

## Randy Mahlerwein – St. Johns Co. Superintendent Semi-Finalist

### **Question #1.**

As superintendent, my instructional approach would be rooted in two foundational commitments: (1) a rigorous return to evidence-based practices in early literacy and numeracy, and (2) the intentional design of future-ready, student-centered instruction in secondary schools. I hold a deep belief that every student deserves access to high-quality teaching and learning. Our work must be both urgent and intentional, and for our schools who need extra support, a commitment to the school improvement process, all of which should be anchored in what we know works and while also being bold in our efforts to innovate.

In reading, I would lead with a strong implementation of the science of reading, particularly in grades K–3. Our goal is clear: every student reading at or above grade level by the end of third grade, but ideally by second grade. This requires structured, systematic, and explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Instructional materials and teacher practices must align with this research base, and professional learning must support educators in delivering high-fidelity, data-informed instruction. When students learn to read early, they are better positioned to read to learn and engage with increasingly complex texts throughout their academic careers.

In mathematics, I would emphasize numeracy development in the early grades through conceptually rich instruction. Students need access to hands-on, visual tools like number lines, base-ten blocks, and ten frames that help them build a deep understanding of place value, operations, and number sense. Instruction should be sequenced intentionally and include opportunities for discourse, reasoning, and reflection. For example, when a student explains how they decomposed a number to solve a problem, they are developing cognitive flexibility, which is a foundation for algebraic thinking and problem-solving in later grades.

As we close gaps in our lower-performing schools, we must also invest in expanding excellence in our highest-performing ones. This is not a zero-sum game. It's a systems-level commitment to excellence. At the secondary level, I would push for instructional models that prioritize inquiry-based learning, project-based units, and design thinking to offer powerful pathways for students to engage in meaningful, interdisciplinary work. These approaches develop higher-order thinking and make learning relevant in a rapidly changing world.

Partnerships with local industries must play a central role in high school redesign. To do so, we must co-develop pathways aligned to regional workforce needs so that we can ensure students engage in real-world problem-solving that builds both technical knowledge and durable skills, like critical thinking, collaboration, and resilience. Whether students are college-bound, entering

the workforce, or pursuing military service, they must graduate ready to thrive in dynamic environments.

Instructional excellence is not a single initiative. It is a culture. A relentless focus on early learning, coupled with innovative, future-forward secondary experiences, will allow us to raise both the floor and the ceiling. The students and families of St. Johns County deserve nothing less than ambitious expectations, intentional design, and exceptional outcomes.

## **Question #2**

As the leader of St. Johns County Public Schools, my first priority would be to establish a cross-functional Planning and Execution Team composed of key stakeholders: district leadership, site-based staff, governing board members, students, families, and both community and industry partners. This team would serve as the strategic engine for managing growth. All efforts would be anchored in our shared vision, community values, and research-based practices. It would also provide a consistent foundation for leadership and decision-making over the next decade.

This team's role would be twofold: to drive the execution of a comprehensive growth strategy and to ensure all voices are genuinely reflected in our decisions. To promote transparency and build public trust, we would implement a community-facing digital dashboard that communicates progress in real time. This tool would display key indicators such as project milestones, instructional program updates, capacity and construction timelines, stakeholder engagement opportunities, and fiscal stewardship. Our community deserves clarity and input in every phase of our planning process.

The first area of focus would be strategic alignment. That starts with defining a long-term vision rooted in academic excellence and operational sustainability. We would work to identify current and future instructional and operational needs, which would ensure our growth aligns with emerging workforce demands, community aspirations, and the evolving expectations of students and families. Strategic alignment also requires coherence across instructional design, facilities planning, staffing, and technology infrastructure so that every new classroom or campus reflects our commitment to student success.

Second, I would lead a comprehensive, data-informed growth analysis to guide decision-making. This includes tracking enrollment patterns, birth rates, market share data (e.g., charter and private school trends), housing and development activity, transportation logistics, and construction costs. Additionally, we would analyze program alignment and compliance with local, state, and federal regulations. The integration of these data points would ensure that our decisions are not only forward-looking but also grounded in operational feasibility.

The same community-facing dashboard would also serve as a tool for the public to monitor these data trends and understand complex trade-offs. This commitment to open data and transparent planning empowers our stakeholders and enhances shared ownership over our direction and outcomes.

Third, we must build internal capacity to lead through growth. I would actively collaborate with superintendents in other rapidly growing Florida districts (e.g., Polk, Pasco, and Osceola) to identify promising practices and lessons learned. At the same time, we must invest in talent development. This means cultivating leadership pipelines, expanding partnerships with local universities to strengthen our educator workforce, and providing targeted professional learning aligned to the demands of a fast-growing, future-ready district.

Through inclusive leadership, thoughtful planning, and transparent communication, we can ensure St. Johns County grows with intention and impact. Growth is an opportunity to design a more responsive and excellent public education system. With the right team, tools, and mindset, we can ensure our growth strategy serves every student well and reflects the community we proudly serve.