

2026 Polk County School Board Seat 5

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?

Kay Fields



Kay Fields has served on the Polk County School Board since 2002 representing District 5. She is a native of McComb, Mississippi, and a graduate of the University of Southern Mississippi. She is President and CEO of Girls Inc. of Lakeland, an afterschool and summer program for girls in grade K-12. She currently serves as a member of the school board's Health Strategy Committee, the FSBA Advocacy Committee, the United Way of Central Florida's Agency Director's Council, and is a board member of the MLK Commission of Lakeland. She is a member of St. Paul A.M.E. Church, Lake Alfred, FL, where she serves as Pro-Tem of the Steward Board, Chair of the Finance Committee and Chair of the Lay Organization. She is married to former Lakeland Mayor Gow Fields, and they have four children and nine grandchildren.

Reason for seeking re-election: I want to continue to be a strong voice for students and employees; continue to advocate for our parents and the communities that our schools serve; and continue improving the quality of education delivered through all of our schools.

Qualifications: I have served on the school board for twenty-three plus years and have the experience and historical knowledge needed to be an effective board member. I have been intimately involved in Polk County for over 45 years serving on numerous boards and committees and have established relationships that can help me better understand the needs of our school district and community.

Sam Neelam



I was born into poverty in India, lost my mother young, and was raised in a Catholic boarding school for poor children. I earned degrees in math and computer science, immigrated to America in 1999, and built successful tech companies that served major clients and made the Inc. 5000 list. I now lead real estate development through Odin Group and serve on the Florida Polytechnic University board, Florida TaxWatch, and the local CDD. I am running because our kids deserve stronger academics, safer schools, and real preparation for life. My combination of business leadership, board experience, and deep commitment to education gives me the qualifications to deliver results on the school board.

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

Kay Fields



Rooted in the belief that *“to whom much is given, much is required,”* I am committed to strengthening my community through service, leadership, and generosity. I actively invest my time, talent, and treasure in organizations that uplift, empower, and create lasting impact across Central Florida.

I proudly serve and support **St. Paul AME Church in Lake Alfred, FL** where faith and community intersect to create meaningful change. My commitment extends to **Girls Inc. of Lakeland**, championing programs that inspire young girls to be strong, smart, and bold. I also contribute to the **Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Commission of Lakeland**, helping advance initiatives that honor Dr. King’s legacy of justice, unity, and service. Additionally, I support the transformative work of the **United Way of Central Florida**, an organization dedicated to improving lives and strengthening families throughout the region.

Whether through hands-on involvement, sharing my expertise, or providing financial support, I am dedicated to building a stronger, more equitable community for all.

Sam Neelam



I support the Stuti Saanvi Foundation, which provides free STEM education to underprivileged children in rural India. I give time and resources to local efforts that help families and students in Polk County. I also serve on boards focused on education, fiscal accountability, and community infrastructure. My giving and service center on improving opportunities through education and responsible governance.

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?

Kay Fields



The two most critical issues that need to be addressed as a board member are improving **student achievement** and **strengthening teacher recruitment and retention**. While we are making strides, our district face challenges in early literacy, math proficiency, and overall academic performance, and addressing these gaps is essential to student success. At the same time, our district must do more to attract and retain high-quality educators by ensuring competitive compensation, strong support systems, and safe, well-resourced classrooms. My commitment is to continue to put students first, support our educators, and work collaboratively with families and community partners to ensure every child in Polk County has access to a high-quality education.

Beyond the two most critical issues that are listed above, the district must also continue focusing on responsible budgeting, modernizing facilities, expanding career and technical pathways, and strengthening partnerships with families and community organizations.

Sam Neelam



The two most critical issues are raising student performance in reading and math and fixing the teacher shortage. Polk schools earned a B grade last year and improved graduation rates, but too many students remain below proficient in core subjects. With over 117,000 students and rapid growth, we need strong instruction and high standards so every child catches up. The teacher shortage is just as urgent, with high vacancies and heavy reliance on substitutes because pay lags behind other districts. As a board member I will push for competitive pay, direct resources to classrooms, demand full transparency, and manage growth responsibly while keeping schools safe. Polk families deserve strong academics, character, and safety without waste or excuses.

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

Kay Fields



Overall, I believe the State of Florida provides necessary support to our local community. At times, efforts to solve a problem in one part of the state can create unintended consequences elsewhere, including here in Polk County. I view this through the lens of how our system of governance is designed to work: **the state sets the foundation and basic framework, while local government and the community build on that foundation to meet local needs and priorities.**

For Polk County, this partnership is essential. The state should continue providing clear standards, resources, and accountability, while allowing local leaders the flexibility to address the specific needs, values, and aspirations of our community. Strong collaboration between state and local government is the key to ensuring our schools can serve students effectively and reflect what Polk County families want for their children.

Sam Neelam



Tallahassee provides necessary support when it sets high standards, expands school choice, and protects parental rights. These state-level actions give local schools direction and tools that help students succeed. At the same time, local communities know their children best, so decisions about day-to-day operations should stay close to home. I support a balanced approach where the state sets clear expectations and locals handle implementation with accountability.

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.)

Kay Fields



I support the right of parents to choose from among the available educational options what is best for their children and families.

Sam Neelam



I strongly support school choice because parents know their children best. Families should be able to select public, charter, private, or religious schools that best fit their child's needs. Competition among options raises standards across all schools and gives every student a better chance to succeed. I believe in expanding quality choices while ensuring strong public schools remain available for all families.

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

Kay Fields



The school grading system provides accountability and gives families an easy-to-understand snapshot of school performance. It highlights important measures of progress and helps identify where support is needed. However, not all schools serve identical student populations, and the grading system alone cannot capture the full picture of student achievement or the unique challenges each school faces. While these accountability measures are useful, they do not fully reflect the resources, interventions, and support required for every school to improve and maximize student learning. A more complete understanding requires looking beyond the grade to the individual needs of each school and its students.

Sam Neelam



The school grading system is a useful tool that brings transparency and shows parents how schools are performing. It helps identify where improvement is needed and encourages accountability. We should keep the system but make sure it accurately measures real student learning, safety, and results rather than just paperwork. Clear grades help drive better outcomes for kids.

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

Kay Fields



As a school board member, I believe meeting student needs starts with ensuring teachers have the tools and support to reach every learner. That includes differentiated instruction, scaffolding for students who need extra help, enrichment for advanced learners, social-emotional support, and strong communication with families. My role is to create the policies and provide the resources that make these effective practices possible in every classroom.

Sam Neelam



Every child learns differently and deserves strong core academics along with targeted support where needed. I will push for effective instruction in reading and math, extra help for students who are behind, and appropriate challenges for advanced learners. We must use data to match resources to real needs while maintaining high expectations for all students. Safe, orderly classrooms where teachers can teach and students can focus are essential for every child to succeed.

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

Kay Fields



We can never truly compensate educators for all they do for our children and families, but it is our responsibility as school board members to ensure that salaries and benefits are as competitive as possible. Our teachers deserve to know that Polk County values their expertise, their commitment, and the impact they make every day. Strengthening our compensation and benefits package—especially in comparison to neighboring districts—is essential to attracting and retaining the high-quality educators our students depend on.

Sam Neelam



Good teachers deserve fair and competitive pay because they do one of the most important jobs in our community. We should reward strong performance in the classroom and make it easier to attract and keep quality educators. At the same time, we must spend taxpayer dollars responsibly and ensure compensation supports results for students. Supporting teachers with competitive pay and better working conditions is key to improving education.

9. What are your budget priorities?

Kay Fields



My budget priorities are straightforward: **make our salaries competitive with neighboring school districts and ensure that as many dollars as possible go directly into classrooms.** Competitive compensation is essential for attracting and retaining high-quality educators and directing resources to classrooms ensures students and teachers have the tools, support, and learning environments they need to succeed. Every budget decision should reflect our commitment to strengthening instruction and supporting the people who make learning possible.

Sam Neelam



My top priorities are strong classroom instruction, supporting teachers, school safety, and core academics. I will focus resources where they directly help students learn and grow while cutting waste and improving efficiency. Every dollar must be spent transparently and with clear accountability to taxpayers. Managing growth responsibly and directing funds to results will be central to my approach on the board.

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

Kay Fields



Voters should support me because I have a long-standing commitment to improving the lives of children and families throughout Polk County. Through my professional career, public service, community involvement, and charitable giving, I have remained laser-focused on the needs and concerns of our families.

My work with Girls Inc. has given me first-hand insight into how students' needs have evolved and how important it is for the school district to adapt its strategies to support student achievement. I understand the challenges our children face, and I have dedicated my career to advocating for their success, safety, and well-being.

I bring experience, perspective, and a deep commitment to serving this community. My goal is to ensure that every decision made by the school board reflects what is best for Polk County's children and families.

Sam Neelam



I bring real experience as a businessman who built companies from the ground up and serve on the Florida Polytechnic University board, Florida TaxWatch, and the local CDD. I understand budgets, accountability, and delivering results from both business and public service. As a father and longtime Polk County resident, I will focus on raising academic performance, supporting teachers, managing growth responsibly, and spending every taxpayer dollar wisely with full transparency. I offer practical leadership and board experience that puts students and families first. I listen to parents and teachers and work to get results. That is why I am the best choice for the Polk County School Board.

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

Kay Fields



You can learn more about my background and priorities by visiting my campaign Facebook page: [Kay Fields for Polk County School Board](#).

Sam Neelam



Check out my campaign website <https://samneelam.com/> or Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/votesamneelam/>. You can also reach out to me directly at sam@samneelam.com or follow updates on local conservative groups and the Polk County Republican Executive Committee. I am happy to meet and talk with any voter.