

## Oakland schools balance improving student performance while making deep budget cuts

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ALISON YIN FOR EDSOURCE

*Oakland Unified is working to improve the performance of African-American students, those with disabilities, English learners and homeless students.*

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**O**akland Unified is struggling with a balancing act that requires it to improve its students' academic performance next year while also slashing millions of dollars from its budget.

At a school board meeting last month, Troy Christmas, the district's financial services director, told the school board they must cut \$5 million to \$7 million from their **budget** next year or face insolvency.

At the same time, the East Bay district is one of 28 in California that could face state intervention in the 2019-20 school year because of poor performance by students based on California's new school accountability system. That's because of a little-noticed **provision** in the law that enacted the three-tiered support system that is part of the state's Local Control Funding Formula, or **LCFF**, the school funding system championed by Gov. Jerry Brown and implemented in 2013-14.

"As the accountability system moves forward," the Education Code states, "the Superintendent of Public Instruction, with approval of the State Board of Education, may intervene in a school district if three or more student groups" are rated red — the lowest rating — on the new color-coded **California School Dashboard** in two or more categories for three out of four years. Statewide, one district — Konocti Unified in Lake County — had five student groups rated red in 2017, while eight districts, including Oakland Unified, had **four** groups in the lowest category and 19 districts had three groups rated red.

The four lowest-scoring groups in Oakland were African-American students, English learners, homeless students and those with disabilities.

The dashboard spans five levels, from red at the lowest level of performance and progressing up to orange, yellow, green, then blue, indicating the highest level.

But before the possibility of state intervention kicks in, Oakland and many other districts are receiving extra help from their county offices of education, called “**differentiated assistance**.” The state has identified 228 districts for this extra assistance.

The 28 districts are those with three or more student subgroups with a red rating, which face the possibility of state intervention. The idea is to provide support to districts to help them improve, rather than punish them for low performance.

This is a switch from the previous **No Child Left Behind** accountability system, which expected all students to achieve proficiency over time or else face possible drastic interventions, such as replacing principals and reconstituting schools, said Ingrid Roberson, chief of learning and accountability for the **Alameda County Office of Education**, who is working with Oakland Unified to help boost student performance.

“With the ‘**California Way**,’ we’re doing things much more collaboratively and assisting districts,” she said, referring to California’s new approach to school accountability. She said districts like Oakland “really are seeing that opportunity and knowing they need to make the most of that opportunity” to receive support before the threat of state intervention kicks in.

Thirty-two percent of Oakland’s 36,814 students are English learners, 26 percent are African-American, 13 percent are students with disabilities and 3 percent are homeless.

Oakland’s new school superintendent, **Kyla Johnson-Trammell**, told EdSource that it was “difficult to be on notice that we are not yet adequately serving our most vulnerable populations of students.”

But she said the district finds “great opportunity in designing instructional improvements specifically designed” for them and in ensuring that spending is aligned with those plans. The district is working with the county “to identify our root causes and identify solutions for our under-performance,” she said.

“Having been in our district for the better part of two decades,” she added, “I find this stance of accountability from the state and county necessary for applying the exact pressure districts need to be serious about results.”

Complicating the need to improve student performance is the fact that Oakland Unified and many other districts are in danger of not being able to meet future expenses unless they make significant cuts, for a variety of reasons, including rising pension costs for current and former employees.

The district’s fiscal crisis will force it to prioritize how it spends its approximately \$600 million budget to ensure that help is targeted to its vulnerable students while the district maintains fiscal stability.

“We are facing these challenges head-on and will make the necessary changes to see through the improvements our students and families deserve,” Johnson-Trammell said.

“We are dedicated to addressing inequities and providing the proper supports and conditions for learning for these students.”

The district is working with the county to identify the root causes for the average poor performance of African-American students, English learners, homeless students and those with disabilities.

If at least three of the four student subgroups who got a red rating on the school dashboard don’t show improvement by 2019, the state could potentially step in to take control of the district’s academic programs, since that would be the third year the state would report dashboard results for accountability purposes. Although state officials have not yet said how or whether they would intervene, the stakes are especially high for Oakland because it has come under state receivership in the past due to fiscal insolvency, and any threat of renewed state involvement is raising concerns in the district.

“They all take this seriously because it’s happened before and they know what it looks like,” Roberson said, referring to Oakland and other districts in the county she is working with. “They know the state has that capacity. I think they are all very clear over the next year or two that that needle needs to move — suspensions need to decrease and academic indicators need to increase.”

Last year, all four of the lowest-performing subgroups in Oakland scored poorly on the state’s **English language arts** tests. Two of the groups were also rated red in **math** and three were red for very low **graduation rates**, while two received a red rating due to high **suspension rates**.

As a key part of that accountability, districts are supposed to seek ideas from “stakeholders” to include in their Local Control and Accountability Plans, or LCAPs, which must be completed by June. Although the district **presented** its dashboard results to its **LCAP** Parent and Student Advisory Committee last week, the school board has not yet discussed the need to prioritize the four identified student groups in its spending.

The district has spent the past few months addressing a budget crisis that has required it to make \$9.5 million in midyear cuts, while also pursuing a facilities **plan** that could lead to school closures, a construction bond to repair aging facilities and possibly raising funds by selling or leasing surplus property.

At a recent board meeting, Johnson-Trammell stressed the importance of making drastic **changes** to stay afloat.

“It’s really about us reimagining the system that we need and the infrastructure that we need to be sustainable — particularly during this time in our state where we have a lot of extraordinary financial challenges — so that we can actually increase the investments to schools,” she said. “We are struggling to provide base programmatic services.”

By the end of this month, the county will prepare a “summary of findings” expected to include strategies for improvement to be incorporated into the district’s LCAP, based on its meetings with district officials.

Nicole Knight, Oakland’s executive director of English Language Learner and Multilingual Achievement, said the district’s priorities have changed over the past few years due to superintendent turnover. In June, the school board appointed Johnson-Trammell to replace former Superintendent **Antwan Wilson**, who left in February after leading the district for two-and-a-half years.

“I think the changes in leadership have led to instability and a lack of sustained focus, but now, we’re really optimistic that we’re in a place to focus on strategic priorities,” Knight said. “The county has been orienting us around what this all means.”

The district team is looking for patterns across the four groups, she said. So far, they have focused on improving teacher training, quality instruction and “conditions for learning” for both students and teachers, she added.

“We do a lot of good professional development, but it’s not been as intentional and strategic and systemic as it needs to be,” she said. “I think everyone agrees that one of our main root causes is we have a lot of needs and we try to take on too much.”

A big reason English learners struggle is that many of those in Oakland are unaccompanied minor immigrants, including refugees, who may have missed months or even years of schooling, Knight said. To better serve them, the district has developed “newcomer” programs and is working to increase the rigor of instruction for all students by presenting lessons based on Common Core standards in English language arts focused on reading, discussing what was read, then writing about it.

The district is also emphasizing that lessons should be presented at grade level, with added supports for students who need it, she added.

Other strategies for improving graduation rates for English learners, homeless students and those with disabilities include offering them more opportunities to pursue career-themed courses that can keep them engaged in school, along with better access to coursework necessary to meet A-G requirements for admission to the University of California and California State University systems, said Jean Wing, the district's executive director of research, assessment and data, who is also part of the district team working with the county.

To reduce suspensions for African-Americans and students with disabilities, which were rated red on the dashboard, the district is expanding its “restorative justice” program and positive behavior program, both of which are aimed at addressing the reasons behind disruptive behavior and holding students accountable for their actions. The restorative justice program includes discussions between those involved in disruptive behavior, which helps strengthen relationships between students and staff while creating a campus community where students feel valued and are less likely to act out.

Providing students with hands-on lessons that include social and emotional skills also helps reduce suspensions by keeping students interested in what they're learning, Wing said. Social and emotional skills include the ability to regulate emotions, be compassionate and nurture trusting, healthy relationships.

“In this sense,” Wing added, “the best discipline strategy is engaged instruction.”

Johnson-Trammell said she is committed to doing what it takes to help students succeed.

“The road ahead is not going to be easy but I am committed to seeing these necessary changes through with students, with their families, with our staff and with our community,” she said. “I am OUSD and I

know we will rise above these results,” she added, quoting the district’s slogan, “I am OUSD.”

Still, some community members fear the district is not moving forward with plans for budget cuts in a way that takes into consideration the negative impacts they may have on students.

At the Feb. 14 board meeting, parent Kim Davis, who participated in the facility plan committee meetings, said she was disappointed the group didn’t consider students’ basic needs and make sure cuts were made equitably. She spoke against cuts to libraries and expressed concerns about the loss of literacy coaches at the neediest schools.

“I think we need to look very carefully at the ways we are impacting communities,” she said, “particularly communities that have already been impacted by a lot of trauma.”

The district plans to host a dashboard workshop on March 22. The school board also expects to review its budget projections in March, as it prepares for cuts to be included in its three-year budget due to the county by the end of June.

“There will be some hard choices,” Knight said. “I think the will is there and I think the money is there, if we’re willing to commit to making these choices.”

## Comments

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**Erik Kengaard**

3 days ago



“Thirty-two percent of Oakland’s 36,814 students are English learners.”

Why don’t we recognize that we pay a price for acting out of compassion rather than reason?

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**► Paul**

3 days ago



I fear that you are confusing compassion with law. If you are saying that English Learners are necessarily undocumented immigrants and that we should not educate undocumented immigrants, please look up Plyler v. Doe. If you are saying that we should not provide language support to English Learners, please look up Lau v. Nichols. It bears repeating that the State of California funds public school districts on a per-pupil, per-day ("Average Daily Attendance" or ADA) basis, and that ... [Read More](#)

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**Erik Kengaard**

3 days ago



“Social and emotional skills include the ability to regulate emotions, be compassionate and nurture trusting, healthy relationships.”

Parents should have enabled their children to develop these skills before age 5. The schools should not be burdened with remedial efforts. That was the case 60 years ago – what has changed?

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**► Victoria Howard**

4 days ago



In other words, the Oakland School District continues to fail its students, particularly its African American students who are no better off than they were in 2015 when Restorative Justice was launched and funded. Now, despite a flat suspension rate and shameful English and Math test scores, Oakland proudly announces they will expand, of course, Restorative Justice. What nobody dare announce is a willingness to implement School Choice—despite its proven success for increasing ... [Read More](#)

