

CASE STUDY

How An Oakland School Achieved Record-High Student Proficiency

A creative model at Cox Academy boosted literacy, maximized student learning time and increased teacher capacity and retention.



Kenneth
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The Challenge

High-dosage tutoring is a sought-after solution for addressing academic challenges in students' phonics and phonemic awareness skills, two foundational pillars of literacy. This solution allows for immediate intervention, helps address diverse learning needs and promotes academic growth. However, embedding it into the classroom can create logistical and budgetary complications. High-dosage tutoring requires complex scheduling, increased prep time for teachers and high costs to hire, train and retain tutors.



Cox Academy's Courtney Morales Rosen, Assistant Principal; Omar Currie, Principal; and Kavitha Senthil, Dean of Instruction for transitional kindergarten to Grade 2. Photo Credit: Mitch Tobias

Cox Academy leaders were surprised that even with many classroom tutors, they weren't seeing academic gains among students. School leaders realized that this was in part because the tutoring model required many students to work independently, despite not necessarily having the skills they needed to do so in a productive way. For 80 minutes each day, students rotated between teacher-led instruction, tutor-led intervention and independent activities. But for 40-60 of those minutes students focused on independent activities, which teachers invested significant time in preparing. Often these activities were either too advanced and required skills the students hadn't yet mastered or were too easy, like coloring sheets or worksheets. With teachers and tutors occupied elsewhere, they couldn't effectively support the independent work, leading to wasted learning time. This was the challenge that inspired them to embrace a new approach to utilize their tutors differently.

Dean of Instruction for transitional kindergarten to Grade 2, Kavitha Senthil; Principal, Omar Currie; and Assistant Principal, Courtney Morales Rosen led the effort to address this challenge, in close collaboration with teachers and tutors.

Cox Academy is a public charter school in East Oakland that serves approximately 480 children from transitional kindergarten through fifth grade. It's one of six schools in Education for Change charter management organization's portfolio of neighborhood schools.

The student body is diverse with a range of distinct needs. A majority of the students—93%—are considered socioeconomically disadvantaged, qualifying for free or reduced meals or having a parent who did not graduate from high school. Over half of the students (56%) are English learners, while 9% are students with disabilities.

The student population is predominantly Hispanic at 76%. African American students make up 17%, Pacific Islanders 4% and students identifying with two or more races comprise 2%. Smaller groups include American Indian (0.4%), Filipino (0.6%) and Asian (0.6%).

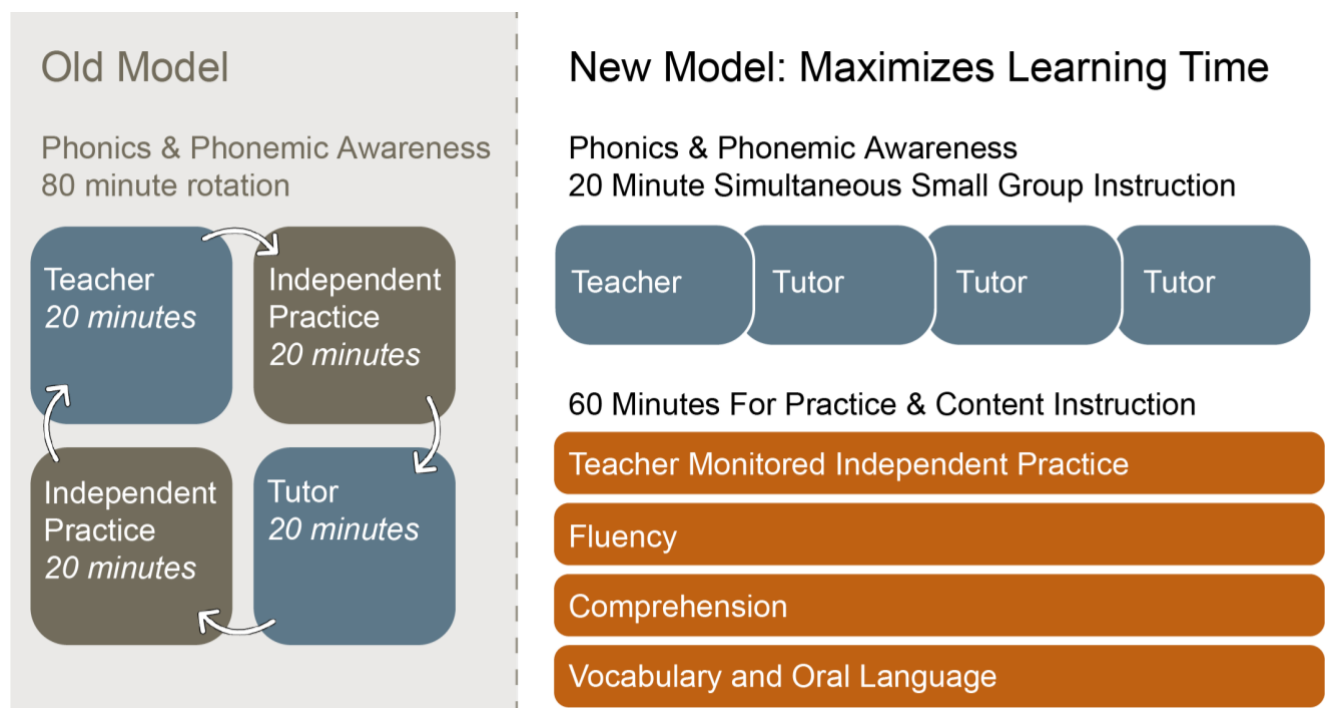


Three tutors lead simultaneous small group instruction along with kindergarten teacher Dan Escantilla (not pictured). Photo credit: Mitch Tobias

The Solution: Inspired By A New Approach

At Plain Talk About Literacy and Learning, a highly celebrated literacy institute for educators, Senthil encountered an approach that shifted her thinking: 80% of instruction should be universal for all students, while intervention should be reserved for no more than 20% of students that really need it. The school's model at the time aspired to meet that guidance, but the rotation structure required time that decreased universal instruction and increased unproductive individual practice, exacerbating the need for more interventions.

Upon her return from the institute, Senthil proposed a potential new model to Currie: reduce the number of tutors from nine to three and have the three tutors rotate to each of the nine classrooms daily. The tutor team, along with the teacher, would provide small group instruction to all students simultaneously. This new model, shown in the diagram below, would reduce the small group instruction time from 80 to 20 minutes, leaving 60 minutes for independent practice that was teacher-monitored, as well as read alouds and content instruction that emphasized foundational literacy skills (fluency, comprehension and vocabulary and oral language).





Clockwise from top: Small group instruction with Tutor Daisy Barrera, Tutor Andrea Flores and Tutor Lead Teisha Davis. Photo credit: Mitch Tobias

Key Strategies Behind The Successful Implementation Of The New Tutor Model

Full-Time Tutors

One key shift that Cox Academy made before being able to implement their new model was transitioning tutors to full-time status. While the school was able to leverage the Kenneth Rainin Foundation’s funding to support nine tutors part time, they realized that full-time employment for three tutors would better position them to achieve their academic goals. They adjusted their school budget to make this shift which in turn increased tutoring capacity, tutors’ compensation and benefits and their sense of ownership of the work. It’s also worth noting that the tutors, who were dedicated community members, had ongoing training and coaching from their district, were experienced and had been at the school for years.



The tutors move between the nine classrooms. Photo credit: Mitch Tobias

Scheduling

Scheduling was also an important element of implementation. They needed to organize everyone's time so that the three-person tutor team could support all nine classrooms during the school day, while also having breaks and prep time.

Literacy Supports

Cox Academy has a dedicated literacy coach whose only job is to focus on foundational literacy skills. Especially in the first year, there were many moving parts, and people needed coaching to be successful. They also brought in a strong Tier 1 phonics program to build staff capacity as they transitioned to a different way of working.

Trusting Relationships

Having existing trusting relationships between school staff and leaders was key to introducing a new model. Leaders trusted staff to successfully shift their practices.

Family Engagement

Finally, the school revisited their family engagement practices relative to student literacy and data. They shifted their approach to family conferences so that families understood their students' data earlier in the year. They also had families observe an introduction to the new model. This increased mutual understanding and mutual accountability between school staff and families.



A second grade student reading independently. Photo credit: Mitch Tobias

The Results



Earsy Jenkins reads aloud to her second grade students. Photo credit: Mitch Tobias

Achieving Record-High Student Proficiency

The shift led to the highest proficiency data to date, with 72% of first graders and 73% of second graders proficient by the end of the 2023-24 school year—up 12% and 18%, respectively, from the previous school year. Not only did students reach record levels of proficiency; they also met these levels earlier in the school year than ever before. With the new model, teachers didn't have to spend time at the start of the year accelerating students' independence so small group instruction could start. This meant they were able to start targeted support three weeks earlier and scaffold independent practice over time, which supported academic gains.

“In all second grade classrooms, half of the groups met the expected end-of-year level by spring 2024. They were independent, reading chapter books and doing comprehension work on their own, which gave us time to provide more intensive work for the other students.”

—**Kavitha Senthil**, Dean of Instruction for transitional kindergarten to Grade 2

Maximizing Student Learning Time

The new model eliminated the issue of unproductive and ineffective independent practice time. Students shifted to having more universal instruction and monitored independent practice for a higher percentage of the school day, leading to increased sense of efficacy, accomplishment and pride. Students have also been more actively sharing their literacy skills and activities at home with their families, a welcome contrast to something that previously felt more like a burden or chore.



*First grade teacher Louie Lipa supports students with independent practice.
Photo credit: Mitch Tobias*

Decreasing Prep Time For Teachers And Tutors

The new model has decreased the amount of prep needed for phonics and phonemic awareness and created more time for literacy components educators know are critical for reading: vocabulary and oral language, comprehension and reading fluency.

Increasing Capacity And Retention

The structural supports that were put in place led to increased educator and tutor capacity. For the 2024-25 school year, Cox Academy projects 100% retention of its teachers and tutors. In the past two years, they've maintained 85% retention, which is a significant improvement from retention rates of 50-60% in the years prior. This is systemic change.

Key Takeaways And Lessons Learned



A student proudly shows their work. Photo credit: Mitch Tobias

The shift in the tutoring model at Cox Academy revealed a need for school leadership to have flexibility and trust from district leaders to provide learning structures that are most beneficial to students, educators and families. School leaders had to fight in order to make a shift that benefited their students and school staff.

Currie underscores that he learned some key leadership lessons through this transition, specifically about the value of not dwelling too long on a challenge and instead focusing on a solution. He also emphasized the value of holding space for teachers and tutors to be honest and transparent about both their challenges and successes.

“The level of rigor in classrooms shot up as did the joy on students’ faces because they felt successful. You can be really proud and it feels good when you’re given a writing task and you’ve written a whole full paragraph on your own.”

–Omar Currie, Principal

Four Reflections From The Funder

As a funder, the Kenneth Rainin Foundation knows that learning with and from our grantees is paramount to effective grantmaking. We are sharing our reflections below to benefit others involved in this work and ultimately help us achieve our goal of all Oakland children being ready for kindergarten and reading successfully by the end of third grade.

School leaders need trust and capacity to demonstrate leadership, make decisions and learn.

School leaders are tasked with many responsibilities and are often expected to be experts in all things related to education. The leaders at Cox Academy, along with many of the effective leaders we've supported, lean into their strengths, hold space for learning, recognize they can't do everything and cultivate leadership in others to achieve collective impact. When these qualities are demonstrated, we've learned that what leaders need most is trust in decision-making, capacity to support those decisions and time to learn.



Dana Cilono, Rainin Foundation Director of Education Strategy & Ventures, with Jasmin Tow, Education for Change Director of Early Literacy; Kavitha Senthil, Dean of Instruction for transitional kindergarten to Grade 2; and Shannon Tanton, Education for Change Tutor Coach. Photo credit: Mitch Tobias

School (and central) leaders need long-term and adequate resources.

The Kenneth Rainin Foundation has financially supported literacy efforts at Cox Academy, and its charter management organization, Education for Change Public Schools, since 2014. That deep and long-term investment included high-quality instructional materials, coaching and training for educators and leaders, central leadership staffing for guidance and monitoring, and staffing for high-dosage tutoring. Education for Change's role was to develop a bold vision, research-based framework for instruction and structures for implementation and monitoring toward its vision. School leaders were tasked with sharing, testing and adjusting that vision and framework within their unique school communities. Our role as a philanthropic partner was to help remove barriers to change. Together, we were clear on the vision, opportunity and responsibility of our partnership.

School culture matters and school leaders set the tone.

In speaking with leaders at Cox Academy, it was clear that the school's success was made possible by its culture. The resources from the Rainin Foundation and the support provided by the charter management organization were foundational, but school culture, defined and maintained by school leaders, determines the success of any effort. At Cox Academy, the culture consists of a deep belief in excellence, and an unwavering confidence in student, family and staff capacity for excellence.

There's an abundance of research on how children learn to read, but there's still a lot to learn about how to effectively teach reading within the constraints many schools face.

Cox Academy leaders realized that the small group rotation model they adopted, one that is often recommended in curricula and resources, wasn't working. Using reading research, the leaders designed a new model that maximized learning within the limitations of its daily schedule and staffing capacity. Over the past few years, there's been rich discourse about the need to apply the abundance of reading research to practice in classrooms when the pathway isn't always clear or replicable.

“Our model works for Cox, but it can't be a program in a box. Leveraging the similarities is more helpful than identifying the reasons why it won't work at your school. How can you take these lessons and adapt the model to your school situation?”

—Omar Currie, Principal

Expressing Gratitude

The Kenneth Rainin Foundation is thrilled about the growth happening at Cox Academy, and we are incredibly grateful to learn with them. We will continue to learn alongside school leaders, using our voice and resources to further illuminate the pathways to literacy.

We wish to thank Omar, Courtney, Kavitha and the teachers and tutors at Cox Academy who were involved in developing this case study. Our hope is that their story will inspire other schools that are working to enhance literacy, optimize learning time and improve teacher and tutor capacity and retention.

The Kenneth Rainin Foundation envisions a world where every Oakland child has the literacy skills to communicate, learn and thrive regardless of race, level of income or neighborhood. Our work supports equitable approaches to literacy in partnership with communities. Learn more at krfoundation.org/education.

In Their Own Words



Left to right: Omar Currie with students. Kavitha Senthil in a classroom. Photo credit: Mitch Tobias

We spoke with Omar Currie, Principal at Cox Academy, and Kavitha Senthil, Dean of Instruction for transitional kindergarten to Grade 2. **[Explore the interview](#)** to dive deeper into the tutor model, the promising results and lessons learned.