

Community Partnership School to Open in Manatee County - Will Sarasota Public Schools be Next?

BY CAROL LERNER

Imagine students attending an elementary school where they learn academics through activities infused with the arts, in a school that is open from 7am to 7 pm, and in a school with engaging recreational activities and quality learning opportunities available both before and after school.

Imagine classroom teachers having direct access to on-site professionals, including medical and mental health staff, who can take action if a student becomes ill or shows any troubling signs.

Imagine parents having access to family support staff right in the school who will provide guidance and support on any parental concern or need for assistance.

Imagine surrounding community residents being able to access medical and other services in their neighborhood school that serves as a hub for the community.

Imagine a school designed to overcome the disadvantages of poverty, where parents are empowered, and supports are available to meet the individualized needs of children.

This type of school is now being created in Manatee County at Manatee Elementary School as it transitions to becoming a full-fledged Community Partnership School (CPS) with an arts-integrated curriculum next August. Some of the services and programs are already in place and others will be phased in over this year as the planning cabinet and task forces formed to plan and implement the CPS model.

The CPS model is one of many community school models implemented in over 7500 community schools throughout the US. The Florida CPS was developed by the Children's Home Society of Florida, Orange County Public Schools and the University of Central Florida (UCF) and first implemented at Evans High School in Orlando in 2010. Formally a struggling school, Evans HS is now considered one of the top community schools in the country. There are now 16 Florida CPS-model schools, including Manatee Elementary, either established, emerging or in a planning stage, and 12 more will be added this year. The large expansion of Community Partnership Schools is due to a five-fold increase in state funding for the program in the 2019 Florida Legislative Session. This increase for CPS, one of only a few positive outcomes in this otherwise dreadful session, was contained in the same omnibus bill, SB 7070, that gave expanded the school voucher program. Had the CPS been a stand-alone bill, it would have received broad bipartisan support.

A Florida CPS consists of at least four core partners—school district, university, mental health nonprofit, and health care provider—that commit for 25-year to develop school-based wellness services (medical, dental, vision and mental health services); afterschool recreational and expanded learning programs; and broad family support services. CPS mental health providers train all teachers and other staff in trauma-informed techniques in working with children and their

families. Each CPS is uniquely crafted based on a thorough school/community needs assessment and with ongoing local community input. Funding for the partnership schools comes from district, public and private sources. The Center for Community Schools at UCF provides technical supports.

At Manatee Elementary School, the CPS model is currently being implemented by the CPS planning group. According to Manatee School Board member Charlie Kennedy in an interview that aired on WSLR's Peace and Justice Report on July 31 of this year, the CPS planning group has chosen MCR Health Services to provide wellness services and the United Community Center's 13th Avenue Dream Center to provide pre- and after- school recreational and expanded learning services. The University of South Florida (USF) will use education, art and health- related student interns to provide tutoring, homework groups, art programs and other educational and expanded learning activities. USF will also be involved in on-going research, evaluation and accountability projects. Children's Home Society of Florida will oversee mental health services.

Residents in the Manasota community became aware of the CPS-model through the work of Protect Our Public Schools (POPS), Manasota, an educational advocacy organization that was formed in spring of 2017 by mostly retired educators concerned with extreme school privatization in Florida. POPS was especially concerned with the Florida's legislature's punitive treatment of struggling schools, particularly Title 1 schools in low-income communities that are largely composed of students of color. When a so-called low-performing school gets three “D” or “F” grades (within 5 years), grades largely based on high-stake standardized tests, the school is forced to either closed down or privatize. POPS members were troubled to learn that two Manatee County elementary schools were on the chopping block due to low grades.

POPS then learned about the Florida CPS- model and its success in improving educational and social/emotional outcomes and saw this program with extensive supports and services as a smart alternative to the “close down or privatize” approach. POPS leaders decided to hold education forums on this topic, first in Sarasota and then in Manatee County, and arranged with staff from UCF's Center for Community Schools to address both forums. Major stakeholders and community leaders from both counties attended this well- received Sarasota forum in December 2018 at WSLR/Fogartyville, including a community leader from Manatee County with close ties to the Manatee Superintendent of Schools, Cynthia Saunders. In addition, a POPS leader had discussed the CPS- model with Manatee School Board member, Charlie Kennedy. Both school leaders came on board to implement a CPS in Manatee County. When POPS held its second forum at South Manatee Branch Library in March 2019, Kennedy announced at the forum that the District had officially signed on to become a Community Partnership School.

The POPS December forum also created an interest in developing a CPS in Sarasota. This interest has intensified recently with the release of school grades this past July that showed that the Emma E. Booker Elementary School had received a “D” grade. This prompted broad discussion in the community and within the Sarasota District on how to turn Booker Elementary School around. In this context, POPS members have approached leaders of the Sarasota District with information on Community Partnership Schools. POPS members believe that Sarasota Public Schools, which already implements some of the features of community schools at Booker and other Title 1 schools, is an excellent candidate for implementing a full-fledged CPS-model.



Meanwhile, key Sarasota community leaders and organizations are taking a close look at the CPS-model. For example, the recently formed organization, Sarasota Strong, which hopes to turn Sarasota into a trauma-informed county, likes the close alignment of its mission and that of the CPS's use of approaches with children. Community leaders from the Newtown section of

Sarasota, where Booker Elementary is located, are also supportive of a CPS, particularly liking the idea of having community input into the school's design.

“With its strong nonprofit sector, robust arts community, well-funded foundations and a population motivated to serve, Sarasota could develop an extraordinary Community Partnership School,” education advocate and POPS member Geri Chaffee stated.



Manatee Elementary School is transitioning to a trauma-informed Community Partnership School.