Oakland Unified School District director
candidate questionnaire

Thank you for taking the time to complete The Oaklandside’s 2020 election questionnaire. Please briefly answer each question using no more than 300 words. Please be as specific as possible when discussing policy ideas or positions you’ve taken, or would take, on different issues.

Name: Austin Dannhaus

What district seat are you running for: District 1

1. Please list your age, education, any professional licenses or other relevant credentials, your current occupation, and your neighborhood of residence.

33 years old. BBA - Finance, University of Texas at Austin. PK-3 teacher credential, State of Maryland (not renewed). Currently the owner of a small business based here in Oakland that consults with foundations, nonprofits and mission-driven companies working to improve education and economic opportunity. Volunteer faculty (English 99A) with the Prison University Project at San Quentin. I live in the Longfellow neighborhood.

2. What schools did you attend? What schools do your kids attend?

I’m proud to have attended public schools my entire life. I graduated from Angleton High School in Angleton, TX and attended the University of Texas at Austin - where I was the first person in my family to graduate from college. I don’t currently have children, but I am running for school board in part because my wife and I are starting our family here in Oakland and are committed to sending them to public schools.

3. What qualifies you to run for the school board?

My entire life - through work, volunteerism, and advocacy - has been dedicated to improving our education systems and fighting for educational equity. My time as an elementary school teacher convinced me that public education is our most powerful lever for social, racial and economic justice. Since then, I have been fortunate to work and serve in a number of roles spanning PK-12, postsecondary, and adult education. I began my career as a 3rd grade teacher in a Title 1 school. After my time in the classroom, I’ve worked as a community organizer for the Opportunity Nation campaign, where I organized education and faith-based groups to support the eventual passage of the 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act; as a volunteer high school coach; as an after-school literacy program founder; as a state and federal policy
researcher and advocate; as an advisor to education philanthropies and non-profits; and as a faculty member with the Prison University Project at San Quentin.

I believe I have unique experience as an educator and business owner that combines empathy with a proven ability to lead organizations, develop strategy, and manage finances.

4. Where can voters get more information about your campaign?

www.austinforousd.com

5. What do you think are the biggest issues facing Oakland schools and students right now?

Our first focus must be on fixing the financial and organizational management failures of the central office. We cannot make critical decisions about the district’s future without a clear picture of our finances and absolute confidence in leadership’s ability to manage the district well. Many of these challenges are the result of high leadership turnover and a lack of rigorous oversight of our processes and practices on everything from contracting to curriculum adoption. Until we address these issues, we will continue to see cycles of broken promises, shifting priorities, and state-led decision-making about local matters.

As we address the underlying management challenges, we must also address the structural racism that has created two OUSDs: one that works for wealthier families and one that fails to meet the needs our BIPOC and low-income communities. I will fight to ensure we prioritize resources for students most at risk of falling further behind.

I think high teacher turnover and a lack of support for educators is also a critical issue. We know a teacher is the most important factor in a child’s education. A teacher in the 90th percentile for academic outcomes can lead students to 6 months of additional growth in a single school year. We must support high quality teaching for all of our students if we are going to raise academic achievement.

Finally, I think we have to address the broken political culture and mend the divides that cause us to prioritize politics over progress for our students. As a board member, I’m committed to building bridges and working with a diverse set of stakeholders – not just those who agree with me. We cannot successfully work towards a shared plan or set of priorities without trust, respect, and collaboration.

6. The district has been plagued by financial problems for years. What do you think should be done to put the district on the right track?

We must first confront the reality of our situation and realize that it means we have to make difficult choices about how we use our available resources. As a board member, I will call for an immediate review of all contracts, consulting engagements, and on-going projects above a certain expenditure threshold. I also believe we should use zero-based budgeting at the central
office to review spending annually and not carry programs forward without approval. I believe we should hold leadership accountable for any misuse of funds because every dollar wasted is a dollar that is not invested in our students.

I would also require leadership to implement better financial controls and policies – and work to engage pro-bono support to update our accounting and contracting practices. The district is routinely unable to provide a clear picture of spending, which makes it nearly impossible to plan effectively.

Finally, I would require that any investment have a clear connection to student academic outcomes. As a board member, I would prioritize investments in teachers; facilities; instruction, social, emotional, and physical health; restorative justice; and community engagement.

7. Earlier this year, the school board voted to eliminate the district’s police department. How should the district ensure safety on school campuses?

Evidence confirms that Black and Latinx students are more likely to be disciplined, suspended and arrested in school when police are present. More importantly, the presence of armed officers in schools can decrease the feeling of safety for Black and Latinx students in particular given the long history of police violence against people of color.

I support approaches outlined by organizations such as the Healthy Schools Campaign that call for investments in and reallocation of resources to: social-emotion learning, more counselors in schools and access to mental health services, a focus on creating “positive school climates,” training on trauma-informed care, restorative justice, and programs that address unconscious biases, particularly for school leaders in charge of discipline of students and hiring of faculty.

Policing does not prevent unsafe situations. It only responds to them once they arise, and often in ways that escalate those unsafe situations. These police-free interventions will result in a proactive and not reactive approach to creating safe, healthy schools.

8. How would you improve the district’s COVID-19 response and distance learning curriculum? How should the district decide when to re-open for in-person learning?

A successful distance learning approach must begin with closing the digital divide. While I’m encouraged that the #OaklandUndivided program seems to be progressing well, we must acknowledge that we are late in getting students set up for success and do better to plan ahead and communicate with families – especially in the midst of crisis.

While I do not believe distance learning is a sufficient substitute for in-person instruction, we should take advantage of the ways in which technology enables us to organize instructional resources differently. For example, instead of replicating the structure of a typical school and
class schedule, we can allow teachers who are more comfortable with remote direct instruction to plan engaging lessons while other teachers are freed up to focus on small groups or 1-on-1 coaching. This could be a more efficient way of setting up instructional time as opposed to expecting each teacher to plan and deliver whole group, small group, and 1-on-1 instruction. Removing undue burden from teachers and focusing valuable freed up resources on students who need support most.

Regardless of the specific pedagogical approach we take, we must communicate clearly with families, establish reliable schedules, and be mindful of the additional mental health needs of everyone in the district during this difficult time – especially students with special needs and whose parents are frontline workers.

Our plans for reopening should prioritize safety and public health while we look for every opportunity to get students – especially those most at risk of falling behind – back in a physical learning environment. The district should comply with state guidelines and proactively work to create unique schedules, space utilization plans, and family interaction strategies that limit the health risks of returning to an in-person school day.

9. Does the district have too many school sites for the number of students it serves, and should it close some campuses? Or, should the district maintain all of its current school campuses and prevent closures and mergers? I would need to see additional evidence regarding both the need for and impact of school closures and consolidations to answer definitively. As a board member, I would require an evidence-based approach to facilities planning. That said, the data suggests Oakland has twice as many schools per student compared to similar districts and an average number of students per school that is well below the definition of “small schools” from the NEA.

We can do more to create school sites that have higher enrollment while balancing class size and resource efficiency. Oakland Tech is an example of a large school with a diverse community that is getting excellent academic results for students. Schools like Oakland Tech should be the rule and not the exception in OUSD. They are proof points that we don’t have to have small schools to create great learning environments. If we can work with under-enrolled, under-resourced school communities to design a combined campus that is more diverse and better resourced while maintaining small classes size, I believe families can and should support those plans. In these situations, we must communicate clearly with families, collaborate with community members, plan well in advance, ensure we don’t lose students from the district in the process, and guarantee a better school at the end of the process. If we take this approach and can confidently say closures and consolidations would lead to better schools overall, then I support efforts to revise our facilities footprint.

10. How would you address under-enrollment across the district?
Under-enrollment stems from a number of complex issues. In my conversations with families, the core issue is a lack of confidence that OUSD can provide a quality, safe learning environment for students. If we are going to change that perception, we must demonstrate that we can overcome the political division, leadership turnover, and resource management issues that lead to underperformance.

More specifically, we should ensure that schools have a plan for better engaging with families, reaching out to their local community, collaborating with local leaders about opportunities for improvement. I support a more empathetic approach that would invest families in helping to improve school culture and performance – giving voice and agency to parent and guardians as a valuable part of what makes the school a great place to learn.

11. What role should charter schools play in Oakland’s education landscape? Do you support or oppose the idea of a moratorium on new charter schools?

The board has not approved a new charter school in Oakland since 2016. Given the need for stability in district and the evidence that we have too many schools relative to enrollment districtwide, I do not support approval of new charters. I support AB 1505 which gives school boards more control of charter approval and allows consideration of the financial, academic and facilities impact of charter schools. When considering charter renewal, I will support collaborative, transparent, high-performing charter schools that accept all students and oppose those that do not.

I believe OUSD needs to articulate a clear policy regarding the relationship between district and charter schools and outline expectations for collaboration. Without clear policy, the competitive relationship, which has proven detrimental to Oakland students’ success, between the two will continue. The original intent of charter schools was to have flexibility to explore new approaches to teaching and learning for the purpose of improving district-wide practice. Schools such as NOCCS in District 1 are doing great work around “diversity by design,” for example, and can share what they are learning to support greater diversity in schools across the district.

12. How can the district attract and retain quality teachers?

Teachers are the most important factor in a student’s education. They are talented professionals who deserve to be treated and compensated as such. As a district, we should fully commit to improving the daily instructional magic that takes place in our classrooms and align programs and spending towards that end.

We should look for opportunities to invest in teachers – including increased pay, creative solutions like expanding state tax credits, and providing discounts on local spending for Oakland teachers. We should also focus on investing in professional development and mental health support given the unique challenges of being an educator in Oakland.
13. What policies, if any, should OUSD implement to create more integrated schools?

The evidence of the benefits of school integration is clear – from improved academic outcomes to increased college enrollment to reductions in bias. Oakland is the most diverse city in California, and I believe our schools must reflect that diversity. We should look to other successful efforts at integration in places like San Antonio, TX to guide our work in creating more racially and socio-economically diverse schools. Promising practices for Oakland to consider include: improving attendance zoning, offering specialized academic programs, expanding family engagement programs, and creating target enrollment metrics that lead to diversity by design.

14. What needs should Oakland schools fulfill to become quality community schools?

The word, “community” carries many meanings in Oakland education discussions. For some, it means “small, neighborhood” schools; for others, it implies a certain set of programming and support services. In my view, the most important definition of “community school” is one that is shaped by input from the families and community members who are a part of the schools. It means giving each school the flexibility to decide what will work best for its students based on input from all stakeholders. This approach requires a framework for community collaboration, a commitment to site-based budgeting, and strong school leadership that can turn community desires into a clear academic and school culture plan.