

Alachua County Named A Top Community For Kids

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An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that a tax approved by voters in 2008 was a one-cent sales tax.

Children snuggle up to grown-ups who read to them at the Alachua County Public Library. Volunteers help elementary and middle school students learn math, writing, reading and science. And skateboarders swoop down ramps at Possum Creek Park.

Those snapshots of life for Alachua County children are why Gen. Colin Powell and his wife Alma's organization, America's Promise Alliance, named the county one of the "100 Best Communities for Young People" in the nation.



The award comes as the Alachua County Children's Alliance continues to work toward increasing after-school help for those in need, reducing dropout rates and increasing graduation rates, along with reducing the number of children in foster care. The alliance is a nonpartisan group that meets monthly to promote better outcomes for children.

"It's really congratulations to the community and the community alliance," said Esther Tibbs, Department of Children and Families circuit administrator and county alliance board member. "While we have work ahead of us, this marks a milestone as public and private agencies have found new ways to cooperate and collaborate to better meet the needs of Alachua County's children."

Alachua County — like most counties in Florida — struggles with Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test scores, along with poverty and drop-out rates.

The Gainesville Sun reviewed statistics provided by the Florida Department of Education and found Alachua County graduation rates and FCAT reading scores improving, along with a decline in the dropout rate. But the numbers also highlight the work that lies ahead:

Nearly 23 percent of high school students didn't graduate last year.

55 percent of 10th-graders did not pass the FCAT reading test this year.

Nearly 50 percent of students receive a free or reduced-price lunch.

"It's only a beginning," Tibbs said about the work and the award.

One bright spot is that Alachua County's SAT scores are the highest in the state. High school students nationwide take the test, which can determine college scholarships and placement at universities.

Part of the reason Alachua County won the 100 Best award, organizers say, is not because it's at the top of the heap in test scores or athletics but because residents are working to make a difference in children's lives each day, especially those in need.

The 100 Best Communities for Young People are taking bold and effective steps to help their youth graduate and lead healthy, productive lives.

"These winning communities refuse to let the challenges they face be the determining factor in the lives of their children and youth," Alma Powell said. "Instead, they are helping to build an infrastructure of assertive, successful and dynamic young people that are the future of this country."

Alachua County agencies have revved up or started new programs in the past few years, including: Success By 6, a United Way program to encourage children to be ready for school. The organization has spent \$1.8 million on programs dedicated to improving school readiness.

Boys and Girls Clubs, a stalwart of after-school activities for decades.

Snuggle-Up Centers, a program in which volunteers read to children at Alachua County Public Libraries.

Welcome Baby Kits, which sends volunteers into homes with books to encourage families to read.

In addition, community leaders in 2008 successfully campaigned to get a one-mil property tax passed to pay for arts programs in the schools at a time when budget cuts were killing similar programs throughout the state.

The Alachua County School District last year received a 21st Century Learning Community Grant, a federally funded program that provides after-school help for elementary and middle school students. The first-year grant was for \$700,000. It is allowing the district to provide after-school and summer help for every middle school student in the district — more than 10,000 sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders.

"And absolutely everything is free ... not a nickel out of parents' pockets," Melissa Montgomery, the program's coordinator, said when it was announced last fall. "Students do not have to financially qualify. As long as a student is enrolled at a school in Alachua County, they can attend one of these sites."

In addition to tutoring, the program provides extracurricular activities such as dance, photography, martial arts, mad scientist, art, furniture design and technology-based activities. It is designed to improve academic performance along with the behavior of adolescents and preteens.

One student who says after-school programs made her life better is Jatterra Bonds, a freshman basketball player at the University of Florida. She participated in the city of Gainesville's recreation programs at the Northeast Community Center.

"I learned patience, social interaction, how to take criticism, discipline and many other valuable lessons," said Bonds, a graduate of P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School at UF. "I have changed as a person, because now I'm more mature and know how to handle the different situations of life."

Published: Tuesday, September 21, 2010 at 12:33 p.m.
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"The 100 Best Communities for Young People are taking bold and effective steps to help their youth graduate and lead healthy, productive lives," Alma Powell, chair of the Alliance, said Tuesday. "Each community has proven that they are developing programs and implementing initiatives to provide young people with the essential resources they need to graduate from high school and succeed in college and a 21st century career."

Brent Christensen and Eric Godet from the Gainesville Area Chamber of Commerce along with Alachua County Children's Alliance member Beck O'Brien accepted the award in Washington, D.C., on Tuesday at a ceremony in front of the Washington Monument. A local celebration is scheduled for Nov. 7 to recognize the agencies that contributed to the recognition. County officials will receive two road signs designating the area as one of the 100 best as well as a trophy.

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