

St, Tammany School Board District 9

Gia R. Baker	Republican
Judith Champagne	Democrat
'Cris' Fontenot	Republican

Questions and Answers:

- 1) What experience in your background prepares you to effectively ensure transparency and accountability as a school board member in setting and achieving sound educational goals?**

Gia R. Baker

I was born and raised in Covington, and currently reside in Madisonville. I am a retired educator from St. Tammany Parish School System. I have experience in regular and special education and served as an IEP Facilitator. I also have business experience that is ongoing and has proved successful. I serve on the board of directors of the Children's Advocacy Center-Hope House on the executive and strategic planning committees. In May of 2022, I became a Leadership St. Tammany Graduate. Through my experience in education, in business, and in my non-profit service, I understand that success is built on trust and trust is built on transparency. Our school system is vital to the success of our community, I am committed to the thriving success of both.

Judith Champagne

In my medical training, it is engrained to put your patients ahead of yourself. Transparency and accountability is required in medicine because there are lives on the line, and I believe that same onus is on those in the positions of representing and educating our children. I plan to devote my life to representing the children in our district with the same commitment that it took to obtain my doctorate. More than that, I am a mother with children in our public school system. For the past 7 years I've been a stay-at-home mom dedicating time to PTA and being fully engaged in my children's education.

Cris' Fontenot

As a mother, step-mother and grandmother, I have been actively involved in my family's education. One of my daughters, in fact, recently obtained her doctorate. As an immigrant from Communist Cuba, I have seen first-hand what happens when government operates without transparency or legitimate concern for the people. As a long-time employee and graduate of Tulane University, I have both administrative experience and educational qualifications to lead. I became a citizen in 1976 and a Republican voter not long afterwards, and am fully committed to transparency and responsible government.

- 2) Despite pay raises and the new certification program, the significant teacher shortage in St. Tammany schools continues. Until the vacancies are filled with qualified teachers, what measures will you take to staff classes and ensure all students receive the highest quality of education?**

Gia R. Baker

I am sad to report that there is a nationwide teacher shortage and St Tammany is not exempt from the effects of such. Revised Louisiana Statue 17:81 states clearly the general powers of the local public-school boards. It is the responsibility of the school superintendent to staff classes. I believe it is essential that the school board work collaboratively with human resource to continue to assess new and innovating ways to draw professionals to one of the most rewarding careers there is by making a difference in the life of a child by becoming a teacher. I am pleased with the ongoing professional development that is required of all teachers annually to ensure our teachers are equipped to deliver the highest quality education.

Judith Champagne

It is imperative that we get the most qualified teachers into the classrooms so I would not short change our students by filling the positions with anyone who is not certified. I'm also committed to keeping classroom sizes as low as possible. My plan to staff the classes would include enhanced recruiting and

offering more teacher support to the teachers we currently have through hiring teacher assistants. This would ensure more one-on-one attention to students as well as alleviating the burden being transferred to teachers in this understaffed situation.

Cris' Fontenot

Whether we are short 10 teachers or 100, the impact will be felt by students. Obviously, we should pay teachers as much as the budget will allow, while continuing to push state and federal leaders for additional funding. We should ensure teachers have not only the financial incentives to join our District, but the intrinsic benefits, as well – support from principals and District Administrators, as well as the School Board itself. If we can re-hire retired teachers, I'm all for it.

- 3) **St. Tammany teachers reportedly consider that the administration does not support them and that they are being asked to do more daily tasks than they can handle with their teaching responsibilities. How will you address the perception that teachers lack the support they need?**

Gia R. Baker

Teaching can be a difficult profession, but I believe the intrinsic rewards outweigh the difficult times. I believe teachers are their best when they feel supported. I am always available to talk to teachers. I encourage them to contact me directly with any concerns. I will continue to listen, question, and observe to understand the needs of teachers and staff and I am committed to supporting their needs as a board member and/or as a volunteer.

Judith Champagne

Quite simply by providing them the support by hiring teachers' aides and addressing teacher concerns in a timely manner. A recent issue has been the massive curriculum change in the K-2 level. The teachers' not receiving the curriculum by the start of school is unacceptable. Teachers are literally having to learn as they go when they should have been trained on it prior to school starting. Ultimately we should be doing everything in our power to make their jobs easier so they can focus all of their energy teaching our children.

Cris' Fontenot

I'm saddened that teachers don't feel supported by their professional leaders. If elected to the School Board, I will reach out not only to the schools in my district but to all employees. Some may not feel safe expressing their concerns to principals and District staff; they will be safe with me, and I will work for whatever changes are needed and appropriate.

- 4) **Many of the schools in St Tammany were built with a design in which open corridors connect adjacent wings of the buildings. Considering this building design could expose children to threats from outside the school campus, what will you do to address the critical problem of ensuring school safety now and permanent changes for the future? How do you propose paying for the changes or measures you identify as a necessary solution to school safety?**

Gia R. Baker

Safety saves lives. Our school system currently has a plan in place that addresses Planning, Prevention, Safety and Response. Please see the letter addressing our STPPS Family dated 5/28/2022 from Assistant Superintendent, Mr. Cosse'. (Note: the letter is printed below) As a board member, I am committed to the continued use of the most updated implementation of technology for safety purposes. Our safety measures are paid for by the 2019 bond renewal. Personally, I will continue to pray for the safety of our children, our schools, and our community.

Judith Champagne

By ensuring that current security measures are up to standard, locked entrances and check-in before entering campus grounds. I would also consider hiring more resources officers to ensure all parts of campus are under surveillance at all times. In the future we can propose that school campuses have one way in, many ways out, bullet glazed glass, and blind spots in the classroom where students can be

undetectable from classroom windows. I believe an independent external audit of our budget will reveal funds that could be used to support this endeavor.

Cris' Fontenot

Keeping our students, faculty and staff safe during the school day is incomparably important. If pupils and personnel have to be worried about their personal safety, they will certainly not be focused on the academic tasks they are there to complete. Maintaining funding for School Resource Officers, along with communication and regular drills with local law enforcement, are important parts of this solution.

Letter referred to by Candidate Baker:

Dear STPPS Family,

Our thoughts and prayers go out to the families and communities impacted by school violence, especially those affected by the tragic and senseless act of violence that occurred in Uvalde, Texas this past week.

I know this tragedy has brought the issue of school safety to the front of all of our minds. I want you to know in STPPS safety remains our number one priority and our district is here to support you. Mental health resources are available to any of our families and employees who may need help as they process what occurred. Email the STPPS Cares helpline at Mental.Health@stpsb.org to get personalized guidance from members of the STPPS Mental Health Team.

As a School System, we are entrusted to protect and ensure the safety of our students and employees. Please know we take this responsibility seriously and have comprehensive plans and measures in place at the district and school levels to help prevent and respond to emergencies.

I want to provide information about some of the important procedures and protocols we have in place.

Planning

We work closely with law enforcement and first responders to develop safety plans, including but not limited to the following:

- Coordinated planning and frequent communication with law enforcement and first responders
- District-wide comprehensive crisis management plan
- (EOP) Emergency Operations Plans are developed and updated by each school's (ICS) Incident Command System Team regularly.
- Web-based emergency plans for every school shared with first responders
- Ongoing training in crisis management as well as prevention and preparedness is provided

Prevention:

- Mental health provider in every school
- Programs and presentations through Sandy Hook Promise trains students and employees how to identify, assess, intervene and get help for those exhibiting at-risk behaviors
- Threat assessment process includes disciplinary data, Crimestoppers, See Something Say Something and mental health team
- Anonymous tip line through the Crimestoppers Safe Schools program to encourage students, parents and others to report potential or actual criminal activity

- Suicide Prevention/Detection is included in curriculum for high school students
- In coordination with law enforcement, we take a proactive stance with investigating threats

Physical Security

- School resource officer detail in every school
- Electronic access control door locking system will be installed on all exterior doors on all buildings on every school campus
- Security Cameras in schools and buses
- Classroom door locks
- Visitor identification system for all visitors
- ID Badges for employees, students and visitors
- Emergency Equipment Kit (First Aid, Radios, Roll Call)
- Two-way portable digital radios for direct and immediate communication between schools, central office and first responders
- Private radio system at every school allows communications between employees around the campus
- Perimeter fencing and gate locks

Response

- Crisis communication tools include robocalls, texts, school and district websites, district social media, app alerts, and media alerts
- Rapid Responder web-based crisis plans with maps and plans accessible by first responders
- Ongoing training and drills in responding to many types of crisis and emergencies are conducted at the schools.

Even with all of these safety measures in place, I know we are not immune to acts of violence. Everyone in our community has to work together as One Team STPPS to keep our schools safe. Thanks to community support of our Securing Our Future bond renewal and millage rededication in 2019 we are able to implement additional safety measures in our schools including access control systems and SROs and MHPs in all of our schools.