

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

Lichter 00:00

Based on the Collier County School Board's vision, mission and priorities listed on the district website, please present your plan to achieve these priorities. The priorities include items under academics, climate and culture, fiscal responsibility, human resources, and student conduct. You have up to 20 minutes to present your plan. The plan should include benchmarks for achievement as the two year and five year marks. You may begin your presentation.

Van Zant 00:32

Good morning distinguished Board and let me just say what a pleasure it is to be back with you here and Collier County to further discuss your priorities as it pertains to the vision that you've created here in Collier. And I'd like to tell you I'm excited I'm excited to even consider the possibility of applying my leadership that I've been able to establish and hone over a couple of decades now and apply it to your vision. And make no mistake about it. I'm here for one reason and one reason only. And that's because your incredible vision aligns with my life calling.

Van Zant 01:21

And I'd like to congratulate you. Collier County School Board has a lot to be proud of. The majority of your students are doing well. You're the fifth ranked academic performing school board in the state.

Van Zant 01:36

And I just like to take a few minutes here this morning and highlight some opportunities for growth. We've all got some and I think together collaboratively we could work on them.

Van Zant 01:49

So during the first six months, if you just look to the far left, as I told you last week, we're going to talk early and often I'm gonna figure out how to communicate with you. I'll be going through the schools and we'll provide training and coaching with a focus on the new education standards. We'll assess ELL practices. We'll look at current programs in pre K to three reading and see what's already in place. We'll look at supports that are there.

Van Zant 02:15

And at the two year mark. Our cadre of instructional staff will be trained and they'll be experts in math, reading, social studies and science. The training supports will be focused around students with special abilities, ELL students and we'll work on closing that reading gap and will begin to see that gap closing. The gap in ELL unfortunately is growing. That needs to be reversed like yesterday. We should be looking for at least a two to 3% decrease at the two year mark.

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

Van Zant 02:57

We should be looking for an increase in the learning gains, especially among the lower quartile students. And that should be our goal regarding Collier students with special abilities, we should continue to close the gap in achievement and should make that a special area of focus. In five years. Collier should have a solid phonics based reading program grounded in the science of reading tied to corrective measures. We'll work close with students to close the achievement gap. And we'll work with students that learn differently and ELL and focus on their reading.

Van Zant 03:45

Now that we're a high performing district, you are, you are a high performing district and you're well above the state average. However, gaps in some of your subgroups are continuing to grow. And like I said before we got to close those up. Those groups are sliding backwards in reading proficiency with some strategic moves, the overall success with those subgroups -- ELL, ESE, students with special abilities -- all can increase. And you can become more proficient in reading and that gap will start to close also. If we plan strategically and use well researched phonics based programs, we can begin to close that achievement gap for Collier's most vulnerable students.

Van Zant 04:33

Please hear my heart here for a minute. Okay, I'm not pointing fingers. I've downloaded all the publicly accessible documents, looked through your pupil progression program. Most importantly, I've had some of my very talented close friends that are working in other districts right now since I left Clay really helped me closely examine your reading plan, people that have been reading coaches and now their teachers and superintendents in other districts.

Van Zant 05:03

I can't find any evidence of research based phonics programs in your reading plan. Now, maybe I'm missing something. I'm not here. I don't have access to your staff. But from what you've published online, you don't have any. And that's a kind of a triple pronged threat. Most importantly, your subgroups I'm mentioning the ELL kids, the ESE kids. They're missing out. That achievement gap is widening for your most vulnerable students.

Van Zant 05:35

Also, you're spending money. I've watched your board meetings, you now have over 50,000 students at last count I heard. And so your lower quartile kids, they're falling farther behind because they can't read. In K to three, we have to teach kids to read because everything they need to do pass second or third grade, they have to be readers to learn it.

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

Van Zant 05:55

Right now schools are graded on proficiency. If your kids here in Collier are 65% proficient, you're an A! You're a high performing district. That's wonderful. You are and you should to be proud of that. However, next year the whole school grading formula in Florida changes. You will not be graded only on proficiency. You will be graded on learning gains, and halfway on proficiency. So half proficiency, half learning gains.

Van Zant 06:21

You have a bunch of elementary school, that's the majority of your schools, right? Those are graded on learning gains. That doesn't happen in secondary. So your district rate is now going to be calculated and weighted by all your elementary schools. And your handful of secondary schools, you follow? So that's going to be a big impact. So you're spending money that goes to your other priorities with ROI on stuff that doesn't work. And most importantly, it doesn't help your kids that are most vulnerable. So I won't beat that dead horse anymore. But that's an issue for you.

Van Zant 06:55

So that's my analysis of academics. That's my plan. I think we plan strategically work together. Again, I'm not pointing fingers. We can work on that we can get it fixed.

Van Zant 07:07

Okay climate and culture. Got a few ideas around that. I love people. I love them. I meet them wherever they are. People are all over the map. You five board members are all different. I'm different. Knows six of us on this team rowing this boat or like. If I become your superintendent, you are the sun and the moon. I only reflect your priorities. The only reason I'm here as I said before is because you have priorities that align with my life's calling. Okay. But I like to go out into the community. I have a track record of that. I will meet with everybody who will meet with me. I will invite myself to their tea parties and I will get embedded in Collier County. I will move my family down here and we will become part of this community.

Van Zant 07:56

Now I can't speak for my oldest he just started with Jack's Fire Rescue this week and moved out Monday morning as my wife and I left Sunday afternoon to come up come down here but the rest of us will be Collier residents.

Van Zant 08:10

All right access. I'll figure out Collier County. I'm sure that I will do some low area reconnaissance of this place. But just we can talk more about culture and climate. In a nutshell, teachers nationwide not just here in Collier are feeling beat up. Some kind of recognition program needs to be instituted. I'm often misunderstood. I've read the comments

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

on social media, I've heard some of the board's comments. But one thing the military gets right is a quality awards and recognition program. And we will recognize and award quality teachers often and I will institute that working with you and we'll get that correct.

Van Zant 09:07

Fiscal Responsibility. This is another good news story here in Collier downloaded your audit report. Again it didn't audit everything and call your county but from what is publicly available, you are in good financial health. All right. So the board's to be commended for that report from everything that's publicly available. There are no material weaknesses listed and you're in compliance with everything the state requires you to be in compliance with. You're very unique. You've got three times the money per pupil roughly, as I did in Clay County when I left the superintendent's chair. You collected in four months between November and February from your ad valorem tax taxes, you invested in accordance with state statute and it's there for you to expend for payroll and other operational expenses through the 12 months of the school year.

Van Zant 09:59

ROI that has a couple of meanings as it applies to school districts. I will evaluate and assess to make sure you're actually meeting those ROI benchmarks. Just quickly from your reading assessment, if what I'm reading is correct, you're not you're not where you want to be. Okay. So we'll make sure that the programs and the things that you're spending money on are actually getting you to where your other priorities say you want to be. But that's one way you can measure ROI on a school district.

Van Zant 10:29

And you know, all the contracts you have. We got to make sure that you're getting them. You're getting them fairly, you're advertising fairly, not saying you're not I just have to assess and evaluate. You know, I've been here three times now in my entire life and this is the third in two weeks and we need to make sure that you are getting services at fair market value.

Van Zant 10:55

Okay. Moving on human resources, differentiated staffing and compensation. In a nutshell, we have to find the very best, very brightest, recruit and retain them and find the best and brightest teachers and put them with the most struggling students. You've got a differentiated compensation manual already. You're already leaning forward and doing that. I noticed I think it was a \$3,000 bonus or something like that for teachers in Immokalee. Didn't have time to read the whole differentiated compensation manual but you're already moving in that direction, which is very, very good. So that sounds easy. It is not. For years collective bargaining had a lot of hang ups in it. I had a hard time finding bus drivers. Big deal. Everybody in the nation

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

right now has a hard time finding bus drivers. Right. But the collective bargaining back in 2012 to 2016 when I was a superintendent would not let me just give the bus drivers a raise.

Van Zant 11:57

And my superintendent secretary was over 30 years in Clay County. She made like \$65,000 a year. She was wonderful. I wasn't gonna lose her. She was on the same salary structure as a bus driver who was making \$11 an hour back then, and I couldn't incentivize just bus drivers which is what I needed. I didn't have a bunch of money. Again about a third of what you have to spend for people. So we just have to evaluate, assess. I'll take your manual where it is. The legislature is moving through some language this year. If it gets codified into law, you'll have even more flexibility around that. And I truly believe we can get there from here and the culture and climate will feed into the HR wisdom awards program but we can get where you guys want to deal with that.

Van Zant 12:43

Student Conduct priorities. Mr. Rutherford, you asked me last week about what I had done I forget if you said character or virtue but to protect children's character or virtue. I served on the school board in Clay County for 14 years. And when you guys need I watched your January were a 30th workshop and you beat words up. You came out of there like athletes after a hard practice, sweaty, after you've toiled, needed some Gatorade. You worked hard on your mission, your vision, you developed some priorities. You brought them back to the public. Y'all beat up words, American culture, American citizenship, discipline, no code of conduct, no. And you came to what you have published on your website which I cut and pasted to a Word document and me and just a very few close friends have dug in to Collier County's data, and website and everything that was publicly available. So what I've found over the years is sometimes when we dig into policy we as a school board and superintendent the staff, man we feel like we've toiled and done our job. And you have, you have, you have 10 great character traits in the front of your code of conduct.

Van Zant 14:00

If I walked into an elementary school cafeteria this afternoon, and sat down with a third grader, and asked him what character traits should you be espousing to as a Collier County student, would they know any of 'em? Would his teacher know any of them? Her teacher? I don't know. So, policy tends to get dusty. That's my point.

Van Zant 14:25

But there are many ways we can how I these character traits, none of these character traits should be offended, offensive to anything. In my resume, you asked me what kind of leader I am. I listed out the Army values leadership, duty, respect, selfless service, same kind of things. Okay. This is what all young American citizens or people from other countries striving to earn

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview April 26, 2023

their American citizenship and studying for and should be working towards. So let's make it easy for 'em. Let's have the principal stand up in the cafeteria and go through one of these every week. Let's have the PE teachers go over this as they're exercising the students after the Pledge of Allegiance in the morning. Let's go over a character trait. These are not hard. I mean, it would take 30 to 60 seconds to go over a character trait and the definition. And maybe some of this will start to sink in. If I mean you can put these up everywhere. So again, we need to kind of embolden those character traits and focus on what we want to happen.

Van Zant 15:25

So I'm not gonna insult your intelligence and read you every slide. You have my printed material in front of you, right? And I meant to say this before, I was thrilled to see how many people do participated in your survey. 4500 of 'em were students. So if you're just tuning in, or you're in the audience, you're you're on online watching or you watch this later. If you go to www.Charlievanzant.com. It says in my application, HYA asked for it. You can follow along with this slideshow. Everything that I that I missed that I didn't get to say is in there. There's videos on what we did to expand secondary options. There's videos on what we did to promote civics education. There's videos on what we did to quell active shooters in Clay. I went through one of those scenarios. Well not a scenario we had an active shooter and had four schools locked down for about five hours and I was dealing with four different law enforcement agencies. So a lot more background. You asked for my website, I loaded it up for you everything that you want to know if you get done with that and haven't figured out who I am, I don't want to be your guy. I don't know how many any any closer to say it than that. Okay.

Van Zant 16:43

So I would like to just tell you why I'm here today. This is really, really simple. During this interview, we've covered many aspects of what I would do as your superintendent. How I would implement your priorities, analyze data, instructional methods, train, coach, supervise all towards building student achievement. And there's a million people in the world that can push student achievement. Florida standards change every day, well every year, and they're going to change next year. And you're going to have to adjust if you're going to meet him. However, I don't want to overlook the one simple reason me and my wife have arranged our last month and are willing to move down here to support you and your vision. I applied for this job because I feel called to the mission to partner with you around your incredible vision. The greatest book ever written says without a vision, the people perish. And I feel compelled in pursuing your incredible vision with you. Education in America, in many ways, in many respects, has lost its way and I want to help restore its Noble Foundation. Fundamentally, American education should be about passing on our western culture and traditions to the next generation through foundational knowledge and skills. We need to develop the next generation of American citizens with core values and character. We studied great historical figures, not because they were perfect, they were not but because we can learn from their examples both

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

good and bad. And we instill virtue in the next generation. As Ronald Reagan once said, We should teach an informed patriotism, a love of country and its institutions.

Van Zant 18:53

I've had various missions in my life. I flew helicopters [inaudible]

Van Zant 19:06

I cried with fellow Floridians who lost everything after hurricanes wiped out their community. However, in my heart of hearts I haven't had a mission or a calling more important than empowering the next generation of freedom loving, civic minded young Americans to be citizens of virtue.

Van Zant 19:37

And that's why I seek this mission of implementing your incredible vision. Again, thank you for letting me be here with you today. Sorry, I get a little choked up about that.

Lichter 19:50

Thank you very much at this time board members, are there questions for Mr. Van Zant. We have about 10 to 15 minutes for any questions related to his presentation. Correct this is just questions related to the presentation. Mrs. Lucarelli.

Lucarelli 20:09

Thank you for the presentation. And I love to hear you talk about freedom loving and civic minded students. One of the things that I am curious about and you just you spoke about, you know, closing the achievement gaps for ELL students and strategic moves that you would make. Could you elaborate and give us an example of how how would how would you go about helping us close those achievement gaps for ELL students and what what are some examples of strategic moves that you would make or that you have done in the past or that you would try and implement here?

Van Zant 20:53

Okay, so in Clay County, when I was superintendent there, we used a program called Reading Mastery. Research spaced over 20 years, you can look it up, it's phonics based, complies with the current state mantra. For years when we went into Common Core, we got lost and again, no, no finger pointing. There are some well intentioned people, well educated, have served in education their entire career, and somewhere in Florida, we got into this. We teach kids how to think they can think about anything and they can learn anything.

Van Zant 21:33

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

But if we don't have intentional phonics based material, especially for English language learners, who may not hear English at home, and if they don't hear it at school, and if they don't have proper support pushed in with good, strong phonics based instructional materials, it won't happen. So if for some reason that got missed in your reading plan, and you don't have reading coaches that are trained in that, that won't happen, so I will have people much smarter than I. Great leaders are humble and surround themselves with smart people. And I'm not interviewing to be your chief academic officer, okay. I'm interviewing to be your superintendent and run the gamut. I liked the little scenario I was given. But you will see quickly that I delegate authority, never responsibility. But I will put the right people in the right places with the right training, and I might need to come in and train some of your folks. And that's fine. That's fine. We had some math gaps in Clay County too. And we had to collaboratively work with our elementary school teachers to get give them the proper training they needed. So I guess, like my slide's saying, you'll have time you're not making this decision till May 9 to go back and look at assess, evaluate everything that first six months if you read that left hand column, that's what I'll be doing. I'll be going in with a handful of people and assess and evaluate everything that's going on. I'll look at your reading plan. You have a look at what the state says we have to have. I'll go back to your priorities. We will figure out together as a board superintendent team, again, I'm going to be sitting off to the side somewhere wherever the superintendent is subordinate to the board, taking direction from you guys and your priorities.

Lichter 23:30

Thank you. Mr. Carter.

Carter 23:32

Thank you, Mr. Van Zant. Thank you and we appreciate your service. Absolutely. My family has big military support in Charleston is where I'm from originally. So you know Charleston, I'm sure. So anyways, question where you talk about the audit current programs to eliminate redundancies. Can you talk about the redundancies in our current budget?

Van Zant 23:50

Well, I know that you have a clean audit. So I don't know that you have redundancies except for and I don't know why, you're currently paying for programs that don't match what you said you want your priorities. And you established these priorities a couple of months ago, and I can't see in your budget, where you've gone out and purchased at least reading material. That's what I've heard of this board. I've watched your board meeting since you this current board was seated in November. You said you wanted strong knowledge base phonics material, you've all rallied around that. Yet, I can't see evidence where you have it. So you're paying money for things that aren't working for your lower quartile. ELL, ESE, special needs students and then you haven't purchased things that you said you wanted. So I would call that a redundancy and I don't know I have no way of seeing if your team has initiated contracts and

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

and I'm not gonna name names of the companies that you're spending money with. I'm not insulting anybody. That at the end of the school year, we're stopping the contract. Maybe they're contracted through June 30. But if you haven't, you should and if you haven't started talking to... Like you fly is free through the University of Florida. Okay. 30 years research, phonics based. If you don't have people looking at that, or other strong well researched phonics based programs, I would suggest that you move towards that no matter who becomes your next superintendent, because that matches your agreed upon board set priorities. So that would be a redundancy, sir.

Lichter 25:28

Mr. Moshier.

Moshier 25:29

In your presentation, you mentioned code of conduct and implementing it. Because you know that we spent a lot of time on that, you know, exactly how would you implement that into our school systems? Because I think it should start right from the beginning of the go all the way through. You do see it but most of time, it's just a book that sits somewhere, or, you know, comes up in a web page, but I'd like to see how, you know, see how you would implement it so all the students would know about it and try to live their life like it. Thank you.

Van Zant 26:06

Was that a comment or a question. How would I implement it? Yeah, sir. Everything that's worth doing is worth overdoing. So the principals, district staff would know the code of conduct. Then we would work collaboratively together and decide quarterly which items, which character traits in that code of conduct we were going to train on. Somebody would come to me and tell me Hey, sir, it's going to be two a month, three a quarter, and we would go down through that but by the end of the school year, we should be able to walk into schools as you visit schools and have lunch with kids or go to music programs or plays or ball games. You should be able to chit chat with a student and ask them the character trait of the month and they should know what it is and have a clue what the definition is. That that would be how I would implement it again. You know, I don't have a doctorate in education. But teaching people words and definitions? I learned how to do that in first grade. The worst teachers I had sometimes just took a textbook, and on Monday, they said, Charlie, class, look at the back of the book, take these words. Write down the definition of each word would be quiz on Friday. That's not hard. That's not hard. I'm not saying that's a good instructional technique either. But learning what honesty means and having the principal or whoever has lunch duty grab the microphone for one minute and say Good morning students. While you're having your snack pack, let's talk about honesty. Honesty is the character trait we're going to work on today. Telling them what that is? That's not hard.

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

Moshier 27:58

Thank you.

Lichter 28:00

Mr. Rutherford. Do you have a question?

Rutherford 28:02

Yes. Well, actually a statement and ask what you will do about it. I noticed a few years ago, when I was over to one of the charter schools that the first thing in the morning the students did was stand up and give the Pledge of Allegiance and the preamble to the Constitution. Little kids, you know, and a solid wasn't impressed by that. It doesn't take that long to do it. How would you approach reestablishing our American culture into the classroom?

Van Zant 28:31

It's not happening here in all your schools? and not the preamble, I'm used to the pledge, but I'm okay with whatever the board directs. And again, that's that's something you can decide. If the board directs me that every morning there's going to be a pledge and the preamble recited? Hey, all, I'm all for it. And again, that's not hard to institute, sun, moon, Col. Van Zant move out. Pledge every morning. Do the pledge every morning. Now does every student have to stand and say the Pledge? No, they don't. Our founders set up this country with many freedoms? You're free to do nothing, too., Can I sit still? No. Does a tear come to mind when taps is played? Yes, it does. But if we do our jobs right, if you read the last slide, in your notebook I provided you, you will understand that teaching students to be American citizens steeped in American culture with American values, sir, if you haven't, would you please go to Charlie Van zant.com and just watch some of the videos. I created a Collier tab. So anybody watching from home if you go to Charlie van zant.com And again, I love that you've involved 7000 plus people in your survey and 4500 of 'em were your students. I'd love to hear from 'em. I have a comment tab. I'm not going to be able to respond to 4500 emails, I promise you I'm not that good and I don't have the staff. But they'll be able to see what I've implemented before and I promise you I can't get away from myself. If nothing else in life. I'm very consistent with myself. And what you see is what you get.

Lichter 30:31

Thank you again for your presentation. And service to our country. We appreciate you.

Lichter 30:37

One of the comments or several comments I've heard from teachers while I was campaigning was that the discipline in classrooms has been a real struggle for teachers to teach and do their jobs. Which is why Student Conduct and was on our board priorities and why we really delved into the student code of conduct to make some improvements. What is your plan? What

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

would be your plan to assist teachers in the schools with discipline? Really just across all schools elementary, middle and high school to rein that back in?

Van Zant 31:16

Well, sadly, I had great success with some programs in Clay that now nationally in the whole CRT movement have gone woke. So again, I'm not going to insult other people's strategies, but we'll go back and take what's good, what's beautiful, what's pure. And you have to have positive reinforcement and you have to have negative reinforcements. And back to your culture and climate. When you asked me about that, and it's one of your priorities. Teachers feel beat up. I mean, some of your teachers need combat pay literally. You know, they deserve a Bronze Star for showing up every day in some of these classrooms and getting hit by a kid. That will not happen. If a student is violent, aggressive bolder, they're gonna get removed from that class. That will not happen. Now Clay County was a little smaller than you guys. I had one alternative school. That was very painful for families and I hated sending kids to that school but I had to do it sometimes. We had a lot of pullout rooms, but we had a lot of intervention. Again, if I haven't said it already, we have to love people enough to meet them wherever they are, but also love them enough to not leave them there. We have to work with that kid work with that kid work with that kid. Some of these kids are so traumatized at seven years old the things they've seen they lived in their car, they washed up in the morning in the gas station bathroom. And you know, they're in Miss Molly's second grade classroom. And they I'm not making excuses for people. I'm not. We can't we can't push that kid with equal outcomes. No matter what they do or don't do in class and give them a diploma. I'm not saying that either. But they can't sit in class and taint the learning of 22 other third graders all day long. So I really don't think I have time to fully go into it, you and I have 30 minutes tomorrow. And we can do a deep dive in that if you'd like.

Lichter 33:23

Alright, thank you. Alright, we've almost hit the 15 minute mark there so we're gonna move on to the next portion of the interview.

Lichter 33:31

In the following segment, you will be asked two questions from each board member on different topics chosen by each board member. Each question is allotted five minutes for presentation, answers and follow up questions. Board members may utilize any remaining time during this segment for follow up questions to responses you provided to questions during the first round of interviews. Any questions about the next phase?

Van Zant 33:57

Is this like follow up from last week or just what the heck?

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

Lichter 34:00

Those are all new questions. Okay.

Van Zant 34:02

Okay is 20 minutes 15 minutes what you're saying?

Lichter 34:05

So, we you'll have five minutes really per question. So a little bit more time than last week where you only had about three minutes. So it's up to five minutes. Maybe you'll answer in two minutes. But and so

Van Zant 34:18

My wife trusted me with trying to trying to stay on task and on time today.

Lichter 34:25

All right. All right. So Mrs. Lucarelli is going to begin with question number one.

Lucarelli 34:30

With the growth that we're seeing in Collier County, we expect to be rezoning several schools during the next few years. Can you please explain your experiences with rezones,

INSERTED 4/29/23 – 10:41 am

the strategies you've used, troubles you've faced, and what you will do to help make the next few years of rezones as smooth as possible. If you've not been involved in rezoning attendance jurisdictions, please tell us how you would proceed, the challenges you believe you would face and how you would handle them.

Van Zant 00:28

That's a great question. And fortunately or unfortunately, I don't know I guess, at least the three to the right haven't been through that. Buckle up. In 14 years as a school board member, we built 14 new schools in Clay County. One year we opened two! We had massive growth. I learned a lot. I was 27 when I first got elected to school board. So. If I don't cover anything, we'll just chunk the questions back out and I'll come back around to 'em. Okay.

Van Zant 00:59

So first off, you meet with your planning staff years before you even put a shovel in the ground. Okay. And you start talking about where's that school gonna go? What's the infrastructure? What's the roadway look look like? Is there water? Is there power? Do we have to dig that? Do we have to pay for it? Is the county going to pay for it? What's around there? Is there

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

wetlands? I mean, there's a million questions around even the planning for the school site. Do we own the land? Do we have a piece of land we can trade with the developer that owns the land? So there's tons of pre-planning.

Van Zant 01:32

Then, okay, is it a high school? Wow, high school. Big deal. You got kids nine through 12. No 12th grader that's an 11th grader this year in high school a wants to get new high school before their senior year there. Whatever a lion and tiger or a bear or whatever, team, gymnasts, lacrosse player, whatever they're doing. They want to do it at this school where they've been doing the last two or three years and wear that uniform to dance, music recitals, whatever they're into, right? So you have to give them their junior and senior year. Kind of a [inaudible]. And if they have little brothers and sisters and mom and dad are going to have to move from this school to this school, you better have a plan for that and students stations if they're going to move because if you want to have this room full of angry mothers, tell them that Johnny who's a senior can stay in here, but little Billy and Bobby who were freshmen have to go to the new one. You gotta gotta plan all that.

Van Zant 02:33

You got to start letting your community know. Bad news does not get better with age so early and often early and often you start pushing it out and you pushing push it out with a plan and you do the rubber chicken circuit. You go to Rotary you go to Kiwanis you go to church halls, and you tell people what's coming and you take their input, you put maps and graphs up on easels, you take PowerPoints, you'd have your facility staff stand up there and talk through that. You invite your county manager team, your facility staff, county manager's facility staff, and you guys talk through the growth or whatever is driving the need for the new school in the new area. And you make sure you have intelligible, thoughtful common-sense answers to the questions. I believe in rehearsing every mission. When I was in the back room, and Miss Valerie came back there to get me I said What am I doing for this scenario, am my, is there a sand table, are there police cars? You know, I guess I'm just standing here talking all day, which is fine. But I mean, I'm used to moving things around. You know, if you give me a scenario and you put me in front of people, it's going to be well rehearsed.

Van Zant 03:43

What were your other questions, ma'am?

Lucarelli 03:45

It was any troubles that you faced during it? What would and basically what will you do to help make the next few years for us as smooth as possible?

Van Zant 03:55

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

I think I just told you what can make it as smooth as possible. And then what was the first one again?

Lucarelli 04:00

Any just what your experience has been with rezones and strategies?

Van Zant 04:04

Most most of them were were positive. We were we have such growth in an area called Lake Asbury if you Google map Lake Asbury near Green Cove Springs, Florida and Clay County. It ballooned. So our superintendent who was my high school principal, David Owens, made a brilliant move. He took a very popular longtime principal of Lake Asbury Elementary and advertised when we met with the community that Mr. Eichorn would be moving to Shadowlawn Elementary, the new elementary. Well parents love Mr. Eichron.

Van Zant 34:47

I mean, that's the guy that brought the popcorn machine back when keeping the hallways clean and keeping the parents happy was the thing. Because Clay County back at that time was growing, which meant our tax rolls were good. We'll talk about required local effort later. I think you misunderstood what I said last week. But so we could roll back the tax rate which is required by the state, but still have an increased tax rate and have more money to go tools. So we advertise Mr. Ashkelon would be moving and that just quelled all the anxiety. So that is a strategy among many strategies that have already mentioned to make it smooth for you guys. I won't put you out there. The sun gets to shine brightly. Superintendent gets to get kicked

Carter 35:44

For the record. Every school does a pledge and you have to have a parental note not to stand for the pledge in Collier County. Okay. Just FYI. Okay. So, please explain if you have or how you will respond to the recent change by the state in test score requirements, more specifically, the changing concordant and comparative test scores. What is your plan to mitigate these changes as it pertains to our students if you're the next superintendent?

Lichter 35:44

Thank you. Mr. Carter.

Van Zant 36:10

Okay. I've been watching this closely. I know Manny Diaz. Minister of Education. And the Republican led legislature every couple of years. It's their track record, no matter who's in the chair, wants to raise accountability, raise standards in Florida. That will happen if we

UPDATED 4/29/23 – 11:30 am

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

don't get last minute relief this year. It'll happen next year, the year after, and it won't happen just in Collier it'll happen all over the state school graduation rates will drop if concordance scores are raised.

Van Zant 00:42

What is happening right now is, through COVID, a good friend of mine, Bill [inaudible], that's the superintendent in Bay, in 2018, he got hit with Hurricane Michael. And then a year and a half later, he got hit with COVID. So his kids were living in cars and tents and everything else and out of school and virtual learning.

Van Zant 01:04

And so by having the comported scores and you've gone through similar stuff here with, I think it's Ian that hit you guys, so you get it. But there's concordance scores for the SATs, what I'm talking about, or a PERT, were more like just graduate, just we're gonna give you some grace. There's been a lot of grace given in the legislature's mind and the Commissioner of Education's mind the last few years where if a kid had enough credits and just got just enough, not enough to get into college on the SAT but a pretty low SAT score on definitely a non college bound kind of kid that one of those that if you if you read my slides on the the grad rate and making a graduation tracker, one of those kinds of students. That's where we were. If that moves up, your 92% graduation rate down here, the 92% graduation rate in Clay is going to look somewhere in the mid to high 80s. Because a kid that went through school last year and graduated, his younger brother or sister could have the same PERT or SAT score and the same amount of credits and possibly not graduate this year. So it doesn't sound fair. I don't have a comment on really whether it's fair or not.

Van Zant 02:21

But if it comes to pass, we'll just have to adjust. But in the meantime, if you read through my slides, I can share some more notes with you tomorrow when we have a little more time. We'll create a graduation tracker, our high school principals, our high school counselors, our graduation team will focus on each of those struggling students and we will work with them. Everything short of giving them SAT answers, which I don't even know how you would do that, to get them through if they're a struggling junior or senior to make sure they get across that stage. That is crucial because everything that we want to happen for a student happens at a much higher rate if they have a regular high school diploma, everything we don't want to happen to a student, teen pregnancy, drug use, juvenile crime, all happens at an alarmingly high rate if they don't get a regular high school diploma.

03:25

Okay

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

Lichter 03:31

All right. There are many concerns in the community related to books in the media centers with borderline pornographic content, and concerns related to an LGBTQ agenda being pushed on to students. How will you address these specific community concerns and what is your stance on protecting the innocence of children?

Van Zant 03:51

Well, regardless of your sexuality, my sexuality, a student's sexuality. This boardroom, your school classes is not the place to express that. So you and I shouldn't express it in this boardroom. Children teachers custodians shouldn't express it in school and there shouldn't be explicit materials in the library. That's pretty simple. If parents want to provide that to their children, they can take them to Barnes and Nobles and buy it for 'em.

Lichter 04:24

Did you, and well just some follow up questions. Did you have any of these issues when you were in Clay County?

Van Zant 04:30

Not then I know of. I had a committee of little kids' grandmas that were concerned about that. And I gave them full access to the H. C. Long Building and and this is before Parkland. And you could kind of walk in the back door, this was when Clay County was a little more sleepy and a little more accessible. Okay. And they had a room they could go in and they could look through our reading list. The ladies in the Long Building that were the instructional staff knew if Miss Sylvia walked in and asked what the third graders were reading they needed to get her hard copies of those books because Miss Sylvia wasn't maybe going to go online, right or Miss D. And that's the way we talked up there. And they could read whatever book they wanted. And if they didn't have a copy there, they'd have whatever elementary or junior high they had that book ship them a copy down to Green Cove where the county headquarters was the county district office. And they'd read those books and if they had a concern, I heard it.

Van Zant 05:27

Pearson had published a history book that had some objectionable material that did not present America in a equal light. All it did was beat us up and it didn't show the struggles. It didn't show our founders' strengths and faults. I'm okay with a true accounting of American history. I know this wasn't exactly your question, but this is an example of how I deal with it. I'm like, Okay, you can tell that the founders weren't perfect, but you also have to show where they pledged their lives, their fortunes their sacred honor. You can't just have a lopsided where just show their warts and not the ideals they were struggling towards. So we didn't adopt that book.

Van Zant 38:59

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

They rewrote a book just for Clay County. They didn't change history, but they made it a balanced history. But if you don't have a community accessible way now everything's online, everybody's grandma's on Facebook. I think it'd be a lot easier than the model I had maybe. And they could go to a lot of those books online and the younger parents that want to do it did, but I would I would work with you to try to establish something like that so people could review that. If somebody reviews it. Hey, there's a ton of books in the library. There's no reason did not pull that live library book. There's a big concern that review it with the district staff the district staff will have my intent okay. They will have they will understand it very, very clearly. And then we can go from there. And you you the board will establish that criteria. You are in charge by Florida statute for curriculum adoptions and standards, they now will support your standards adopted.

Lichter 40:01

I'll just make one final comment on on my question, but I think there is definitely a fear across the country because of this whole push with the LGBTQ agenda. Again, I don't think it has a place in schools. But I do think it starts with the leadership at the top to make it clear to the principals across the entire district that we have your back that this stuff is not going to be pushed in our in our school system.

Van Zant 40:27

They will have no questions, ma'am. In fact, if you go to my website, I have made that abundantly clear.

Van Zant 40:34

In 2016. President Obama, Commander in Chief I was still in uniform at the time and on part time basis came out with an edict. I was out visiting schools on a Friday morning I walked into my office around lunchtime. My secretary said what do you think about all this? So when you come back, Karen, she said the president said boy can go in the girls bathroom. I said not here. I don't care how they feel. And so I got calls all weekend long. I'm standing in church Sunday morning, literally with my head bowed and the guy was tugging on my coat. He said Charlie, I'm not send my daughter to school tomorrow. I'm like, What are you talking about? He said, You haven't said anything. I haven't got one of your calls home. I haven't seen a video. I mean, Clay County had no social media. The website was a mess. I could barely make a call when the anyway I won't get into all that. So we ramped it up. So Monday, I called my PR staff on, which was one young college graduate that could actually operate all this, she was barely out of college. And I said set up one of those camera YouTube things and we're doing a video Monday. And I came in and I was hot. I was angry. And when I spoke I was visibly angry and she said Can you calm down? I'm gonna rewrite what you wrote. So the version you will see on YouTube is much more calm than what I gave her and told her I was gonna say, I took a

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

few breaths. She came back after lunch and we did a much more calm version, which is what you will find.

Lichter 42:08

Thank you very much. Mr. Moshier.

Moshier 42:11

All right. This is kind of a long question and if I have to repeat let me know. A significant significant responsibility of the school board and the superintendent are minding the numbers making sure we have what we need to run the business. This the Florida Education Finance program is extremely compartmentalized funding formula that leads to complication maze of roads for funding. In addition, there are special appointments. Briefly describe what you know about the formula, special appointments and how appropriations Sorry it's been a long morning how would you go about ensuring that CCPS will get the maximum amount of funding and particular the appropriations that will provide some of the unique and special learning opportunities for our students?

Van Zant 43:06

Okay, so that's kind of a multi pronged question. Florida's funding program. It took me a couple of years to learn I was probably 30 Before I felt like I could speak about it very well. It is tweaked a little over the years, but you're very unique here in Collier. Almost 90% ... They call you and most South Florida counties 90% districts and and what that means is you collect 90% of the money you have to spend throughout the year between November and February from your ad valorem property taxes. Unlike Clay County and most of North Florida, which is rural and much less a fluent, where we're dependent on the state every two weeks to send us a check if you will, a wire transfer. So we can put gas in the buses keep the lights on all that kind of stuff. So you you are very healthy fiscally.

Van Zant 44:03

However, you guys asked me about what I would do do enhance post secondary opportunities. In 2010, Governor Rick Scott took office. I had met him in the spring of 2011 when I got back from Afghanistan with the Special Forces Task Force and he had not met me yet. My father was in the legislature at the time, and he honestly embarrassed me, walked into the room and I'm just a major, I'm there to literally flip PowerPoint slides for the general who's briefing him on our task force's mission in Afghanistan. He saw my nametag, he loved my dad, he walked in the back of the room started talking to me. We got all done, he had ignored the generals just asked me about the whole mission. I thought I was gonna get demoted. I thought I was gonna be a private again at the end of the thing. And he says anything I can do for you? I said, Can I get your phone number and I can I come to Tallahassee and talk to you in a couple of weeks

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

when when I get reestablished with my family. He said sure. And he knew I was a school board member.

Van Zant 45:11

So I went and built a relationship with the sitting governor who ran on 700,000 jobs in seven years. So once I understood who Governor Scott was and what he wanted to do in my heart of hearts, I'm all about kids who aren't college bound. Okay? When you send a lot of kids to college and kids that are learning, you've got tons of you got tons of high performing kids that can go to Harvard and West Point, and become CPAs and doctors and lawyers and do all that stuff. And that is great. And those kids don't need a whole lot of extra help. They're gonna get there. You're very affluent, and they're coming from great homes, right?

Van Zant 45:49

But what I learned is you have to speak the language of whoever's holding the seat. So I restructured our vocational and technical opportunities around job growth in Clay County. I went out into the community and met within the first month I became superintendent. I called business leader roundtables and I asked them what they needed. people to do. And they told me. Mechanics for cars, airplanes, etc. I said, I need you to write me letters and I'll draft you a model and then you put it into your own words. So we started veto-proofing our appropriations request for special appropriations and I think that's what you're asking me right? How to get more money, spend other people's money on your kids?

Moshier 46:32

Exactly.

Van Zant 46:33

And I would be very, very good at that. And so the business leaders were writing Governor Scott. He campaigned hard through Clay County, very red county very much like Collier and said, Hey, we've got a new young superintendent. He wants to put our vocational and technical training and really ramp it up. We've got it more than 50% of our kids in Clay don't go to college, but they need jobs. They need to come out of high school and do jobs. We need draftsman and car mechanics and airplane engine mechanics and on and on and on and on. And so I got to be friends with the governor's education chief of staff, Kim McDougal, she had come out of the DOE and went into his executive cabinet.

Van Zant 47:12

So all during the fall prior to my first session with him as governor and me as superintendent, I went up and I met with Miss McDougal 'cause the governor is a busy guy right and I let her know what our plan was. And I said, hey, when this gets to the end, please ask Governor Scott remind him who I am. I'm the young major that briefed him when I got back from Afghanistan.

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

And please take the red pen out of his hand and ask him to breathe because he just loves to line out and veto things right? He's a businessman. He don't want to spend money on fluff, and remind him that this is supporting his 700,000 job creation program and we're going to create jobs in Clay County If he lets me train these kids. And so we got money and we built kitchens. We built mechanic shops. We bought airplane tools. We bought old engines we could rebuild. So that's how you get a special appropriation. But again, it takes a lot of strategic planning on the front end. So when it gets to through the legislature, and I didn't even get to the two houses of government, obviously the three branches of government, not just the executive branch. But you have to get to know it doesn't really matter. Maybe who? Well, let me rephrase that. You must know who the education appropriations person is in the House and the Senate.

Van Zant 48:36

Many days if you're go for a special appropriation, that's more important than the chairman of that policy. Right now, Senator Keith Perry chairs Ed Appropriations. Senator Perry's a good family friend who just put a roof on my father's church that has been passed on for 20 years. Perry Roofings. Okay. He and my father served in the legislature together in the House for several years. I've known Mr. Perry since I was in my 30s. So if I become your superintendent, I'll have an open dialogue with him and so whatever your priorities are, remember, you're the sun I'm the moon, I will go to him and I say and I'll tell him Hey, Collier wants to enhance secondary post secondary opportunities. And here's what we would like to do. Will you help me with this please, sir. And in three more years, Sam Garrison, who is from Clay County will come forward as Speaker of the House.

Van Zant 49:28

And I'm just naming them two names. There's multiple people I will go visit, but you have to keep those relationships. I was a very active superintendent in Tallahassee before and active board member years before but you have to go talk to those people that control the money well before session. If you're if you don't get there till March, you're you're out of the picture. You have to get there in June to August. You go see them in their office, wherever they live. Sam lives and clay Mr. Perry lives in Gainesville. And you keep beating that drum beating that drum year round and you might not get it this year. It gets to the end, often the House Speaker, the Senate president might have three big funding priorities and Collier County's post secondary in 2024 might not be one of them, doesn't mean we quit. But we just start laying that groundwork as quick as we can. It's all it's all strategic planning. I mean, if you give me a few minutes, I'm alright. If you give me a year, man, we can really do some great things.

Lichter 50:25

Mr. Rutherford, next question, please.

Rutherford 50:26

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

Riots.

Van Zant 50:30

Sir?

Rutherford 50:31

Riots. Murders. Well is this is on... Riots. Murders. Fires. Robberies. These are people who have grown up in our public schools. So what's happening right now is understandable. What will you do to correct the problem for our students?

Van Zant 50:59

Well, kind of goes back to your code of conduct. The most in the best that we can do while they're in school with is teaching them to be young American citizens inculcated with real values and character traits and virtue. That's our job. We can drive it home. We can teach them those things. We can embed it into the fabric of everything we teach. We can teach character traits across the curriculum, math, reading, science, social studies, we can do all those things. And hope and pray that those sink into them as they leave. Once they leave our public schools it may or may not but I can tell you being reflective over my time in the school system and watching what a travesty some of the policies that have gone through Florida and the and the nation have created especially with Common Core, it hurts my heart.

Van Zant 51:56

I was sitting on the school board. I was 31-32 years old, Walter Brock, our Assistant Superintendent for Instruction, had just read through common core standards. She says Mr. Van Zant you're gonna love this. George W. Bush out of Texas and our great Governor Jeb Bush have collaborated on this. And so for you young families with young children, and you're transferring around in the military, we're going to have a common set of standards across the nation. So if your family gets uprooted from Florida and moved in Michigan, your kids that when they when they left Florida as a third grader at winter break, studying English and math and they they plop into Michigan the second semester, they're going to know pick right back up. I thought wow, that makes sense. Made sense. I hadn't read the plan, they hadn't even wrote the plan. Right? I said well, what if we don't like it? It's next generation sunshine state standards. Even back then I thought it was sliding like this is like 2000, 2001 I said what about American history? What about civics? Are they getting into that? Oh no, civics, history that's gonna stay next generation sunshine state standards for now, but they're just talking about math and English language arts at the moment. I'm like, okay, I said what if we decided to not do this? He said, Well, there's money and training dollars that we can get in a grant and again, Clay didn't have money like you got down here that you can have to train your teachers and these new standards. So my advice to you is you take that money because the standards are coming whether you like them or not. If you don't let us write the grant, and I think I was a

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

board chairman at the time, and you and the superintendent sign the grant, then you don't get the money. Your teachers don't get the training. And the standards come anyway. And that's what has tracked school board members. For so many years. I remember. I don't remember how many years ago it was that Lee County got fed up with Common Core and they said, Hey, we're out we're done. A couple of weeks later, they didn't get their draw from the DOE for their FEFP. For their financing. They didn't get their check. Guess why? And often back end pretty quickly, memory serves.

Van Zant 54:14

So you know, I tell the young people I mentor and I mentor a lot of young people, some of them are now elected officials. They're in the military fine cool stuff. They're firemen. They're cops. They're pastors. And I tell them if they don't have the courage of their convictions, then they're just nice thoughts. If you don't have the courage to backup, what you're saying. It really doesn't matter. Really. It just doesn't matter. And I just always go back to our founders when we started this country. It started with a lot of individual responsibility. To be a citizen here meant something, it meant you had to work it meant you had to get up with the sun and toil. I mean, those guys said we give our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor, honor meant something, so if you're going to throw a rock through somebody's business because you're mad about whatever, you've got no honor, you're going to run into Walmart is steal a TV because somebody got wrong. What's honorable about that? It doesn't even make sense to me. So we have to work with our kids for as long as we have them to instill as much value into them. And, you know, pray and hope that that is enough to start stemming the tide.

Lichter 55:36

Thank you. Mrs. Lucarelli.

Lucarelli 55:41

Okay, this is a little bit similar to similar to Mr. Moshier's question, but can you explain your understanding of the FEFP and the base student allocation and what it means to be a donor district, since Collier is one, and what you have done or will do to cut the budget without negatively impacting students?

Van Zant 56:06

Well, I'm not super familiar with the donor district thing that would be inverse. I'm sure that you were a donor and Clay was a receiver. But I will study and figure that part out. The FEFP every year Florida decides what you are weighted at and I think you are weighted at 1.07, you remember your weight, I had it written down somewhere. I don't have it in front of me. I pulled it out of your budget. You remember the number? A little over one.

Van Zant 56:44

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

Clay, because it's much less expensive. My wife has been looking at houses on Zillow. I mean, I'll just tell you I bought a nice house on the lake a couple of years ago for \$425,000. We're staying in a VRBO south of, I don't remember the name of the street now. And some of the homes on that street are three and eight and \$10 million. And we're in this little bitty one about as big as this podium. I didn't even ask how much we're paying for it and I needed a place I could spread out and study and zoom with my smart guys and gals and get ready for you guys. So Clay was like .93-.94 So with that means that we get less. So the state decides, every student in Florida is worth X. So let's just say \$10,000 per pupil. That means you get your factor, 1.0, whatever it is, and we get less than that, we get .9 whatever. Old Stand Jordan used to fly in my National Guard unit years and years ago, I out of Craig Field in Jacksonville and they were battering this formula back and forth and he was on the Duvall County School Board. And a representative from Miami said we have to have more blah, blah blah down here than you do up there. And Representative Jordan took the mic on the House floor. And he said representative, let's say Diaz it wasn't Manny Diaz, this was 20 years ago. He said representative tell me how much is a 99 cent Big Mac in Miami running these days. Didn't make any sense but it sounded good. It made good copy right.

Van Zant 58:20

So what I will do with you guys is go through that budget I will pour with it. I'm not an accountant. But what I am is an excellent leader of people. And I will go through it, understand it and I will find the things that you're spending that don't fit with your priorities. What I've heard from all five of you very clearly, from watching your board meetings and reading your priorities is you want good return on investment. You want to know when you go out for an RFP on something that you're getting bang for the buck. And when it comes to advocating in Tallahassee. It's never over. It's never over. Okay, right now, Mr. Carter asked me the question about the concordance scores. What's the April 26 today? Graduation's what day? I think it's May 26 and Clay right before Memorial Day weekend and we still don't know what students are graduating? Are you kidding me? a month away? But that's for if you don't like education policy, you don't like the funding formula or you don't like the weather Wait 20 minutes is going to change okay, we're in that change month right now as they're wrapping up.

Van Zant 59:27

So I'm sorry, I'm not an expert on your budget yet. But last Friday, I got an email and told and told me what this scenario was going to be and I promise you I've spent about 18-19 hours a day I don't sleep much but I have to sleep a little. So I have figured it out as much as I possibly can. But the good news is you're financially healthy. And I've got decades of experience in the FEFP and I know that the song is never over in Tallahassee is they're dealing with your budget and if it's unfair or unpalatable to this board, I will work hard to get it where you want.

Lichter 1:00:10

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

Yeah, we just have a minute not even but okay, go ahead.

Lucarelli 1:00:14

Then I'll save it because...

Lucarelli 1:00:18

I just you talked about making sure of surrounding yourself with the right people so that you can address some of these issues. So what positions or people do you expect to need to bring in in order to be able to determine, you know, the ROI and the had, you know, evaluating and assessing programs to ensure that our and ensuring that our academics are top notch?

Van Zant 1:00:46

I'm not sure you don't have the right people in this building right now. And I'm so thankful you asked that question. I'm assuming that the hatred and vile and I haven't really watched it people feel the need to screenshot and send me texts off social media. What a lot happens in a lot of counties a new sheriff gets elected new superintendent gets appointed, they bring in a truckload of their people and everybody else gets the pizza.

Van Zant 1:01:12

Charlie Van Zant isn't running a school district. Most of my friends that are working in the Clay County school district have younger children and they're happy where they are. I'll bring in three or four people that I trust, that have moved on to other districts. Maybe a half dozen, I don't even know, I haven't had those conversations. But I promise you I don't have a boatload of people. When I came into Clay, you know how many educators CFOs and facilities directors left? Okay. For whatever reason, everybody's anxious everybody gets anxious. They got mortgages to pay, car payments to make, okay. And I'm not saying some of them aren't gonna leave. I'm one of those figures for whatever reason, people are either with me or they're not. I'm gonna come in here and some of your people are going to jump ship and go somewhere else. Do you have a job? Excuse me, if you have a skill set and want to go work somewhere in America right now and are willing to get out of bed and go work you can go find a job.

Van Zant 1:02:13

So again, that first six months, I'm gonna evaluate who's here? What they're doing. If I feel like they're good at it. I've never negotiated a superintendent's contract. And I'll ask more questions to the board later, but as we go through that, I'll talk about how many I would like to bring in and what positions but you can bet your bottom dollar I'm going to ask about a reading specialist that I trust because I see no evidence you're doing that in compliance with your own priorities or state standards. I'll bring in possibly a financial person that I trust but right now I'm seeing no material weaknesses in your audit reports. So that's not a, I know enough other people that you know, once I have access to the top floor and can see the budget, I might can

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

just have them scan and get a comfort factor. So I honestly don't know the full answer to your question. Yet ma'am.

Lichter 1:03:07

All right, we'll move on. We're gonna run out of time. But Mr. Carter, go ahead with question number two.

Carter 1:03:12

In recent years, several districts in the state of Florida have requested a tax referendum from the voters. Please explain to the board your knowledge of CCPS's tax referendum. Also, how do you intend to handle the budget challenges if it continues, and if it does not continue?

Van Zant 1:03:27

Well, I'm rarely for a tax referendum but that's really not my call to make. You're the elected officials okay. So whatever tax referendum you have, supporting whatever part of your budget and honestly, I don't know what that is. But if you're using a half cent to fund capital, or a ad valorem tax to fund salary, then I will analyze all assess and I will always, always give you at least three courses of action. Always plan it way ahead. And I will give you the worst case scenario. So if you're coming up at the end of a referendum time and putting it back out to the voters and they decide to not pass it, I will let you know early and often what has to be done.

Lichter 1:04:29

Thank you. All right. This is a scenario question. It has been brought to your attention that a teacher is using their class to promote a certain political ideology and is using unapproved resources to perpetuate radical ideas. How would you handle this situation as the superintendent?

Van Zant 1:04:49

Did you give me the same scenario that was in my envelope? Are you just changing it up?

Lichter 1:04:55

Oh,no, this is just Oh, me like,

Lichter 1:04:58

I like this scenario yet.

Lichter 1:04:59

Not we're not in the scenario.

Van Zant 1:05:00

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

Okay.

Lichter 1:05:01

Sorry.

Van Zant 1:05:02

No problem. So I've got a teacher using curriculum that was not approved in the district?

Lichter 1:05:09

Yeah, they're in they're also using their classrooms to promote certain political ideology, promote radical ideas, and it's been brought to your attention. How would you handle this situation?

Van Zant 1:05:22

So they're gonna be suspended with or without pay, whatever your policy says. HR is going to go investigate that. And depending on what my staff tells me is appropriate board policy for employee discipline., there'll be dealt with. But they're not they're not going back to work the next day until I figure out what exactly is going on. We do live in America. You're innocent till proven guilty. But if all that's true, there's going to be some consequences.

Lichter 1:05:50

Thank you. Mr. Moshier.

Moshier 1:05:59

Every parent's worst nightmare is an active shooter event at their child's school. Can you share with us how your background has prepared you to deal with this? What you have already accomplished in your career to prepare for this ordeal? An event? And have you ever had to deal with this such an event? What's your position on the Guardian program and how would you implement it?

Van Zant 1:06:26

Okay, sadly, I have had to deal with that. In 2016 I was sitting at Keystone Heights High School where my children went to school. Talking with the school principa. Her secretary came in and said Mr. Van Zant two people have been murdered in Green Cove and the shooter is behind Charles E. Bennett Elementary. I said call the sheriff called Green Cove PD. Tell them I'm in my truck heading that way if they've already got a roadblock up, tell them I'm in my tan Silverado. And I just started walking out the door.

Van Zant 1:07:03

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview April 26, 2023

Sheriff called GPD chief called they started briefing me on the scenario. I called we didn't have a Director of Safety in schools at that time, but I had a law enforcement liaison that was also the guy that ran all my custodians and several other things get to get out and have a ton of money right? We didn't have the Guardian program yet. Whether or not I carry is a question you can have in your own mind based on my background... But I started moving out now on highway 16 and got to penny farms. Tapped the break, highway patrolman waved me through knew who I was. I got to my office and Charles E. Bennett elementary school was about a mile not even maybe from my office at the county seat. So Charles E Bennett elementary school, Rico spring junior high, clay High School and our alternative alternative school Bannerman Learning Center. We're all under lockdown for about five hours that day.

Van Zant 1:08:04

So I spent the rest of that day about the next five hours. Communicating with Florida Department law enforcement, Florida Highway Patrol had roads blocked off. Clay County sheriff and the chief of the green Cove Springs police department because the school happened to be in the city limits. On the way there I called Sergeant Major Jeff topping who was my director of maintenance, he and I've been in Iraq and Afghanistan. And Bruce Harvin, who is now the safety specialist for Clay County. At that point, he was my director, liaison officer, coordinator whatever title I had him and they had already set up in my office maps, charts, blueprints of all the schools and. I think geographically, I think in plans, as I shared with you, my dad was bi-vocational with his architect and minister. So they had everything and they knew I wanted up and I just talked to everybody that needed to be talked to and coordinated with, I'd have them get the principals on the phone. I assured them that we were doing everything we possibly could. They had their kids away from windows, down behind concrete block walls. away from anything. I could see the helicopter from Jackson, but we don't own helicopters in our sheriff's office in Clay County. Hovering over the property. Sadly, the man that committed the shooting had four children in two different schools and had already visited the children that day. Okay, nobody knows you don't have a scanner that says if somebody's mentally unstable, you have one to tell you if they're a sexual deviant. But he had presented a driver's license, been scanned. One young lady that was a child of his had been in testing, one of his sons that Charles E Bennett elementary came out to the foyer of the school and visited with his dad for a little while and went back to class. So he murdered his ex wife and ex wife's father in her beauty salon. And went to the Clay County dump where his girlfriend or ex wife I forget all the details. You can Google was the attendant that let you in and out and murdered her and was on his family's farm. So we just kept working in this scenario I mean the army troop leading procedures, you received the mission, you issue a warning order your to your people, which is what I did driving in I told everybody that needed to have anything to do with it what was going on. Develop the situation then you issue more orders. I know I can be a scary guy. I don't bark at teachers. So please understand that. This is a much more collaborative

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

environment and hopefully God forbid we ever have a situation like that. But when you put me in crisis mode, you get Colonel Van Sant. It's a different guy. Okay.

Van Zant 1:11:07

You had another part of that question. I have dealt with it.

Moshier 1:11:12

What's your position on the Guardian program and how would you implement it? I'm watching the news. Just north of us, they already have their program and we're kind of dragging behind a little bit.

Van Zant 1:11:20

You need that. The more good guys with guns the better. I went to my Sheriff when I first got elected, and I said how do we train up our people? I come obviously from a little different background than most educators. I flew an aerial reaction force which means you go out you preflight your helicopter, you make sure everything works, and you hang your helmet there. So all you have to do is go back and quickly flip switches. So if somebody called screaming, we're under attack, you can get there quickly, right? And if you're flying an Apache, you deal with it yourself. And if you're flying a Blackhawk, you have your quick reaction force armed and in the back. In the civilian world, what that means as to the Guardian program, if you, and this is voluntary, we're not arming sweet little third grade teachers in denim skirts and kids, if they don't want to be, okay. Please understand, this is collaborative. You might have a custodian who used to be in the army or used to work in law enforcement. In Clay County, now we have the Guardian program. You might have a media specialist with a 38 on her hip and her blouse pulled out. You can get shot by lots of different people in Putnam County right now. If you go into school, and you're a coward intend to do harm. Rick Surrency, my friend, is the superintendent there. They only have like 15 or 16 schools, and they have almost 100 Guardians. So go in there and pop off in the library, and the media specialist might just drop you right there. I'm okay with that.

Lichter 1:12:49

I don't mean to interrupt, but we do need to get to the final question, time is almost up. So Mr. Rutherford.

Rutherford 1:13:02

What do you think is the major reason for the moral decline? In our country and our schools?

Van Zant 1:13:12

Wow, great question, sir. I think we are in our third or fourth generation. And I'm gonna tell you what I think, it is not something that can solely be served, solved by the school board, of

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

largely unchurched uncultured Americans. When I was a kid, almost nothing was open on Sunday morning.

Rutherford 1:13:37

Right.

Van Zant 1:13:38

Okay. And whether or not the family went to church, there was a general respect of, hey, that family is probably in church. Don't call 'em and bother 'em on Sunday morning. Six to eight o'clock at night? Our phone didn't ring. 'Cause people knew that was dinner time, that was family. Whether or not, if you watch the old westerns like Bonanza or the Big Valley, wholesome that did those guys drinkers were a little bit and have to shoot it out sometime? Absolutely. But was there a general respect? Did they pray sometimes before a meal? Yeah, they walked in the saloon. Were they perfect? No. Much like our founders. They weren't perfect, but they have a general respect. Did you hear Pa Cartwright, every once in a while saying, you know, gracious God bless us today, or something like that? Yes. So there was a general appreciation for the good, the beautiful, for virtue. There's just not anymore.

Van Zant 1:14:33

I was talking to a friend of mine the other day and he has small children and they weren't with him. But another kid pulled up on a side by side which happens in Keystone Heights, big, hyped-up 4-wheel drive pumping gas with some rap song on it. And he said, I heard more swearing and profanity and vulgarness in the three minutes while I was pumping my gas than I ever had. And people are crazy these days. So I didn't approach the kid. But if I'd had my family with me I would have because I would not have up my gas and let my children hear that. Yes, a little bit. So I think the reason is we haven't done a good job. My generation hasn't done a good job. That's why I mentor so many young people. There's young boy named Logan just finished fire college went through the iteration about six months behind my son Luke. Dad's in prison. His mother's a drug addict, okay.

Van Zant 1:15:32

Any more questions? I can't tell that story. based farm and now fire department [inaudible]

Rutherford 1:15:36

All things are possible to change he goes young people, especially when they're young enough to receive good morals and and a good education. Same time. The founders established the fact that you can't have a moral nation if you don't have moral schools and teaching those morals in the schools.

Van Zant 1:15:56

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

I agree and I fully support that. Thank you for picking up my slack. there.

Lichter 1:16:03

Thank you so much. I think we're down to I don't know it looks like about 10 seconds or so. Bout a minute about a minute, Mr. Moshier I know you wanted to have a follow up question. I just didn't want to not get to Mr. Rutherford's question. Did you have anything else? You're good. Okay. All right.

Lichter 1:16:21

So we are we have Thank you very much for answering those questions. We are now this is now the scenario challenge time. Right. So you will have approximately 10 minutes well you were given 10 minutes correct to prepare. So please read the scenario to us and take up to 15 minutes to prioritize and present your action steps. So again, please read this scenario and take up to 15 minutes to prioritize and present your action steps.

Van Zant 1:16:53

Okay. Preface: situation is Monday morning, October 16, 2023. You've been the superintendent of Collier County for several months and you become familiar with the staff and operations of the district. You have a good working relationship with the board members and you've come to trust those who report to you directly. Trust that's going to be key the first few months. You are scheduled to be in your office for the day. The following events are brought to your attention from between 8 and 8:15. Please describe the actions that you would take immediately during the remainder of the day to address the issues.

END RECORDING #1

Van Zant 1:17:35

Prior to your arrival chief HR informs you then assistant principals arrested over the weekend and has been detained in Miami due to what's been described as a very serious altercation.

Van Zant 1:17:46

8 am, CFO mentions to while you're walking into the building in the morning that has concerns regarding increased cost of fuel given the allotted to allocate the funds allocated in the budget and the current price per gallon of fuel, the buses will stop running April 1, 2024.

Van Zant 1:18:05

8:05. You get a call from the managers of for the county commissioner who informs you about a change in plans for the new housing development that may impact traffic around CCPS schools. She needs to review this with you and get feedback ASAP all constructions all construction at the site has been halted.

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

Van Zant 1:18:29

You are told by the administrative assistant a reporter called this morning asking for your comment on a community protest that social media sources indicate will occur this afternoon near several of the high schools regarding a decision regarding middle and high school redistricting. The reporter indicated that the community members including the parents and students and 10 protests near dismissal times and demand that current school boundaries remain in place. You learn that several local networks intend to film the protest and attempt to speak with both students and parents.

Van Zant 1:19:11

The Director of Transportation calls to tell you that there was a bus accident in Everglades City and at least five students and the driver are hospitalized.

Van Zant 1:19:21

The Assistant superintendent comes to your office to notify you that mold has been reported in several schools. Your input is needed on several solution options. And I come communications plan on whether to send the students home for virtual learning.

Van Zant 1:19:45

I've had those Monday's literally were on the way to green Cove. I called my secretary and said cancel the day. It happens sometimes. And literally if you're just joining us go to Charlievansant.com. I made a nine minute film that Manatee County required and is on there this day kind of like. Okay so we're just taking one at a time. Time you wanna go down the list? One by one. Okay.

Van Zant 1:20:13

The guy in the jail. Spent over three decades in uniform. Saturday morning Sunday morning Monday morning, private squeaky is in jail. Got drunk got stupid. Every story I ever heard where one of my soldiers embarrassed the uniform in public started out with with Sir You know we were sitting around drinking and, then it goes downhill from there. Had a teacher at Clay high. Assistant superintendent for HR called me one morning said Mr. Van Zant. Miss so and so came back from Christmas break for teacher planning day. Principal McCabe walked in the room. She had a bag of cocaine in her purse. Not good. So that one. We live in a country where you're innocent to until proven guilty. I'm not going down there to get him out of jail. The HR staff is going to investigate it. Find me the truth and we'll deal with them in accordance with your discipline plan and if they're supposed to be in a school and we need to send an additional AP then HR can sort that out with a principal that's not high priority. It is

Van Zant 1:21:29

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

I deal with all these in my mind. I use a risk analysis chart that the Army developed for years and I'm constantly looking at the high left end of the chart. It's kind of like a government pay chart but in reverse. If the event can be catastrophic, and it's likely, then the risk is high. But going down that chart if it's could be bad, but not that bad, or it's just not a big impact. And going right on the chart. If it's could happen frequently, or not as likely, or probably not at all, it comes down to the bottom right and it's a very low risk. So that's how I evaluate this all just in my head from years of doing it.

Van Zant 1:22:14

So item, CFO mentioned to you that while you're walking in the building, concerned about fuel cost with buses, if we didn't plan a budget with your healthy fund balance to where we can't drive buses past April when it's October? That guy or gal probably isn't gonna work for me anymore first. Okay. But that's not the building's not burning down. Okay. I'm going to tell him to go back with the Transportation Department plan me some options and by Friday have me for at least three courses of actions on how we're going to do this.

Van Zant 1:22:53

Okay. While all this is happening, the Assistant superintendent from HR is gathering a list of things I'm going to call you about at the end of the day. And by then I will have gotten a good working relationship with you, this says we have already built trust between the district staff, you the board and me the superintendent, that's everything is couched in that. So you're gonna get one phone call from somebody, it may or may not be me, because I'm going to be driving to a hospital here and there, okay. So in they're gonna go down the litany and let you know what's going on and give you updates through the day until I have time to talk to each of you.

Van Zant 1:23:35

So the fuel again, barn's not on fire. We'll figure that out.

Van Zant 1:23:39

You get a call from the county commissioner's office and a change in plans. So facilities staff is going to go over there and review with the county manager what's going on? I wouldn't put you in that situation. I wouldn't have proposed a school in a place where it doesn't make sense in the first place. Ms. Lucarelli had a great question earlier. And I went through several steps we would have taken prior to. Land doesn't just totally change overnight. Traffic patterns don't change overnight. Believe me government moves at the speed of smell. Nothing over there should have been a surprise. Okay. The expressway didn't jump a mile or a half a mile north south east or west on this. So we're gonna figure that out like calm, measured, disciplined adults. And then I will report back to you but we'll let you know that it's a problem in case Action News Collier or whoever your news station gets out there and puts the camera on it will

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

let you know about it, but we're gonna let you know that we're going to come back to you with a couple of plans to mitigate it.

Van Zant 1:24:47

8:10 administrative assistant comment on protests okay. That's common. For some reason. Somebody did not do what I said we were going to do and that, again, that's not likely to happen here. It could, it could because nobody likes change. Not even a wet baby that's crying about their diaper. It takes them about a minute to warm up to the idea that we're gonna get a new nice dry diaper and wipe right. So it just takes a minute for people to warm up to the idea of change. So, you know, Billy and Bobby, their mom, grandma, whoever is raising them might be upset that they're moving into the new high school. But I'm gonna do everything in my power, working collaboratively with you and the community to make sure we don't get pinched in that scenario. But I promise you when you open a new school, whether it's 1%, 5% you're going to have some speakers at this podium or wherever the public stands, and they're going to be upset, because you don't love my children and you're going to hear it. I heard it for 18 years as an elected official. You're going to have a little bit of that. I hope it doesn't come to protests and we'll do everything we can to mitigate that but you're going to you're going to know this is going to happen. We're going to do everything on our school sites to make sure that it's safe. And we're going to have communicated that message communicated that message communicated that message, and we will continue to offer to meet with these people and hear them out. Remember, we're meeting people where they are, loving them not enough to not leave them there. And if we can work through these one by one and solve some of these issues, we will but first and foremost we're going to make safety a priority on our campus and not let anything crazy get out of hand to Mr. Rutherford point. They come with bricks and flames and stupid, we'll deal with that too.

Van Zant 1:26:48

Okay. 8:15 All right. While this is going on, Charlie's in his truck, heading to whatever hospitals down here. I had three buses run into each other. One afternoon about three o'clock and they were all Clay County buses. Somebody stopped somebody didn't see it. There was a glare in the sun. One bus hit the other bus hit it. So I had three buses full of junior high people making a eastbound turn off the northbound lane to traffic from Blanding, turn it on to 220. And no children thankfully were hurt seriously. But once the first child put their hand on their neck and said My neck hurts. Every child hurt so what did I get? I get a call that says Mr. Van Zant you had three bus wreck and they're all being transported to hospitals. There's only three ERs in Clay County. So my deputy superintendent was in my office. Maybe it was closer to four was towards the end of the day. She says what do you need and I said you want to go make some hospital rounds. So we left North on 17 Out of green Cove and we went to the first ER and we talked to a lot of people there and nobody was seriously hurt. So we went on up north to Orange Park we went to Orange Park hospital. By time I swung back around towards the

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

Middleburg hospital. They had already gone, but I talked to every one of those parents. While we're driving we're talking to the board members and we let 'em know it's all right, this sounds a little more serious. But you know, I don't know till I evaluate it. And that would be what I'm talking to you about that day more than anything else I've come across so far. That and the protests scenario.

Van Zant 1:28:25

Okay. 8:17. Assistant superintendent comes to your office notifying you that there have been there's mold in several schools. That happens maybe before I get in my truck or maybe they have to call me while I'm driving in the hospital. But I'm sending them on a phone call to the County Health Department. School District safety personnel. They're going to have a conference call with the school principals. The PR staff is going to be getting with them and formulating the message and might be the deputy superintendents voice and my staff is going to be engaged in all this process chief staff deputy that's why you pay them the big bucks for so all these things that aren't aren't burning anybody's feet at the moment. All that can be handled. I'm gonna be going to the hospital that you're going to be communicated with all the people in the community are going to be communicated with. I'm going to do whatever I can do to counsel and help the kids and their families that are in the hospital.

Van Zant 1:29:27

And out of all this we're gonna make sure our campuses are safe when the protesters arrive. Everything else here is not a high threat and not time critical other than communication and knowing that it's going on and we'll come back with plans and courses of action if you don't like 'em, we'll keep planning them, the fuel on the bus, the county planning. That's all stuff we can continue to work on. But the key here is to strategically plan these moves in our budget and where you're going to put a school and communicate with all the stakeholders holder so you don't have these come like this. I've never had an exact day like this, because I'm a little bit better planner than whoever this superintendent is. I feel sorry for him. Some school board, not you guys, made a poor hire there.

END RECORDING #2

Lichter 00:36

Thank you. Are there any questions at this point? Okay. All right, so we are moving into really the final round. This is your this is your opportunity to ask the board questions. We have approximately 20 minutes that has been allocated. So you can let us have it.

Van Zant 01:05

Okay. Well, I'd like to thank you all. Literally, sincerely for letting me do. So six weeks ago, I was planning on going to fly for the airlines lifeline. retiring from the army late last year. Let me

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

really kind of chill out and evaluate where I was. And I never dreamed that my calling to lead a school district would align with the school board's values. And here we are. I got a call from a friend of mine since you didn't pay any attention to what's going on in all your county. I said you know what's going on down there. And then bam, holy smokes. And once you guys put my resume online, I get a call from a retired Air Force colonel and managing. He says, I want you to apply to be our school superintendent. I said is it Oh yes. Handy. Retired Air Force. Colonel. I've read your resume. I've Googled yet and you're the kind of app that we'd like. So the reason that I'm in two other superintendent searches, I just want to say that out loud, is because there's some combat veterans on to other school boards. I'm not saying you should hire a bunch of army guys. I don't have a bunch of come down here. Don't be scared of that. But that's how I ended up in free you guys put my resume online. So I can't accept responsibility for that other than transmitting the resume to you. But as I said before, how you like to be communicated with if you can just go down the line and start helping the chair please and tell me a little bit about yourself how you like to be communicated with you sit at your desk all day. You want to call wrap up at the end of each day. You want me to interrupt your day if there's a county planning issue or only if there are kids transported. Usually I go with life, limb or eyesight. If I got to transport somebody, I stopped them calling.

Lichter 03:06

Alright, we'll start down there with Mrs. Lucarelli. Work our way down. Thank you.

Lucarelli 03:10

Okay, thanks. So basically, I mean, I'm in the building a lot. So oftentimes you can probably just come right down to my office, but a phone call or text is always great as well. Okay, especially if it's something urgent, I think we need to know immediately.

END RECORDING #3

Carter 00:08

So I'm a business owner in Collier County and especially during season my day starts at 4am. So usually the mornings are better for me to communicate. If it can be texts, that's fine, if it's something simplistic. If it needs a conversation, then usually the mornings on a phone call is better for me. You know, and if it's strictly urgent, I will make time to come in and have a face to face. Yeah,

Van Zant 00:33

I'll text you at four or 430 and let you call me I want to win by 430.

Lichter 00:46

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

So, one thing you know as a board, we don't ever want to micromanage staff. I think that's critically important. Like Mrs. Lucarelli said, most of us are in the office so we are accessible. The superintendent job is is a big job. So I think communication is definitely important. Like we want to know the good, the bad, the ugly. So, you know, I would say unless it's, if it's a pressing issue, definitely want to be contacted immediately whether it's just hey, here's the situation through a text or a brief email or a quick phone call. And then sometimes it's just a follow up, sit down conversation that if it requires more in depth communication. But at the end of the day, I'm very well versed in the role of the governing board versus the superintendent and I think we both need to stay in our lanes. Communication, trust is extremely important. But I also don't want to micromanage the job of the superintendent. So I'll leave it at that. Mr. Moshier.

Van Zant 01:48

That is lovely, thank you.

Moshier 01:52

I think I'm accessible pretty much 24 hours a day. I've been getting emails, I've, you know, read them in the middle of the night. I don't have a problem with that, texting, phone calls, if it's important. I'm gonna leave it up to you. I'm not going to like what Kelly said micromanage you but if you think there's an issue that we should know about and should address, I have no problem talking. I'm in the building, you know, two or three times a week depending on what the schedule is, you know, and how often I'm here but you know, my phone's always open. If I don't there, I'm not can't get to you leave me a message and I'll probably get back to you within you know, 15 to 30 minutes at the most. You know, I like to I like communications. I like to have, you know, your input on things. Especially, there's a big problem we've, you know, we have this system set up now where we all get texted on any major thing that's going to happen, you know, especially if anything happens with the media, you know, to be informed about because you usually know before I'll know about a situation and there's, you know, the situation is going to affect a lot of people, you know, let me know, I mean, we had a fire a couple of weeks ago that really messed up every kid getting home from school. I live at the south end there was at the north end of the of the county, you know, keep me informed about a case. I started getting a few phone calls so I can address what the situation is.

Van Zant 03:07

Yes, sir. My goal will be for you to never be surprised. Like a birthday and I just get a while here. I have this habit of calling even my former staff and singing happy birthday. I sing very quietly to myself. But every once in a while if I just want to embarrass somebody, I'll sing Happy Birthday to them.

Moshier 03:25

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

Thank you.

Rutherford 03:26

For myself, this is a full time job. Even though I have another occupation. I'm a painting contractor, but I have a son and the last year while I was running for election, and even to now he runs the business. I'm trying to train him so he can have his own business. So eventually what I'll do is say you take it and run with it, because I'm here. I'll be here for four years and I expect to be available to the superintendent at any time. So you'll find me most often in the office and so I'm pretty close to where you are or where you did

Van Zant 04:03

That is awesome! And you guys have your own offices here. Yeah, we didn't have enough space in Clay County. I parked my truck in a dirt parking lot. And walked in the back door to the superintendent's office but board members we had a conference room and they could make arrangements to come in and sit there if they need to talk to me or the attorney that

Rutherford 04:20

I know. I know another district that has the the superintendent has his office, they come out of their home they stay at their home.

Van Zant 04:30

I got a friend in Mayo that helps cut the grass. He has two schools a K five and a seven from we won't get into all that and we're 612

Lichter 04:37

Can I just make one final comment that I forgot? The other piece of the communication is not to, I guess filter the information or manipulate it. I'm a straight shooter and that's what I would expect from the superintendent to be very straightforward, clear, not manipulate or sugarcoat something just to tell us what we may want to hear. Just give it to us straight.

Van Zant 05:00

I would encourage you to call all Clay County, call the superintendent's office number. Talk to David Roski. I mentored him from high school principal to assistant principal is now the superintendent. Call the Lake County superintendent. She was my assistant superintendent for Instruction then my deputy superintendent. She went and interviewed in Lake and quickly beat out 97 other applicants at the last minute right before it closed. She's superintendent there. I met her when she was a principal at one of the new schools we opened when we built 14 schools. My big saying to them, I'll tell you what it is but you just write this down. What is Mr. Van Zant's policy on news. They will likely rattle off to you, "he always says bad news doesn't get better with age." Okay, I told them that, I drilled that into them. And also told them give it to

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

me early. Give it to me often. And I had board members that loved me and some that didn't love me so much. Okay, I'll just be clear with you. But I communicated with all of them as often as I could. With the same message. I invited them, I offered 'em, some of them were older ladies, they'd like me to meet them at the McDonald's and get a cup of coffee by their house. Again, I did a survey district wide, board members, teachers principals, however you'd like to be communicated with, Mr. Jerry, if you're in your office upstairs. I'll come to your office. Mr. Moshier, if your truck shop, come to your truck shop, you're on your back, looking up changing the oil, I'll get down on a crawler and come under there with you and we'll talk you know I believe in meeting people where they are and I'm very sincere in that

Van Zant 05:40

I just wanted to piggyback on what Miss Lichter was saying because this was something I was going to add as well, I think important to know when you're talking about communication. I have four kids that have been through well two of them have been through the school district so I have two that are still currently in our schools. So if something happens in our schools, we know that our kids are very quick to, you know, let us know, find out from parents and such. So to piggyback what Miss Lichter was saying, yes, just giving it to us straight. I mean, even if we don't know the full story yet, or you don't know exactly how you're going to handle it. This is a situation that is occurring right now. Because the worst thing that I've encountered is for parents or students to say, Hey, what's going on? I heard this that or the other and and I have to say, I don't know what you're talking about.

Van Zant 07:45

Right? Well in this day and age, unfortunately, in my opinion. Second graders have an iPhone in their pocket and they're telling mom, I heard something outside the school.

Van Zant 07:55

We're building a new cafeteria at the elementary school in my hometown where our kids are. Or my children went to school where I went to school. Well if you're riveting metal on the roof, and you're some scared little kid heard about a school shooting last week in some other state. That might sound like a gunshot to you and you're texting your mom saying I hear some shooting. They're building a new cafeteria. I get it. I get it. You won't. If at all possible. If I know about it, you will know about it. I'll make that commitment to you and you all five, ma'am, will know the same thing as close to the same time as I possibly can.

Rutherford 08:31

Thank you. Yeah, we

Lichter 08:32

We have about nine minutes left.

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

Van Zant 08:35

Okay. So can you each tell me again one by one if I'm honored to be offered the position as your school superintendent, you had a list of priorities. We went through them. Individually, you got to have one that you're kind of a little bit more towards another. I think I can guess what Mr. Rutherford's is but what would success look like to each of you?

Lichter 09:03

All right, Mr. Rutherford, what would success look like to you?

Rutherford 09:08

I have five points on my brochure when I was running for office that I believe are necessary for a student to have a good education. And I expect to follow through on those. I'm going to do what I promised to do. And the first one is both mental and physical discipline. Some people took that out of text. What I meant was, if you can't discipline yourself, you certainly won't be able to do anything in sports because that is needful and also in your mental capacity, you need discipline in order to do your work and do it properly. You got to make yourself study. I did not go to college. But I've been in what you call it in today's world, a ever learning let's say a type person. I have eight or had eight book cases filled with books, I read constantly and what they call a indefatigable reader. I want to know what's happening. I want to know what can be done about it.

Rutherford 10:22

And so the second thing is, indeed, as I've mentioned to you need good morals. You can't have a good education without good morals.

Rutherford 10:31

Another one is to be able to have our history properly taught. Because it's been let's say it's been censored and one reason it's been shown to be biased and everything it was not like it was when I came up. It I understand because I'm from the south, I understand that KKK, I understand lynching. I'm saying love things that were opposed to people of color, and I'm opposed to that. It needs to be taught exactly like that, they need to know the bad as well as the good. And then yet we also need to know that this history is going to be taught from the textbooks and we need to choose the proper textbooks. And there are a couple of other things but also American exceptionalism. We are in a unique nation. No other nation on Earth has been like our nation. And for the greatest period of our country's history, we had a realization that we were exceptional. We did more things, actually. In three to three years, 100 years we've been here, we've accomplished more than in the past 5000 years, in our technology and everything else. And so I believe if we're doing the right thing, the students will have the right kind of education.

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

Van Zant 12:00

Sir, I agree with those wholeheartedly. I still challenge. [break in recording]

Van Zant 12:35

mentally, and physically, I believe in good morals. And again, if you're just joining us or you're a parent driving between meetings today and listening online, please go to Charlievanzant.com. This board has plenty of time to make this decision, you're meeting again on May ninth. I address American exceptionalism. I address a proper accounting of history. The only guy I know that's ever been a school superintendent that hosted an American history conference to highlight the exceptional things that we've done as Americans especially around our founders, around great literature and around a proper accounting of American history.

Rutherford 13:14

The last thing I would like to mention on my five points was Respect, respect for each other, respect for others, respect for authority. And so if we don't have those things, we can't have a good nation.

Van Zant 13:30

I agree. I went back in the classroom in 2017, the first school year that I wasn't a superintendent. I wrote the Army values on the board and you can look at him, they're on my resume but respect is one of them. And I circled that one. Now was in low performing very challenged socioeconomic school on the west side of Jacksonville where there shootings and knives and what have you. And I asked those kids I said if we have respect, we will have zero problems with Mr. Van Zant. You know how many discipline referrals I wrote that year? None. One student was acting out during the pledge, not standing which is his constitutional right. I whispered in his ear and like Chris, I need you to go to the dean's office. Yes sir. Went to the dean's office. Pledge was over. I texted the dean. I said just hold him till the end of class. And I'll talk with him during lunch. I forget exactly what I said. I talked with Chris, we didn't have any more problems. I didn't put a note in his record. And that was it. Maybe a year later, I ran into Chris at the Clay County Fair, Clay County has a great family-oriented fair. He came up he hugged me and he introduced me to his mother and his grandmother that were raised him. Showing the kid some respect. Didn't embarrass him in front of the class. But I did not I mean, I hadn't been in the classroom since 1998. This was 2017 You know you can get a lot if you give kids simple expectations and mirror them yourself.

Moshier 15:16

Basically I like to get back to classical education. You know, back to basics. I see so many students right now they can't figure out basic change. I think we need to work on that. I was in the event and the girl didn't know what a yardstick was and for the fourth grade. You know, just

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

getting back to basics and go from there. You know respect I think is very good too. Basic, you know, I'm from the trucking business and not every kid is gonna go to college. Those are gonna go I just want to put some vocational education for the others. And safety. I used to have a hair salon real close to Parkland. So I know a lot of that family is over there. And that's the big, you know, safety for me. I mean, you always care about your kids with everything and that's what I want to see, you know, push for our stuff.

Lichter 16:03

We're almost out of time, so...

Van Zant 16:06

I'm sorry, we we're gonna have more time tomorrow.

Lichter 16:09

Yes, we will.

Lichter 16:09

So I'll just make it quick for me what success. I know we talked about the district being an A school district. But when you really look into the numbers on the literacy aspect is still not where we need to be. So I feel like we need to be honest where we are and implement things that actually work and is proven to be successful, not what has been happening in the past year, which is a lot of educational fads and programs that were never done with fidelity and I unfortunately, I think we've done a disservice not only to our students but also to the staff who's had to keep learning something new. So I think, you know, those things have to change. And we are we are changing that. Mr. Carter,

Carter 16:12

For me it would have to be capitalism through our entrepreneurship courses. During the last recession, 70% of the jobs were created by small business. This community is made up of a huge amount of small business. The way to keep America first is through capitalism and gross domestic product, which is done through small business. So I think our entrepreneurship program that we do is top rate and I want to make sure we continue that and our technical colleges as well as an alumni from our local technical college.

Lichter 17:22

Alright, let's finish it up. Go ahead. Lucarelli

Lucarelli 17:24

Well, as an educator and a parent, academics are the top priority for me, making sure we have you know, we're improving our reading programs, our writing programs, our math programs

Charles Van Zant, Jr., Final Interview
April 26, 2023

and being able to differentiate what we're doing to meet the needs of all the children that we serve in a big diversity. So and, and also streamlining the programs because I agree. Over the years we've seen a lot of programs come in and that maybe weren't well tested, or approved or proved to be successful. And I we've been doing this but this this has been a priority to kind of get rid of the things that we know we have that aren't working and build up and improve the things that we have that are and if we need to bring in new.

Van Zant 18:18

Yes, ma'am, that's nothing objectionable.

Lichter 18:22

Well we want to thank you very much for your your time. I know this is a unique experience being interviewed in front of you know, potentially 1000s of people could be watching online or on TV. So thank you again for your time and we look forward to meeting with you tomorrow.

Lichter 18:49

At this time, board members and to the public we will be taking a break and at 1030 We will begin the next round. Thank you