

Georgia's down-ballot races deserve top-of-the-ticket energy

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Jessica Fleming

Opinion

School boards make a lot of decisions that affect voters, but their candidates get little attention.



Credit: Natrice Miller / Natrice.Miller@

Georgia voter stickers. (Natrice Miller/The Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

I took a deep breath, gave my widest smile and rang the doorbell. After a conversation with the man who answered — a father of three kids in my district — he said I had his full support. “But how do I vote?” he asked. His question was a brutal reminder that even though running for my local school board has taken over my life, most people have no idea that important school board races will be on the same ballot as the presidential election.

I’m thrilled to see excitement across Georgia and the country about this presidential election. In the 24 hours after the presidential debate, Vice President Kamala Harris’s campaign raised \$47 million. Our former lieutenant governor, Geoff Duncan, a Republican, praised her

performance. Then, Taylor Swift's social media post sent more than 400,000 people to voter registration sites. When I'm canvassing, and I see homes decked out with Trump signs and flags, so I see how passionately Republicans feel about the top of their ticket, too.

Credit: Handout

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I wish we could bring this energy, excitement and flood of donations to down-ballot school board races. The people on your local school board make decisions directly affecting your family's life. They're the ones who will spend your hard-earned tax dollars and make decisions about your children's education. They set policies around curriculum, student transportation and which books will be on school library shelves. They significantly impact what matters to most parents: teaching children to read and keeping schools safe.

School safety is, rightly, one of the most pressing issues school board members face. Never has that been as apparent in Georgia as after the tragic shooting in Apalachee High School this month.

Even if you don't have school-aged kids, whether or not your local Board of Education keeps the schools competitive influences your quality of life and property values, so supporting the right candidates is truly an investment in your future.

Yet these elections only receive a fraction of the funds and attention of national races, especially from Democrats. In 2022, national political action committees poured millions of dollars into races for conservative candidates. The right-wing Moms for Liberty has five chapters in Georgia and provides a step-by-step school board candidate handbook. Meanwhile, Democrats are less likely to vote for down-ballot candidates than Republicans. The Harris Campaign is giving \$25 million to down-ballot state house and senate candidates but not to crucial school board races.



But there's too much at stake for Democrats and moderates to sit out of school board elections. Georgia already has a divisive concepts law and a Parent's Bill of Rights that limit the topics educators can teach. The Cobb County School Board fired a teacher for reading a picture book about inclusion and acceptance to fifth graders. My family's Forsyth County school district has made national headlines because of author censorship and book banning. We need leaders who can resist getting entangled in every culture war issue and focus on student outcomes, retaining talented educators and accepting everyone.

Public education is already more in danger than ever. Former President Donald Trump wants to abolish the Department of Education, which prohibits discrimination and provides funding to districts nationwide, including the 1,500 Title 1 schools in Georgia. Gov. Brian Kemp signed a voucher bill that will start the process of defunding public education in our state. Teacher morale is already dangerously low. In a 2024 Pew Research study, 70% of teachers said their schools are understaffed, and more than half the respondents discouraged young people from going into the profession.

How can school boards fight back against these attacks? These decision-making bodies enact local policy and control the budget. School board members can be a last stand against extremism to help buffer the harm to students and teachers.

With four children in public education, including two who just started kindergarten, I won't give up on my local public schools. That's why, even though I'm a full-time working mom, I put my name on the ballot to run for school board.

Most school board candidates are just regular people who want to make a difference. Many of them, like me, were hoping someone else would run. But when no one representing our values emerged, we rolled up our sleeves and got to work. And work it is. Unlike in larger campaigns, school board candidates are often their own campaign manager, accountant, social media director and yard sign designer all rolled into one. Every dollar or hour of volunteer work you contribute to our campaigns will go further and have a more significant impact than a drop in the bucket of a larger operation.

Look up your local school board races. If you agree with the candidates' views, donate time, money or resources to help them. At the very least, tell your friends and neighbors about the importance of school board races and to vote down the ballot. If all like-minded people take these actions, we can protect public education and the students they serve.

Jessica Fleming is a mother of four Forsyth County students and is running for the Forsyth County Board of Education, District 2.