



GO Interviews School Board President Gary Yee, District 4

Oakland [School Board President Gary Yee](#) talks about why he ran for School Board, leadership, and building a great school system through great teaching.

“Gary Yee, a lifelong Oakland resident, currently is the Chair of the Education Department at Holy Names College in Oakland. Yee has worked as an educator for thirty years, beginning a career in public education in 1973 as a third grade teacher at Cleveland Elementary School, directing the Gifted and Talented Education Program (1983-85), serving as assistant principal at Franklin Year Round School and Principal at Hillcrest School (1985-90), and Assistant to the Superintendent (1992-1995). Yee served as a captain in the United States Air Force during the Vietnam War era. Yee graduated from Castlemont High School, the University of California at Berkeley (B.A.), California State University at Hayward (Teaching Credential and Masters in Public Administration), and Stanford University (Ed.D.)” Director Yee was first elected to the School Board in 2002 and re-elected in 2006.¹

GO Public Schools wants to help you get “in the know” about Oakland’s public schools. We are interviewing your School Board members to share information with the community about what they do. [Previous interviews include Director Jody London, District 1](#) and [Director David Kakishiba, District 4](#).

Great Oakland Public Schools (GO): What motivated you to run for School Board?

Gary Yee (GY): I have been in the schools for about 20 years. Well, actually, about 40 years - from kindergarten all the way through preparing teachers and principals for Oakland schools. In the middle, I was a teacher, a vice-principal, principal and district administrator. I thought I had something to offer. When you look at school board members, they are typically community activists such as PTA presidents or something like that. Sometimes it’s a small business person, or in the case of Oakland, we’ve often had attorneys. But we have rarely had a professional educator and I thought it was important to have a professional educator’s voice on the Board. Therefore, I felt like I had something to offer. I got my doctorate in administration and policy analysis at

1

<http://publicportal.ousd.k12.ca.us/199410818191577/blank/browse.asp?A=383&BMDRN=2000&BCOB=0&C=56683>

Stanford. I've had a fairly extensive theoretical as well as practical experience with schools and school policy. I felt like the Board was in a place where I could play that out.

GO: Has that worked out, that your experience has been relevant?

GY: Two things happened. When I was running, we had a potential budget surplus of \$17 million. That was in June, and by time I got on the Board, we had a potential \$100 million dollar deficit. So, basically, I was a governing School Board member for about 6 months, and then we asked for a loan from the State. Then we got state administration. So, my experience was more or less in exile for six years, until we figured out how to get some measure of local control back - I think that expertise was unfortunately not widely used by most of the State Administrators. Then, just about every activity or every policy decision focused on a combination of the desire of the state to exercise its educational prerogatives around school reform. Then came a series of fiscal crises, which included paying back the loan, not having a successful audit by the state controller, FCMAT, and assessments of the areas we needed to improve structurally. Finally came the budget crisis of the last couple of years because of the state budget. So, I would say that my perspective wasn't widely considered.

GO: What do you see as your responsibilities as a Board member?

GY: I think three things right now. The first thing is to hire and evaluate the superintendent, to make sure we're fiscally responsible, that we are good trustees of the district's resources, and to provide some transparency and some communication to the public - some honest communication with the public as to what the conditions are in the schools. Not only in the schools, but really to hold in trust the defense of the public good of public schools. I think communicating to the staff the importance of their professional responsibility to hold the public trust seriously, but also communicating to the community that the public schools are a public trust. They are not only a private good, they're a common good.

GO: Do you make a distinction between private and for-profit?

GY: When I talk about public good, I'm not talking about public versus private schools or public versus charter schools. What I think I'm referring to is whether people's disposition around public schooling as a public good is for the common good - it is to develop an effective citizenry. It's to prepare for the long-term future, it's to build community capacity for growth and development and maturity as opposed to schools being a place where parents exercise their right to choose the best possible schooling for their own kid. When I say I private good, I mean parents making decisions about only their child's welfare. That's a very complicated process, and part of a Board member's responsibility is to communicate to people the importance of a public school system for everybody, not only for children and parents, but for seniors and the homeless and for adults without kids and for everyone, that the public school has value for the common good, not just for the individual family or the individual child.

GO: How do you persuade a parent to put this higher good above what's best for their child?

GY: Well, I think the main thing is you rely on the side of parents, especially parents who live in Oakland. The predisposition of living in Oakland is that Oakland's diversity and its longevity as a City is something that they value, and they value for their family. So, if that's in fact the case, then building an entire system ultimately benefits their child too. I was at Montclair school last night, and was struck by what a fine school it is. How delightful it is for parents who live in the Montclair area or for parents who were able to get in by lottery, by choice, to Montclair. I was communicating to the parents there at Montclair that it's really important that every school be of as high quality and as full service as Montclair. If we actually had every school like Montclair school – this is what I was communicating to the parents - then the issues around individual good become irrelevant because everyone has a really high quality school for their own kid. Beyond that, you have a city that is rich, full, vibrant, and well-educated.

GO: What's the minimum amount of time you think it would take to achieve this whole system where every school is good?

GY: We just heard a presentation at the Teaching and Learning Committee yesterday on a really different and refreshing paradigm shift in teaching and learning called [*Teach for Success*](#). It's really trying to identify effective teaching, and so rather than only test scores, or looking at the life circumstances of kids, or only looking at curriculum, it's looking at what effective teaching looks like. I think that's the first step, having some kind of a common agreement on what effective teaching looks like. So then, if you have that (and considering we have effective teaching all over the district), holding that up as model of an end goal, that's one essential component. The second component is providing the necessary complementary or support mechanisms for families and children in distress. I think if you have those two pieces and a good strong parent component, those pieces all make it possible to move within say five to eight years.

The challenge is we're in a financial crisis with the State in terms of its funding of education. So, we are waiting for the reversal of the decline of funding of schools. Maybe a renewed focus by philanthropists on all of our schools, not specific schools, would make it possible. I think the momentum is in the right direction.

What's great about this is that the focus is on what goes on in the classroom. It's not about the structure of schools, whether they should be large or small, whether class size should be large or small, whether we should have centralized or decentralized funding; all those kinds of things are not what the focus is. The focus of *Teaching for Success* is on teaching, and I love that.

GO: What do you think are the qualities of a successful Board member?

GY: I just finished watching a video on leadership done by [Jim March](#), and it was wonderful because the allegory for leadership was Don Quixote, which is kind of

unusual. But, the upshot is that leadership is about commitment, identity, and beauty or joy. A successful Board Member is somebody who demonstrates a long-term commitment despite success or failure - somebody who knows who he is. Everybody can understand exactly who he is and people understand why he acts the way he does. It's somebody who expresses joy and the possibility of a bright future. I think those are the three characteristics. So, the person is not wishy-washy, the person takes responsibility for his actions in a consistent manner with integrity, and a person who is optimistic about the future. I think those are the characteristics of a good Board member.

GO: What do you think is the hardest aspect of being an Oakland school board member?

GY: The first is that you sometimes have to make a decision that is just one vote of seven. The challenge is that if you are not in the majority, you still have a responsibility as a school board member to support the decision of the majority. So it's up to the vote, but when the vote is made, you need to support the majority decision as if it were your own decision.

Second, the political process requires having strong and transparent and reliable policy positions but then also be willing to compromise in order to get the common good.

The third piece is there's a difference between the policy work and constituent work of a Board member. Constituent work has to do with an individual's item, so a resident might be bothered by school bells ringing on the weekend. But on the other hand, we've been spending countless hours on proper language on the parcel tax, which impacts the entire city. So how does a Board member know how to allocate their time? Constituents who will vote for them or what impacts the whole city? How do you balance that out?

Fourth is balancing continuity and change. As a Board director, it's my responsibility as a trustee to promote a certain continuity and stability in the district, reliability in the district. But at the same time, school districts shifts in funding, and people's interest in school reform require you to be at the forefront of change, so it's a balance between maintaining stability and promoting change.

The toughest decisions are personnel decisions, especially the principals. How do we judge whether a principal is an effective principal or not? These last two years there has been a lot of turnover in terms of principals and the really the big question is: did we make good decisions about hiring and supporting and removing principals? And [the Board] we haven't really evaluated whether we did a good job or not making those decisions.

GO: What do you wish the public understood better about the School Board?

GY: I'm on the School Board not because I have political aspirations or because of the modest benefits of a health plan and stipend, but because it's my duty and I want to give

something back to community. People don't necessarily understand how time consuming and personally involving the position is. I think that's a big piece of it.

The other big item is the difference between what a School Board does and what a Superintendent does. In the last 6 years, we've had a State Administrator who served as both the School Board and the Superintendent. So he never had any check and balance. Now we do have a check and balance between the Superintendent and School Board, and it just so happens in most cases we were in very close alignment. I think that healthy tension produces better outcomes. There's a healthy dialogue among the Board and between the Board and Superintendent. That relationship is really critical for the public to understand. The Board should not *be* the Superintendent. The public needs to know that the Board can't just go to the Superintendent and tell him to shut the bells off [that are a nuisance to school neighbors] – that's an administrative function.

GO: What's one of your proudest accomplishments as a School Board member?

GY: Right now, I would say passing the Superintendent's strategic plan with a unanimous vote. Not only is it a high quality plan, but helping the Board come to consensus so we all supported it. Second, is hiring the Superintendent. Third, is stopping the sale of the district's downtown headquarters four years ago.

GO: How has your role changed since OUSD has been back to local control?

GY: First, under State Administration, we all were in an advisory capacity and few of us believed that we were actually being listened to and being taken seriously. We could freely speak our mind on anything. Now what we say matters - we have to be more circumspect about how the public will view our work. We are no longer the opposition to the state administration and we are now the policy makers. From being on the outside to the inside has been a big thing.

Second, organizing ourselves so we act as a board and not as individual board members. The State Administrator promoted us to try and get our agendas done informally rather than public way we do it now.

The third is that there's much more interest and attention by the public in terms of what school board leadership is all about. That heightens the public's attention to our work, which requires us to act more publicly and more responsibly. That public accountability for our actions, that's probably the major difference.

GO: What do you think of the coherent governance policies and how that system is working?

GY: I think I'm really supportive of Coherent Governance because it lays out an appropriate role for an elected School Board vis-à-vis the Superintendent. I think all of that is really great, and it's clear enough that it actually does influence our board's behavior. The challenge of it is that we ourselves as a board need to be coherent. There's

the external coherent governance with the superintendent. The second piece is - how is the Board itself going to operate?

None of this is to say there is not a diversity of opinions. There are strong policy differences across our city. Those differences, when they are raised, require a lot more time for discussion and debate than I think that Coherent Governance assumed. Under Coherent Governance, when we went through the training, the goal of the facilitators was that each board meeting would be no more than 1.5 hours long. But a lot of people have a lot to say, the public and board members want their positions well known. The narrowing down of the Board's differences and public comment has not ever happened. But Coherent Governance has been an important tool between board members and the Superintendent.

I was really skeptical of the charter school movement as being a fundamental change. I thought they were an evolution of the private management of schools which was a phenomenon in the 1980's and early 1990's. Management organizations sought to take over school districts and that movement was a complete failure. Many of us thought charter schools would come, but when they attempted to go to scale, would collapse because of the lack of experience, etc. It seems the charter school movement has a foothold, especially in urban districts.

One of reasons that the charter school movement was difficult for me was because it siphoned off many of the parents who would have been the most helpful in improving the system. Those parents who had strongest voices for the children and capacity to make decisions, instead of fighting, just exited the system, which benefited those parents but not the entire system.

In the short term, a charter school benefits those parents, but it's a net loss for the public school system. If you use the model of Albert Hirschman's [*Exit, Voice and Loyalty*](#), they have exited the system. It is important to keep those voices heard, that's probably the best hope for districts like Oakland to continue to improve. He also talks about loyalty. The reality is people are loyal to the system unconditionally, without voice-- and that doesn't benefit the system.

We need to increase voice, even though it means rancor and make us uncomfortable. My goal is we need to find a way to allow or have people who are in the charter school movement help to inform the improvement of the Oakland school system. This is not about supporting the charter school movement but about how to improve the Oakland public schools. That's so tricky for people to do because it asks people who are outside the system to help with the transformation of the system itself. For instance, David Montes de Oca and the Office of Charter Schools have tried to bring back some of those voices to help constructively improve the traditional school system. That's a good thing to do. Typically, we see the charters advocating for themselves, not for the system as a whole.

My responsibility as a School Board member is to take care of the 109 schools that are the Oakland Public Schools. I'm not on the Board of all these charter schools.

Second, people in the system need to take responsibility for the improvement of the system, and not be satisfied with their individual contentment. Most people in the system feel embattled and defensive. My job is to say no, we want to hear those voices even though it makes us feel uncomfortable. That's an important role for our unions and the Collective bargaining process. Betty Olson-Jones (OEA President) has raised the challenge to use alternative methods besides test scores to measure performance. Under State Administration, test scores were all that mattered. Most teachers operate within their own classroom, so their loyalty is not going to improve the system as a whole. My goal is to improve the system as a whole.

We're now challenging the profession as a whole to speak up around how we should define effective teaching. The reality is, I have a more sympathetic view of the teachers' union in terms of it being able to speak consistently over time. Teachers come and go but Betty Olson-Jones has been consistent over the years for better rounded and more nuanced measure of effectiveness.

I think it's really important for the [teacher effectiveness] commission to create a public square . We need to set a new standard for collaboration and dialogue where it doesn't become a replication of the existing collective bargaining or teacher evaluation process. It has to be like the public square, the good society, use the language of getting together. This is a time to exercise voice, not loyalty and not exit.