

Oakland Schools face \$60 million in cuts, state takeover

By Jonathan Burleigh
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Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), California's 11th largest, serving over 50,000 students, is facing demands for \$60 million in budget cuts over two years from the state's Fiscal Crisis Management and Assistance Team (FCMAT) and the Alameda County Superintendent of Public Schools, Karen Monroe.

The district is in an education crisis, with decades of budget cuts and deteriorating conditions driving larger class sizes, understaffing, a high turnover rate among teachers, and regularly failing to meet federally mandated special education services. Cutting any more from the already thin budget threatens a complete collapse.

Last year, the school board cut \$9 million and so far, the school board has proposed \$16.5 million in cuts for the next school year, including removing up to 340 positions. If those cuts are not deepened, the government is threatening the district with direct receivership. "If we see that those budget balancing strategies are not being implemented, we will have to impose strategies," Monroe said.

On November 14 Kyla Johnson-Trammell, the Superintendent of OUSD, gave an initial presentation on the School Board's "Community of Schools" policy which includes a systematic review of operations to determine what should be cut.

In an e-mail to OUSD staff and student families explaining the report, Johnson-Trammell demanded a shift towards charter schools stating that "OUSD operates too many district-run schools for the number of students we serve" and "the District must work together with charter schools to make every public school option a quality option." The report claimed, based on enrollment data, that the optimum number of district-run schools would be 53, requiring closing or merging of 23 out of 76 schools, roughly a third.

Johnson-Trammell was at pains to defuse popular backlash by emphasizing that this report was preliminary and that a final decision on how many schools to close and which they would be, is coming in February. She was adamant that some schools had to be closed and the district had to develop charter schools. According to the preliminary report

OUSD only expects to serve 57.6 percent of school-age children in Oakland by 2023. The rest will be in charter or private schools.

Currently, over 30 percent of OUSD students are in Oakland's 45 charter schools, the highest concentration in the state, and that number will likely increase as the district closes its own schools and sells or leases more property to charters. Study after study has shown that charter schools, on average, produce no improvement in a student's educational outcome, but they do open up enormous amounts of public school funding to private profit and corruption by shifting money currently going to teacher compensation and student programs into the pockets of the private operators of charter schools.

To facilitate this cash grab, both Democrats and Republicans have carried out the steady dismantling of public education under the guise of "school reform" at the local, state and national level.

Crisis conditions in districts across the country led to a string of statewide strikes last school year in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona. The walkouts arose outside the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), the two national teachers unions, which did everything in their power to isolate the teachers and turn the strikes into midterm election campaigns for the Democrats. The unions tried to present this as a "red-state rebellion" against the policies of the Republican party, but the conditions in Oakland highlight the no less vicious attacks on public education carried out by the Democrats.

Since 1970, the Democrats have dominated both houses of the state legislature, only losing control of the State Assembly between 1995-96. California passed its first charter school law in 1992. The former and future Democratic Governor of California, Jerry Brown, was elected mayor of Oakland in 1999 and opened two of his own charter schools, and then orchestrated the 2003 state takeover of Oakland Unified alongside Democratic state senator Don Perata. The Democrats, coordinating with

FCMAT and the state attorney general, conspired to force the district to accept a \$100 million state loan and direct state control of the district in order to cover a \$27 million budget deficit.

Although the state returned administration to the district after a series budget cuts in 2009, the state continues to collect \$6 million a year for the debt and maintains a trustee with veto power over district spending decisions. Over the past 15 years the school board, state trustee, county superintendent, and unions have collaborated in imposing an endless string of cuts to district-run schools while expanding privately-run charter schools.

This has come at immense cost to public education. According to the May 2018 study “Breaking Point: The Cost of Charter Schools for Public School Districts” published by the University of Oregon’s Labor Education and Research Center, charter schools cost OUSD significantly more in funding compared to education provided directly by the district. This is mostly because funding is apportioned per pupil, yet charter schools enroll a much smaller percentage of high need students than district-run schools. For example, charter schools get 28 percent of the district’s state-provided special education funding but only teach 19 percent of the district’s special needs students and almost none of the district’s severely disabled students. Similar disparities exist for refugee and recent immigrant students. Although charter schools are required by law to accept any student requesting admission as long as they have room, they are able to drive low-performing or high need students back into district-run schools through harsh discipline and other abuses.

In total, the study estimates charter schools cost the district just over \$57 million each year. OUSD would have a significant budget surplus were it not for the amount siphoned through charter schools into private profits. The heart of Johnson-Trammell’s talk about closing district-run schools and “building constructive relationships with charters,” is the bankrupting of public education to line the pockets of the charter school corporations.

Throughout the decades long assault on public education, the local affiliate of the NEA and AFT, the Oakland Education Association, has been a willing accomplice. The union endorsed last school year’s budget cuts, only quibbling on the total amount. “They do have to cut in order to make the \$1.2 million reserve, that’s a legal requirement” said then OEA President Trish Gorham, “but that’s \$5 or \$6 million, not \$9 million.”

During the teacher strikes earlier in the year, the union maintained absolute silence out of fear that Oakland teachers, who are in their second year of working without a contract, would try to join or support the strike wave.

In the nearly three weeks since the superintendent’s presentation, the union has not issued any statement on the matter to its membership.

The results of this collaboration have been disastrous for students and teachers. One second-year special education teacher spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear of reprisal from the district and union.

“Across the board the district is in a state of collapse,” he said. “Every year about 20 percent of the teachers leave because of the terrible and stressful conditions. My school has a nurse for only one day a week so all the medication, cuts and scrapes have to be dealt with by the teachers and secretaries; we were short janitors and had to deal with roaches and mice; we even ran out of money for paper towels in the bathrooms two months before school ended last year so students couldn’t dry their hands.

“The situation is the worst with special education. These are the hardest jobs with no extra pay so they have the highest turnover. Each year it’s another set of teachers with no training, getting hired on an emergency credential, to deal with the district’s highest need students. We’re so short-staffed that almost none of my students are getting all of their federally mandated services and I’d guess that’s pretty common district-wide.”

According to OUSD statistics, 251 teachers in the district have either an emergency or intern credential, meaning they have not completed a teacher training course. This includes 10 percent of general education teachers and 17 percent of special education. The district currently has 31 teaching positions open for the current school year, more than three months in.

In order to fight these conditions, teachers cannot accept the budget constraints dictated by the state and accepted by the school board and unions. They must draw the lessons from the teacher strikes and build rank-and-file committees independent of the unions in order to mobilize for a nationwide strike in defense of public education against both big business parties.

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