

Polk County School Board 2026

Candidate Questionnaire — Full Responses

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All 2026 Polk County School Board Candidates were asked the same questions. Responses are presented as submitted, with minor punctuation edits only. Candidates are grouped by district, and then are listed in alphabetical order. We have also included their campaign website or email. Candidates without a response are identified.

To navigate directly to responses for a candidate by name, please select below.

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District 3

Sarah Corona — District 3 Candidate

<https://www.sarahcorona4schoolboard.com/>

1. Why are you running for Polk County School Board, and what specific experience qualifies you for this role?

I am running for the Polk County School Board because I believe every student deserves access to a safe, high-quality education and the support they need to succeed academically, emotionally, and socially. Mental health is a critical part of student success, and I will advocate for increased access to school counselors, mental health resources, and programs that promote student well-being. My experience as a parent, community advocate, and leader has given me firsthand insight into the challenges facing our schools. Throughout my career, I have developed strong leadership, communication, and problem-solving skills by bringing people together, listening to different perspectives, and working toward practical solutions. I believe in transparency, accountability, and collaboration with parents, teachers, students, and the community. As a school board member, I will use my leadership experience to make informed decisions, strengthen our schools, support educators, and ensure every child has the opportunity to thrive.

2. What do you see as the single biggest challenge facing Polk County schools right now, and what would you do about it?

The single biggest challenge facing Polk County schools is ensuring that every student has the support they need to succeed while attracting and retaining excellent teachers. Student achievement is closely tied to strong educators, safe learning environments, and access to

mental health resources. As a school board member, I will advocate for competitive teacher support, professional development, and policies that help recruit and retain high-quality educators. I will also prioritize expanding access to school counselors and mental health services so students receive the support they need to thrive both academically and emotionally. I believe in making data-driven decisions, listening to parents, teachers, students, and the community, and ensuring transparency in how resources are allocated. By investing in our teachers, supporting student well-being, and maintaining accountability, we can improve academic outcomes, strengthen public trust, and prepare every Polk County student for success after graduation.

3. Polk County has seen rapid growth and ongoing facility and capacity questions. How would you approach decisions about school construction, boundaries, and overcrowding?

As Polk County continues to grow, we must take a proactive and fiscally responsible approach to school construction, attendance boundaries, and overcrowding. Decisions should be based on accurate enrollment data, long-term population projections, and the needs of our students and communities, not short-term solutions. I believe transparency and community engagement are essential. Parents, teachers, and local residents should have a voice before boundary changes or major construction decisions are made. I will support careful planning to ensure tax dollars are used efficiently while providing safe, modern learning environments for every student. When evaluating new schools or boundary adjustments, I will prioritize minimizing disruption to families, maintaining equitable access to educational opportunities, and preserving strong neighborhood schools whenever possible. By planning ahead, listening to the community, and making data-driven decisions, we can responsibly manage growth while keeping students' best interests at the center of every decision.

4. Do you support increasing teacher pay in Polk County, and if so, how would you fund it? What do you see as the biggest challenges teachers face in the classroom every day, and how should the board address them?

Yes, I support increasing teacher pay because attracting and retaining high-quality educators is essential to improving student success. Competitive salaries help reduce turnover and ensure Polk County can recruit and keep outstanding teachers. Any salary increases should be funded through responsible budgeting, prioritizing classroom instruction, seeking available state funding, and identifying efficiencies that reduce unnecessary administrative costs without impacting student services. Beyond compensation, teachers face increasing challenges every day, including larger class sizes, student behavioral issues, growing mental health needs, excessive administrative demands, and limited classroom resources. The school board should support teachers by expanding access to counselors and mental health professionals, providing meaningful professional development, ensuring classrooms are safe and orderly, and giving educators a stronger voice in district decisions. When we invest in our teachers, we invest in our students. Supporting educators with competitive pay, resources, and respect will strengthen our schools and improve outcomes for every child.

5. How would you balance parental input and involvement with the professional judgment of teachers and administrators on curriculum and classroom decisions?

Parents are their children's first and most important teachers, and their voices deserve to be heard. At the same time, our teachers and administrators are trained professionals whose expertise is essential to providing a high-quality education. I believe the school board's role is to foster collaboration, transparency, and mutual respect among all stakeholders. I support open communication with families, giving parents clear information about curriculum, instructional materials, and their children's academic progress. I also trust educators to use their professional judgment in delivering instruction that meets state standards and supports student learning.

When concerns arise, they should be addressed through a respectful, transparent process that includes parents, teachers, and school leaders. My goal is to build partnerships, not create conflict, so decisions remain focused on what is in the best interest of students. By working together, we can create schools where families feel heard, educators feel supported, and students have every opportunity to succeed.

6. What role should the school board play in addressing student mental health and safety on campus?

The school board has a responsibility to ensure that every student can learn in a safe, supportive environment. Student mental health and campus safety go hand in hand, and both are essential to academic success. I will advocate for increased access to school counselors, mental health professionals, and early intervention programs that help students before challenges become crises. Supporting students' emotional well-being also helps improve attendance, behavior, and academic performance. School safety requires a comprehensive approach that includes secure campuses, well-trained staff, strong partnerships with law enforcement and first responders, and clear emergency preparedness plans. Equally important is creating a positive school culture where students feel respected, connected, and comfortable reporting concerns. The school board should provide the resources, policies, and oversight needed to support both mental health and school safety while working closely with parents, educators, and community partners. Every student deserves to feel safe, supported, and ready to learn every day.

7. How do you define your role in oversight of the district's budget, and what would you prioritize if forced to make cuts?

The school board's responsibility is to provide strong fiscal oversight by ensuring every taxpayer dollar is spent wisely, transparently, and in a way that directly benefits students. Every budget decision should reflect the district's mission of improving student achievement while maintaining accountability to the community. If difficult budget cuts became necessary, I would prioritize protecting classroom instruction, teacher salaries, student mental health services, school safety, and programs that directly support student learning. Before considering cuts that impact students or educators, I would carefully review administrative expenses, operational efficiencies, and opportunities to eliminate waste or duplication. I believe in making data-driven decisions, engaging the community in the budget process, and ensuring transparency throughout. My goal would be to preserve the resources that have the greatest impact on student success while maintaining the district's long-term financial stability. Every budget decision should put students first and reflect responsible stewardship of public funds.

8. Is there anything else voters should know about you before they cast their ballot?

I want voters to know that I am running for the Polk County School Board because I genuinely care about our students, our teachers, and the future of our community. I am committed to serving with integrity, transparency, and accountability, always putting students first. As a parent, community advocate, and leader, I understand the importance of listening to families, supporting educators, and making thoughtful, data-driven decisions. I believe our schools should provide every child with a safe learning environment, a quality education, and access to the mental health resources they need to succeed. I am not running to promote a personal agenda. I am running to bring people together, build trust, and find practical solutions that strengthen our schools. I will work collaboratively with parents, teachers, administrators, students, and the community because the best decisions are made when everyone has a seat at the table. I would be honored to earn your trust and your vote.

Victor Sims — District 3 Candidate

<https://www.simsforpolk.com/>

1. Why are you running for Polk County School Board, and what specific experience qualifies you for this role?

I am running for Polk County School Board because I know what it feels like for a child to depend on a school for stability, encouragement, and hope. As a Polk County native and former foster youth who attended 12 different public schools here, I experienced both the gaps students face and the life-changing difference caring educators can make. That experience shaped my career in service to children and families. As a social worker and advocate, I have worked with state agencies, community organizations, and families to keep children connected to the community, strengthen family stability, and build systems that help young people thrive. I am running to make sure no student feels invisible, no parent feels unheard, and no teacher feels unsupported. What qualifies me most is not only professional experience, but lived understanding of how board decisions affect real children in real classrooms across Polk County.

2. What do you see as the single biggest challenge facing Polk County schools right now, and what would you do about it?

The single biggest challenge facing Polk County schools is making sure every child, in every ZIP code, has consistent access to a high-quality education despite rapid growth, uneven resources, and staffing pressures. The district serves more than 117,000 students, and Polk remains one of Florida's lowest-funded districts while trying to keep pace with growth. My remedy would start with equity and execution: direct resources to under-resourced schools, strengthen teacher and staff retention, expand tutoring and after-school supports, and use transparent data to track whether students are actually gaining ground. I also believe the board must align every major decision with student outcomes, not politics or headlines. If a school is struggling, we should respond early with staffing support, academic intervention, and community partnership. The goal is simple: not pockets of excellence, but a district where quality is dependable and opportunity is real for every student.

3. Polk County has seen rapid growth and ongoing facility and capacity questions. How would you approach decisions about school construction, boundaries, and overcrowding?

School construction and boundary decisions should be data-driven, transparent, and centered on students and families. Polk already uses school concurrency, long-range planning, and rezoning to respond to accelerated growth; the board's job is to make sure those tools are used early, clearly, and fairly. I would start with enrollment trends, housing growth, school utilization, transportation times, and the condition of existing campuses. Then I would insist on real community engagement before final decisions are made. Families deserve to see the data, understand the options, and know the timeline. When boundaries must change, the district should minimize disruption, keep neighborhoods and feeder patterns together where possible, and protect students already established in a school. When construction is needed, we should prioritize high-growth areas and campuses with the greatest facility need. Good planning means fewer surprises, less overcrowding, and confidence that every child will have a safe, high-quality place to learn.

4. Do you support increasing teacher pay in Polk County, and if so, how would you fund it? What do you see as the biggest challenges teachers face in the classroom every day, and how should the board address them?

Yes. I support increasing teacher pay, and I also believe support staff must be part of that conversation. Polk's hope for stronger schools cannot succeed if teachers, paraprofessionals, secretaries, custodians, and other employees are asked to do more while neighboring districts pay more. I would also push my colleagues on the board to address pay compression so experienced employees are not left behind. The biggest classroom challenges teachers face every day are too many unmet student needs, not enough time, limited resources, and the strain that comes from staffing instability. The board should respond by improving compensation, protecting planning time, investing in classroom support and professional development, and reducing avoidable burdens so educators can focus on teaching and relationship-building.

5. How would you balance parental input and involvement with the professional judgment of teachers and administrators on curriculum and classroom decisions?

Parents and educators should not be treated as opposing teams. Parents are their children's first teachers, and their voice matters. Teachers and administrators, however, bring professional training, daily classroom experience, and responsibility for delivering instruction consistent with state standards and board-adopted materials. My approach is to insist on transparency, respect, and a clear process. Families should have ready access to curriculum information, understandable pathways to raise concerns, and meaningful opportunities to be heard. At the same time, one disagreement should not override sound academic judgment or disrupt classrooms countywide without a fair review. The board's role is to set policy, ensure legal compliance, and create trust in the process. The superintendent, principals, and teachers then carry out that work. When everyone knows how decisions are made, conflict becomes easier to manage. The goal should be partnership: strong parental involvement, professional integrity, and classrooms focused on student learning.

6. What role should the school board play in addressing student mental health and safety on campus?

The school board should treat student mental health and campus safety as connected responsibilities, not separate silos. Physical security matters, and Polk has invested in guardians, school resource officers, threat assessment, visitor controls, and other campus protections. Those measures should remain strong. But safety also means making sure students are emotionally supported before problems become crises. The board should ensure schools have access to counselors, psychologists, social workers, mental health facilitators, crisis supports, and community partnerships that help students regulate stress, anxiety, grief, and trauma. I support a prevention model: identify concerns early, connect families to help quickly, and build school climates where students feel known, respected, and safe asking for support. The board's role is oversight, funding, accountability, and coordination with trusted partners; it is not to micromanage casework. Students learn best when adults protect both their physical safety and their emotional well-being.

7. How do you define your role in oversight of the district's budget, and what would you prioritize if forced to make cuts?

A school board member's budget role is stewardship. The board does not simply approve a spending plan; it must ask whether district dollars are aligned with student outcomes, legal requirements, and long-term stability. In Polk, that means scrutinizing spending carefully because the district is large, growing, and financially constrained. I would prioritize classroom instruction, school safety, and the people closest to students. If cuts were ever required, I would start by protecting core teaching and student-support functions and look first at nonessential overhead, duplication, delays in lower-priority purchases, and administrative efficiencies. I would also want every proposed cut explained publicly in terms families can understand. Budget trust comes

from transparency. My test would be straightforward: does this expense improve learning, safety, or student support? If it does, it should be hard to cut. If it does not, it should be examined before we ask schools and classrooms to absorb the pain.

8. Is there anything else voters should know about you before they cast their ballot?

Voters should know that I am running from lived experience, not from distance. I know what it means for a school to be the stable place in a child's life. I also know that when systems fail, children carry those consequences for years. That is why I approach this race with urgency, empathy, and accountability. My campaign is rooted in a simple belief: every student should be seen, every educator should be supported, and every family should feel they have a place in our schools. I bring the perspective of a former foster youth, a Polk County native, a child-and-family advocate, and a parent invested in this community's future. This campaign is not about slogans. It is about doing the steady work of improving opportunity, backing staff, protecting students, and rebuilding trust. I am asking voters for the chance to serve with the same care Polk schools once showed me.

Kate Wallace — District 3 Candidate (Incumbent, Appointed)

<https://kateforkids.com/>

1. Why are you running for Polk County School Board, and what specific experience qualifies you for this role?

I'm running to add urgency around putting Polk County students on a path toward real academic excellence. I want Polk County Public Schools to be a district families choose with confidence. Today we rank 55th of 67 counties in student achievement, and too many families lack access to an A-rated school. I'm committed to changing that course. I'm a Bartow native and proud PCPS graduate with 20 years of experience across business, nonprofit, and government, including expanding rural broadband to 11,000 Polk households, advancing early literacy and school choice with the Foundation for Excellence in Education, and founding Lakeland Leads (now ConnectEd Polk). That experience is why Governor DeSantis appointed me to this seat in November, and why he asked me to share the podium at Lakeland High School on June 26 to announce Florida's statewide test results. No other candidate brings this combination of experience and relationships.

2. What do you see as the single biggest challenge facing Polk County schools right now, and what would you do about it?

Below-average academics. Only 52 percent of our students read on grade level, and half do not graduate ready for college or career. But here's what I know: our kids are just as capable as any in Florida, and I've seen what happens when a community expects more. Thirty-five Polk schools earned or kept an A grade this year. Excellence is happening here, and now we must make it the standard, not the exception. As a board member, my levers are clear: set measurable goals for student achievement, hold the superintendent accountable for results, and align every dollar behind what works for students. Here's the reality behind our ranking: too many graduates face underemployment, unable to comfortably provide for themselves and their families, with fewer doors open to them. In an economy reshaped by AI, the cost of falling behind has never been higher. We must do more, and we can.

3. Polk County has seen rapid growth and ongoing facility and capacity questions. How would you approach decisions about school construction, boundaries, and overcrowding?

Polk County is growing, and we are blessed to grow. Our job is to be ready for that growth, and the board is already acting: we have approved a new school in Northeast Polk slated to open in 2028, we are rezoning schools to better manage utilization and reduce overcrowding, and we continue authorizing quality charter providers who can open schools of choice families want in short order. We need to get this right, especially in Northeast Polk, where a high number of our students attend school in Lake or Osceola County due to overcrowding. We need to earn those students back. I bring two decades of business, infrastructure, and local government experience, including permitting, rights of way, and coordination with county and municipal governments across Polk. I will insist on honest enrollment projections, a measured approach to growth, and careful stewardship of every taxpayer dollar.

4. Do you support increasing teacher pay in Polk County, and if so, how would you fund it? What do you see as the biggest challenges teachers face in the classroom every day, and how should the board address them?

Yes. Great teachers are the most important school-based factor in student learning, and Polk must compete for them. Funding starts with spending smarter: making tough operational decisions that free up more dollars for teacher pay, and continuing my advocacy in Tallahassee for a fairer share of state funding, since Polk ranks near the bottom in per-pupil dollars. I also support further modernizing our compensation structure so educators who take on the hardest assignments and deliver the strongest results have the greatest earning opportunities. Beyond pay, teachers tell me their daily challenges are student discipline, paperwork, and feeling unsupported. The board controls the levers that matter: adopting a student code of conduct with teeth and standing behind educators who enforce it, repealing board policies that pile paperwork onto teachers, and ratifying an employment contract that treats them as professionals. Teachers want to teach. Our job is to remove what gets in their way.

5. How would you balance parental input and involvement with the professional judgment of teachers and administrators on curriculum and classroom decisions?

These should not be in conflict, and in healthy schools they rarely are. Parents are a child's first and most important teachers, and Florida law rightly guarantees their access to curriculum and instructional materials. When questions arise, I start with parents, and when in doubt, I side with them. Transparency solves most disputes before they start: when parents can see what is being taught and know their concerns will be heard, trust follows. Teachers and administrators are trained professionals, and the board should not micromanage lesson plans from the dais. But the board must ensure our classrooms stay focused on academics, free of inappropriate or extreme ideologies, as Florida law requires. The state sets standards for what students learn; educators exercise judgment in how to teach it; parents deserve full visibility. My job is to make sure that process works and every decision serves what is best for the student.

6. What role should the school board play in addressing student mental health and safety on campus?

Safety is the board's most fundamental obligation, because no learning happens where children do not feel secure. Polk is fortunate to have a strong partnership with the Polk County Sheriff's Office, and I will support all efforts to keep our schools fully compliant with Florida's school safety laws, with hardened campuses, trained personnel, and real accountability for threat assessment procedures. I am honored to be endorsed by Florida State Board of Education Chair Ryan Petty, who lost his daughter Alaina in the Marjory Stoneman Douglas tragedy and has

devoted himself to school safety ever since. His trust reflects how seriously I take this responsibility. On mental health, the board's role is to ensure students have access to counselors and early intervention, that staff are trained to recognize warning signs, and that parents are kept informed and involved in decisions about their own children's well-being.

7. How do you define your role in oversight of the district's budget, and what would you prioritize if forced to make cuts?

The board's job is oversight, not rubber stamping. That means asking hard questions before votes, demanding clear performance data tied to spending, and insisting every major expenditure answers one question: how does this improve student outcomes? Polk operates with less per-pupil funding than nearly every district in Florida, which makes discipline even more essential, because we have no margin for waste. If forced to cut, I would protect classroom instruction, early literacy, teacher compensation, and school safety first, and look hardest at central office administration, consultants, and programs that cannot demonstrate results. Districts too often cut what is visible instead of what is ineffective. I would do the opposite. And I will work with legislative leaders and the next governor to fix the structural funding formula issues that shortchange Polk students, because the best answer to scarcity is bringing home the resources our kids have earned.

8. Is there anything else voters should know about you before they cast their ballot?

Polk County is my home. I attended PCPS schools K-12, graduated from Bartow IB, and built my career fighting for students here and across Florida. I'm a lifelong conservative and member of First Presbyterian Church of Bartow, raised on Luke 12:48: to whom much is given, much is required. Living that principle, I donated \$10,000 of my school board salary to all 20 PCPS campuses in District 3, a \$500 grant for each, to show my gratitude. I'm proud to serve with United Way of Central Florida, VISTE, and the Junior League of Greater Lakeland, and I'm a graduate of Leadership Florida's Education program. I'm endorsed by all four Polk County State House members, including Rep. Jennifer Canady, and Polk County Commissioner Bill Braswell. Visit kateforkids.com or email kate@kateforkids.com to learn more.

District 5

Kay Fields — District 5 Candidate (Incumbent)

[PENDING — Kay Fields did not respond to The Citrus Tea questionnaire].
No campaign website. Email: kayfields32@gmail.com

Sam Neelam — District 5 Candidate

<https://samneelam.com/>

1. Why are you running for Polk County School Board, and what specific experience qualifies you for this role?

I am running to serve the families and students of Polk County by helping ensure every child has access to a strong education. As a longtime resident and father, I want to support our schools as

they continue to grow and improve. My background includes founding and leading technology and real estate companies, serving on the Florida Polytechnic University Board of Trustees, and managing large budgets as a community development district supervisor. These experiences have given me practical skills in planning, financial oversight, and working with teams to deliver results. I believe these skills can help the school board make thoughtful decisions that benefit students, teachers, and taxpayers.

2. What do you see as the single biggest challenge facing Polk County schools right now, and what would you do about it?

The biggest challenge is managing rapid student growth while maintaining high-quality learning environments across all schools. I would focus on long-term planning that uses resources efficiently. This includes supporting the district's efforts to balance enrollment, investing in existing facilities where possible, and working with local governments to coordinate new development with school capacity. I would also prioritize clear communication with families so they understand decisions that affect their children. By focusing on practical solutions and collaboration, we can help ensure every school has what it needs to support student success.

3. Polk County has seen rapid growth and ongoing facility and capacity questions. How would you approach decisions about school construction, boundaries, and overcrowding?

I would support a data-driven approach that makes the best use of current facilities before building new ones. The school board recently approved comprehensive high school rezoning to balance enrollment across schools, which is an important step. I believe we should continue evaluating capacity carefully and work closely with county and city governments through school concurrency planning. Transparency is essential. Families should have clear information and opportunities to provide input on boundary decisions. My goal would be to support solutions that reduce overcrowding where it exists, maintain reasonable class sizes, and plan responsibly for future growth so every student has access to a quality learning environment.

4. Do you support increasing teacher pay in Polk County, and if so, how would you fund it? What do you see as the biggest challenges teachers face in the classroom every day, and how should the board address them?

Yes, I support competitive teacher pay that helps attract and retain excellent educators. Funding should come from careful review of the overall budget to prioritize classroom needs. Teachers often manage large class sizes and limited resources. The board can help by directing more funding toward direct classroom support, reducing unnecessary administrative costs, and providing strong professional development. I would work to ensure teachers have the tools and support they need so they can focus on student learning and success.

5. How would you balance parental input and involvement with the professional judgment of teachers and administrators on curriculum and classroom decisions?

I believe parents and educators both play important roles. Parents should have clear information about what their children are learning and be able to share input with the board and schools. At the same time, teachers and administrators bring professional expertise to classroom instruction. The best approach is strong communication and transparency. When families and schools work together with mutual respect, students benefit. I would support policies that encourage open dialogue while respecting the expertise of educators in delivering instruction.

6. What role should the school board play in addressing student mental health and safety on campus?

The school board should ensure every school provides a safe and supportive learning environment. This includes maintaining strong safety protocols and supporting programs that help students succeed both academically and personally. I would work to expand partnerships with families and community organizations that provide additional resources for student well-being. The board's role is to set clear expectations, allocate appropriate resources, and monitor outcomes so schools can focus on helping every student feel secure and ready to learn.

7. How do you define your role in oversight of the district's budget, and what would you prioritize if forced to make cuts?

My role is to ensure taxpayer dollars are used responsibly and directed toward student success. I would carefully review spending to identify efficiencies while protecting core classroom functions. If cuts become necessary, I would prioritize maintaining teacher positions, instructional materials, and school safety. I believe the focus should always remain on supporting students and teachers first, with reductions made in areas that have the least direct impact on learning.

8. Is there anything else voters should know about you before they cast their ballot?

I am a husband, father, and business owner who has lived and worked in Central Florida for many years. I have served on the Florida Polytechnic University Board of Trustees and as a community development district supervisor, where I gained experience in education policy, budgeting, and community planning. I am running because I believe strong public schools are essential to our community's future. I am committed to listening to families, working collaboratively with educators, and making decisions based on what best serves students. I bring a practical, results-oriented approach and a genuine desire to contribute to the continued improvement of Polk County schools.

District 6

Kasen Hampton — District 6 Candidate

[PENDING — Kasen Hampton did not respond to The Citrus Tea questionnaire.]

<https://hamptonschoolboard.com/>

Justin Sharpless — District 6 Candidate (Incumbent)

<https://sharpieforstudents.com/about/>

1. Why are you running for Polk County School Board, and what specific experience qualifies you for this role?

I am running for re-election to the Polk County School Board because every child deserves a safe school, outstanding teachers, and opportunities to succeed. As a longtime Polk County resident, parent of three, career educator, current School Board Chair, and Vice President of the Florida School Boards Association, I have dedicated my professional life to serving students and improving public education. My experience as a middle and high school agriculture teacher, university professor, and department chair has given me firsthand insight into the needs of students, families, and educators. During my first term, I have worked to enhance school safety,

support teachers, expand career and technical education, improve academic achievement, and be a responsible steward of taxpayer dollars. I am seeking another term to build on that progress and continue providing student-focused leadership that puts Polk County's children and families first.

2. What do you see as the single biggest challenge facing Polk County schools right now, and what would you do about it?

Polk County Public Schools is one of Florida's fastest-growing school districts, and managing that growth is our greatest challenge. We are seeing unprecedented demands on our classrooms, transportation system, workforce, and financial resources. To address these challenges, we implemented comprehensive rezoning to balance enrollment, construction of new schools, and optimized district operations to maximize taxpayer dollars. However, Polk County ranks 62nd out of Florida's 67 school districts in per-pupil funding, making reform of the Florida Education Finance Program a top priority during my second term. We have also strengthened our workforce by creating the Office of Recruitment and Engagement to attract and retain outstanding teachers and staff. These strategic investments ensure we can meet the needs of today's students while planning for growth. By combining responsible fiscal stewardship with long-term planning, we will continue improving academic achievement and delivering on our Students First mission for every child in Polk County.

3. Polk County has seen rapid growth and ongoing facility and capacity questions. How would you approach decisions about school construction, boundaries, and overcrowding?

As a lifelong Polk County resident, parent, educator, and School Board Chair, I understand that every decision about school growth affects families, neighborhoods, and students. That's why I believe we must take a long-term, fiscally responsible approach to planning for our future. We are currently undertaking a comprehensive districtwide rezoning process to better balance enrollment and ensure our schools are used efficiently. These decisions are never easy, so they must be transparent, data-driven, and include meaningful community input. We also need to continue building schools where growth is occurring, maximize existing facilities, and pursue impact fees, voter-approved sales tax revenue, and fairer state funding so growth pays for growth. Throughout my first term, I've worked to balance responsible stewardship of taxpayer dollars with the needs of our students. I will continue making thoughtful decisions that keep students first while preparing Polk County for the future.

4. Do you support increasing teacher pay in Polk County, and if so, how would you fund it? What do you see as the biggest challenges teachers face in the classroom every day, and how should the board address them?

I strongly support increasing teacher pay because attracting and retaining great teachers is one of the best investments we can make in our students. During my first term, we've approved raises for every employee group, and I will continue advocating for competitive salaries through responsible budgeting, operational efficiencies, and reforms to Florida's education funding formula. But compensation is only part of the solution. Teachers also face increasing classroom demands, student discipline issues, administrative burdens, and the rapid emergence of artificial intelligence. The Polk County School Board should continue providing strong classroom discipline policies, reduce unnecessary paperwork, invest in instructional coaches and mentoring programs like Teachers Coaching Teachers, expand AI professional development, and ensure teachers have the resources and technology they need to succeed. My commitment is to create an environment where teachers feel respected, supported, and empowered to focus on what matters most, which is helping every student succeed.

5. How would you balance parental input and involvement with the professional judgment of teachers and administrators on curriculum and classroom decisions?

Parents are their children's first and most important teachers, and they deserve the ultimate voice in their child's education. At the same time, I deeply respect the professionalism of our teachers and administrators, who bring expertise and experience to the classroom every day. The Polk County School Board's role is to establish clear policies, adopt state-aligned curriculum, and ensure transparency, not micromanage individual classrooms. I believe the best decisions are made when parents, educators, and school leaders work together with mutual respect. When concerns arise, they should be addressed promptly through established channels, beginning at the school level whenever possible. I also support providing parents with clear access to instructional materials and maintaining a transparent process for curriculum review. My goal is to foster trust, accountability, and open communication so we can remain focused on what matters most: helping every student succeed in a safe, high-quality learning environment.

6. What role should the school board play in addressing student mental health and safety on campus?

Student safety is the Polk County School Board's most important responsibility because students cannot learn unless they feel safe. During my first term, we strengthened campus security through single-point entry, perimeter fencing, expanded school safety technology, and our partnership with the Polk County Sheriff's Office, which provides every campus with School Resource Deputies or Guardians. Safety also includes supporting students' mental well-being. The board should ensure schools have access to counselors, school psychologists, and early intervention resources while empowering parents as partners in addressing students' needs. We must also equip students to navigate today's digital world by educating them about online safety, social media, and the dangers of artificial intelligence misuse. Our role is to set strong policies, provide the necessary resources, and hold the district accountable for implementation. By prioritizing both physical safety and student well-being, we create an environment where every child can learn, grow, and succeed.

7. How do you define your role in oversight of the district's budget, and what would you prioritize if forced to make cuts?

The Polk County School Board's responsibility is to ensure every taxpayer dollar is spent wisely, transparently, and in a way that improves student outcomes. As a school board member, I've supported efficiency audits, responsible budgeting, and long-term financial planning while protecting our classrooms. If difficult budget decisions became necessary, I would prioritize preserving direct services that impact students, including classroom instruction, school safety, teacher compensation, career and technical education, and exceptional student education. Before considering cuts that affect students or employees, I would look for operational efficiencies, administrative savings, grant opportunities, and other ways to reduce costs without sacrificing educational quality. I also believe we must continue advocating for a fairer Florida Education Finance Program, as Polk County ranks 62nd of 67 districts in per-pupil funding despite serving one of Florida's fastest-growing student populations. Fiscal responsibility means making thoughtful decisions that protect students while respecting taxpayers who fund our schools.

8. Is there anything else voters should know about you before they cast their ballot?

I believe my experience, proven results, and commitment to serving Polk County make me the right choice to continue representing District 6. It has been an honor that my colleagues elected me as Polk County School Board Chair and Vice President of the Florida School Boards

Association, allowing me to advocate for our students both locally and statewide. I'm also grateful to have earned the endorsement of our entire Polk County State House delegation, Sheriff Grady Judd, and 14 other local elected officials. Together, we've strengthened school safety through our partnership with the Sheriff's Office, improved our district grade from a C to a B, eliminated all F schools, and helped raise our traditional high school graduation rate to 92.7 percent. Last year alone, students earned 57 percent more industry certifications, reflecting our commitment to preparing every student for college, careers, or military service.

District 7

Lisa Miller — District 7 (Won Uncontested)

<https://miller4polk.com/>

1. Why are you running for Polk County School Board, and what specific experience qualifies you for this role?

I ran for my third and final term on the Polk County School Board because I believe every student deserves a leader who understands education from multiple perspectives. As the parent of my son, Michael, who has cerebral palsy and autism, and my daughter, Evie, a high-achieving creative writer, I have experienced our education system firsthand and understand the importance of ensuring every child has the opportunity to succeed. My career has included marketing and public relations, owning a successful real estate brokerage, classroom teaching, nonprofit leadership, and disability advocacy. Those experiences have prepared me to make thoughtful decisions involving people, policy, budgets, and long-term planning. I remain committed to ensuring every voice is heard and every student is prepared for success beyond graduation.

2. What do you see as the single biggest challenge facing Polk County schools right now, and what would you do about it?

The greatest challenge facing Polk County Public Schools is keeping pace with our rapid growth while ensuring every student has access to a high-quality education. As one of Florida's largest and fastest-growing districts, we must recruit and retain outstanding teachers and staff, build and maintain schools that meet our community's needs, and use taxpayer dollars wisely. My focus is on long-term planning rather than short-term solutions. That means strengthening partnerships with businesses and community organizations, expanding career and technical education opportunities, and ensuring resources reach classrooms where they have the greatest impact. We must also continue supporting students with diverse learning needs, from those requiring specialized services to those seeking advanced academic opportunities. Every decision should be guided by one question: Will this improve outcomes for students?

3. Polk County has seen rapid growth and ongoing facility and capacity questions. How would you approach decisions about school construction, boundaries, and overcrowding?

Growth is one of Polk County's greatest opportunities, but it requires thoughtful planning and responsible stewardship of taxpayer dollars. As one of Florida's fastest-growing districts, we are already rezoning schools to maximize the use of existing facilities while continuing to build new schools. Our challenge is that current school construction funding does not always keep pace with the speed of growth, making it difficult to build for future students before capacity is reached. Our new high schools fill much faster than anticipated. We must continue advocating for funding solutions that better reflect the realities of high-growth districts. At the same time,

we must ensure students in all 17 municipalities have access to high-quality academic, career, technical, arts, and extracurricular opportunities that prepare them for success. Through long-term planning, transparency, and community engagement, we can make thoughtful decisions that serve both today's students and the generations that follow.

4. Do you support increasing teacher pay in Polk County, and if so, how would you fund it? What do you see as the biggest challenges teachers face in the classroom every day, and how should the board address them?

Yes. Recruiting and retaining outstanding teachers is one of the most important investments we can make. While Florida has made progress increasing starting teacher salaries, we must continue improving compensation throughout a teacher's career to retain experienced educators. The school board's role is to adopt responsible budgets, establish policies, advocate for adequate state funding, and prioritize resources that support classrooms and student success. Teachers face increasing classroom demands, student behavioral and mental health challenges, and the responsibility of meeting the diverse needs of every learner. The board's responsibility is to listen to educators, students, families, and district leadership to understand those needs and make budget and policy decisions that provide meaningful support. By investing in our employees, strengthening classrooms, improving school safety, and expanding student supports, we can help create learning environments where both students and staff thrive.

5. How would you balance parental input and involvement with the professional judgment of teachers and administrators on curriculum and classroom decisions?

Parents are a child's first and most important teachers, and they deserve to be informed and engaged in their child's education. At the same time, our educators bring professional expertise, training, and experience to the classroom. The best outcomes occur when families and schools work together with mutual respect and a shared focus on student success. The school board's role is to establish policy, ensure transparency, and provide accountability. I support open communication, opportunities for parental involvement, and processes that allow concerns to be heard and addressed respectfully. I also believe teachers and administrators should be trusted to implement curriculum and instructional practices that align with state standards and district policies. When disagreements arise, we should seek collaboration and solutions rather than conflict, always keeping the needs of students at the center of the conversation.

6. What role should the school board play in addressing student mental health and safety on campus?

The school board has a responsibility to ensure every student and employee has access to a safe, supportive learning environment where they can succeed. Student safety includes strong campus security, effective emergency preparedness, and proactive threat assessment, but it also means recognizing that mental health is essential to student success. The board should continue supporting access to school counselors, mental health professionals, behavioral supports, and partnerships with community agencies while ensuring schools have the resources to respond to students' needs. We must also create school cultures where students feel connected, respected, and comfortable asking for help before a crisis develops. As a board member, my role is to establish policies, allocate resources responsibly, and provide oversight while allowing trained educators, counselors, and administrators to implement evidence-based practices. Safe schools are built through prevention, strong relationships, and a shared commitment to the well-being of every student.

7. How do you define your role in oversight of the district's budget, and what would you prioritize if forced to make cuts?

Responsible stewardship means making thoughtful decisions today while ensuring the long-term financial stability of our district. Every budget is ultimately a statement of our values. If faced with difficult financial decisions, I would prioritize protecting direct services to students, including classroom instruction, school safety, exceptional student education, and recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers and staff. Before reducing programs that directly impact students, I would look for operational efficiencies, evaluate spending for effectiveness, and explore partnerships and other resources that help maximize taxpayer dollars. As a board member, I believe every expenditure should answer a simple question: Does this investment improve outcomes for students?

8. Is there anything else voters should know about you before they cast their ballot?

Although I was honored to be elected without opposition, I have never believed these seats belong to the individuals elected to fill them. They belong to the people of Polk County, and every resident deserves to have a voice in the decisions that shape our schools. I hope you will always see me as approachable and accessible. Whether you have a question, concern, idea, or simply want to better understand an issue before the school board, I encourage you to reach out. Some of the best solutions begin with a conversation. Serving our community has been one of the greatest privileges of my life. As I begin my third and final term, I remain committed to listening first, leading with integrity, and making decisions that put students at the center while respecting taxpayers and supporting our dedicated employees.