

April 13, 2025

Florida School Boards Association  
Superintendent Search, Monroe County School District

Dear Board Members,

Please accept the following responses to questions provided on your behalf, by the FSBA:

Question #1:

With the restructure and possible elimination of the United States Department of Education my plan would be two pronged to work towards a solution to the problem. Whether serving as a mentor, teacher, coach, assistant principal, principal, district leadership, or superintendent each step has been a chance to forge lasting relationships. This is a relationship business and I welcome the opportunity to problem solve with collaboration and teamwork.

My first step would be to be highly visible in schools and in the community of Monroe County. This visible presence would also include Tallahassee to work with legislators for the benefit of Monroe County. In my previous tenure, I found value in working with a lobbyist while serving as superintendent of Flagler County Schools which provided meaningful access to legislators. Serving as superintendent in Maine and developing a relationship with Senator Joe Baldacci impacted educational opportunities for Bangor students during the pandemic academically, socially, and emotionally. The relationship with the Senator was influential in assisting students receive supports to graduate high school during a difficult time for families. To adapt to federal changes, it is a necessity to work hand in hand with politicians and policymakers nationwide to best serve all students in Monroe County.

Secondly, I believe it is paramount to not get too caught up with the distractions and focus on the here and now on the things I can assist with as superintendent. In researching this job, after assessing the strengths and weaknesses, the following would be prioritized:

#### **Areas of Strength**

- **EOC Performance:** Scores are generally on par with or exceeding state averages for Level 3 or higher; a consistent trend.
  - **Next Steps:** Review how students are targeted for course enrollment. Evaluate course progression to ensure a steady pipeline of students advancing into increasingly rigorous coursework.

- **Equity in Access:** Promoted equity by analyzing the percentage of students enrolled in advanced coursework by demographics, compared to overall district demographics.
- **Strategic Plan Alignment:** The district's 5-year strategic plan mirrors those of many other districts. This suggests alignment in instructional materials, resources, and student success focus.
  - **Next Steps:** Ensure strategic plan metrics are personalized to Monroe's population. Confirm the metrics are appropriate and actionable. Validate that required professional learning has been delivered to teachers.
- **School Grades:** School grades present a more favorable picture than general assessment data in ELA and Math.
  - **Next Steps:** Address data integrity issues (e.g., Survey 2/3 mismatches, mobility tracking, graduation cohort edits).

#### Areas of Weakness

- **ELA/Math Performance:** Scores have declined since the implementation of FAST and BEST standards. Teachers are struggling with the transition to new benchmarks.
- **Science Performance:** Grade 5 and 8 science scores are also declining, likely due to resource reallocation toward ELA and Math.
  - Current strategy is ineffective and is negatively impacting science performance.
- **SWD Performance Gap:** There is a ~25 percentage point gap between Students With Disabilities (SWD) and non-SWD on statewide assessments.
  - **Issue:** Overuse of Tier 3 interventions in lieu of appropriate SWD identification and services.
  - **Fix:** Ensure proper evaluation for SWD status and provision of appropriate services.
- **Acceleration Rates (MS/HS):** Relatively low, at ~55%.
  - **Next Steps:** Ensure enrollment in accelerated coursework mirrors overall demographics. Improve readiness by restructuring the math progression:
    - Grade 6 and 7: Accelerated Math
    - Grade 8: Algebra
    - High School: Geometry

Question #2:

My recommendation to the School Board regarding spending \$15 million dollars as deemed necessary would include five specific areas which would conceivably make a lasting impact well after the expenditure comes to fruition. My belief is that all five ideas would improve culture and pride for faculty, staff, students and their families. There also will likely be an improvement for the teaching and learning experience academically, social, and emotionally. An additional benefit would be enhanced opportunities for community involvements.

Idea #1 would be the largest expenditure earmarking funds for recruitment and retention. The housing emphasis that I read about in the strategic plan is a positive step. With the generous gift of \$15,000,000 it would be wise to develop a long-term plan for recruiting and retention with input from the teacher union. Within this investment it would be beneficial to incentivize staff members and interested secondary students to pursue a teaching certification.

Idea #2 after reviewing the areas of strength and weakness on academic performance I believe that an investment for In-School tutoring individually or in small groups is a proven way to raise academic performance. In-School tutoring also would be an avenue to stipend teachers or selective staff dependent upon areas of expertise to provide on grade level instruction, specifically with Special Education and English Language Learners.

Idea #3 would be to consider adding to the strategic plan a goal for all students to participate in two of more co or extracurricular activities per year. This idea would add to the school experience and provide an opportunity for student voice to suggest new clubs based upon interest and appropriateness. This is also another potential stipend or supplement for employees.

Idea #4 to hire a mentor coordinator and grow a mentoring program that will benefit the district culturally, academically, socially, and emotionally. Having a mentor is a relationship that can last a lifetime.

Idea #5 to explore a Flagship for all Monroe County Schools. Simply stated this would be a school wide determination to choose something unique that each school is famous and prideful for. In one of my past superintendent experiences one of the elementary schools has an Environmental Flagship. First grade students within that Flagship researched, advocated, and created change in outdated lunch trays to a biodegradable tray. This solution to the problem was replicated by all the schools in the district and others within the state. The beauty of Flagships promotes critical thinking while teaching across the curriculum infusing reading, writing, speaking, mathematics and science.

Enthusiastically yours,  
James Tager