uses relevant texts from multiple sources, including Open Court Reading Curriculum as appropriate, and moves toward an Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound approach. The teacher also uses strategies such as guided reading,¹⁵ literacy centers,¹⁶ shared reading,¹⁷ reciprocal teaching,¹⁸ independent reading, and others. Once a teacher reaches this level of the continuum, it is expected that he or she leads and models for other teachers in strategies for supplementing the Open Court curriculum. Teachers are placed on the continuum by the teacher development team, which is comprised of EnCompass teacher-leaders and the principal.¹⁹ According to one teacher, using the continuum has helped increase instructional coherence:

The whole idea behind it [the continuum] for us is to move toward being more cohesive in our practice and be on same page as to how we define best practices. Some people really follow Open Court, especially the teachers that came to us from other Oakland schools, and we need to account for that. Overall, we're getting more coherent in how we use Open Court.

One of the key struggles for EnCompass has been reconciling its curricular flexibility with the assessment requirements in both ELA and math. Some teachers feel their autonomy is substantially limited with regard to Open Court, primarily because of the assessments. As one teacher says:

Even though we had some curriculum autonomy, we had to use Open Court assessments, so

when we're planning, it felt like we're teaching to the test. We felt frustrated. We might have made different instructional decisions, but we didn't feel like we could make those decisions because we're bound to the other thing.

The tension between being granted curricular flexibility, yet being held accountable to a particular standardized assessment creates a perceived disconnect between district policies geared toward success for all students and teachers feeling supported. A teacher says:

I don't always feel like we're set up to succeed, the way we were given autonomy over things, but had to show growth in district benchmark scores, or they'd shut us down. It's not like we're coming out of this loving supportive environment. We'd be on our toes even without that. We're committed to education and giving these kids what they deserve and giving them access to everything they should have access to. We're not as vulnerable, since we're a blue²⁰ school, it feels like we're safer, but the stress is still very tangible.

Granted curricular flexibility by the district, EnCompass hopes to have an assessment program in place for 2008-09 that will align with its curriculum and instructional practices and support increased CST scores. These changes at EnCompass have also been supported by what Nguyen describes as a more supportive district assessment strategy:

The district has moved toward more standards-based assessments, which is very helpful. The Research and

Assessment office has been progressive and responsive. They have been thoughtful about the best assessments for the school. It used to be about accountability and summative²¹ assessments, but that is changing. Our teachers want more formative²² assessment and we've been supported in making changes to implement those assessments.

The overall sentiment is that more coherent district assessment policies will do much to decrease teacher frustration.

According to Nguyen, the adoption of the ALS assessments, combined with the changes in the district assessment philosophy, will move the school forward in developing instructional coherence. She states the new assessments will result in a much improved planning process: "Since we're using a new assessment structure, we calendared out the year. We can plan so it makes sense for our school. We can plan our instruction knowing what are we going to map out each trimester. That moves us toward being more cohesive."

Although much of the school's focus has been on ELA, as the ELA scores have been lower than math at the school, EnCompass is also working on developing an effective math program as well. Overall, teachers seem encouraged about the possibilities for math instruction for the 2008-09 school year. Several EnCompass teachers stated that they will be able to plan more effectively because of changes in the district pacing guide. In 2007-08, the teachers indicated that district was slow to release the math pacing guides, and they were difficult to understand. In the spring of 2008, staff reported that they already had the pacing guides for the

following year, and the guides were much more clear.

There is also optimism about implementing the Si Swun math²³ program. The Si Swun elementary math program was developed by a teacher in Long Beach, California, and later adopted by the Long Beach School District. EnCompass considered applying for the Si Swun program in 2007-08, when OUSD began introducing it at several schools in hopes of strengthening its math teaching. However, EnCompass was ineligible because it was a “blue” school,²⁴ and the district was prioritizing the lower performing elementary schools. Many of the schools that piloted the Si Swun program in 2007-08 experienced gains in their math scores on the CSTs, leading OUSD to expand the pilot program from three schools to 20.²⁵ EnCompass was selected as one of the pilot schools for 2008-09, and Nguyen indicates that the program has already made substantial gains in students’ mathematics benchmark achievement.

In addition to making changes in its assessment plan, EnCompass also developed a new strategy for providing interventions for targeted students in 2007-08. First thing each morning, the school does an intervention block. The intervention block is an assembly for first through third graders who do Brain Gym as well as oral chants to learn spelling and high-frequency words. While the majority of the students participate in the large group assembly in the multi-purpose room, 32 students are pulled out to work on more specific interventions using the Reading Recovery²⁶ model. The 32 students who are pulled out are divided into groups of four for an 8-week intervention cycle. The students are pulled out 4 days a week for the first 5 weeks. Students are grouped into one of three reading levels

for this time, and each teacher teaches one level. As students advance, they rotate out of one teacher’s group into another’s. This decreases the preparation time necessary for teachers. In week six, the students are assessed, and in weeks seven and eight the students are not pulled out. Instead the teachers meet to look at the student data and reflect on their practice. The first time the school did this, at the beginning of the 2007-08 school year, students advanced rapidly. By the third 8-week cycle, 72% of the students had advanced one level, and 43% had moved up three levels — the equivalent of a half-year to a whole year’s growth, depending upon the student’s grade level.

At the beginning of the school year, the lowest level students were targeted, but in the fourth intervention cycle, the staff decided to work with students on the cusp of proficiency, who often underperform on the ELA portion of the CSTs because of their reading skills. Teachers have found that for those students, it is primarily low reading skills that prevent them from achieving proficiency on the CSTs. By targeting students on the cusp of proficiency in the weeks immediately preceding the CSTs, the school hoped to increase the school’s overall proficiency levels. Although ELA scores decreased in second and third grades in 2008, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of this program in terms of CST scores because of the other factors involved in the school’s instructional program as outlined in section one.

Although the staff at EnCompass spends considerable energy on helping students achieve proficiency on the CSTs, the school is not what one would characterize as a test-prep school. EnCompass Academy stu-

dents are exposed to a wide-ranging curriculum and teaching strategies that emphasize engaging the student with the content in multiple ways, rather than strictly preparing for a big, high-stakes test at the end of the year. In commenting on the teaching strategies, students say that, “I didn’t understand math at my old school, my teacher just did it on the board. Here they teach it on the board, we work on the carpet, then teach it to each other.” Others students praise the opportunities they have to experience subjects outside those that are tested on the CSTs: “We have more breathing space. We have music, art; it is fun and educational. We remember it and share it with our friends. Art and PE help us in college and high school.”

All of the above assessments and strategies work within the school mission that calls for addressing the needs of the whole child. This includes developing children’s internal ability to assess their power and responsibility. Nguyen describes it this way, “We try to create a responsive classroom. Responsive classroom is an approach, not a program. [To correct behavior,] we try to make logical consequences, that make sense to students, helping students make amends and take responsibility.” EnCompass staff emphasize that all members of the community have responsibilities to one another.

Nguyen acknowledges that much of what EnCompass has been able to accomplish in building its instructional program is because of the district’s willingness to give schools curricular flexibility. Curricular flexibility has helped EnCompass Academy staff to build and refine an instructional program that makes sense for their school. Despite some frustrating experiences, Nguyen feels very positively toward the district. She says, “There are things that

drive me nutty, but I celebrate our district. Because the district has made significant changes, in the spirit of that, they are going in the right direction.”

PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY

Much of EnCompass Academy’s original human resource strategy was based on hiring vision-driven teachers that fit the culture of the school. As the school has matured, the strategy has evolved to also include building the teachers’ capacity necessary for long-term improvement in student outcomes.

From the start, EnCompass staff knew that the school’s unique vision made it important to hire teachers who fit the culture of the school. Therefore, the school developed a thorough selection process. The hiring process involves watching teachers teach and asking them to reflect on a transformative moment for a child they’ve taught. Teachers are also asked about what they have learned through their life experiences around issues of power (e.g., in society, in school, in the classroom, in the community). The principal looks for teachers who have thought about equity, about their relationship to power, and can address issues of mind, body, and spirit. Prospective teachers also write an essay about why they want to teach in East Oakland.

The interview process, co-created with parents, is based on understanding who the teacher is in the world, what his or her approach is, and how it maps to the school vision. As the principal says, “Once you get to us, you are not surprised by the things that we do. One teacher came from a school that taught how great Columbus was, and I also wanted her to teach about

how Columbus was perceived from the perspective of the indigenous people. She knew it wasn't a fit."

Teachers describe the school hiring process as very intense and appreciate the rigor, but seem frustrated that after completing the demanding interview process, they still must go through a complicated district-level hiring process. One teacher indicated there is a lot of time waiting to get the contract from the district:

After they offered me the position, then it became very complicated because of bureaucracy at the district. It's very difficult for a school site to actually get teachers they are interested in, because the district has structures around placing and all of that. It took a long time before I could sign a contract and know that I had actually secured the position. I applied for the position at the end of the school year in June, and I signed my contract during the orientation week of August.

In some cases, due to bureaucratic complications, EnCompass has lost the opportunity to hire teachers from high-performing schools who wanted to work at the school.

EnCompass has also been forced to change aspects of its hiring philosophy as the school has added grade levels. Specifically, it has had to hire more beginning teachers as the school has matured. Historically, Nguyen has tried to avoid hiring first-year teachers, unless they are very strongly recommended. This policy has been altered out of necessity because as the school has grown there has not been a sufficient supply of veteran teachers from which to select.

As the school has grown, professional development has shifted from a principal-led model to a collaborative, distributed leadership model. The professional development at the school is led by the teacher development team (TDT), which not only places teachers on the Open Court implementation continuum, but also creates a professional development plan and coaching structures for the school. EnCompass uses grade-level release time²⁷ every six weeks as a key tool for improving practice through collaboration. The grade-level professional development uses what the school calls a "Results-Driven Collaborative Process" During this process, teachers engage in data inquiry facilitated by coaches. This process was a shift from the 2005-06 school year. The professional development coordinator described the process and the shift in professional development strategy:

Last year [2006-07] we spent a lot of PD [professional development] time looking at data, analyzing it, and using it to figure out what did students master, what do I need to re-teach, what can I do between now and the next assessment. A lot of people use it to guide their instruction. Last year, it happened whole-group. This year we did it by grade level. We had grade-level release teams start off sessions looking at data, analyzing it, and then planning. We also had a data coach this year, and a professional development leader who facilitated grade level release times.

The coaches then follow up on the meetings by observing classrooms, which provides an accountability mechanism for the professional development program to ensure that teachers are carrying out the plans developed by their respective teams.

This fits into the larger framework of individualized, teacher professional development created by the school's teacher development team. Until this year, the principal designed most of the professional development sessions, but now she brings in coaches to work with teachers one-on-one. As the professional development coordinator says:

“Some teachers are experts, you've got others who are newer, at a different range of capacity. We're trying to differentiate it, so some supports happen in small groups, some happen just with coaches. We want more school-wide use of coaches.”

Teachers also have weekly professional development sessions built into the school day for collaboration. During this time, teachers are offered a variety of professional development sessions. In the time we observed, teachers focused on their English Language Development (ELD) groups for students who are learning the English language, and the other teachers spent time working with the music teacher to learn how to teach music. We primarily observed the music professional development. During this time, the music teacher modeled and taught different ways to teach music concepts, activities, and songs. As he modeled strategies, he asked teachers to notice how he is teaching and how they learn. The teachers enjoyed these sessions immensely, and most teachers seemed confident in their abilities to use music in their classrooms as a result of this type of professional development.

In addition to utilizing instructional coaches, Nguyen has also personally benefited from many coaches, including Hae-Sin Kim Thomas, the former new small schools incubator director; Tania Gutierrez, her

data coach; and Holly Babe Faust from the Oakland Small Schools Foundation—all of whom are funded through the district's system of Results-Based Budgeting through which school sites, rather than central office, control their own budgets. Nguyen has found the coaching to be a very useful support, but still wishes more could be done to provide leadership sustainability. She observes:

The district needs to think about principals' sustainability. They can't rely on young principals without families. It needs to be easier for me to get an assistant principal. Don't send the message that if you are a small school, you don't need it.

Teacher comments echo that supports such as coaching are extremely important, but only when the coaching is instructionally supportive rather than compliance-oriented. As one observed, there are also concerns about the potential burnout from the demands of working in a small school and needing to take on multiple roles:

It is harder for us to have all those leads that the district likes to have because we have fewer people, [so] one person ends up being the lead for everything. It requires everyone to be a lead in something. That causes conflict; teachers have families and other things to take care of. Coaching in general has been a big support, but only coaches who know Open Court and balanced literacy. We don't want coaching if it means we have a Reading First coach, and all the emphasis is on implementation checklists. Teachers want coaching to be coaching and not making sure we implement the

five different things. Anything that makes the district a collaborator in the process is helpful, anyone who is willing to work with us and helps us accelerate the child, that is support. When collaboration becomes mandates, it's a little more difficult because we want to be able to adjust our direction very quickly. With mandates, you don't have that flexibility.

PARENT AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Although much of the initial work with the community centered on building trust and designing the school, recent work has focused on really making the families partners in the academic development of the student. As Nguyen says:

The family involvement model is about going deep rather than wide. It is easy to have lots of big events with big turnout, but the cross-race dynamics can be problematic. This year for the first time, we have a part-time family involvement person funded by the Haas Foundation. They try to focus on the academic component with families. I expect teachers to meet with 100% of their families at the first and last report card.

The principal also leads a test success program with parents. She emphasizes the importance of starting from their own personal experiences and from their hearts. She talks about the historical biases in testing, but that families don't have to be disempowered now because the CST tests are more equitable.²⁸ She explains the test by grade level, and has the parents set a goal for their child and write a letter to their

child. The goal is to help people think differently about the test.

EnCompass also involves families through a beat drumming class. In this class, families drum with their children, and as they are drumming, they learn about drumming in diaspora communities of African Americans and Latinos. This helps connect community shared by the students and staff at EnCompass to families in East Oakland. Nguyen says, "People then have more ownership because they have relationships with each other."

As mentioned previously, positive parent-community and school relations are deeply embedded in the culture of the school, and individual teachers all make efforts to reach out to families. As a founding teacher says:

Teachers that come on board are really committed to the vision of the school. It's what has made the school successful. We are committed to creating this loving, supportive, culture and community for the children. We have really high expectations of the kids and of our families in terms of supporting their students. That doesn't happen all the time in other schools in this area, where there is not the expectation that families and students can step up.

Teachers try to get families involved in the classroom by inviting them to observe, and if that is unsuccessful, teachers and the principal often conduct home visits, particularly for students who are new to the school. The results are evident, as staff report 100% attendance at report card conferences.

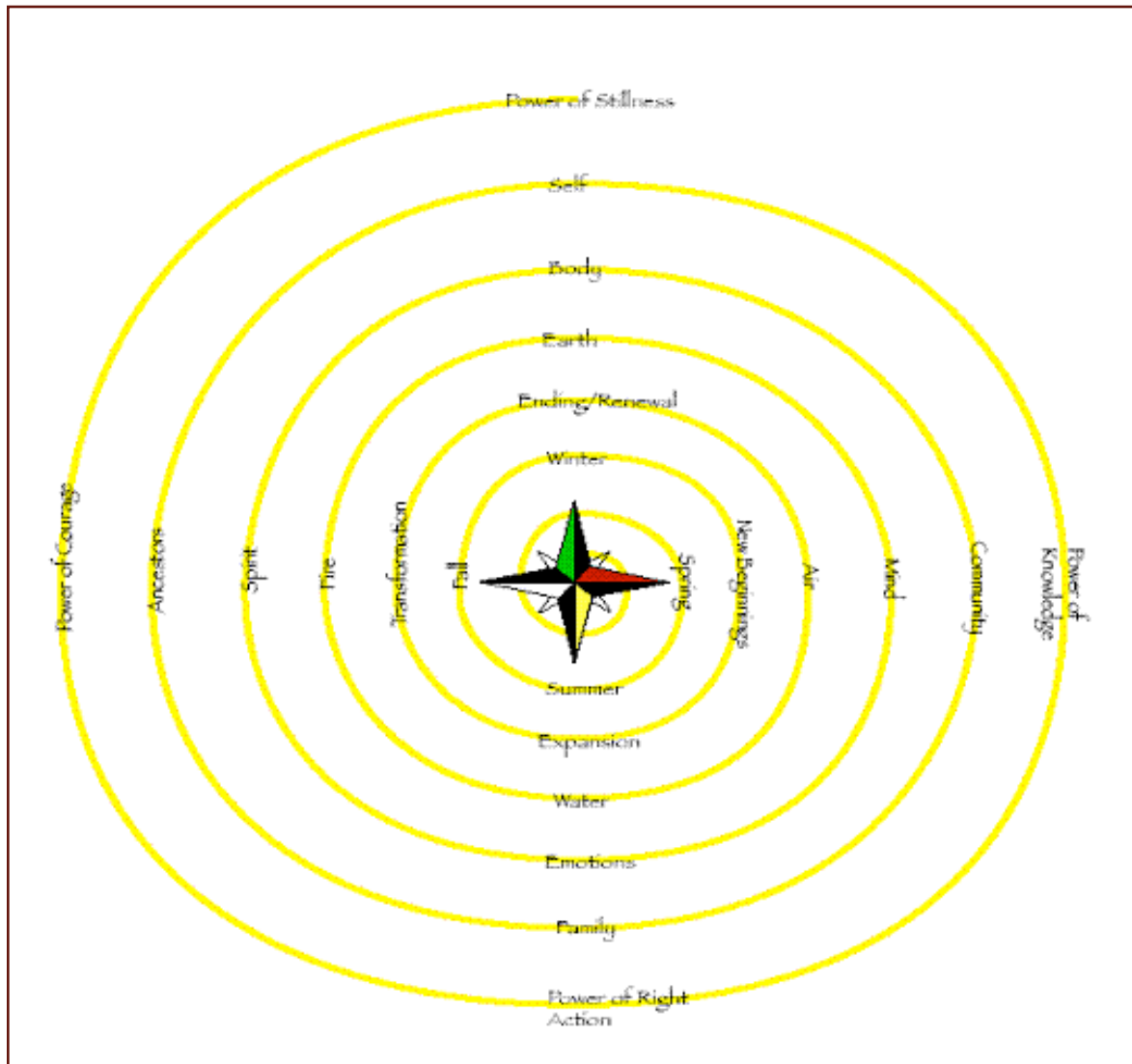
OTHER STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT INCLUDE USING THE STUDENT SUPPORT

Team process to help parents understand where the child is academically, and creating a child development focus. Despite these strategies, there is some sense that the school has not been as successful as it could be recruiting parents to take leadership positions in the school. One teacher says, “We’ve been less successful with that — people feel we work hard with their kids and don’t feel there is a need or place for them.”

Overall, parents do report a high level of satisfaction. Many feel that the teachers are very involved with their children and say that, “The teacher puts more personal attention to the kids. I love the principal —

she is involved in the life of kids. The principal works personally with boys and tries a lot of ways to get kids on a good level.” Others report very much feeling a part of the EnCompass team: “The principal works with the teachers, the teachers work with the parents, and we are all part of a team. The teachers teach parents what they are doing with students, so parents can help.” Another parent says, “The school is interested in how to best teach children, they ask the parents what works with their kids.” Perhaps most importantly, parents say EnCompass has realized its vision of building a school that meets the community needs: “The teachers and principal know every kid, every family. It is like a big family. At our old school, everyone just walks along and doesn’t interact. At EnCompass, it is like a big family. It is nice and good for the kids.”

Appendix A: EnCompass Academy Life Spiral



Endnotes

1. <http://www.smallschoolsfoundation.org/encompass>.
2. <http://www.smallschoolsfoundation.org/encompass>.
3. EL refers to students classified as English learners and FRL refers to students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.
4. Edison Schools Inc. is a for-profit education management organization for public schools in the United States and the United Kingdom. It was founded in 1992 as The Edison Project.
5. EnCompass recently had a teacher take medical leave who was replaced by a first-year teacher, but overall the staff is comprised of more experienced teachers, with all teachers receiving instructional coaching.
6. The focus standards are those standards that are highly assessed on the CST, are easily linked across content areas, and serve as prerequisites to other standards. <http://www.actionlearningsystems.com/pp/be.htm>
7. A pacing guide outlines the pace, content and the sequence of instruction for the year.
8. A standards map is a tool for helping teachers identify where the standards are taught in the curriculum. By using standards maps, teachers can help ensure that students have the opportunity to learn the standards.
9. Boston Pilot Schools are the result of an innovative strategy used by Boston Public Schools to create schools that have increased autonomy and innovation, while they remain as part of the Boston school district.
10. All schools and local educational agencies that do not make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on the California Standards Tests (CSTs) are identified for Program Improvement under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. The goal of NCLB is to have 100 percent of students proficient in reading and mathematics by the year 2014. AYP is the gain that must be made each year in reading and mathematics proficiency towards the 2014 goal. AYP also requires 95 percent student participation.
11. California Department of Education.
12. Although uniform color-coding implies looping, in which a teacher will stay with a group of students for more than one year, the school does not consistently loop. EnCompass only loops in grades 2-5, and only if the teacher is experienced. The principal does not want a beginning teacher to have to learn a new curriculum for 2 consecutive years.
13. ELOB is an approach to education that centers on learning expeditions, which are interdisciplinary units. It is experiential and project-based, involving students in original research — with experts — to create high-quality products for audiences beyond the classroom. <http://www.elschools.org/>
14. The foundation is the OCR green section (phonemic awareness), blue section (spelling, conventions and grammar use), supplemented with Standards Plus, and writing craft, which supplants the blue section of OCR with a writers' workshop model.
15. Guided reading is a strategy in which the teacher interacts with small groups of students as they read books that present a challenge common to all students in the small group. The teacher introduces reading strategies, tailoring the instruction to the needs of the students, gradually releasing practice to the students to build independent learners. http://www.educationoasis.com/curriculum/Reading/glossary_reading_terms.htm

16. Literacy Centers involve setting up stations for students to rotate through in small groups, with each station using a different activity to teach literacy.
17. In shared reading, a teacher reads to a group of children rather than to a single child. The shared reading model allows a group of children to experience many of the benefits that are part of storybook reading done for one or two children at home. <http://www.eduplace.com>
18. In reciprocal teaching, students are trained to have group leadership roles that include “Monitoring/Clarifying,” “Predicting,” and “Summarizing.” Students are able to take academic leadership roles during discussions and therefore have more ownership of reading goals.
19. EnCompass Academy Curricular Flexibility Application. 2008-09
20. Blue is OUSD’s highest level in the tiering system used to categorize schools based on student academic outcomes. The OUSD tiering system combines three categories of performance: absolute performance on CSTs, cohort-matched student-level growth, and closing the achievement gap. A school is first tiered by its program improvement status and then can move up or down based on either growth or the achievement gap. OUSD PowerPoint Tiering Methodology January 3, 2008.
21. Summative assessments (or tests) are given periodically to determine at a particular point in time what students know and do not know. Summative assessments are tools to help evaluate the effectiveness of programs, school improvement goals, alignment of curriculum, or student placement in specific programs. <http://www.nmsa.org/Publications/WebExclusive/Assessment/tabid/1120/Default.aspx>
22. Formative assessments (or tests) are part of the instructional process. When incorporated into classroom practice, they provide the information needed to adjust teaching and learning while they are happening. In this sense, formative assessment informs both teachers and students about student understanding at a point when timely adjustments can be made. Ibid.
23. The Si Swun math program is used by the Long Beach Unified School District. The Si Swun lesson design is as follows: 1) spiral problem of the day (from old content that wasn’t mastered), 2) stating/writing of the lesson’s objective, 3) writing new vocabulary in math journal, 4) direct instruction, 5) structured guided practice (students work in groups to solve problems), and 6) presentations (students randomly selected to solve a problem/explain strategies on board).
24. OUSD uses a color-coded tiering system to rank schools. Blue is the top color. EnCompass is a blue school, and other schools were given preference for the pilot program based upon greater need.
25. OUSD parent guide 2008-09.
26. Reading Recovery is a short-term intervention emphasizing one-to-one tutoring.
27. Release time is when teachers are released from their teaching duties and given the opportunity to receive professional development during the school day.
28. In this case, the equity of CST refers to the test being a criterion-referenced rather than norm-referenced test. Criterion-referenced tests measure student performance in relation to standards, norm-referenced tests measure student performance in relation to other students. Many argue that criterion-referenced test are more equitable because they move away from comparing students to one another. They also allow all students to be able to reach the highest level, which wouldn’t be possible in a norm-referenced test.

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