

Florida's Early Learning Roadmap

Fall 2023





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850+ PARTICIPANTS

70% PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

65 LISTENING AND FEEDBACK SESSIONS

Developing the Roadmap

The Future Project began with an idea: Imagine our future when each child in Florida has the early learning opportunities they need to thrive. Our work was guided by a simple premise: The dreams and struggles of parents and educators across the state can help us reimagine the future of early learning. In fact, the perspectives of parents and educators are too often missing from the process of making policies that impact them. We took on the challenge of developing a roadmap in three phases.

Our Listening Tour

The Future Project began with a listening tour through a series of “Let’s Talk!” sessions in which parents, educators, family child care home operators, and center owners and directors shared about their challenges, hopes, and dreams for early learning in Florida. Between April and November 2022, staff from The Children’s Movement of Florida conducted 40 “Let’s Talk!” listening sessions in 22 counties with 159 educators and 234 parents. Three sessions were held virtually and nine were conducted in Spanish. After each session, participants were asked to complete a brief survey to share additional information about their background and engagement with Florida’s early learning system. This information was synthesized and analyzed in a [report](#) prepared by expert consultants and reviewed by the Future Project [Steering Committee](#).

Drafting the Roadmap

The Future Project’s 39-member Steering Committee met monthly from September 2022 through April 2023 to develop a shared vision, review findings from the listening tour, draft the roadmap, and make plans for community feedback sessions. The group consisted of parents of young children, early learning teachers, owners and directors, and advo-

cates from across the state of Florida. They were selected through a competitive application process and represent the diversity of Florida. Members who are parents and/or educators who are not otherwise compensated for their engagement in early learning policy and system planning activities received a stipend for their participation.

Community Feedback

Between May and June 2023, The Children’s Movement and its partners shared the [draft roadmap](#) with communities across Florida to gather feedback. Through 25 community feedback sessions in 14 counties and virtually, more than 450 participants provided feedback to help refine the roadmap and inform its implementation. The Steering Committee spent the summer of 2023 reviewing feedback and refining the final roadmap presented here.

For more on the planning process and materials developed along the way, visit <https://www.childrensmovementflorida.org/future-project>.

Note: All of the quotes used in this roadmap came directly from parents and educators who participated in a “Let’s Talk!” session.

Our Steering Committee

Our Steering Committee is a diverse group of parents of young children, early learning teachers, owners and directors, and advocates from across the state of Florida. They come from different economic circumstances and family backgrounds and bring different parenting styles, educational preferences, and unique understandings of the intricacies of the early learning system.

- **Anna Tedder**, Board Certified Behavior Analyst and Educator, *Pensacola*
- **Arleen Lambert**, Family Child Care Home Provider, *Miami*
- **Belisa Morón Espinosa**, Parent, *Jacksonville*
- **Dawn Montecalvo**, Guadalupe Center, *Immokalee*
- **Denise Brown**, Parent, *Jacksonville*
- **Diana Romero**, Home Visitor, *Jacksonville*
- **DJ Lebo**, Early Learning Coalition of Flagler and Volusia Counties, *Daytona Beach*
- **Gladys Montes**, Former educator and director, *Miami*
- **Heather Siskind**, Jack and Jill Center, *Ft. Lauderdale*
- **Herman Knopf**, Anita Zucker Center for Excellence in Early Childhood Studies, UF, *Gainesville*
- **Janet Maxham**, Early Learning Coalition of Manatee County, *Sarasota*
- **Jennifer Coleman**, Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County, *Palm Beach*
- **Jesyca Katie Blaine**, Parent, *Tavares*
- **Kayla Miranda**, Parent, *Crawfordville*
- **Kettia Lafleur**, Parent, *Arcadia*
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- **Mary Huffstetter**, St. Lucie Public Schools, *Port St. Lucie*
- **Mia Jones**, Children's Trust of Alachua County, *Gainesville*
- **Miracle Wilson**, Parent, *Daytona Beach*
- **Molly Grant**, Association of Early Learning Coalitions, *Tallahassee*
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- **Nidia Duque**, Owner, Good Adventure Family Child Care Home, *Lakeland*
- **Pamela Hollingsworth**, Early Learning Coalition of Miami-Dade and Monroe, *Miami*
- **Randy Aleman**, Parent, *Jacksonville*
- **Rita Brown**, Brownsville Preparatory Institute, *Tallahassee*
- **Russell Scoates**, SWDC of Florida, Inc., *Gainesville*
- **Sandi Bisceglia**, Former Elementary Teacher and Pre K-8 Principal, *Florida Keys/Islamorada*
- **Sasha Pack**, Early Childhood Educator, *Palm Coast*
- **Sharon Miller**, King's Kids Christian Academy of Tampa, Inc., *Tampa*
- **Simone McDaniel**, Parent, *Tallahassee*
- **Suzan Gage**, Early Learning Coalition of Northwest Florida, *Panama City*
- **Tamara Tener**, Florida Family Child Care Home Association, Inc. (FFCCHA), *Crystal River*
- **Toshiko Pinckney**, Early Childhood Educator, *St. Petersburg*
- **William L. Edwards III**, Early Childhood Educator, *Crescent City*
- **Zhane Clayton**, Early Childhood Educator, *Daytona Beach*



Project Team

The Steering Committee was supported by a dedicated team of consultants and staff from The Children's Movement of Florida.

Core Team:

- **Hamilton Simons-Jones**, ResourceFull Consulting, New Orleans, LA
- **Keshia Jenkins**, The Children's Movement of Florida, Tallahassee
- **Maureen Joseph**, ResourceFull Consulting, New Orleans, LA
- **Rocio Velazquez**, The Children's Movement of Florida, Miami

Additional Support:

- **Mapi Garcia**, The Joy of Impact, Miami (Spanish-speaking family engagement)
- **Jeanette Gordon**, Seek Higher Ground, Palm Beach (community feedback)
- **Nikki Martin-Bynum**, Seek Higher Ground, Palm Beach (community feedback)
- **Talethia Edwards**, TOE & Associates, Tallahassee (parent engagement)

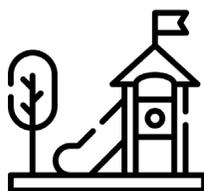
Our Destination

The pages that follow offer a roadmap to our shared destination – our collective vision for Florida’s early learning system and what it provides children, families, and the community of professionals required to ensure our children’s success. This vision consists of four key components:



1. Thriving Parents

All parents – including mothers, fathers, and other caregivers – and families can access the resources and support they need to help their children thrive, including mental health resources, caregiver support systems, and affordable year-round early learning that meets the unique developmental needs of their children.



2. Impactful Learning Experiences

Every teacher has the tools to provide every child with engaging, hands-on, high-quality, developmentally appropriate, differentiated, and purposefully playful early learning experiences that foster the magic of exploration and learning as the foundation for healthy early childhood development and school readiness.



3. A Respected Workforce

The teachers and directors who are the backbone of the early learning system are recognized, respected, and supported with ample training, competitive compensation, and benefits that support them in making a living as a career early learning professional.



4. A Well-Coordinated, Resourced, & Data-Driven System

All parents, educators, and other family service providers work together, communicate regularly, and coordinate effectively in an aligned, well-funded, data-driven, accessible, and effective early learning system that supports the growth, development, and overall success of all young children in Florida.

Across these four components, there are several guiding principles that form the foundation for any effective early learning system. These include:

- **Relationships are the foundation.** An effective early learning system functions on strong and healthy relationships, not just between adult educators and children, but also between caregivers and teachers, and professionals across agencies designed to support the success of Florida’s young children.
- **Adequate funding is required.** A high-quality early learning system requires adequate funding – from a combination of federal, state, local, and private sources – to ensure each family can access early learning programs that are affordable and financially sustainable.
- **High expectations are coupled with sufficient support.** All of Florida’s children can achieve. Florida’s early learning system must maintain high expectations for the quality of early learning experiences across settings AND provide the support needed to help early learning providers, teachers, parents, caregivers, and young children meet these expectations.
- **It takes all of us.** Achieving this vision for Florida’s early learning system requires all of us – from families and early childhood educators to early learning center owners and directors, from pediatricians to business leaders, from elected officials, government agency staff, and policy makers to Early Learning Coalition leaders, and health and social service partners. This roadmap is designed to help all of us work together toward a shared vision for early learning in Florida.
- **Families’ basic needs must be met.** Child care is but one of several basic needs a family must address to support the healthy development of their children. Addressing early learning in Florida will have limited impact without ensuring families are healthy, economically secure, have food on their tables, and have safe and affordable housing.
- **Mental health is fundamental.** The mental health of children, caregivers, and early learning providers is critical to the success of Florida’s early learning system. Yet, too many caregivers and early learning professionals struggle with their mental health in isolation, amidst stigmas, and without support. An effective early learning system requires us to ensure a wide range of accessible and non-intrusive mental health supports are available – from peer groups to more clinical interventions.

The recommendations that follow have symbols to indicate how best to enact change:

 through government action or policy change

 action from community or civic organizations



1. Thriving Parents

The Goal

All parents – mothers, fathers, and other caregivers – and families can access the resources and support they need to help their children thrive, including mental health resources, caregiver support systems, and affordable year-round early learning that meets the unique developmental needs of their children.

The Issue

Parents are a child's first and most important teacher. Yet, too many Florida parents are struggling to support their families and effectively and confidently navigate the journey of parenting a young child. According to the Florida United Way, an increasing number of Florida households are considered ALICE: Asset-Limited, Income-Constrained, Employed. As basic household expenses have increased, wages have not kept up. So, while 13% of Florida households live below the Federal Poverty Level, another 33% – including many early learning teachers – earn above the Federal Poverty Level but not enough to afford basic household necessities. While reforms in early learning alone may not change families' economic circumstances, for families with young children, child care is their single greatest expense¹. Many of these families either do not qualify for or cannot access publicly subsidized early learning programs that allow them to work knowing their child is in a safe, positive educational environment.

The biggest thing for us is that we technically make too much money to be able to qualify for anything, but we're pretty broke, so we can't actually afford a lot of stuff. So, we're right in that middle ground where you're just like... sorry."

– Alachua parent

While VPK now serves more than 65 percent of four-year-olds in Florida, it is only funded to operate three hours per day, leaving many families struggling to identify and/or afford other options for their children while they work. Many working families in Florida don't work a traditional Monday through Friday 9 to 5 schedule and require regular care for their children on evenings and weekends. These fundamental challenges are compounded for parents whose child has a disability. Many parents express frustration that their relationships with family-serving agencies feel transactional, instead of supportive and trusting, which would make them feel valued.

Research shows that when parents with young children gain knowledge of child development and experience support and community as parents, child outcomes improve². Florida has existing infrastructure – 30 local Early Learning Coalitions charged with providing information and resources to families³, the Florida Division of Early Learning's website⁴, Florida's Healthy Start home visiting programs⁵, Help Me Grow Florida screening and early intervention⁶, proven models for parent engagement and leadership through the Head Start program, the Florida 211 information and referral call system⁷, and one of the oldest statewide voluntary pre-kindergarten programs for four year-olds in the nation⁸ – that can be leveraged to provide additional support for parents.

Recommendations

A. **Expand parent engagement strategies in family-centered places** – from grocery stores to libraries – with **trusted guides for parents** so they have relevant and timely information about early learning opportunities and how they can support their child’s early learning and development, in partnership with educators.

- i. **Expand the availability and reach of information and resources for families** with young children, beginning at birth, leveraging online resources, texting services, and existing local Early Learning Coalitions to offer regular parent orientations, information about available programs, and skilled navigators to help with the just-in-time support for different ages and stages. 
- ii. Improve **parent engagement practices and expectations** for Florida’s early learning programs to increase communication, partnership, and community among parents and early learning teachers and providers, particularly as it relates to their child’s progress and early learning curriculum and standards.  
- iii. Develop and implement a statewide framework for **parent advocacy and leadership development training** that can be customized for local contexts and includes modules for developing parents’ ability to understand and advocate for children across settings.  
- iv. Provide **resource and information sessions and community-building activities for families** statewide and in their local communities across multiple languages, formats, communication platforms, and agencies so parents have

relevant and up-to-date information on health care, child development, mental health, available resources, how to identify quality early learning, and changes in early learning programs and policies.  

B. Increase opportunities for parents and providers who have direct experience with the state’s early learning programs to **co-create the policies** that impact them.

- i. Establish regular feedback loops and **authentic family partnerships to drive program and policy changes** through the participation of parents and caregivers whose children are direct program beneficiaries (School Readiness, VPK, Healthy Start, etc.) in system governance and leadership, beginning with local Early Learning Coalition boards and expanding to the state-level councils or advisory boards. 
- ii. Encourage **parents and early learning professionals to run for office** to bring their direct experience into the policy making process. 

C. Expand the availability and accessibility of services that support the **mental health, economic well-being, and overall success of mothers, fathers, and other caregivers.**

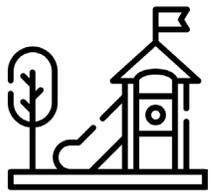
- i. Make available more free and accessible **support groups and other opportunities for mothers, fathers, and caregivers** to connect and access peer support, encouragement, and community, especially for parents of children with disabilities.  

[I want] a group like this once a week for all the parents that feel depressed or stressed – somewhere to go. Some things you are going through you don’t have to tell your mom or your man. Yeah, a support group.”

– Palm Beach parent

- ii. Provide affordable or free **mental health screenings and therapies** for parents to understand and address their own mental health needs.  
- iii. Advance policies that support parents and caregivers in establishing and maintaining **financial security** and preventing benefit cliffs in which families lose important benefits that cancel out any increases in earnings. 

“I know the number one thing is communication is key. Just getting out to the parents, reaching out to the parents as much as we can.”
– Immokalee educator



2. Impactful Learning Experiences

The Goal

Every teacher has the tools to provide every child with engaging, hands-on, high-quality, developmentally appropriate, differentiated, and purposefully playful early learning experiences that foster the magic of exploration and learning as the foundation for healthy early childhood development and school readiness.

The Issue

Decades of research on child development shows that what and how children learn from birth through age four is fundamentally different from their older peers. Neuroscience research continues to increase our collective understanding of brain development in a child’s earliest years.⁹ The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has documented the importance of and guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice – defined as “methods that promote each child’s optimal development and learning through a strengths-based, play-based approach to joyful, engaged learning.”¹⁰ While Florida’s Early Learning and Development Standards reflect a nuanced understanding of the multiple domains of child development across age spans,¹¹ the implementation of state-funded

programs does not consistently support teachers with clear, consistent expectations and universal standards and pathways. Too often, Florida’s early learning programs lack the resources they need to deliver the high-quality instruction that research shows promotes school readiness and healthy child development while struggling to meet burdensome state requirements that can eliminate the magic of exploration that is the cornerstone of early learning. Meanwhile, significant numbers of infants and toddlers lack access to a high-quality early learning program, despite research on the importance of brain development in the first years of a child’s life.¹²

Florida already has numerous building blocks to ensure teachers have the tools and resources they

need to create high-quality early learning experiences that foster the magic of learning in the early years. These include thousands of passionate, knowledgeable and committed early learning teachers working in 12,000+ early learning centers, preschools, and family child care homes across the state, robust Early Learning and Development Standards, and significant professional development infrastructure.¹³

Recommendations

A. Move towards a **fully-funded quality early learning system** that supports the early brain development of all children, birth to age five.

- i. **Increase per-child funding levels** across early learning programs to support improved quality and increased access that is in line with the true cost of care. 
- ii. Find **sustainable funding streams to provide reliable resources** year-to-year for the early learning system to support healthy child development from birth to kindergarten. 
- iii. Increase **teacher compensation** to better support quality and attract and retain talent in early learning classrooms. (See recommendation 3C). 

B. Increase understanding of the **importance of early learning and the value of developmentally appropriate practice** among policy makers and the public.

- i. Engage **state and local policy makers as champions to educate their peers** by visiting early learning programs and learning about developmentally appropriate practice and the need to increase funding levels for early learning.  
- ii. Launch a **public awareness campaign to educate community stakeholders** on the importance of early learning and developmentally appropriate practice, the return

Just seeing how colorful everything is and seeing their tiny little furniture and how they listen to you and how they want to do everything - that brought me joy. And just whenever they learn stuff and you see those little faces light up. It's amazing."

– Immokalee educator

on investment in early learning, and the role they can play in supporting teachers.  

- iii. Promote programming that effectively addresses the **unique developmental needs of infants and toddlers**.  
- vi. Strengthen coaching and support for teachers to enhance **Florida's accountability system** and advance high-quality, and developmentally appropriate instruction. 
- v. **Ensure adequate play time for children**, including outdoor spaces in communities that are designed to be safe and engaging.  

C. Improve **training, professional development, and the availability of expert support for early learning teachers** to implement developmentally appropriate practice and meet differentiated children's needs.

- i. Increase **training available for teachers to meet varying children's needs** in early learning settings.  
- ii. Establish more **training and support for first-time teachers** in early childhood development to better prepare teachers to enter and remain in early learning classrooms.  
- iii. Provide additional **trained personnel with expertise** in behavioral health and assessing and serving children with disabilities to support teachers in meeting their needs in the classroom.  



3. A Respected Workforce

The Goal

The teachers and directors who are the backbone of the early learning system are recognized, respected, and supported with ample training, competitive compensation, and benefits that support them in making a living as career early learning professionals.

The Issue

Extensive research shows that the quality of teachers is a key driver of child success in early learning environments.¹⁴ They are important brain architects who foster child development. Yet, a significant number of the more than 59,000 Floridians who make up the early childhood teaching workforce¹⁵ struggle to make ends meet, while many early learning programs operate on razor-thin margins without sufficient funding to increase teacher compensation. One in six early educators in Florida lives below the Federal Poverty Level, a rate that is more than five times higher than for K-8 teachers.¹⁶ While Florida's new minimum wage requirement will bring up the wages of a child care worker from the 2019 average of \$10.87 per hour,¹⁷ it remains insufficient to maintain a strong early learning teacher workforce.

Too often, Florida's early learning teachers lack the community respect and appreciation, compensation and benefits, training and professional development, and support in the classroom that they need to succeed and thrive.

In a 2015 research brief, The Institute of Medicine and National Research Council of the National Academy of Science concluded:

“The science of child development and early learning makes it clear how important and complex it is to work with children from infancy through the early elementary years. Yet... those

who provide for the care and education of children... are not acknowledged as a cohesive workforce, unified by the shared knowledge and competencies needed to do their jobs well. Expectations for these professionals often have not kept pace with what the science indicates children need, and many current policies do not place enough value on the significant contributions these professionals make to children's long term success.”¹⁸

Fortunately, according to McKinsey & Company, “Research shows that early childhood teaching quality is actually quite malleable.... Professional development, particularly when it involves regular in-class support from a mentor-teacher or coach, has been shown to significantly improve the quality of teacher-child interactions.”¹⁹ In recent years, Florida has increased investments in the training and professional development of teachers. The state

It kills me when you have people that work in early childhood education, and then have to go apply for benefits and be on the system. That makes no sense to me that someone who has such an important and vital job has to sit there and worry about whether or not they can pay their bills or they can feed their own.”

– Jacksonville educator

has established an Early Learning Professional Development Standards and Career Pathways handbook²⁰ and now uses the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) tool in all publicly funded early learning classrooms to measure the quality of teacher-child interactions, but many educators and families remain concerned that its use is not accompanied with enough support for quality improvements.

Recommendations

A. Increase **public awareness, appreciation, and respect** for the important and challenging work done by early learning professionals.

- i. Launch a statewide **educational campaign** about the importance of qualified professionals for providing quality early childhood learning experiences.  
- ii. Expand the number and frequency of state and local **community recognition** opportunities and appreciation activities for early educators, including an Early Learning Teacher of the Year award.  
- iii. Provide specialized staff, additional training, and other **resources to support teachers in addressing challenges** in their classrooms (higher rates of children in poverty, challenging behaviors, disabilities, dual language learners, etc.) (See recommendation 2C).  

B. Strengthen **career pathways and pipelines** for the preparation, professional development, and advancement of early learning professionals.

- i. Outline and promote a standard set of **career pathways/progressions** and minimal educational requirements that raise standards for professionals within the early learning field and are phased in over time. 
- ii. **Provide compensation, scholarships, hands-on in-classroom training, and time off and classroom coverage** for training

I know it's a weird balance... in order for them to pay these teachers properly to give quality care, they have to charge a certain amount. But it's just the cost in general [that] has become so high."

– Tallahassee parent

outside of the classroom for early learning teachers to participate in training, professional development, and continuing education.  

- iii. Promote the role of **master teachers, center directors and other coaching** roles for excellent teachers to remain in the field and impact program quality through work with centers, schools, and Early Learning Coalitions.  
- iv. Advance efforts to **recruit new teachers** into early learning classrooms, including through training programs that begin in high school.  
- v. Develop more **training opportunities** for advanced teachers and directors in early learning to continue to hone their craft.  
- vi. Engage early childhood educators who have direct experience in early learning classrooms and training and professional development programs in informing the development of the **informal pathway** for early learning professionals. 

C. Improve **compensation and benefits** for early learning professionals. (See Recommendation 2A).

- i. Document the **true cost of quality care** with a well-compensated workforce and educate policy makers and stakeholders about this along with examples of effective funding models.²¹ 

ii. Explore, pilot, and expand opportunities for government- or employer-led purchasing pools that would allow **early learning professionals to access comprehensive health benefits** (including vision, dental, and mental health).²²



iii. Advance efforts to provide **free or discounted child care** for the children of early learning professionals. 

“Your child deserves to see a teacher that’s happy and wants to be there with them. Every day.”

– Lake County parent

iv. Implement activities that recognize early learning teachers as professionals **eligible for the same perks and benefits as K-12 teachers**, ranging from paid time off to discounts with area businesses. 



4. A Coordinated, Resourced, & Data-Driven System

The Goal

All parents, educators, and other family service providers work together, communicate regularly, and coordinate effectively in an aligned, well-funded, data-driven, accessible, and effective early learning system that supports the growth, development, and overall success of all young children in Florida.

The Issue

Over 68% of the more than 1.1 million children under age five in Florida have all available parents in the workforce, making access to child care critical for most Florida families with young children.²³ More than 42% of families with young children in Florida are considered low-income and cannot afford high-quality early learning without support.²⁴ Despite extensive research that shows the impact of high-quality early learning on their future educational success, health outcomes, and earnings, approximately half of Florida’s three and four year-olds, and the overwhelming majority of infants and toddlers

are not enrolled in an early learning program.²⁵ With current funding and eligibility requirements, more than two thirds of young children living in Florida households earning below 85% of the state median income (SMI) are still not served by the School Readiness program.²⁶ This has enormous costs to Florida’s economy. Extensive research in other states conducted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce has shown that the lack of stable, quality child care could cost the Florida economy in excess of \$1 billion annually.²⁷ Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckmann has estimated that

investments in high-quality early learning generate a return on investment of more than 13%.²⁸

While greater investment is critical to support Florida children, families, and the economy, an effective system requires more than just money. It requires careful coordination and regular data analysis. Yet, Florida's system remains siloed. Multiple funding streams and programs serve children of different age groups with a myriad of different eligibility requirements and significant gaps. The state's early learning system is a maze and its participants don't have a map. There is no comprehensive or shared data system to track children's services, needs, and progress across programs.

Fortunately, Florida has significant groundwork to build upon. COVID has brought increased attention to the importance of child care and early learning to our economy. The Florida Division of Early Learning offers a centralized state entity responsible for the state's major publicly funded early learning programs. Early Learning Coalitions provide county-level infrastructure.

Recommendations

A. Ensure equitable access to **early learning programs that are accessible, affordable, and responsive** to the needs of families.

- i. Incentivize the creation and funding of **more early learning options to cover more families more equitably**, including non-traditional hours, dual language learners and immigrant families, and children who are at-risk of or diagnosed with a disability. 
- ii. **Increase funding levels** for early learning programs to provide more quality options. (See recommendations 2A and 3C). 
- iii. Expand the availability of federal and state funding to increase access to and the supply of **specialized instruction and therapies for young children with disabilities and special health care needs**. 

It was... heartbreaking. I was really close with [the administrator] and she would say, 'Oh I already know this application for this family is going to get denied. I wish this person wouldn't have put the other parent on the [application], because now [they don't qualify].' And it's like, you shouldn't have to do that. You shouldn't have to wish that a parent wouldn't have put the other parent on there. Now because they put dad on there and said dad is involved, which is a good thing, [they cannot access child care subsidies].... That's what we're supposed to be fostering and nurturing. To have to say, 'Oh well, because dad is in the picture now, the income is not [eligible].' And then they can't afford child care. There's too big of a gap where their just needs aren't being met."

– Daytona Beach educator

B. Establish mechanisms and practices that allow parents, educators, and others who regularly interact with families with young children to **share information and resources, express concerns, coordinate to support families**, and build community.

- i. Create and biannually review an **easy-to-understand system map** of early learning options and interactions with family services to identify gaps, duplication of services, and opportunities for coordination.  
- ii. **Expand eligibility** to match Florida's economic reality and **coordinate enrollment and follow through** across state and federal programs that respond to the needs of families with young children. 

iii. Connect early learning programs with **comprehensive health and social service programs** to promote early learning and other resources for families.  

C. Advance regular **data-driven decision-making** to support 100% kindergarten readiness through program and process improvements that are informed by real-time, coordinated data systems across children and family services.

i. Establish and use **unique identifiers across shared data systems** to streamline screening

data, connect early learning quality indicators to other data points, disaggregate data to identify critical success factors and gaps across maternal and child health, education and workforce systems, and conduct system-level evaluation. 

ii. Regularly review data to **identify and address disparities** in outcomes for different populations (e.g., dual language learners, immigrant families, rural populations, children with disabilities or special health care needs, families living in poverty, and/or particular racial and ethnic groups).  

 **I’m surprised about the lack of support for people who don’t have strong English. There are no resources... The work that is being given to bilingual people does not meet their standards. I know the teacher salaries are terrible. There aren’t enough prepared personnel to do this job.” – Jacksonville parent**

Glossary

ALICE Household: ALICE is an acronym popularized by the United Way that stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed — households with income above the Federal Poverty Level but below the basic cost of living. In its ALICE report, the United Way defines a household as all the people who occupy a housing unit, but excludes those living in group quarters such as a dormitory, nursing home, or prison.

Categorical Eligibility: When families or households are eligible for certain public assistance programs based solely on their participation in another public assistance program and not other eligibility criteria.

Child care: Often used synonymously with early learning (see definition below), child care refers to the range of settings and services that provide developmentally appropriate early learning experiences for children under age five while allowing mothers, fathers, and other caregivers to work, attend school, or participate in other activities.

Child Development Associate (CDA): The most widely known credential in early childhood education, which helps early childhood education professionals demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of key concepts in early childhood education and advance in the field.

Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS):

An observational assessment tool designed to assess the quality of teacher-child interactions in early learning classrooms to ensure quality, drive improvement, and improve child outcomes. In Florida, CLASS assessments serve as a cornerstone for the state accountability system for early learning programs participating in the School Readiness and VPK programs.

Continuing Education Units (CEUs): Certificates awarded by education and training providers to show successful completion of non-cred-

it programs and courses intended to improve the knowledge and skills of working adults; typically, professionals in the early childhood workforce must complete a certain number of continuing education units each year.

Department of Children and Families (DCF): A Florida state agency responsible for working in partnership with local communities to protect the vulnerable, promote strong and economically self-sufficient families, and advance personal and family recovery and resiliency. DCF is responsible for licensing early learning programs, administering the state’s child welfare system, and administering numerous public benefits programs for families.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) as “methods that promote each child’s optimal development and learning through a strengths-based, play-based approach to joyful, engaged learning.”

Division of Early Learning: A division within the Florida Department of Education dedicated to supporting access, affordability, and quality in early learning services for children and families through 30 early learning coalitions and the administration of the School Readiness, VPK, and Child Care Resource and Referral programs.

Early Head Start: A federally-funded program that serves infants and toddlers under the age of three, and pregnant women. Early Head Start programs provide intensive comprehensive child development and family support services to low-income infants and toddlers and their families, and to pregnant women and their families.

Early Learning: Education and care programs for children under age five that are designed to support healthy child development and school readiness.

Early Learning Coalition (ELC): A community network chartered by the state with the administration of publicly funded early learning programs in their community. Florida has 30 ELCs, which are nonprofit organizations that leverage local private and public partnerships to meet children’s needs.

Early Learning Professional: An early learning professional is anyone who works in the field of early learning or to support the successful implementation of early learning programs. This is a more inclusive term than teacher, as it includes center directors, trainers, support staff, chefs, custodians, interventionists, and other specialists.

Early Learning System: Florida’s early learning system includes all programs, services, funding sources, and policy-making bodies that impact children, from birth to age five. These include Head Start and Early Head Start, School Readiness, VPK, Early Steps, home visiting programs, and others.

Early Learning Teacher: An early learning professional who provides developmentally-appropriate instruction to children under age five.

Early Steps: Florida’s early intervention system through which 15 local providers across the state offer services to eligible infants and toddlers, from birth to 36 months old, who have or are at-risk for developmental disabilities or delays.

Early Childhood Educator: An early childhood educator is a paid professional who is responsible for the development of a child during the early childhood years. For purposes of this document, early childhood educators work with children from birth to kindergarten. The word, “educator” is derived from the Latin word “educare,” which means “to guide or lead out.” This root word indicates that an effective educator does not simply fill children with information and knowledge but guides them and develops their inherent abilities. The terms “educator” and “teacher” are used interchangeably throughout this document.

Educator: See Early Learning Teacher above.

Equity: When each individual/community gets what they need to survive and thrive — like access to opportunity, networks, resources, and supports — based on where individuals/communities are and where they want to go. Equity recognizes that each person has different circumstances and allocates resources and opportunities accordingly.

Family Child Care: A form of early childhood education in which the child care provider cares for children in their own home.

Head Start: A federally-funded program that supports children’s growth from birth to age 5 through services that support early learning and development, health, and family well-being. Head Start services are available at no cost to children ages birth to 5 for families living near the federal poverty level. Since 1965, Head Start programs have reached 40 million children and their families. Research has shown children who enrolled in Head Start programs are more likely to graduate from high school and attend college, have improved social, emotional, and behavioral development, and are better prepared to be parents themselves than similar children who did not attend the program.

Healthy Start: A free home visiting program that provides education and care coordination to pregnant women and families of children under the age of three. The program was enacted by the Florida legislature in 1991 to lower risk factors associated with preterm birth, low birth weight, infant mortality and poor developmental outcomes.

High-Quality: Meeting an accepted standard of excellence. The state currently requires a minimum quality threshold based on a 4.00 rating on the CLASS assessment.

Home Visiting: A service delivery strategy that matches expectant and/or new parents and caregivers of young children with a designated support person – typically a nurse, social work-

er, or early childhood specialist – who guides them through the early stages of raising children. Services are voluntary, may include caregiver coaching or connecting families to needed services, and are provided in the family’s home or another location of the family’s choice.

Infant: A child under the age of one year.

Informal Pathway: A form of professional development for early learning professionals that often takes place outside of the formal degree-granting infrastructure of higher education to include a range of learning opportunities offered through state-approved providers that meet predefined standards or quality criteria that may result in credentials awarded demonstrating satisfactory completion or competency attainment in a prescribed course of study.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC): A national professional membership organization that works to promote high-quality early learning for all young children by connecting early childhood practice, policy, and research. The association, which was founded in 1926 as the National Association for Nursery Education, is a leader in the field of early childhood education with nearly 60,000 individual members and 52 Affiliates.

Professional Development: Continuing education and career training after a person has entered the workforce in order to help them

develop new skills, stay up-to-date on current trends, and advance their career.

School Readiness Program: Florida’s program to help children from low-income families be prepared for success in school while allowing parents to work or attend a training or education program. The program serves more than 200,000 Florida children each year. It is administered by the Florida Division of Early Learning and operates in partnership with more than 6,700 private child care centers, private and public schools, and family child care homes who agree to meet certain quality standards and health and safety requirements. The program was first created by the Florida Legislature through the passage of the School Readiness Act in 1999 and is funded primarily by a federal Child Care and Development Fund Block Grant.

Teacher: See Early Learning Teacher above.

Toddler: A child between the age of 12 months and 36 months old.

Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK): A half-day free prekindergarten program offered to all Florida four-year-olds regardless of family income. The program, which was first launched by the state of Florida in 2005, has served more than 2.6 million children through a variety of education settings to date with a focus on preparing early learners for success in kindergarten and beyond.

Endnotes

- ¹ <https://www.unitedforalice.org/state-overview/florida>
- ² <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/three-early-childhood-development-principles-improve-child-family-outcomes/>
- ³ <https://www.floridaearlylearning.com/parents/coalitions>
- ⁴ <https://www.floridaearlylearning.com/parents/family-resources>
- ⁵ <https://www.flmiechv.com/about/home-visiting/>
- ⁶ <https://www.floridaearlylearning.com/parents/coalitions>
- ⁷ <https://www.211.org/>
- ⁸ <https://www.floridaearlylearning.com/vpk/floridas-vpk-program>
- ⁹ <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/inbrief-the-science-of-early-childhood-development/>
- ¹⁰ <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/developmentally-appropriate-practice>
- ¹¹ <https://flbt5.floridaearlylearning.com/>
- ¹² <https://www.firstthingsfirst.org/early-childhood-matters/brain-development/>
- ¹³ <https://www.floridaearlylearning.com/providers/professional-development>
- ¹⁴ <https://extension.psu.edu/programs/betterkidcare/early-care/tip-pages/all/what-research-tells-us-why-early-educators-are-important>
- ¹⁵ <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/states/florida/>
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ https://nap.nationalacademies.org/resource/19401/BirthtoEight_brief.pdf
- ¹⁹ <http://ceelo.org/toolkit/cpqr/teachers-important/>
- ²⁰ <https://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/19910/urlt/22-3.PDF>
- ²¹ <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/fact-sheet-The-Early-Educator-Workforce-Crisis-How-Legislators-Can-Make-a-Difference-for-Kids-Families-and-Educators-2023-03-13.pdf>
- ²² <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED583847.pdf>
- ²³ <https://datacenter.kidscount.org/data#FL/2/0/char/0>
- ²⁴ Families are considered low-income if they live at 200% of the federal poverty level or below according to [Kids COUNT](#).
- ²⁵ From Florida [KIDS COUNT](#)
- ²⁶ <https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/2021-08/cy-2018-child-care-subsidy-eligibility.pdf>
- ²⁷ <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/reports/untapped-potential-economic-impact-childcare-break-downs-us-states-0>
- ²⁸ <https://heckmanequation.org/resource/research-summary-lifecycle-benefits-influential-early-childhood-program/>

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