

2024 Polk County School Board Candidates for Seat 1

Questions were given to all candidates on May 18, 2024. All candidates were asked to respond no later than June 1, 2024. This document was produced June 14, 2024.

1. What is your background?

William Allen



My wife and I celebrate 22 years of marriage this year. My wife is a 1st grade Paraeducator. We have two children in Polk County schools and one finishing her sophomore year of college. I'm a tenured faculty member at Florida Southern College with approximately 20 years of teaching experience. As an at-risk Bartow High School student who barely walked across the graduation stage to obtaining a Ph. D, I'm passionate about applying my educational lens and story of hope to Polk County School Board-District 1. Being a Polk County Public School graduate, I have a deep-rooted zeal for our Polk education system.

Bernnie Brandt



I was adopted as an infant and raised in Winter Haven by a now-retired nurse and former teacher. I attended Seventh-day Adventist Christian schools as a child and, later in life, obtained an A.S. in Criminal Justice from Tallahassee Community College. Professionally, I have held leadership positions in the safety and security, solid waste, and hospitality fields, and have also worked as a correctional officer and a bus driver. I currently work as a security supervisor, where I handle security operations at warehouse, manufacturing, and corporate-level facilities for a large company. In February of last year, my wife and I welcomed our first child into our home, bringing our household total to seven: three humans, three dogs, and a cat.

2. Why are you running for this position now?

William Allen



My values and initiatives drive my work as a school board member, focusing on student success, access to choices, and building strong community partnerships. These are the key ingredients that have shaped my educational journey and continue to guide the way I govern as a school board member.

Bernnie Brandt



After becoming parents in 2023, my wife and I completely changed our outlook on life. We began to focus on the future of our child and have conversations with other parents about things like good doctors, youth sports, and schooling. Many voiced concerns about special needs programs, concerns with school administration, and the scheduling of school board meetings and work sessions. After these conversations, I began to look into the school system and decided that the best way to make positive change was to try and put myself in a position to be directly involved with the decision-making process. Our students and staff who are members of the LGBTQ+, special needs, and other marginalized communities deserve someone on the board who will recognize, affirm, and listen to them and genuinely care about and prioritize their needs.

Teachers, ESPs, and paraeducators deserve someone on the board who strongly supports their union and wants to prioritize their needs.

3. Why should citizens vote for you specifically instead of your opponent?

William Allen



I have no doubt that PCPS is headed in the right direction - towards an academically focused climate and safe learning environment. And while the vision for PCPS's future is clear and true, much work is needed to get there. As you know the 22-23 school year was our baseline for these goals/initiatives. Our work turns to implementing that vision, which is arguably more difficult. It requires deep knowledge of the industry, smooth navigation of the politics, learning from our challenges and carefully moving the organization through the transition ahead. Knowledgeable leadership will be critical to carry PCPS through these times of significant educational/technological change and ensure we are better on the other side. I believe my data-driven decision making perspective and educational experiences make me the better choice.

Bernnie Brandt



My perspective on the education system is much different than that of my opponent. Because I have a one-year-old and am close with many other parents of young children, I have a vested, deeply personal interest in making long-term improvements to our education system. I am also a shift worker, so I understand the need for the board and school system to be flexible when scheduling meetings, work sessions, and events. I am a strong ally of the LGBTQ+ community and I understand the importance of ensuring that our schools are safe and affirming places for our LGBTQ+ students and staff. The board desperately needs the perspective of an average parent who works forty or more hours per week at an average job who just wants to ensure that the education system will be well-equipped to prepare the future adults of our community to become well-rounded, accepting, caring, compassionate, independent, critically-thinking members of society.

4. What do you believe are the most important challenges or priorities regarding public education that families and the Polk County School Board are currently facing?

William Allen



With a school district that services more than 117,000 students, our challenges are never-ending. However, from my perspective, our top priority is 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. Beyond our academic priorities, the challenges include retaining high quality instructional staff, ensuring our students and staff are safe, and moving through our extensive rezoning all while we continue to experience excessive growth within Polk County.

Bernnie Brandt



I believe that politics, religion, and hate are the three biggest challenges to our students, their families, and school staff. There is a strong movement to further alienate and discriminate against members of already-marginalized groups of people that just want to comfortably exist in our society. The school system should never take political or religious sides, but rather, it should be a place where everyone and their differences are accepted, included, celebrated, and learned about, and where no one is made to feel less than anyone else. Politics and religion are slowly creeping into our school system, and someone needs to be there to stop them. The only place that political or religious ideologies have in a public school is in a class that teaches them from an objective, academic perspective.

5. There is an amendment scheduled to be on the November 2024 Florida ballot that would change school board elections from nonpartisan to partisan beginning in 2026. What are your opinions regarding this and term limits for School Board members?

William Allen



If voters approve this constitutional change, my hopes are that we see broader community discussion about education and greater accountability for candidates. First, as it relates to moving school board elections from nonpartisan to partisan, I believe student outcomes are nonpartisan and moving to partisan elections may distract from education-related matters. Secondly, I believe term limits should be in place for all political offices.

Bernnie Brandt



Education should be nonpartisan. Making school board positions partisan would encourage voters to vote blindly along party lines, like many already do in elections for state and federal offices. Blindly voting along party lines is an irresponsible and dangerous practice that needs to stay far away from the educational future of our community. Voting should be based on the merits of individual candidates and not their party affiliation.

6. What strategies or recommendations do you have for how the Polk County School Board and the Lake Wales Charter School system could work together more effectively to ensure all families and facilities in Lake Wales are better supported?

William Allen



The Polk County School Board and the Lake Wales Charter School system should establish a joint committee to facilitate regular communication, set shared goals, and develop collaborative initiatives. In general, within separate districts, each board member should provide a space for open communication and active participation with charter school administration and boards.

Bernnie Brandt



Charter schools exist to supplement public schools and provide opportunities to students that may not be available in a traditional public school. Every student in Polk County deserves to be able to attend school close to their home. Too many students in Polk County are bused to other areas for public schools because the area in which they live has been inundated with charter schools that are allowed to be selective with their admission processes. I would like to see a countywide shift toward keeping students in their communities and focusing funding on improving, expanding, and/or increasing the number of public schools so that students are not faced with the choice of “try to attend a charter school or go to school somewhere else”. I would like to see a balance developed that allows charter schools to have their needs addressed, while also helping students be able to attend school, public or charter, in their home communities.

7. Where can people go to get more information about you and/or your campaign?

William Allen



www.allenforpolk.com

<https://www.facebook.com/allenforpolk>

<https://www.instagram.com/allenforpolk/>

Bernnie Brandt



My campaign website is: www.bernnieforpolk.com

The campaign also has a presence on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, where the username to all three is: @bernnieforpolk

The campaign email address is: bernnieforpolk@gmail.com