

The Oakland Unified School District has slated seven schools for closure while four others will either merge or be downsized. The district said it's closing schools due to declining enrollment and funding. The plans ignited community unrest among teachers, parents and students, who are pleading to keep the schools open.

While the closures will have repercussions for parents and school employees, the ones who bear most of the brunt are the students, who are overwhelmingly Black and brown. [The ACLU has filed a complaint with to the state Department of Justice](#), alleging racial discrimination toward Black students. At four closing schools, over half of their student population is Black, while less than 25% of the district's overall student population is Black.

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Despite public pressure, the school board has held its ground and plans to proceed with the ~~its~~ closures. Although [the original number of closures was reduced, amid public outcry](#).

Two schools will be closed at the end of this school year: Community Day School and Parker K-8. The schools to be closed next year are Carl Munck Elementary, Korematsu Discovery Academy, Grass Valley Elementary, Brookfield Elementary and Horace Mann Elementary.

La Escuelita, and Hillcrest K-8 will be downsized; while Rise Community Elementary and New Highland Academy will merge.

Interviews with community members laid bare the costs of the shutdowns, particularly on students.

Community Day is an alternative program for expelled students. It's the only school of its kind within 20 miles, said Elisabeth Barnett, a math teacher there.

Barnett said she came to Community Day because she gets to provide an ideal education, in an intimate environment, where very small class sizes allow students to get the special attention they need. Community Day had an enrollment of about 20 students, as of mid-March, fluctuating based on the number of expulsions occurring in OUSD.

The student body and faculty are small enough to foster a sense of community, she said. Students even form bonds with teachers they don't have, enabling them to get the education and development they need.

Like students at most of the other affected schools, students at Community Day come from lower income households. The majority of affected schools have a population of at least 80% socioeconomically disadvantaged students. The only two exceptions are Hillcrest, which has about 9%, and Munck at 67%.

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"We have ninth and 10th graders who read maybe at a second- or third grade level, so that tells you right there, maybe they haven't been getting support since the second or third grade," Barnett said. "Oftentimes, this is their last chance at school in more than one way. ... It's also probably the first time they've gotten really close personalized academic support."

A viable alternative isn't available for Community Day students once their school shuts down, said Barnett. The next campus of its kind is in Hayward, a significantly longer commute especially if relying on public transportation. Another option would be to enroll in an independent study program, in which students would be assigned packets to work at home, as opposed to being in a class.

The threat of school closures in OUSD isn't new, Barnett said, and it's perpetuated a cycle of students being displaced and their education hindered as a result.

"It reinforces the sense of abandonment and loss," she said, "and then they're expected to go to this new place and be able to focus, learn and build belonging. And it's not there."

Barnett questions the decision to close a school she said only costs \$740,000 a year to keep open. Enrollment (which correlates with funding) at Community Day is starting to pick up again after a recent return to in-person classes, something that the school board has ignored, she said.

While declining enrollment has been a chief justification for these closures, enrollment has ticked up slightly in a couple of schools.

Hillcrest had 394 students in the 2020-2021 school year compared to 377 in the 2016-2017 school year. La Escuelita experienced declining enrollment between 2017 and 2019, but in the 2020-2021 school year, enrollment was at 408, compared to 2016-2017's school year of 404.

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The district said it spends more on teacher salaries than most other large districts in the state, but the average teacher salary is still the lowest. This is due to an oversaturation of small schools, according to a press release provided by John Sasaki, a spokesperson for OUSD. The abundance of small schools also means there's insufficient staffing, according to the district.

In a separate statement, the district said it has been told by the state to close schools to improve its finances, and that it's also been told by Alameda County that previous closures have helped improve its financial standing.

"OUSD is investing some of its newly available funding to better support students, prioritizing Black students in many areas," the statement said. "The District has been, and continues to be, focused on addressing inequities that exist in student outcomes, and must make ongoing funding adjustments to do so."

Linda Selph, a speech-language pathologist at Horace Mann Elementary, said children undergoing speech therapy who are affected by the closures can still receive their services at another OUSD school. But it's not that simple.

"I've built relationships with these kids and these families for years," she said. "There's a level of trust developed, and for some of our students who have a significant trauma background, that's not a small thing, right? And so, to just plop them down somewhere else and think everything is going to be OK is short sighted at best."

Speech-language pathology is crucial, she said, so children can socialize with their peers and get the most out of their education. Selph and her clients already experienced barriers in the pandemic such as faulty internet connections during remote learning. A return to in-person still wasn't perfect, as masks covering the mouth obfuscate the therapeutic process.

Children with communicative disorders make up a larger population of disabled students at the affected schools and throughout the district. Nearly a quarter of Brookfield Village's student population is disabled, while a third of Grass Valley students are disabled. Six other affected schools have at least 10% disabled students out of their overall population.

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Selph said she's experienced closures at other schools, and said budgetary issues weren't resolved, despite the justification from OUSD.

"We haven't seen it really improve student outcomes," she said. "The way that this happened was so horrible, frankly. I mean, there was no community engagement. There was no listening to any of these families."

The closures, community members told this reporter, aren't just harmful for students but make no financial sense either. Hillcrest efficiently raises funds for itself, said Geraldina Lionetti, a parent whose two children attend the school. As much as "\$300,000 a year or more" is raised, she said.

Along with the plentiful funding, Hillcrest is a top performing school, she said, so there's no logic behind Hillcrest being downsized by losing its sixth through eighth grades.

"Why are you trying to take something away that does well for our students?" Lionetti asked, directing her question at OUSD. "I think most people are really just thinking of leaving the district at this point because we just have no faith."

Lionetti's eldest child, Sophia, 10, will be starting fifth grade in the coming school year. She realizes she'll have to make new friends at another middle school. Plus, she'll have to travel further to her new school. Like her mother, she was in disbelief over the district's decision.

"I was really shocked. I didn't really know if it was real. I thought it was going to be OK," Sophia said. "But then ... I noticed that it wasn't going to be there for just a little bit and then go away. It's a big problem. I don't know if it can be fixed."

While Sophia may be more immediately affected by the removal of Hillcrest's middle school, her younger sister, Chiara, 7, is also saddened by the downsize.

"I feel sad because I worry about my sister and me. I don't want my sister to leave my school," said Chiara. "I'm scared for her to go to a different school and I'm scared for myself too because I don't want to leave all my friends."

A recurring grievance from community members was the disruption the closures would bring. Angelina, 10 years- old, moved from San Francisco to Oakland a year ago. It was difficult to find a school that could admit her, said her mother, Maria Castillo, who now has to look yet again for another school. The process was challenging the first time, and even more difficult now with the closures, Maria Castillo said, so the new commute would have to be longer.

Castillo said she has another daughter to drop off at another school, further complicating her commute. She has a car but pointed out that there are parents and children who rely on public transportation.

"I felt really sad because I'm going to lose my friends. And I got attached to them," Angelina said. "Sometimes I just get really sad and start crying."