



## Empower Oakland 2024 Candidate Questionnaire

*Empower Oakland is a movement fueled by Oakland residents who recognize that “business as usual politics” will only further perpetuate Oakland’s downward spiral. We believe in empowering Oaklanders to amplify their collective voices for greater political impact and influence.*

*All submissions will be unedited for spelling, grammar, and format and published on [empoweroakland.com](http://empoweroakland.com) to educate Oakland voters. Empower Oakland will also use candidate submissions to help inform their Candidate Endorsement process. Candidates may be asked to interview in-person with the Empower Oakland Endorsement Committee. Final endorsement decisions will be made by early September.*

*Please email the completed questionnaire as a .doc or .pdf document to [info@empoweroakland.com](mailto:info@empoweroakland.com). Due by Friday, August 16th by 6PM.*

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**Candidate Name:** Benjamin Salop

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**Phone Number:** 5108135459

**Office & District Sought:** OUSD School Board Director, District 1

**Campaign Website:** [benforoakland.com](http://benforoakland.com)

**Social Media Handles**

- Twitter:
- Facebook:
- Instagram:
- LinkedIn: <http://linkedin.com/in/benjaminisalop/>
- TikTok:

**Expected total Fundraising Amount:** 75000

**Funds Raised To Date:** 7500



## General Questions

### 1. What is your background/experience in Oakland?

I am a born-and-raised Oaklander and graduate of Melrose Leadership Academy and Oakland Technical High School. As an Oaklander, I've volunteered for countless organizations, served on the youth commissions for OUSD and the City of Oakland, and worked on campaigns for Loren Taylor and Ken Berrick.

### 2. What are the top two challenges facing Oakland today? What are the bright spots?

Right now, one of Oakland's biggest challenges is a loss of faith in what Oakland can be. Crises related to Public Safety — such as the tragic gun violence affecting Oakland families and perpetual cases of property crime throughout the city — as well as the housing crisis have sapped confidence in our Mayor, City Council, District Attorney and School Board to effectively represent Oaklanders and create a safe, livable city for residents. Without trust in the institutions of government that we expect to provide housing, public safety and education, it's hard for businesses to stay open, for families to enroll their children in the school system or for new Oaklanders to move here.

Nevertheless, Oakland is a resilient city, and Oaklanders can't be held down by any challenge. I think we Oaklanders are buoyed by a unique sense of humor — the inclination to make jokes out of our struggles and offer some levity when it's most needed — and this collective spirit keeps us going. Oakland has a vibrant cultural scene and a long and diverse history that we can build upon; regardless of any issues affecting City Hall or concerns about our communities, Oakland is still a social and economic powerhouse. During the worst of the bipping and property crime in 2022, new Oakland festivals, community events and organizations brought tens of thousands of residents out to listen to music, share food and have fun.

### 3. Why are you running for office and why are you uniquely qualified to fulfill the office you are running for at this time?

As a recent OUSD student, I have firsthand experience navigating OUSD bureaucracy. Our School Board has the responsibility to represent Oakland parents, students and teachers — however, we as Oaklanders can see this isn't the case. As the student body president at my high school, I saw how the Board chose an agenda based on interest group perspectives that didn't reflect the issues OUSD's student leaders advocated. We've seen in recent years that Oakland residents demand common-sense policies that get serious on the issues we care about; it's time for Oaklanders to step up and become the leaders we deserve. I'm running for School Board to become part of the next generation of Oakland leaders who will offer real representation to the people.

My experience as an Oakland Student prepares me to be a unique advocate for Oakland parents and students. Understanding the experiences that OUSD families go through every year, I can bring my perspective — and more importantly, uplift the voices of students and families who like me until recently weren't heard by their board — to ensure that our schools meaningfully integrate the goals and ideas of stakeholders.



While student perspectives are important, it's critical to have governing experience, fiscal and legislative knowledge and the understanding of how to enact change. I've put my perspective to use while serving as a commissioner in both OUSD and the City of Oakland, advising both the School Board and City Council on how to amend legislation to reflect youth interests. I've worked in City Hall, attended board meetings and lobbied for OUSD students at the State Capitol. If elected, I'd be ready to leap into this leadership role and immediately begin the work of representing my constituents.

**4. Prior to running for office, how were you involved in local government, School Board, and/or your community? What were your biggest accomplishments?**

In the last few years, I've represented Oakland Tech and Oakland students on the local, state and federal level, coauthoring and cosponsoring legislation designed to help our community. I've met with the Oakland School Board representing LCAP interests, represented students to board meetings as Oakland Tech's student body president, and advised OUSD's own student directors for board meetings to rally support for issues like restorative justice, Foster Youth funding and the Career and Technical Education Hub in downtown Oakland. Concurrently, I served as chair of the Oakland Youth Commission (OYC), where our work focused on civic engagement and municipal transparency. OYC's greatest accomplishments included the passing of the flavored tobacco ban, the development of a citywide civic engagement platform and notably, Oakland Measure QQ, a measure I coauthored and championed in City Hall. On the state level, I've coauthored and cosponsored state legislation like Senate Bill 742 (vaccine access), AB101 (ethnic studies) and AB824 (local School Board student members).

Nevertheless, I believe that public service in our community is the best way to make a real impact. Since a young age, I've volunteered with groups like the Alameda County Food Bank, Studio One, and local environmental/nature preservation clubs. While this work may not be as newsworthy as policy wins, I think my biggest accomplishments are on issues like these — doing my part to help other Oaklanders thrive. I couldn't be more proud to help in beautifying Lake Merritt, helping families learn to paint or teaching math to new students in the District.

## Oakland School Board

**5. What are the highest priority challenges facing Oakland Unified School District (OUSD)?**

Right now, OUSD faces the following challenges:

- Our district is currently facing a significant projected budget deficit and increasing expenses in future years.
- Academic Standards and Graduation rates are below state targets, and critically, the achievement gap between students of color in OUSD schools has widened in recent years.
- Attendance rates have been stagnant and absenteeism is high in many Oakland schools
- Oakland teacher turnover is high, and teachers aren't paid a living wage



- Oakland students don't feel safe in their schools, and recent incidents of violence on campuses are unacceptable.

**6. What is your vision for OUSD in 10 years? What specific and measurable steps will you take to advance toward realizing that vision in the next 4 years?**

In ten years, I envision OUSD schools as paragons of quality education which prepare students for meaningful careers after graduation. I believe that OUSD can provide every student with the resources and facilities they deserve in the next 10 years.

In my time at OUSD, I spent many years in portable or improperly maintained classrooms, where uncomfortable conditions were the norm. No student deserves this outcome. By developing our school sites based on greatest need and replacing seemingly continuous maintenance with capital improvement projects, I hope to develop each site so that it meets the needs of students. Recently, I participated in the process to develop the Career Technical Education (CTE) hub in Downtown Oakland — I believe projects that integrate housing, education and community services on our vacant properties like this one are critical to generate funding, build school sites and redevelop our communities. On the Board, I will work with the facilities committee and local developers to propose projects like Teacher Housing or new libraries alongside housing developments and aim for every vacant school site to be in the development process within five years aimed at developing sites with the greatest need.

On each campus, I hope that we can recruit and retain top-tier staff and provide them with the resources to develop or implement their coursework. In our lower schools, providing funding for field trips, new books, or learning specialists can help offer real-world learning opportunities for students. In our upper schools, these same resources can be dedicated to specialized equipment or software for our linked learning pathways. In many of these cases, educators need small amounts of funding to close the gap or fund an individual effort, and on the Board I will develop a fund for micro-grants and digital resources that teachers can access to deliver top-tier education to their students. For all teachers, I will support cross-departmental relationships to exchange best practices and share knowledge, through a pilot program where students or teachers can spend time on other campuses to collaborate on new ideas.

Critical to these goals is the development of metrics and data to explore and quantify the successes of these programs. OUSD's data dashboard is admirable in its current form — I will expand the data program to further increase transparency and explore adding as much information related to programs and initiatives to this dashboard for students and the community to study.

**7. OUSD student enrollment has declined over the last five years. This is not just an Oakland trend but a trend across the Bay Area region. How do you plan to address declining student enrollment?**



Addressing student enrollment is a multipronged issue. It's hard to figure out what's leading to families leaving our schools, and any actions won't have a measurable effect for several years. However, part of the enrollment decline can be addressed by improving community engagement and trust between our school district and our parents. It's critical that OUSD address this issue by building stronger relationships with our families, our community groups and our local leaders to publicize the successes in OUSD and challenge this prevailing narrative. Many of our community schools outcompete charter programs because of these strong relationships between our educators and the community — I will work to replicate these successes by incorporating parent perspectives and feedback across each school site. On school sites with decreasing enrollment, I will collaborate with parents to explore their requests and concerns, and work to open up OUSD's operations to our parents and families so that they understand our district better and can directly benefit their school.

By expanding the academies improving afterschool programs with new offerings on our campuses, and providing more diverse courses like new Advanced Placement classes and specialized course offerings, we can increase the breadth of curricula on each campus and make OUSD schools more competitive. For our younger students, I will also support new facilities such as outdoor classrooms or libraries to garner public support. Publicizing these programs like the new Biotech component of the Health Academy at Oakland Tech or Skyline High School's coursework related to the Green Academy can attract college and career-minded students.

**8. Please share your perspective on the quantity of public schools in Oakland. Should the district consolidate schools or maintain the current number that exists today?**

The number of school sites operated by OUSD is greater than what our budget can currently fund. Operating more schools than we can fund means that every student receives fewer resources than they deserve, as school site overhead and maintenance costs are spread across further locations. Operating empty seats at schools is simply unfair for every other student who lacks sufficient funding at their campus, and the only option to address this issue is exploring school consolidation. I believe that consolidation should be the last possible resort, and I think it's critical for every neighborhood to have a site for young people to congregate — whether it's a library, a rec center or a school — but if needed, consolidation is a step to explore.

**9. What are the sources of the low literacy and math scores of OUSD students? How can the district meaningfully improve them? What will you specifically do to see that change during your 4 years on the Board?**

Right now, the primary cause of low literacy and math scores across OUSD is a lack of directed resources allocated from early childhood education through secondary education. While OUSD lacks equitable funding in most aspects when compared to wealthier districts like Piedmont or San Ramon USD, we can still invest in more programs that target literacy and math learning, following the successes set by schools like Piedmont Avenue and Melrose Leadership who have overseen increases in test scores.



On the Board, I want to increase the number of parents, community members and older students tutoring OUSD youth while directing resources towards teachers whose classes are not yet approaching grade level. Supporting the efforts of groups like Oakland REACH to include the community in math and english education can connect young people to real-world educational resources and help encourage academic success. I will work collaboratively with our school leaders, outside organizations and our community to enlist supporters and bring more outside support into our classrooms, organizing listening sessions and town halls to identify areas for improvement and then enacting the ideas that parents identify. I will also work to allocate funds dedicated to hiring and retaining tutors and support specialists for these objectives and support our teachers at each grade level to ensure that curricula are designed and updated to support student success.

**10. How will you ensure the equitable education of all students across the district and that prepares every student for college and/or career success?**

A critical component for equitably increasing the success of OUSD is expanding and improving our pathway system so all students are equally served. OUSD's academies have already helped to increase graduation rates and prepare high school students across the board, and it's time to expand these successes to middle school and elementary schools where possible. Improving our math and science curricula in middle schools — offering classes like Claremont's computer graphics courses — is one step, as is expanding reading programs for our youngest students to build academic habits early in partnership with the Oakland public library. Importantly, making sure each school — not just those who can afford for the PTA to fund these programs — is key to an equitable strategy that benefits all students. I will support efforts to bring a school librarian and school library to every elementary school where reading and math are below grade level and seek out grant funding for these programs.

In high schools, expanding our CTE pathways while connecting these programs with resources at our Community Colleges and local Universities is a key step in preparing students for graduation. The current dual enrollment system can be a critical step for student success, but too often it fails to include courses students want to take or is hampered by bureaucracy. As a student, my first course in constitutional law — a dual enrollment course at Oakland Tech — helped shape my college track and is likely the reason I'm running for office today. I will communicate with leaders at UC Berkeley, Cal State East Bay and USF to reestablish and expand partnerships connecting faculty with OUSD teachers — a program at Melrose I benefited from — promote access to concurrent enrollment courses by funding an AC transit pilot for OUSD students and assist our PTAs and teachers with developing and funding new spaces like urban farms and engineering workshops at each campus.

Outside of STEM coursework, expanding career pathways in the humanities like Oakland Tech's paideia program are a step towards my vision of quality schools. The course plans and institutional knowledge developed by generations of teachers in these programs can and should be expanded so every OUSD student can enroll in one of these courses. Our programs like African Male Achievement (AAMA) and Asian Pacific Islander Student Achievement (APISA) have done laudable work to address the inequities between students in OUSD, and they should be supported and integrated within the pathways for these successes to be replicated for all students of color.





**11. What role should charter schools play in Oakland’s education landscape? What do you feel OUSD should do differently as it relates to its oversight and policy-making for charter schools in the district? What should it keep doing? What measurable steps will you take as a board member as it relates to OUSD charter schools?**

I believe that every Oakland student can and should receive a world-class education from our OUSD schools, and I would love for every family to choose OUSD. Charter schools exist because they can offer different styles and pedagogies than OUSD, and many parents believe these schools are the best fit for their children. Even though I would love for every Oakland student to attend a public school, it’s unfair to close charter schools and dismantle the communities that have been built within them. High performing, community driven charter schools have a right to exist within Oakland and have the potential to collaborate meaningfully with OUSD. Nevertheless, OUSD should hold charter schools accountable to the same academic standards as public schools, while considering inclusion and attendance equity in these schools as well as equitable education of special education students in charter schools. If charter schools do not achieve certain metrics for success over time, the Board can revoke that school’s charter; a challenging decision, but one that I believe is right.

As a member of the Board, I would continue the efforts of our current board to ensure each school meets our academic standards and consider financial impacts when overseeing the authorization of new charter schools. I would work with charter leaders to make sure our charter schools work well with OUSD, admitting a representative share of students and sharing resources between our district and charter schools. I wholeheartedly support efforts for stronger collaboration between charters and OUSD, and am open to the idea of incorporating our charters into OUSD to preserve these strong school communities while sharing the costs of each campus evenly. I believe that incorporating Oakland charter schools into the district while actively preserving their independence, student success and distinctive communities is one of the best options to support our charters and our public schools.

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

Oakland’s funding is primarily dependent on Average Daily Attendance — that is, maximizing the number of days each student spends in the classroom will maximize our revenue. Promoting measures to get students in school is the most direct way to increase funding, and continuing our pilot programs and district measures to reduce truancy like the recent direct payment pilot are viable options. Outside of these programs, OUSD should explore every state and federal grant and program available to our district to maximize our revenue.

Even as OUSD faces further deficits, it’s hard to make cuts on top of the measures taken in prior years. Exploring ways to centralize our resources and fairly distribute them across campuses is one of the most important objectives. Building partnerships with other city departments — such as our public libraries or parks and recreation department — is one way to preserve our programming while reducing



expenses. In addition, considering the life-cycle-cost of our facilities and programs is a possible to reduce the long-term expenses within OUSD. OUSD has many underutilized or unutilized parcels of land that could be redeveloped — while preserving a campus or educational presence — to generate funds for the district while reducing current maintenance costs.

On the statewide level, reforming the local control funding formula to address the gap in funding between high income school districts and low income school districts is a necessary step to address OUSD’s budget shortfalls. Coupled with simplifications to the LCAP process to lower the knowledge barrier is a key step to increase community funding. We should allocate funds to school districts based on their needs and reassess our metrics so that students who qualify under multiple categories (like English language learners who also qualify for free lunch) are double counted and provided twice as much funding, building upon Gov. Newsom’s equity multiplier. Even as the district takes measures to reduce our overhead, limit discretionary spending and minimize expenses where possible, it’s difficult for us to balance our budget without working with state and federal leadership. I previously supported Prop 15 (changing property tax assessments) to raise further funding, and while I don’t see new taxes statewide as a short-term option to put the district on the right track, this is an option to explore.

**13. Teachers and staff are the heart of a thriving school district. What specific measures will you take as a School Board member to make OUSD the district of choice for teachers, staff, and other employees?**

OUSD faculty and staff are some of the hardest working educators in the State of California, and supporting our employees is critical to reducing turnover while increasing student success. The key step to making OUSD the district of choice is to increase our pay and benefits. OUSD teacher recruitment is directly correlated with compensation rates since and staff who can afford to live in Oakland will stay to work in Oakland schools. It’s critical to increase salaries and benefits where possible to ensure each staff member is compensated what they deserve. In addition to these measures, developing institutional memory within departments through teacher-to-teacher and staff-to-staff mentorship programs like the Paideia program —anchored by a strong set of experienced educators who train newer teachers to join this cohort — builds faculty relationships and fosters an inclusive community. By developing a strong community, well-developed lesson plans, and a supportive parent network that will advocate and fund the needs of these staff, Paideia has some of the highest retention in the district.

Leveraging the best practices from these successful programs and others is key to improving teacher recruitment and retention. More importantly, incorporating the feedback from teachers and staff can help to identify the successes and opportunities for growth on the district level. As a member of the Board, my responsibility would be to represent Oakland staff throughout the district; connecting successful programs in one school with another is one way that I can ensure each school receives the support it deserves.