

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

The potential restructuring or elimination of the U.S. Department of Education represents a significant shift in the landscape of public education.

As Superintendent, I would prioritize an in-depth review of the current budget to avoid as many disruptions as possible so that Monroe County students continue to receive high-quality education in a safe and secure environment. That process would begin with a thorough assessment of how federal programming currently supports our schools. Fortunately, I am confident in my abilities to review and restructure budgets as this was a specific task I led in my role as Deputy Superintendent. Though slightly different, it may turn out that the work districts had to do to wean themselves from ESSER funding might result in implementing a similar review process when it comes to the reduction of federal funds. I have experience leading similar endeavors as this is not that different than the process I had to facilitate in Collier County when we had to assess priorities and needs with the reduction of over 14 million dollars due to the sunset of ESSER funding. Programs such as Title I for low-income students, IDEA for students with disabilities, Perkins grants for career and technical education, and federal nutrition programs are critical elements in the education of students and we would need a thorough analysis focused on any potential loss of funding.

Should the Department be restructured or eliminated, we would evaluate how those resources would be redistributed. This includes whether or not the additional responsibilities would shift to state or even local district level. I would work with the Florida Department of Education, our legal counsel along with our Finance and Performance Team to identify the implications and formulate contingency plans. This would include creating potential alternative budget scenarios to anticipate funding shortfalls and identifying opportunities to supplement or replace federal dollars through state support, competitive grants, and local partnerships.

At the same time, this shift is an opportunity to strengthen our local and state systems. Without federal oversight, there may be more flexibility in how we design and implement programs. This includes potential new opportunities for collaboration with other school districts. By leveraging these enhanced relationships we would strive to engage in best practice and resource sharing where applicable. We would need to capture the opportunity to innovate, while still always holding ourselves accountable to high standards of equity, access, and excellence.

Communication will be key. I would ensure that our school board, staff, families, and community partners are kept informed about changes and our responses. Transparency builds trust, especially during times of uncertainty, and we would need to adopt new communication modes in order to ensure all stakeholders have access to information which would help mitigate stressors associated with the restructuring.

The response necessitated by restructuring the Department of Education would begin with a close analysis of direct impact, protecting services for students, leveraging collaboration, and using the moment to build a more resilient, responsive educational system for the students of Monroe County.

#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?

A donation of \$15 million dollars has the potential to have a lasting impact on any school district if a plan for use is thoughtfully crafted. Upon receiving the generous bequest of \$15 million with no specific restrictions, my primary recommendation to the Board would be to establish a substantial endowment. This approach offers the most sustainable and impactful long-term benefit for the district and its students. Investing the full \$15 million into an endowment, assuming a conservative average annual return of 5%, would generate approximately \$750,000 in perpetual annual revenue.

While the flexibility of the bequest allows for various immediate uses, directly allocating the entire sum to one-time operational costs or capital projects would be a fiscally imprudent decision. Such an approach would deplete the funds relatively quickly, failing to address ongoing needs and potentially creating budgetary gaps in subsequent years. The beauty of an unrestricted gift lies in its potential to provide continuous support.

Initially, the \$750,000 in annual earnings could be strategically deployed to address critical areas identified by a comprehensive needs assessment. This might include bolstering staffing levels in crucial support roles like counselors or paraprofessionals, investing in high-quality professional learning opportunities for our educators, or developing targeted intervention programs to address learning gaps and improve graduation rates. The specific allocation each year would remain adaptable, subject to Board approval and the evolving needs of the district.

Furthermore, the Board retains the authority to adjust the endowment's spending policy in the future if compelling circumstances arise. This built-in flexibility ensures that the funds can be responsive to unforeseen challenges or emerging priorities. One only need look at the potential uncertainty of restructuring of the Department of Education to see that

While the provided information raises important considerations regarding potential donor intent, existing capital needs, and outstanding debt, the establishment of an endowment does not preclude addressing these areas. The annual earnings could, for instance, contribute to a capital improvement fund over time or be strategically used to offset debt service costs, thereby freeing up operational funds for direct student support.

Exploring alternative strategies, such as hiring a dedicated community engagement officer with a portion of the funds while investing the remainder in an endowment, also holds merit. This approach could cultivate additional external resources and partnerships, further enhancing the district's financial stability and program offerings.

However, the immediate and enduring impact of a significant endowment provides a bedrock of consistent funding that can adapt to the district's evolving needs, ensuring that this extraordinary gift benefits generations of students to come. Therefore, my strongest recommendation remains the creation of a robust endowment, strategically utilizing its annual earnings to address critical needs while preserving the principal for long-term sustainability.