

Oakland Unified School District

ACORN Woodland Elementary School

**1025 81st Avenue
Oakland, California
94621**

**Principal: Kimi Kean
Dates of review: May 20 – to 21, 2009
Reviewer: David Glick
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Content of the report

Part 1: The School Context

Background information about the school

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well

What the school needs to improve

Part 3: Main findings

Part 1: The School Context

Information about the school:

ACORN Westland Elementary School (AWE) serves approximately 250 students in kindergarten through grade 5. The student body is comprised of 74 percent Hispanic, 21 percent African-American, 3 percent Pacific Islander and 1 percent Asian. Seventy percent of the students are Spanish-speaking English language learners, and 92 percent are eligible for free or reduced price lunch compared to 64 percent district-wide. Three percent are special education students. The school's 95 percent attendance rate is equal to the district average.

Although the school started in 2000, the school underwent a significant "re-incubation" in 2005 as it moved into its new facility with its current configuration and leadership. The school shares a multi-building campus with another elementary school. The two schools share a cafeteria and jointly offer after-school activities.

Part 2: Overview

What the school does well:

- Using a multitude of creative approaches, the school builds very strong positive, collegial relationships among teachers, staff members, parents and students, resulting in a close-knit community with a deep commitment to the school.
- The well-loved principal creates multiple structures to establish shared leadership practices while still maintaining her authority as the leader of the school.
- The leadership team and the teachers effectively use data to monitor and predict the academic progress of the students and the school, as well as to actively reflect on the school's strengths and areas for improvement.
- Teachers strategically group students, particularly for reading, to provide targeted assistance appropriate to each student's level.
- The school actively instructs students in group processes, conflict resolution and the school's nine core values of scholarship, integrity, dignity, perseverance, compassion, leadership, communication, reflection and inquiry.
- A wide range of after-school and enrichment activities, coordinated with the day school, addresses many students' academic, artistic and athletic needs.
- The school engages parents in a multitude of ways to support the academic, behavioral and cultural growth of the school and its students.

Areas for improvement:

- Improve the consistency of teaching and of lessons by clarifying expectations for teacher lesson plans and holding teachers accountable for implementing strategies gained from professional development experiences.
- Refine the use of standards-based learning objectives and associated rubrics to more clearly focus instruction on the state standards.
- Establish specific, measurable, challenging, standards-based goals for each individual student, classroom and the school as a whole.

Part 3: Main Findings

OVERALL EVALUATION: THE SCHOOL'S OVERALL PERFORMANCE

ACORN Woodland Elementary School (AWE) has experienced dramatic improvements in performance over the past few years, and has now established itself as one of Oakland's high-achieving schools. Performance is above district averages in nearly all areas, and achievement gaps between measured subgroups are generally small. High expectations are the norm, and students have multiple opportunities to get the resources and support they need to succeed.

Teaching is generally high quality, although several teachers depend on whole-group instruction which results in some inattentive students. Generally, assignments are creative, engaging, and focused on critical thinking. Most teachers track data through posted charts that allow students to monitor their own progress in multiple subject areas. However, many teachers do not use clear standards-based objectives or rubrics to clearly describe what the students should be learning and what high quality work looks like.

The school deliberately teaches its core values and consistently communicates high expectations for learning and behavior to students. Although minor behavior problems occur more often than desired, major problems such as fights are extremely rare. Strategic and deliberate efforts to create a respectful environment that bridges role and culture differences demonstrate the school's commitment to mutual respect throughout the school community.

The principal is well respected by the entire community. As someone with a background similar to that of many of her students, she is genuinely concerned for the students and possesses a powerful ability to connect with families. Effective structures for sharing leadership engage staff and parents in school decision-making without diminishing the principal's authority. A culture of continuous improvement permeates the school, and students are proud to know that theirs is one of the highest achieving schools in Oakland.

The parents and community very involved with the school, in part because the school was founded by community members. Multiple practices ensure that this connection continues. Teachers visit homes at the beginning of the year to establish relationships with the families. After-school activities for students and a wide variety of classes for parents also serve to create a community that is far more encompassing than the traditional school hours.

Criterion 1: Student achievement in the core subjects

The students' achievement exceeds expectations.

ACORN Woodland Elementary School (AWE) has produced steadily improving results over the past few years. As of 2008, the most recent results available, the school's overall Academic Performance Index (API) of 785 exceeds the district average of 676 by 16 percent. The school's students also exceed district averages in proficiency English language arts, mathematics, and grade 4 writing. The most dramatic improvement came in the grade four writing proficiency, which jumped from 16 percent in 2007 to 74 percent in 2008. This result far exceeds the district average of 46 percent. Proficiency levels in grade 3 English and for English language learners were approximately flat from 2006 to 2008 and remain slightly below district average.

For 2008 and based on these subgroups, the school achieved a statewide ranking of six, meaning it is in the top 50 percent of schools in the state. In comparison to similar schools, AWE has a ranking of nine, putting it in the top 20 percent of similar schools statewide.

The school's numerically significant subgroups include Hispanic students, socio-economically disadvantaged students, and English language learners. All other subgroups, including students with disabilities, fall below the 100-student threshold used for numerical significance in California. The school is comprised of 74 percent Hispanic/Latino students, 70 percent English language learners (ELL) and 92 percent socio-economically disadvantaged students. Achievement gaps between the measured subgroups are small, in part due to the large overlap between them.

Scores have increased significantly over the past few years. In 2006, only 20 percent of students achieved proficient or advanced on the English language arts, but by 2008, 44 percent were achieving at that level. Even more dramatically, in 2006, 25 percent of students performed at proficient or above, while in 2008, 65 percent did so.

Results on the 2008 California Standards Tests (CST) in mathematics are remarkably consistent across the measured subgroups with 61 to 67 percent of students in each group scoring at proficient or advanced. Proficiency in English language arts is neither as high nor as consistent. The largest gap is between English language learners and African-American students. Thirty-five percent of English language learners score proficient or above while 47 percent of African-American students perform at that level.

Science results on the CST are particularly erratic. Fifty percent of the boys score proficient or advanced while only 25 percent of the girls perform at that level. Although 34 percent of Hispanics score proficient or above, only 13 percent of English language learners do so. The school plans further study to better understand this challenge. Overall, the school performs above the district average in all three subject areas. The scores are above the state average in mathematics, but below state average in both English language arts and reading.

Criterion 2: The quality of learning and instruction provided, including quality of teaching, curriculum, assessment, and the use of performance data to promote learning.

This area of the school's work meets expectations.

At AWE the goal is excellence, not proficiency. The principal clearly states, "Proficiency is a floor, not a ceiling." This belief comes alive in most classrooms. Teachers use data from assessment software programs and interim tests to constantly monitor student progress. Nearly all classrooms have multiple charts where students and teachers together can chart student progress in reading and math, and sometimes other subjects as well. As a result, the school was ready for last year's much-improved test results. "Our results were not a surprise at all. We knew exactly how we were going to do."

Professional development activities include grade level meetings, collaborative lesson planning, and coaching by the leadership team. The school hires specialist consultants to fill gaps, such as a data specialist and a language arts specialist. The constant flow of information that results from these varied approaches results in a generally high quality of instruction throughout the school. A great deal of professional development also happens informally before and after school, and even on weekends. Said one teacher, "It feels good to work in a place where everyone works hard." Teachers commonly need to remind each other to leave the school and lead a balanced life. Even students recognize their teachers' commitment and commented on how teachers should be paid more, should have more vacations, and not have to buy things for the school with their own money.

The school has developed curriculum maps that explicitly plan the academic year. All teachers are aware of the maps and, in many cases, have been involved in writing them. The maps clearly outline each core area of the curriculum and the plans for addressing state standards. Teachers consistently post daily agendas that they follow carefully. Instructions for activities are consistently clear, and students follow them dutifully. However, in the classroom, teachers rarely post or refer to learning objectives. As a result, although students understand what they are supposed to be doing, they less often understand the reasons behind the

activities. Without the clear objectives, teachers are unable to explicitly tie activities to state standards for the students. Students are therefore unaware of how their daily work and their performance on the California Standards Tests (CST) and other tests are connected.

Clearly, teachers have high expectations and students strive to achieve at a high level. However, teachers rarely provide exemplars or rubrics that demonstrate what excellent work looks like. The school uses and continues to refine a writing rubric, but other subjects and most projects do not share in the benefits that such a rubric provides. Similarly, students are aware of their reading level and strive to improve it. However, they do not fully understand what they need to do or learn to move up in reading level or what strategies will help them get there.

Several teachers depend primarily on whole-group instruction. During those lessons, students quickly become bored and inattentive. Low-level behavior problems arise that frustrate both students and teachers. However, in most classes, individual and small-group projects that allow for individual expression effectively engage students in learning. In some cases, teachers use the school's mobile computer lab to provide differentiated instruction and age-appropriate activities. The school's technology coordinator is usually available to assist with both the technical and instructional aspects of using the computers.

Extended day activities include a wide range of artistic, athletic and academic options that engage students effectively. A large number of students participate in these activities, and many stay at the school as late as 6:00 pm on a regular basis. One student said, "I don't like going home. It's boring there. I like being at school more." Another added, "All the activities we do in school are so awesome." Amongst these after-school activities are academic intervention classes for students struggling in particular subject areas. Students see participation in these classes as a positive thing that will help them succeed. Parents also commented positively about how students are so engaged in school life, they have little time for television or for getting in trouble.

Criterion 3: School environment and fostering the development of students' personal character

This area of the school's work exceeds expectations.

AWE has adopted nine core values that summarize its approach to character development: scholarship, integrity, dignity, perseverance, compassion, leadership, communication, reflection and inquiry. Teachers deliberately model these values in multiple ways. At the beginning of the year, teachers and other staff members participate together in a retreat that emphasizes the important role of all adults in maintaining the school community. Following that, students are oriented into the school with a series of character education lessons aligned to the core values. Both teachers and support staff teach these classes, which contributes to the sense of equity and responsibility for all. The generally positive student behavior at the school, although certainly not perfect, demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach.

Although there are occasional behavior problems at the school, the school administration plans strategically to address issues that may arise and responds quickly to immediate situations. For example, the school created a position of Social Support Counselor. That person acts as conflict mediator, social worker, and counselor. As a result, in his words, "There is an abnormal lack of knock-down fights here. In this community, where things can escalate so quickly that people die, things do not escalate here in the school." Parents confirm this observation.

As described in Criterion 2 above, extended periods of whole-group instruction contribute to inattentiveness in some classrooms. Although some students express frustration with classroom behavior flare-ups, they are respectful and appreciative of the rules. One student sheepishly stated, "When you get in trouble, it's not just for getting in trouble, it's for learning your lessons." Teachers and students both express concern that

behavior deteriorates for substitute teachers or when teachers are not present. However, students clearly play well together on the school grounds with minimal supervision.

Students are taught to mediate their own conflicts, and one such incident played out during the site visit. A second grade student approached the teacher and calmly said, "We're having a conflict in our group." After a few gentle questions, the teacher encouraged the student to solve the problem with his classmate. With minimal assistance from the teacher, the student was able to get the attention of the other child. The two of them separated themselves from the group, expressed their opinions, and both went back to the group smiling.

Under the supervision of a school safety officer, students act as crossing guards and help control the pick-up/drop-off processes at the school's entrance. In many classrooms, students also have clean-up or organizational roles that increase their level of responsibility. In one revealing case, a teacher, without hesitation, gave a pair of students the keys to her office so they could retrieve something.

Students are extremely proud of their school and their performance. Numerous incentives and awards programs motivate them, and the teachers actively encourage exceptional performance. One student stated, "We're the highest school in Oakland! They keep telling us we're the highest, and that makes us want to learn more."

Criterion 4: Effective school management and leadership.

This area of the school's work meets expectations.

The school's nine core values of scholarship, integrity, dignity, perseverance, compassion, leadership, communication, reflection and inquiry provide a clear and consistent foundation for learning throughout the school. The school spends several days at the beginning of each year providing deliberate instruction in these values. The experience is carefully structured to ensure that all students work with all teachers and staff members. As a result, all staff and students get to know each other early in the year. Most adults know almost all students by name, and use these relationships to effectively maintain the learning environment.

The principal shares leadership effectively through the leadership team, a school culture team and a faculty council. The principal is receptive to ideas from all stakeholders. Students, parents and staff all find her very approachable and effective at setting a vision, resolving challenges and whenever possible, providing the resources necessary to address any problems. The principal effectively implements shared leadership while simultaneously leaving no doubt that she is the ultimate decision maker responsible for all aspects of the school.

The small staff enjoys little turnover, allowing for stable growth and long-lasting impact of professional development efforts. All adults in the building know each other well and work together toward common goals. The principal observes classes frequently. High quality staff interaction occurs frequently through grade level meetings, and colleagues regularly help each other develop plans and resolve issues. As a result, formalized and extensive teacher evaluation processes are not a high priority for the school. The principal was referring to both students and teachers when she stated, "It's much harder to fail here than it is to be successful."

Constant data analysis for both academics and behavior provides the school with a consistently up-to-date view of the school's progress. The school uses the data from interim benchmark tests, Accelerated Reader and classroom assessments to plan staff development experiences, identify struggling teachers and students, make curriculum changes, and predict levels of success on upcoming tests. For example, English language arts results have encouraged the school to move away from the Open Court Reading Series (OCR) in favor of a more balanced literacy approach.

Consistently high expectations drive the school leadership in all areas. As mentioned earlier, CST proficiency is seen as a floor rather than a ceiling. The principal describes this as an emphasis on learning

rather than performance. When looking for benchmarks for her students' success, she looks not to other similar schools, but to the highest performing public and private schools she can find. "I ask myself and my teachers," she said, "Could our kids hang in there with private school kids?" Although test scores are generally solid and improving, she noted, "We know we're not there yet because kids are not reading at home on their own as much as we would like. We can always do better."

Criterion 5: Partnerships with parents and community

This area of the school's work exceeds expectations.

ACORN Woodland Elementary was created by the community and maintains extraordinarily close relationships with its families and organizations. Parents are proud of the principal and her performance. The first thing they said when asked what they liked about the school was, "We love our principal."

Parents appreciate the numerous opportunities they have which enable them to be involved in the school. The School Site Council (SSC) allows parents a voice in the decision-making. A wide variety of classes such as nutrition and self-defense serve to involve parents in the school community while also providing valuable skills and information. Data Night, Science Night and swimming lessons at the local YMCA also develop the school community.

Teachers engage parents at the beginning of the school year with home visits that include positive goal setting. In the case of returning students, teachers review the previous year's data, as well as the school's core values. Teachers communicate frequently and constructively with most parents about performance so that the parent-teacher relationship is almost universally positive. When problems arise, the strong partnership pays its dividends, and the teacher and parent can easily work together with the student to resolve the issue.

To proactively reduce any potential cultural conflicts in the school, the principal initiated "Partnership Class." This monthly parent class brings together parents from the Hispanic/Latino and the African-American communities served by the school. As a result, a high degree of trust, understanding and camaraderie exists among the participating parents. This infectious positive mood permeates the various parent classes and activities. For students, community-led after-school activities include both Hip-Hop and Ballet Folklórico to represent aspects of the two cultures prevalent at the school.

Parents feel that their students are very safe at the school. Although they recognize that there are occasional behavior problems, they fully trust the teachers and administration. "There's always someone here looking after your babies." "Everybody looks at the kids as their own kids." Furthermore, they appreciate the exceptional dedication of the staff, which includes their willingness to take students on weekend outings to the farmers' market or other events. "Teachers and staff will go beyond what's regular. That's not job-related. That's heart-related."

The school also helps parents understand how they can help their children move forward academically. Although this assistance does not extend to clear, individualized goals that are updated regularly, teachers coach parents to turn off the television, set aside reading time and help them to review for tests. Parents attend rewards ceremonies that honor students' achievement and growth.

The parent enthusiasm for the school is genuine and deep. When asked what they would change about the school, the large group of 15-20 parents was challenged to come up with anything other than "extend the school to eighth grade." One parent smiled, sighed and said simply, "Está completa." It is complete.