



## National Model or Temporary Opportunity? The Oakland Education Reform Story

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Education reform takes more than just money and revolutionary ideas. Meaningful change comes only when strong leadership, structural reforms grounded in law, and long-term commitment combine to result in measurable student achievement. These are among the lessons learned in an unprecedented in-depth study by the Center for Education Reform (CER) of reform efforts in the Oakland (Calif.) Unified School District.

Oakland has long been hailed as a national model for education reform in which public-private partnerships combined with strong leadership and vision to transform a long-struggling public education system. But as today's report shows, an in-depth look brings into question both the success and the staying power of these reforms.

"Without question, the Oakland school district has made some dramatic improvements in recent years," said Jeanne Allen, CER president and leading authority on school reform. "But those improvements have been dependent on people, not the substantive, statutory reforms that can outlive personnel changes. Even with the best people in place, long-term gains cannot occur unless districts make permanent changes that exist long after a superintendent is gone."

The report outlines 10 important lessons learned from Oakland's reform efforts. Among them:

- **Decentralization promotes change.** The potential for drastic change in failing school districts increases tremendously the moment the elected school board is stripped of its power. Oakland saw significant change only after the state took control of the district.
- **Competitive pressures are key.** Charter schools in Oakland have proved an important part of student improvement. They also gave state-appointed manager Randy Ward an upper hand in negotiations with teachers and central office staff. Unfortunately, many charter operators say they have existed without any meaningful support from the district. Although the success of charters for some of the city's most poor had been ignored by many in the district, their existence fueled the move to restructure and create smaller schools which had a positive effect on student achievement. The district benefited from charters in many ways.
- **People matter.** Educators and administrative staff responded to pressures from Ward because of his leadership skills. But people need more than personalities to sustain reform. Ward failed to make critical contract changes that would allow performance to be a criterion for rewards and sanctions.
- **Political support is essential.** School leaders attempting to implement reform must have strong political backing all the way up to the top. The Oakland study found that Ward repeatedly tried to have his contract with Oakland renewed - an effort that was denied by the state superintendent. This led to speculation that teachers unions or other political forces unhappy with Ward's reforms put pressure on the state to change course in Oakland.
- **Student achievement is a necessary outcome.** Successful reforms only happen when student instruction is



significantly enhanced. Although Oakland students' performance on California's Academic Performance Index increased by 19 points between 2005 and 2006 - the single highest increase of any large city in the state that year - it still lagged 68 points behind the state average score, a strong indicator of how much work still needs to be done in Oakland just to reach "average."

Oakland earns points for its efforts to reinvent its bureaucracy. Today's report, however, demonstrates that even well-funded, well-researched, and well-led reform efforts take more than superficial changes to succeed. True education reform must be grounded in law and must spread responsibility beyond bureaucracy of the school district.

This report is particularly important in light of other troubled district leadership changes, such as Washington, D.C. School leaders who work to implement legislative changes in contracts and expand choice-related reforms will leave more control in the hands of people who stay after leaders are gone.

Click here to view the full report [National Model or Temporary Opportunity? The Oakland Education Reform Story](#) by Joe Williams.

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*The Center for Education Reform would like to thank the Koret Foundation Funds for its support of this report that not only challenges and strengthens the San Francisco Bay Area educational system, but seeks to inspire communities across the nation.*

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