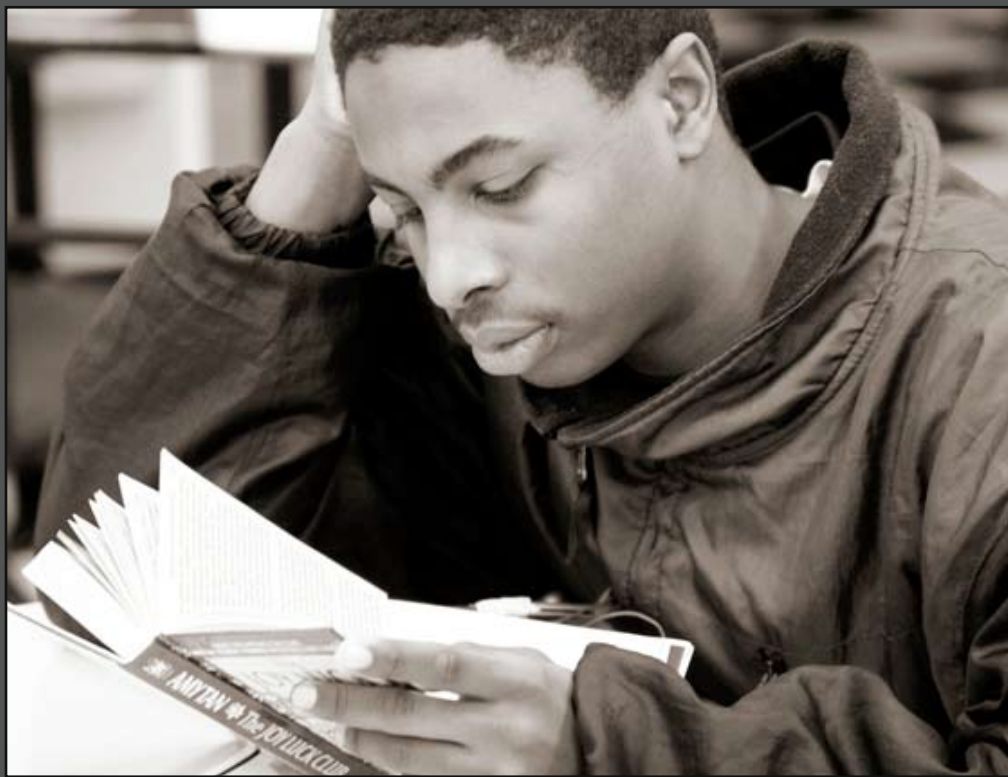


**Oakland Unified School District
Case Study
The McClymonds Educational Complex:
BEST and EXCEL High Schools**



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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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Introduction

The McClymonds Educational Complex case study informs Oakland Unified School District policy by illustrating the strengths and challenges of converting a comprehensive (OUSD) high school and its existing faculty into smaller high schools that share an existing campus. The case study demonstrates the promise and unintended consequences of converting McClymonds High School in West Oakland into two small schools: Business Entrepreneurial School of Technology (BEST) and Experience eXcellence Community Empowerment Leadership (EXCEL). It also provides a window into how OUSD's theory of action for new school development has been enacted in the predominantly African-American community of West Oakland.

Section One of the case study describes the academic trajectory and conversion process for the two high schools since their opening in Fall 2005. Notably, BEST and EXCEL have achieved positive academic trajectories that vastly improve upon McClymonds High School – once one of the

lowest performing high schools in the state of California. While both new small schools are academically more successful than the former comprehensive high school, EXCEL's rate of improvement exceeds BEST's. This result may reflect a sharper focus on student success on the California Standards

Tests (CSTs) as well as a trend toward enrolling a somewhat lower proportion of low socio-economic status (SES) students as compared to BEST. Differences between the two schools emerged during the conversion process, when EXCEL benefited from greater leadership stability than BEST, a situation that continues today.

EXCEL's principal, Reeves, was part of the school's initial design team, was mentored by McClymonds' former principal, Lynn Dodd, and received strong support from central office administrators. In contrast, BEST's design team leader was not approved by the district to be the school's founding principal. Instead, Dodd was appointed at the last minute to manage BEST along with Kizmet Academy,¹ a new middle school that was opened on the same campus at the same time as BEST and EXCEL.

Thus, both BEST and Kizmet had a part-time principal during the crucial start-up year. BEST finally received a full-time principal in mid-Fall semester 2006, more than a year after it opened, when James Gray was appointed by the central office to lead the school. Gray was subsequently appointed to lead Roosevelt Middle School for the 2008-09 academic year, signaling yet another leadership transition for BEST.

Section Two of the case study describes four critical attributes of a school's academic functioning: the school learning climate, instructional program, professional capacity, and parent and community relations. By discussing these four attributes and the district policy supports that contributed to their development, the case study is designed to inform, improve, and strengthen understanding and connections between OUSD's central office and local schools.

With respect to school learning climates, both schools are far stronger than the former McClymonds High School. Whereas McClymonds was described as academically dysfunctional, both EXCEL and BEST have created orderly campuses and cultivated college-going student cultures.

The instructional program at both schools is designed to meet California's A-G course requirements² and to offer students exposure to career- and theme-based academies. EXCEL offers academies in law and in media studies, while BEST offers academies in culinary arts and hospitality management, architecture/construction/engineering, and small business management/entrepreneurship. Despite these similarities, EXCEL's instructional program is more focused on student achievement on the CSTs and celebrating their academic success, including transitions to higher education.

Differences between the two schools are more pronounced in the area of professional capacity. At the time of conversion, a uneven distribution of veteran and new teachers resulted in EXCEL having a large number of youthful, enthusiastic teachers in need of instructional guidance and support. In contrast, BEST attracted mostly experienced McClymonds veterans with great individual strengths but little collective motivation for developing a new identity that would sharply distinguish the new school from McClymonds.

With respect to parent and community relations, both schools are deeply (and almost exclusively) connected to West Oakland. While BEST and EXCEL have strong ties to the community, they share the common challenge of declining student enrollment and the local community

perception that OUSD does not place a high priority on meeting the needs of the families in West Oakland.

Overall, the case study demonstrates the promise of converting McClymonds' into two small schools that are demonstrably academically superior to the old comprehensive high school. At the same time,

it suggests that the conversion process and outcomes could have been improved through increased leadership stability at BEST, greater attention to teacher distribution at the time of conversion, and by actively addressing the core challenge of declining enrollment that threatens to make the schools small by default rather than by design.



Photo: 510 Media, courtesy Oakland Unified School District



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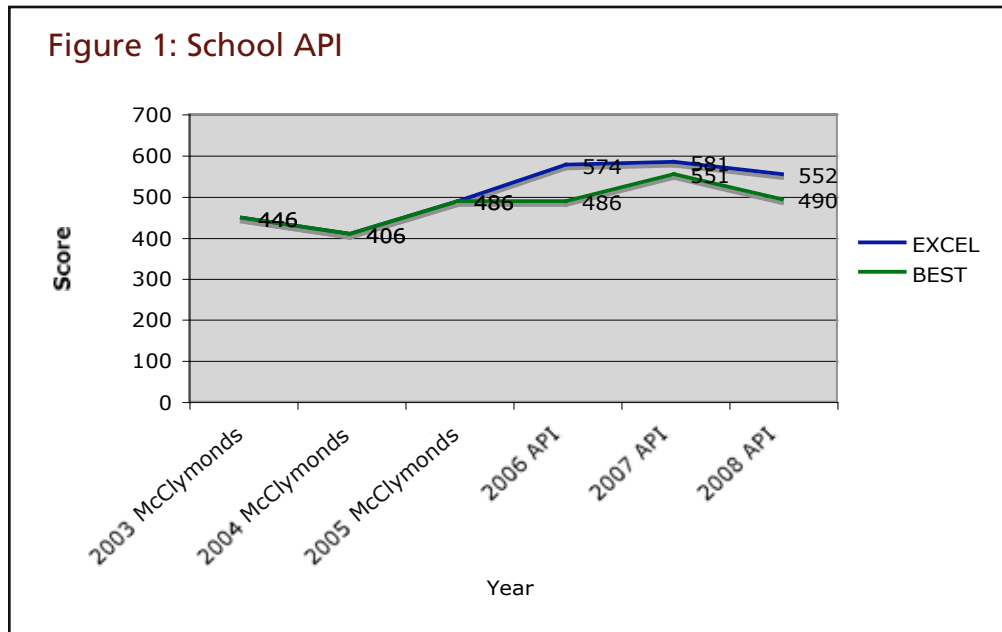
Section One: Academic Trajectory and Conversion Process

BEST and EXCEL opened in 2005 as part of the conversion of the McClymonds High School campus, the third OUSD high school conversion after the Fremont and Castlemont High School campuses. Unlike the new school creation process for the other case study schools, in which prospective teachers had to apply and be accepted for the new school, the conversion process entailed dividing the existing comprehensive high school campus into small, autonomous schools staffed by existing faculty who would be assured of a teaching position at one of the new schools.

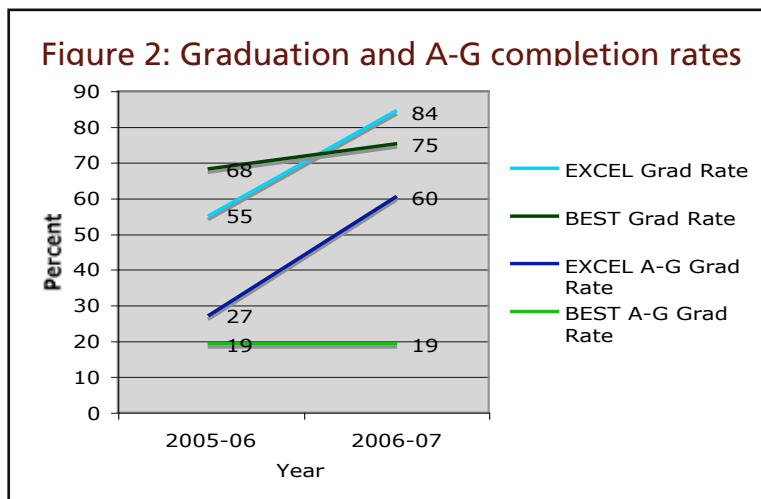
As with Fremont and Castlemont High Schools, district leaders decided to convert the McClymonds campus because of its poor academic performance.³ In 2004-05, the year prior to conversion, McClymonds enrolled 766 students and graduated 72 students. Of these graduates, only 13 completed all the courses necessary for University of California or California State University admission. The school's CST proficiency rate was also low: 7%

in English Language Arts (ELA) and 3% in Mathematics.⁴ As illustrated by the Academic Performance Index (API)⁵ scores in Figure 1 (page 5), McClymonds had an upward academic trajectory prior to the conversion, but there was still much work to be done in improving academic outcomes.

Since their inception, BEST and EXCEL have experienced academic progress in mul-



Source: <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>, OUSD Scorecard



tiple areas. For example, a 2007 evaluation of the small schools initiative by Strategic Measurement and Evaluation, Inc. — and our current re-analysis of the data — finds that EXCEL’s students exceeded their projected performance (controlling for background variables and prior student achievement) on the ELA portion of the CSTs.⁶

Figure 1 (above) shows that API scores of both EXCEL and BEST high schools exceed

the scores of the McClymonds campus, with EXCEL showing the most improvement.

Positive API trends are complemented by strong growth in student graduation and A-G completion rates. As shown in Figure 2 (above), between 2005-06 and 2006-07, EXCEL and BEST increased their graduation rates, and EXCEL substantially increased its A-G college eligibility completion rates.

College enrollment has also increased since conversion, with BEST sending 42-46% of its graduating class to college and EXCEL sending between 65-70% of its graduating class to college. Notably, Table 1, below, shows that BEST and EXCEL more than doubled the number of students going to 4-year colleges between 2006 and 2007.

Since the conversion of McClymonds into two small high schools, EXCEL and BEST continue to serve West Oakland’s student population, and the demographic makeup of the students has remained stable. As one person close to the McClymonds Educational Complex pointed out, “Parents are not [yet] choosing to send their children to West Oakland; the students that attend EXCEL are [the same as] those that would have attended the old McClymonds.”

Although the overall makeup of the campus has remained stable, the composition of the students participating in the state testing requirements varies substantially by small school. As Figure 3 (page 7) illustrates, in 2005, the year prior to conversion, 71% of the students tested at McClymonds were classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged. Following conversion, in 2006, 60% of the students at EXCEL were socioeconomically disadvantaged compared to 78% at BEST, with similar enrollment trends continuing in 2007. Thus, while the overall

number of socioeconomically disadvantaged students on the McClymonds campus has remained relatively stable over the past 3 years, it appears that their enrollment may be more concentrated at BEST than at EXCEL.

The conversion of McClymonds High School into two autonomous small schools — BEST and EXCEL — that share a single campus illustrates the challenge of changing secondary schools with a long history and tradition in their communities. It also demonstrates how complications that take place early in the conversion process can create ongoing challenges to new schools even as they mature.

Although the conversion of McClymonds High School into BEST and EXCEL took place in 2005, Dodd began laying the groundwork for change by mentoring and supporting the development of EXCEL’s future principal, Yetunde Reeves.

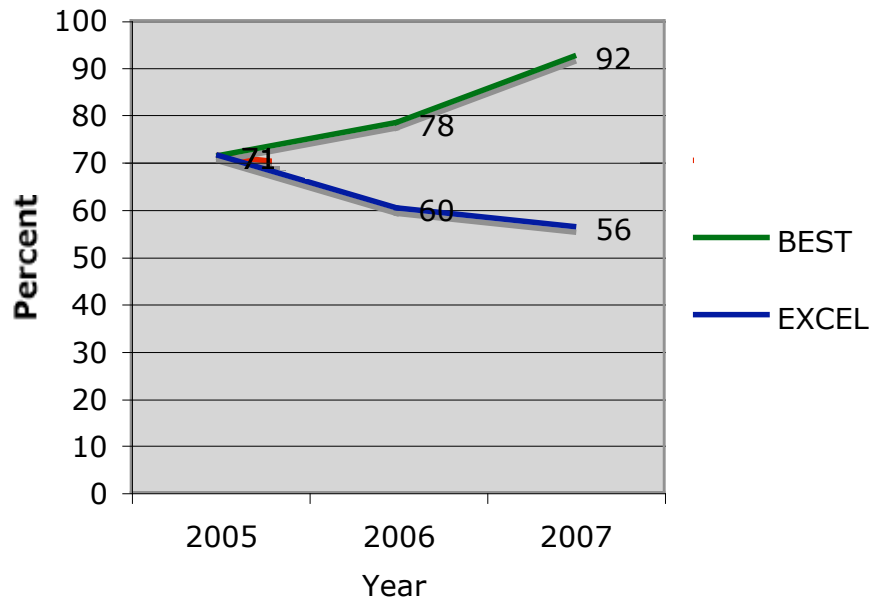
Once McClymonds was selected for conversion by the district, two young teachers, Reeves and Bridgette Taylor,⁷ led the design process at EXCEL, while LuPaulette Taylor and Dodd led the BEST conversion. Reeves soon transitioned from teacher to an assistant principal and began working with the small group of young faculty to design EXCEL. In addition to having support from

Table 1: OUSD Current College Enrollment

	Class of 2006					Class of 2007				
	Grads	College Enroll	College Enroll %	2 yr. College	4yr. College	Grads	College Enroll	College Enroll %	2 yr. College	4yr. College
BEST	40	19	48%	15	4	36	15	42%	5	10
EXCEL	37	24	65%	11	13	53	37	70%	11	26

OUSD Current College Enrollment (2005-2007) from data provided by the National Student Clearinghouse

Figure 3: Percent Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Participating in CSTs



six relatively new teachers who had selected EXCEL, Reeves benefited from ongoing mentoring and tutelage from Dodd. Reeves also received important support through an OUSD initiative that allowed assistant principals to dedicate 20% of their time to developing new schools.

As part of the conversion process, the design team leaders from BEST and EXCEL both participated in a 2-year incubation program developed by the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES). The BayCES program brought together school design teams to create blueprints for the new small high schools that would emerge from the conversion of the Fremont, Castlemont, and McClymonds' campuses. As part of this design process, the design teams

had the opportunity to visit successful small schools across the country.

Reeves and others praised the BayCES incubation strategy for the strength of the design it enabled them to create, but also noted areas for improvement: Unlike schools that were incubated by the OUSD New School Development Group "incubator," BayCES could not provide a support network for new small school leaders after their new schools were designed and opened. As a result, the school leaders that went through BayCES incubation process had limited ongoing support as they opened their new small schools, and went directly into existing OUSD high school networks that had no time to address start-up issues faced by new schools. Nevertheless, Reeves

was able to develop close and supportive relationships with key district personnel that helped her achieve success at EXCEL, and she underscored the importance and value of being part of an OUSD network of school leaders. School leaders at BEST do not appear to have developed strong informal support mechanisms, largely because of multiple changes in leadership throughout BEST’s existence. This underscores the need for formal supportive relationships, particularly at school sites that undergo multiple leadership transitions.

The McClymonds conversion experience illustrates that leadership instability at a school’s founding can make it exceedingly difficult for a school to build the foundation necessary for long-term success. Although Dodd was part of the design process at BEST, she did not intend to lead the school. The person slated to lead BEST was not ultimately hired as principal, giving Dodd the responsibility of being the principal of BEST while simultaneously serving as principal of a middle school on campus (Kizmet).⁸

By all accounts, Dodd was a skilled leader placed in an unworkable situation, given the complexity of launching a new middle school on a high school campus while also being the principal of a newly converted

high school. According to a district official, the middle school never filled all of its teaching vacancies, and there were numerous altercations between middle and high school students. After two challenging years, Kizmet was closed, and the space is now being used by continuing adult education programs. Dodd spent a great deal of her time and energy resolving issues at the middle school, even teaching math classes while looking for a teacher to fill the open position, while the primarily veteran BEST staff managed the new high school. This is a stark contrast to the stable, consistent leadership at EXCEL provided by Reeves throughout the design process and the formative years of the school (see Table 2 below).

The leadership constraints created by the personnel decision to not hire the presumptive principal, along with the structural issue of Dodd leading both a new small high school and a new small middle school, deeply challenged BEST’s ability to establish a unique school identity apart from McClymonds, during the window of opportunity of the first year of the school’s conversion.

In addition to the differences in leadership stability, there also emerged important differences in teacher distribution

Table 2: Continuity of School Leadership

School	2005-06 (Principal)	2006-07 (Principal)	2007-08 (Principal)	2008-09 (Principal)
BEST	Dodd BEST (.5) Kizmet (.5)	Gray	Gray	Todd
EXCEL	Reeves	Reeves	Reeves	Reeves

during the conversion process. While there are multiple reasons cited for how McClymonds' teachers were distributed between the two schools, it is clear that veteran teachers leaned toward BEST while less experienced teachers ended up at EXCEL, in part because EXCEL's youthful administrator appealed to younger staff, while veteran teachers may have been reluctant to go with someone with limited experience.

The asymmetrical teacher distribution powerfully influenced the school culture. The teaching staff at BEST provided valuable leadership during the first year of operation, but appeared to be directed toward retaining key elements of the old

school rather than developing a new small school. As one district official commented, "You don't really have two new small schools on the McClymonds campus, you have a new small school, and an old small school." Others commented that, "BEST holds on to much of the tradition of McClymonds, and there are things in place that are not necessarily inspired by BEST." The performance advantage of EXCEL compared to BEST and the overall trend of declining student enrollment led to the district decision to phase out BEST beginning in the 2008-09 academic year. In Fall 2008, all 9th-grade students were enrolled in EXCEL, leaving BEST to serve its remaining 10th-12th graders.

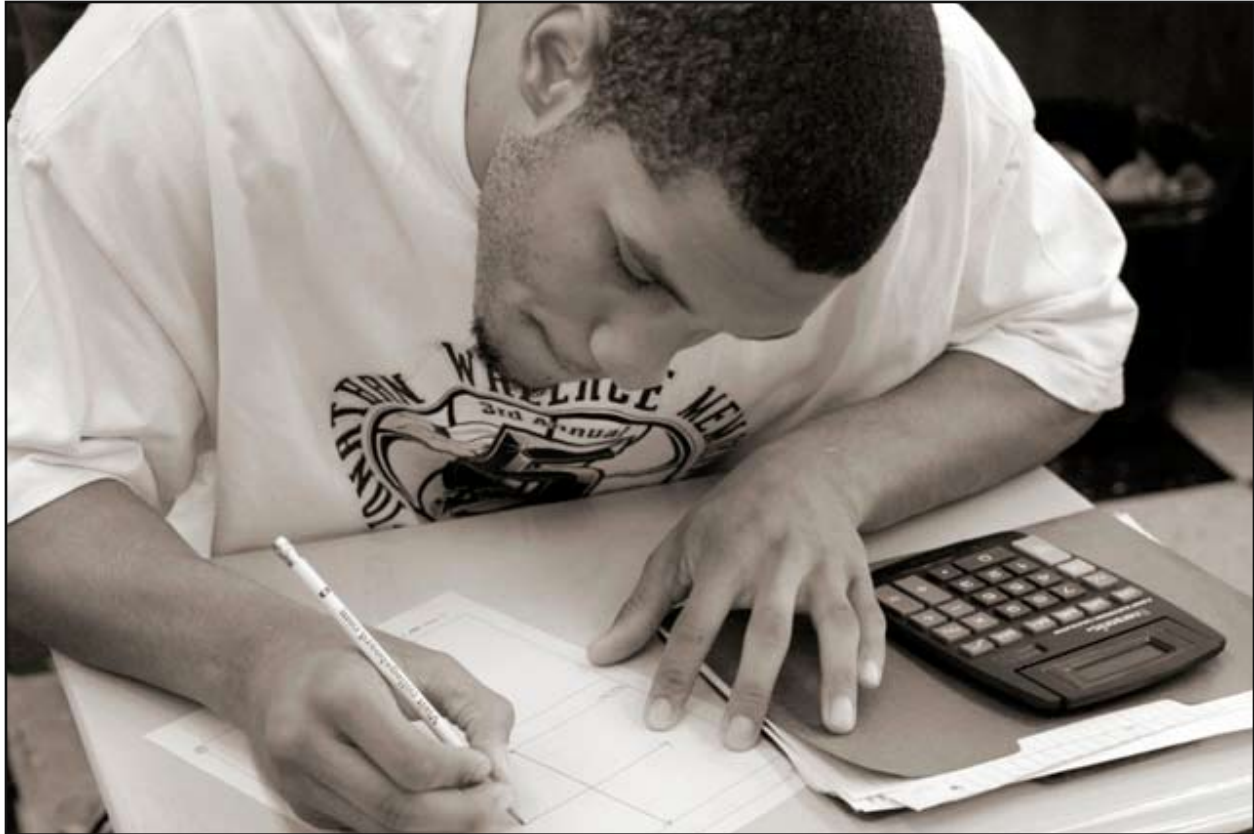


Photo: 510 Media, courtesy Oakland Unified School District

Section Two: Academic Functioning and Supports

SCHOOL LEARNING CLIMATE

By both quantitative and qualitative measures, BEST and EXCEL substantially improved the school learning climate and increased student achievement compared to the former McClymonds High School. Many of the academic improvements at both BEST and EXCEL have emerged out of a clear commitment to creating a school culture organized around and oriented toward learning. At BEST, 86% of the students report that their teachers expect them to do their best in school with 90% of the students at EXCEL reporting the same.⁹ The schools have accomplished this by focusing on college readiness, with strong personal support for students from staff members. Although both schools have positive learning climates, the focus on college and succeeding on the CSTs is more prominent at EXCEL than BEST.

Whereas multiple respondents painted a chaotic picture of McClymonds – where students roamed the halls and entered and exited the building at all times — visitors

today are struck by a sense of order and student respectfulness. During multiple school site visits, the halls were invariably orderly and calm, students tended to go

to class on their own without being prodded, and were on-task and generally eager to participate in classroom activities. As one 12th grader who attended both McClymonds and EXCEL recalled, “At McClymonds, in most of our classes, kids were not attending classes, you could see a lot of kids in the hallways.” She also commented on how the unruly nature of the school and the absence of permanent teachers made learning difficult. “In most of the classes we didn’t have books, because the kids would tear them up.... The classrooms were crazy in my freshman year; I remember not having a set teacher. We’d have a substitute teacher for two months and then we’d get another substitute.”

Today the campus of BEST is also safe and orderly, as students exhibit a respectfulness toward others that they carry out into the community. As BEST Principal James Gray noted, “When we travel to games off-campus and talk to folks in other neighborhoods, they talk about how well-mannered our [BEST and EXCEL] students are, what great kids you all seem to have.” It is clear that both schools have created safe and orderly learning climates focused on college readiness.

Many of the improvements in school learning climate at both BEST and EXCEL have been attributed to the strong relationships that have emerged from the small school size. Gray commented, “You feel like you’re part of a family, the strength of the small schools is the development of relationships between teachers and students and administrative staff.” Gray added that the personalization has not only created a more orderly campus but also increased students’ academic focus by supporting a student-centered perspective with a more rigorous curriculum and built-in support

mechanisms. “It [the small school structure] gives you a sense of the real needs of the students and the risk ... it allows me to build a better curriculum, which leads to the challenge of finding the resources to give every student every possible opportunity,” Gray said. Working in a small school has also helped develop strong personal support norms, as it is common at BEST to see students staying after school to work on essays and other projects to improve academic outcomes.

Like BEST, small school size has helped EXCEL elevate the level of personalization that teachers are able to achieve. A 12th grader compared it to McClymonds:

Before when it was one school, you didn’t get that much attention from the teachers because it was so big. Some of the teachers didn’t even know your name when it was one school. [Now at EXCEL], you have more a personal relationship. Teachers have office hours, office numbers, free period, after school. They give everybody their cell phone, their e-mail.

It is common to see students taking advantage of teachers’ availability by staying after school and completing their homework in a favorite teacher’s classroom. Teachers frequently stay late at school to help students with homework, senior projects and college applications. According to several educators who have worked with EXCEL, the early and ongoing attention to developing a positive academic culture has set the stage for the school’s current academic success.

But, as Gray noted, the small size is a double-edged sword. Small schools provide tremendous opportunities to understand

student needs, often accompanied with resource constraints in meeting those needs. As a result, BEST staff often teach four, and at times five, different courses requiring separate lesson planning and preparation. Other observers have noted that the BEST staff is strongly committed to West Oakland, as they spend hours and hours beyond the normal workday to take students on field trips and other events to help them earn college scholarships.

In 2008-09, BEST's staff will officially act as college counselors because the school will not be able to afford a counselor. The staff at BEST has taken on many duties that have increased the academic focus of the school, but it should be noted, this situation was born out of necessity, given the size of the school and the district's results-based budgeting system (RBB). Almost half of the staff at BEST has 25 years of teaching experience or more, with an average teacher salary of \$64,755. (In comparison, the average teacher salary at EXCEL is \$45,093.¹⁰) Mr. Gray estimates that if the staff were composed of teachers having roughly 3-5 years of experience, the school could add another two teachers and pay for a clerical position. As Gray notes, when one looks at the general purpose funds, small schools are at a disadvantage because the costs associated with quality instructors, who in BEST's case are often veteran instructors, creates limits on the funds available to hire support staff or pay for the programming options available to students.

At EXCEL, staff members have improved the school climate by cultivating an academic focus that fosters high expectations for students. Reeves, EXCEL principal and a former history teacher and assistant principal at McClymonds, emphasized the con-

nection between improved school climate and increased academic aspirations:

Kids have raised their aspirations, [and] the climate of the school has changed. When I first was here we had a tougher student body, fewer kids going to college, fewer kids on track. Now most kids feel they're going to college; we have fewer kids who are in trouble in the community. Most kids feel relatively safe: we don't have a lot of fighting and chaos. The first year we were always dealing with a fight.

EXCEL has clearly established a positive school culture in which students are expected to participate in class and complete their schoolwork and are publicly honored for their academic successes. While student successes at BEST are acknowledged within individual teacher classrooms, EXCEL has worked to develop strong peer norms for academic success by making student success highly visible to everyone on campus. For example, large pictures of all college-bound students adorn the halls, accompanied by copies of the students' personal statements and college acceptance letters. Names and pictures of students who earned a 3.0 GPA or above are prominently displayed.

In addition to these personalized touches, posters and flyers throughout the school highlight improvements in EXCEL's CST performance (e.g., moving 10% of students out of Far Below Basic and moving another 5% of students into Proficiency or Advanced), California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) passage rates, graduation rates, and A-G course completion rates. Other posters paraphrase the popular advertising campaign for milk, asking students, "Got CAHSEE?" or "Got Standards?" EXCEL

has markedly increased the visibility of its academic focus in an attempt to amplify the college-going culture by fostering strong peer academic norms.

EXCEL works to situate the academic success of its students within the context of their life trajectories. Students visit numerous colleges throughout the country, understanding that their academic work does not end once they leave EXCEL. The climate is such that students have internalized this message. A 12th grader describes the school's focus as "[not just] getting students out of high school into college, but staying in college and finishing with some sort of degree." According to students, the extra help and college trips show students "an alternative to hanging out on the corner and selling drugs, or having babies and dropping out of school, or turning to that life."

BEST has a similar, albeit less visible, focus on college readiness, as it too has a vision is for every student to attend college. As Principal Gray noted, "Every student who steps onto the McClymonds campus is going to a two- or four-year college, that's it. Our mission is to enlighten and get students exposed to and thinking about college and building confidence, so they say, 'I am college material and I'm ready for it.'" One benefit of BEST's mostly veteran teaching staff is that they are familiar with California's A-G requirements and often informally act as college counselors.

Both BEST and EXCEL students have access to a College and Career counseling center on campus, run by UC Berkeley. The staff at this center works closely with EXCEL's advisory teachers and directly with students to expose students to a breadth of college options and assist their completion of financial aid, scholarship,

and college application. The schools' commitment to developing a college focus has resulted in 42% of BEST's 2007 graduating class and 70% of EXCEL's 2007 graduating class being accepted to either 2- or 4-year colleges.

INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM

OUSD's policy toward curricular flexibility has given the schools the latitude to reinvent themselves from McClymonds and create an entirely new instructional program. Both BEST and EXCEL have used this autonomy to expand their A-G curriculum, supplement district texts, and provide students with advisory periods and additional classes before and after school. The two schools face different challenges: At EXCEL, teachers can become overwhelmed as they create the school's instructional program with limited guidance and prior experience. At BEST, veteran teachers have found it difficult to develop an instructional program distinctly different from the one previously offered at McClymonds.

For EXCEL's early-career teachers, creating a rigorous learning environment is a task so daunting that one second-year teacher almost quit after her first year. The teacher said:

I've created my curriculum each year that I've been here. I've done it in isolation. People are willing to share and support, but we are not planning together. Each teacher can teach what and when and how they want. As a first-year teacher it was so hard, I was literally teaching four different subjects with no real support in curriculum, I was just starting my curriculum and instruction class at San Francisco State. It was really

challenging for me to know what to do when and to sequence things.... Last year I was this close to quitting, I had no idea what I was doing; it was too much.

Although many teachers indicated that they would appreciate additional curriculum support, they have also benefited from the rich network of supportive relationships in the central office developed by Reeves. Using these relationships to build on and extend their instructional vision for the school, Reeves and her staff have focused on preparing EXCEL's students to meet and exceed proficiency standards on the CSTs and prepare themselves for college entry.

One 12th grader recalls that at McClymonds, "We had low curriculum; our test scores [were] low; we weren't learning at grade level." In contrast, students now believe that EXCEL is a school that you attend if you want to go to college. Filling out college applications, applying for scholarships, and financial aid are all interwoven into the advisory curriculum to ensure that all students take these important steps. Another 12th grader put it this way:

[EXCEL] gives you a better chance to actually master a subject. So rather than a teacher at a blackboard, they can walk around and ask you, "Do you get this? Do you need help?" There are no one-word answers like, "I think women should have the right to vote." [Teachers ask] "Why?" so you actually have to have a clear understanding and know what you are talking about.

EXCEL's academic success has been abetted by the implementation of key instructional design features, such as career-themed

academies in law and media studies. One veteran EXCEL teacher who is a former attorney has implemented a law academy with a focus on environmental law. The students work on policy issues and have taken trips to Sacramento to advocate for change. As part of the law focus, EXCEL has implemented a Youth Court to address minor infractions. Students in Youth Court are responsible for reviewing referrals and conducting hearings to determine if a school rule has been violated. Under the direction of the Law & Government Academy director, Youth Court also makes a ruling on the infraction. Students are required to serve detention, write a letter of apology, etc.¹¹ Although BEST does not have a law focus, it too uses Youth Court as part of its discipline strategy.

In addition to the law academy, students at both schools have numerous other opportunities to participate in career-based academies. For example, students at EXCEL are able to also participate in a media studies academy that helps them gain proficiency in the use of computer, video, and audio technology tools, while applying this knowledge to projects across students' core academic classes. Students have used the class to develop and market mock consumer products, create videos for class projects, and make digital portfolios of the class assignments that are most meaningful to them.

During seventh period, BEST students participate in one of three academies: Culinary Arts & Hospitality Management; Architecture, Construction & Engineering; and Small Business Management-Entrepreneurship. The academies often serve as the basis for the school's senior project requirement. For example, one student in the small business academy completed a proposal for

opening a barbershop. Juniors and seniors observed the proposal presentation in which this student presented analysis on the economic impact of his business to a panel of teachers and community members.

Students are introduced to all academies during their freshman year and choose one during their sophomore year. BEST has attempted to further its college readiness mission by supplementing its career academies with concurrent enrollment at Merritt or Laney Community College. Currently, there are 47 students in concurrent enrollment in grades 10-12. Students may enroll in either Introduction to Business, Marketing and Finance, or the Art of Negotiation. The classes begin during seventh period and last one hour beyond the end of the school day. BEST is exploring the option of offering concurrent enrollment classes on its minimum-length school days, providing students the option of taking classes while BEST staff engage in professional development. For students not involved in the concurrent enrollment program, BEST offers an advisory period for students to receive help understanding their transcripts and applying for college scholarships.

In addition to the academies mentioned previously, both BEST and EXCEL will participate in a transportation and logistics academy, capitalizing on West Oakland's location at the Port of Oakland. The program will serve as another tool to attract students back to the McClymonds complex and will enroll approximately 100 students from both schools beginning in fall of 2008.

Both BEST and EXCEL adopted some innovative school design features; staffs at both schools have implemented programs to increase student performance on the

CST's. While teachers acknowledged that these state standardized tests were not intellectual "destinations" for students, they noted the political importance of raising the school's overall API. At EXCEL, this focus on testing has resulted in a variety of activities designed to increase students' commitment to and success in testing. For example, students are given rewards for academic success that include hooded sweatshirts, iPods and college visit trips for successes — like passing the CAHSEE in 10th grade.

EXCEL is also working hard to improve students' performance on CST tests and increase their "buy-in" to perform well on them. For example, a two-and-a-half hour staff meeting was devoted in large part to training teachers in CST test preparation strategies. A lead teacher models her instructional strategies for preparing students for the CST by having them do practice problems individually, reviewing them in groups, and then discussing their answers with the entire class. As one teacher explains, "We teach the test explicitly here as part of the overall curriculum; from what I see from my students, they don't stand a chance on those standardized tests unless we do that." Prior to the staff meeting, many teachers were assigning test prep problems as homework, but in the staff meeting they were encouraged to scaffold and support their students' test preparation by doing the work in class. For example, the teacher who modeled her CST instruction devoted every Friday entirely to test preparation.

Not only do EXCEL teachers build students' skills, but they also focus on how to build student buy-in to the importance of the test. Teachers report that many students do not care about the test and do not make any effort to answer the problems. In

response to this, the teachers drafted key points that they taped to every student's desk reminding them why they should care about the CST. Each teacher also creates a report for each of his or her students on their past state and district test scores, along with a reflection document that asks the students to identify where they have done well, why the CST is important to them, and asks for their parent's reflections and signature as well.

BEST offers a "Zero" period from 7:15 to 8:05 a.m. that sets aside time for remediation, in addition to a CAHSEE preparation course built into the school day for second-semester 10th graders. During the Zero period, students are offered a program, available online, that allows them to complete work for grade improvement. BEST grading policy dictates that students earning below a C in a class receive no mark.¹² The student is then given the opportunity to retake tests, finish incomplete assignments, or develop contracts for grade modification. BEST has used these programs to support its college-focused curriculum, increase CAHSEE pass rates, and improve student outcomes on the CST's.

BEST and EXCEL provide students a default curriculum that meets the A-G requirements. As BEST's principal James Gray notes, "We're trying to help students meet UC requirements. When you talk about the sciences, it's biology, chemistry, and physics. It's automatic. We are discouraging students from shying away from challenging courses like AP [Advanced Placement]¹³ courses." In 2006, 58% of BEST students took an AP exam. Other opportunities for BEST students include AVID¹⁴ and Academic Success, Key Club, Future Business Leaders of America, and

Distributive Education Clubs of America (a marketing club).¹⁵

Despite these multiple instructional supports, BEST struggles to align its program under a single consistent and coherent instructional vision. Numerous observers suggested that strong individual programs and teachers at BEST pose a challenge to building a school-wide instructional program. While EXCEL has been successful in developing a common vision for its instructional program, it struggles to implement it as teachers improve their capacity to implement a program focused on college readiness.

PROFESSIONAL CAPACITY

Many of the successes and challenges at both schools can be attributed to the knowledge and skills of staff members at the time of conversion, and the development of professional capacity over the past 3 years. As one would expect, the variation in capacity between the two schools is most noticeable in their professional learning communities.

When Reeves became the founding principal of EXCEL, she was a young educator who brought with her the administrative and instructional experience she had gained at McClymonds. Along with the school's design team members, Reeves used her knowledge and experience from McClymonds to craft a stronger academic vision for the new school. In addition to developing her leadership skills as the director of student activities and assistant principal at the McClymonds campus, Reeves received mentoring from both her site administrator, State Administrator Vincent Matthews, and Chief Services Officer Laura Moran. She credits these

experiences and relationships for improving her skill set and establishing her leadership presence in the school community. Reflecting on her experience at EXCEL, Reeves said, “People have supported me and they [want to help the school to succeed].”

EXCEL’s strong leadership capacity at the principal level has been a considerable asset, given the youthful composition of the school’s teaching force. For Reeves, the fact that only a handful of McClymonds teachers joined EXCEL’s conversion was seen as a positive development:

We had 11 brand new people. It was a tremendous blessing; they had no baggage; there were no discussions of “Oh, we used to do it this way.” They only knew there was a new school called EXCEL.

EXCEL benefits from teachers who are largely new to the school and profession and brimming with youthful energy and creativity. EXCEL has also taken steps toward improving its instructional capacity, such as changing staffing patterns in a way that gives teachers common preparation time for collaboration and peer-coaching, which facilitates observations of each other’s teaching and opportunities for feedback from fellow teachers.

The preponderance of early-career teachers also provides financial supports for the school under the district’s RBB system. Whereas RBB constrains a school with a highly experienced staff such as BEST, EXCEL retains the additional money it garners from the reduced salary costs associated with having less experienced teachers, and can spend this money on other needs such as college visits and smaller class sizes.

While the school has definitely benefited from its youthful teachers and the increases in financial flexibility, there are few experienced teachers to serve as models of good practice and mentors for new teachers to turn to for assistance and guidance. As a result, the staff is committed to developing strong instructional practices, but often lacks knowledge of and experience with a broad range of instructional strategies or effective school design features and principles. One staff member, commenting on the school’s instructional focus on addressing students’ skill deficiencies without watering down the curriculum, said, “It is hard to have so many new people on staff who are all trying to figure out what is the best way to do this and this, without anybody who knows.”

Reeves suggests an important role for the district in helping support the instructional capacity of new teachers. While she praised the Oakland Teaching Fellows (OTF) program for bringing quality teachers into the profession, she also noted a need to strengthen the coaching and mentoring supports for Fellows. Reeves also worries about new teachers who do not yet have credentials and are left out of larger support systems such as Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA). New teachers working toward their credentials have to depend on their school’s support and external professional development opportunities to develop their teaching capacity. EXCEL’s conversion experience suggests that increased attention to and involvement in teacher recruitment and capacity building would be an important support strategy for OUSD.

The professional capacity at BEST contrasts sharply with that of EXCEL. While much of the success at EXCEL can be attributed

to the knowledge and skills of its principal and the collective enthusiasm and commitment of its teachers, BEST's success can be attributed to a veteran core of committed teachers. The teaching staff at BEST is often characterized as hard-working, good teachers with substantial individual skill. The challenge at BEST has been in creating process for transferring the individual skill of its teachers into collective knowledge. One BayCES coach familiar with the school said, "There are pockets of great things, amazing teachers working in great ways, but no way to systematize it and have teachers share a common approach."

District officials hope that the district-wide Professional Learning Communities (PLC) initiative will facilitate the process of distributing expertise throughout the site. The PLC initiative is designed to help teachers collaborate on planning lessons, assess what students have learned, and develop common strategies for responding when students do not understand material. A key challenge at BEST for the PLC initiative is to formalize processes for teachers to collaborate around student data. Many teachers feel that collaboration entails planning together and sharing lessons, but they do not close the loop and reflect on how the lesson played out in the classroom and the steps that should be taken if the lesson did not work, and they may lack expertise in looking at student work or developing effective common assessments of student learning.

Over the past few years, BayCES coaches have been working with the administration at BEST on establishing common expectations for the PLC. This has been particularly challenging given the leadership transitions at BEST. Before working at BEST, Gray was a principal of a large school in

Louisiana. He has provided stability to the BEST campus and shown strong managerial skills, but he was not part of the BEST design team or the broader new small schools movement in OUSD. Differences of opinion among BEST's teachers about school organization and policy have also distracted from a focus on instructional leadership. However, in Gray's second year as principal, he was able to shift his focus to teacher professional development based on learning and teaching the California state standards for what students should know and be able to do at the high school level. As one BayCES coach commented, "It's a work in progress, I have a small contract with the school. Time does not allow me to do instructional supervision. My time is focused on developing instructional leadership." Given that Gray has been reassigned to Roosevelt Middle School for the 2008-09 school year, the next BEST principal faces the challenge of creating a professional community from a staff that has grown accustomed to changes in leadership.

PARENT AND COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Both schools on the McClymonds campus have worked to communicate their instructional programs to parents in the community. At BEST, Gray says:

Both schools have college-going cultures. The college mission is communicated every day, every way: in report card conferences, Back-to-School Night, scholarship opportunities. We start enrolling students in scholarship opportunities as freshmen; we start counseling on A-G, scholarships, and GPA with ninth graders. Money (for college) seems to talk; you get parents' attention, we invite them to observe a lot of

things juniors and senior will do, such as FAFSA¹⁶ and college applications.

Similarly, EXCEL's staff understands the importance of, and has taken steps to connect with, the West Oakland community. Students cited multiple examples of community outreach, including having EXCEL's law academy partner with a local environmental justice program to sponsor a community clean-up. In another instance, a group of EXCEL teachers took students to meet with the mayor about an outbreak of violence in their community. In addition, for their senior projects, all seniors research an issue affecting West Oakland and propose a solution. As one student explained, "It is not just school, school, school. It is trying to pan out into the community and better the community and get the community more involved in making the community a better place."

BEST publicly promotes its orientation toward community service, noting its "roots as the first public high school in Oakland to require students to engage in Community Service or Service Learning... and [requiring] and [encouraging] all students to engage in service learning or community service projects. BEST students are required to perform at least 100 hours of service before graduation."¹⁷ BEST and EXCEL staff are also committed to developing open lines of communication with parents. EXCEL staff members communicate frequently by mail, give parents access to teachers' e-mail and cell phone numbers, and have instituted an automated caller system, through which teachers can use an Internet-based program to select a range of comments about students (e.g., did not attend class today, is doing well in class, has a missing assignment, etc). The principal encourages each

teacher to utilize this program on a daily basis. Both schools use this system and share the costs – an example of cooperation and collaboration on the campus. Parents strongly support the program, and even the students admit it is helpful in keeping their busy and hardworking parents apprised of what is going on at school. BEST has an open door policy¹⁸ and has established a cadre of parents who serve as grade-level parent leaders and communicate frequently with grade-level teacher leaders.

Although both schools are now entering their fourth year as new small schools, they are still under the legacy of McClymonds, particularly BEST, which kept many of the McClymonds teachers after the conversion. This has certain advantages and disadvantages. Gray comments:

The legacy of McClymonds is helpful in recruiting, especially the sports, legacy of champions. It hurt us because of a negative, inaccurate perception of the neighborhood and campus — people think it's a very tough neighborhood, rampant with violence; it's not very safe to travel to and from school. I've been here 2 years, and McClymonds is one of the safest neighborhoods; it's one of the neighborhoods with fewer and less intense incidents, but the perception has been difficult to overcome.

Despite the improved outcomes of the two schools, many in the community still view the school as "McClymonds," or "Mac." As Network Executive Officer Alison McDonald noted, she still receives requests from parents to have McClymonds written on the diplomas, illustrating the difficulties of establishing a new identity in the community for these small high schools.

EXCEL's and BEST's community outreach efforts take place in the larger context of declining student enrollment and ongoing skepticism about the district's overall commitment to West Oakland. The McClymonds Educational Complex is facing declining enrollment. While McClymonds served 761 students in the 2004-05 school year, currently EXCEL serves 291 students and BEST serves 204, for a total of only 495.¹⁹ Combined, the schools do not have enough students to fill the building. For the 2008-09 school year, EXCEL and BEST have attracted only about 40 incoming ninth graders each, prompting the district's decision to phase-out BEST and enroll all ninth graders at EXCEL.

As a result of the overall low enrollment and EXCEL's academic success relative to BEST's, the latter school is being phased out by the district. According to a letter written on April 6, 2008 by both schools' Network Executive Officer, "More families have been choosing that school [EXCEL] in part because EXCEL has established a strong college-going culture and rigorous instructional program. The district is supporting that trend." McDonald also suggested that 440 high school students living in West Oakland (almost an equal number to the enrollment at both BEST and EXCEL) are choosing school options in other parts of the city.

The declining enrollment situation surfaces a number of challenges for the district. Channeling all incoming 9th graders into EXCEL reinforces a community perception that the two schools are basically still McClymonds, and enrolling in one is the equivalent of enrolling in the other. It is unclear how the district will handle the problems created by declining enrollment in West Oakland.

Second, the declining enrollment at the McClymonds complex threatens to exacerbate a longstanding community perception that West Oakland is not a priority the district. Members of McClymonds Educational Complex community suggested that the district is "not in tune" with the needs of the community and that that the community is "forgotten about and not recognized."

One student expressed the belief that district leaders were not recognizing students' academic gains. Rather than acknowledge EXCEL's academic achievements, parents suggested that the district focused almost exclusively on athletics, and even that focus came only after the men's varsity basketball team (comprised of BEST and EXCEL students) won the state championship. Another student reinforced this opinion, saying, "They gave us a day for our athletics, but they don't let us bring our test scores to show off." The parents echo this perspective and call for recognition of the students' CAHSEE pass rates and college-going rates. They want the district to meet with parents and students and listen to their concerns.

Exacerbating the perception that the school is a low priority are student complaints about the physical condition of the campus. Students say that they have seen rats and mice run across the floor in the cafeteria while they are eating lunch, and that rats and mice die in the heating system. They joke, "Everybody says the rodents here should have backpacks too." They also identify tiles falling off the ceiling, an intercom system falling out of the walls, and cracking and peeling paint on the outside of the building as problems with the facility. These inadequate facility issues compound a sense that West Oakland schools deserve greater attention by the district.

Perhaps most surprisingly, the increase in student outcomes and development of a positive learning climate — in sharp contrast to the old campus — did little to stop the exodus of students from West Oakland. Gray estimates that BEST lost approximately 150 students to Oakland Technical High School alone last year. Although the trajectories of both schools on the McClymonds Educational Complex are largely positive, leaders must consider if it will be sufficient to keep students in West Oakland.

The perceived disconnect between the district and community is particularly acute at this time, given the district's explicitly stated efforts to focus resources on West Oakland during the 2007-08 academic year. While this focus has meant a priority in rates of filling substitute teacher requests and professional development focused on classroom management, EXCEL staff suggested that the district expand its efforts to include coaching in instructional strategies. As Reeves says:

I am 33 and a senior principal in West Oakland. Other schools have new leadership, and we don't have a broad district effort to build this community up. We need K-12 alignment in the community, and we need the district to say we'll bring people in to do the work.

EXCEL staff suggested that community concerns could be addressed by additional outreach and support from the district, particularly in the area of marketing and student recruitment. Given the inherent challenges of recruiting students to attend West Oakland schools, educators at EXCEL suggested the need for greater district involvement in informing parents

of the school's success and establishing connections and pathways to EXCEL from a variety of possible feeder schools. Staff suggested that an active and visible district role in supporting West Oakland schools and families would help reduce the historical unease between the district and the community, and possibly reverse the declining enrollment trends taking place at the McClymonds complex.

All new schools undergo considerable challenges in their initial years. Amidst the decision to send all incoming ninth graders to EXCEL in 2008-09, leaving BEST as a grade 10-12 school, and the appointment of BEST's third principal in 4 years, it is important to understand how human resource decisions about principals and teachers during the conversion process have influenced the standing of the two schools over time. Amidst the decision to send all incoming ninth graders to EXCEL in 2008-09 (leaving BEST with grades 10-12), and the appointment of BEST's third principal in 4 years, ample evidence suggests that human resource decisions about principals and teachers during the conversion process have influenced the standing of the two schools over time.

The culture, climate, and academic improvements that have been made by BEST and EXCEL may have been increased and enhanced with greater attention and commitment to securing strong and stable school leadership, balanced teacher composition, and community engagement and outreach. District and school leaders may wish to revisit these issues as they develop future plans for the McClymonds Educational Complex as part of the OUSD's developing portfolio of high quality schools.

Endnotes

1. Dodd was the design team leader for Kizmet and had planned to focus exclusively on leading the new middle school.
2. A-G courses are those that are required for University of California (UC) and/or California State University (CSU) admission. Details can be found at <http://cde.ca.gov/dataquest>.
3. New School Development Group PowerPoint slide.
4. Enrollment, UC-CSU completion rates, and proficiency data can be found at <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>
5. The Academic Performance Index (API) is a score on a scale of 200 to 1000 that annually measures the academic performance and progress of schools in California.
6. 2007 Evaluation Study by SME Associates Inc. An Evaluation of the Oakland Small School Initiative.
7. Reeves and Bridgette Taylor began the design process based on a co-principal model. Toward the end of the design, circumstances did not allow Bridgette Taylor to become a co-principal.
8. Dodd led the Kizmet design team in the OUSD New School Development Group incubator in preparation for becoming its founding principal.
9. OUSD Use Your Voice Survey Data, 2007. In January 2006, OUSD created the Use Your Voice Survey initiative to serve as a public, formal vehicle for all school stakeholders to share their experiences and shape the future of their schools. Surveys have been administered in 2006 and 2007, and will continue each year to give voices to students, parents, teachers, staff, and community members. District leadership will continue to use the survey results as a key driver of improvement in Oakland public schools. <http://webportal.ousd.k12.ca.us/WebItem.aspx?WebItemID=210>.
10. <http://webportal.ousd.k12.ca.us/sarc/>.
11. <http://webportal.ousd.k12.ca.us/sarc/>. Accessed June 2008.
12. EXEL has a similar policy, having done away with “D” grades. Students receive either an A,B, C or F, as part of the emphasis on teaching and learning for mastery.
13. AP courses provide students the opportunity to take college level courses as part of the high school curriculum. Students are given an opportunity to take a test at the end of the course and, depending on their score, may be given college credit for their work. EXCEL also offers a wide range of AP courses, even more so than BEST. BEST offers four AP courses and EXCEL offers nine.
14. AVID stands for Advancement Via Individual Determination. The program is designed for first-generation college-bound students and provides support in both classes and in the college application process.
15. BEST resources for students and families 2007-08.
16. Free Application for Federal Student Aid: Students must complete this application to be eligible for college aid from the federal government.
17. <http://webportal.ousd.k12.ca.us/sarc/>. Accessed June 2008
18. EXCEL has an open door policy as well.
19. <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>. Accessed June 2008



Photo: 510 Media, courtesy Oakland Unified School District

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