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## Opinion

# **James F. Lawrence: Neighborhood pinpointed for turnaround effort**

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One of the top recommendations to emerge from Phase 2 of Gainesville for All meetings calls for creation of a Gainesville Empowerment Zone to turn around a neighborhood where students are performing poorly in school and their families are struggling to make ends meet. We're moving forward.

Because there is hardly a scarcity of such neighborhoods in Gainesville, this summer a diverse group of leaders from the community, non-profit agencies and government has been meeting to pinpoint a geographic area for this pilot project and begin planning its launch.

Our GEZ organizing committee, led by Partnership for Strong Families CEO Stephen Pennypacker and community activist Gerard Duncan, pastor of Prayers by Faith Outreach Ministries, has chosen to focus on children and their families in the Metcalfe and Rawlings Elementary School catchment areas. The area is bounded by 39th Avenue, 16th Avenue, Ninth Street and Waldo Road.

We were drawn to this northeast Gainesville neighborhood mainly because the kind of work we want to undertake has already begun there. Rather than start from ground zero, we thought it wiser to build on the services being provided families of Howard Bishop Middle School students.

For the past two years, Bishop has been one of a handful of Community Partnership Schools in Florida. These schools focus intensely on high-quality academics and provide family-support services such as health care and counseling.

We believe the GEZ will complement the services at Bishop, which most recently was graded a "B" school by the state based on criteria such as standardized test scores. The GEZ will concentrate on families of students

primarily attending Bishop's feeder elementary schools — nearby Metcalfe and Rawlings. Last month they received a "D" and "C," respectively.

The GEZ hopes to expand and accelerate services to families dealing with such challenges as crime and violence, joblessness and mental illness. In the 32609 Zip code, for example, 14 percent of the families with children there live below the poverty line, and 12 percent of residents over age 16 are unemployed.

"With creative design and engagement by the whole community, we expect a growing synergy to take place that will have a positive and lasting impact for children and families," said Pennypacker, whose agency contracts with the state to provide child welfare services.

The GEZ will introduce proven successful strategies and devise new and innovative approaches. For instance, local charter schools hold classes year round and their students have longer school days. We'd like to see the School Bboard allow schools in the GEZ to have the same flexibility. After all, not a single charter school is graded below a "C". They are obviously doing something right.

Among a wide range of family support services being discussed are 24 hour day-care facilities and an initiative to help fathers. Too often dads in poor neighborhoods are overlooked or dismissed as deadbeats. We'll help them find jobs or training for stable employment as well as encourage a more active parenting role.

But we don't believe we have all of the answers. That approach has a track record of failure. Already we're planning public meetings in the GEZ to hear from neighborhood residents. We want them to tell us what their greatest needs are and figure out how together we can address them.

"I believe that compassion and collaboration of a group of people with similar concerns for the well being of their community can initiate a societal change," is how Pastor Duncan summed it up.

Put another way: Together we all can make it happen.

*James F. Lawrence is director of GNV4ALL.*