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## What Grades are the Charter Schools in East Palo Alto Earning?

### Issue

What impact are the charter schools, which serve East Palo Alto, having on student performance and the financial picture of the Ravenswood City Elementary School District?

### Background

Improving student performance in East Palo Alto (EPA) public schools is one of the greatest educational challenges in San Mateo County. Approximately 70% of students from EPA do not graduate from high school after four years. The Ravenswood City Elementary School District (Ravenswood) serves the East Palo Alto and East Menlo Park areas. It is a relatively small district with 4,900 students and is composed of seven traditional schools serving grades K-8, three elementary charter schools, and two charter high schools. A private independent high school, the Eastside College Preparatory School, is also located in East Palo Alto. Ravenswood is one of the districts in California under a formal Performance Improvement program, which is mandated by the California Department of Education for districts with below-target performance.

Charter schools are nonsectarian public schools that operate with freedom from many of the regulations that apply to traditional public schools. They are intended to provide additional public school choices to families. The "charter" establishing each such school is a performance contract detailing the school's mission, program, goals, students served, methods of assessment, and ways to measure success. Most charters are granted for three to five years by the school district. Some charters are approved at the county or state level. At the end of the charter's term, the sponsor granting the charter may or may not renew the school's contract. Charter schools are accountable to their sponsor-- usually a state or local school board-- to produce positive academic results, measured by the state standardized testing program, and adhere to the charter contract. The basic concept of charter schools is that they exercise increased autonomy in return for this accountability. They are accountable for both academic results and fiscal practices to several groups: the sponsor that grants them, the parents who choose them, and the public that funds them. Legislation enabling charter schools in California was enacted in 1992. There are now 750 charter schools in California with an enrollment of 276,000 students. The state legislature annually authorizes the number of charter schools allowed. Charter schools must meet all statewide academic standards and conduct student assessments applicable to students in traditional public schools. Charter schools must also serve special education students and must reflect the racial and ethnic balance of the general population living in the school district.

Charter schools are formed for a variety of purposes. In California, many are targeted at improving academic performance in communities where performance has historically been low.

Many are in communities with a high percentage of economically struggling families or a high portion of English learners. Charter schools have often been effective in raising academic performance in these communities. One recent report found that 12 of the 15 top performing public schools in California, serving children in poverty, are charter schools.<sup>1</sup>

There has been considerable debate regarding the impact of charter schools on student performance and on the financial picture for traditional schools in the same districts. The California State Education Code does not allow districts to consider financial impact when considering a new or renewal charter school application.<sup>2</sup> However, the San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) recognizes that financial impact does affect public opinion of charter schools. There are currently five charter schools serving the East Palo Alto community. Given the challenges related to educational performance in EPA and the need to drive improvement, the Grand Jury assessed the impact that charter schools are having in EPA, both in terms of student performance and the school district financial picture.

Student demographics are quite consistent across both charter and traditional schools serving EPA. Ravenswood has more than 99% minority students, the largest ethnic group being Hispanic. Each school has at least 80% of students from low income families, that is, with children eligible for free or reduced lunch. Except for James Flood Elementary School, all schools have at least 50% English learners, at least 66% Hispanic students, and less than 8% of parents with college degrees. In each school, between 4% and 10% are special education students. Concern was expressed to the Grand Jury that charter schools attract the more motivated students and parents. However, a Ravenswood official stated that approximately 80% of charter school students live in the charter school's neighborhood.

## **Description of Schools**

East Palo Alto Charter School (EPACS) opened as a K-8 charter school in 1997 with 260 students. In 2004, the school became affiliated with Aspire Public Schools (Aspire), a not-for-profit charter school management corporation, which focuses on preparing urban students for college. Enrollment at EPACS is now 420 students.

In 2006, in order to provide a continuation path for eighth graders at EPACS, Aspire opened a companion high school, East Palo Alto Phoenix Academy (EPAPA). There are now 110 students enrolled in grades 9-11. Grade 12 will be added in the 2009-2010 school year. Given the relatively brief time in operation for EPAPA, meaningful data are not available to assess academic progress at the school. Consequently, data will not be presented in this report on EPAPA.

The Edison-Brentwood Academy was opened in 1998. It is a K-4 charter school with 570 students and is managed by the nationwide Edison Schools Inc. (Edison), a for-profit company. The curriculum and structured learning programs are created by Edison. Unlike other charter schools serving EPA, the teachers at Edison-Brentwood are under a union contract. The contract differs somewhat from contracts at traditional schools in Ravenswood in order to accommodate elements of the Edison design. The Grand Jury learned that several of the best practices allowed

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<sup>1</sup> California Charter Schools Association Research Brief, "Charter School Performance Service 'Children in Poverty'", November 2008.

<sup>2</sup> California Education Code Section 47605 (b)

in the Ravenswood charter schools would be difficult to implement under the current union agreements in the Ravenswood traditional schools.

The East Palo Alto Academy High School (EPAAHS) opened in 2001 under the Aspire Schools organization. Four years ago, the charter was shifted to Stanford New Schools, a non-profit organization formed in collaboration with the Stanford University School of Education (School of Education). The Dean of the School of Education also serves as the President of the Board of Stanford New Schools. Current enrollment there is 296 students on a campus located in Menlo Park. The focus of EPAAHS is to prepare its students for success in college. Although chartered by Ravenswood, the Sequoia Union High School District provides funding for the campus.

In 2006, Stanford New Schools opened a charter elementary school, the East Palo Alto Academy Elementary School (EPAAES). The school currently serves grades K-3, 7, and 8 with a total of 347 students. The charter schools serving EPA are open to all applicants. If the number of applicants surpasses a school's capacity, a lottery is conducted to select students. The ethnic and socio-economic make-up of the charter school population is very similar to that of traditional schools serving EPA.

In addition to the traditional and charter schools serving EPA, Eastside College Preparatory School (Eastside) is a private middle and high school located in EPA serving 225 students in grades 6-12. Eastside opened in 1996 with the goal of preparing students for success in college. To date, 100% of Eastside graduates have gone on to a four-year college, including many of the top colleges and universities in the country. Eastside is composed of 100% students of color, and 98% are the first in their families to attend college. As a private independent school, Eastside is able to establish its own selection criteria for admitting students. All students are on full scholarships with the cost of their education covered by donations and grants. Although Eastside is not a charter school and not a focus of this report, it is mentioned here to highlight the fact that students from East Palo Alto can thrive in school, given the right structure, school resources, and parent involvement.

Edison McNair Academy and the 49er Academy, two other EPA charter schools, did not have their charters renewed in the last two years. In the case of Edison McNair, the inability to manage student behavior was cited as a key factor leading to the non-renewal. For the 49er Academy, poor academic performance and a challenging financial model led to the non-renewal.

## **Comparison of Charter Schools to Traditional Schools**

### *Key Measures of Academic Performance*

California Standards Tests (CST) and California Achievement Tests (CAT) are both part of the California Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Program and form the basis for assessing academic performance of public schools, including charter schools, across the state. An Academic Performance Index (API) is derived from CST and CAT scores for each school and is the core accountability metric for schools in the state. The API of a school can be compared with overall state, county, and district average scores and to schools with similar student demographics. Annual API goals are set for each school yearly. CST, CAT, and API performance data for all public schools in California are reported in detail on the California Department of Education (CDE) website, along with school enrollment, demographic, staffing, and other data. The federally mandated "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) accountability

standard, Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), is also reported on the CDE website.

There are additional key metrics for high schools. The California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) assesses student performance in math and English language arts (ELA) and is generally administered in tenth grade. Other key high school metrics are graduation rate and the portion of graduates who successfully complete courses required for admission to the University of California (UC) and the California State University system (CSU).

In this report, the following specific metrics were used to compare school performance:

- CST English/Language Arts and Math, % Proficient or Advanced
- CAT Reading, Language and Math, % scoring above 50<sup>th</sup> percentile nationally
- API Score – 2008 Growth API
- API Rank versus all schools in California on a 1-10 scale (10 is the highest)
- API Rank versus schools with most similar students, teachers and class sizes on a 1-10 scale
- CAHSEE Math and ELA, % passing
- High School graduation rate and % of graduates completing courses required for UC/CSU admission

### **School Comparisons – Elementary & Middle Schools**

As seen in the accompanying chart, EPACS academic performance is dramatically higher than any other school in the Ravenswood District. For instance, CST/ELA and CST/Math scores are roughly twice the average of the traditional schools. The API score of 836 is almost 200 points higher than the average of the traditional schools. EPACS's API rank is eight out of a possible ten versus all public schools in California and ten out of ten as compared to schools with similar students, teachers, and class size. This represents a remarkable achievement considering that 87% of its students are from low income households and 55% are English learners.

Edison Brentwood Academy has the second highest API score in Ravenswood at 690, although significantly behind EPACS. Edison Brentwood's API rank was three out of ten versus all California schools and eight out of ten versus similar schools.

The EPAAES is in its third year of operation. Experts note that a school should be in operation for at least five years before its performance can be fairly judged. At this point, the API score for EPAAES is 608 with an API rank of two out of ten against all schools in California and seven out of ten for similar schools.

There are a total of six traditional schools in Ravenswood, four K-8, one K-4, and one 5-8. One of the K-8 schools, James Flood Elementary, was a magnet school until five years ago. It is physically located outside of the Ravenswood District in Menlo Park, yet draws its students from

EPA and East Menlo Park. Its portion of English learning students is significantly lower than any other school in Ravenswood at 32%. Its API score in 2008 was 674, giving it a rank of one out of ten and a similar-schools score of three out of ten.

The remaining five traditional schools have API ranks of one out of ten and similar schools ranks of one to five out of ten. Their API scores range from 607 to 667.

## Comparison of Charter and Traditional Schools Serving East Palo Alto

	Belle Haven	Cesar Chavez	Costano	Green Oaks	James Flood	Willow Oaks	EPA Charter	Edison Brentwd	EPAAES
<b>Traditional / Charter</b>	T	T	T	T	T	T	C	C	C
<b># Students</b>	646	517	373	490	279	602	420	570	347
<b>Grades</b>	K-8	5-8	K-8	K-4	K-8	K-8	K-8	K-4	K-3,7,8
<b>Year started</b>							1997	1998	2006
<b># Teachers</b>	29	21	15	27	14	28	21	18	12
<b>Average Class Size</b>	22	26	21	21	22	22	20(K-3) 26(4-8)	22	21
<b>% English Learners</b>	67	51	56	84	32	71	55	75	54
<b>% Disability</b>	6	8	9	8	4	5	5	10	4
<b>% African Americans</b>	11	9	16	4	52	7	18	10	20
<b>% Hispanics</b>	80	80	66	87	37	85	80	79	71
<b>% Asian / Pacific Islanders</b>	9	11	17	9	9	7	2	11	7
<b>% Low Income</b>	87	94	93	93	83	90	87	80	82
<b>% Parent College Graduate</b>	3	7	7	4	11	4	1	2	5
<b>Spending per Student</b>	\$5775	\$5281	\$6587	\$3088	\$6333	\$6067	\$7142 *	\$3644	\$9822
<b>CST/ELA</b>	18%	13%	22%	13%	30%	23%	47%	29%	22%
<b>CST/Math</b>	23%	31%	24%	28%	35%	34%	68%	43%	11%
<b>API</b>	633	625	612	607	674	667	836*	690	608
<b>API Rank</b>	1	1	1	1	1	1	8	3	2
<b>Similar Schools Rank</b>	2	5	4	1	3	3	10	8	7
<b>CAT Reading</b>	30%	17%	11%	7%	31%	12%	73%	17%	-
<b>CAT Language</b>	37%	12%	18%	17%	27%	31%	50%	34%	-
<b>CAT Math</b>	34%	20%	15%	30%	43%	36%	64%	50%	-

\* 2007 data

## **School Comparisons – High Schools**

There has been no traditional public high school within EPA since 1976. The largest portion of students from EPA and East Menlo Park, approximately 600, attend Menlo-Atherton High School (M-A) in the Sequoia Union High School District. Another 1400 students attend M-A from Menlo Park, Atherton, Portola Valley, and Redwood City. The charter school, EPAAHS, only serves students from EPA and East Menlo Park. In order to provide meaningful comparisons between the charter high school and traditional high school, data are included in the accompanying table for students from low income families, English learners, and Hispanics. California High School Exit Exam results for EPAAHS and M-A are very close for low income and Hispanic students in both math and English language arts. English learners scored significantly higher at EPAAHS than M-A in both math and English language arts. Looking at all students from the two schools, the 2008 API score was significantly higher at M-A. However, when looking again at the scores for only low income, English learner and Hispanic students, API scores were very close between the two schools. Graduation rates for all students at the two schools were 84.4% at EPAAHS and 89.4% at M-A. The portion of students graduating with courses required for the University of California and California State Universities was significantly higher at EPAAHS, 94.7% versus 60.7% for all students at M-A, and 28.4% for Hispanic graduates at M-A. For EPAAHS, this metric aligns with the stated mission of preparing all of its students to pursue a college education. Finally, EPAAHS provided data indicating that 48% of the June 2008 graduates planned to attend a four-year college and another 43% planned to attend a two-year community college.

## Comparison of Charter and Traditional High Schools Serving East Palo Alto

	<b>East Palo Alto Academy High</b>	<b>Menlo-Atherton High School</b>
<b>Number of Students</b>	296	2000
% English Learners	53.7%	19.4%
% with Disabilities	4%	11%
% African Americans	17%	6%
% Hispanics	73%	39%
% Asian / Pacific Islanders	6.9%	5.3%
% Low Income	82%	32%
Average Class Size	19	29
Spending Per Student	\$9,823	\$9,728
Average Teacher Salary	\$58,835	\$72,326
<b>CAHEE % pass Math / ELA (2008)</b>		
Low Income	72%/58%	73%/63%
English Learners	58%/53%	48%/33%
Hispanics	72%/59%	70%/61%
<b>API (2008) All Students</b>	608	766
Low Income	601	607
English Learners	577	585
Hispanics	615	607
<b>Graduation Rate (2007, all students)</b>	84.4%	89.4%
<b>Graduates with UC/CSU Required Courses (All/Hispanics)</b>	94.7%/96.8%	60.7%/28.4%

### Ravenswood and the Program Improvement Project

Ravenswood is in the third year of its Program Improvement Project required of schools that do not meet the minimum standards set by the California State Board of Education under the federal NCLB Act. Being named a Program Improvement district means being subjected to an escalating series of interventions and consequences by the state through the San Mateo County Office of Education (COE.) Standards must be achieved by June 2010. If criteria are not met, sanctions can be applied by the state. Strategies for improvement are developed by the COE through the Bay Area Region IV District Assistance and Intervention Team. A comprehensive

Elementary School Corrective Action Plan for 2008-09 is mandated for Ravenswood and designed to develop projects, ideas, and curriculum, especially in English and language arts. A sampling of corrective actions includes:

- Student assessment, monitoring, reporting, and action planning
- Explicit English Language Development instruction
- K-3 teacher coaching in intensive reading and math intervention strategies
- Collaborative grade-level meetings for teachers
- Fiscal policies and fiscal allocation plans aligned with student achievement outcomes and instructional goals
- Parent involvement committee, enhanced parent communication, and ESL and literacy classes for parents
- On-going professional development for teachers and collaboration with the New Teacher Center at UC Santa Cruz to provide mentorship and support to new teachers and principals

### **Financial Impact of Charter Schools**

As noted above, California law does not allow chartering authorities to consider the financial impact when considering a new or renewal charter school. However, those interviewed by the Grand Jury stated that charter schools do have a financial impact on Ravenswood. The district is funded as a "revenue limit" district, receiving state funds based on average daily attendance. (ADA) With 25% - 30% of the population choosing charter school education, the district shifts that portion of its funding to the charter schools each year. Ravenswood currently has 4,900 students, with 1,500 attending charter schools.

Additionally, Ravenswood's finances are impacted by an additional 1,200 Ravenswood students attending schools in neighboring districts through the Tinsley Voluntary Transfer Program, which allows for inter-district transfers for traditional schools. There is hope that the provision of quality schools in Ravenswood will draw students back. Ravenswood is also operating under a court order regarding special education. The court order currently requires a state-designated monitor and also requires significant expenses from the district budget to meet compliance regulations.

The financial impact of charter schools on Ravenswood changes year by year. In a given year, if a large incremental number of students leave traditional schools in Ravenswood for charter schools, the ADA funding for those students also comes out of the budget for the traditional schools and goes to the student's charter school. However, the immediate reduction in expenses in the traditional schools would be less than the lost funding to the charter schools because some costs can only be reduced over time, such as buildings and other infrastructure. Over several years, though, a school district can and must adjust its cost structure to reflect actual student enrollment in traditional schools.

## **Factors driving Charter Schools Performance**

From interviews, the Grand Jury learned that the following factors were seen as being most important in achieving academic success in EPA charter schools:

- Contracts with parents specifying parent involvement, student conduct, and strict attendance standards
- Flexible school year for teacher development
- Frequent communication with parents
- Extended school day with extra time to reinforce curriculum
- Ease of removing low-performing teachers
- Categorical block grant funding that may be used for any purpose determined by the charter governing board
- Flexibility to be experimental, innovative, and more nimble, even though they must follow similar state requirements
- Able to attract more donations and grants
- Frequent progress assessment on each child to identify learning gaps
- Frequent professional development for teachers
- Flexibility to select state approved textbooks that are not being used elsewhere in the district
- Autonomy of school principals to creatively address site specific issues
- High and explicit expectations for student performance
- Full time coaches for teacher training and reinforcement

## **Relationship of Charter School, Ravenswood, and Stanford University**

Ravenswood and their charter schools have limited, if any, communication or sharing with one another according to the representatives interviewed from the traditional and the charter programs. Both the district and the charter schools have expressed the need to increase both formal and informal collaboration among teachers and principals, with the superintendent and the school board. Some have described a relationship lacking in trust which negatively impacts the community and its leaders, creating a lack of community commitment and cohesiveness. Neither the traditional schools nor the charter schools feel welcome to talk and interact with one

another.

At Stanford University (Stanford), improving K-12 public education is one of five core campus-wide interdisciplinary initiatives. A tremendous breadth of resources from across Stanford, and especially from its School of Education, is being focused on:

- Investing in teacher development to invigorate classroom instruction
- Preparing entrepreneurial K-12 administrators who will champion instructional and organizational reform
- Providing rigorous, scientific research to inform and advance effective education policy

In addition to its involvement in running the EPA Academy Schools, Stanford is driving a number of programs aimed at providing tangible support to educators, particularly in historically disadvantaged communities. From interviews, the Grand Jury learned that the School of Education wants to work with the new Board of Ravenswood and that the School of Education will have failed in its initiative if it is not deeply connected to and fully collaborative with Ravenswood within five years. Both the School of Education and Ravenswood report that collaboration to this point has been minimal.

## **Investigation**

The 2008-2009 San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury interviewed past and current senior education administrators from the San Mateo County Office of Education, Ravenswood, and the Sequoia Union High School District; Ravenswood school board members; eight school principals from traditional and charter high schools and elementary schools; and representatives from the Stanford University School of Education. The Grand Jury also reviewed data from the California Department of Education, the San Mateo County Office of Education, and Ravenswood, as well as, industry research papers and local media articles. Additionally, the Grand Jury toured several Ravenswood schools and met with several charter school students who were included by their principal to participate in a Grand Jury interview.

## **Findings**

The 2008-2009 San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury found that:

1. The Ravenswood City Elementary School District (Ravenswood) has taken a number of steps to improve student performance; however, there are longstanding inherent challenges, such as a high percentage of English learning students, lack of parent involvement, and poverty in the community, which the District cannot directly control. The charter schools have mitigated some of these factors through setting high expectations for student performance and parent involvement, strong teacher support, empowering site administrators, and laser focus on real-time student performance assessment and corrective action.

2. Ravenswood understands that many of their students are underperforming and has approved the granting of charter schools to help their students perform better.
3. East Palo Alto Charter School students performed exceptionally well in the 2008 state standardized testing. The Edison Brentwood Academy School API score was above all traditional elementary schools in the District. East Palo Alto Academy Elementary School is only in its third year of operation. While scoring low on most measures so far, its affiliation with Stanford University School of Education brings Stanford's resources, research, and innovation to the school and hopefully, over time, to the district.
4. Student performance at East Palo Alto Academy High School (EPAAHS) is comparable overall to the performance of students with similar demographics at Menlo-Atherton High School (M-A), the nearest traditional high school to East Palo Alto and with the largest portion of students from Ravenswood. The portion of students completing courses required for UC/CSU admission was significantly higher at EPA Academy High School than at M-A. EPAAHS has established an excellent record of preparing its graduates to attend a four-year college.
5. A number of best practices were consistently followed in the charter schools but were sporadically applied in traditional schools.
6. The Stanford University School of Education is highly invested and committed to the long-term improvement of K-12 student performance across the country and, specifically, in East Palo Alto.
7. There is not enough ongoing communication among leaders from Ravenswood, the charter schools in the District, and the Stanford University School of Education regarding future vision, best practices, and strategies for improving academic performance in the community. This lack of communication and trust occurs at all levels: between traditional and charter school teachers and principals, the Ravenswood Superintendent and charter school principals, and the Ravenswood School Board and Stanford University.

## **Conclusions**

The 2008-2009 San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury concludes that:

1. Charter schools in East Palo Alto give students in under-performing schools successful alternatives to traditional public schools.
2. The charter schools that have been operating for five years or more are making solid positive contributions to student performance and have highlighted the importance of parent involvement and maintenance of high student expectations.
3. The two newer charter schools, East Palo Alto Academy Elementary School and the East

Palo Alto Phoenix Academy, are both part of organizations-- Stanford Schools Corporation and Aspire Public Schools-- which have demonstrated success with other charter schools in East Palo Alto. While it is too soon to adequately judge their performance, the two newer charter schools deserve the Ravenswood City Elementary School District's (Ravenswood) encouragement.

4. A significant shift in student enrollment from traditional schools to charter schools can create a difficult financial situation for a school district in the short term, particularly if not planned for sufficiently in advance. School districts can mitigate longer term financial impact by diligent planning of infrastructure and other "fixed" costs.
5. Ongoing and frequent assessment, monitoring and reporting of student progress are essential for students to meet proficiency standards at mid to high levels. Traditional schools assess less frequently, in general, and report less consistently to parents.
6. The challenges facing education in East Palo Alto are significant. While there are signs of progress in improving student performance, Ravenswood has not proven able to address them single-handedly. The local charter schools and Stanford University are willing partners with energy, ideas, and resources to contribute to district-wide improvement. To date, trust, communication, and collaboration with these potential partners have been inadequate.
7. Not all charter school practices can be simply transferred to traditional schools; however, the Grand Jury believes that strong communication, creativity, and good faith problem solving between Ravenswood and the teachers' union can allow more charter school best practices to be productively utilized.
8. Traditional schools in Ravenswood have not capitalized from collaboration with the charter schools.

## **Recommendations**

The 2008-2009 San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Trustees of the Ravenswood City Elementary School District:

1. Maintain support for the current charter schools in the District-- East Palo Alto Charter School, Edison Brentwood Academy, East Palo Alto Academy Elementary School, East Palo Alto Academy High School, and East Palo Alto Phoenix Academy.
2. Meet with leaders from the Stanford University School of Education with the goal of developing a specific plan within three months describing the best opportunities for collaboration between the organizations.
3. Meet regularly with local charter school leaders to create written objectives describing opportunities to bring successful charter school strategies into the traditional school structure. Investigate such topics as instructional best practices, after school programs that are a continuation of the curriculum, more formalized parent involvement, and

attendance management.

4. Recognize the importance of teachers, who are essential to improving student performance, and increase non-student work time for teachers to prepare, collaborate, receive coaching, observe, and individualize student instruction.
5. Work collaboratively with the teachers' union to add flexibility to union agreements needed to allow implementation of the highest impact of best practices from charter schools.

## Glossary

ADA	Average Daily Attendance
API	Academic Performance Index
AYP	Adequate Yearly Progress
CAHSEE	California High School Exit Exam
CAT	California Achievement Test
CDE	California Department of Education
COE	San Mateo County Office of Education
CST	California Standards Test
CSU	California State University
ELA	English Language Arts
EPA	East Palo Alto
EPAAES	East Palo Alto Academy Elementary School
EPAAHS	East Palo Alto Academy High School
EPACS	East Palo Alto Charter School
EPAPA	East Palo Alto Phoenix Academy (high school)
M-A	Menlo-Atherton High School
STAR	California Standardized Testing and Reporting
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
UC	University of California



"OUR CHILDREN – OUR FUTURE"

## ***Ravenswood City School District***

### **ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE**

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*Superintendent*

August 28, 2009

Honorable George A. Miram  
Judge of the Superior Court  
Hall of Justice  
400 County Center  
Redwood City, CA 94063-1655

Dear Honorable George A. Miram,

RE: Response to Charter Schools in East Palo Alto

Thank you for the opportunity to review and comment on the findings from the Grand Jury. This letter serves as our response to the recommendations found within the report.

1. Maintain support for the current charter schools in the District – East Palo Alto Charter School, Edison Brentwood Academy, East Palo Alto Academy Elementary School, East Palo Alto Academy High School and East Palo Alto Phoenix Academy.
2. Meet with leaders from the Stanford University School of Education with the goal of developing a specific plan within three months describing the best opportunities for collaboration between the organizations.
3. Meet regularly with local chart school leaders to create written objectives describing opportunities to bring successful charter school strategies into the traditional school structure. Investigate such topics as instructional best practices, after school programs that are a continuation of the curriculum, more formalized parent involvement, and attendance management.
4. Recognize the importance of teachers, who are essential to improving student performance, and increase non-student work time for teachers to prepare, collaborate, receive coaching, observe, and individualize student instruction.
5. Work collaboratively with the teachers' union to add flexibility to union agreements needed to allow implementation of the highest impact of best practices from charter schools.

## **District Response:**

The Grand Jury's report has been reviewed by the Board of Education and RCSD leadership at the September 11, 2009 Board Meeting. We thank the Grand Jury for their interest in the progress of the students of Ravenswood City School District and for their report outlining recommendations for consideration by the District.

In 2008-09, Ravenswood City School District (RCSD) sponsored the following charter schools:

Edison Brentwood Charter School (Grades K-4)

Stanford Charter Elementary (Grades K-8)

EPACS/Aspire Charter School (Grades K-8)

All other charter schools that were noted in the report, have been revoked or have been dissolved. In 2009-10, RCSD will continue to support the three charter schools listed above.

RCSD agrees that there is a value to sponsoring a charter school, if only to give parents an educational choice for their students. It is important to note, however, that there are inherent differences and factors in both systems that make the comparison points between the charter program and district school system inherently unequal and misleading.

Two major considerations must be taken into account when comparing both systems. The first difference is the "freedom" of academic program development afforded to charter schools without the restrictions of bargaining unit agreements, state mandates, and financial restrictions. The ability to hire and fire ineffective teachers and staff and the advantage of creating a longer day without additional compensation to staff allows a charter to systematically offer families longer instructional days and an enriched curriculum. The second is the structure for charter school funding which differs dramatically from the state and national funding requirements for a public school district. For example, a charter school is allowed to use their State and Federal categorical funding for "discretionary purposes" in contrast to a public school that must use their funding for "restricted purposes" only. A charter school may also accept donations because of its 501c3 status from philanthropic institutions to supplant its program. In contrast, a public school system can only use their funding to supplement its system but not supplant it.

Each recommendation from the Grand Jury has been reviewed by the Board of Education and discussed with the District administration in an open hearing. The following responses have been prepared:

### **Recommendation #1: Support of Charters in RCSD**

As previously stated, Ravenswood City School District (RCSD) is sponsoring the following charter schools:

Edison Brentwood Charter School (Grades K-4)  
Stanford Charter Elementary (Grades K-8)  
EPACS/Aspire Charter School (Grades K-8)

In 2009-10, RCSD will continue to support the three charter schools listed above. RCSD will visit the programs regularly, confer with program officials and annually set in place Memorandums of Understandings (MOUs) and other agreements for the school year:

- Accounting, payroll and accounts payable
- Assessment
- Educational Support
- Facility Usage
- Financial Information and Reporting
- Special Education
- Student Attendance Accounting Systems
- Oversight of its programs

An example of RCSD and Charter School cooperation is through its after-school programs that serve the school-age students of East Palo Alto that attend RCSD or a charter school in the district boundaries. There is has an extensive after-school program at seven public non-charter schools and two charter schools: Edison Brentwood Academy and East Palo Alto Charter School. All programs have been funded by the California After-School Education and Safety (ASES) grant (Ed Code Section 8482-8484.6) since July 1, 2004 and continuously work together to reflect on and improve programming. In 2007, programs worked **collaboratively** to create a sound vision that all after school programs could commit to. This resulted in a vision statement and common goals for all programs. The programs, including the after school programs at the two charter schools, are designed to align to the regular school day, providing students with one hour of Homework Assistance per day as well as offering a variety of academic and recreational enrichment opportunities. According to the ASES grant, after school programs must be designed to look different than the regular school day. Curriculum that is used in school cannot be used in the after school program. Because of the mandated differentiation, RCSD's after school program uses alternative curriculum that is standards based and research based. Lesson plans and academic content are aligned to the California State Standards.

For the past three years, district level after school professional development has been offered to all after school staff. Topics include: strategies to use with English Learners, preparing students for the STAR, fund and engaging math and science practice activities, and literacy strategies that can be used to tutor students. All programs have 2-3 certificated teachers working after school as well. Teachers are hired to provide a strong link between the regular school day and the after school program. They plan academic enrichment support for students, interventions and recreational enrichment.

In accordance to Ed Code Section 8482.3 (f) (3) stating that: *Each partner in the application agrees to share responsibility for the quality for the quality of the program*, the after school Coordinator plans Collaborative Meetings between all program coordinators and programming partners and stakeholders. These once a month meetings give programs the opportunity to plan together and share resources in an effort to provide a strong quality program at each site. Programs also prepare a Mid-Year and End-of -Year Accountability Report documenting the progress of the students and the advancement of the shared goals of all RCSD After School Programs. Each one of these programs also creates a site-based advisory committee that focuses specifically on the after school program. This is also in adherence to the requirement as listed in Ed Code Section 8482.5 (b).

As you can see the cooperation spans program funding, teacher/staff training and reporting of progress that transcends beyond the school district and into forming partnerships with the charter programs currently in the area of East Palo Alto.

### **Recommendation #2: Set meeting times with Stanford University**

RCSDs administrative staff will schedule meetings with Stanford University School of Education with the goal of conferring and exploring best practices as both organizations work to find educational solutions for educating the students from Ravenswood School District. Both the Superintendent and the Assistant Superintendent of Instruction have visited the K-5 campus relocated to the Flood campus and discussed the program goals with the new principal. It was agreed at that time that additional meetings would be calendared with staff from both the Stanford Charter School and RCSD.

### **Recommendation #3: Confer with Charters on their Best Practices**

In regularly scheduled meetings with charter school administrators and leaders, RCSD will conduct a careful review of data, instructional practices, curriculum and continue to study transformational program elements that might be replicated for use in RCSD schools.

### **Recommendation 4:**

RCSD teachers have their instructional day and required minutes clearly outlined and negotiated in their Teachers' contract. Teachers have a set work schedule once they arrive at school and required to stay ½ hour after school is over. Planning and meeting times that are organized by the school principal or the district office and also negotiated in the RTA Bargaining Agreement .

Once a week, the schools bank their instructional minutes in order to create a shortened day where all teachers can plan, confer and work to align their programs and grade levels. Attached please find the scheduled for the 2009-2010 Wednesday Professional Development Calendar for RCSD where all teachers are required to

work collaboratively to plan their instructional program. Schools may also use their categorical, grant or other site funding to pay teachers for additional planning time and professional development and most schools budget for this effort.

All new teachers in RCSD participate in coaching and mentoring from the New Teacher Center (NTC) as part of a special grant from *Hewlett Packard* for the first two years of their professional career. In addition, all teachers participate in Professional Development Cycles of Inquiry by grade level or content area supported by teacher mentors from NTC. Principals were also given NTC Mentors during the 2007-08 and 2008-09 school years.

RCSD has in fact defined both the professional day and the meeting and planning time in collaboration with the Ravenswood Teacher Association for all teachers and works to find grant and private funding when possible to develop each teachers' professional capacity as an educator. This work is constant and on-going.

#### **Recommendation 5:**

The bargaining unit, RTA and the District negotiate a yearly calendar the Spring of each year for the upcoming school year. Only East Palo Alto Charter has a calendar that is substantially different from the RCSD. The other two charters and the District have tentatively agreed to allow Special Education teachers from the District who serve at charters to follow the charter school instructional calendar. Currently, the new contract for 2009-10 has not been completed.

The District and the certificated bargaining unit have already agreed to establish a committee in 2009-10 which will work to develop standardized report cards revising the District report card that is currently used by all RCSD teachers. The District is held to Ed. Code on the dismissal of ineffective teachers, a standard not enforced in charter schools. The District formally notified the Association of a need to establish a Peer Assistance and Review Panel in 2009-10, a mandatory step in the dismissal process of ineffective teachers.

The District is coordinating all of the professional development activities scheduled by the sites, district level, San Mateo County Office of Education and other entities for the teachers and administrators of the district in an attempt to align in-services and professional development offerings for staff. In addition to this effort, the District is also under the mandates of both the RC Special Education Consent Decree (RSIP) and the District Assistance and Intervention Team (DAIT) requirements for a Program Improvement district. These two compliance and monitoring efforts restrict RCSD's academic program flexibility. At many levels, RCSD is without autonomy in determining creative and innovative solutions for their instructional programs until the school district is able to meet the academic targets set out by the State and Federal government and meet the requirements outlined by the RSIP.

RCSD presently collaborates with multiple outside agencies to include: Stanford University, CISCO Systems, Hewlett-Packard, Menlo Park City, East Palo City Government, Boys and Girls Club, One East Palo Alto, Ravenswood Health Clinic, San Mateo County Curriculum and Instruction Division, Ravenswood Inter-Faith Community, to list a few. Experts from throughout the United States work with RCSD staff in the areas of coaching, RtI, full inclusion, strategic schooling, and programs to effectively serve our special populations (English Learners and Special Education), parent governance and parenting classes. RCSD administrative and school staff have to coordinate all of this support in addition to keeping its focus on student learning.

In closing, the District agrees with the Grand Jury recommendation to work collaboratively in support of the District's charter schools. We thank you for your review of the programs in East Palo Alto and an opportunity to respond in kind. Please contact me if you need additional information or have additional questions.

Sincerely,

*Rosa G. Molina*

Rosa G. Molina  
Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction  
(Administrator Assigned to Document the Board of Education's Response to the Grand Jury Report)

Approved at September 11, 2009 Board meeting.