LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF SARASOTA COUNTY

Sarasota County School Board Report Card

The League of Women Voters of Sarasota has established an Observer Corps to monitor the Sarasota County School Board meetings. The goal of the Observer Corps is to objectively evaluate meetings for ethical, legal and professional conduct on the part of the board and Chairperson with respect to the public comment session and the meeting agenda. This evaluation will be shared with the Board and the public following each meeting.

Meeting Date: May 19, 2026

A = Consistently B= Frequently C= Occasionally D= Rarely F= Not at All

Board follows and advances a written agenda.	A
Board limits citizens' comments only to opinions on topics that are in the Board's purview. The Chair interrupted a few speakers to clarify that they should be addressing agenda items during the first public comment session. Several speakers used the agenda rather loosely to comment on issues, including one mother who talked about what she felt was a lack of appropriate response to the bullying of her daughter.	B
Board Chair reminded commenters and the audience at the beginning of the meeting and any time it became necessary, to speak with courtesy and respect and refrain from personal attacks and abusive language.* ***This is new wording to acknowledge court rulings that prohibit the Chair from stopping almost any comment and merely allow the Chair to request for decorum or pause a speaker in extreme cases.*** The Chair read the prepared statement calling for comments to be civil. However, a few speakers are intent on attacking the Chair who wasn't able to interrupt them according to the law. This included one person who was very direct and personal in his attacks on the Chair. However, the Chair modeled undesirable behavior by using part of her comment time to attack another board member.	C+
Board Chair treats speakers equitably. The Chair thanked each speaker.	A
Board adheres to Robert's Rules of Order.	A

The Board Chair runs an orderly meeting. The meeting ran smoothly and with more positivity than in the past due to an agenda that did not include divisive policies for political theater. It came off the rails at the end, however, when the Chair used her time to strongly defend school choice and to respond to a fellow board member's op/ed article. She detailed how masking in Sarasota public schools four years ago forced her to find another school for her children. She then apologized for her diatribe but said she had no other choice. There had to be other ways.	C
Board delegates operational and educational decisions to the professional staff. There were several occasions during the meeting when the Chair referred individuals with issues to members of the Administrative staff.	A
Board gives evidence of being responsive to public comment. Most of the comments during the agenda comment period were specifically addressed by the board and Superintendent. However, rather than offering recommendations to improve situations, several members of the board were defensive when responding to public concerns addressed during the general comment period.	C

Recap of key issues discussed at this meeting:

Pastor Jeff Gross of New Life Lutheran Church delivered the most ecumenical invocation so far, setting a positive tone for the meeting. His approach was appreciated by those in the audience.

The Superintendent and board members used comment time to talk about personnel changes, retirements, and graduations. Volunteers and staff who were recognized for their work during the past year. Looking ahead to the next school year, parents were encouraged to register early for bus transportation. The Superintendent described a lease agreement with a Children's Museum for space on the Wilkinson Elementary School campus. Many speakers thanked the board and superintendent for their work to recover tax dollars withheld by the Sarasota Tax Collector and encouraged the board to continue any and all efforts to safeguard those dollars.

The district is continuing a partnership with All Faith's Food Bank to provide food summer nutrition. One speaker noted that Florida turned away over $250 million of federal dollars that could have provided food for school children this summer. Speakers urged the board to make more concerted efforts in legislative arenas to actively support public education, The voucher program ,in particular, is moving us toward the privatization of education, which is a violation of Florida's constitution and is now subject of a lawsuit by several organizations.

The Superintendent's Financial Report had been absent from recent agendas with no explanation. The Superintendent noted that there would be a monthly financial report at subsequent meetings. There was also a request to inform the public any time budget changes are required due to lack of appropriate funding from State and Federal sources.

A new system from Tyler Tech will be used for bus routing and tracking next year. Parents were also encouraged to check the district website for new school start times for next year.

Several agenda items involved purchases of supplemental instructional materials and professional development. Commenters requested the district to rely on the professional judgement of teachers to implement best practices rather than demand scripted behaviors. There was concern that teachers were not allowed to provide different educational approaches for different students. Others were concerned about the amount of time devoted to professional development. Liz Barker and Superintendent Connor assured them that teachers still have independence insofar as implementing curriculum. Superintendent Connor and board members stressed that professional development is a benefit for staff because they can earn academic credit toward advanced degrees. Not every district provides that benefit.

One commenter, a candidate for school board, compared the yellow tag students briefly wore four years ago to indicate they were exempt from masking to the yellow star the Nazi government required Jews to wear.

Many observers were horrified by a speaker's comparison of these tags to yellow stars worn by Jews in Nazi Germany. They found this offensive and showed the speaker's ignorance of the real suffering and deaths of millions of Jews. There is simply no comparison.

This same commenter questioned the League of Women voters standing as a non-partisan organization, referring to a pamphlet that she had received before the meeting, a simple checklist for evaluating candidates. If she had read the pamphlet, she would have known that it contained no partisan language. Members of the League of Women Voters belong to both parties or no party. When they speak as individuals, they may express their personal political opinions. When they speak officially as the League, they are strictly non-partisan. The League never officially endorses candidates, and all candidates are invited to participate in League candidate forums and to respond to questions on VOTE411.org.

Additional Comments:

Aside from instances already cited, the tenor of the meeting and comments was primarily positive, supportive and congratulatory. That good feeling came to a screeching halt when the board Chair, out of the blue, took her personal anger with one board member to an inappropriate level. During the last eight minutes or so of the meeting, the board Chair proceeded to use much of the time to angrily attack a fellow board member. This was an unfortunate end to the meeting.

Ms. Rose stated that she believes in school choice (as it is now defined by the state of Florida) and it is not her role to protect the public education system. Those beliefs are in direct conflict with what most community speakers have been saying for years. While she is entitled to her personal opinion, a board member has a responsibility to protect the system that she is supposed to govern.

Recommendations:

Pastor Jeff Gross delivered an invocation that more inclusive of non-Christian individuals and that was appreciated. We hope that the board will continue to advise those giving invocations that there is a diverse constituency in the district that must be acknowledged.

We urge members of the board avoid using their comment time for airing personal agendas. They need to model the kind of behavior they would like to see of the public commenters. Until that happens, no one will feel the need to hold back

We would hope that board members would do everything in their power to protect the students in our public schools by speaking up about vouchers, funding cuts and other policies that appear to hurt more than help our children.

Submitted by: Sarasota League of Women Voters School Board Observer Corps.