

2026 Ferndale Public Schools School Board Candidate Questionnaire
Mark de la Vergne

1. What experiences have led you to run/rerun for school board?

My family moved to the Ferndale School District in 2017. My wife and I wanted our daughter to grow up in a district where all kids are supported and can be who they are. She was a proud little Eagle from day one, from Ferndale Early Childhood Center, to Ferndale Lower (virtual and in-person), then on to Ferndale Upper, and now thriving at the Middle School.

After the 2024 Presidential election, it was clear that public school districts like Ferndale were going to come under fire from the federal government. A few weeks later, a seat opened up on the School Board and I saw that as an opportunity to step up, become more involved and impact change. I applied and was appointed, and a year later, my fellow Trustees had the confidence to elect me Board President.

My professional background is in policy, specifically transportation. I've spent over 20 years working with communities to improve how they get around, and that work brought me to Michigan. I've been working in the policy world ever since, always with an eye toward the positive future we're building for our kids. This experience has served me well as I review policy and guide decisions that are in the best interest of the Ferndale Schools community.

I have always been passionate about public service. In addition to my current position on the School Board, I served in a leadership position for the City of Detroit for four years, and I am currently on the Pleasant Ridge Planning Commission. During my time on the school board, we've passed a Strategic plan, made concrete improvements on absenteeism, implemented numerous capital projects, and weathered budget challenges from the federal and state government.

I believe in Ferndale Public Schools. I believe in our students, our teachers, our families, our administrators, our staff, and our whole community. I want us to keep growing and improving while staying grounded in what makes Ferndale Schools so great: our commitment to equity and our focus on building a bright future for every student. Ferndale Public Schools has real momentum, and we need steady, experienced leadership to keep it going.

2. What do you see are the strengths and weaknesses of Ferndale Public Schools?

Strengths:

- We have a strong leadership team, helmed by Superintendent Hibbler, and an amazing, caring group of teachers and staff that is dedicated to our students.
- We have a local community that has continually showed up for our schools at the ballot box, trusting us to deliver two bonds over the last few years and overwhelmingly supporting the county millage effort that didn't pass.
- An unwavering commitment to diversity, equity, and belonging
- Our performing arts programs.

Weaknesses:

- We have made a lot of progress on improving our communications to families, but we can do much more.
- We still have a number of aging buildings, facilities, and infrastructure that need to be addressed. I want us to continue to make these investments so that we can provide teachers and students with a safe, dignified place for learning as well as reduce our future operational costs.
- We have a fragmented secondary school experience that needs to be improved to ensure that all of our students feel like they are truly part of the Ferndale Schools community.

3. How do you see collaboration between the Ferndale School Board and city governments/ other local stakeholders?

One of my core beliefs is that public schools should be the center of a community. We currently have good relationships with our four partner municipalities, but there is room for improvement.. I want Ferndale, Royal Oak Township, Pleasant Ridge and Oak Park leaders and residents to see *our* success as *their* success. That translates to members of these communities championing our events, supporting us on grants, and working with us to connect families to resources. A specific priority of mine is the Kulick Center and supporting the City's efforts to build it into a true community center.

4. How do you perceive the relationship among the different schools within FPS?

I think that, today, the experience across schools is inconsistent and fragmented. Ideally, we would get to a point where there is a consistency in communication, grading, and policy across schools, while still allowing each school to maintain its own personality and culture. We have made a lot of progress towards this goal over the last few years, but we still have significant work to do.

I have seen the leaders at the Early Childhood Center, Lower Elementary, and Upper Elementary work closely together to create a consistent experience, and I've seen firsthand how they collaborate on their approach to curriculum, teaching, and assessment.

I view the Middle School as our bridge. Middle school students are going through a lot of personal change and parents are adapting to their kids' growing independence. We must encourage this independence while understanding that strong communication to parents is still critical at this stage.

Then we have our high school experience. We currently have three secondary schools that each offer completely different experiences. We need to address this disparity and I will prioritize working with our leadership to get there over the next few years.

5. Oakland County voters recently voted against a regional school enhancement millage. How does this affect FPS? More generally, what is your experience with budgeting that you bring to this position?

To be blunt, the millage not passing really stinks. The School Board's had planned to put that money directly toward our teachers and the staff we entrust with our kids. This would not only benefit our amazing staff but also would have gone a long way in making our teaching salaries more competitive which, in turn, improves our ability to retain great teachers. We need this millage and I will continue to advocate to make another run at it.

I've worked closely on the district's budget over the last two years and we are lucky to have a strong finance team. My instinct with the budget is similar to how I address every issue at the board table. I ask a lot of questions and my focus is always: what is the impact the spend has on our students? I want us to focus on aligning our budgeting with our Dynamic Plan so we are able to direct more resources toward the areas where we have the most work to do. In my professional life I've spent years on budgets, fundraising, and financial strategy for mission-driven organizations. My philosophy is to make sure we are clear about our priorities, we ask hard questions, and we make sure we are being the best stewards of the public's tax dollars.

6. What role does AI (artificial intelligence) and EdTech have in the classrooms of FPS?

On EdTech, COVID forced our teachers to shift to a digital landscape literally overnight and we are still working our way out of this. We must get to a point where each of our students has the appropriate, useful level of technology. Age-appropriate decisions are critical as our littlest Eagles don't need to be on screens but our high schoolers need to be ready for their next step after graduation. This is going to take some time as we need to bring the entire community along for these changes, but I'm committed to moving as quickly as possible while listening to feedback from both parents and teachers as we make changes.

In regards to AI, I firmly believe that our youngest students do not have a need for AI, in the classroom or out. Older students are going to encounter AI and quite possibly use it as an experiment. But that doesn't mean we should have in the classrooms as part of our curriculum. I am supportive of any tool, digital or physical, that reduces the

administrative burden on our teachers and gives them back time, either for our students or for themselves.

We are going to need to have open, honest conversations about AI on a regular basis, both at the board level and with the community, so we can get this right.

7. In what ways do you see FPS working toward racial equity?

No matter how much progress we make on racial equity, there will always be more work to do. I am committed to ensuring that our school board continues to make racial equity a priority for Ferndale Schools. Listening and having open and honest communication with community leaders, as well as the families and staff who live these experiences is of the utmost importance.

We have strong Black leadership, both in central administration and in many of our buildings, and a clear culture of embracing diversity among our staff. We've used our Dynamic Plan to measure things like students' sense of belonging, out-of-school suspensions, and absenteeism and we've been transparent and honest about the disparities that this data shows.

I am fully in support of the administration's push for equitable grading practices. Research shows that traditional grading practices, like heavily weighting homework and participation or handing out zeros, can disadvantage students facing more barriers outside the classroom, and that disproportionately affects our Black students. Continuing to move to a grading for equity model is a priority of mine.

8. How do you see FPS working toward climate sustainability?

This is something we need to continue to push on, not just because it's the right thing to do but also because of the impact on our district's finances. The 26-27 school district budget shows a 27% increase in our electricity costs. This and the rising cost of diesel fuel that we use for our buses will continue to reduce the amount of funding we have for our students.

With my leadership, we made some progress on this, particularly in transportation, where we have Oakland County's first Bike Bus (a group of parents and students who bike to school together) and our pilot projects to add electric buses to our fleet. In order for FPS to work toward true climate sustainability, we need to look at our larger building systems and facilities to find meaningful ways to reduce our ecological footprint as well as the long-term costs that ultimately affect our students.

9. Are there any additional thoughts you would like to share?

I am committed to serving on this Board and making Ferndale Schools better for all of our students, staff, and community members. I believe I have had considerable impact in my two years on the Board and we have real momentum, which isn't something many public school districts in Michigan can say. I have been able to learn and grow

tremendously as a board member over these last two years by listening to so many perspectives across the district, both at the table and in the community. I love being a part of this community and would like the opportunity to continue this work. I would be both honored and humbled if the community gives me that opportunity.