

Meeting the candidate: Mary Prows

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

- A community is only as strong as its next generation. My passion for empowering students and serving in the community drives me to run for school board. If elected, my priorities would be to continue to strengthen early childhood learning opportunities, expand college and career readiness, and work with the newly elected Superintendent, current board members, and administrative staff to review the strategic plan and the effectiveness of allocated resources.

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

- Community involvement includes attending Encounter Church in Wildwood. I serve in the Kidz Encounter Ministry, working with students PreK to 5th grade from all areas of Sumter County. My husband and I serve in prayer ministry and leadership. I have assisted the Choices Pregnancy Center in Wildwood with strengthening the organization to become a recognized 501c3 as they serve families and children of Sumter County. Since November of 2023, I have attended Sumter County School Board meetings and have met with several members of leadership and staff of Sumter County Schools to better understand the community's needs.

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

- The top priority would be to continue to strengthen early childhood learning opportunities. It is vital for the success of children to give them a strong foundation to build upon as they grow in learning. It is more cost effective to build a strong early learning program than to continue to provide remediation through graduation. The same would be compared to a home without a strong foundation, it is still a house but costs more to maintain than if the foundation was strong in the beginning.

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

- College and career exploration should be introduced in elementary school. Today, life is about choices that can affect a student's ability to succeed in college or a chosen vocation. When passion for learning and purpose is unlocked in a child, it assists them in making wise choices, develops better habits, and creates opportunities for them to accomplish their goals.

5. How should the district address underperforming schools?

- It is important to understand the reason for an underperforming school. There are a variety of reasons a school may be underperforming: demographics, lack of resources, staffing, etc. An analysis should be performed to review strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats that prohibits higher achievement. The team should include a diverse group of community leaders to perform the review, a plan formulated, accountability measures put in place, and a timeline created to incite changes.

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?

- Sumter County School's is innovative in recruiting highly qualified teachers by offering a highly competitive starting teacher's salary. The district and county must look for additional ways to retain lifelong educators.
- Continue to support our educators with a premium salary and benefit package.
- Health and well-being initiatives. i.e. proper support staff to reduce burn out
- Work with the community to create affordable housing options. i.e. Local lender low cost mortgages...
- Community buy-in to assist in student loan forgiveness for those who do not qualify under the Federal Teacher Loan Forgiveness Program.

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

- A market without competition results in complacency. Research shows since Florida began their School Choice Program in 2001, the result for public schools has been lower absenteeism and higher test scores. An excellent example is that Sumter County School District has continued to improve in academic achievement with the expansion of the Villages Charter School and other private schools. Improvement results in more students seeking two-year and four-year college degrees. The Florida School Choice Program is now a model for states across America for school improvement.

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

- There are pros and cons to standardized testing. Testing can give a point of reference for learning and improvement, set learning goals, specialized teaching, and is a good indicator for college success. However, it does not give a true indication of a successful educator through investment in their students, outside barriers to learning, and to a student's ability to problem solve and form solutions. Standardized testing is only one part of determining a school's success. A welcoming environment and a feeling of community in a classroom is where success begins. Until all components are able to be quantified, standardized testing will remain.

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?

- The role of a school district is to prepare a student for lifelong success. Academic proficiency in Math, Reading, Science, History and career should be the focus of a school district. Controversial political and social issues should be left for a parent to decide. Florida HB 1557 signed into law in 2022 addresses parental rights and gives specific guidance to school districts to have written policies in place regarding gender, sexuality and race.

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

- The individual or group requesting for a book to be removed from the library or classroom should be treated with respect by the School Board. At the time of the request the book should be temporarily suspended, pending review. A school district should have policy and procedure guidelines in place to assist with all requests and reviews. Guidelines should be set by a representation of the community in compliance with state law. Guidelines should take into consideration age-appropriate content, community values, explicit or sexual meaning, and historical/education value. Guidelines should include who will review materials. Once the request has been reviewed and a decision made, the complainant should be informed by mail as to the decision.

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

- Historically, unions have played a vital role in negotiating member's pay, benefits and employee/employer dispute resolution. However, in recent years, employee membership has waned in unions. Currently, the market is driving competitive wages due to the shortage of qualified educators. As the law is written, it requires like-employee groups to determine if they want to continue to have union representation or allow the union to disband. A downfall, to the union disbanding for not meeting the required membership, is if in the future the market becomes saturated with qualified educators, employees potentially could lose high competitive wages and benefits.

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

- Gone are the days of people allowed to come and go. Security measures need to be put into place to take into consideration weapons, active shooters, sexual predators, etc. As a result, legislators, law enforcement, and school leadership continue to work to have best practices in place to keep students safe. Sumter County Schools has worked well with local agencies to implement such practices. They continue to review and make adjustments as needed. Based on my knowledge of the practices in place in the Sumter County School District, I believe students have a safe environment.

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

- As I am not a currently seated Sumter County School District Board member, I must have faith the elected board has allocated funds to the best of their ability. Once elected, I will utilize my skills in business administration and accounting to effectively review the budget and work with the other elected school board members to make the necessary appropriations to the next budget.