

Where do the candidates stand on reading literacy?

Sioux Falls School Board — June 2026 election

CHALLENGERS — WANT A NEW APPROACH TO LITERACY

New Approach	New Approach	New Approach
<p>Stuart Willett Challenger</p> <p>Submitted a formal literacy proposal grounded in Krashen’s Input Hypothesis. Proposes 36 books for fourth graders, stair-stepping from end-of-third-grade to fifth-grade level, two hours daily. Has seen the method work firsthand teaching ESL in Taiwan.</p>	<p>Jean Childs Challenger</p> <p>Called literacy the most important issue facing the district. Cited Mississippi’s dramatic reading turnaround as a model worth following and expressed strong interest in Krashen’s methodology as a proven framework.</p>	<p>Michael Stangeland Challenger</p> <p>Urged the district to stop reinventing the wheel — look to where dramatic improvement has already been achieved and apply what works. Framed the country’s 50 states as 50 laboratories: the results already exist, the district just needs to follow them.</p>

INCUMBENTS — SAY THE CURRENT APPROACH IS WORKING

Status Quo	Status Quo	Status Quo
<p>Gail Swenson Incumbent</p> <p>Defended the UFly (University of Florida Literacy) program currently being piloted, said phonics has always been taught, and noted that training teachers takes time. Sees the district as already on the right path.</p>	<p>Marc Murran Incumbent</p> <p>Argued students catch up by eighth grade and cited Sioux Falls students outperforming the state average in ELA, math, and science by junior year. Defended the growth model over snapshot testing as the right measure of success.</p>	<p>Dawn Marie Johnson Incumbent</p> <p>Attacked Krashen’s methodology directly, calling it outdated second-language theory. Cited UFly pilot results showing 69% proficiency vs. 40% in non-pilot schools, and framed the literacy gap as a national crisis — not a local failure.</p>

More than half of Sioux Falls students cannot read at grade level by sixth grade. The challengers agree that the current approach is not working and that proven alternatives exist — Mississippi went from 49th to 6th in the nation in roughly two years. The incumbents defend the current trajectory, pointing to pilot program data and long-term growth trends. Voters must decide: is incremental progress over many years acceptable, or does a result where more than half of students are failing to read on grade level demand a fundamentally different approach?

What each candidate said at the forum

New Approach **Stuart Willett — Challenger**

Willett's literacy proposal is grounded in Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis — the idea that comprehensible input just above the student's current level (I+1) is the engine of language acquisition. He has submitted a formal proposal to the district's innovation grant process, available at Willett4SFSD.com. The plan gives 36 books to fourth graders, beginning at an end-of-third-grade reading level and stair-stepping up to a fifth-grade level, with students reading approximately two hours per day in the classroom during the spring semester. He drew on direct personal experience to make the case: teaching ESL in Taiwan, he saw two students arrive in America at the start of sixth grade speaking no English. By January they were reading *Charlotte's Web* and *Stuart Little*. By spring, motivated by the upcoming Harry Potter film, they read the novel in English — a sixth-grade level book — within nine months. His point: children already speaking English have an enormous head start. The results are achievable.

New Approach **Jean Childs — Challenger**

Childs called literacy the most important challenge facing the district and was unsparing about the current results: fewer than 50% of students are reading at grade level by sixth grade. She pointed to Mississippi as the most compelling proof of concept — a state that faced a serious literacy crisis and completely reversed it within two years. She expressed genuine interest in Krashen's methodology after hearing Willett describe it, saying it is worth looking into and that the three challengers are committed to pursuing techniques that have proven themselves rather than continuing with an approach that is not producing adequate results. She also connected the literacy failure directly to the homeschooling surge: parents are not filing petitions, they are pulling their children out of the system — and the 143% increase in South Dakota homeschooling over the past decade is the clearest signal the board has received that something needs to change.

New Approach **Michael Stangeland — Challenger**

Stangeland's approach to literacy follows the same logic as his approach to the budget: stop reinventing the wheel. He noted that the country functions as fifty different laboratories where states implement different systems and produce measurable results. The outcomes already exist — states and districts that have achieved what Sioux Falls is looking for have already done the work. The task is to identify where those results have been achieved and apply what worked here. He did not advocate for a specific methodology by name, but his framing strongly aligned with the challengers' consensus that the district should be looking outward at proven models rather than defending the status quo.

Status Quo **Gail Swenson — Incumbent**

Swenson defended the district's current literacy strategy, centered on the UFly program — the University of Florida Literacy Institute curriculum — which is being piloted in elementary schools. She pushed back on the suggestion that phonics has been neglected, saying the district has always taught phonics and cursive, and that the reading intervention work has genuinely helped students. She acknowledged wanting the program to move faster but said teacher training takes time. Her overall message: the district is on the right path, the strategies are working, and the challengers are mischaracterizing a record of progress.

Status Quo **Marc Murran — Incumbent**

Murran challenged the framing that Sioux Falls students are failing, arguing that the growth model tells a more complete story than snapshot proficiency scores. He acknowledged that third-grade reading numbers are not where anyone wants them, but argued that by eighth grade students have caught up to the state average — and that by junior year in high school, Sioux Falls students are running ahead of the state in ELA (69% vs. 64%), science (60.9% vs. 49%), and mathematics (60% vs. 36%). His argument: the district is not failing its students, it is starting from a harder baseline and producing strong long-term outcomes. He also pointed to parental engagement as a critical factor the district cannot control on its own.

Status Quo **Dawn Marie Johnson — Incumbent**

Johnson offered the most pointed rebuttal to the challengers' literacy argument, directing it specifically at Krashen's Input Hypothesis. She said she looked it up and found it was developed in the 1970s and 80s as a second-language acquisition theory — not a K–12 structured literacy curriculum — and cited *Frontiers in Psychology* (2025) describing it as conceptually flawed, empirically outdated, and practically insufficient. She argued that the science of reading, which underpins UFly, requires explicit phonics instruction, and that Krashen moves in the opposite direction. She also drew a pointed contrast: one family homeschooling is not the same as running 38 schools serving 24,000 students including 3,000 ELL students and 4,400 students with IEPs. On the UFly data, she cited pilot schools reaching 69% proficiency versus 40% in non-pilot schools as evidence the district's current approach is working.