

Enhancing Grade Level Reading Outcomes for Florida's Children

There is growing recognition in Florida that systemic approaches are needed to improve education outcomes for young children. With more than four million children and youth calling Florida home, and 45% of them living in low-income families, targeted messaging, data, policy recommendations and partner engagement are needed to develop and implement strategic investments and policy improvements in early childhood development and grade level reading outcomes.

Florida KIDS COUNT at the University of South Florida is uniquely poised to contribute to the public policy work of early childhood system development. There are focused efforts in Florida that can be built upon and enhanced to increase synergy and alignment of work and make meaningful differences in the public policies developed that support young children's development. By aligning the data, expertise and resources available within two current Florida efforts, results can be maximized:

Foundation for System Improvements

Early Learning Consortium. In 2015, the Early Learning Consortium was established to research and identify effective public policies that support young children's development. The strength of the Consortium is working together to support key early learning objectives through an increased role in influencing legislation in Florida. Members include: The Children's Forum, Common Sense Kids Action, Florida Association for Child Care Management, Florida Association for the Education of Young Children, Florida Children's Council, The Children's Movement of Florida, and United Way of Florida. The Consortium works year round to develop strategies and collateral material that support more effective public policies for the early childhood system.

Florida Grade Level Reading Campaign. The Florida Children's Council (the Council) serves as Florida's state network lead for the national Campaign for Grade Level Reading. In 2013, the Council was approached to serve alongside 14 other states in an effort to elevate local grade-level reading campaigns from across the nation. With funding provided by the Helios Education Foundation the Florida Grade-Level Reading Campaign is now focusing on creating infrastructure to sustain grade-level reading efforts statewide: 1) *Network of Community Leaders*— 16 Florida communities with Grade Level Reading Campaigns share best practices, focus on outcomes and align efforts and serve as demonstration sites for what can and should be accomplished statewide; 2) *Early Childhood Policy Thought Leaders*— working from analysis on current state investments, child development research, proven system development strategies and community efforts, early childhood experts are developing a unified platform for systemic change that is focused on improved child and family outcomes; and 3) *Florida Business Leaders Alliance* — in partnership with the Florida Chamber of Commerce, the business sector is working to increase the prominence, funding and understanding of critical early childhood initiatives.

Anticipated Results

Building on foundational successes in the last year, our state policy work will focus on 1) increased access to quality early learning programs by aligning higher provider reimbursement rates with quality benchmarks and standards and 2) development of a comprehensive system of accountability birth through kindergarten that includes the child care subsidy program, state prekindergarten program and Kindergarten assessment policies and protocols.

Increased access to quality early learning programs through aligned higher payment rates. Florida has some of the lowest reimbursement rates in the nation for the child care subsidy program because of its priority on quantity over quality. The Early Learning Consortium conducted a cost analysis to determine the impact of low reimbursement rates that made the systemic challenges in Florida's

current system clear. Florida can strategically improve program quality by investing in increased reimbursement rates based on an organized definition of quality. By deliberately incentivizing quality improvements early childhood, businesses will be able to improve and sustain higher quality programs while also serving the students at greatest risk of school failure. With intentional focus of the advocacy community to better educate the legislature on the impacts of quality and need for increased funding, the Florida legislature has made modest investments to increase funding in the child care subsidy program in the last few years. Building from early successes, there is significant opportunity and need to ensure the investments continue to increase and be targeted to support quality in concentrated areas of poverty to support children at greatest risk of school failure.

Development of a comprehensive system of accountability with emphasis on instructional supports that improve child outcomes. In the 2016 legislative session, lawmakers made clear the need for changes in the current accountability model relative to prekindergarten and kindergarten assessments. Within the next two years, the state Department of Education will make recommendations on accountability. This has resulted in an important window of opportunity to influence the recommendations that focus on protocols that 1) improve classroom instructional practices and increase opportunities for children to enter kindergarten and be successful, and 2) can be used secondarily as appropriate accountability measures for state investments. This work would have Florida well positioned to coordinate efforts to solidify the use of fewer assessments and focus on related teacher professional development.

Define the Opportunity or Threat¹¹⁷_{SEP}

This is a critical moment in Florida's history for early education and supports for children birth to age 8. Changes to early learning governance, attention and focus on early childhood development, and increased understanding of the critical importance of grade-level reading have all contributed to this pinnacle moment. While not adjusted for inflation, K-12 funding levels have been largely been restored to previous levels and there is growing recognition for the need for increased investments and quality in early learning, it will be critical to have focused leadership on early learning issues to maximize the policy and legislative opportunities that will be available in the next few years.

Florida has made significant strides in increasing reading proficiency, but reading scores have leveled off and for the last six years scores have held constant with 61% of fourth graders not reading at proficient levels. While key state leaders are focused on identifying additional supports in the early elementary school grades that will impact and improve student outcomes, there is not sufficient focus on other key system elements that would also impact student outcomes, such as early learning and summer enrichment programs. There is considerable opportunity to educate government officials on the importance of a strong birth-8 framework with policies and supports that can improve student outcomes.

During this same period of time, communities have been busy organizing efforts around the grade-level reading framework to create meaningful change for children in poverty and to positively impact child outcomes. This translates into considerable opportunity for informing state policy decisions based on the community efforts that have been proven to impact children's development. This coupled with growing awareness by the business sector that the foundational experiences of children's development represent the beginning of the education continuum and is key to ensuring economic viability and prosperity.

The annual investment in Florida's early learning programs is approximately \$1 billion. With a significant level of public investment there is great need to make certain we are maximizing the benefits with targeted strategies focused on system improvements that better support access to quality and

improved instructional practices that support developmentally appropriate child outcomes. More effective policies for assessments related to children and instructional practices directly impact the quality of programming. Additionally, the legislature has appropriated increases to the child care subsidy program in the amounts of \$5-\$10 million the last three years. With a trend of modest increases, it is all the more important to make sure increased funds target concentrated areas of poverty to increase the capacity of quality programs.

For these reasons, Florida is primed to capitalize on growing momentum. Organizing efforts will provide infrastructure, continuity and collaboration that will build on growing momentum and result in significantly improved outcomes for young children. By aligning efforts of the Early Learning Consortium and Florida's Grade Level Reading Campaign, supported by Florida KIDS COUNT, the work of both initiatives can be augmented to impact children at greatest risk of school failure. There is opportunity for focused work targeting areas of early childhood system policy that are anticipated legislative issues for the upcoming 2017 session. Leveraging the work of communities and state leaders working to improve child outcomes can directly influence policies and funding decisions.

Strategies/Scope of Work

With grade-level reading proficiency as a unifying goal, there are targeted strategies with aligned outcomes that better support children's development and incremental system change.

Increase access to quality early learning programs by aligning higher provider reimbursement rates with quality benchmarks and standards. Research demonstrates that the structural quality of the early learning environment (physical environment, staffing, health and safety requirements) and process quality (adult-child interactions, curriculum) are integral to ensuring positive child outcomes. Effective professional development helps improve both structural and process quality. Florida's low payment disincentivize quality by making it unaffordable and disproportionately effects the children at greatest risk of school failure. Currently there are fragmented efforts to increase quality that create both opportunity and need for a coordinated systemic approach. **Targeted outcome:** Identify and implement strategies that increase access to quality early learning opportunities for young children in order to increase school readiness outcomes. **Activities:** Building on previous work demonstrating compelling need for increased investments aligned to quality, a methodical implementation plan will be developed factoring in pockets of communities with distressed zip codes. To accomplish this, Florida KIDS COUNT and the Early Learning Consortium will conduct an analysis of targeted communities and neighborhoods most in need of thoughtful planning and intervention. The development of an enhanced policy agenda with a clear implementation plan will further articulate the need for increased investments legislatively as well as serve as a roadmap for the Office of Early Learning on implementation of polices related to the early learning system. This proposal has been shared with the Director of The Florida Policy Institute (FPI), our State Priorities Partnership grantee. FPI will work with KIDS COUNT and the Early Learning Consortium on common priority areas in implementing this grant.

Develop a comprehensive system of accountability birth through kindergarten that includes School Readiness, VPK, and Kindergarten assessment policies and protocols. Building coherent and comprehensive systems of early childhood assessments is challenging and requires the coordination and alignment of assessments, instructional practices, data systems and most importantly the way in which knowledge is transmitted or diffused to administrators, teachers, parents and students. **Targeted Outcome:** Coordinate and advance efforts to solidify the use of fewer assessments and to identify methods to coordinate related teacher professional development. The assessment system should primarily include tools and instructional supports that improve classroom instruction and child outcomes

and secondarily have resulting data that can be used for accountability. **Activities:** Conduct research and analysis of both national and state policies, practices, and data sets to identify and develop strategies to improve the quality of teacher instructional strategies. Draft policy recommendations for reducing the number of early childhood assessments and identifying specific assessments for implementation.

To accomplish these activities and outcomes, the Early Learning Consortium will meet throughout 2016 to develop plans, recommendations and related collateral educational material. As the state lead for Florida's Grade Level Reading Campaign and project lead for the Early Learning Consortium, the Florida Children's Council will serve as project lead for the work and will contract with consultants for work supports. The Council will be responsible for integrating the work of grade level reading community successes and Consortium priorities as well as managing work flow, products, and deliverables associated with the agreed upon work priorities and plan. The Early Learning Consortium, will capitalize on its strengths of providing policy and strategy expertise, as well as strong research and content expertise by serving as the coordinating lead for related analysis, work and messaging.

- **Provide subject matter expertise and guidance** as it relates to public policy priorities, opportunities, and community implementation of early childhood assessments
- **Deliver presentations and educating policymakers** on public policy priorities, opportunities and challenges related to improving the quality of early learning environments
- **Facilitate meetings** of the Early Learning Consortium to develop a strategic plan for focused early learning investments and early childhood assessment coordination

Funds will be used to support the time and contributions of subject-matter experts in the field of early childhood development, early learning system design, and policy and data. This will ensure that the integrity of the products put forward are of the highest caliber and provide sufficient data for thoughtful decision making, and is tied to all applicable child development research and early learning system design.

- **Strategy-** This includes devising a strategic plan for accomplishing the public policy priorities, ensuring all Consortium members are aware of current Consortium legislative and administrative priorities, and individual member organization's legislative agendas, deploying Consortium members to speak to key legislative influencers when appropriate and reporting back legislative accomplishments.
- **Communication, Branding and Messaging-** This includes developing universal talking points to ensure consistency of messaging among stakeholders, designing Consortium branding, assisting with infographics, and resources for Consortium members to use with stakeholders and legislative members.

Data Analysis ^{SEP}

Florida is ranked in the bottom third in the family and community domain, which includes the number of children living in concentrated poverty, as compared to other. More than half a million (15%) of Florida's children under 18 live in areas of concentrated poverty. Relative to the general population, higher proportions of Black / African – American (32%) and Hispanic children (18%) live in these neighborhoods. When looking at children under six only, the numbers are more staggering with 26.8% of these children living in poverty, with 43.6% of Black / African – American and 31.7% of Hispanic and Latino children. Florida is home to more than 2.6 million children ages birth through elementary school, which includes 27% of children ages birth to 5 living in poverty, 23% of children ages 6 to 17 living in poverty and a total of almost 1 million children younger than 18 living below the federal poverty line. Florida lags behind in several key indicators of later life success for students of all ages. As compared to

the nation, Florida ranks 34th in the nation for Family and Community Supports, 45th for Economic Well-being, 27th in Education and 38th in Child Health.

Specific to student literacy, only 39% of Florida’s 4th graders are proficient or above in reading. Moreover, some student groups are at higher risk of not being proficient at reading in 4th grade. When the data is disaggregated, specific populations have even lower reading proficiency rates:

- By race, 49% of children who are White, 34% of children who are Hispanic, and 20% of children who are African American are proficient or above in reading;
- 29% of children who are low income are proficient or above in reading;
- 16% of children with disabilities are proficient or above in reading; and
- 9% of children who are English Language Learners are proficient or above in reading.

There are approximately 1.3 million children younger than age 6 in Florida. About 49% of those children are from low-income families - of these, approximately 25% are served in the child care subsidy program. Early learning is a largely privatized model and an integral part of the education system. In Florida, nearly 10,000 small and large private businesses provide the child care subsidy program annually. Though budget priority is on maintaining services to children, there is also a clear need to increase the quality of child care settings and ensure children are ready for kindergarten. There is also great need to include transition planning and supports for continuity to ensure children are reading on grade level by the end of 3rd grade. Florida stands to benefit greatly from focused work supporting better grade-level reading outcomes.

Performance Measures ^[L] _[SEP]

Influencing Policy Change	Performance Measures
How Much	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Research and summarize key policy opportunities in Florida:</i> existing policies and eligibility criteria will be carefully reviewed in Florida to identify opportunities for better coordination and collaboration. ○ <i>Develop a short- and long-range policy plan:</i> The short- and long-range policy plan specifying targeted partners, goals and timeline will be drafted, reviewed by key stakeholders, and refined as needed. It will be a tool for both advocates and state leadership to use for implementing more effective public policy supporting children and families in poverty. ○ <i>Convene key stakeholders:</i> Key stakeholders will be convened at least twice a year in person and monthly by conference call to review policy analysis, provide feedback to potential policy solutions. ○ <i>Educate key leaders:</i> Educate policymakers, businesses and other organizations about evidence-based strategies and policies that best support child outcomes and the short- and long-range policy plan. ○ Develop an implementation plan 07/16-10/16; Education on the plan and need for increased investments aligned to quality 10/16 - 05/17
How Well	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Engagement of the Early Learning Consortium:</i> Member engagement and development of focused public policy agenda for 2016-17 and beyond ○ <i>Engagement of Business Community:</i> Business leader engagement to champion the cause for 2016-17 and beyond ^[L] _[SEP]

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Practice Changes:</i> development of an implementation model focused on more effective policies related to two key drivers—increased funding to improve quality and assessment protocols to improve instruction and model a better system of accountability
<i>Difference Made</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Application:</i> policies or administrative changes enacted and implemented based on the assessment recommendations and funding implementation model ○ <i>Funding:</i> Amount of public funding maintained and enhanced that is focused on aligning payments to quality^[L]_[SEP] ○ <i>Population Impact:</i> Number of children in targeted poverty track areas receiving public benefits^[L]_[SEP]

Budget

Florida KIDS COUNT. Florida KIDS COUNT will be used for personnel costs related to project management, data analysis and travel to participate in Early Learning Consortium meetings. **Funds requested: \$7,273**

Florida Children’s Council. The Council will serve as project management lead for this work as the project manager for the Early Learning Consortium and Florida Grade Level Reading Campaign. The Council has a strong history of working to effectuate change benefiting Florida’s children and families through state leadership on policies, programs, and services as experts with demonstrated success in serving local communities. This is accomplished by 1) providing support to communities through resource maximization and peer learning exchanges on evidence-based strategies that impact child outcomes; 2) educating policymakers, businesses and other organizations about demonstrated successes from communities; 3) advancing a prevention and early intervention agenda for children and families; and 4) building productive partnerships with individuals and organizations interested in making strategic investments in Florida’s children and their families.

Funds requested: \$20,000

Indirect (10% of total costs) \$2,727

Total funds requested: \$30,000