

2026 Polk County School Board Seat 6

Surveys were sent on June 13 and all candidate responses were received prior to June 30. This document was published July 4, 2026.

Prepared by Citizens Support Services Lake Wales.

1. What is your background? Why are you running for school board now, and what are your qualifications?

Kasen Hampton



My name is Kasen Hampton. I am a student, leader, and advocate who understands the value that a free and fulfilling education can provide, not just for me, but for countless other students. My family instilled in me the importance of education and the responsibility that comes with dedicating your life to public service.

As a student, I faced challenges, but my teachers were always there to support me, lift me up, and help me succeed. I have seen firsthand what it feels like to struggle and to be overlooked as just a small part of someone's day. That's why I believe our dedicated teachers and staff deserve to feel that their work truly matters and is making a difference.

I am running because I believe we must invest in public education so that every child has the opportunity to learn, grow, and contribute to making our society better. I believe in investing our time and effort into supporting our teachers and staff, and in fixing our broken, reactionary approach to student mental health.

Justin Sharpless



I was born and raised in Lake Wales and attended Polk County Public Schools (PCPS) from kindergarten through 12th grade. After graduating from Lake Wales High School in 2002, I attended the University of Florida, where I earned a bachelor's degree in Agricultural Education and a master's degree in Agricultural Business. I returned to Polk County to begin my career as an agricultural educator, teaching in both PCPS and Lake Wales Charter Schools (LWCS). In 2015, I joined Warner University, where I currently serve as Department Chair of Agricultural Studies. My commitment to public education extends beyond the classroom. I currently serve as Chair of the Polk County School Board and as Vice President of the Florida School Boards Association, providing statewide leadership on issues impacting students, educators, and public schools across Florida. My wife, Emilyn, and I are proud Polk County natives and graduates of PCPS. We live in Lake Wales and are raising our three sons: Wyatt, Rhett, and Garrett. I am seeking re-election to the Polk County School Board for the same reason I first ran in 2022: to ensure that my sons, and every child in Polk County, have access to an excellent education. I am also committed to supporting the employees who make that possible. Education is a family calling for us: my wife, parents, in-laws, and brother are all current or retired PCPS and LWCS employees. Their perspectives help keep me connected to the opportunities and challenges facing our schools and strengthen my commitment to serving students, families, and educators.

2. What service organizations do you support with your time and money?

Kasen Hampton



I enjoyed volunteering at the Care Center in Downtown Lake Wales, and buying food from local vendors & shops.

Justin Sharpless



Community service and leadership have always been important parts of my life. I am proud to invest both my time and resources in organizations that strengthen education, youth development, and our community, including the Florida School Boards Association, Polk Vision, Future Farmers of America (FFA), and the Polk County Youth Fair. As Vice President of the Florida School Boards Association, I participate in ongoing professional development and advocate for strong public schools at the local, state, and national levels. I am also a graduate of Leadership Polk Class XVIII and currently serve on Polk Vision's Government Advisory Council, which brings together leaders from across local government to support the long-term success of Polk County. My involvement with FFA spans more than two decades as a student, educator, and volunteer. Most recently, I have served as a judge for statewide Leadership Development Events, helping students develop public speaking, leadership, and career-readiness skills. In recognition of my service to agricultural education and FFA, I was honored to receive the Outstanding Alumni Achievement Award from the National FFA Organization. In addition, I serve on the Board of Directors for the Polk County Youth Fair, supporting opportunities that help young people develop responsibility, leadership, and a strong work ethic. These organizations have played an important role in shaping who I am, and I am grateful for the opportunity to give back to the community that has given so much to me and my family.

3. What do you feel are the 2 most critical issues that need to be addressed as a board member? What do you believe are the most important (not necessarily urgent) challenges/priorities facing Polk County and the School Board?

Kasen Hampton



My Two Critical Issues are supporting our Public School Teachers & Staff and Extending Student Mental Healthcare to all students in the public education system.

Justin Sharpless



Two of the most pressing challenges facing the Polk County School Board are managing rapid population growth alongside infrastructure needs, and addressing persistent funding inequities causing staffing shortages. Polk County is one of the fastest-growing counties in the nation, and Polk County Public Schools, now the 7th largest district in Florida, must continue to expand responsibly, modernize, and efficiently utilize facilities to keep pace with that growth. Recent efficiency audits highlighted opportunities to better align school capacity with student enrollment, leading to a comprehensive rezoning process currently underway. Moving forward, it is essential that we continue to make thoughtful, data-driven decisions that maximize the use of existing facilities while planning responsibly for future growth. At the same time, PCPS faces significant financial challenges. The district is currently ranked 62nd out of 67 in Florida for per-pupil funding, which directly impacts our ability to recruit and retain teachers, bus drivers, and other critical staff, an issue further compounded by national workforce shortages. These constraints make it increasingly difficult to sustain the level of support our students and schools deserve. If re-elected, one of my top priorities will be advocating for a more equitable Florida Education Finance Program (FEFP) funding formula to ensure that PCPS receives its fair share of resources. Addressing these structural challenges is essential to maintaining strong schools, supporting our educators, and meeting the needs of our rapidly growing community.

4. How do you view Tallahassee’s involvement in our local community? “overreach” or “necessary support”? Why do you take this view?

Kasen Hampton



I believe Tallahassee plays an important role in supporting our schools, but too often this involvement becomes overreach. I believe in a balanced system where Tallahassee is there to support us, not control us. I take this stance because I believe in the power of local communities, the closer decision-making is to the people, the more representative it is of their needs.

Justin Sharpless



I believe local government is the level of government most directly accountable to the people it serves. As a Polk County resident and public servant, I regularly see the impact of that accountability in everyday life, whether I am speaking with constituents at Publix, a local restaurant, or community events. I value those interactions and see them as an important and constant reminder of the responsibility that comes with public service. That same level of direct, face-to-face accountability is not always present at the state level, which is why I believe local decision-making should be respected whenever possible. There are times when state involvement in local matters can create unnecessary overreach; however, I also recognize the important role the state plays in ensuring consistency, fairness, and proper stewardship of taxpayer dollars that flow to local governments. Ultimately, I believe the best outcomes for students and families are achieved when responsibilities are appropriately balanced: maintaining local control where possible, ensuring strong accountability for public funding, and implementing thoughtful statelevel policy where needed to ensure the safety, success, and long-term flourishing of all students.

5. What are your views on school choice? What are your views on the competing components of choosing a school? (public, charter, private, religious, etc.)

Kasen Hampton



I believe in school choice because parents deserve the ability to choose the best school for their child, even if it is outside their county. I believe in fair competition where all schools are held to the same standards, are required to ensure their teachers are properly licensed and experienced, and that students are equipped with the tools they need to further their education.

Justin Sharpless



I am a strong supporter of school choice and believe parents are best positioned to make educational decisions for their own children. As a father, my wife and I take that responsibility seriously every day. When we drop our children off at school, they do not become “government property.” They remain the most important priority in our lives, and that same mindset should guide education policy. Florida’s Family Empowerment Scholarships have helped make those opportunities more equitable for families, ensuring that a child’s access to quality education is not determined by income level or ZIP code, but by the needs and decisions of their parents. At the same time, I believe school choice must be paired with transparency and accountability. When taxpayer dollars are used, whether through the Florida Education Finance Program or scholarship programs, there should be clear, consistent public accountability for student outcomes. Polk County Public Schools and public charter schools are held to A-F grading standards based on performance, and I believe any school receiving public funding, including private schools participating in scholarship programs, should be held to a comparable standard of accountability. Expanding opportunity and maintaining accountability are not competing values; they are both essential to ensuring families have access to high-quality education and that public investment is used responsibly.

6. What are your views on the school grading system?

Kasen Hampton



It is far from perfect. Right now, grading is based upon standardized testing and does not always reflect the full picture of a school's performance. I believe in improving the system by looking from multiple angles, student growth, access to resources, teacher support, and overall school environment, not just test scores. Schools should be examined in a way that is fair, accurate, and focused on helping them improve, not just labeling them.

Justin Sharpless



I believe accountability through the A-F school grading system is essential to continuously improving educational outcomes for students. Transparent performance measures help ensure that every school is focused on what matters most: student achievement and success. Since I joined the Polk County School Board, Polk County Public Schools has improved from a “C” to a “B” rated district, while also eliminating “F” rated schools during that time. These are meaningful signs of progress that reflect the hard work of our educators, students, and school communities. While I am proud of that progress, my goal is for Polk County Public Schools to become an “A” rated district. The A-F accountability system provides a clear and honest framework for measuring that progress, highlighting both where we are succeeding and where we must continue to improve.

7. How will you address the different needs of all students?

Kasen Hampton



I will support establishing a non-voting Student Board Member who can participate in discussions, represent students countywide, and ensure the voices of those most affected by our decisions are heard at the School Board table.

Justin Sharpless



Polk County Public Schools is committed to meeting the diverse needs of every student through academic accountability, individualized support, and a whole-child approach to education. We use a strong progress monitoring system to track student growth and provide timely, targeted interventions that meet each learner's needs. Our district offers a full range of academic pathways, including Advanced Placement (AP), dual enrollment, International Baccalaureate (IB), and Cambridge AICE programs. At the same time, PCPS is a state leader in Career and Technical Education (CTE), with students earning approximately 9,000 industry certifications last year, a 57% increase over the previous year. Through Traviss and Ridge Technical Colleges, students also have access to affordable, career-focused training for high-demand fields. PCPS provides comprehensive support for exceptional student education (ESE), serving gifted students and students with disabilities from early childhood through age 22, with a commitment to the least restrictive environment. Beyond academics, we invest in the whole child through strong fine arts and athletics programs, with participation in fine arts exceeding the state average by about 5%. We also work to remove barriers to learning by meeting basic student needs. All students receive free breakfast and lunch, every student is provided a laptop or tablet through our one-to-one initiative, and safety measures like Safe Stop help protect students during transportation. Together, these efforts reflect our commitment to preparing students for academic success, career readiness, and lifelong achievement.

8. What are your views on educator salaries and benefits?

Kasen Hampton



I strongly support competitive salaries and meaningful support for our teachers and school staff. When we invest in the people who educate and mentor our students every day, student success follows. Attracting and retaining high-quality educators requires fair compensation, adequate resources, and strong institutional support. I will support any measure that responsibly raises teacher and staff salaries and ensures they have the tools they need to help every student succeed.

Justin Sharpless



We cannot have great schools without great teachers, and supporting our educators remains one of my highest priorities. Even as one of the lowest-funded districts in Florida, currently ranked 62nd out of 67 in per-pupil funding, Polk County Public Schools has made it a consistent priority to invest in our workforce. Each year I have served on the School Board, we have worked to provide salary increases for our employees, recognizing the importance of both attracting and retaining high-quality educators and staff. We have also created innovative programs designed to support professional growth and strengthen the teaching profession from within. One example is the “Teachers Coaching Teachers” program, which allows experienced educators to mentor their peers while remaining in the classroom and receiving a stipend for their leadership. In addition, we established a dedicated Office of Recruitment and Engagement to better support employees throughout their careers and to strengthen our ability to attract new talent to Polk County. We have also set a clear goal of improving teacher retention each year, because stability and experience in the classroom directly benefit student success. At the heart of all these efforts is a simple belief: when we invest in and support our teachers, we are directly investing in the success of our students.

9. What are your budget priorities?

Kasen Hampton



First, we should invest in our teachers and staff by ensuring competitive pay, better resources, and strong support in the classroom. I believe that when we invest in educators, students benefit.

Second, I want to expand mental healthcare for students. Our system is too reactionary, we need to be more proactive by placing more counselors in schools, increasing access to care, and making sure no student falls through the cracks.

Third, I believe in strengthening our public schools by providing the support and resources needed in the classroom.

Justin Sharpless



My budget priority is to faithfully uphold the interests of both students and taxpayers. I am committed to the continuous improvement of our district's budgeting and operational processes to ensure the responsible stewardship of public funds entrusted to the School Board by the taxpayers of Polk County. That responsibility requires a careful and thoughtful balance: directing as many resources as possible into the classroom where they have the greatest impact on student learning, and ensuring we remain competitive in recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers and staff. Sound financial management is not just about balancing a budget; it is about making disciplined, transparent decisions that prioritize student success, support our employees, and maintain the public's trust.

10. Why should citizens vote for you specifically instead of your opponent(s)?

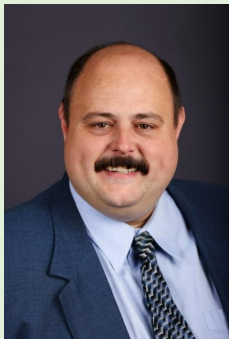
Kasen Hampton



As a recent graduate, I bring fresh ideas, a new perspective, and firsthand experience with the challenges and opportunities facing our schools today. Having lived in Polk County my entire life, I have seen the life-changing impact that accessible, high-quality public education can have on students and families.

My campaign is focused on strengthening our public schools and ensuring every student has the opportunity to succeed. In contrast, my opponent has received support from political action committees and special interest groups that have advocated for policies such as expanding the privatization of education, restricting access to certain books, and opposing initiatives like Autism Awareness Month recognition by the Polk County School Board. I believe our focus should remain on supporting students, empowering educators, and keeping public education strong for future generations.

Justin Sharpless



There are two core reasons citizens should vote for me instead of my opponent: experience and a commitment to the pro-student and pro-taxpayer values of Polk County. I was born and raised in Polk County, graduated from Polk County Public Schools, and later returned to teach in them. That lifelong connection, as a student, educator, parent, and now School Board member, gives me a deep, firsthand understanding of our schools from nearly every perspective. I carry that experience into every decision I make. As a former educator in both PCPS and Lake Wales Charter Schools, I understand the realities teachers face in the classroom and remain committed to ensuring they have a strong, effective voice at the table. I am also grateful for the trust placed in my leadership by my peers, including my service as Vice President of the Florida School Boards Association and Chair of the Polk County School Board. I am a law-abiding citizen who values school safety and deeply respects the law enforcement officers who protect our students and staff. I also believe strongly in responsible stewardship of taxpayer dollars, keeping financial discipline at the center of every budget decision so we can maintain low debt, invest directly in classrooms, and support and retain great employees without placing additional burdens on taxpayers. Equally important, I serve as a voice for Polk County's business community. Through my work in agricultural education and partnerships with local industry, I have developed strong relationships with employers who consistently share their workforce needs. I understand the vital role our school district plays in preparing students for careers across a wide range of industries, and I take that responsibility seriously. At every level, my focus remains the same: strong schools, safe learning environments, responsible budgeting, and meaningful preparation for students' futures. Thank you for considering the #SharpieForStudents re-election campaign.

11. Where can people get more information about you and/or your campaign?

Kasen Hampton



1. Candidate email address: Hamptonfor2026@yahoo.com
2. Best phone number to reach your campaign: 863-605-3088
3. Campaign website: <https://hamptonschoolboard.com/>
4. Campaign Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61581584411526>
5. Campaign Tiktok: https://www.tiktok.com/@hampton4schoolboard?is_from_webapp=1&sender_device=pc
6. Campaign Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/hampton4schoolboard/>
7. Donation Link: <https://secure.actblue.com/donate/kasen-hampton-1>

Justin Sharpless



My campaign website is <https://sharpieforstudents.com/> My school board member Facebook page is <https://www.facebook.com/SharpieForStudents/> My campaign email address is justin@sharpieforstudents.com