

Student-Centered Schools: Closing the Opportunity Gap

June 2014

About This Series

Findings from SCOPE's *Student-Centered Schools: Closing the Opportunity Gap* study are published in four case studies and a cross-case analysis, a policy brief, and a web-based educator's tool.

To see the full series and related work, please visit <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/projects/633>

This research is made possible with support from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation.

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We don't bring the bar down for them. We have that expectation to set the bar high. I scaffold and support you to get there; you can get there. All of our students.

—Life Academy 10th-grade humanities teacher

Student-Centered Schools: *Closing the Opportunity Gap* documents the practices and outcomes of four urban high schools that, through student-centered approaches, are preparing their students for success in college, career, and life by providing them with the building blocks of knowledge and skills they will need as adults.

The schools in the study are non-selective in their admissions and serve populations that are predominantly low-income students of color. The studies focus on schools using student-centered practices through either the Linked Learning initiative or Envision Education model. Linked Learning, a state-wide initiative, integrates rigorous academics with career-based learning and real-world workplace experiences. Envision Education is a small charter network that creates personalized learning environments for students to develop 21st century skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration. Table 1 on page 2 provides an overview of the school demographics.

Table 1: Study School Demographics 2012–2013

School Characteristics	City Arts and Technology High School	Dozier-Libbey Medical High School	Impact Academy of Arts and Technology	Life Academy
Type of school	District-approved independent charter	District school engaged in Linked Learning	District-approved independent charter	District school engaged in Linked Learning
District or CMO affiliation	Chartered by San Francisco Unified and operated by Envision Education	Antioch Unified School District	Chartered by Hayward Unified and operated by Envision Education	Oakland Unified School District
Student enrollment	397	639	462	338
% free/reduced lunch	70%	48%	59%	99%
% Students of color	92%	78%	90%	98%

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

The Context: Why Student-Centered Learning Matters for Students

For the past 13 years, as an unintended consequence of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the nation has moved to an increasingly inequitable educational system as low-performing schools, particularly those serving low-income students of color in segregated settings, more and more relied on drill-and-kill direct instruction of basic skills primarily in English and math. In fact, most high schools in the United States remain structured for an industrial era when few graduates attended college or had professional careers. However, specialized skills and knowledge are now required for at least 70% of jobs. Low-income students and students of color are particularly unprepared as they are more than likely to attend segregated schools with a narrow and impoverished curriculum.

Despite the many forces limiting learning opportunities for low-income students and students of color over the last decade, some schools have managed to create a context within which rich, engaging curriculum is offered to all students in a manner that personalizes education and supports students’ individual needs. In this study, we selected schools that embody the following features of student-centered schools:

- Curriculum, instruction, and assessments are designed to help students engage in the learning process and develop analytical, collaboration, and communication skills. Formative assessments enable teachers to understand how and what students are learning so they can support student mastery of content, skills, and dispositions.

- School structures support personalization and connections to adults within the school and to the community outside of school. Teachers work together to focus on students' strengths, interests, and needs; to engage in their own learning; and to collaborate on the improvement of their instructional practices.
- Leadership is shared among the adults in the building with a specific focus on incorporating the voices of teachers, staff, administrators, and parents in key decisions.

We found that schools that incorporate these key features of student-centered practice are more likely to develop students who have transferrable academic skills; feel a sense of purpose and connection to school; as well as graduate, attend, and persist in college at rates that exceed their district and state averages.

What Are the Results of a Student-Centered Learning Approach?

Analysis of outcomes for students at all four study schools confirms that they are outperforming most other schools in their respective communities that are serving similar populations, especially African American, Latino, low-income students, and English language learners. This is evident in graduation, student achievement, and college preparatory course completion data; college persistence data; and surveys of graduates.

Outperforming peers on state assessments

After accounting for prior learning, students in the study schools exhibited greater gains in achievement on the California Star Test (English language arts) and California High School Exit Exams (ELA and mathematics) than similar students attending other schools in the same district. In particular, our analysis shows the value added to student learning in the study schools is even greater for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those whose parents had not attended college.

Graduating more students

The study schools' high school graduation rates exceed district and state averages. Particularly noteworthy is the high graduation rate for African American students at Dozier-Libbey and Impact Academy: 90-95% of African American students at these schools graduate, compared to district and state averages of about 66%. The graduation rate for Latino students, English learners, and economically disadvantaged students is also high for three of four schools, ranging from 10% to 24% higher than state averages at City Arts and Tech, Dozier-Libbey, and Impact Academy.

Making students eligible for college

These schools strive to do more than graduate their students, they seek to open the doors to college and provide students with the tools they need to persist in college. Key to gaining access to the California state system is completion of the required "a-g" college preparatory courses in high school (4 years of English, 3 years of math, 2 years of lab science, and foreign language and arts course requirements).

Statewide, there are sizable gaps between a-g completion rates of low-income students and stu-

dents of color when compared to White and Asian students. The student-centered schools in this study—by structuring their course offerings, and in some cases their graduation requirements, to be compliant with the a-g requirements—are dramatically overcoming this statewide gap for their students. Table 2 provides an overview of each of the schools' California college course completion rates.

Table 2: College Preparatory Course Completion Rates 2011–2012

Graduation rates	Types of students	CAT	District	Dozier-Libbey	District	Impact Academy	District	Life Academy*	District	State
Percent of graduates completing all courses required for UC/CSU admission	All	99%	56%	96%	24%	100%	44%	87%	51%	38%
	African American	100%	28%	94%	15%	100%	34%	100%	34%	29%
	Latino	100%	36%	100%	15%	100%	39%	82%	54%	28%
	Limited English proficient	100%	38%	92%	24%	100%	34%	n/a	46%	23%
	Socioeconomically disadvantaged	100%	54%	95%	22%	100%	45%	n/a	48%	30%

Source: Data for all sources except Life Academy from <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>

*Life Academy data from Oakland Unified School District

At City Arts and Tech, Dozier-Libbey, and Impact Academy, 96-100% of students have completed the California college course requirements. Life Academy, while having somewhat lower rates than the other three schools, serves a higher-need student population than the others and won recognition from its district for having the highest a-g completion rates of any high school in the district.

Persisting in college

The student-centered schools in this study have designed their curriculum purposefully to provide students with not only the kinds of academic skills they need to do college-level academic work, but also the fortitude to persist through challenges and to be successful in their chosen careers as well. Beyond enrolling in college, the quality of students' high school preparation influences their persistence rate in college.

For students from City Arts and Tech, 97%, and for Life Academy, 69%, of graduates enrolled in 4-year colleges were still enrolled in their 4th year of college. These rates far exceed national averages, particularly for students who are first in their family to attend college. Survey data of graduates suggest that particular high school practices of relationship-building, high standards, deep learning, and instructional relevance contribute to students' success in college.

School Practices That Promote Student Success

Through interviews, observations, and teacher and student survey data, the study unpacks the components of student-centered practices to explain the on-the-ground realities of how they play out in schools with students typically underserved by the educational system. Despite their different approaches, all four schools have many characteristics in common. A defining characteristic of each study school is a strong school vision that includes an unrelenting belief that every student has the potential to achieve high academic standards and to attend college. The schools' visions shape what students are expected to know and do when they graduate, how students are assessed and taught, and the ways they are supported to achieve these goals.

Building relationships with students

Personalization is a set of practices that enable adults to know students well and tailor their interactions to meet individual students' strengths, interests, and needs. The common personalization practices in the schools in this study include advisory programs, a culture of celebration, student voice and leadership opportunities, and connections to parents and community. Undergirding each of these practices is the explicit expectation that a core component of teachers' jobs is to build relationships with their students.

Rigorous, relevant, and engaging instruction and assessments

Preparing students for college and careers requires increasing the focus on the development of the analytical and communication skills needed to navigate and excel in a dynamic, information-rich environment. To build these skills, each of the four schools places a central focus on supporting students' leadership capacities and autonomy within the classroom, emphasizing the importance of students connecting with and applying what they are learning through culminating performance-based assessments. In particular, the schools draw on:

- relevant curricula,
- inquiry-based instruction,
- collaborative learning,
- student-directed learning,
- a focus on mastery,
- flexible uses of time,
- ongoing assessments, and
- performance-based assessments.

Academic supports for student success

Student-centered practices are often reserved for students who enter high school well-prepared, self-confident, and motivated. Additional supports are necessary to adopt these strategies in schools serving students who lack basic skills and self-confidence and who face constant external challenges to persist in school. To meet the needs of students who enter with low academic skills and face educational challenges related to poverty or language fluency, the schools have adopted in-class and out-of-class strategies to support students' ongoing academic development. These strategies include the use of advisory to provide academic support, differentiated instruction,

tutorial and after-school support, and the provision of additional resources and support to English language learners and special education students.

Shared leadership and professional development

Creating and sustaining schools committed to student-centered personalization and instructional practices requires substantial investment in developing and supporting staff capacity. This capacity-growing has multiple elements, including an investment in creating a shared school-wide vision; supporting grade-level teacher collaboration; enriching teacher expertise in pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, and academic support; providing opportunities for staff to reflect on their practice; distributing leadership to include teachers; and utilizing external support from the district or charter management organization and community partners.

Supports That Enable Student-Centered Schools

All schools that are serious about closing the opportunity gap need support at multiple levels, including internal school-level supports for teachers, from the district or charter management organization level, and outward to the state and federal levels. In this research, we identified three areas of support that substantially influence the ability of high schools to engage in student-centered practices: funding, human capital, and instruction and assessment policies.

Funding student-centered schools

Until 2013, California schools faced year after year of budget cuts and a complicated funding system in which schools had little autonomy over how to spend their decreasing resources. In 2013, California implemented the Local Control Funding Formula, a weighted student formula that enables schools serving high-need populations to receive additional funding. This funding formula has the potential to dramatically change the quality of resources available to schools with high percentages of low-income students, English language learners, and foster children. While this is a substantial improvement over the previous state funding system, it remains to be seen whether the increased funding will be sufficient, as California still lags behind other states in per pupil funding. But as a model, it holds tremendous promise for other states to consider.

Human capital policies that support student-centered teachers and leaders in urban schools

Addressing human capital needs is the heart of transforming outcomes for students. Teachers need to enter the profession well-prepared to address students' academic as well as social emotional needs. Once in the profession, teachers and administrators need ongoing support to analyze and revise their practice. Schools will benefit from local, state, and federal policies that:

- invest in and set standards for high-quality teacher education,
- address inequities in teacher salaries between districts,
- invest in teacher induction programs,
- provide time for teacher collaboration to plan curriculum,
- follow principles for meaningful professional development, and
- revamp teacher evaluation to encourage inquiry and collaboration.

Implementing student-centered instruction and assessments

Student-centered instruction, which includes project-based instruction, collaborative learning, relevant curriculum, and performance-based assessments, is challenging to enact effectively. States and districts can support these rich learning environments for students by creating a balance between common goals and local opportunities for invention and innovation that are tailored to the needs of students and schools.

- States and districts should ensure that educators are prepared not with a single pedagogy but with a wide repertoire of strategies that support student-centered learning in both teacher-directed and student-directed ways.
- Similarly, states should limit directives to schools that constrain practice in ways that may not be productive for all students, but instead document and disseminate successful practices and support schools in learning from the research and from each other through conferences, networks, site visits, and other strategies.
- Finally, states should adopt a limited set of state-level assessments that support the kinds of deeper learning opportunities central to student-centered schools, and then encourage local use of even more robust assessments that allow students to inquire, investigate, collaborate, present, and defend their ideas, as well as to think critically and be creative.



Examples of Student-Centered Practices

City Arts and Technology High School

SAN FRANCISCO



Curriculum includes a strong focus on social justice and identity. Often there is an interdisciplinary dimension to the integration of social justice issues. For instance, upper-division history students prepared educational fliers on a criminal justice topic of their choosing — racial profiling, death penalty and people of color, pregnant women in jail, immigration and detention, etc. The project included a reading; gallery walk; video and outreach campaign on their topic; and production of related campaign materials such as t-shirts, buttons, and posters.

Dozier-Libbey Medical High School

ANTIOCH



Twelfth-grade students examined medical ethics across academic disciplines, reading *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* in English; learning about eugenics and medical experimentation in Medical Ethics class; and developing, designing, and building a device to address a disability in physics. Students write a paper on who benefits, who is harmed, and the cost of making their medical device. In a culminating project, they investigate the meaning of disability and the biases in the notions of “fixing” a disability.

Life Academy of Health and Bioscience

OAKLAND



The culminating work for students is the senior research paper, a yearlong and multi-stage assignment. Each student researches a question that emerges out of an internship experience. To answer the question, each student conducts a scaled-down literature review, interviews an expert, writes a paper, and presents and defends findings to a panel that includes the advisor, students, and family or community members.

Impact Academy of Arts and Technology

HAYWARD



Teachers emphasize that there are multiple perspectives to any issue. A history teacher describes a unit on Reconstruction: “We looked at different historical interpretations ... from the 1870s, the 1920s, and the 1960s and they had to pick a claim that a historian ... made about Reconstruction.” Students conducted research to either prove the claim true or debunk it, compile the primary source research and analyze the documents. History was taught as an occurrence requiring interrogation and interpretation, not passive acceptance.