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Efforts of Children's Trust include expanding access to summer programs, reducing youth violence

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Summer break went fast for K-12 students this year.

The COVID-19 pandemic delayed the start of the 2020-21 school year for Alachua County Public Schools, so the last day didn't happen until mid-June. Students had less time off than usual before classes resume for the fall Tuesday.

But a short summer isn't necessarily bad news. It means less time for the "summer slide," the phenomenon in which students forget lessons from the previous school year.

With students already experiencing learning losses related to the pandemic's disruptions, they can't afford to fall even further behind. Low-income children who lack access to summer programs or other enrichment activities are especially at risk.

Thankfully the Children's Trust of Alachua County funded about 2,000 scholarships for local students to attend such programs this summer. County voters approved the Children's Trust in 2018, authorizing property taxes in the county to be raised up to a half mil annually over 12 years to pay for programs benefiting local children.

Children's Trust Executive Director Colin Murphy expects summer to be a main area of funding moving forward. That might include expanding the scholarships and working with summer programs to beef up their offerings, as well as a summer employment initiative helping teens develop the skills needed to land jobs and partnering with businesses in these efforts.

Providing young people with positive activities is part of a push to reduce shootings and other violence in the community. Murphy said the Children's Trust is going to be focusing on violence prevention, including filling gaps in existing programs or funding new efforts, in the coming weeks.

Another initiative being considered by the trust's board involves local providers of early childhood education. Murphy said a new state law allows providers to receive more funding if they're accredited, so the trust is considering establishing an accreditation academy. Increased funding would allow providers to pay their teachers more, which Murphy said should help with recruitment and retention.

If Alachua County is ever going to reduce persistent disparities, the work of the Children's Trust is needed to augment the efforts of local schools and other institutions. The pandemic has only made these kinds of problems harder to tackle, an issue that I will be discussing with Chris Curran of the University of Florida's Education Policy Research Center and others during a Florida Pulse roundtable Thursday on The Sun's Facebook page.

Our community needs to take full advantage of the Children's Trust by having other institutions coordinate on achieving specific goals, such as a long-discussed plan to improve third-grade reading proficiency. While the trust's many initiatives provide a variety of benefits, voters need to see programs with a major impact to boost the chances they will renew the program when its 12-year authorization ends.

Murphy said he is confident that measures from reading scores to rates of youth violence will be headed in the right direction due to the trust's work.

"When it comes time for the voters to make a decision, it will be very simple: Is our community better with the trust or without it?" he said.

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