

Oakland, California school board set to enact mid-year budget cuts

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Last week the Oakland, California Board of Education revealed its latest plan to impose mid-year budget cuts on the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), which serves 50,100 students. OUSD is already largely in a state of disrepair due to decades of austerity measures enacted by the Democratic Party-controlled state government.

At the board meeting, Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell outlined \$9 million in cuts, presenting this as a downward revision from the \$15.1 million proposed at the end of November. However, \$2 million of the reduction is simply a result of fudging the numbers by not including \$1.6 million in already unfilled teacher vacancies and \$0.4 million in unspecified "fall revision adjustments."

The cuts will affect numerous district-wide central office departments and every school in the district, with \$4.2 million coming from the 87 district-run schools (excluding the 35 district-authorized charter schools), and \$4.8 million coming from the central office.

These cuts follow \$14 million in mid-year budget cuts approved by the board last January, which were followed by further cuts of \$22.6 million in the 2017-18 school year budget. If the proposed \$9 million cuts are approved at the board meeting on Wednesday, the total amount cut from OUSD's budget in the past year will be a devastating \$45.6 million.

The district says implementing the cuts is the only way it can prevent state receivership, following an August report by the state-run Fiscal Crisis and Management Assistance Team, which concluded that the district "has lost control of its spending." In 2003, OUSD was forced to go through state receivership and take out a \$100 million loan from the state, the largest ever given to a California school district, out of which they still owe \$40 million. The amount needed to stave off another receivership, however, is only \$1.2 million, not \$9 million.

While the crisis is ultimately bound up with federal and

state policies, the school board and former Superintendent Antwan Wilson (now chancellor of the Washington, DC School district) are no doubt guilty of squandering vast sums of public monies. At the behest of Wilson, the school board approved dramatic over-spending on 75 non-budgeted positions and an expansion of highly paid administrator positions district-wide. At the same time, OUSD spent only \$6.8 million on books and school supplies, despite an allocated budget of \$20.1 million.

There is deep opposition to further cuts. Over 300 people from a cross section of Oakland's largely working-class population attended last week's school board meeting and dozens of speakers, including students of all grade levels, teachers, support staff and parents, denounced the cuts and demanded the right to high quality education.

Eduardo, a Castlemont High School student, proclaimed, "I find it absurd you're advocating cutting additional resources when we didn't get what was promised in the first place." Alana Corpuz, a parent, declared, "There already isn't any art at the school. We just lost a physical ed teacher. We're about to lose another P.E. teacher. There are no extra-curricular activities."

The meeting exposed the cynical and dishonest character of the school board members and superintendent, who are intimately connected to the Democratic Party and speak for powerful financial interests that hold the school's bonds and are pushing for the privatization of public education.

The board changed the meeting's location at the last minute to a room that seated only 60 people. Then, as people took to the mic to denounce them, the board members paid more attention to their cell phones than the speakers, as one of the speakers noted. In an effort to intimidate and silence opponents, six police officers and four security guards manned the elevator, stairway, and entrance to the room, and repeatedly consulted with board

President James Harris and Superintendent Johnson-Trammell.

During their tenure, Harris and board member Jumoke Hinton Hodge have both been instrumental in promoting charter schools in Oakland, which has one of the highest concentrations of charter schools in the US. In the 2016 school board elections, two pro-charter groups backed by billionaires, including Michael Bloomberg, donated a combined \$225,000 to Harris and \$113,000 to Hodge.

Since Harris was first elected in 2013, enrollment is OUSD has grown by 5.9 percent. All of this growth has gone toward charter schools, where enrollment has risen by 28.5 percent, while enrollment at traditional public schools has declined by 0.4 percent. This has served to drain resources from the traditional public schools and exacerbate the budget crisis, which in turn is being used to justify the diversion of money to for-profit school schemes.

Far from more budget cuts, the schools in Oakland require a large increase in funding to meet pressing social needs. California has an overall poverty rate of 25 percent while some neighborhoods of Oakland are nearly double that. In South Central Oakland, 47 percent of young children live in poverty. The number of homeless students in the district has more than doubled from 400 in 2015 to 901 in 2017, mostly driven by the soaring housing costs in the San Francisco Bay area.

Oakland schools are further confronted with the broader crisis facing immigrants. District wide, just over half of all students speak a language other than English at home, with a third speaking Spanish and the rest speaking 53 other native tongues. In addition to the language difficulties this presents, students have to deal with police harassment and the threat of deportation for friends and families.

A study by the University of Southern California estimated that across Alameda County 6 percent of residents were undocumented immigrants, but in East Oakland that rate soars to 17 percent. While Oakland is a so-called sanctuary city, Immigration and Customs Enforcement has carried out raids and high-profile deportations.

The opposition to the school cuts is part of a growing political radicalization in the area. In response to the election of Trump, thousands of high school and middle school students walked out in protest. Currently 3,000 city workers are continuing a week-long strike after suffering years of cuts and furloughs. Since June 30, 2017, Oakland teachers have been working without a contract as

negotiations drag on and working conditions deteriorate.

The crisis confronting OUSD is only going to get worse as more money is drained out of public education to pay for the Trump tax cut legislation, which threatens to drain \$63 billion from California public school funding over the next 10 years.

Oakland Education Association (OEA) has done nothing to oppose the budget cuts and boosted illusions that appeals to the school board. During the state receivership in 2003, the OEA negotiated pay and benefit cuts. Oakland teachers are currently working without a contract and whatever agreement they reach after the budget cuts are voted on will only further undermine the jobs, living standards and working conditions of the district's 2,317 teachers and 1,845 support staff.

The unions are allied with the Democratic Party, which under the Obama administration spearheaded the drive for corporate-backed "school reform" and deliberately starved states and school districts of money even as it handed over trillions to Wall Street and the Pentagon. On the state level, Governor Brown, who first took office in 2011, continued the attack on education former Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger escalated after the 2008 crash.

Between 2008 and 2013, the two had cut \$18 billion from education and 32,000 full-time teachers in the state had been laid off. Throughout his term, Brown has pushed for two main education policies: pension "reform" to cut the benefits given to public school teachers; and the expansion of charter schools.

In March 2016, Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf was the keynote speaker at a \$250-a-person election fundraiser for Great Oakland (GO) Public Schools—backed by San Francisco-based venture capitalist and philanthropist Arthur Rock, the Walton Foundation and other public education opponents—that funded school board candidates pushing charters and other pro-corporate policies in the Oakland Unified School District.



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