The Oakland Community School
A BPP Community Survival Program

The concept for the OCS arose from point five of the BPP 10 Pt. Program and Platform, written in 1966:

> **POINT FIVE:**
> We want decent education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want an education that teaches us our true history and our role in the present-day society.
>
> We believe in an educational system that will give to our people a knowledge of self. If you do not have knowledge of yourself and your position in the society and in the world, then you will have little chance to know anything else. (BPP Platform, 1966: Point 5)

In the anthology, *Want to Start a Revolution? Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, Angela Le-Blanc Ernest and Ericka Huggins provide an overview of the mission, goals, policies and structure of the educational project, Oakland Community School (Gore, Theoharis & Woodard, 2009: 161-184). The Oakland Community School focus on quality education for black and poor youth made it not only the flagship Black Panther Party community program, it also became a locale for a small but effective group of administrators, educators, and youth who challenged the concept of "uneducable youth" and "impoverished communities". By doing so, they established a replicable model for education that was designed to empower whole communities, without regard to race, class or gender.

The OCS was a community-based, child-centered, culturally competent, non-profit elementary school for youth four to 12 years of

age. Staffed by teachers and mentors engaged in social and political transformation in every area of society, OCS became an internationally recognized grassroots model for elementary education. The school evolved organically, based on the needs of the larger community.

The children the school served were always at the center of the model. It was one of the first elementary schools of its kind in any community of color in the US. The OCS proposal for transformative education, through community control of schools, was considered radical in the 1970s for its revolutionary stance. Throughout its ten-year existence the school provided an alternative instructional model for the system of public education.

In 1971 the Intercommunal Youth Institute (IYI), the BPP elementary school, the precursor to the OCS, opened its doors. In the face of the city and nationwide wide education crisis, Oakland Community School administrators followed a tradition of revolutionary educators.

Historically, African American women have used academic education and "common sense" experiences to combat social injustice. The activism of BPP women and men, who became the OCS teaching staff during the 1970s and early 1980s, was no less significant than women who organized and educated black and poor communities in the 19th and early to mid-20th centuries. The voices of Sojourner Truth, Mary McLeod Bethune, Septima Clark, Ella Baker, and particularly the outspoken, courageous and defiant actions of Harriet Tubman and Fannie Lou Hamer preceded them. These were activists and leaders who risked their lives, as revolutionary educators, during pivotal historical periods in the early and modern African American Freedom Struggle.

In resistance to racism and sexism, these educator-activists embodied a stance of dignity and courage that defeated white and male supremacist attempts to humiliate them and those they served.

In line with this great tradition of resistance, the OCS administrators and faculty saw the dire need for quality education and stepped forward to create change in educational conditions for youth of color.

Honoring this history of revolutionary education and the current needs of the children of color, the Oakland Community School blossomed. Located in a primarily Latino and Black neighborhood the school was well-respected. It excelled in popularity throughout its existence, not only because of unique inroads with the local community, but also because of its innovative approach to education.

The OCS students were given guidance in *how* to think and not what to think. The core of student instruction was math, science, language arts (Spanish and English), history, current events, art, physical education, theater, dance, choir, gardening and environmental studies. The student population ranged between 50 and 150 from 1973-81, yet each student continued to receive an education tailored to (her/his) specific need and learning style. Community support for OCS was wide-ranging. The school's effective teaching model was recognized by the individual school districts of Oakland, Berkeley, and San Francisco. Over the school's lifetime, supporters included staff to the California State Department of Education, local politicians and local, national and international educators. Educators visited to learn, teachers completed their internships there, and community members volunteered weekly.

The school was very appealing to the communities it served because it was tuition-free. The OCS administrators knew that poor families could not afford to pay monthly for the school's services. Therefore, the school was funded by private donations, grants from local foundations, city and county resources, and later, the California State Department of Education. In turn, the Educational

Opportunities Corporation (EOC), the school's non-profit sponsor, wrote grants and applied for funds. These actions were essential for the school to remain tuition-free and operational throughout its history.

All BPP members, including the general membership, party leadership and school leadership, were creative in garnering significant financial support for the school. Parents did not pay tuition; however, they were requested to donate their time and skills in and outside the classroom. The school's parent/teacher organization planned house parties and other social events, including two radio-hosted fundraisers, numerous community dances, fashion shows and concerts.

Students were admitted, from a waiting list, on a first-come, first-served basis. A student's ethnicity, gender, economic class, learning style, or physical ability was never a factor for entrance or retention. Due to its East Oakland location, OCS students were 90% African American. Mexican American, Asian American and European-American students were also enrolled.

OCS was a replicable model, in which all children were individually appreciated and cared for. Funding was distributed equally, children were cared for directly. Students were divided into seven groups, each designed for students working on that level, each according to their ability, each according to their need. The student population was roughly 55% female; 45% male. The staff was more culturally diverse than the student body. Staff were 70% African American and 30% Latino/a, Asian-American, Native, African and white. The age range of these teachers was 22-35 years. Some teachers were newly trained public school teachers; some were seasoned educators hoping to be re-inspired. Although men were not represented in the OCS administration, their leadership roles as head

teachers, after school program coordinators, building and food service managers as well as OCLC Senior and Teen Program staff was apparent. It was common to see a male teacher brushing a child's hair or soothing tears. As well, it was common that female staff made decisions that impacted facility use, programmatic details, and fiscal solvency. No duty was beyond any person-whether they were male or female, administrator or staff, BPP or community teaching staff; party member or volunteer. Whoever had the skill or ability to do it did.

The OCS curriculum was based in a dialectical and interactive teaching method derived from staff explorations of various African, Asian, Central and South American as well as European philosophies The basic tool of critical thinking was central to the teaching method at the school. The teacher and students posed a question and dialogued about the possible answers. This method encouraged students to demonstrate and articulate creative modes of human communication and nurtured an expansive, global awareness. The students were taught that no one person holds the "right" answer. They were encouraged to create solutions to a challenge and implement those solutions together.

With help from local educators and specialists children were tested, diagnosed and assessed with different learning styles. Consequently, the plan for their individual learning was adjusted, as were specific teaching strategies. The OCS nurtured its many students by providing formal and informal outlets for the students' physical, emotional and social education as well as their creative, abstract, and spiritual needs. Physical education, in the form of martial arts, physical yoga and calisthenics were taught to help students make the link between mind and body.

The link between academic and emotional intelligence was strengthened by each administrator's open-door policy for children who needed to talk privately. Faculty and staff encouraged children to ask as many questions as they needed to grasp a concept or

understand relationships between groups of human beings. This encouragement to learn with and from others became the impetus for the formation of the school's remarkable Youth Committee (YC). This student run committee was the formal venue for student empowerment and governance. Students utilized the YC as a forum to critique and refresh self, faculty and school programs. A student-generated newsletter fostered independent by encouraging students of all ages to contribute articles, news, poetry and stories. Students developed and used their "voice" in all areas of school life. Students at the Oakland Community School tutored their peers, hence implementing the essence of the school's *Each One Teach One* philosophy. Students wrote and performed their own plays about socio-economic and political realities that were both humorous and sobering.

In 1979 the school added a daily meditation session. Every day after lunch the entire staff and students sat quietly for five minutes to honor their own innate greatness. These and other activities demonstrated the many ways in which children, and staff, were taught to care for themselves, and one another, in the school community. Equally important to staff and parents was each child's physical health, cleanliness, and appearance. The health care and well being of OCS children was given high priority. A team was created to oversee clothing, grooming, nutrition and doctor visits.

The staff and faculty emphasis was on the quality of education that the combined staff could achieve. Caring for children and maintaining the school's daily program required a specific kind of educator. Patience and dedication, among other qualities, were essential. The long school day, breakfast through dinner, and the personal and direct contact with small children demanded light-heartedness and ease. Consequently, the Oakland Community School's reputation attracted educators interested in educating the whole child.

Educators and community representatives viewed OCS as an innovative educational program for all children regardless of ability, ethnicity or geographic location (Gore et al, 2009). Unlike the mandates for state and local public schools, OCS did not rely on state standardized testing as a base-line for structuring and implementing its curriculum, or for grade placement. Similarly, the school's student groups were not arranged according to age; they were grouped according to skill level with various age ranges in each group. This was of great support to the progress of the individual child. OCS students did not receive letter grades. Instead, their families received carefully written academic and social evaluations. These evaluations encouraged the child's academic, creative and social efforts while highlighting areas of needed improvement.

The OCS attracted the attention of educators and community representatives who saw it as an easily replicable educational model for children regardless of ability, ethnicity or geographic location. Indeed, the school educated the students so effectively that parents often waitlisted their unborn children. In August 1977 the California State Department of Education gave its approval to the school as a *model* elementary, one of the OCS administrators' goals. When William Whiteneck, former Deputy Superintendent of the California State Department of Education visited, he gave official approval to the school and acknowledged its outstanding contribution to the Oakland and Bay Area communities. This award led to increased public exposure.

Parent participation was a critical component of OCS success. The active parent-teacher board provided a direct link between the OCS and the community. The OCS Parent Advisory Board (PAB) planned and implemented fundraisers and student-sponsored events in the larger community. Individual parents were required to participate weekly in their child's schoolwork as well as monthly

PAB meetings. In keeping with the school director's open door policy, families were able to meet with teachers without an appointment.

The Oakland Community School became a landmark community institution by 1974. Yet a school history is incomplete without discussing its direct link to the non-profit Oakland Community Learning Center (OCLC) and its powerful influence on the self-worth of teens and elder family members of students enrolled in the school. This center was an umbrella that covered a host of BPP-generated community programs.

As the surrounding community's needs were uncovered, the OCS school staff supported the development of programs and used the school's physical space to host them. Such proximity allowed OCS students to reinforce their connections to the community by participating in various programs after school, with neighbors and family members. This was also a way for the staff to infuse their broad community activism into the academic education.

The OCS school building and community center sponsored numerous programs; adult education, a teen program, a free film series, self-defense classes, community legal aid classes and a community forum for political discussion and action. The BPP Seniors Against a Fearful Environment (SAFE) also moved into the Learning Center. S.A.F.E. was a powerful example of a community need that linked OCS youth with community elders. Similarly, OCLC hosted teen empowerment, education and employment opportunities for young adult siblings (and their friends) who longed to broaden their horizons and life options beyond the symptoms of poverty and multi-generational trauma.

Several OCLC-based programs advocated for public housing support, finances and health care for single parents. The BPP George Jackson People's Health Clinic provided health, dental and emotional

care (Brown, Thesis, 1993). School staff and administrators also worked in coalition with broader community organizations.

In 1979 in a televised press conference data was announced that showed the city of Oakland to have one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world. The African American and Chicano communities of Oakland experienced 26.3 deaths per 1,000. In response, OCS and OCLC leadership summoned community organizations, including the Third World Women's Alliance, to found the Coalition to Fight Infant Mortality, an organization composed of 44 community groups (Lucas, Jet Magazine, 1976).

After many years of success, the Oakland Community School and the Oakland Community Learning Center officially closed in 1982 due to the cumulative impact of government surveillance of the BPP and the decline in the leadership of the BPP. By 1981 the funds that flowed freely to the OCS were decimated.

However, before that time, teachers, educators and youth advocates throughout the US, Europe and Africa were able to visit, document and replicate the school. The goal of these global and local educators was resonant with the OCS principle of creating easily replicable, child-centered, racially open, gender free, model schools in their own states and countries. This crucial principle lives beyond the OCS and has implications for generations now and in the future.

by Ericka Huggins, 2016