



ALAMEDA COUNTY HEALTH CARE SERVICES AGENCY
PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENT

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September 20, 2011

Mr. David Montes de Oca, Executive Director
Quality Community School Development
Oakland Unified School District
4551 Steele Street
Oakland, CA 94619

RE: School Closures and Health Equity

Dear Mr. Montes de Oca,

We are writing in regards to the **School Portfolio Management Restructuring OUSD to Expand Quality and Release Resources Plan**. We appreciate Oakland Unified School District's efforts to make a thoughtful decision on this very difficult issue. We are writing because this decision will potentially impact individual and community health and we would like to ensure the impact on health inequities is considered as well as offer suggestions for how to incorporate a health equity perspective into the decision-making.

Education is essential for creating healthy people and healthy communities. We are striving for an Alameda County where all children – no matter where they live, the color of their skin, or how much money in their parents' bank accounts – have the same opportunity for a long, healthy life. Currently, there is a 15-year life expectancy gap between an African American from West Oakland and a White person from the Oakland Hills. This persistent health inequity is directly linked to inequities in access to essential social goods like education and employment.

Oakland Unified School District is a strong partner in working collectively to achieve the goal of health equity. We commend OUSD's vision of becoming a Full-Service Community District that serves the whole child, eliminates inequities, and offers high-quality, effective instruction for every student. We recognize the decision to close schools is perhaps the most difficult decision a school district faces. We acknowledge the budget situation OUSD is facing and that restructuring will open up funds to improve the district as a whole. We appreciate the decision-making process OUSD has laid out for the restructuring, which increases transparency and makes it easier to provide feedback into the process. While we understand OUSD is making school closure decisions with the intent of expanding quality and releasing resources, because of the link between education and health, **school closures could have unintended impacts on health of students and communities**. The main ways that school closures could lead to short- and long-term health consequences include:

1. **Student displacement** – Dislocation of students from their school community could lead to loss of student connections and support, possible bullying or victimization at new schools, and mental stress during and after the transition.
2. **Transportation burden** – Longer commute times for some students could cause stress and increase tardiness, absences, and truancy. Additional transportation costs could further burden families and necessitate health trade-offs (e.g., paying for food, housing, or healthcare).
3. **Safety** – Students forced to commute through unsafe or high-crime areas could face increased risk of traffic injuries or violence.
4. **Parent disengagement** – Levels of parent engagement could decline if parents have to travel long distances or have difficulty integrating into new schools, which has academic and health consequences for students.
5. **Loss of community anchors** – Since schools often serve as community anchors with deep neighborhood ties, their closure can be devastating for communities and lead to loss of access to resources (e.g., healthy breakfasts, after-school programs), services (e.g., health and social services), and supports. Additionally, if closed schools remain vacant, blight could occur. Finally, school closure could reduce property values and decrease neighborhood desirability for residence and investment, which harms community health.

We recognize that school closures will not necessarily lead to negative health consequences for students and communities. On the contrary, health benefits can occur at individual and community levels – if students are transitioned into higher-quality schools that do not require long commutes through unsafe areas or closed schools are converted into beneficial uses for the community, for example. **In order to support equitable and positive health outcomes, we are making four recommendations to be considered in school closure decision-making and implementation:**

1. **Health/health equity lens** – Since school closures have health impacts, a health/health equity lens should be applied to decision-making. This involves considering questions such as: 1) How might this school closure or these school closures impact student or neighborhood health? 2) Would school closures disproportionately impact subgroups of students or neighborhoods already suffering from poor health outcomes? 3) What neighborhoods are already facing an undue burden of negative social factors and how might the restructuring process be an opportunity to increase access to quality education and services for these neighborhoods?
 2. **Health and social criteria** – Given the various ways in which school closures are expected to impact student and neighborhood health, specific social and health-related criteria and indicators can be utilized in decision-making. With the Research, Assessment, and Data Unit and recently developed Healthy Kids, Healthy Oakland tool, OUSD is well positioned to consider criteria in its school closure decisions. Examples include assessing how school closures may interact with other social issues such as inequities in quality public transportation and access to services and resources and how this interaction may in turn impact health outcomes.
 3. **Student, parent, and community engagement** – The decision to close a school substantially impacts students, parents, and communities in many ways, including health. As such, they must be informed, engaged, and given opportunities to provide input throughout the process, from deciding which schools close to developing a transition plan. Hearing all voices and perspectives will be essential to making the best decision. As communities that face the most negative education and health outcomes are often the communities that also face barriers to participating in decision-making, it will be important to ensure there is outreach to these students, families, and communities.
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4. **Transition planning** – Given the stress and potential health impacts of school closures, we must underscore the importance of supporting students, families, and communities as they transition from closed schools. For example, efforts must be made to support dislocated students in dealing with stress of transition and ensuring they are well integrated into receiving schools. Families must be well-informed and supported in making the healthiest possible decisions for their children in terms of which school they choose to attend. Finally, communities where schools are closed will need to be supported so they remain connected to necessary resources and services and have healthy transition plans in place that transform closed school buildings into community assets rather than blight.

We recognize the complexity and difficulty of school closure decisions and are committed to working with OUSD to prevent and alleviate potential health impacts on students and communities. We also understand current state and local funding has greatly impacted OUSD and we are committed to highlighting the importance of education and the need for increased education funding. Please do not hesitate to contact me or the Community Assessment, Planning, Education, and Evaluation (CAPE) Unit Director Chuck McKetney (chuck.mcketney@acgov.org or 510-268-4150) to further discuss.

Sincerely,



Anita Siegel, RN, MPH
Director, Alameda County Public Health Department

cc: Tony Smith, Superintendent, Oakland Unified School District
Alice Spearman, Oakland Unified School District Board of Education
Christopher Dobbins, Oakland Unified School District Board of Education
David Kakishiba, Oakland Unified School District Board of Education
Gary Yee, Oakland Unified School District Board of Education
Jody London, Oakland Unified School District Board of Education
Jumoke Hinton Hodge, Oakland Unified School District Board of Education
Noel Gallo, Oakland Unified School District Board of Education
