

Student-Centered Learning

How Four Schools Are Closing the Opportunity Gap

January 2014

About this Series

Findings from SCOPE's Student-Centered Schools: Closing the Opportunity Gap study are published in four case studies and a cross-case analysis, a policy brief, and a web-based educator's tool.

To see the full series and related work, please visit <https://edpolicy.stanford.edu/projects/633>

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While, nationally, students of color and low-income students continue to achieve at far lower levels than their more advantaged peers, some schools are breaking that trend. A new set of case studies looks at four of these schools in Northern California in which traditionally underserved students are achieving above state and district averages.

The schools are non-selective in their admissions and serve populations that are predominantly low-income students of color. The studies focus on schools using student-centered practices through either the Linked Learning or Envision Schools model. Linked Learning, a state-wide initiative, integrates rigorous academics with career-based learning and real-world workplace experiences. Envision Schools is a small charter network that creates personalized learning environments for students to develop 21st century skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration.

These student-centered environments emphasize supportive relationships between students and teachers in academic environments that are challenging, relevant, collaborative, student-directed, and connected to real-life situations. Students are assessed on their mastery of knowledge and skills and have multiple opportunities to demonstrate that mastery. Educators are supported in creating a student-centered learning environment through opportunities for reflection, collaboration, and leadership. This is the type of setting necessary for students to develop the skills to succeed in college, career, and life.

The case studies use quantitative data to track achievement and extensive observations, surveys, and interviews to document practices. In all schools, African American, Latino, economically disadvantaged, and English learner students achieved above — and, in some cases, substantially above — similar students in their districts and in the state.

Student-centered practices are more often found in schools that serve affluent and middle-class students than those located in low-income communities. Creating student-centered learning environments is one way the country can effectively address the opportunity gap for these students.

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Examples of Student-Centered Practices

City Arts and Technology High School

S A N F R A N C I S C O



Curriculum includes a strong focus on social justice and identity. Often there is an interdisciplinary dimension to the integration of social justice issues. For instance, upper-division history students prepared educational fliers on a criminal justice topic of their choosing — racial profiling, death penalty and people of color, pregnant women in jail, immigration and detention, etc. The project included a reading; gallery walk; video and outreach campaign on their topic; and production of related campaign materials such as t-shirts, buttons, and posters.

Dozier-Libbey Medical High School

A N T I O C H



Twelfth-grade students examined medical ethics across academic disciplines, reading *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* in English; learning about eugenics and medical experimentation in Medical Ethics class; and developing, designing, and building a device to address a disability in physics. Students write a paper on who benefits, who is harmed, and the cost of making their medical device. In a culminating project, they investigate the meaning of disability and the biases in the notions of “fixing” a disability.

Life Academy of Health and Bioscience

O A K L A N D



The culminating work for students is the senior research paper, a yearlong and multi-stage assignment. Each student researches a question that emerges out of an internship experience. To answer the question, each student conducts a scaled-down literature review, interviews an expert, writes a paper, and presents and defends findings to a panel that includes the advisor, students, and family or community members.

Impact Academy of Arts and Technology

H A Y W A R D



Teachers emphasize that there are multiple perspectives to any issue. A history teacher describes a unit on Reconstruction: “We looked at different historical interpretations ... from the 1870s, the 1920s, and the 1960s and they had to pick a claim that a historian ... made about Reconstruction.” Students conducted research to either prove the claim true or debunk it, compile the primary source research and analyze the documents. History was taught as an occurrence requiring interrogation and interpretation, not passive acceptance.