

Florida PTA Candidate Questionnaire

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Candidate for: *

Governor

1. What are your top priorities for improving public education? In your opinion, what do we do well as a state and how can we improve Pre-K - 12 education?

Florida's public education system is chronically underfunded, from its voluntary pre-kindergarten program to its high schools. We must make sure that our students receive the highest-quality education possible because that is what they deserve and what taxpayers expect. I believe that a significant part of the underfunding for our public schools simply reflects a failure of 20 years of one-party rule in our state to properly prioritize public education more generally (e.g., versus systematic tax cuts or the funding of private prisons, both of which cost state millions) and relatively (e.g., as opposed to the funding of private schools, especially those that operate for profit).

It is a true disservice to our children and society in general that while 90 percent of Florida students attend public schools, 90 percent of the conversation in Tallahassee is focused on everything but public schools. While some non-profit charter schools are true inspirations, our state leadership has become beholden to the for-profit charter industry, and we cannot continue to support this industry at the expense of our children and our public school system. To that end, it is reprehensible that we are not funding our public schools to the extent that is necessary to support our students. Despite being the nation's third largest state, Florida is a back-of-the-pack state when it comes to the quality of our public schools. We need fresh leadership in Tallahassee that prioritizes our students' futures. I recently rolled out a six-point criminal justice reform plan which calls for using the approximately \$1 billion in cost savings from reducing mass incarceration for nonviolent offenders by 50 percent over the next decade and legalizing, regulating, and taxing recreational marijuana to give our teachers a raise, renovate and build new schools, and improve the overall quality of our public education. In addition, I have made free community college and trade school a critical part of my platform. I want to make attending community college or trade school free, so that every Floridian can have the opportunity to get good paying jobs.

2. How will you ensure that public schools are adequately funded and operate effectively so that all children achieve academic success and reach their full potential?

As discussed above, the underfunding of public schools reflects the fact that our elected representatives have not properly prioritized public education vis-à-vis the other facets of the state budget. As governor, I will change these priorities so that public education receives the funding necessary to give our students the highest quality education possible. In addition, also as mentioned above, my criminal justice reform plan will provide significant new sources of funding for pre-K – 12 education. Not only will we fully fund a best-in-class universal pre-K program, but we will also allocate funds to elementary, middle and high schools so that our children are not wanting for opportunities and our teachers are paid commensurate with their critical role in their students' lives and society in general. Finally, I have proposed that the sales taxes collected from firearm and ammunition sales, as well as a special ammunition fee, be dedicated to the Every Kid Fund for Gun Violence Prevention. This Fund will invest in prevention and intervention programs, school safety measures, and programs to study and reduce the epidemic of everyday gun violence. It also would reimburse trauma centers for medical costs of treating victims of mass shootings.

3. What efforts will you take to ensure that culturally/critically responsive instruction is the norm and not the exception?

The best way to ensure that our children learn is to teach in ways that help them connect to the material and demonstrate that our instructors are empowering them socially, emotionally and culturally, not just intellectually. Moreover, we must encourage our teachers to give our students opportunities to cooperate and collaborate in their schoolwork and make connections to “real-world” applications. As governor, I will ensure that part of the education budget is dedicated to providing training to teachers in these techniques. Many teachers do not employ these instructional techniques not because they don't want to or do not find them useful, but simply do not have the training to implement them successfully. Our teachers are wholly focused on making sure their students succeed, and so we need to make sure they are given the tools and training to help them do that.

4. How do you plan to expand bilingual education opportunities for English Language Learners and teachers alike?

Like culturally responsive instruction, bilingual education is critical to reaching and teaching a significant part of our public school student population. Our goal is to prepare students to be successful citizens in our communities and bilingual education is critically important to this mission. As discussed above, I have demonstrated several paths to greatly increasing the funding to our public schools, and bilingual education is an essential program that will benefit from this funding. Of course, our bilingual education programs are only as good as the teachers who stand as the cornerstone of such programs. As such, the additional training and resources provided to them will help make them successful and help jumpstart and continue our students' success.

5. How can the government effectively partner with parents and families to support student and school success – especially in underserved communities?

As discussed below, I think the government best partners with parents and families by demonstrating that their voices are important and heard. Government and schools can achieve this by building mutual respect and educating the community that its input is crucial. Government can help further by ensuring that forums take place at times and places that consider the restraints on families and parents from underserved communities. Those who represent underserved communities, including communities of color as discussed below, must also have a seat at the table at the state level, not just the local level. Our state leadership needs to learn from these parents and leaders directly so that programs and initiatives have true buy-in.

6. What are you going to do to incorporate the voice, participation, and leadership from parents in order to close the gap in academic achievement for students of color?

Real community involvement in schools is essential for ensuring that children are given the environment they need to succeed. Making sure that parents and community leaders know that the schools (and the state) believe their input is valuable and necessary is only the first step. And this input cannot be limited to only academics or extracurriculars. It must involve safety (both at school and getting to school), it must involve community-relevant projects, and it must involve the additional resources available to students and teachers in the community. We need parents and community liaisons to be present so that students have models of success and leaders to look up to, especially models that look like them, come from the communities the students live in and face the same issues that students struggle with. While school leadership needs to have a strong voice, we cannot pretend that anyone party has a monopoly on good ideas or worthy methods of engagement, so we must give parents and the community at large a voice. All of these things support students and, consequently, teachers who can rely on outside support to further advance their lessons.

7. How would you ensure that the constitutional requirement for a safe and secure school environment is provided to every child?

We cannot live in a world where our students are unsafe. It is impossible to teach or learn in an environment of fear. The world at large is dangerous enough and schools must be a safe space where students share, flourish and learn. As discussed above, my Every Kid Fund for Gun Violence Prevention will provide significant funding to ensure our children's safety in school. But this cannot only be about physical school safety measures. We need to attack some of these problems at the source. We must expand Medicaid to ensure that Floridians have access to the mental healthcare services they need, which will provide a significant bulwark against school shootings. In addition, studies have shown that if parents have healthcare insurance, their children are much more likely to be covered. This ensures that our students have access to medical care when they need it, which keeps other kids safe and healthy from communicable diseases. Moreover, the increased funding I will direct to public education will ensure that schools can conduct proper background checks on all school personnel. It will also provide teachers with the training to spot problems before they start and diffuse them once the problem threatens to escalate. All of these preventive measures have enormous potential, and we need a governor who makes them a priority. I will be that governor.

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