Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammel
Oakland Unified School District
1000 Broadway, Ste. 300
Oakland, CA 94607

November 13, 2019

Dear Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammel, School Board Director James Harris, President Jody London, Director Aimee Eng, Director Jumoke Hinton-Hodge, Director Gary Yee, Director Roseann Torres, and Director Shanthi Gonzales:

We, the undersigned educators of Elmhurst United, have been closely following the events unfolding in our district regarding the closures and mergers of schools as part of the Blueprint process. We have observed on multiple occasions that OUSD is using the optics of our success in order to promote a narrative that is both incomplete and false. We are writing to make clear that we vehemently reject that Elmhurst United be used as an exemplar to justify these plans which will decimate community schools across the city of Oakland. The success of our new school is due exclusively to the hard work and emotional labor of our educators, parents, and site leadership, as well as the context of our particular school sites. We are writing to testify to the trauma, misinformation, lack of support, and challenges our school community has faced over the past two years as evidence that the Blueprint Plan to close and merge schools in Cohorts 2 and 3 should not proceed at this time.

The families and students impacted and destabilized by the Blueprint process are disproportionately students of color from the flatlands of Oakland (Elmhurst, Alliance, Frick, SOL, Roots, Sankofa). Elmhurst United is a middle school in Deep East Oakland serving Black, Raza, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Yemeni students, nearly 100% of whom qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch. Our school community was forced not only to accept the closure and merger of Elmhurst Community Prep and Alliance Academy into one school, but also to welcome displaced students of the now closed Roots International Academy. Children are at the center of our work and we welcome all of these brilliant young people of East Oakland with open arms; however, it's important to recognize that school closures have long-lasting and devastating impacts on children and adults alike.

There was no meaningful community engagement around the process, nor was there any evidence presented that money would be saved as a result. On May 21, 2018, staff was told about the decision to merge our schools as part of Cohort 1 of the Blueprint process. This was a decision made by district officials with little knowledge of our schools' histories, cultures, and needs. Soon after, the district called one cursory meeting for the community, giving only two days notice to our working families, and it was poorly attended. From the superintendent's own statements at these meetings it was clear to us that all of the school board members had made up their minds before the vote was called in June.

The case that we need to close schools to resolve the district's financial situation is flimsy at best. The district claims to be in financial crisis and forces the students and teachers of Oakland to upend their lives and make massive sacrifices to resolve this problem, yet was any money saved by merging and closing our schools? This question has never been answered. It was not a surprise to us when the February 2019 Fact Finding report revealed that "potential savings from attempted school closures are offset by implementation costs and a loss of enrollment primarily to charter schools." As we created a new school there were added costs of hiring movers (which our leadership had to push for on our behalf), rekeying the buildings, repainting, rebranding and designing new uniforms which OUSD did not plan for. Our site had to cover the cost of purchasing uniforms for our new school out of our own site budget, which was between $10,000-$20,000. The arts integration work carried out by Alliance teachers was not incorporated into the new school, which translated to tens of thousands of dollars of grant money invested in professional development squandered. Where are the savings?

If the "merger" at Elmhurst United is indeed a success, that is no thanks to the district. Contrary to what was promised by district officials, support from the district was weak and inconsistent at best. In her newsletter dated 9.17.19, Superintendent Johnson Trammel wrote, *"I take hope in witnessing first hand the positive changes that are happening as a result of the Blueprint process last year (Cohort 1). Elmhurst United Middle School (the product of a school merger between Elmhurst and Alliance) is brimming with students and offering more robust elective courses."* This statement erases the extra labor staff at all levels took on to make this happen, since the district was largely absent. Despite requests for support, Superintendent Johnson-Trammel and Director James Harris never came to support or check in on the process. Staff on the Vision Team met every Thursday for two hours to design the new school, yet we only saw district staff approximately 5 times the entire year. This lack of district support was coupled with the impossible timeline of trying to close two schools with dignity and open another one twice as large with some semblance of functionality. It was difficult to coordinate across sites because we had different schedules, and the team had to work over the summer and during preps in order to complete the work. The principal of Alliance left abruptly at the start of the planning year which caused additional strain on that school. In the end, we created a workable plan, but this was not because of the District.

Merging multiple school communities on a campus twice the size continues to be difficult. We are currently trying to build one cohesive school culture with students from Alliance, Elmhurst Community Prep, Roots, and now EPIC charter school. Even with all the time and resources dedicated to planning prior to opening the doors, the real work began on the first day of school in August 2019. We are still currently working to build community, learn new systems, revise structures, and process all the changes with our students. This has been an extra burden that has made teaching more difficult and our relationships with students and each other have suffered. Our students and staff have experienced a loss of school pride and community.

With all of these difficulties, we also recognize that our site had many advantages over Cohorts 2 and 3. We retained many of our teachers and our principal has been on site for over a decade, whereas some Cohort 2 schools have new leadership and higher turnover. We began our design process in summer 2018, giving us a full year to prepare, while Cohort 2 schools have much less than one year. Elmhurst and Alliance already shared a campus, many facilities, and an after school program; meanwhile, all of the Cohort 2 schools are on separate campuses.

For all of these reasons, we firmly believe that OUSD does not have the track record to proceed with closures and mergers at Frick, SOL, Kaiser, Sankofa, and the yet undisclosed schools of Cohort 3. We were promised financial and structural supports that were never delivered; those that were delivered were so meager or so late as to be downright disrespectful. While dealing with the intense emotions of mourning that come with losing a school and the stress of crafting the process without a literal blueprint, we had to fight to keep our enrollment up, to reassure our families, and proactively recruit students from surrounding elementary schools. Perhaps this is why enrollment was projected far below where it actually stands today, and now the district doesn't hesitate to claim credit for the fact that our school is "brimming with students."

The Blueprint process pits our communities against each other while paving the way for charter schools and privatization. At Elmhurst United, we are doing our best to heal from the disappointment and sense of loss that we have inherited from these disastrous policies, and we are making the most of the merger because it is our duty, as it is the school district's, to serve young people as best we can.

Sincerely,
Bianca Shiu, 8th Grade teacher, OEA
Shula Bien, ELD teacher, OEA
Nico Pemantle, Guidance Counselor, OEA
Julia Cheng, 7th Grade teacher, OEA
Mara Flores Schustack, 7th Grade teacher, OEA
Kiara Herrera, 6th Grade teacher, OEA
Alia Ghabra, 6th Grade teacher, OEA
Darielle Vigay, 7th Grade teacher, OEA
Shayda Zarafshar, 8th Grade teacher, OEA
Eli Kirshbaum, 8th Grade teacher, OEA
Alexandra Ryan-Gutentag, SDC teacher, OEA
Marisa Mills, Newcomer teacher, OEA
Alyssa Pandolfi, 7th Grade teacher, OEA
Ida Barnett, 8th Grade teacher, OEA
Bao-Quyen Tran, 8th Grade teacher, OEA
Estefania Rodriguez, 8th Grade teacher, OEA
Kia Walton, 6th Grade teacher, OEA
Anais Gilder, 7th Grade teacher, OEA

Alyssa Baldocchi, Newcomer teacher, OEA
Mariko White, TSA, OEA
Anthony Turner, TSA, OEA
Chloe Rutter-Jensen, Spanish teacher, OEA