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Alachua County Commission

Recent news headlines decrying Alachua County third graders below state average reading test scores should have set off alarms. After all, this has been going on the past five years straight.

The situation is especially dire among Black students from low-income households as well-documented by the 2018 study, *Understanding Racial Equity in Alachua County*. But the problem hasn't been grasping the severity of the downslide. Rather it has been acting on the obvious need for a much more aggressive, community-wide response.

Since its inception in 2016, Gainesville for All (GNV4ALL) has advocated high-quality early learning based on decades-old research that has shown 85 percent of brain growth occurs by age three. We believe early learning coupled with providing wraparound services to help stabilize struggling families is the way forward. Done right, society will benefit with fewer problem-plagued families, less crime, and fewer social ills in general.

Gainesville for All wants to do it right. But we need help.

We're appealing to the Alachua County Commission to join our efforts by providing a one-time appropriation of \$500,000 that primarily would be used to help sustain our Gainesville Empowerment Zone Family Learning Center over the next three years of a demonstration project on the campus of Metcalfe Elementary School in East Gainesville.

A request seeking the same amount is currently under consideration by the Gainesville City Commission. We're asking the city to help us pay for building renovations, \$125,000; internet installations, \$10,000; playground development, \$125,000; classroom furniture, \$80,000; early childhood teaching essentials, \$60,000, and immediate staff hiring, \$100,000.

The funds we're requesting represent investments in strengthening a community that is only as strong as its weakest link. County assistance will help ensure that our pairing of high-quality early learning with family-stabilizing services will significantly help improve appalling statistics that show Black children, in particular, are being left behind.

After more than a year of negotiations with Alachua County Public Schools, we have signed a Memorandum of Understanding and a rent-free lease agreement for a nearly 8,000-square foot building

on the Metcalfe campus. 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 six-weeks to age 5 with their best hope for high-quality early learning using low staff-student ratios, we will refer their low-income families to a wide range of services such as referrals to prenatal care, parent coaching, job training and medical assistance.

Our approach 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. 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 spearheaded 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.

The requested \$500,000 from the county will significantly close the gaps between the donations, grants, and state funding through the 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.

Please keep in mind that many of the costs are not recurring. The GEZFLC will strive to achieve the Gold Seal rating with NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) within 18 months of opening to increase the base rate of school readiness dollars. The GEZFLC also will be completing student assessments to receive an additional hike in school readiness dollars, and our administrators will work closely with staff (mentoring and training) to attain the scores necessary for additional funding.

The county's assistance will go far toward ensuring the success of this community-wide effort and to truly making Gainesville 4 All.

Thank you for your consideration.

James F. Lawrence

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