

The Gainesville Sun | Gainesville.com

OPINION *This piece expresses the views of its author(s), separate from those of this publication.*

Vote 'yes' to renew One Mill for Schools

Editorial Board Gainesville Sun

Published 12:00 p.m. ET Sep. 30, 2020

Alachua County voters have repeatedly supported local public schools when they have been hit by recession-related budget cuts or received inadequate funding from Tallahassee.

This year, that help is needed more than ever. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to significant new expenses for schools, while causing a recession that will likely mean millions of dollars in cuts from the state.

Thankfully the One Mill for Schools initiative is coming before Alachua County voters on this fall's ballot. The measure funds some of the district's key needs during the pandemic, such as distance learning technology and school nurses, in addition to academic programs that motivate students and prepare them for college and the working world.

Voters should again pass the One Mill initiative, just as they have three times before. Doing so will help protect the jobs of teachers and programs vital for students from the more than \$16 million in funding cuts expected to come as a consequence of the pandemic.

Florida already ranks nears the bottom of states for funding public schools. The state slashed funding further during the Great Recession, which would have forced major cuts in local schools had Alachua County voters not passed the first One Mill initiative in 2008.

Voters supported the measure again in 2012 and 2018, the last time with 77% of the vote. The measure currently supports more than 320 teaching and staff positions, including librarians, nurses and teachers in art, music, and magnet and career programs.

Academic magnet programs such as the Cambridge and International Baccalaureate programs prepare students for the rigors of college. Career and technical programs in areas such as automotive technology, health professions and veterinary services provide students with skills that allow them to get good-paying jobs or enter more advanced programs.

Funding for art, band, drama and music programs are key in keeping students well rounded and motivated. Research has shown that the benefits of these programs include improved attendance and a higher likelihood of graduating high school and success after graduation.

Funding for these programs needs to be protected as the district scrambles to find money for new demands such as personal protective equipment and training for teachers to help prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The One Mill measure pays for a nurse in every school, a critical need as schools deal with potential cases of the virus.

The measure is also the primary funding source for school technology, which is another need made greater by the pandemic. The district has provided more than 7,000 laptops and 1,000 internet hot spots for use by students who are now taking classes online.

The One Mill initiative is projected to raise about \$17 million per year for the next four years, all coming from a portion of property taxes that amounts to just a \$7 monthly cost for the average Alachua County household. The ballot language specifies how the money can be spent, while requiring an independent citizens' oversight committee to review spending.

Strong public schools benefit students and their families as well as the rest of our community. Alachua County voters have recognized this fact by supporting the One Mill initiative on three previous occasions. They should continue that support during these challenging times by voting "yes" on renewing the One Mill for Schools.