

By Bill Husfelt

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It's no secret that many children across the country, and really even the world, are floundering right now. That's partly due to the impact of the pandemic and school closures and, in our area, it's definitely due to the devastating impact of Hurricane Michael. But there's also a connection between some of the struggles our children are facing and the incredible number of them who are growing up in homes without two parents and without the active presence of fathers.

I am very pleased that Governor Ron DeSantis recently signed a bill (HB 7065) promoting the importance of fathers in the lives of our children and providing funding to programs that encourage initiatives related to increasing the support for children in those situations. The funding is a start but the ambition (and overall goal) is a BIG STEP in the right direction.

As you can see from the graphic below, children born into fatherless homes are two and three times more likely to experience adverse outcomes than their peers who have active fathers. This is a sobering statistic and one that we must all work together to help our children overcome.

When he was signing the bill, Governor DeSantis noted, "If you look over the last many decades, one of the worst social trends has been the decline of fatherhood," he said. "We do have, in many instances, a fatherhood crisis in this country" (<https://floridapolitics.com/archives/515793-gov-desantis-signs-bill-promoting-fatherhood-programs/>). This concern isn't new, I've heard similar sentiments expressed in the past by leaders like Bobby Bowden and Tony Dungy, but it's definitely a plan we can all support.

I have shared before that I was raised, along with my two brothers, by a single mom and we lived in subsidized housing. I was blessed with her constant focus on my education and by the outpouring of love, support and encouragement I received from my teachers and my coaches. I am a proud product of public education and I firmly believe that public education is the great equalizer and the foundation of a strong society and a flourishing community. However, today's classrooms and world are very different than they were decades ago. Our educators do so much for our students and they are often just overwhelmed by the magnitude of the needs of their students. The number of children who need this additional support is higher than it ever has been and it seems to only be increasing despite our best efforts. Many of our children need MORE support and MORE encouragement than we are currently able to give them and that's why I am so pleased to support this legislation. Our schools cannot solve this crisis alone.

While we will do all we can to support this initiative by Governor DeSantis, we also need the citizens of our community to step up and offer their assistance. One child at a time, we CAN make a difference and we WILL change the outcome for many of our students if we work together.

While we work on wrapping up this school year, we're always planning for the next school year and we want to spend the summer recruiting as many mentors and volunteers as we can. I've

written before about the various mentoring programs we offer and I would encourage anyone interested in mentoring to contact either Stacey Legg at leggs1@bay.k12.fl.us, Melissa Pinero at pinerm@bay.k12.fl.us or Gordy Pongratz at Pongrgr@bay.k12.fl.us. There's also not a school in our county that won't welcome additional volunteers so anyone interested can reach out to his/her neighborhood school.

But there's more we can do together. What if we all reached out to the children we know in our neighborhoods, our churches, our friend groups etc., to see how we can help them? What if changing the life of a child is as simple as asking "how can I help you?"

I invite you to join me in thinking about what else you can do for the children you know this week and going forward. Together we CAN make a difference.

Stay safe and God Bless!

