

ECCL

ESTERO COUNCIL OF COMMUNITY LEADERS

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FEATURE: Excellence in Education

THE VILLAGE OF ESTERO AND LEE COUNTY SCHOOLS

CREATE GOLD STAR COLLABORATION

Embracing the philosophy that education is the passport to the future, the Village of Estero, the ECCL Education Outreach Council, and the Lee County School District have joined together to take ambitious, forward-thinking action by establishing the Estero Educational Initiative. This public/private partnership was formed last spring to elevate our schools and to ensure that they achieve the highest standards of excellence.

PLANTING THE SEEDS

Over the past decade, the demographics of Estero have shifted from primarily a retirement mecca to a multi-generational, family community, especially in areas east of I-75. As changes in population occurred, concerns about the educational environment began to arise. These issues became even more pronounced during the fall of 2013 when Hertz moved their headquarters from New Jersey to Estero. Former Mayor of Estero and current councilmember Nicholas Batos, along with other council members and local residents, were disappointed to learn that Hertz' New Jersey employees expressed reluctance to move to Southwest Florida. Many felt the schools were just not up to par. On top of that, the families that did make the move often



chose Collier County for what they perceived were “better school policies.” And perhaps the most worrying indicator on the academic front was that Hertz found they were unable to find enough qualified employees in Southwest Florida.

At that point, Mayor Batos, the ECCL, and the Village council knew they had to take action. One of the first steps was to encourage community involvement.

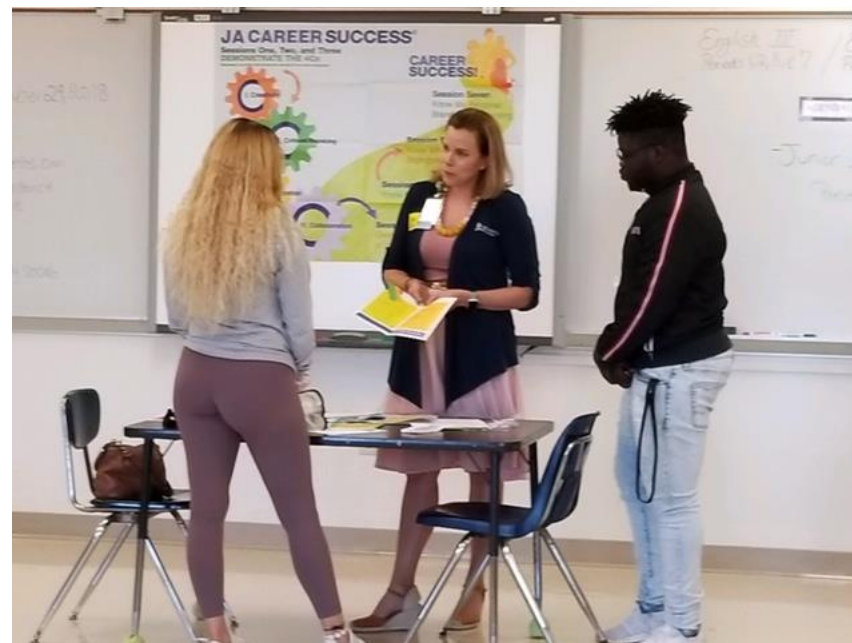
“The Lee County School District covers a multitude of schools and populations which presents a challenge to get people involved unless they have children in school,” said Mr. Batos. “Up north, where school districts are usually smaller, people feel more connected, recognizing that good schools increase real estate values and stimulate positive results for both residents and businesses. Our core group of like-minded people have joined together to bring this small town effect to Estero, an approach that has long-term potential to serve as a model for other parts of Lee County, and even throughout the state.”

A NEW INITIATIVE FORMS ROOTS

The collaborative commitment to education in the four schools that serve Estero: Pinewoods Elementary, Three Oaks Elementary, Three Oaks Middle, and Estero High School has taken hold and gathered positive momentum.

Village of Estero Vice-Mayor Bill Ribble and Chair of the Lee County School District Cathleen Morgan signed a Memorandum of Understanding establishing a Joint Educational Advocacy Task Force in a ceremony at Estero High School on May 21, 2018.

Lee County Schools and the Village of Estero are joining with the EOC, businesses, civic organizations, residents, parents and school staff to work together to encourage volunteerism in our schools and to raise funds to improve educational, recreational and esthetic experiences in our schools.



The Memorandum of Understanding encompasses an ambitious, multi-faceted relationship between the Village and the school district. Building a strong relationship means that the Village can weigh in on major decisions, such as the timing, location, and programming of the two new schools planned for Estero during the next five years.

The scope of the memorandum encompasses the development of the “2-5-8 Graduate” Junior Achievement (JA) program in all four area schools, the identification of needs for all four schools, and building a volunteer program to fulfill those needs.

This agreement is the first of its kind between the Lee County School District and a municipality.

The official Memo of Understanding does the following:

- Create mentoring and tutoring possibilities
- Promote the development of career academies and job skill programs with local businesses
- Encourage student internship programs
- Promote the colocation of future educational and recreational facilities
- Promote coordination and shared financing of infrastructure projects
- Encourage the use of school facilities by Estero residents when not in use by students

Village of Estero officials and staff, and the principals of the four Estero schools and District staff sit on a guidance task force. Its members are tasked with finding, planning and implementing programs, partnerships and promotional opportunities. They meet at least quarterly to work on their objectives.

The program has taken off with great momentum, and successes are already evident. The Junior Achievement “2-5-8 Graduate” program has inspired community members from all generations, and has engaged more than 80 wonderful and dedicated

volunteers. A power washing project took place last June at Pinewoods Elementary School where staff and owners of The Club at Grandezza gathered to refresh the school’s exterior and



walkways. Councilmember and School Liaison Batos wrote in his note of appreciation, “This act of kindness is exactly the type of community involvement that makes Estero stand out and will make our school shine when compared to other schools.”

And most significant is the establishment of the Estero Education Initiative.

Councilman Batos stated, “I believe that the better our schools are, the more desirable our community becomes both for residents and businesses that are here today and for those looking for a place to locate to in years to come.”

He added that he hopes, “This program will not only make the schools of Estero stand out but will become a model for other cities to emulate.”

Stakeholders in the Village of Estero are proving that building a strong community begins with educating and empowering its youngest citizens. Scores of volunteers are rallying around a fired-

up, passionate team of Estero council members, school district officials, Junior Achievement leaders, and members of the Estero Council of Community Leaders (ECCL) to define goals and standards that will strengthen the bonds between our community and our schools. Ultimately, their efforts will benefit students, teachers, residents, area businesses, and the entire Village of Estero.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SECONDARY EDUCATION

The growth of Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU) has had a tremendous impact on the Village of Estero's educational and economic climates. As more students enroll, there has been an increase in rental and student housing.

A key part of the Estero Education Initiative is to encourage and nurture FGCU students to build their futures in Estero. The university has responded to the community by expanding educational opportunities relevant to Southwest Florida's economic needs including a renowned Hospitality program. They have also launched an Entrepreneurial program which requires mentorship from our large pool of retired business professionals, deepening the relationship to an even greater degree.

THE INCREDIBLE VALUE OF VOLUNTEERS

Lee School Board member Chris Patricca, a key stakeholder in the pilot program, is enthusiastic about the Village/School

collaboration. Recounting her early meetings with Mr. Batos and Mr. Shields, Ms. Patricca says, "Estero is so unique to Lee County in the number of dedicated volunteers in this community – they really show up in force, and with so much energy and commitment."



Volunteers for the program are eager to voice their enthusiasm:

Amy Kuchenbecker, involved with Junior Achievement "2-5-8 Graduate" since last spring, describes her role in the Estero-area schools:

“I am the 8th Grade Ambassador leader. This entails recruiting and scheduling all our ambassadors, liaison with Three Oaks Middle School administration and school teachers, and support of all JA 8th-grade Ambassadors. I like to give a personal touch with our 8th grade JA Ambassadors, so I offer help in each of their classes as long as they want me there. I also teach an 8th Grade JA class at Three Oaks Middle School with a friend of mine who has a son in that class.”

Amy continues to be inspired by the program.

“The Junior Achievement lessons help us teach in a manner the kids can relate to. We (as ambassadors) tell our real life experiences, and I know the kids are interested in our personal stories.”

Dave Nichols also shared his Junior Achievement experience:

“I am partnering with Cheryl Lauterbach from Estero Place, and we are having the best time with 2nd graders at Three

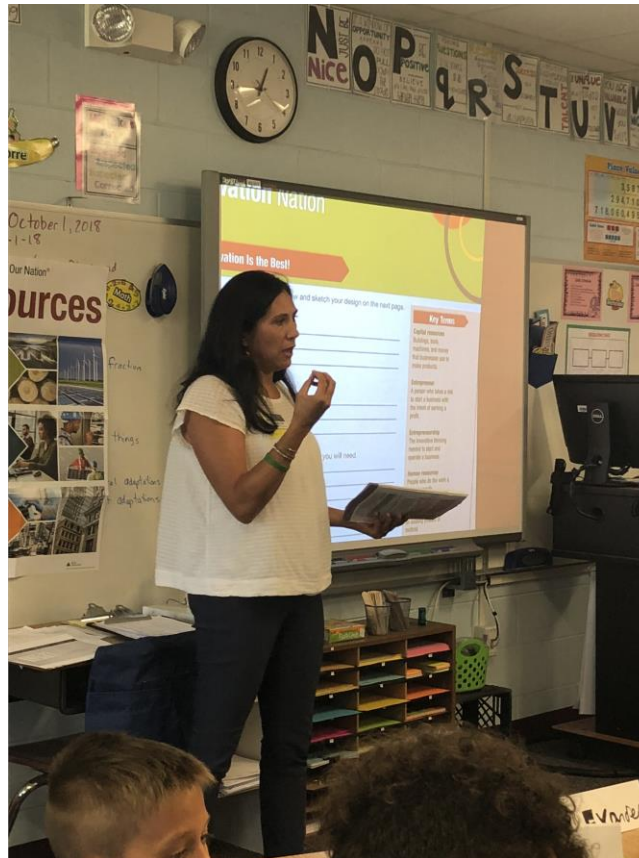
Oaks Elementary. The first lesson was about ‘People in a Community Work Together.’ The students learned terms such as Community, Jobs, Businesses, Citizens, Need, Want, and Skill. This JA program is wonderful, and the kids are really engaged. Jim Shields has done an exceptional job of getting volunteers to help out, and as people learn how simple it is to teach the five lessons, taking only 45 minutes each, they will be lined up to help.”

Miglena (Meg) Daradanova, parent and facilitator with Junior Achievement and co-secretary of Three Oaks Elementary PTO shares her story:

“I started facilitating for Junior Achievement in Ms. Lambert’s 5th grade class a month ago at Pinewoods Elementary when the “2-5-8-Graduate” program started. My children inspire me (to participate). I’m setting an example for

them with community involvement: to make your community better, you have to be active and contribute.

“Junior Achievement teaches kids at different ages about a basic American freedom: to work and live in a free market



economy. Not taking this freedom for granted is important. On a smaller, everyday level, we talk with them about job searching, prioritizing things in life, and being financially responsible. These are essential skills that are not otherwise taught or reiterated in school. We are trying to touch kids' lives at different ages, and get them thinking and planning about the future. Our schools have very involved and passionate faculty and administration who work to inspire and build our children. Being able to assist them an honor.

“Finally, the job market is changing (whole branches of jobs are disappearing, while others are introduced/growing fast), as well as global and national economy, so kids will need this type of guidance more and more to be able to navigate their adult lives successfully.”



These are but a few of the inspiring volunteer stories that are beginning to emerge.

Volunteers are still needed to empower and inspire our local young people. Mentors will be trained, and given a set of lesson

plans compatible with the grade and school to which he or she is assigned.

Jim Shields, major driver behind the Estero Junior Achievement program, initiator of the mentor program with the FGCU Entrepreneur program and arranger of the Grandezza support for the power washing program at Pinewoods Elementary, explains:

“As a mentor myself, I can tell you that the energy and excitement from engaging with the students is unmatched. Sharing these lessons is an incredibly rewarding experience. Volunteers have the unique capacity to make school relevant and fun, which means students are more likely to respond to them. As volunteers share their real-world experiences while presenting JA curricula, they help students bridge the gap between what

they learn at school and what they can expect in the world of work. There’s nothing more fulfilling than watching this process unfold, knowing that community volunteers have the potential to make a meaningful, long lasting impact on students’ lives.”

Mr. Shields continues, “To me, the amazing thing is that *first reaction by people* when you tell them about what is happening ... ‘but Jim, these kids are 7 years old, do they understand the terminology and the course content?’” The answer is, “The kids are all about it, they understand every bit of it; they become fully engaged. Classes can become so engaged that the teacher who is *in charge of classroom decorum* at times needs to calm the class down.”

A Community Collaboration

A new section has been added to the Village website which includes the scheduled public meetings of the task force, some of the achievements to date, Initiative partners, documents and articles thus far as well as a page where residents and businesses may contribute to the Estero Education Initiative.

Supporters in the community are giving their time, commitment, and their dollars to this effort. Substantial financial assistance for Estero High School’s Culinary Program has enabled a rapid emergence of this program to the extent that they are filling a great need in the Southwest Florida community.

The community has also stepped up to support the ½ cent sales tax, fueling the impetus to pay for Estero’s two new schools. Most residents agree that the new schools are integral to Estero’s growing student population and less crowded classrooms.

The adage, “It takes a Village,” is coming to fruition in Estero as the Village, the ECCL and Lee County Schools join together. The spirit of collaboration, communication, and cooperation is palpable and the efforts of the Estero Education Initiative are already demonstrating an impact.

Stand by for even greater things to come.

Estero Education Initiative Task Force Meeting Dates:

November 15, 2018 – 9:00 am

February 28, 2019 – 9:00 am

April 25, 2019 – 9:00 am

For more information about the Estero Educational Collaborative Coalition, contact Nicholas Batos at <mailto:mbatos@estero-fl.gov> or visit <https://estero-fl.gov/education/> and <https://esterotoday.com/education-outreach-council/> .