

Broward School Board elections could shift political direction, school closures



Four Broward School Board candidates attend a Moms for Liberty candidate forum July 9 in Fort Lauderdale. From left, they are Windsor Ferguson, Daniel Foganholi, Jason Loring and Tom Vasquez. (Scott Travis/Sun Sentinel).

By [SCOTT TRAVIS](#) | South Florida Sun Sentinel
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Five Broward School Board members are facing challenges this year in a pivotal election that could help determine whether some schools stay open or closed and whether the board's political makeup shifts left or right.

The Aug. 20 election is on paper non-partisan, but political affiliation has become a major factor since 2022, when [Gov. Ron DeSantis replaced](#) four Democratic School Board members with four Republicans, giving Republicans a brief 5-4 majority.

Right now, there is a 6-3 Democrat majority, and two DeSantis appointees, Torey Alton and Daniel Foganholi, are running against well-funded Democrats. Two Democrat board members, Sarah Leonardi and Debbi Hixon, have Republican challengers, while Democrat Jeff Holness is being challenged by a more conservative Democrat.

Topics such as [sex education](#), [LGBTQ inclusion](#), [book challenges](#) and [teacher raises](#) have divided board members in the past two years, with the progressive majority usually winning out. That could change depending on who is elected.

A contentious but less partisan issue facing the district is whether to [close schools](#) with low enrollment. The incumbents and challengers have different views on how to proceed but all agreed the efforts so far have been flawed.

District 1

Three candidates — incumbent Daniel Foganholi, lawyer Maura McCarthy Bulman and educator Chris Canter — are vying for the District 1 seat. The district covers the southeastern part of the county, including Hollywood, Dania Beach, Hallandale Beach and parts of Miramar.

With three candidates it's possible no one gets a majority Aug. 20, which would send it to a Nov. 5 runoff.

The term is two years instead of the normal four, because a candidate elected in 2022 was [deemed ineligible](#). Foganholi was appointed to serve until November of this year. Residency has become a major issue in the race. Bulman, 46, said she has lived in District 1 for 20 years, while her opponents have lived there nine months or less. "I'm the only one that has lived here for a period of time and the only candidate for this race that didn't move here to run for the seat," she told the Sun Sentinel Editorial Board. "This is my community. This is where my home is and where my children were born."

A state law passed last year allows School Board candidates to run in a district where they don't live but must move there after election. School board members appointed by the governor are also not required to live in the district for the duration of their term.

Foganholi, 38, lists his main residence as Coral Springs but told the Sun Sentinel he's renting a place in Hollywood now and is looking to buy a house in District 1.

Canter, 47, was living in District 2 in southwest Broward and even filed to run in that race before moving to Hollywood, where he said his family lived previously for six years. "I'm a renter and they sold our house and we had to move. We had the ability to move back to Hollywood and decided to move back," he said.

Canter said he's the most experienced candidate in the race, having served as a teacher and federal grants specialist in Florida and Georgia and has had leadership roles with the Broward County Council of PTA's. "Experience matters, and I am the only candidate to bring these unique skills to the dais, and this level of activism,

advocacy, and measurable results,” he said. “I will be ready to hit the ground running on day one, without a steep learning curve.”

Foganholi said in a recent forum for Moms for Liberty, a conservative group, that he’s been fighting a culture reluctant to change. He said School Board members have been critical of charter schools but haven’t looked at what they’re doing well to attract students. He’s been a [proponent of uniforms](#), which are common in charter schools, as a way to improve discipline.

Foganholi compared the district to the [nearly defunct retailer Kmart](#) at the recent candidate forum. “They didn’t change, and look how that worked out,” he said. “Right now we are Kmart. You’ve got a lot of empty buildings that you’re looking at closing because you didn’t adjust to your competition.”

Foganholi has supported the need to close schools but has criticized the proposals released so far, including one that would close two schools in District 1. Canter and Bulman are also critical of the effort, with Canter saying the process appears to be arbitrary and without proper data and Bulman saying the district spends too much time “bemoaning financial shortfalls rather than finding effective ways” to attract students.

Bulman has by far raised the most money in this race, at \$52,803, followed by Foganholi at \$7,209 and Canter at \$3,272.

District 2

The District 2 race also includes a DeSantis appointee hoping to keep his seat. Torey Alston, 39, was appointed in 2022 after DeSantis removed four board members due to a scathing grand jury report. He is being challenged by Rebecca Thompson, 34, who until recently was an assistant to School Board member Allen Zeman. The major cities in the district include Pembroke Pines and Miramar.

The race has become one of the most heated, with Alston and his supporters accusing Thompson of [doing campaign work](#) on work time while a school district employee, which Thompson denies. Thompson’s former boss, Zeman, recently filed a [state ethics complaint](#) against Alston related to a potential conflict of interest his wife has with charter schools.

Alston had also boasted large bipartisan support, but then several Democrats [rescinded their endorsements](#) after Alston was listed as a speaker at a candidate forum for Moms for Liberty, a conservative group despised by many Democrats. Alston backed out before the event was held.

Like the District 1 race, residency has become an issue. Alston is not required to live in the district unless he wins the election. He's [been vague](#) about where his primary residence is, with public records showing Fort Lauderdale and Coral Springs. "My family actually owns multiple properties in Broward. I do spend part of my time in my family residence in District 2, but I also have other residences," he told the Sun Sentinel Editorial Board.

Thompson, who lives in Pembroke Pines, said she hears from voters that Alston hasn't been around much in her district. "I think it's great that Mr. Alston can afford multiple properties throughout Broward County. That's not the position of my family or most of Broward County," she said. "However, it is so important that we have a representative from this district who hears on the ground what the issues are."

Alston accused Thompson in the Editorial Board meeting of negative campaigning. He said his focus has been on addressing longstanding problems in the district. "There's a reason that we have \$3 billion in capital needs. There's a reason we have 125,000 students who are left behind (academically). That's what voters want to hear us talk about, not the negative sniping back and forth," he said.

Alston has been at odds with the Broward Teachers Union, voting against a teacher raise that he said the district couldn't afford and then advocating for raises for other employee groups, including administrators. While Thompson is backed by the Broward Teachers Union, Alston has support of the Broward Principals and Assistants Association.

A major issue facing the district is potential school closures. Miramar and Pembroke Pines have some of the most under-enrolled schools in the county as many parents have opted for charter schools.

Alston had voiced strong support for the concept of closing schools, but then objected once specific schools were suggested, including ones in District 2. "Our School Board member Torey Alston is fighting against school closures in our community that unfairly target Black and Hispanic majority schools," a campaign text said.

In a Sun Sentinel questionnaire, Alston supported closing schools but said it must be done right. "It must be implemented in a countywide comprehensive manner," he wrote. "All parts of the county have at least one under-enrolled school, except one small portion of the county. With the district's steady declining enrollment and \$3 billion in growing capital needs, we must make the tough decision to close schools."

Thompson said she supports closing schools only as a last resort, in contrast to her boss, Zeman, who has voiced support for closing dozens of schools to save money and provide more resources to other schools. "Schools are often the heart of our communities, and closings are very disruptive to the students, families, and school

staff,” Thompson said in a questionnaire. “We still have work that we can do to improve the schools, win back students who have left, and rebuild our communities.”

So far, Thompson has outraised Alston, \$33,573 to \$7,900. However, Thompson has been in the race since September, while Alston only filed to run in June.

District 3

Jason Loring, who owns a handyman business and who attended two school district technical colleges, is hoping to unseat Sarah Leonardi, a former teacher who was elected in 2020. District 3 includes Wilton Manors, Oakland Park and parts of Fort Lauderdale, Pompano Beach and Hollywood.

Leonardi, 34, said her accomplishments include securing teachers better pay, implementing safety measures and persuading the School Board to approve a [\\$90 million replacement](#) for Rickards Middle in Oakland Park after a roof collapse. Loring, 40, is the president of the Broward chapter of [Log Cabin Republicans](#), a group for LGBT conservatives. Many of Leonardi’s conservative critics have blasted her progressive stances on culture war issues, including book bans, sex education and transgender athletes.

But Loring said his main issue with Leonardi isn’t her votes but her absences. He alleged during an Editorial Board meeting she’s only attended about 63% of meetings, a number he said he calculated by watching every meeting since Leonardi took office and noting whether she was present. He said some of those times, she was participating by phone. “District employees and teachers who have a poor attendance record, similar to Sarah’s, might be fired with a vote from their own board member,” he told the Sun Sentinel in a text.

Leonardi challenged Loring’s data, presenting the Sun Sentinel her own attendance spreadsheet. Her report showed she attended in person for 97 of 123 meetings during her tenure on the board, or 79%. The report stated she was absent eight times and participated by phone 18 times. She argues she’s participated in-person or by phone for 93% of the meetings.

Leonardi gave birth twice during her term and attributes the absences to being a new mother. “My opponent may not know what it is like to give birth to children, and he may not understand what it’s like to recover from an emergency C-section, like I had with my first child or to heal from an episiotomy, which I had with my second child,” she told the Editorial Board. “He may not understand what it’s like to wake up every three hours and nurse a newborn baby.”

She said she's had situations where her child is too sick for childcare "and you're calling into a meeting while a toddler is throwing up on you."

The two candidates voiced similar views on several issues, including opposition to the current school closure plan, opposition to a ballot initiative that would make School Board races partisan and support for implementing [metal detectors](#) and increased restrictions on student cellphone use.

Leonardi has outraised Loring \$57,133 to \$9,742. Loring said money doesn't guarantee victories, noting a city commission race in Pompano Beach where a candidate won despite raising less than half the money of her opponent.

District 5

Jeff Holness, a business owner and former teacher, was [elected in 2022](#) to complete the final two years of a seat that had been held by Rosalind Osgood, who left to become a state senator. This time, Holness, 52, is running for a full four-year term against political newcomer Windsor Ferguson, 59, a pastor and former manager for Publix.

The majority Black district includes Lauderhill, Lauderdale Lakes and parts of Fort Lauderdale, Sunrise and Plantation.

Holness said his educational experience makes him the best candidate.

"There are so many issues that require proven experience leadership," he told the Sun Sentinel Editorial Board. "There are just numerous issues on the table that it would be unwise to not continue with leadership that will see this to the end."

Ferguson said Holness hasn't been involved enough in the community. "I feel as though that we need to be more aggressive," he told the Editorial Board. "I think at times some of the issues the board discusses don't have a lot to do with our students. We need to be fighting for our kids, our students and our community."

Holness said he has been heavily involved in the community and said he has visited all 35 schools in his district, often multiple times.

School closing are a major issue in this district. A previous proposal would have closed the low-enrolled and low-performing Broward Estates Elementary in Lauderhill. The district's proposals are being revised, and it's unclear which schools will be targeted.

"I believe before we close any schools, we should be more aggressive in executing a plan to recruit students and families within our communities to our schools," Ferguson said. "Let's put together a competitive plan and showcase what we have to offer to and for our students, families and communities within Broward County."

Holness sees school closures as necessary. “When schools are significantly under-enrolled, the District encounters challenges to function effectively,” he said. “There are approximately 43,000 empty seats in Broward County Schools. We will not be able to continue to function efficiently unless the District either fills or reduces the number of empty seats.”

While both candidates are Democrats, Ferguson has favored more conservative positions than Holness on issues such as sex education, book challenges, LGBTQ issues and charter schools. While Holness is endorsed by many unions and progressive-leaning groups, Ferguson participated in a candidate forum with the right wing Moms for Liberty and largely agreed with the sentiments of other panelists, who were all Republican. He’s also supported by Brenda Fam, the most socially conservative member on the School Board.

Seat 9

Debbi Hixon is hoping to be elected to a second term on the School Board. A longtime teacher, Hixon, 57, ran for office in 2020, partly due to district safety concerns. Her husband, Chris, was a coach and security monitor [killed in the 2018 tragedy](#) at Parkland.

Her opponent is Tom Vasquez, 51, a veteran who recently served as a banking and finance vice president and who has become a fixture at School Board meetings in recent months, speaking on management and leadership issues. A father of six, he has served on a school board at a military base.

Vasquez has been a critic of [instability in the district](#), which has had four permanent and two temporary superintendents during Hixon’s term, which Hixon blames on the board being divided.

Both candidates support closing schools to deal with under-enrollment. Both have special needs children and have voiced a need to improve services for those students.

The two candidates have both raised a significant amount of money, with \$58,319 for Hixon and \$24,316 for Vasquez.

At-Large Seat 8

Incumbent Debbi Hixon is being challenged by Tom Vasquez for the at-large Seat 8 on the Broward School Board.

Unlike some other School Board races, the contest between Hixon, a Democrat, and Vasquez, a Republican, has been mostly civil.

“My opponent is a nice lady, a community leader, and a person who has grieved and experienced incredible hardship,” Vasquez told the Sun Sentinel in a questionnaire. “She will always have my compassion and respect. However, we have very difficult challenges ahead of us that require experienced leaders to be able to successfully manage.”

Vasquez said in his role as a father and community leader, he has “taught, coached and mentored our youth over the years and can connect with them enough to inspire positive changes and course corrections.”

Hixon said she’s provided effective leadership in her four years, helping to implement school safety initiatives and securing significant teacher raises. She said her lifelong Broward residency also makes her deeply rooted in the community.

“As someone who has personally visited every single school in the district, I have been in the field, seeing our schools in action, and identifying both their needs and strengths,” she said in a questionnaire.

“My deep connection with the community has made me accessible and responsive to concerns and suggestions. I have lived my whole life here, raised my family here, and, sadly, lost my husband here,” she said. “This lifelong commitment to Broward County Public Schools fuels my dedication to ensuring the continuous strength and improvement of our public schools.”

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