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: Victor Javier Valerio

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

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

Our school district is at a critical juncture. Never before have there been four (4) open school board seats. Last year, the Alameda Grand Jury released a report on a broken administrative culture in OUSD that results in millions of dollars wasted every year. We don’t have millions to waste. I’m running for the school board because East Oakland is my community and we deserve a school district that is transparent, collectively accountable, and visionary to strong neighborhood schools where parents can entrust their children to attend.

I grew up in East Oakland and attended Oakland public schools. I am the first generation of a Mexican family that emigrated to the Bay Area in search of a good life for their children. Both my parents worked hard and striven to make ends meet. Education was important to them and they made sure their children graduated from High school and college. I believe in public education, people having a chance to succeed, and a hard work ethic.

Today I work as a project engineer with SFMTA. I work on transportation projects ensuring their completion and functionality via engineering and management. I am also a commissioner for the Independent Citizen Bond Oversight Committee for Measures A, B and J. I am aware of the obstacles the school district faces. I have observed the proliferation of charter schools in Oakland that has proven detrimental that lead to misguided school closures without the stewardship to address broad spectrum of fiscal solvency. I believe as School Board Director I can provide the history, the experience in management, student experience, and community background to help redirect the leadership role of the school board and reevaluate the course of action needed to strengthen public education for all students.
2. Please list your age, education, any professional licenses or other relevant credentials, your current occupation, and your neighborhood of residence.

- I am 37 years old.
- I graduated from San Francisco State University.
- Double Majored in Civil Engineering and Political Science.
- I am a Transportation Project Engineer for the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency.
- Member of the Citizen Oversight Committee for Bonds A, B, and J for OUSD.
- I live in the Webster Neighborhood in District 7 of Oakland, CA.

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

   I attended Lazear Elementary, Oakland Charter Academy (formerly Jingletown Charter), and Fremont High School.

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

   I am the right person to represent District 7 because I am familiar with crisis management and deeply understand the diverse communities that make Oakland.

   I have been active in community discussions since I was in Junior High School. As a student at Fremont High School (1997–2001), I was part of an all-city council and witnessed the role and dynamic between the school board and the superintendent. I further developed my knowledge of budgets and how to read them by serving as an intern and assistant on policy for the Energy Commission and Assembly Pro Tempore during the State Budget Crisis in 2011–2012.

   As school board director, firstly, I will read and listen from studies, community members and history. I will re-evaluate previous votes and on current data and budget projections to make the right decisions. Secondly, I will hold community meetings more frequently to hear from parents, teachers, and students at the school sites. I will work and collaborate to establish an independent committee for Ethics, Transparency and Accountability in the school district with legal advisor support (independent from the superintendent’s office); and requiring internal controls as checkpoints for best management and informed decision-making.

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

   Voters can find information at my website, Facebook page, and Twitter.
   Website: https://valerioforoakland.nationbuilder.com/
   Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/Valerio-For-OUSD-2020-110526173817752
   Twitter: @OaklandValerio
6. What do you think are the biggest issues facing Oakland schools and students right now?

The school district needs to provide school site support for Health and Safety Plan during the pandemic environment and other emergencies, increased student enrollment, revenue generation for fiscal solvency and program funding, internal controls for best management practices, outreach to Bay Area industries for vocational job placement and apprenticeship programs in collaboration with the City for students, Academic and Health Support centers at school sites, Site Based Management Teams to collect community input, and a structural apparatus to assure transparency, accountability, and ethics for oversight in the day-to-day operations of the school district. Collective accountability must be the approach and student's interest in an attainable education must be the bottom line.

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?

OUSD's financial crisis did not happen overnight and it existed before COVID-19. Since the passage of Proposition 13 (1978), California divested from public education and became the wealthiest state with the lowest per-pupil spending in the nation. Locally, the District has suffered from a lack of consistent leadership, lack of collective accountability, and an unwillingness to restructure implementing internal controls and oversight. Fiscal solvency is following the mathematical equation of revenue and expenses. It is a vision to increase revenue to improve dilapidating infrastructure, provide student resources as clinics, tutoring, and mental health services. And, an extensive collaborative network and investment by local industries for developing job placement programs for students.

As a board member, it is necessary to reevaluate the basis of budgetary items that are not restricted and assure the expenditure is working for students by establishing an oversight rubric on its impact. First, avoid school closures and divesting from our district-run neighborhood schools by any means. Reevaluate and find revenue sources to increase funding and investment in student programs. Create an office for student enrollment that provides campus support to increase feeder patterns to district-run neighborhood schools. And, Strengthen and Establish oversight bodies within the school district that engages with community, students, and parents in the decision-making process.

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

I never understood why the school district had to establish its own police force within the district administration level. Considering the budget constraints and expenditure of $6 million that can be directed to support programs the school board voted to keep that
expense. I believe the expenditure for the police force should be carried largely by the City. Student safety and protection is a priority where school sites can house a dispatch center but not at the current cost. I support to stop police abuse, an end to criminalization of black and brown students in the Oakland Unified School District, alternative models for school safety, and a re-evaluation to programs that support policies and practices within OUSD that does not endanger student’s safety.

I also believe that there must be an existence of a respectful and amicable relationship with school or city police. I believe police presence is essential when induced violence is provoked at school sites by gangs, or if teachers need support to stop physical confrontations. We have all witnessed teachers and students assaulted, threatened, robbed or harrassed. I believe the police force must be invested in their community to gain trust and respect, therefore police officers must understand the neighborhood, share time at school sites, live in Oakland, and volunteer in anti-criminalization student programs to engage with community partners, parents and students.

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?

I must emphasize that online learning will not replace the quintessential experience of a classroom and community building. The online learning is meant to provide support during these unprecedented times for safety and health reasons and a future access to school resources. The pandemic has exposed the inequity that exists in Oakland more than before where 20 percent of students do not have online access and has already created setbacks in learning. We need to have a comprehensive plan with the resources available to execute learning for all students despite zip codes or special needs. We must not waiver wellbeing for sake of appeasing administrative pressures without proper measures in place for everyone’s well being.

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?

I will work to avoid any further school closures in our school district as it only has fed into our dire fiscal conditions and toward negative narrative on urban public schools. OUSD had struggled to increase resources to provide students the needed support in the past; and the addition of new schools had proven detrimental. There were twenty eight more charter schools added since 2003 and that impacted student enrollment; alongside lack of academic support on school sites, and school closures. In addition, the interim state receivership did not improve fiscal solvency and only reduced responsiveness to the community that in turn installed distrust toward OUSD. The issue has never been too many schools in 2012, but mismanagement.
I will consider the re-evaluation and optimization of current district-run schools sites before closures. The school district has strived in its history to provide numerous school locations to facilitate student attendance and community building. The vanguard to provide strong neighborhood schools must be continued as it serves community building, student academic excellence, engagement, and ownership.

The passage of AB 1505 will help establish equal footing between school models to meet the requisites for better oversight, school site conditions, standards, and management. In the process, we must re-evaluate the purpose of co-location of charter schools with district-run schools. It is the school board’s responsibility to strengthen district-run schools and collaborate with charter schools to serve and benefit Oakland students.

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

As a School Board Director, I will work with the School Board to develop policy to increase student enrollment in our district-run campuses while improving school sites. I will propose and work with the School Board community to determine how schools are defined under-enrolled, re-evaluate the premise of a smaller teacher-to-student ratio in classrooms for implementation, and optimize school properties for present (and future) student enrollment with comprehensive academic support. It is also necessary to collaborate with City and County programs to provide a hub of services to students who need the support. It is a fundamental notion to avoid school closures and invest in capital improvements to increase student enrollment; and improve student learning environments.

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?

Charter schools were meant to innovate methods of pedagogy to improve students’ academic performance that can be adopted districtwide. Charter schools were never meant to substitute district-run schools. I believe in a moratorium of charter schools because it is the local leadership’s responsibility to manage and administer resources to better serve our students. The recent proliferation of charter schools has been detrimental to both the school district’s budget, student’s access to improved learning environments, and student enrollment. Charter schools have a role in our public education but it must be a manageable number; and at the benefit of the overall school educational system to better provide service to our students.

13. How can the district attract and retain quality teachers?
Quality teacher retention is a statewide issue that we have encountered since divestment from public schools in the 1980s. There are factors I propose to help with teacher retention: improved communication, academic support at our school sites, and City and County mental and health services at the school site for student support. One practice that helped improve communication with all stakeholders at the school site in the past was the enactment of Site Based Management teams. Site Based Management teams provided an environment for input and problem solving among teachers, parents, and students. Community ownership is essential where teachers can communicate and feel empowered in the decision-making process.

As a board member, I will listen to the site based management teams to reevaluate the basis of budgetary items that are not restricted and assure the expenditure is working for students by establishing an oversight rubric on its impact. To work with the School Board to avoid school closures and divesting from our district-run neighborhood schools by any means. Implementing transparency to reevaluate and find revenue sources to increase funding; investment in student programs; and keep good teachers. Create an office for student enrollment that provides campus support to increase feeder patterns to district-run neighborhood schools. And, strengthen communication and accountability with the community.

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

As a School Board Director, I will work with the School Board, and Superintendent, to address the inequities of our neighborhood schools by integrating quality learning with student support programs. My understanding of integrated schools is that all schools equate in safety, a positive and safe environment, and students being academically supported despite neighborhood incomes. These efforts include bridging the digital divide, investing in student academic support services, learning resource centers, and developing a student support plan in low performing schools. These improvements will then assure higher graduation rates, skilled and professional development, and a thriving community.

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

As a School Board Director, I view the feasibility of an overall quality community school district by the adoption of oversight of all public schools. For a community school district to succeed, it is necessary to require charter schools meet the same administrative requisites and policy as district-run schools with the exception of the flexibility to their pedagogy methods (if deemed beneficial to student learning and teaching improvements). It is important to recognize that the school board is responsible for fiscal solvency, and investment, in our current district-run schools. That requires a cap on the number of charter schools. A history of divestment has meant that public education requires current (and additional) resources to best serve our students. Responsible
oversight on fiscal management, collaboration, and collective accountability to our communities is a must. OUSD has a responsibility to its students and it requires complete oversight of its jurisdiction and to exercise local control.