

School Board Candidate Name [Johanna López](#)

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1. Please describe your background and why you decided to run for District 2 School Board. Did you or your kids attend OCPS schools in District 2?

As a teacher at Colonial High School for the last twenty years, a single mother of four OCPS students, and a community advocate on issues of education and inclusive empowerment, I have seen our schools' potential. From our recently arrived students to the teachers who work tirelessly to ensure that our youth is prepared to tackle the complex issues of the real world, I am assured that our public schools can and must be better. On top of that, students are not being heard, our teachers and staff members are afraid to speak up, and our parents are not engaged in our schools.

That's exactly why I decided to run to represent District 2 on the Orange County School Board. Our district deserves a School Board Member who embodies our community's values of fairness, empowerment, and unity. With that in mind, I have put forth a common sense platform that seeks to empower our students, teachers, staff members, and parents with the purpose of creating an exceptional local public education system. Particularly, I will work to level-out the playing field to ensure an equitable education, fight to give our teachers and staff members what they need to be successful inside the classroom, and prioritize our children's safety and well-being, which includes increasing and improving the mental health professionals in our schools.

Over the span of years, my kids have attended: Ventura Elementary, Northlake Park Elementary, Andover Elementary, Hidden Oaks Elementary, Vista Lakes Elementary, Odyssey Middle, Acceleration Academy, Colonial High, and Lake Nona High. My daughter Gianna is a rising 8th grader at Odyssey Middle.

2. Florida's new MHDHS Public Safety Act includes an option to allow teacher and staff volunteers to carry guns on campus, with the exception of full-time classroom teachers. The program requires background checks, psychological profiles and 132 hours of training. The district has the option to decline or accept the funding for this program. What is your position on Orange County participation in this program, and what would you do to keep our children safe at school?

As a teacher, I am totally opposed to arming our school staff and teachers because of different reasons. First, armed staff members could easily lose control of their guns, putting other students at risk. Second, arming school staff will increase students' anxieties and stress. Schools should provide a peaceful environment for learning to all students. Lastly, arming school staff is really costly. We could invest such money on schools' infrastructure, instructional and non-instructional employee trainings, and schools supplies, among others.

To keep schools safe, we need to work on different fronts at the same time. Primarily, we need to increase funding for mental health initiatives, including increasing access to psychologists and counselors, creating and supporting anti-bullying programs, and educating our families to end the stigma around mental health. As well, we need to educate families, staff members, and teachers on how to identify potential violent behavior. We should also work with our local law enforcement agencies to monitor our schools' surroundings to identify potential threats. Providing a safe and secure learning environment for all of our students will be my priority.

3. What are the biggest challenges you see for our district?

- School safety
- The lack of understanding for each school's different culture.
- Teachers feeling undervalued due to lack of autonomy and the unfair evaluation system.
- The majority of our students are graduating without having clear post-secondary plans.
- Most parents do not know how the education system works, which leads them to not be fully engaged in their kids' schools.

4. How do you plan to keep your constituents informed about what is going on at the district and state levels?

I am a firm believer that every school, every student, and every community deserves attention. To improve community involvement, we need to listen to parents, teachers, staff members, and students. With that in mind, if elected, I will hold monthly town hall meetings across our district's different schools, where every member of the community will be able to express their concerns about our school system. I will also host roundtable discussions and individual meetings to target our schools' specific needs. Both of these strategies will allow me to remain transparent and accountable as an elected official.

5. Staff Retention is a big issue. Sometimes our schools keep poor teachers because they can't find replacements. What do you suggest to solve this problem? Should there be tenure?

Florida teachers and staff members are underpaid and overworked, which is exactly why retention and recruitment is such a big problem in our state. To increase retention, we have to improve teachers' conditions by giving them more autonomy in the classroom, providing them with more respect as professionals, increasing their wages and employment benefits, and ensuring their safety in their teaching environment. OCPS should also provide professional growth opportunities to their teachers, including grants for new certifications and advanced degrees in return for the promise of a certain time of service. While all of these will also help in terms of recruitment, we could also increase recruitment by helping local unemployed certified educators, such as newly arrived Puerto Rican teachers who in many cases are bilingual, through the OCPS application process. To do this, we should add a recruiter that can specialize on identifying their strengths while connecting them according to the needs of the different schools. Overall, we need to work to ensure that our teachers and staff feel respected and valued regardless of tenure. When our teachers and staff feel respected and valued, they provide a better education for all students.

6. Candidates talked about empowering teachers and administrators, but how do you plan to do this when the states set the standards?

From changes in the evaluation system to providing professional growth opportunities through community partnerships, I have put together a clear plan to empower our teachers, staff and administrators. Most importantly, however, we need to offer a platform for teachers and administrators to feel comfortable to speak up about their concerns within our schools. When talking to the School Board, they need to be heard without any fear of retaliation. More than anything, I will be a leader who will listen at all times. At the same time, our communities need to work together at a local level to be able to effectively advocate for our children and public schools at the state level.

7. What specific ideas do you have to address disciplinary issues?

- Based on the student code of conduct, our schools have a responsibility to follow-up on disciplinary referrals, which many teachers believe is not being done.

- Many times, out-of-school suspension does not work as a disciplinary action. That's why we need to develop a curriculum that educates the suspended students so that they don't repeat similar problematic behaviors in the future.
- Utilize our mental health initiatives and counselors to support bullying victims as well as bullying offenders. Families should be included in this learning process as they are fundamental to ensuring the safety and well-being of our youth.

8. How can you help reduce the load of testing in our schools? Some people talk about getting rid of standardized testing, but how do we fairly measure it if all students across the state and country are learning the same things?

I am a firm believer that our students deserve to be evaluated by their teachers. At this point, students are so drained by the testing overload that the exams are losing their function. That's why I will work to reduce the load of testing in our schools. First, end-of-course exams, which are established by OCPS, should be eliminated as they only work to create a more stressful environment for our students and teachers. These locally-mandated exams are working to deteriorate the learning process, making our schools less innovative. Secondly, we need to advocate to ensure that our students are not held behind due to their FSA scores. As established, the FSA, which is not culturally-relevant, is currently working as a filter to keep students from graduating from high school, even if they don't want to go to college. High school graduation should be based on how much a student knows, not on how well they test. Finally, to measure learning across the state and the country, we can utilize PERT, ACT, and SAT scores, which have been recently updated.

9. A record number of students are trying to cope with mental health issues such as anxiety, OCD, and depression related to stress from testing and other school pressures, plus additional safety concerns. You all talked about the lack of mental health counselors, but where do you think you could take money from in the budget to hire additional counselors?

- As we work to get rid of locally-mandated standardized testing, we could utilize those funds to hire additional counselors.
- We should also create strong partnerships with local universities and colleges, which can provide aspiring mental health professionals through internship and fellowship programs.
- The school system should direct the OCPS Foundation, local philanthropic groups and non-profit organizations towards increasing funding to increase and improve our mental health resources.

10. Why are the high schools (and now some middle schools) pushing so hard for students to take AP classes? It's great to have the option to challenge some of the students and a good idea to make sure that college bound students take a few of these AP classes to get a feel for college courses, but it seems like the schools and counselors are pushing all students into taking these classes – regardless of how their grades are or previous teacher recommendations.

I understand there are economic reasons behind pushing as many students as possible to take AP classes, which I strongly believe should not be the case. A student's course load, including whether or not they are to be enrolled in AP courses, should be determined by the student and his/her parents, with the help of their guidance counselor. No student should be obligated to stay in a course in which they feel frustrated.

11. OCPS focuses students on getting into colleges, but is enough being offered to students that won't attend college and need technical training?

I don't think OCPS is doing enough to guide our students who are going to college in their post-secondary plans. In particular, we need to expand programs for vocational education and offer more incentives for allowing students who aren't attending college to have an equal shot in today's workforce. A potential solution to this problem is to provide our students with workshops,

presentations, and seminars that explore vocational schools, entering the workforce after high school, and non-traditional paths to colleges. We should also work to strengthen our dual-enrollment program with Orlando Tech through better and more advertisement of the available resources.

12. What sets you aside from other candidates?

Throughout my career, I have worked with my students, teacher colleagues, and parents to create change at a local, state, and national level. Here are some examples of the groundbreaking work we have done:

- Achieved 100 percent passing-rates in AP Spanish Language and AP Spanish Literature for over fifteen years.
- Led the first massive voter registration drive in Central Florida, registering over 550 students to vote in the span of a week through Colonial's Hispanic Honor Society.
- Increased parent engagement at Colonial High School through the creation of Familias Presentes: Estudiantes Excelentes, a platform that facilitates the engagement of Latino parents in our schools and communities by educating them about the local education system.
- Developed students' leadership through civic engagement and community service, achieving over five thousand volunteer hours between 2014 and 2016.
- Founded Puerto Rican Teachers in Action to create a fellowship community that sought to facilitate the transition for certified teachers from Puerto Rico into OCPS, helping in our county's recruitment efforts.
- Advocated alongside local non-profit and civic organizations to protect and support undocumented students.
- Advocated in favor of teachers' rights through the Orange County Classrooms Teachers Association.

This results-driven work, which allowed me to become the first latina Teacher of the Year in the history of Orange County Public Schools and the national Queen Smith Award for Urban Education recipient, is representative of the passion that I have for our students and schools.

That's exactly why my campaign is fully run by current and former OCPS students, who have already made history. Since I announced my candidacy in December, we have been endorsed by the Florida National Organization for Women (NOW), the Orange County Classrooms Teachers Association, and Representative Carlos Guillermo Smith. We also became the first campaign to qualify to the ballot by petition.

We are making history while empowering our community!

I look forward to representing you and District 2 on the Orange County School Board.

- Johanna