

## 2024 Polk County School Board Candidates for Seat 4

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?

#### Rebekah Ricks



I was born in Oklahoma and raised in Upstate New York, moving to Polk County in 2001. I've been married to a third-generation Polk County native for 20 years, and we have two young boys. With 23 years of experience in education, I have taught in traditional classrooms, started a tutoring business, worked on education legislation, and founded a university model school. I serve on the Florida School Music Association Board and chair the Florida Parent Educators Association Foundation. Additionally, I co-founded The Coalition of Mothers and The Alliance of Mothers and have been actively involved in children's church and summer camp volunteering for over a decade.

#### Sara Beth Wyatt



I am a proud product of Polk County Public Schools, born and raised in Winter Haven. I went to the University of Florida for undergrad, where I studied Telecommunications – Media & Society. I spent my first year after college working for the Randy Roberts Foundation, focusing on scholarship and mentorship opportunities for high school students and Congressional Classroom, where high schoolers were selected annually to attend an immersive learning experience in Washington, D.C., at no cost to the students. In 2016, I became the Development Director of Theatre Winter Haven, overseeing fundraising, community relations, and special projects such as creating programs like DramaTime: Live! to take the arts into the classroom. In 2022, I was appointed as the President & CEO of the Winter Haven Chamber of Commerce, serving Winter Haven area businesses to advance commerce and community. While I have worked in the nonprofit community for most of my career, my volunteer work is extensive, with experience serving on boards and committees such as Polk Vision, Junior Achievement, Winter Haven Public Education Partnership, Main Street Winter Haven, Florida School Board Association, Polk Career Academies, and more.

## 2. Why are you running for this position now?

### Rebekah Ricks



I am running for this position because I am deeply committed to improving our education system and supporting our community's families. With 23 years of experience in education, I have taught, founded a tutoring business, worked on education legislation, and started a university model school. The education landscape has changed significantly, especially with school choice, and over 500 pages of education legislation were passed this year. I have read every page and want to ensure state-level intent is effectively carried out at the county level. My extensive community involvement reflects my dedication to service.

### Sara Beth Wyatt



When I ran in 2016, I was 23 years old, working with students daily and kept running into red tape. At that time, my primary goal was to bring students into the conversation and to make sure every decision centered around what was best for kids. Eight years later, I am proud of the strides we have made to make students and families a bigger part of the conversation, but there is still work to be done.

I intentionally waited longer than I usually would to announce my candidacy this time around, as I had my son last fall and knew that he would change my life in ways I could never imagine. They say never to make a major life decision in the middle of a major life change, so I wanted to wait and ensure I still felt as though I could serve the almost 120,000 students in this district diligently while being a mom. I now look at my young son and am overwhelmed with the realization that this is not only still where I feel called, but that I have a whole new reason I need to finish the work I have started.

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

#### Rebekah Ricks



Citizens should vote for me because of my 23 years of diverse experience in education, including teaching in actual classrooms, founding a tutoring business, and working on state-level education legislation. I have also started and managed a nonprofit and served on state boards, giving me a broad understanding of educational policies beyond Polk County. My direct involvement with parents, teachers, and students uniquely positions me to address their needs effectively.

While my reach extends beyond Polk County, my roots and commitment to our community ensure I am dedicated to making a positive local impact.

#### Sara Beth Wyatt



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.

#### 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?

**Rebekah Ricks**



The key challenges and priorities for public education in Polk County include ensuring the safety of students and staff, improving academic outcomes, and keeping salaries competitive to attract and retain quality educators. Adequate staffing and balancing population growth with growing needs are also crucial. We need to maximize operational efficiencies, undertake comprehensive rezoning, and combat chronic absenteeism. Additionally, addressing state-mandated changes in school start times and expanding partnerships for school-to-work and industry programs are vital for the district's success.

**Sara Beth Wyatt**



Growth – We are the fastest growing community in the nation with no slowdown in sight. How do we recruit additional staff, create additional student stations, etc., while still improving and enhancing our offerings?

Technology – We are in an age of unknowns when it comes to technology. We have the responsibility to teach our students to use it wisely, but we also have the responsibility of keeping kids safe and teaching students soft skills, such as how to talk to each other in real life. With new emerging technologies, such as AI, I think we are just scratching the surface of the opportunities and challenges on the horizon.

**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?**

**Rebekah Ricks**



I believe that keeping school board elections nonpartisan is crucial for focusing on the best interests of students and the educational system, free from political influence. Partisan elections could introduce unnecessary political biases into decisions that should prioritize educational outcomes and community needs.

Regarding term limits for School Board members, I support the idea as it encourages fresh perspectives and prevents stagnation. Regular turnover can lead to innovative ideas and approaches, ensuring the board remains responsive to the evolving needs of our schools and community.

**Sara Beth Wyatt**



I am not in favor of school board elections becoming partisan, as it will more likely than not further politicize public education. Unfortunately, we have become a society where civil discourse is not a common occurrence. We all too often tend to throw the baby out with the bathwater. A single letter cannot accurately describe the intricate, local viewpoints and opinions of most, especially in today's world. Shifting the conversation from ideas and beliefs to partisan politics does not benefit students. I am in favor of term limits; however, I would say that for local offices, 12 years tends to be more common and allows for a better balance of "new blood" and historical knowledge. For any board, I always find it valuable to have a couple of board members who can shed light on historical information while having a couple of newer board members with fresh ideas and perspectives.



**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?**

**Rebekah Ricks**



To enhance collaboration between the Polk County School Board and the Lake Wales Charter School system, I recommend regular joint meetings to discuss shared goals and challenges, creating a framework for sharing resources, and developing a joint task force to address community feedback. Aligning policies for consistency and initiating collaborative projects, such as curriculum development, can also improve support for families and facilities in Lake Wales. These strategies will lead to better educational outcomes for all students.

**Sara Beth Wyatt**



I would love to work together to ensure that every student living in Lake Wales is able to attend a school in Lake Wales, as we know that bussing students outside of their community to attend schools is often detrimental to the student's success.

I think part of that conversation needs to be ensuring that we are using every available student seat in Lake Wales and that those seats are being made available for Lake Wales students first. It was a little confusing to receive a request for a reduced projected student allocation this year. I have asked the district for data on how capacity is calculated in comparison to student enrollment because I want to better understand why on paper the capacity numbers for many of our charter schools are much higher than student enrollment. I do think it would be valuable for us to have a joint school board meeting to discuss what growth in the Lake Wales region looks like when it comes to the need for additional student stations to keep up with growth. As LWCS is really the only entity of its kind in the state of Florida, we will likely need to get creative in our solutions.

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

### Rebekah Ricks



For more information about me and my campaign, you can visit my website at [www.rebekahricks.com](http://www.rebekahricks.com). You can also follow my campaign updates on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Stay connected to learn more about my background, priorities, and how I plan to make a positive impact on our community's education system.

### Sara Beth Wyatt



Website: [www.sarabethwyatt.com](http://www.sarabethwyatt.com)

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