

Spencer R. Klein

1) Why do you want to be a School Board Director?

I would like to serve on the school board because I would like to guide the BUSD to help all students. The Berkeley schools serve some kids extremely well, but others fare more poorly. On the school board, I would work to put mechanisms into place to help all children. There are two key aspects to this. The first is to try to put children into appropriate settings for them; the school district is fairly hit-and-miss at this. The second is to provide flexibility when a student ends up someplace that just doesn't work for them, for whatever reason. Here, the district has a pretty dismal record, especially at the high school level. There are indeed resource constraints to consider, but we can certainly do better than we are now. I would also like to diversify the schools educational missions, to provide useful vocational training for those who do not want to go to college. Money isn't everything, but it is worth pointing out that auto body shop workers make more than most college graduates.

2) What strengths would you bring to the School Board?

I have a doctorate in physics, and more than 20 years experience with science education, project planning, budgeting and management. I am currently the principal investigator on 3 grants, totaling over \$400K/year; I am ultimately responsible for all budgeting and managerial decisions based on this money. I have also worked on a number of large, multi-year construction projects, including co-leadership of a \$4M construction subproject; this hardware was completed on-time and on-budget. I supervise scientists and engineers, and mentor graduate and undergraduate students. Much of my work is done as part of large (200 to 500 people) multi-institution international collaborations, so I understand the importance of listening, consulting and building consensus. Most of my colleagues have different cultural orientations from me, and many are not native English speakers.

I have taught classes at both UC Berkeley and Stanford. At Stanford, I taught a course on "Modern Physics through Science Fiction," which proved to be a good way to interest non-majors in science.

I have also been active in community organizations, including a stint as treasurer of a local religious 501(c)3 organization, where I learned a lot about community-based budgeting.

3) What are your three top priorities for Berkeley public schools?

My priorities are (1) to work to develop mechanisms to help all students, particularly those who end up 'trapped' in an inappropriate school setting, (2) to try to broaden the schools offerings, providing a solid education for all students, while (3) keeping the schools on a solid financial footing. Regarding item (1), different children come from very different background and learn differently, and so flourish in different environments; we need to provide more choices to address diverse learning styles. Regarding (2), I would like to try to provide more vocational training for students who do not wish to continue with classroom learning in college. Point (3) - finances - isn't sexy, but it is necessary for the long term health of the district. The problem of underfunded retirement benefits must be dealt with head on.

4) How would you work with your fellow Board members and Superintendent to address these priorities?

The school boards job is to oversee the Superintendent and the school system by setting policies. It is not to get involved in day to day activities. Over the next year, the school board must proceed carefully, but expeditiously to hire a new superintendent who shares our values, is able to work in a complex environment, and is a strong leader. Beyond that, we must listen to our communities and set policies to benefit all students, without micromanaging. It is important to build consensus, but we must also not let the need for consensus stop important projects.

5) How does your experience and knowledge lend itself to promoting the District goals of addressing the opportunity gap and the 2020 Vision?

It is absolutely critical that a prime focus of BUSD is for all children to succeed in their education. Throughout my career, I have worked with many different types of people. It is clear from my experience, and from much research, that different people learn in very different ways. Accordingly, I would work to provide more diverse educational styles for children who learn differently. I would like to develop alternatives (in addition to BIS) for students who are not able to succeed at Berkeley High, be it because of the lack of attention, cultural differences, or inability to deal with the size of BHS or its culture. In short, this would be another safety net for high schoolers who would otherwise fall through the cracks. This is particularly critical for lower income families, since families with resources can (and do) send these children to private schools; families without resources have no other options.

6) What are the greatest assets and strengths of BUSD?

BUSD possesses a tremendous staff, an amazingly diverse student body, and a large group of active and participatory parents, complemented by considerable aid and attention from the Berkeley community. At the elementary and middle school level, there are considerable resources available to help students who are struggling. In considering BUSDs assets and strengths, it is also appropriate to comment on its weaknesses; one of its major weaknesses is its very limited flexibility.

7) What do you see as your primary role and responsibilities as a School Board Director?

As a school board member, my primary responsibility is to ensure that the district runs smoothly. Our job is not to run the district, but to set priorities and provide high-level direction, choose the district leadership and supervise them, and provide the resources for them to educate our students. In this respect, ensuring that the district remains financially sound is a key priority, as a prerequisite for implementing all of the great ideas that the BUSD community has. Taxes are a key resource, but one that we have limited control over; I would like to see us enhance our efforts to attract (appropriate) grants and donations from the local community. BUSD benefits from a very active parents community. They are in many ways our supervisors, and we need to consult with them and retain their support. At the same time, we need to avoid micromanaging. We should use parent input to set our priorities, without intervening in low-level decisions. For the coming year, choosing a new superintendent and supporting them as they begin their duties, will be one of our main responsibilities.

8) How does an effective School Board ensure opportunities for families and community members to express a diverse range of views to inform Board deliberations on important policy issues?

First, we need to actively listen. We need to do this in as many forums as possible - at school board meetings, at back-to-school nights, at PTA meetings, and by being visible and accessible in the community. We also need to be available to working parents who may not have time to go to meetings, by communicating via surveys and email, and being available for phone conversations.

9) What has been your involvement with public schools and/or in the community?

Both of my children attended Cragmont elementary school, and had positive experiences there. One is now at Longfellow Middle School, where he enjoys a very supportive environment. The other had a disastrous freshman year at Berkeley High School, where he was placed in a social environment that did not fit him at all. He was also receiving an inadequate education (including an English class that was years below state standards, and social science material that badly outdated and sometimes factually wrong). After unsuccessful efforts by my wife and I to move him to a more compatible environment within BHS, he is now in a private school, where he is flourishing.

I work as a physicist, and have frequently volunteered at local elementary and middle schools (including both BUSD and Oakland schools), through the auspices of Community Resources for Science, through my work (including helping with 5th grade class visits to Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory) and on my own initiative. I particularly like helping students choose and plan science fair projects.

I have been involved with a number of community groups, including a small religious congregation where I served as a board member and treasurer.