

Despite DeSantis' school board losses, one Hillsborough school board member knows attacks on public education will continue

'It just seems that it's the same business as usual.'

By [Chuck Merlis](#) and [Ray Roa](#) on Thu, Aug 22, 2024
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Jessica Vaughn, District 3 Hillsborough County School Board Member.

After being literally targeted by Gov. Ron DeSantis, Jessica Vaughn isn't exactly breathing a sigh of relief.



"I knew this race was going to be tough no matter what," Vaughn told Creative Loafing Tampa Bay two days after she handily beat back a challenge in Hillsborough County's District 3 school board race.

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Vaughn worried less about her political career and more for the wellbeing of her family after the governor set his sights on her race.

“It was personal pressure=,” she added. “Am I safe? Are there people who believe the horrible lies that I want to support pedophiles, or that I'm trying to peddle pornography in schools? That gives someone a lot of leeway to want to hurt people if you create that narrative around them just trying to do their jobs.”

Vaughn's opponent, Myosha Powell was one of 23 school board candidates endorsed by DeSantis statewide. And she wasn't the only one who lost on a night that further diminished the light of a governor who became more or less untouchable politically in a 2022 re-election campaign that saw him wipe the floor with Republi-cratic Charlie Crist.

Timing in politics is everything; just ask former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, who after being viewed as the future of the Republican Party for just 10 years, is now a pariah. The last 18 months for DeSantis—marked by prolonged and public spats with Disney and former President Donald Trump, and capped off by a doomed Presidential campaign—have seen his influence both in national and statewide politics dwindle.

And the governor's grip over Florida politics appeared to weaken this week, as candidates he endorsed across the state for school board positions lost elections up and down the state.

DeSantis has worked to overhaul the Florida education system, engaging in culture war issues like the so-called “Don't Say Gay” bill, banning certain books, and dictating curriculum on how topics like gender and sexuality are taught. He has long sought to install political allies in both governor-appointed roles, like at New College of Florida.

The governor has also not hesitated to throw the weight of his political apparatus behind school board candidates. In 2022, only five of the 30 school board candidates he backed lost.

Not this time.

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Last Tuesday, nearly half of the candidates DeSantis endorsed for school board positions lost their races, a result almost unimaginable just two years ago.

In Hillsborough's District 1 school board race, DeSantis-backed Lalya Collins

failed to unseat incumbent Nadia Combs.

Collins's defeat came despite taking in over \$136,000 dollars in campaign contributions, according to the Hillsborough Supervisor of Elections. By contrast Combs raised less than \$75,000. Despite the gulf in cash, Combs still cruised to reelection, outpacing Collins by more than 4,000 votes.

Collins was not the only DeSantis-backed school board candidate to lose their elections in Hillsborough County. In District 3, Myosha Powell lost to Jessica Vaughn by nearly 6,000 votes.

Vaughn beat Powell by more than 6,000 votes; the District 3 race was different from the one in District 1, with Powell unable to replicate the fundraising advantage Collins had over Combs.

“What a lot of people don't see when they look at the fundraising is that the governor basically poured his presidential war chest, which he had amassed during his failed presidential campaigns, directly into this Empower Parents PAC,” Vaughn told Creative Loafing Tampa Bay two days after her election night win.

CNN said the Friends of Ron DeSantis PAC changed its name to Empower Parents PAC over the summer and received \$82.5 million from the DeSantis-supporting Never Back Down PAC.

Candidates who got the governor's stamp-of-approval in Pinellas County got the same results.

Incumbents Laura Hine and Eileen Long defeated their DeSantis-backed candidates Danielle Marolf and Erika Picard. In Pinellas' District 5, DeSantis-backed Stacy Geier, also failed to secure a victory in a three-way race, earning just 37% of the vote and being forced into a November runoff against Katie Blaxberg.

While the trend of DeSantis-backed candidates suffering defeats continued into Sarasota, Pasco, Manatee, and Polk counties, Tuesday's election did see 12 of the governor's candidates win, including Tony Richardson and Melody Bolduc, whose victories in Duval secured a 4-3 conservative majority on the county's school board.

But Vaughn told CL she didn't see her race through a partisan lens.

“There were so many Republicans that voted for me because they really care about public education,” she added.

Some say Tuesday’s election offers a glimmer of hope for Florida’s Democratic Party, which has been looking for a way to reestablish its footing in the state. In a statement on election night, Florida Democratic Party Chair Nikki Fried said “Ron DeSantis' culture wars are over.”

Vaughn is a little less sure.

“I think that it's hard to say. I think that some of the more divisive, immediate, culture war stuff, obviously has been cooling down, and that's not working,” she told CL, adding that the next round of attacks on public schools—which have been happening for two decades—will be more calculated and below the surface.

“They realize it doesn't resonate with our communities as much, that there are people on all sides of the aisle that are very pro-public education, people who see the value of it and how much it means to our communities and want to support it,” Vaughn added.

But the bitterness may have already started.

Vaughn said she has not received one word of congratulations or a sincere “I wish you luck” from any of her opponents or the governor.

“There's no interest in collaboration or working together across the aisle on what's best for our kids and for schools,” she said. “It just seems that it's the same business as usual.”

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