



ENDORSEMENT QUESTIONNAIRE 2022

Heather Ashby

**Running for
Orange County School Board
District 2**

Candidate Information

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1. What motivated you to run for this position?

I have been working in public education since 1997. When I was hired for my first teaching job, finding open positions was difficult. Teaching jobs were sought after. The pay was not great then either, but it was seen as a worthy profession. Most universities had Colleges of Education. Now the public school system is under assault by business interest who want to make education for profit and have secured endorsements by legislators who systematically introduce legislation made to cripple public education. School Board members have a difficult job and hard decisions need to be made. I want to ensure that the person representing my district is not in line with this frame of dismantling public education or blindly running for a singular purpose. As a former teacher, a parent, and a school counselor, I believe I understand the needs of our students, faculty, and families. I want to keep Orange County Public Schools the safe haven they should be for all of our children.

2. What does being an ally or advocate for the LGBTQ+ community mean to you?

Being an advocate or ally means protecting the rights and interests of the LGBTQ+ community. I believe I have been an ally longer than I knew the term. When I taught AP Psychology in the early 2000s, I had numerous students come out to me after we covered our unit on Human Sexuality. I believe it was the open and accepting way that I treated the material. My classroom was a safe space. It was some of those early experiences that led me to continue my education in Mental Health Counseling. As a School Counselor I strive to support my LGBTQ+ students. My office is a Safe Space. I take the time to learn preferred names and pronouns. I communicate with teachers when needed to make sure my students feel comfortable in the classrooms. I am mindful of what I say when communicating with parents. I understand the delicate position some LGBTQ+ students are in and I strive to do what I can to support their mental health needs.

3. Please summarize your history of community involvement. This may include city boards, civic associations, non-profits, etc.

As a school employee my community involvement has been centered on my school and children. When teaching I served as a volleyball coach, SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) Advisor, and SGA Class Sponsor. As my children were growing up, I served as a parent volunteer with their Girl Scout Troop, and spent most weekends carpooling to a volleyball or soccer event. When my children went away to college, I began advocating for School Counselors in Orange County. I joined the Orange County School Counselors Association (OCSCA) Board in the position of Advocate. In this position I worked with the Orange County Classroom Teachers Association (OCCTA) to advocate specifically for the needs of counselors in the district. I formed a separate group in OCCTA where counselors met monthly with a representative from the union to introduce initiatives to support counselors. One of the main initiatives has been trying to get more counselors in schools to lower caseload numbers so counselors can be more available and familiar with the students in their charge. We have also fought for more summer days so a counselor would be available at the school even during the summer. Summer can be hard for some students as the increased time at home leads to an increased number of conflicts. This can be especially true of LGBTQ+ students without family support.

4. Please summarize any work you have performed in the past five years to further LGBTQ+ rights. This may include paid positions, volunteer work, and donations.

I have donated to the Zebra Coalition. I work with LGBTQ+ students in my school. I prefer not to disclose the specifics.

Questions

- 5. The rise in anti-LGBTQ+ legislation barreling down from Tallahassee has caused a sharp increase in discrimination and violence against the LGBTQ+ community in Orange County. How would you go about reducing discrimination in your district or local community? How would you measure your progress?**

The most important action right now is educating/training staff in schools. With new legislation are headlines and "rules" that teachers and staff do not fully understand. This leads to fear of being personally sued, disciplined, or losing their job. I fear this type of misunderstanding can leave vulnerable students underserved. I have personally asked the county student services office for clarification for counselors but have not received it. Any type of discrimination or violence in the schools would fall under the Code of Conduct with prescribed disciplinary actions. There are protections under Title IX and investigation procedures. Title IX investigations are reported and incidences can be monitored. Through this monitoring the county can address current trends and create and implement needed action plans.

- 6. Elected officials and office staff are still woefully under-educated on the transgender community. This means that the services their offices provide are often ignorant of the needs of the transgender community. What actions would you take to ensure that the services your office will provide will be educated on and cognizant of the needs of the transgender community?**

As with all things, I have learned to ask questions. I have friends and supporters within the transgender community. I would ask people how OCPS can better serve them or their families. I do not believe a person has to be specifically part of a community to support a community, but you must have an open line of communication. As a School Board member, I would actively cultivate relationships with members of many diverse communities within OCPS.

- 7. The Florida Republican Party is leading the country in stripping away LGBTQ+ rights, starting with our children. Students are having their lives and livelihoods placed at risk by laws such as the Transgender Sports Ban, the so-called Parental Bill of Rights, and now Don't Say Gay. These shamelessly discriminatory bills are forcing LGBTQ+ families to reconsider their future in Florida. What would you tell the parents of LGBTQ+ children in your district who feel they need to leave Florida in order to protect their children?**

I believe this is a very real concern. I know college-aged students choosing to leave to study in different (more supportive) states for this very reason. I have friends looking at other states in fear that their family and their marriage is in jeopardy. Unfortunately, the school board does not make laws but we can do everything possible to support all families in Orange County. I would listen to the parents concern and stress the support our schools can offer them and their family. Ask what as a community we can do to help? Ultimately though, I would respect whatever this family felt they needed to do to protect themselves.

- 8. The Trevor Project's 2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health found that 45% of LGBTQ+ students seriously considered attempting suicide and 1-in-5 LGBTQ+ attempt it. How would you lead on this issue and work to decrease these statistics over the course of your term in office?**

This question is hard for me because it truly is a daily concern in my line of work. In schools I would want all middle and high schools to have a SAFE (Student Assistance and Family Empowerment Program) room. In this room a SAFE coordinator, school counselor, or social worker would be present for crisis intervention or connecting the student to community resources. All elementary schools would have all the same resources but perhaps not a designated room as the total number of students is often less. I would also want to limit the "duties as assigned" to these mental health workers so they are available to students in need.

9. The same survey by The Trevor Project found that nearly all transgender and non-binary students have had to worry about their access to gender-affirming healthcare, bathrooms, and sports teams being taken away from them. How would you work to take this fear off their shoulders so that they can go back to just being kids?

I believe it would be unrealistic to think actions I take would be enough to alleviate the fear of a transgender or non-binary student when there are law makers targeting them specifically and lawyers and court systems processing the constitutionality of such laws. Practices in schools should be gender affirming. The FHSAA (Florida High School Athletic Association) states, "All eligible students should have the opportunity to participate in interscholastic athletics in a manner that is consistent with their gender identity and expression, irrespective of the gender listed on a student's birth certificate and/or records. " But Florida passes a law barring transgender females from playing on public school teams intended for student athletes born as girls. Schools need to work to ensure gender affirming practices in everyday life as much as possible. Two years ago, I worked with a student who identified as female and was part of the school ROTC program. I worked with the ROTC Commander pushing and asking questions until we secured this student the female uniform. I believe this struggle is likely to continue which is why it is important to have the right leaders who will ask the questions and continue to push to secure students the best opportunities.

10. Far-right groups are pushing to ban books on any topic they find disagreeable, such as books on Black history and experiences, immigration, the LGBTQ+ community, climate change, etc. Do you support these book bans? If not, what is your plan to counter them and ensure students have access to a full array of age-appropriate knowledge and experiences?

I do not support book banning nor the basis of keeping information from the masses. As a school board member I would support the current system in place for book screenings and the process when a parent lodges a complaint. If the situation occurred where schools were ultimately unable to house particular books, I would encourage information to where these current books can be found. Truthfully, more students will be interested in reading a book because they were told they can't.

11. During a town hall in your district, a constituent describes being gay or transgender as a "lifestyle choice." What is incorrect about their description? How would you constructively respond in this situation?

I would politely counter that I do not agree with their terminology of "lifestyle choice". First, I do not believe sexuality or gender identification is a choice. Second, a lifestyle choice to me better describes an exercise regime or diet not the essence of someone.

- 12. During a board meeting, the board chair purposely refers to a transgender woman as “he” and “him” as the woman attempts to give her public comment. The woman corrects the board chair each time, insisting that her pronouns are “she” and “her.” The board chair continues to misgender the woman until she eventually leaves the chamber in tears. How would you respond in this situation?**

In this situation I may try to interject emphasizing the correct pronouns before the situation gets to the woman leaving in tears. But, if this happened I would contact the woman and invite her to a sit-down to discuss the issue she was there initially to discuss. I would apologize for the situation that occurred during the board meeting. Further, the chair and I would have a conversation regarding this insensitivity and how respond differently in the future.

- 13. A parent approaches you at an event, insisting that her son’s teachers have “groomed” him into liking boys. Her son is at her side when she says this. How do respond to the parent’s statement such that the young boy leaves feeling better about himself?**

I would politely listen to the parent's concern. I would state for the parent and son that teachers do not "groom" students. I would make eye contact with the son and state something like our "affections are individual and natural". I would offer to speak with the parent at a later/more appropriate time to further discuss her concerns. At that time my "counseling cap" will be on so I can better assess and address her true concern/fear.

- 14. Orange County continues to embrace urban sprawl, despite a plethora of data that links urban sprawl to severe strains on our housing, employment, healthcare, and public transit systems (to name a few). What are your thoughts on Orange County's growth? What could Orange County in terms of development that would better serve the communities in your district?**

As a school board member I do not believe I can impact the current urban sprawl in Orange County. I do believe it will continue. Orange County Public Schools can continue to build schools in individual communities keeping commutes to school close to allow for walking and bike riding and decrease busing.

- 15. Do you support the idea of constructing more multi-family homes in neighborhoods traditionally zoned for single-family homes? What impact would this have on your district?**

This is not something under the School Board's control but I do support affordable housing options in Orlando. Housing shortages and high rental costs are very concerning. Of course as these changes are made there needs to be plans for how this growth will impact local roads and schools.

16. Homeowner Associations often prevent homeowners from transitioning their lawns away from non-functional grasses such as turf and towards sustainable options such as native Florida plants and edible landscapes. HOAs insist that moving away from the traditional pristine green lawn would lower housing prices. What is your opinion on this issue?

As a school board member this would not be an issue in my control but I do support transitioning spaces into more natural, low watering spaces. There are some areas in Lake Nona around Boxi Park and the Wave Hotel that I believe are a great example of the use of native plants and wild flowers that are both beautiful and are low maintenance, and offer food to butterflies and bees. I believe like any change it takes time for people to see something different as desirable. Orange County Schools could begin this type of transition in flower beds on school property. Many elementary schools have a gardening area so this type of sustainable options could start at the local schools. Many middle and high schools also have agriscience classes so sponsoring sustainable and edible landscaping projects could become a competition each year that could slowly change our landscape.