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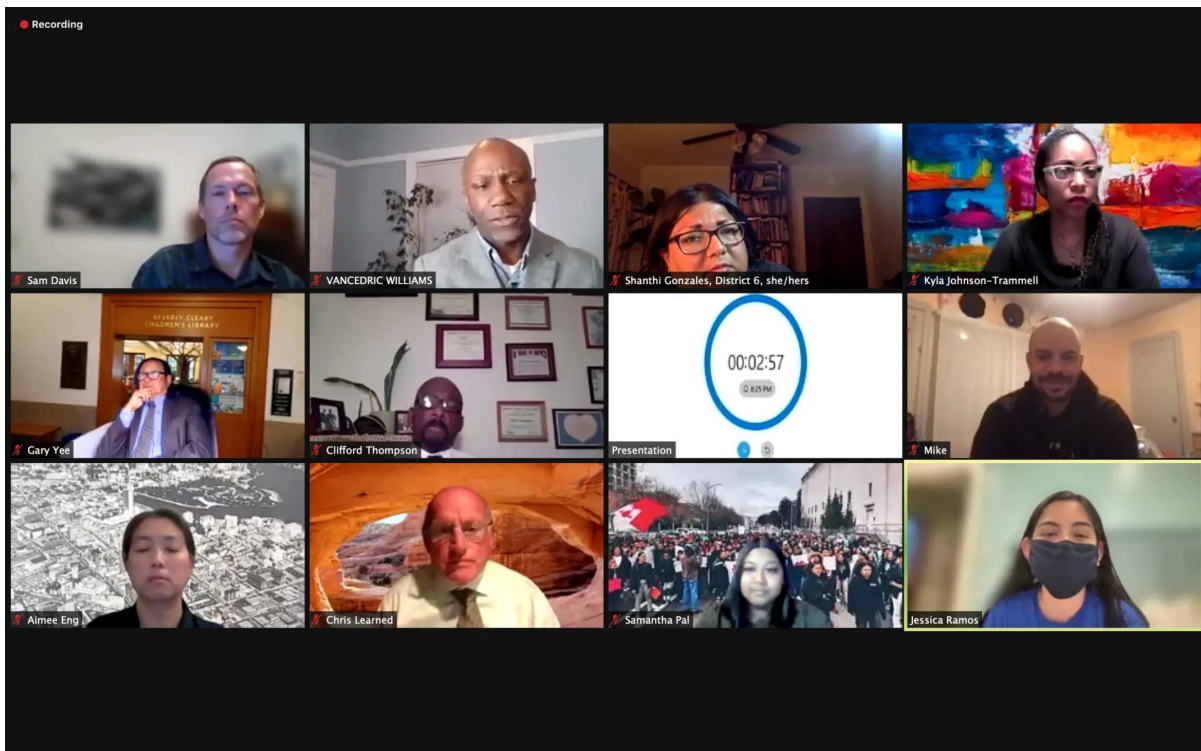
EDUCATION EQUITY

Oakland school board says yes to reparations for Black students, no to banning school closures

Disagreement over whether Oakland should close schools nearly derailed a sweeping plan to address the achievement gap and declining Black student enrollment.



by **Ashley McBride**
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Chris Learned, OUSD's state trustee, made a rare appearance at Wednesday night's school board meeting to object to a moratorium on school closures. Credit: Screenshot

The Oakland Unified School District board approved a resolution Wednesday night to provide more resources to the district's roughly 7,800 Black students—but without support from the two board directors who sponsored the original initiative.

The [Reparations for Black Students](#) resolution will create a task force to monitor Black students' academic performance, examine the learning gaps between Black students and others, fundraise for Black families who have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and provide anti-racism training to OUSD teachers and staff.

Most of the initiatives have been uncontroversial. But a single sentence in the original resolution—about postponing school closures—was opposed by OUSD Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell and Chris Learned, a state trustee who oversees the district's finances, who made an unprecedented appearance at Wednesday's school board meeting.

“I cannot support this resolution and that particular section because it's a budgetary thing and it really puts chains on the district's ability to right its ship,” Learned said. “Without the removal of that particular language, I will stay your approval.”

Learned is not involved in day-to-day decisions at OUSD, but has veto power over any policies or contracts that could, in his view, jeopardize the district's finances. He has never used that power, but came close during the 2019 teachers' strike, when he released a statement saying that the district [could not afford the 12% raises](#) that the Oakland Education Association was bargaining for (the district and union eventually [agreed on 11% raises](#)). Learned will remain in his position until Oakland Unified finishes paying off its state loan, which is expected to happen in 2026.

Supporters of the resolution, which was introduced Wednesday by District 3 Director VanCedric Williams and District 5 Director Mike Hutchinson, had hoped the board would approve it without any amendments or changes. But two votes to pass the resolution as-is failed. To supporters, the vote was viewed as an affront to the hundreds of Black families and students who have been organizing for two years to create the reparations policy.

“I am so insulted that you are doing this to our community,” Hutchinson said to Learned. “What you’re saying is, unless the district has the ability to close Black schools, they can’t manage their budget.”

District leaders have defended school closures as one way to address budget shortfalls and declining enrollment. With fewer schools, OUSD can spend less money on utilities, staffing, and other costs required to maintain school buildings.

The district has closed more than a dozen schools since 2004, but OUSD’s financial troubles still exist. During the 2022-2023 school year, the district is projected to have a deficit of \$58 million, Learned said.

Opponents of closures point to how disruptive closing a school can be for students and neighborhoods, and how closures disproportionately impact Black students. More than 55% of students at the four OUSD schools that closed in 2012 were Black. The Reparations for Black Students policy initially included a requirement that OUSD schools with Black populations higher than 30% be designated as historically Black and protected from any future closures.

“You can’t balance the budget on the backs of Black students. You can’t right-size the district on the backs of Black students,” said Kampala Taiz-Rancifer, one of the leaders of the campaign.

After having conversations with district staff and other board members over the past month about how to improve the policy, it became clear to the resolution’s sponsors that if an indefinite moratorium on closures were included in the proposal, even if limited to historically Black schools, it wouldn’t get support from all the board members. As a compromise, Williams and Hutchinson introduced a revised resolution Wednesday that would instead postpone any board votes on closures until June 2022. Learned and OUSD Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell still objected.

“As the superintendent, I cannot support language that prevents the district from making difficult decisions to ensure financial solvency,” she said at Wednesday’s board meeting.

Director Aimee Eng, who represents District 2, proposed removing mention of suspending school closures altogether and voting on the rest of the resolution. That was done and the amended resolution was approved, leaving supporters of a moratorium on school closures disappointed. Williams abstained and Hutchinson voted no, objecting to the change.

“Black families and Black parents have very eloquently told us, ‘We want our schools to be stabilized.’ What this board is potentially doing is saying, ‘So what? We still want to close your schools,’” said Pecolia Manigo, a community leader of the campaign. “We absolutely do not agree with closing schools in the middle of a pandemic.”

Community members are allowed to submit items to future board agendas, and toward the end of Wednesday’s meeting, Taiz-Rancifer requested that a previous version of the reparations resolution that Learned had not challenged be considered at a future meeting. Board president Shanthi Gonzales will decide whether and when it will be introduced.

“This is Oakland’s Black community—what’s left of us here—really trying to fight for our kids,” Taiz-Rancifer said. “This will not be the end. This will fuel our fire.”



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