

# STUDENT VOICES COUNT

A STUDENT-LED EVALUATION OF HIGH  
SCHOOLS IN OAKLAND



Have you ever been discriminated against based on your race or language at school?  
If YES, please explain:  
I was speaking Spanish and was discriminated against.

**STUDENT VOICES  
COUNT**  
A STUDENT-LED EVALUATION OF HIGH  
SCHOOLS IN OAKLAND

**May 2003**

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### **About Kids First/REAL HARD**

**K**ids First is a citywide, multiracial organization working to create opportunities for Oakland youth to become visionary leaders capable of transforming our schools and communities through organizing, alliance building, creative arts, and leadership training. REAL HARD (Representing Educated Active Leaders – Having A Righteous Dream), the youth leadership program of Kids First, is comprised of youth who are dedicated to building a youth movement that ensures all students graduate from schools in Oakland that are equitably funded, have more honors and AP classes, invest in violence prevention services, teach ethnic studies, life skills and all forms of creative arts, train students to participate in developing school policies, and hire more qualified teachers to inspire students to learn and grow.



## Youth Introduction

*“No one ever asks us our opinion. The truth is, we have the most to lose when our schools aren’t working right, and the most to gain when they are.”*

**Jamaul Thomas, student at Oakland High School.**

**T**here is a budget crisis currently in Oakland schools, but for those of us who go to these schools – we know that the schools have been in a crisis for a lot longer. Our school bathrooms are dirty and have no soap, our classrooms have old books or no books, and we don’t have enough qualified teachers. Our counselors don’t always make time for us, and many students feel like there’s no one to talk to about our personal problems. While we understand school administrators and teachers are trying their best to give us a quality education, we believe that the state government is neglecting our schools and that Governor Davis should be giving more funding to the schools that need it.

The current situation is a financial crisis, but we have a great resource in the schools that is being overlooked. There are 48,000 youth in Oakland’s schools that are experts– who are in class every day and who have a lot to say about how the schools are run and how to improve our education. Whenever something happens in the schools, everyone wants to hear from the teachers and parents – but what about the students? Who asks our opinion? Why do we feel shut out, like no one cares what we think?

We created the first-ever student report card surveys for students to voice their opinions by evaluating the performance of school personnel and the conditions of the schools. We decided to use a report card format since that is the way we’re most familiar with getting feedback. We understand that a single letter grade is not so helpful if you don’t know why or how you got it. So we created a report card with space for comments and created our own criteria for what makes a good teacher. We also came up with guidelines for what the students would be evaluating their schools on, so that the schools would get evaluated not just by personal opinions, but by how well they create a supportive and positive learning environment.

We got 1,000 students to tell us their opinions. Imagine what we could do if all of those students were coming up with new ideas to deal with real issues of school safety, drop out prevention, discipline policies, and multi-cultural unity. We know that the report cards will not solve the whole problem, but it’s a step to getting to the real root of the problem – which is that we need more youth leaders involved at every school who care passionately about changing it.

**REAL HARD Youth Organizers and Youth Members  
(Representing Educated Active Leaders – Having A Righteous Dream)**

## Executive Summary

On October 23, 2002, the East Bay Express ran a cover story entitled, “Can Small Schools Make Students Give a Damn?” REAL HARD youth organizers have been trying to figure out what will make students care about school change ever since they set their vision on lowering Oakland’s drop out rate and making sure their peers graduate with a quality education. Through their discussions, they determined that it wasn’t going to be enough to simply decrease student-teacher ratios or break up into small schools. Rather, they argued - empowering a broad base of students, especially their peers on the margins, would have to be a focal point of any effort to transform their high school learning environment.

With this goal in mind, REAL HARD youth organizers from Oakland High School, McClymonds High School, and Oakland Technical High School designed the first-ever report card survey to solicit feedback from 1,000 students on the state of their schools. At a time when an impending state takeover and state appointed administrator threaten to remove all local control from the Oakland School Board, it is critical that some measure of local control is retained where students are encouraged to give feedback and come up with solutions on how to improve the schools. This report presents a summary of the findings and recommendations for problems throughout the district. In most sections of the report, graphs highlight the key findings and selected quotes illustrate various student opinions and experiences.

### Findings Include:

- Three quarters of students surveyed want to have more of a say on issues that impact their education such as school safety and security, teacher quality, classes and extra-curricular activities
- 62% of students surveyed have never been asked their opinion about how to improve the school by their Student Council
- 77% of students surveyed want to support teachers through student evaluations
- 24% of students surveyed don’t know what classes they need to graduate from high school and/or get into college

### Recommendations Include:

- Expand the scope and purview of Student Councils to address student prioritized issues
- Initiate a voluntary process for students to evaluate teachers

- Have students prioritize areas for teacher professional development
- Add more counselors, trained advisors and student peer counselors
- Have counselors meet once a semester with each student to develop a plan to successfully fulfill high school graduation and college admissions requirements

This report will serve as the basis of a District resolution to increase student participation in school change efforts by strengthening student councils, expanding leadership opportunities, and providing a core leadership training curriculum. This resolution is the first step in addressing some of the most pressing issues found in this report.

# Counselors

High school counselors are a critical resource for students as they are responsible for providing assistance to juniors and seniors applying to college, ensuring students take the courses they need to graduate, and generally supporting students in reaching their academic goals. The counselor to student ratio in Oakland’s high schools (one counselor to 400-500 students) makes it difficult for counselors to reach all of the students. One respondent said, “*Counselors give you the information, if you go to them.*”

REAL HARD youth organizers who designed the survey determined that in addition to academic counseling, students need counselors who encourage them to reach their personal goals and with whom they can discuss personal issues. One respondent said, “*It’s sometimes hard for me to keep on track when I can’t see my counselors. I understand they’re busy...I need some other kind of encouragement from them. If no one really encourages me I will slack off and feel that no one really cares.*”

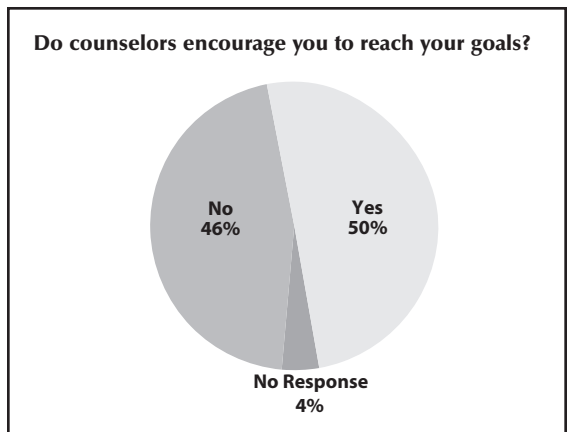
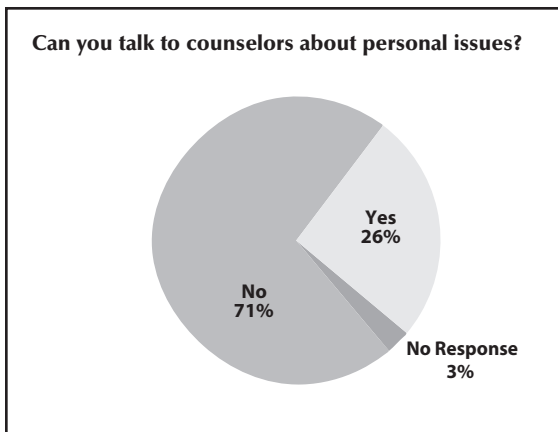
While a majority of students surveyed reported that counselors fulfilled their basic responsibilities of keeping them on track academically, a quarter of

the students surveyed were still not being informed of high school graduation and college admissions requirements. One respondent said, “*I go to my counselor once every marking period, and I STILL don’t know if I’m graduating this year.*”

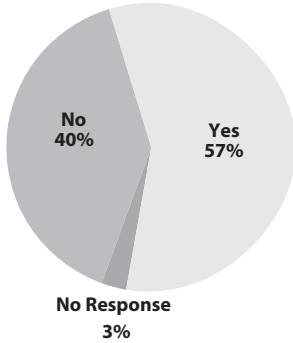
As the expectations of counselors to provide more comprehensive services to students rise, the ability of counselors to meet these expectations, as reflected by the survey results, falls drastically. Almost half of students surveyed did not think counselors encouraged them to achieve their goals and over three quarters of respondents felt they could not discuss personal issues with their counselors.

## Recommendations

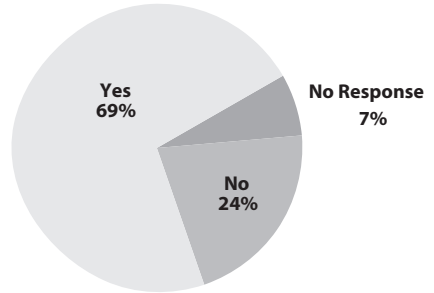
- **Add more counselors.** Add more counselors, trained advisors, and student peer counselors in order to allow counselors to broaden the scope of their work to meet with students on both personal and academic goals.
- **Provide Transcript Evaluations once a semester.** Have counselors meet once a semester with each student to develop a plan to successfully fulfill high school graduation and college admissions requirements.



**Do counselors help you stay on track in your academics?**



**Do counselors let you know what classes you need to graduate or go to college?**

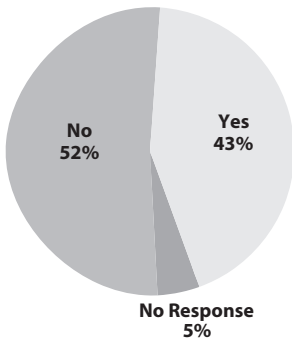


## Principals/Vice-Principals

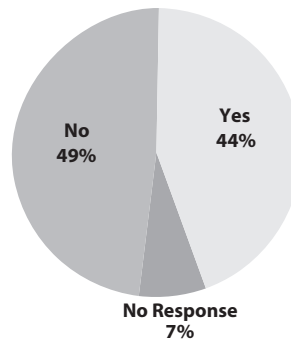
Students surveyed were evenly split as to whether the principals and vice-principals on their campuses were working to make their schools

a great school. Almost half of the students surveyed thought their principals and vice-principals could make more time to talk with students.

**Do you feel like they are doing a good job of making your school a great school?**



**Do they make time to talk with a student who requests it?**



## Safety & Security

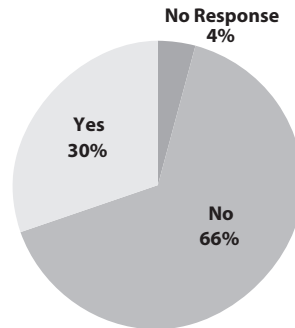
An enormous amount of resources are allocated to insure school safety with over 100 school security officers, a handful of Oakland police officers assigned to school sites, and administrators who mostly deal with disciplinary issues. Despite the intention of the district, two-thirds of students surveyed felt that having security guards and police on campus did not result in making them feel safer on campus.

Given that a majority of students surveyed do not feel safe on campus, it is encouraging to know 3 out of 4 of students want to have more of a say in how to make the school safer. One respondent said, *“Students who fight should not be suspended; they should have a Saturday detention.”* Another respondent also commented on the efficacy of the discipline policy at their school by asking an important question, *“Why is there study hall for tardy students? All students are doing is using Study Hall to cut.”* Students want to see more preventative measures as demonstrated in one respondent’s plea for schools to, *“Help the students, don’t punish them.”*

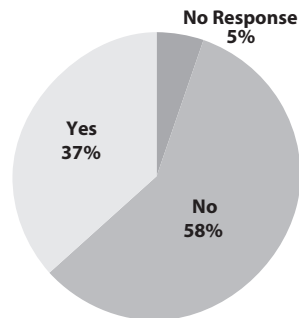
### RECOMMENDATION

**Engage students in coming up with a school site safety plan that allows students and faculty the opportunity to define a safe school and utilize creative solutions.** The state mandates that every school have a school site safety committee to facilitate this type of plan.

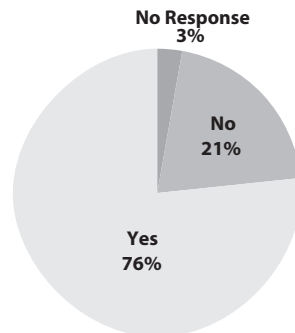
Do security guards/police make your school safer?



Do security guards/police treat students fairly during conflicts?



Should students have a say in how to make school safe?





# Teaching

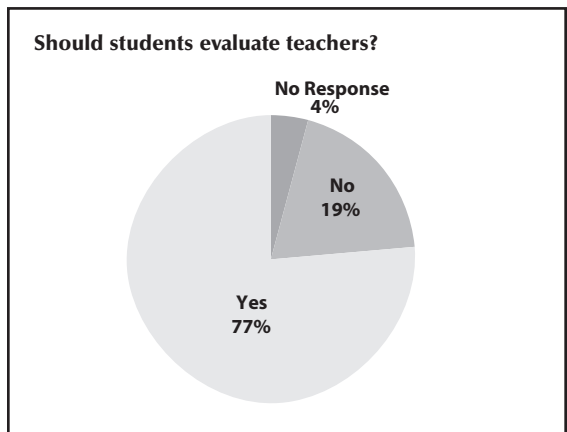
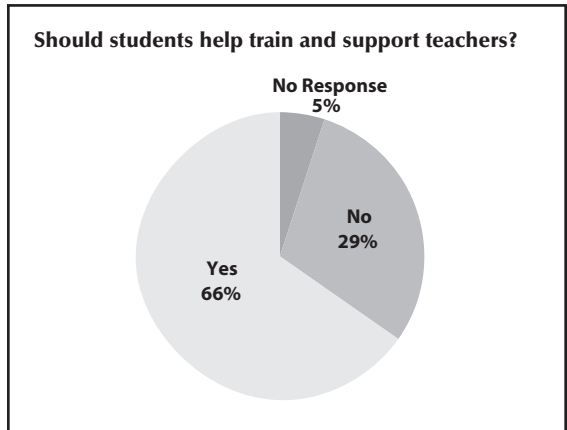
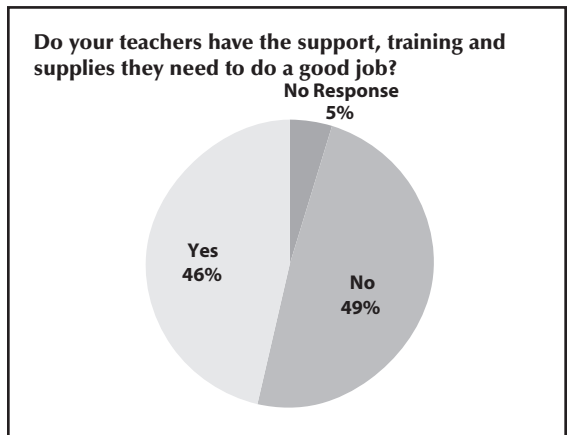
REAL HARD youth organizers prioritized teacher quality as one of the key issues that most impacts their academic achievement. The youth felt that a student evaluation of teachers would be the best way to let teachers know what they are doing right and what they can improve upon. Opponents of student evaluations fear the evaluations will amount to little more than a popularity contest. A majority of the students surveyed, however, were able to distinguish between personality and teaching efficacy as well as between their own individual performance and that of the teacher. One respondent said, “*My teacher knows the subject well. I give her an A, even though she gave me an F.*”

Students also recognize that teachers in Oakland are operating under extremely under-resourced conditions. Almost half of the students surveyed said they did not believe that teachers had the support, training, and supplies they need to do a good job. A majority of students surveyed said they want to support their teachers through trainings or student evaluations of teachers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Initiate a process for students to evaluate teachers.** Create a committee of students, teachers and parents to develop an evaluation tool that is meaningful to both teachers and students. Start with voluntary teacher participation.

**Increase student involvement with teacher training and development.** Create mechanisms for students to share student-defined priorities for trainings that they determine would improve teacher efficacy. Create opportunities for students to develop and lead their own trainings for teachers.



The following are comments and recommendations from the student surveys about how to improve teacher quality and efficacy.

## **According to Oakland Students, teachers are more effective when they:**

### **Use creative curriculum**

*“He makes learning fun and the way he teach make you want to go to his class”*

*“We sing songs to remember things in Spanish and have mini skits”*

*“Challenging teacher, fun experiments, good comedian”*

*“Teacher keep lesson exciting and interactive with students”*

### **Have high expectations of students**

*“Expects students to do their best”*

*“She pushes you to do your work and she doesn’t stop until you know the work, and she does it all while being your friend”*

*“Teacher encourages students to participate. Pushes all students to learn”*

*“They are helping me get into college and seeing me through school”*

### **Build caring relationships with students**

*“Teacher is available to help students. Teacher shows respect to students”*

*“Magnificent teacher. Understanding, caring, loves everybody equally”*

*“Takes time to listen”*

*“Great teacher. He is someone I can relate to”*

*“She’s teaching me new things everyday and is supporting me in everything I do”*

*“He talks to students and very understandable for students’ situation”*

*“Shows us respect and lets us learn and make mistakes ourselves”*

### **Have control of their classrooms**

*“Handles class very well. Very structured class”*

*“She knows her subject, keeps discipline and order and always pushes to get more out of us”*

*“Always know and accomplish what he wants to get through”*

### **Supports learning at every level**

*“She helps with everything and gives detail when she wants us to do something”*

*“He moves slowly and clearly so he won’t leave anyone behind”*

*“She encourages questions and always answers questions truthfully”*

*“Have time for every student to understand subject. He doesn’t go on until the class understand”*

*“Makes the class fun as much as he can. Stays at lunch and after-school to help us. Lots of essays and many group projects but his format helps me and makes it easier”*

## According to Oakland Students, teachers are less effective when they:

### Minimally engage students

*“He does not teach at all. He gives book work and doesn’t help. He sits at his computer”*

*“Never does the lesson with us. Just tells us to do it”*

*“Not organized. Doesn’t collect work at all”*

*“He doesn’t really come around and help us. We copy notes from the board and do a worksheet. And when we ask him a question, he says “look in your book.” What if we don’t really understand the chemistry language? I need someone to show me so I can learn better. Reading doesn’t always help”*

### Do not explain the material well

*“Doesn’t know the subject well”*

*“She sometimes doesn’t know what she’s doing, telling or teaching us the wrong thing”*

*“He explains but teaches too fast”*

*“She gets upset too quick”*

*“Doesn’t explain. Gets flustered easy. Class not always structured. Need more improvement on controlling class”*

*“Some teachers don’t take the time to talk to and understand students”*

*“Teachers need to have better communication with students”*

### Do not treat students with respect

*“Only helps bad students”*

*“Never help us, sexist and love the football team”*

*“The teachers will discriminate against you academically if they don’t like you”*

*“Always talking about people”*

*“She does not like kids. She doesn’t explain the work”*

*“He knows what he’s doing, but he’s not very encouraging instead he makes fun of me cause I’m short and laughs when I’m trying to do something new”*

*“She doesn’t have class under control. Most of the time she has favorite students while teaching others rudely”*



# Student Leadership

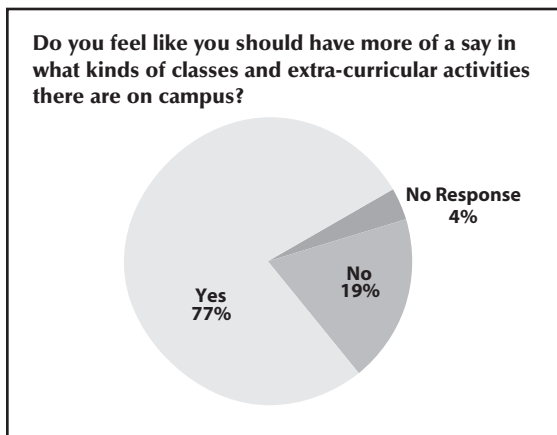
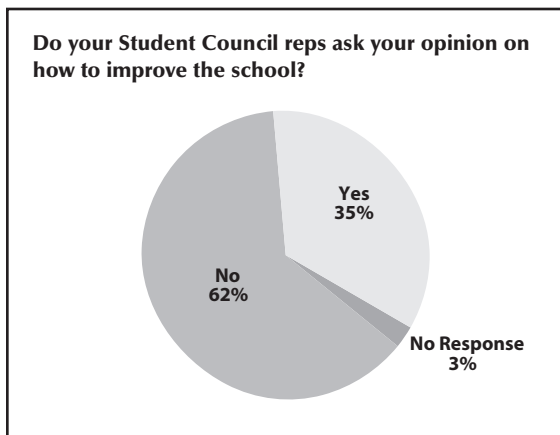
Over the past four years, the Oakland Unified School District has taken great initiative to dedicate resources to establishing the infrastructure needed to support student leadership and engage students in improving the schools. While the supports are now in place, over half of the students surveyed said their Student Council representatives still do not ask their opinion about how to improve the schools. Given the impending state takeover, it is even more critical to follow through with the District’s commitment and set up mechanisms for more student participation and leadership at the school site. One respondent described their elected student representatives as, “*people who plan prom.*” Another respondent said, “*We should have a say so on everything that concerns our education.*” Three out of four students surveyed want to have more say in the kinds of classes and extra-curricular activities offered at school.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Expand the purview and authority of Student Councils and leadership class members to develop action plans that address student prioritized issues on campus.** Student Councils should be comprised of elected student representatives who reflect the diversity of the student body and who are empowered to address the real issues and needs of the student population – with a core leadership curriculum, expanded leadership opportunities, access to supplies and funds, and support to turn ideas into policies and actions.

**Student Councils and leadership class members should hold regular open forum meetings for the general student body to raise issues, problems and suggestions for school improvement.**

**Student Councils and leadership class members should be trained to sit on site based decision-making bodies such as Site Councils, Curriculum and Technology committees, School Site Safety committees, and others.**



## Student Relations

A majority of students reported that students get along well across cultures. However 21% of students surveyed did report experiencing racial discrimination based on their race or language. The number goes up slightly to 25% for students who reported experiencing sexual harassment on campus. One respondent reported the problem as, “A lot of people say words that describe a certain race and they assume things too much.”

### RECOMMENDATION

**Student leadership at the school sites should create a forum or workshop to address issues of discrimination and harassment where young people could not only testify about their experiences but also come up with creative solutions to address the issue on campus.**

Student comments regarding discrimination on campus included:

*“I’ve been called many names by students and teachers that hurt my feelings”*

*“A girl was speaking Spanish and a secretary in the office said, ‘this is California, speak English’”*

*“My math teacher always kicks out the black students”*

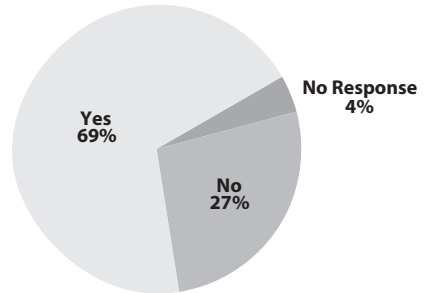
*“In classrooms, certain teachers favor students of certain cultures or race”*

*“I have been called a ‘faggot’ a few times, but done nothing about it”*

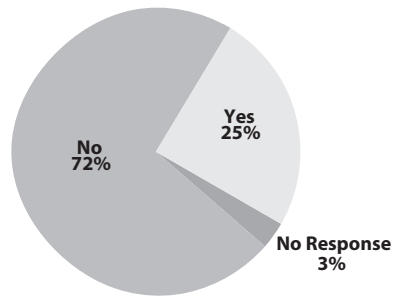
*“Because for me, being Black, they don’t expect much from me.”*

*“Just because I’m Asian does not mean I’m Chinese and I don’t appreciate when people make fun of my language”*

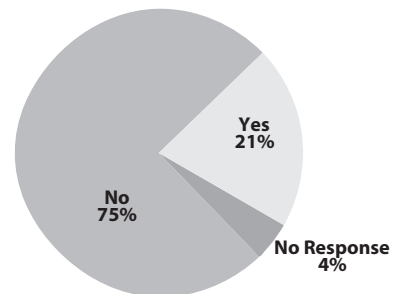
**Do students from different cultures get along with each other at school?**



**Have you ever experienced sexual harassment at school?**



**Have you ever been discriminated against based on your race or language at school?**



## Facilities

Student respondents were evenly divided on the conditions of the school facilities with 54% of students surveyed saying that the gyms, athletic fields and swimming pools are kept in good condition. The number drops to 38% for students surveyed who reported that the bathrooms were in working condition or open during the school day.

### RECOMMENDATION

**Engage students in developing plans to beautify and maintain the school.** Cultivate a sense of responsibility and ownership in the school by creating student committees who would maintain and upkeep hallways, murals, plant life and artwork that students and community members dedicate to the school site. One respondent notes, *“We need to spend more time working on the safety and cleanliness of the school.”*

*Student comments on school facilities included:*

*“We have great janitors”*

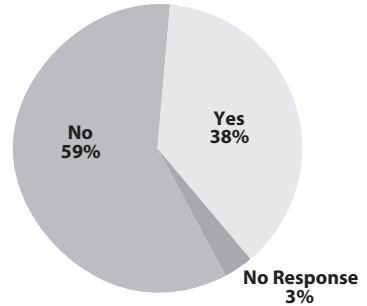
*“The bathrooms are in working condition, but are very dirty. We run out of tissue and paper towels”*

*“Why the school put so much money into those things and not books and classroom curriculum?”*

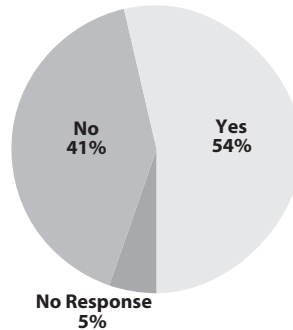
*“There should be toilet seat covers and sanitary napkin machines also”*

*“There’s like four bathrooms, but only one is open. I understand people cut class to go there, but teachers should give us the key, so I don’t have to walk across the school just to use the bathroom”*

**Are the bathrooms in working condition and open during the school day?**



**Are the gyms, athletic fields and swimming pools kept in good condition?**



*“Gym, athletic fields need to be in good condition for us to play on”*

*“We need better things to play with (basketballs, hockey sticks, mitts, etc.)”*

*“The kids destroy everything. But the teachers don’t promote things we need. They got a new football field while we need new books”*

## Research Methodology

In January 2003, REAL HARD organizers developed a “report card” survey with evaluation criteria to grade the schools, because they believed that school personnel, just like students, need information on how they are doing so they can improve. They developed questions to assess student perspectives about every aspect of the school – including school facilities, student relations, school safety, and counselors. The questions they prioritized emerged from discussions about what an ideal school would look like and how to measure Oakland high schools in relation to that vision. For example, students developed many questions concerning relationships on campus between students and school personnel, demonstrating the importance of relationship building as a key component of schools that work for students.

From February to April 2003, REAL HARD youth organizers made classroom and individual presentations to their peers during and after school and collected nearly 1,000 report cards surveys. They also held monthly membership meetings for other students to complete report cards and provide additional feedback on the conditions of Oakland schools.

Students surveyed attended the three high schools in which REAL HARD is active: McClymonds High School, Oakland Technical High School and Oakland High School.

- Of the 997 report cards collected, 462 respondents (46%) came from Oakland High; 141 respondents (14%) came from McClymonds; and 394 respondents (40%) came from Oakland Tech.

- Of the 997 report cards collected, 227 respondents (23%) were freshmen, 404 respondents (41%) were sophomores, 235 respondents (24%) were juniors, and 131 respondents (13%) were seniors.

In April, 2003, REAL HARD youth organizers entered the raw survey data on excel spreadsheets. They read through all the report card surveys and highlighted the comments that stood out to them. After synthesizing the data, the youth held a series of meetings to analyze the results. Finally, they convened student forums in April and May to engage a broader group of students in developing prioritized student recommendations based on the survey results.

## Conclusion

When students are given the opportunity to voice their opinions about the problems and solutions to the educational crisis, they develop solutions that have a unique and critical perspective. We need to find ways to respond to the needs and insights of young people who want to have agency in their education. Students, like teachers and parents, want their experiences to be validated and valued. For Oakland schools to truly meet the needs of their students, we must support students in helping to lead the efforts to make schools work for all students. This report is a model for an annual process that we recommend be led by students in each school to assess current challenges and progress made toward meeting student defined goals and objectives for improving the schools.

# Sample Report Card

**SCHOOL PERSONNEL**

	YES	NO
<b>COUNSELORS</b>		
Do you feel you can call or write for a personal contact?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do they encourage you to reach your goals?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do they give you help to do with the work in your classroom?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do they let you know what needs you need to graduate from high school?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do they let you know what needs you need to graduate from high school?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>SECURITY GUARDS/POWERS ON CAMPUS</b>		
Do they make their school safer?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do they treat students fairly when dealing with a problem?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you believe students should have a say in how to make the school safer?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>PRINCIPALS/VICE-PRINCIPALS</b>		
Do you believe they are doing a good job of making your school a great school?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do they make time to talk with a student who requests it?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>TEACHERS</b>		
Do you feel teachers have the necessary training & support they need to do a good job?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Should students help train and support teachers?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<b>COMMENTS/CONCERNS:</b>		

**SCHOOL CLIMATE**

**ATMOSPHERE:**

Do your Student Council meet with you and opinion on how to improve the school climate?

Do students feel they are safe and secure at school?

Do you feel you should have more of a say in your school activities?

Do you feel you should have more of a say in your school activities?

Do you feel you should have more of a say in your school activities?

Do you feel you should have more of a say in your school activities?

**ACTIVITIES:**

Are there enough activities in your school?

Are there enough activities in your school?

Are there enough activities in your school?

**COMMENTS/CONCERNS:**

YOUR INITIALS \_\_\_\_\_ DATE \_\_\_\_\_ GRADE \_\_\_\_\_

YOUR SCHOOL \_\_\_\_\_

**GRADING TEACHERS: HELP TEACHERS IMPROVE**

**A =** Teacher is available to help students

- Teacher shows respect for students
- Teacher keeps control of the classroom
- Teacher knows the subject well
- Teacher encourages students to participate
- Teacher tries to make learning fun & enjoyable
- Teacher is fair & honest
- Teacher respects you as an individual

**C =** Teacher is available to help students

- Teacher shows respect for students
- Teacher keeps control of the classroom
- Teacher knows the subject well
- Teacher encourages students to participate
- Teacher tries to make learning fun & enjoyable
- Teacher is fair & honest
- Teacher respects you as an individual

**B =** Teacher is trying to do all of the above but is having a little trouble

**D =** Always includes and rewards good students if they understand or read long

- Does not treat students with respect
- Does not have control of classroom
- Does not know subject they are teaching

PERIOD/SUBJECT	TEACHER	GRADE	EXAMPLES OF GOOD OR BAD TEACHING
A			
B			
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			



## Acknowledgements:

REAL HARD youth organizers and members who developed the report card survey questions, made classroom presentations, collected 1,000 surveys, entered the data, analyzed the results and wrote the introduction:

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