

**Florida Association of District School Superintendents**  
**State Board of Education**  
**July 14, 2021**  
**St. Petersburg College - Seminole Campus - 9200 113rd St.**

**Welcome/Introductions**

**Dr. Michael A. Grego, Superintendent**  
**Pinellas County Schools**

Provide general comments about the district and the district's summer programs in response to COVID-19.

**General Comments**

As the 2021-22 academic and fiscal year formally began on July 1, superintendents and educators across the state are mindful of both the opportunities and challenges that this school year will bring as we return following an extraordinary 18 months for our students, staff, families and communities. As educational leaders, superintendents are excited to open our doors with more familiar, collaborative and interactive practices that we know are foundational for the academic and social-emotional learning of our students.

I am pleased to share that in Pinellas County more than 95% of our students across all grade levels participated in state assessments this past spring, and as Commissioner Corcoran shared a few weeks ago, 97% of third grade students across the state took the English Language Arts assessment. These numbers are extremely encouraging, *and* extremely important. High participation in assessments ensures districts, school leaders and teachers have the data needed to focus efforts and support accelerated student growth and achievement. I am so grateful to the staff of Pinellas County Schools and staff around the state for taking extraordinary steps to welcome students safely into our buildings for assessments. The data allows us all to be more strategic, targeted and effective with our resources and programs.

With the upcoming release of assessment data for individual students, schools and districts, the 2021-22 school year will see the implementation of plans for the recovery of any learning losses caused by COVID-19 and continued acceleration for all students to reach their infinite potential. This school year will also begin our transition to Florida's new B.E.S.T. standards into the curriculum. As educators who are committed to student learning, growth and development, this year marks the beginning of a window of opportunity through the strategic use of COVID-related funding (Cares Act, ESSER and ARP). We deeply believe in and are committed to the work we do on behalf of students and families. I know, as a state we will responsibly and successfully leverage the funds to eliminate the impacts of COVID-19 and accelerate student learning past pre-COVID performance.

Summer programming is one of the important strategies for school districts across Florida to provide additional direct supports and services for student learning and growth. Our Summer Bridge program ends tomorrow (July 15), and I am excited to report we had record participation in Pinellas County Schools. More than 15,000 students attended, including over 60% of our students identified for summer supports being present. Additionally, approximately 5,000 students were engaged in district-hosted summer enrichment programs such as STEM Camp, Ignite Music Camp, Visual Arts Camps, Elevating Excellence College Preparation

and Driver's Education. Finally, thousands more students are extending their learning independently through the district's [Level Up](#) initiative, which allows students and families to make the most of their PCS Connects digital learning devices and to help them remain digitally connected to learning all summer long. Our staff went above and beyond to provide an even more robust summer schedule in order to appeal to and be accessible to the largest number of students and families. We added transportation for our Summer Bridge programs, as well as new Voluntary PreKindergarten (VPK) (1,100 students) and Kick Off to Kindergarten programs. I am so proud of our district for expanding our options instead of using the pandemic as an excuse to slow down. I know similar acceleration is taking place in districts across the state and will allow our students to build on the success of the 2020-21 school year.

This is also the time of year when school districts adopt their annual budget. The budget process is a time where we align our financial resources to district priorities, always with student achievement at the heart of our decision making. Not long ago, we feared that we would be faced with trying to recover from the effects of COVID-19 with significantly less funding available. However, Florida's economy proved resilient, and the Legislature passed an education budget that will not require significant cuts by most school districts. As school superintendents, we are grateful that our state leadership has consistently supported our staff, students and families throughout this time. As I mentioned across the state, superintendents are responsibly and sustainably working to ensure our operational budgets and COVID-related funding align with the priorities for student learning and represent the highest levels of financial stewardship. Districts are already implementing their strategic use of federal funds, whether it will involve extended school days, greater access to tutoring and other after-school programs, increased technology resources, improved facilities, or all of the above.

We are grateful to Governor DeSantis and the Legislature for providing funding to increase our starting teacher pay to \$47,500 during the 2020 session and for continuing that funding during the 2021 session. In Pinellas we are working hard to bring our beginning teacher salary to \$50,000. We are also grateful to the Governor for prioritizing educators and providing \$1,000 bonuses to our principals and classroom teachers.

That funding was critical in allowing Pinellas County to provide similar bonuses to all our full-time staff members who worked throughout the pandemic. We are using ESSER dollars to supplement the state's funding, and I have received countless messages of gratitude from teachers, principals, assistant principals and support staff, not just for the money, but for being recognized for their extraordinary efforts to keep Florida's children in school and learning. I know many superintendents are also looking for ways to thank the balance of their employees who did so much this past year to make Florida an example for the entire country.

As superintendents, we are also encouraged by the Legislature's emphasis on early literacy and await the new Division of Early Learning and the new programs that will seek to reach students earlier than we ever have before. In Pinellas, we are expanding our VPK offerings at 25 elementary schools (45 additional classes) that serve a high percentage of economically disadvantaged children. We will be able to offer a full-day of services, including meals, without any cost to the parents. It is our hope that as a result, significantly more students will begin kindergarten on grade-level so that they do not have to start playing catch-up on their first day of school.

Also, as the state continues to recover and rebuild, workforce needs within the state have become readily apparent. This was also a clear focus of the Legislature this year, and superintendents are also excited by the opportunities we have to put more of our students into high-demand, high-wage jobs through the expansion of career and technical education programs. Here in Pinellas, we are proud that both the Pinellas Technical College Clearwater and St. Pete campuses have been ranked in the Top 5 community/technical colleges in the

state. And, Richard O. Jacobson Technical High School was selected as the new and emerging magnet school of excellence in the country. The Career Education Board, our district CTE advisory council, continues to support our CTE programs from middle school through technical college by actively engaging in career academy site visits and providing real-time industry input to needs of the Pinellas economy. Our adult education programs are leading the way with integration of adult education and career preparation by implementing career training programs in our adult education centers and during this coming school year will have opportunities for all adult education students in Pinellas County.

So, as we enter the 2021-22 school year, we remain hopeful that we are now at the beginning of a window of opportunity that we will likely never again see in our careers. We have a year of unparalleled change behind us. And we know that we have challenges ahead of us, like the ongoing shortage of certified teachers and critical staffing. But, as we move into the new school year we are excited to return to the practices we know engage our students and support increased achievement. As the leaders of the school districts across the state of Florida, we are also energized by the charge to seize this moment and leverage our resources to accelerate student and district growth. I know all superintendents are up to this challenge because supporting student success is why, as educators and leaders, we entered this most noble profession. Thank you for your continued support.