

Amber Archer Acevedo – MCSD Superintendent Submission

Question 1: With the restructuring and possible elimination of the U.S. Department of Education, what would be your plan to address the changes to federal education programs?

The restructuring or elimination of the U.S. Department of Education would bring significant changes to federal education programs, including potential reductions in funding for Exceptional Student Education (ESE) and support services for struggling students. This shift poses a real challenge to maintaining an equitable learning environment. Federal resources have played a crucial role in providing tailored instruction, accommodations, and specialized support, helping increase inclusion rates in this district from 35% to 79%. Without this support, student outcomes could suffer dramatically. While any cuts are painful, it is vital to prioritize services that directly impact student learning and well-being, particularly for our most vulnerable population.

If faced with the loss or change in these funds, I believe a creative and strategic review of our current expenditures would be essential. The first step I would take would be to conduct a thorough audit of existing programs, identifying areas where savings could be achieved without sacrificing the quality of instruction or essential personnel. In this scenario, it would be more desirable to make reductions in non-instructional areas – those that involve “things” rather than people. Having worked in this district through difficult financial times, I’ve experienced the tough choices that come with funding reductions, and I’ve been successful in finding ways to work smarter without sacrificing the core mission of educating all students.

One area where we can be more strategic is in how we purchase educational materials. We often spend heavily on updated textbooks and supplemental resources that may not significantly improve instruction. Extending the life of existing materials can lead to meaningful savings. Technology spending also deserves a closer look such as delaying device replacements when possible, limiting software subscriptions to platforms, and seeking community partnerships or grants for additional tech support. We have begun this process this past year, reviewing data to determine the effectiveness of various educational programs to ensure we are focusing only on those that deliver measurable student learning gains.

After-school programs also warrant review to ensure they align with academic priorities. With multiple programs running in the district, identifying those that do not directly support student achievement or serve only a small population is necessary. Some programs may need to be consolidated or modified. Academic assistance initiatives, for example, could be incorporated into existing tutoring efforts or supported by volunteers, helping maintain student support while reducing operational costs.

Above all, protecting our teachers, aides, and specialists who work with ESE and at-risk students must be our priority. The connection between educators and students is irreplaceable, and cutting staff would be far more damaging to student success than adjusting material resources or auxiliary services. By taking a thoughtful, data-driven approach to reducing less critical expenses, districts can absorb funding losses while ensuring students continue to receive the support they need to thrive. Making smart, strategic decisions now will help us weather financial challenges without losing sight of what matters most—our students.

Question 2 : The district I left \$15 million dollars, as a beneficiary to a will. The money is to be used “as the district deems necessary”. As Superintendent, how would you recommend the board best use the money.

If the Monroe County School District were to receive a \$15,000,000 gift, the funds should be strategically allocated to advance crucial infrastructure needs outlined in the district’s capital plan.

Having contributed to major capital projects like building Poinciana School and developing the Backyard at Key West High School, I’ve seen firsthand how thoughtful, long-term investments create lasting benefits for the community, shaping its future for generations.

The primary focus for a donation at this time would be the renovation of Reynold's School, transforming it into a new home for the district’s maintenance facility. This project is shovel-ready and aligns with broader district goals, including improving operational efficiency, restoring historic educational facilities, relocating the Administration Building from the Trumbo property, and addressing the pressing need for affordable housing for educators.

The groundwork for this initiative began in 2023 when the district secured a \$2 million grant from the state legislature. Since then, substantial planning has taken place, including the development of architectural designs for the Reynold School renovation and a community engagement meeting to gather input from stakeholders. With the infusion of an additional \$15 million, the project could swiftly transition from planning to execution, allowing construction at Reynold’s to begin immediately.

This action would serve as a critical first step in a larger sequence of improvements. After the maintenance facility relocates to Reynold’s, work can begin on restoring Bruce Hall on United Street. This historic building is set to become the district’s administrative center, preserving its legacy while offering a more centralized location for leadership functions.

Most significantly, vacating the Trumbo Property—currently home to administrative offices—would pave the way for an ambitious initiative: the development of an affordable housing complex for teachers. At a time when school districts across the country face challenges in recruiting and retaining qualified educators, offering housing solutions can serve as a powerful tool to support the workforce, particularly in high-cost-of-living areas such as Monroe County.

By investing in the renovation of Reynold’s School and its planned improvements, the district would not only upgrade the facility but also initiate a series of transformative projects that will benefit students, staff, and the broader community for generations to come. This \$15 million infusion would accelerate these essential efforts, demonstrating a strategic and responsible use of funds that aligns with community priorities and the district’s long-term vision.