THE RECKONING: ADDRESSING OAKLAND'S LITERACY CRISIS

Oakland set out to address a literacy crisis that left 3 in 4 Black and Latine students unable to read at grade level. Four school board members had other priorities.

Ashley Jochim, Senior Fellow

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"The city of Oakland is [in] a national crisis," Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell declared at a February 2020 meeting of the school board. "We need to do a much better job across all our different types of schools to teach kids how to read, [and] this is not just a discussion for the academics department. It needs to be driven by parents and students."

Johnson-Trammell made the remarks in support of a group of Oakland families, marked by their bright yellow T-shirts, who were at the board meeting to secure adoption of "Literacy for All," a resolution that would formally commit the city's schools to using evidence-based literacy practices and provide the Black and Latine parents most impacted by the city's failed approach to reading a "seat at the table."

Lakisha Young was at the group's helm, and the bright yellow T-shirts signified them as part of The Oakland REACH (REACH), an organization Young founded in 2016 to change an educational system that left The Oakland REACH (REACH), an organization Young founded in 2016 to secure families of color a seat at the decision-making table. "[Families] know if they do not make sure that their children read, there is a potential prison bunk waiting for them," she testified.

This report presents findings from our up-close observation of Oakland's effort to make good on the commitment the board made that night. Over the course of five years, Oakland quietly reinvented its schools around a simple idea: "All students will learn at high levels when instruction meets their needs." Operationalizing this idea was more complicated than anyone, Young included, predicted; delivering the promised results has taken longer than anyone hoped. But tangible signs of progress are everywhere if you know where to look.

Today, that tentative progress faces a familiar existential threat as a long-brewing budget crunch meets head-on with a school board more focused on scoring political points than delivering results. Whether Oakland continues to reap the rewards of the investments made over the last five years will hinge on whether the city can once again tap into the "parent power" that animated REACH's Literacy for All campaign. That energy helped inoculate Oakland's work to improve instruction against the political forces that usually stymie complex reforms. It could be marshaled again to help the city's schools face their financial challenges.

A district on the brink

In 2019, Oakland schools were on the brink of failure. A financial crisis threatened the city's exit from a 20-year, much-maligned state receivership. The Alameda County Grand Jury had just released a report describing in painstaking detail the district's "broken administrative culture." Results from Stanford's Educational Opportunity Project, which compares educational outcomes across school districts and states around the country, found Oakland's students learned less than their peers in other districts in the state and nation, and that this gap was growing larger over time.

Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell was the woman tasked with stemming the bleeding. Johnson-Trammell took the helm of Oakland schools in 2017 after advocates admonished the school board for, once again, considering "a rising national leader." The tenth superintendent in 20 years, she understood Oakland's challenges better than most, having risen the ranks from teacher to principal to district central office leader. That pedigree bought her more goodwill than most superintendents have at the start of their jobs, with one local education advocate saying, "You would be hard-pressed to find anyone in the district who has anything negative to say about her."

Her first two years on the job had her making millions of dollars in midyear cuts to rectify a predecessor's accounting mistake and navigating a seven-day teacher strike. Both were "extinction-level" events that could have resulted in Johnson-Trammell's early and untimely dismissal. But they didn't.

That's in large part because Johnson-Trammell boasted lived experiences on the very issues that her critics sought to undermine her on. At a school board meeting on the eve of the 2019 teacher strike, she reminded the audience of those experiences—Oakland student, teacher, union rep, and principal. "I understand the issues from all sides," she said, in making a plea for problem-solving in the wake of the district's budget challenges.

Job #1: Effective Instruction

That understated approach became a hallmark of Johnson-Trammell's leadership of Oakland schools. In her inaugural meeting with principals and teachers, she shed the "superhero" jumpsuit that superintendents usually don and suggested that improvement would hinge on their "collective" efforts. Job number one, the district declared in 2019: effective instruction.

But accomplishing this job in Oakland was more difficult than it appeared at first glance. The district had a long tradition of decentralization, stemming from the "small schools" movement that found roots in the city in the early 2000s. "The central office has never developed operations in a way that situates the district as a central decision-making entity," one central office leader described. When Johnson-Trammell took the helm in 2017, Oakland schools were characterized by a "choose your own adventure" approach to education, with schools varying widely in the curriculum they used, how they supported teachers, and their use of supplementary and community-based programs.

Rectifying these problems in the schools was complicated by the fact that the central office itself was in disarray, having been whipsawed by years of turnover at the senior leadership level. One former senior central office leader who had observed these changes over the course of his 15-year tenure in the district told us, "There had been a lot of different plans and frameworks … it wasn't clear from the seats I held what the district was trying to do."

These challenges were especially salient in the context of literacy instruction, in which just three years earlier, the district had nominally adopted Lucy Calkins' Units of Study. This curriculum de-emphasized systematic phonics instruction in favor of what *New Yorker* writer Jessica Winter critically called "literacy by vibes." Schools were "all over the map" in how they were teaching reading, said one central office leader, and the results were abysmal, especially for the city's Black and Latine students.

If, as district leaders believed, access to effective instruction was key to improving educational outcomes for Oakland's students, building a system capable of supporting it at scale was essential.

Building a system for good instruction

To systematize something is to bring alignment to efforts that would otherwise be fragmented. OUSD understood that improving instruction districtwide hinged on bringing greater alignment among all the adults involved in supporting instruction—in the central office, between the central office and the schools, and between schools and the community.

Over the course of five years, district leaders sought this alignment through work on the district's "coherent instructional system" (Table 1). That system described the organizational practices that district leaders believed were key to improving both teaching and learning at schools.

Table 1. Oakland Unified Builds a "Coherent Instructional System"

What	Why
Common curriculum • SIPPS (2021) • EL Education (2021) • Benchmark Adelante (2021) • Eureka Math² (2020)	Schools vary widely in the quality of instructional materials in use
Centrally supported system of professional learning • New Teacher Institute • New Teacher Professional Learning • Standards and Equity Institute • Language and Literacy Institute • Centralized professional development	Teachers need to be supported to use instructional materials and have access to consistent, ongoing professional development
Required interim and diagnostic assessments • DIBELS (2022) • iREADY (2020)	Schools need a way to track progress and identify students in need of additional support
Site-level instructional leadership • Centrally supported teachers on special assignment (2021) • Centrally supported instructional rounds with principals and coaches	Teachers need job-embedded coaching and support to strengthen instruction; principals can't provide this support on their own
Tiered supports • Literacy Liberators (2021) • MathBoost (2024) • Tier 3 (1:1) tutoring pilot (2024) • SummerBoost (2024)	Students below grade-level need more support than a classroom teacher can provide on their own; parents and caregivers can contribute additional support if schools invest in their capabilities to deliver it

Beginning in 2020 and continuing to the present, the district central office redesigned nearly every element of the instructional system that touched schools, putting in place a new curriculum, interim assessments, curriculum-aligned professional development, and centrally supported site-based literacy and math coaches. These, district staff believed, were the essential elements needed for any effort to raise the quality of classroom instruction in literacy and math.

The pandemic provided an unusual opportunity to address the long-standing weaknesses in central support structures. "At the beginning of the pandemic,

everybody was like 'tell us what to do,'" one senior central office leader recounted. The demand for guidance gave the district a reason to establish centralized support, while federal pandemic aid provided the money to operationalize it.

External pressure and support fueled the district's efforts. As co-chair of a new working group tasked with shaping the district's vision for early literacy instruction, Young injected REACH's family-focused approach into meetings typically focused on the nuts and bolts of pedagogy and curriculum. For district staff who spent most of their days interfacing with teachers and leaders, the collaboration allowed them to "hold space for families," as one central office leader put it. "Holding families at the center," this individual described, "made me spiral into what's next, what's next." An Oakland-based literacy advocate echoed this depiction, saying, "Their voice and perspective are laser-focused: What do our families want? It's hard not to listen."

For Young, the collaboration gave REACH an up-close view of both the enormous opportunities to make change and the serious obstacles that stood in the way. She observed that there was no shortage of ideas from central office staff on what needed to be done to move outcomes for Oakland's children. But the day-to-day demands of their jobs left them in a perpetual state of triage, uncertain about whether they could make the shifts they understood were needed.

This outlook was in part a function of many staff members' long tenures in a district where budget cuts were a perennial threat. "OUSD was constantly in fiscal crisis," recounted one central office leader. "We hardly ever think [about the] big picture: How do we invest? How do we strategically change our resources?" But it also reflected weaknesses in the prior experiences staff brought to their roles in central. All were former principals—a job that made them well positioned to "fight [the] fires" in front of them, as Young put it. But operationalizing the district's instructional strategy didn't require fighting today's fires; it required staff to make choices today that would ultimately serve their long-term vision for instruction.

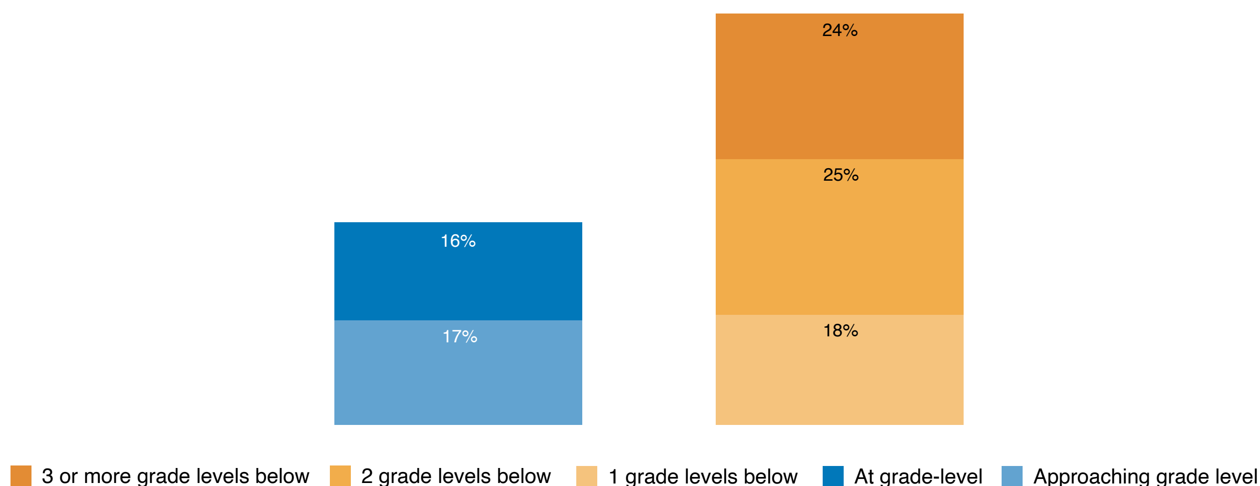
REACH addressed this challenge by helping district staff remain grounded in the most important *what* and *why* of their work. As one central office leader put it in a meeting with staff from both organizations, "We need everyone aligned to make the shift. No one will make the shift unless they are vested in the why. REACH can provide the why."

While Young and her team understood the urgency of the work, REACH was careful to focus their pushes with district staff on the problem, not the people charged with addressing it. "This work is not about shame and blame," Young said in a 2024 interview. Instead of going "public" with their concerns, Young used her relationships with district staff to push for the changes REACH believed were most important to families. "What has differentiated us is that we are very, very collaborative. We will never leave you hanging. But we're not cooperative. If we think something needs to happen differently, we will push and challenge [you]." A coach who worked with REACH and OUSD staff in the earliest days of the partnership suggested that this approach was critical to building the trust that all effective partnerships depend on: "I think that they're honest with each other [and] there's a lot of trust. Everyone trusts that everyone else will do their job [because] they all want the same thing."

Solving for the "inverted pyramid"

That collaborative approach would take center stage as the district looked to build out a set of "tiered supports" designed to intensify intruction for struggling students. Those supports were essential in a district where 67 percent of students read below-grade level (Figure 1) and one-third were learning English. "Our pyramid is completely inverted," one central office leader explained. "Teachers are in classrooms doing grade-level work, but very few kids are able to access it." Improving access, district leaders believed, hinged on addressing weaknesses in foundational skills.

Figure 1. By third grade, a majority of Oakland's students are reading below grade level



Notes: Figure presents data for third graders on the fall iReady assessment in the 2021–22 school year.

A fledgling early literacy tutoring program, piloted in 16 schools as part of a 2016 Kenneth Rainin Foundation initiative, initially provided a "shovel-ready" way to close this gap. That initiative was made possible by Jennifer Rainin, the daughter of the foundation's namesake and chief executive officer, whose early work as a teacher and literacy specialist informed the foundation's investment strategy in education. It paired an evidence-based professional learning program for early literacy educators with a schoolwide approach to providing tutor-led, small-group literacy instruction.

But scaling the initiative proved more challenging than expected. Though the district had the motivation and money to support the effort, they were struggling to fill tutor positions that offered little more than minimum wage. REACH stood ready to help, having honed their own early literacy tutoring program during pandemic-era school closures. In partnership with OUSD and FluentSeeds (now Collaborative Classrooms), REACH launched the Literacy Liberator Fellowship to recruit, train, and support early literacy tutors in hard-to-staff positions. The unlikely source of talent: the parents and grandparents who were most impacted by the city's prior approach to literacy instruction. The collaboration brought 104 centrally funded and supported early literacy tutors to the district's elementary schools. "It's mind-blowing. REACH can just light fires under different folks and organizations to get things moving," said the central office leader responsible for scaling the early literacy tutoring program.

District staff credit REACH's willingness to share in the work as critical to the district's progress. In 2023, REACH worked with district staff to design and launch a new math tutoring program, which used the same design principles as their literacy work, tapping caregivers with a direct stake in Oakland schools to become tutors. In 2024, they took on summer learning, helping district staff design and run a new program that better capitalized on the district's investments in the instructional system to extend learning time over the summer for students most in need of additional support. "The work has been able to move," one senior central office leader observed, because REACH was willing to "roll up [their] sleeves" and "be hand-in-hand in the work."

That partnership, in turn, was made possible by funders that provided REACH the flexibility to solve problems and pivot their approach in real time. "We love our funders," Young told us in 2022. "You can't pay for this [work] with monopoly money. [Flexible] funding allowed us to not skip a beat when it came to getting kids and families what they needed."

The bumpy road from "presence" to "fidelity"

Over the course of two years and 66 interviews with district and school staff as well as community members, we were hard-pressed to find anyone outright opposed to the changes described above. More often, teachers and principals we interviewed described trying in good faith to operationalize the district's vision as they faced serious challenges doing so. "Our move is presence, fidelity, and quality. I think we [have] presence and now we need to move to quality to see results with kids," a central office leader said.

Some of those challenges predated the district's investment in the instructional system. The district had long struggled to retain teachers, with 25 percent of elementary school teachers leaving after just one year and only half staying three years or more. Among those in the classroom, 32 percent were identified by the state as "ineffective," a designation that includes those on emergency permits or acting as long-term substitutes—among the highest rate of any district in California. These statistics seriously compromised the district's investment in the instructional system. As one said, "We are three years into our full implementation of EL Education [but] some of our sites are really at year one because of the number of teachers that they've turned over."

To address this problem, district staff provided universal and targeted support to all new and uncertified teachers. Foundational professional development and job-embedded coaching were offered to all new teachers so that teachers could be "oriented to their curriculum" and "feel prepared to plan and teach it."[1] Additional centrally provided coaching and professional development were offered to teachers working at schools that lacked a critical mass of experienced staff who could act as a resource to new teachers.

But these investments in professional support hinged on teachers' time: how much was available and who was responsible for directing its use. The district's collective bargaining agreement (CBA) with the Oakland Education Association (OEA) allocated just six "non-instructional" teacher workdays, fewer than many peer districts, and it gave central office leaders no direct control over their use. As a result, central office staff couldn't directly require teachers—whether new to teaching or not—to participate in professional development to improve curriculum implementation. "We couldn't make anybody do anything," a senior central office leader told us.

1. According to the district's New Teacher Survey, "using/creating/adapting curriculum" is a top challenge. The number-one challenge reported: "lack of time and sense of overwhelm."

This dilemma became a significant point of disagreement during negotiations with OEA in 2023. The district sought to increase the number of contractually obligated non-instructional teacher workdays from six to 10 and give district administrators more influence over their use. OEA balked, saying that teachers already worked many hours outside of their contractually obligated day and didn't need more "micromanaging." That issue was eventually overshadowed by others when teachers went on strike, and the current contract maintains the required six non-student teacher workdays.

While principals, instructional coaches, and central office staff we interviewed were sympathetic to both sides of this equation, they were also clear about the costs of providing teachers with so little structured support. "We have a day and a half [to prepare for the school year]. … It's not enough time, it's just not enough time," one principal said.

In theory, principals could work outside of these constraints by leveraging support that operated outside of the contractual workday, such as informal observations and feedback. "We are dependent on school site resources to train everybody on how to [provide effective instruction]," a central office leader who supervises school principals said. Central office staff invested in "teachers on special assignment" (TSAs) to serve as instructional coaches for this very reason. But in practice, schools varied widely in the extent and quality of professional support offered to teachers.

These gaps in support had many causes. TSAs and principals we interviewed described a system built like a house of cards in which small stressors—teacher absences, conflict between students, staff, and parents, or an overdue compliance report—regularly undermined the stability of the instructional support system. "Things come up every day," one principal said. "[C]onflicts [between students, staff, and parents]. Then there's deliverables we have to do for district administration. … [The work] piles up."

If implementation challenges diluted the impacts of the instructional shifts district leaders sought, soaring chronic absenteeism rates may have erased them altogether. Oakland initially weathered the pandemic better than most, with students making significant gains in reading achievement between 2019 and 2022. But by 2023, as chronic absenteeism rates soared to 61 percent, the gains were erased. Today, according to data from the Recovery Scorecard, post-pandemic educational outcomes in Oakland are better than in many districts, but that progress does not reflect the gains the district won and then lost due to chronic absenteeism.

Change is inevitable, progress is not

> *"Human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of dedicated individuals."* —Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Five years into the journey to ensure that every Oakland child has access to effective instruction, there are no "mission accomplished" signs hanging in district offices. But the impacts of the city's investments are visible if you know where to look—in the instructional materials teachers use, in the daily small group instruction students can now access, and in the central office, now more focused than ever before on improving student learning conditions. District data show that kindergartners are learning their letters sooner[2] and more students are making "typical" and "stretch" growth based on the district's interim assessments.

This progress, however, is a drop in the proverbial bucket given Oakland's large achievement gaps. In fall 2024, more than 40 percent of first through eighth graders tested two or more grade levels below state standards. While Literacy Liberators have helped close gaps in early literacy outcomes, more students need support than currently exists to provide it.

In a reflection of the enduring value of problem-solving, these challenges provided the foundation for the district's next round of investments. A central office reorganization implemented in late 2024 sought to break down the organizational silos that have complicated the district's effort to improve instruction in schools struggling the most. Before that change, the academics team was responsible for developing the instructional strategy yet lacked any authority over its implementation, a responsibility held by "network leaders" who supervise and support principals. District staff on both sides of this division said that this structure had contributed to implementation gaps. "Our implementation model [is] learn it, expect it, support it, [and] monitor it. In each of those areas, I don't think we've had as much clarity as we could have," one central office leader said. District leaders hope the reorganization, which brought the two teams together under a single reporting structure, will enable them to better address the obstacles to improved instruction in schools.

A new collective bargaining agreement, negotiated in 2023 after the controversial strike that sent students home from school for 10 days, committed the district to raising teacher salaries. This, district and union officials say, is critical if Oakland is to stem the bleeding of teacher talent from the system and better capitalize on their investments in teachers' development. The contract, which the Alameda County Office of Education projected would cost the district $110 million over

2. 24-0250. Language & Literacy K-5 Annual Plan: 2023-24.

three years, raised teacher salaries from among the lowest in the region to the median.

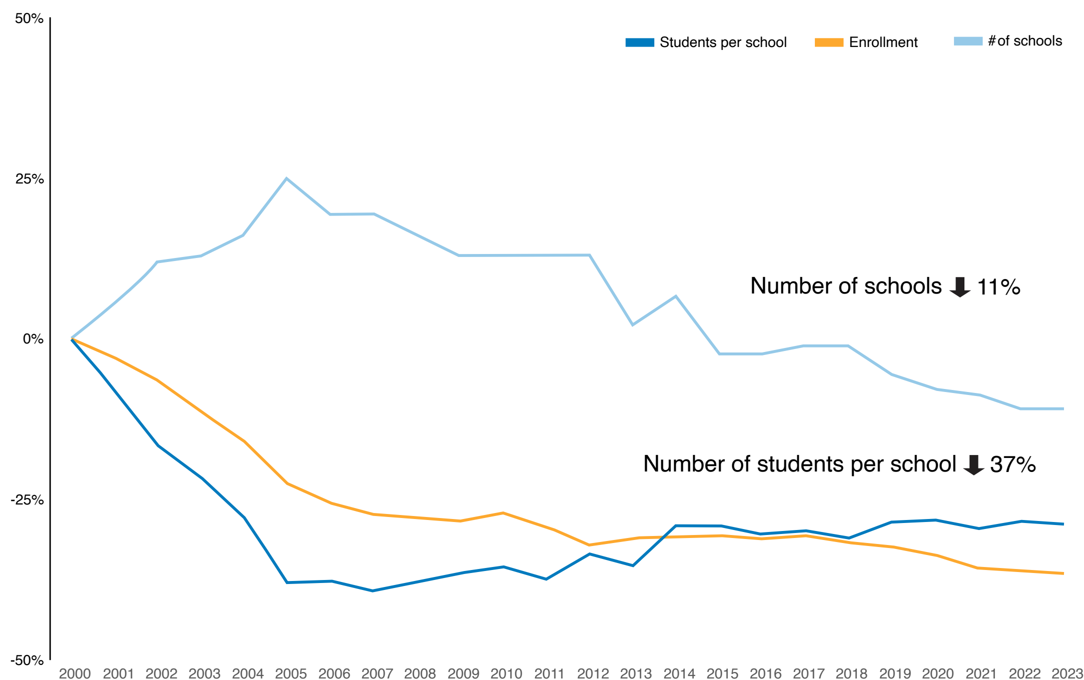
The district is also expanding its investment in one-to-one tutoring programs thanks to a grant from Eat. Learn. Play., a foundation established by local NBA star Stephen Curry and his wife, Ayesha Curry. District leaders hope intensive, one-to-one tutoring can make a dent in literacy gaps that remain large even after the district's other investments.

Sustaining all this work, however, depends on budget reallocations. While federal pandemic aid provided a reprieve from the perpetual budget crisis that has threatened Oakland schools since 2003, those dollars have dried up. Without significant spending reductions, the district is projected to be insolvent by the end of the 2025–26 school year.

Close observers of the district's financial health, including Johnson-Trammell, argued that avoiding this fate hinges on school consolidations. The average school in Oakland is a little more than half as large as in comparable districts in California (430 students per school compared to 766 students per school).[3] Though Oakland has fewer schools today than it did 20 years ago (115 schools in 2005 compared to 82 in 2025), school closures and consolidations have not kept pace with enrollment declines (Figure 2).

3. Based on district data, Oakland has 82 schools to serve 34,428 students or 430 students per school. Nearby Fremont has nearly the same number of students (34,782) but half has many schools (41). The average school size among 13 comparison districts is 766 students. See 24-2598D Presentation to the Board - 2025-2026 Fiscal Year Budget Balancing Solutions.

Figure 2. Since 2000, enrollment declines have outpaced school closures, pushing average school size lower



Oakland currently operates 18 elementary schools with fewer than 300 students. Interviews with principals and teachers in some of these schools, conducted over the course of our two-year project, made clear the hard-knock realities that come with under-enrollment: principals overwhelmed by the leadership demands of their jobs without an assistant principal to help, high rates of teacher turnover, and students forced to go without essential support.

Taking action on school consolidation has proven impossible, however, despite repeated warnings from district, county, and state administrators. The school board voted to consolidate seven schools in 2022, only to rescind the measure a year later following protests outside of school board members' homes, an 18-day hunger strike by staff, and altercations between OUSD security and protesters at a school slated for closure.

These challenging political realities led Oakland's school board to take the unusual step of terminating Johnson-Trammell's contract in May 2025—two years ahead of schedule and just months after the board had voted to extend that very contract. The plan, hatched in secret during a closed session, was backed by the four board members known for their ties to the city's teachers union and opposition to school closures. Mike Hutchinson, who was elected to the board in

2020, was so outraged by his colleagues' collusion that he leaked the news of the untimely dismissal, in violation of state law.

While the four board members who hastened Johnson-Trammell's exit from Oakland did not offer an explanation for the decision, a statement issued by the superintendent in her outgoing press conference was telling, citing a lack of alignment on "what it takes to continue … financial sustainability." Johnson-Trammell had made her position on addressing the budget crisis clear the prior December: "We can't get to closing the deficit for good without addressing the number of schools we have, period. … This isn't conjecture. This is math. There is not $95 million worth of investments, staff, support, and central office to get you out of that."

On June 3, the school board named Denise Saddler, a former principal, district administrator, and union president, as interim superintendent. Hutchinson took to social media to denounce the choice, arguing that the selection would hasten the departure of the senior staff who were responsible for managing the district, including its investments in the instructional system.

What board members hope to accomplish through these actions isn't entirely clear, but the path to fiscal sustainability is increasingly murky. On the heels of Johnson-Trammell's untimely exit, the board faced widespread opposition to a decision to cap district spending on outside contracts. Though the board had been warned that implementing the decision would affect the city's afterschool providers, when news of the cuts broke, two of the four union-backed board members blamed district staff for failing to implement the changes according to their "intent."

While magical thinking about tough budget realities may score short-term political points, it's hard to see how the board's action will address Oakland's financial challenges or sustain its educational improvements. Nor is a lone school board member, even a determined one like Hutchinson, enough to counter the political pressures—from both the teachers union and community members—that the board's action (and inaction) ultimately reflects.

Should Oakland fail to address its financial challenges, the current board will face state receivership again. While state and county officials may find success in stemming the financial bleeding, they are unlikely to restore the community trust and support that the city's schools need for long-term improvement.

That trust and support hinges on tapping into the pragmatism and political power of the families who depend on Oakland's public schools to succeed at their core mission. Families understand the stakes better than most: their children's futures depend on district leaders investing in the evidence-based solutions that will deliver results. Johnson-Trammell tapped that urgency and focus by providing REACH a seat at the decision-making table. District leaders concerned about the board's current direction could make a similar bet.

Or they might take inspiration from REACH's latest move. The organization's new venture—the REACH Parent District—will marry "best-in-class" virtual tutoring with family-focused coaches to assist Oakland families in need of more support than their schools can provide. "Going direct to families is an opportunity to extend the school day at home," Young said. It will also, she observed, give them an avenue to have continued impact no matter what district decision-makers might do next: "It's politics-proof."

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