CHS in the News

Children's Home Society of Florida

Building equity in education requires commitment, partnership | Opinion

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COVID-19 has put a spotlight on how complex social issues — such as equitable access to quality education and health care — have overwhelmed many of our communities. While these issues have become increasingly apparent during the pandemic, let's make no mistake: They have existed for too long.

Sadly, many of the existing inequities even have been recognized as norms. But it is not the norm, and these deep-seated problems affect all of us, including our children.

A child's ZIP code or family income should not determine their potential. It should not determine the type of education or health care they receive. All children deserve to have equitable access to the resources they need to live and thrive.

We start by building bridges – by listening to community members to learn their needs, their barriers and how we can, collectively, build systems that work for everyone. It takes partnerships, commitment and scale to drive equity solutions for all.

And it's already happening.

In 2009, the University of Central Florida and Children's Home Society of Florida came together with a shared commitment – to use their scale and resources and collaborate with community members to tackle inequities affecting student success.

Bringing in Orange County Public Schools, the partnership resulted in Florida's first Community Partnership School, located at Evans High School in Orlando. But it didn't stop there.

CHS and UCF saw the transformation this partnership initiated, and they saw the potential to do even more, alongside more communities and with more partners. Florida now has 26 Community Partnership Schools – each with a university, nonprofit and health provider connection – driving outcomes that improve student success in the classroom and beyond. Sabal Palm Elementary is an example in Tallahassee.

Central to the model is the commitment of each core partner, working in tandem with the community to change odds into opportunities for students, families and the entire community. Together, these partners address inequities that have long afflicted their communities.

During the 2019-20 school year, Community Partnership Schools served more than 23,000 students, 87% of which were economically disadvantaged. Students received much-needed resources and services, including individual learning opportunities like tutoring, and wellness support visits such as physicals, dental and eye exams and mental health support.

Since the needs of each Community Partnership School are as unique as their neighborhoods, the core partners are positioned at the local level to work closely with each school to best address students' barriers and provide the greatest opportunities.

But there is more work to be done.

A report from the Brookings Institution's Task Force on Next Generation Community Schools recommends "the transformation of U.S. schools into community schools, centering initial efforts on the 4% of school districts that educate approximately 40% of the country's children ... and have the greatest concentration of unmet student needs." A sizable portion of Florida falls within this recommendation.

The partnerships must grow, and the collective impact advance. The Florida Legislature has recognized the importance of — and funded — the Community Partnership School model since 2014; for that, we are extremely appreciative. Its commitment will undoubtedly strengthen communities for generations of children.

While we are moving forward, we understand there are still inequities within our communities.

Fortunately, we have a road map to make a difference — a plan to lift students at the earliest stages of development, to not only transform lives but to transform communities.

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