

Oakland Site Visit: Models of College Access & Digital Connectivity

Recognizing the success of innovative college access and digital connectivity efforts developed and implemented in Oakland, CA under Mayor Libby Schaaf, the NewDEAL Forum convened a delegation of state and local leaders from across the county, along with our partners at [All4Ed](#), to examine the key lessons of those initiatives. Participants met in August, 2022 with members of the Schaaf administration, the Oakland Unified School District, leaders of organizations implementing the work, and students to examine the success of: [Oakland Promise's](#) cradle to career education work, including college savings accounts, scholarships, and mentorship opportunities, as well as #OaklandUndivided, which is connecting children and families to high-speed internet connections and devices.

At a moment when unprecedented federal resources are flowing to communities to invest in education, broadband, and infrastructure, there is a unique opportunity for communities across the country to benefit from successful models. In this context, the delegation explored two fundamental questions: **why are Oakland's initiatives working and is it practical to export them across the nation?**

On the second question, the answer is undoubtedly yes. This briefing reviews the delegation's findings about the programs, including insights into how state and local policymakers can use them as models for other communities.

Oakland Promise

Overview and Results

Oakland Promise (OP) provides cradle to college and career support with the goal of providing every student with the financial resources, educational programming, mentorship, and a supportive community to help them thrive in higher education and the career of their choosing. In 2022, Vice President Kamala Harris, Mayor Schaaf, and Superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell, in partnership with Oakland Promise co-founder David Silver, former OP CEO Mia Bonta, and current Oakland Promise CEO Sandra Ernst [announced](#) that **within 4 years, every income-eligible Oakland public school student will receive \$1,000/year while pursuing a degree and every eligible baby will receive \$500 in a college savings account through 2035**. The Future Center at Oakland High School – visited by the delegation – assists students with college and career research, college and scholarship applications, and financial aid planning.

- OP has put more students on track to succeed in college, handing out 30,000 early college scholarships since 2016, with more than \$17 million in scholarships and persistence support, and 1,300 students paired with mentors. Encouragingly, **88% of participants in the first cohort have persisted to a second year of college**.
- The delegation noted the important goal of the programs to not only provide resources to students, but explicitly strive to **shift mindsets among students and their families and create a college-career focused culture**.
- Another notable example was the **effective use of the Mayor's convening power to bring together various government agencies, community organizations, and private partners**. Driven by a shared mission, the group was able to coordinate efforts and generate financial support.
- Oakland Promise was recently named an implementation partner of Measure AA, a local parcel tax that voters passed in 2018 to invest **\$11.5M per year (for the next five years) in early childhood education and college access for students from low-income backgrounds**.

Recommendations and Takeaways

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Push boundaries and set audacious goals. Mayor Schaaf established an ambitious goal to triple the number of Oakland students who graduate from college within a decade through investing in system level changes to support Oakland students with a series of interrelated programs from cradle to career and to open doors to educational and economic opportunity for students up and down the economic ladder. Mayor Schaaf pushed boundaries by creating a mayoral Education Team, led by Director of Education David Silver and Deputy Director Kyra Mungia, to address an issue on which the Mayor's office does not have any formal jurisdiction.

- Prior to the inception of OP, **fewer than 500 Oakland public school 12th graders graduated from a 2 or 4-year college within 6 years of high school graduation** each year.
 - Mayor Schaaf emphasized the importance of **building meaningful relationships** and how to use the convening power of her office to unify existing programs into a single comprehensive effort.
 - The city worked with a team of researchers and auditors to **develop their impact goals and anticipated financial need**.
 - The Mayor shared that investors were **motivated by big bets rather than smaller fixes on the margins**.
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Start small and then leverage and grow those investments for bigger impact. Oakland has done an amazing job of scaling Oakland Promise and other related programs from an initial \$160,000 investment in a director of education to a \$3 million pilot (funded with \$1 million of city funds and \$2 million from philanthropic sources) to a \$125 million public-private partnership (which that has the potential to unlock \$3 billion in public resources). Public-private partnerships are key to the success of this program, as government often moves slowly and is more risk averse.

- It is important to leverage private funding to prove concepts and bring back to policymakers to approve additional funding in their budgets. Oakland Promise received over **\$70 million from philanthropies**.
 - Oakland Promise followed this money and **won over the support of Oakland City Council** which has approved **\$2.2 million in funding and the Oakland Unified School District** which has provided an additional **\$2 million to the program**. Related programs include:
 - [Teachers Rooted in Oakland](#) – which aims to increase the recruitment and retention of teachers – especially Black, Latine, and other teachers by addressing housing affordability (\$5 million in public funding, \$3.55 million philanthropic) led by founding Executive Director Kyra Mungia
 - [AssistHub](#) - personalized services to help students and families access public benefits (\$2.5 million in public funding, \$1 million philanthropic)
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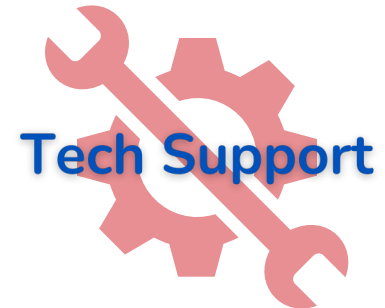
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Effective college and career counseling has a high return on investment. Students spoke to the delegation about the Future Center, which provides support and guidance to help navigate the college application and financial aid process. Several students also discussed their [dual-enrollment and concurrent enrollment programs](#) where they earn college credit.

- All4Ed emphasized that this is the best type of intervention to boost college competition; **students become 3x more likely to earn a degree**.
- Oakland Promise launched Future Centers to provide **school-based advising in middle and high school to support college and career planning**.

Overview and Results

#OaklandUndivided is a collective impact movement led by the Mayor's Office in partnership with Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), the City of Oakland, Tech Exchange, and the Oakland Public Education Fund, along with 20 other leadership partners to meet their goal of closing the digital divide for good. Co-founded by David Silver and led by #OU Director Patrick Messac, in partnership with #OU Deputy Director Townes-Bouchard-Dean and Community Engagement Director Cinthia Diaz from the Oakland Mayor's office, #OaklandUndivided has been guided by three priorities:



In 2022, the Mayor and Superintendent [announced](#) that for the third straight year, they will continue to ensure that **all 50,000 Oakland public school students have home access to a computer, internet connection, and technology support**. Additionally, #OaklandUndivided (#OU) is expanding cradle-to-career to also provide digital access to preschool and college students and announced a **bold new goal to connect 90% of the city's 37,000 unconnected residents within 5 years**. So far, #OU has delivered **35,000 computers, provided 15,000 hotspots and responded to 18,000 tech support requests, increasing home access to a computer, internet and tech support for students from low-income backgrounds from 12% pre-pandemic to 98% at the end of the 2020-21 school year**.

The digital divide is a complex, structural inequity that necessitates a multifaceted, cross-sector approach that includes leveraging public dollars (e.g. Emergency Connectivity Fund, Affordable Connectivity Program), investing in open-access infrastructure in unconnected communities, eliminating adoption barriers by providing free connectivity, and working alongside trusted messengers to connect residents to these benefits.

Recommendations and Takeaways



React Fast then Respond with Systems Change. Address immediate issues to get students connected and also work to build a sustainable program to improve systems that promote access and affordability of high-quality broadband to ensure they work better in the long term. Improve access in the short term by partnering with private sector groups to provide wifi hotspots and other devices.

- Identify unserved and underserved communities and build out new networks and infrastructure and establish sustainable affordability solutions through the [Affordable Connectivity Program](#), [Emergency Connectivity Fund](#), and [Free Apartment Wi-Fi](#).



Collect Actionable Data and Partner with Trusted Messengers. The Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), a trusted community anchor institution, launched a coordinated response that leverages public funds. **OUSD institutionalized a home digital needs assessment in back to school forms assessing connectivity for over 33,000 students at the start of the school year.** OUSD continuously improves its [tech survey](#) in response to parent feedback and ways to operationalize the results. #OU identified the following best practices:

- **Short and binary responses** were key to receiving completed surveys. Questions with multiple answer choices were frequently overlooked or answered inaccurately.
- **Fewer demographic questions.** Many families reported feeling these questions were invasive, even when questions were optional. A benefit of working with the school district is that a lot of this aggregate data can be generated on the back end.
- **Home owned computer.** OUSD computers are school-loaned, and #OU believes every family should own at least one computer. #OU uses philanthropic dollars to meet the need identified by this question.
- **Internet access and speed.** It's not enough to ask families, "Do you have access to the internet?" Many will answer yes when they can access Google on their cell phones. Ask how families get their internet as a proxy for the quality of the connection and ask a speed questions to prioritize ACP outreach.

#OaklandUndivided also identified trusted messengers as essential to help residents access available services. Non-profit community organizations, such as [EducationSuperHighway](#), Homies Empowerment, Bay Area Parent Leadership Action Network, TechExchange, Unity Council, among others, play a key role in **meeting the community where they are with flexible locations and times and in appropriate languages.** These partners also help with the more involved enrollment processes for the **federal Affordable Connectivity Program, funded by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill.**

It's also key to **wire apartment buildings or hotels that serve unconnected populations.** With the support of #OaklandUndivided, EducationSuperHighway, has been able to support the deployment of Wi-Fi networks that provide free, reliable, fast internet to the residents in 10 buildings that fall within highly unconnected Oakland neighborhoods. **The initiative involves installing and maintaining a single WiFi network for the entire building, similarly to a hotel, at a low monthly cost for the landlord and no cost to the residents.**

We encourage Leaders to use the resources provided here to help connect students and families in their communities:

- Review the report from our Broadband Task Force, "[Bridging the Digital Divide.](#)"
- Read the [East Bay Times op-ed](#) by NewDEAL CEO Debbie Cox Bultan & NewDEALer AL House Minority Leader Anthony Daniels
- View the [slide deck](#) provided by the City of Oakland.
- Contact [Sandra Ernest](#), OP CEO, [David Silver](#), co-founder of OP and #OU; Mayor Schaaf's Director of Education, or [Patrick Messac](#) Project DirectorManager, #OU for more information.
- If interested in working on related education projects, connect with [Jenn Ellis](#) at All4Ed
- Review the media coverage of our visit from [KTVU FOX 2](#) and [KCBS Radio.](#)