



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Thursday, Dec. 2, 2021
CONTACT: Bill Montford, Chief Executive Officer
Florida Association of District School Superintendents

Florida District School Superintendents Voice Concern on Key Issues Impacting Education

Florida's district school superintendents met in Tampa this week during the annual joint conference of the Florida School Boards Association and the Florida Association of District School Superintendents. The superintendents discussed many of the common issues and concerns facing our public school students and staff members. Collectively, the superintendents focused on four particular issues of statewide and national concern: mental health, school security, staffing shortages, and the impact of the minimum wage constitutional mandate. As Dr. Kamela Patton, who was named 2022 Florida Superintendent of the Year for her work leading Collier County Schools, said, we all need to continue to "remain focused on the well-being of students and find yet more ways to improve students' lives." It is clear that the financial and staffing resources available to school districts must align with this goal.

Mental Health

There is a tremendous need within our communities for mental health resources. Students are asked to deal with more during their early lives than ever before, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic coming on the heels of the Opioid crisis has exacerbated many of the frightening trends we have seen across the nation in recent years. Anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts and actions are overwhelming our students and affecting their ability to cope, to learn, and to simply be children.

Superintendents are appreciative of the recent emphasis the Florida Legislature has placed on student mental health, as well as the tireless work of Florida's First Lady Casey DeSantis. However, mental health is a community problem affecting much more than just student performance at schools, and as such, requires a greater solution than school districts can offer on their own.

A child spends approximately 10% of his or her life in the classroom by the time he or she reaches 18 years of age. That means nearly 90% of a child's formative years are spent in an environment outside of public education. As such, we cannot continue to ask our schools to address all of our children's needs beyond academic instruction during the school day. We must find ways to bring communities and stakeholders together to use the proper resources and expertise to help our children thrive. Public schools provide and will continue to provide mental health resources, but they need the help of a functional, comprehensive, and community-wide system of care that extends beyond the school day and outside of school grounds.

Similarly, superintendents expressed concern about the mental health of their staff members, as they are asked to do more and more than ever before with the limited resources and time. Teachers and other staff members enter this profession for the joy of helping children grow and learn, but now they are often tasked with so much more.

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The sense of helplessness as they encounter students facing enormous challenges both at school and at home and the weight of being asked to do so much more than just teach, have led to an increase in exhaustion and burnout. On top of those added pressures, the high numbers of vacant positions across all fields leave fewer people to shoulder these burdens. As a result, we have seen our staff's mental health needs increase dramatically over the last two years.

School Security

The recent shooting at Oxford High School in Michigan reinforces the continued need to focus on school safety. Meeting today's challenges in public education requires more than excellent teachers, motivated students, and good academic programs. Students' academic growth and development is dependent upon a safe and secure school environment that allows teachers to teach and students to learn. Achieving this goal requires changes in the classroom, the school and the community, along with significant collaboration with law enforcement, fire and safety professionals.

Florida's superintendents believe a safe learning environment is paramount to quality academic instruction and are committed to providing a safe learning environment. As noted above, the financial and staffing resources available to school districts must align with this goal.

Staffing Shortages

School districts are facing a critical shortage of teachers and other staff members, including bus drivers, substitute teachers, food service workers, paraprofessionals to work with our special needs children, and many more. The Governor and the Legislature recently took steps to increase starting teacher salaries, but more teachers are leaving the profession than entering it. We must find ways to keep veteran teachers as well as attract new teachers to the profession. Salary compression, workload increases due to staffing shortages, and other issues, if ignored, may continue to drive more teachers out of teaching than higher starting salaries can attract. If this trend continues, our students will pay the price by losing precious instructional time without an effective, certified teacher.

Impact of Minimum Wage Constitutional Mandate

Florida is working its way towards a \$15 per hour minimum wage, and school districts are going to need the resources to meet this constitutional requirement just as the Legislature has started preparing for this for state workers. This minimum wage increase will produce a ripple effect throughout the school district. For every position raised to the new minimum wage, there are others currently just above that amount who will need to see a commensurate increase in recognition of their skills, abilities, and responsibilities. For example, the head custodian at a school must be recognized for the extra responsibilities of the position and cannot make the same amount as a newly hired custodian.

Florida's Superintendents remain committed to working with stakeholders to address the multiple crises that Florida's education system is facing. Parents, students, legislators, school board members, community members and agencies, Department of Education personnel, teachers, administrators, and education support professionals must come together now to start finding solutions. Our children are counting on us.

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The Florida Association of District School Superintendents assists and supports superintendents as the chief advocate for Florida's public school system in their role of ensuring every student has access to a high-quality public education system.

Media Contact: Diana Shelton Oropallo | doropallo@fadss.org | 850.591.2669