



Chief Strategy Officer
Oakland Promise
Oakland, California

THE SEARCH

Oakland Promise seeks an inaugural Chief Strategy Officer (CSO) to help lead the organization through a pivotal period of growth, complexity, and opportunity.

Founded in 2016 through a partnership among the City of Oakland, Oakland Unified School District, and East Bay College Fund, Oakland Promise was created to address persistent inequities in educational attainment and economic mobility and to expand opportunities for Oakland children and families from birth through college and career.

Over the past decade, Oakland Promise has grown from an ambitious college access initiative into one of the nation's most innovative and comprehensive cradle-to-college-and-career organizations. Today, the organization supports students and families through college savings accounts, scholarships, college access and completion programs, workforce development initiatives, and community partnerships. At the same time, Oakland Promise has assumed an increasingly important role as a grantmaker, convener, implementation partner, and steward of public and philanthropic investment.

As Oakland Promise enters its second decade, the organization is operating at a new level of scale and complexity. Through its role as the College Access Implementation Partner for the Oakland Children's Initiative and its growing portfolio of partnerships and investments, the organization's impact increasingly depends not only on the programs it delivers directly, but also on its ability to support collective action across a broader ecosystem of schools, nonprofits, funders, government agencies, and community stakeholders.

To meet this moment, Oakland Promise is investing in its leadership capacity by creating two inaugural executive positions: Chief Strategy Officer and Chief Operating Officer. Together, these leaders will help strengthen organizational capacity, build the leadership infrastructure and performance systems necessary to drive execution and accountability, and position Oakland Promise for its next decade of growth, impact, and influence.

Reporting directly to CEO Sandra Ernst, the CSO will serve as a key member of the executive team, helping to guide and advance strategic initiatives across Oakland Promise's programs, partnerships, and grantmaking efforts. This is an exceptional opportunity for a visionary, execution-oriented leader to help shape the future of one of Oakland's most ambitious and influential organizations dedicated to expanding educational opportunities and economic mobility for children, youth, and families.

ABOUT OAKLAND PROMISE

Oakland Promise emerged from a bold civic vision: that every child in Oakland, regardless of circumstance, should have access to the resources and supports needed to thrive from birth through college, career, and beyond.

Recognizing that educational attainment is among the strongest predictors of economic mobility, community leaders came together to build an organization that would combine direct support for students and families with broader investments designed to expand opportunity and improve outcomes across Oakland.

This work was supported through both public and private investment. Alongside significant philanthropic fundraising efforts, community leaders secured voter approval of Measure AA, establishing a long-term source of public funding for Oakland children and families and laying the groundwork for future community-wide initiatives.

As the organization's ambitions, assets, and responsibilities grew, leaders recognized the opportunity to establish a stronger and more sustainable independent institution.

That opportunity culminated in the 2019 merger between Oakland Promise and East Bay College Fund. The merger combined Oakland Promise's citywide cradle-to-career approach with East Bay College Fund's longstanding expertise in college access, persistence, mentoring, and scholarship support, creating a single organization capable of supporting students across the educational continuum. Widely regarded as a mission-driven success, the merger reflected a shared commitment to community impact rather than organizational identity. The result was a stronger organization, uniquely positioned to support Oakland students at every stage of their educational journey.

Today, Oakland Promise's mission is to mobilize Oakland to expand opportunity and economic mobility through cradle-to-college and career achievement. By 2030, the organization aims to place 50,000 Oakland youth on the path to postsecondary attainment.

OAKLAND PROMISE TODAY

Through programs including [Brilliant Baby](#), [Kindergarten to 12th Grade](#), [College Access](#), [College Completion](#), [career readiness initiatives](#), scholarships, and family supports, Oakland Promise serves thousands of students and families each year. Its work spans early childhood through workforce development and engages a broad range of public, nonprofit, educational, and philanthropic partners.

Since its founding, Oakland Promise has enrolled more than 4,000 babies in college savings accounts, invested nearly \$10 million in citywide initiatives, and supported thousands of Oakland students on pathways to college and career success. In FY25 alone, Oakland Promise enrolled more than 1,000 babies in Brilliant Baby, reached more than 14,000 students and caregivers through programs and partnerships, and awarded more than \$5 million in scholarships to 1,436 Oakland public high school seniors pursuing postsecondary education.

Over the past several years, the organization's role and responsibilities have expanded considerably. A particularly important milestone came in 2022, when Oakland Promise was selected as the College Access Implementation Partner for the [Oakland Children's Initiative](#) (OCI), a public-private partnership that invests in programs and services designed to improve outcomes for Oakland children and families.

As the College Access Implementation Partner, Oakland Promise oversees investments to support postsecondary access and success, manages partnerships and contracts, and coordinates the efforts of a broad network of community-based organizations. In FY25 alone, the organization regranted approximately \$4 million to 35 community organizations.

Today, Oakland Promise's impact extends far beyond the programs it operates directly.

In addition to serving students and families, the organization increasingly works through partnerships, investments, and community collaborations to advance educational opportunity and economic mobility across Oakland.

As a result, Oakland Promise now operates in multiple capacities. Today, it is:

- A direct service provider;
- A scholarship and college success organization;
- A grant-maker and re-granter;
- A convener;
- A steward of public investment;
- An implementation partner; and
- Increasingly, a backbone organization helping align efforts across a broader ecosystem.

This evolution has created extraordinary opportunities for impact while also increasing organizational complexity. Success in this next phase will depend on Oakland Promise's ability to pair a bold vision with strong execution, ensuring that its people, resources, partnerships, and investments are aligned around shared priorities and measurable outcomes for Oakland children and families.

GOVERNANCE, FINANCE, AND LEADERSHIP

Oakland Promise is an independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Oakland, California. The organization is governed by a 16-member [Board of Directors](#) composed of leaders from the nonprofit, education, philanthropic, civic, and business sectors.

With an annual operating budget of \$20 million and a staff of approximately 55, government funding now represents a substantial portion of annual revenue, complemented by foundation, corporate, individual, and investment support. As a key partner in the Oakland Children's Initiative, Oakland Promise also operates within a broader public-private partnership environment that includes relationships with city leaders, public agencies, community stakeholders, and oversight bodies responsible for stewarding public investment.

Since 2022, Oakland Promise has been led by Chief Executive Officer Sandra Ernst, who previously served as Senior Director of College Access and Completion for Oakland Promise and Interim Executive Director of East Bay College Fund prior to its merger with Oakland Promise. The CSO will serve as a member of the executive team, providing oversight for a staff of approximately four across direct service, grantmaking, partnerships, convenings, and related functions.

KEY OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Build a High-Performing Executive Leadership Team

As Oakland Promise enters its second decade, one of the organization's most significant priorities is strengthening executive leadership capacity. The creation of the Chief Strategy Officer and Chief Operating Officer roles reflects a deliberate effort to build the leadership infrastructure needed to support this more complex and influential organization.

Working with the CEO, the CSO and COO will foster a culture of shared leadership, effective decision-making, excellence, and clear accountability. Success will require strengthening cross-functional collaboration, encouraging leaders to operate from an organization-wide perspective, and ensuring that Oakland Promise has the talent and management practices necessary to support its growing scale, complexity, and ambitions.

Help Oakland Promise Fully Embrace Its Role as a Backbone Organization

Over the past decade, Oakland Promise has evolved from a college access initiative and direct service provider into a multi-faceted organization that also serves as an implementation partner, grantmaker, convener, and steward of public investment. As a result, the organization's impact increasingly depends not only on the programs it delivers directly, but also on its ability to successfully influence and support a broader ecosystem of partners working on behalf of Oakland children and families.

The CSO will play an integral role in leading this organizational evolution. A central challenge will be supporting staff, board members, and external stakeholders in embracing a broader understanding of Oakland Promise's role and mobilizing collective action in support of community-wide goals.

Shape Oakland Promise's Long-Term Strategy and Community Impact

As Oakland Promise's programs, partnerships, and investments continue to expand, the organization has an opportunity to strengthen alignment across its direct service, grantmaking, convening, and implementation efforts and clarify where it can have the greatest impact in the years ahead. The CSO will serve as a thought partner to the CEO, Board, and executive team, helping to assess emerging opportunities, identify evolving community needs, and shape Oakland Promise's long-term strategic direction. This leader will help the organization determine where to invest its energy and resources, how to build on its unique strengths, and what new approaches may be necessary to achieve greater outcomes for Oakland children, youth, and families. Success will require balancing innovation with disciplined execution, deepening partnerships, fostering cross-sector collaboration, and helping Oakland Promise identify opportunities to become a model for how communities support educational attainment, workforce development, and economic mobility.

Equally important, the CSO will help translate vision into action. Working closely with leaders across the organization, this leader will help align people and resources around strategic priorities, develop actionable plans, and ensure that initiatives across the organization reinforce one another.

QUALIFICATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

- A deep commitment to advancing educational opportunity, economic mobility, and equitable outcomes for children, youth, and families.
- Significant senior leadership experience helping complex organizations navigate growth, transformation, increasing scale, and/or organizational change.
- Demonstrated success shaping organizational strategy and translating vision into action, establishing clear goals and expectations, and driving execution in service of mission delivery and community impact.
- A track record of building, mentoring, and developing high-performing teams while fostering a culture of excellence, collaboration, learning, trust, and shared ownership.
- Experience establishing accountability, performance management, and decision-making practices that align people, resources, and organizational activities with desired outcomes.
- Skilled at using data, evidence, and continuous learning to inform decision-making, assess organizational effectiveness, and guide strategic priorities.
- Ability to align programs, partnerships, grantmaking, and stakeholders around shared priorities and drive collective action in service of community-wide goals.

- Experience serving as a convener, facilitator, coalition builder, or partnership leader, bringing together diverse constituencies to advance common objectives and strengthen cross-sector collaboration.
- Experience leading through influence in complex ecosystems involving public agencies, school districts, community-based organizations, philanthropy, higher education institutions, employers, and other stakeholders.
- Familiarity with collective impact, place-based change efforts, ecosystem building, grantmaking, public-private partnerships, or other collaborative models that require organizations to work toward shared community outcomes.
- While familiarity with Oakland and its communities is welcome, the organization is equally interested in candidates who demonstrate an ability to build trust and credibility quickly, navigate complex stakeholder dynamics, forge productive relationships across diverse constituencies, and lead with both humility and conviction in service of the community.
- A seasoned, values-driven leader with resilience, emotional intelligence, sound judgment, strong interpersonal instincts, and the leadership presence to inspire confidence, build alignment, and lead effectively through change and ambiguity.

LOCATION AND COMPENSATION

Oakland Promise is a place-based organization located in Oakland, California. It is a requirement that all staff reside within commuting distance to the main office, located at 484 9th Street, Oakland, CA 94607.

Oakland Promise anticipates a salary range of \$220,000 to \$240,000, commensurate with experience and qualifications, along with a competitive benefits package.

APPLICATIONS, INQUIRIES, AND NOMINATIONS

Screening of complete applications will begin immediately and continue until the completion of the search process. Inquiries, nominations, referrals, and resumes along with letters of interest should be sent via the Isaacson, Miller website [here](#). If you require a reasonable accommodation to complete an application, participate in an interview, or otherwise take part in the selection process, please contact Harley Bartles at hbartles@imsearch.com.

Rebecca Swartz, Phuong Ta, and Harley Bartles
Isaacson, Miller

Oakland Promise is a place-based organization located in Oakland, California. Oakland Promise requires that employees work in person at various engagements. It is a requirement that all staff reside within commuting distance to the main office, located at 484 9th Street, Oakland, CA 94607. Please note that at any time, a full in-person work plan may be required, and it is of utmost importance that all staff are able to meet this requirement. Oakland Promise is proud to be an equal opportunity employer. Oakland

Promise is committed to providing a work environment free of harassment, discrimination, retaliation, and disrespectful or other unprofessional conduct based on sex (including pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding or related medical conditions), sex stereotype, race, religion (including religious dress and grooming practices), color, gender (including gender identity, gender expression, and transgender), national origin (including language use restrictions and possession of a driver's license issued under Vehicle Code section 12801.9), ancestry, physical or mental disability, medical condition, genetic information, marital status, registered domestic partner status, age, sexual orientation, military, and veteran status or any other basis protected by federal, state or local law or ordinance or regulation. It also prohibits discrimination, harassment, disrespectful or unprofessional conduct based on the perception that anyone has any of those characteristics, or is specialist with a person who has or is perceived as having any of those characteristics.

This document has been prepared based on the information provided by Oakland Promise. The material presented in this leadership profile should be relied on for informational purposes only. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of this information, the original source documents and information provided by Oakland Promise would supersede any conflicting information in this document.