

**Subject:** Hall Pass: Your Ticket to Understanding School Board Politics, Edition #100

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The debate over reading instruction in California

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Ballotpedia's Hall Pass

## March 06, 2024

Welcome to *Hall Pass*, a newsletter written to keep you plugged into the conversations driving school board politics and governance.

In today's edition, you'll find:

- On the issues: The debate over reading instruction in California
- School board filing deadlines, election results, and recall certifications
- AI a prominent topic at COSSBA annual conference
- Extracurricular: education news and numbers from around the web
- Candidate Connection survey

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## On the issues: The debate over reading instruction in California

*In this section, we curate reporting, analysis, and commentary on the issues school board members deliberate when they set out to offer the best education possible in their district. Missed an issue? Click [here](#) to see the previous*

*education debates we've covered.*

*Last October, we ran a four-part series exploring the science of reading: [one](#), [two](#), [three](#), and [four](#).*

California legislators introduced [Assembly Bill 2222](#) on Feb. 7, requiring the science of reading approach to instruction, which it defines as “explicit and systematic instruction in phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and writing.”

The *Los Angeles Times* Editorial Board writes that the science of reading instruction—which they say includes formal teaching on sounding out words (phonics) and vocabulary—is common sense. The Editorial Board says California should require more phonics-focused technical instruction in teacher training and student curricula.

Allison Briceño writes that the science of reading approach is poorly defined and tends to oversimplify the learning process. Briceño says science of reading curricula tend to focus too much on foundational skills like phonics and less on other related skills like writing and language development. She says teachers should have the flexibility to choose what reading curriculum to use.

**[Editorial: The science of reading works. California should require it](#)** | The Editorial Board, *Los Angeles Times*

“It’s an impressive-sounding moniker, the science of reading. But many successful teachers call it common sense and have been using it informally for years. It involves more direct instruction by the teacher, a significant dose of phonics, or sounding out words from letters, as well as building vocabulary, encouraging students to read aloud and helping them comprehend what they’re reading. In contrast, the two other principal methods of literacy education followed the theory that reading comes naturally to children, who just need to be exposed to engaging literature and figure out words by guessing them from the pictures and other context. While this actually does work for 30% of students, it leaves the futures of the other 70% in peril. Opponents of science of reading complain that phonics is too mechanical. But it doesn’t have to be if combined with vocabulary and enjoyable literature. Besides, what’s worse, a couple of years of sounding out words to build fluency and comprehension, or a lifetime of illiteracy? ... Schools need a sense of urgency to ensure that California students are improving academically right now, especially those in marginalized groups and from low-income families.”

**[Opinion: Should California schools stick to phonics-based reading ‘science’? It’s not so simple](#)** | Allison Briceño, *Los Angeles Times*

“In fact, the term ‘science of reading’ lacks a clear definition. It’s more a misleading marketing ploy and ideological catchphrase than a subset of research or teaching methodology. ... Researchers agree that learning to read is a complex process. But curricula that claim to be aligned with the science of reading tend to oversimplify the process, overemphasize and isolate

foundational skills such as phonics (the correlation between letters and sounds), overlook oral language as a foundation for reading and ignore the importance of writing. In other words, they misrepresent the “science” part of the ‘science of reading.’ Learning to read in this way would be like learning to pedal on a stationary bicycle and then being expected to ride a bike through L.A. traffic without understanding balance, steering, speed and the rules of the road. ... Overemphasizing foundational skills can take classroom time away from writing, language development, science and social studies. Foundational skills are extremely important for young students, but they are insufficient for developing critical thinking, reading and writing.”

## Share candidate endorsements with us!

As part of our goal to solve the [ballot information problem](#), Ballotpedia is gathering information about school board candidate endorsements. The ballot information gap widens the further down the ballot you go, and is worst for the more than 500,000 local offices nationwide, such as school boards or special districts. Endorsements can help voters know more about their candidates and what they stand for.

Do you know of an individual or group that has endorsed a candidate in your district? Click [here](#) to respond!

## School board update: filing deadlines, election results, and recall certifications

*In 2023, Ballotpedia covered elections for over 9,000 school board seats in more than 3,000 districts across 34 states. We’re expanding our coverage each year with our eye on the more [13,000 districts](#) with elected school boards.*

### Election results from the past week

Yesterday was Super Tuesday, and voters in [15 states and two territories](#) went to the polls to cast ballots in federal, state, and local elections in one of the biggest voting days of the year (subscribe to Ballotpedia’s [Daily Brew](#) for coverage of elections up and down the ballot!).

March 5 was also a big day for school board elections. Ballotpedia covered school board elections in Arkansas, Alabama, California, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Tennessee. That included elections in the [Los Angeles Unified](#)

[School District](#)—the second-largest in the country. We also covered recall elections in two California districts.

Here's a brief look at some election results.

## Los Angeles

Four seats on the [Los Angeles Unified School District](#) school board are up for election this year. On March 5, voters decided primaries for Districts 1, 3, 5 and 7. Candidates can win outright with a majority of the vote. If no candidate wins a majority, the two top vote-getters advance to a general election in November.

As of this writing, only one candidate—incumbent Tanya Ortiz Franklin, in District 7—is leading with a majority of the votes.

Here's a look at the [early results](#):

- **District 1:** Seven candidates are running in this race. Khallid A. Al-Alim and Sherlett Hendy Newbill are leading, with each having 22.3% of the vote. Dewayne Davis is in third place with 17.9%.
- **District 3:** Six candidates are running in this race. Incumbent Scott Mark Schmerelson and Dan Chang are leading with 41.5% and 29.5%, respectively. Raquel Villalta is in third place with 13.2%.
- **District 5:** Four candidates are running in the race. Grace Ortiz and Karla Griego are leading with 32.8% and 31.9%, respectively. Fidencio Gallardo is in third place with 23.6%.
- **District 7:** Incumbent Franklin has 53.8% of the vote and Lydia A. Gutiérrez has 46.2%.

[According](#) to the *Los Angeles Times*, “Big-picture issues include declining enrollment, potential school closures, the ending of pandemic-relief aid, the future of school police and student drug use.”

## Recall elections

- [Orange Unified School District](#)

**Who faced recall?** Board members [Madison Klovstad Miner](#) and [Rick Ledesma](#).

**What's the outcome?** As of this writing, early results show 53% voted “Yes” to recall Miner and Ledesma, and 46% voted “No.” Votes are still being counted. Click [here](#) to learn more about this recall.

- [Woodland Joint Unified School District](#)

**Who faced recall?** Emily MacDonald, the Area Two representative on the seven-member Woodland Joint Unified School District board of trustees.

**What's the outcome?** [Unofficial results show](#) 60.61% voted "Yes" to recall MacDonald and 39.39% voted "No." Click [here](#) to learn more about this recall.

Read more about school board recalls [here](#). We'll have more on noteworthy March 5 school board elections next week.

## Artificial Intelligence (AI) a prominent topic at COSSBA annual conference

Artificial intelligence (AI) in education was one of several major topics at the Consortium of State School Boards Associations' (COSSBA) annual conference in Dallas, Texas, from Feb. 23-25. AI was not a topic at COSSBA's inaugural conference last year.

COSSBA represents state school board associations in 25 states. More than 1,300 school board members from all 25 states attended the conference.

I traveled to Dallas for the conference and spoke with school board members from around the country.

### What is COSSBA?

[COSSBA](#) was [founded in late 2021](#) and is one of two national organizations representing state school board associations. The other, the [National School Boards Association](#) (NSBA), was founded in 1940. COSSBA describes itself as a "non-partisan, national alliance dedicated to sharing resources and information to support, promote and strengthen state school boards associations as they serve their local school districts and board members." For more background on COSSBA and NSBA, [click here](#).

Last year, I covered COSSBA's inaugural conference in Tampa, Florida, [here](#) and [here](#).

### AI in classrooms

COSSBA Chief Operating Officer Debb Oliver said AI raises many questions, including about school safety. Oliver told me: "One of the things we hope to keep awareness of it's not just AI—AI is not bad. It's not good. It is a shift. And it's something that we all are going to have to be a part of. How do we look at that holistically?"

[ChatGPT](#) is the most prominent AI platform. OpenAI, a nonprofit, released ChatGPT on Nov. 30, 2022. Within two months, more than [100 million people](#)

were using the tool, making it the technology with the fastest-growing user base in history at the time. ChatGPT, an example of [generative AI](#), is [trained on large volumes of data](#) to [predict](#) which words are likely to follow one another. Users interact with ChatGPT through questions and prompts. With varying levels of accuracy, ChatGPT can generate essays, solve math problems, write computer code, and more.

Other notable AI platforms include Google's [Gemini](#) and Anthropic's [Claude](#).

An EdWeek Research Center poll of teachers and district leaders conducted between Nov. 30-Dec. 6 found that [56% of respondents](#) expect AI use to increase in the next year. Educators have [responded to ChatGPT](#) in varying ways. Districts in [Los Angeles](#) and [New York City](#) have blocked access to ChatGPT out of a concern that it could help students cheat. Other districts, like Wichita Public Schools in Kansas, have cautiously [embraced](#) the tool in and out of the classroom.

Breakout sessions on AI included:

- AI in Education: Opportunities and Challenges
- AI Writing Generators — The Good, The Bad and The Ugly
- AI in Education: Legal and Policy Considerations
- AI in Education: Safety Considerations

[Marvin Jones](#), a member of the Cabot School District school board in Arkansas, said AI will “cross every segment of society, and education is going to be on the forefront.” Jones, who said recruiting high quality teachers is one of the biggest issues facing his district, said that AI could help schools deal with teacher shortages: “With AI, my experience from what limited exposure I’ve had, this could very well be the vehicle that helps schools move to the forefront in terms of educating the young people like we should.”

On whether students might use AI platforms to [cheat](#) Jones said: “A dishonest student can be dishonest today without AI. Right. There’re too many forums out there they can utilize.”

Director of Digital Initiatives for the Missouri School Boards' Association Mark Henderson, who presented at a session on AI in the classroom, said, “For teachers, you know, it’s basically a virtual teaching assistant that can help them develop lesson plans and worksheets, and test and write letters to parents and just endless possibilities. For students, you know, there’s so much that they can do with research and with developing their own ideas, learning about things they could never have learned about before.”

Henderson, also said he was worried AI could be used to manipulate local elections, including those for school boards: “We did a [webinar](#) with some state associations about deep fakes and their potential threat on the elections.”

[On the Ballot](#), Ballotpedia's weekly podcast, has covered [state-level AI regulation](#) and [AI's effect on political news](#).

## What other topics were covered at the conference?

The conference featured keynote speakers and dozens of breakout sessions on finance, governance and leadership, safety and mental health, community involvement, and student achievement. Session titles included:

- School Safety Preparedness: Beyond Drills and Tabletop Exercises
- Parental Rights in K-12 Education
- I Count too: Affirming Students Who Look Love Learn and Live Differently
- Unlocking the Science of Reading: A Journey into Literacy
- Governing School Boards Through an Equity Lens: A Transformative Approach to Education

## Extracurricular: education news and numbers from around the web

*This section contains links to recent education-related articles from around the internet. If you know of a story we should be reading, reply to this email to share it with us!*

- [FCC rolls out planned \\$200 million school cybersecurity program](#) | *Politico Pro*
- [Virginia school board member arrested on Jan. 6 charges](#) | *WTOP News*
- [Nex Benedict's school will be investigated over possible federal civil rights violations](#) | *The Oklahoman*
- [Teachers Unions Quietly Spend Millions on GOP Primaries in 32 States](#) | *The Daily Signal*
- [‘More kids, more joy.’ What happened when two small Denver elementary schools merged](#) | *Chalkbeat Colorado*
- [Voucher expansion leads to more students, waitlists and classes for some religious schools](#) | *The Associated Press*
- [Head Start funding not keeping pace with rising child poverty rates](#) | *K-12 Dive*
- [Coalition Challenges Residency Requirements for Public Schools](#) | *The 74*
- [The Surging Growth of K-12 Classical Education](#) | *RealClear Education*
- [Beaufort, South Carolina, schools return most books to shelves after attempt to ban 97](#) | *CBS News*
- [‘There’s just not enough resources’: In wake of violence, Brockton High students say school needs more teachers](#) | *Boston Globe*
- [The Pathfinder: The Ballot Information Problem](#) | *PBS*

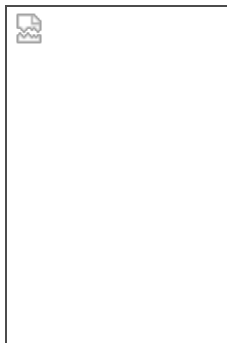
- [Should kids learn about LGBTQ issues at school? Many teachers and teens say no, new surveys find.](#) | *Chalkbeat*

## Take our Candidate Connection survey to reach voters in your district

Today, we're looking at survey responses from Incumbent [Susan Hines](#) and [Brock Foley](#), two of the seven candidates running in the [April 2 general election](#) for three seats on the [North Kansas City Public Schools](#) Board of Education in Missouri.

Hines and Foley are the only candidates who have, as of this writing, completed the survey. North Kansas City Public Schools is the fourth largest district in Missouri, with an estimated enrollment of 20,300 students.

Here's how Hines answered the question, **"What are the main points you want voters to remember about your goals for your time in office?"**



"Being elected to the School Board will enable me to continue championing an educational environment that mirrors the inclusivity, resilience, and excellence that defined my own educational journey. Let's access, affirm, and activate the full potential of all children of North Kansas City Schools together!

- The students in our district inspire me every day-
  - Northtown students spoke up in 2021 about the district's need to review the approach and policy on removing books from our libraries with passion, eloquence, conviction, and persuasion.
- A student spoke about how the restorative approach she experienced in the Temporary Alternate Placement Center helped her to move forward and return to school with new-found confidence and sense of purpose.
- I am proud of how our district continues to evolve and adapt - the homogenous, rural district that my grandmother, Hilda Linville, went to school in through the 1920s and 30s is very different from the cosmopolitan canopy our community has become."

Click [here](#) to read the rest of Hines' responses.

Here's how Foley answered the question, **"What are the main points you want voters to remember about your goals for your time in office?"**



- My primary concern, before anything else, is student





success. I want students leaving the North Kansas City School District to be confident, capable, and prepared to join society as productive citizens. I want our students to be set up for fulfilling lives, where they go and whatever they choose to do.

- If we want our students to be successful then the North Kansas City School District must be fiercely committed to student welfare. There are many challenges facing our young people but perhaps none is more prevalent today than the well documented issue of poor teen mental health. Schools cannot be expected to solve this problem but they are on the front lines of fighting it! Our students cannot be successful if they are not well and I will be fiercely committed to improving our students well being.
- Finally, I want better for our teachers. I want to see low teacher turnover, high teacher pay, and high job satisfaction. Happy teachers mean happy students.

Click [here](#) to read the rest of Foley's responses.

If you're a school board candidate or incumbent, click [here](#) to take the survey. If you're not running for school board, but there is an election in your community this year, [share the link](#) with the candidates and urge them to take the survey!

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