



*Bringing Oakland together for our students*

VIA E-MAIL

May 13, 2011

Board of Education  
Oakland Unified School District  
1025 2nd Avenue, Suite 320  
Oakland, CA 94606-2212

Dear Board of Education Members:

As the Board of Education prepares to review a first draft of *Thriving Students*, GO Public Schools writes with an appreciation as well as to emphasize four key ideas that will be critical to the early stages of implementing *Thriving Students*.

We applaud the vision of the Board and Superintendent Smith in creating this plan. We also deeply appreciate the hard work of and thoughtful contributions made by the entire Oakland education community in developing a unifying vision for Oakland's students. We know that the Board of Education—as leaders of Oakland's education community—will make sure that *Thriving Students* is a living document that improves the lives of students and evolves based on student need.

### **Implementing *Thriving Students***

*Thriving Students* requires the commitment of the entire Oakland community. One important challenge to its success is the skepticism of an education community and public who have seen previous strategic plans abandoned, shifted, or poorly executed. The District's approach should address and overcome this wariness. For the early days of implementation, GO's initial suggestions center around four main themes:

**(1) Sense of Urgency and Accountability:** After a year of planning, *Thriving Students* must strive to make an immediate improvement for students during the first year of implementation, and a critical way to make that happen is to ensure that specific people are accountable for every project.

**(2) Transparency and Accessibility:** To create community buy-in, the progress, barriers, and successes of *Thriving Students* should be documented publicly and in a way that is easy for the public to access.

**(3) Integration and Collaboration:** The District cannot afford for its departments to work in silos or for projects to proliferate. Departments must work together and managers must be disciplined to keep teams focused.

**(4) Collective Impact:** The District needs to clarify what decisions will be made at school sites, collectively, or at the central office. Many parts of *Thriving Students* demand collective action and coordination among departments, schools, and partner agencies. However, Oakland schools have made significant progress through site-based decision-making, and the District should not abandon the successes that have happened as a result of schools controlling resources.

While some of this may seem basic, these important ideas can be overlooked if they are not given enough attention in the early phases of implementation. Following is a summary of GO's recommendations with additional detail available as an appendix.

# GO Public Schools' Initial Recommendations Implementing *Thriving Students* (Summary)

## 1. Sense of Urgency and Accountability

**a. “Why does this matter for me?”:** Everybody (parents, teachers, etc.) in the Oakland education community should understand clearly how *Thriving Students* will improve their experience of public education in Oakland. Specifically, Oakland stakeholders should be able to say how this plan benefits them personally – how does this improve teaching conditions, parent access, community safety, etc. – and how it translates to an excellent education for all students.

**b. “Who is responsible for success?”:** Every student outcome or implementation milestone for year one should be measurable, and it should be clear who is responsible for making it happen.

**c. “What is most important?”:** In a resource-constrained environment, the District should prioritize the specific student outcomes that require the most immediate attention and focus on the high-leverage actions that will improve those outcomes. *For example, if high school graduation and college-going rates are priority outcomes, OUSD should focus on secondary teacher and principal professional development, high school leader and teacher recruitment and retention, high school interventions programming, and pilot the full-service community schools at the high schools first.* The district should identify resources that departments and agencies *can and will* contribute to improving those outcomes.

## 2. Transparency and Accessibility

**a. Create a Student Outcomes Dashboard:** An effective Student Outcomes Dashboard will (1) identify the student outcomes to be improved, (2) be easily accessible (online, etc.), (3) identify specific responsible people, and (4) be updated quarterly to the public.

**b. Create a District Work Plan:** An effective District Work Plan will (1) combine the work of the 14 task forces, (2) clearly define success and have interim milestones, (3) have commitments from all departments and agencies involved, (4) identify specific responsible people, (5) be easily accessible (online, etc.), and (6) be updated quarterly to the public.

## 3. Integration and Collaboration

**a. Work Across Departments:** The District cannot afford for its departments to work in silos or for projects to proliferate. Departments must work together and managers must be disciplined to keep teams focused. District departments must work together to implement *Thriving Students* in order to be efficient and avoid losing sight of the larger goals.

## 4. Collective Impact

**a. Clarify Decision Making Framework:** In order for *Thriving Students* to improve OUSD's collective decision-making so that it advances equity and excellence across the city, more thought and time must be given to clarifying the District's decision-making framework.

**b. School Site Autonomy:** Building on the success of empowering school communities and principals, absent a compelling reason, the district's framework should default to the position that resources stay close to students and school sites should retain control over those resources.

### ***Moving Forward***

Leaders and the community must live up to our own high standards. In that spirit, GO Public Schools looks forward to supporting and evaluating the Board of Education and staff's implementation of the plan as a whole, as well specific areas aligned with GO's Beliefs and Vision.

To begin, we will support our community in sharing its feedback on *Thriving Students* by participating in the district engagements following the release of the plan on May 18. We invite the Board of Education, District leadership, and task force leaders/members to sit down and engage with the community as it offers constructive feedback on the first draft of *Thriving Students*.

Again, GO congratulates the Oakland education community for its efforts in developing this plan. We look forward to seeing the preliminary results of the task force process so that we can begin the hard work of making it real for our students.

Sincerely,

Jonathan Klein, President  
Great Oakland Public Schools

Marc Tafolla, Policy Director  
Great Oakland Public Schools

Cc: Tony Smith, Superintendent, OUSD  
Vernon Hal, Deputy Superintendent, Business Services & Operations, OUSD  
Maria Santos, Deputy Superintendent, Instruction, Leadership & Equity-in-Action, OUSD

## Appendix: GO Public Schools' Initial Recommendations Implementing *Thriving Students* (Detailed)

### 1. Sense of Urgency and Accountability

**a. “Why does this matter for me?”: Everybody (parents, teachers, etc.) in the Oakland education community should understand clearly how *Thriving Students* will improve their experience of public education in Oakland.**

The District should ensure that (1) Students, (2) Parents/caregivers, (3) Teachers, (4) School Leaders, and (5) School Support Staff understand clear outcomes marking how OUSD will be improved for them as a result of *Thriving Students*. For example, as a result of the first year of implementing *Thriving Students*:

- *Teachers will have access to 60 additional minutes of collaboration time each week; or,*
- *Families will receive “X” progress reports each year on student academic and social development.*

This will increase community support for the plan. And, given the scope of the plan, it is critical that everybody understands why he or she should be personally invested in this new direction.

**b. “Who is responsible for success?”: Each student outcome for year one should be measurable, and it should be clear who is responsible for making it happen.**

Without accountability, the District could easily become derailed in the implementation process. All goals—but especially year one goals—should be specific, measurable, and meaningful. Each year one goal should be assigned to specific individuals who are then held accountable for success. Progress reports should be regular, accessible, and public. With a wide array of departments and agencies involved in the process, the Board should be on guard against vague accountability measures. The Board should work with staff to develop a public accountability calendar with dates and topics for reporting on the progress and goals of the plan.

**c. “What is most important?”: The District should select the most important student outcomes and focus immediately on improving them during year one. The district should identify resources that departments and agencies *can and will* contribute to improving those outcomes.**

The District clearly has fewer resources than anticipated when OUSD established this direction in June 2010. Therefore, the District should create a list of priority student outcomes for year one and prioritize implementing *Thriving Students* around those outcomes. These outcomes should be high impact with clear, achievable, and measurable goals. This will increase collaboration among leaders from different sites, departments and agencies. This discipline/collaboration is necessary to avoid “project proliferation” that the District cannot afford. Instead, groups and leaders must be asked to collaborate on shared, interdependent projects.

Successful implementation will require a focus on identifying what resources each agency and department **can and will** contribute to the work rather than focusing on limitations. This visibility will help create additional investment. The District might consider a public process inviting endorsements of the plan from partners and give partners both a chance to comment on and commit publicly to how they will support the plan.

## **2. Transparency and Accessibility**

**a. Create a Student Outcomes Dashboard: An effective Student Outcomes Dashboard will (1) identify the student outcomes to be improved, (2) be easily accessible (online, etc.), (3) identify specific responsible people, and (4) be updated quarterly to the public.**

Ultimately, results for students are the most important measures of success for *Thriving Students*. By creating a student outcome dashboard and updating it regularly to the public, OUSD will foster alignment both within the district organization and among partners about how to best use scarce resources and capacity.

**b. Create a District Work Plan: An effective District Work Plan will (1) combine the work of the 14 task forces, (2) clearly define success and have interim milestones, (3) have commitments from all departments and agencies involved, (4) identify specific responsible people, (5) be easily accessible (online, etc.), and (6) be updated quarterly to the public.**

As an initial step, district leadership should create a single brief document explaining how the 14 Task Force's work overlaps. This will allow the District and community to better understand and effectively prioritize the work.

A Work Plan with clear goals and benchmarks will help the district and community remain confident that *Thriving Students* is moving forward. Clear goals will also help the district address small issues as they arise rather than waiting until they become more significant problems. Additionally, *Thriving Students* requires the support of many departments, organizations, and agencies across Oakland. Having a clear Work Plan, including the commitments of these entities, will help solidify the support and confidence of all partners.

## **3. Integration and Collaboration**

**a. Work Across Departments: The District cannot afford for its departments to work in silos or for projects to proliferate. Departments must work together and managers must be disciplined to keep teams focused. District departments must work together to implement *Thriving Students* in order to be efficient and avoid losing sight of the larger goals.**

In addition to prioritization, working across departments will help create support and build awareness for the value of each department, and will underscore how the work is interconnected. OUSD has, in the past, suffered when departments do not understand how their work affects others. GO acknowledges that it is essential for District staff to have the resources necessary to implement *Thriving Students*.

In terms of efficiency, working across departments should have the explicit goal of minimizing disruption to school sites. For example, different task forces should use technology to coordinate their information requests to site administrators. It is important that teachers and administrators not be distracted from serving students because many task forces ask them the same question, in slightly different forms. Lack of coordination will result in weak information and lack of participation from staff.

#### **4. Collective Impact: (Large scale change requiring cross district coordination)**

**a. Clarify Decision Making Framework: In order for *Thriving Students* to improve OUSD's collective decision-making so that it advances equity and excellence across the city, more thought and time must be given to clarifying the District's decision-making framework.**

OUSD lacks District-wide clarity about who makes decisions around people, time, program, and resources. For example, *under what circumstances should the school site control resources and when should the central office?* In order for *Thriving Students* to improve OUSD's collective decision-making so that it advances equity and excellence across the city, more thought and time must be given to clarifying the District's decision-making framework.

Starting with 1998's Site-Based Decision-Making policy, OUSD's direction has been to increase decision-making authority at the school sites. By contrast, several initiatives under *Thriving Students*, such as some of the proposals coming out of Regional Governance Task Force, may represent a break from the value of school site autonomy and shift to central decision-making.

OUSD needs to address this change thoughtfully and deliberately by creating a decision-making framework that addresses questions about who makes decisions about people, time, program, and resources. An effective district-wide framework will:

- guide these decisions rather than forcing staff to recreate that decision making process at each juncture, which will no doubt, arise frequently through implementing *Thriving Students*.
- make *Thriving Students* more deliberative and coherent;
- ensure the transparency of the district's decision-making process; and
- alleviate community fears that successful school-site autonomy reforms will be lost without compelling reasons or capacity to make better decisions collectively.

**b. School Site Autonomy: Building on the success of empowering school communities and principals, absent a compelling reason, the district's framework should default to the position that resources stay close to students and school sites should retain control over those resources.**

OUSD has made solid gains over the last 6 years in part by empowering school communities with resources and decision-making authority. However, there are clearly some decisions and resources that should be centrally controlled (e.g. Board of Ed. staff/support).

After the district defines the potential universe of school-site decision-making, it should create a transparent framework for determining when to deviate from its default position and shift decision making to the Central Office. This framework may contain factors such as:

- *Is this resource a key central resource such that devolving it impacts the district's ability to fulfill a core function? Or*
- *Is this resource currently supporting a core function or a strategic function in the central office? If it's a strategic function, what evidence do we have to support its effectiveness? Or*
- *Is this resource needed infrequently or unpredictably making it hard for schools to budget for it?*

A successful framework will also clarify what services are mandated that school sites provide and what resources the school sites will receive to provide those services.