



Candidate Profile - School Board

Name	Justin Sharpless
Office Seeking	Polk County School Board, District 6
Do you currently reside in the district?	<input type="radio"/> Yes
Years lived in Polk County?	28
Campaign Address	4832 Avon St Lake Wales, FL, 33859
Campaign Phone Number	(863) 412-8986
Campaign Email	Justin@SharpieForStudents.com
Campaign Website	SharpieForStudents.com
Party Affiliation	Republican
Education	Currently a PhD Candidate in Agricultural Education and Leadership (University of Missouri), MS in Agricultural Education and Leadership (University of Missouri, 2014), Masters of Agribusiness (University of Florida, 2008), BS in Agricultural Education and Communication (University of Florida, 2007), High School Diploma (Lake Wales High School, 2002)
Occupation	Assistant Professor
Employer	Warner University
Have you attended a Public Leadership Institute/Political Leadership Institute (hosted by a Chamber of Commerce or Economic Development Council)?	<input type="radio"/> Yes
If yes, who hosted the institute?	Florida Institute of Political Leadership/Lakeland Chamber of Commerce
Have you ever run for office before?	<input type="radio"/> No

Describe your civic involvement:

Alpha Gamma Rho National Grand President's Award Winner,
National FFA Alumni and Supporters Outstanding Achievement Award,

Florida FFA Alumni Outstanding Alumni Achievement Award,
Blue and Gold Award from the Polk County FFA Federation,
Winter Haven High School Agricultural Education Advisory,
Winter Haven Christian School Agricultural Education Advisory,
Florida FFA Public Speaking Contest Judge,
Polk County 4-H Public Speaking Judge,
Alpha Gamma Rho National Scholarship Program Evaluator,
Florida Junior Brahman Association Public Speaking Judge,
Great American Teach-In Speaker

List any Boards on which you serve, including positions of leadership

Polk County Public School Attendance Boundary Committee Member,
Polk County Public School Superintendent Search Citizens Screening Committee Member,
Lake Wales High School Career & Technical Education Advisory Board Member,
Polk County Youth Fair Committee Member,
Florida State Fair Committee Member,
Former President of the Lake Wales FFA Alumni,
High Point Church Board of Elders Member,
Secretary of the Alpha Gamma Chapter of the Alpha Gamma Rho Fraternity Educational Foundation Board,
Gamma Alpha Chapter of the Alpha Gamma Rho Fraternity Strategic Planning Committee Member,
Former Orange Blossoms 4-H Club Leader

Describe your political involvement:

I've been an active and registered Republican voter since turning 18 years old. I have also volunteered on campaigns in the past. However, this is my first time running for a public office. When it comes to public service, Adam Putnam and Grady Judd are two of my role models.

Why are you running for office?

I am seeking a seat on the Polk County School Board because I want to ensure my children as well as all Polk County students have access to a world-class education, one that can help any child, no matter his or her station in life, achieve their dreams and reach their full potential. I also want to give back to the very system that helped mold me into the person and professional I am today and helped me discover my calling to become an agricultural educator.

As a board member, I would bring many personal and professional assets to the role, all stemming from my background as a professional educator, a Polk County native and PCPS alumnus, a parent, teacher educator and community member.

First, I bring an informed perspective as a practitioner of education. I am proud to have more than 13 years of experience in the middle, high school and collegiate levels, including within Polk County Public Schools and Lake Wales Charter Schools. I understand the often overwhelming and under-resourced environments both teachers and non-instructional staff often find themselves in every day, and my approach to governance would include that expertise. I also come from a family of educators, all of whom still teach in Polk County. I am the child and brother of PCPS educators, and the son-in-law and husband of LWCS teachers. While I no longer work in the elementary or secondary settings, I only have to reach so far as my kitchen table to access live, real-world perspectives about the challenges facing Polk County public school teachers and classrooms on a daily basis.

Second, I am the father of two boys, Wyatt (4 years old) and Rhett (1-year-old), and as a parent, I will soon be a direct customer and stakeholder of our public school system. In other words, this isn't simply a political pursuit for me; rather, it's deeply personal. I truly care about the direction of our public schools because how much progress we do or do not make will directly impact my children.

Third, I have shown a proven passion for serving the community and giving back to others. My interest

in public service has been around from an early age. As a new high school graduate, I spent a gap year serving as a statewide Future Farmers of America (FFA) state officer, promoting the organization's mission to students across Florida and preparing future leaders. During and in the years since college, I have continued to volunteer with my fraternity, Alpha Gamma Rho, and recently received the Grand President's Award for service. I have also volunteered with local FFA chapters and the Polk County Youth Fair. I serve as a deacon with High Point Church in Lake Wales. And with PCPS, I am proud to have served on the district's attendance boundary committee as well as the Citizens Screening Committee during the district's recent Superintendent search.

Finally, I also bring perspective from outside of the K-12 education realm and outside of Florida. I attended graduate school in Missouri and learned about differing educational perspectives and practices from our state; and in my role as a college professor, I have educated and trained students who are now teaching in PCPS. While preparing college graduates at Warner University for entry into the agricultural industry, I have built relationships with business partners who communicate their hiring needs. I understand and take seriously the school district's role in preparing talent for local businesses of all sizes and industries. This experience helps me understand the serious mission we have at PCPS to prepare students for meaningful careers as well as life after high school.

What do you consider to be the top three (3) issues facing Polk County Schools. (listing in order of importance)? If elected, when would you plan to address these issues and hope to see them accomplished?

I.

Issue #1: Improve Academic Performance. While there are a number of great schools and programs in Polk County, and some progress had been made leading up to the pandemic, unfortunately, our school district has chronically ranked in the bottom third or quartile of the state on student achievement ever since the state began issuing district grades in 2004, a few years after school grading began in 1999. As of 2019, the last time full and complete school and district grades were issued, Polk County ranked 54th out of 67 districts in total student achievement. According to 2021 FSA results, less than half of Polk County's students were on grade level in English-Language Arts and Math. Fewer than one quarter of Polk's students matriculate to a four-year college or university in Florida, and of the one-third who move on to community college, less than one quarter of those students will earn a two-year associates degree on time. Also, Polk County students are far less likely than their statewide peers to academically qualify for Bright Futures scholarships. So we have a lot of work to do if we want to build a talented workforce of tomorrow and attract the workers we need today. As a school board member, in my first meeting with Superintendent Heid I would discuss with him my priority of improving our academic performance. I would ask him to do annual progress reports at board meetings and with key stakeholder groups so all of the public is aware of our progress.

II.

Issue #2: Access to High-quality educational options for Polk's families. Because I believe parents have the right to choose the best educational option for their children, I will champion increased access to high-quality educational options for all families. A student's access to educational options should not be defined by their zip code. We have too many students on waiting lists for magnet, charter and other special programs, and no family should be denied access to the high-quality education they seek. These include high-demand career and technical education programs, fine arts and other advanced academic curriculums across the district such as International Baccalaureate and Cambridge. I recognize the success of Polk's Career Academies has led to fruitful economic development opportunities for homegrown talent recruitment and retention in our community and I appreciate the importance of continuing to evolve these programs through business-based input and partnerships. I will champion continued advancements and equitable access to these high-demand programs across the district. Also, I will represent and welcome our private school, charter school and home school educators and families, as I recognize the value they bring to our entire education system. Just like in the private sector, competition breeds innovation. School choice requires schools to compete for enrollment and generally makes schools better. My expectation for Polk County Public

Schools is for us to work harder to improve our schools so more parents will want to choose us for their child's education. Offering access to more quality choices is also an economic development imperative for Polk County because our high-skill employers must be able to attract and retain top professionals who will not move and pay taxes here unless we offer schools they want for their children. While I would love for a Polk County Public School to be everyone's first and best choice, I will always honor the right for parents to choose the best education for their families, as one size does not fit all.

III.

Issue #3: Recruiting and Retaining High-quality Staff. As a former classroom teacher, I understand the importance of recruiting and retaining the best staff possible and will hold district leadership accountable for building and sustaining a positive workplace culture for Polk County Public Schools employees. Currently, 82% of the entire district budget goes to payroll and benefits. After state budget provisions required districts to boost starting teacher pay to approximately \$47,500, that was a step in the right direction but was frustrating to veteran teachers who saw meager pay increases. While salary is important, workplace culture is equally if not more important and the superintendent's coming efforts to add more counselors and support staff to reduce workloads across the board should help improve morale. I will also look for innovative solutions to reward, promote and compensate PCPS' most innovative, loyal, and valued employees. Our students are best served by qualified staff with high morale.

Rank the following as you see their current order of importance:

1: Empowering parents

2: Improving public education

3: School Safety

4: Reducing taxes and government spending

During an economic downturn, how should Polk County handle decreasing tax revenues caused by the normal economic cycle? You may check more than one choice. Depending on your choice/choices, please state what you would cut and what you would increase.

Cut Spending

Other

Depending on your choice/choices above, please state what you would cut and what you would increase.

I would advocate for Polk County Public Schools to cut spending out of obligation and repurpose and reappropriate staff where we can to ensure critical services aren't disrupted. We need to follow the practice of zero-based budgeting to identify possible savings now. Redundant expenditures could be found across multiple departments. I would look at areas like underutilized schools to reduce expensive facilities costs. I would also look at incentives to reduce transportation costs. Finally, I would prioritize leveraging more technology to reduce costs and/or boost efficiency in operations or time saved.

What is your top priority if elected to the Schoolboard? How do you plan on measuring your performance to report to your constituents?

My top priority is to improve the academic performance of the district. As I mentioned before, as of

2019, the last time full and complete school and district grades were issued, Polk County ranked 54th out of 67 districts in total student achievement. Not only do we need to raise performance, but we also need to narrow achievement gaps between various demographic and socioeconomic groups. I would ask the superintendent to have an annual "state of the district" address, which could be accessed virtually. I would stress academic goals in our strategic plan. I would ask how we address academic deficiencies in real time. I believe a website should be created as a means for parents to easily access academic performance at the district and school level. I would measure my performance based on the performance of our school district in creating avenues for parents to access school and district performance data. Additionally, I would hold the superintendent accountable for district achievement as part of his annual review.

What is your long term vision during your time in office?

My vision is for every Polk County family, no matter their income or zip code, to have access to a high quality education that meets their child's needs and prepares them for life after high school. Long waiting lists and exclusive access to great schools for the wealthy and privileged will be a thing of the past. I will work with the superintendent, board member colleagues and community partners to create a high performing educational system that becomes a beacon of opportunity to our students and an exemplar model to our peers. The bottom line is we not only have to get better, we have to improve our standings on the state-wide stage if we want to compete in the twenty-first century economy.

What is the largest budget you have overseen and how did you prioritize spending?

The largest budget I have overseen was when I was part of the committee to oversee the development and building of the over 2 million dollar Ed and Myrtle Lou Swindle Agriculture Complex at Warner University. The building being both academic and vocational in nature, we prioritized spending on what would have the greatest impact on student success. Working collaboratively as a group, we had to make tough decisions at times. I'm proud of the building and the students who graduate from our program that are educated in the building.

What leadership qualities do you possess that make you the best choice to serve on the Polk County Schoolboard?

The leadership qualities I possess that make me the best choice to serve on the Polk County School Board are: intelligence, confidence, determination, sociability, integrity and courage. Always reading and advancing my understanding of the issues, I lean on my intellect to quickly digest and synthesize information and make informed decisions. I am a confident and self-assured leader who believes I can accomplish lofty but attainable goals I set for myself. I am a determined leader who is focused and attentive to the task at hand. I have a genuine love for people and enjoy cultivating positive and cooperative relationships in my personal and professional roles. I am a leader with integrity who values the qualities of honesty and trustworthiness. Finally, I consider myself a courageous person. It takes courage to run for office and solicit support from thousands of voters. It will also take courage to make system-wide decisions, many of which could be divisive or controversial. In doing so, it will also take courage to always do what is best for students, even when many adults pressure me to do otherwise.

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