

LOCAL

Polk School Board member Kate Wallace files to run, faces challengers



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- Kate Wallace, appointed to the Polk County School Board in November, is running for a full term.
- She joins candidates Sarah Corona and Victor Sims in the nonpartisan race for the District 3 seat.
- The election is scheduled for August 18, with a potential runoff if no candidate secures over 50% of the vote.

Kate Wallace, appointed to the Polk County School Board in November, is now seeking election to a full four-year term.

Wallace has filed to run for the District 3 seat in the fall election. She joins two candidates who filed in 2025, Sarah Corona and Victor Sims.

Wallace's appointment by Gov. Ron DeSantis followed the August death of first-term School Board member Rick Nolte of Mulberry after a long illness.

District 3 includes schools in South Lakeland, Bartow, Mulberry and Winter Haven. Candidates must live in the district, though voting takes place countywide.

School Board races are nonpartisan and occur during the primary elections scheduled for Aug. 18. If no candidate receives more than 50% of the vote, a runoff election will be held between the top two finishers.

Here is a summary of the three candidates in alphabetical order:

Sarah Corona

Corona, 61, is a native of Cuba who has lived in Lakeland since she was a teenager, graduating from Lakeland High School.

Corona is CEO of a behavioral health network based in Tampa. During her five years as CEO, Corona said she has increased the company's revenues by 53.27%.

After starting at Polk State College, she earned a bachelor's degree from Florida Technical College. She added two master's degrees, including an MBA, from Grand Canyon University.



A married mother of two grown sons, Corona said that her sons attended a range of school types: traditional public, charter, magnet, and private. Corona said she is active as a

congregant at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Lakeland and describes herself as "a servant of God."

Corona said that she and her husband, Jesus Corona, have done missionary work. Corona said she is a member of the Polk County Sheriff's Advisory Council.

"I'm running because I care deeply about our schools and our community," Corona said. "I think, with my background in leadership, budgeting, and analyzing areas that need improvement, I see clear opportunities to better support educators. And it's not just about talking, it's about delivering results and transparency and accountability."

Despite her demanding job, Corona said she could commit to dedicating the necessary time to serve on the School Board.

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"There are 23 schools in my district, so I will be able to visit each of them," she said. "And this is something that I want to do, and I want to make a difference. I've been visiting the schools, and I've been told that they have never seen any School Board member. So, I want to be that bridge from the community and the schools."

Corona said she was interviewed by DeSantis' office after Nolte's death as a candidate to replace him.

As of April 14, Corona had reported about \$31,000 in campaign contributions. Her donors include Polk County Commissioners Bill Braswell and Martha Santiago, Polk State College Trustee Ashley Bell Barnett, and Steve Maxwell, founder of Citizens Defending Freedom.

Victor Sims

Sims, 30, is a Winter Haven resident and works as a senior associate in philanthropy for a child-welfare organization. He said he works remotely from home but also travels for his job.

He said that he spent 12 years in foster care in Polk County, starting at 6 months old, before being adopted. Sims said he attended 13 elementary schools while moving through foster-care homes. He graduated from Chain of Lakes Collegiate High School in 2014.

Sims received a bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of South Florida, a master's degree in business from Florida International University, and a law degree from Florida State University. He and his wife are parents of a 3-year-old and an 8-month-old.



Sims said the inspiration to run for the School Board arose from his experience of caring for a foster child who had an Individualized Education Plan through her public school.

“When I was in the IEP meeting, there were a lot of gaps in services or, really, services not happening at all,” he said. “Not through the fault of really the district, but the complexities of what it means to have funding that just isn't there anymore, and how do we get more creative around funding?”

Sims said he decided that he could apply his experience of working “in complex systems all across the state and the country” to the Polk County School Board to ensure that all students with special needs receive the services they are entitled to.

He said that he has a personal understanding of individualized education, having been diagnosed with “selective mutism” in childhood as a response to trauma.

Sims volunteered with a curriculum committee for the school district last year and said he serves on child-welfare boards around the country.

“I come from humble beginnings, so money has never been the biggest influence for me,” Sims said. “But I've got more donors who are educators and former educators than any of the School Board candidates combined.”

As of April 14, Sims had reported about \$15,800 in campaign contributions. His donors include former School Board member Sarah Fortney; Marianne Capozziello, former president of the Polk Education Association; David Jones, vice president of the Rainbow Ridge LGBT Democratic Caucus of Polk County; the Solavita Democratic Club; and the Collective PAC, based in Washington, D.C.

Kate Wallace

Wallace, 40, is a Bartow native and graduated from the International Baccalaureate School at Bartow High School in 2003. She earned a bachelor's degree in public relations from the University of Florida. She holds a Certificate in Nonprofit Leadership and Management from the Harvard Kennedy School.

After her appointment, Wallace moved from Lakeland to Bartow to live within District 3, she said. She is a lifelong member of First Presbyterian Church of Bartow.

Wallace is the director of state government affairs for Charter Communications. She previously worked for the Foundation for Excellence in Education (ExcelinEd) and was the founding executive director of Lakeland Leads, now known as ConnectED Polk.



In a news release, Wallace described herself as “a proven conservative with a track record of success.” She said her top priorities include protecting parental rights, ensuring school choice for families, and addressing the lack of access students have to A-rated public schools in Polk County.

“Polk County families need a fighter dedicated to ensuring that their children have access to A+ educational options,” Wallace said in the news release. “Our parents and kids deserve accountability for the fact that there isn’t a single A-rated neighborhood public middle or high school in all of Polk County. If elected, I will be focused on broadening school choice options and cultivating a culture of academic excellence within our school system.”

Wallace said she secured a grant that helped bring IDEA Public Schools, a national charter network, to Lakeland. She serves on the Florida Fiduciary Board of IDEA Public Schools.

She said she also championed the expansion of the Junior Achievement 3DE program in Polk and the creation of the Barnett Family JA Discovery Center, scheduled to open this year at Tenoroc High School.

Wallace said she had worked with Florida legislators to enact a statewide public school choice option and expand access to education savings accounts for students with unique abilities. She said she helped attract millions of dollars in grants to connect more than 11,000 Polk County households and students with high-speed broadband service.

“When Florida’s families wanted more public and private school choice, we fought in Tallahassee more than 10 years ago to make that a reality,” Wallace said in the news release. “Now, more families than ever choose the best education for their child. This is just the beginning of the improvements I plan to bring to our parents, teachers, and students.”

Wallace has been active in civic organizations, including the Junior Leagues of Florida, Leadership Florida, the United Way of Central Florida, Polk Vision, the Gator Bowl Sports Committee, American Enterprise Institute Leadership Network, and local Chambers of Commerce and Economic Development Councils across Florida, the release said.

Wallace had not reported any campaign contributions as of April 14.

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