

Leah Wilson
Berkeley School Board Director

EAST BAY YOUNG DEMOCRATS

CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Name as it will appear on the ballot: Leah Wilson
2. Office sought: School Board Director
3. Current Occupation: Manager, Juvenile Court Programs
4. Incumbent?: No
5. How long in district/city?: 12 years

Campaign Contacts:

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1. What would you do as a board member to address the growing equity and achievement gaps facing Berkeley's students?

The school district and the City have jointly adopted the "2020 Vision" plan, which represents a comprehensive and holistic approach to addressing not just the achievement, but also the "outcome" gap, that exists both with respect to academic and health indicators. I believe that this plan, along with the collaborative nature by which it was developed and adopted, is truly visionary. If implemented with real purpose and focus, and with sufficient corresponding resources, the 2020 Vision will result in our turning the tide on generational inequity.

My contribution to efforts to implementing the Vision will focus on sustainability and institutionalization. My work as a Board member will be to ensure both alignment of resources with Vision implementation activities, and the development of a structure for district oversight of site-level implementation.

Another and related key area of focus will be on constant evaluation to determine if what we are doing is resulting in any concrete results. This simple step is often overlooked in our district, with many seeing the end product as the adoption of a plan, or the establishment of a new program. Clearly, we must be equally committed to evaluating our efforts to see if they are actually working.

2. Certain local measures on the November ballot directly affect the Berkeley USD. What are your positions on Measures H and I?

Leah Wilson
Berkeley School Board Director

I strongly support both the construction bond and renewal of the maintenance parcel tax.

3. What are your top three priorities if elected to the School Board?
 - a) Clear articulation of a discrete set of priorities grounded in evidence, not politics or personality;
 - b) Aligning funding with our stated priorities; and
 - c) Evaluation of what we are doing to see if it actually works.
4. All public schools in California are facing very difficult budget choices. What will your priorities be if Berkeley USD is forced to make cuts, and what will you do to minimize the need for budget cuts?

As reflected in my response to the question above, I think it is critically important that we build consensus around a discrete and limited number of priorities, rather than each School Board Director operating under his/her own individual ideas of what constitutes a key district initiative or program. That being said, I believe that the 2020 Vision's focus on early childhood and elementary education is the right one – we know that investments in the early years have huge and lifelong dividends. So, for me, programs falling under this rubric should be spared from budget cuts.

An important and significant caveat, or addendum to this answer is this – if we begin evaluating our efficacy, our work with respect to budget cut will be greatly eased. We should not continue to fund programs that don't work under any circumstances. In difficult budget times, continuing to fund ineffective programs, at any grade level, is not good public policy, and is not viable.

With respect to the question of what I will do to minimize the need for budget cuts, there are limited mechanisms for revenue generation in a public school setting. Berkeley USD is widely known for having significantly higher truancy rates than other similarly situated districts. Truancy is a fiscal issue, in that attendance drives school funding levels. To the extent that, as a School Board Director, I could work with staff, schools and families, to develop a meaningful truancy program addressing the systemic causes of poor attendance, I would both potentially mitigate budget reductions and address a significant problem impacting many disenfranchised communities.

5. Have you collaborated with young adults in your community work in the past (list specific examples)? How are young adults involved in your campaign? How will you continue to involve young activists in your work after you are elected?

I work closely with the California Youth Connection (CYC) in my professional life; this organization represents current and former California foster youth. My partnerships with CYC include drafting, and advocating for, legislation, development of new statewide regulations, and local juvenile court system improvement work. CYC as an agency is young adult driven, and youth-centered. My work with this organization has been rewarding beyond measure.

With respect to my campaign, I have a number of teenage volunteers, including my website developer and precinct walkers. I am the mother of two teenage sons, both students at Berkeley High School. As such I have vast youth exposure, and have harnessed their energies and talent for campaign activity. My volunteer pool also includes college students and other young professionals who are serving as community liaisons, fundraisers, and precinct walkers.

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Berkeley School Board Director

As a School Board Director, I will work on the development of meaningful mentorship opportunities for young adults interested in school district administration, and also for a more visible role for youth through the Student Director school board position.

Accomplishments for Young Adults

1. Mentor

I spent 3 years as a mentor at a middle school in San Francisco's Hunter's Point neighborhood, from 2002-2005. I specifically worked with a group of girls from the 6-8 grade, in empowerment/leadership workshops and meetings. I developed close relationships with many of these girls; 5 years after that cohort left the 8th grade, I remain in touch with many – these girls have grown into young women, most of them *successful* young women, defying the odds of both race and class. I am proud of whatever impact our relationship had on the trajectory of their lives.

2. Teacher

In 2005, and upon the conclusion of the mentoring program referenced above, I took a year of absence from my job with the California Court system and taught math at the very same middle school. Without any training and little support, I can fairly categorize my teaching as abysmal. However, what I lacked in skills I made up for in enthusiasm, and a determination to have high expectations for each of my students, regardless of their life circumstance. In that, I succeeded. There is one youth in particular for whom I had great affection – a 12 year old boy from Samoa, who had assimilated quickly into “ghetto” life in the Hunter's Point projects. He boasted of his skills with “women”, and of his drug-dealing prowess, and never showed up for class with a single material. He was incredibly bright however, a true whiz-kid, and I made him my teaching assistant, and then had him bumped up to 8th grade math. He was shocked – his peers were shocked – to be recognized in this way. I ran into him recently on BART, and he is attending community college, and has not gone to jail – very real accomplishments for a child confronted with the challenges he faced, and living the life he lived at age 12. I felt so proud to have been even a tiny part of that success story.

3. System Reformer

In my work for the state court system, I oversee juvenile court programs, specifically in the areas of dependency (foster care) and delinquency. In this capacity I work on major system reform initiatives designed, in short, to achieve two basic goals: 1) keep families together, or reunify those separated quickly and safely; and 2) ensure that a youth's first contact with the juvenile justice system is his/her last. This work requires me to work in partnership with state and local agencies, and advocacy and community-based organizations, to develop practical solutions to the challenges facing children, youth and families in the juvenile court system. I believe in family, and know that most youth who emancipate from care end up homeless within 3 months of their 18th birthday. I know that early intervention programs do work, and that youth can change. These beliefs have made me a strong advocate within my field for families, and for innovative rehabilitative programs. To the extent that, in my leadership capacity within my organization, I have been able to steer minds and funding towards my beliefs, I have been able to positively impact the lives of thousands of youth and young

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adults across California.

Experience

In addition to the relevant experiences noted in the answers above, I have direct school governance experience garnered from my years as a parent volunteer, as follows:

- Classroom volunteer: 12 years
- School site governance body member: 6 years
- District-wide parcel tax oversight committee member (current)

My direct classroom, school site, and district-level experience provides me with a first-hand understanding of the impact of School Board policy on our students and families, and gives me the knowledge and experience to be able to translate ideas into action. I am also the mother of three children, including two adolescents, leaving shortly for college. For me then, the needs of young people are not ones that I must theorize or hypothesize – I live them, both in my own home, and in the school environments in which I have been an active participant for many years.

Please see attached endorsement list and letter of recommendation.