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What happens to S-K schools after federal money's gone?

Four Salem-Keizer schools have made improvements with federal stimulus grants, but the funds won't last

*By Stefanie Knowlton
Statesman Journal*

Four struggling Salem-Keizer schools promised huge gains in several benchmarks such as test scores and attendance starting this year in exchange for millions in federal School Improvement Grants.

In all, the schools will get \$12.6 million during the next three years, or about \$3,000 to \$6,000 per student depending on the school.

The grants are a small part of the \$100 billion in federal stimulus money pouring into schools throughout the country in an effort to catapult U.S. students to the top of academic achievement. The funds are education's share of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act approved in 2009.

Six months into the ambitious project, Salem-Keizer's four schools already show signs of improvement.

But will it be enough to make good on the district's promises, and will the changes outlast the money?

The schools — Hallman Elementary, McKay High School, Early College High School and Roberts High School — have placed in the bottom 5 percent in the state based on reading and math scores in the past.

Each school wrote its own plan with a heavy dose of teacher training, collaboration and adding more instruction in the hopes of finding the fast track to student success.

Quest for transformation

McKay High School invested the lion's share of its \$5.6 million in hiring 18 staff members with job descriptions as diverse as coaching teachers and monitoring hallways.

It also pays for teacher training, incentives and longer days. School starts about an hour later, which helps attendance but also gives teachers extra time for planning, training and working together.

Teachers meet weekly to compare test scores and share techniques. They'll even swap classrooms so one teacher can take the students who are struggling to learn a concept while the other gives an advanced lesson to those who have it down.

"We're trying to bring teachers together to learn from each other," said McKay Principal Ken Parshall.

McKay also offers students more opportunities to learn, thanks to three new teachers. The math and

English lab teachers help students master the basics to build a strong foundation.

Now all freshman going into algebra must take a math lab for the first half of the year as well as any students who get a C or lower in math class. Those with A's and B's can drop the lab and take an elective. Same goes for English lab.

Students also get extra help on Saturdays with free tutoring and a Language Acquisition Academy where Spanish-speaking students hone their English skills. About 500 students, or roughly one-quarter of the student population, struggle to read, write and speak English at grade level.

Sixteen-year-old Yasmin Mendoza signed up for every language academy since they started and she plans to attend the next one, too.

"I want to improve," she said, "and go to levels more easily."

She started learning English at age 7 in Salem-Keizer School District, she said, but she's always felt lost. Mendoza hasn't moved up a proficiency level since middle school, she said, but with help from the academy she will move two levels this year.

"I want to go to college, and I want to become a teacher to help others to be better," she said, "to help kids like me learning English."

A team of eight behavior experts also is working to improve safety and reduce disruptions at McKay, which had nearly 2,000 behavior and attendance referrals to the office last year.

Behavior specialists will work with teachers to help them manage problem behaviors in the classroom while mentors assist struggling students solve problems at the root.

The other three schools are using similar techniques to find success.

Hallman Elementary, which is getting \$3 million, hired a consultant to help teachers improve instruction, paid for training and set aside time and money for teachers to collaborate to improve the school and their own teaching.

One example is the school's monthly training days where the grant pays for substitute teachers to teach all the classes.

The investment allows teachers to visit a classroom together and take over a lesson one at a time so others can watch them in action and provide feedback later.

It provides an opportunity for teachers who wouldn't otherwise have the chance to watch each other or get peer feedback, said Hallman Principal Steve Lush.

The grant also paid for an assistant principal, two instructional coaches and an outreach coordinator who helps students and their families access resources in the community. The biggest single expense, about 15 percent of the grant, paid to extend the school day by 45 minutes, which adds more than a month of instruction per year.

Early College High School and Roberts High School hired part-time principals to help manage the programs, which have about 500 students each.

Early College hopes to boost its technology savvy with laptops for students and a technology coordinator to train staff.

Roberts High School transformed the structure of its largest program from mostly online to face-to-face learning with teachers accredited in the core subjects. It also extended learning time from three-quarters to a full day.

Big promises

All four schools have essentially spent or committed the money from the first year, and in four months the federal government will ask to see proof that the investment paid off.

Each school promised to hit certain targets at the end of the school year for the next three years.

So far McKay is on track to hit or exceed many of its goals.

The school promised to reduce referrals by 40 percent in three years. But in the first six months the school already reduced its rate by 65 percent.

It also exceed its first-year goal on reading tests by 2 percentage points. Math test scores are up 2 percentage points, which could be shy of the 7 percent promised.

McKay also made strides in attendance and course completion rates.

"This is amazing progress in one semester," said Parshall, "but we have a million miles to go."

At the end of three years, the school needs to improve its math and reading scores by 27 percent and course completion rate by 30 percent.

Hallman Elementary already met its math and reading target last year before the grant even started, so Lush moved the targets up by 10 percentage points this year.

So far early test scores are down, Lush said, but he isn't worried. Teachers will take data from the early tests and help kids who need extra time on certain concepts.

"We're all expecting good results, but we also recognize it's going to take time," said Salem-Keizer Assistant Superintendent Salam Noor.

"If a school has struggled for six years, you can't make it all up in the first year."

As long as schools make progress, he said, it should be considered a success.

Success without funds

But even if schools meet their targets, it's unclear if the improvement will continue after the funds run out.

Schools spent most of their grant money on expensive interventions such as hiring staff from assistant principals to behavioral specialists. Salem-Keizer is unlikely to keep them on the payroll at a time when Oregon projects a decade of deficits and the district might need to cut \$55 million this year alone.

The key to long-term success rests in improving core instruction, said Steve Larson, Salem-Keizer's director of elementary education.

That means as teachers and schools improve, they're less likely to need costly interventions in the future.

Grant money provides a shot in the arm to get quick gains while schools work for lasting change, he said.

That shot gives schools three years to transform the culture so teachers improve instruction, learn how to use data, collaborate and align the curriculum to core standards.

If schools successfully boost teacher quality, that impact alone could be huge. Students with effective teachers for four years in a row essentially eliminate the achievement gap, according to a 2006 report from the Brookings Institution.

Teachers need time to meet and learn from each other as well as direct leadership, feedback and support in addition to evaluations that factor in student improvement, said Aimee Craig with Oregon's Chalkboard Project, which is leading a pilot program in districts throughout the state, including Salem-Keizer, to improve teacher quality.

Those requirements don't necessarily cost any more money once they're in place, Craig said.

All four schools are making strides to adopt those practices, including revamping teacher evaluations as soon as next year to take student improvement into consideration. Currently student performance is not considered during a teacher's evaluation in Salem-Keizer School District.

Even if the district can't continue some of the programs, it will at least know what to expect from certain types of interventions, Noor said. That could help the district decide how to spend the money it has.

"It's a challenge because we know it's resource intensive," Noor said.

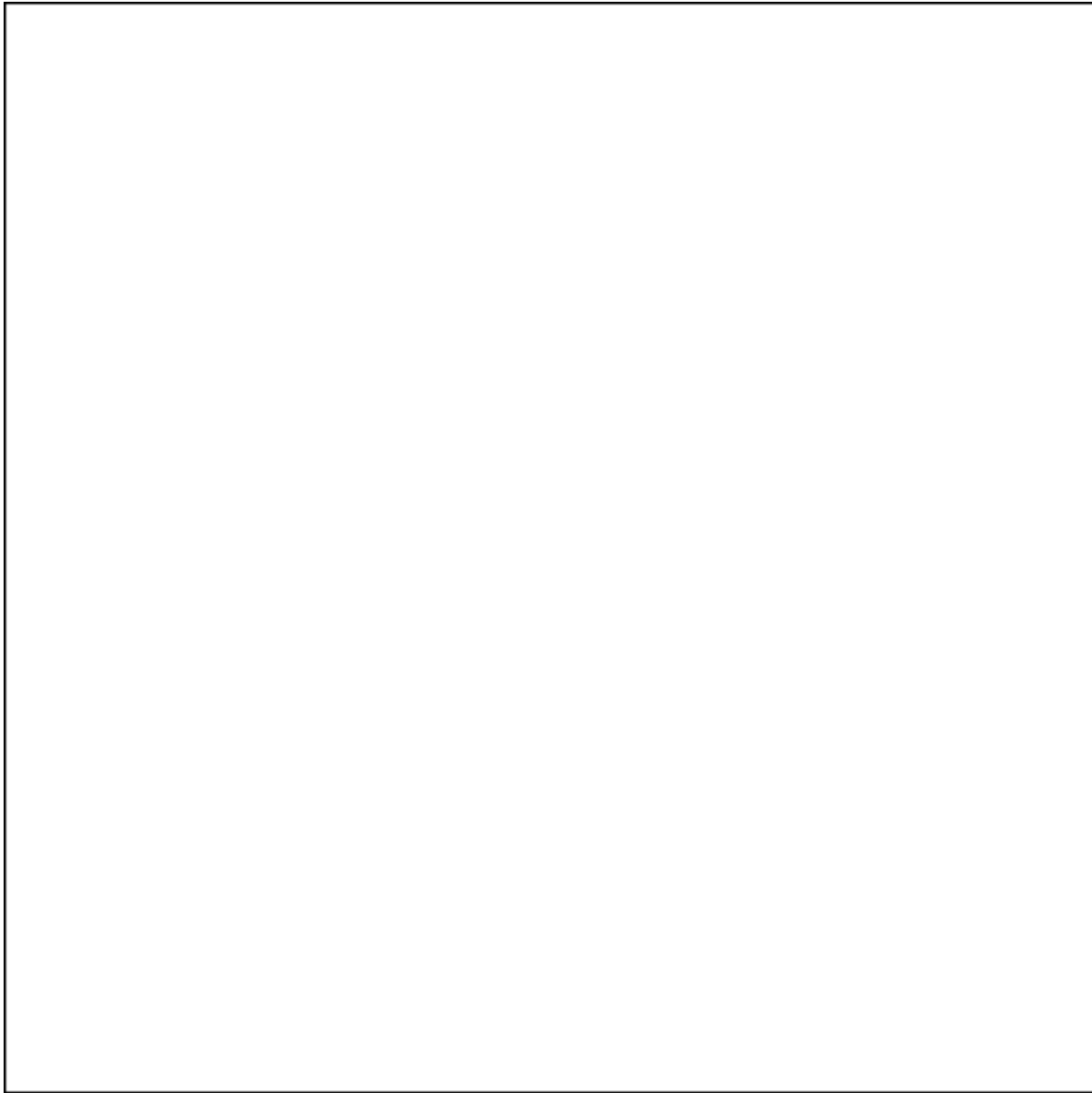
"But we are going to learn from what these schools are doing and try to replicate it."

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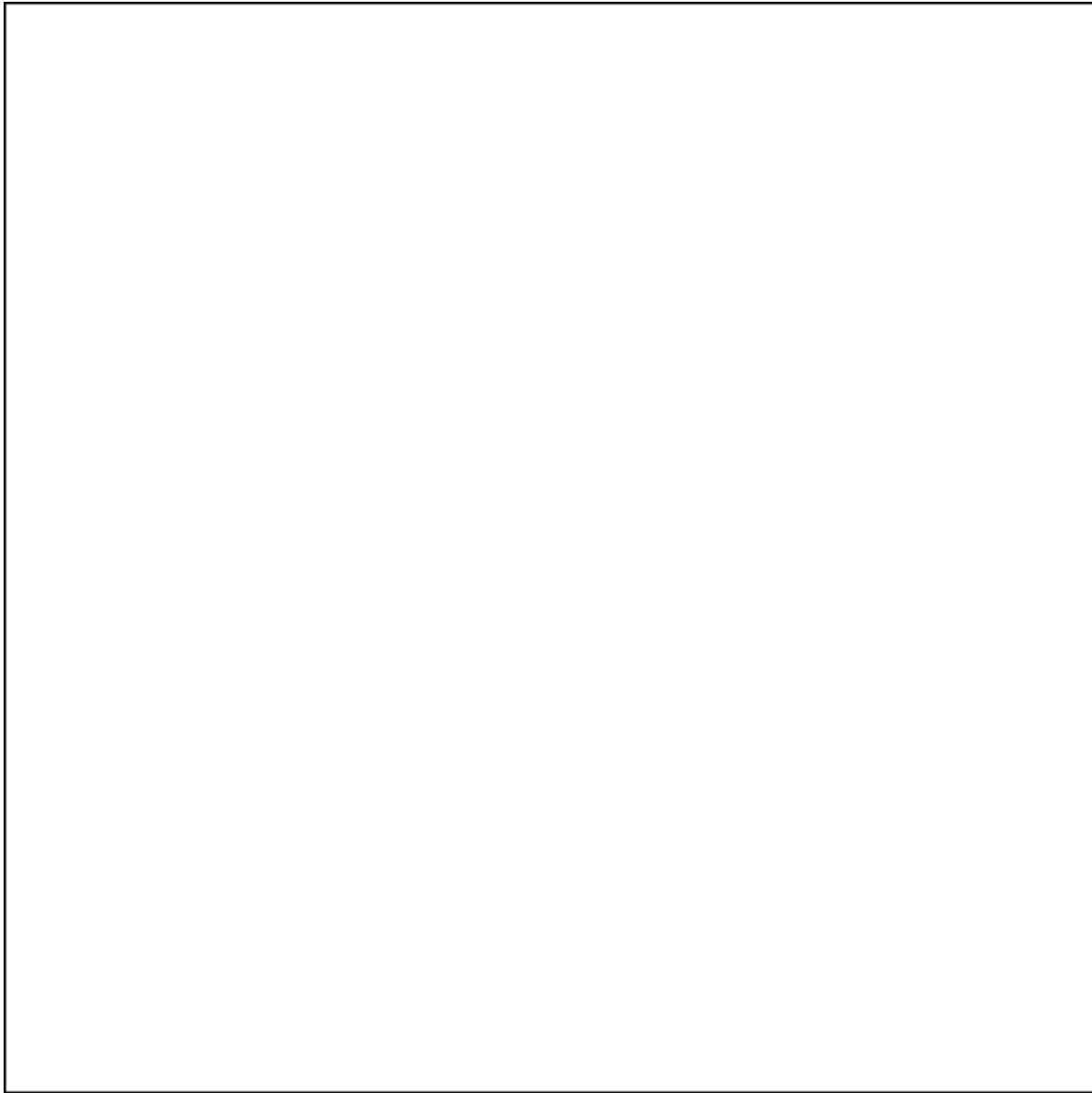
School Improvement Grants

<http://www.scribd.com/doc/49130161/McKay-2010-School-Improvement-Grant-Application>

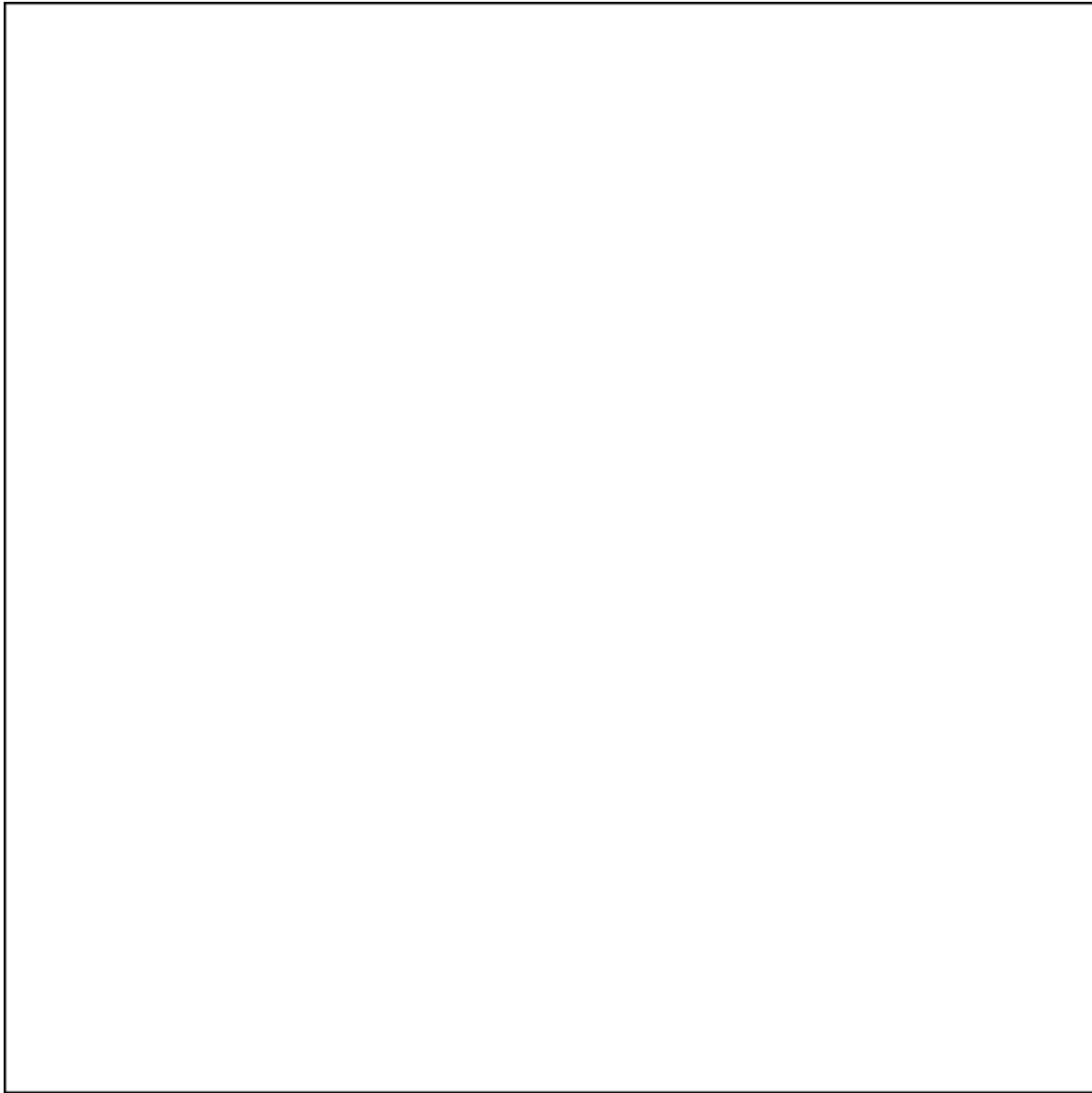
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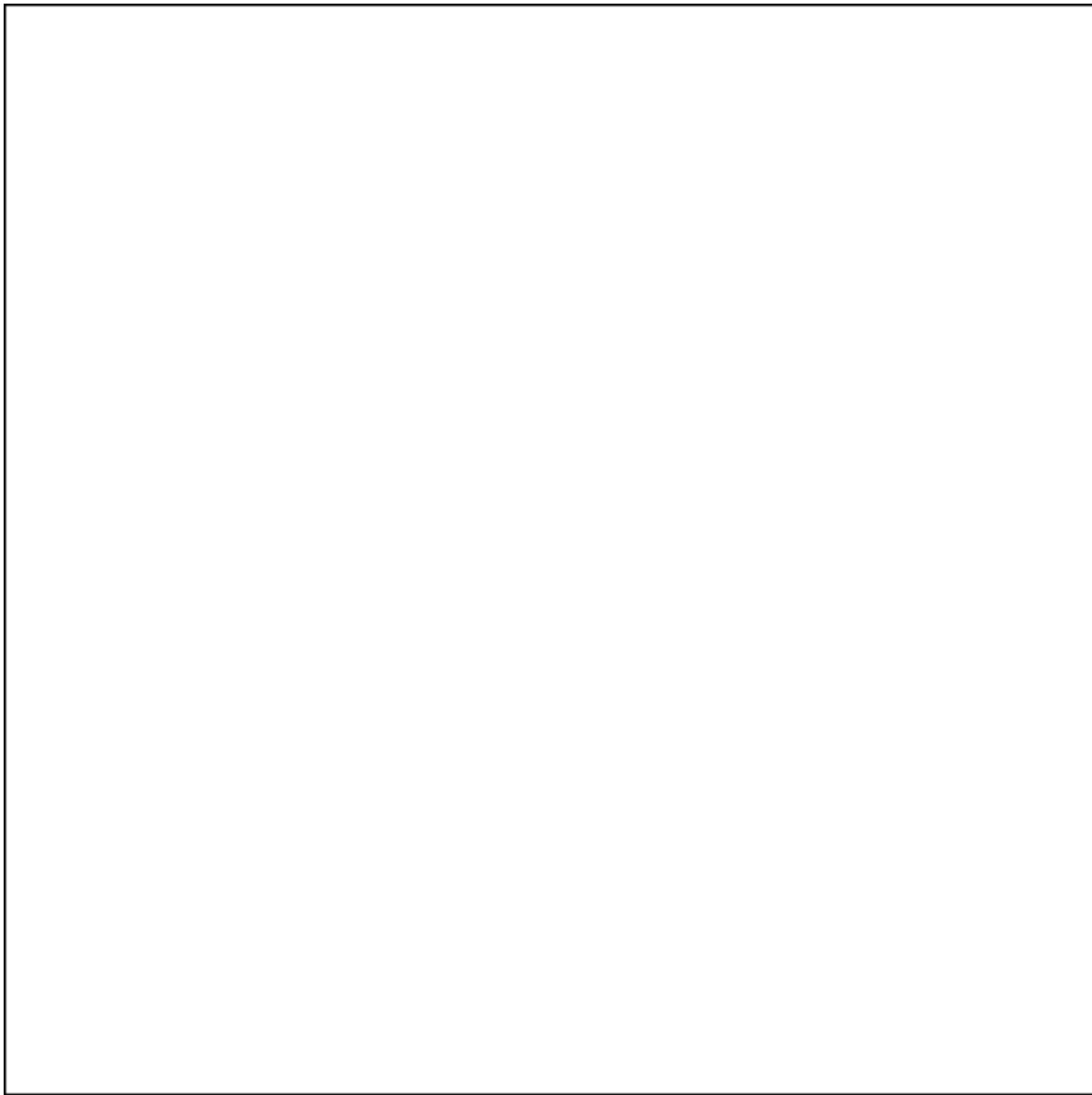
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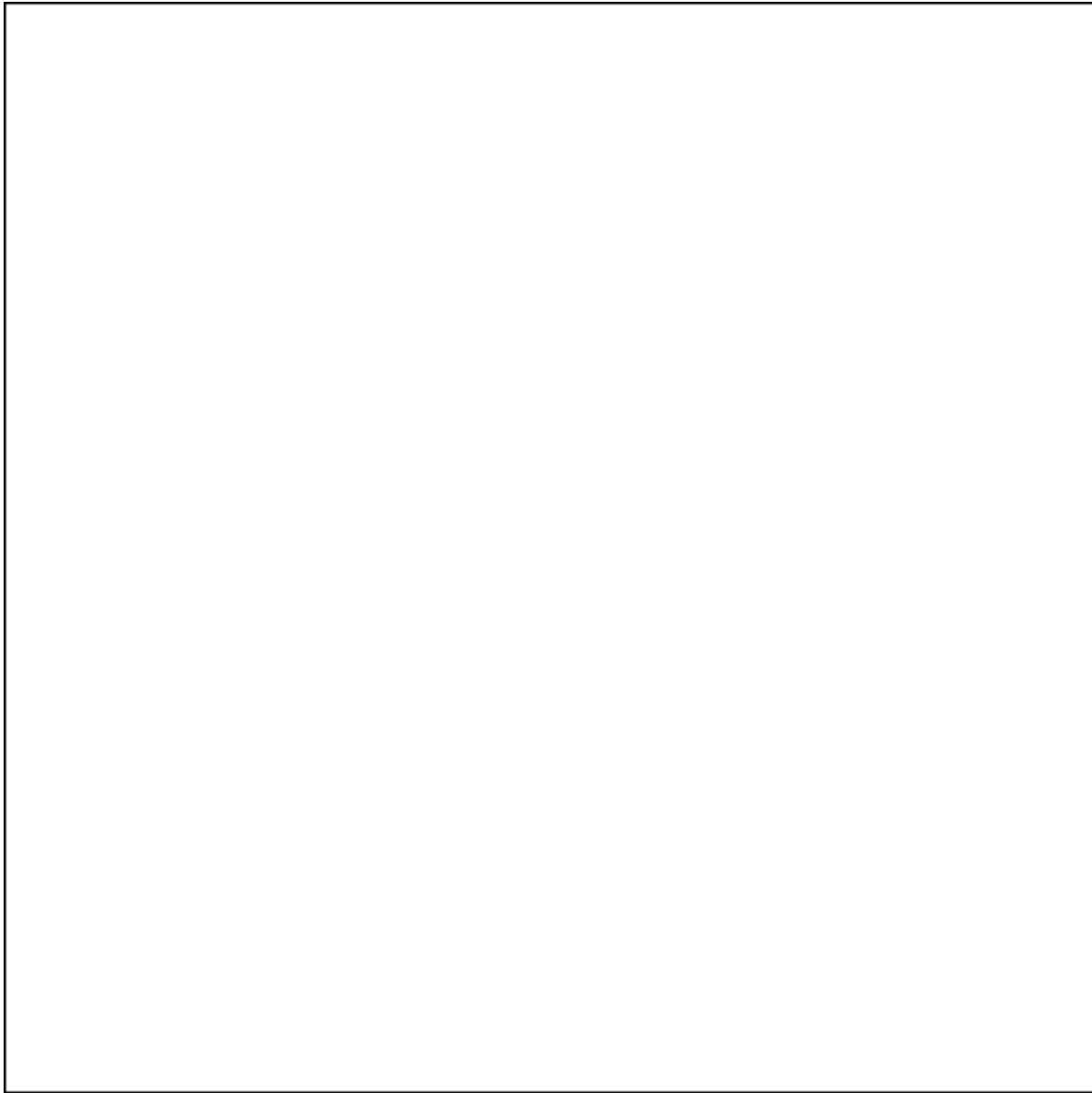


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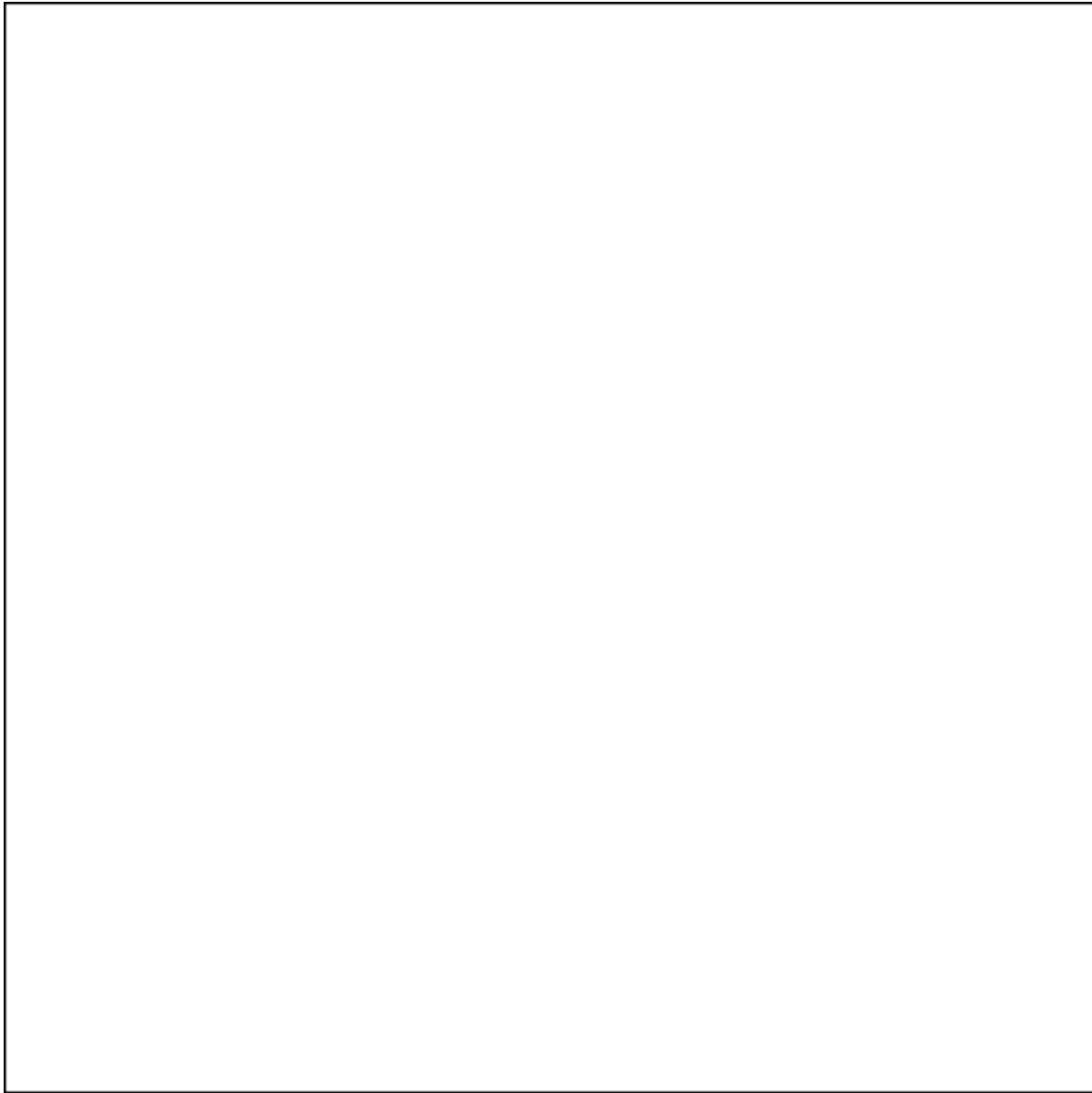


Goals

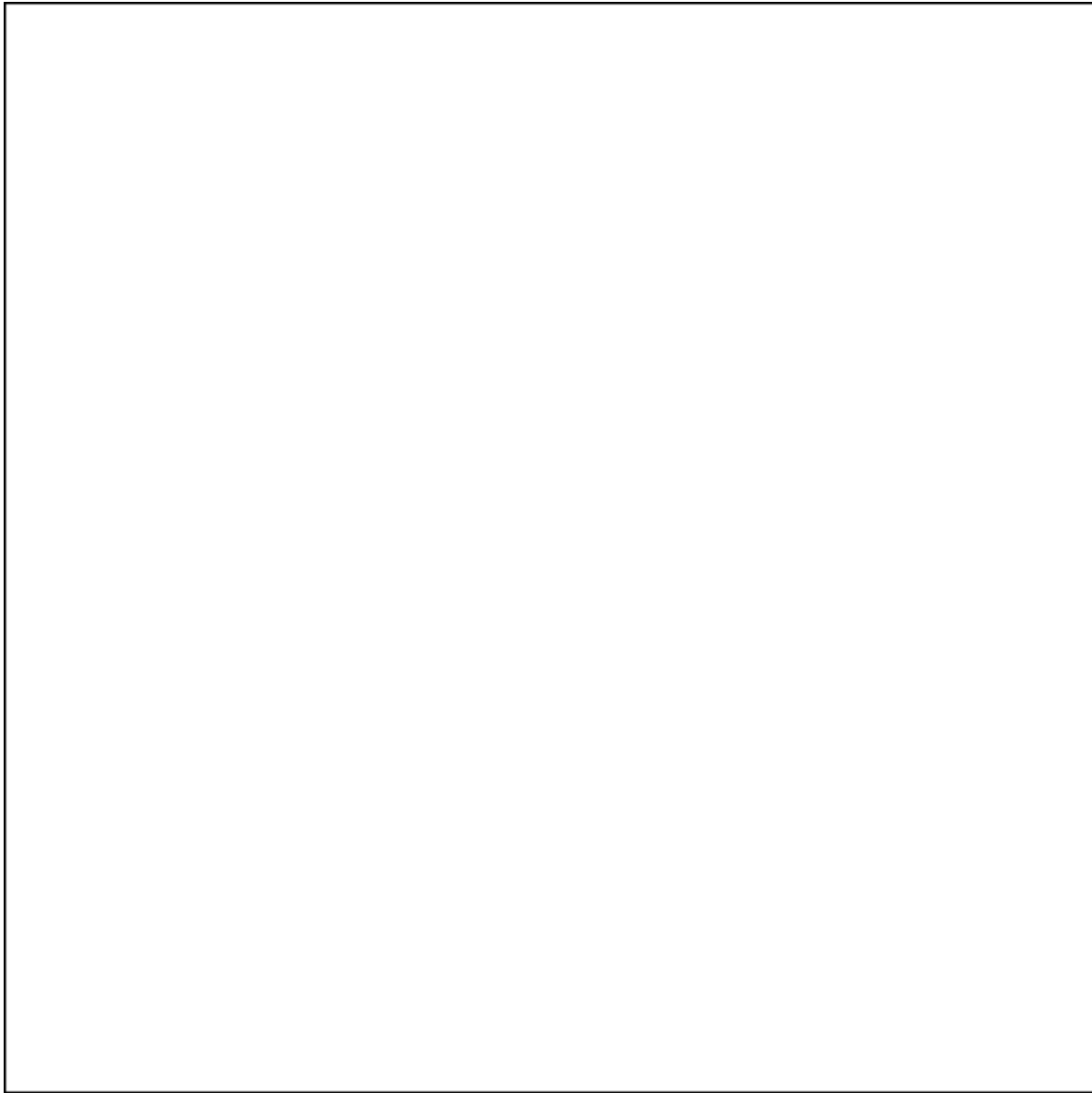
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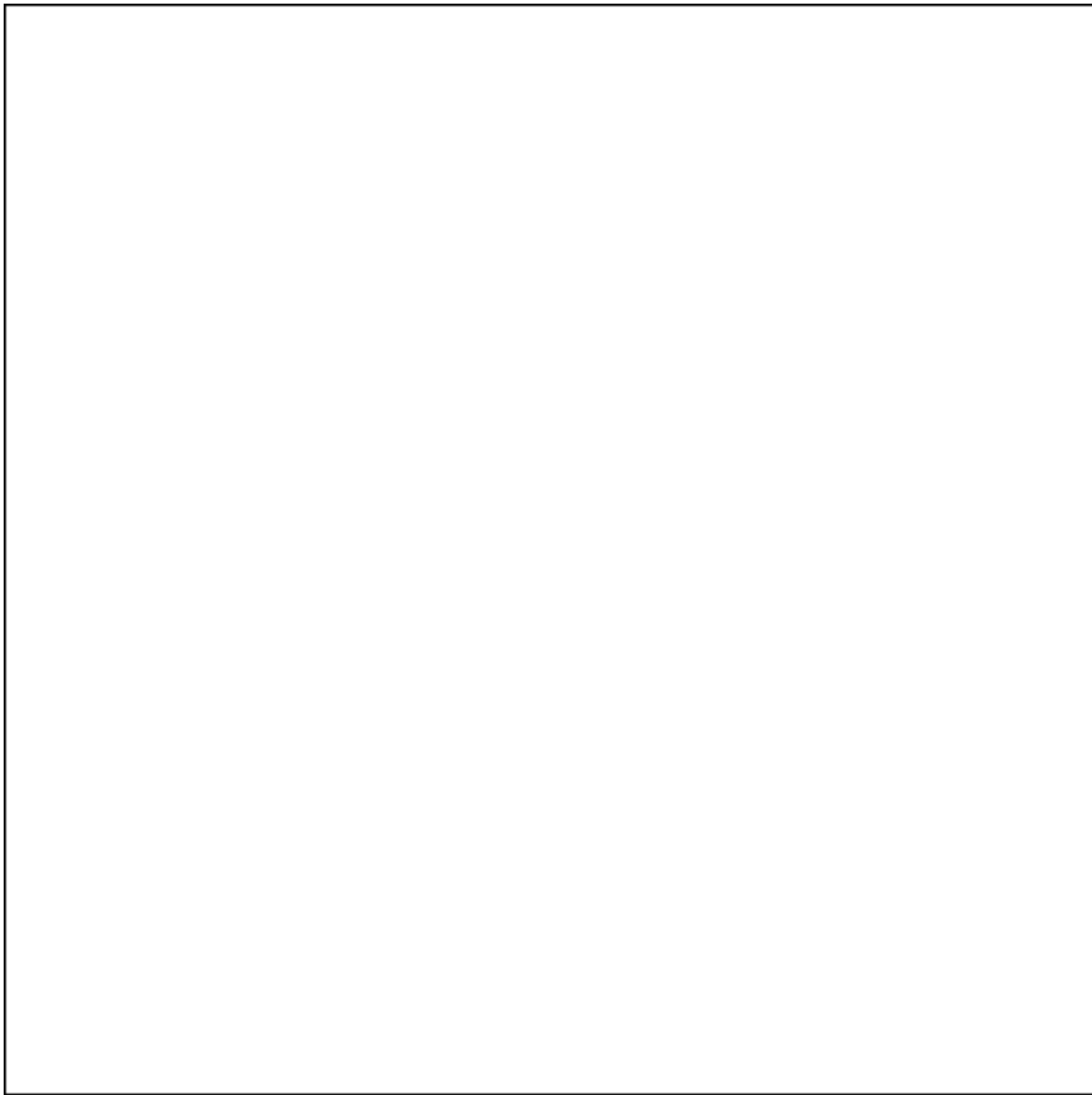
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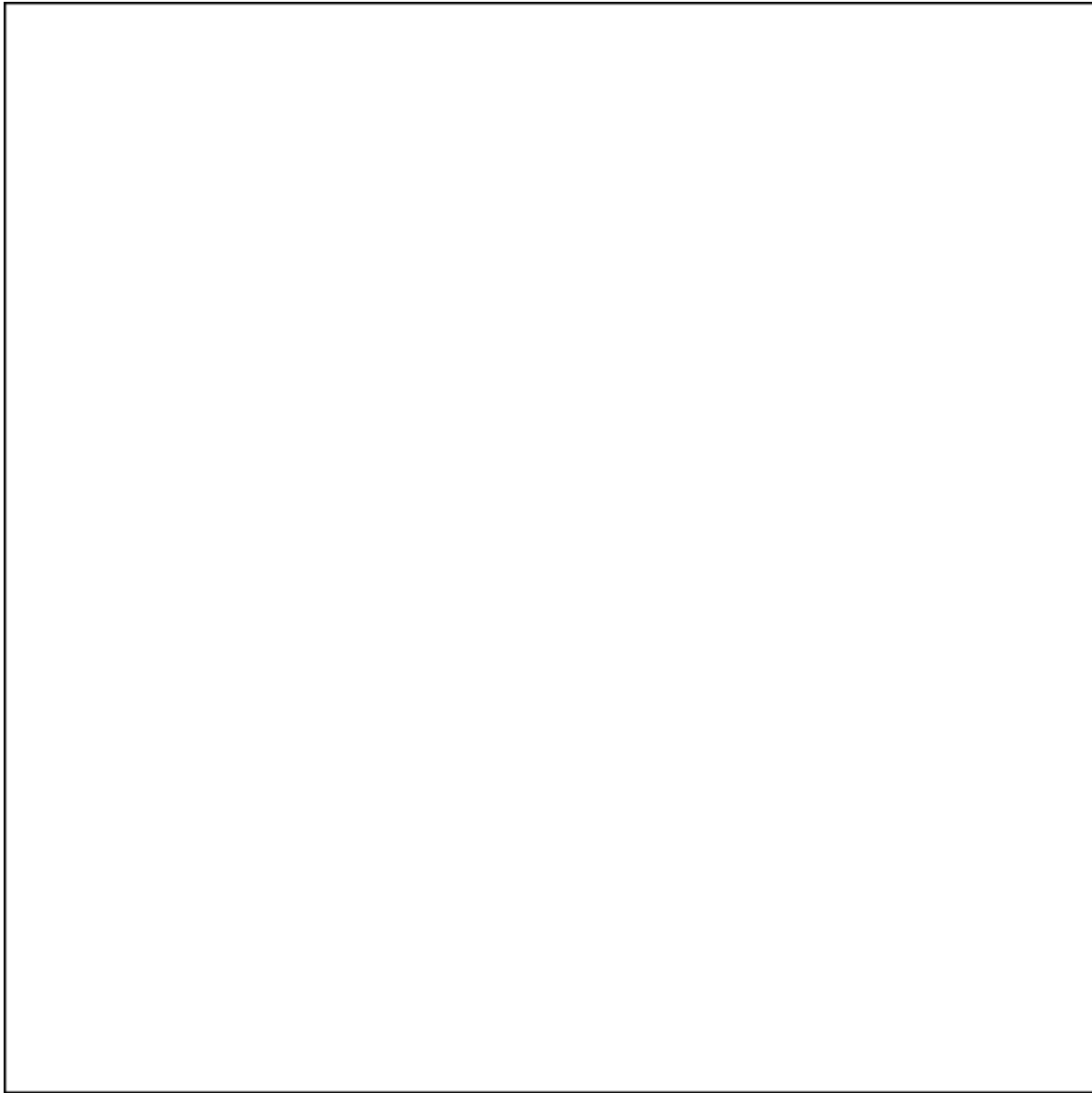


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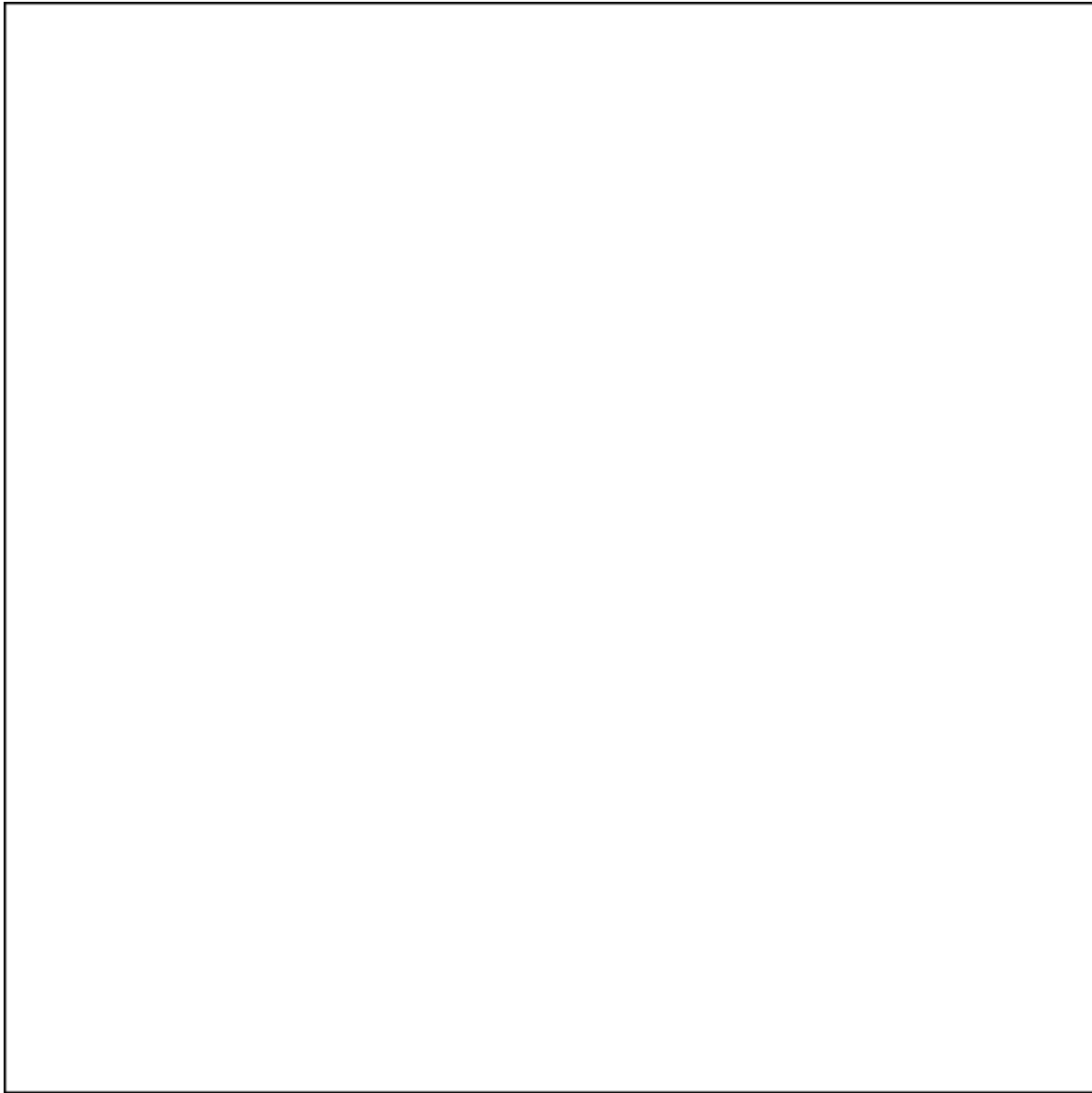


SIG Balances

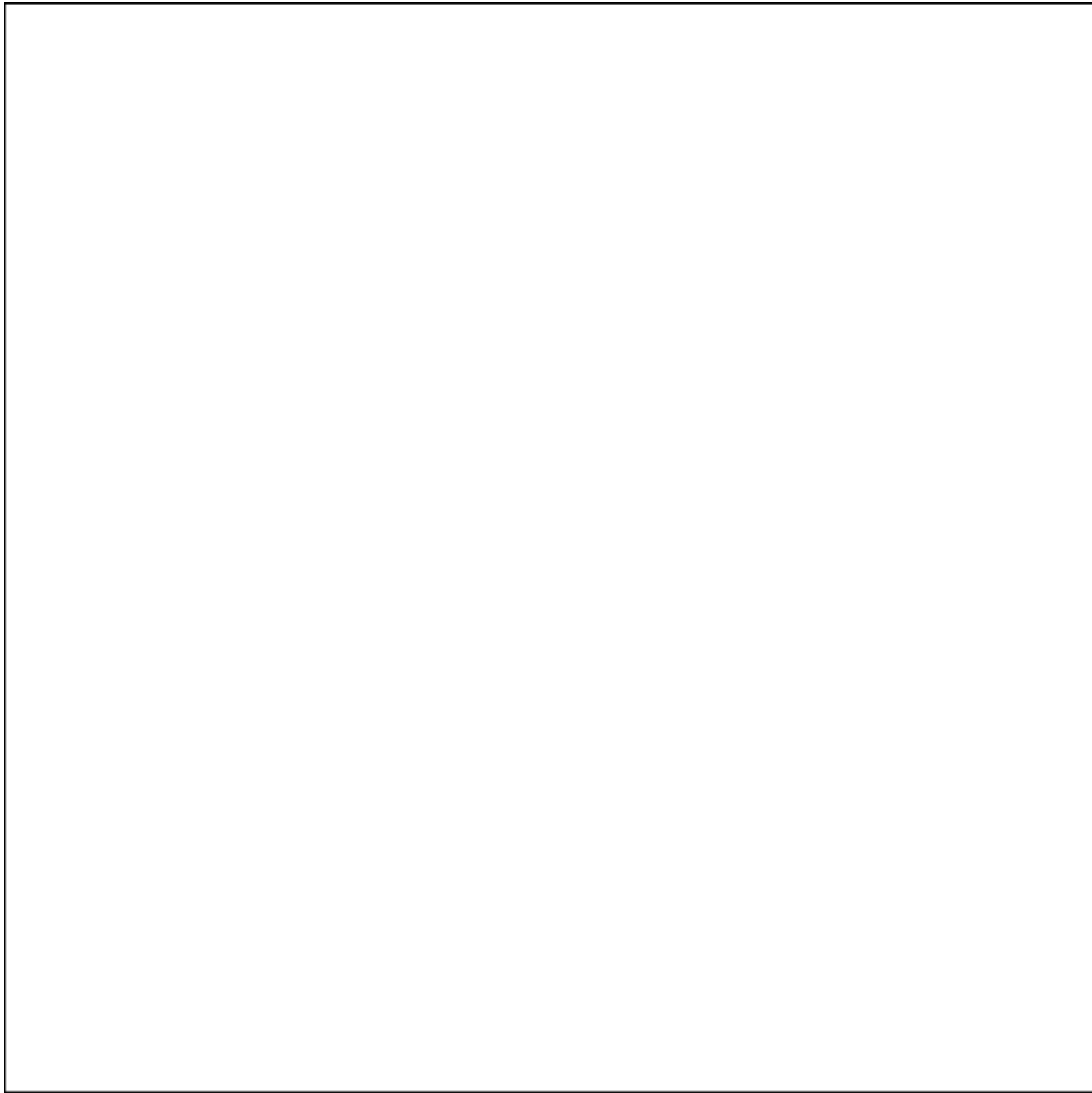
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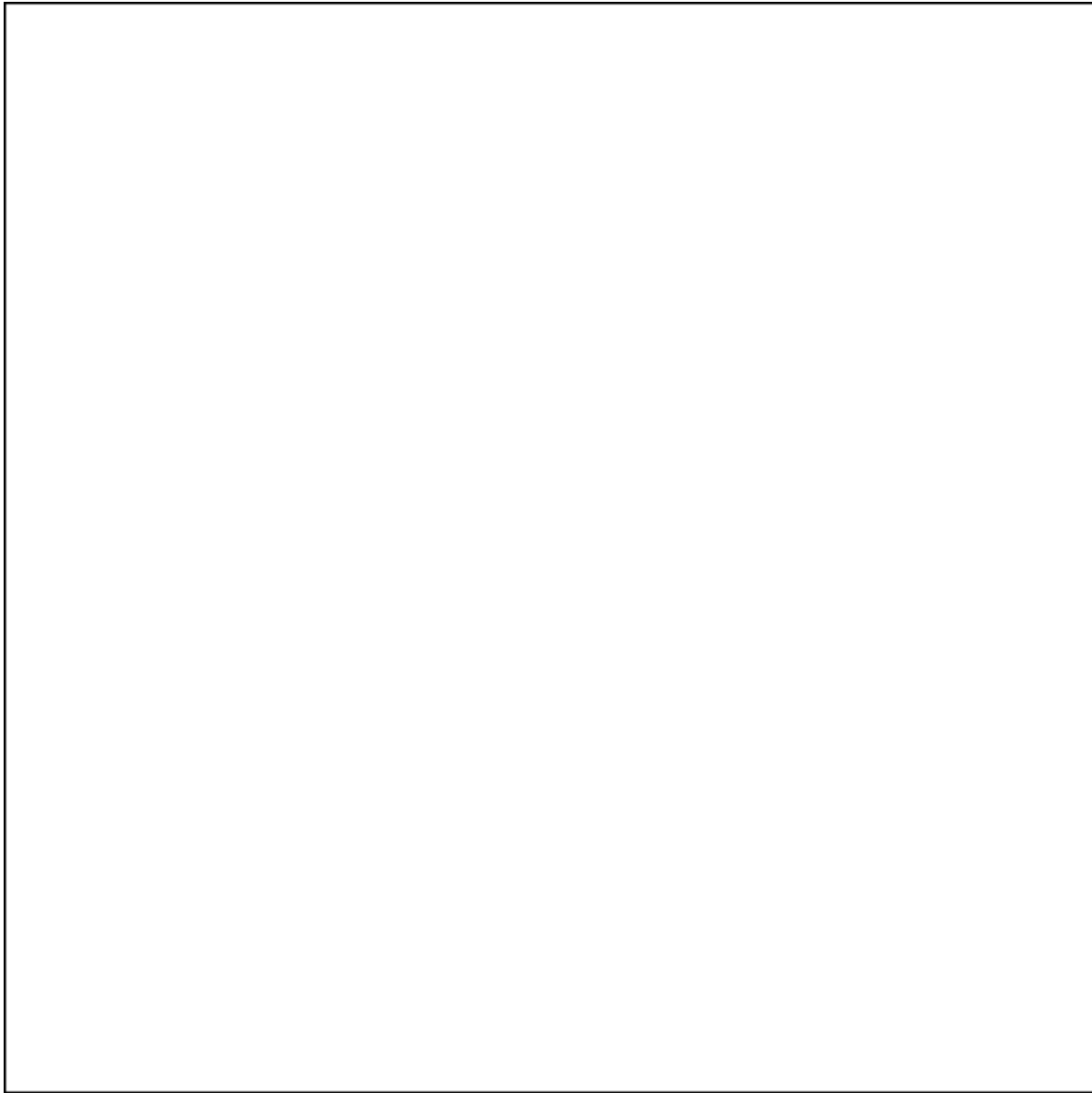
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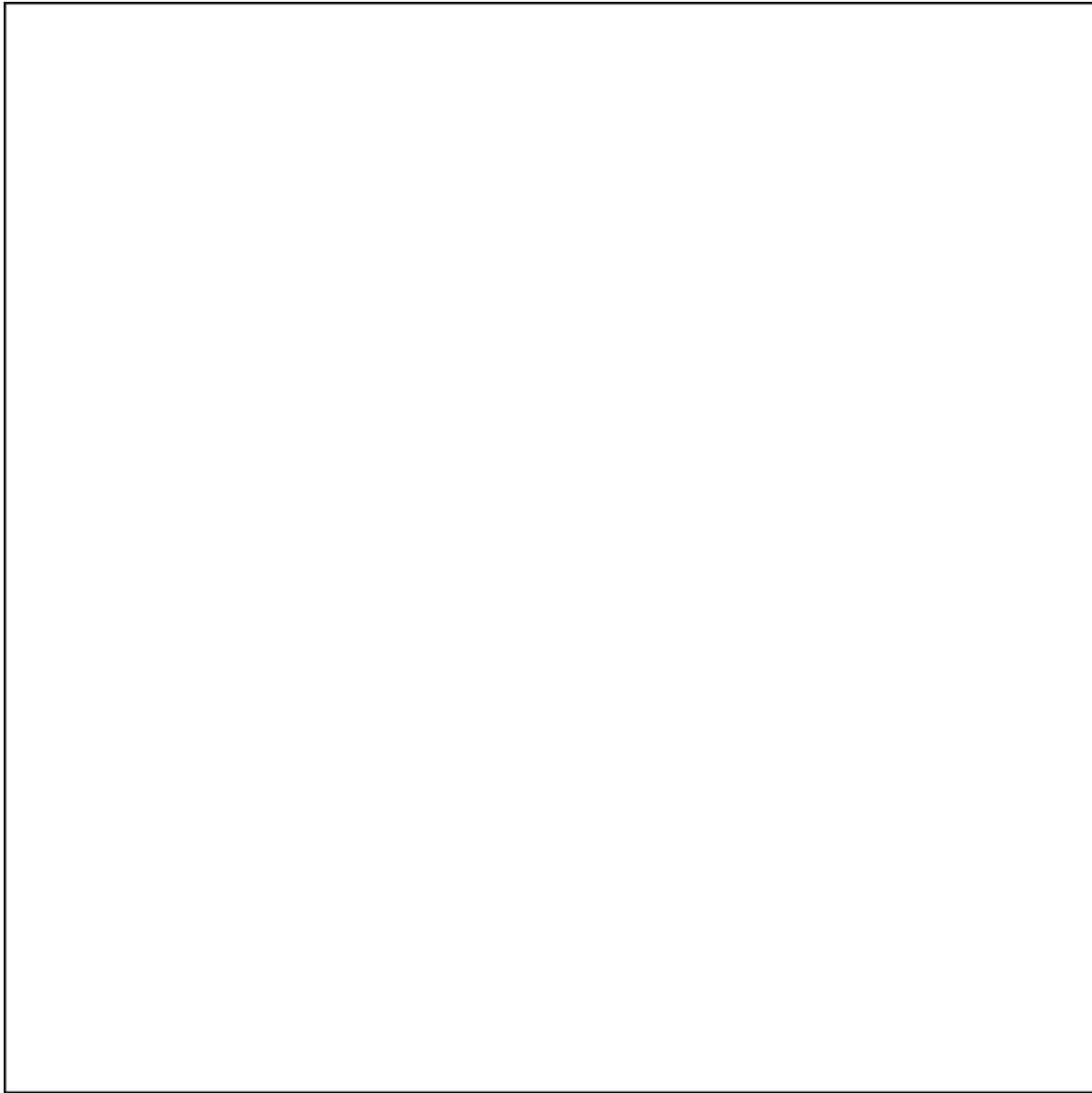
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Additional Facts

\$12.6 million at work in Salem-Keizer schools

Hallman Elementary

Grant amount: \$3 million

How it's being used

Train teachers and staff in best practices for English and math instruction.

Create teams where teachers work together to improve teaching and learning with help from educators outside the building.

Extend the school day by 45 minutes, extend teachers' hours to help with preparation, collaboration, training and also meet with students

Hire a vice principal to allow principal to focus on new initiatives

Hire two instruction coaches

Hire support services person to help parents and students connect with employment, food, health and housing resources.

Better identification of students who need help and a tiered approach to helping students based on their level of need

McKay High

Grant amount: \$5.6 million

How it's being used

Delay school start time by 45 minutes to give teachers more time to train, prepare and collaborate for better instruction

Hold weekly one-hour training sessions to help teachers improve instruction. Also hold four half-day training days throughout the year

Create teams of teachers who meet once a week to work together to improve teaching and learning.

Offer Saturday tutoring to help students with work and Language Acquisition Academy to accelerate English skills

Hire three teachers, a teaching coach, assistant principal and other support staff

Offer additional math and English classes to help students who are struggling

Roberts High

Grant amount: \$2 million

How it's being used

Revamp Structured Learning Center for face-to-face learning instead of primarily online classes

Swapping out teachers with other schools for a broader range of classes offered on site

Extend the day from three-quarters day to full day

Created a library

Hired half-time librarian

Training for teachers

Hire part-time assistant principal

Early College High

Grant amount: \$2 million

How it's being used

Laptops for student use and possible check-out services

Training for teachers

Hired technology coordinator to work with staff

Hire half-time career and college pathways person

Hire part-time assistant principal
