



August 9, 2021

To: OUSD Board of Education Directors and OUSD Superintendent

Dear Benjamin "Sam" Davis, Aimee Eng, VanCedric Williams, Gary Yee, Mike Hutchinson, Shanthi Gonzales, Clifford Thompson, and Dr. Kyla Johnson-Trammell:

Oakland Unified School District appears to be on the verge of reopening its schools to full capacity, even though the best available data indicates that the spread of COVID-19 is quickening and expanding, particularly in several of the City’s most vulnerable neighborhoods. Because marginalized communities suffer compromised health even in the best of times, it appears inevitable that Oakland’s Black and brown youth and their families will disproportionately bear the brunt of new infections, and increased morbidity and mortality.

We write to pose some essential questions, the answers to which will reflect the degree to which elected leaders of the school board are willing and prepared to take the steps necessary to protect the well-being of some of the most vulnerable among us. Choices the school board makes with respect to COVID-19 cannot be divorced from the demands for equity that are sweeping the nation for the simple fact that health vulnerabilities of our communities of color can, in many instances, be traced back to and are deeply rooted in generations of unjust oppression, unequal access to opportunity, and undeniable neglect at the hands of both the public and private sectors.

To be sure, OUSD’s actions in the 2020-21 school year to quickly pivot to distance and then hybrid learning are to be commended. Swift action to suspend in-person instruction and equip students for distance learning surely saved lives, and courageously modeled for an entire nation principles of self-sacrifice and equity. But these important achievements risk being squandered.

First, an adequate plan for regular and targeted COVID-19 testing has yet to be implemented. “Recommended testing” at one of “10 OUSD locations” on a *voluntary* basis for symptomatic and exposed teachers, students and families, is wholly inadequate. That teachers are not *required* to undergo routine testing or demonstrate proof of vaccination despite spending hours indoors (especially) with unvaccinated children is unfathomable, particularly since the Delta viral strain is transmitted more easily

to and from children than the wild-type strain. This means our children are at an even greater risk of infection, and of then passing it to their households or other caregivers. Furthermore, it should alarm everyone that access to testing will be particularly challenging in communities most impacted by the virus – particularly areas of East and West Oakland that house the Bay Area’s essential workers, those whose health is already compromised, and those who may not be able to travel to these sites or miss work to be tested. *Given a lack of required or routine testing, what assurances do parents have that positive cases among teachers, staff, or students, will be identified and responded to in a timely fashion?*

Just as concerning is the seemingly limited capacity to undertake outbreak response and contact tracing. There is no question that the County’s need for contact tracing currently outstrips its ability to provide such tracing. This gap is widened by Alameda County Board of Supervisors’ recent approval of a “no cost” contract extension that will result in the loss of critical community-based contact tracing teams. Each day, new COVID cases are discovered and reported, but there is little evidence that the school district has, or will soon have, the infrastructure to identify and notify persons who came into contact with someone infected in a timely fashion. *What assurances can OUSD provide that outbreak investigation and contact tracing programs can meet demand, and that persons are being told timely that they have been in close proximity to infected individuals and properly instructed on steps they must take to protect themselves and others? What is the isolation and quarantine policy for symptomatic students, staff and teachers? What is the testing and isolation plan for students who become symptomatic at school? And what is the learning plan for children who need to isolate at home?*

The more transmissible Delta variant is infecting younger populations. The need for routine testing, outbreak investigation, and contact tracing will increase dramatically following school reopening, particularly with no physical distancing requirements in classrooms and hallways, especially given the more transmissible Delta variant. *What indicators did OUSD assess to arrive at the conclusion that we are ready for such reopening? What peer-reviewed data suggests that distancing is not needed in a school setting, particularly in light of the Delta strain?*

*How will distancing, testing and masking guidelines be reviewed and updated? How many epidemiologists are now working to analyze COVID-19 data for the district and what information does OUSD prioritize for collecting and reporting? What has the district found to date with respect to the rate of spread of the virus and the areas and populations most affected by the virus? What were the results of outbreaks in the 2020-21 school year, how were they identified, and what was the response? What is the plan for indoor classroom set up and mitigation strategies to decrease the risk of transmission? Which OUSD classrooms have HVAC systems, and which will rely upon opening classroom windows and doors and/or portable filtration units? What is the plan for lunch periods - will lunches be held indoors or outdoors and will they be staggered? What will be done differently on days of poor air quality or inclement weather?*

These are some of the questions that need to be asked and answered if OUSD is going to inform itself and the public about whether the district is taking basic, evidence-based steps to address a deadly disease that disproportionately infects people of color and disproportionately kills Black people.

Finally, there may be powerful reasons why a reopening of the schools at full capacity promotes overall well-being and outweighs the health risks posed by the coronavirus. It is conceivable that public health professionals, employing the tools in which they are trained, can make that case. But such a case depends upon collecting, analyzing and making publicly available for review and discussion the data and

modeling in support of that case. Only when this is done, can the public - the individuals, organizations, businesses, agencies and elected officials that rely upon the expertise of public health professionals - adequately assess their options and make decisions appropriate to their needs and consistent with their appetite for risk. If Oakland parents and students must choose between at-home/distance learning and exposure to a serious illness that could prove fatal to themselves or loved ones, then they should be provided information about the relative risks of their options so that they can debate and shape the types and timing of trade-offs being asked of them during this ordeal.

**At a minimum we insist that the school board require:**

- symptomatic students, staff and teachers isolate and test negative before presenting to any school site
- every school site have supplies and staff for onsite COVID-19 testing
- all unvaccinated teachers and staff undergo at least weekly mandatory testing
- all unvaccinated teachers and staff wear N95 masks at all times
- the following data points be included on the OUSD Dashboard:
  - ventilation strategy being utilized *at each school site*
  - distancing guideline(s) being observed *at each school site* for each common area (classrooms, hallways, multi-use rooms)
  - percentage of vaccinated teachers and staff *at each school site*
  - notification of each COVID-19 outbreak with number of student and teacher/staff cases

As community leaders and physicians we stand ready to serve as not only accountability partners, but as a resource to help ensure the health and well-being of our dedicated teachers and school staff, and the safety of our children. Please do not hesitate to reach out to us for additional information or if we can be of assistance. We look forward to hearing from you.

Respectfully Submitted,

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Donald Frasier, Executive Director, Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency™

Pastor Michael McBride, National Director, LIVE FREE Project

Carolyn (CJ) Johnson, CEO, Black Cultural Zone Community Development Corporation

Candice Elder, Founder and Executive Director, East Oakland Collective

Tanya Dennis, Oakland Frontline Healers Coalition

CC: Alameda County Superintendent of Schools, L. K. Monroe; County Administrator Susan Muranishi; Health Care Services Agency Director Colleen Chawla; Alameda County Public Health Officer, Nicholas Moss, MD; Alameda County Public Health Director Kimi Watkins-Tartt; Alameda County Board of Supervisors; Mayor Libby Schaff; Oakland City Council Members