INSIDE THE ISSUES
Democratic Party of Lee County

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An Interview with India Palencia
Candidate for Lee County School Board, District 6

Who is India? Last month, The Informed Democrat introduced you to India, who is running for a Lee County School Board seat in District 6. Here are key takeaways from our recent Q&A session.

1. Why the School Boards Matter to Everyone

LeeDems: Why do school boards matter to everyone, even those in our community who do not have children in school?

India: Even for those without children in school, school boards make decisions that directly affect local taxpayers—such as setting the millage rate, which determines how much property owners pay in school taxes. These decisions influence how tax dollars are spent, shape the future workforce, support local values, and affect property values and community growth. Strong schools contribute to a stronger economy, reduced crime, and a more informed, engaged society. When our schools do well, our whole community benefits.

2. School Safety & Start Times

LeeDems: What is your position on the proposed 'Safe Start Initiative'?

India: Safety must be a top priority. I support initiatives that enhance campus security and student wellbeing, provided they are well□planned, evidence□based, and communicated clearly to families and staff.

LeeDems: Do you support later start times for middle and high school students to align with sleep science research?

India: There is strong evidence that later start times improve student health and performance. I would support exploring this change carefully, ensuring it's feasible for transportation, families, and extracurricular programs. It must be a balanced approach.

3. Use of Technology in our Schools

LeeDems: How should the district balance technology use (like smartphones) with classroom focus and student mental health?

India: Technology is an important learning tool, but excessive use can distract from education and impact mental health. I support clear, consistent policies limiting phone use during instructional time while still allowing access when needed for safety or educational purposes.

LeeDems: What additional safety measures do you think are needed in Lee County schools?

India: We should regularly review our safety protocols, expand mental health resources, and strengthen partnerships with local communities. Any new measures should balance strong security with maintaining a welcoming, unintimidating learning environment.

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4. Teachers Rights and the Role of the School Board

LeeDems: Do you support teachers' right to organize and advocate for better conditions?

India: Absolutely. Teachers deserve a voice in shaping their work environment, and collaboration between educators and leadership often leads to better outcomes for students.

LeeDems: What role should the school board play in improving teacher morale and support?

India: The board sets the tone by listening to educators, recognizing their contributions, and ensuring they have the tools and professional development they need to succeed. Supporting teachers directly supports students.

LeeDems: How do you ensure transparency and community trust in board decisions?

India: I support MORE opportunities for the public to address their concerns. We need to go back to more frequent school board meetings. Once a month is not sufficient for a school district this size. By communicating openly, sharing the data and reasoning behind decisions, and giving the community meaningful opportunities to provide input before votes are taken we can increase trust in our decisions.

5. Teacher Retention & Pay

LeeDems: Lee County ranks 49th out of 50 in teacher pay. What specific actions would you take to improve salaries and retain quality teachers?

India: Competitive pay is critical. I would advocate for reprioritizing our budget to invest more in teacher salaries, actively seek additional funding sources, and work with state leaders to address long□term pay equity. I recently received a report through a public records request to the school district, detailing the salaries of district administrators. After removing principals and assistant principals, the data shows 192 administrative positions with a combined salary expenditure of $21.3 million. The average administrator salary is $111,114.08—more than double that of the average teacher—while our district continues to fall short of state educational benchmarks and faces significant challenges in meeting the needs of our ESE students. Notably, 106 of these administrators earn over $100,000 annually.

While administrative costs, alone, are not the sole factor in our teacher pay challenges, they represent a logical starting point for redirecting funds back into our classrooms. I would support a thoughtful review of administrative compensation—potentially linking it to student outcomes—and exploring temporary reductions until teachers in Lee County are earning a fair, livable wage. This kind of rebalancing could strengthen both classroom support and student achievement.

LeeDems: How do you propose addressing the current teacher shortage and our open positions?

India: Our teacher and bus driver shortages have seen significant improvement, and I want to acknowledge the leadership of our Superintendent and her staff in helping achieve that progress. At the same time, it's important to recognize that the numbers don't tell the full story. These improvements were made possible, in part, by strategic decisions—such as the elimination of 25 teaching positions and 28 bus driver roles, the reduction of five mental health positions, the reassignment of certified educators to areas outside their primary expertise, and the implementation of a foreign exchange teacher program. While these measures helped address immediate staffing challenges, it's essential that we continue to ask thoughtful questions about the long-term impact of these solutions on student outcomes and overall educational quality.

6. Addressing Equality Concerns

LeeDems: How would you ensure that discussions around race, gender, and sexuality are handled appropriately, if at all, in the classroom? **continued next page**

India: These topics can be sensitive but are part of the real world students live in. I believe they should be addressed carefully, factually, and in ways that are age appropriate, while respecting family values and beliefs and keeping parents informed.

LeeDems: How would you address concerns from families and students who feel excluded or underrepresented in the current educational system?

India: Listening is key. I'd work to create forums where families can share their concerns, and I'd support practical solutions that help students feel safe, respected, and supported in their learning journey.

LeeDems: How do you reconcile federal directives on non-discrimination with local control of schools?

India: Both are important. We need to follow the law when it comes to protecting students' rights, while also respecting the role of our local community in shaping how policies are implemented in our schools. What works in Lee County may look different than other counties.

Stay tuned Part Two of our interview with India Palencia and her thoughts on:

School Board Policy-Making Process

Curriculum & Book Bans

Equity in School Construction

Capital Improvements

Racial Incidents & Inclusion

Transparency and Community Trust in the School Board