



Bringing Oakland Together for Our Students

City Council Candidate Questionnaire 2010

Thank you for responding to this City Council Candidate Questionnaire from Great Oakland Public Schools Information Center.

Great Oakland Public Schools Information Center is a 501c3 charitable organization that provides leadership, education, and information to ensure that all Oakland students have access to excellent public schools in their neighborhood and throughout the city. The GO Info Center supports a coalition of Oakland families, students, teachers, principals, community, and civic leaders united around a positive, student-oriented vision for public education in our city. More than 250 parents, teachers, principals, and community leaders from the hills and flatlands, East, West, and North Oakland, charter and district public schools have endorsed GO's beliefs and vision for improving Oakland public schools.

Your responses to the questions here will be used in candidate profiles published both in print and on the GO Information Center websites. Please be candid, complete, and forthright in your responses, and prompt in returning the completed questionnaire.

You will receive both an electronic and paper version of this questionnaire; we prefer that you return your questionnaire electronically. Completed questionnaires should be signed and returned **by Friday September 17th** to:

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Great Oakland Public Schools Information Center Questionnaire

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Please answer each question in 250 words or less.

1. Oakland Unified School District has been the most improved large, urban school district in California over the last five years yet, continues to fail many of its students. Only 42 percent of high school graduates in OUSD have taken the A-G courses required to apply to a CSU or UC for college,¹ and this does not take into account the 28 percent of students who drop out in grades 9-12.² We are not producing excellent outcomes for all students. What is your vision for equitable public education in Oakland, and what systemic changes will you work toward to achieve that vision?

My vision for equitable public education is that EVERY student graduates with the knowledge and skills needed for success in college and the career of their choice. Systemic changes needed for this vision include school that provide instruction and enrichment year-round, all-day; a quality teacher in every classroom, and healthy children and families.

Some immediate, realistic steps we could take towards this vision is supporting better quality teaching by ensuring adequate compensation, support and training for our teachers; increasing support for pre-school and out-of-school-time programs (after-school and summer), and combating truancy.

2. OUSD's "Options" program allows families to choose which of Oakland's public schools they would like their children to attend. Students are then assigned to schools based on their preferences and a school's available openings. What reforms, if any, would you propose for OUSD's "Options" program?

I like Oakland's system, where families are encouraged and virtually guaranteed a spot at their neighborhood school. Neighborhood schools build community; my children will be attending their neighborhood public school. But until every school in Oakland is performing at an excellent level, the options process works. The Options process engages parents in thinking

about school quality and presents an opportunity for parents to become more knowledgeable and engaged in school quality issues. We need to do better at making ALL families and care takers aware of the system.

3. What role should charter public schools play for students and families in Oakland?

Charters are providing another option for Oakland families and are predominantly serving families whose neighborhood schools are low-performing. They need to be held to high accountability standards. Demonizing charters, which is somewhat popular in Oakland, is holding us back and keeping us from realizing the best outcomes for our kids. Oakland's charters are each unique, thus difficult to understand as a "system." Many are organic, stand-alone schools started by families in the community. The promise of Charters is that they will provide lessons to be applied to the public school system to make it better -- they should be a means to this end. The District should improve the connection between charters and the district. Charters should do more to share best practices and support neighboring public schools and the district as a whole. The District should do more to support Charters with facilities and, maybe even including them as part of the Options Process. Roughly 17% of our children attend Charters – a number that has steadily increased over time. These children deserve our attention and support.

4. What State-level practices and policies hold back the quality of our public schools, and what are your plans to change them?

The manner in which California funds education is deficient in many ways. Inadequate levels of funding for education, tying funding to attendance rather than enrollment and radically changing school budgets every year at the last minute are three practices and policies I will advocate to change. I'd like to partner with experts to lobby and advocate for these and other changes. Strengthening public education has always been my personal passion. As a Council Member, my advocacy efforts could be even more effective.

5. Where do you turn for information and ideas about how to improve Oakland public schools?

I was one of the earliest subscribers to the GO Public Schools Information Center and am in constant contact with GO founders and staff. For years I have read and/or subscribed to EdVoice and EdSource websites. I have kept abreast of local education issues through my service on the Boards of Directors or Advisory Boards of several local educational non-profits, including Mocha (Museum of Children's Art), Lighthouse Community Charter School, Oakland Education Partners, East Bay Agency for Children and Oakland Schools Foundation. Fifteen years ago, I quit my job as an attorney at Oakland's largest law firm to build and run a centralized volunteer program for the Oakland Unified School District at the Marcus Foster Educational Institute. During those three years, I came to know many of OUSD's administrators and school site personal, as our program grew to serve all 90 public schools at that time. I personally volunteered every week in a classroom for four years. I gained deep insights through these experiences and still maintain many relationships with these dedicated educators today, which continue to inform my ideas about improving Oakland public schools.

6. What will you do to ensure there is an effective, qualified teacher in every OUSD classroom?

While the City Council has no jurisdiction over the public schools, there is much it can do to support Oakland teachers. I would use my bully pulpit to support the District's policies and practices to ensure there is an effective, qualified teacher in every OUSD classroom. I will work to promote and expand the Teacher's First Time Home Buyer Program and try to develop an affordable rental project for teachers. I will continue to work with Oakland Community Organizations in their work around schools – an amazing organization I've worked closely with for fifteen years. I would work to identify private resources that might support teacher programs like subsidizing Mentor Teacher Positions or create signing bonus for hard-to-recruit disciplines like math or science – similar to what other cities like Chattanooga, TN have done. I'd work with the schools in my district to ensure that teachers feel safe and have adequate parking. I'd direct city resources towards combating truancy. I'd propose a Fiscal Policy, modeled on San Francisco's, that allows the City to provide any surplus funds to the school district in a year where it experiences a deficit. I'd also like to see a Centralized School Volunteer Program, like the one I built and ran in 1995, return to Oakland.

7. Do you support the November 2010 Parcel Tax (Measure L - Oakland Student Achievement, Support and Safety Measure) to increase compensation for Oakland's teachers? Please explain.

Yes. I supported the similar Measure NN two years ago and even had my op-ed published in the San Francisco Business Times in support of this tax to raise teacher compensation. Starting Oakland teachers are paid significantly less than their counterparts in the region. While I agree that Oakland home owners pay an inordinate amount of taxes, there is no better investment we can make than in the people we've entrusted to give our children the tools for a successful future.

8. President Obama is making the largest single Federal investment in education in history via competitive and formula grants. How will you ensure Oakland students benefit from this funding?

First, I will advocate for resources like this. Oakland can't afford to pass up funding opportunities like this, which is why I found it unfortunate that Oakland's Mayor Dellums was the only big-city Mayor in California who didn't sign onto this program. I'm interested in exploring whether the school district and city could combine our state and federal lobbying contracts – potentially making us a more unified and powerful lobbying force in Sacramento and Washington D.C.

9. Are there other cities you would look to as models of city-schools partnership and why?

I have spent time researching what other cities have done to better support their school district. Some examples I found included San Jose under Ron Gonzales, Chattanooga, TN and the Harlem Children's Zone in New York. I oppose Mayoral control over the School District. I do support a closer partnership where the City works to support the Whole Child and their Families and help schools serve as Community Resource Centers.

10. OUSD has just released a new strategic framework called “Thriving Students,” in which City Government plays a significant role. How will you make the City a partner in the implementation of “Thriving Students?” What role can City agencies play in developing the Promise Neighborhoods envisioned within OUSD’s new “Thriving Students” strategic framework?

Dr. Smith’s vision of a Full Service Community District will require significant coordinator from the City of Oakland and other agencies. I find this vision exciting and will put my full energy into supporting it. Since the beginning of my campaign, I have been talking about better coordination between the City and Schools, particularly in the areas of facility maintenance, recreations facilities and libraries. It was exciting to see those very same ideas called out in the Thriving Students plan.

11. How do you plan to support public schools and public school students in your District?

I have already told Gary Yee that I look forward to being a supportive partner to him, or whomever is the District 4 School Board Member, including offering access to my policy staff. I will also be responsive to parents in helping address their problems, and never just say “I can’t help with that; call the school district.” I will stay engaged in funding decisions by the Oakland Fund for Children and Youth and Measure Y to ensure they are coordinated with and supportive of the public schools in my district. I will continue to stay active with the educational non-profits I’m currently involved with, particularly the Oakland Schools Foundation, which is bringing significant private resources and support to Oakland public schools serving low-income students.

I attest that the above answers represent my actions and beliefs, are now part of my public record, and may be used by Great Oakland Public Schools.



Signature

September 18, 2010
Date

¹ The Education Trust- West. *Oakland Unified School District Education Opportunity Audit Report.2009*

² California Department of Education Educational Demographics Office . Dropouts by Grade OAKLAND UNIFIED (0161259) for the Year 2007-08. 2009