

OPINION

Roger Brown, Opinions Editor
roger.brown@heraldtribune.com

Herald-Tribune

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Your Turn
Megan Rose
Guest columnist

‘Better together’ a worthy goal for Florida’s families

After a decade of work inside Florida’s child welfare system, I could see there had to be a better way. Foster care is a traumatic experience for children, even in the best of circumstances. Families are simply better together.

Keeping families intact while providing parents with community support and resources is at the core of Better Together, a nonprofit founded eight years ago that now works in 24 Florida counties and has served more than 9,000 children.

More than 98% of the families we’ve served remain together, and our work along Florida’s Gulf Coast is among the most impactful – and the most needed.

According to recent stats from the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF), the agency’s Suncoast region – which it defines as a span of Southwest Florida from Pasco to Collier counties – had the highest number of children placed in out-of-home care, including foster care and group homes.

Nearly 2,500 children in our region were in foster care, group homes and other settings. That’s nearly 35% higher than the next highest region.

With the help of hundreds of volunteers and church communities, Better Together builds lasting support systems to help families cope with hurdles such as job loss, substance abuse, homelessness and incarceration – while also ensuring children are cared for in a safe home until the family can be reunited.

Our families-focused initiative is wholly voluntary, and parents never lose legal custody of their children. Through our workforce initiative, Better Together also partners with churches and employers in 22 states to help at-risk parents and other job seekers find steady employment – a key factor to family stability considering that three-quarters of our families can trace their struggles to job loss. That program has served thousands of job seekers across the country – 70% of whom find jobs within six weeks.

Among our success stories is Lindsey Taylor, who several years ago faced the possibility of losing custody of her 5-week-old son. She had already been dealing with an 18-month DCF case with an older, behaviorally challenged child who faced an emergency hospitalization.

“I was ready to let my son go,” Taylor says, “but because of this organization, my son is (now living at home) and doing exceptionally well.”

As a nonprofit, Better Together is 100% privately funded; our continued success depends on robust community support and engagement.

Our approach also revolves around a critically important truth that tends to be overlooked by most government policies and social programs designed to address hunger, homelessness, neglect and poverty: Societies are made up of individuals, and no two people or families are the same.

Big social problems don’t need one answer – they need millions of small ones.

At Better Together, we are building a community of people willing to help those who are hurting, one person and one family at a time. The kind of community that takes years of time and trust to build, with the kind of people who are in it for the long haul.

The cost savings are profound. A child in foster care costs Florida taxpayers roughly \$30,000 each year, with the average stay around a year and a half.

At Better Together, our family-based program costs just \$1,300 a year per child – with the typical child staying with their host family for just 45 days before family reunification.

Our goals are ambitious – we want to end the foster care crisis, starting with a targeted 20% reduction in the number of children in foster care over the next five years.

Visit BetterTogetherUS.org or call 239-470-2733 for more information.

Megan Rose is the CEO of Better Together, a nonprofit organization that helps parents and families in Florida.

SEND A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR



Gov. Ron DeSantis signs three bills at New College of Florida in May. One bans state funding for diversity, equity and inclusion programs at Florida’s public universities. THOMAS BENDER/HERALD-TRIBUNE

Review of New College fails smell test

It’s remarkable that the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges gave a clean bill of health to New College’s compliance with SACSCOC’s accreditation standards.

SACSCOC’s own position statement on diversity, equity and inclusion reads:

“While there are no specific benchmarks regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts for SACSCOC member institutions, all are encouraged to continue to regularly engage in thoughtful discussions about diversity, to intentionally cultivate and sustain inclusive and equitable processes, and to implement strategies to create and maintain respectful and supportive learning environments in which to learn and work.”

The association may not have benchmarks, but surely this powerful statement reflects a standard.

Was SACSCOC unaware of the widely reported and numerous violations of DEI principles that have occurred under New College’s president and its governor-appointed board?

They include:
● Closing the DEI office.
● Eliminating entire areas of concentration, such as gender studies.
● Abruptly firing the college’s librarian, a member of the LGBTQ+ community.

New College Board Trustee Christopher Rufo even defiantly stated that he wanted the board to go on record as opposing any DEI initiatives.

SACSCOC’s review of New College doesn’t pass the smell test, and it warrants closer examination.
Jill Lewis-Spector, Ed.D., Sarasota

Honor Constitution: Cut Trump from ballots

The recent Colorado Supreme Court ruling disqualifying former President Donald Trump from the state’s primary ballot raises this question:

Is the disqualification of someone under the 14th Amendment, Article 3 – which bars an individual from federal office for “conduct of insurrection behavior” – anti-democratic?

Many believe only the voters should decide Trump’s fate, while ignoring both the intent and purpose of our Constitution.

I’m not a constitutional scholar. However, it is clear through previous rulings that Trump’s behavior Jan. 6, 2021, was that of an insurrectionist.

What would be anti-democratic is to not honor the Constitution by allowing a person already determined to have committed insurrection to be on the ballot.

You can’t have it both ways for “political” reasons. The Constitution is clear on this.

The Colorado Supreme Court got it right, and courts in other states may also do so.

Robert O’Brien, Holmes Beach

More than one cause of child care crisis

A letter Dec. 21 suggested the solution to our child care crisis is for larger employers to offer child care on-site.

We believe that’s only part of the solution.

Providing safe, accessible, quality child care isn’t as easy as just designating a room where kids go for eight hours a day. Many issues converge at the root of this crisis.

Perhaps the biggest: a shortage of qualified preschool teachers.

Wages in the industry are historically low and our cost of living only worsens things for child care workers, many of whom are working poor.

The pandemic upended this already fragile industry, with centers closing and a quarter of the workforce leaving. No wonder we have waitlists and empty classrooms at the same time!

The good news is our community is working hard to change that.

The strategies include:

● A recruiting campaign to grow the workforce (<https://youcanteach.org>).
● Professional development and retention bonuses to develop and keep qualified teachers.
● Support for preschool directors.

Policy is also a piece of this puzzle, and state Rep. Fiona McFarland has sponsored a bill that includes tax credits for employers who provide or pay for child care.

There is indeed an opportunity to help working families access the child care they need. Achieving it requires cross-sector collaboration with community and business commitment.

Kelly Romanoff, senior vice president, Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation, Sarasota

‘Election readiness’ quiz shows what you know and what you need to learn



Seidman Says
Carrie Seidman
Columnist

The start of a new year is more artificial construct than actual promise of a clean slate. Just because we’ve turned the page on the calendar doesn’t mean anything has changed – least of all the political divisions that have only magnified since the last election.

By now, our adversarial stances are second nature, our positions and hearts hardened. And while passion is a plus, willful blindness is not.

Which is why the dawn of 2024 seems like a necessary call to action.

At no time in my life has an election year felt so critical and pivotal, the choices so oppositional and the potential outcomes so disparate. Many have said the very future of our democracy depends on this year’s election and I don’t think it’s overly dramatic to think so.

Yet many of us have distanced ourselves from civic responsibilities. We turn only to news sources that confirm our biases; we stop monitoring the news entirely because it’s “depressing” (it is); or we focus all our attention on the presidency when who gets elected locally is more likely to have an impact on our quality of life.

None of us are looking forward to the coming

media oversaturation of presidential primaries, polls and promises. But now is a good time to begin researching and evaluating candidates for local office who will get much less attention (and in some cases, none).

To that end, here’s a little quiz to assess your election readiness.

Obviously, you can find the answers on Google, but that’s not the point. If you’re honest, it should give you some idea of what you know and what you need to learn (and where to find answers) before you’re faced with that big blank ballot in November.

1. How many days before a primary or election do I need to be registered?
2. Can I vote in the primaries if I am registered as an Independent?
3. When is the presidential primary in Florida and what influence does it have?
4. Why is it important for me to vote in the August primary, regardless of my party affiliation?
5. What offices are up for election locally in 2024?
6. How many seats are up for Sarasota County Hospital Board and why do they matter?
7. What do members of the Charter Review Board do?
8. Where can I find information on local candidates and their positions?
9. How can I research who has donated money to a local candidate’s campaign?

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