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: Dr. Clifford Thompson

What district seat are you running for: School Board District 7

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

After researching the pressing issues of families in East Oakland, I decided that I could bring new and innovative insight to the Board that would add depth to decision making and policy establishment. The following are my reasons for running for school board.

a. There needs to be a voice of someone who has taught in k-12, been an administrator, a county coordinator, and taught at the college level. I have done all three and was very successful at all three. Additionally, I returned to the classroom and am presently teaching 5th grade. Also, I have an acute understanding of quality indicators of a successful school, including data analysis and disaggregation, effective decision-making, strategic financial analysis, and instructional strategies.

b. Champion issues of educational equity for all students. Unfortunately, there seems to be a culture of those who are afforded advanced educational opportunity and those who are not. I will help to guarantee that equitable opportunity is afforded all students, while keeping in mind BP 6005 and BP 6006.

c. Understanding how to allocate finances, while making certain that reserves are maintained, is essential in order for any organization to remain viable. I will make certain that we get on the path to being solvent.

1. Please list your age, education, any professional licenses or other relevant credentials, your current occupation, and your neighborhood of residence.
I am 66 years old. My educational career spans several years. I attended UC Davis where I earned my first BA, which was in French and Rhetoric. Later, I received my first teaching credential which was a single subject in French. In 1981, I relocated to East Oakland, where I have been for the last 40 years, and enrolled in Cal State Hayward and received another BA, teaching credential and a Masters in Administration and Supervision. In 1995, I enrolled in USF and earned my doctorate in Education in 1999.

I also hold a Masters in theology from Fuller Seminary. I went on to earn my doctorate in theology attending such school as Regent University and ultimately East Bay Theological Seminary. Additionally, I am presently working on a PhD in higher education.

I am a fifth grade teacher and reside in the East Oakland area.

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

I attended school (k-12) in Oroville, CA. My son attended school in Oakland and eventually graduated for Skyline High School.

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

When my mom passed away I was in middle school, I went to a counselor at school who guided me throughout high school. She became a mother figure to me and believed in me. She saw me through to my successful application to college as the first in my family to attend college. I went onto a career as a teacher and administrator. I believe our educational system needs to champion each child in Oakland and make sure they have the support they need to succeed. I might not be here without that champion. (1) I want to be the voice on the board who champions educational equity for the students who have been most underserved (2) I’m running because after my 20 years in the classroom, there needs to be a voice for someone who has K-12 teaching experience (3) I oversaw several budget and want to make sure we are in a solid position with our district finances. (4) Let students know that they have a champion in me as one of their board members.

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

They can visit my website at clif4oaklandschool.org.
5. What do you think are the biggest issues facing Oakland schools and students right now?

The biggest issues facing Oakland schools and students are:

- (1) Safety/COVID,
- (2) Equity of Access to a Viable Curriculum,
- (3) Listening the Voice of the Underrepresented,
- (4) Budget/Financial Stability, and
- (5) Defunding the Police/Restorative Justice.

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?

I think the most significant drivers of the current crisis rest on three primary issues. They are (1) approving too many outside contracts, (2) sustaining the operation of failing schools, and (3) losing sight of the state mandated reserves. Actually, all three circumstances position the district to operate from a deficit model instead of robust positive position.

As a board member it would be incumbent on me to establish policy that would refocus our attention on highly sustainable schools, sound academic programs, and prudent financial responsibility. Additionally, I would use my skill in building relationships and organizing community efforts to refocus stakeholder vision toward financial solvency. All of this would require the “tightening of the belt” until we have gotten a handle on things.

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

I am not sure that I would completely abolish the police force. To be sure, there are some changes in the police force that have to be made. Unfortunately, this society is not ready for the total abolishment of the police force. However, that is a concept that we should work toward achieving.

I am in total agreement that we should reevaluate the number of dollars allocated to the police and perhaps, redirect some to other strategic operations, such as counseling, rehabilitation, and other personnel services. Additionally, actions such
as singling out a certain race of individuals is totally inappropriate. However, I am of the belief that doing so is a product of long standing systemic racism which must be dismantled. That can only be achieved by everyone having the long, hard, courageous conversations and pledging to recalibrate appropriately.

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?

This pandemic highlighted the inherent inequity that exists in our district. It showed that certain students and families have the resources/accessibility to the necessary tools to continue the educative process. Conversely, the light was shined on those who lack the resources/accessibility. Unfortunately, the hardest hit subgroups are those who have traditionally been underserved.

A major concern that I have is the delivery of services to all students including Special Ed, Homeless, Foster Youth, LGBTQx, and others. In other words, more effective instructional time using formative measurements must be implemented to guide instruction.

I must acknowledge that the District moved to provided resources to all students, however, it was not done according to the timeline I would have implemented. That said, the move to online learning was not smoothly accomplished. I think structured adequate processes were not established to address issues of the pandemic. I would have established a team to preempt the aforementioned situations. In other words, predictive planning should always be part of any strategy. Additionally, I think we need to follow the instructions of the CDC and the County. Also, I would maintain intense communication and connection with the community, including the religious community, medical facilities, teachers and other staff unions, and after school programs.

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?

Yes, the District has too many school sites for the number of students it serves. As a school board member I would look at economies to scales and let it be part of the conversation that is had relative to combining school sites until there is hard data to support expanding.
10. How would you address under-enrollment across the district?

I believe under enrollment is a crucial issue facing many of our schools. I think addressing under enrollment require taking a bold stance. I would do the following;

(1) I would call it out as a need to be addressed. Research proves that there is a direct relationship between performance and attendance.

(2) I would look at redirecting some of the funds from defunding the police to attendance (ADA) issues.

(3) I would involve our counseling department in ascertaining the reasons for non-attendance.

(4) I would evoke BP 5113.1.

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?

I personally believe we have taken the argument of Charters vs. District Schools out of context. Instead of looking at the quality of education being provided, we have relegated ourselves to acrimonious bickering that steers us away for the crux of the matter (student achievement) and plunges us into the depths of despair. I believe we should look at what is working and duplicate it throughout the district for all of our students, whether in a charter school or district school. Regardless of the school’s name, if the program is not benefitting students we should jettison what it has to offer and effectively work with it to adjust its path.

Having been an administrator in both settings, I am willing to consider the restructuring of both if either is not producing the correct outcomes. At the present time we do not need additional schools. We have to work with the ones we have and guarantee they provide excellent, robust, engaging education for our students.

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

As a current practitioner, I am aware of what teachers are looking for. Therefore in order to retain and attract teachers we must:

(1) Ensure the classroom environment is conducive to teaching and learning,

(2) Create an environment where the needs of the whole child is addressed,

(3) Provide opportunities for continual professional development for teachers,
(4) Offer a competitive salary, especially considering the high cost of living in the Bay Area.

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

I am especially would like to see BP 5032 acted upon and discussed often. Also, I think BP policies 6005 and 6006 should always be part of the conversation.

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

I know Oakland students can achieve to high standards because I have done it. Many years ago when I started out as a new classroom teacher, my students consistently achieved above state standards. As, I climbed the ladder and assumed the role of Teacher on Special Assignment (TSA), assistant principal, principal, and county coordinator of secondary schools I continued to lead schools to achieve outstanding results. However, I decided to take all of the experience and return to the classroom where I could directly impact student learning on a daily basis. That is where I am now in a Richmond school very similar to those in District 7. I can proudly say that last year 80% of my students met or exceeded their targets in reading in only six months.

Therefore, the needs that Oakland schools must embrace to become quality community schools are:
(1) Ensure that quality is afforded all students, regardless of the school’s location,
(2) Utilize educational strategies that result in high student achievement,
(3) Consistently monitor and prioritize funding to invest in academics, and
(4) Identify and emulate programs and schools across the district that are getting positive results.

We need to come together with our best thinking: East and West, Flatland and Hills, District and Charters. Our kids deserve nothing less.