

Greater Pensacola Chamber 2024 Candidate Forum

Escambia County Public Schools Board

Candidate: Earle McAuley

District: 4

What are the educational gaps or weaknesses in Escambia County? Strengths?

There is a definitive gap in reading scores across the county. Nine elementary schools have less than a 25% pass rate for 3rd grade reading (2022-23 school year). Only three have over a 70% pass rate. Things do not improve for middle schools-- in large part because the highest achieving families are leaving to go to private school or virtual school for 6th-8th grade. Only one middle school and one high school has over a 70% pass rate for reading. Both of these are "magnet" schools.

These scores are often divided along socioeconomic lines. A medium level solution is to create more magnet schools for high achieving students. Schools within schools.

In terms of strengths, we have some amazing teachers across the county, and they are doing amazing things in their classrooms. We have students who are graduating and going to some of the top universities in the country and beyond. We have many opportunities for students to become involved in their communities, and most of our kids from Kindergarten through 12th grade are eager to become the best that they can.

How would you address low teacher pay and how would you attract more qualified candidates to Escambia County schools, especially in areas of math and science?

This is paramount. Study after study has concluded that the most important factor in student success is the teacher leading the class. New schools, new technology, even new programs only work if the teacher is dynamic and skilled. In short, if we want quality schools and quality outcomes for students, we must have the absolute best in each classroom.

A lot of energy is placed on starting pay; unfortunately, Escambia County (like most of Florida) does not currently offer a pay raise until year 11. And that is \$200. If we want good teachers to remain in the field, we must bring back some form of step increase: if penned down, I would go with a 5% step every three years. 0-2, 3-5, 6-8 etc. Further, we should incentivize advanced math and science teachers with a supplement, not just a signing bonus. Another idea is to pay highly effective teachers and administrators a bonus incentive to go to our lowest performing schools.

The rewards for having top teachers is worth a lot of sacrifice. The budget should be worked to make this happen. Re-allocations, redistribution, and every avenue should be explored.

How would you engage the business community to improve Escambia County Schools? Be specific.

Pensacola has a vibrant business community with highly engaged professionals who are eager to become involved. A check for supplies is nice, but physical engagement is better. From the Navy base and Navy Federal to smaller law, dental and medical offices, to retail stores we have great people who have amazing expertise. It would be low hanging fruit to establish an app that pairs expertise with classroom needs. How cool would it be for a seventh grade English class to bring in a local author to discuss editing? Or a local attorney to come discuss leases with graduating seniors? How about a flight school student to come read to a group of second graders? The possibilities are endless. Sparks are essential to education and our business community is a largely untapped resource.

What is your vision for education in Escambia County? How does it support the economy and quality of life in the community?

Great schools attract great families. Morale matters a lot and attitude is infectious - both good and bad. Schools influence real estate values, schools influence talented adults who may (or may not) wish to move to the area to work. Pensacola is a lot more than a beach. My vision is to create an environment where families are proud to send their children to the local schools.

Candidate: Carissa Bergosh

District: 4

What are the educational gaps or weaknesses in Escambia County? Strengths?

I would first like to discuss the many strengths in Escambia County. There are many opportunities like Workforce Education, this department provides more than 60 career academies, small learning opportunities that focus on career exploration and paths.

Of course there are some challenges in the school system that stem from a lack of fathers that are engaged in the educating of their children. Controlling Discipline, no bullying need to be addressed.

How would you address low teacher pay and how would you attract more qualified candidates to Escambia County schools, especially in areas of math and science?

Teachers contribute and prepare children for a successful future. They empower students for lifelong learning but ECSD needs to continue to attract and retain good teachers. The pay is set by Florida Legislature but the Federal Govt also enforces some mandates that ensures the ECSD resources are spent elsewhere. The Florida governor maintains dedication to education.

How would you engage the business community to improve Escambia County Schools? Be specific.

Continue and enhance the Community Partnerships program. Our community provides such needed resources, volunteers and mentors to our schools.

What is your vision for education in Escambia County? How does it support the economy and quality of life in the community?

The current vision for Escambia County Public Schools is "Unite for Every Student" I do agree with this statement; we all need to work together for every student to succeed and empower them with a love of learning.

Candidate: Tom Harrell

District: 5

What are the educational gaps or weaknesses in Escambia County? Strengths?

Gaps or Weaknesses

- academic achievement
- attendance
- discipline
- on-time graduation rate
- employee retention
- teacher & employee salaries

Strengths

- highly trained work force
- supportive community
- safe and secure well-managed facilities
- can do family-oriented workforce

How would you address low teacher pay and how would you attract more qualified candidates to Escambia County schools, especially in areas of math and science?

Low teacher and employee salaries continue to be a problem for our School District. We must develop a plan at the highest level (Supt. & School Board) to allocate a greater percentage of the overall budget to salaries. We should be paying salary supplements for math and science teachers. Also, a recruitment bonus would help in attracting new qualified candidates.

How would you engage the business community to improve Escambia County Schools? Be specific.

Enhancing our current partner-in-education program and training for principals and directors.

What is your vision for education in Escambia County? How does it support the economy and quality of life in the community?

My vision is one where we place children first in all decisions. We empower and encourage students to reach their full potential. It is my hope that we can help students be ready to contribute to our society as productive/responsible citizens. Hopefully, students will want to remain in our area. A well-educated workforce always improves the economy and enhances the community.

Candidate: Jim Taylor

District: 5

What are the educational gaps or weaknesses in Escambia County? Strengths?

Weaknesses:

- (A) We need to bring back shop programs in middle and high schools.
- (B) We need to have better intern and apprenticeship programs in high school.
- (C) We need better discipline procedures to protect students and staff.
- (D) We need to improve pay for all employees, especially for teachers, support staff, and bus drivers.
- (E) We need to do a better job of removing "dirty" books.

Strengths:

- (A) The Superintendent and a vast wealth of available military personnel, both active duty and retired, to aid our system.

How would you address low teacher pay and how would you attract more qualified candidates to Escambia County schools, especially in areas of math and science?

- (A) I would push for a minimum of 5% teacher pay raise for every year I am in office.
- (B) I would work with businesses to develop a bonus program to be paid twice a year to math and science teachers.
- (C) I would do a better job of teacher retention and tapping into a vast resource of military personnel in our area, both active duty and retired.

How would you engage the business community to improve Escambia County Schools? Be specific.

- (A) I would have School District personnel meet with the business community to see how the District can better meet their needs.
- (B) I would ask business leaders to go in and actively seek employees.
- (C) I would ask businesses to have workshops for potential employees to determine what they are looking for in employees.

What is your vision for education in Escambia County? How does it support the economy and quality of life in the community?

- (A) My vision is for a more efficient and productive school system that meets and exceeds the needs of our students, employees, parents, and the community.
- (B) I would ask that two different tracks be developed for students -- one for college and

one for vocational students to meet their and the community's needs.

(C) I want this school system to move into the Top Ten systems in the state in academics, vocational, athletics, and employee pay.

(D) A better education produces better workers and winning sports teams, and extracurricular programs improve the morale and pride of the community.

Candidate: Brian Ranelli

District: 4

What are the educational gaps or weaknesses in Escambia County? Strengths?

According to US News and World Report, Florida Ranks #1 Overall in Education.

When focusing on Escambia County, Opportunities Include:

- Preschools have an average ranking of 4/10 which is the bottom 50% of Florida Public preschools. Source: Public School Review.
- Math and reading have significant room for improvement. Math proficiency scores 43% vs. a state average of 52%. Reading scores 44% vs. a 52% state average. Source: Public School Review.
- 2022-2023 High School Graduation Rates are 8 percentage points lower than the state average of 88% as per www.northescambia.com.
- Absenteeism is Higher in Escambia County than Santa Rosa and Okaloosa. Percentage of students absent 21+ days in Escambia is 22%. Santa Rosa and Okaloosa are both 12%. Note: The state average is 19%. Source: FLDOE, 2022-2023.
- Overall, Escambia ranks 57th of 67 Florida Counties according to SchoolDigger*. By comparison, Okaloosa is ranked 8th, Santa Rosa, 19th.

*SchoolDigger pulls data from the National Center for Education Statistics, US Department of Education, The US Census Bureau and the Florida Department of Education

Strengths Unique to Escambia County:

- Business community is uniquely positioned to support education with multiple hospitals and healthcare systems, credit unions and banking, aerospace, and other industries of commerce.
- Those who serve and who have served in the military add to what this community can offer young people and education.
- Pensacola is rich with nonprofit activity that step up to supplement instruction within the walls of K-12 schools.

How would you address low teacher pay and how would you attract more qualified candidates to Escambia County schools, especially in areas of math and science?

Wages are important but looking at salary alone is a misstep. We will never be able to pay teachers a high enough salary for all they do to educate the next generation. Having said this, we should be looking to other ways of attracting and

rewarding high-quality teachers:

- **Professional Development:** The University of San Diego says that when done well, professional development adds both perceived and proven benefits that add to teacher satisfaction. Several strategies include developing subject matter experts, a speaker's series rather than one-off training days on different subjects like bullying prevention, and using different formats/technology all contribute to more engaged teachers.
- **Investment in Culture/Leadership:** Elevatek12.com points out that when a school has solid leadership, teachers feel supported, safe, and empowered. The article references a pilot study conducted in a high poverty elementary school that improved because the principal made three key changes to improve teacher retention/recruitment: 1.) Instead of focusing on abstract vocational mission, the principal promoted the idea of service to the community. 2.) Instead of scoring a teachers' performance on a day-to-day basis, they encouraged teachers to proactively seek feedback and advice. 3.) They took administrative tasks away from teachers so they could focus completely on teachers.
- **Create Institutional Partnerships/Develop Leaders:** The Institute of Education Sciences advocates an approach that builds relationships between districts and teacher preparation programs and allows teachers autonomy within their school. This approach also adds to relationship-based recruitment programs.

Teacher compensation and development is one of the most important components of getting education right. My campaign promises to address teacher pay, compensation, and development at every opportunity.

How would you engage the business community to improve Escambia County Schools? Be specific.

The engagement of the business community is essential for the improvement of Escambia County Schools. As an active business and community leader (Director, Vytalize Health; Member, Leadership Pensacola; Board Member of Parent University (Chair), Pensacola Mess Hall, ARC Gateway, Valerie's House Pensacola, College of Business Dean's Advisory Board at UWF, and Speakers Chair – Pensacola Cordova Rotary), I will work with regional businesses, community leaders – both for profit and nonprofit to increased their focus on improving Escambia County schools and the performance of our students. Examples include businesses/community support and education partnerships with: Global Learning Academy School, Dixon School of Art and Science, Weis Elementary School (a Community Partnership School), N.B. Cook

Elementary School of Art, Charter Academy at Pensacola State College, etc. Key community organizations that are focused on improving educational and workforce opportunities for our students include but are not limited to: Studer Community Institute (Civic Con), Studer Education via Huron, and Achieve Escambia. I am also particularly impressed with the Escambia County Sheriff's Blazer Academy for young men and women, Building Brains (Studer Community Institute), and the good work of workforce development through ESCAROSA. IHMC, too, has much to offer especially in the field of health, resilience, and performance. It is vital to further rally business/community support around education that furthers STEM, trades, and financial literacy. In addition to partnering with the fine organizations listed above wherever possible to move the needle on education in Escambia County, I'd look to best practices throughout the state. Examples include: • The Florida Chamber of Commerce has an Alliance for Early Learning Project which leverages an ever-growing number of business to promote kindergarten readiness and reading levels. • Junior Achievement of South Florida aims to tackle achievement gaps and financial literacy. • University of Florida is leading the charge to build AI into K12 education. There is no reason we shouldn't continue to leverage the great resources of UWF, PSC, and other higher education institutions in Northwest Florida to advance our schools.

What is your vision for education in Escambia County? How does it support the economy and quality of life in the community?

My vision for education in Escambia County is consistent with the districts stated mission to provide equal access to quality education. My north star will always be striving to give young people better opportunities so each student reaches his/her full potential.

Having a solid education system is directly tied to the economic development and the quality of life in our community. Moreover, education is the key to the economic, cultural and social development of our county and - most importantly, to the future successes of our children.

I realize we have a tremendous opportunity to improve the school system in Escambia County relative to other districts in Florida. Our current ranking in the state is a clarion call for action.

As an elected member of the Escambia School Board, I will focus on increasing accountability, business techniques, strategic planning and better budget management practices (note the current budget for Escambia County School District exceeds \$800M).

I am deeply committed to:

- Focusing on curriculum to compete with the emergence of vouchers.
- Supporting teachers by addressing pay, compensation, and career development at every opportunity.
- Enhancing safety in our schools with local law enforcement on every campus. Also, focusing on long walks to/from bus stops, the use of technology, bullying.
- Fostering stronger parental engagement with more thoughtful ways parents can participate in the education of their children.

Improving area education will make Escambia County a better place to Live, Work and Play. It's time to rally around data where children love to learn and teachers love to teach. Let's get to work!

Candidate: Rich Holzknecht

District: 4

What are the educational gaps or weaknesses in Escambia County? Strengths?

The gaps are myriad, beginning with "Corridors of Concern" for low-performing, at-risk students. Two Decades ago, Escambia County ranked among the Top 5 school districts in Florida. The County now ranks much closer to the bottom among the 67 school districts in our State. To pull out of this educational "flat spin", we need to reward and retain good teachers, weed out destructive ideological indoctrination, restore good order and discipline in our classrooms, and get back to educational basics to better prepare our children for life after high school - - be that in college or the work force. Educational basics would include teaching our children to read, write, master basic math & science skills, problem solve & think critically, know the unrevised history of American exceptionalism, and effect positive cultural change through informed constitutional citizenship. In the last three years, we have lost 1,600 students to private and home schools with an attendant loss of over \$13M in revenue which could have been used to improve public education & incentivize/retain good teachers. We need to stop the bleeding by making public schools more attractive and competitive.

From world-class theater, chorus, band and orchestra programs, to the various career academies and JROTC programs, the strengths of Escambia County Public Schools are especially showcased in high school athletics, the arts, and career academy programs.

How would you address low teacher pay and how would you attract more qualified candidates to Escambia County schools, especially in areas of math and science?

While Governor DeSantis has done a good job in recent years to bump up starting teacher salaries, (now at the target goal of \$47,500/year), veteran teachers are experiencing "salary compression" and are not making a whole lot more. Teachers with a masters degree only make an additional \$2500/year, a monetary incentive that has not changed in over 30 years. To reward and retain good teachers, we need to do a zero-based scrub of our \$800M annual budget, examining all "sacred cows" to make sure we are maximizing the impact of every educational dollar. Moreover, seeing that Escambia County has the largest per capita veteran population in the Nation, we should be tapping the special STEM skills and real world experience of our resident military population by making an appeal for military volunteers in the classroom (as I did personally for many years as a Math Superstars instructor) and by encouraging veterans to consider follow-on career opportunities like, "Troops to Teachers". These same veterans might also be tapped to augment local law enforcement to protect our children on the campuses of Escambia County schools.

How would you engage the business community to improve Escambia County Schools? Be specific.

For one, there is growing population of students in Escambia County who are taking a pass on college and opting to go directly from high school into the work force. The Chamber and business community need to engage students, especially at the middle school and high school levels to showcase their respective trades and career opportunities. Local businesses can also contribute to programs like the Escambia County Public Schools Foundation and Community Partnership Schools. Chamber members and local businesses should also encourage their employees to participate in student mentoring programs like Navy Federal and other businesses have been doing.

What is your vision for education in Escambia County? How does it support the economy and quality of life in the community?

Good Schools attract business, increase home values, and strengthen the community by providing a continuous stream of prepared young adult local citizens. As a combat-proven leader, I will insist on accountability among all educational stakeholders from the Superintendent, to administrators, to teachers and various district specialists to collectively and creatively improve the quality and competitiveness of our public school system. As we reverse the trend of downward performance and improve the quality of our public schools, Escambia County will better attract military families and businesses to the area, all to the improvement of our local economy.