

Naples Daily News

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Future Ready Collier

Collaboratively planning for our next generation

NAPLES DAILY NEWS

EDITORIAL BOARD

Ask any local resident or frequent visitor what makes Collier County a special place and you'll likely get some common responses.

There's the weather, miles of public beaches and resplendent sunsets. Collier has outstanding restaurants and resorts: how many communities have two Ritz-Carltons? Other responses may identify excellent cultural arts, philanthropy and living close to nature, from the western Everglades to the Gordon River Greenway.

We have two other answers we submit should be included. One is the array of nonprofits and foundations working to improve the quality of life of all Collier residents. Another is the ability of those organizations to collaborate with government and business to tackle community concerns.

Such is the case with the heretofore behind-the-scenes work the past two years of a blossoming network called Future Ready Collier, drawing together about 40 organizations and public agencies to address two goals with broad implications.

One goal is to ensure all children are ready for kindergarten. The second is to make sure those finishing school will graduate on track to earn a degree or credential for employment.

At the network's website — futurereadycollier.org — you can learn about the challenges ahead (for example, 34 percent of children aren't ready for kindergarten), its goals and criteria for measuring progress, and how to get involved.

Getting started

Champions For Learning, the nonprofit education foundation in Collier that is facilitating the teamwork, was one of six initial partners that agreed to work together on these educational matters in June 2015. Others were Collier County Public Schools, Community Foundation of Collier County, Greater Naples Chamber of Commerce, United Way of Collier County and the Naples Children & Education Foundation, sponsors of the Naples Winter Wine Festival.

The initiative has gained leadership steam since, with dozens of other organizations joining in, Lisa Church, vice president of Champions For Learning, recently told our editorial board.

It's an extraordinary lineup for bringing about significant change to the benefit of Collier children of all ages. Participants range from some of the most celebrated early childhood agencies in Collier to Southwest Florida's impressive lineup of higher education institutions.

Future Ready Collier complements key components of the A-grade school district's strategic plan, schools Superintendent Kamela Patton told our editorial board.

"It's a big lift to have all these folks working together," she said.

Don't expect those involved in this network to be all talk, no action. Although still in its relative infancy, Church points to an early measurable success of seeing an increase in the percentage of high school students completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA. It's gone from 43 percent in July 2016 to 53 percent by a year later.

What's ahead?

With two years in the books to establish mutual trust and build collaboration, the network now is splitting into eight teams. Each will home in on a key topic. These are weighty challenges.

One group, for example, is to address funding for early learning and another is looking at the quality of provider programs. Parents well know how difficult it is to find quality, affordable early childhood care in Collier and how long the wait can be; Dawn Montecalvo of Guadalupe Center told us its waiting list hit 400. Enticing pre-K teachers into the historically low-paying profession creates challenges. Florida SouthWestern State College is helping explore strategies, such as internships and job-related commitments for those who attain degrees.

On the post-high school side, the chamber is helping lead a group looking at workplace learning and internships. The available talent pool is the No. 1 issue for Collier businesses, chamber chief executive Michael Dalby told our editorial board. Approaches the team identifies will be key for providing a qualified workforce for employers. Internships at area businesses might entice local students to stay in our marketplace so we're not exporting our talent after investing in their education.

Local residents and frequent visitors may just be getting an early education about Future Ready Collier, but it holds great promise to graduate into one of the community's identifiable assets.