



June 9, 2022

Honorable Mayor Lauren Poe

Gainesville City Commission

The 2018 study, "Understanding Racial Equity in Alachua County," thoroughly documented gross inequities and disparities that exist in our community. Among the worst findings: Less than 30 percent of Black children in the county are reading proficiently at third grade compared to 74 percent of White students.

Since its inception in 2016, Gainesville for All (GNV4ALL) has advocated high-quality early learning based on research that for decades has shown that 85 percent of brain growth occurs by age three. As acclaimed early learning advocate David Lawrence put it during a recent visit to Gainesville: "Get the early learning right and children probably will have momentum for the rest of their lives."

There is also no dispute that children from stable families are more likely to succeed in school. This long-accepted fact is why GNV4ALL has devised the strategy of pairing high-quality early learning for children from six weeks-old to age four with family-stabilizing services to begin narrowing the county's academic achievement gap, which is among the worst in Florida and the nation.

Specifically, we want to open the Gainesville Empowerment Zone Family Learning Center this fall on the campus of Metcalfe Elementary School as a state-of-the-art facility that can be a blueprint for other communities in Alachua County, the state, and the nation.

After more than a year of negotiations with Alachua County Public Schools, we have already secured a standalone building. As part of our Memorandum of Understanding with the School District, GNV4ALL is leasing the nearly 8,000-square foot building with an energy cost allowance of about \$12,000 a year. Craig Carter, a former city commissioner and commercial real estate specialist, estimates the value of the school district's contribution at \$120,000 a year. If GNV4ALL had to purchase the building it would not be affordable, and our project would not be viable.

From our Metcalfe location, in addition to providing children from low-income households with their best hope for high-quality early learning at low staff-student ratios, we will refer families to a wide range of services from prenatal care and parent coaching to job training and medical assistance.

Our approach to serving the needs of these families is dependent on tapping existing community services. It can only be successful if all segments of the community such as government, business, faith, and educational institutions make significant contributions.

The University of Florida's Anita Zucker Center is advising us on curriculum and will track our students' academic and social/emotional progress. Our students must qualify for School Readiness and/or VPK funding which will be provided by the Early Learning Coalition of Alachua County on a recurring monthly basis. The Early Learning Coalition of Alachua County funding is dependent on attendance. At full capacity we will have 77 students. Human service agencies such as Catholic Charities have already committed to working with our pregnant mothers, providing such services as food, diapers, utilities assistance and other essentials.

In the past several years since we began public discussion of the Gainesville Empowerment Zone Family Learning Center, we have received more than \$200,000 in private donations and grants.

This month we are launching a series of one-on-one meetings with prospective private donors. This effort is being led by Dr. Ed Block, retired University of Florida distinguished professor who led the College of Medicine's largest department, which had an annual budget of \$90 million.

We request that the City of Gainesville join these efforts by making a one-time donation of \$500,000 that will help launch the Gainesville Empowerment Zone Family Learning Center this Fall. GEZFLC will judiciously use the Gainesville City Commission funds to support children and families in an underserved community. Your funding will allow us to pay for capital improvements and personnel costs that include:

- Building renovations - \$125,000
- Internet network installations - \$10,000
- Playground development - \$125,000
- Classroom furniture - \$80,000
- Early childhood teaching essentials - \$60,000
- Immediately hire essential staff - \$100,000

The \$500,000 will significantly close the gaps between the donations, grants, and state funding through Early Learning Coalition of Alachua County. GNV4ALL will continue to pursue private donations, grants, and in-kind supports for the Gainesville Empowerment Zone Family Learning Center.

Many of the costs are not recurring. Additionally, GEZFLC will be striving to complete the Gold Seal rating with NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) within 18 months of opening. This increases the base rate of school readiness dollars. GEZFLC will be completing student assessments to receive an additional hike in school readiness dollars. The school administration also will be working closely with staff (mentoring and training) to attain the Class Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) scores necessary for additional funding.

The city's assistance will go far toward truly making Gainesville 4 All.

Thank you for your consideration.

James F. Lawrence

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