

Meeting the candidate: Stephanie Vanos

1. Why are you running? If elected, what would be your top goals as school board member?

- I am running because we need knowledgeable, rational people on our school board, and people who put students first. I am a problem solver with the background, experience, and contacts in the community to be ready on day one. My priorities are 1) to keep the focus on students and their needs which includes everything from supporting evidence-based reading instruction, to robust academic counseling, to mental health resources, to equitable access; and 2) to rebuild trust and support for our professional educators by decreasing micromanagement and treating them as professionals.

2. In what school district or community activities/organizations have you been involved?

- I have been a volunteer in our public schools since my oldest daughter started kindergarten. I completed OCPS Leadership Orange in 2016-2017 and was appointed to the OCPS Reapportionment Committee in 2021. It was my honor to serve on nonprofit boards including PACE Center for Girls and Girls on the Run Central Florida, and as a Trustee for Track Shack Youth Foundation. My experience with the League of Women Voters, including two years as co-chair of the Education Committee, and as VP of the Democratic Public Education Caucus of Florida, gave me a strong foundation of knowledge and advocacy experience.

3. What is the top issue you believe the district needs to address?

- Educator recruitment and retention is a key issue. Our educators are professionals. They do not need to be micromanaged, but they do need the freedom to teach and time to develop trusting relationships with students. This not only benefits our students academically but increases school safety. We must also build bipartisan coalitions to advocate at the state level for increased funding to pay our educators as the average salary is 50th in the nation. Locally, we can explore incentives for our teachers such as low cost or free child care, increased schedule flexibility, and partial or fully paid family leave.

4. What can be done to ensure everyone who graduates is either ready for college or a vocation?

- First, we need robust academic counseling from fifth grade through graduation. Second, we need to not only expose our students to the vast array of programs and certifications already available to them through OCPS, local nonprofits, and businesses, but we need to affirmatively identify students who might benefit from these programs and ensure equitable access to them. Finally, we need to have some tough conversations about metrics; if rates of absenteeism are increasing, why is our graduation rate the same? We need to focus more on the goal of preparing our students for life rather than meeting a metric.

5. How should the district address underperforming schools?

- Improving a struggling school requires a long term approach. All schools need strong, stable leadership and high expectations for both educators and students. We must also involve the community – the families, businesses, nonprofits, and other stakeholders – to join in building a positive climate and culture around the school. We need to meet community members where they are and communicate in a clear, respectful manner. Finally, I support increased state funding for community partnership schools to address basic unmet needs that hamper our students' ability to learn. Increased funding will also enable schools to recruit and retain highly qualified educators.

6. Local and state initiatives have been launched to address the need for more teachers in our classrooms. What more do you think needs to be done to recruit and retain teachers in your district?

- Teacher pay must be immediately addressed by the state legislature. We must also decrease the micromanagement of our teachers and their fear of losing their certificate. Our teachers need to know that the district supports them and respects their professionalism. We also need to ensure that we do not make bad state laws worse, and address benefits such as health care costs. One option that I have worked on is to allow school districts to opt into the state health plan. We can also offer incentives such as providing free or low cost childcare, and allowing flexibility in scheduling.

7. What is your stance on the state's current school choice program?

- I believe that public funds should remain in public schools. Public school parents love public school choices and all students should be informed about and able to access these choices. Just this year, the state's voucher program has diverted nearly \$4 billion from our public schools to voucher schools with little to no transparency or accountability. Nearly 78% of voucher schools are unaccredited, and over half of the students return to public schools after two years. Charter schools are considered public schools, and I support those that are nonprofit, not real estate ventures, and serve an unmet need.

8. Does school testing really give an accurate portrayal of the education quality/experience of a school?

- No. State mandated standardized testing provides data, but I don't believe it's the most important or valid measure of student or educator progress, development, or achievement

9. Issues surrounding gender, sexuality and race have created controversy between school boards and parents. How much say should parents have in deciding what is and is not included in the public school curriculum?

- All curriculum is approved by the state, and the approval process allows for parents to provide feedback at the local level. Parents have always been able to restrict their own child's access to books or information from the approved curriculum, but one parent should not have the right to restrict books and information for any other child.

10. What is your rubric for deciding whether a book should be banned?

- Book banning has never been on the right side of history. That we are forced to spend time and taxpayer funds reviewing books that have been on library shelves for years highlights the distraction and damage caused by the recent passage of culture war laws. Media specialists are highly trained to ensure that school libraries contain appropriate and diverse books and we should allow them to do their job. Any parent can restrict their child's access to books and information. However, parents and community members do not have the right to restrict books for other children.

11. What is your position on the new law that implements new rules for teacher unions?

- The new law singled out the teacher unions. I do not support politicians singling out any group for purely political reasons and to gain a political advantage. This move is particularly mind boggling during a time when we are experiencing a high number of teachers leaving the classroom, and the pipeline of new teachers is at a low. I will advocate for the repeal of this law as a School Board Member

12. Do you feel students are safe at school? Or does more need to be done to protect school campuses?

- The unfortunate truth is that no one can guarantee that our students are 100% safe at school; however, I do know that our public schools are among the safest places for our children. There is a balance in using evidence-based approaches to harden our schools without completely isolating our schools from the vital communities of which they are a part. I support School Resource Officers who protect and build positive relationships with students. Most importantly, we need to build positive, nurturing school climates and cultures so that situations are identified before they become problems.

13. Do you feel any changes are needed to your district's budget? Is money being spent in the right places?

- The most necessary change is that the district's budget needs to be increased. It is outrageous that Florida is the bottom ten in the nation for per pupil funding, particularly with four of the eight largest districts in the country. It is hard to suggest cuts when everything is so underfunded, but when making tough choices I favor cutting education technology over educators. I support the creation of an independent budget review committee composed of financial experts who regularly review OCPS's budget, offer insight and guidance, and provide updates at each school board meeting.