

A Community School in Service of Newcomer Students

Lessons from Oakland
International High School

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Oakland International High School, winner of the 2017 National Community School Award, supports its recently arrived immigrant students by integrating academic, social, mental health, and material supports into the school day and beyond. Its community school model incorporates a Wellness Center, a tiered system of support and engagement, external partnerships, specialized staffing, and a collaborative culture of continuous improvement that promotes agency and belonging for both students and staff. As a result of this work to promote comprehensive student well-being, newcomer students at Oakland International drop out at half the rate they do at other district schools, and roughly 63 percent graduate, compared to just 40 percent of newcomer students districtwide. This brief describing Oakland International’s model may serve as a resource for school and district leaders working to develop their own community school models.

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Introduction

California leads the nation in the scale of its investment in the community school model as a strategy for educating the whole child and meeting the needs of students and their families. In recognition of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as long-standing inequalities in opportunity among students, the California legislature has allocated more than \$4 billion through the California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP) for preK–12 public schools across the state to plan and implement community schools. The CCSPP, which is currently awarding grants to districts, is designed to support schools' efforts to partner with community agencies and local governments to align community resources for transforming traditional schools into community schools. The state has also made large investments in other programs relevant to community schools that support equity and the whole child, such as programs in behavioral health, nutrition, universal preschool, and expanded learning.

In 2022, the California State Board of Education approved the California Community Schools Framework to guide the planning and implementation of community schools. This framework is a critical resource for schools and districts exploring the community school model as a strategy for improving schools. Amid burgeoning interest among practitioners in community schools, there is a growing desire to understand how community schools operate in practice and how the model affects the lives of students, particularly those furthest from opportunity. This brief explores the implementation of the community school model in one California district to illustrate the impact a community school can have on students and families, especially those with the highest needs.

Oakland International High School: A Community School

Oakland International High School (OIHS) is a public high school established in 2007 in California's Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) that serves 100 percent English language learners, ages 14–21 in Grades 9–12, all of whom began OIHS as newcomers (meaning they arrived in the U.S. within 3 years of enrolling in school). As a community school, the mission of OIHS is to provide a quality, student-centered learning experience for recently arrived immigrant students and their families that values the multilingualism, cultural diversity, and many ways of understanding the world that the students, their families, and their communities contribute to the school. All OIHS students, families, and staff collaborate towards a more just society, recognizing that OIHS students are leaders shaping our future world. OIHS develops and sustains a variety of authentic learning opportunities for students aligned to their future aspirations in college, career, and community work. As a community school, OIHS is grounded in restorative practices, wellness support, and a spirit of both mutual accountability and collective transformation.

OIHS Students

Each year, OIHS serves approximately 360 immigrant students, ranging in age from 14 to 21, who are newly arrived from approximately 20 different countries. More than 96 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, representing the highest poverty rate of any high school in OUSD. Ten percent of students are refugees or asylees who have fled some of the world's most protracted conflicts and civil unrest (including roughly 15 students evacuated from Afghanistan in 2022), and approximately 50 percent are unaccompanied minors navigating the exclusions of the U.S. immigration system. At least 35 percent of families speak a primary language at home that is considered a "minority language" in Oakland, including Indigenous languages from Mexico and Central America, Farsi, Urdu, Amharic, and Tigrinya. From 2018 to 2022, OIHS's graduation rate was 62.7 percent, compared with a districtwide newcomer graduation rate of 39.4 percent.

Importance of the Community School Model in the Newcomer Context

The community school model can be particularly critical for newcomer students and families, fostering academic success, social-emotional well-being, connections to their new communities, and a sense of institutional trust. OIHS staff members are dedicated to the principle that academic achievement cannot be separated from social-emotional wellness and community connectedness. For students to thrive in school, they must also access the necessary services that keep them well and resourced. OIHS's program provides extensive connections to social services that students and families may not have been able to access in their home countries, that are not available or accessible to them in their current neighborhoods, and/or that are difficult to access without navigational support.

Moreover, students must feel a sense of trust within the school walls: trust with their peers, their teachers, and the school administration. (This can be all the more important, and potentially challenging, for students and families whose first experiences in the U.S. were being apprehended by U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents and locked in inhumane detention facilities.) OIHS often is one of the only trusted institutions to which newcomer families are connected during their early days in Oakland, providing on-campus resources that better equip newcomer students to make successful transitions to their new school and home in the U.S. Analysis of student outcomes shows that OIHS students stay in school and graduate at higher rates than any other newcomer student population in Oakland or California.

The OIHS Community School Model

OIHS opened in 2007 with five full-time teachers, a principal, an attendance clerk, a part-time assistant principal, and two community partners. The school now employs more than 50 core staff and engages roughly 25 partners in service of students and families. As a community school, OIHS is a shared endeavor with its community-based partners in offering intensive family support, education, and engagement services; mental health support for youth and families to grapple with past trauma, current trauma, and the stress of moving to a new country during adolescence; health, dental, and vision referrals and services; food and housing security resources; immigration legal services; social services and benefits application support; restorative justice to navigate conflicts as well as groups that support healthy decision-making; crisis management; academic support; and referrals to additional outside resources. School-based staff and strategic partners also provide mentorship and opportunities designed to engage students and families as leaders in the school community and beyond. The school partners with community organizations (such as cultural organizations, resettlement agencies, churches, mosques, temples, and community centers) that are based in the students' own neighborhoods and/or support the specific cultural and linguistic communities to which the students belong.

As OIHS has developed its community school program, the following program components have been critical to the overall success of the school.

“Wellness Center” Hub

The hub of the OIHS community school is the Wellness Center, which opened in 2016 as a dedicated space on campus serving the wraparound social-emotional needs of OIHS students outside the classroom so that they are better able to thrive in the classroom and beyond. The Wellness Center is the mechanism through which students and families access support; it is where academic staff make referrals, and it serves as the umbrella for all programs, partnerships, and services at the school.

Wellness Center supports. The Wellness Center hosts regular all-school wellness events (several per month), ranging from biweekly food distributions to cultural engagement events to movie nights, to build connections to students and families. These “Tier 1” services facilitate ease of access to more targeted high-need supports, including referrals to medical, dental, mental health, and immigration legal services both on and off campus as well as complex case management services. The Wellness Center also incorporates student leadership activities, making students active participants in program design and continuous improvement.

Access and referrals. Students and families access Wellness Center services via self-referral during class periods; referrals from teachers, staff, coaches, outside providers (e.g., immigration attorneys or social workers), and program partners; referrals from family members; and by dropping

in before school, during lunchtime, and after school hours. Creating these varied mechanisms of access is critical to ensuring equitable engagement: students and families can access services on their own terms and with support from allies. All families learn about and are introduced to the Wellness Center during school registration, and during their first weeks at the school, all new students receive “Welcome Circles” led by student leaders and Wellness Center staff.

Tiered System of Engagement and Support

The OIHS community school model can best be understood as a tiered system of progressive support and touch points for students and families. All students are beneficiaries of and participants in the community school, although students’ needs, past experiences, current circumstances, and interests dictate the depth and breadth of their engagement.

Tier 1: Supports that bolster community wellness and student success. Tier 1 services tend to be schoolwide learning and engagement opportunities that allow all students and families to participate and build a sense of community trust, celebration, and mutual support. Tier 1 supports include several components.

- Integrated instructional program: OIHS’s classrooms, teachers, and courses of study are central to its community school program. Teachers serve as bridges to Wellness Center programs and services via a schoolwide advisory structure, and cohorted teaching teams regularly case-manage students in need of additional support. Meanwhile, teachers integrate social-emotional learning practices into their curricula, including group work, integration of home language resources, restorative and community circles, team building, end-of-year “portfolio” presentations, and projects based on and led by students’ identities, interests, and backgrounds. OIHS also offers specific elective classes to support students’ academic and social-emotional needs simultaneously, including the following:
 - Students with interrupted formal education (SIFE) English and math classes provide literacy, reading, and numeracy remediation for students with a gap of 2 years or more in their formal education. This curriculum is based on and within the community, involving field trips and hands-on practices.
 - Dual enrollment college classes and school-day support are afterschool courses held on campus and taught by community college staff that provide both high school and college credits while offering an advanced curriculum in a safe, known environment. All enrolled students also take a support class during the school day to bridge any learning gaps and receive help with homework for the faster paced college courses.

- Cotaught “postsession” courses such as hiking, rock climbing, mural making, career exploration, and water sports are field-trip based and support students with learning new skills, engaging with teachers and one another in and outside of the classroom, and discovering new places and resources in the Oakland community. OIHS offers these classes each year during a 3-week, end-of-year “mini semester.”
- **Welcome Circles and/or orientations for all students:** When they first enroll at OIHS, all new students participate in multilingual Welcome Circles, led by student leaders and wellness staff. The Wellness Circles build community, offer advice and support, answer questions, provide a school tour/scavenger hunt, and connect students to the Wellness Center and Soccer Without Borders programs.
- **Afterschool and weekend drop-in support programs:** These include daily afterschool tutoring services, “Saturday school” catch-up days, college crunch days, Medi-Cal and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) enrollment, college and career information sessions, and afterschool program fairs.
- **Staff- and student-led wellness events:** Such events include a schoolwide International Festival, sex education week, “Shoo-the-Flu” vaccination clinics, and biweekly distributions from food pantries.
- **Soccer Without Borders and other afterschool programming:** Afterschool programs provide engagement, a sense of belonging and shared purpose, and a safe place to recreate, learn, practice English, and grow after school, during school breaks, and on weekends.

Tier 2: Targeted support and training to build students’ skills and capacities in service of personal and community wellness. Tier 2 services are generally more structured in their outreach and demographics, have more consistent participation (i.e., they are ongoing programs for a consistent roster of students and their families), and are based on shared identity, needs, and/or interests. Tier 2 offerings include the following programs.

- **Student “affinity groups”:** Bicultural and multicultural OIHS staff and partners create spaces for regular meetings of cultural affinity groups, such as Asian Club, a “Black Girls Rock” group, Arabic Club, Latinas With Dreams, Afghan Club, Genders & Sexualities Alliance, Maya Mam Club, and others.
- **Wellness Ambassadors:** Student Wellness Ambassadors are elected by advisories and serve as links to the Wellness Center to inform the Wellness Program’s design and activities. Ambassadors receive regular trainings that support leadership as well as personal and community wellness, and they plan schoolwide events.
- **Restorative justice trainings:** Students participate in circle-keeper trainings to learn how to run restorative and community-building circles with their peers.

- **Manhood development circles:** These are workshops for students with chronic discipline and/or anger-management challenges that support goal setting, conflict-resolution skills, and community connectedness.
- **“Community walks”:** Taking place during a professional development day for teachers, community walks are planned by students and families from affinity groups to help teachers better understand students’ contexts, goals, backgrounds, and cultures as well as to provide leadership opportunities for students.

Tier 3: Targeted, individualized support for students who are struggling or at risk to ensure they are connected to services. Tier 3 services tend to be more individual in nature and in service of particular needs or challenges.

- **Intensive case management and crisis intervention:** These services are provided by Wellness Program staff.
- **Academic and attendance interventions:** OIHS integrates targeted academic interventions into Wellness Center programming, including drop-in homework help, transcript analysis, truancy home visits, Saturday School, and college/career readiness and information workshops, with a focus on students who are particularly struggling and/or disengaged to help them create harm-reduction attendance plans aimed towards graduation.
- **Therapeutic services:** To supplement limited Medi-Cal-funded therapy spots and ensure equitable language access, OIHS engages several partners that offer individual and group therapy services in multiple languages, including Arabic, Tigrinya, Spanish, and Dari.
- **Tier 3 restorative justice circles:** Staff and partners facilitate these circles to repair harm, support justice-involved students and those who are postexpulsion or dropping out, and resolve high-intensity conflicts.
- **Immigration legal services:** These services are offered via partnerships with legal organizations and in partnership with the central OUSD offices.
- **Home visits:** OIHS staff will prioritize home visits for students struggling with attendance, school participation, or community connectedness, as needed and appropriate.

Combined, these services both address the barriers to students’ actively engaging in and being successful in school and offer pathways towards active leadership and participation in decision-making at OIHS and beyond.

The latter is fundamentally important but easily overlooked. Too often, young immigrants either are excluded from services or are merely recipients of top-down services, with little

acknowledgment of or support for their capacities and strengths as leaders. Any successful community school requires understanding not just the challenges but also the assets a community brings, and building its model accordingly.

Strong Partnerships

More partnerships do not necessarily beget stronger community school programs. OIHS invests in meaningful partnerships that first and foremost serve the articulated needs and interests of students and their families.

When forming new partnerships, OIHS looks to data as well as student and family engagement. Data such as truancy, mental health referrals, California Healthy Kids Survey results, “discipline” referrals, and grades, cross-referenced for gender, country of origin, language, and age, help identify unmet needs. Input from students and families (via surveys, focus groups, and leadership bodies) helps inform the programs that they want to see on campus. OIHS works with district leaders and local forums, such as the East Bay Immigrant and Refugee Forum, to connect with potential partners; the school is also often approached with interest from established community organizations. For any partnership to work and to last, it must be “win-win-win”—that is, it must support students and their families; it must support the interests of the school (without draining too many school resources, such as financial resources, human resources, or physical space); and it must support the interests of the partner organization.

Partnership Spotlight: Soccer Without Borders

One of OIHS’s first partnerships was with Soccer Without Borders, which was invited to the school because so many students had expressed a desire to play the sport. There was also a lot of conflict among students across language and cultural divides, and a mechanism was needed by which students could learn and play together. The program started during OIHS’s third year as a small, drop-in, afterschool boys’ team run by Soccer Without Borders that played occasional weekend games, and it grew from there. Now, more than 40 percent of OIHS students participate in Soccer Without Borders programming; there are two boys’ teams and a girls’ team as well as drop-in programming for occasional participants. The program is fun and engaging, offers connections to peers and caring adults, and provides a safe space after school, on weekends, and during school breaks. The school benefits from the fact that the Soccer Without Borders organization does an excellent job supporting students who often struggle academically and regularly engages coaches in conflict mediation and academic case management. The organization benefits from ease of recruitment, access to student data for grant reporting, and the use of OIHS office space.

Investment in Core On-Campus Staff

While partnerships are essential to the OIHS community school model, the school also relies on dedicated on-campus staff—including a community school manager—to hold the vision, engage constituents in a process of continuous learning and improvement, manage partnerships, supervise staff, and tend to administrative matters like budgeting, memorandums of understanding, and contracts. To staff and resource the Wellness Center, OIHS has also hired case managers. Community school staff are integrated into the school’s organizational and leadership structures and have strong working relationships with office staff, teachers, and other school leaders.

Staff, Partners, and Programs Integrated Into School Structures

For a community school to be successful, all elements of the school must fall under the community school umbrella. At OIHS, partners attend regular meetings, for instance engagement and coordination-of-services team meetings. The community school manager sits on the school leadership team and meets regularly with teacher-leaders. Students can access the Wellness Center hub of services via a pass system from their academic classes. Teachers, meanwhile, make daily referrals to the Wellness Center so that their students can access the support they need. Students and families are also able to self-refer.

School Culture: Keys to OIHS Success

In addition to the programmatic and structural features of OIHS’s community school model, several features of OIHS’s school culture have been instrumental to the success of the school.

An Atmosphere of Welcome

Families, students, and visitors frequently note the good “feeling” one gets when stepping on campus. This is by design but is also a spillover function of all the features of the school culture described in this section. The flags of every country hang from the cafeteria ceiling. The central courtyard features an array of community gardens tended by students and families. Staff and other students smile at and wave to any campus visitors, including new students and their families. Front office staff are welcoming and kind. Multiple languages are heard spoken throughout campus, signaling that this is a place of welcome, refuge, connection, and learning. Given that many students and families speak languages other than English and that many are confronting attempted deportation, it is vital that they report feeling welcomed immediately when they step on campus.

Strong Relationships

The school also values strong working relationships and trust building among students, staff, families, partners, and members of the immigrant community. These trusting relationships are critical for identifying and developing new programs, engaging student and family voices, navigating conflict, and building bridges across perceived divides in language, race, culture, and class as well as between the academic and nonacademic elements of the school. “Heterogeneity and collaboration” are core principles of the Internationals model, to which OIHS adheres, as stated on the Internationals Network website (www.internationalsnetwork.org): “Schools and classrooms are heterogeneous and use collaborative structures that build on the strengths of each member of the school community to optimize learning.” The same is true of staff-planning structures, where staff work across content, teams, and roles to improve school structures and practices continuously.

Ever-Evolving Vision Towards Continuous Improvement

There is no set-it-and-forget-it model of a community school. OIHS strives for continuous improvement of its existing programs as well as constant reevaluation and reiteration according to changing demographics and needs. The needs of OIHS families deepen and shift each year with changing sociopolitical contexts (the advent of COVID-19 and Trumpism, for instance) and changing student demographics. For example, during fall 2013, OIHS was home to a handful of unaccompanied minors. By January 2014, nearly 60 students were in active deportation proceedings and urgently needed attorneys (as well as, as was often the case, mental health and other services). Thus, OIHS’s community school manager invested time and resources forging new partnerships with immigration legal services and advocating for such services districtwide.

Example Student

The following description provides an example of how the structural and cultural components of the OIHS community school come together to meet the needs of a newcomer student:

- The student arrived unaccompanied from Guatemala in 2021. He was apprehended by U.S. Customs and Border Protection in Texas, placed for 3 months in an immigration shelter for minors, and released to his uncle in Oakland. He speaks some Spanish and is fluent in Mam, a Mayan language. He attended school in Guatemala through sixth grade and is now 16 years old.

- After enrolling in OUSD, the student attends an OIHS Welcome Circle on his third day of school where he meets other new students, learns about the school's resources, and shares his hopes and fears about school. Another Mam-speaking student sits next to him and translates. He then takes a school tour where he meets the attendance clerk and the principal, visits the Wellness Center so that he knows where to get support, and is taken to the Soccer Without Borders offices, where he is encouraged to attend practice on Thursday.
- The student is placed in special English and math classes for students with interrupted formal education. In his other classes, he is part of a consistent cohort that moves through the day together. In each class, he is seated at tables with students who speak Farsi, Spanish, and Tigrinya as well as another student who speaks Mam. He was intentionally placed in this cohort because there is another Mam student who can support his transition.
- When he enrolled at OUSD, the student shared with the district staff that he needs help finding an immigration attorney. The OIHS Wellness Program team secures him a space on a wait-list and eventually connects him to an attorney with a partner organization, Immigrant Legal Defense. The attorney meets with him at school to explain the legal process and tells him that she will help him apply for asylum.
- The student regularly leaves class with a pass to the Wellness Center because he has headaches. The Wellness Team give him a quiet place to sit, a glass of water, and a cup of tea. They refer him to a neighboring school-based health center with which OIHS partners and where students can get care. Other than at the immigration shelter, the student has not seen a doctor in more than 8 years.
- As his immigration court hearing approaches, the student becomes more and more nervous. The Wellness Center connects him with a Spanish-speaking mental health clinician on campus. One of the case managers accompanies him to his first immigration hearing in downtown San Francisco so that he doesn't have to go alone. (His uncle cannot take him because he works.)
- Other student leaders encourage the student to join the Mam Affinity Group, which meets during lunchtime on Tuesdays. The group plans a big afterschool event in the courtyard to celebrate Guatemalan Independence Day. He organizes one of the dance performances. More than 80 students attend.

- At the end of the year, it is time for the student to choose his postsession class: a 3-week intensive interdisciplinary class that combines students from Grades 9–12. His top choices are biking, rock climbing, and mural painting. He is enrolled in biking. He is given a bike for the 3 weeks, learns how to change its tires and tune it up, and bikes throughout the East Bay, visiting places that he’s never seen before, like the Albany Bulb and the Bay Bridge.
- As part of the Mam Affinity Group, the student helps plan this year’s “community walks,” leading a group of OIHS teachers and staff in a 1-hour class on campus that includes the history of Guatemala, a talk by an Indigenous leader about persecution of Indigenous groups, and Mam language lessons. The group then visits a Mam cultural center in Oakland and prepares food together at a local community kitchen.

Building a Model Takes Time—and the Destination Is Never Reached

OIHS is a trusted hub of community support for immigrants in Oakland. It has been locally and nationally recognized as a leader in providing inclusive, supportive direct services to newcomer youth and families in Oakland, including with the 2017 National Community School Award. Hundreds of educators throughout the country have learned from its model.

Developing the school’s model took time, though. The program was built slowly, with determination and intention. Funding was critical to the school’s expansion, but so was strategy: the ability to forge mutually beneficial partnerships with organizations and leverage the nonfinancial resources of time, space, and staff capacity. Meanwhile, the school continues to grow and shift to meet new needs and fill holes. Currently, the school is focusing on building more equitable work-based learning and pathway programs, and it continues to evolve into an organizational model that does not merely provide quality services to immigrant communities but deeply involves students and families in schoolwide decisions and in determining what the school is, how it operates, and what it will become.

Author Biography

Lauren Markham is a writer and educator working at the intersection of immigration and education. Her writings have been published in outlets such as *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The New Republic*, *Mother Jones*, *Harper’s*, and *The Atlantic* as well as in her award-winning 2017 book *The Far Away Brothers: Two Young Migrants and the Making of an American Life*.

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Related Publications

Finn, S. (2023, May). **[Newcomer education in California](#)** [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Hansen, D. & Finn, S. (2023, June). **[Guidance for district administrators serving newcomer students](#)** [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Lavadenz, M., Kaminski, L, & Armas, E. G. (2023, August). **[San Juan Unified newcomer support: Promising practices](#)** [Report]. Policy Analysis for California Education.

Umansky, I., Thompson, K. D., Soland, J. D., & Kibler, A. (2022, October). **[Newcomer students' English language development: A summary brief](#)**. [Policy brief]. Policy Analysis for California Education.



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