

What's in a D school? Community rallies to lift Cocoa's Endeavour Elementary

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Endeavour Elementary in Cocoa has earned a reputation for being a “failing” school. It was the only Brevard County school to receive an F grade in 2013 and since then it has struggled to rise above a D.

Its campus is located in one of the poorest parts of Brevard. All of its students receive free or reduced lunch and 90 percent are minorities. What the school grade doesn't tell you is that a community has rallied behind this PK-6 school.

Will those efforts improve the school's performance on standardized tests? The jury is still out.

Endeavour became the Space Coast's first “community partnership school” in 2015 through a program run by the nonprofit Children's Home Society of Florida. The program offers medical, mental health and dental services for students, an after-school program for nearly 100 students, an on-site food pantry and workshops for parents about topics like cyber bullying and test preparation as well as family-fun nights. The city of Cocoa, Brevard Public Schools and Eastern Florida State College are partners.

Endeavour is one of 12 community partnership schools in Florida and the Children's Home Society is lobbying the Legislature for money to expand the program.

The impacts of the program and the community's support are the intangibles the district and parents I talked to say aren't portrayed in school grades. A grade of D doesn't take into account the child who once couldn't focus because of a tooth ache or hunger but now receives help through the school. It doesn't take into account teachers who have chosen to stay at Endeavour to make a difference or the positive messages and art displayed on school walls.

Krystal Betances moved to Cocoa from Chicago, where her 9-year-old daughter attended an A school. She said she was initially worried about Endeavour's academics but her daughter's participation in the after-school program has improved her grades and kept her from hanging out with the wrong crowd.

“I love the fact she comes home with new stuff for us to talk about,” Betances said.

SCHOOL GRADES DO MATTER

Grades don't reflect the intangible experience of a school, but they are what Florida uses to tell whether a school is succeeding or struggling.

A recent law requires intervention for schools that have earned a grade below C for more than two years in a row, said Jane Cline, Brevard's assistant superintendent for elementary leading and learning. After the third year below a C, the school enters “cycle two” of that process, which is Endeavour's case.

The school and the district had a few options for intervention, such as becoming a charter. They chose instead an “external operator,” a person hired by the district to oversee school operations, advise and support school leadership beginning this school year.

Principal Christopher Reed was brought on board from Ralph Williams Elementary in Viera in 2017 to turn Endeavour around. Based on early assessments for reading and math, he believes he will bring the school's grade up to at least a C this year. School grades will be released in the summer.

Students receiving tutoring in Endeavour's after-school program showed improvement of more than 40 percent on their reading and science scores and of 28 percent in math since last year, according to data provided by the school. Discipline referrals are down by 60 percent for all students and the school's science test scores have also improved.

"The perception of the school is what we're trying to change," Reed told me.

POOR SCHOOL VS. RICH SCHOOL

Yet Endeavour's performance on standardized tests in 2018 shows it has a lot of catching up to do:

- Endeavour's English language arts achievement score was 25 percent, compared to a 60 percent average for other Brevard elementary schools and 56 percent for the state.
- The school's math achievement was 33 percent, compared to 62 percent district-wide and for the state.
- Endeavour's challenges don't necessarily begin in the classroom. They begin even before children enter the school.

Research has shown poverty impacts cognitive and brain development. Poor children, for example, heard 13 million words by the age of 3, compared to 45 million words heard by children of professional parents, according to the 1995 book "Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children."

These figures draw a direct line between income and school performance:

- At Brevard elementary schools that received As in the last three years, an average of 22 percent of students were economically-disadvantaged.
- At schools that received As or Bs, an average of 32 percent of students were economically-disadvantaged.
- At schools that received Cs or less, an average of 75 percent of students were economically-disadvantaged.

LACK OF PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

I asked Reed whether poverty is the root cause of Endeavour's problems. He said not necessarily. One of his challenges is getting parents more engaged with the school and their children's education.

School Board member Cheryl McDougall told me lack of parental engagement is an issue at all struggling schools in her district, which includes Endeavour. Schools still need to figure out how to best reach out to the parents who don't speak English, had a bad school experience growing up or who work multiple jobs. Almost a quarter of Endeavour students are English learners, compared to 3.5 percent for all Brevard public schools.

"The struggle is, the parents who come to (school programs) are not the parents who need to be there," she said.

The difficulty in getting parents involved seems to bring us back to poverty. How much time do parents worried about survival have to read to their children, join PTAs and show up to school functions? Impoverished communities are also largely transient because of the large number of renters. Every time a family moves to a new school, connections are lost and educational gaps are created, said former Cocoa Mayor Mike Blake, a Cocoa High teacher.

Schools like Endeavour will forever play catch-up with these powerful socioeconomic factors. Providing a good education and the best teachers alone will not reverse the impact of poverty on learning. But programs like community partnership schools can change the lives of at least a few students.

"It takes a village" is a cliché, but bringing Endeavour up to par with its counterparts will require all hands on deck.

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