



**Item:**

Gainesville For All FY 24 Update on Gainesville Empowerment Zone (GEZ) Family Learning Center (Mia Jones and James Lawrence)

**Requested Action:**

The Board is asked to receive this update.

**Background:**

The Gainesville Empowerment Zone (GEZ) Family Learning Center is a joint project by Gainesville for All and the Alachua County Public School District. Located on the property of W.A. Metcalf Elementary School, one of the missions of the Gainesville Empowerment Zone Family Learning Center is to empower children and families from six weeks to age five with tools that will enhance their lives by providing them with a high-quality educational foundation and connections to vital social and community services.

In June 2023 GEZ was licensed by the Department of Children and Families for a capacity of 128 children and shortly afterwards obtained certification from the Early Learning Coalition of Alachua County (ELC). They have enhanced the children's learning experience by investing in state-of-the-art playground equipment and a highly recommended curriculum called Creative by Teaching Strategies Gold. GEZ has also hired a Family Engagement Specialist to bridge the gap between the educational needs of the children and community assistance needs of the family.

As of this report, they have a team of 11 teachers and teacher assistants serving 34 enrolled children. They anticipate enrollment of 5 more children in the month of April and 12-15 more children during the summer. As of March, 22 of the 34 children are currently on a full (17) or partial (5) GEZ scholarship. Although Grants from Alachua County and the City of Gainesville are expected to be depleted by June 2024, they do have an operating budget for the remainder of the year. In their attached report, GEZ has projected an annual budget for 2025 at \$902,000 with a shortfall of \$186,000.

The Children's Trust has invested approximately \$45,000 in support thus far. GEZ has applied for and received funding from the CTAC Emergent Needs Fund. GEZ is participating in the Business and Leadership Institute for Early Learning V'Locity Master Class and Accrediation Academy. Completion of the Accrediation Academy and application for Gold Seal will draw down additional dollars.

GEZ is currently reviewing if families who are receiving GEZ scholarships would be eligible to participate in the Child Care Tuition Assistance Partnership and if they are on ELC's working families waitlist or their working families-Match category waitlist. This match funding partnership between ELC and CTAC would support working families with incomes above 150% of the FPL to below 200% of FPL who do not qualify for any other childcare funding category. GEZ's primary mission is to reduce disparities in English Language Arts Achievements. Rising Kindergarteners from GEZ are most likely zoned for two elementary schools working towards improving kindergarten readiness rates and third grade level reading scores. We are exploring with GEZ local options to add additional literacy support like UFLI or Ask Meno.

To better inform the upcoming budget cycle, the Children's Trust staff will be partnering with the Florida Association of Children's Council and Trust, the Early Learning Coalition, and other local/state level partnerships to better understand the implementation of the recent additions to appropriation and legislative changes to family eligibility, school readiness rate increases, and the SR Plus Program that will be effective July 1. We believe this will provide needed support and sustainability for GEZ and all Early Learning Centers within the County.

The Children's Trust staff has recommended to GEZ:

- To work with ELC to identify funding categories and resources.
- To utilize the Accreditation Specialist to strategize any barriers or challenges as they move through Accreditation Academy to Gold Seal.
- To evaluate how the school readiness rate increases, school readiness plus program, after school programming, and future designation as Gold Seal will impact the remainder of 2024 and income projections for 2025.
- To research and collaborate with us on piloting a literacy project for early learning like UFLI or Ask Meno fully funded by the Children's Trust.

For this presentation, Gainesville for All will provide an update on GEZ.

**Programmatic Impact:**

Goal 2- Children and youth can learn what they need to be successful.

**Fiscal Impact:**

N/A

**Recommendation:**

The board is asked to receive the report. We will present to the Board our findings at that time along with any needed changes to the implementation of the Child Care Tuition Assistance Program and any recommendations regarding funding supports for families enrolled at GEZ and other Early Learning Centers. Once we receive clarity on the new legislation.