

Listening Project: Executive Summary

Introduction

The Children's Trust of Alachua County began the Listening Project in August 2022 by contracting with Prismatic Services to complete a community listening project focused on identifying and characterizing ways to support all children in Alachua County and determining how the Children's Trust resources could be invested wisely to achieve collective community impact. To this end, the purpose of the Trust Listening Project was to:

- ◆ *Identify and focus the Trust's efforts on priority issues impacting all children birth to 18 in Alachua County.*
- ◆ *Make recommendations for an overarching framework and key strategies to address priority issues.*
- ◆ *Make recommendations for a strategic plan for the use of Trust funds.*
- ◆ *Develop materials and processes that can be used as part of ongoing efforts by the Trust to gather stakeholder input to inform short- and long-term Trust strategies and investments.*



During the Listening Project, the Children’s Trust and Prismatic worked to:

- ◆ *Ensure that the Trust’s various stakeholders have meaningful input into the Trust’s strategic planning.*
- ◆ *Reveal findings that will allow the Trust to develop priorities and strategies to address the identified needs and gaps while utilizing and mobilizing existing community strengths and resources.*
- ◆ *Provide data and analysis that will help maximize the impact of Trust resources in addressing the needs of Alachua County children.*

The Children’s Trust voluntarily undertook this work, wanting an independent listening project to identify and characterize ways to support all children in Alachua County and to determine how Trust resources can be invested wisely to achieve collective community impact. Concurrent with the Listening Project, the Children’s Trust engaged in a strategic planning effort. The results of the Listening Project were incorporated into various strategic planning activities. The full report of the Listening Project can be found on the [Children’s Trust website](#).

Who We Heard

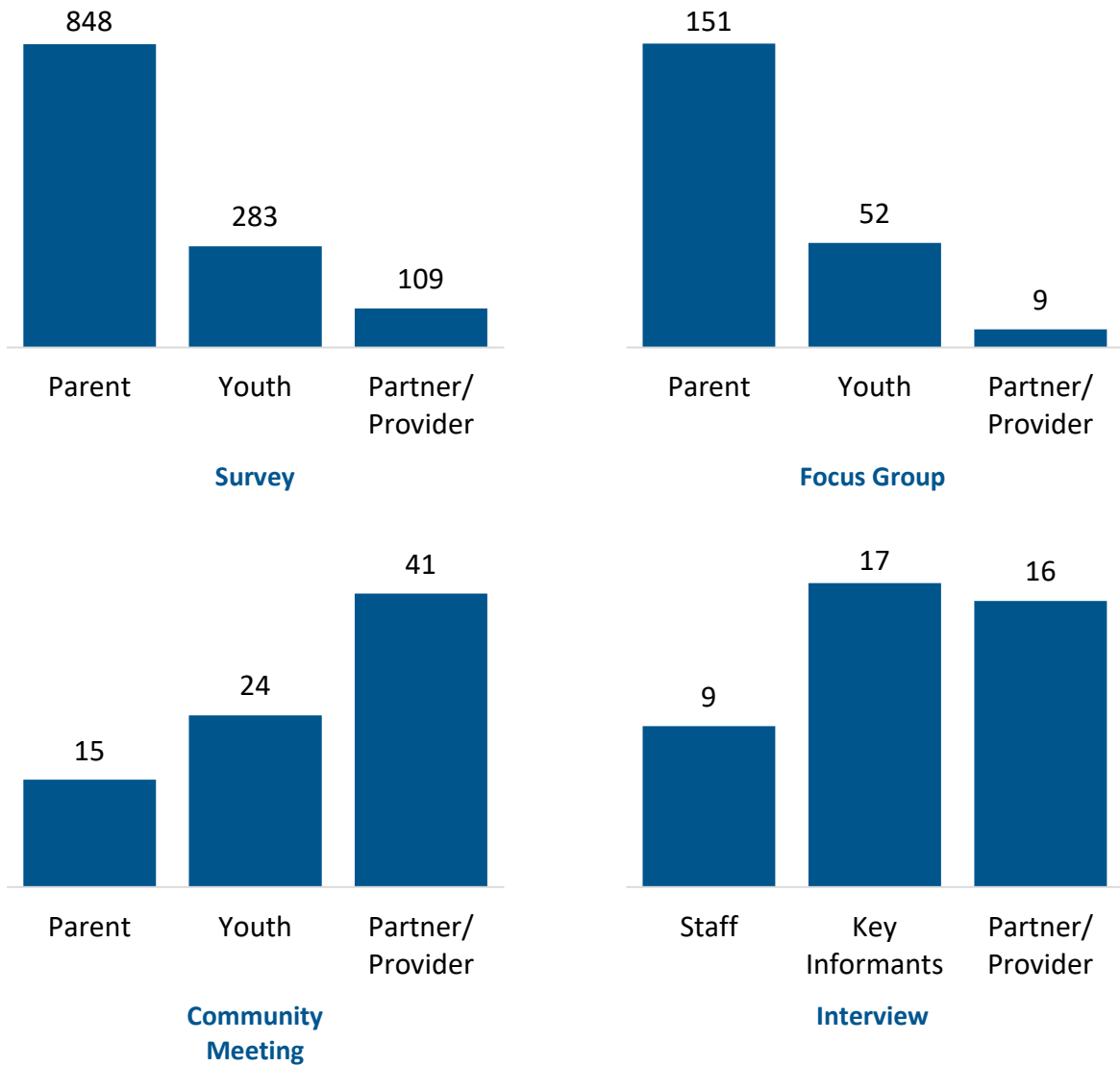
Alachua County is home to a diverse population of approximately 279k people. As of 2021, the Census estimated that 70% of residents are White, 21% are African American, and 6% are Asian. Gainesville is the hub of Alachua County, housing 75% of county residents, and 61% of residents between 0-17 years old. Alachua County municipalities outside of Gainesville include Archer, Alachua, Hawthorne, High Springs, La Crosse, Micanopy, Newberry, and Waldo.

During this project, the Children’s Trust provided in-person input opportunities throughout the county, as well as opportunities to participate virtually in focus groups, surveys, and interviews. Input opportunities varied according to constituent group. To ensure the widest possible listening, Prismatic conducted activities across Alachua County. Across the surveys, focus groups, and community meetings, a total of 1,532 individuals provided input - this input came from across all zip codes in the county.

Listening Opportunities by Group

Constituent Group	Survey	Focus Group	Community Meeting	Targeted Interview
Youth	✓	✓	✓	
Parents/Caregivers	✓	✓	✓	
Children’s Trust Staff				✓
Key Informants	✓	✓	✓	✓
Partners	✓	✓	✓	✓
Providers	✓	✓	✓	✓

Participation by Group and Activity Type



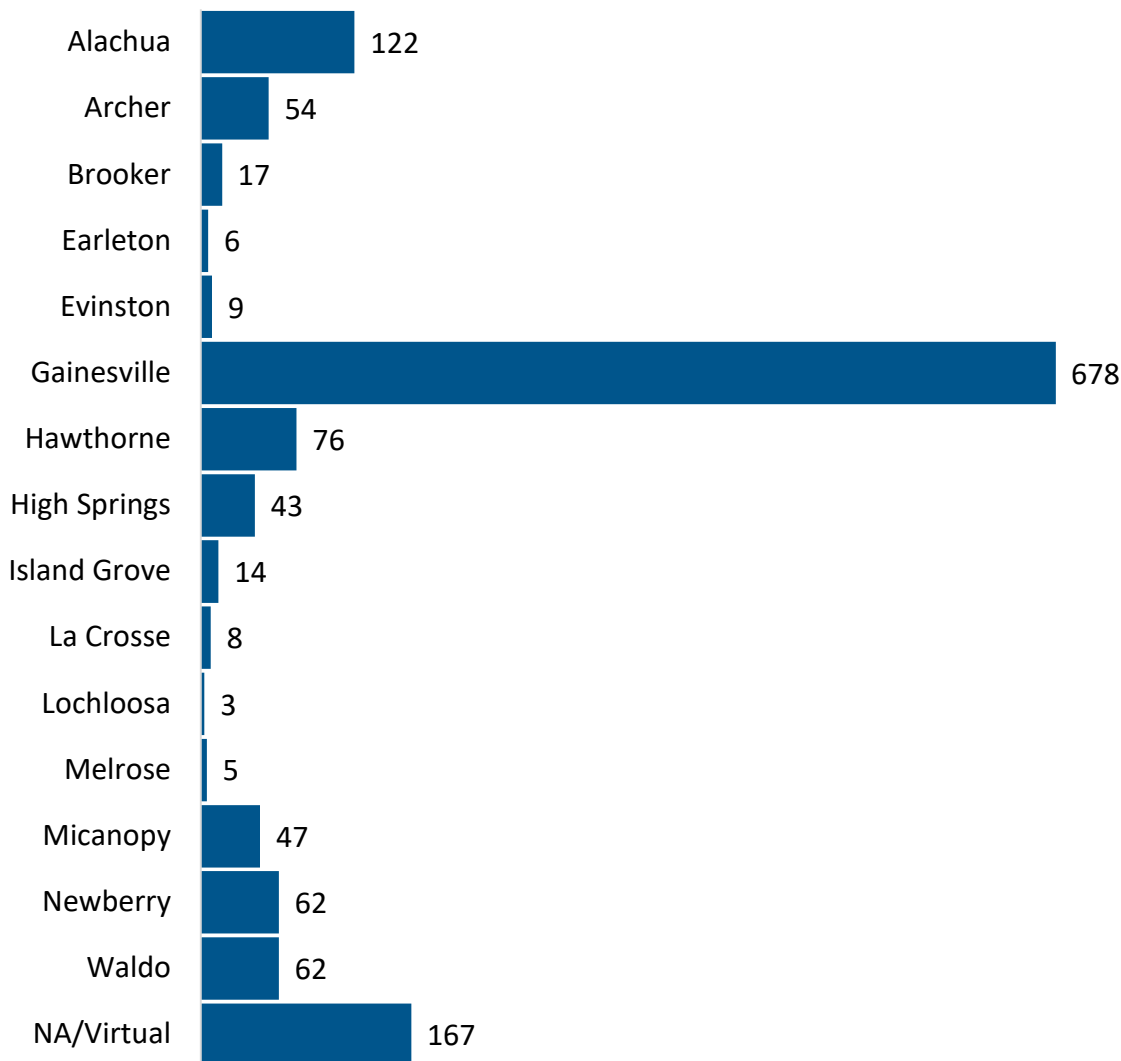
Both in-person and virtual focus group opportunities were provided. A total of 23 focus groups were conducted for the Listening Project.

Demographics of Listening Project Focus Group Participants

Group	# Participants	Race/Ethnicity				Gender	
		White	African American	Hispanic/Latino	Other	Male	Female
Youth	52	14	22	3	13	22	30
Parent/Caregiver ¹	151	22	72	46	11	56	94
Provider/Partner	9	5	3	1	0	1	8

¹ One Parent/Caregiver focus group participant did not disclose a gender.

Number of Listening Project Parent and Youth Participants by City of Residence



The Listening Project sought input via interviews from Trust staff members as well as:

- ◆ Key informants - individuals with an interest and role in promoting the well-being of children through service, advocacy, or partnership who were specifically identified by the Children’s Trust steering committee members.
- ◆ Partners and Providers - individuals from organizations interested in promoting the well-being of children and families through service, advocacy, or partnerships. Providers – as distinct from partners – are those who have received funding from the Trust to carry out specific services to benefit children and families.

Overlap among the Key Informant and Partner/Provider categorization was possible. In total, 17 Key Informants, Partners, and Providers, and 9 Trust staff members were interviewed.

Together, the interviewees offered unique and special perspectives on the needs, challenges, and potential solutions for children and families in Alachua County.

Listening Project Interviewee Focus Areas

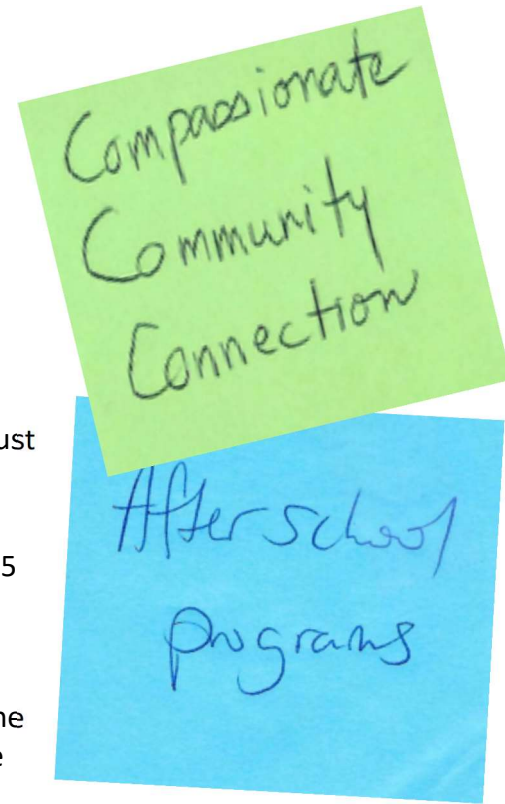
Focus Area	Key Informant	Partner	Provider
Ages 0-5 Supports	1		1
Childcare	2	2	
Child Advocacy	1		1
Community Foundation	1	1	
Education	3	2	
Faith-Based	1	1	
Family Resource Supports	4	2	1
Juvenile Justice	1	1	
Teen Services	2	2	1
Town Government	1		1
Total	17	11	5

Seeking to hear from those not reached via survey or focus group, Prismatic worked with Children’s Trust staff to develop a community meeting format. Each community meeting included multiple stations where participants could meet the new Trust CEO, provide input into Trust budgeting priorities, share positives about the community, and vocalize what they feel is needed to improve the lives of children in Alachua County. A total of three community meetings were held; 24 youth and 15 parents/caregivers attended and provided input.

Project Limitations

The Listening Project was designed to gather feedback and input from the stakeholders of Alachua County. It was not intended to be an exhaustive research project. As such, there were some project limitations:

- ◆ The Children’s Trust was only able to hear from stakeholders who were willing to participate in project activities.
- ◆ Because it is typically difficult to gather accurate feedback from young children, the Children’s Trust did not seek the explicit participation of children below 6th grade, either through surveys or focus groups. Instead, parents/caregivers and providers/partners were asked to voice feedback on their behalf.



- ◆ Although surveys and focus group guides encouraged participants to provide feedback and input across a wide spectrum of areas of interest to the Trust, not every participant was equally interested in all areas. The Children’s Trust recognizes areas of strong concern to some stakeholders and worked to include those concerns in this work, though some concerns may only be applicable to a small percentage or subset of the larger population (e.g., pregnant women, children with special needs).



Conclusions

Alachua County, as a community, demonstrates a willingness to come together to make sure children have equal opportunities in life. There are many organizations designed to support education, health, overall well-being, and opportunities for children. For many years, existing community support organizations have made positive impacts on children.

The Children's Trust has a staff with backgrounds in the "right areas" to help provide guidance to providers and help organizations become sustainable. The providers in the county have a strong desire to collaborate and align efforts to meet the needs of children. Many have adapted their services over the years as needs have changed. Their adaptability and advocacy for children is what made the Trust possible.

75% of parents surveyed agreed that their neighborhood is a good place to raise children.

Partners/Providers named community support as the greatest strength of the Children's Trust.

What the county lacked at the time of the Listening Project could largely be provided if the community, partners, providers, and the Trust collaborate to align services and address service gaps together. Listening Project participants identified a number of services and resources they felt are needed.

Service and Resource Needs Identified Through the Listening Project

<p>Afterschool & Summer</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More opportunities • Homework help • Recreation • Free or scholarships • More programs • Summer camps 	<p>Children & Youth Support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentor program • Program for teen parents • Employment opportunities • Support groups • Counseling & Behavioral support
<p>Education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • County-wide literacy plan • Vocational training • Tutoring • Scholarships • Apprenticeships • Career Exploration • Career Center • Affordable/accessible PreK 	<p>Schools - General</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community elementaries • Revised discipline approach • Safety patrol • Mental health counselors • All treated with respect • More clubs • Students select classes • Relevant coursework • Improve school meals
<p>Schools - Transportation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Separate elementary and high school students • Address bullying • Safer bus stops • Provide late buses 	<p>Schools - Facilities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clean/Upgraded bathrooms • Fix air conditioning • Better desks • Facility upgrades so all schools have same quality • More playgrounds
<p>Recreation & Activities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More public sports facilities • Greater variety of sports options • Free/subsidized sports • Larger recreational facility, open daily • Field trips • Playgrounds, Trails, Parks, Pool, Arts, Crafts, Cooking, Dance 	<p>Health</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hospital/healthcare accessible in rural areas • Dental screenings • Health insurance • 24-hour EMS • Address childhood obesity • More programs Prenatal-5 • Behavioral support training • Mental health counseling

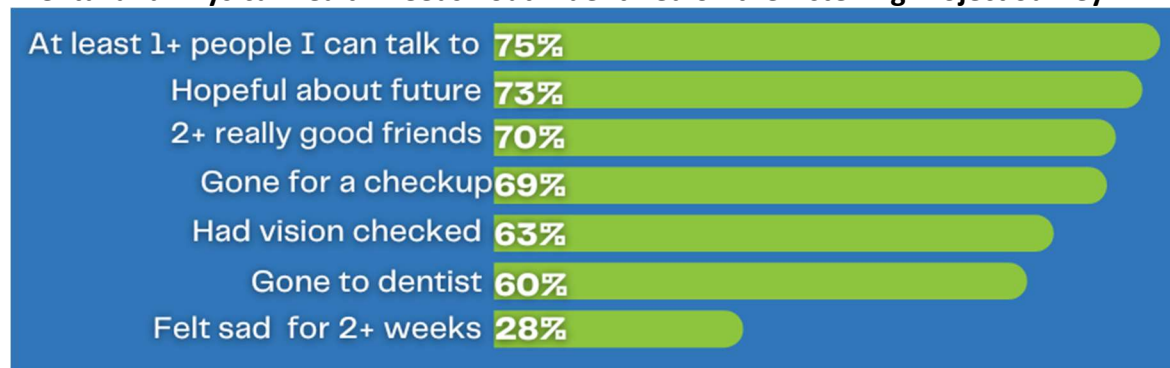
Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add police substation • More police patrols in communities • Violence prevention • Gun safety/awareness • More lights • Safer roads, better road maintenance 	Public Transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase services • Keep it free for children • Expand to rural areas • Larger buses • Add sidewalks • Safer and closer bus stops • Shelter and bench at bus stops
Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Database of services • Larger library • Technology access • Communications about resources 	Parent Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parenting classes • Family life center • Family counseling

As the Children’s Trust moves forward in supporting the children of Alachua County, Prismatic recommended that it focus on the development and embedding of processes that will outlive the tenure of current staff, steering committee members, and board members and become part of the fabric of the organization and county.

Mental and Physical Health

The mental health of children in Alachua County was repeatedly referenced by all participant groups. Of the youth surveyed, 75% agreed that they have at least one person they can talk to, but 28% reported they had felt sad for two or more weeks within the past year.

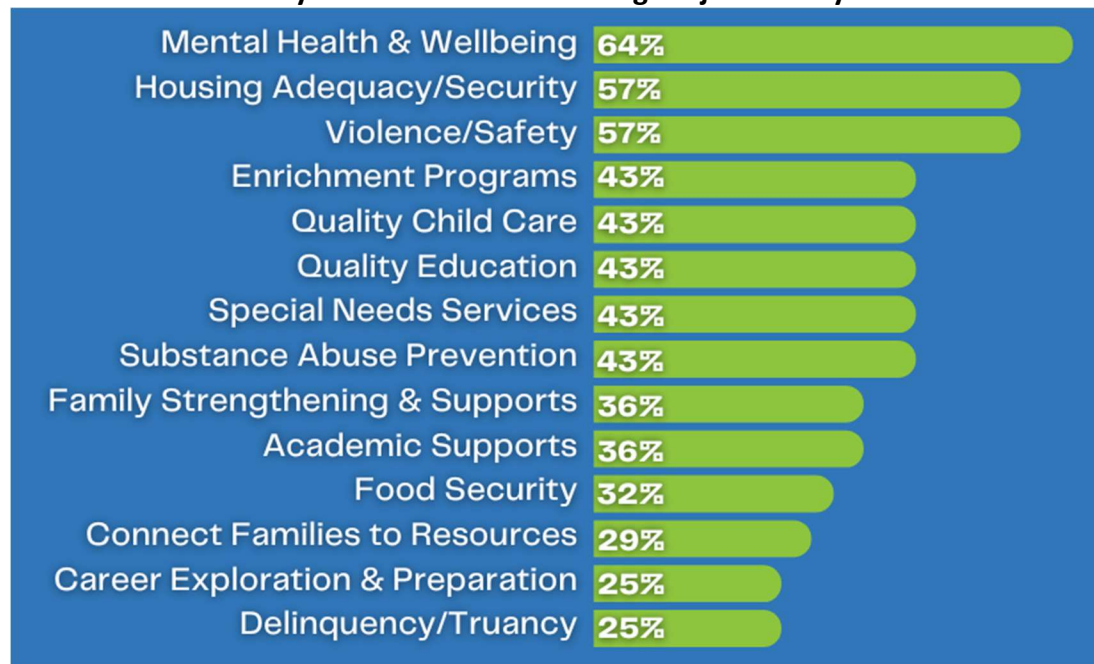
Mental and Physical Health Needs Youth Identified on the Listening Project Survey



Of the parents/caregivers surveyed, 34% expressed a need for more mental health supports for their children. Parents/caregivers stated a desire for substance abuse avoidance classes (recommended by 29%), and classes on meditation/yoga (recommended by 22%) to support children’s mental health.

Mental health was ranked as a top priority for both providers and partners. They also expressed concerns about children going without services -- 59% of partners and 43% of providers reported their organization is not able to provide services to all the children in need resulting in waitlists.

Concerns Identified by Partners on the Listening Project Survey



Concerns Identified by Providers on the Listening Project Survey



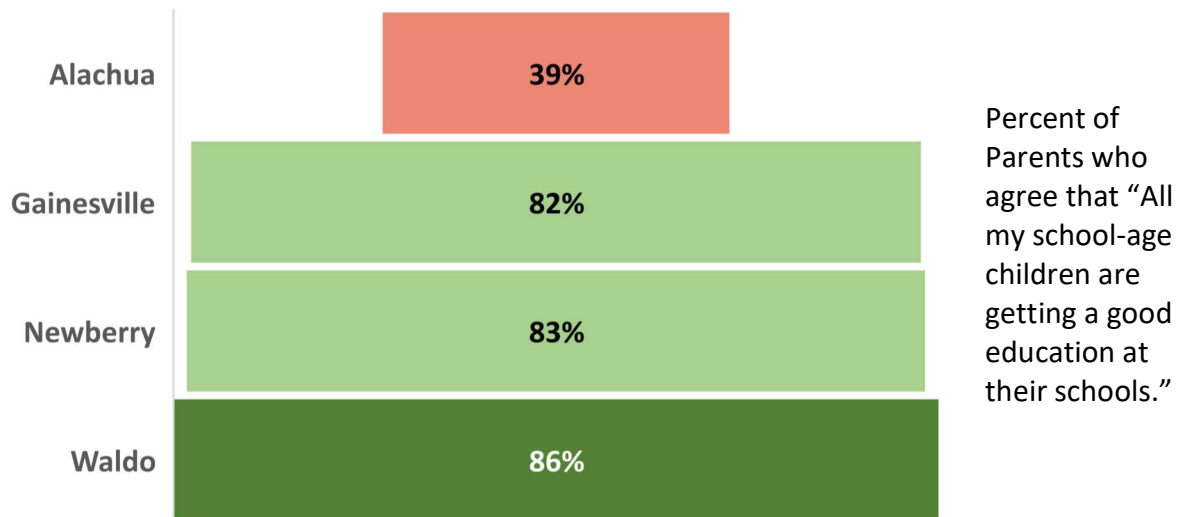
Education & School

Parents were overwhelmingly pleased with the VPK/preschool program their child attends (81%). However, for others, quality childcare is not as accessible. The availability of good childcare was cited as an issue by 37% of parents/caregivers surveyed.

The majority of parents/caregivers surveyed also believe their children are getting a good education in Alachua County (75%). Parents/caregivers were pleased that they also have the opportunity to apply for a school for their children from a variety of public and private/charter school options.

There were substantial variations in opinions regarding quality of education by respondents' city of residence. Only 39% of parents living in the City of Alachua felt their children were getting a good education. Cities not shown did not have at least 30 responses to the question.

Parent's Perception of Education Quality by City of Residence



When asked about academic support, 70% of youth and 66% of parents surveyed indicated they know how to access tutoring. Again, there were substantial variations by city of residence, with parents/caregivers in Alachua being the least likely to know how to access tutoring (42%).

Alachua County is home to both Santa Fe College and the University of Florida. Both educational entities offer key resources, services, and potential to residents. However, access is often limited depending on where the resident lives and whether they have transportation.

There were also discrepancies in academic support service availability reported between groups of students. Parents, providers, and partners agreed that additional academic services are needed to support children with disabilities.

Community & Neighborhood

Many parents and students reported positive experiences in their neighborhoods. Of those surveyed, 75% of parents/caregivers and 51% of youth indicated that Alachua County is a good place to raise children, and a good place to grow up. Many parents/caregivers and youth agreed that the best thing about their neighborhood is their friendly neighbors and a sense of community.

As for neighborhood safety, 73% of parents/caregivers surveyed believe their children to be safe in their neighborhood. This coincides with the youth survey results where 23% of youth reported it is not safe for them to be outside in their neighborhoods.

When asked what was the most needed improvement in their neighborhood, youth named safety. It was also named in the top 3 challenges within their neighborhood. Youth named the lack of quality tutoring available after school as the greatest concern.

Top Neighborhood Concerns of Youth on the Listening Project Survey



As in education, disparities were also reported in neighborhoods. While 74% of youth reported a park or public space for recreation near their home, youth in rural areas reported a lack of access to parks, libraries, and recreational activities. On the other hand, several youth who live in neighborhoods with better access to recreational facilities reported facing other struggles - neighborhood shootings, drug activity, and traffic congestion.

Family Services

Many families in Alachua County rely on assistance with access to childcare, medical care, mental health support, dental services, food, educational support, and housing. Of those surveyed, 39% of parents/caregivers reported that their family sometimes needs help with having enough food. With so many needing support, communicating to families information about available services and how to access services is crucial. Many providers reported struggles communicating with their target community (40%) and a need for increased family awareness of services (52%).

34% of parents and caregivers surveyed indicated they are interested in more mental health support for their children.

Several parents reported struggles accessing healthcare for their children, citing the lack of transportation, waiting lists for providers, and availability of the type of care they need as the

primary issues. Partners, providers, and parents shared the need for a coordinated system for referrals and service access to help remedy access issues. Once connected with services, those receiving care reported having a good quality of care. Those who engaged in prenatal care were very pleased -- 85% of parents/caregivers reported they received great prenatal care -- although 1 in 4 reported struggles getting appointments.

The Children’s Trust

Listening Project participants acknowledged the considerable number of like-minded partners of the Trust available in the county. The Children’s Trust was recognized as one of the many sincere, committed organizations with goals related to improving the lives of youth and families in the county.

With nearly 51,000 children/youth in the county, the Trust’s estimated \$8 million in annual funding to allocate among programs/services amounts to just \$157 per child. Poorly allocated, this limited amount of funding would have minimal impact in achieving the first part of the Trust vision to “facilitate equitable access and opportunities for all children and families” in the county. This points to a need for strategic and thoughtful funding allocations.

Partners/providers would like to see the Trust develop a system that is fair, equitable, and allows programs to truly serve those most in need. Many partners/providers expressed a desire for the Trust to start a “pilot” program for new organizations, to seed new initiatives.

Recommendations

After analysis of all the input derived from the Listening Project, Prismatic proposed 11 recommendations listed below to the Children’s Trust. These recommendations are centered around the areas identified as most in need of Trust support. As the Children’s Trust finalizes its new strategic plan, Prismatic recommends that it consider implementing these recommendations, which are further detailed in Chapter 5 of the full report.

Prismatic’s Listening Project Recommendations

Priority Issues

1	Adopt explicit dollar spend goals for each age group rather than for each goal.
2	Address the transportation divide.
3	Incubate new programs.
4	Support community centers and sports.
5	Become the marketplace for interns and community supporters/organizers.
6	Become the county fulcrum for information.

Strategic Planning

7	Listen continually.
8	Communicate regularly.
9	Leverage community.
10	Revise Trust principles, then set measurable annual goals.
11	Adopt better metrics of output and impact.

As the Children’s Trust voluntarily sought to engage in this Listening Project, it is under no obligation to implement any of the Prismatic recommendations. Moreover, in examining the data presented, the analyses provided, and the conclusions drawn, Trust leadership may find different or better methods for addressing the challenges that Prismatic found. What matters most is addressing the root causes of the challenges and deficits found through the Listening Project.

As to how quickly the Children’s Trust should implement recommendations, Prismatic does not advocate for a hasty approach. It should be understood that not all of the recommendations should be started at one time, nor all at once. It will be up to the Trust to determine the pacing of implementation for recommendations. Prismatic recommends establishing a timeline of 3-5 years for full implementation. This timeline should also be paced with the Trust’s current strategic planning effort.

