



## **Barrera outlines School Board goals, initiatives**

By Jon Blauvelt  
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College and career readiness, flexible learning, student leadership opportunities and growth management are currently among the primary, strategic goals for the St. Johns County School Board, according to Board Chair and District 4 Member Kelly Barrera.

A Ponte Vedra Beach resident, Barrera spoke with the Recorder last week to discuss these goals, areas of focus and the Board's overall vision, as well as key topics such as safety and security and mental health.

### **Goals and vision**

As for goals and vision, Barrera said the School Board has identified four goals within its strategic plan. The first is regarding college and career readiness to ensure students graduate with the skills they need for college and/or a career. The second is to provide students with the choice/flexibility to customize their learning path. This includes the ability to learn online or via virtual instruction.

Another goal for the School Board, Barrera said, is to focus on well-rounded student success and providing students with the opportunities for leadership and character building. Included in this bucket is strengthening students' life skills, by, for example, participating in service projects in the community.

Barrera said the final goal in the School Board's strategic plan is growth management success. She explained that managing systematic growth doesn't simply mean building buildings; it also translates to updating and maintaining current buildings. In addition, that area of focus includes hiring more excellent teachers and developing and hiring the best leadership in the district. Meeting this goal, Barrera said, also includes fulfilling the needs of non-instructional personnel, such as bus drivers, food service employees, etc.

Other goals for the School Board include increasing exposure to Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM), partnering with other agencies to build the optimal environment for teachers and staff and working on mentorship programs for teachers and students. Barrera said the School Board will also be putting more focus on continuing to expand First Coast Technical College.

## **Safety and security**

Almost one year after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Barrera said she feels “very strong” about the safety and security of schools in St. Johns County.

“We were very proactive on safety and security of our schools before Parkland, and we had already been putting that money and resources into beefing it up,” she said. “With the money that the legislature put towards that and the half-cent sales tax, we’ve been able to take that to another level.”

With that being said, Barrera said they are never satisfied, and that the district is always making the issue a top priority.

“Unfortunately, in today’s world, no one is ever 100 percent safe,” she said. “But as we keep investing more resources and more attention and more focus on that, we continue to improve. Equipment becomes better. Communication and resources and collaboration between agencies has become better. Prevention has become better. That will always be one of our top priorities.”

In an editorial Barrera submitted to the Recorder in August 2018, the School Board chair noted that every school in St. Johns County School District is now protected by trained, armed security personnel. The district has worked with the St. Johns County Sheriff’s Office and U.S. Security Services to do so.

As for the investments that were made in security prior to the Parkland shooting, Barrera highlighted in her editorial the purchase of the 800 MHz security radios for every school and school bus to provide direct communication with the Sheriff’s Office. In addition, Barrera said the district has conducted active shooter training drills for some time, among other investments.

## **Mental health**

As expectations continue to rise for students across the country, school districts are presented with the challenge of balancing the desire to succeed with maintaining mental health.

Barrera addressed this topic and told the Recorder it’s important to remind folks that it’s OK to fail.

“Everybody is on their own journey,” Barrera said. “They will excel and not excel at different times. ... Everyone shines in different ways. It all doesn’t have to be at one time.”

In her August 2018 editorial, Barrera noted the district has hired additional school psychologists, mental health counselors and social workers to support the mental health of students. Barrera noted that the district is also working with third-party community partners to address this issue. They are also adding additional avenues for social and emotional learning through programs such as Character Counts!, Capturing Kids Hearts, Link Crew and more.

“There are so many different ways that students excel,” Barrera said. “Certainly the school looks for when students have overfilled their plate or are overstressed. But I encourage parents at home to keep in mind that there’s a place for everyone to succeed.”