

9 QUESTIONS FROM



Meet the Candidate: Sara Beth Wyatt

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

I have a genuine love for this community and take the responsibility of representing the full community seriously. I take the time to understand both sides of every issue before making any decision. Most importantly, though, I have an understanding of Polk County Public Schools that has been decades in the making and started well before my time on the board. I often joke that education is apparently a calling you just can't escape. I come from a family of Polk County educators and have spent the better part of my life in our classrooms as a student, volunteer, or board member. I have taken the time to talk to our students, families, teachers, and staff to understand ongoing issues and concerns and have a track record of rolling up my sleeves to work on solutions.

While we are not where we want to be yet academically, we are certainly moving in the right direction. Since being elected in 2016, PCPS has moved from being ranked 57th in Florida to 49th in Florida. We went from have 6 "F" schools to 0 "F" schools. We are out pacing the state in proficiency gains for 6 of 9 categories. The graduation rate has increased from 69% in 2016 to 78% today. We have increased starting pay for all employee groups to remain competitive, while maintaining a zero premium insurance plan for all employees. We are second in the nation for our career academies and have worked to expand academic offerings by adding programs such as 3DE and expand programs such as Cambridge.

My top priority is ensuring that every decision we make is what is best for students. When we do what is right for kids, our school grades increase, our graduation rates increase, and our dropout rates decrease, but most importantly we will be sending into the community good citizens after graduation that are prepared to enter college or a career.

A few components of that include:

- expanding access to advanced curriculum programs that prepare students for future success at all schools.
- Transitioning all schools to school-based budgeting to prioritize dollars being spent to best meet the needs of each individual school.
- Prioritizing our human capital with a focus on alleviating compression and maintaining a zero-premium health insurance option for all employees.
- Encouraging active participation from parents, teachers, and community members in decision-making processes

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

Polk County Public Schools is currently ranked second in the nation for career academies. These programs allow students to explore industries, evaluate career opportunities, and work with mentors as part of their high school experience. I think we need to do a better job of exposing students to different industries in the elementary and middle school years. I am a big believer that “if you can’t see it, you can’t be it.” Exposing students to opportunities beyond their K-12 experience is essential for preparing them for the future.

When Superintendent Heid arrived, he made a concerted effort to expand school counselors, as one counselor cannot possibly help 800 students figure out what they want to do next. As we continue to improve our ratios of counselors to students, I know that we will see an increase in meaningful conversations around what options are available post K-12 in earlier years, so that students can ensure they are taking the right classes, participating in the right activities and doing the things necessary to prepare them for success in whatever future they choose.

Currently, the number one concern we hear from employers is the lack of “soft skills” of those entering the workforce. Often students are so dependent on technology that they struggle to communicate. We need to find ways to balance the use of technology with the face-to-face interactions to ensure that students have the employability skills (communication, teamwork, time management, etc.) needed to excel in their future careers. I believe the 2023 change in state statute to restrict legally restrict cell phone use during instructional time is a great start.

3. How should the district address underperforming schools?

Every school is different, so part of the solution is identifying where the school is struggling and finding the core issues. For a school that struggles with low reading scores, a math coach may not be the answer. We have recently restructured our school transformation department to ensure that underperforming schools are not being shuffled between regional superintendents depending upon their letter grade for a given

year. Instead, schools continue to report to their regional superintendent, but have additional supports added from the department of transformation. Part of this process is looking at the school's test scores and determining where the trouble spots are and what resources could be most helpful. This can range from additional supports for teachers on curriculum to tutoring for students to additional parent/community engagement initiatives and everything in between.

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?

PCPS currently exceeds the national average with an 88% retention rate, but that is still not where we want to be. While we are working to increase salaries, we also must continue to keep our high-quality benefits, such as the zero-premium health insurance for all employees. We also need to be a better job of advertising the value of our benefits. We hear stories of teachers leaving for higher salaries in neighboring counties every year, only to realize that their first paycheck is less than it was in Polk County. We are consistently exploring opportunities with our local unions for quality-of-life benefits and other ways to better support our educators. While we can never pay them enough, we must get creative with other benefits we can offer.

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

Florida has led the way in school choice for decades, allowing parents and guardians to choose the best educational model for their students. Every student learns differently and can be most successful in a different environment. There are so many opportunities out there that we cannot possibly offer every program at every school, so choice becomes critical in ensuring that students can access every opportunity no matter their zip code. In Polk County, I want to ensure that every school is a destination school worthy of being chosen. There is a difference between choosing a school or program because it is what your child needs and choosing a specialized program to escape the zoned alternative. In Polk County my goal is that we have programs, academics, student success, and school cultures at every school, so that no parent feels like they must go somewhere else to escape their zoned school.

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

Moving to FAST testing has given the opportunity for school testing to truly be used in adjusting curriculum and seeing where students are throughout the year as a progress

monitoring tool in core academic subjects. That being said, school testing doesn't measure many things that make a school great – electives and extra-curricular opportunities, school culture, community involvement, etc. Because education is not a one-size-fits-all solution, it is hard to rank schools when they often exist to serve different purposes. For example, a student who dreams of going into construction, would likely be more successful at a C-rated school with a great Construction Academy than at an A-rated school with no construction classes. We know that students who get involved in programs or extracurriculars are more engaged in their school and perform better academically. Annually, I receive calls from parents at A schools that are unsatisfied with the school and parents from C schools that are gushing over their child's incredible experience.

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?

State and local curriculum adoption processes both have the opportunity for parent and community feedback (and have for decades). I think we need to do a better job of advertising those opportunities for engagement. At the end of the day, there is a much higher standard of appropriateness of materials and content used for classroom instruction than there is for self-selected reading and materials on the topics. Items used for instructional materials should be relevant to curriculum and state standards. While items self-selected by students may cover much broader topics and depths, based on student interest and parent or guardian comfort.

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

In Polk County, we have led the way in school safety. We have an incredible partnership with Sheriff Grady Judd and the Polk County Sheriff's department. We often cannot share many of the things our team is doing behind the scenes to keep kids safe. Florida statute protects school safety plans from the sunshine law to avoid giving a blueprint to individuals looking to do harm. I feel confident that there are few safer places than on our school campuses.

I do think that there will continue to be opportunities for improvement in the digital world as technology improves. We have the responsibility to teach our students to use it wisely. With new emerging technologies, such as AI, I think we are just scratching the surface of the opportunities and challenges on the horizon. I am currently working with the superintendent and our technology department to better align our policies to the digital age. For example, my hope is to be able to bring forward a more modern photo release policy within the year to ensure families have the ability to exclude their child's photo and information from being shared on public social media pages without excluding their child from the yearbook.

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

Last year, we completed an efficiency audit and are currently implementing the recommendations to streamline programs for cost savings and to cut spending. Many programs are being brought in-house, using the professionals we already have here in the district, for trainings and curriculum development. One of the largest items is rezoning our schools to streamline bussing. We currently have some neighborhoods that will drive past 2 or 3 other schools to get to their zoned school. while other neighborhoods have 6 blocks attending 6 different schools each requiring its own bus for transportation. By re-aligning our school zones, we will see some cost savings, but we will also be doing what is best for kids, by ensuring they have access to a school in their area.

We are also currently in the process of moving to school-based budgeting. I have been a big proponent of this initiative because every school has different needs, and this allows our schools to allocate their funds to best support the needs of their student populations. The transition started last school year with a pilot group and now includes nearly half of our campuses.

9 Questions from



FROM REBEKAH RICKS
FOR POLK COUNTY SCHOOL BOARD
DISTRICT 4

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

I am running for the Polk County School Board because I am deeply committed to improving our education system and supporting our community's families. With 23 years of experience in education, including teaching in classrooms, founding a tutoring business, working on education legislation, and starting a university model school, I bring a wealth of knowledge and practical experience. My extensive background in managing nonprofits and serving on state boards also equips me with strong leadership and organizational skills, making me well-suited to address the diverse needs of our schools. If elected, my top goals as a school board member include advocating for students' rights, ensuring that all students, especially those with learning disabilities and ESOL needs, receive the necessary support and resources for academic success. I aim to address the rapid growth in Polk County by securing increased funding, expanding school facilities, and hiring additional staff to meet the needs of a growing student population. Furthermore, I am dedicated to improving academic outcomes by implementing strategies to enhance reading proficiency and ensure daily attendance for every student. I will monitor key performance indicators such as standardized test scores, attendance rates, and graduation rates to ensure continuous improvement in student outcomes. These goals reflect my passion for education and my commitment to making a positive impact on our community's education system.

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

To ensure every graduate is ready for college or a vocation, we must implement a comprehensive approach that includes enhancing career and technical education (CTE) programs, expanding dual enrollment opportunities, and providing personalized academic counseling. Strengthening partnerships with local businesses and colleges will offer students real-world experience through internships and apprenticeships, bridging the gap between education and the workforce. Additionally, incorporating skills-based learning and career exploration into the curriculum from an early age will help students identify their interests and aptitudes. By fostering a supportive environment that prioritizes both academic excellence and practical skills development, we can prepare every student for success in their chosen path, whether it be higher education or entering the workforce directly.

3. How should the district address underperforming schools?

To address underperforming schools, the district should adopt a multifaceted strategy that focuses on targeted support and accountability. This includes implementing comprehensive improvement plans tailored to the specific needs of each school, providing professional development for teachers to enhance instructional practices, and ensuring access to high-quality resources and materials. Increasing parental and community engagement is crucial, as it fosters a supportive environment for students. Additionally, regular monitoring and assessment of progress will help identify areas that require further intervention. Partnering with educational experts and leveraging successful models from other districts can also provide valuable insights and strategies. By fostering a culture of continuous improvement and collaboration, the district can effectively raise the performance of underperforming schools and ensure all students receive a quality education.

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?

To effectively recruit and retain teachers in our district, we need to implement a comprehensive approach that addresses both immediate and long-term needs. First, offering competitive salaries and comprehensive benefits packages is essential to attract and retain top talent. Creating a supportive and collaborative work environment, where teachers feel valued and appreciated, will also enhance job satisfaction. Providing ongoing professional development opportunities and clear career advancement pathways can help teachers grow and stay motivated. Additionally, reducing administrative burdens and ensuring manageable class sizes can prevent burnout and improve job satisfaction. Strengthening partnerships with local universities

to create robust teacher preparation programs and offering incentives for teachers to work in high-need areas can also help address shortages. Finally, fostering strong community and parental support for teachers will create a more supportive environment, encouraging teachers to remain in the district. By addressing these key areas, we can build a stable and committed teaching workforce dedicated to providing high-quality education to our students.

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

I support the state's current school choice program because it empowers parents to select the best educational environment for their children, catering to their unique needs and learning styles. School choice can foster innovation and improvement across all schools by encouraging healthy competition. However, it is crucial to ensure that all schools receiving public funds, including private and charter schools, adhere to the same rigorous accountability standards as public schools. This ensures that taxpayer dollars are used effectively and that all students receive a high-quality education. By balancing choice with accountability, we can provide families with diverse educational options while maintaining high standards and equity across the educational system.

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

While school testing provides valuable data on student achievement and can highlight areas needing improvement, it does not fully capture the quality or experience of education at a school. Standardized tests primarily measure proficiency in specific subjects but often overlook critical aspects such as creativity, critical thinking, social-emotional learning, and the overall school environment. Additionally, over-reliance on testing can lead to teaching to the test, narrowing the curriculum and potentially neglecting other important areas of student development. A more comprehensive evaluation of a school's quality should include multiple measures, such as student engagement, teacher effectiveness, extracurricular opportunities, and parent and community involvement. By considering a broader range of indicators, we can gain a more accurate and holistic understanding of a school's educational quality and experience.

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?

Parents should have a significant role in shaping the public school curriculum, as they are primary stakeholders in their children's education and upbringing. Open communication and collaboration between parents, educators, and school boards are crucial for creating a curriculum that reflects community values while also ensuring a comprehensive and inclusive educational experience. However, it is also essential to balance parental input with the professional expertise of educators and the need to adhere to educational standards and policies. By involving parents through advisory committees, public forums, and transparent decision-making processes, schools can foster a respectful and constructive dialogue. This approach helps to ensure that the curriculum is well-rounded, inclusive, and respectful, while also preparing students to navigate and understand a complex and diverse world.

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

While many schools have made significant strides in improving safety, there is always room for enhancement to ensure that all students feel secure on campus. Safety measures such as controlled access points, security personnel, and surveillance systems are essential, but they must be complemented by fostering a positive school climate. Implementing comprehensive anti-bullying programs, promoting mental health support, and encouraging open communication between students, staff, and parents can help create a more supportive and safe environment. Regular safety drills and updated emergency preparedness plans are also crucial. Additionally, involving the community and local law enforcement in safety planning can provide valuable insights and resources. By taking a holistic approach that combines physical security measures with efforts to support students' well-being, we can create a safer and more nurturing school environment for everyone.

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

Yes, I believe there are areas where changes could be made to ensure our district's budget is spent more effectively. While our district has made strides in certain areas, there is always room for improvement to ensure that funds are being utilized in the most impactful ways. One priority should be increasing investment in teacher salaries and professional development to attract and retain high-quality educators, which directly affects student outcomes.

Additionally, more resources should be allocated towards technology and infrastructure to keep up with the rapid advancements in educational tools and the growing student

population in Polk County. Expanding programs that support students with special needs and English language learners is also crucial for ensuring equitable education opportunities for all students.

We should conduct a thorough review of administrative costs and operational expenses to identify potential savings that can be redirected towards classroom instruction and student support services. Engaging in a transparent budgeting process that involves input from educators, parents, and community members can help ensure that financial decisions align with the district's educational goals and priorities. By focusing on these areas, we can better support our teachers and students, ultimately improving educational outcomes across the district.