

Meeting the candidate: Brian Bennett

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

- My sons both attend Osceola Schools, and one of them is mentally handicapped. He was sexually assaulted in the classroom. Unfortunately, this is not an event limited to just my family. We have tried working with the administration to address his needs both educational and safety and have been met with stiff resistance. I have critically evaluated the curriculum available for these students and it is completely inappropriate. My professional career has been in the budgeting, planning and execution. I have experience looking at multi-billion-dollar budgets and measuring results against plans. I intend to use those skills to bring Accountability, Curriculum Reform, and improve the teachers' working conditions.

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

- I have been a longtime supporter of Scouting, the arts, and have worked with 4-H. I currently participate as an orchestra member for the Central Florida Community Arts Symphony Orchestra.

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

- The school district needs to be transparent about their business activities. Whether it be spending, discipline, teacher shortages, or changes to curriculum. Holding them accountable for following the Florida statutes on transparency will go a long way to ensure that our money is being spent wisely for the right programs.

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

- We need to return some of the vocational programs to the schools. Harmony High School used to have a construction program where they taught basic building techniques, electrical, and plumbing. Those programs have been removed, and our students are left with no choices to learn skills that could make them instantly employable when graduating. I hope that all students can attend college or vocational programs but not all families have the resources to allow their students to do so without debt. Providing some basic hands-on training would allow these students to work while working to better themselves.

5. How should the district address underperforming schools?

- The district needs to measure the schools objectively, understand where they are seeing failures and focus on remediation in the areas that they are deficient. If needed, better leadership needs to be installed at the principal level in the schools so that we don't continue to move problem administrators to better performing schools only to have those schools test scores and efficiencies decline.

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?

- Pay is one item that would assist teachers. We have closed the pay gap with surrounding districts for novice teachers which helps us attract them, but we don't continue to provide growth opportunities that match the private sector for the veteran teachers. In addition, the teachers need to feel supported and have tools put in place to address behavior disruptions, violence in the classroom, and classroom sizes. No one can be effective if they cannot provide enough individual support to students who are struggling. My father was a lifelong educator and I know that he did it because he loved children, loved teaching, and loved seeing growth in his students. I believe that all of our teachers feel the same way, it has to be discouraging to feel like you are not given adequate support to provide the care every student needs.

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

- I am a firm believer in school choice. I have heard from parents however that the process takes too long, and there is not adequate communication from the district leaving parents frustrated and unsure of the application status.

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

- No, I believe that school testing provides a measure on the individual school's ability to teach to a test. We need to look at the school more holistically and look at the well-being of the students, their preparation for the next grade or ability to be successful upon graduation.

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?

- Parents should have the ultimate say on what is being taught to their children. With the removal of books and moving to on-line teaching content parents are unable to fully participate or vet the curriculum being presented to their children. Parents need to be included in the selection of the educational materials being used with their children.

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

- I follow the same belief as Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart. When he was asked a similar question regarding obscenity in 1964, he responded "I know it when I see it". Books that portray gratuitous violence, pornography or adult themes that are not appropriate to students should be apparent and should be vetted first by school media specialists. If a parent finds materials objectionable that have passed this hurdle, they should have the ability to prevent those materials from being available to their children and should be evaluated by a committee.

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

- I understand the reasoning behind the union decertification legislation in Florida. If a union fails to reach a 60% it does not represent many of the teachers. Union dues are used to influence political elections supporting agendas and candidates that most teachers do not support.

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

- My experience with my son would suggest that our students are not safe in the classroom. He was sexually assaulted by another student in a classroom that should have had a higher teacher-to-student ratio than a standard classroom and he was supposed to always have a dedicated 1-1 aide within arm's reach of him to assess his epilepsy. They failed him, and they failed the other developmentally disabled student who was allowed to assault him. Bullying is allowed to continue in the High Schools, and oversized classrooms do not provide enough oversight and safety to our students.

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

- It is hard to assess the district's budget when they do not respond to public records requests to view the budget, and associated spending. I believe that we need to have a clear top-to-bottom look at the budget, the associated spending and transparency of any connected vendors to current or prior administration. If we have multiple vendors for services, we should ensure that the primary spending is not being given to a single provider.

Meeting the candidate: Paula Bronson

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

- As a School Board District 5 candidate in Osceola County, I offer a unique perspective to this race. I am a lifelong resident, a product of the Osceola County School District, and an educator with over 20 years of experience in our local schools. This extensive experience has equipped me with a deep understanding of the changes in education and the needs of our classrooms. Our county needs a board member with an educational background to shape district policy and decision-making. I am committed to advocating for our students, families, and staff.

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

- My dedication to fostering student success in our community is unwavering. As a teacher, I have been deeply involved in student-based activities for over two decades, volunteering countless hours. From after-school gardening, cheerleading, and reading sessions to science, STEM, math, family, and data nights, I have been deeply involved in our students' lives. I attend high school plays, football games, track meets, and music nights, witnessing firsthand how these school-based activities transform lives. This level of involvement is not just a testament to my dedication to our community but also an inspiration for others to join in and contribute to our students' success.

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

- One of the top issues I believe our district needs to address is improving student achievement. This is a cause I am deeply committed to. Engaged students are not just interested and passionate about the subject, but they also take ownership of their learning. As educators, we are in the classroom every day, working with students and understanding where the educational learning gaps are. We need more support in our classrooms and the ability to focus on small-group learning for those who need support with foundational skills. Parents must be presented with the data and given a plan to which the whole family is committed. There is nothing more important than our students' success, and I am dedicated to inspiring hope and confidence in the future of education in our district. My focus on improving student achievement will instill confidence in our community about the future of our district.

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

- As a district, we should ensure that everyone who graduates is ready for college and/or a vocation. Osceola County needs to focus more on information, technology, and communications electives, starting in our elementary schools and working up. Students could learn business leadership skills and engage in service-learning activities at the school and in the community. Career and technical education programs across our school district need to be geared toward enhancing educational opportunities and workforce readiness for students.

5. How should the district address underperforming schools?

- The underperforming school did not happen overnight. This happened because there was no real sense of urgency to address the problem initially. I have been in staff meetings when educators were asked their opinions and ideas on changing the school trajectory, and those suggestions were ignored. We needed to be proactive instead of reactive. We have all the data to track test scores and achievement. As a district, we need to strengthen our students' foundational skills. We need to keep highly qualified teachers in our classrooms. Parents and our community need to be pulled into the conversation and help with support for success.

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?

- Increasing pay for the classroom teacher is always the go-to for teacher retention and recruitment. This is the exact reason why we need a seasoned educator to share their perspective. We, as educators, need to feel valued and appreciated. We would not be educators if we did not believe in something better and give so much of ourselves. This is, however, also how educators are taken advantage of. Every year, the district finds yet another way to take something away, even when you think there is nothing left to take. Teachers feel exhausted and overworked, with large classroom sizes, no supplies, behaviors, paperwork, constant meetings, and students with many needs. Why not give one Wednesday a month after school to plan and get learning ready in your classroom, or offer the meeting on Teams so we can multi-task?

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

- I believe in school choice being an option for families. Parents need to be in the driver's seat of their children's education. We have so many great options for student learning and success. I see these benefits as an educator and parent. My mother homeschooled me for two years. I have worked in private, charter, and public schools. Each style of learning offers great opportunities for achievement.

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

- Over the past twenty years, I have been aware of the increase in testing for our students. Testing does not always accurately portray the quality of education. This puts a lot of stress on students and staff. So much testing is now completed on the computer, and I don't feel that our students are set up for success. Technology is the way of the future, but we have to take a better look at giving our students keyboard classes with an actual curriculum. We would achieve higher writing assessments if the students could confidently type and know where to find the tools for the particular program so they could highlight and compare texts. Parents and community members should have the opportunity to take the same type of assessment.

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?

- Parents should always be able to have a voice in their children's education, which is another reason school choice is important. Nothing should be hidden from parents. I invite parents to review the curriculum in my classroom and library. All of my personal classroom books are logged into Beanstack for total transparency. I think that is the first huddle. Parents must be included in the conversation. The problems start when someone feels left out of the conversation.

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

- Everyone needs to be included in the book-banning discussion and needs to have previewed the material cover to cover. This needs to be considered so that context is understood for clarity reasons. The material needs to be age-appropriate and have a clear line of reasoning as to why the material is inappropriate. There should be specific claims as to why the material is not suitable. Osceola County does a great job of limiting materials and having parents able to set guidelines for their children.

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

- The new law requires educators to have a union membership of 60% or else be decertified. No one else advocates for education but the teachers' union. One major issue is that union dues cost extra money, and teachers live paycheck to paycheck. Families are making decisions based on the needs of their households. If we could bring the cost of union dues down. The numbers stay in the union's favor.

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

- I feel that Osceola County Schools has made school safety a top priority. Safety protocols in the front office, parents, visitors, cameras, doors that lock when closed, and clearly labeled personnel. As educators, we discuss age appropriately with our students when reporting suspicious activity and what to do in case of an emergency. We are always made aware of school safety issues and want students, parents, and staff always to feel safe. I feel we are proactive in safety but must be vigilant.

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

- I feel like changes in the budget could be made. Our district awards projects that come under budget; no one ever asks what was taken out of the budget. What fund is that money going into? Why are we building schools without large k-5th grade playgrounds and providing sun covering for play spaces? Every elementary school should have a large disability-inclusive playground. So much in life is learned through play. Social, emotional, and physical learning occurs in and on the playground. We are building homes with zero lot lines, and children need to have physical play that is safe and accommodating. This is how we begin to make positive changes, and it starts with including every child on the playground.

Meeting the candidate: Scott Ramsey

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

- I am running because I want to be a catalyst for positive change on the Osceola County School Board and help to guide the focus back to what is most important, the students. If elected my top priorities will continue to be school safety, discipline in schools, and increased pay for classroom teachers.

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

- I am a very active member within the community, I have volunteered as a coach for Harmony Youth Football and St. Cloud Little League. In 2013/2014 I served as the Big Boss for the Silver Spurs Rodeo and I am currently the Chairman of the Rodeo Committee. I am the Chairman of the Farm Services Agency Board for Osceola and Brevard Counties. I am the Vice President of the Board of Directors for Osceola County Farm Bureau. I am a member of the Florida Cattlemen's Association, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, and a former President and current Board Member for the Osceola County Cattlemen's Association.

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

- One of the top issues that needs to be addressed is student discipline, because without discipline no education can occur.

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

- Osceola County students are now ranked fourth in the state for college attendance. I will continue to support the initiatives of the Osceola County School District including, but not limited to advance courses, dual enrollment, and Career & Technical Education Programs. As well the Osceola Prosper program that has been put in place by the Osceola County Commissioners.

5. How should the district address underperforming schools?

- It is crucial that underperforming schools have the additional resources and supports needed, so that all students are receiving grade level instruction as well as targeted, intensive interventions to ensure that that all students are making the necessary academic growth to obtain grade level achievement.

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?

- The Osceola School District has implemented out of the box thinking when it comes to the recruitment of teachers, by looking outside of the State of Florida as well as using job fairs and job websites to cast a wide net to ensure that our students have high quality instructors. I would support the continuation of these initiatives. The School District of Osceola County provides specific training for new teachers prior to the beginning of the school year as well as support throughout the school year through new teacher mentor programs. I would support the expansion of these mentor programs, as they greatly contribute to new teacher retention.

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

- I believe that parents have the right to make educational choices for their child(ren), which include school choice.

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

- There are numerous factors that must be examined in order to obtain the full picture of a student's success. I believe that testing is just one of the data points that must be used in order to determine if a student is being successful on an academic level during their educational journey.

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?

- I support all legislation that has been signed into law by Governor Ron DeSantis regarding Parental Rights.

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

- The School District of Osceola County has a procedure in place to review books and I would follow the procedure that is currently in place.

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

- As a School Board member my job is to uphold the laws of the State of Florida.

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

- I do believe that the students of Osceola County are safe due to the diligence of the School District as well as the individual schools. The School District has allocated resources to support one of the best Safety and Security teams in the State of Florida. However, due to our everchanging society, the threats to our students and schools evolve and it is crucial that our safety plans are continuously reevaluated and updated to ensure the safety of all students as well as our faculty and staff.

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

- The School District of Osceola has a very complex budget that has a bottom line of over 2.1 billion dollars. The School District has done a great job of reviewing the items on the most recent budget to ensure that the money is being allocated appropriately with a students first mind set. The School District's budget is something that needs to be continuously reviewed as both needs and circumstances change, and adjustments must be made to meet the needs of both students and teachers.

Meeting the candidate: Dylan Reinsel

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

- I am running because I am a teacher in Osceola County and a member of the Bargaining Leadership Team. While performing in those capacities I have seen opportunities for change and growth to better serve our students. One of my top goals as a school board member would be to effectively address our shortage of teachers and staff. I would also be focused on increasing pay for our veteran teachers and increasing transparency to improve public trust in our school district.

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

- I am currently a US History and US Government teacher at St. Cloud High School. I was recently the Head Golf Coach and have been an assistant/volunteer wrestling coach periodically over my six years with SCHS. I am also an active member of the Osceola County Education Association which is the only organization that represents our teachers and staff.

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

- Our top issue that needs to be addressed is attracting and retaining employees. I believe retention efforts need to be addressed the most because the state's focus has been on attracting new staff members. Within the efforts to attract staff members we have been lacking in our retention efforts. This is one of the largest barriers to increased student achievement and opportunity

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

- I believe this effort starts at the primary level (grades K-2). It is crucial that students leave these grades with the ability to read and specifically read to learn. After the primary level, many students have been passed on to intermediate grades without the necessary skills and this has a compounding effect through their educational journey and by the time some students get to high school they are so far behind its difficult to bridge the gap. However, at the secondary level we must provide as many options as possible for students to find where they are proficient and be able to motivate their desire to succeed.

5. How should the district address underperforming schools?

- I am an advocate for decentralization within the school system, which means we need to empower administrators at the school level to address the needs of their school and we need to empower teachers to address the needs of their students. This is not to be confused with not holding schools accountable, but rather the opposite. There is an important balance that must be struck between the power to make decisions and the accountability for those decisions. Too often we assign accountability without the empowerment to make decisions, that doesn't work in the real world.

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?

- State leaders need to understand that their efforts to recruit and retain have been very lopsided toward recruitment. The state has also made it all but impossible for local school districts to properly compensate their veteran teachers because of many laws that dictate how teachers can be paid. Unfortunately, many of those laws prohibit paying based on years of service, which is what really needs to happen to address wage compression. However, we do need to address this need through realigning our budgetary priorities here in Osceola and providing benefits that would give us an advantage over other counties.

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

- I believe school choice is a net benefit for Florida residents. I am for it as long as it is public school to public school. Recent efforts by the state legislature to funnel public school funds into private schools or for-profit charter schools are unacceptable. Our state government and our school board have a responsibility to make sure our public schools are adequately funded and staffed. We can provide choice for parents and students while not at the same time putting some schools at a disadvantage.

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

- I think in some cases it gives us an idea of how schools are performing. In that case, I would say it is accurate, but incomplete. We must be honest in acknowledging that tests do not measure, nor can they measure everything that an education should provide a person. There are some things that we will not be able to measure on a test that will be unbelievably valuable to students as they get older. In fact, I believe that if we were more focused on the things we cannot measure on a standardized test, our test scores would improve.

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?

- Parents and the public should have mechanisms for bringing forward their opinions, hopes and concerns about the school curriculum. However, each segment of the curriculum is based on state standards and other academic organization standards (i.e. College Board) which dictate what is required to be taught. Parents should be able to opt their child out of participating in certain topics or classes if it conflicts with something they believe, but parents should not be able to limit opportunities for other people's children. There must be transparency so that parents can make an informed decision on what they feel their child should participate in.

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

- I certainly think some books are not suitable for a school setting, especially books that are sexually explicit or provide graphic detail of sexual acts. However, having a book that depicts a same-sex couple does not qualify as sexually explicit. This is not a matter of sexuality, it's a matter of reality. Same sex couples are in our society, and same sex marriage has been a constitutionally protected right for almost a decade. These depictions should be age appropriate, but students should be able to see themselves and their families in the books they read.

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

- The new rules that have been implemented are not only bad for our teacher unions, but bad for students as well. Recruitment and retention are directly correlated to student success and those efforts are better implemented through a healthy collective bargaining process. Management and labor must have a dialogue for addressing work environment issues to make sure that the well-being of our teachers and staff are being adequately considered. I would encourage our state legislators to reevaluate their posture against our educators' right to band together to advocate for themselves and their students. It's simply a bad policy and ideologically shortsighted.

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

- I believe that the general security measures that have been implemented provide for very safe schools regarding possible threats coming on to campuses. I am a big supporter of the use of SROs and of single-entry campuses. However, I think the larger threats to safety on campus are found within the student body with aggressive students, especially in classes that are overcrowded that would make it harder for a teacher or other adults to manage the room. This is another large reason why properly staffing our schools is so important. It is a safety concern just as much as an academic concern.

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

- Our budget must be classroom and school centric. Too often we have seen cuts at the school level only to add more administrative positions at the district office. We need to make sure our budget is directed as close to a student's desk as possible. We should also look at the amount of money we spend on computer programs. We may achieve learning gains faster with efforts to reduce class size, reduction of assessment time, increased attendance accountability, or increasing our ability to recruit and retain staff. Tools are great, but people who know how to use them are better.