

## **OPINION**

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# Legislature must fund Community Partnership Schools in Florida | Opinion

**Betsy Couch, Your Turn**

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**Betsy Couch** (Photo11: My View)

Safety while learning is top of mind this legislative session – as it should be.

As elected officials make decisions on how to best advance academic achievement, we must be cognizant of many factors outside the classroom that influence success.

Two recently released studies indicate the urgency to address this issue is increasing.

Johns Hopkins professor Julia Burdick-Will (<https://soc.jhu.edu/directory/julia-burdick-will/>) revealed that exposure to neighborhood violence negatively affects students' behavior and classroom success. Her research also demonstrated that students struggling with this trauma influence their classmates' learning – a significant finding with serious implications.

When kids arrive to school stressed from a night of violence, hungry or wondering if the lights will be on later, it shapes their academic outlook and performance. Their trauma manifests in behaviors that lead to classroom disruption, pulling peers and teachers away from their focus: learning.

Couple this with data from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's KidsCount report (<https://www.aecf.org/work/kids-count/>), which indicates 21 percent of Florida children live in poverty. Among the many challenges this leads to, exposure to violence is right at the top.

Community challenges bleed into our educational system – and our kids' futures. We have a responsibility to address these issues, to reverse the spread of violence and its influence in schools while empowering communities.

This is the driving force behind the Community Partnership School model we've implemented at Sabal Palm Elementary School, which is a partnership among Children's Home Society of Florida (<https://www.chsfl.org/>), FAMU, FSU PrimaryHealth — a primary care medical practice of the FSU College of Medicine – and Leon County Schools.

**More:** [FSU College of Medicine eyes site near Sabal Palm for clinic \(/story/news/2017/03/29/fsu-college-medicine-eyes-site-near-sabal-palm-clinic/99778002/\)](#)

**More:** ['It's been a journey': Sabal Palm teacher is Glenn Howell Educator of the Year \(/story/news/2018/04/07/its-been-journey-sabal-palm-teacher-glenn-howell-educator-year/493266002/\)](#)

Our strategy: Bring the right services and resources into the school – where kids and families already are – to eliminate barriers interfering with academic success.

While the successful model has been replicated more than a dozen times, this is the first school in Leon County to adopt the proven approach.

Since parents are vital to the success of their children's education, a core component of the Community Partnership School model includes parent engagement, with other programs tailor-made to meet local needs.

This reinforces Burdick-Will's recommendations: The best solutions require long-term, systemic support, not a crisis-driven response.

This approach works. Schools that have implemented the model have experienced improved attendance and significantly decreased behavior challenges; Weis Elementary in Pensacola saw increased graduation rates, reduced community crime and suspensions cut in half.

I'm proud to see Tallahassee adopting this transformational model to address the root causes that create barriers to learning.

But success comes with a cost.

While the core partners at each school — as well as generous community donations — help fund the approach, we cannot continue the success we've seen throughout the state without a legislative investment.

I urge our elected officials to put students and families first, and to allocate \$5.8 million to fund Community Partnership Schools in Florida.

If you agree children deserve the best opportunity for academic success, please join me in advocating for this critical issue and come help at the school. For example, last Wednesday, my husband's dental practice shared dental care tips with students.

There are many ways to help, but we especially need the legislative funding.

Surely we can all agree on one thing: Our children's future – and ours – depends on it.

*Betsy Couch is a mother of two elementary school children and an advocate for improving the lives of Leon County's children. Reach her at [betsycairecouch@gmail.com](mailto:betsycairecouch@gmail.com).*