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Authors
Kissell, René Espinoza
Trujillo, Tina

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Leading Towards Equity Through Decades of Reform: Oral Histories of District Politics and Community-Driven Reform in Oakland

René Espinoza Kissell[1] and Tina Trujillo[1]

Abstract

District leaders have rich insights into managing civic-minded reforms, like community schools, yet, little research on school reform examines their experiences within policy paradigms and political contexts that are increasingly marketized. Through oral histories with two longtime Oakland education leaders, we show how leaders negotiated and carried out initiatives while juggling challenges. Despite commitments to quality public education, leaders often faced competing pressures and values by local and external actors. We argue that Oakland represents a critical case of central office reform amid a resource-scarce, market-oriented educational landscape that shapes racialized community engagement and redefines power dynamics in the district.

Keywords

leadership, identity, qualitative, scale construction, school reform, urban education, neoliberalism, social

[1]University of California, Berkeley, CA, USA

Corresponding Author:
René Espinoza Kissell, Graduate School of Education, University of California, 2121 Berkeley Way, #4224, Berkeley, CA 94720, USA.
Email: rkissell@berkeley.edu

Introduction

As local sites of opportunity, contestation, and imagination, the purposes of public schools and their leaders are shaped by competing educational goals around the civic, economic, and social purposes of schooling in society. The pressures on today's district leaders are part of a legacy of over three decades of disinvestment in public services, spurring experimentation via market-based strategies for school improvement, known as *neoliberal* ideology and practice. This trend follows more recent economic shifts, from state funding that has not bounced back from the Great Recession cuts to gentrification processes that have radically shifted the demographics and character of urban spaces. Understood within macro-level political and economic contexts, today's rapidly growing market-based school improvement reforms serve as cases of broader societal trends in public institutions around the world (Trujillo, 2016).

One particular reform, *community schools*, departs from the trend of market-based policies in a few key ways. Community schools represent a place-based improvement strategy where "schools partner with community agencies and local government to provide an integrated focus on academics, health and social services, youth and community development, and community engagement" (Oakes et al., 2017, p. 1). The practice has already existed informally across many individual schools in high poverty and working class urban areas, which are disproportionately Black and Latinx, and where staff coordinate these services out of necessity. Many school leaders are aware that clothing, food, and health needs, along with job and housing security, are necessary before students can feel safe, supported, and ready to learn. Community school models started in the 1970s, which were promoted by Black Panthers and other community groups as programs that could nurture schools' most vulnerable racial and socioeconomic groups by fostering more equitable learning conditions in historically disinvested neighborhoods (Drummond, 2016). In the 1990s, community schools grew with philanthropic support as a system-wide improvement approach due to the popularity of the Harlem Children's Zone, a charter school network led by Geoffrey Canada that provides free parent education, all-day pre-K, health services, and college admissions support. The reform spurred the Obama administration's Promise Neighborhoods program in 2010 at the federal level, along with district-wide initiatives in Oakland and New York City. What these different strategies share, besides their name, is an attention to the external conditions that shape schools, but that are also beyond their control, and a recognition that traditional school functions alone will not adequately meet

underserved students' needs without concerted, coordinated efforts across multiple sectors.

Yet, the potential of community schools, like many education reforms, is limited by factors like poverty and budget cuts, as well as an increasingly marketized education landscape. When district and school leaders are tasked with improving academic quality and educational equity, they are operating in a sphere that reaches much farther than district boundaries. They contend with political and economic conditions that often restrict the finances they have to work with and inequalities across race and class lines. Indeed, there has been increasing policy pressure on district leaders to follow through with the bottom line—financial solvency and test-based student outcomes. Federal policymakers and reform advocates entrust superintendents and others to turn around "failing" districts with the resources at their disposal in lieu of redistributive policies (Trujillo, 2013a). Educational leaders play an important role in mediating external standards and funding, local history and politics, and being responsive to the daily realities of their public school staff, students, and families (Oakes et al., 1998; Welner, 2001). Yet even expert leaders with the best of intentions and skills can sometimes lack the capacity to address the full range of exigencies in pushing through certain initiatives.

Thus, to understand why community schools initiatives sometimes take root and thrive, or why they falter, requires scholars to examine the reform as it is nested within the broader landscape. Whereas many analyses of reforms look narrowly at the dynamics of a single reform, investigations that consider the multitude of initiatives and policies that interact with community schools efforts can help explain why community schools, as a case of democratic reform, are structured differently in each city. Democratic schools and reform efforts, as they relate to school district governance, engage in more participatory forms of decision making which center the welfare of others as the part of a collective public good. This article considers one case of community schools, the Oakland case, as it relates to the other reforms and policies that preceded, coincided, and succeeded it. In doing so, we embed community schools within the broader field of urban district reform to present a textured analysis of the structural factors that weighed on its potential to deepen Oakland public schools' civic-oriented reforms amid multiple, competing market-based policy pressures.

While research on district leaders yield rich insights into the role of leadership development programs in preparing the future generations of school leaders, increasingly focused on managerial strategies taken from the business sector (Anderson & Cohen, 2018; Trujillo, 2016), few studies consider leaders' long-term experiences across multiple waves of changing policy paradigms and political contexts. This leads us to examine how district

leaders conceptualize the purpose of schooling in regards to democracy and equity amid contextual conditions that have enabled or constrained community-based reform of its public schools. As told through the voices of two longtime educational leaders and former educators, we compile their narratives of over 30 years of reform in Oakland's public schools, including site-based decision-making, bilingual education, state receivership, results-based budgeting, small schools, charter schools, community schools, and the current portfolio model. We argue that Oakland represents a major case of the enduring tensions between civic and market ideals and between centralized and decentralized models of public education for urban schools and communities. We show how district leaders have played key roles in mediating educational change and navigating local and external actors' competing values while pursuing community-based, democratic reforms. In practice, these ideals and strategies function as a part of a constellation of tensions, as illuminated in the findings, where most district initiatives possess elements of different forms of funding and levels of oversight. For the purposes of this paper, we use terms like *market, civic, centralized*, and *decentralized* to describe the primary characteristics of the reforms in our study of Oakland.

Literature Review

This paper builds on three related strands of literature: the commodification of education, New Public Management and market-based reforms, and the politics of urban district reform.

Commodification of Education

Historically, public schools have served multiple, and often competing, purposes in democratic societies that respond to civic, moral, and economic functions (Kantor, 2015). Yet the commodification of education over the last three decades has redefined the purposes of schooling to prioritize the economic aims for public schools, which puts the value on training workers to be competitive in a globalized economy (Labaree, 1997; Mathis & Trujillo, 2016). From activists and families to researchers and policymakers, stakeholders are increasingly framing education as a "commodity" to be delivered (Biesta, 2004). This economic exchange between teachers as "providers" and students as "consumers" aligns with the rise of venture philanthropy in education, whose core principle centers on maximizing funders' "return on investment" in seeking to make a high social impact similar to venture capital investment (Scott, 2009).

These market principles also underlie accountability policies, where performance data and output control are viewed as central strategies for improvement (Møller, 2017). Accountability policies are now a global phenomenon; today, it is commonplace for national rhetoric on school reform to include references to tougher performance standards, strict accountability for test results, and the need for excellent and efficient schools that function as training grounds for the workplace (Lingard et al., 2013).

New Public Management

In the United States, lawmakers have been cultivating New Public Management (NPM) policies since at least 1983, when President Reagan's Commission on Educational Excellence released its landmark report, *A Nation at Risk*. The report called for the federal government to deregulate public education by prioritizing excellence in student test outcomes, rather than investing in equity-oriented civil rights protections and policies, and that states hold schools accountable to this test-based bottom line. Since then, scholars have examined local and global characteristics of NPM, or "the transfer of managerial and market principles to the public sector," which is most evident in accountability policies (Anderson & Cohen, 2018). Through a political analysis of shifting education governance arrangements, this scholarship reveals who wins and loses power as new actors enter the policy and advocacy terrain, and where contested ideals about democratic education can provide a counter-narrative.

Politics of Urban District Reform and Leadership

The literature on urban district reform has generally focused on the technical aspects of school improvement, such as measuring achievement effects through standardized test score data (Trujillo, 2013b). More recently, however, this research has expanded to focus more on the political dynamics of district policymaking (Henig et al., 2001), and within that, some scholars have called attention to how community stakeholders are engaged and disengaged (Marsh et al., 2015; Trujillo et al., 2014). Taking into consideration the political economy of urban education, these cases illustrate the tensions surrounding competing visions for equity and democratic engagement, which are not monolithic among community members. Yet most of the academic literature has not sufficiently captured the nuanced perspectives of those with the most at stake in district reforms and how they understand various initiatives. This theme was echoed in Trujillo et al.'s (2014) study, which found

historical legacies of structural racialization shaped mistrust between community members and a school district.

A dearth of studies consider how district leaders' perspectives, grounded in ideologies and experiences, meet the socio-politics of place to grapple with the changes in education reform, in particular, externally-imposed changes. While, at the school level, some scholars have begun to explore the challenges for school leaders in preserving social justice ideals, including across comparative contexts (Horsford et al., 2018; Trujillo et al., forthcoming), such district-level studies are in short supply. Still needed are studies that ask how and why equity-oriented district reforms often get coopted by market logics over time, particularly during the implementation process, and how leaders define and use their agency to make change.

Conceptual Framework

This article draws on concepts from democratic education, critical policy studies of education, and new managerialism to build a conceptual framework that illuminates local agency, cooperation, and cooptation within structures of external power that shape public schooling. Apple and Beane posit that there is perhaps no more problematic concept in education than that of democratic schools (2007). Diverse ideas, experiences, and people shape the many ways that citizens conceive of democracy—from Anderson and Cohen's vision of "a more democratic professional who can advocate for community empowerment and work for a common good" (2018, p. 2) to Hill and Jochim's conclusion that "the price of democracy [. . .] comes at the expense of efficiency" (2014, p. 20). John Dewey (1997) is often invoked as one of the earliest scholars to explore these civic purposes of schools, especially the methods schools can use to prepare students for participation in a democratic society (Biesta, 2004). Apple and Beane (2007) build on these traditional notions to expand the purpose of democratic schools to include concerns for the welfare of others, in particular, members of marginalized groups.

Cultural notions of democracy and schooling are deeply embedded in political economic conditions, as seen through the distinct values and practices in (neo)liberal democracies and social democracies. As such, critical policy studies of education markets make a strong case for bridging developments in education with broader social policy and specifically situating educational privatization within larger theories about economic thinking (Burch, 2009, p. 10). This literature helps unpack the values and ideologies that underlie market models for public school systems, as well as their assumptions about the purposes of schooling and the subsequent roles for school

leaders. Educational markets, some scholars theorize, have gradually privatized public goods by promoting more financially efficient and effective practices in public spaces. Ball (2001) suggests that this New Public Management paradigm has shifted school teachers' and leaders' values, practices, and goals so much that they identify themselves more as market actors than as citizens providing a public good. Trujillo et al.'s (forthcoming) theorized in their comparative study of Norwegian and American school leaders that the social democratic values in Norway translated to "distinct educational policies and classroom practices, where mutual trust fosters values for student autonomy, rather than surveillance and policing." Oakes et al. (1998) remind us that the interaction between macro-level policies with micro-level initiatives creates a "zone of mediation" that bounds the extent to which educators and principals can advance changes or priorities.

School leaders have long been tasked with managing systems, to some extent, since the consolidation of smaller districts during the administrative progressive reforms of the 1930s. However, the *new managerialism* that emerged in the 1980s, as defined by Anderson and Cohen (2018), follows a "discipline of the market and high-stakes outcomes measures" (p. 1). Practitioners, particularly school leaders, are politicized directly and indirectly through a new professional identity. This process occurs across sectors, including healthcare and housing, where workers encounter increasing market-based reforms, from high stakes, outcomes-based measures of performance to entrepreneurialist notions of decentralization that espouse professional autonomy and fiscal expediency (Evetts, 2009). This shift is particularly evident in the emergence of portfolio management district reform models, or diverse provider models, part of which includes district leaders redesigning and streamlining central office services through private contracting with intermediaries (Hill & Jochim, 2014). Managerialism is the thread that connects a legacy of reform initiatives in many urban districts, including Oakland Unified. Together, these concepts lend us tools to analyze how district leaders, with strong histories within the schools, navigate the various governance levels that control local public schools, particularly funding and legislation, within the zones of mediation of their unique contexts. These conceptual tools further illuminate how and why external actors from the municipal and state government as well as the private sector attempt to gain control of public schools.

Methods and Data Sources

In unpacking how Oakland's current community schools reform is a part of a longer history of reform and politics, we used oral histories as a method to

elicit individuals' personal perceptions of their experiences as leaders in Oakland Unified. Oral histories provide a valuable source of knowledge about past events while offering new, interpretive perspectives on the present (Delgado Bernal, 1998; Dougherty, 1999). This makes oral history a key methodology for exploring the lived experience of reform, policymaking, and school leadership in an urban district, one that offers a unique approach to exploring how structural and political conditions in Oakland can affect individual understandings and behaviors throughout generations of reform. In this way, oral history provides an alternative form of policy and reform analysis that helps magnify the micro-level processes that both shape and are shaped by a district's change efforts.

Oral history as a methodology reveals less about fact than about meaning. Rather than yielding "discrete, value-free data" about past events, oral histories are "emotionally laden" constructions of participants' subjective realities (Ben-Peretz, 1995, p. xvii). Such perceptions can reveal individuals' relationships, ideologies, and reasons for participating in or resisting a district's reform efforts. Delgado Bernal (1998) explains that subjectivity in oral histories represents who we are, how we act, what we think, and what stories we tell; such perceptions become actualized within a framework that recognizes existing hegemonic histories. For her, the struggle to understand history is at its core a contention over power, meaning, and knowledge. Thus, this method assumes that unequal power relations, recounted through individual narratives, can explain, in part, the politics of urban district reform.

The following questions guided our research:

(1) How do long-standing district leaders in Oakland conceptualize the purpose of schooling in regards to democracy and equity?
(2) How have specific policies and reforms fostered civic-based or market-based models of public education in Oakland over the past 35 years?
(3) Which contextual conditions do Oakland's district leaders perceive to have enabled or constrained community-based, democratic reform of its public schools?

This study is part of a larger oral histories project that was commissioned by former OUSD superintendent Tony Smith to better understand community engagement around the district's newly-implemented community schools initiative (Trujillo et al., 2014). This article delves deeper into the experiences of two individuals who served in multiple leadership roles at the school and district level over the span of 38 years in OUSD. We selected these participants for their diverse experiences inside and outside of the central office;

one worked almost exclusively in Oakland and was eventually elected to serve on the school board, while the other centered in Oakland, but included wider involvement across the country, eventually becoming an important Oakland charter leader. Each represents different professional and ideological routes, while crossing paths as school leaders, in academia, and in city politics. We conducted 10 oral history interviews between 2016 and 2018, each lasting approximately two hours, using a semi-structured interview guide that addressed participants' backgrounds, experiences, and insights into the district's reforms, past, present, and future. The oral histories were conducted with both participants together to investigate their stakeholder-specific challenges and opportunities over time, as well as their experiences associated with various reforms. Through conversation with one another, their reflections helped to illuminate where the leaders' beliefs and positions were similar and where they diverged. Like focus groups, the joint interview approach also helped yield more generative thinking, as each leader's reflections interacted with the other's to produce deeper, more textured insights than may be produced alone. In fact, because the participants were colleagues and later friends, we found their familiarity and ability to disagree and challenge one another to be a strength of the data.

Data analysis was iterative. We developed codes both from our framework and from themes that emerged during analysis. From there, we coded transcripts collaboratively until we reached an acceptable level of inter-rater agreement between ourselves, the two researchers. While we aimed to identify commonalities across the narratives, we also valued the individualized nature of the experiences. For this reason, we share each individual's narratives about his or her experiences, with select accounts of each theoretical construct across both participants, as is more conventional in qualitative research.

Participant Descriptions

In 2018, Dr. Louise Waters retired as the Superintendent and CEO of Leadership Public Schools, a network of four charter schools across the Bay Area, including Oakland, Richmond, and Hayward. After working as a high school teacher, Louise worked as a teacher education professor at California State University, East Bay where she led the State's first new teacher program in partnership with the Oakland Unified School District. Subsequently, she served for 8 years as an elementary school principal in the New Haven District (Union City, CA). Then as Associate Superintendent of Student Achievement in Oakland, Louise led the district's instructional reforms from 2000 to 2004. She later became the director of research at the Stupski Foundation before leading an Oakland-based

charter management organization (CMO) for 11 years. Taken together, she has been involved in Oakland education for 25 years.

Dr. Gary Yee served for more than 10 years as an elected school board member of the Oakland Unified School District, from 2002 to 2013, and again from 2018 to the present. During his first tenure, Gary served as board president for two terms and was appointed by the school board as interim superintendent for the 2013 to 2014 school year. Altogether, he has served since 1973 as an elementary teacher, assistant principal and principal, and district office administrator. Gary also worked as a faculty member and department chair in various teacher and leadership preparation programs (Boston College, St. Mary's College of California, and Holy Names University). He went on to assume senior management positions in the Peralta Community College before retiring in 2008.

Oakland Unified School District in Context

Oakland, California is a city defined by its activism, neighboring tech industry, and philanthropic investment in public policies. This major California port city boasts one of the most diverse demographic profiles in the country. Its population of approximately 425,000 spans pastoral hills lined with Redwoods and Oaks, as well as crowded urban flatlands home to working-class enclaves of communities of color. Thriving shopping districts and affluent housing are within walking distance to economically disinvested neighborhoods in the West and Deep East sides of town. Depressed housing and industrial districts are never far from sight. Paralleling the social stratification across most American cities, the life outcomes of Oakland's youth are correlated with their zip code, where an African-American child born in West Oakland is four times less likely to read at grade level and almost six times more likely to drop out of school than a White child of the Oakland hills (ACPHD, 2008). District leaders are tasked with improving schools amid deeply unequal structural conditions.

Oakland's public schools have been the site of political imagination, innovation, and contestation, and a district where superintendents face formidable challenges. Since Marcus Foster became the city's first African American superintendent in 1970 and champion of community-focused, whole child-driven education, the district has repeatedly attempted to roll out reforms intended to counteract the pervasive effects of poverty, structural racism, and persistent inequities in the quality and outcomes of different groups' schooling (Spencer, 2012). A low point for OUSD was when the state of California assumed control of the district for fiscal insolvency in 2003. At the time of the takeover, the state estimated that the district had run up a deficit of at least $37 million. In 2009, when the state returned control to the local school board, the district's debt had increased to $89 million. During this period, the state

had opened up opportunities for charter school expansion, and Oakland was seen as a site for such expansion (Murphy, 2009). Under state receivership, the district hemorrhaged more than 17,000 students, while charter school enrollment experienced an unprecedented expansion from 2,000 to 8,000 students.

In 2011, Oakland Unified School District became the first to work towards creating a district-wide community schools system when Superintendent Tony Smith unveiled an ambitious strategic plan that sought to tackle persistent, systemic patterns of racial and socioeconomic inequity within Oakland's public schools. While the plan contained a variety of programs to address students' social, emotional, physical, and academic needs, its centerpiece was the creation of district-wide, full-service community schools by 2016. With funding from the San Francisco Foundation and The California Endowment, this reform was based on the rationale that each school could serve as a comprehensive site for families to access health, housing, recreation, academic, and other services that were specific to their local community. The district administration aimed to reframe schools as community hubs that would encompass before- and after-school enrichment programs, job training, and health clinics on campus, while continuing other district priorities of community engagement and curriculum. District-wide community schools represent a democratic conception of local school districts' role and their relationships with communities, where the school sees the community as a resource for the school, and the community views the school as a resource for itself. As a full-service community school district, Oakland aimed to foster collaboration among key stakeholders, as well as a sense of collective responsibility for the success of all students, families, and the community.

Since the board's power was largely reinstated after the takeover in 2009, there have been five superintendents and dozens of charter and district school closures. Some community members and activists from local school sites have provided pushback with respect to district budget cuts, school closures, and general financial instability, which coincided with demands for higher pay during the teachers' strike of 2019. Despite these challenges, OUSD continues to be at the forefront of various educational initiatives, including restorative justice, full-service community schools, and the African American Male Initiative.

Findings

Finding #1: Positionality, Identity, and Unequal Schooling Experiences Shaped Approaches to Leadership

Louise. Dr. Louise Waters grew up in California's rural Central and Salinas Valleys during the 1950s, where she excelled in academics at an early age. When she scored high on the verbal portion of the IQ test, a member from the

research team conducting the exam warned her, "that might be a problem for you." Louise fit naturally into the teacher role from a young age: "I taught all of my brothers to read. I'm the oldest and so we had desks and a chalkboard and they all learned how to read before kindergarten." Coming from a family of educators, it was not unusual for dinner table conversations within her White family to touch on race and inequality in education. Her father, a superintendent of the New Haven District in Union City, 20 miles south of Oakland, implemented desegregation efforts during "tumultuous times" of the late 1960s. His equity-minded leadership did not sit well with his school board, which consequently fired him.

While her family was positioned with more privilege in rural, agricultural towns, their move to Palo Alto made Louise acutely aware of the relatively "non-elite" status of her family, where she did not fit in with her homemade clothes, long braids, and glasses. These differences in social class, and eventually race, spurred Louise to proactively use education to combat inequity, first as an English as a Second Language teacher while still in high school, then creating a Whiteness curriculum as a college student, and later working in the de-segregation office in San Francisco Unified. Alongside these professional initiatives, her personal experiences as a White woman in an interracial family also shaped her worldview.

Her high school course on Whiteness as a teacher at Berkeley High School in the early 1970s garnered media attention for probing, "what is a proactive role for Whites in this era in dealing with social justice?":

> The course was called "What is White?" [A]bout 1/3 of the students were non-White in the course because we did a lot of social action projects. I actually taught Ethnic Studies, English, History, and Home Economics, too. I had five preps and taught across the range [of students], so I became really aware of skill gaps. That's where I started. When I got my doctorate, I also got a reading specialist credential and everything except the final aspect of the thesis for a master's in reading. I saw a concurrent need for skills and ethnic studies in achieving social justice.

Louise pursued advanced degrees after being let go from Berkeley due to budget cuts, including a master's at Stanford and a doctorate at Penn State, both in Education.

Gary. Dr. Gary Yee was born and raised in Oakland by immigrants who arrived to California as teenagers in the 1930s from impoverished farming villages in Southern China. His family moved around between Chinatowns in San Francisco and Oakland before settling down in East Oakland. He recalled his upbringing during a time of major demographic shifts in the city:

> I'm confident that I was the only non-White kid in the [elementary] school at the time because that area was primarily working-class European immigrants. They all subsequently moved out to Walnut Creek, Fremont, San Lorenzo and so forth. [. . .] By the time I'd gotten to 6th grade the school had become much more integrated. It happened within that period of the 10 years that we lived there. It had changed from an all-White neighborhood to a mostly-Black neighborhood. [. . .] The covenants which controlled who could buy a house in the neighborhood had been lifted because of Byron Rumford [California Fair Housing Act of 1963].

During White flight, the African American population grew quickly in his high school, Castlemont. The Black community, he later noted, seemed to have deeper ties to the school over generations.

Gary described his upbringing as "very conservative" where his family held a "strong belief in the importance of my educational development." His parents took on two different paths as his mother, who learned English in China, first attended an Oakland adult school to become a secretary and then pursued her bachelor's degree over a period of 20 years, and his father moved from laundryman to aircraft mechanic. As a Chinese-American family in the 1950s, they faced significant discrimination and danger: "my parents were chased out of their initial house in San Francisco because of Klan activity, and I know that part because we stayed in touch with the postman who kind of came to their defense at the time." A "rebellious" kid, he resisted going to Chinese school amid bicultural tensions of not being Chinese enough for the Chinatown kids and not White enough for his classmates:

> I remember being pushed around and being really awkward, but I also remember just feelings of inadequacy and insecurity and wanting to know what the Ozzie and Harriett world was all about. I didn't understand Chinese. I was resisting the language, and then at some point the whole language part and the Chinese culture part really affected me—the desire to be White. I no longer had the language skills and I didn't grow up [in Chinatown] so I was considered an outsider anyway. Someone always had to drive me home as opposed to getting to walk home with the rest of the kids.

The "ostracism and teasing" in school was intertwined with the racism he experienced as an Asian American youth.

Growing up in the Cold War Era in a church-centered family, the "space race" inspired him to want to become an engineer and fighter pilot. He joined ROTC in 1963, right in the middle of the Free Speech Movement in Berkeley. After being stationed in Guam, where he grew increasingly disillusioned with

the War, he returned to Oakland to work as a research analyst for the police department. His circuitous career path eventually led him to become a teacher alongside his wife, where he simultaneously worked towards a teaching credential during the day and a master's in public administration in the evening, and eventually earning a doctorate from Stanford.

Finding #2: Central Office Reforms and Resource Scarcity Shaped Racialized Stakeholder Engagement and Empowerment

Teacher empowerment. These two district leaders would go on to cross paths throughout their time in Oakland Unified, but they worked with distinct purposes and roles in school reform initiatives. Louise's earliest involvement with the district began in 1986 when she created the first urban teacher pipeline and support program in the state of California as a faculty member in teacher education at Cal State, East Bay. In coaching and observing educators, she saw firsthand the issues facing Oakland teachers and principals, many of whom "had potential, but that the system was just overwhelmed in supporting them." The challenges her teachers faced led her to create a teacher pipeline where candidates who were predominantly people of color, bilingual, or from the community were provided in-depth experiences, training, and mentoring so that they would remain and be effective in the district. Louise proudly reported that most of them stayed as long-term teachers and a number of them became administrators.

Yet, the problems faced by staff called for more than a pipeline. By the mid-80s, teacher empowerment and site-based decision-making were popular strategies that called for more authority for decision making residing in teachers, as opposed to their principals and other the site-based administrators. Louise spearheaded the pilot initiative, calling herself a "catalyst" in helping with data and analysis, connecting resources, listening, and finding places to model from. She focused on specific schools with strong leadership and a cadre of veteran teachers. She described the optimistic culture where "the teachers got pretty jazzed about being part of the decision-making process, whether you call it redesign, turnaround, innovation, whatever. . ." Her work with site-based decision making actually led her to leave the university and become a principal because she saw the critical role of the principal in creating a context that supported the potential of teacher empowerment and avoided its unintended consequences. Without the right structures, Louise concluded, the reform did two things: one, divide the faculty into those who had time to do it and those who did not, and pit them against each other; and two, it pulled away the "star teachers" to spend large amounts of time making decisions for non-critical tasks, such as common rules for four-square.

As a new school principal in the 1980s, Gary was an early critic of the teacher empowerment advocates and other decentralization efforts led by the Coalition of Essential Schools, a non-profit organization founded in 1984 that advanced a whole-school reform model based on John Dewey's concept of "democratic pluralism." Noting in the interview that he felt a "visceral reaction" upon discussing this period of time, he explained what he viewed as its limitations:

> The Coalition of Essential Schools was just starting to elevate in terms of its prominence as a potential change strategy for schools. The Coalition said if you put teachers together they can make informed decisions on behalf of a school. From my point of view, the teacher councils ended up endlessly voting and lobbying on things. I mean the classic example that people always use is "which coffee machine company should the school adopt". . . very mundane. It never gets up to the school discipline policies or the curriculum—what's the instructional strategy or point of view that we have?

After 2 years as assistant principal, Gary moved from a working-class OUSD public school in the flatlands to an affluent public school in the hills. Upon reflection on the education reform movements of the 1990s, Gary pointed out that "this is the beginning of efforts to look at schools as part of systems," a movement "where people understand that schools need to be reformed but they cannot be reformed without the whole system working together." Louise chimed in about working across institutions: "If we don't do something about the environment that many of our students grow up in—poverty, crime, structural inequality—education alone will not have the impact we are seeking." For these reasons, Oakland Unified in the 1990s was defined by a multilayered educational investment and increasing non-profit partnerships. This was reflected in Superintendent Pete Mesa's (1990–1994) 5-year strategic plan, which took into consideration the "life circumstances" in assessing student and school outcomes in relation to equity. Gary explained:

> There were all these strategies for engaging schools and communities. You have the community schools movement, you have the site-based decision making, which is kind of a version of community schools, then you have the mayor's Urban Health Initiative. All of these things are efforts—in some way positive, almost benign efforts—to improve the schools and not to make the schools solely accountable for their results.

Gary paused to consider what this means for the latest round of community-oriented initiatives: "Now that I think about it, it is probably a worthy reflection for people who are looking at community schools today to look at the impetus and the results of that [earlier] movement."

Here, we see how different forms of community schools efforts were in place before the proliferation of the more targeted community school policy in 2011. To understand the trajectory of Oakland's community schools, it is critical to consider the multiple, related reforms that coalesced to bridge schools and communities. As Gary's and Louise's reflections illustrate, the principles behind community schools were evident across several district initiatives, all intended to mitigate the effects of structural inequalities.

Academia and philanthropy. Philanthropy was key in the Oakland reform scene, as was the role of universities. However, the disconnect between academic experts and practitioners was one of the reasons why Louise left academia altogether. Part of her CSU program grants went towards paying for university professors to help the district, but they "were not the people who could deliver" the expertise teachers needed in the programs she was designing. However, her concerns went deeper and spanned future aspects of her career, particularly as associate superintendent:

> My beef was that Berkeley and Stanford were pushing things that were great philosophically but it was assuming a context that wasn't there. It would be great to have the whole language, balanced literacy program if you had a school that didn't have 30% teacher turnover and non-credentialed teachers and a principal with no background in literacy. . . And then being willing to write off the reality and have no accountability for actually moving students because the philosophy and the process was sacrosanct. Since there wasn't a way to get from here to there, "oh, by the way, all these kids are failing." Where was their responsibility for that?

The lack of meaningful ways to apply educational theory, Louise explained, left people on the ground to pick up the pieces that academics did not complete, or figure out how to fit this initiative in with another researcher's foundation-funded grant. And neither the academics nor the foundations held themselves accountable for results or unintended consequences.

Gary described his frustration with think tanks and academic researchers who could identify the limitations and deficiencies of school district efforts to address the needs of low-income neighborhoods. They often came with solutions based on research pilots, with the promise of outside funding, and they offered to help districts improve. But when the results were less than desirable, or the funding ended, they stepped away without considering the effect of their departure on the neighborhoods who were promised the moon:

> That's why I think university researchers are actually complicit deliverers of the message of the failure of community-based efforts without describing how

> difficult it is to balance multiple and often competing initiatives and board policies, while at the same time addressing the external compliance responsibilities. Researchers go from one place to the other, and they shape the dialogue of failure across urban education, without acknowledging the important changes that may be occurring along the way.

Schools and families were left with confusion, disappointment, and anger with yet another "failed" district initiative. Evaluations, by think tanks and researchers, invariably placed the blame on the failure of the school or the district to fully and faithfully implement. Early on, Gary admitted that he had pigeon-holed Louise as a consultant, a category that he was quite critical of:

> "There was always a group of consultants who would be coming out from higher education with advice at some high level on this. And from the point of view of an operations person, 'what do they actually know?' They're working in this policy [world] and they're not actually delivering any value."

Philanthropists and university researchers have played a major role in the Oakland reform scene, most notably with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's funding of the small schools movement (Tompkins-Stange, 2016), undergirded by the work of Linda Darling-Hammond out of Stanford.

Philanthropic, non-profit, business, and academic partnerships continue to be an important part of OUSD initiatives like community schools, but they differ in key ways. Rather than national venture philanthropies like the Gates and Broad Foundations, community schools have been largely financed by local funders like Kaiser Permanente, The San Francisco Foundation, Atlantic Philanthropies, and the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth. This is in addition to an array of partnerships with community agencies that provide wraparound services, which includes providing counselors to school sites, restorative justice circles, the African American Male Achievement initiative, and professional development for district youth workers. Community schools are far from a venture capital project, yet they still largely centered on partnerships with non-profit organizations for social services, and thus, relies on some degree of outsourcing. And, there are serious questions as to whether the school district can continue to fund these efforts, even with the help of partnerships, without a long-term political commitment for state and federal funding for the infrastructure of community schools.

Race and class politics. Despite community schools' equity-minded principles, which acknowledge that wraparound resources are vital to student achievement and opportunity, other political pressures easily sidetracked

district leaders' attention. In a resource-strapped urban district, leaders had to contend with juggling student needs against external pressures, which were happening concurrently with demographic changes in the city. Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, Oakland's school-age population was already shifting dramatically to students of color. By the 1990s, the city had a sizeable Latinx and Asian population. Both groups were growing more influential in the political sphere, where African Americans had made major inroads in the decades prior. Beyond programs and policies, districts are sites of employment (Shipps, 2003), and so struggles over reforms are inextricably linked with job competition. Gary and Louise's district experience revealed that language education was a proxy for larger debates about race and ethnicity as the growing Latinx and Asian immigrant populations were situated to compete with African Americans for resource allocation.

In California, debates surrounded bilingual education versus English-only, English as a second language instead of bilingual education, and Ebonics as a legitimate language. There was a perception by some in central office that English learners were double dipping with both the Civil Rights and the language funding. Gary explained:

> You have policy coming down supporting bilingual education and then the school has to make decisions about what to do with the African American teachers who are in fact not bilingual. So the fight became, how can we talk communities into accepting English as a second language, which the veteran teachers could teach, when there are other people like the Latino Task Force lobbying for Spanish language instructors? It actually became a matter of who gets the jobs, the employment.

Moreover, there was hostility towards Spanish teachers brought in from Spain, Mexico, and the Philippines, and confusion over credentialing between bilingual, transitional, and English-only classes. Gary explained these differences within Oakland's Asian American and immigrant communities, where teachers and instructional assistants were hired directly from China, yet were not quite fluent in English or knowledgeable about the neighborhood context of Chinatown:

> In Chinatown, Lincoln Elementary had a Chinese bilingual program. That program became an internal teacher assignment between bilingual-certified teachers, who may have been trained in China, and those locally educated teachers who could never be qualified as a bilingual Chinese instruction teacher, but their conversational Chinese was good enough for them to be in a transitional or an English only class for the language support. There are all those kinds of battles internal to the school so teachers are fighting for students sometimes.

Upon reflecting on race and class politics, he noted that "you still see these things play out 15 years later."

Louise found herself in the middle of the interracial strife. In her district administration role, she fused two offices: the Title I Office led by African-Americans and the Latinx-led Bilingual Office. The response was mixed; some refused to talk to Louise again, but many moved forward in some semblance of organizational unity. It was the fear of an external audit and the reality that the state was withholding five million dollars from OUSD for non-compliance that eventually motivated the divided staff. She recalled:

> Here was a financial organizational imperative that was external. So, frankly, what I leveraged were the external threats of "how are we going to respond to get the money back to serve the kids?" Let's come together against these external [pressures].

Throughout this process, Louise found her niche in creating organizational coherency. Instead of sending two separate staff members to meetings with two disconnected plans for federal compliance regulations, there was more planning around the bigger picture of the school. She recalled at least five principals buying her flowers or candy for simplifying their lives by streamlining bureaucracy. As she put it, "this was not a big philosophical shift. [. . .] Here was this huge pain point which was all the reporting and duplicative effort. I couldn't really solve all of the underlying issues but I could at least alleviate some of the pain and make a little coherence." She explained that her general philosophy has been to "find the points of pain that you can solve, and then use that as the entry to the more important stuff," such as the conversations and collaborations that led to actual changes in practice that supported students.

However, the disorganization among school leadership meant that Louise's system of helping principals organize their myriad reporting requirements would not make the difference if principals still had the same conflicting demands on their time. Gary chimed in with a different narrative about the external pressure:

> The dilemma was not that there weren't enough notes, but that principals inherently don't see their communities as decision-making friends and allies. The notion of having community involvement often involved food or other kinds of incentives for people to come, but very little meaningful decision making happened.

Gary eventually realized that Louise was a part of key meetings with state officials, who usually did not have set directives for districts, "what they cared about was that there was somebody in leadership who exuded confidence that

she had it all under control." Louise was essentially buffering the district from state and federal scrutiny by assuring some form of coherence. However, no organizational coherence would buffer Oakland Unified from stronger political forces that grew influential during the neoliberal reform era.

The conflicts revealed the complex web of factors—beyond those directly related to community-driven reform—that inevitably weighed on Oakland's capacity to enact more civic-minded reforms. In a shifting reform environment, concerns over resource scarcity interacted with efforts to empower teachers at the school site, as did outside influences by academic and philanthropic elites, and long contextualized histories of race and class politics. Districts had to manage these fiscal constraints created by outside factors while trying to attend to the resource needs of schools implementing wraparound services. The wedge between school principals and their students, teachers, families, and community resources was driven by competition and economic disinvestment.

Finding #3: Who Runs Oakland's Schools? Managerial Experts Redefine Power Dynamics and Educational Opportunity

These educational leaders' deep histories illuminate the complex web of governance among various policy actors at the state, county, municipal, and district levels over who controls Oakland's schools. There is no better example of these intergovernmental relations than the state takeover of OUSD as experienced by leaders in unique roles. In an attempt to "take the politics out" of school improvement, politics simply took a different direction, with the influence of an independent audit agency and its support by various elected officials. These oral histories of the state takeover illuminate the two leaders' understandings of the constraints around the options local educational leaders had, as well as where their limitations lie.

Powerful interests, from state officials to intermediary organizations to philanthropists, set their sights on Oakland. Elihu Harris, a state assemblyman who would go on to become mayor of Oakland in 1991, led the creation of the independent audit agency called the Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team (FCMAT). Gary witnessed the beginning of state involvement in Oakland governance and finance when he came to central office as a doctoral intern:

> We already had a FCMAT trustee who had stay and rescind powers, but he wasn't involved in the direct daily operations. The superintendent still ran the district but the trustee was there to oversee the budget [. . .] to at least give the patina that district operations were improving.

As state politicians' interest in Oakland's financial and political matters stirred "turmoil" for the school board and central office administration, Mayor Jerry Brown returned to local politics in 2000 between two tenures as California governor (1975–1983, 2011–2019). He swiftly set his sights on being an "education mayor," and he accomplished this through three simultaneous movements: (1) founding two charter schools, (2) attempting to achieve mayoral control of the schools, and (3) appointing three school board members. Brown created an education commission, the purpose of which, according to Gary, was "to give validity to his efforts to control the schools." He also had critiques of the mayor's charter initiative, "I felt that Brown should invest the same time, energy, and political prestige he gave to his charter schools on some of Oakland's traditional high schools." Mayor Brown was angling to get his city manager, George Musgrove, to become interim and eventually permanent superintendent. Instead of hiring the mayor's choice, the board selected popular, long-time educator and principal, Dennis Chaconas, a move that would trigger many of the political problems that would unfold for the district in the 2000's.

In 2003, OUSD underwent state receivership due to a district budget deficit of approximately $35 million dollars. The exact cause of the deficit was unclear and remains contentious. Gary and Louise unpacked how they interpreted the takeover from their perspectives: historical financial management issues uncovered by district leaders in the transition to a new financial system; Superintendent Chaconas' ambitious plan to raise teacher's wages and staff every single empty teaching position; political infighting between an overreaching mayor, a popular district superintendent versus a surveillant county superintendent; and the rise of FCMAT.

Louise learned on her first day on the job, at a board meeting in 2000, that she would be handling the FCMAT oversight of special education. She recalled, "then I had to learn what FCMAT was." Two years later, the FCMAT oversight of special education became the all-inclusive takeover where the district lost oversight to state officials. The progress toward the return of OUSD's decision-making authority was solely determined by, once again, FCMAT, which had been growing increasingly powerful as an extra-state organization for management and oversight during times of financial crisis. From the viewpoint of Gary, a newly-minted school board member in 2002, "it was partly the dysfunction of the way the state financed schools. Everybody would say that if you didn't have a strong reserve you were treading on thin ice." Whatever the exact combination of factors that caused the deficit, the crisis surrounding the reserve created a sense of urgency about finding money as well as finger-pointing about who was to blame for the financial mess. What ensued was a very public and bitter battle between former political

allies that led to a “serious unraveling” of relationships, per Louise’s view. County Superintendent Sheila Jordan’s refusal to approve the short-term trans-district loan stirred problems with the OUSD superintendent. Board members chose sides as to whether to support the call for a loan with conditions unfavorable to the District, or to support Superintendent Chaconas and fight it out in Sacramento, the state capital. Ultimately, Mayor Brown and State Senator Perata advocated for a $100 million bailout—much more than what was needed but an urgent and impressive number that became a national headline of urban fiscal mismanagement. The board voted to accept the terms and conditions.

For Gary, at some point it made sense to move forward with the loan rather than to take up a fight with the state, which felt inevitable. According to the conditions of the loan, this meant that Superintendent Chaconas needed to resign or else be fired. “The writing was on the wall,” Gary admitted, “I was one of the people who said ‘let’s just cut this battle.’” The state administrators’ refusal to loan OUSD the money necessary to stay afloat left the board with limited options. He recalled feeling “blindsided” by the deeper political dynamics outside of the school board’s control by policy actors largely unknown to them:

> The dynamic of leadership as a board member is that you have certain responsibilities. You’re very admiring of the educational vision that was being put out there, especially by one of your own. You feel an immediate loyalty. But I realized at the time how naive we really were and that we didn’t know any of these people who were actually the players.

The discussion around “loyalties” to leaders is embedded within the context of “local” versus “outsiders,” a long-standing tension that has intensified in Oakland under the last 15 years of gentrification. High superintendent turnover, venture philanthropy gone awry, and displacement of many of the district’s working class constituents has led to calls from constituents for “local” superintendents and “homegrown” efforts. While Louise viewed stability as critical to making an impact, she believed that prioritizing local people, strategies, and resources should continue to be emphasized only if it is making a positive difference for teaching and learning. Ultimately, she believed that there are ideas and plans outside of Oakland that would still benefit the community: “if you’re going to have people there for a long time, you can take great ideas from other places, and you can build them.” Gary was most concerned by the lack of commitment in Oakland to cultivate homegrown leadership:

> My belief is that there's not an investment in the professional class of educators for people to stay a long time in a mid-sized district like Oakland. Would politicians, education think tanks, and school reformers love the fact that somebody had stayed here for 10 years, and been successful over those 10 years? I don't think so. I think that at the 5 year point they would start looking for that person to run Chicago or LA or something because these are successful school leaders that. . . are pieces to be moved around the larger systems.

He emphasized that long-term leadership leads to beliefs that skill set and success can be elevated into a larger setting, which is also connected to professional aspiration and changing expectations of leaders and systems. These insights reveal an assumption implicit in market-based reform: that long-term leadership is not valued in an educational marketplace that relies on constant churn, as opposed to the stability that community-centric reforms aim to achieve.

Powerful elites weighed heavily on Oakland leaders' ability to deepen preexisting reform efforts. City-level managerial leaders played significant roles in determining the focus of the Oakland school district's leadership practice. Likewise, state-level policymakers largely circumscribed the extent to which Oakland's leaders could deepen homegrown reform initiatives. Tensions between internal and external forms of power surfaced repeatedly, and the inertia of external elites eventually shaped leaders' attention and resources more than internal, community-driven forces. Decades of experimentation with their public schools from "outsiders" disillusioned many Oaklanders, while creating political momentum for local strategies. Community schools take a holistic approach to education and building just, democratic societies as both a national and local effort.

Discussion

What does it mean for a district initiative to be "community-oriented" following decades of struggles that have chipped away at any authentic democratic engagement of its constituents? Can community stakeholders subvert the inequitable aspects of "local control?" These are the tensions that require serious consideration under a "community schools" paradigm. As challenging as it has been to enact democracy in practice, it is a persistent value among many community stakeholders and continues to be woven into cycles of district reform.

Diving deep into the diverse histories of two educational leaders reveals critical, yet often overlooked perspectives of the limits and opportunities of

community-based district reform. Their thoughtful reflections on their personal and professional trajectories through multiple waves of policies illuminate how reform leaders make sense of conditions to improve equity and quality for their school system. They also provide a rare opportunity to hear narratives of power-building across generations as well as critiques of their own movement. Their insights also show how both decentralized, site-based decision-making and management as well as centralized, hierarchical district bureaucracy have their limitations as drivers of community-based reform. Neither approach laid an ideal foundation for community-based reforms, yet neither approach completely undermined community school reforms either. Rather, each governance approach was colored by a multitude of other forces, both external and internal, that shaped district leaders' willingness and capacity to strengthen repeated attempts to craft community schools and their related initiatives.

These narratives also illuminate a nuanced understanding of how personal and political histories meet political economic realities to shape the professional trajectory of district leaders across three decades of education reform. Shaped by their family history and identities, education gave each of them a sense of belonging (and some exclusion), yet it was the site of unequal opportunities that would shape their foray into leadership. Once Louise's parents were aware of the limited opportunities she would have in the Central Valley as a woman, she went on to have a better-resourced public education system. The more she learned about education and had more exposure to different people in her classes, the more politically active she became with respect to addressing dilemmas on curricular and systems levels. As an Oakland native, Gary grew up in a time of major shifts in the city where White flight and immigration changed Oakland's demographics. City transformation spilled into district politics, where the tensions over resources between community leaders of color underpinned support or pushback on programs. Race, class, and gender contoured the opportunities for the families that Oakland Unified served, and Gary and Louise would eventually learn how an unequal educational landscape and disinvestment in public education would define the capacity of an urban district to meet its democratic responsibilities; despite these lessons, they continue to serve.

Whether it was Louise's innate calling to become a teacher, or Gary's stumbles into a lifelong career and commitment to education, each OUSD leader participated in what would become the myriad of reforms where Oakland's schools and students served as the testing ground for civic and market-based reforms. As various initiatives were piloted and stakeholders navigated their opportunities and limitations, these leaders were left to sort out ideas and implement them in a meaningful way. Despite their differences,

both ended up as practitioners focused on increasing access and outcomes for students in all that the day-to-day reality of Oakland entailed. This meant advancing policies and programs that they themselves sometimes did not agree with, or being disappointed when good ideas and strong leaders got lost in translation. But it also meant building trust with various stakeholders and wielding influence on the direction of OUSD. Regardless of the policy churn, the push and pull between market and bureaucracy, as well as centralization and decentralization, they have seen that these shifts come with the job.

The two respective narratives elucidate the tensions of pushing for change with the agency that district leaders have, as well as with their constraints, imposed by conditions that often limit structural change. It also meant embracing the ongoing tension between the social purposes of education set forth in community schools and democratic schooling, and the academic and linked economic imperatives so important to low-income families and championed by both the education "reformers," as well as by traditional public education advocates. Both Gary and Louise saw merits and limitations in each "camp," and they continually sought to pull from both—as the self-described pragmatists that they were. The "zones of mediation" (Oakes et al., 1998) in Oakland illuminates how micro-level conditions are tied to school system pressures to successfully manage its limited resources, which are not enough to offer the services expected in a community school system. This is the fundamental dilemma district leaders face today with budget cuts and school closures.

Today, community schools are still a key part of Oakland Unified's priorities, with some differences. Community schools continue to partner with many local agencies to prepare OUSD students to be "college ready, career ready, and community ready" (OUSD, 2014) that exists alongside a market-oriented *portfolio strategy* for district redesign. This initiative aims to create more school options for families, give school leaders more autonomy over certain decision-making areas, and requires more coordination with charter schools. At the time of this writing, Oakland's district, charter, and philanthropic leaders are invested in merging these divergent strategies, as seen in Gary and Louise's support as representative leaders in the district and charter sectors. The two penned an op-ed for a local Oakland advocacy organization that referred to bridging the district-charter divide as "a way forward" (Waters & Yee, 2017). However, the vision of neighborhood schools that support "feeder patterns" continues to be a point of contention with providing "choice" for school options inside of the district, exacerbated by close to one-third of the students opting out of public district schools in Oakland altogether. Tensions are especially high as the district continues to face severe mid-year budget cuts and more school closures (Ormseth, 2019).

While mayoral and state receiverships are framed by some to "take the politics" out of district reform, schooling is inherently political; democratic impulses invariably rise to the surface. Before, during, and after state receivership, leaders had to respond to the many competing values of not only their constituents, but new fiscal agencies, like FCMAT. Among all of these shifts and pressures, community schools—a reform with a long history in OUSD—often got lost in the shuffle of power, resources, and leadership. In this way, Oakland serves as a critical case of central office reform because it shows how this reform, like any other, is subject not just to the will of the community leaders who may want to champion it, but to the manifold, conflicting policies, reforms, and politics that interact to steer district leaders' sights toward multiple priorities and pressures that inevitably detract from a targeted emphasis on any given reform at a given time. In Oakland's case, market-oriented policy pressures interacted with a local context characterized by severe resource scarcity to repeatedly undermine district leaders' potential to deepen community-driven reform amid an increasingly marketized educational landscape.

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ORCID iD

René Espinoza Kissell https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1047-7262

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Author Biographies

René Espinoza Kissell is a doctoral candidate in UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Education. Her research and teaching focus on education policy and politics, urban political economy, and community engagement in school district reform.

Tina Trujillo is an associate professor at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Education. Her research and teaching focus on democratic education, federal and state education policy, and the politics of school reform.