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# 'Most of all, they are loved': Sabal Palm students feel community embrace as school starts



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It truly takes a village and at Sabal Palm Elementary School, the village is in the multitude of community partners helping to break down barriers blocking kids' education.

Thursday, Blisha Hogue remembered her own time at Sabal Palm as she walked her second-grade daughter Aubree Hogue in for her first day of school.

"We're excited," Hogue said, "This is her first year here, but I used to go here when I was a kid. Everything's still the same, like the same teachers and everything."

Although nothing seemed to have changed in Hogue's eyes, the community partnership program concept is new to her and her daughter.

Sabal Palm Elementary School is the only community partnership school in the capital city with over 25 outside entities working to provide support services such as health care, off-campus field trips and food pantry programs. The school now has an outdoor and indoor food pantry supplied by Second Harvest of the Big Bend.

"When I see the smile on students' faces and feel their excitement on the first day of school, I know why we work so hard to ensure they are safe, educated, but most of all, are loved," Principal Shannon Davis said as she greeted each student and parents at the front gates of the school on Ridgeway Street.

Similar scenes played out at school districts around Tallahassee as more than 34,000 students returned to class. A spokesperson said the year began with little drama, and only the usual hiccups like late school buses as transportation officials find their rhythm.

Back at Sabal Palm, teachers and administrators know they serve a community with real challenges.

The school is located on the southwest side of Tallahassee in the 32304 ZIP code, which has been dubbed the poorest in the state.

"These kids have real adult baggage," said Anna-Kay Hutchinson, director of the community partnership program on campus. "So, we take all these barriers and bring in programs that remove them so they can focus on their education."

The school's grade for the 2021-2022 school year was a C. School grades for the 2022-2023 school year have yet to be released.

Learning gains from state standardized testing were not assessed from last year's inaugural Florida Assessment of Student Thinking (FAST) exam scores, but Davis says the school is in a good position to improve on this year's FAST exams.

"Looking at the rise in proficiency and knowing in the future that we can also bring kids up just makes me feel like we're on the right trajectory," she said.

Davis says the school is fully staffed with the recruitment of a new fifth-grade science teacher and a resource teacher who is anxious to meet with students.

"This is my first year here, so I'm looking forward to getting to know the students," Clarissa Lowry, the K-2 resource teacher said in the school hallway.

## New community partnerships

According to Hutchinson, each community partnership school has four core partners that are under a 25-year contract, a commitment that is vital to the success and survival of the program.

"A lot of times people write grants and those come and go and in like two or three years that grant funding dries up and the program goes away," Hutchinson told the Tallahassee Democrat. "So that's why the 25 years is so intentional, so that the teachers, the families and the community know we're here to make a difference."

Children's Home Society is the nonprofit organization partner for the school which spearheads the program, Florida A&M is the university partner, Florida State University Primary Health is the medical partner, and the Leon County School District is the school partner.

"I am extremely excited for the future of Sabal Palm Community Partnership School as it enters its fourth year," Superintendent Rocky Hanna told the Tallahassee Democrat. "The amazing wraparound services for the children at Sabal Palm serve as a model for other schools throughout the country."

Hutchinson is most excited about the new on-site dental clinic overseen by Bond Community Health Center, a project she felt passionate about after witnessing a student pass out from a toothache on the first day of school in 2020.

She said opening the clinic to the community was important to help change the culture of the neighborhood.

"I was like, we can do it, it's going to be really hard and it's going to be uncomfortable, but we can do it if we work together," Hutchinson said.

"They didn't have that when I was school," Hogue said of the community partnerships, "It would have been lovely. I wouldn't have had to leave school to go to the dentist."

In addition to the dental clinic, the school also presented a new 36 x 9-foot-mural commissioned by the Junior League of Tallahassee, a community partner, at the entrance of the school.

One student said, "everything looks so different" as he glanced at the mural and made his way to class.

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