



THESE COMEBACK KIDS DON'T BAKE COOKIES: THE COMMUNITY-BASED TRANSFORMATION OF AN URBAN SCHOOL



You could call it the comeback kid.

In 2010, Seattle's Rainier Beach High School was on the edge of closure. Just 320 students occupied a building constructed to serve nearly four times that number. Its on-time graduation rate of 48 percent was among the lowest in the state of Washington.

Fast forward to today and the picture has completely changed. Enrollment exceeds 700. The graduation rate is 89 percent. And, unlike many other school turnarounds that superficially look successful, the school has continued to serve the same families and community. At Rainier Beach, nearly three-quarters of the students hail from low-income families, and 40 percent come from immigrant or refugee backgrounds. The school's diverse population is 49 percent Black, 26 percent Asian, 14 percent Hispanic, six percent multi-racial, three percent White, and two percent Pacific Islander/Native American/Alaskan.

In 2016, NEPC recognized Rainier Beach as a School of Opportunity, making particular note of the school's rigorous but supported classes and its thoughtful and powerful community outreach.

Too often, transformations like Rainier Beach's are attributed to external forces such as state accountability measures or the introduction of a new and charismatic leader. But in a recent article in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Educational Administration*, Ann M. Ishimaru, an associate professor of Educational Foundations, Leadership and Policy at the University of Washington's College of Education, uses interviews, document analyses, and observations to tell a very different tale about Rainier Beach.

Truth be told, some aspects of the Rainier Beach story are not out of the ordinary. It brought in new leadership. It struggled with and benefitted from the implications and resources associated with accountability-based reforms.

But another part of the school's story is indeed unusual—and offers important lessons for other schools now struggling to improve. Professor Ishimaru traces the school's transformation to a groundswell of activism led by local families, students, and community members. Working together with educators, these activists were able to benefit from structures of conventional schooling by transforming those structures to better suit their needs. As Ishimaru notes, these were practices and institutions often imposed on low-income, “majority-minority” communities—structures that often do little to engage those communities or respond to their voiced needs.

For example, activists leveraged the power of the PTA, using it to spark change. As one parent leader explained:

We don't make cookies. We're not here to fund raise for your school. We're here to be transformative change agents for the school. We need you to deploy us to spaces that you can't get to, like School Board meetings and the Superintendent [...] No, we don't make cookies. [...] We infiltrate, that's right.

Other community-based strategies Ishimaru identified included:

- Participating in the accountability-based school turnaround/school improvement grant process;
- Holding community “cafes” to build support for the school's new International Baccalaureate program; and
- Supporting academic and behavioral interventions (such as introducing [Freedom Schools](#) and hiring a restorative justice coordinator) that empower youth.

“This study is a testament to the changes that can unfold when parents and communities drive priorities and action in school change efforts,” Ishimaru concludes.

Still, she cautions that work remains to be done at Rainier Beach: Key community leaders have moved on. Parents worry that African American students are still under-represented in the school's International Baccalaureate program. And there's no guarantee that the program itself will continue to attract the resources it needs to operate.

Interested in learning more about the Rainier Beach transformation?

[Click here](#) for an archived October 11th Facebook Live Chat with Ishimaru, Rainier Beach parent leader Carlina Brown-Banks, former principal Dwane Chappelle, and teacher Colin Pierce.

More resources on Rainier Beach:

- Read Ishimaru's article: [Re-imagining turnaround: families and communities](#)

leading educational justice.

- Read about Rainier Beach in *The Washington Post's* Answer Sheet column: [This school was on the brink of closure. Here's how it saved itself.](#)
- Learn more about Rainier Beach's Schools of Opportunity honor.
- Visit [Rainier Beach's website](#).

NEPC Resources on School Reform and Restructuring

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC), housed at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education, produces and disseminates high-quality, peer-reviewed research to inform education policy discussions. Visit us at: <http://nepc.colorado.edu>