

'A really long time coming': Sabal Palm becomes a community partnership school

Margie Menzel, Special to the Democrat Published 7:15 p.m. ET Sept. 10, 2019

Leon County School District; the Florida A&M College of Education; Florida State University PrimaryHealth and the Children's Home Society of Florida make 25-year commitment to school

In June 2015, then-Tallahassee City Commissioner Gil Ziffer visited the first community partnership school in Florida: Evans High in Orlando's rough Pine Hills neighborhood. Ziffer was curious about the school's dramatic improvement under its new model and wondered whether that approach could work in his hometown.

He came back sold.

Within a few years after Evans became a community partnership school, it went from being considered a "dropout factory" to landing a B ranking with the state Department of Education. Its graduation rate shot up from 64 percent to 88 percent. Attendance and parental engagement grew, while disciplinary infractions dropped.

The secret? A wide array of services in a poverty-stricken, high-crime area: food, health care, counseling, tutoring, internships and other supports – not only to students and their families but to the entire neighborhood.

"The whole atmosphere at that school changed," Ziffer said.

It's changed even more since his visit, with even better outcomes in many cases.

Meanwhile, the number of community partnership schools has grown to 15 statewide, and the 2019 Legislature allocated \$7.1 million in recurring funds to encourage more.

And four years after Ziffer's visit to Evans, Tallahassee cut the ribbon Tuesday morning on its first community partnership school, Sabal Palm Elementary in the southwest part of the city.

The initial location has changed, along with some of the players, but the guiding principle has not: four key partners, each with a 25-year commitment: the Leon County School District; the Florida A&M College of Education; [Florida State University PrimaryHealth \(/story/news/2019/05/09/fsu-primaryhealth-center-set-open-monday-southwest-tallahassee-location/1142047001/\)](https://www.floridastate.edu/news/2019/05/09/fsu-primaryhealth-center-set-open-monday-southwest-tallahassee-location/1142047001/), overseen by its College of Medicine; and the Children's Home Society of Florida.

Charles McDonald, then the regional director for the Children's Home Society of Florida, credits visits to Evans and Pensacola's Weis Elementary by local leaders with finally getting the project off the ground. He organized two bus trips to Weis, the first elementary school in Florida to adopt the community partnership model, taking Leon County School superintendent Rocky Hanna and school board members, Sabal Palm principal Anicia Robinson and local university officials.

"It had felt for many months as if we were spinning our wheels," McDonald said. "But once people saw Weis and talked to their counterparts, they were ready to go."

Especially excited was Hanna, McDonald said, vowing to help in any way he could, including recruiting university partners. They met with FSU President John Thrasher – "and from there, FSU just took off," with the College of Medicine agreeing to provide the crucial health care pillar of the collaboration.

Then McDonald and his team met with FAMU President Larry Robinson, whose College of Education students and faculty members will provide tutoring and other supports at Sabal Palm.

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Leon County Schools Superintendent Rocky Hanna applauds all those that had a hand in making Sabal Palm Elementary School a community partnership school Tuesday, Sept. 10, 2019. (Photo: Tori Schneider/Tallahassee Democrat)

A 25-year commitment

Essential to the four-way partnership of the community schools is the 25-year commitment by its major providers. The schools tend to be located in neighborhoods where grants are often implemented, but in much shorter bursts – say, 3 or 4 years – before disappearing and leaving greater mistrust behind. The 25 years is necessary to build community buy-in, proponents say.

Thrasher did not hesitate.

"Obviously, location is a big part of it," he said. "We've looked at opportunities to place a facility in a location that we knew was underserved and that would welcome us, and this area around Sabal Palm certainly fits those criteria and those principles."

He said FSU studied the area around Sabal Palm, where it had land, "and all of it led back to saying that's a prime place for us to be... I think that after we get it going, ten years later, I believe that facility will probably double what it is today. And more of our students, more of our faculty members will have opportunities to serve the public, and more of the public in that area will be served – some of them maybe for the first time – in terms of real primary care."

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Dean of Florida A&M's College of Education Allyson Watson speaks during a ribbon-cutting ceremony held to introduce Sabal Palm Elementary School as a community partnership school Tuesday, Sept. 10, 2019. (Photo: Tori Schneider/Tallahassee Democrat)

Allyson Leggett Watson, dean of the FAMU College of Education, is also looking down the road.

"In 25 years, we will truly see the impact of our collective efforts to bring academic enrichment and support and a holistic approach to improving the lives of students," she said.

"When you imagine the kindergartners who are at Sabal Palm this year and look forward to their lives as fifth-grade students who complete the program during their elementary matriculation, you can imagine a group of students whose lives have been improved greatly."

Other partners include the City of Tallahassee, Whole Child Leon, Tallahassee Community College, Neighborhood Medical Center, Bond Community Health Center, the Early Learning Coalition of the Big Bend and America's Second Harvest of the Big Bend.

"The model works because of the collective partnership," said Summer Pfeiffer of the Children's Home Society of Florida. "Everyone has a seat at the table."

The aim of the partnership is to relieve both students and teachers of burdens that interfere with teaching and learning.

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Gil Ziffer received multiple rounds of applause from those attending a ribbon-cutting ceremony held to introduce Sabal Palm Elementary School as a community partnership school Tuesday, Sept. 10, 2019. (Photo: Tori Schneider/Tallahassee Democrat)

For instance, Ziffer said, educators at Evans asked students what would get them to attend tutoring sessions. "They said 'Feed us,' and the growth was exponential."

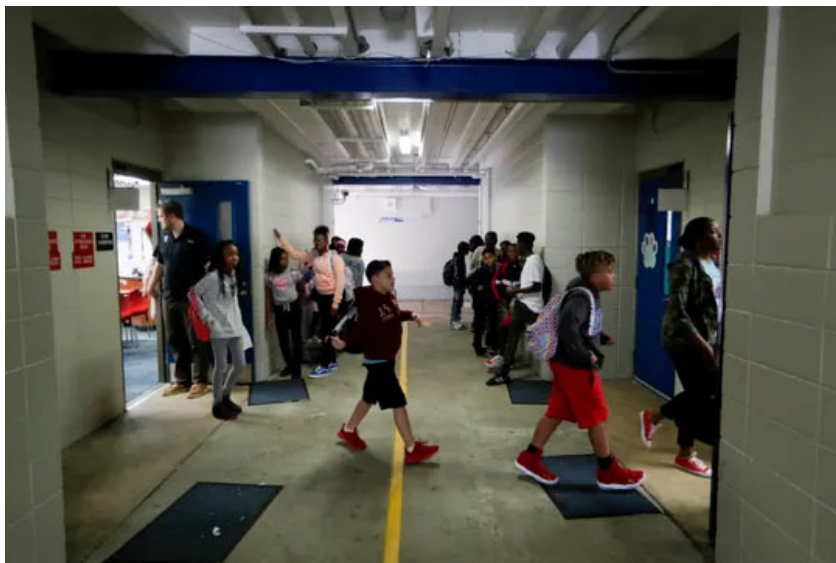
At Weis Elementary, there's a community garden – in the midst of a food desert. With help from a local garden club, the students harvest vegetables, cook them at school and take them home to their families.

Hunger and physical and mental health issues prevent students from learning, and so they are integral to the "full service school" concept. The Sabal Palm model includes a behavioral health component; Thrasher called suicide and mental health issues a "growing national concern."

"We have the same issues here at Florida State University with some of our students," he said. "So we're ratcheting up that opportunity, too, to serve those students who need that kind of help. But it's clear it's also needed in the community, and so that to me is a part of primary care, making sure that we have some emphasis on that and some ability to help people when they have those kinds of issues."

It takes time to solve problems at the schools, Pfeiffer said, which is where the community engagement comes in. For instance, she recalled a student at Evans who brought a weapon to school in her backpack. She was on the verge of expulsion when officials realized that she had brought it for protection on her dangerous walk to school.

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Fifth graders transition from Mr. Carson Schmidt's classroom to math class with Mrs. Tamika Brown at Sabal Palm Elementary School Tuesday, Sept. 10, 2019. (Photo: Tori Schneider/Tallahassee Democrat)

"So the community cabinet set up a perimeter," Pfeiffer recalled. "Representatives from the churches and the community stood at the intersections."

Timothy Only, now an FSU student, recalled the moment he learned he was headed for Evans – just after it became a community school, in 2011.

"I was like, 'Ah, not Evans,' " Only told the House PreK-12 Innovation Subcommittee in February. "So many problems, violence – it had a bad reputation."

But after a rough start, Only ended up president of his senior class. He interned at the Orlando Police Department.

"I used every service at the community school, down to the mental health, the internships, the clothing, the food pantry, the Fame House, which is another place where kids who don't have a place to stay, they can go live there because they're dealing with a lot of issues at home," he recalled.

Only now studies criminology at FSU and has won a prestigious scholarship through the Children's Home Society. He helped to set up the new structure at Sabal Palm and is thrilled that FSU is playing a key role.

"I think it's amazing to see a Top 20 university on board to making a difference," he said.