

Decolonizing School Systems: Racial Justice, Radical Healing, and Educational Equity inside Oakland Unified School District

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A deep district-wide commitment to racial equity for African American male students, based on the framework of targeted universalism, has laid the foundation for expanding the focus to include African American girls, Latinola students, and Asian and Pacific Islander students.

Educational spaces, like the rest of our nation’s current policy arenas, have become a contentious terrain where ideological and political battles are fought and particular futures won. We write this article in the aftermath of the atrocity at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, in August 2017, where racism, racial rage, hate, violence, and death took center stage during a white supremacist rally at an institution of higher education. A month later, motions were set into play to repeal the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program – impacting the legal rights of children of immigrants to attend school.

Oakland is also a battlefield. The innovative work of the Office of African American Male Achievement (AAMA)¹ in Oakland Unified School

District (OUSD) is part of a larger legacy to reimagine schooling as powerfully inclusive and unapologetically democratic. We offer a racial justice paradigm for other school systems struggling to move towards educational equity.

THEORY OF CHANGE: TARGETED UNIVERSALISM

A driving, essential question within AAMA’s theory of change is, *who is the canary in the coal mine* – that is, who will be affected first and most severely by the toxicities of the system? This question derives from John Powell’s (2009) extensive legal scholarship on

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1 See <https://www.ousd.org/Domain/78>.

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structural racism and racialized spaces. To achieve equity, his framework, *targeted universalism*, focuses on those least served. The National Equity Project describes it in this way (Perrius 2011):

Targeted Universalism alters the usual approach of universal strategies (policies that make no distinctions among citizens’ status, such as universal health care) to achieve universal goals (improved health), and instead suggests we use targeted strategies to reach universal goals.

In other words, problems of society are likely to spill over into the lives of everyone – just as the lower Ninth

“African American male students are extraordinary and deserve a school system that meets their unique and dynamic needs.”

– Office of African American Male Achievement

Ward was not the only part of New Orleans to suffer in the wake of Katrina, nor did the subprime credit crisis end in poor, urban communities, but, rather, spread throughout the global economy (powell, 2009; powell & Watt, 2009). To improve the entire ecosystem, specific *institutional targets* need to expose, address, and uplift those who are least served. Strategic

inputs then create improvements that cascade out, affecting the policies and practices of the larger collective.

OAKLAND ELEVATES A COUNTER-NARRATIVE: OFFICE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE ACHIEVEMENT

In the K–12 system, the urban school crisis affects African American males unlike any other ethnic or gender group (Ferguson, 2001; Ginwright, 2010; Howard, Douglas & Warren 2016; Noguera, 2009). Consistent with these national patterns, OUSD was facing major challenges with educating Black males successfully. On nearly every academic indicator, these students were disproportionately unsuccessful in school. In 2009-2010, African American males in OUSD were chronically absent: missing 17.6 percent of the academic year in elementary school, 19.8 percent in middle school, and 22.2 percent in high school. Even though they comprised 17 percent of the population, Black males accounted for 42 percent of the suspensions annually and their graduation rate was only 41 percent.²

The district applied powell’s framework of targeted universalism to Oakland and devised a plan to elevate African American male students and, in the process, improve the educational ecosystem for all children.³ OUSD joined forces with community organizers, religious leaders, neighborhood elders, teachers, parents, and students to launch the Office of African American Male Achievement (AAMA). These pioneers made the formal declaration that, “African American male students are extraordinary and deserve a school system that meets their unique and

2 Data in this section are from the OUSD Research, Assessment, and Data department.

3 For more on targeted universalism in Oakland, see Chatmon & Gray 2015.

dynamic needs.” To accomplish this goal, Oakland dared to name institutionalized racism – and not the children – as the problem. Under the leadership of one of the authors, Christopher Chatmon, various listening campaigns and initiatives were launched to disrupt underachievement by elevating a counter-narrative of Black educational excellence.

At the writing of this article seven years later (late 2017), AAMA’s flagship Manhood Development elective course is now being offered at twenty-three elementary, middle, and high schools throughout the district, out of a total of eighty-seven district-run schools, and serves around 16 percent of the African American male student population. These academically rigorous classes are taught by African American male teachers who form deep relationships with the students and help them navigate through school and life. Students develop an understanding of who they are as African American males, develop a brotherhood among classmates, and boost their academic achievement by building their vocabulary and studying challenging, culturally responsive texts (Ross et al. 2016; Watson 2014). To date, AAMA has focused on eliminating four problematic conditions: harsh discipline, unequipped teachers, biased curriculum, and the media’s negative portrayal of African American males.

AAMA has contributed to the system-wide transformation of OUSD. Significant shifts have emerged because of AAMA’s theory of change and strategies. Seventy-five percent of the AAMA instructors are now funded through the district. From 2011-2012 to 2015-2016, the suspension rate for African American males decreased from 17.7 percent to 10.8 percent, and the raw numbers fell by 48.8 percent, from 1,200 to 614. From 2010-2011 to 2015-2016, the cohort graduation rate increased from 41.3 percent to

59.8 percent. While we cannot attribute these changes exclusively to the efforts of AAMA, they do suggest that the district is moving in the right direction.

AAMA has received national recognition, with features in the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, and the *Huffington Post*. When former President Barack Obama launched *My Brother’s Keeper*, AAMA was heralded as a beacon of promise. Subsequently David Johns, the previous executive director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans, frequently visited Oakland to garner best practices in the field. Chatmon received the prestigious recognition as a *Leader to Learn From* by *Education Week*.

SCALING UP RACIAL JUSTICE: THE OFFICE OF EQUITY

Although AAMA focused strategically on engaging, encouraging, and empowering African American male students, children do not develop in isolation. For AAMA to increase its impact, students’ families and their neighborhoods needed to become an explicit part of the solution. Moreover, district demographics are ever-changing; 41 percent of students are now Latinx. Focusing on the needs of Black boys is a step towards racial justice, but it is not the entire journey.

Building upon the successes of AAMA, in 2016, I (Chris Chatmon) launched the Office of Equity to implement the next stage of targeted universalism and take the work of racial equity and healing to scale. First, my colleagues and I are broadening support beyond African American males and have launched initiatives for African American girls and for other racial/ethnic groups. The Office of Equity aims to energize, inspire, and empower

students and staff at all levels of the district to develop initiatives that actively disrupt systemic inequities associated with race, gender, ethnicity, and class; examine biases; create inclusive and just conditions; and improve outcomes for African American, Latino/a, and Asian and Pacific Islander students.⁴

The Office of Equity is joining together piecemeal movements that have been under way in Oakland for generations. Each program director is tasked with organizing deep listening campaigns with key constituents and holding a community conversation around the findings. Similar to AAMA, programs are student-centered and asset-based. However, there are also differences. For instance, fights among African American girls were escalating, so a plan was devised to organize restorative healing circles. By continuously elevating the children – in particular, children of color – who are furthest away from opportunity, OUSD is addressing and ameliorating structural disparities in schooling.

Another key shift under way is the expansion of the AAMA theory of action. After several years of work with individual schools at more than twenty sites, the application of targeted universalism has intentionally moved toward greater efficacy and deeper support for school communities, using a regional approach in the city’s most disparate pockets of West Oakland.⁵ In partnership with OUSD’s Office of Research, Assessment, and Data, the Office of Equity compiled information based upon neighborhood stress levels (1=least stressed to 6=most stressed) that took into account a normalized composite score for several indicators, such as crime, food security, socio-economics, and other environmental issues. The entire West Oakland Area

received an overall score of 4.48, and from there, two sites were selected.

As part of this strategy, both AAMA and the African American Female Excellence (AAFE) initiative will now be housed directly in West Oakland. My staff and I are wrapping around an elementary and middle school (in a feeder pattern) with the goal of creating an ecological change for African American students *and* families. With stronger, real-time relationships and the efficiency of co-location, AAMA/AAFE leaders will be able to develop rhythms with principals and culture keepers at each site with greater traction and nuances. Key strategies and programs include adult learning, mentorship, and restorative circles, among others.⁶

These strategies and programs have all been piloted independently at other Oakland school sites over the last seven years, but never before has there been a synergy of scope to align the best of these practices simultaneously within a feeder pattern. Ultimately, this prototype program will serve as a “proof point” to further accelerate the change necessary to utilize schools as beacons for community revitalization (Warren 2005, 2014). The vision is to shift the narrative by normalizing success, celebrating community assets, and reclaiming the legacy of African American power in West Oakland.

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4 For a diagram representing the different initiatives of the Office of Equity, see <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/48>.

5 We are using *network improvement science*, an approach to applying a methodology to a scaled problem of practice in multiple venues, to apply targeted universalism for AAMA across our network of schools. See <http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/our-ideas/>.

6 For more detail on inputs and expected outcomes, see <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/48>.

DECOLONIZE SCHOOLING: A RACIAL JUSTICE FRAMEWORK

Which logic models are useful if the system itself is illogical? This rhetorical question helps break open the mythologies of white supremacy and the injurious nature of colonialism. School systems are not innocent bystanders in the reproduction of racism. Oppression constrains, confines, and suppresses the collective imagination. But education – whether in a classroom, community center, or at the kitchen table – can seed social change. As we critique the functions of schools, we cannot forego the liberatory nature of learning (Patel 2016).

The Office of Equity in OUSD has taken a number of action steps to decolonize school practices and curriculum, such as a series of rituals of resistance that, when practiced consistently and holistically over time, create shifts in the culture of the institution. Meetings and community events honor the ancestors, respect the past, and acknowledge the land; distinctive histories and herstories nourish a collective appreciation for difference; and the present is celebrated through the lives of the children, for they embody the future. Racial justice, radical healing, and educational equity are at the center of this movement.

Other action steps include an aggressive campaign to recruit and support Maestr@s – Chicano/a and Latino/a educators – that attracted fifty interested candidates in the first week; a new annual Latino/a staff appreciation gathering attended by 100 Latino/a staff; a Latino staff directory aimed at building a network for staff and creating support systems for students and families; and collegial space for African American and Latino/a instructors to work hand-in-hand and share pedagogical techniques and resources. Based on the success of AAMA models, one high school with

a high proportion of Latinos will pilot a newcomer intervention program to support unaccompanied minors arriving from Central America, and will launch a culturally sensitive mentoring program.⁷

Altogether, a racial justice paradigm exposes systemic ills, asks the hard questions, and simultaneously incubates possible answers. A “one size fits all” approach can become yet another Eurocentric entrapment of homogeneity. In our social justice work, we strive to reject the colonialism that pits people and programs against one another for funding and attribution.

The Office of Equity was born out of a struggle against racism; in Oakland, the ground was fertile because of generations of activism within and beyond the borders of the school district. The fight continues because the disproportionate failure rate of children of color is no longer an option. As equity-based work gains in popularity, it must guard against becoming just another fad that is pursued half-heartedly by districts but never fully realized.

Equity is not strictly policy-driven or compliance-based. It is a value system of service, humility, and love. It is about how individuals show up and work together, with purpose and integrity, to move the mountain of school reform. We are striving to transform systems to become more soulful, more humane, and inevitably more democratic.

We are constantly challenged and at times overwhelmed. It is essential to maintain a community of critical colleagues who are willing to struggle alongside one another. This work is not easy, because ecosystems of oppression can seem intractable.

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⁷ For more information, see <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/48>.

However, we are constantly reminded that courage is contagious, much like fear. Fear burdens and weighs heavily upon the heart, while courage enlightens. Both authors were struck by a recent call-to-action circulating on social media: *If you build a wall, we'll grow wings*. It is time to fly. As Assata Shakur teaches,

It is our duty to fight for
our freedom.
It is our duty to win.
We must love each other and
support each other.
We have nothing to lose but
our chains.

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FURTHER RESOURCES

Kingmakers of Oakland: <http://kingmakersofoakland.org>. A new docu-series on the Office of African American Male Achievement.

Radical Healing with Dr. Shawn Ginwright: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxbRQx_8TUA. This short video (under five minutes) on equity is a powerful teaching and organizing tool, designed to bring joy to justice and liberation to learning.