

9 QUESTIONS FROM



CANDIDATE: Eileen Long

INCUMBENT: Yes

OFFICE: Pinellas County School Board (PCSB) District 4 (Single Member District)

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

I believe that education should be free of politics, and that ALL children – regardless of race, gender, etc – should receive a high-quality education. As an educator of 34 years, that was my mission in my classroom – to educate every child to the best of their ability. As a board member, my priorities remain the same – to continue to promote and implement science-driven early literacy interventions, maintain our county’s relationship with the Pinellas County Sheriff’s office to keep our school campuses safe, and to ensure that teachers (once recruited) feel supported in our classrooms so that they remain in our district.

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

I truly believe continually making parents and students aware of the plethora of options available both before and after graduation helps to ensure all students find a path forward. The best way we as a district can prepare all our students are prepared for life post-graduation is to ensure that each child is educated to the best of THEIR ability. This may look different for each child, which is why some children have accommodations or specialized learning plans – it is important that we continue to implement these measures and expand access to them as needed.

3. **How should the district address underperforming schools?**

All underperforming schools in our district have individualized success plans aimed towards improving measures of success – the district also evaluates leadership at these schools to ensure that the fit between the school and the administrator is a good one. As a district, the objective is always to find balance in supporting our wonderful administrators with the individual needs of each school. As reported this past week, for the first time in our district’s history we were rated with an “A” score – and all our schools were awarded a “C” grade or higher! This is a wonderful accomplishment and reflects that our measures for promoting successful schools are working.

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?**

I believe it starts with a culture of respect – our teachers deserve to feel supported and their expertise in their fields both acknowledged and respected. When teachers feel mentally and emotionally safe walking into their classrooms each day, that sets a positive tone and enables them to put forth their best. Continuing to offer competitive pay, healthcare benefits, and other additional services like our new childcare program for the children of teachers are also additional

ways to recruit and retain staff – the passing of the referendum enables us to continue to have these things and to introduce new measures as needs arise.

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

I believe in healthy competition, because it ultimately benefits us all – it promotes better schools, parental involvement, and accountability. With that said, the standards applied to schools must be made equal – as it stands now, public schools are held to the strictest educational standards of all while the oversight for charter and private schools remains minimal. I think if there was greater transparency and a fair application of the state's standards across the board we would all benefit (public schools, charter schools, and private schools alike.)

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

I believe there are instances where testing is important – those scores are diagnostics to show us where a child currently stands in their education and what areas they may need additional assistance in. Test scores are just one piece of a larger puzzle to help us assess the health of a school, and they are extremely helpful on an individual and school-wide basis when properly implemented – other measures which are worth mentioning would be teacher retention rates, behavior statistics (e.g. number of detentions, suspensions, etc), and feedback collected in climate surveys for staff or parents as well.

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?**

As a teacher, my job was to educate every child who walked through my classroom door. ALL children deserve educational access – as a board member, I am here to serve every student, every constituent. Parental involvement is critical in ensuring student success, and ultimately a parent should have the final say in what resources their child makes use of. That is why we prioritize parental choice – if a parent does not wish their child to read a particular book, for instance, we offer an opt out form. Ultimately, every child and family is different – this has been the standard in our district for over 20 years, and should be upheld as it exists now.

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

I am so proud of the partnership PCS has maintained with Sheriff Gualtieri and the Sheriff's Office – I am prouder yet to be endorsed by him for my re-election campaign. I am very confident in the many measures PCSO and our school resource officers implement and maintain at each of our schools, and I remain committed to my role serving on the school safety advisory committee (which I have served on for years.)

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

I am confident in the fiscal responsibility our district has demonstrated with our budget. The referendum remains a critical component of our district's success – financially and otherwise – and I fully support its renewal. Many forget the budgetary restraints imposed on the school board by the state – to put it simply, you cannot just move funds from one pot to the next. If money is specifically allocated for a need – say ESE education and support – you cannot remove money from that area and apply it elsewhere. Our district is meeting the expectations set before us by the state of Florida and managing taxpayer money transparently and with care.

Meet the Candidate: Erika Picard

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

-I am running to bring a current and fresh perspective to the board. Since I currently have my own kids in public schools and work in the public schools as a high school counselor, I believe that perspective must be represented at the board level.

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

-We counselors, and the college and career personnel, work very hard with the tools we have to ensure students have a plan after high school, whether it be college-ready, tech school-ready, career-ready, or military -ready, based on what the students/families are desiring for their future. The sad thing is that counselors have very large caseloads (mine is 620 students, plus parents). It is close to impossible to get all those students where they need to be with fidelity. Our schools are just not properly supported and this is another reason why I am running... To make sure our students/families/teachers are supported in our schools. We also must expand our trades and internship programs, as this is the needs of this generation. Long gone are the days that every student needs to be only college-ready.

3. How should the district address underperforming schools?

Leadership is important and schools who are not performing need to have "surgical teams" to turn schools around. I believe our district is absolutely addressing them and so proud of those schools for receiving nothing less than a "C" as their school grade this year. I believe highly that the schools need to get the communities surrounding them involved to see what they can help with at their schools.

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? I believe in paying our teachers well. I also believe one of the best ways to retain teachers is to STOP throwing new programs and initiatives down to the school level all the time! Just let them teach! Also, our high schools have become testing sites and a very large chunk of our teacher's time is spent proctoring exams (ACT, SAT, CLT, PM1, PM2, PM3, State EOC's, District EOC's, AP Testing, Certification testing, weekly tests for the classroom, AND make-ups for all of these exams! It is far too many and teachers are tired of it. Teachers are out of the classrooms not teaching and the students are out of the classroom not learning far too often. I don't even get me started with how many dollars we spend on testing per year.

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

I believe in school choice. If a school is not working for a student, especially with specific needs, they should have the choice to go elsewhere. I believe this will make our public schools more of a competitive entity and hold accountability for our tax dollars at work.

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

Absolutely not! When I hear the word school grades, I always take it with a grain of salt. There are still trends telling us of certain achievement gaps between different students

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?

I believe as a school, we need to stick with teaching Reading, Writing, Math, Science, Social Studies, the Arts, Physical Ed. We should not be teaching according to our opinions, yet teach the actual facts of our history. It is not our job to teach students about their sexuality/gender. That should be something between the student and their family. I understand not all students have a great family background, but that is a topic that I believe should be private and between a student and their family. I also believe since we have minors in our schools, there should be no hint of sexualizing our students with pornographic material. I do not believe in book banning, but I do believe in age appropriate books. Books that are "pornographic in nature", have no place in our schools and it begs the question, how did they ever get there in the first place???

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

I believe that Pinellas County Schools does a good job at securing the perimeter of our schools. However, we still have many issues with bullying. Especially cyber bullying. I am on board with the new cell phone policies that will be in place this upcoming school year!

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

I get very frustrated at my job when I see the district buying all these new programs all the time and they are in one year and out the next. I think this is a waste of spending and there definitely is fat to cut. The programs MUST be vetted better and there needs to be better oversight of that. Our board members need to be asking more questions to make sure these programs will work before we buy them, which I believe takes a board member with recent and current experience working in the schools to know if these programs will actually work.