

Accessing Early Learning

Initiative Summary Statement:

Position early childhood learning programs to better prepare children for schooling and increase accessibility to high quality Pre-K education and student funding vouchers.

Initiative Description:

Objective: This Initiative will improve the overall posture of young children entering the school system and increase their lifelong success in higher education and when joining the workforce. Creating and improving existing early childhood learning programs of high quality accessible to all community members is critical to supporting this objective.

Improving program quality includes assessing and evaluating current program gaps and applying new standards across the region, incentivizing program employees to advance their credentials, and providing resources and materials to families with children at home, unable to access outside early learning care. Increasing access includes funding the expansion of existing programs and partnering with trusted organizations to create new programs in underserved communities and developing vouchers for families with financial barriers.

Ensuring early learning programs are high quality requires implementing strategies that attract skilled workers. Programs often find themselves competing with higher paying areas to fill teaching positions. Marketing early learning programs as entry level into K-12 teaching or a steppingstone into higher education is one example of a tactic that can increase candidate pools.

Early learning provides young community members with the building blocks to success in the workforce. Investing time and resources into the success of the sector reaps lifelong benefits for both the current and future states of the workforce.

Need: Before Hurricane Ian's impacts, the Florida Department of Education reported that more than half of children entering kindergarten are unprepared in 2019, only ranking ahead of four out of the 67 counties in the State of Florida. This affects reading proficiency scores, high school graduation rates, and ultimately workforce development. Many of the skill gaps employers identify as barriers to employment begin developing before kindergarten. Furthermore, our workforce needs quality, reliable early childhood education, and daycare to be able to work.

The early childhood education and daycare system has been severely upended by a variety of disruptions including but not limited to the COVID-19 Pandemic, Hurricane Ian, and staff

shortages requiring a multi-pronged approach to make this critical component of the talent pipeline resilient. Disruptions continued in 2022 with Hurricane Ian impacts further illustrating the need to increase capacity and resilience in regional early learning systems. The frequency of changes in program availability causes confusion amongst community members generating the need to centralize and market existing quality programs and information. The region requires exploration of strategies to make programs and systems more resistant to changes and resilient enabling quick recovery to full functionality. This need also aligns with a secondary objective – efficiently returning the workforce to their normal operations after experiencing disruptions of all natures.

Regional Approach: This initiative requires partnership amongst private, public, and non-profit stakeholders to effectively work together and address gaps in services throughout the whole community. Some communities require improvements to existing programs while others may need new investments altogether. The Bonita Springs YMCA is an example of a current program/facility serving community members with early learning needs that could increase capacity with some strategic planning, expanding access to others.

Approaches should employ tactics and strategies throughout the region that incentivize businesses or local non-profits to develop early learning programs within their respective scope through grant funding providing workforce members with additional opportunities to access needed care. This could include a large business applying for funding to provide early learning services to employees with young children or faith-based organizations using grant funding to develop similar services to their constituents or community members.

Stakeholders have also described communication as a need to message the importance of kindergarten readiness to community members and provide parents and families with information on existing resources throughout the region. This can be accomplished by leveraging trusted community partners who regularly engage with community members.

Impact: The National Institute of Child Health and Early Development reports that supporting early learning leads to high test scores through age 21, better grades in reading and math, increased high school graduation and college entry rates, fewer teen pregnancies, improved mental health, lower risk of heart disease in adulthood and longer lifespans.

However, the impacts of this Initiative can go beyond directly improving kindergarten readiness rates and lifelong success in the workforce. Newly constructed or enhanced existing facilities can be designed to support other community needs like emergency or

special needs sheltering with hardened infrastructure. Sites can also be designated as Resilience Hubs, distribution centers, or staging areas depending on the needs of an incident increasing overall resilience.

Accessible childcare also generates increased economic and workforce resilience. Increasing community capacities in early learning programs and attainability reduces the burden of parents who rely on services to care for their children while they go to work. Employers can also see higher employee retention rates when needed services are conveniently provided in tandem with workplaces.

Key Considerations:

- Market existing programs through new avenues and in a variety of ways to ensure opportunities are communicated to all community members in need of early learning services, especially within vulnerable and underserved communities. Include resources listed on the Lee County Birth to Pre-K website when marketing and messaging existing resources to community members.
- Track the number of new accredited childcare centers, number of VPK children enrolled, number of childcare educators with advanced training, average rate of pay for childcare and early learning staff to help measure Initiative success rates.
- Reference existing efforts of community organizations like New Horizons and the Grace Place of Naples, when developing an implantation strategy to avoid common missteps and leverage all existing resources.
- Develop parent advocacy education programs for parents who are non-English speaking. Programs should include bilingual early learning opportunities for young children.
- Develop early learning program start up guidance for interested stakeholders (e.g., private businesses and non-profit or faith-based organizations). Guidance should include grant funding information and best practices in promoting high quality programs.
- Coordinate plan and implementation develop with the Lee County School District to ensure the technical approach aligns with current needs and promotes overall resilience.
- Identify policy barriers and challenges and develop solutions that can address these barriers through incentives and advocacy. Funding is often needed to support these solutions, highlighting the need to advocate for and educate on community needs.
- Consider exploring dependent Children’s Services Councils (CSC). Dependent CSC’s do not have a taxing authority and typically receive funding from the County’s property tax revenue, falling under the annual budget.

Co-Sponsoring Branches:

Education and Workforce, Economic Recovery, and Health and Social Services, and Cultural Resources

Stakeholders:

- School Districts
- Charter Schools
- Local non-profit and faith- based organizations
- New Horizons of Southwest Florida
- Grace Place of Naples
- Early Learning groups and coalitions

Potential Funding Sources:

- United States Department of Education
- United States Department of Health and Human Services
- United States Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Florida Department of Education
- Florida Department of Children and Families