



# EARLY LEARNING COALITION OF POLK COUNTY

*Heart of Education*

FEBRUARY 10, 2026

**Dr. Marc Hutek, CEO  
Early Learning Coalition of Polk County**

Kindergarten Readiness and  
Community Forward Thinking



EARLY LEARNING COALITION  
OF POLK COUNTY

# Three Main Priorities

- Administrator of the Federal CCDF School Readiness Program for Polk County  
(Enrolled 5,700)
- Administrator of the State's VPK Program for Polk County  
(Enrolled 3,700)
- The State Designated Childcare Resource and Referral Agency for Polk County



# Recent Educational Shifts in Accountability

- Programs shifted under DOE management
- Emphasis on education and readiness for school vs. childcare for workforce purposes
- Teacher classroom assessments
- Provider rating scales
- Child assessments and thresholds for readiness designation



# Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK)

In Polk County...

- Fewer than half of incoming kindergartners attend VPK
- Fewer than half the children in kindergarten are deemed “kindergarten ready”
- Performance trends flat
- Improvement needed
- Impacts to K12



# Something Must Change!

- Polk Vision and ELC partner to address readiness rates
- Kindergarten orientation vs. vertical articulation
- Bridge to connect VPK/K teachers
- Conducted pilot program w/long term plans to connected feeder patterns
- Kindergarten teachers – what's most important



# ELC's New Priority is Born!

KINDNESS

(post-it notes)



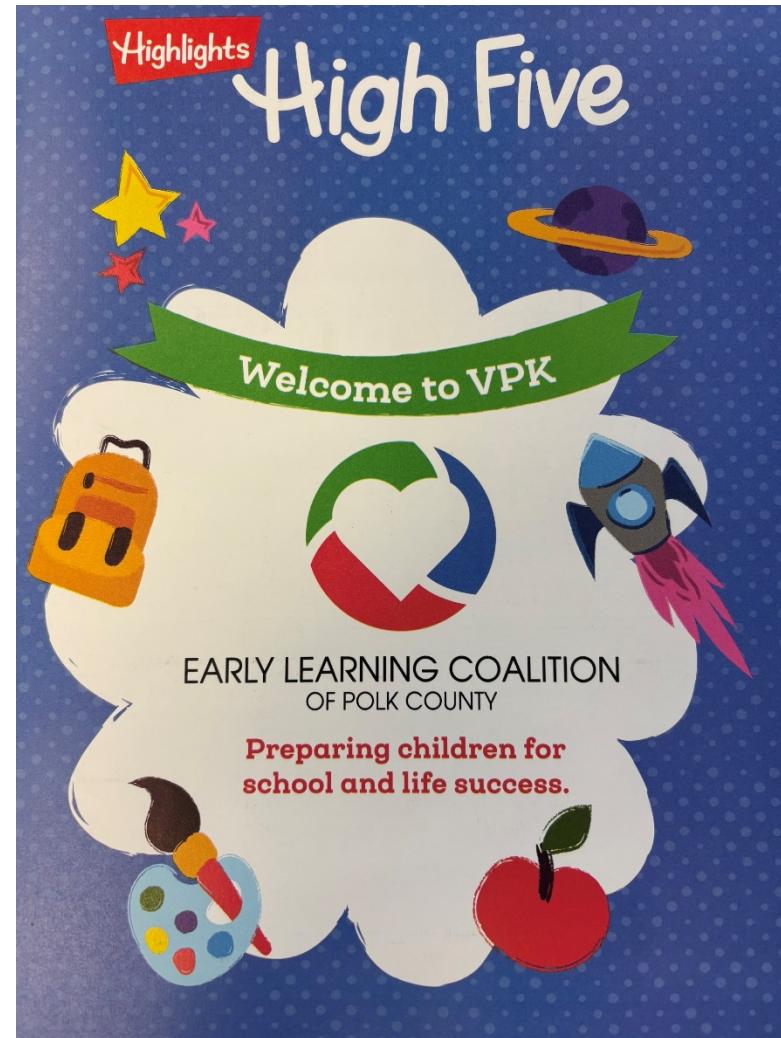
# Long-term effects of poor social-emotional development

- Education: Expulsions/violence/bullying/less instruction/lower academic performance
- Workplace: soft skills/teamwork/collaboration/reputation/employee turnover/profit loss
- Community: Getting along in society/adulthood polarization/political views/violence/world atrocities/daily unkind acts (over 500 mass shootings in US last year)



# The Highlights Connection

- Kindness kits to providers
- CEO Kent Johnson at Teacher Appreciation event
- Branded ELC Highlights magazines
- ELC conference presentation
- National recognition of Polk FI kindness initiative



# ELC Kindness in our Services

- Engage in additional activities targeting kindness with children – Kindness Connections Kits and kindness book bundles
- Investments in classroom based SEL tools and supports – Pyramid Model, SEL family kits
- Professional development programs to support prioritized SEL programs in classrooms
- Prioritize mental health related supports



# ELC Kindness in the Workplace

- Kindness activities among staff - monthly
- Kindness theme for annual gala, parade, Fun Day
- Display children's kindness artwork
- Kindness bracelets, lanyards, luncheons, etc.



# ELC Kindness in the Community

- Staff volunteering locally
- Community wellness initiatives
- Early childhood mental health collaborative (concept)
- Radio Ad

AND...



# INTRODUCING...



# Understanding the “4-Point Foundation”



# Understanding the “Triangle Top”

**Be  
Kind!**

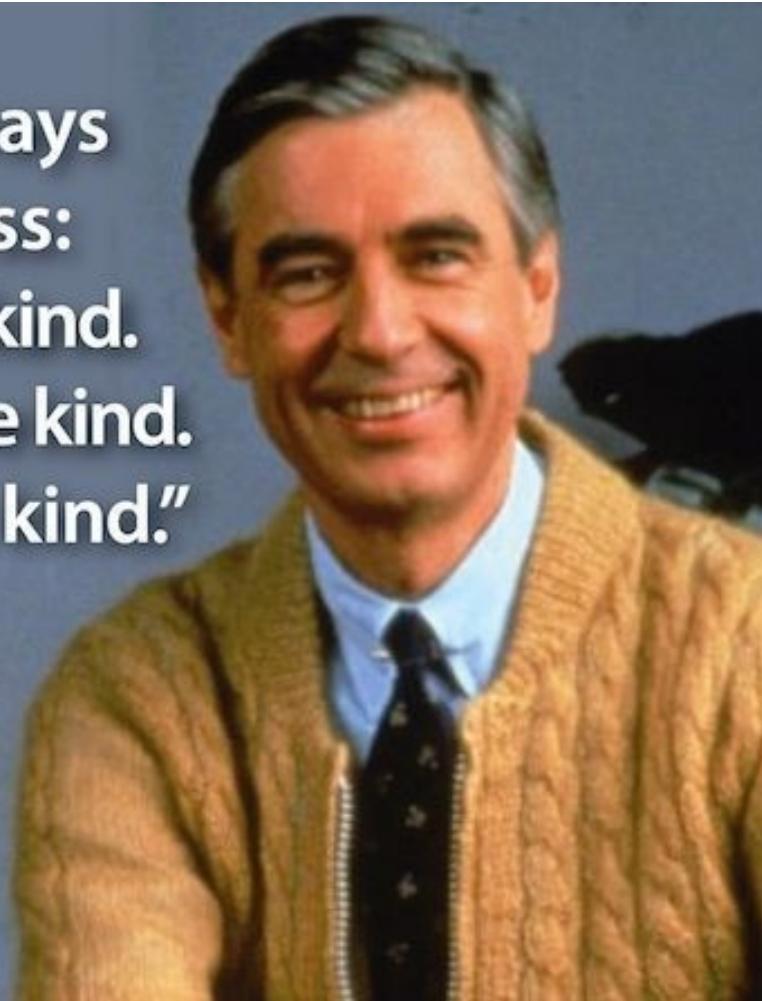
Abraham Maslow's  
hierarchy of needs  
representing “Self-  
Actualization”



# A “Kinder” Community for Children

**“There are three ways  
to ultimate success:  
The first way is to be kind.  
The second way is to be kind.  
The third way is to be kind.”**

**Mr. Rogers**



# Possible Next Steps

## Prioritizing Kindness

- ELC leads efforts on early childhood
- Advancing community efforts
  - Identify community sector leaders
    - Mayors, Commissioners, Police/Fire Chiefs, Chamber/Hospital/Bank/Business Leaders, anyone who can represent and lead interests for a common group
    - Consider geographic leadership/coordinating on behalf of a city/area
    - Other Ideas? Join Us!



# Bekindpolk.org

## Register Your Organization



ndness **Bettering our Community by Investing in our Children and Modeling Kindness** Bettering our Community

At "Be Kind! Polk" we strive to promote kindness that starts with children and resonates through our community! Our goal is to have children ready to enter kindergarten and ready for life! Our community can carry this commitment forward by modeling kindness and making our community nicer... leading by example!

[LEARN MORE](#)



### Register Your Organization

Attach Files

Attachments (0)

[SEND](#)

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Our children need this!

Thank you for having me! ☺

