Giving Every Child a Fair Start

By David Lawrence Jr., The Children's Trust Founding Chair

Go back three decades, and here's the story, the mission, the progress toward giving every child a good start in life and then in school.

Start with 1996, and Governor Lawton Chiles establishing a statewide Task Force on "school readiness." He asked me to chair that. The father of five children, I had a lot to learn.

The mission then and for everything since: Figure out how to help **all** children have the chance to fulfill their potential with the fullest understanding that the earliest years of a child's life are critical to the best possible outcomes.

That led to the School Readiness Act of 1999 signed by Governor Jeb Bush that created Early Learning Coalitions throughout Florida.

Our state's story has come to be this: People coming together determined to build a movement embracing the future of **everyone's** child.

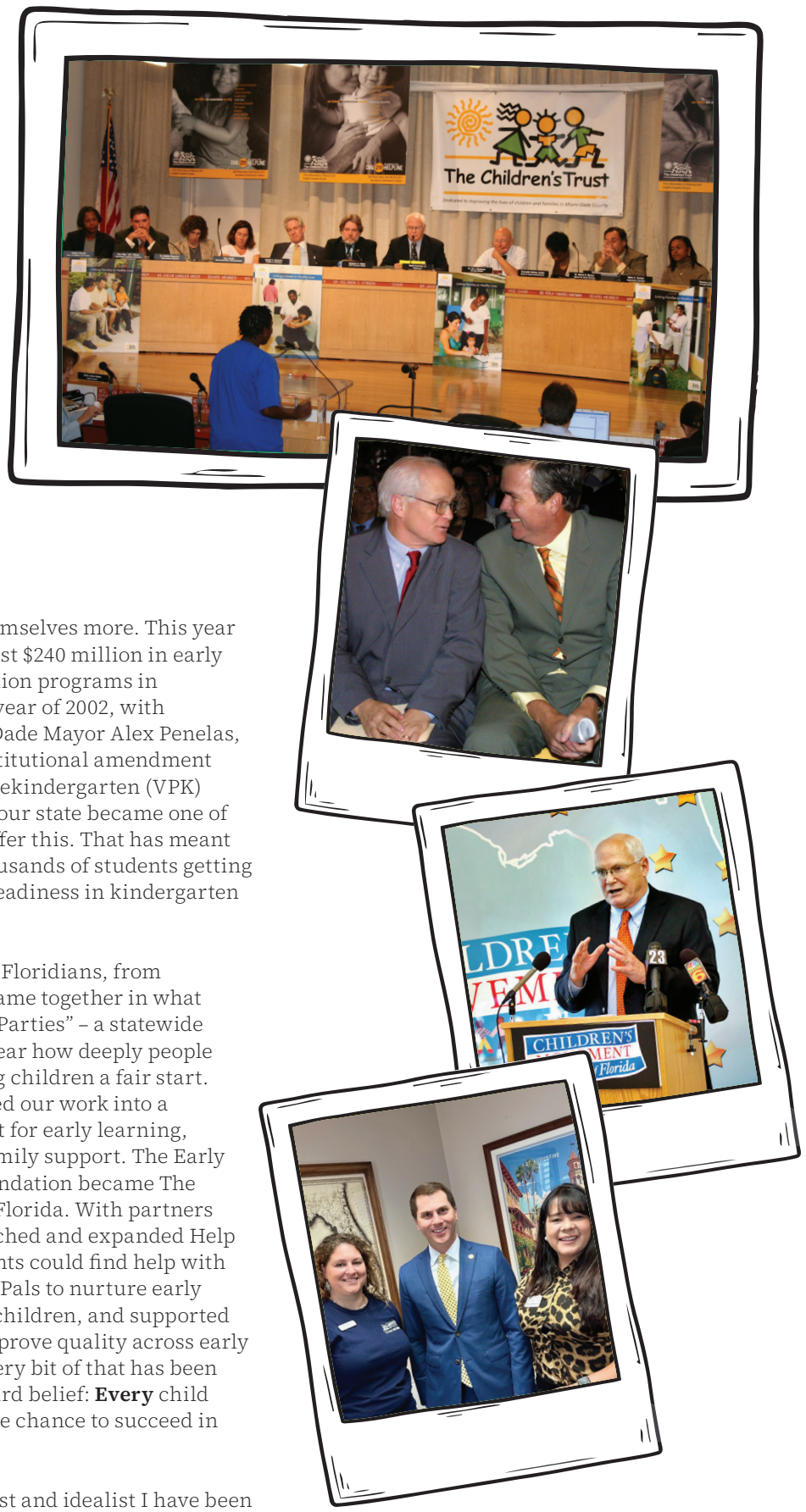
Our work didn't focus on politics or headlines, but rather on giving everyone's child the best possible chance to be "kindergarten ready." That means high-quality early learning opportunities for only those lead to significant outcomes. We've made great progress, and much more to do.

In the late 1990s, along with the late and special Carol Barnett, I chaired the Florida Partnership for School Readiness. That was a good step toward a more coordinated early learning system. In 1999, after 35 years in newspaper journalism, I "retired" to spend my fulltime energies on all this. Thus came to be The Early Childhood Initiative Foundation, which wouldn't have happened without a generous Miami couple, Dr. Jane and Gerald Katcher, and then Dan Lewis and Mike Fernandez and so many, many more.

And that led to 2002, when Miami-Dade voters created The Children's Trust, choosing to invest in children by taxing themselves more. This year alone The Trust will invest $240 million in early intervention and prevention programs in Miami-Dade. That same year of 2002, with leadership from Miami-Dade Mayor Alex Penelas, Floridians passed a constitutional amendment to offer free Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) for every 4 year old, and our state became one of the first three states to offer this. That has meant literally hundreds of thousands of students getting a running start toward readiness in kindergarten and beyond.

In 2010 more than 15,000 Floridians, from Pensacola to Key West, came together in what became known as "Milk Parties" – a statewide effort that again made clear how deeply people cared about giving young children a fair start. That moment transformed our work into a true statewide movement for early learning, children's health, and family support. The Early Childhood Initiative Foundation became The Children's Movement of Florida. With partners across the state, we launched and expanded Help Me Grow Florida so parents could find help with one call, started ReadingPals to nurture early literacy in thousands of children, and supported bipartisan reforms to improve quality across early childhood programs. Every bit of that has been rooted in a straightforward belief: **Every** child deserves the best possible chance to succeed in school and in life.

At age 84 I am the optimist and idealist I have been all my life. We have much more to do, work that will transcend my lifetime, and a mission that speaks to the future of children, community and country.



David Lawrence Jr. is the founding chair of The Children's Trust and now chairs The Children's Movement of Florida.