

# 9 QUESTIONS FROM



## Meet the Candidates: Ken Frink

1. Why are you running? If elected, what would be your top goals as school board member?

I am running for the Citrus County School Board because I am committed to ensuring that every child receives a superior education in a safe and welcoming environment. My top goals include:

  - Returning Citrus County Schools to an “A” grade by focusing on academic excellence and raising performance standards.
  - Ensuring parents have a voice in their child's education.
  - Providing teachers and support staff with the resources and support they need to succeed.
  - Promoting professional development and fostering a positive workplace culture.
2. What can be done to ensure everyone who graduates is either ready for college or a vocation?

We need to start at an earlier age by identifying career paths for each child. Citrus County has a strong track record for college bound students, but we must improve vocational preparation. I will bridge the gap between industries and educators to:

  - 1) Shape the vocation curriculums to ensure our kids are employable upon graduation, and
  - 2) Educate businesses about the programs offered in our schools that prepare students for the workforce.
3. How should the district address underperforming schools?

By holding administrators accountable for those underperforming schools and giving them more discretion in rewarding educators that do perform and addressing those that don't.
4. Local and state initiatives have been launched to address the need for more teachers in our classrooms. What more do you think needs to be done to recruit and retain teachers in your district?

It is obvious that pay and working environments need to improve. Seasoned teachers should be compensated according to their value to education. Also, our policies need to be revised to give teachers much more control over managing their classrooms.
5. What is your stance on the state's current school choice program?

I am a firm believer of a parents right to choose where their child is educated. However, if a non-public school is to receive public funding, they should have to play by the same rules as our public schools. This includes not discriminating against any child by screening out students that may not be in their best interest to enroll in their non-public school.

6. Does school testing really give an accurate portrayal of the education quality/experience of a school?

No, but it is necessary to benchmark our schools across the state. I would like to see much more emphasis on tracking the post-graduate success of our students.

7. Issues surrounding gender, sexuality and race have created controversy between school boards and parents. How much say should parents have in deciding what is and is not included in the public school curriculum?

Our parents and students are our customers. We need to keep primary focus on the fundamentals and basics of education and make sure that our parents have the ultimate right to decide what their child is exposed to at school.

8. Do you feel students are safe at school? Or does more need to be done to protect school campuses?

Currently, yes. However we must always be mindful of the threats that do exist and never lose site of the importance of keeping our schools secure. This includes keeping our security protocols current, and working closely with local law enforcement to assure they stand ready to address any threat that may exist.

9. Do you feel any changes are needed to your district's budget? Is money being spent in the right places?

Yes, the district recently increased pay for newer, less seasoned educators, creating a compression issue. We need to address pay ranges to ensure both retention and recruitment of seasoned teachers

# 9 QUESTIONS FROM



Laura Gatling-Wright for Citrus County School Board, District 2

1. Why are you running? If elected, what would be your top goals as a school board member?

I am running for school board to make a positive impact on my community. As a teacher with 15 years of classroom experience and a parent of two school-aged children, public education is very important to me. If elected, my top priority would be teacher and staff recruitment and retention. Research supports that the greatest resource we can provide our students is qualified teachers. To make Citrus County appealing to educators, I would address issues surrounding pay, affordable insurance, childcare, and personal leave.

With quality education being a top priority, another goal I would work towards is ensuring the safety of our staff and students. I advocate for policy revisions to solidify the language regarding disruptive and harmful student behaviors, including bullying.

Consistency in discipline measures across all learning sites is crucial, so I would strive to ensure that these policies are clearly defined and uniformly applied.

2. What can be done to ensure everyone who graduates is either ready for college or a vocation?

I will continue to promote our learning academies within the district. Citrus County currently offers computer science, environmental science, health, construction, and arts academies, as well as technical career education and a supportive program for students with disabilities transitioning to the workforce. In the near future, the district plans to introduce a teacher academy. I also firmly believe that providing information to students and families about career options is critical, especially before high school, so students can begin planning for their future.

3. How should the district address underperforming schools?

We need to listen to the experts—the teachers who are in those classrooms every day. By conducting surveys and interviews, we can pinpoint their professional development needs and then tailor that development to address specific challenges. This approach will help ensure that the support provided is relevant and effective in improving outcomes.

4. Local and state initiatives have been launched to address the need for more teachers in our classrooms. What more do you think needs to be done to recruit and retain teachers in your district?

We need to focus on initiatives that will make Citrus County an attractive place to live, work, and play. As important as pay and benefits are to staff recruitment, it is equally as important to provide a supportive work environment in order to retain the excellent employees currently on our team. I want teachers and staff members to feel supported by their administrators, especially when it comes to classroom management and delivering uninterrupted education to all students. Ensuring clear policies and providing consistent support are key to retaining and attracting quality educators.

5. What is your stance on the state's current school choice program?

I am an advocate for parental rights. Parents should have the right to choose where to send their children, especially because everyone thrives in different environments. However, I do not agree with utilizing taxpayers' dollars meant for public education for the voucher program. These funds should be leveraged to improve and support our public schools to benefit all students.

6. Does school testing really give an accurate portrayal of the education quality/experience of a school?

No. It is just a small piece of a very intricate puzzle. Many variables and factors need to

be considered when evaluating student success, such as home life, absenteeism, socioeconomic standing, learning disabilities, and more. There are many ways to measure a student's success, and it isn't always demonstrated on a state test.

7. Issues surrounding gender, sexuality and race have created controversy between school boards and parents. How much say should parents have in deciding what is and is not included in the public school curriculum?

It is critical for school districts to follow legislative mandates when it comes to teaching the curriculum. Parents have always had the right to opt their children out of targeted lessons or presentations that revolve around growth and development. Curriculum design is a science that requires an understanding of child development and state standards.

8. Do you feel students are safe at school? Or does more need to be done to protect school campuses?

I do believe students are safe in Citrus County schools. The school district took a proactive stance shortly after the Sandy Hook tragedy, by requiring all classroom and external building doors to remain locked during student contact time. The governor recently passed legislation to make this a statewide mandate, which became effective July 1st. Citrus County schools have School Resource Officers, as well as a Guardian program for extra security. However, we can improve protection from internal factors such as bullying by revising policies to clarify what constitutes bullying and implementing clear initiatives to counter these actions and protect victims.

9. Do you feel any changes are needed to your district's budget? Is money being spent in the right places?

There is always room for improvement to ensure funds are allocated efficiently and effectively. We need to prioritize competitive salaries and benefits to attract and retain quality teachers and staff. Additionally, investing in professional development, classroom

resources, and student support services should be at the forefront. It's crucial to continually assess our spending to make sure it aligns with our goal of providing the best possible education for our students while supporting our educators.

## 9 QUESTIONS FROM



Dale Marie Merrill for School Board

1. Why are you running? If elected, what would be your top goals as school board member?

I want to promote better behavioral health in our schools. Better behavioral health interventions at an early age give children the skills they need to manage their behavior and become productive citizens, while reducing crime and making our community a safer place. In particular, we need to ensure that children with disabilities, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, ADHD, PTSD, Bipolar, Tourette's, OCD, and Oppositional Defiant Disorder receive the life-altering interventions required under the law.

We also need to work with the legislature to create more options for students who want to pursue trade school.

2. What can be done to ensure everyone who graduates is either ready for college or a vocation?

Before a child can be ready to effectively focus on their academics, they need to resolve their behavioral health issues.

We do a great job with our Academies in Citrus Schools and we need to expand the options.

We should work with the legislature to create a separate high school diploma for students who are on the vocational track, so that they can graduate high school ready to enter their desired trade.

3. How should the district address underperforming schools?

Many of the issues related to underperforming schools are also tied to the problem of needing better behavioral health in our schools. It is difficult for a student to focus on academics when they are overwhelmed with such issues as PTSD, depression, anxiety, ADHD, etc.. This issue also affects the learning of other students, since children with behavioral health issues can be a major distraction in a classroom and interfere with the learning of other students.

4. Local and state initiatives have been launched to address the need for more teachers in our classrooms. What more do you think needs to be done to recruit and retain teachers in your district?

Citrus County has a plethora of retired educators who have come here to retire. We should find creative ways to lure them back into our classrooms. They could be a valuable asset in mentoring young teachers, and also provide the quality education that one only gains from an experienced teacher. I would love to work with the legislature on creative ideas to lure experienced retired educators back into the school system. Perhaps the time to vest in the retirement system might be reduced for them. Or maybe we could create part-time teaching positions to give them more flexibility.

5. What is your stance on the state's current school choice program?

I support school choice because it allows parents the right to make decisions about what kind of education is best for their child. Families have



different values and beliefs that they wish to foster in their children, and school choice allows families that freedom.

6. Does school testing really give an accurate portrayal of the education quality/experience of a school?

No. Some children might have complete mastery of a subject matter, but simply be poor test-takers. Our educational system should not be evaluated on the ability of the children to take one high stakes test, but instead whether they can demonstrate mastery of the subject matter. For this reason, I favor allowing students alternative methods to demonstrate mastery of a subject, such as presenting a portfolio of their work.

The criteria is also flawed. For example, one of the criteria for evaluating schools is how much they have improved. However, a highly rated school does not have as much opportunity for improvement, as a school of a lower rating.

7. Issues surrounding gender, sexuality and race have created controversy between school boards and parents. How much say should parents have in deciding what is and is not included in the public school curriculum?

A parent is entitled to opt out of curriculum that they deem inappropriate for their children; however, no parent may be allowed to infringe their beliefs or values on other peoples' children. Every parent deserves the respect to allow them to make decisions about their own children.

However, in Florida the state that sets the curriculum, and not the school board.

8. Do you feel students are safe at school? Or does more need to be done to protect school campuses?

Behavioral health issues place our entire community at risk—and our schools are no exception. We need to be proactive in identifying and providing services to students who are at risk and who suffer from behavioral health issues. We need to pay more attention to teachers and parents who are in the best position to identify children at risk. Currently, Citrus County does not have any psychiatrists, never mind a child psychiatrist. It is unconscionable that Citrus County schools had to Baker Act over 50 children last year. Meanwhile, we had 250 youngsters arrested and more than half of them were for serious felonies. This indicates a failure to be proactive with behavioral health.

9. Do you feel any changes are needed to your district's budget? Is money being spent in the right places?

My education and experience provide me with the tools to effectively manage the district budget. I have an MBA and have worked with numerous Fortune 500 companies on cost-justifying mission critical systems.

I agree with those who say we need to examine the levels of management in our schools, and see what we can consolidate. Further, I see expenses such as building fences around the schools (which would prevent students and staff from escaping in the event of an active shooter) both dangerous and a waste of financial resources.

# 9 QUESTIONS FROM



## Meet the Candidate: Victoria Smith

Why are you running?

I am running to bring my years of experience in the classroom, leading the local educators association, engaging district administration, the school board, and state leaders to ensure the focus of student success is based on a strong educational system that respects students, parents, teachers and staff.

If elected, what would be your top goals as a school board member?

To ensure we put the right money in the right areas, which is just one way to support teachers, staff and bus drivers. Expecting rigor and accountability for students and teachers and providing the opportunities for students to be successful in their learning.

What can be done to ensure everyone who graduates is either ready for college or a vocation?

First, better professional learning (formerly professional development), second improve student discipline and address bullying, third get rid of the automatic 50% grade granted to Elementary students, and lastly support the options of the trades as a career.

How should the district address underperforming schools?

This is specifically done through professional learning. The more you invest in helping your educators grow in knowledge, the more tools they bring to the table for student success.

Local and state initiatives have been launched to address the need for more teachers in our classrooms.

What more do you think needs to be done to recruit and retain teachers in your district?

The importance of teachers feeling supported by the school board is the biggest need. Along with improving and expanding the current mentorship program so educators feel that they have someone to lean on. Of course the obvious is more money, with the state mandating the minimum be raised it has caused a compression with veteran teachers. I know how to move money, without raising taxes, to help with that compression.

What is your stance on the state's current school choice program?

School choice is a tool the state has implemented to give more options to students, but the core of education will always be classical education through the district run schools as many parents still feel it's the best choice.

Does school testing really give an accurate portrayal of the education quality/experience of a school?

Testing has always been a part of education. Having experience with everything from FCAT to the current FAST and EOC, I know testing can go too far and be a detriment but I believe that testing is needed. My work at the district and state level has shown me that this will always be an issue. A better solution would be project based learning and formative assessments that would allow the teacher to determine if the student truly understands the standards at the same time prepare the student for their future endeavours.

Issues surrounding gender, sexuality and race have created controversy between school boards and parents. How much say should parents have in deciding what is and is not included in the public school curriculum?

Parents are the ones in charge of their children, so it's important to listen to them on these issues, as education is a service to parents to help develop knowledgeable and capable adults. However, we have to make sure the curriculum is age appropriate and does not disrupt the learning environment.

Do you feel students are safe at school? Or does more need to be done to protect school campuses?

The tragedy of school shootings definitely means we should always look to improve security. But equally we should focus on bullying as well. An example would be that currently teachers only get shown a video about bullying at the beginning of the year. We should update the current policy to have more intensive professional learning to allow teachers to better understand the many ways of bullying and how to address it as well as the consequences for the students.

Do you feel any changes are needed to your district's budget? Is money being spent in the right places?

As a school board member, I would support an effort to increase teachers, and all other staff members salaries. However, currently the district gives the same percentages to our support staff, custodians, and bus drivers as they do to our administrators which gives a much larger raise to the administrators and smaller raise to our lowest paid employees. We currently have two Assistant Superintendents, only one is needed for a district our size, and multiple other positions that are not necessary at the district level. My years of being part of the bargaining team has shown me where money can be reallocated to help give all our staff a liveable wage.