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ELEV8

PREPARING YOUTH FOR A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION TO
HIGH SCHOOL: ELEV8 OAKLAND ANNUAL BRIEF



BRIGHT
RESEARCH GROUP

By Brightstar Ohlson, Mejin Leechor, and Moira DeNike

ELEV8 PREPARING YOUTH FOR A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION TO HIGH SCHOOL: ELEV8 OAKLAND ANNUAL BRIEF

The middle school years are a critical period in the life of a student: recent research indicates that academic performance and behavior in middle school are strongly tied to high school graduation rates. Without early intervention, students who experience difficulty with academics or attendance or who exhibit poor behavior risk becoming high school dropouts. Moreover, students who struggle upon entering the ninth grade are unlikely to recover and complete high school and beyond. Hence, middle schools play an important role in preparing students for success in high school and beyond.

Elev8 Oakland is a community schools initiative operating at five low-income middle schools. The purpose of this brief is to provide a summary of the services and supports that Elev8 Oakland students and their families received to prepare them for a successful transition to high school. The following questions guide the research:

1. What supports are provided in Elev8 middle schools that directly support Elev8 student participants' successful transition to 9th grade?
2. What are the experiences of student participants in Elev8 in 6th, 7th, and 8th grade that help them prepare for the transition to 9th grade?

To address these questions, interviews and focus groups were conducted in the Spring and Fall 2013.

About Elev8 Oakland

Elev8 Oakland is part of a national initiative funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies that provides coordinated services to middle school students and their families. In partnership with public sector partners, Safe Passages, an Oakland-based nonprofit, operates the Elev8 program at five Oakland middle schools: Coliseum College Preparatory Academy (CCPA), Madison Park Academy (Madison), Roosevelt Middle School (Roosevelt), United for Success Academy (UFSA), and West Oakland Middle School (WOMS). Elev8 Oakland is designed to transform traditional schools

into full-service community schools, wherein multiple forms of support are not only available but are *coordinated*, so that students and their families experience a seamless and synchronized set of supports working to advance student success. The Elev8 service model features academic supports, family resource centers, and health care in an integrated school-based system. With respect to the high school transition, Elev8 Oakland is built on the premise that mitigating risk factors for academic failure by addressing academic and non-academic barriers to learning can result in future academic and career success in high school and beyond. Key supports include extended learning programs that target students who are struggling with grades, behavior, or attendance, and a weekly Coordination of Services Team (COST) that ensures that individual students' needs, whether academic or personal, are matched to appropriate services and supports. Additional services and supports vary by school site.

In partnership with the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), the City of Oakland, the County of Alameda, and other community-based partners, Safe Passages has served as the lead agency for Elev8 Oakland. Safe Passages is a non-profit organization committed to advocating for children, youth, and families with a special emphasis on vulnerable populations within the County of Alameda. The organization was founded in 1998 and was one of five sites across the country selected to participate in the national Urban Health Initiative funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

METHODOLOGY

About the Local Evaluation

Bright Research Group is conducting a multi-year local evaluation of Elev8 Oakland that focuses on three areas: (1) evaluating the costs and benefits associated with the Elev8 Oakland model of community schools, (2) identifying effective strategies for moving students at the highest risk of academic failure toward academic success, and (3) examining the impact of Elev8 supports and services in preparing students for a successful high school transition. This brief falls into the latter category and represents the first in a series of annual briefs focused on the transition from middle school to high school.

Key Informant Interviews and Focus Groups

Interviews and focus groups with a cohort of Elev8 student participants and their families were conducted in the Spring and Fall of 2013. One of the objectives in conducting these interviews was to better understand the experiences of Elev8

student participants in 6th, 7th, and 8th grade that help them prepare for the transition to 9th grade. The interviews also sought youth and family perspectives on receiving integrated supports and services from Elev8; these perspectives are outlined in a separate policy brief entitled, “Youth and Family Perspectives on Community Schools,” November 2013.

The cohort that was interviewed included 25 youth participants in Elev8 and each youth’s parent or caregiver. Site coordinators from Safe Passages at each Elev8 middle school identified and recruited youth and families to participate in the study. Evaluators conducted interviews and focus groups in person at each school site or by telephone in a small number of cases. Participants received gift cards for their time. As needed, interviews were conducted in Spanish for monolingual or bilingual participants.

School	Students	Family Members
Coliseum College Prep Academy (CCPA)	5	5
Madison Park Business & Arts Academy (Madison)	6	7
Roosevelt Middle School (Roosevelt)	6	3
United for Success Academy (UFSA)	5	5
West Oakland Middle School (WOMS)	5	5
Ethnicity	Students	Family Members
African American	9	9
Latino	17	16
Other	1	0
White	0	0
Gender	Students	Family Members
Male	14	6
Female	13	19

In addition to interviewing the cohort, key informant interviews were conducted with 10 site coordinators, family advocates, school administrators, and other staff and volunteers involved with Elev8. These interviews provided information on service providers' perspectives on Elev8 supports and services, including the program's role in supporting a successful high school transition. Data collected at quarterly meetings with family advocates and site coordinators were also used. Interviews were recorded on a computer; then the data was coded and analyzed for key themes.

HIGH SCHOOL TRANSITION FINDINGS FROM 2012-13

SUPPORT AND PREPARATION

Families focused on the immediate benefits of participating in Elev8 extended learning and academic support programs in middle school. For limited English proficiency (LEP) families, the extended learning program was of particular value, providing academic supports to youth that parents/caregivers felt they could not provide.

Rather than conceptualizing the benefits of Elev8 in terms of high school preparation, families and youth highlighted the immediate benefits of participating in Elev8, particularly extended learning. Some of the benefits they attributed to Elev8 afterschool programs include the following:

- A safe place for youth to stay after school
- Caring adults with whom youth can share problems and concerns
- A place where youth can work on homework and receive homework help
- Snacks and food
- Language assistance for students with limited English proficiency (LEP)

[Elev8] is really a great program, especially for parents who work... [My son] went straight from school; what he didn't understand, they were able to help with it. Homework was done when he got home – it's better than him staying up until 11 or 12 doing homework. They put a lot into those kids. They were great... A few times he had a project in, they would sit there and help him and they would call and ask if it would be OK for him to stay later. The teachers would walk him down the hill to the bus stop and stay with

him until he got the bus. That was great; you didn't have to worry. (Roosevelt parent/caregiver)

Many families felt that Elev8 academic supports had improved their children's performance in middle school, which would in turn contribute to success in high school. Several parents/caregivers mentioned homework help as a service their children had received to prepare them for high school. Similarly, youth talked about improvements in study habits and grades. One youth respondent mentioned that Elev8 had helped her start doing her homework and "taking things more seriously." Some LEP parents/caregivers remarked on their limitations in being able to help their children in school, including low literacy and language barriers. For these families, Elev8 academic supports play an especially important role in filling these more immediate gaps. Several mentioned that they appreciated having a place where their children could get help with homework.

It is very good to have the extended learning; they help [my son] with his homework. I don't understand English. It is very good to have him here, where he can get help. (CCPA parent/caregiver)

In general, however, most youth and families did not conceptualize the services received through Elev8 as being explicitly focused on the high school transition. When asked how Elev8 services and supports had prepared them for the challenges ahead, including high school, many were unsure. This finding may be tied to the fact that Elev8 has never been branded to families as a program explicitly focused on high school transition, though successful transition to high school is a long-term program goal.

Elev8 staff members often made the connection between Elev8's comprehensive supports and preparedness for high school. Several pointed out that Elev8 serves young people who are at the highest risk for academic failure due to a variety of risk factors, including academic and behavioral challenges, trauma from the home environment, substance abuse, and other family and community conditions. They pointed out the need for social and emotional skills in addition to academic skills for high school success. Elev8's school-based and integrated services aim to mitigate those risks and to support academic success over the long term. Students' responses suggest that they are noticing the

benefits of having the services Elev8 provides, particularly social-emotional supports. Several noted the impact of Elev8 supports on their behavior and their ability to cope with family problems, feelings of isolation, and personal losses.

I like the afterschool [program], and I talk to [Elev8 staff members] if I am having a problem. I've been through a lot in my life. My dad died when I was two years old; my stepbrother died two months ago, and a couple years ago my grandfather died. It was so tough. When other kids are talking about their dad – they have the best dad – I feel so sad and want to cry. Or when my brother died, I was crying a lot. My family is busy; I try not to bother them. So [Elev8 staff member] helped me; she gave me someone to talk about [it with]. If not, I would be walking around the hallway crying. (UFSA student)

With these comprehensive supports in place, parents/caregivers reported, students are likely to have a stronger academic and social-emotional foundation for high school than they would have otherwise.

At two Elev8 sites, the expansion of the schools through 12th grade has eased the transition to high school. At West Oakland, some students reported receiving school-based services to prepare them for high school.

Madison and West Oakland Middle School (WOMS) students are able to stay through the 12th grade. Madison is in the midst of a transition to a transition TK-12 (transitional kindergarten through 12th grade) model, and CCPA currently serves students from the 6th through the 12th grade. Consequently, for many youth and families interviewed, there was no anticipated high school transition in terms of entering a new school. Several families felt positive about having the option to remain at the same school through high school.

[My child] was very encouraged by her success with Elev8 to stay at Madison; she knows a lot of the programs. As she starts high school, they have made arrangements for her to continue in the individualized education program to ensure that she can continue to overcome her epilepsy. (Madison parent/caregiver)

The preceding example of the youth with special arrangements for epilepsy points to one advantage of a combined middle/high school model: enhanced information sharing and coordination of services that are typically disrupted in a high

school transition. An Elev8 Project Coordinator explained the benefits of the new model as follows:

We will have information from the very beginning and we will follow them through high school. We are aligning all aspects, mental health service, academically... Prior to the high school structure that we are transitioning to, the handoff to high school made us nervous. Some of them, we felt like they weren't ready. They needed that hand to guide them, and some of the high schools didn't have any supports. What happens once they leave us? Will they falter? Will they drop out? It was scary and it was reality.

At West Oakland Middle School, some families and staff mentioned more explicit school-based activities focused on the high school transition.

[High school students] showed us some math and science from high school and talked about what we would learn there going to high school. They talked about their experiences, what they did wrong and right and how to achieve a successful life in high school. They had high academic grades, and they wanted us to see how easy it could be if you maintain your goals and your grades; it will make it easier in high school if you learn the basics in middle school. (WOMS student)

Staff described a school-based program outside of Elev8 where current high school students serve as “ambassadors” to students and families, sharing experiences and answering questions.

Some youth and families indicated that they would like additional information and guidance about high school.

We need to learn about high school and how high school is going to be but they focus more on college. They talk to us as if we know about college, but sometimes I don't know what they are talking about. I wish they would describe more basic stuff. (UFSA student)

READINESS

Most youth conveyed optimism about their readiness for high school; some were nervous about the high school transition. In general, Elev8 students expressed high hopes for their futures. Many want to attend college or university or have professional aspirations.

Most youth were vocal about their excitement for high school, although a few expressed fear or anxiety about the transition. When we asked how prepared they are for high school, nearly all of them responded that they feel prepared. However, youth were quick to point out that high school would be more challenging academically than middle school. Many described high school as “harder” than middle school.

I'm glad I'm going to the 8th grade and not high school – I see all the hard work my sister puts in... She gets straight to the books. Last year I had to study and study and study. Just imagine if it was harder work and more classes. I want to be prepared. I want a program like Elev8 to prepare me. (WOMS student)

A large number of youth mentioned grade point average (GPA) as an important factor in their future academic success. Youth generally seemed conscious about the need to keep their GPA up and that a high GPA would help them in high school and college. Some students indicated that their school had communicated the importance of a high GPA and tied it to incentives, such as being able to choose classes.

In general, Elev8 youth participants appeared to be aware that new demands and responsibilities would accompany the high school transition. They also understood the connection between a good GPA and being prepared for the future. At the same time, youth maintained hopeful enthusiasm about the prospect of high school and their ability to meet new challenges with success. Contrary to common perceptions that at-risk youth have low ambitions, Elev8 youth participants spoke about their futures with high hopes and aspirations. The vast majority said that they wanted to go to college or university, and many were eager to share professional interests. They named jobs in a variety of fields, including sports, law, medicine, education, and the arts.

Parents/caregivers expressed reservations about their children's readiness; many believe that their children need additional academic support. Both youth and fam-

ilies noted math as an area in which additional help is needed.

Most parents/caregivers were concerned about their children's readiness for high school. When asked how prepared their children are for high school, they named a variety of hurdles that could prevent their children from being successful. Chief among their concerns was academic preparation. In keeping with current research on school transitions, one parent/caregiver observed a pattern of academic setbacks accompanying school transitions in general. The parent/caregiver concluded that students need support through transitions to succeed. Math was highlighted as the academic subject in which students needed the greatest level of support. While most respondents talked about students' difficulties in terms of middle school math classes and low scores on standardized tests, at least one parent/caregiver felt that math had been a longstanding challenge for her child.

In addition to having concerns about academic readiness, several parents/caregivers voiced anxieties about negative influences within their communities. They hoped their children would avoid using or selling drugs or succumb to other forms of peer pressure. These concerns echo the observations of Elev8 staff members who pointed out that Elev8 serves young people whose exposure to a variety of community risks place them in greatest danger of academic failure. For these students, peer influences and factors beyond the classroom threaten to undermine their success. Even the parents/caregivers who spoke optimistically about high school gave more tempered responses than the youth. Some qualified that readiness would come with continued support.

I think it's little by little; it's one step at a time... Every year, he is going to get a little bit better. He needs support to not fall off the train. (UFSA parent/caregiver)

Overall, parent/caregiver concerns reflected the broad spectrum of needs of Elev8 youth participants, underscoring the importance of supports that address both academic challenges and non-academic risk factors.

PLANS FOR HIGH SCHOOL

Youth and families showed varying levels of knowledge about their high school plans. Some families have given thought to where their children will attend high school, while others are more focused on supporting their child through middle school.

Interviews with youth and families yielded a wide range of approaches to high school planning. At one end of the continuum, families were thinking strategically about high school options and looking at higher-performing schools. Some CCPA and Madison families had already made the decision to stay with the same school through high school. As discussed earlier, most of these families indicated that they were pleased to have this option. A few families were looking beyond neighborhood schools to enable their children to follow individual interests and ambitions.

My son wants to go to Life Academy or Oakland Tech. He is doing a summer program at Merritt. [He] goes to visit colleges. My son wants to be the first Latino president; I tell him to keep striving towards it. (UFSA parent/caregiver)

At the opposite end of the continuum were parents/caregivers who told us that they were not yet ready to think about high school. This was true of several families whose children had not yet reached the 8th grade. One pointed out that middle school is itself a major transition that requires plenty of adjustments. Responses from these parents/caregivers reflected the belief that it is more important to focus on present challenges than indeterminate future ones.

Let me get him through this year. [My child has] talked to me about high school and even college; where we will go with that, I'm not sure. What life has to deal with, what high school, what college, I'm not there yet. (Madison parent/caregiver)

Some families were thinking about high school but felt that the educational system restricted their high school options. Their responses reflected feelings of concern about where their children would go for high school. In numerous interviews, families talked about non-academic needs and priorities that impacted the high school decision, including sibling choice, safety, transportation, and location. At times, parents/caregivers and students expressed differing agendas: the youth prioritized academics, whereas the parent/caregiver focused on location and transportation.

I don't really want to go to McClymonds. I feel like it's a big-gar, ghetto-er version of this school. My brother is in Tech; even if I have to wake up at 6, I think it would be worth it for my education. (WOMS student)

He told me he wants to go to Oakland Tech, but I said no, it's too far. He said he could take the bus, but I said no. He would have to wake up at 5:30 in the morning. He would have to go and wait for the bus. I don't think he's going to keep doing it every day. It's too much work for him, too dangerous... McClymonds would be better. I can drive him and pick him up. (WOMS parent/caregiver)

These conflicts between academic and non-academic priorities exemplify the family and community conditions that many Elev8 families face. Many Elev8 youth participants come from low-income and working families that are struggling to meet basic, immediate needs. Parent/caregiver work schedules and transportation barriers may limit the range of accessible high school options, and a lack of community safety all affect how youth and families feel about high school. Ultimately, these conditions can impact families' high school decisions and the scope of academic opportunities available to youth.

LEP and immigrant families exhibited varying levels of knowledge and confidence in their ability to navigate the educational system, including the transition to high school.

Among LEP and immigrant families, there was diversity in levels of knowledge about how to navigate the educational system. Several families described the public school system, school assignment process, and Options process as difficult to navigate and confusing. Some reported relying on their child to make the choice. Other families had a general understanding of the assignment process but expressed concern about where their children would end up going and the quality of options available to them.

On the other hand, some LEP and immigrant parent/caregivers expressed greater confidence in their ability to navigate the educational system. One parent/caregiver talked about getting information and assistance from the Unity Council, a local nonprofit agency.

[I] remember there was a meeting about what schools to go to. There is a program, Joven Noble, and they help people get ready for high schools. The Unity Council Latino Boys and Men program has been very helpful; they said they can help them get into the right high school. Life [Academy] is very close to me, and I don't drive. They focus on students that want to study medicine (STEM). I would like [my children] to be able to be surrounded by that seriousness. My friend, her son went there. He wants to study nursing. He graduated without papers and is going to San Diego to study medicine. (UFGA parent/caregiver)

This parent/caregiver's response highlights the importance of having information and resources available to families so they can make informed decisions about high school.

CONCLUSION

This brief summarizes findings related to the supports and services Elev8 youth and their families received to support a successful high school transition based on interviews and focus groups conducted in 2013. Key findings include:

- Families focused on the immediate benefits of participating in Elev8 extended learning and academic support programs in middle school. For limited English proficiency (LEP) families, the extended learning program was of particular value, providing academic supports to youth that parents/caregivers felt they could not provide.
- Most youth conveyed optimism about their readiness for high school; some were nervous about the high school transition. In general, Elev8 students expressed high hopes for their futures. Many want to attend college or university or have professional aspirations.
- Parents/caregivers expressed reservations about their children's readiness; many believe that their children need additional academic support. Both youth and families noted math as an area in which additional help is needed.
- Youth and families showed varying levels of knowledge about their high school plans. Some families have given thought to where their children will attend high school, while others are more focused on supporting their child through middle school.

- LEP and immigrant families exhibited varying levels of knowledge and confidence in their ability to navigate the educational system, including the transition to high school.

Interviews and focus groups with Elev8 youth participants and their families revealed that they are generally not conceptualizing the Elev8 as a program focused explicitly on the high school transition. For many, Elev8 provides supports that help to mitigate immediate academic, social, and emotional barriers to learning that will contribute to later academic and professional success.

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