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:
Sam Davis

What district seat are you running for:
District 1

1. Why are you running for Oakland Unified School District’s board of education?

To put families and educators back at the center of decision-making about our schools, because we are the ones that know best what our students need to succeed.

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

I am 47 years old, and have a BA in Math from UC Berkeley and an MA in Applied Math from Cal State East Bay. I also did graduate work at Cal State LA in education that led to a California adult education credential. I am currently an Education Analyst at the University of California and I live in the Golden Gate neighborhood of Northwest Oakland.

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

I grew up in Queens, NY, where I went to the United Nations elementary school until 6th grade, and then public school for middle and high school. As mentioned above, I went to UC Berkeley for my undergraduate degree, and did graduate work at Cal State LA and Cal State East Bay.

I have one child who went to Manzanita Seed Elementary School and Claremont Middle School, and just started at Oakland Tech HS in 9th grade this month.
4. What qualifies you to run for the school board?

Parents and teachers know first-hand the issues in the schools, and what kinds of changes will help our students. I have been in the Oakland schools as a public school parent, and before that a teacher, for 17 years. As active parents, we went to school board meetings innumerable times to advocate for protecting school site budgets when cuts were being made. We advocated for big changes, like Measure N (Linked Learning), which raised graduation rates across the city, as well as leading with many other volunteer projects, policy initiatives, and ballot measures over the years. Through this work I developed relationships across the district, learned what works and doesn’t in our schools, and saw the importance of involving families and school staff in creating policy if it is to take root and create lasting change in OUSD.

Much of my volunteer work has been with Faith in Action East Bay, formerly OCO, where I serve on the board of directors. I also have experience as a member and site representative for OEA from my time as a teacher.

Over the past year and a half, I have been developing relationships with parents and educators at every public school in District 1. This district can learn a lot from other parts of Oakland where parent organizations are more diverse, and there are more systems to lift up the voices of parents of color. As the Family Outreach Coordinator at Manzanita Seed Elementary for three years, I learned a great deal about supporting families of color at schools.

Finally, in my professional life at UC, I have worked for 5 years on the Transcript Evaluation Service, a data project to increase college eligibility for historically underserved students. This gives me experience in analyzing, understanding and presenting numerical data to the public.

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

www.samdavisforoaklandschools.org

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

The pandemic has exposed even more starkly the inequities in our society and in our schools. The biggest issue is lack of funding for education, since California is 41st out of 50 states in per-pupil funding. Secondly, our enrollment system creates tremendous concentrations of need at some schools, and concentration of privilege at others. This includes charter schools, since many do not serve students with special needs, newcomer students, and other groups at the same rate as district schools.
Structural racism and income inequality are the root causes of inequity that our schools do much to overcome. Yet they could do more. Some of the solutions are: disrupting the current patterns of enrollment inequality; recruiting more teachers and staff of color in our schools and creating more pathways for classified staff to move into teaching roles; and using an equity formula for allocating school budgets.

Another enormous issue in our schools is teacher and staff retention. This is partly due to the district’s lower pay scale, but schools have different turnover rates based on their school culture and climate. We need to incentivize teachers to stay at flatlands schools, so that we don’t see concentrations of experienced teachers at schools in the hills.

If there was more trust in the district, and specifically better relationships between the board and labor, we could resolve our problems more quickly. When questionable financial practices are a thing of the past, and there is real transparency and community engagement in our budgeting and decision-making, then there will be more unity of purpose and an ability to move forward together to address the big issues we confront.

7. 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?

Every penny of district funds should be spent wisely to help our students succeed. Yet for years OUSD has gone from crisis to crisis, amid many allegations of improprieties and poor decisions. It is clear Superintendent Johnson-Trammell has made big strides towards improving financial management after the misdeeds of the previous superintendent and CBO. And I am hopeful that the new CBO, Lisa Grant-Dawson, and COO, Preston Thomas, will continue to move this work in the right direction. But it is not enough to hope; we need a board that will set high standards and hold the superintendent to them. Haven’t your best managers had high expectations of you?

And many bad practices persist: contracts coming to the board for approval after work has already commenced; consultants being hired because of relationships within the district; and paying rent at 1000 Broadway for office space when we have so much vacant space in district-owned buildings. Many question why the district spends so much on consultants and contracts, so I would insist on transparent information on this issue.

Resources should also get pushed out to schools as much as possible to serve students. Schools use “zero-based budgeting,” where their budgets are built from scratch every year based on their needs, yet central office positions and departments are assumed to persist from year to year unless there are cuts. Too often, philanthropy has created positions at the central level that continue even after the funding that created them has expired.
Again, we should have a transparent process where the community and our labor partners can see and weigh in on how we are allocating our funds. This kind of open process will help the board to create a stable, long-term budget and to restore trust in the district’s finances.

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

Students feel safe when they know that issues and conflicts they have with other students (and adults) are being addressed by the adults who have caring, trusting relationships with them. That's why initiatives like Restorative Justice are popular and successful at school sites. We need to continue to train teachers and staff, especially our (unarmed) school safety officers, in restorative justice, implicit bias, and treating student trauma, so that they can address the root issues that cause discipline issues at schools, and continue to reduce suspension rates. Some of the almost two million dollars that was being spent on a handful of school police officers will go a long way in supporting this training.

Again, it is important to push this expertise and these resources out to school sites, because only staff with caring relationships with students will be able to implement restorative justice well.

We also need to have a safety plan for those situations when 911 is called from a school site. I have seen this happen both needlessly and also in cases of real emergency. The district should work with the city Police Commission to establish clear protocols of which calls will lead to OPD going to campus, and which won’t. Across the country, too many tragic situations have resulted when police are unnecessarily called in to discipline students; at the same time, if an active shooter is on campus, of course police should go immediately. We are lucky in Oakland to have a strong Police Commission that can work with the district to establish clear rules, as well as discipline for situations where OPD responds inappropriately.

9. 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?

Students need as much academic and social interaction as possible during this difficult time. The district should use afterschool partners, substitute teachers, and community organizations to provide more online study group support for students. There should also be partnerships to support psychological health.

Teachers should organize study groups among their students, which can meet as ‘pods’ either in-person outdoors or virtually, supervised by parent volunteers or other school staff. An equity
lens should be used when organizing these groups, so that nobody is left out and groups don’t form in ways that worsen racial, class, gender and other dynamics in the classroom.

There should also be trainings available for family members of young students on how to use the technology. Ideally this would be a ‘train-the-trainer’ model so that family volunteers can spread the information to others.

All students should be required by their teachers to tutor younger students. One of the benefits of Zoom is the ability to bring together students from different campuses in a way that was previously unimaginable. Teachers could be teamed up to facilitate this process, and again parent volunteers can help.

All of this will cost money to organize, but luckily there is about $50 million in coronavirus relief funds available to the district to spend on these needs. Assuming a new federal administration, hopefully additional funding will be forthcoming in the new year.

Obviously we can’t return to schools until infection rates are much lower. Sadly our whole planet is experimenting with this question right now, and we will know much more in two months about what kinds of in-person instruction are safe. We should follow the recommendations of health experts based on what has succeeded and failed in school districts across the country that are experimenting with this question as we speak.

10. 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?

Closing a school is very painful to its families, educators, and neighborhood, and it should be the last resort when no other solution is possible. My neighborhood just lost its public school on the Santa Fe campus for a second time (Santa Fe closed in 2012 and reopened during the Glenview renovations from 2016-20), and we felt its absence keenly. The lack of a neighborhood public school was one reason we drove across town to Manzanita SEED for 6 years.

As I talked to families and school staff over the past year about this issue, I heard that the district argument was that combining schools would free up resources to allow schools to be more successful. But teachers, who are usually very aware of the resources at their sites, did not believe that argument. Even teachers at Elmhurst United, which had just gone through the process, said that this was not their experience. Until the district can convince teachers that consolidating schools will bring them more resources, rather than driving families from the district so that there are actually fewer resources available, this project will continue to cause only conflict and contribute to the negative cycle that the district is experiencing.
In the end, the community needs to make these decisions together. If we as a community choose to prioritize many small schools over fewer larger schools, that is a choice we can make about how to allocate our resources. As long as these decisions are forced upon the community in a top-down way, however, they will contribute to families continuing to lose trust in the process and leaving the district for charter, private, or neighboring districts.

11. How would you address under-enrollment across the district?

It is surprising how rarely this question is asked, so thank you for raising it. Oakland Unified should have multiple strategies for increasing enrollment. One is simply marketing and recruiting for its schools. Many charter schools and neighboring districts do this, but OUSD schools rarely do. One OUSD principal told me that there are many district and charter elementary schools in her neighborhood, but when she went to preschools to recruit, she saw only charter staff, no other OUSD staff. Another high school administrator told me that district schools usually invite charter schools to their options fairs, but that charters do not reciprocate.

Among young white parents, there are often misperceptions of Oakland schools based on all the stereotypes. There should be a marketing campaign addressing white millennial parents who marched for #BLM asking them to visit Oakland public schools (and not just in the hills). For example, the beautiful HBO documentary about the Martin Luther King Jr. Oratorical Festival could be better used to celebrate the successes of Piedmont Ave Elementary School, which many neighborhood white families do not choose but should.

Finally, in some areas of Oakland (not as much in D1 but definitely in D5 where I used to work), feeder patterns are broken between elementary and middle, and middle and high schools. Students often get split up from their friends in the transitions, due to outdated enrollment maps. Strengthening the feeder patterns would both increase enrollment, and help students with those difficult transitions in their teen years.

12. 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?

All students should have a fair chance at getting the education they need. Yet students with disabilities and newcomer students are very underrepresented in Oakland charter schools. This contributes to the concentration of need at many of our district public schools. (It’s true that there are big disparities between district schools as well, but the district’s need to compete with charters has contributed to that.)

The proliferation of charters has also made it hard for the District to plan and control where schools are located in Oakland: when the Board has denied a charter, it has gotten approved at the county or state level. Charters also have Prop 39 rights to locate on district property. With
the charter system almost half the size of the district, this creates a tremendous level of confusion and duplication of systems. For example, I recently met a North Oakland family who asked me how to get Chromebooks for the new school year. Their children go to Emery HS, Tech, OMI, and NOCCS, which are four different organizations, so each one has a different system for distributing technology.

For all these reasons, it is clear to me that there should be a moratorium on new charter schools. I will also hold charter schools to the letter of the law in AB 1505, expecting clear evidence that they are not pushing out special education or other students in their enrollment, before voting for their renewal.

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

I taught in Union City for two years before coming to Oakland in 2003, excited to come serve this vibrant, diverse, exciting community. California should pass initiatives to fund Oakland to pay teachers more, but until there is greater equality in school funding, OUSD may continue to have lower teacher pay. However, teachers are not motivated only by money: many work in Oakland because of a commitment to racial and economic justice or because they love our town.

We should create more pathways for parents, graduates, classified staff, and other Oakland residents to become teachers. At Oakland International HS, they use Measure N funding to hire instructional aides in every classroom. Many aides eventually become teachers. We have one Education Academy at Skyline HS, and it would be good to have more. People who come to teaching through these pathways are more likely to stay longer.

We should also recruit more teachers of color, who are likely to have deeper relationships with students of color. It’s also important for white students to experience people of color as teachers early in their lives - I know it benefited my son.

By pushing more resources out to school sites, we can have more non-teaching positions for experienced teachers: TSAs, reading and math specialists, etc. Currently, the career path in OUSD after years of teaching is too often to move to a hills school or to take a job in central office. We need to incentivize experienced teachers to stay at schools in the flatlands, so they can mentor newer teachers or become experienced principals.

Finally, by reducing bureaucracy at central office, improving relationships between the district and OEA, and including teachers more in decision-making, we will create a more supportive work climate in OUSD that will lead to less teacher burnout.

14. What policies, if any, should OUSD implement to create more integrated schools?
Research shows that integrated schools benefit students of all races. This is a key moment in history for us to take action to better integrate our schools, given the #BLM movement and its repercussions. However, any reforms need to be done carefully to avoid unintended consequences from parents trying to ‘game’ the system.

Again, reforms will only take root if the community, including the teachers’ union, is involved in developing the changes from the beginning. I was concerned to hear that a committee of parents has been meeting on enrollment issues, and made recommendations to the board, but the process was not well publicized and has caused a lot of false rumors.

The committee did make some good recommendations, many of which I could support, such as giving priority during school assignment based on a student’s feeder school; regional enrollment such as is used in Berkeley; or creating some enrollment slots at schools designated for low-income students. However, again I do not think any of these recommendations will be successful unless there is a better process leading up to them that will create trust and popular support for the proposals. If elected, I would consider it partly my responsibility to make sure that process happens properly in District 1 schools.

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

Schools are so often the place that low-income families go to in order to get so many of their questions answered, because they trust teachers and school staff to know how to navigate our complex government. As a teacher, and later as family outreach coordinator, I connected families to so many different services and resources. Even in the middle of a profound recession, such as the one that we experienced while I was family outreach coordinator, and the one we may be entering now due to the pandemic, schools can be a coordinating place for government and non-profit services. Our Community School Managers at the school sites play an important role in connecting families to services. Many of them have deep connections to their school communities and are playing crucial roles.

If Schools and Communities First passes, or another measure to increase funding for services and education, the school board should advocate that the county devote a significant portion of those funds for youth and families, and connect those services to schools, meaning deep partnerships and positions that work on or near school campuses. We should have better communication between city agencies like our libraries and rec centers and our schools.

We should continue to pursue philanthropy and revenue measures to support coordination of these services out of our schools, such as has been provided by Kaiser in our school health centers.
Again, it is shameful that California devotes so little funding to education compared to other states. With appropriate funding, there are so many other services we could support for our students and families.