



Forging the Food Justice Path

Chapter EIGHT

Tony Smith, Superintendent of Schools, Oakland, California

In this story, oakland school Superintendent Tony Smith shares his vision of a “full-service community school district” that provides an array of services to students and their families so that all children have an equal chance to thrive. As you read, consider how his own life experiences influenced his emotional and social intelligence, and how he integrates these skills with a capacity for systems thinking, a core dimension of ecological intelligence.

IMAGINE STANDING OUTSIDE a hospital nursery window, looking at two newborn baby boys side-by-side in their plastic bassinets, fists curled and screaming their little lungs out. Both appear healthy, full of life, and, you imagine, ripe with potential. Yet the reality is that after the boys arrive at their homes, the disparity in that potential will soon become evident. Because of the difference in where they live—which is just one ZIP code number apart—one of those babies will grow up to eat healthy food purchased from a supermarket or farmers’ market. He will finish high school, attend college, and live to the age of eighty-two. The other boy will fill up on unhealthy food purchased from a corner liquor or convenience store. He will drop out of high school. And he will die fifteen years before the first.¹

These are the everyday facts of life in Oakland, California, the third most diverse city in America, but they are not unlike those in many other urban areas across the nation. Food is just one factor, but in recent years, there has been a growing awareness that inequities in food access have a significant impact on children’s education, health, and life expectancy—and that a radically new approach toward food is needed to ensure equity for all schoolchildren.

One of the people leading the effort to create such an approach is Tony Smith, a former San Francisco 49ers football player who is now superintendent of the Oakland Unified School District.² Since he took over the district in 2009, Smith has been working on a comprehensive plan to transform Oakland into one of the first “full-service community school districts” in the nation. In Smith’s vision, a full-service community school district weaves together a broad network of services—through government agencies, the business community, foundations, philanthropists, and nonprofits—to level the playing field for all children.

He is, for example, working with the Alameda County Health Department to create school-based health care centers that offer services that range from administering vaccines to counseling children who have lost friends or family members to violence. He is encouraging the local business community to create internships for young people who come from families in which no one has held a job for generations. And he is striving to improve the quality of food Oakland students eat—both in the school cafeteria and at home.

As someone who struggled against the odds himself, Smith is not naïve about the seriousness of the challenges he faces. Oakland, true to its reputation, is a tough place to live. Gang violence, racial tensions, and conflicts between police and residents date back to well before the founding of the Black Panthers there in the 1960s. Oakland suffers from high rates of poverty and unemployment, as well as a history of inept city government. The school district itself, which was placed under state supervision due to high debt and a record of mismanagement before

THE RISE OF SCHOOL FOOD REFORM

Once a seemingly fringe issue embraced in places such as Berkeley, California—but ignored or even scoffed at elsewhere—school lunch reform has become widely recognized in recent years as vital to health, education, the environment, and the economy. First Lady Michelle Obama made it central to her plan to solve the problem of childhood obesity within a generation. Numerous schools have taken it upon themselves to make improvements. And celebrity chef Jamie Oliver highlighted it as the focus of a reality TV show in 2010.³

One of the biggest reasons for this growing attention is the realization that one out of three American children is overweight or obese, due primarily to unhealthy diet and lack of physical activity. This fact presents significant public health and economic hazards, threats, dangers, and challenges. When children are obese or overweight, they tend to remain so throughout adulthood—putting them at increased risk of heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, stroke, osteoporosis, and cancer.

Treating millions of people with diet-related diseases places an enormous burden on an already fragile economy. The amount of money the United States spent to treat obesity-related conditions doubled between 1998 and 2008, rising to an estimated \$147 billion per year in 2008.⁴

Smith took over, still faces grave financial burdens and a dropout rate twelve points above the national average.⁹

But the superintendent, who is white, is not only a man with a plan; he is a man with the empathy to champion kids who most need it—in this case, kids of color—and a capacity for the systems thinking that is vital to creating comprehensive change. Because the causes of the inequities facing young students of color are systemic, he says, the solutions need to be as well. This quality of systems thinking, a core dimension of ecological intelligence, enables Smith to recognize the vital role of the school food environment in the education and health of Oakland’s 38,000 students and the community at large.

“To me, it’s not that somehow we will get to the food stuff *after* everything else,” says Smith, who has a Ph.D. in education from the University of California, Berkeley. “When you move a system, you have to move all of it. That is why school food reform is built into the context of our new strategic plan. It’s about the long-term health and well-being of our students, and it’s about building sustainable systems.”

Smith agrees with the growing consensus among health experts that it is critical to tackle the epidemic of diet-related health problems among young people—and that it makes sense to engage schools in this goal, because students consume an estimated 40 percent of their daily calories at school. But he also recognizes that reforming the school food environment is an opportunity to use the institutional power of schools to address some of the ecological

If current trends continue, the cost will more than double again—to \$344 billion—by 2018, according to projections by Kenneth Thorpe of Emory University.⁵

Reversing these trends will require a comprehensive approach that involves behavioral changes on the parts of families, food suppliers, and the federal government. But many argue that schools must also be key players in the response to this public health crisis. Among their reasons are these:

1. Young people consume an estimated 40 percent of their daily calories at school.⁶ For some, school lunch may be the most important meal of the day.
2. Foods high in fat and low in nutrition (such as deep-fried chicken nuggets, pizza, and nachos) continue to figure prominently in many school food programs, largely because they are cheap and easy to prepare and serve.⁷
3. A growing body of research connects better nutrition with higher achievement on standardized tests and increased cognitive function, attention, and memory, as well as better school attendance and cooperation.⁸

problems—including soil depletion, water scarcity, water and air pollution, and climate change—caused by today’s industrialized food systems. He insists that school food reform is a basic equity issue: If the least-advantaged students are going to have a shot at improving their academic achievement and well-being, he argues, they must be given access to healthy food. As a former professional athlete, after all, he knows first-hand how critical nutrition is to peak performance.

THE ROOTS OF EMPATHY

Like Geoffrey Canada, the education reformer who founded the Harlem Children’s Zone,¹⁰ Smith is a reformer who himself succeeded against the odds. He was born to teenage parents—high school juniors who were asked to leave their small hometown of Camino, California, when his mother became pregnant. He and his mom spent his early childhood moving (twenty times, by his estimate) to stay with friends and family who would give them a place to sleep. In the fifth grade, he lived alone for a time, surviving on food stamps and walking himself to school, as his friend Derek Van Rheenens recalls in the 2010 book, *Out of Bounds: When Scholarship Athletes Become Academic Scholars*.¹¹

Yet Smith was also talented, hardworking, and fiercely determined. By middle school, he was already thinking about how he could get himself to college. He considered joining the Navy and working on a submarine but realized that at 6-foot-3, his height made that impractical. He then settled on football, which seemed to offer the most likely pathway out of poverty for someone with his size, strength, and skills. With the help of an uncle, he wrote a plan to win a football scholarship to a Division I university—detailing, for example, when he would need to win an all-city title and become team captain. And then he set out to meet his goals.

His stature—helpful in football—served as a double-edged sword, however, causing coaches and teachers to expect him to behave like an adult when he was still only a high school student. It was a lot of pressure for any young person, let alone one already shouldering more than his share of adult responsibilities. But at a few critical moments, Mike Coulson, the football coach at Eldorado High School, stepped in with fatherly support. “He would say, ‘This guy, he’s a kid first. He’s been through a lot. And he is uncommon. So you’ve got to not punish him for not being what you want him to be. You have to understand who he is.’ He made room for me,” says Smith, taking a pause, and then repeating, “He made room for me.”

In high school, Smith loved poetry as much as slamming into guys on the field. When he graduated, he’d earned recognition as both English Student of the Year and captain of the football team. He went on to attend the University of California, Berkeley, on a football scholarship and studied English under Robert Hass, the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and U.S. poet laureate. After graduation,

the young man known for being a kind-hearted defensive lineman who helped his teammates with their English assignments signed with the Green Bay Packers and later the San Francisco 49ers. Injuries forced him to leave both teams; by the time he was twenty-four, the football career he had planned as his pathway out of poverty was over.

In an effort to regroup, Smith considered studying law. But Jo Baker, the director of UC Berkeley's Athletic Study Center at the time, strongly suggested that he consider teaching. "He was always interested in others' development, not just his own," says Baker, who had known Smith since he was a freshman. "He was able to break things down, make things easy for people to absorb. And he's an optimist. To me, that's a teacher."

Convinced that Baker was right, Smith returned to Berkeley, where he earned a Ph.D. in language and literacy from the School of Education. This experience, he reflects, helped shape his approach to reform in Oakland, because it helped him understand the history of education and the reasons why schools are designed the way they are. Above all, his studies helped him recognize how schools reinforce cultural and class inequities: Even the notion that only a few make it to the top, he says, serves as "a powerful way to keep things where they are."

Smith is, of course, one of the few people with such a background who found success as an adult. But although his determination and well-rounded intelligence certainly contributed to his success, so, too, he insists, was the support he received from educators, coaches, and other individuals along the way. "I wasn't cared for in the ways I should have been, but I was cared for by people who chose to care," he says. "And I know for a fact that if not for other people—a coach or teacher who said, 'Come here, you need to stop doing what you're doing; you have worth; you have skills; come this way'—I would not be here today." That is the kind of transformative support he wants to offer now, not just to a few individual students, but to a whole school district situated in a community that has more than its fair share of challenges.

SURFACING SYSTEMIC INEQUITIES

Oakland is the sixth most dangerous city in America, according to the FBI.¹² In 2011, an average of five to six people a day (more than 2,000 people per year) were victims of gun violence. And, as of August of that year, 199 of those shooting victims were children. That's up 60 percent from 2006, according to the Urban Strategies Council.¹³ Some residents blame the proliferation of handguns for the violence. Others fault an understaffed police department. Still others say the problem is the city's high unemployment and poverty rates. In 2011, Oakland's unemployment rate was 16.5 percent,¹⁴ almost twice the national average.

At the same time, as Smith enthusiastically points out, Oakland is also a dynamic city with many beautiful neighborhoods, an extensive park system (11 percent of

city land is dedicated to parks), trendy new restaurants, and a burgeoning arts scene that earned it the fifth spot on the *New York Times* list of “The 45 places to go in 2012.”¹⁵

What explains the two faces of Oakland? Smith and other leaders point to systemic inequities in race, class, and ethnicity that affect such fundamentals as food, health, and education. For example, in West Oakland, which is populated largely by poor African Americans and Hispanics, there is only one supermarket for every 93,126 residents, according to the Hope Collaborative, an Oakland-based organization focusing on environmental health and food policy issues.¹⁶ And many residents can’t travel to the supermarket because they don’t have access to a vehicle or public transportation. So they buy their food at small stores within walking distance of home—liquor stores or convenience stores that rarely carry fresh, nutritious, affordable fruits and vegetables amid the shelves of unhealthy, highly processed (and often highly priced) food options.¹⁷

Higher income whites living in North Oakland, in contrast, have one supermarket per 13,778 residents, according to the Hope Collaborative. They also have access to several farmers’ markets, where they can buy organic produce in season, while enjoying samples of healthy food and live music.

Stark health differences develop in adulthood, largely as a result of these disparities in food access. An African American resident in West Oakland, for example, is five times more likely to be hospitalized for diabetes than a white resident born in the more affluent Oakland Hills. Moreover, that same African American resident is two times more likely to die of heart disease or cancer as the white resident.¹⁸

Not surprisingly, significant disparities in academic achievement also exist in Oakland. According to the Oakland School District, only 54 percent of African Americans and 56 percent of Latinos graduate from high school, while 75 percent of white students and 79 percent of Asian American students graduate, with many going on to college.¹⁹

And the racial achievement gap is clearly not limited to Oakland. “It’s a pattern that plays out city by city, district by district, state by state, across the country,” Smith told a recent Chamber of Commerce meeting. “The system is producing the specific and exact outcomes that it is designed to produce if it’s this consistent across all districts. . . . It’s a tremendous waste of human potential to keep sorting and selecting the way we do, and to have this kind of predictable gap over and over and over again.”

Although poverty and other factors are surely to blame, the racial achievement gap is also increasingly being recognized as connected to the poor nutritional quality of food available to many African American and Latino students in Oakland and elsewhere. And that is one of the things Smith is trying to change in Oakland—in more ways than one.

THE CURRICULUM CONNECTION

If your school eliminates chicken nuggets and offers a salad bar instead, will students change the way they eat outside of school? Not necessarily—if that’s all you do. But if you also integrate classroom lessons about healthy eating and hands-on cooking or gardening classes, you will have a much better chance of changing students’ knowledge, attitudes, and behavior toward food.

That was the finding of a study of the School Lunch Initiative, a pioneering collaboration among the Center for Ecoliteracy, the Chez Panisse Foundation, and Berkeley Unified School District, which was one of the first comprehensive school lunch reform efforts in the nation.

Conducted by the Dr. Robert C. and Veronica Atkins Center for Weight and Health at the University of California, Berkeley, the study found that in those schools that combined healthier food, classroom instruction, and cooking and gardening classes, the following occurred:

- Sixty percent of families surveyed said that the school changed their child’s knowledge about healthy food choices (in contrast to thirty-six percent in schools that only changed the food).
- Forty-two percent said that school changed their child’s attitudes about food (compared to nineteen percent in schools that only changed the food).
- Thirty-five percent said that school improved their child’s eating habits (versus sixteen percent in schools that changed only the food).

To read the report, “Evaluation of the School Lunch Initiative: Changing Students’ Knowledge, Attitudes, and Behavior in Relation to Food,” visit the Center for Ecoliteracy website at www.ecoliteracy.org/downloads/school-lunch-initiative-evaluation.

DRUGS THERE, APPLES HERE

On an unseasonably warm afternoon in January, a group of students filed out of a high school in East Oakland—home to an area known to have the highest rates of shootings, prostitution, and drugs in the East Bay. Rosa Arciniega, a Latina mom with a white apron tied around her waist, approached the first group. “Fresh apples,” she cheerfully called, directing them to some nearby tables filled with apples, broccoli, chard, and a dozen other items under a white canopy. A few students half-heartedly walked over. Then history teacher Alfredo Matthews appeared, pulling out his wallet, waving a dollar bill above his head, and firing off questions to the newly alert group of students: “What’s beneath the atmosphere? Who can tell me how many teeth are in the human mouth? What came first: the chicken or the egg?” Every time a student gave a correct answer, he gave them a dollar bill. “But you have to spend it at the farmers’ market,” he called out.

The farmers' market at East Oakland's Castlemont Community of Small Schools is held every Wednesday afternoon, inside the front gate. Only a few years old, it sells primarily to teachers at this point, says Kelly Quane, a high school English teacher who volunteers to bring the produce to the school. Many of the kids don't have the money to purchase food, she says, which is why her colleague, Matthews, made a game out of giving away money so a few kids would experience the taste of a fresh apple. Quane hopes that local residents, even just those who live across the street, will try the produce, because the prices are more affordable here than in the supermarket more than a dozen long blocks away. "But it's a hard community. We can't go knocking on the doors," she says, adding that they will try leaving flyers on doorsteps.

Still, the kids see the fresh food there every week. Many receive tastings from Arciniega, whose own children are grown, and who can't seem to resist giving out samples. And some get a good deal more involved than that. Melinda Monterroso, a senior who calls herself a "green pioneer," is one of the East Oakland students who regularly volunteer to work at the stand. "My dad got sick because of the way we were eating. It was unhealthy. That was a wake-up call for me," she says. "Having it here at the school is a reminder to eat healthy," she adds, flashing a big smile.

Senior Omar Mateo says he became interested in healthy eating because of a teacher who engaged him in a school garden project and taught him about food. "She told us it was not healthy to eat chips all day. Just because it tastes good doesn't mean it's good for us." He volunteers at the farmers' market because that teacher (who has since gone back to school herself) taught him to take care of his

RETHINKING SCHOOL LUNCH

The Center for Ecoliteracy's Rethinking School Lunch planning framework is based on a positive vision: healthy children ready to learn, "food literate" graduates, invigorated local communities, sustainable agriculture, and a healthy environment.

The framework identifies ten pathways for innovation and change in school food. Because they are interrelated, school food reformers can begin with any of them, knowing that the change process will eventually lead them to the others. They are:

- **Food and health:** The school food program promotes student health by offering nutritious and appealing menu options.
- **Wellness policy:** The school nutrition program is guided by a district wellness policy developed through a collaborative community process.
- **Teaching and learning:** Hands-on learning, the lunchroom experience, and teaching and learning in the classroom deepen students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes about food, culture, health, and the environment.
- **The dining experience:** Students feel welcomed, safe, and valued in an atmosphere that encourages healthy eating and positive social interaction.

health. He also likes that Arciniega shares leftovers with the student volunteers when it is time to close for the night.

CHANGE: FROM PIECEMEAL, TO SYSTEMIC

Oakland schools had made a number of improvements in school food before Smith came on the scene. This was due largely to the dogged determination of district food service director Jennifer LeBarre, who recalls earlier days when she poured nacho cheese sauce into a bag of Flamin’ Hot Cheetos and called it lunch. But since then, the district has banned soda (even before the state mandated it), trans fat, deep fryers, high-sodium foods, and most white bread products. It introduced “meatless Mondays,” universal breakfast, daily fresh produce at every school, increased fresh food prepared onsite, and local purchasing.

In collaboration with several community organizations, Oakland Unified also organized weekly farmers’ markets like the one at Castlemont at twenty-two of its ninety-one schools—mostly in communities known as “food deserts,” where there is little access to fresh produce. With the help of the local food bank, the district offers a program that sends some of the poorest students home on Friday afternoons with backpacks filled with healthy food to last the weekend. It also provides a mobile food pantry at two schools twice a month, which attracts hundreds of students and parents. Salad bars now operate in sixty-two schools; some are so popular that strawberries and other fresh fruit have to be rationed.

- **Procurement:** The school meal program buys fresh, seasonal, sustainably grown food from local and regional sources.
- **Facilities:** The dining facility serves as a learning center, offers fresh food prepared onsite, and reinforces lessons learned in the classroom.
- **Finances:** Wise budget planning makes the shift to fresher, more nutritious food financially viable.
- **Waste management:** The school food program reduces waste and helps students understand the need to conserve natural resources.
- **Professional development:** Nutrition services staff and teachers receive the training they need to prepare healthy food.
- **Marketing and communications:** Districts promote healthy meal programs and meaningful learning environments.

You can download the Rethinking School Lunch guide on the Center for Ecoliteracy’s website at www.ecoliteracy.org/downloads/rethinking-school-lunch-guide

Still, there are limits to what even dogged determination can achieve when a school system faces the kind of structural obstacles confronting Oakland and many other districts. Oakland schools, for example, serve some 36,854 meals a day—on a very slim budget (with a maximum reimbursement from the federal government of \$2.77 per lunch and \$1.51 per breakfast).²⁰

Fewer than one in four Oakland schools has a working kitchen. Even in schools with kitchens, most of the equipment is so old that it no longer works. Many of the 300 food service workers do little more than rip the plastic off pre-packaged food and pop it in the microwave. Real change to provide healthy food for all students would require changing a complex and deeply flawed system.

That's why Smith approved a collaboration between Oakland Unified and the Center for Ecoliteracy, a pioneer in school lunch reform for more than a decade, to develop a comprehensive Rethinking School Lunch Oakland feasibility study about reforming the district's school food environment.²¹ The aim of the study was to determine what it would take to transform Oakland school food, based on the model of the Center's ten-point Rethinking School Lunch Initiative, which addresses every step of the process from procurement to waste.

In addition to a thorough analysis of the obstacles to improving the quality of food served to the district's 38,000 students—70 percent of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price lunches—the study made a number of recommendations. Among them are the following:

- Develop a 1.5-acre farm and central commissary kitchen in West Oakland.
- Refurbish seventeen cooking and fifty-eight finishing kitchens across the district to move away from pre-packaged meals and toward cooking with fresh ingredients.
- Transform ordinary school kitchens into “school-community” kitchens that local residents can use during off-hours for cooking, culinary training, and business development. Says Smith, “Imagine school not only being a place where you go for a PTA meeting, but also where you go to do some cooking with community members—a place where you can have twenty-five, forty people. That starts to change the character and nature of the place. As a community member, you start to feel it's yours.”

Achieving these changes, projected to cost \$26 to \$27 million over five years, will take a lot of effort, given the series of budget cuts the district has withstood, the need for significant facility upgrades to meet seismic requirements, and public controversy following the superintendent's decision to close some schools in order to become more cost-efficient.

Still, Smith is confident that the community will support healthy, local food in ways that nurture families, communities, and the environment for all students. “Look at all the food leaders who are already here in Oakland,” he says. Among them are People's Grocery, a food justice organization based in West Oakland; Revolution Foods, a for-profit firm that offers healthy, freshly prepared meals to a growing number of schools nationwide; Kaiser Permanente, one of the largest not-for-profit

health plans in the nation; and the Oakland office of The California Endowment, a public foundation that announced in 2010 that it will dedicate \$1 billion during the coming decade to improve the health and health care of Californians.

Children of color are too often blamed for poor outcomes in schools and in life, Smith says, as if those outcomes are determined by their own efforts alone, and not affected by the adults in their lives and the systemic forces that do not provide support or that reduce chances of success.

But truly changing outcomes for young people, especially when it comes to equity issues that have plagued a community for generations, can occur only when those systemic inequities are addressed, and adults throughout a community show genuine empathy for its youth. In this respect, Smith says he is inspired both by his own personal experience and by the work of people such as Father Greg Boyle, who helps former gang members gain jobs, training, and education in Los Angeles.²² Drawing from the words of Boyle (who in turn quoted Mother Teresa), Smith says, “If we behaved as if we belonged to each other, what would we do? We would turn toward each other.”

Then he adds softly, “If you really believe that, it changes how you are in the world. And I believe that.”

Like many large U.S. cities, Oakland is home to huge disparities in income, neighborhood violence, and access to food, public transportation, and health care services. Students similarly suffer from significant disparities in academic performance. Think about what you have read here and reflect on Tony Smith’s belief that “When you move a system, you have to move all of it.”