

Arts for a Complete Education / SPAA
2026 Pinellas County School Board Candidate Survey

Responses Organized by Candidate

Candidate responses are published exactly as received, without editing.

Lisa Cane — District 2, At Large

1. What role do you believe comprehensive arts education (music, theatre, dance, visual arts) should play in the education of Pinellas County students? Please explain your position.

Comprehensive arts education should be recognized as an essential part of educating the whole child. Music, theatre, dance, and visual arts are not just enrichment activities—they develop creativity, confidence, discipline, communication skills, collaboration, and critical thinking that benefit students in every area of life.

The arts provide students with opportunities to discover their individual strengths, express themselves, and build connections with others. For many students, the arts are where they find belonging, purpose, and the confidence to succeed both inside and outside the classroom. They also help students develop skills that are highly valued in today's workforce, including problem-solving, adaptability, teamwork, and innovation.

As a school district, we should ensure that students have access to quality arts instruction while also maintaining strong foundations in literacy, mathematics, science, and career readiness. A well-rounded education does not require choosing between academics and the arts—the arts strengthen academic success by engaging students and helping them develop skills that support lifelong learning.

2. How has your personal or professional experience shaped your view on arts education?

My experience as the founder of Tampa Bay Performing Arts Academy has shaped my belief that arts education is essential to developing the whole child. For nearly two decades, I have watched students grow—not just as performers, but as leaders, communicators, and confident young people.

The arts teach discipline, teamwork, creativity, and resilience. Those skills benefit students whether they pursue a career in the arts or any other field. I believe every child deserves the opportunity to discover their strengths and passions, and a well-rounded education must include access to quality arts experiences.

3. What are your top three priorities if elected to the school board? Explain your reasoning for choosing these and what actions you will take to address these priorities.

Student achievement in reading and math through strong instruction and early intervention. Expanding opportunities in arts, athletics, and career programs so students stay engaged and discover their strengths. Strengthening college and career readiness through academies, certifications, dual enrollment, and real-world learning so every student graduates prepared for their next step.

Student Achievement: Improve reading and math outcomes by supporting evidence-based instruction, expanding early intervention programs, using student performance data to identify needs, and ensuring teachers have the resources and training necessary to help every student succeed.

2. Student Opportunities and Engagement: Expand access to arts, athletics, career programs, and extracurricular activities by protecting these opportunities during budget decisions, building community partnerships, and ensuring students across the district have access to programs that help them discover their strengths and stay connected to school.

3. College and Career Readiness: Strengthen pathways after graduation by expanding career academies, industry certifications, dual enrollment opportunities, internships, and partnerships with local businesses so students gain real-world skills and graduate prepared for college, career, military service, or their chosen path.

4. As Pinellas County Schools responds to declining enrollment through potential school closures and other district strategies, how would you ensure that every K–12 student continues to have equitable access to high-quality arts education, regardless of where they attend school?

As Pinellas County Schools addresses declining enrollment, we must ensure that every student continues to have access to high-quality arts education, regardless of the school they attend. I would advocate for maintaining strong arts programs during district planning and budget decisions, expanding partnerships with community arts organizations, and exploring innovative scheduling and shared-resource models when appropriate. Arts education develops creativity, confidence, communication skills, and critical thinking, and should remain an important part of a well-rounded education for every student.

5. School board members often face difficult budget decisions. If funding is limited, what principles would guide your decisions? How would you approach decisions that affect arts education?

When facing difficult budget decisions, my guiding principles would be student impact, fiscal responsibility, transparency, and equity. Every dollar should be evaluated based on how it supports student success and improves educational outcomes. When considering reductions, I would prioritize protecting classroom instruction, student opportunities, and programs that engage and support students. I would advocate for maintaining strong arts programs while exploring efficiencies, partnerships, and innovative solutions to preserve opportunities for students.

Nancy Velardi — District 2, At Large

1. What role do you believe comprehensive arts education (music, theatre, dance, visual arts) should play in the education of Pinellas County students? Please explain your position.

A well-rounded education includes the arts. Music, theatre, dance, and visual arts help students develop creativity, confidence, discipline, collaboration, and critical thinking, skills that benefit them in every subject and throughout their lives. Not every student learns or expresses themselves the same way, and for many children, the arts are where they discover their strengths and find a sense of belonging. As a School Board member, I will support maintaining strong arts programs because every student deserves access to an education that develops the whole child, not just prepares them for a test. That belief aligns with my commitment to student-centered learning that engages and inspires every learner.

2. How has your personal or professional experience shaped your view on arts education?

After more than 20 years teaching English in Pinellas County public schools, I saw firsthand how the arts help students grow both academically and personally. Literature, creative writing, theatre, and other forms of artistic expression gave students confidence, strengthened their critical thinking and communication skills, and often helped them connect with school in ways traditional instruction could not. Some of my students found their voice through the arts, and those experiences reinforced my belief that arts education is an essential part of a well-rounded education.

3. What are your top three priorities if elected to the school board? Explain your reasoning for choosing these and what actions you will take to address these priorities.

After more than twenty years teaching English in Pinellas County public schools, I saw firsthand how the arts enrich learning and help students succeed. Literature, theatre, creative writing, and visual storytelling all encouraged students to think critically, communicate effectively, and see the world from different perspectives. Some of my students who struggled in traditional academic settings found confidence through creative expression and school arts programs. Those experiences reinforced my belief that education should inspire students, nurture their talents, and provide opportunities for every child to grow, both academically and personally.

4. As Pinellas County Schools responds to declining enrollment through potential school closures and other district strategies, how would you ensure that every K–12 student continues to have equitable access to high-quality arts education, regardless of where they attend school?

Every student deserves access to a well-rounded education, regardless of which school they attend. As difficult decisions about enrollment and school closures are made, I'll work to ensure arts programs remain part of every student's educational experience. As a longtime English teacher, I saw how literature, theatre, writing, and the arts build creativity, confidence, and critical thinking. We should look for innovative ways to preserve strong arts opportunities because they are essential to student success, not an extra.

5. School board members often face difficult budget decisions. If funding is limited, what principles would guide your decisions? How would you approach decisions that affect arts education?

My guiding principle is simple: put students first. Every budget decision should be evaluated based on its impact on student learning, opportunity, and well-being. I believe the district should first look for

administrative efficiencies before reducing programs that directly benefit students. Arts education should not be viewed as an extra, it is an important part of a well-rounded education that supports academic achievement, student engagement, and school culture. The funding for the arts comes predominantly from the referendum here in Pinellas. I am proud of the fact that from its inception 20 years ago, the teachers union got the referendum on the ballot and has paid every 4 years since to get it approved by the citizens of Pinellas. That is why our students still have access to the arts, even with drastic budget cuts. I would work to protect those opportunities while ensuring the district remains fiscally responsible and transparent with taxpayers.

Curtis Campogni — District 3, At Large

1. What role do you believe comprehensive arts education (music, theatre, dance, visual arts) should play in the education of Pinellas County students? Please explain your position.

I believe comprehensive arts education should play a significant role in the education of Pinellas County students. While strong academics are essential, education is about developing the whole child. I'm a strong advocate for every student being involved in either athletics, the arts, or ideally both. These experiences build confidence, critical thinking, discipline, teamwork, creativity, and a sense of belonging that extends far beyond the classroom.

I was reminded of that recently while watching a school choir perform at a School Board meeting. Their performance was so moving that it brought a tear to my eye. It was a powerful reminder that the arts aren't an extracurricular afterthought, they're an opportunity for students to discover their passions, express themselves, and develop skills that will serve them throughout their lives.

Every student deserves the opportunity to find where they belong, and for many young people, that place is in music, theatre, dance, or the visual arts.

2. How has your personal or professional experience shaped your view on arts education?

My perspective has been shaped by more than 15 years of working directly with young people, including leading programs for at-risk youth. While our primary goals were employment, education, and long-term success, we quickly learned that before students would invest in those goals, they first needed to discover confidence, purpose, and something they were excited about.

The arts became one of the ways we helped make that happen. Whether it was partnering with local recording studios so students could create music, hosting community painting events where they showcased their creativity, or giving students opportunities to express themselves in ways they hadn't before, we saw firsthand how the arts could unlock motivation, build self-confidence, and strengthen connections with their community.

On a personal note, I wasn't the strongest academic student growing up. Traditional classroom instruction didn't always motivate me the way it seemed to motivate others. But when it came to creative writing, music, and opportunities to express myself, I was all in. Those experiences gave me confidence, helped me stay engaged in school, and provided a positive outlet during a time when I easily could have become disconnected.

3. What are your top three priorities if elected to the school board? Explain your reasoning for choosing these and what actions you will take to address these priorities.

My top three priorities would be supporting teachers, advocating for strong public schools, and improving outcomes for underserved students.

First, we must better support, retain, and compensate our teachers. Florida's teacher pay is not where it should be, and compensation is only part of the challenge. Teachers also need to feel heard, respected, and empowered to do their jobs. I would advocate for competitive pay, reduced unnecessary burdens, stronger support for experienced educators, and meaningful teacher input before decisions are made that affect their classrooms.

Second, I would be a strong advocate for public education. Pinellas County offers outstanding programs, educators, and opportunities, but we must do a better job rebuilding trust and communicating what our schools provide. I would support efforts to improve the student and family experience, promote the many choices available within our public school system, and ensure decisions are guided by what strengthens schools and serves the entire community.

Third, I would focus on improving outcomes for underserved students by building stronger partnerships among schools, families, employers, nonprofits, and community agencies. Schools cannot address every barrier alone. My professional experience has shown me that students are more likely to succeed when they feel connected, supported, and motivated by opportunities that reflect their interests and goals. I would work to bring partners more directly into the school experience through mentoring, arts, career exposure, workforce development, and other programs that help students see a meaningful future for themselves.

4. As Pinellas County Schools responds to declining enrollment through potential school closures and other district strategies, how would you ensure that every K–12 student continues to have equitable access to high-quality arts education, regardless of where they attend school?

Declining enrollment isn't simply a facilities issue; it's an engagement issue. Families are more likely to choose and remain in public schools when students feel connected to their school community and excited about their educational experience. High-quality arts education plays an important role in both.

As the district evaluates school closures and other enrollment strategies, I would advocate for preserving equitable access to arts education across all schools. A student's opportunities shouldn't depend on their ZIP code or which school they attend. Music, theatre, dance, and visual arts help students develop creativity, confidence, and a sense of belonging while strengthening the culture of a school.

I also believe we should continue building partnerships with local arts organizations, community groups, and businesses to expand opportunities for students. If we want families to choose Pinellas County Schools, we must offer experiences that inspire students and connect them to their schools. Investing in the arts is one way we do exactly that.

5. School board members often face difficult budget decisions. If funding is limited, what principles would guide your decisions? How would you approach decisions that affect arts education?

Every budget decision involves tradeoffs, so I believe it's important to have a consistent framework for making those decisions. My priorities would be teacher support, the quality of the student experience, and ensuring underserved students have access to meaningful opportunities.

When it comes to arts education, I wouldn't view it as an "extra." The arts contribute to student engagement, creativity, confidence, and a sense of belonging; all of which influence academic success and school culture. Before considering reductions to arts programs, I would first look for efficiencies in administrative costs, operational spending, and other areas that have less direct impact on students.

My goal would be to protect opportunities that enrich the educational experience while remaining a responsible steward of taxpayer dollars. Budget decisions should reflect not only what we can afford today, but also the kind of school system we want to build for the future.

Dawn Peters — District 3, At Large

1. What role do you believe comprehensive arts education (music, theatre, dance, visual arts) should play in the education of Pinellas County students? Please explain your position.

I believe arts education plays an important role in academic achievement by helping students develop creativity, critical thinking, problem-solving, focus, and communication skills that support success across all subjects. Research shows that students who participate in the arts are often more engaged in school and demonstrate stronger academic outcomes.

The arts are not separate from academics. They enhance learning by giving students opportunities to think creatively, build confidence, and apply knowledge in meaningful ways. A well-rounded education should include both strong academic instruction and access to quality arts programs, ensuring students are prepared for success in college, careers, and life.

2. How has your personal or professional experience shaped your view on arts education?

My view on arts education has been shaped by watching the positive impact it had on my own daughter's public school experience. Through music and the arts, they developed confidence, discipline, creativity, and a stronger connection to their school community. I saw firsthand how arts education complemented their academic learning by encouraging critical thinking, self-expression, and perseverance. That experience reinforced my belief that the arts are an important part of a well-rounded education and can help students thrive both academically and personally.

Professionally, I have heard the amazing stories of staff throughout the district and how they have witnessed music and art education helping their students achieve success in their academic courses.

The most impactful story I have ever heard was from a music teacher working with nonverbal children and how they are able to communicate through music. Extraordinary!

No one can hear these stories and see the evidence and be unaffected by them.

3. What are your top three priorities if elected to the school board? Explain your reasoning for choosing these and what actions you will take to address these priorities.

If reelected, my top three priorities are:

1. Strengthening academic achievement by ensuring every student has access to high-quality instruction and the support needed to succeed in reading, math, science, and career-focused learning, with the strongest focus on third grade reading scores.
2. Increasing transparency and accountability so parents, staff, and the community have confidence that decisions are made openly, responsibly, and in the best interests of students.
3. Preparing students for success after graduation by supporting multiple pathways, including college readiness, career and technical education, skilled trades, military service, and workforce opportunities.

At the center of every decision, I will remain focused on student success, parental & staff involvement, and ensuring that all students have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

4. As Pinellas County Schools responds to declining enrollment through potential school closures and other district strategies, how would you ensure that every K–12 student continues to have equitable access to high-quality arts education, regardless of where they attend school?

As Pinellas County Schools responds to declining enrollment, thoughtful consolidation can strengthen student opportunities by using resources more efficiently and expanding access to high-quality programs.

My priority is ensuring that every student continues to have access to a well-rounded education, regardless of where they attend school.

I also support strengthening community partnerships to enhance student opportunities and experiences. By working collaboratively and leveraging available resources, we can continue providing enriching educational experiences while keeping students at the center of every decision.

5. School board members often face difficult budget decisions. If funding is limited, what principles would guide your decisions? How would you approach decisions that affect arts education?

When funding is limited, my approach is to maximize student opportunities while being a responsible steward of taxpayer dollars. I support making strategic budget decisions that prioritize student achievement and long-term value.

As the district addresses declining enrollment, thoughtful school consolidation can help reduce costs, better align resources, and expand access to high-quality programs. I would also seek to leverage community partnerships to enhance opportunities for students while maintaining fiscal responsibility.

Nancy Bostock — District 6, Single Member

1. What role do you believe comprehensive arts education (music, theatre, dance, visual arts) should play in the education of Pinellas County students? Please explain your position.

Comprehensive arts education plays an important role in the education of Pinellas County students and I believe it should continue to do so. Our students benefit greatly from the investment our district has made through the general budget and through supplement funding from the referendum dollars. As a School Board Member, I will support continuing these efforts.

Arts education is important not only as stand-alone, dedicated courses, but also as an integrated topic in all the other subject areas throughout the curriculum. Our students here in Pinellas are fortunate to live in a community with many opportunities to experience art and the more the District can offer these experiences to our students, whether on campus or as a field trip, the better for our students.

2. How has your personal or professional experience shaped your view on arts education?

I was fortunate to attend schools with strong arts programs as a student and to send my children to schools with strong arts programs. As a former Pinellas School Board Member of ten years, I saw first-hand the great work our arts departments and how much our students benefited.

3. What are your top three priorities if elected to the school board? Explain your reasoning for choosing these and what actions you will take to address these priorities.

Students: I will always put our students and their success first. I will base every decision on one simple question: Does this help our students succeed?

Community: I will stand with our parents, support our teachers, and listen to our community.

Fiscal Responsibility: I will protect our tax dollars by ensuring that each expenditure benefits our students.

4. As Pinellas County Schools responds to declining enrollment through potential school closures and other district strategies, how would you ensure that every K–12 student continues to have equitable access to high-quality arts education, regardless of where they attend school?

We must keep the first thing first, student success—and an important part of student success is access to high-quality arts education. By taking a strong, proactive approach to finding efficiencies and balancing budgets, the District can put itself in a stronger position to maintain our commitment to arts education.

I successfully balanced 14 annual budgets while serving on the School Board and the County Commission, four of them during The Great Recession. We had to cut spending in our General Fund at the County from \$730 million to \$542 million, about 26%, and we did it while protecting our core services. I will use this experience to help our district work through its financial challenges while protecting the services that most contribute to student success—including arts education.

With declining enrollments and anticipated budget stress, this will not be an easy chapter for our School District, but with experienced leadership we will find out best options, and we will continue to deliver student success and a strong arts education program.

5. School board members often face difficult budget decisions. If funding is limited, what principles would guide your decisions? How would you approach decisions that affect arts education?

Funding is always limited and in the near future will likely be increasingly so. I will base budget decision on one simple question: Does this help our students succeed? I will approach decisions that affect arts education with the same standard in mind. I will seek input from our district leaders, educators, and community members.

Amanda Lord — District 6, Single Member

1. What role do you believe comprehensive arts education (music, theatre, dance, visual arts) should play in the education of Pinellas County students? Please explain your position.

I believe every child deserves access to a high-quality art education because music, visual arts, theater, dance and digital arts help students develop creativity, communication, collaboration and critical thinking skills that can benefit them across every subject and in their future careers. I also believe having access to various arts programs gives students a reason to look forward to coming to school and can provide a sense of belonging.

2. How has your personal or professional experience shaped your view on arts education?

I participated in the arts throughout middle school and high school, both in chorus and theater, and these programs personally helped keep me engaged and motivated throughout the school year. I've also seen my own children thrive in arts programs provided through Pinellas County public schools, via art shows, afterschool theater club and middle school chorus. The opportunities to perform on stage and have their artwork displayed for all to see has built a special type of confidence in my children beyond basic academics.

3. What are your top three priorities if elected to the school board? Explain your reasoning for choosing these and what actions you will take to address these priorities.

1 - Manage declining enrollment - In Pinellas we need to continue offering families choices, whether that's fundamental, magnet, specialized programs or career and technical programs that give industry certifications and career pathways. We must meet families' needs and make public school their first choice. I will work to support and expand the amount of school choices families have across the district.

2 - Retain great teachers - We need to focus on teacher retention because this addresses two issues, improving student academic performance and alleviating budget pressures. Experienced teachers have the skills to identify and support students with academic challenges, and these teachers are a critical component to closing the achievement gap. Teacher turnover is expensive. Recruiting, onboarding and training replacements costs money. I will work to improve mentoring for new teachers, push for retention incentives in high-need schools and support tiered raises for highly effective tenured teachers.

3 - Attendance - Students cannot achieve their academic potential if they are not in school. Poor attendance also places an unfair burden on teachers to catch a student up who has missed critical lessons. School is not task oriented and the real learning comes from activities in the classroom when students are moving around the room, discussing in small groups and sharing out in class. None of these things can be given to a student as 'make up' work. I will make sure we evaluate the attendance issues happening in our schools and work with teachers and administrators to find solutions to this widespread attendance problem. Improvements in attendance will take an unnecessary burden off teachers and will improve our students' academic outcomes.

4. As Pinellas County Schools responds to declining enrollment through potential school closures and other district strategies, how would you ensure that every K–12 student continues to have equitable access to high-quality arts education, regardless of where they attend school?

I believe the district needs to be intentional with managing through school consolidations and closures, and I will support protecting anything related to the classroom, including high-quality arts education. Not

every school may have the same programs, but I am committed to protecting opportunities for students. I would achieve this by establishing districtwide expectations that every elementary, middle and high school offers meaningful arts instruction. I would also ensure that when schools are consolidated, that students retain access to comparable or expanded arts program versus losing them. I also would look to continue to support and expand partnerships with organizations in the community to support high-quality arts programs in our schools.

5. School board members often face difficult budget decisions. If funding is limited, what principles would guide your decisions? How would you approach decisions that affect arts education?

We can't cut our way to excellence, however Pinellas County Schools is under financial compression and constraints. I will take a balanced approach that protects our classrooms, improves efficiencies, retains great teachers, grows enrollment, strengthens community partnerships, and makes sure every dollar is delivering results for students. For me, every budget decision should answer one question: How does this help students succeed in the classroom.

Fortunately, through the property tax referendum, Pinellas County Schools receives crucial funding for visual and performing arts. We must continue to support that local property tax revenue because it is a key income source for supporting arts education. In addition, we need to support and expand partnerships in the community to ensure our District has a robust and comprehensive arts program across all schools. As a school board member and parent of two children in public school, I understand and have experienced the importance of arts in education and I will work to protect, support and expand these programs within our schools.