

The Pennsylvania State University

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**WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM THE SCHOOLS OF OPPORTUNITY:**

**HOW 19 SCHOOLS CLOSE OPPORTUNITY GAPS**

A Thesis in

Educational Theory and Policy

by

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## ABSTRACT

Opportunity gaps address the inputs of the education system— a student’s relationship to his or her learning environment and his or her access to supports— rather than the single measure of a test score resulting in an achievement gap. A focus on addressing opportunity gaps in schools draws responsibility for student learning back upon schools rather than placing blame on students or student identities (Milner, 2012). The Schools of Opportunity Project at the National Education Policy Center recognizes public schools around the United States for enacting practices which close opportunity gaps. This paper surveys the 19 Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity for significant patterns and characteristics that allow for the adoption of these practices. The Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity shared five areas through which they altered their social system and created change: student-centered practices, strong community partnerships, an asset-based approach to diversity, strong learning culture, and commitments to clear mission and vision.

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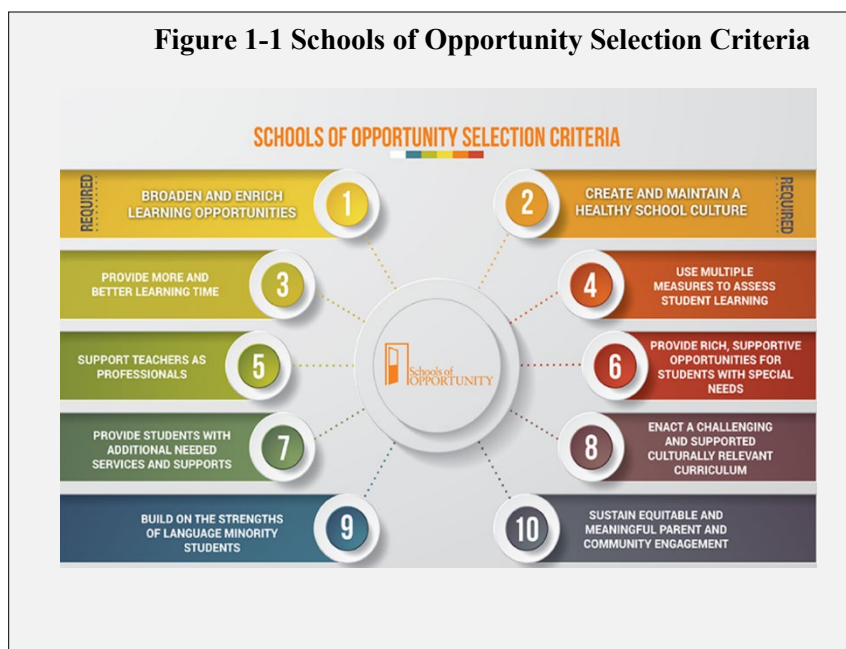
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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Opportunity gaps address the inputs of the education system—a student’s relationship to his or her learning environment and his or her access to supports— rather than the outputs of the education system, measured in test scores and achievement gaps. Focusing on opportunity gaps in schools draws responsibility for student learning back upon schools rather than placing blame on students or student identities (Milner, 2012).

In 2015, the National Education Policy Center at the University of Colorado Boulder created a project that deliberately sought out schools enacting practices to close student opportunity gaps. The Schools of Opportunity Project began to recognize quality public schools for qualities beyond the standard measurements of test scores or graduation rates. Each year, the project recognizes schools from across the country for



their accomplishment in ten criteria (see Figure 1-1). Recognition requires that all schools eliminate student tracking and demonstrate school



discipline policies that do not discriminate against students based on identity group.

Schools can then select three other criteria in which they feel they excel.

Since its foundation in 2015, the Schools of Opportunity Project has identified 19 schools as Gold recognition schools, meaning that they have demonstrated the most significant movements toward practices to maximize student opportunities. The project does not, however, go beyond recognizing these schools to determine what they have in common.

The 19 Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity offer a unique chance to glimpse what models work in public education outside of the narrow focus on student achievement scores. This paper investigates the Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity as a cohort. Despite their varying size, location, and student populations, these schools share a common commitment to non-traditional methods for closing student opportunity gaps. Other public schools in the United States could benefit from the identification of factors that allow schools employ practices that help students achieve, outside of coaching them through a standardized test. Public schools need to know not only what the Schools of Opportunity are doing, but also how they are doing it.

The primary research question of this paper is: what are the common attributes of the Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity and how might these be transferable to other public schools within the context of public schooling? My analysis examines various characteristics of the 19 schools both individually and as a cohort in order to describe common themes that connect the schools. The findings from this analysis demonstrate the assets of the public school model and the ways in which other public schools could adopt similar practices. This paper will not evaluate the outcomes of the schools, nor their

quality, but rather the patterns in practice and philosophy that contribute to closing student opportunity gaps.

In this paper, I first explore some of the relevant theory and literature for opportunity gaps and school design. Then, I present the data and methods used to survey the Gold recognition schools for patterns and processes most effective for explaining the institution of policies expanding student opportunities. Finally, I connect findings to the literature and theory in order to identify areas for future exploration.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Several strains of literature are connected in this review. The first category of literature investigates the need for examining the role of opportunities in education. This supports the need for the Schools of Opportunity Project and contextualizes the work that each Gold recognition school is doing. The second strain of literature necessary to this paper is that of school design and change which can help to explain the ways in which the Schools of Opportunity have escaped traditional public school models in order to become more in tune to the equitable distribution of opportunities to students.

### **Opportunity to Learn Standards**

Opportunity to Learn (OTL) standards rose in political conversation in the sweep of educational goals set forth during the Goals 2000 movement. Set in motion during the administration of George H.W. Bush, Goals 2000 officially codified a set of educational goals for the United States education system, including increasing the high school graduation rate and removing drugs and alcohol from schools (Dougherty, 1996). However, Goals 2000 also continued a national debate over the inclusion of OTL standards, which were described as “resources, practices, and conditions necessary... to provide all students with an opportunity to learn the material in voluntary national content standards or State content standards” (108 Statutes 129). Though Goals 2000 was not accompanied with mandates to state education departments, it did set in motion the mission of developing a set of standards that would measure American schools’ OTL.

While definitions vary, most definitions of OTL are concerned with the conditions of schools which contribute to the learning of students (Dougherty, 1996; Elliott, 2015; Elmore & Fuhrman, 1995; McDonnell, 1995). The specific content and processes relevant to measuring OTL are under debate, however. Whether or not OTL should be concerned with inter-school or extra-school factors remains of interest to those concerned with developing definitions of OTL.

A micro-level definition of OTL uses a lens on just the classroom and teachers responsible for students. Content coverage, teaching practice, instructional materials, and application of critical thinking all contribute to the micro-level of OTL (Elliott, 2015; Elliott & Bartlett, 2016; McDonnell, 1995). This is a closed-door approach to OTL that is not particularly concerned with processes occurring in students' lives outside of schools. By this definition, the responsibility of providing OTL to students lies almost entirely upon teachers—their skill level, their use of classroom time, and their ability to provide students with the necessary materials for learning. Though this is a contributor to a student's opportunities, classrooms are anything but closed-door spaces. Classrooms are subject to numerous effects from student backgrounds and school contexts that also shape OTL.

Some definitions of OTL take into consideration school-level contributions to opportunities. The scope of these school responsibilities varies, however. According to the report of the National Council on Education Standards and Testing (NCEST), OTL can also be considered “school delivery standards,” which measure whether or not schools are providing the support and resources for which they are responsible (National Council on Education Standards and Testing, 1992). School-based OTL removes primary

responsibility from the teacher and transfers it to the school or district educating students. This lens acknowledges that school culture and practice also play a role in constructing a student's opportunities. Schools, districts, and state governments all play essential roles in the construction of opportunity for students (Elmore & Fuhrman, 1995). The ultimate goal of this wide scope of measuring opportunities is to ensure that all students have access to quality education regardless of predetermined characteristics including race, socioeconomic status, and neighborhood (Porter, 1995).

The methods for measuring opportunities remain up for debate. Without being able to afford the tools required to collect the qualitative data for measuring opportunities in schools, the most effective method for measuring OTL would be teacher surveys (McDonnell, 1995) or other self-reported data. However, the debate over how much or what kind of data to collect depends on the researcher and variables set forth.

First, and perhaps most challenging to consider is the question of what variables are the most important and most feasible for measurement of opportunities. Those proposed in the original Goals 2000 were "intra-school factors," leaving out the influence of student home environments, educational aspirations, or cultural capital (Elliott & Bartlett, 2016). A very basic approach to OTL would consider the "enacted curriculum," through the dimensions of time, content, and quality (Elliott & Bartlett, 2016). Opportunities would be evaluated through the length of time students have with material, what the material is, and the quality of their instruction on the material. These data would be cross-referenced with tests to determine whether or not the student had sufficient opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed.

Opportunity to Learn demands consideration of factors outside of the classroom, however. Unfortunately, it might still be next to impossible to determine the most salient variables in student opportunities because doing so requires the application of values, rather than science (Dougherty, 1996). In other words, by choosing variables to consider and those not to, any policy seeking to regulate student opportunities would be favoring certain values over others. While a classroom-centric approach might increase the value of education in the relationships between teachers and students, the extra value assigned to the classroom leaves out other important ingredients to opportunity, including school environment, educational leadership, and family engagement. Finding mechanisms to regulate extra-school factors, though they are influential, has yet to be determined through any studies.

The challenge of measurement is perhaps best summarized in McDonnell (1995), who said, “having a single production function would make the development of OTL standards much easier... unfortunately, we lack such certain knowledge.” The relationship between merit, achievement, and opportunity has yet to be solved and likely never will be. And so, it is scientifically and politically challenging to determine the best ways to optimize student success through opportunities because the debate over what elements are most important can go on endlessly. However, the challenge of measuring opportunity does not mean it is not relevant to consider in educational research, particularly when the alternative is the flawed and narrowed use of achievement scores. Opportunities might be the harder value to pin down, but they could also be the key to solving a problem that has continued in the education system for as long as it has been around. As of yet, however, policy has not determined the best method to monitor student

opportunities from a top-down perspective. Individual schools maintain control as to how to distribute opportunities between students. This paper seeks to develop an idea of how individual schools might create conditions for monitoring and building Opportunity to Learn using some of the concepts introduced in OTL debates.

### **Opportunity Gaps in Education**

The construct of achievement gaps insinuates that those performing highly, most often white middle and upper-class students, have been capable of doing so through some inherent quality to their identity. These performance differences are better attributed the underlying resources that create opportunities for higher achievement. The situation of achievement gaps is a function far more of what could be called a “receiving gap,” a difference in the distribution of resources and racial privileges across student groups (Chambers, 2009). Consistent portrayal of students of color and students of low socioeconomic status as low-performing and lacking in educational skill has the potential of placing students under stereotype threat—trying to fight back against constant political and cultural rhetoric that paints them as struggling, lacking individuals rather than individuals lacking the supports or resources to succeed (Steele, 2010). Interpersonally and structurally, this can create significant challenges for students in classrooms and schools.

Considering achievement in static year to year increments ignores the generational education debt, that has accumulated as a result of inequality and subjugation of entire groups of people across the country (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Until

sixty-five years ago, schools willingly segregated groups of students based upon their racial identity. While students are no longer legally segregated, vast amounts of segregation still thrive in United States public schools and in many areas, one can predict whether or not students are predominantly white or black simply by looking at the quality of facilities in a school (Kozol, 2005). It should, therefore, be unsurprising to see the achievement gaps between white and black students. This is not a reflection of lacking merit so much as it is a reflection of generational discrimination, marginalization, and racism.

A test score is one datum point, but in order to see what's really happening in schools, one must analyze all the ingredients that contribute to the solitary output of a standardized test score, at a point in time but also throughout history. To truly grasp the complexity of educational inequality in the United States, one needs a holistic comprehension of the system of opportunity structures administered between and within schools that contribute to the return of student test scores. Upon achieving that better framework for evaluating schools, school reform can more directly address opportunity gaps rather than fixating on the continued use of standardized test scores and publication of achievement gaps.

### **Solutions in Practice**

Creating schools with a more student-centered approach to instruction and curriculum improves the learning opportunities of low-income students and students of color (Adamson & Darling-Hammond, 2014). Student-centered schools feature engaging



curriculum for students, connections between teachers and parents in the school community, and strong leadership for enhancing the experiences of students. In strong contrast to the narrow mindset of standards-focused schools, student-centered schools shape their practices around the needs of the students they serve; they meet students where they are rather than pushing or pulling them to a standard of achievement to survive.

The inclusion of opportunity standards in policy or practice would not eliminate the use of test scores. However, both the practical and interactional relevance of tests could be used differently in order to avoid complicity in perpetuating education inequalities. As is, test scores are often used as a prescriptive tool to determine what recognition or punishment a school and its students deserve. In contrast, test scores used as diagnostic tools identify the needs or weaknesses of schools and could then be used to support them. The culture of schooling could shift from one of assessment to one of improvement (Stanny, 2018). In this way, many of the damages dealt to schools based upon test scores would be avoided and instead result in increased attention and allocation of resources to build student opportunities to achieve. Instead of being punished, schools would receive supports for addressing gaps in opportunities rather than be pressured to narrow the curriculum to increase test scores.

On a more interpersonal level, teachers and administrators can also take individual steps to ensure that their practice is not negatively impacting student achievement. Racial bias and deficit thinking construct practices in classrooms that limit the opportunities allotted to certain groups of students. In many cases, schools are responsible for limiting the opportunities provided to students through the use of

tracking, discipline, and other policies which create barriers for students (Lewis & Diamond, 2015).

Schools need to craft professional development and supports to ensure that faculty members are approaching students with a belief in their capabilities as learners, regardless of their racial or family background. Some of this can be accomplished by better teacher preparation and development in the field, but most needs to come from supporting and engaging students in their own learning (Colket, Snowden, Overton, & Vandergrift, 2018). Student need to know that they are appreciated in their school community, not just for their test scores. Deeper inquiry into student experiences and identities will allow schools to create a multi-dimensional concept map of student achievement that does not rely on destructive deficit narratives.

Some of these changes require a shift in existing educational paradigms. As it stands, education is oriented around identifying “failing,” or “struggling” students or schools and fixing them in such a way that their achievement improves. This results in students being identified from a deficit mindset, regarding them based on what they lack rather than what they possess. Education does not just need to improve this paradigm, but to throw it out altogether and create one through which students are identified by their strengths and assets (Zhao, 2016). Students do not need to be fixed through education, but to be pushed to become the best versions of themselves; this is only possible if school leaders and policymakers lessen their hold on strict mandates that result in deficit thinking and practice. A more asset-based approach to educating all students, but particularly students of color and low-income students, would prevent some of the damage caused by achievement ideologies (Flores, 2018).

On more practical note, however, many of the inequalities in achievement across American schools need primarily to be addressed in the redistribution and improvement of resources between and among schools. In the past, achievement gaps have been attributed to poor teachers or to a lack of merit or effort in students. However, vast amounts of the literature suggest that the difference in resources in schools is a significant factor influencing student achievement. Creating schemes for equitable funding across the school system would enable schools to provide a stronger curriculum and better prepared teachers in areas with the most need (Darling-Hammond, 2013). Achievement is a function of opportunities and if the opportunities accessible to high needs students expand, their achievement is likely to rise.

## Chapter 3

### Conceptual Framework

This study of the 19 Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity investigates the conditions through which schools adopt policies and practices that close opportunity gaps. The selected conceptual framework for this study combines Brofenbrenner's (1992) ecological systems theory and Meyer and Rowan's (1977) institutional change theory. The two theories contextualize the data collected on the Schools of Opportunity within a framework on school environments and reform.

#### Social Systems Theory

This study seeks to identify what environmental conditions allow for schools to incorporate practices that increase student opportunities. Social systems theory presents a model for analyzing the conditions that impact social entities. In this study, social systems theory contributes a model of layered influences that impact a school's policy and practice.

Structural functionalism, or *social systems theory*, proposes that a social entity, such as an organization or institution, might be studied as an organism (Giddens, 1986). This paper investigates the multi-faceted environments of the 19 Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity. All recognized schools excelled in different areas and operated in vastly different environments. However, this paper sought to identify the common

facets of the Schools of Opportunity that seemed to allow their success in closing student opportunity gaps.

Part of the analysis of this paper uses a conceptual framework founded upon Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (1979). The ecological model is a theoretical model that helps explain how people are influenced by factors at different levels of their context, and how people also have an influence on their context. Bronfenbrenner examines these impacts on five different levels: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem, the macrosystem, and the chronosystem. The levels of social influence operating in the Schools of Opportunity differ from Bronfenbrenner's theory in that they are more challenging to separate and distinguish. However, this paper attempts to pull apart a few aspects of the schools which seem to have the greatest impact on enabling their practices: state, community, and institution.

### **Institutional Change Theory**

The Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity exist outside of the realm of traditional public schools in their establishment of strong practices for student opportunities. They have been able to resist some of the conventions of traditional public schooling to create more equitable conditions for their students. This paper uses institutional theory to postulate what aspects of the Schools of Opportunity have allowed them to escape the rational model of public schooling.

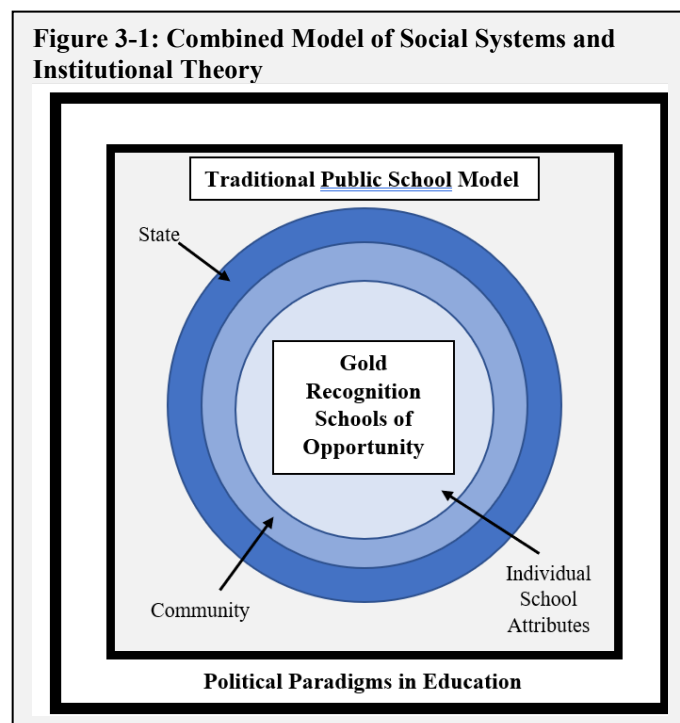
Institutional theory investigates the ways in which formal institutions rationalize standard practices as pathways to legitimacy. Public schools tend to adopt similar

structures which contribute to a concept of real school. The standards-based reform movement has created a system in which schools must conform to models of extensive testing and achievement measurement in order to be considered legitimate or successful public schools. Both policy and practice coordinate to ensure that educational institutions are obligated to adhere to an achievement-based paradigm (Mehta, 2013).

This paper investigates how the 19 Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity operate within an environment that emphasizes institutional isomorphism, conformity, and rationalization. Schools do not tend to place a significant emphasis upon student opportunities as explanations for achievement (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2017). The Schools of Opportunity, therefore, exist outside of the realm of traditional public schools and have therefore somehow resisted some of the effects of institutional change theory. Their policies and practices do not align perfectly with what is considered a rationalized and legitimized model of public schooling.

### **Combined Model of Social Systems and Institutional Theory**

The use of social systems theory and institutional change theory allows this paper to illuminate where opportunity to learn and opportunity gaps fit within the broad context of educational paradigms as well as what can be done at individual schools to better support student opportunities. The purpose of this paper is not to decide how schools change, but rather what practices or policies might allow them to thrive within a context that resists change.



The combination of Social Systems Theory and Institutional Change Theory in this paper- (see Figure 3-1) will explain the environmental factors that contribute to schools that thrive outside traditional public school models. This paper intends not only to determine the environmental factors which the Gold recognition schools employ, but it also seeks to

understand the ways in which other public schools might adopt similar policies.

The Schools of Opportunity must be examined as examples within a cohort of traditional public schools and the political paradigms in education. The current model of public schooling, particularly in policy, resists acknowledgment that student opportunities play a significant role in student achievement (Flores, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Welner & Carter, 2013). The social systems in which the Gold recognition schools operate suggest potential approaches that would allow other public schools to adopt similar practices. This paper analyzes the role of the state, local community, and individual attributes of the schools within the traditional public school model as well as within the current education political paradigm.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Data and Methods**

This study of the 19 Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity used three separate methods of data collection: school demographic data, school profiles, and two detailed examinations of schools. These three methods were selected to collect a sufficient amount of illustrative data within the limited access to each school. Both the school demographics and school profiles were available publicly, while the detailed examinations of two schools took place via interviews with school principals. This methodology illuminates any notable patterns that exist to connect the 19 winning schools to one another and suggest thematic areas through which other public schools would benefit in practice.

#### **School Demographic Data**

This paper uses demographic data from each recognized school and compares them to the average demographics of schools in their state. This method was selected to determine the privilege and performance of the schools to schools in their state. Data come from a variety of sources including the National Center for Education Statistics and the Census Bureau. While the confines of the study prevented visiting individual schools, the publicly available demographic data offer context for the schools in question and how they compare to the broader context of traditional public schools. Demographic data also provide attributes of the schools as they compare to one another.



## **School Profiles**

The Schools of Opportunity Project publishes profiles for each winning school, detailing the policies and practices that earned the school recognition. This paper examines each of the 19 school profiles for commonalities among the winning schools. This phase of data collection required in-depth analysis and reading of each school profile individually and then creating connections between multiple schools to determine the common attributes of the 19 schools which led to the closing of opportunity gaps between students.

Each school did not get analyzed individually, but rather the focus of this phase of data collection was to develop concepts that remained common across all schools in the environment they create for their students. Notes taken from each school relating to programs and partnerships unique to that school were cross-compared for thematic patterns and linkages in school attributes. The purpose of this paper was to determine what could be learned from Schools of Opportunity as a cohort of successful schools; the analysis of the profiles was used to bring out common characteristics of the schools that were critical to their success in closing opportunity gaps. These common characteristics were the critical findings of this paper.

## **Detailed Examples of Schools**

Interviews with two Schools of Opportunity were conducted to take a closer look at the environments through which they close opportunity gaps. Each Gold recognition school principal was contacted individually in March 2019 to gauge interest in

participating in an interview to get more information as to how their school was capable of enacting policies and practices to close opportunity gaps. Both principal Jeff Gilbert (Hillsdale High School) and William Hook (Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences) responded with interest in participating.

Interviews took place over the phone in early April 2019 and each lasted approximately forty-five minutes. They were recorded through the microphone on a personal computer. The interview protocol (located in the Appendix) incorporated both background and context about the school as well as the supports, funding, policies, and environments that allowed the school to be structured the way it was. The purpose of these interviews was to illustrate the true mission and practices of the school and to develop from a school leader an idea of how the school came to adopt its model. While not all 19 schools were able to participate in an interview, the two interviews conducted yielded opportunities to look at two unique Schools of Opportunity for their own situation within the conceptual framework.

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed for important themes and then written up including quotations that were illustrative of study main findings. Additional information from the school website and other sources also contributed to creating a detailed examination of the two individual schools as examples of the diverse types of methods that take place at Schools of Opportunity.

### **Data Analysis**

The three phases of data collection in this study yield a cohesive array of data for analysis. Though taken separately, each phase offers distinct insight into the common

attributes of Schools of Opportunity not only in their demographic characteristics but also in the qualitative practices and philosophies they employ.

The demographic data were collected in a notebook and then transferred into an excel spreadsheet for analysis and the creation of tables. At first, these data were deposited into a master table of all of the schools, including every category of demographic data collected. Then, the data were analyzed for significant patterns of explanation for school conditions— in this case, the areas for analysis were school locale and size, median household income, and graduation rates. Upon identification of these areas, the data were separated into smaller tables for closer analysis. Here, the state and school data points were compared through ratios. The tables became the primary area through which this phase of data analysis took place. The comparison of the data contextualized the position of the schools within their states as well as in comparison to one another.

The school profiles were analyzed through notetaking and thematic coding. Each profile yielded notes of characteristics of each school. Notes on each of the 19 schools were then cross-referenced and tallied for the number of times certain themes or characteristics arose. Mention of a characteristic in over half of the profiles led to an additional read through of the profiles on that particular theme. This process yielded five themes that created the bulk of this phase of data collection.

The detailed examinations of the two interviewed Schools of Opportunity took a more narrative direction. Each interview was transcribed and analyzed for relevant parts to the research question at hand. The parts of the interviews that were consistent or in stark contrast to the themes of the school profiles became the most significant areas of

focus. While maintaining the narrative and illustrative tone of the interviews, this section of data analysis also sought to bring dimension to the aspects of the Schools of Opportunity found to be most significant in the 19 school profiles. The stark differences between the two interviewed schools also served to demonstrate the diverse pathways to recognition as Schools of Opportunity.

## Chapter 5

### Findings

#### School Demographics

The 19 schools in this study come from nine states across the United States including California, Colorado, Illinois, Massachusetts, Nebraska, New York, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington. Table 5-1 details the type, location, locale, and enrollment of each recognized school. Among these schools, seven reside in suburban areas of ranging size, ten in cities, and two in rural areas. They also range in size from very small schools of around 300 students to large schools serving as many as 2,030 students. The diversity of these demographic patterns demonstrates that there are not necessarily size or location requirements that impact a school's ability to develop strong policies and practices for student opportunities.

**Table 5-1: Gold Recognition Schools of Opportunity**

	Recognition Year	Type of School	Location	Locale	Enrollment
Broome Street Academy Charter High School	2017	Charter	New York, NY	City: Large	320
Centaurus High School	2015	Public	LaFayette, CO	Suburb: Small	1,032
Chicago High School for Agricultural Science	2017	Magnet	Chicago, IL	City: Large	720
Crater Renaissance Academy	2016	Public	Central Point, OR	Suburb: Midsize	463
Denver South High School	2017	Public	Denver, CO	City: Large	1,565
Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School	2015	Public	Bronx, NY	City: Large	487
Grand Valley High School	2015	Public	Parachute, CO	Rural: Fringe	280
Health Sciences High and Middle College	2017	Charter	San Diego, CA	City: Large	584
Hillsdale High School	2016	Public	San Mateo, CA	Suburb: Large	1,400
Jefferson County Open School	2015	Public	Lakewood, CO	City: Midsize	525
Leland and Gray Union Middle and High School	2016	Public	Townshend, VT	Rural: Fringe	325
Lincoln High School	2017	Public	Lincoln, NE	City: Large	2,030

Malverne High School	2015	Public	Malverne, NY	Suburb: large	531
Rainier Beach High School	2016	Public	Seattle, WA	City: large	700
Revere High School	2016	Public	Revere, MA	Suburb: Large	1,772
Rochester International Academy	2016	Charter	Rochester, NY	City	307
Seaside High School	2017	Public	Seaside, CA	Suburb: Midsize	1,108
South Side High School	2016	Public	Rockville Centre, NY	Suburb: Large	1,106
William Smith High School	2016	Public	Aurora, CO	City: Large	305
Data from <a href="http://www.schoolsofopportunity.org">www.schoolsofopportunity.org</a> and National Center for Education Statistics (“National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Home Page, part of the U.S. Department of Education,” 2019)					

The 19 Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity reside in communities with median household incomes comparable to their states (see Table 5-2). Seven of the schools, in fact, are located in communities with median incomes well above their state’s. Most of the schools in question are between 0.85 and 0.9 of the state median income. The lowest ratio of any of the recognized schools is that of Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom School with a ratio of 0.588; this community is one of the poorest in the nation. On the whole, however, the demographic data suggest that most of the Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity operate in communities that are fairly comparable to that of their states, with some outliers earning far more or far less than the median income in their state. This suggests that resource scarcity or plenty might play a role in individual schools but is not a unifying factor between and among the 19 schools.

**Table 5-2: Median Household Income of Community Versus State**

	Median Household Income	Household Income by State	Ratio of Community to State
Broome Street Academy Charter High School	\$79,781	\$71,805	1.11107862
Centaurus High School	\$76,059	\$69,117	1.10043839
Chicago High School for Agricultural Science	\$52,497	\$62,992	0.83339154
Crater Renaissance Academy	\$48,409	\$60,212	0.80397595
Denver South High School	\$60,098	\$69,117	0.86951112
Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School	\$36,593	\$64,894	0.5638888
Grand Valley High School	\$39,837	\$69,117	0.5763705

Health Sciences High and Middle College	\$71,535	\$71,805	0.99623982
Hillsdale High School	\$103,399	\$71,805	1.43999721
Jefferson County Open School	\$61,058	\$69,117	0.88340061
Leland and Gray Union Middle and High School	\$54,716	\$57,513	0.95136752
Lincoln High School	\$53,089	\$59,970	0.8852593
Malverne High School	\$106,250	\$64,894	1.63728542
Rainier Beach High School	\$79,565	\$70,979	1.12096536
Revere High School	\$53,794	\$77,385	0.69514764
Rochester International Academy	\$56,969	\$64,894	0.87787777
Seaside High School	\$57,653	\$71,805	0.80291066
South Side High School	\$105,444	\$62,894	1.67653512
William Smith High School	\$58,343	\$69,117	0.84411939
Data from niche.com (Niche.com Inc., 2019) and National Census Bureau (Census Bureau, 2017)			

Graduation rates at the Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity fall at comparable places to that of their states (see Table 5-3). Half of the schools claim a graduation rate that is higher than the state average graduation rate. Those that fall below the average graduation rate vary greatly with the lowest graduation rate at 37% at Broome Street Academy Charter School. Graduation rates are not the primary metric through which Schools of Opportunity are recognized. However, the relative comparability of most of the schools does indicate that schools can demonstrate similar metrics of conventional success (i.e. high graduation rates) and still provide further resources for closing student opportunity gaps.

**Table 5-3: School Graduation Rates versus State Averages**

	Average Graduation Rate	State Graduation Rates	Graduation Rate vs. State Graduation Rate
Broome Street Academy Charter High School	37	80	0.4625
Centaurus High School	95	79	1.202531646
Chicago High School for Agricultural Science	92	86	1.069767442
Crater Renaissance Academy	77	75	1.026666667
Denver South High School	81	79	1.025316456

Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School	67	80	0.8375
Grand Valley High School	92	79	1.164556962
Health Sciences High and Middle College	95	83	1.144578313
Hillsdale High School	90	83	1.084337349
Jefferson County Open School	55	79	0.696202532
Leland and Gray Union Middle and High School	85	88	0.965909091
Lincoln High School	72	89	0.808988764
Malverne High School	92	80	1.15
Rainier Beach High School	82	80	1.025
Revere High School	87	88	0.988636364
Rochester International Academy	Data not available	80	-----
Seaside High School	90	83	1.084337349
South Side High School	96	80	1.2
William Smith High School	72	79	0.911392405
National Center for Education Statistics (2019)			

On the whole, the demographic profiles of the Schools of Opportunity do not show conclusive patterns to suggest what enabled them to enact their policies and practices. Most of the schools are relatively well-resourced and are not at the far end of struggling public schools.

The following sections detail the findings from analysis of the school profiles and detailed examinations of two schools. These sections help to illustrate more of the social systems impacting the institutional change and derivation of the Schools of Opportunity. They illustrate some of the critical environmental ingredients that contribute to the success of the Schools of Opportunity model. These contributions in combination with the demographic data yield important answers to the research question of what creates the success of these schools from a theoretical perspective.



## **School Profiles**

Upon examining the profiles of the 19 Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity, several patterns and themes became clear. While each school remains unique, the commonalities between them suggest areas through which other schools may learn to better accommodate the needs of students in need of closed opportunity gaps.

### **Student-Centered**

The 19 Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity share one important aspect in common— a student-centered approach to learning. Student-centered practices take on many forms; in this study, school profiles that detailed efforts the school had made to respond to the demonstrated needs of the student body met the requirements for categorization as “student-centered.” 15 of the schools showed significant aspects of their school structure which indicated a student-centered approach, many of which were consistent with the student-centered practices detailed in Adamson and Darling-Hammond (2014).

These schools have made substantive attempts to structure their environment around the needs of their students. This lies in stark contrast to the traditional achievement ideology based approach to public school, which places the blame and responsibility for failure upon students. Instead, the Schools of Opportunity place the onus upon themselves to create better environments for learning. According to the principal of Centaurus High School in Lafayette, Colorado:

If a learning environment is not closing the achievement gap by at least two grade levels in one year, we change the environment for the student and possibly the entire program. (National Education Policy Center, 2019)

This approach looks different in each of the schools. For some, being student-centered meant responding to patterns they saw from year to year in their school. At Broome Street Academy Charter School in New York City, administrators saw that students were struggling to graduate and instituted several internal supports to better serve students. They also saw disproportionate patterns in discipline and adjusted their practice toward one of restorative justice. The Rochester International Academy in Rochester, NY recognized that it served a high population of refugee students due to its role as an official resettlement site of the United Nations and instead of ignoring student differences, embraced them. It offers a variety of supports and services to its students speaking many languages.

The student-centered practices of the Schools of Opportunity enable them to escape conventional traditional school structures. Rather than focusing on demanding higher test scores from their students, the Schools of Opportunity engage in responsive practices with their student bodies in order to yield desired results. For most of the 15 schools that demonstrated clear student-centered practices, the student-centered practices came in response to a challenge to student success. For example, Rainier Beach High School faced possible closure in 2010 from waning student enrollment; budget crises forced most classes to be cut. In response, the school community got together and decided, after a long process of deliberation, upon establishing an International Baccalaureate Program with the requirement that this program is available to all students. In many school communities, this kind of crisis might have led to school closure and blame placed upon the under-served students of the school. Instead, a student-centered

lens upon school reform enabled the school to turn around and better serve students of all backgrounds.

Many public schools struggle to navigate the education policy sphere in a way that allows student-centered practice. However, the Schools of Opportunity provide insight into how creating schools that respond to students rather than vice versa can expand student opportunities as a whole. The focus on student needs opens the door for schools to address student opportunities directly rather than circumvent them through achievement focused practices. Institutional change theory suggests that the shifted ideology of student-centered practice might destabilize the rational model of public school while maintaining a legitimate public school model.

### **Community and External Partnerships**

Many Gold Schools of Opportunity rely upon partnerships with external organizations to offer the best opportunities for their students. In fact, for many of the schools studied here, the work they do would be impossible without the support of various partners. 12 of the 19 Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity profiles demonstrated clear, beneficial relationships with external partners. For the purposes of this study, external partnerships meant any organization with which the school collaborated to provide programming or supports to students.

Public schools cannot fulfill all the needs of their students on their own. Schools of Opportunity recognize this gap and instead of shrugging off responsibility, seek out organizations to help them. Many schools connect with organizations that help them be as student-centered as possible. Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School resides in the poorest congressional district in the United States and therefore acknowledges that its

students need more than a public school might be able to offer. School administrators partner with the Children's Aid Society to provide students with external medical and dental services that allow them to better learn in their environments. Many Schools of Opportunity also partner with local colleges and universities to bolster course offerings for students, all with the commitment of making these opportunities openly accessible to all students.

All of the schools found to utilize external partnerships did so with a purpose. Often, the partnerships fulfilled a need that would have otherwise gone unfulfilled in the school community. Consider the case of Leland and Gray Union Middle and High School:

When some students were found to lack dental care, the school fundraised to provide cleanings, checkups, and treatment with the local dentist. Leland and Gray found partners for their work. The Stratton Foundation's generosity has allowed every student without insurance to receive dental care and a 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant, brought dozens of academic, recreational, arts, and athletic opportunities after school and in the summer for students.

(National Education Policy Center, 2019)

While no one can expect a school alone to completely close the wide gaps in opportunities available to students in the United States, the Schools of Opportunity go to show that when schools make substantial efforts to seek out allies in their mission for closing opportunity gaps, students get access to a much wider array of opportunities than available within a traditional public school. External partnerships offer the availability of funding, field trips, extra classes, and additional support to students.

The importance of partnerships links the Schools of Opportunity to the sphere of community within the framework of this study. The close, seamless ties between the Schools of Opportunity and their partners increase their ability to close opportunity gaps and escape the convention of public schooling. Partnerships strengthen the school community and bolster the supports to students without placing additional strain upon schools that are already taking greater responsibility for the needs of their students.

### **Approaches to Diversity**

Opportunities in public school often remain reserved for the privileged few in the United States. White and middle-class students more often than not benefit from access to the best schools and largest array of opportunities in their public school experiences. Even in schools that serve a diverse population of students, opportunities tend to hoard around a privileged few. Not so in the Schools of Opportunity. Over half of the school profiles detailed commitments to embracing student differences and supporting the needs of diverse student bodies. Schools fell into this category of practices when specific efforts or practices showed meaningful acknowledgment and address of student diversity in a positive manner. While all recognized schools needed some demonstration of healthy and diverse cultures, the school programs directly mentioned in the profiles show the role that diversity can play in opening school models to diverse students' opportunities.

Schools of Opportunity embrace difference as a bridge to better learning opportunities. They do not attempt to erase the cultures of their students but instead make those cultures a centerpiece of the school. For some schools, this means requiring that all teachers are certified in teaching English Language Learners. For others, it means ensuring that their diverse population of students all have access to the same array of

course offerings. At Denver South High School, where students come from over 40 different nations, faculty and staff also make a point to visit the homes of students to build connections with families and encourage engagement of all kinds. Commitment to asset-based approaches to student diversity led the way for the student-centered approaches to programming.

Most of the 19 recognized schools house a diverse population of students, which stands in stark contrast to what one typically sees among top recognized schools in places like U.S. News. The opportunities they offer, therefore, are not reserved for only the privileged few. While schools like Leland and Gray in rural Vermont do continue to serve a population of 96% white students, Rainier Beach High School in Seattle, Washington serves a population of over 95% students of color. The Schools of Opportunity serve a much broader group of United States students and do so while embracing the aspects of diversity of their students. At Rochester International Academy:

Serving a population that is also 100% economically disadvantaged, RIA's mission is to provide rigorous social and academic language instruction and interdisciplinary learning in collaboration with families and community partners.

(National Education Policy Center, 2019)

Schools with asset-based approaches to their diversity take on student identities as a strength for their culture, rather than an excuse for any challenges they face. Students from challenging backgrounds get additional supports in their school building. Refugee students, a prominent population at both Lincoln High School and Rochester International Academy, receive language supports but still had access to all of the challenging curricula and programming at the school.

Adopting these positive practices for student diversity does not necessarily require restructuring the entire public school model, but rather removing the barriers that tend to prevent students from accessing all programs. Removing tracking, providing support for students in poverty or who speak different languages, and taking diverse cultures as assets to the learning environment all increase a school's ability to be inclusive of all student identities.

### **Learning Culture**

The Schools of Opportunity approach learning with a fervor that some would argue is impossible in traditional public schooling. Like the commitment to being student-centered, the 19 schools analyzed all demonstrated that they had resisted the political pressure to approach learning as a means toward an end— a test score or achievement-based outcome. Instead, the schools all took different approaches to ensure that learning occurred in meaningful and transformative ways within their buildings. School profiles that showed a school's interest in sparking students' intellectual curiosity through both curricular and extracurricular activities suggested that learning culture was a significant theme amongst the Schools of Opportunity.

All 19 schools found ways to make challenging curricula accessible to all students. Low track and remedial classes had to be eliminated entirely for schools to be recognized but many went one step further by engaging all students in AP or IB level coursework or finding other techniques to open doors for students otherwise excluded from learning opportunities:

Seaside engages its students in deep, meaningful learning experiences. For example, when faced with disappointing test scores in math, the school resisted

creating a lower-track class with lowered expectations. Instead, the school's educators created team-taught classes combining coding and robotics, with students heterogeneously grouped.

(National Education Policy Center, 2019)

Seaside High School and many of its peers amongst the Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity took responsibility for expanding student learning rather than closing doors for students through tracking. At all the schools, students take part in AP or IB programming without tracked barriers, meaning that every student has the opportunity to learn and succeed at a challenging level.

The schools also reflect a culture of learning within their teaching staff. Faculty members take on a huge responsibility in closing opportunity gaps within their classrooms and uphold that responsibility by engaging in innovative methods for increasing leadership and voice. Many schools offer professional learning communities to support teachers inside and outside of the classroom environment. This gives teachers ownership over their classrooms without placing blame upon them for overly emphasized student achievement scores. At William Smith High School in Aurora, Colorado professional development leads the way to creating a School of Opportunity. Teachers spent a significant portion of their time collaborating with one another, discussing events, and traveling outside of the school to learn about how the surrounding community can be integrated into their classrooms.

At Grand Valley High School, teachers commit to the growth of students both academically and personally, using data to support their future decisions:



Our team of educators uses [a growth mindset] to meet as a group, via RTI, and discuss what students need to be more successful. This essentially creates individual educational plans for every student with the mindset that we can all get better.

Schools of Opportunity show that public schools can be places for learning for all students, not just the privileged few. They do so by escaping some of the conventions of traditional public school which demand ability grouping in classes. Instead, learning and growth belong to all students and Schools of Opportunity take responsibility for expanding learning opportunities and making them accessible and enjoyable for all students. The commitment to a strong learning culture qualifies as one of the most influential systems through which the public school model can shift toward creating richer opportunities to learn.

### **Clear Mission and Vision**

Some, but not all, Gold Schools of Opportunity have adopted a specific mission or vision that leads the pathway to create student opportunities. Most of these schools take on less traditional models of public schooling with a specific focus on fields or ideologies for student growth. Among the 19 schools, nine reported very specific philosophies that guided their practices. Schools profiles categorized for clear mission and vision either had specific curricular focuses or had learning philosophies that guided their school structure. The unifying effect of the vision helps the school to form cohesive practices for closing opportunity gaps between students.

Specialty high schools offer unique methods for alleviating opportunity gaps. The Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences in Chicago, Illinois and the Health

Sciences High and Middle College in San Diego, California both make career prep a central part of their curriculum and mission. The focus on agriculture and health fields respectively create a coherent path for the schools to offer a wide array of student opportunities. Health Sciences High ensures that students access a wide variety of internships in the health field in order to give them hands-on experiences to which they can apply their classroom learning. The commitment to health does not end in curricula, however:

As a health sciences and healthcare careers school, the culture is based on that old physician's creed: Do no harm. The school uses restorative practices to help students heal strained relationships, making Health Sciences a safe and comfortable to place for learning.

(National Education Policy Center, 2019)

The focus on health or agriculture might guide the programming of the schools, but it also creates foundations for philosophies in the school culture. The strength of these philosophies amongst several of the recognized schools explained many of the schools' successes in closing opportunity gaps.

Not all high schools have the integrated subject focus of Health Science High or Chicago Ag, but many share a similar commitment to a vision for their school. Coherent visions for activating student opportunities or growth potential also unite the 19 Gold schools. William Smith High School, for example, adopts a Project-Based Learning Model that guides much of the structure of the school— including allotted time every Friday afternoon for students to meet regarding outstanding projects. Jefferson County Open School takes a less structured vision of student learning and focuses on student

intellectual curiosity to guide curricula and programming. Those schools that showed these visions for their school's mission and purpose adopted practices and policies that were coherent with those visions. Student opportunities flourish as a result.

### **Detailed Examples of Schools**

#### **Hillsdale High School**

Hillsdale High School is a comprehensive high school serving approximately 1600 students, located in a suburban area of Silicon Valley in San Mateo, California. The Schools of Opportunity Project recognized Hillsdale High School in large part because of their small learning communities. The school is separated into seven learning communities, each of which has four assigned teachers. The students spend ninth and tenth grades in one cohort and eleventh and twelfth grade in another. Each student also has a portion of each day spent in advisory, working individually with an assigned faculty advisor to work toward the completion of a graduation defense at the end of their four years.

Hillsdale's commitment to community and cohesive modeling developed from a long school redesign project that began in the 1990s. At the time, Hillsdale was performing poorly in comparison to the surrounding high school areas and families and students chose to follow friends to other schools rather than stay at Hillsdale. The school's reputation suffered. Rather than stay the course, however, the principal at the

time chose to take advantage of the voices of several young and ambitious teachers who wanted to turn the school around.

Hillsdale's school redesign project took place in collaboration with the Stanford School of Education but also capitalized around the leadership of teachers. Reformers relied heavily upon the theory of coherence in the creation of a new school model. Once at a "Dine and Discuss," hosted by renowned researcher Linda Darling-Hammond, teachers and administrators were fervently discussing a course of action for the future of the school. They turned to Hammond and, according to Principal Jeff Gilbert, she told them that she did not know what they needed to do for their school. What she did know was that schools were often made too complex and that the closer to coherence they could bring their school, the better their model was.

For Hillsdale, coherence resides in four cornerstones— personalization, rigor, equity, and shared decision making. It was a vision that, according to Principal Jeff Gilbert, made all the difference in the creation of Hillsdale High School:

It was this broad outline of the sort of place we want it to be, which allowed there to be authentic discussion about how to get there. And I think if we had led with how we were going to get to a place but not named a place, I think schools that do that, and we saw this over and over with schools who are doing small learning, community redesign because we kinda got out in front.

(J. Gilbert, personal interview, April 11, 2019)

Hillsdale based its redesign upon a coherent vision and path to getting there. Policy and practice at Hillsdale all rely upon the cornerstones. In large part, they are the reason

Hillsdale has been able to enact policies that expand student opportunities. Valuing personalization led Hillsdale to emphasize the need for teaching assignments in advising individual students. All students at Hillsdale get ample time working one on one with a faculty advisor to guide them toward a graduation defense portfolio project. Additionally, the use of small learning communities lessens the prevalence of tracking because all students take classes in cohorts of their “houses.”

The reform and redesign of Hillsdale toward a more opportunity rich model took place through multiple levels of support. Hillsdale sought out partnerships and support from external organizations:

That principal at that time really reached out to Stanford because he knew... if there are people that are doing reform, like let's connect with the School of Ed and let's figure out how they can help us... which was a really savvy political move. Um, and then also the federal government was, had started doing planning grants for smaller learning communities. High schools and small schools were in vogue at that point.

(J. Gilbert, personal interview, April 11, 2019)

Not only did they receive advice and support from Stanford, but they also used various funding resources available at the time of the reform. Government funding for school redesign projects as well as Gates funding for small schools both enabled Hillsdale to pursue multiple approaches to their school improvement project. Without additional funding and partnerships, Hillsdale might not have been able to engage in such uprooting changes.

Administration and staff also engaged in a significant amount of redesign decision making at the school level. In order to secure the funding for advisory to be a part of faculty's regular teaching assignment, Hillsdale gave up certain parts of their budget, including department head bonuses and even decided not to hire certain classified positions to fill their budget with more teacher salaries. The sacrifices and compromises required of school redesign for increased student opportunities relate back to another of Hillsdale's primary cornerstones— shared decision making. Principal Jeff Gilbert recognizes that he is not the leader of the school, but rather the director of a team of strong leaders in his staff. He uses the analogy of an elephant and its rider:

And so I'm the, as administrator, I'm the rider, and in theory know things that the elephant [doesn't], but in fact the elephant's really in charge, um, sort of an id/ego thing. The elephant's going to do what it wants to do ultimately. So how do you, how do you clear a path for the elephant so that the easiest thing for it to do is to go where you want it to go or where the leadership wants it to go. So thinking about that all the time. And I think we mess up when we make things hard for people and then they have reasons not to do it.

(J. Gilbert, personal interview, April 11, 2019)

The shared decision making at Hillsdale High School helps faculty members to take greater ownership of their institution. Creating the opportunities of Hillsdale High School requires leadership to collaborate with faculty members. The coherence of the

mission at Hillsdale also ensures that all changes align with the overall goals of the school.

Hillsdale serves a diverse population of students. While many come from affluent white or Asian families, the area has also been facing an influx of Hispanic students and English language learners. The strong, coherent model Hillsdale employs ensures that all students have an equitable opportunity to learn through individualized advising and rigor that aligns with that of their house cohort:

The already excellent schools of the San Mateo Union High School District are on notice that they must become even better to meet the challenges of the 21st century. That means we must educate all students, regardless of social, economic or educational background. If we hold all students to high standards, then we must provide the necessary support systems for students to reach these goals.

(“Hillsdale High School / Homepage,” 2019)

Hillsdale demonstrates a strong commitment to providing every one of its students with equitable learning opportunities regardless of their background, evidence that their school focuses on closing student opportunity gaps.

Hillsdale benefits from privileges that have allowed it to gain recognition as a School of Opportunity. Strong teacher leadership and administrative support allowed the school redesign to take place with minimal resistance, an uncommon occurrence in many areas facing the same type of challenges that Hillsdale faced in the 1990s. The school community embraced the shifts in culture without significant resistance. Hillsdale’s model may also not be transferable to areas with different communities of students. As is

pointed out in most opportunity gap literature, the ideal conditions for schools to increase student opportunities are easy enough to determine, but the detail of how that actually will happen is more challenging.

For Hillsdale at least, the ability to close opportunity gaps came down to a shared vision and commitment to a coherent model of schooling as well as leadership and faculty who were committed to creating that change. With the advantage of funding and support, the school redesign built up the reputation of the school and gave hundreds of students access to the attention and rigor they needed to succeed.

### **Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences**

One might not expect to find a fully functioning 72-acre farm in the middle of the city of Chicago. Even more surprising, however, might be the fact that that farm actually operates through the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences. Indeed, Chicago AG runs a fully functioning farm in addition to a rigorous high school serving around 800 students. The school opened in 1985 when the community around the last functioning farm in Chicago pleaded to keep it. It was the second high school of its kind to run the integrated high school and college prep program in agriculture.

A magnet school, Chicago AG accepts students through a random lottery system. Each year, they accept about 200 students from all around the city of Chicago. The lottery runs partially through a proximity lottery and partially from a lottery accepting students from all around the city. All the school requires for admission is for students to apply, which means that all students have a chance to access the opportunities the school



offers so long as they enter the lottery. Entry is, however, limited. Last year alone the school received close to 3,000 applications for 200 openings.

Students at Chicago Ag learn by doing. The Schools of Opportunity Project recognized them for this reason:

Our diversity is our, is our greatest strength... and our second greatest is that... every student has both critical technical education and college prep. In most public schools, you pick one.

(W. Hook, personal interview, April 15, 2019)

Not only does the school run a full career and technical education program, but through the farm operates a college-prep program for students interested in various fields in agriculture. Rather than sitting in a classroom and learning about farming or animal-raising techniques, students are in the field running machinery, raising chickens, and building barns. The students take ownership of the projects run on the farm, but the faculty members, many of whom are from a variety of professional fields in agriculture, use their experiences to support the needs of the students.

An operation as large as Chicago Ag does not run without the support of partners. In addition to receiving their allotted funding from Chicago Public Schools, Chicago Ag also benefits from partnerships and funding from numerous organizations. In particular, as one of the largest chapters of Future Farmers of America, the farm receives additional funding for its projects. The University of Illinois also has an office on the campus of the school and supports student programs.

Community connections also enable the school to build a culture of opportunities for students. In addition to the school running a farm, it also houses a community center. Members of the community use the pool on the facilities of the school and attend events hosted by the student body to showcase the work they have done, whether serving a meal of food prepared on the farm or organizing a fall pumpkin festival. The school and its community rely upon one another. This connection breeds opportunities for the student body and contributes to a culture of ownership for the school.

The universal access of Chicago Ag opens the door for all students to enjoy vast learning opportunities. The accessibility would not be possible without the tremendous amount of resources and supports the school receives from its partners. However, the result is that any student enrolled in Chicago Ag has the ability to contribute to the farm, take field trips, and take on leadership roles. The special education program at Chicago Ag drew particular attention from the Schools of Opportunity Project due to its growing size and ability to engage students with special needs in the work on the farm:

There's three high schools in Chicago that are strictly for special needs students. Outside of those schools we have the largest enrollment of special needs cluster students, which are, which are the low incidence. We have students, we have three programs for students with autism. We have two programs for students who are mentally handicapped. And we have two programs for students who have a severe and profound disabilities. And you know, when I got here... we had three classes of 36 students. Now we're up to seven classes with 80 students.

Um, and we also worked with Springfield to codify it in the law. So we'll always have that program here. And I do, I, it's, it's a great opportunity for our students. And again, I think that adds to our diversity.

(W. Hook, personal interview, April 15, 2019)

The Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences does not look like the average United States public high school. Both in its magnet model and its unique set up as a functioning farm, its strategies for increasing student opportunities cannot easily be adopted by the average public high school. However, one can see in Chicago Ag several pathways to enacting more opportunity-oriented policies. In particular, the partnerships and supports the school receives give it additional abilities for serving students. The school also connects with the community it serves. Most importantly though, the clear mission and vision of the high school through focus in agriculture opens the door for faculty and administrators to build up the opportunities for students through programs and partnerships.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Discussion**

The 19 Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity demonstrate how public schools can foster a positive environment for expanding student opportunities. Each school adopts unique models for serving its population of students, and yet this paper found that there were still common ingredients that distinguished the Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity and explained how they were able to succeed within the confines of the public school model.

The findings of this paper prove consistent with both theoretical and empirical literature on opportunities in schools. The Opportunity to Learn movement that entered the policy realm in full force during the Goals 2000 era struggled to define the necessary conditions for students to receive adequate opportunities. The Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity's focus on curricular content and accessibility to challenging coursework is consistent with definitions of OTL that focus on the classroom and teaching practices (Elliott, 2015; Elliott & Bartlett, 2016; McDonnell, 1995).

The findings of this paper also demonstrate that environments through which student opportunities can thrive also rely on out of school factors, which many schools confronted using the support of external partnerships. External partnerships expanded the access schools had to resources and support of learning. Many educational researchers have found the importance of considering schools as organisms that are effected by the external experiences of students (Carter et al., 2017; Dougherty, 1996; Schmidt,

Burroughs, Zoido, & Houang, 2015; Sundquist, 2002). In this regard, the findings of this paper contribute to the literature on factors that must be considered within conversations about opportunities in schools.

The demographic data of the schools showed that the Schools of Opportunity fell into diverse categories of location and wealth. The schools were not consistently performing better on tests or graduation rates than their state averages; some schools did better and others did worse. Most importantly, relative incomes and graduation rates did not demonstrate that schools needed to be wealthy or have a high graduation rate in order to be a School of Opportunity. In fact, Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School resides in the poorest congressional district in the United States and still builds programs to help students to succeed. This suggests that schools can find ways to close opportunity gaps even without the wealth of resources enjoyed at some of the most privileged public schools around the nation.

Student-centered practices and commitment to a learning culture in the Schools of Opportunity both create institutions adaptive and responsive to the needs of the students. The various approaches to making schools student-centered, from building relationships with students, engaging professional learning communities, and creating challenging course curricula, fell in line with the work of Adamson and Darling-Hammond (2014), which detailed some of the ways public schools could restructure to support students more successfully. In practice, the student-centered and learning culture aspects of the Schools of Opportunity differed greatly but demonstrated that there is not one direct pathway to closing opportunity gaps. Rather, there are conditional requirements that support the creation of a stronger school environment.

The Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity utilized asset-based approaches to diversity. The impact of achievement focused policy and practice in education has been critical for students of color and poor students who often find themselves on the lower end of achievement measures (Zhao, 2016). Deficit-based practice and policies treat diverse students as though they are a liability to the school rather than an asset. In the Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity, the diversity of the student population contributed to an open and accepting culture. The schools embraced their students' differences and used them to create a stronger learning environment.

Hillsdale High Schools and the Chicago High School for Agricultural Sciences presented further evidence of the strength of the five factors in the social ecosystems of the Schools of Opportunity. Hillsdale's approach to school improvement and growth coincides with literature that envisions a shift in school reform toward a more positive method for change (Stanny, 2018). Though both schools adopted vastly different models, their commitment to coherence remains consistent. Chicago Ag's 72-acre farm demands that the school adopts a tight structural model that also opens vast opportunities to its students. Hillsdale's commitment to coherence through the four cornerstones also ties back to the theme of clear missions and visions amongst the Schools of Opportunity. Those schools with a unifying goal or philosophy tended to have a foundation through which to build coherent pathways to closing opportunity gaps.

This paper sought to examine the Schools of Opportunity within the spheres of their states, communities, and individual institutions. Institutional change theory postulates that changing institutional routines is challenging because schools tend to adopt practices within a rational model of legitimization. The Gold recognition Schools

of Opportunity shared five areas through which they altered their social system and created change: student-centered practices, strong community partnerships, an asset-based approach to diversity, strong learning culture, and commitments to clear mission and vision. The five findings suggest that the way to altering the strict institutional structures of public schools might not have to be through the means of policy, but rather through a shift in mindset or philosophy which in turn impacts school practice.

Individual schools can take the models of the Schools of Opportunity to evaluate their own practice and policies but policymakers can also use the models of the Schools of Opportunity to determine how they can better foster a space for conversations about opportunity to exist in the policy world. Policy might not change the schools, but policy can create environments through which schools have the efficacy to adopt some of the philosophical changes that separate Schools of Opportunity from traditional public schools.

### **Limitations**

The scope of this paper is not large enough to make any substantive conclusions regarding the use of opportunity-oriented policies in public schools. The Schools of Opportunity are good examples of success but they are not the only examples, nor are the conditions through which they are created necessarily transferrable from school to school. While the analysis of this paper illuminates some ideological patterns in the Schools of Opportunity, it was not able to conduct field research which would have determined the degree to which those patterns affected school quality.

None of the data used in this study can be used to claim statistically significant findings relevant to American public schools, or even the Schools of Opportunity themselves. In order to do so, more data would need to be collected from each recognized school and analyzed for evidence of significant results in increasing student opportunities. Instead, the data here identify patterns for consideration in relation to student opportunity gaps and school practice.

This paper skims the surface of a vast array of information that can be learned from Schools of Opportunity and those like them. The information provided here represents a stepping stone to more nuanced policy and practice to better support the needs of more United States students. Further research needs to examine each Gold recognition School of Opportunity more closely to determine the real experiences and achievements of students within those schools. Research does not need to focus solely on the Schools of Opportunity, however. Educational research must examine not only where education fails but also where it succeeds and how that success might be spread to other struggling schools. Unfortunately, the Schools of Opportunity studied herein are the exception rather than the rule in United States public education. Future research needs to focus on the specific results and practices of successful schools in order to provide better ideas of how that success can be spread elsewhere.

## **Conclusion**

Opportunity gaps stand in the way of thousands of students seeking an education in the United States. Schools do not hold the sole responsibility of closing those gaps, but



they do in many cases perpetuate them through various institutional barriers such as tracking and discipline (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Expanding the number of schools that create an environment in which opportunity gaps can be meaningfully addressed would accomplish far more in education than a commitment to a strictly standards-based paradigm. The Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity go to show that the change in public schooling may not come in big political shifts, but rather in commitment to ideologies and mindsets that open doors for student opportunities— as schools change and create coherent visions for helping all students succeed, there will be far more than 19 Gold recognition Schools of Opportunity to look to as examples for success.

## **Appendix**

### **Interview Protocol**

Hello! First of all, thank you so much for being willing to speak with me about your school. Are you comfortable with me recording the conversation for my research?

Before we start our conversation, I wanted to tell you a little bit about the project I'm working on. I'm a master's student at Penn State University studying Educational Theory and Policy. I'm interested in thinking about not only what policies can help broaden student opportunities, but also what enables schools to adopt those policies and practices. I've identified schools recognized as Schools of Opportunity as excellent examples of schools doing this work. By talking to you today, I'm hoping to get insight into your school and what has enabled it to become a School of Opportunity.

#### **Questions:**

Could you provide a little bit of background on yourself and how long you've been at your school?

Tell me a little bit about your school and its mission.

What prompted your application to the Schools of Opportunity? What practices allow your school to contribute to closing opportunity gaps?

*How does your school compare to schools in your area? If it is different, why is that?*

*What practices or policies exist in your school that don't exist elsewhere?*

What motivates your school to close the opportunity gap?

What supports does your school use to accomplish the work that it does?

Series question: How does school leadership deal with

Community

State policy

Student body... Contribute to a school culture around building student opportunities?

Anything else you think plays a critical role in enabling your school to earn recognition?

What is the role of place in your schools' practice?

Is there anything else you think I should consider for my thesis? Are there any other administrators or teachers who would be willing to speak with me?

Any questions! Can I follow up? Thank you!

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