

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: Leroy Gaines

What district seat are you running for: Oakland District 5 School Board

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

For 9 years, I was principal at ACORN Woodland with my head down. Working with my teachers, parents, and students, I focused only on policies and systems that directly impacted the classroom. It's clear to me now though, that there is a huge potential for impact in having someone like myself on the School Board who has experience running and creating budgets at the school level, has demonstrated results driving literacy rates for students of color, and has led non-profits that recruit, develop, and retain teachers and principals. This is a challenging and pivotal moment for OUSD, as 4 of the 7 school board members are stepping down and the District is facing a massive financial crisis. At this moment, I feel called to represent East Oakland students and families on the School Board to ensure that decisions are made equitably and responsibly with their input.

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

I'm 40 and have a BA from Bowdoin College and an MA from Columbia University Teachers College. I am an Executive Director at New Leaders and live in the Fruitvale. I have a Multiple Subject Teaching Credential and an Administrative Services Credential.

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

I attended Holyoke High School and Northfield Mount Hermon in Massachusetts, where I grew up.

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

I became a teacher out of college and saw firsthand the power of teaching and the power of educators to impact children's lives. After four years in the classroom in San Jose, I joined Partners for School Innovation, an organization lauded for using data to guide teachers and schools in inquiry and research. I finally came to Oakland and became an elementary principal at ACORN Woodland for nine years. As an OUSD principal, mentor principal of other OUSD leaders, Executive Principal, and member of the United Administrators of Oakland Schools (UAOS) Executive Committee, I was able to understand the massive challenges facing the Oakland Unified School District and the opportunities to creatively and strategically address those challenges. I was recognized as Principal of the Year by OUSD and my East Oakland school was named a California Distinguished School by the California Department of Education. One of my proudest moments was being one of two California leaders ever recognized by the Human Rights Campaign for my work in facilitating an inclusive learning community for children, ensuring that LGBTQ youth felt safe and connected. I am running for School Board because the challenges confronting the Oakland Unified School District require direct experience addressing those challenges. As a seasoned principal, I understand what schools need to recruit, develop, and retain high-quality and diverse staff. I understand what it takes to truly accelerate academic outcomes and facilitate joyful and inclusive learning.

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

My facebook page, Leroy Gaiens for Oakland School Board, and my website www.leroygaines4oakland.net

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

Across the board, our students are not succeeding to the standard we should expect. Early literacy is one of the greatest indicators of later academic success and our students' ability to have active choice in their life paths. A hugely disappointing portion of our students aren't reading at grade level in elementary school, which has implications for the rest of their academic journey. The second most pressing issue is our financial instability. Too often, new superintendents, board members, or other decision-makers bring in a fancy new program or process that costs a lot of money, takes tons of time to on-board, and doesn't end up impacting students in the desired way. Our district has to have the discipline to be committed to a few initiatives, like early literacy, and strategically use resources on practices that will actually impact the classroom.

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?

Principals recognize that the district was cutting things that were needed and investing in places that we didn't. It's important to monitor our investments and be critical of if the service we are

providing is having the impact we expect. We need a culture of being invested in children and making sure every dollar spent is impacting student learning. It's critical that we align with best accounting practices and have an excess to account for unforeseen issues that pop up. Finally, and most centrally, we need our schools to be fully enrolled. If OUSD continues to lose students to other districts or private schools, we will never fix our financial problem. The central question must continue to be how we can improve the instruction at all of our schools because this will also bring more students and dollars back to the district.

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

We must work with all stakeholders, including families and school site leaders to assess what safety concerns exist at specific schools sites. I'm excited to reimagine what safety looks like at Oakland schools, specifically in implementing a higher degree of restorative justice practices to reduce suspensions across the district. Working with communities to listen to their voice and assess their needs is critical in this decision-making process.

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?

We must continue to follow the guidance from health officials and the direction of the State Department of Education. Additionally, once it is safe and with a phased reopening, I would advocate for the most vulnerable students to be able to return to school first, namely students with IEP's, English Language Learners, and our unhoused students. Overall, I have been so impressed with our teachers. They are rocking it. They've completely pivoted on a dime to shift to distance learning and support all students to the best of their ability. We did an awesome job making sure students and families were fed. While we undertook a tremendous effort to get every student the hardware needed to access content, that is not universal and there is still a need for us to find answers to universal access to the internet. We could also do more to help parents supplement their kids' learning at this time, in addition to supporting parents with childcare issues.

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?

The pandemic has changed everything. We shouldn't be opening or closing any schools at this time. A year from now, things might look different. Our budget could shift for better or for worse. We would all love to have small schools and to never close any schools, but we can't afford to maintain the number of buildings we currently have. It is likely that after the pandemic has ended, there will be a need to make the difficult and impactful decision to close schools in order to better serve all students across the district.

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

Under-enrollment primarily occurs because families are taking their students to private schools or to different school districts. We have to attract families back to OUSD. Oakland has so many great schools and great teachers; OUSD is a legit education powerhouse but we don't do a good job shining light on these. Our language programs, for example, have huge demands. An adequately enrolled district directly impacts our financial issues and is a direct result of instructional excellence. Everything starts with recruiting, supporting, and retaining our teachers.

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?

I was principal of a district school in East Oakland for 9 years, but it is not the role of a School Board member to attempt to win a debate on charter vs. district schools. I'm here to listen to the voters in District 5 and ensure that all students receive an excellent education. District 5 has a significant number of charter schools and about one third of all Oakland students attend charter schools. Parents began pulling students out of district schools and enrolling them in charter schools in the 90's; OUSD has been failing Oakland students before charter schools existed. My job is to listen to teachers and families and ensure all students receive an excellent education. I don't think we should be opening any new schools right now, charter or district.

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

Teachers need to be paid, respected, and developed like professionals. Two pipelines that I devoted time and resources to at ACORN Woodland were supporting classified staff members in becoming teachers and supporting teachers in becoming administrators. A higher proportion of credentialed staff members are from Oakland and represent the racial diversity of our students than do our teachers. Working with these staff members at my school to encourage, support, and train them through the process of receiving their teaching credential was an important step towards attracting excellent teachers that have shared backgrounds as our students. The second pipeline was supporting great teachers at my school who wanted to be principals. Providing opportunities for these teachers to be instructional coaches, sit on leadership committees, oversee parent volunteer efforts, and hold other important roles, set them up for success in pursuing their administrative credentials. Importantly, these experiences also increased their likelihood of staying in OUSD as principals.

14. What policies, if any, should OUSD implement to create more integrated schools?

We know that integrated schools are proven to improve outcomes for all students. The process of integrating, though, can be incredibly difficult. My family experienced forced integration in Boston and it was horrible and dangerous for me and my siblings. My mom moved us because of it and what became my hometown of Holyoke, Mass integrated communities by developing low income housing in wealthier white neighborhoods. This made it so we went to our community

schools that were integrated. This process was significantly more beneficial for me and other students of color.

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

The goal is to have an excellent school in every neighborhood. That means investing in teachers and staff, prioritizing policies and systems that directly impact instruction, and ensuring a streamlined and sensible budget. The Board's decisions should primarily take into consideration the needs of our most vulnerable students, including access to technology and socioemotional support.