

Developing a Public Health Academy to Empower Students

Oakland High School - Oakland, CA

2014

WHY CREATE A PUBLIC HEALTH ACADEMY?

The impetus for developing a Public Health Academy at Oakland High School was twofold – to improve students' academic achievement and their health. After reviewing data on health and academic achievement disparities among ethnic subgroups within the school, the school's youth council and adult advisory board identified academic academies, topic-focused educational programs that prepare students for careers in specific areas, as a successful model that promotes student development. Academies cultivate students' connection to school, fostering close relationships between students and teachers, preparing them for college, and connecting them to services and programs within the school and larger community. The Public Health Academy also provided an opportunity for the school-based health center to institutionalize and scale-up health education activities to consistently reach large numbers of students.

DEMOGRAPHICS

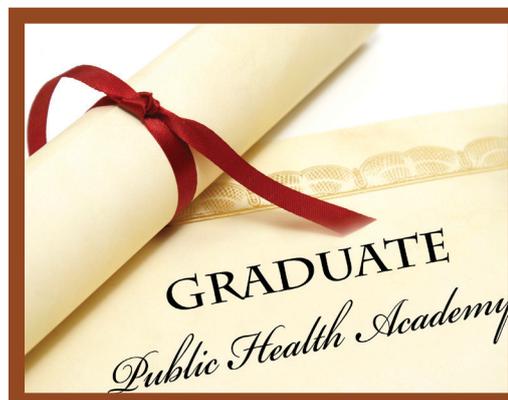
- 9th-12th grade
- 1,552 students
- 87% of students qualify for free/reduced-price meals

Ethnicity:

- 37% African American
- 36% Asian
- 22% Hispanic/Latino
- 3% Other
- 2% White

ACTION STEPS

With the Wellness Champion (the school-based health center managing director) in the lead, a team was formed to develop the Public Health Academy. Working directly with teachers and administrators, the Wellness Champion helped develop a curriculum anchored in public health and oriented toward reducing health disparities. Classes covered health education, nutrition and physical activity along with core academic subjects. The content of the coursework was informed by a survey that identified the top health concerns among students. The Wellness Champion also worked to bring public health to life for students by creating health-related internship opportunities that exposed students to public health careers and allowed students to learn job skills. The Academy team successfully leveraged funding from The S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, bringing in state education funds to support the academy. The first class of sophomores entered the Academy in 2011; three years later in Spring 2014, the academy enrollment was 180 students in grades 10-12.



CHALLENGES & SOLUTIONS

The partnership between the teachers and the school-based health center staff broke new ground and, like any new relationship, the kinks had to be worked out. Balancing health center and school priorities was initially difficult, but with weekly team meetings and quarterly advisory committee meetings, a smooth working relationship was established. Teacher turnover has been a struggle. Many of the academy students require extra academic and social support, which can be difficult on teachers who are already stretched. To help resolve this, Oakland High School-based health center staff provide counseling and one-on-one support to the students to ensure their success in the program and connect them to resources. The Academy also provides teacher training and professional development to build a committed and competent Academy faculty.

IMPACTS & ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The comprehensive, multifaceted approach of the Public Health Academy exposes students to a variety of educational experiences. Students conduct and present original research projects at conferences and receive exposure to the professional public health field through internships coordinated by the Academy. Both activities boost students' confidence and sense of achievement. Academy students gain leadership skills by advocating for health issues on campus, including making recommendations on school nutrition, athletic programs, and cultural activities. Oakland High School has high hopes for the Public Health Academy students' academic achievement; statistics on Academies show that an average of 80% of academic academy students graduate on time with post-secondary plans, as compared to only 65% of the general student population. The Public Health Academy graduated its first cohort of seniors in 2014.

"Academy involvement has affected [the students'] sense of school and empowerment...it is preparing them for college and beyond."

Wellness Champion

ADVICE FOR OTHER SCHOOLS

Bringing together a diverse team—teachers, school administrators, school-based health center staff, community organizations and students—and ensuring that everyone prioritizes academics and public health course content is a must when implementing a Public Health Academy like Oakland High's. Presenting data on health and academic achievement and highlighting best practices from other academies was key to generating buy-in from school leadership. Specialized staff professional development helps integrate health with core subjects (such as sciences, history or English) and builds teachers' sense of efficacy in teaching new topics. To assure Academy success over the long term, sustainability planning should be built-in from the get-go. Identifying partnership and funding opportunities will allow the Academy infrastructure to flourish beyond initial funding cycles.

For More Information:

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