

Responses to Written Questions

Question #1:

With the restructuring and possible elimination of the US Department of Education, what would your plan be to address the changes in federal education programs?

The executive order to dismantle the U.S. Department of Education and reallocate its functions to state and local authorities presents significant logistical challenges for school districts nationwide. As superintendent of Monroe County School District, I am committed to ensuring that these transitions do not disrupt the educational services our students rely upon.

State and local dollars generally fund core district functions, such as teacher salaries, transportation, and operations. Federal funds support supplemental services that target achievement gaps and student equity. While the district may use state dollars to fund base instructional staffing, Title I federal dollars are used to provide intervention teachers or academic coaches in schools with higher poverty rates. Programs such as Head Start, Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education, and the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act have also been instrumental in serving underrepresented groups and improving access to postsecondary opportunities.

The proposed elimination of the Department of Education raises concerns about the continuity and funding of these critical programs. Specifically, Project 2025's recommendation to phase out Title I funding over the next decade and restore revenue responsibility to the states could potentially affect support provided to vulnerable students (Dans & Groves, 2023).

Strategic Response Plan

To navigate these changes effectively, I will implement a comprehensive plan focusing on assessment, collaboration, and advocacy:

- **Comprehensive Program Audit:** Conduct a thorough evaluation of all federally funded programs within the district to identify those at risk and assess their impact on student achievement and well-being.
- **Stakeholder Collaboration:** Engage with state education agencies, local government officials, and community organizations to explore alternative recurring funding sources and establish partnerships that can help sustain essential programs.
- **Resource Reallocation:** Analyze the district's current budget to identify opportunities to reallocate resources to prioritize programs that serve our most vulnerable student populations.

- **Policy Advocacy:** Work alongside other district leaders and educational associations to advocate for state policies that will fill the gaps left by the withdrawal of federal support, ensuring that the needs of our students remain a legislative priority.

Throughout my career, I have engaged directly with state legislators to protect CTE , School Readiness, and Voluntary Prekindergarten funding. I have also provided input on the real-world impact of proposed allocation models and testified before the Florida Senate pre-k-12 appropriations committee. This experience will guide my advocacy in this evolving policy landscape. This background equips me to lead our district through the anticipated transitions, ensuring that we maintain the integrity and effectiveness of our educational programs.

The potential shifts in federal education policy underscore the need for a steadfast commitment to educational equity. We must proactively seek solutions that uphold our mission to provide high-quality education to all students, regardless of their background or circumstances. By focusing on strategic planning, collaborative partnerships, and unwavering advocacy, Monroe County School District will navigate these changes effectively, ensuring that our students continue to receive the support and resources they need to succeed.

Question #2:

The district is 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 use the money?

Receiving a \$15 million unrestricted donation presents the Monroe County School District (MCSD) with a rare opportunity to invest in initiatives that directly support student success—now and into the future. Because this is a non-recurring funding source, the district must prioritize one-time expenditures that yield long-term benefits without creating future financial obligations. Among the most impactful uses are workforce housing for MCSD employees, expansion of Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs, and enhancement of early literacy initiatives—all of which directly influence student achievement.

In Monroe County, the high cost of living poses an ongoing barrier to recruiting and retaining exceptional teachers and staff. This challenge has direct consequences in the classroom: high turnover disrupts student learning, and staffing shortages strain school operations. A portion of the donation could be allocated to advance the district’s longstanding plan to develop affordable workforce housing on the Trumbo Road property in Key West. A 2022 unsolicited proposal outlined a plan for 76 employee-only units, an administrative office, and green space (Payne, 2022). Moving this project forward could stabilize staffing across the Keys, allowing students to benefit from consistent instruction and experienced educators who can stay and grow in the community.

Expanding and modernizing CTE programs would powerfully equip students for real-world success, opening doors to high-demand careers and future-ready opportunities. Investments could include acquiring updated industry-standard equipment, creating new pathways aligned with regional workforce needs, and strengthening partnerships with local employers. By connecting classroom learning with real-world skills, CTE helps students see relevance in their education, improves engagement, and increases graduation rates. The return on investment is measurable: students gain certifications, internships, and employment readiness that set them up for lifelong success.

Research is clear: reading proficiency by the end of third grade is one of the strongest predictors of long-term academic achievement and broad-based prosperity. Targeted investment in early literacy would help ensure all students start strong. This could include high-quality instructional materials, evidence-based interventions, expanded professional development, and deepened alignment with private pre-kindergarten providers. Closing early literacy gaps early reduces the

need for later remediation and sets students on a path to sustained achievement across all subject areas.

Given the one-time nature of this gift, it should not be used to fund recurring costs. If legally permissible, the district could explore the feasibility of placing a portion of the funds in a restricted trust or endowment to support long-term, sustainable projects. Additionally, the district should seek opportunities to braid this funding with other local, state, or philanthropic sources to maximize impact and extend the reach of key initiatives. This strategy would require close coordination with financial and legal counsel to ensure compliance with state law.

By thoughtfully investing this \$15 million in strategic, student-centered initiatives, workforce housing, CTE expansion, and early literacy, Monroe County School District can translate a generous gift into lasting impact, advancing equity, opportunity, and excellence for every student.

References

Dans, P., & Groves, S. (Eds.). (2023). *Mandate for leadership: The conservative promise*. The Heritage Foundation.

Payne, K. (2022, April 28). *Monroe County school board considers new plan to build affordable housing on district land*. WLRN. <https://www.wlrn.org/education/2022-04-28/monroe-county-school-board-considers-new-plan-to-build-affording-housing-on-district-land>