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Via Email

St. Tammany Federation of Teachers and School Employees
AFT Local 3952
union@stfed.org

RE: 2026 School Board Candidate Questionnaire — Ben Banchs, Candidate, District 7

Dear Federation Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the Federation's 2026 School Board Candidate Questionnaire. I am seeking the endorsement of the St. Tammany Federation of Teachers and School Employees and, if eligible under the Federation's rules, consideration for a political contribution. My complete responses to all twelve questions follow. These responses reflect my own positions, and my typed name at the close of this letter serves as my signature. I understand the Federation may also consider my public record, candidate interview, and other relevant information, and may publish these responses in full.

Candidate information

Candidate: Ben Banchs
District: 7
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Campaign phone: (985) 205-8922
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1. Priorities and Preparation

Why are you seeking election to the St. Tammany Parish School Board? What are your three highest priorities, what experience or preparation do you bring, and how should voters judge whether you have been successful?

I'm running because I believe in public service. I've been a public servant all my life — 27 years in the Louisiana Air National Guard, a first responder during natural emergencies, a youth coach at the Abita ballpark, and chair of the American Legion's Children & Youth Committee. For the past four years, I've volunteered to read to elementary students, who then ask me about my military service. This campaign is an extension of that duty. My wife, our three daughters, and I are all products of public schools. With a granddaughter on the way, I want the school she walks into to be top-notch.

My three priorities are safe schools; fiscal responsibility and transparency; and competitive pay for teachers and support staff. I bring 20 years as a union representative, 16 of those in a full-time capacity as Business Manager of Laborers' Local 1776, representing a nationwide bargaining unit of nearly 5,500 employees of the Department of Defense. I have a track record of serving my community and representing union members who rely on me. Voters should judge my success by whether the board makes measurable progress on school safety, clearly explains major financial decisions, and moves teacher and support-staff compensation toward the top tier statewide without compromising the district's long-term financial stability.

2. Record or Readiness (new candidate)

What have you done to learn about the St. Tammany Parish Public Schools? What have you learned that most influences your decision to run?

I've done my research, and I'll keep doing it. I've studied the district's audited financial report, which shows approximately \$480.3 million in General Fund expenditures and a \$148.6 million General Fund balance. That balance is roughly 29 to 30 percent of a year's operating costs, compared with the board's policy requiring a minimum reserve equal to two months of operating costs. The balance includes funds committed for financial stability and funds assigned for salaries, benefits, and other educational priorities. Comparable October enrollment figures also show a decline of about 1,500 students since 2020. I've reviewed the collective bargaining agreement and the district's attendance-boundary map - comprehensive and complicated at the same time. I've attended and spoken at board meetings, and I've engaged the board over the years on the Lakeshore attendance boundaries, student discipline and due process, parking fees, and collective bargaining. My wife and I also count educators and school staff among our friends, and we hear their concerns firsthand.

I come to this as both a taxpayer and a longtime labor advocate. St. Tammany remains among the higher-property-tax parishes in Louisiana, and schools receive nearly half of local property-tax revenue. Yet teacher and staff compensation is not in that same top tier. That gap deserves a clear explanation, and I want to understand what choices have produced it and what can responsibly be done to close it.

3. Parliamentary Procedure

How familiar are you with Robert's Rules of Order and the use of fair and consistent rules during Board meetings? If elected, would you be willing to participate in training on Board governance and parliamentary procedure?

Familiarity with Robert's Rules of Order: 5 — Advanced Knowledge. Would I participate in training on Board governance and parliamentary procedure: Yes.

4. Collective Bargaining

Do you support collective bargaining in St. Tammany Parish Public Schools?

Yes.

5. Employee Compensation

Do you believe compensation for certificated and support employees is competitive?

No.

6. District Finances

Rate your knowledge of STPPS finances and budget.

4 — Strong Knowledge.

7. Recruitment, Retention, and Working Conditions

What do you believe affects the district's ability to hire and keep good employees?

Most people would probably identify pay and benefits as the main factors affecting recruitment and retention. In fact, one of my proudest accomplishments was an effort I spearheaded that secured a roughly 30 percent pay increase for New Orleans-area federal wage employees after Hurricane Katrina.

But, after nearly 20 years representing employees, including 16 years full-time, I can tell you that while pay certainly plays a major role in an employee's decision to leave or stay, the main reason good employees often leave is because of bad management and whether they feel valued, respected, and supported. I've watched excellent employees accept less money to work for an organization that values them rather than take more money to work in a poor environment. Pay is unquestionably front and center, and I hear that from the teachers and school staff my wife and I know here in St. Tammany. But workload, student behavior, administrative support, and whether employees have a meaningful voice can make every compensation problem better or worse.

From a human-resources perspective, I would push for the same principles I fight for as a union representative: policies applied consistently, due process, clear guidelines, manageable workloads, adequate planning time, and a workplace where employees are treated as professionals. No employee – teacher, paraprofessional, bus driver, cafeteria worker, or anyone else – should feel threatened or intimidated for using the processes and protections available through the collective bargaining agreement, school board policy, or state and federal law.

8. Professional Autonomy and Instructional Decisions

When a school uses a scripted curriculum, how much freedom should educators have to adjust the lesson, pace, or teaching methods to meet their students' needs?

Professional autonomy ranks alongside respect and adequate pay because all three are connected. A strong curriculum should provide a foundation, not become a script that prevents teachers from responding to the students in front of them. Educators should have meaningful discretion to adjust lesson delivery, pacing, examples, and teaching methods while still meeting state standards, learning objectives, and district requirements. There is no cookie-cutter student: students have different aptitudes, interests, learning needs, and personal circumstances. Teachers are closest to the daily realities of the classroom, and we should trust their professional judgment while providing the materials, training, and support they need.

It's the same in my own work. No two cases that cross my desk are alike; every disciplinary matter, grievance, and contract negotiation turns on its own facts, people, and circumstances. Consistent standards matter, but rigidly identical treatment does not always produce a fair or effective result. Schools are no different.

9. Safe and Supportive Schools

How should the district handle violence, threats, bullying, repeated behavior problems, and other behavior that makes it hard to learn or feel safe, while also protecting student rights and giving students the help they need?

Safety has to come first, while at the same time respecting the rights of students, teachers, staff, and administrators. Violence, threats, and bullying require a prompt and serious response. For repeated or severe behavior, consequences should be deliberate, fact-based, and timely. Discipline must be applied fairly and consistently, regardless of who the individual is or whom they are connected/related to. That is how we protect students who are there to learn and adults who are there to teach and care for them.

At the same time, consequences alone are not enough. Mitigating circumstances should be considered, due process must be protected, and students or employees dealing with personal hardships should have access to appropriate counseling, intervention, or other support. A system of clear rules, consistently applied consequences, due process, and meaningful support is how we create a safe environment.

10. Educational Opportunity and Student Success

What school programs and opportunities for students should the district improve or add?

Most of this is anecdotal, but a recent Lakeshore graduate told me this week something I've heard from other students: they do not feel prepared for the real world. First, career pathways. A four-year college degree is not every student's best path. Students should have strong exposure to skilled trades – electricians, plumbers, carpenters, welders, and other careers – along with military service, technical programs, apprenticeships, and university options. As a Laborers' union leader, I know the trades offer good careers where people can earn while they learn and complete training without taking on substantial student debt. Schools should present those paths with the same pride as the university track.

Second, practical life skills: paying bills, managing a bank account, understanding credit and taxes, carrying yourself in a professional environment, and saving for retirement in a world with fewer pensions and uncertainty about Social Security.

Third, the arts. Sports are a major part of our culture, but music, theater, visual arts, and other creative programs also deserve a strong place in our schools. We are next door to New Orleans, one of the most culturally and musically important cities in America, and our students should have meaningful opportunities to participate in and appreciate the arts.

I recognize that the district may already offer some of these opportunities and that my impressions are based on a limited number of students and families. My point is that we should continually evaluate whether these programs are available, well communicated, and accessible across the district – and whether students themselves believe the programs are preparing them for life after graduation.

11. Artificial Intelligence, Technology, and Screen Time

How should the district approach AI, technology, student devices, and screen time?

AI should be approached thoughtfully, not fearfully. It is already part of daily life and will reshape fields from manufacturing to medicine. Our responsibility is to prepare students for a world shaped by AI while being clear that technology should support, not replace, good teaching and independent thought. That means age-appropriate AI literacy; firm expectations for academic integrity; protection of student data; strong cybersecurity; equitable access; and training and input for teachers before new tools are introduced.

Phones and screen time require a different approach. Phones are a distraction during instruction, and requiring students to put them away during class is reasonable. More broadly, district devices and educational technology should be used when they improve learning, not simply because they are available. Students also need meaningful device-free time for discussion, reading, writing, hands-on work, and interaction with teachers and classmates. Before new technology is adopted, teachers and parents should be informed and have a real forum for questions and concerns. The board must manage the school system, but it should do so with the advice of the people in the classroom and at home.

12. Accountability and Accessibility

If elected, how will you stay available to employees and the public, communicate with Federation representatives, and protect employees' right to speak up about workplace concerns? If you make a decision that is different from what you said during your campaign, how will you explain that decision to the public?

First and foremost, everyone I represent - whether they live in my district or not - deserves dignity and respect. You will never find me disrespecting a constituent or employee, especially when they attend a public meeting and address the board. I plan to serve in this role with clear, dedicated ways for constituents and employees to reach me directly by email, an online form, or a dedicated phone. Any website or communication channel I use will comply with district policy and public-records requirements. My pledge is simple: respond and do not go silent. Communications will be received, evaluated, and answered, and when action is needed, people will know what I think and why. I will also support clear non-retaliation protections so employees can raise good-faith workplace concerns without fear of punishment or intimidation.

Finally, the Federation. I respect the Federation's legal role in representing its members and bargaining-unit employees collectively. Dealing with the Federation means listening to employees with dignity, respect, and a genuine desire to provide answers. My pledge is to honor the positions on which I campaign. If new facts or circumstances ever lead me to consider a different position, I will explain the valid, fact-based reasons publicly, seek input when practical, and be transparent about my final decision to the fullest extent permitted by law. People may not always agree with my vote, but they should never have to guess why I cast it.

Thank you — and thank you to your members for the work they do every day in our schools, on our buses, in our cafeterias, and in every other way they make sure our school district runs smoothly. I would be honored to earn your endorsement, and I welcome the opportunity to sit down with the Federation in person.

Sincerely,

Ben Banchs

Candidate

St. Tammany Parish School Board – District 7

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