

9 QUESTIONS FROM



Meet the Candidates: William Allen

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

As a proud graduate of Polk County Public Schools, I have a deep-rooted passion for our educational system and I believe it should be one of the strongest pillars of hope within our community. My values/goals continue to shape how I govern as a school board member. These goals include ensuring student success, access to choices, and building strong community partnerships. These values and initiatives have shaped my journey in education and continue to guide how I govern as a school board member.

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

Giving parents confidence that the educational pathways and options their students are exposed to through Polk County Public Schools provides the rigor to prepare them for a successful future is what parents expect from this board. This involves building clear pathways from elementary/middle/high school, increasing dual-enrollment options in an equitable way across all high schools, enhancing and encouraging participation in our accelerated (IB, Cambridge, DE, and Industry Certification) programs. Lastly, in general, we must deeply assess every student sub-group academic targets to determine student success within the core academic foundations.

3. How should the district address underperforming schools?

I have no doubt that PCPS is headed in the right direction - towards an academically focused climate and safe learning environment. Currently, we have eliminated all unsatisfactory (F) schools in Polk County and have maintained that for the last two years. Along with that, since 2020-21, under our Superintendent's leadership, this board reduced the number of "D" rated schools from 42 to 7. Lastly, since the 2020-21 school year, we improved the amount of "B" schools from 7 to 27 and more than tripled the amount of "A" schools from 3 to 15. Several strategies and initiatives are in place to sustain and improve upon our progress.

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?

Improving teacher retention rates requires a multi-tiered approach which is embedded in our overall strategic plan of developing great teachers and leaders. To improve overall recruitment and retention, we must continue to offer competitive salaries, provide strong support for new teachers, and ensure a

positive working environment. Addressing pay competitiveness is crucial in this effort. Since 2021, this board has moved Polk to rank number three within the Central Florida School Board coalition in terms of advanced degree pay supplements. Additionally, Polk County is ranked number two for employer contributions to health insurance premiums, helping maintain lower rates for our employees. While PCPS's veteran teacher retention rates exceed the national average, we need to work on improving retention rates for new teachers to compete with the national average. Given that over 30 percent of our teacher workforce has served five years or less, this is a significant undertaking.

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

Access to choice comes at all levels and benefits the whole. One of my top priorities is helping support parents as they seek access for what's best for their child. Polk County Public Schools continues to build more choice options for parents such as our elementary Digital Media Academy, Central Florida Aerospace Academies, Cambridge (all grade levels), International Baccalaureate (all grade levels), and other rigorous options.

Beyond those choices, since 2001, Florida has offered scholarship options primarily aimed at low-income and working-class children and families, later expanding to include special needs students promoting more school choice options. House Bill 1 (HB-1) integrated enhanced accountability measures for parents receiving these scholarships, along with increased accountability and deregulation. Overall, I hope to see our legislators continue to deregulate public schools. Lastly, I would like to see public school students, with their parents guidance, have the option to take either the statewide assessment or one of the state-approved norm-referenced exams.

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

School testing is an essential tool for measuring student achievement and holding schools accountable. However, it's important to recognize that testing alone cannot fully capture the quality or experience of education at a school.

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?

The school board has a long-standing policy that allows any community member to challenge the educational suitability of books held in school libraries. This policy has continuously adjusted to align with state statutes. While I am mostly satisfied with the district's current process, I remain open to refining it to ensure it is transparent, fair, and consistently applied. It's important that we balance the diverse viewpoints of our community while upholding the educational integrity of our school libraries/curriculum.

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

While the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act has significantly enhanced school safety in Florida by mandating school resource officers, funding mental health services, and establishing threat assessment protocols and an anonymous reporting system, there is always more that can be done

to ensure the safety of our students. Recently, we moved to place all school resource officers under the Polk County Sheriff's office, allowing for more continuity between our Safe Schools Division and Law Enforcement. I'm confident that Polk continues to evaluate and improve measures to maintain a secure school environment.

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

Our recently conducted efficiency audit offers a clear path to providing more financial resources to our district. Currently, we are undergoing a comprehensive rezoning for k-12 which will have a dramatic positive impact on our resources. The current board continues to maximize our community partnerships and find ways to maximize operational efficiencies, ensuring that money is being spent in the right places.

9 QUESTIONS FROM



Meet the Candidate: Bernie Brandt

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

I am running because I want to make our schools more accepting, inclusive, accessible, and exciting places to learn and work than they currently are. I will be a voice for our community and—as long as what the constituents want is ethical, constitutional, fair, and financially responsible—truly be a public servant who advocates for what the people of the county want. My top goals would be prioritizing responsible, transparent use of our tax money to properly fund our schools, making our schools more accepting and inclusive of all students and staff, and being personally available and accessible to the community, so that I can be in touch with the issues that are important to my fellow taxpayers and properly represent them.

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

Teachers should be given freedom to select the materials and teaching methods that best suit the needs of their students and the community around their school. More effort should be put into addressing and incentivizing attendance, because attendance directly affects grades.

3. How should the district address underperforming schools?

There are a multitude of reasons that schools underperform. Each situation should be scrutinized and addressed at the root of the problem. Whether it is overcrowding, attendance, lack of community involvement, or another issue, it should be addressed and a solution developed that will be effective long-term and not just a Band-Aid.

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?

Pay needs to increase, administration needs to support teachers, and Tallahassee needs to let teachers teach the way that is best for them and their students.

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

I believe that every parent has the right to choose the educational path that their child takes on their way to becoming an adult. I also believe that every non-public school that accepts even a single penny of tax money should be held to the same minimum standards of curriculum and staff credentials as their public counterparts.

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

Testing only grades a student's ability to take a test. Some of the most brilliant minds are terrible test-takers. Some of the most important lessons in life cannot be effectively graded in test form. Everyone learns and communicates what they have learned differently and, as such, should not be lumped into the same box.

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?

Schools should always have materials that provide consistent, fair representation of all, regardless of race, gender identity, culture, orientation, level of ability, or ethnicity. Additionally, providing a comprehensive, age-appropriate sex education program is historically proven to reduce rates of teenage pregnancy and STI transmission. If a parent wishes for their child to not have access to a particular resource (book, presentation, lesson, etc.), they should be able to opt-out and select an alternative, but their choice should not affect any student other than their own.

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

campuses?

I feel that students are generally safe, but could be safer. As someone with a background in safety & security management, I recognize that improvements could be made to perimeter security, points of ingress and egress, and sporting events at schools throughout our county. I would advocate for an expansion of the Guardian program, metal detectors at every point of entry at every school, and regular (monthly or more frequent) inspections of fences and gates.

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

I feel like money is going to the right places, but that the way it is prioritized needs to be adjusted. Paying staff a comfortable, living wage should be top priority, followed by security and maintenance, and then everything else. A school system with poorly-paid staff and under-maintained facilities is not a system that will thrive.