

NOTE: An earlier draft of this statement has circulated at some schools. The statement below includes additional information and input from the High School Caucus and will be distributed to the OEA Rep Council 3/1/04.

OEA High School Caucus Small Schools Statement

February 28, 2004

Over the past several years, OEA and many of its members have supported the creation of small schools under conditions that are sustainable, democratic and equitable. These are principles embraced by a number of Oakland's new small elementary schools and by the small schools movement itself nationwide. Unfortunately, at the high school level, OUSD's small schools implementation has disregarded these principles and exploited the hopes and hard work of educators and parents. To the extent that we allow these false promises to distract us from the deteriorating conditions in our schools, our students – especially those most in need – will, yet again, be the losers.

Oakland's mixed experience with small schools has fed a paralyzing ambivalence within OEA on the issue. With this statement, the High School Caucus hopes to stimulate discussion that can move the union from an ineffective, reactive stance to proactive leadership for genuine reform.

Small Schools: The Right Way and The Wrong Way

Much of the impetus for small schools originated with the Coalition of Essential Schools, a national school reform network. CES has identified key principles necessary for authentic, sustainable reform. Here are five of those principles and a brief description of how they have fared in Oakland's newest small high schools:

- 1) **Democratic decision-making.** Fremont High staff was first told in the fall of 2001 that it would be broken into "small autonomous interconnected schools." Administration steamrolled the faculty's contractual right (Faculty Council section, 7.6) to approve, modify or reject this decision. The principal issued a memo advising dissenters to "begin to consider other options for your future." A similar process of coercion has ensued at Castlemont, slated for break-up into small schools next year.
- 2) **Empowered teacher teams.** Despite the energetic participation of some small school design teams, the District's top-down policy has severely limited genuine empowerment. At most small high schools in the Fremont Federation (formerly Fremont High), the principal is the sole decision-maker on personnel, budget, master schedule, facilities and other issues. Where teachers participate in decision-making, they do so on top of an already full schedule.
- 3) **Smaller student-teacher ratios.** To reap the benefit of a small learning community, the Coalition of Essential Schools suggests a student-teacher ratio of no more than 80-1. Small schools have not reduced our traditional 160-1 ratio in Oakland high schools.
- 4) **No increase in administrative costs.** Last year, Fremont High had one principal and three assistant principals. The Fremont Federation's six schools have six principals and no vice-principals. While increasing the administrative payroll, Fremont has lost the benefit of an administrative division of labor. Each school's sole administrator is often

occupied with a pressing issue when a crisis arises or, all too often, at a required meeting off campus. Furthermore, each principal is fairly powerless to deal with roving groups of anonymous students from other schools just across the courtyard or on another floor of the same building.

5) **Community involvement/input.** The District consistently claimed that the Fremont and Castlemont makeovers were being “pushed by the community.” But the sole community representative pushing the break up of high schools was Oakland Community Organizations, and included few if any parents or students at the targeted campuses. Also heavily involved in the decision-making was the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools, a private non-profit organization in charge of disbursing Gates Foundation dollars to create small schools. After the decision was imposed, school design teams did involve some parents in setting up the schools.

Equity?

Teachers and parents who have pushed for and created small schools have been motivated largely by the desire to achieve educational equity. Yet, implementation at the high schools threatens to increase inequity. An indispensable element of small school autonomy is democratic control of site budgets, but instead, the District has given them something akin to the Results Based Budgeting (RBB) now planned for all of Oakland’s schools.

Site-based budgeting was to increase each site’s control over its program and reduce central office waste. And new small schools teachers have reported that supply orders are filled much more efficiently now. But RBB will change the practice of allocating positions to each site based on enrollment and, instead, will issue a lump sum based on a site’s average daily attendance in the preceding year. This will hurt flatland schools the most, where the need is greatest but attendance is lowest. And since funds will no longer correspond to the number of positions needed at a site, principals – given nearly total control under the State Administrator’s brand of RBB – will be encouraged to hire newer (lower salaried) teachers over more experienced (higher salaried) teachers.

Progress?

Two small autonomous high schools opening in the past few years (LIFE and the School of Social Justice) have been staffed almost exclusively with relatively new teachers. We don’t know whether all posting and seniority requirements have been observed at these schools or at the Fremont Federation. But some aspects of small high schools increase the likelihood of contract violations, especially when combined with RBB and the increased control it transfers to the principal. For example:

- **Subject prep limits.** It is more difficult to provide a full program at small high schools without piling three or more subject preparations on individual teachers. Some small schools are violating the contract’s two prep limit. RBB’s emphasis on “profitability” will exacerbate the problem.
- **Limiting students’ program choices.** Even while violating prep limits, small high schools cannot offer the range of subjects offered in large schools. Among the courses not available at some small high schools are sheltered-English core

subject instruction for LEP students, world languages other than Spanish, Advanced Placement courses, calculus, visual art, drama, music, dance or vocational education. Castlemont's planned break-up into small schools next year will eliminate all of its current vocational education offerings.

- **Contracting out work.** The difficulty in providing a full program with a small staff has led some small high schools to "creatively" provide art and PE without art and PE teachers. Some small high schools have operated without a counselor. Fremont's six small schools have no recorder this year, so counselors there have added that work to their load without the contractually mandated stipend. Last year, District administrators advised small school design teams to sidestep contractual requirements to rehire laid-off classified workers by changing their job descriptions. As schools suffer the effects of drastic cuts in custodial and food services, pressure to contract out these jobs to non-union companies will mount.

Expedience vs. Sustainability

Politicians and top administrators often accuse those with contractual objections to their latest education plans of "putting adults' concerns ahead of children." This rhetoric falsely pits unionism and democracy against educational progress. The problems we've described undermine not only OEA and the rights of our members, but the sustainability of our schools. Overstressed, disrespected and burned out educators will not sustain the growth of powerful learning communities. Nor will a perpetual revolving door replacing the burnouts with rookies

Sugar-Coating the Attack on Public Schools

In the hands of a District historically hostile to unions and teachers, and which has repeatedly used the veneer of "reform" to impose its will, it should surprise nobody that small schools could be similarly exploited. Some exploitation feeds on educators' willingness to subsidize underfunded programs with volunteer labor. Small schools, rightfully praised for their team spirit, are also favored by those pressing schools to do more with less.

At a Board meeting last year where OEA protested almost 1200 layoff letters, a District spokesperson lauded small schools for "tapping inner resources at a time of shrinking outer resources." This year, a leading small schools advocate and principal opened a public hearing about a plan to close elementary schools with a lengthy explanation that the closures are a painful part of a necessary process of change. This closure of "unprofitable" schools represents the first salvo of Randolph Ward's brand of RBB.

But long before Ward's arrival, Fremont High's principal promoted the school's break-up into small learning communities as "educational entrepreneurship," in which competition for enrollment (and ADA) would spur excellence. Embracing an enterprising spirit within public schools, he said, was our only defense against the tide of charters and privatization. Does this view represent the mainstream of the small schools movement, or is it another OUSD abuse of it? In OEA, we need to thoughtfully consider the implications of competition among small schools in order to clarify our analysis and strategy.

Real vs. Illusory Reform

Some new elementary schools in Oakland exemplify the best in small school reform. Even at some of the new small high schools, closer relationships among staff, students and parents reveal exciting possibilities. As noted earlier, given the proper conditions, small schools can provide a vehicle for powerful learning. Absent those conditions, small schools will bring a hit-or-miss pattern of success and failure, increase fragmentation, and dilute of our collective power to fight for sufficient resources and against privatization.

We need not fall into the mistaken pursuit of “half a loaf instead of none.” Oakland is not a poor city. The aggregate annual profits of major corporations located in downtown Oakland and at the Port are in the billions. Soon OEA plans to launch an in-depth study of Oakland’s corporate wealth and the extent to which it has and hasn’t paid its share to the community.

When we strip away the myth that scarce resources are a fact of life, we can demand reform that truly addresses our students’ needs. We need small schools with the resources to offer full programs and to provide educators with respect, reasonable work loads, small classes, and adequate support, materials, facilities and time to plan lessons *and* to run the school. Teacher teams will be empowered only with enough time during the work day to discuss and make wise policies.

During our last negotiations, the District attempted to exempt all small schools from major contract provisions. Not only must we continue to reject such proposals, OEA also must take a leading role to ensure that new small schools are sustainable environments for teaching and learning.

A strong start would be to bargain contract language building union orientation and guidance into each small school’s “incubation” process. Contract provisions on hiring and transfers, class size, subject prep limits, Faculty Council, conference periods and pay for extra meetings are not impediments to small schools’ success; rather, they are indispensable conditions for serious school reform. Denying this reality to accommodate warped economic and political priorities will perpetuate failure. Let us envision and fight for what we know can work.