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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**Student Success Takes Center Stage as Freedom Institute Hosts State Education Leaders**

NAPLES, Fla. — As state education leaders gathered in Naples on April 17, the most compelling moments of the day didn't come from policy discussions. They came from two students whose stories brought those ideas to life.

During its statewide meeting at The Freedom Institute of Collier County, the Florida Board of Education recognized students Erik Aspegren and Eire Layton, highlighting two distinct paths shaped by a more flexible, individualized approach to learning.

For 16-year-old Erik Aspegren, that path has been anything but traditional and far more expansive than what most students are offered.

After navigating public, private and homeschool environments, Aspegren found his footing at The Freedom Institute, where he can pursue multiple pathways at once rather than being confined to just one. While many students are asked to choose between college, trade school or entering the workforce, Erik is doing all three simultaneously.

Now on track to completing his high school requirements early, Aspegren is enrolled in dual enrollment courses and is expected to earn his Associate of Arts degree by the time he graduates. At the same time, he is exploring trade certifications in fields such as HVAC, electronics or welding while also gaining real-world experience through a paid internship at a Naples auto dealership, where he works nearly 30 hours a week.

By the time he finishes high school, Erik will have earned a diploma, completed two years of college coursework at no cost, and made significant progress toward trade certification—all while building several years of hands-on work experience. The approach not only accelerates his timeline but also allows him to combine these experiences in ways that open multiple future opportunities, from entering the workforce ahead of his peers to eventually launching his own business or continuing toward a four-year degree.

“Freedom changed my life by giving me the confidence to think for myself, speak honestly and take control of my own future,” Aspegren said.

Aspegren, the son of Kevin and Eva Aspegren, represents a growing shift toward educational models that prioritize flexibility and real-world readiness alongside academics.

“Erik has experienced just about every educational model public, private, homeschool, hybrid and even international and what we’ve found at Freedom is truly unique,” Eva Aspegren said. “It’s the first place where his education is fully personalized, allowing him to pursue his mix of interests while gaining real-world skills and experience. The flexibility and efficiency of the model have been incredible. He’s able to start dual enrollment early, accelerate his learning and make the most of his time. Freedom has given him the support to build his own path, and we’ve seen him grow in confidence, independence and purpose.”

His story stood alongside that of senior Eire Layton, whose journey reflects a different kind of balance, one that blends academic achievement, athletics and community involvement.

A four-time state finalist swimmer and team captain at Naples High School, Layton has maintained a 4.0 GPA while completing dual enrollment coursework. She also works as a lifeguard for the City of Naples and has been recognized multiple times for her leadership and character.

“Freedom has been the perfect place for me to continue to pursue my academic and athletic goals,” Layton said. “Due to the flexible scheduling of classes through Freedom, I was able to not only take high school and college courses but also pick up more shifts at work as a lifeguard, attend lectures by guest speakers, take AI courses and shadow at Chico’s this year. All these experiences have made me feel ready for the University of Colorado and have helped me decide that I want to work in brand marketing. Managing all

these activities did take discipline and organization, but I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to attend Freedom, where I learned so much both in and out of the classroom.”

Seventeen-year-old Layton plans to attend the University of Colorado Boulder this fall to study marketing or communications, with an interest in business. She is the daughter of Thomas and Monet Layton.

For the Layton family, the impact of Freedom’s model is best seen through student growth.

“The success Eire has had at Freedom has been rewarding and so empowering,” Monet Layton said. “She has truly grown as a person and has thrived in the flexible environment Freedom has provided. She has taken control of her own learning and learned so much this year beyond textbooks and PowerPoints. The guidance from all her teachers and success coaches have truly helped her navigate this journey. Watching her become more independent, confident and kind is a testament to Freedom and all the staff she has been able to work with. I know she is well prepared and ready for her future.”

Their recognition during the meeting offered a real-world example of the type of outcomes state leaders are increasingly focused on preparing students not just for graduation, but for life beyond the classroom.

“These students represent what’s possible when education is tailored to the individual,” said Christy Vaill, principal of The Freedom Institute. “They’ve taken ownership of their learning in different ways, and that’s exactly what we hope to foster.”

The Florida Board of Education’s meeting, held on The Freedom Institute’s campus, is part of its regular statewide schedule to review policies affecting students, families and schools. Topics included school choice, student progress monitoring and accountability; priorities that align closely with the institute’s model.

For The Freedom Institute, hosting the meeting provided an opportunity to showcase that model in action.

“We’re seeing education move toward more personalized, real-world learning experiences,” said Chris Marker, CEO of The Freedom Institute. “Having the board here made it possible to connect those conversations directly to students who are living it every day.”

That connection was not lost on Tom Grady, board chair of the Freedom Institute and a former chair of the Florida Board of Education.

“It’s one thing to talk about education policy,” Grady said. “It’s another to see how those ideas are impacting students in a meaningful way.”

As policymakers discussed statewide strategy, students like Aspegren and Layton served as a reminder that the future of education is already taking shape, one individualized path at a time.

***About the Freedom Institute of Collier County***

*The Freedom Institute is an innovative high school program offering personalized and flexible learning pathways that build critical thinking, financial literacy, and the foundations of engaged American citizenship. Through an AI-enhanced curriculum, a blend of high school and college courses, and real-world experiences including internships, college and career preparation, and job placement students gain the skills, knowledge, and values essential for economic freedom and workforce success. The Institute's American Dream Conversations at Freedom series brings civic, business, and thought leaders directly to students to share lessons about life, liberty, and the pursuit of excellence.*

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