

Dorchester Reporter

“The News and Values Around the Neighborhood”

2021 CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE

Section 1: BACKGROUND

1. What is your name, age, place of birth and present address?

Joel Richards - 37 - New Rochelle, NY - 1 parkman place, Dorchester

2. What is your present occupation? Also, please note any past employment that may be relevant to your candidacy.

Proud Boston Public School Teacher

3. Please detail your personal educational background and achievements.

I got my undergraduate from Morehouse College and went on to get my Masters in Education from Union University

4. Please list some of your affiliations with non-profits, civic associations and political groups.

I am a member of the Boston Teachers Union, a chair of Boston Black Lives Matter at School, and a board member of MassCUE.

5. What in your experience to date will most help you to be an effective leader?

Being a teacher has given specific insight into the disparity within Boston. My roles in the Boston teachers union as Regional rep, building rep, and organizer. I have also been the chair of FCMS, and I organize an annual Dorchester Juneteenth community event.

6. What are the three accomplishments you're most proud of?

1- I am a chair and founding member of Boston Black Lives Matter at School, in which we have pushed for a social worker & counselor in every school, smaller class sizes, and hiring of more teachers of color.

2- Founded and continue to organize the Juneteenth Celebration in Dorchester.

3- My two sons, Joel Caleb and Johan, are my greatest accomplishments that make me proud every day.

7. Are you a member of a union?

Yes, I am a member of the Boston Teachers Union.

8. Please list any endorsements to date.

The Boston Teachers Union, Greater Boston Labor Council, Boston Sunrise Movement, Democratic Socialist of America, Grassroots Law Project, Run for Something, and Representative Mike Connolly.

Section 2: POLITICS & ELECTIONS

1. What is your party affiliation and how would you characterize your political ideology?

I am a registered Democrat and would characterize myself as a Democratic Socialist.

2. Please name up to three (and at least one) of your political role models? Please feel free to explain your choices.

Shirley Chisholm. Her struggle for Black people and all working class communities in the face of great opposition has been a major influence in how I view elected office.

Bob Moses. His leadership in the Algebra Project has greatly influenced my work as a teacher, specifically that to truly uplift and educate our youth it takes organizing the community around them and collaborating with their family.

3. Are you in favor of term limits for the seat you are seeking? If so, how many terms?

I am in favor of term limits, preferably 5 terms.

4. What would you do to increase voter turnout in the city of Boston? Do you favor same-day voter registration or lowering the voting age to 16? Do you favor mail-in voting?

For the health of both our democracy and city, I believe it is imperative we increase voter turnout in Boston. We can achieve this by making voting more accessible and breaking down current barriers. On top of passing same-day voter registration, I support increasing the number of polling locations, specifically in communities of color, and keeping our current mail-in voting and in-person early voting. After my 15 years of teaching, I have come to confidently support lowering our voting age to 16. We need to bring our youth into the process, not push them out of it.

5. Do you think that Boston should adopt a rank-choice voting system in upcoming election cycles?

Yes I support rank-choice voting. This system simply allows more choice, something that is always desirable in a democracy.

Section 3: ISSUES & PRIORITIES

1. What is your top priority if elected?

My top issue will be to push for the equitable Boston Public School system that our families deserve. I have been a teacher in BPS for over 8 years, and in this time I have seen too many classrooms overcrowded, school facilities falling apart, and students going without the academic and emotional support they deserve.

This inequality cannot go on. We need more direct investment in our public education system. As one of the wealthiest cities in the world, it is time we fully fund our schools. I know that we can fully staff our schools, because after years of organizing with fellow teachers and parents we were able to get a social worker and nurse placed in every school.

We also need a transparent budgeting process, so that our parents, teachers, and students have a say where our tax dollars are going. Historically we have not provided our working class families and youth of color the means to succeed, and we as a city have a moral obligation to do so. A more equitable school system will lead to a more productive, and just society.

Lastly, there is no issue that is not inseparably tied with the looming threat of climate change. Every part of our policy platform must accommodate the necessary changes to prevent further environmental crises. This means we need to retrofit schools and equip them with green infrastructure. I want to dedicate myself to the retrofitting of schools and installing solar panels across BPS facilities.

2. How will you approach the issue of gun violence in our communities?

Gun violence is a personal issue for me. As a Boston Public School teacher I have both witnessed and felt the impact this needles violence has on our communities. We must take immediate action on gun violence, but we will not solve this crisis through solely punitive measures. What we need to do is examine the conditions that make this violence commonplace in our society. Oftentimes, perpetrators are those who were denied a good education, secure housing, and economic opportunity. To prevent gun violence in our communities, we must invest in our neighborhoods and provide our youth the opportunities and security they deserve to prevent them from going down a regretful path.

In addition, we need to invest in professionals who can assist afflicted individuals now and rehabilitate them before they do something they cannot

undo. These professionals must meet youth where they are at, in the school, at parks, and in the community.

3. Is there a specific city agency you see as in need of urgent reform? If so, please explain.

The Boston Planning & Development Agency (BPDA) is in need of major reform. Our current system of development planning does not support working class families and people of color. Residents of District 4 continue to have their neighborhoods shaped without their input, leading to developments that displace residents instead of assisting and providing for them. We deserve to have our voice heard in these decisions. If elected City Councilor, I will push to break up the Boston Planning & Development Agency and make all successor organizations democratically accountable to their constituents. Until that is achieved I will use my vote and voice during the vetting process to push for a BPDA board which supports the protection of public housing, expansion of affordable housing for rent & ownership, and are against public land being sold off to developers.

4. What is your position on residency, i.e. requiring people hired by the municipal government to live in the city of Boston?

I agree with the policy. However, if we do not tackle the housing crisis this requirement can become a burden to our working class individuals. For decades civic jobs have been a pathway to career success for many working class people.

5. The city of Boston presently owns and manages the historic Strand Theater in Uphams Corner. How would you seek to program, market and utilize this asset?

The Strand Theatre is a great asset to the community. As City Councilor, I would partner with local youth, artists, and religious groups to have events that showcase the talent of Mattapan, Dorchester, Jamaica Plain, and Roslindale. This could be a meeting place that unifies communities and inspires future generations.

6. What is your position on vaccinations? Should students be required to be vaccinated for Covid-19 to attend school in Boston?

We need to follow the science and wait for results since trials are still being conducted for children under 12. However, current findings highlight that all students 12 and over should be vaccinated and I accordingly adhere to the opinion of the researchers.

7. Do you favor a return to an elected School Committee? Please explain.

I favor a publicly elected School Committee. I am entering my 15th year as a public school teacher, and this experience has shown me that a committee accountable to the families and communities of Boston is essential to an equitable school system. Without a fully elected school committee, we cannot ensure a school system that benefits all students and families. What we really need is a body that will deliver a meaningful voice to our parents, teachers, and students in the direction of our schools.

8. Do you support the recent decision of the BPS and School Committee to alter the admission plan for the city's three exam schools?

I believe that the recent reforms are better than what was established previously. However, my concern is with the schools in Boston which are currently lacking proper funding. Our public schools are left to make do with poor materials, overcrowded classrooms, and learning conditions that are not conducive to the success of the whole student. We still have many schools that lack proper air conditioning with 100 degree heat in the warm months, and facilities with lead based plumbing systems.

In short, whether you qualify for an exam school or not, I am more concerned with achieving an exceptional educational experience for every child in Boston, no matter their income, race, residency, or test scores.

9. Do you support the citywide ballot question that would hand new budgetary powers to the City Council?

I would vote Yes. Our campaign wants the people of Boston to have input in where their money is invested. For the people to have a say in the budgetary process the city needs a democratically-elected body that acts as the voice of the people. No budgetary decisions should be made without input from the people directly affected by these choices. It is time we ensure that all future budgetary decisions are transparent and allow for community approval.

However, it is crucial for City Councilors to proactively organize community members and leaders. It is easy to say no to a single or a few city councilors; it becomes much harder to say no when they are backed by the community unified behind a single issue.

10. The city of Boston is presently without a permanent police commissioner. What should the next mayor do to fill the position and what type of person should be selected to lead the BPD?

The city of Boston needs a commissioner that can help rebuild the trust between the BPD and the community. Our next Mayor should give this search over to an independent body created by the city council. The next Police commissioner should be appointed by the people of Boston, through their direct representatives.

11. Do you support the redevelopment of City Hall and City Hall Plaza?

Boston residents are in desperate need of assistance and support. Our city faces a housing affordability crisis, underfunded schools, and constant burdensome traffic. With COVID still a threat, and schools in desperate need of renovation, the redevelopment of City Hall would be a very low priority for me.

12. What is your assessment of the Climate Ready Boston initiative conceived and executed to date by the Walsh administration? Is this initiative a sufficient response to prepare for the anticipated climate change in coming years and decades? What else might you do to build climate resiliency in the city of Boston?

The Climate Ready Boston initiative was a great step forward in preparing Boston to not only combat climate change, but to also build climate resilient infrastructure for all communities. What was also admirable about this initiative is that its participants went out into the community to educate residents on the need to build a resilient and eco-friendly Boston.

This is only a first step though. We must continue to take action in building green and resilient communities. For one, as a BPS teacher, I can recognize that we are in desperate need of retrofitting our schools and educating our youth on the existential threat of climate change. Therefore, one big step we could take is focusing on our schools as hubs of environmental education and green energy.

As City Councilor, I will organize with the already thriving climate justice groups (like the Sunrise Movement), families, and activists to build solar panels on every Boston public school, implement smart composting programs, and retrofit schools to use less energy. If we teach our students about the approaching existential threat of climate change, they can be properly equipped to fight it.

I will also organize and speak for investment in our decaying public transportation services to encourage people to take more eco-friendly methods on their daily commutes. We have to expand coverage of public transportation in our district (especially in communities of color), shift to a fully electric fleet, and make our public transportation services free to the public. This allows people to commute with reduced energy consumption and reduced emissions. Further, people's money goes towards the operations of public transport and so they deserve to enjoy the fruit of their investments by having free access to it.

13. A millionaires tax is expected to be on the statewide ballot in 2022. How do you plan to vote?

My vote will be a guaranteed Yes. Our wealth gap in Boston has been growing consistently since the 1970s. Boston is home to 24 billionaires and counting, and yet over 70% of our public schools do not have working air conditioning, 25% of Bostonians are paying over half their income on rent, and we continue to see our public transit services being cut while fares increase. We need this small segment of our society earning millions of dollars to start paying their fair share,

since so many in our community are paying more than they are reasonably capable of giving just to squeak by with a comfortable living.

14. Should gig workers be considered company employees, rather than independent contractors?

The Gig economy has destroyed previously existing industries (like that of the taxi business) and therefore absorbed their workforce. As they attempt to attain a monopoly, they are trying to remove their workers' status as employees and strip them of their due benefits. This means denying them compensation for any injury incurred on the job, workers compensation, and even denying them of any guarantee of making minimum wage.

Drivers in the gig economy depend on their jobs to get their children into college, to pay rent, to buy groceries, in short, they use these jobs to make a living and provide for their families. We are not talking about teenagers adopting a summer time job for a bit of money on the side. Uber, Lyft, Doordash, etc. drivers are *workers*, people attempting to earn a dignified income.

Therefore, as Uber and other gig companies assault their sources of income and their job security, they gladly announce their willingness to either push their drivers to the brink by forcing them to accept obscene working hours and brutally efficient working habits, or, they are gladly demanding them to accept poverty.

It is my belief we must fight to the end to ensure that these trends are beat back indefinitely.

15. A report commissioned by the Walsh administration found that just 1.2 percent of city contracts awarded between 2014-2018 were awarded to Black or Latino-owned businesses. What would you do to change that?

I believe that our city contracting process should accurately reflect our population and be handled more equitably. This means empowering BIPOC businesses, improving the application process, and providing better translation services. Many people have been excluded by an entangled bureaucratic system. We need to streamline our procedures so that more people have access to city contracts.

16. In 2018, the Walsh administration set a goal of creating 69,000 new units of housing in Boston by 2030. What is your assessment of this target — and what would your office do to balance growth with the concerns that many have about displacement in neighborhoods like Dorchester?

Dorchester is facing an affordable housing crisis. An increasing share of community members are having to pay 50% or more of their income on rent, and more so are unable to buy a home in Boston, denying them the opportunity to build generational wealth. This has led to a constant stream of our friends and family having to leave the community they were raised in to search for affordable housing and attainable homeownership elsewhere. For the future of Dorchester we need real investment put into building *affordable housing* for both rent and

purchase. That is why as City Councilor I will advocate to raise the Inclusionary Development Policy to 33% with a priority of 40% AMI for rental units and 60% AMI for homeownership. Expand current housing lotteries so that working class people have the ability to attain homeownership at an affordable price and build generational wealth. I will also use my voice and vote to make sure that any appointee to a housing related commission or agency will support the protection of public housing, expansion of affordable housing for rent & ownership, and are against public land being sold off.

17. What is your assessment of the Walsh administration's overall performance? Please offer a letter grade or pass/fail as part of your answer.

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18. What is your assessment of the acting Mayor Kim Janey's performance since taking office in March 2021? Please offer a letter grade or pass/fail as part of your answer.

It would only be fair to give an incomplete since Mayor Kim Janey has not finished her term.

19. Will you seek to expand or change the composition of the Zoning Board of Appeals? If so, how?

Our current system comprises a complex set of rules and regulations, and lacks transparency. We need to reformulate the approval process so that it is accountable to the community. We need to make sure that our zoning process is accountable to the people and that their decisions are validated by those who will be affected by their decisions. The ZBA should be helping small businesses thrive (especially those projects launched by marginalized groups), and this can only happen if the ZBA is accountable to the people of Boston.

20. When not on the campaign trail, how do you unwind?

With two kids, unwinding looks like long walks with the whole family, play dates with friends, movie nights with friends, and date nights when Grandma can watch the kids at night.

21. If you were not a candidate, who would you support in this election for City Council?

Nikkia Jean-Charles

Thank you for participating in the Dorchester Reporter questionnaire.

Please send the completed document as a PDF or WordDoc to newseditor@dotnews.com by Fri. Aug. 8, 2021.