

The Herald-Sun

Guest column: It's time to close the achievement gap

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BY SHELDON LANIER and JAKE HENRY, Family Success Alliance



Jake Henry



Sheldon Lanier

CHAPEL HILL —

Ensuring that all students in Orange County have the opportunity to learn, so they may achieve academic and individual success in life is a major goal of both Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools and Orange County Schools.

However, it is a goal that our school districts cannot achieve on our own.

In Orange County, some of our families are struggling to pay their bills, put food on the table and provide their children with adequate health care. We all know that what happens to our children outside of the classroom, like their neighborhoods, homes and nutrition, has a major impact on what happens inside the classroom. And ultimately, the future of our community depends on whether our children reach their full potential.

That's why we are so excited to be a part of a new initiative in our county that aims to bring a diverse group of elected officials, community organizations, non-profits and government partners together to provide our families and children with the support and resources they need to overcome any obstacles on their road to success, learn, and grow successfully.

The Family Success Alliance will adapt lessons from successful models such as the Harlem Children's Zone to improve our children's chances for educational and economic opportunities. These models serve a defined geographic area and its children with evidence-based programs, services and support from cradle to career. These opportunities are like charging stations that children depend on to "charge up" their developing brains and reach their full potential.

The first charging station begins with every child beginning kindergarten healthy and ready to thrive. High-quality early childhood experiences build the foundation for the future, and will make a tremendous difference for our at-risk students. As educators, we know that the academic achievement gap is greatly impacted by a child's access to resources, beginning at a very early age. The Family Success Alliance will work to increase access to these resources for our families and children, which should be a big help in reducing, and possibly eliminating, the achievement gap in our schools.

The charging continues through school and the community to make sure each child succeeds academically, receives support both in and out of school, graduates on time, begins college or a career and then ends by supporting these young adults with their life and career goals.

Many families, who have felt unheard and unimportant in the past, have expressed excitement and anticipation for the work of the Family Success Alliance. By combining input from the families, children, service providers and leaders in the selected zones with decades of research, the Family Success Alliance will be able to greatly improve the odds of success for children and families in our county.

When we all work together as a community, great things can be achieved. By surrounding children with dedicated organizations and individuals who are able to provide resources and support along the way, we feel confident that all children in Orange County schools will be able to achieve their true learning potential.

EDITOR'S NOTES: Sheldon Lanier is director of equity and AVID for the Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, and Jake Henry is the chief academic officer for Orange County Schools. ... For more information on the Family Success Alliance, visit www.orangecountync.gov/departments/health/FSA.php online.