

9 QUESTIONS FROM



Meet the candidate: Laura Hine

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

I'm running because I am committed to academic excellence for all students at all schools. For schools not performing as well, we dig in and provide the resources and support necessary to turn that tide. Teacher recruitment, retention and improved pay is a top priority. Our teachers deserve a professional salary commensurate with the importance of their role.

Greater focus on early childhood learning and closing the achievement gap is needed. If a child falls behind early on, the chances of catching up as years go by are slim. And we must continue to grow the job skills certifications and connections so students can go from classroom-to-career if that is their path.

Dealing with inflationary issues to ensure all schools have the resources they need is also a priority.

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

By focusing on excellence in every county school, ensuring children can read proficiently by third grade, and providing the resources needed to support all students, our students will be ready for college or a vocation when they graduate. The direct access to vocational education for students who want to follow that path has exploded in recent years and must continue to grow. Currently, students can graduate from our schools a certified nurse assistant (CNA) and get a job, a certified veterinary technician (CVT) and get a job, auto mechanic, boat mechanic, EKG technician, and so much more. The district must have strong relationships with local industry to know what the market demands are and provide those skills for our vocational-focused students.

For college, we had 14 National Merit Scholars this year. PCS graduates attend every college in Florida, military academy and Ivy League school. We have top-level academics available for our students to include IB, AP, AICE and a many dual enrollment options. We have hundreds of students graduate high school with their AA degree already in-hand, or many college courses already completed, saving families thousands of dollars in college tuition.

3. How should the district address underperforming schools?

I am very proud that Pinellas County has just been awarded its first districtwide "A" rating by the Florida Department of Education since the rating system began decades ago. This year, 130 schools in our county were ranked A, B, or C, with 83% either an A or B. No public schools in our

county received a D or F. We have made amazing progress over the past 4 years. Nonetheless, we won't rest on our laurels. We will continue working to bring any C schools up to B, and B schools up to A.

4. 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?

Recruiting and retaining the best and brightest classroom teachers is the single most important factor in student achievement. We're doing better than most counties in this regard. At this time in 2022, we had 208 teacher vacancies; in 2023, it was 177; currently it's 67. I believe that Pinellas is doing as well as it is because of our referendum supporting higher teacher pay, and our focus on climate and culture that values teachers, staff, students and families. Having said that, we must continue to work on improving salaries and providing a supportive culture of excellence in all schools. We need to continue to create mentor relationships, foster positive climate and culture, and say yes to supporting our teachers at every turn in addition to advocating for professional pay.

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

In Pinellas County, the vast majority of students attend traditional public schools. Most students receiving school vouchers were enrolled in charter and private schools prior to vouchers becoming widely available regardless of income level.

I believe in tax dollar accountability and in our tax dollars providing a return on investment to the public good; therefore, any school receiving public tax dollars through vouchers should be held to the same standards and accountability levels as traditional public schools. While some private schools are very good and very well-operated, all private schools being supported through vouchers are not required to be accredited nor to have certified teachers or teach any particular standards and measure their efficacy.

We must ensure all schools provide academic excellence, all tax dollars have accountability, public dollars go to public good, and that we can demonstrate return on investment of those dollars to the same.

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

A single test is a single measure. A snapshot. It does matter and it is important, but it does not tell the whole story of a school. I sent my children to a D-rated elementary school. They are thriving, and so is the school. As a matter of fact, studies show that all students fare better when there is a mix of strengths and weaknesses in a classroom. When we acknowledge measures like the percent of students that qualify for free or reduced lunch, we can give the right resources and supports and tell a more full story. The only way to know the quality of a school is to visit one. Come. We are very proud of our district's recent A-rating. Come visit any Pinellas County School: A, B or C, and you will be impressed.

7. 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 do have a say in what happens in our schools. The curriculum is all public and goes through public approval processes which include several opportunities for parents and the community to express their opinions about the curriculum. Collaborating with parents and respecting their opinions and values is imperative.

We are obligated and committed to providing excellence in education for all students. We provide access to age-appropriate materials as recommended by the Florida Department of Education. Our library catalogs are available online, and we have an effective process in place to request a review of any materials. From our data regarding challenges, we know parents overwhelmingly trust their teachers and schools to make good choices.

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

We are fortunate here in Pinellas County to have Sheriff Bob Gualtieri who has been the lead of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Safety Commission for the state of Florida since the shooting in 2018. What this means for us is that Pinellas is a front-line partner with the Sheriff on developing and implementing all safety protocols – as well as screening and mental health protocols – as they are provided. School safety is paramount. The most powerful endorsement that I can give of safety in our schools is that I send my two children to them every day. I do want to mention that we need to stay on top of all protocols on safety in our schools, yes, and we also need the community and society's help to lower the temperature. What we need most is for people to not want to harm other people. That will lead to safety for everyone. And, yes, our schools are on the tip of the spear with implementing safety measures.

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

I have an MBA in Finance and have been responsible for millions of dollars in the private sector, I care very much about our budget and use of tax payer resources. Pinellas County Schools's financial house is in order. Our financials are fully transparent and available to the public. We use a zero-based budgeting approach that makes clear what we need, then we match what we actually receive into those needs. Unfortunately, our school district is living in the same inflationary environment that we all are. We buy groceries, too, but we buy them for 100,000 people. We pay for health insurance and car insurance, too; for thousands of people. While inflation has risen 5-11% in recent years, our funding from the state has increased 2.9%, 3.12%, 1.16% and - 2.18% in the recent four years, respectively. We are doing everything we can with the resources at hand to provide excellence in our schools and we will continue to do so.