

Call to Protect Students with Disabilities by Rescinding School Closures

OUSD Community Advisory Committee for Special Education

2/14/22

The school closures that the OUSD School Board approved on February 8, 2022 are vivid examples of institutional ableism, racism, and the intersection of both within our district. Those closures will have a disproportionate and devastating impact on Black students and disabled students of color, particularly those with moderate to extensive support needs.

Several of the schools slated for closure are among the ones with the highest number of disabled students with Special Day classroom (SDC) placements; especially Black disabled students. These few inadequately funded schools have for many years provided a valuable and necessary experience of stability, continuity, and belonging for students assigned to SDCs.

Lack of Concern and Negligent Treatment for Disabled Students

The School Board has, again, not taken the time to understand why SDCs, Black disabled students, and other disabled students of color are concentrated within these schools. Their experiences have not figured at all within the board's deliberations. The School Board has not shown that it understands that many of the schools slated for closure have served as models of disability access, integration and inclusion, working against the built-in disincentives our district has created that discourage schools from supporting students served through SDCs. These schools have demonstrated a sustained commitment to students systematically excluded from other schools. The service that these schools are providing is an asset for these students and their families, and for our district as a whole.

Our School Board leaders must consider the enduring and protective function of these schools for these vulnerable students. To do so, they must put an immediate stop to the planned closures. OUSD must work to prevent irreversible districtwide damage to disabled students. These students are just beginning to recover from the disparate impact of distance learning and the pandemic on them and their families. Because many of the children at these schools have developmental disabilities and complex needs, stability and continuity is of special importance to their well-being, especially during the pandemic.

Harmful Consequences and Risks

It is terrifying and challenging for parents and caregivers to find appropriate SDC placements for students; placements that successfully integrate students within school routines and experiences. OUSD, by its own admission, does not have the resources to manage all of these SDC transitions, especially within schools that have not previously experienced a density of Special Education programs and are unprepared to support the specific disability needs of incoming students.

Parents and caregivers will address the resulting chaos with a multitude of frustrated interactions, IEP meetings, complaints, and expensive lawsuits. For those students who do not have parent advocates, the chaos will fall on teachers and other staff to manage.

The risk that Special Education teachers will choose not to move to their “Welcoming School” is very real. Some will leave, taking with them invaluable institutional knowledge and talent. This will further exacerbate our extremely low retention rate for Special Education teachers.

Because the School Board chose to postpone, rather than rescind the closure of these Special Education focal schools, the disruption to programs, students, and schools is underway. Families are already reacting to the uncertainty that the planned closures have created. They are unsure about the availability of placements at closing schools, where those placements would end up once they close, or what will be available at other schools.

All of this disruption will prove very costly, not only to the students and their families, but to our district as a whole.

The members and community of the CAC for Special Education call on the leaders of the School Board, County, and State to immediately rescind the planned closure of schools in OUSD to prevent irreparable damage to disabled students, Black students, and other students of color. In doing so, they will protect school communities with a demonstrated history of embracing and supporting the most vulnerable of disabled students in OUSD.

Recognizing that these school communities are assets for disabled students and our district, OUSD must instead gather the families and staff from the schools that currently have the most SDC classrooms and students so that they can:

- name what they need at their school sites to continue to support disabled students, students of color, and disabled students of color in their schools within a vision for disability inclusion**
- help OUSD define how it will provide a stable and supportive school experience to these students districtwide and how OUSD will become a model of disability justice in education.**

To: OUSD School Board Directors, Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell, Alameda County Superintendent L. Karen Monroe, Alameda County Board of Education Trustees, Oakland City Council Officials, California State Superintendent Tony Thurmond, Governor Gavin Newsom

CC: CAC Members, Sondra Aguilera, Raquel Jimenez, Cintya Molina, Melisha Linzie