



OFFICE OF EQUITY

All City Council Student Union's Student Director Report

Yota Omosowho and Josue Chavez

2.11.19

Dear President Eng, Vice President London, members of the Board of Education, and Superintendent,

When I was first voted into this position by my peers, I understood it was to represent their needs in this space as a partner in the decision making of our education here in OUSD. I know I have expressed in the past that while on this board I have felt silenced, the truth is that I have felt restricted, I have felt powerless on certain situations, a recent example being the closure of roots. I sit here wondering if whatever I says matters, I wonder if I am just another tokenized student. I question if this is truly the best way for me to reflect the voices of my peers. I question the true purpose of the board and I slowly begin to lose any sense of hope or trust in this system.

Then I remember that I am not the first student who has been in this seat. I am reminded that there are people who fought with tears and sweat to make sure that this platform is available for me to truly express the needs of my constituents. I am grounded by the honesty and integrity of that fight. I bring my own experiences of the times I have felt invisible as an immigrant and as a black woman in my school dealing with passive aggressive racism and implicit bias. I got through those moments by drawing from the energy and legacy of my ancestors who are responsible for my existence. In times when I feel vulnerable in this position, I remember the stories of my peers who walk these hallways and sit in these classrooms designed by others who are not youth, eat the school food that is made by others who are not youth, and experience, and are subject to, the curriculum and policies and practices that were designed by others who are not youth. I remember the words of my mentors and the history of student voice in this city of Oakland and in particular of OUSD. I remember the story of the movement it took for OUSD to bring the meaningful student engagement initiative, the intentionality in supporting real student voice. I am reminded that this board passed the meaningful student engagement standards in 2007, and I think maybe they do care about these students, maybe there is hope.

And in this same breath, I am reminded of why I came to this country. My mother felt that my education was under attacked. The education of the female children in my country was threatened and it is still being threatened in different parts of the world and my mother decided to take a stance for my survival and that of my sisters. Navigating my new home and a new education system was incredibly challenging. But everything shifted the first time I sat in a Restorative Justice community building circle. It was my first time of me feeling truly at peace in this country. My cultural background shared similar traditions of creating spaces to heal and recognize our humanity. I say this to remind us that restorative justice is not new but has deep roots in indigenous practices of people who came before us. This helped me feel a sense of belonging in my school. When I hear that RJ is being almost completely eliminated, I can't help but feel fear that we will take another step back. Fear of what the next young black immigrant women that leaves her country is going to do and how she will be supported. And I want to emphasize that it wasn't just the circles but the people, like our RJ facilitators who really understood how to carefully hold space not just for me but in supporting other teachers and the whole school to also hold it.



OFFICE OF EQUITY

Fast forward to a year ago, little did I know this role was on my path. I am the first Black immigrant young woman to be Students Director for All City Council and Oakland Unified School District's board of education, at least in the last 10 years. When I ran for this position, I ran because being in a community as diverse as Oakland, I was able to discover my purpose. I learned about the different layers of my intersectionalities as a black young woman and as an immigrant. I realized that we depend daily on racist and sexist systems. And I strongly believe giving young people the access to a quality education is truly what we need to shift these oppressive systems. Our education is at the core of the future of other young people. This is not just on a city level, it is about standing in solidarity with young girls around the world who are denied education, with children that are crossing the border as we speak, with young black girls who are forced to grow up too fast, with the children in West Oakland who are able to recognize the sound of shots before they learn to read, with our "undocumented" immigrant community, with our LGBTQ community, with people who have been historically marginalized. And I learned to unpack all of this and my understanding of who I am in relation to my brothers and sisters from different backgrounds and identities through Restorative Justice. Learning to hold circle and being in circle has been critical to how I represent students.

So, I don't know why many of you are here, what keeps you here - is it to fulfill a purpose? Is it to fulfill an ask? Is it to respond to a need? To gain experience? To grow and hopefully be a better leader? What I do know is why I am here, I stand in my truth and in my purpose. I have been vulnerable with you all and shared my story because I believe in the power of truly seeing each other's humanity. This is one of the biggest lessons that restorative justice brought in me.

So colleagues, if my vote is to matter, I hope it is today. I want to ask my colleagues to follow student voice, follow my direction and reject this initial proposal for budget reductions, and ask for a revised proposal that truly takes into account our student recommendations to protect Restorative Justice and our targeted student initiatives: APISA, LSA, and AAMA. If equity is to really exist, we need more than just math equations - and budget language like restricted and unrestricted funds. We need an equity criteria used in this process. While I understand our financial situation is a larger issue with the way this country prioritizes education, and lack of state funding, I know we can do better to protect students from adult mistakes. I looked up the definitions and vitality - "the state of being strong and active". So if vitality means strong then Fiscal vitality to me means an education systems that doesn't compromise a quality education that serves the needs of all students. We have the opportunity to reshape our education but for that to happen, this board needs to lean into difficult conversations with students, parents, teachers and the larger Oakland community. What makes Oakland strong is our community. Partner with the young people of Oakland to pave the road to the quality education that we deserve. Our history and our young people will always keep us grounded. I urge you to tap into the untapped wisdom. And I want to remind us of our commitment to equity and student voice, 2 of our OUSD values.

In closing, I ask that you take this moment to truly remind yourself of your why and reach into your own past experiences as a student and a resident of Oakland. Another important value I learned through RJ is empathy and I ask you all to hold that value in this space and in this moment. In response to the countless hours dedicated by All City Council to bring meaningful students voice in this process, and after reviewing the budget proposal, and then listening to the discussion and voices heard today and last week, I vote to reject this initial proposal for budget reductions, and ask for a revised proposal that truly takes into account our student recommendations to protect Restorative Justice and our targeted student initiatives: APISA, LSA, and AAMA.



OFFICE OF EQUITY

Lastly, I also really want to know what else I can do to get us in a better place financially, I ask for guidance from the board and our superintendent on what can students do to be partners in taking this to the county or the state. Students need to be at the table not on the menu.