

Q&A WITH GUSTAVO BALDERAS

New 4J superintendent discusses his first month on the job

As a child, Gustavo Balderas attended school in the tiny rural town of Nyssa in Eastern Oregon. Balderas' parents did not speak English, but his kindergarten teacher reached out to them, he says, in an act of kindness that he has always remembered. "She connected to my mom and dad and made them feel welcome," he says. "She really stands out to me as impacting my decision to go into education."

Balderas, Eugene School District 4J's new superintendent as of July 1, comes to Eugene from the Ocean View School District in Huntington Beach, California, but his Oregon connections run deep. In addition to growing up in Oregon, he taught high school and worked as a counselor in the Hillsboro School District, and all of his degrees, including a Ph.D. from the UO, are from Oregon universities.

4J's last superintendent, Sheldon Berman, left the district after orchestrating his own exit at the school board's request, according to a series of *Register-Guard* articles published earlier this year. Parents and community members have noted a lack of communication between the district and its stakeholders.

Balderas says he wants to develop a plan for the district that centers around stakeholder input, and he says he's passionate about promoting diversity and serving underprivileged kids.

EW sat down with Balderas to discuss his educational experiences and his role in shaping the future of 4J. Kerry Delf, 4J's associate director of communications, was also present for the interview.

What do you think is the correct approach for getting more funding for schools?

I don't know that there's one correct approach. Every state does things a little differently. Proposition 30 in California was passed [in 2012] and it was a statewide tax measure that was able to generate some income to keep our schools above water. Since then, the economy has improved, so there are more resources for our kids in our schools.

That's one way of doing it, but I think we really need to look at the inherent process that we have right now for funding here in Oregon. We need to take a hard look. We've talked about it for a lot of years, and I think something needs to be done to create a more permanent solution to the issue. Or else it's going to continue to be an issue. It's something that is critical for our communities and our students.

4J Board Chair Jim Torrey told EW that he liked your approach to "strategic planning." Could you explain what that means?

What I want to do this year is develop a community engagement plan that drives what we do in the next three to five years. The community engagement plan, aka the strategic plan, really would drive what we do as well as align the board goals to that.

What I envision is having a multi-stakeholder group of community leaders, parents, staffers and, of course, teachers and classified [staff] to get together to determine what we want the district to look like.

Of course, it's a lot more complicated than that, but in simplistic terms, it's an action plan that drives what we do — gathering as much stakeholder input as we can to move forward.

Could you give specific examples of what that might look like?

Absolutely. I've done this in every district I've been in. What it will look like is having a meeting here, and first of all identifying 40 to 50 people in the community who would drive things. We would then have a facilitator come

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in and help guide the work to lead folks in coming to a determination of the key elements that we want to look at to improve the district.

From those key elements, typically you find four to five strands, and from those four to five strands, we have action teams that are led by district folks but also involve community leaders to help frame that up. For example, one of the strands could be "better communication with our communities."

What's missing, if anything? How do we frame it up for improvement? Weed the garden if things aren't working really well. With that, the community is involved with directing the path of the district. I think that's essential, since we're here because of kids and we're here because of community.

Are there any other things you think the district might need to work on?

I have a 100-day plan, and that means I'm doing a lot of listening and learning. So I plan to do a lot of listening in the community. That's why my days are packed with meetings. And in my meetings, I ask questions.

So that's one of the things that I'm doing right now. I'm doing a lot of listening and a lot of learning, on top of the day-to-day superintendent duties. The school district still needs to run, so we're still moving forward, but I'm doing a lot of that because I think that's essential for me to really understand the community, as well as understand the district, before any change really happens.

Sometimes in those informal conversations you get some gems in terms of what people are feeling about the system. The more I can connect out there, the more I can gather information and get a good trend line as to what's needed.

EW's spoken with a lot of parents in this community who have strong opinions on standardized testing. What is your position on the Common Core State Standards and testing in general?

First of all, there's Common Core and there's testing, so I kind of want to put them in two buckets.

So, Common Core: We have state standards that we need to teach to. We don't have an option on that. So, the



state standards are what they are. Sometimes what you'll find with the Common Core State Standards is it's really just a realignment of the standards, but in a certain subject matter it's the teaching that's involved and changed. For example, math is now more spiraled and more center-based, and there's a more collaborative approach to learning.

What people try to do when adopting state standards is look at what's expected in the workforce. When you work nowadays, in business or any situation, the expectation is that you collaborate. You've got to learn how to play nice in the sandbox. That's what the Common Core tries to do.

The state testing is another box, and that's a work in progress. We've been doing testing for a long time. In Oregon, we've been doing online testing for a long time. I think it's just assessing how we can continue to improve the system since it's new and making sure we're doing what's right for students.

You have a background in working for underserved and underprivileged students. Are you planning to continue that work in 4J?

Yes, continue the work, and work with as many partners as we can get to continue the work. And help people understand why the work is important for all kids. We need to meet all kids where they're at in terms of grade level, and if I could, I'd develop a personal education plan for every student.

Every student has a connection in school, regardless of the color of their skin or the language they come with. I think it's about making sure we have a moral obligation to every student. And we need to make sure we're meeting every student's needs, regardless of skin color or language, and knowing full well that sometimes kids who look a little different to the mainstream need a little extra because of the fact that maybe they have a learning disability or a language deficit. It's not intelligence deficit, it's a language deficit. So making sure people understand how to work with all kids.

I'll definitely continue the work. It's part of my core, and it will always be part of my core. ■

This interview has been edited and condensed for length and clarity.