

South Bay Progressive Alliance Candidate Questionnaire For Board of Education



Please complete this questionnaire and email the completed document to info@SouthBayPA.org. By submitting your responses to this questionnaire to the South Bay Progressive Alliance (SBPA), you agree that your responses are public and that we may share your responses with others.

Name: Mer Curry Nuñez

School District Name: East Side Union High School District 1

Phone(s): (408) 901-0290

Email: mer@merforschoolboard.com

Website: merforeastside.com

Line of Work: Educator, Consultant, and Advocate

Candidate Pledge:

(If you cannot not make the following 4 affirmative pledges, the SBPA cannot endorse you at this time.)

CORPORATE-FREE. I commit to be a corporate-free candidate and publicize that I am a corporate free candidate in my campaign literature. YES ☒ NO ☐

PLEDGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY. I commit to publicize and hold regular listening sessions with my constituents, to stay in touch with their needs and concerns. YES ☒ NO ☐

PROGRESSIVE POLICIES. I commit to author, co-author, support, promote and defend people-focused progressive policies and practices that incorporate SBPA core values to improve communities and the quality of life for my constituents. YES ☒ NO ☐

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION. I commit to help level the playing field for ALL people and prioritize the development of leadership among under-represented communities. YES ☒ NO ☐

General Questions:

1. Endorsements—

- a. Who are you endorsing, from national races, all the way down from ballot to local races? Are you endorsing anyone else in your own race?

As a voter, I have not yet endorsed any candidates for the November election. I have not endorsed anyone in my own race, this is the first time the district will have trustee areas.

- b. Who has endorsed you?

I have a total of 185 endorsements including nine (9) youth and young leaders, 104 community and education leaders, 68 current and former elected officials including all five (5) Santa Clara County Supervisors, the Bay Area Young Democrats, the CA High School Democrats, Local UA

393, and the School Board Project. You can see the full list of my endorsements at <https://merforeastside.com/endorsements>.

c. Whose endorsements are you seeking or expect to receive?

I am currently seeking the endorsements of the Bay Area Municipal Elections Committee (BAYMEC), Black Young Democrats, County Employees Management Association (CEMA), Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), Democratic Activists for Women Now (DAWN), East Side Teachers Association (ESTA), NCS Carpenters, Santa Clara County Democratic Party, Silicon Valley Asian Pacific American Democratic Club (SVAPADC), Silicon Valley Young Democrats, South Bay Labor Council (SBLC), South Bay Progressive Alliance, and the Working Families Party.

Campaign Funding —How much money do you plan to raise for your campaign? Where will the money come from? Describe sources of financial contributions for your campaign that you would refuse to accept (if any). How much money do you currently have for this race? How much money do you plan to raise? Where will the money come from?

I have raised \$69,392 as of August 12, 2026 with a goal of raising \$110,000 by October 2026. I made a personal loan of \$6,000 total to my campaign.

I'm proud to have raised this funding from over 250 unique donors, reflecting that the campaign is grassroots and actively growing. The core strategy is to raise this money from individual donors, community supporters, local leaders, and aligned labor and grassroots networks rather than corporate or privatization interests. My priority is to demonstrate broad grassroots support by building a large donor base and sustainable campaign infrastructure.

- a. Will you reject campaign contributions and endorsements from oil companies, oil company associations, public utilities, and PACs which take money from any of the above including, but not limited to, Chevron, Valero, Western States Petroleum Association, and Sempra Energy? YES ☒ NO ☐
- b. Will you reject campaign contributions and endorsements from law enforcement groups? YES ☒ NO ☐
- c. Will you reject campaign contributions and endorsements from the Apartment Association or the Association of Realtors? YES ☒ NO ☐
- d. Will you reject campaign contributions and endorsements from for-profit health care entities and insurance companies? YES ☒ NO ☐
- e. Will you reject campaign contributions and endorsements from charter school associations? YES ☒ NO ☐
- f. Will you reject campaign contributions and endorsements from corporate PACs? YES ☒ NO ☐

Board of Education Questions:

1. **Motivation**—Why did you choose to run for School Board?

I am running because I am a proud East Side Union High School District (ESUHSD) graduate and lifelong East San José resident who has spent more than two decades working to expand college access, affordability, and economic mobility for students like those in the East Side. The systems and networks I've helped build at the local and state levels have opened doors for

hundreds of thousands of the state's public school students. As a graduate of Piedmont Hills High School and other East Side public schools, I want to target that experience and my passion in the district that raised me.

This is the first election that ESUHSD has implemented trustee areas, and Area 1 (Alum Rock) has never had its own trustee before. The district has not had a Black trustee in decades, and has never had a board member of Filipino descent in its 76-year history. I'm running to ensure that Alum Rock families finally have a dedicated, accessible trustee who listens, follows through, and fights for academic excellence, college and career readiness, economic mobility, and mental wellness for all students.

2. Program and Priorities—a. What do you believe are the main priorities for the School Board?

A school board's priorities include improving educator working conditions which in turn improve the educational experience of all students; working in partnership with labor unions to deliver a high-quality public education system; hire, evaluate, and support the superintendent by providing clear priorities; fiduciary responsibility that includes fiscal solvency; and accountability to the district's families and the voters who elected the trustees through regular community engagement.

Elected office provides the opportunity to proactively lead by placing new ideas on the agenda for consideration and development. **b.** What are some specific ideas you intend to pursue if elected?

Once in elected office, the three pillars I'm focused on build upon issues that I've championed for years. My pillars are:

(1) Tackle youth mental health with school-community care: Establish districtwide partnerships focused on early intervention, counseling, culturally responsive supports, and Mental Health First Aid training to address the youth mental health crisis.

(2) Close academic gaps with data-driven support: Close preparation gaps through stronger coordination with the seven feeder districts so more students enter high school on track and graduate ready for life after high school. Additionally, ensure that intersectional employees and stakeholders are considered in collective bargaining negotiations.

(3) Graduate students college and career ready: Build stronger partnerships among schools, unions, employers, colleges, and nonprofits to expand paid internships, apprenticeships, and career-connected learning that leads to upward mobility.

3. Qualifications—a. Please give a brief summary of your background and qualifications for the office of School Board. **b.** If you are an incumbent, what issues have you worked on that have made a positive impact? As an incumbent tell us about your service on the school board, and share with us the decisions you have led, which have impacted the school district?

a. I would be an effective school board member because I lead as a listener, collaborator, and problem-solver who keeps students and educators at the center of every decision. For over two decades, I've worked to advance racial justice, economic mobility, and financial inclusion for working-class and marginalized communities, values that guide my commitment to public education. I understand that the board's role is governance, not micromanagement. Effective governance means setting clear and transparent goals, aligning resources, and supporting staff to succeed. I bring 17 years of board leadership experience, including service as Chair and Secretary, where I practiced transparent, community-centered governance, monitored outcomes, and held leadership accountable while maintaining collaborative relationships with

labor and community partners.

As a former nonprofit leader and long-time education advocate, I have launched regional emergency microgrant programs, influenced state-level data systems, advocated for student representation on boards, and helped implement free college and career tools such as CaliforniaColleges.edu and DecidED.org for the benefit of first-generation and low-income public school students. My policy experience includes helping to pass and implement state legislation, and working across the cradle-to-career pipeline to strengthen pathways for students beyond high school. I have also worked closely with public schools and districts to balance limited resources, diverse student needs, and high expectations, bringing educators, families, and community organizations together to craft workable solutions. I believe good board members represent the entire community, not special interests, and must invest the time to learn, ask hard questions, and make transparent, evidence-based decisions. I am committed to equity, accountability, and strong partnerships that allow every student to thrive and every educator to build a sustainable career.

b. I am not an incumbent and this is the first year that the high school district has implemented trustee areas.

4. School Climate, Engagement— **a.** What is your understanding of the kinds of changes that most schools are making to improve school climate and school discipline policies? **b.** What are your views on school suspensions? **c.** What are your suggestions to support students who are chronically absent, students who have dropped out or left school, or are on the verge of leaving or dropping out? **d.** Where do you stand on police presence in schools?

a. A school climate where students, families, and educators feel safe and valued starts with everyone being identified in the metrics and goals, and having a voice in shaping policies. Student-centered schools invest in restorative practices over punitive ones, strengthen the mental health ecosystem, and dive into disciplinary data to intentionally tackle inequities. Tackling the youth mental health crisis is my top priority and as trustee, I will work in partnership with the administration and local agencies to first stabilize, and then strengthen, the mental health ecosystem of East San Jose.

b. I support restorative, trauma-informed, and culturally responsive approaches that reduce suspensions and keep students learning in their home schools whenever possible. Suspensions have historically been over utilized in ways that disproportionately affect Black and Brown, immigrant, low-income, foster youth, unhoused, and other multiply marginalized and underserved students. At the same time, schools must also have the ability to act decisively when one or more students present a genuine concern or threat to themselves or others. The goal should be for students to continue their academics whenever possible, otherwise the data shows that removal from instruction can lead to worse outcomes. Suspension should only be considered when counseling and restorative accountability are components of the reentry plan. At ESUHSD, the 2024-25 suspension, expulsion, and behavior referral rates were highest for African American students at 6.9%, 0.4%, and 13.2% respectively, though they represent only 1.5% of the student population (354 out of 23,350). For discipline referrals, Hispanic students represent 75% of discipline referrals though they are 48.4% of the population, English Learners receive 34.6% of the referrals and are 21.6% of the population, and Students with Disabilities receive 27.9% of referrals while only 13.3% of the population.

c. Student-centered policies involve respectful outreach to families as a result of early-warning systems that quickly flag attendance concerns. Respect looks like asking families why attendance has become a challenge, and proactive outreach to welcome young people back to combat any stigmas. To effectively implement such policies, I support mental health care that is

available on-campus, flexible credit recovery, basic needs assistance including transportation, and attendance teams. At ESUHSD, the Truancy Flowchart demonstrates a multi-tiered process to notify guardians, meet with the school site, and engage in support services, and attend an attendance review conference (ARC) meeting before referral to Truancy Court. During the 2024-25 year, American Indian or Alaska Native, African American, Hispanic, and Pacific Islanders students had the highest unexcused absences and out-of-school suspension absences.

d. I oppose over-policing and criminalization of students. Every student and educator deserves a safe, orderly campus, and that requires clear expectations, consistent follow-through, and a commitment to restorative practices that keep students connected to school whenever possible. I believe discipline policies must be transparent, applied equitably, and developed with input from teachers, classified staff, students, and families. At the same time, safety is not just about rules and enforcement; it is also about relationships and trust. The board should ensure that schools have adequate staffing for counselors, mental health professionals, campus supervisors, and nurses, and that educators receive training and support when asked to implement new discipline or safety practices.

5. Equity & Access - The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the severe equity issues in education in communities of color. **a.** As a board member, what ideas and strategies will you bring forward to close the equity gap for students facing challenges of digital access and facing difficulties with remote learning.

a. ESUHSD can benefit from adopting a districtwide digital citizenship framework that considers equity issues related to digital access and remote learning.

On cell phones: I support clear, consistent, and enforceable site-based policies that limit distraction while respecting that families use phones for safety and communication. That means phones should not be out or used during instructional time, except when a teacher intentionally incorporates them into learning. Students should know exactly what to expect at each school and in each classroom.

On Artificial Intelligence: I believe the district should develop an AI policy in partnership with teachers and unions that prioritizes student privacy, academic integrity, and educators' professional judgment, and includes training and time for educators to learn to use AI in ways that reduce busywork rather than replace human relationships. I see AI as a tool that can either widen or help close inequities, depending on how we implement it and how thoughtfully we plan for ongoing training, maintenance, and evaluation. I do not support any use of AI that undermines educator jobs, increases harmful surveillance of students—especially Black, Brown, disabled, and immigrant youth—or hands more power over to unaccountable tech corporations and interests that would cause undue harm in our communities.

6. Inclusion— **a.** What are your views on special education? **b.** What changes, if any, need to be implemented? **c.** Should special education students be included in general education classes? Why, or why not?

a. Special education is a fundamental commitment rooted in the civil rights of every person. The challenge of school districts' inability to adequately support special education goes way back to 1975 when IDEA (the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) required schools to be free and the feds were supposed to cover 40% of the additional cost for students with disabilities, but this has never been met (between 10-15%). While school districts must meet the burden of overcoming these significant budgetary gaps, it is critical that school board members advocate

for students of every background, regardless of ability, so that they can come to school as their authentic selves.

b. ESUHSD must invest in appropriate staffing that makes it possible to effectively and consistently implement students' IEPs. This includes teachers, paraeducators, psychologists, and more, in addition to strong partnerships with families that consider language access.

c. As with any student, because all students are unique in their gifts and abilities, there is no one solution for students with special disabilities. When placing a student in a general education classroom, the IEP team must consider if additional resources are needed. This could include accessible accommodations like specialized materials and differentiated instruction.

7. Charter Schools—**a.** Beginning July 2020, districts have begun considering the fiscal impacts a charter will have on programs and students in any given district. As a board member, what will be your position when considering a new charter school petition or request to expand (either by a countywide charter, or on appeal) that will have negative fiscal or community impacts on one or more districts in the county? **b.** What level of oversight and accountability do you believe the Board of Education must provide after approving a charter school application? In your opinion, has the County Board done an adequate job providing such oversight and accountability? If not, what do you think should be done? **c.** Do you support the right of charter educators to unionize? How will you enforce that right? **d.** Do you support appointing community members to the boards of charter schools that are authorized by the county?

a. I believe that strong, transparent, accountable public schools are the backbone of our democracy and our local economy. While there may be limited roles for specialized partnerships and services, I am deeply concerned about models that take resources and students away from neighborhood public schools, reduce public oversight, or create parallel systems that exacerbate inequities. As a trustee, I will use every tool in state law to oppose charter practices that harm students, educators, or district finances. I will prioritize strengthening our district schools over approving or expanding charters.

b. I support strong accountability, transparency, and community oversight for any existing charters in East Side. AB 1505 permits consideration of impacts like destabilizing district finances and failing to serve the interests of the whole community when evaluating new charters and expansions. The Santa Clara County Board of Education provides oversight, however in the most recent opportunity to make a decision on Escuela Popular, the county courts brought the charter back to ESUHSD. Both ESUHSD and SCCOE should work collaboratively to ensure oversight and accountability of East Side's charter schools.

c. All educators, including those who work at charter schools, deserve the same right to organize, engage in collective bargaining, and speak up without retaliation. Respect for these rights must be a clear expectation in the authorization and renewal process. I believe public dollars should go to democratically governed, union-friendly public schools. As a board member I will scrutinize any charter petition or renewal for its involvement with labor, fiscal impact, transparency, and effect on ESUHSD students and staff.

d. All schools, including charter schools, should have community representation on their governing bodies consisting of students, parents, educators, and other stakeholders that reflect the diversity of the neighborhoods served.

8. Testing and Teacher Evaluations—**a.** What should policy be around student testing, and teacher evaluation? **b.** Do you see alternatives to the use of mandated standardized tests in meeting local, state and national education goals? **c.** How much are we teaching to the test now, and what should we be doing differently, if you feel it should be different?

a. Over the last 12 months, I've talked to educators who described juggling larger class sizes, increasing student mental health needs, closure of student-centered programs, and constant pressure to raise test scores. While standardized testing has a legitimate purpose, it is also limited and data shows that Black and Brown students are disproportionately impacted. Tests should not be used to judge a student, educator or school, but they can be used to improve instruction and inform allocation of resources. I oppose using standardized test scores as the only measure of teachers' effectiveness since there are too many factors affecting student learning.

b. There are other ways to measure student success beyond test scores, such as portfolios, demonstrations, written projects, family feedback, and engagement data. As an example, public school students can use their free [CaliforniaColleges.edu](https://www.california.colleges.edu) accounts to develop life plans, track extracurricular activities, and set SMART Goals. Together, the combination of these measurements give a fuller picture of what students can do and what they know.

c. The superintendent's goals should be aligned with board-adopted metrics that go beyond test scores to include graduation, college and career readiness, attendance, discipline data, and climate indicators. Districts can leverage the parts of California's assessment system that help teachers respond to student learning throughout the academic year. Protecting instructional time and judging schools through multiple measures are ways to ensure teachers receive timely and constructive feedback paired with support.

9. **Curriculum**—What are your views on the use of the proposed Ethnic Studies Curriculum? Do you support the teaching of Critical Race Theory in schools within your district?

I support locally responsive Ethnic Studies curriculum that is age-appropriate and well-designed in partnership with labor and the community. When done well, this content can help students build their empathy, see themselves, and strengthen their sense of belonging. When not done well, it can further feelings of exclusion and othering. The state's curriculum is a guide that can be leveraged, but should include careful review and consideration by the local community before implementing. I also support teaching standards-aligned curriculum that is honest about the impacts of discrimination and movements for civil rights that do not blame or shame any student for their identity. My focus is more on whether instruction is inclusive and accurate and helps students think critically about our shared history and how it impacts the present. "Critical Race Theory" or CRT is a specific framework for college that is not often taught in high schools like ESUHSD.

10. **Budgetary Priorities**—Imagine in the year after your election to the school board, due to a shortfall your annual budget is reduced by 10%. **a.** Where would you make cuts? **b.** What would you try to shield from cuts?

a. I had the privilege of completing the Education Justice Academy program in 2025 which gave us explicit examples like this to think through and thought-partner around with school board members of other districts across CA. A 10% reduction is incredibly significant and deserves a detailed review of the budget that is public in order to engage the broader community. For example, ESUHSD just cut \$16 Million from a \$400 Million budget, roughly 4%, which has already had drastic impacts on the mental health safety net of the district. I would reduce nonessential expenses, outside contracts and consultants, redundant programs, and non-urgent tools and projects where safe to do so. I would audit programs to consolidate only after meaningful community review and based on program outcome and usage data. We should also diversify revenues by pursuing grants and partners while redirecting dollars from initiatives that are not serving students based on the data.

b. As a trustee I will work to strengthen students' legal rights and access to quality teaching especially during a budget crisis. I would protect classroom instruction, the educators and classified staff who work directly with students, and special education and English-learner services. I would also consider how we keep class sizes reasonable and maintain/strengthen core academic supports because students rely on them every day.

11. Governance—**a.** What concerns, if any, do you have relative to the current School Board? **b.** What policy changes would you make? **c.** What solutions would you propose to address and prevent conflicts of interest and misuse of public funds?

a. I see the school board–superintendent relationship as a governance–management partnership grounded in clear roles, transparency, and mutual accountability. When each stays in their lane, board on governance, superintendent on management, but collaborates closely and communicates openly, the entire system is better able to serve students and families. However, I am concerned that there aren't enough questions being asked when critical decisions are made about budget cuts, student outcomes, and district goals.

b. When it comes to my priority around tackling the youth mental health crisis, it is unclear if the students who need it most are being served. ESUHSD does not provide a public districtwide breakdown showing which specific student subgroups are being served, nor which have the “largest” changes in mental-health indicators over time. It is critical that ESUHSD both track and report data for subgroups, so we can monitor their experiences and compare them with their access to services. I would partner with the administration and other trustees to reimagine how ESUHSD can address the student mental health crisis, with a focus on how to strengthen the safety net for East Side students.

c. Our students, families, educators and their unions should be engaged in budget discussions early on. The discussion should include the impacts of enrollment, have multi-year projections, consider flexible and restricted funding sources, use the district's LCAP goals and data, and map budget items to student impacts. When information about how public funds are used are transparent, accessible, and well-defined, there is greater opportunity to prevent and address conflicts of interest and misuse of public funds.

12. Accountability—**a.** Concretely and specifically, how will you make yourself accountable to the voters who elect you? **b.** How can the voters participate in holding you accountable if you are elected? **c.** Do you support hybrid in-person and online meetings?

a. I want to show that Area 1 families have a stronger, more direct voice in district decision-making through a functioning advisory committee and consistent, transparent communication from their trustee. For this reason, as the first trustee of ESUHSD Area 1, I will launch the first Community Advisory to meet regularly around the needs of James Lick, Mount Pleasant, and W.C. Overfelt High Schools.

b. The ESUHSD Area 1 Community Advisory will consist of parents, students, educators, labor, and stakeholders from the local feeder schools, offering regular access to a trustee so that voters feel seen, heard, and valued. In turn, I will also benefit from the community's input because I believe that data-informed decisions and practices must consist of qualitative data that can only come from timely interactions with the people who are most impacted.

c. Yes, I support hybrid in-person and online meetings because they improve democracy, equity, accountability, and representation. I've had the opportunity to attend many ESUHSD board meetings, and they are all hybrid with the opportunity to attend and give public comments

online. This is incredibly beneficial for families, educators, and other stakeholders that have transportation access and scheduling challenges, but want to meaningfully engage with the school board. In contrast, the Alum Rock Union School District, which is a feeder to ESUHSD, hosts some board meetings in-person only. I have witnessed how this has prevented parents, educators, and others from engaging in agenda items they are passionate about, and the additional burden it requires to find alternates, submit written comments, or pursue other methods of advocacy.

13. Environment: **a.** What policies would you put in place to protect our environment? **b.** What would you do to reduce your district's carbon footprint?

a. I cherish our open spaces and environment, and believe in environmental justice. Clear air, clean water, and climate safety are basic human rights and shouldn't be determined by zip code and identity. I would support policies that go beyond the requirements set by CA in order to prioritize the health of working families, including resilience and clean energy projects.

b. I would support policies like building decarbonization. The older structures in ESUHSD can benefit most from projects like efficiency retrofitting, especially when these schools tend to serve the least-resourced communities of the area.

14. Does your campaign commit to engage substantial numbers of new voters? If yes, what is your plan to make it happen?

Yes, I commit to engaging substantial numbers of new voters, while also focusing on high-propensity voters. We will use tools like Voter.vote and PDI to build turfs and maximize the 100+ volunteers we have recruited through November. I launched my campaign in August 2025 and have attended a minimum of 10 local events per month since then in order to meet voters where they are and build name recognition. I launched canvassing on July 19, 2026 and have nearly 80 shifts totaling over 300 hours of canvassing, phone banks, and events. Last, I am also offering virtual meet & greets from August through October to improve accessibility so that families, educators, and other voters can learn about my campaign before the election.

15. Anything Else? — Is there anything else you would like to share?

I am a graduate of local schools in East San José, and my lived experience as a student in this community deeply shapes how I understand school climate, opportunity gaps, and the importance of culturally responsive teaching. As an alum of Piedmont Hills High School and a 2023 East Side Hall of Famer, I see ESUHSD as a district with tremendous potential, already anchored by strong educator leadership, union advocacy, and local policymakers who champion the community. My goal on the board would be to build on the existing foundation by ensuring that district policies reflect what is actually happening in your classrooms and campuses.

In the ten years I have lived in Alum Rock, I have spent time in East Side Union High School District schools talking with students, teachers, and families about what is working and where they need more support. I've attended school events, board meetings, and community forums, which have given me a ground-level view of the strengths of East Side—its diverse students and dedicated educators—as well as the pressures they are facing around staffing, mental health, and academic recovery. By the end of my first term, I want to ensure that students, families, and staff feel more represented by and included in the board's makeup, strategy, and decisions.

Positions on Issues

Please answer YES or NO for each statement.

Do you support a living wage for all district employees? YES ☒ NO ☐

Do you support participatory budgeting (citizen involvement in school board budgeting)? YES ☒ NO ☐

Do you support free public education from preschool through graduate studies? YES ☒ NO ☐

Would you support allowing undocumented immigrants to vote in school board elections? YES ☒ NO ☐

Do you support the right of transgendered individuals to use the restroom of their choice? YES ☒ NO ☐

Do you support a policy to place school board funds in a public bank? YES ☒ NO ☐

Do you support Medicare for all? YES ☒ NO ☐

Do you support building or subsidizing affordable housing for faculty and staff? YES ☒ NO ☐