

FLORIDA  
GRADE-LEVEL  
READING  
CAMPAIGN

3RD GRADE READING  
SUCCESS MATTERS

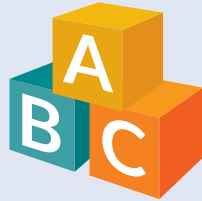
# FLORIDA GRADE-LEVEL READING CAMPAIGN POLICY PLATFORM



# BACKGROUND

A significant number of children – about 64 percent nationwide and more than 80 percent of those from low-income families – are not proficient readers by the end of third grade.<sup>1</sup> This has significant and long-term consequences not only for each of those children, but also for their communities and our nation as a whole. If left unresolved, this problem could undermine efforts to disrupt intergenerational poverty, close the achievement gap, and reduce high school dropout rates. Far fewer of the next generation may be prepared to succeed in a global economy, participate in higher education, or enter military and civilian service.

**Learning to Read  
(Birth to Third Grade)**



**Reading to Learn  
(Fourth Grade and Beyond)**



**Students not reading proficiently by the end of third grade are four times as likely to not graduate from high school—for students in poverty, the staggering reality is that students are thirteen times less likely to graduate.<sup>2</sup>**

The National Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (CGLR) was developed to reverse this disadvantageous trend with recognition that the education system alone cannot be held responsible for student success. The CGLR was established on three foundational tenets that together provide a framework to improve third-grade reading proficiency:

- **School Readiness or Kindergarten Readiness**
- **Summer Learning**
- **Attendance**



<sup>1</sup> National Center for Education Statistics: The Condition of Education 2017. Available: [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe\\_cnb.pdf](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/pdf/coe_cnb.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation: How Third Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation: <https://www.aecf.org/resources/double-jeopardy/>

The Florida Children's Council (Lead Organization), serves as Florida's state network lead for the Grade-Level Reading Campaign. In the fall of 2013, the Lead Organization was approached to serve alongside 14 other states in an effort to elevate local grade-level reading campaigns from across the nation, and in 2015 Florida Children's Council officially launched a statewide campaign, the Florida Grade-Level Reading Campaign (FGLRC), made possible by grant funding through the Helios Education Foundation. The Lead Organization works closely with experts from CGLR on ways to support local efforts and strategies to expand the work.

The FGLRC, in partnership with subject-matter experts and critical stakeholders, has identified significant need to develop quality early learning policy, enhance summer and afterschool programming, address child absenteeism and health issues, and engage families as children's first teachers.

Florida students' reading performance once outpaced the national average, but growth has recently plateaued. Performance on 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) grew steadily from 1998 to 2008, but, over the last four years, Florida's score has not exceeded 60% on the Florida Standards Assessment (FLDOE, 2018), with just 57% of children reading proficiently at third grade in 2018.

To address this critical challenge, FGLRC builds from and works in strong partnership with local grade-level reading campaigns that are leveraging resources to create promising community strategies that inform the statewide direction, work, and policy recommendations. The FGLRC focus mirrors the three primary tenets identified by the CGLR that have been proven to strengthen grade-level reading success and are particularly critical in Florida: school readiness/early learning, absenteeism, and summer learning loss.

To strengthen policy and practice in these areas, the following strategies are the primary drivers for change for the FGLRC, including:

**Community Leaders Network:**

This learning community of 17 Florida communities implementing local Grade-Level Reading Campaigns comes together regularly to share updates, best practices, focus on outcomes, and align efforts. Successful local efforts help inform state policy needs and opportunities.

**Policy Thought Leaders Network:**

Comprised of public, non-profit, and private sectors leaders, this network focuses on the key tenets of the campaign. The Policy Thought Leaders work intensively to determine where system improvement can be made that is focused on improved child literacy outcomes. These recommendations include the identification of policy and resources needed to support children's development and improve grade-level reading outcomes. See Appendix A for a list of members.

**Business Alliance for Early Learning:**

In partnership with the Florida Chamber of Commerce/Florida Chamber Foundation and other key business leaders, the Alliance supports and influences a grade-level reading framework by educating members on research advances, policy development opportunities, and meaningful community solutions that support children reading on grade-level. With regional representation across Florida community and state-level efforts, Alliance members increase engagement of the private sector through education and strategic mobilization.

# POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

An essential part of Florida’s multi-faceted campaign is the Policy Thought Leaders Network, which includes public, non-profit, and private sector leaders who identify potential new system strategies to support continued student achievement.

Over the course of three years, the Policy Thought Leaders convened and completed an intensive review of systemic data and policy that impacts kindergarten readiness, absenteeism, and summer learning. Throughout this process, the Policy Thought Leaders consulted with the Department of Education, the Office of Early Learning, and the Department of Health. The analysis was supported by the University of Florida and included:

- Development of interactive fiscal mapping by county detailing statewide budget appropriations over a five-year period to understand the current need, services, resources, and student Florida Standards Assessment results in Florida.
- Completion of a statewide policy index documenting legislative statutes and Florida Administrative Rules that govern Florida’s early learning programs, school attendance and absenteeism policies, and afterschool and summer learning programs.
- Review and summarization of extensive child development research, evaluation of proven system development strategies from within Florida and other states, and review of extensive information on community efforts to develop policy recommendations for kindergarten readiness, absenteeism, and summer learning loss.

The intensive data analysis, policy review, and research synthesis resulted in the identification of concentrated areas of focus for integrated system improvement strategies, as well as opportunities for more effective public policy.



# SCHOOL READINESS/KINDERGARTEN READINESS: EARLY LEARNING

## WHY DOES EARLY LEARNING MATTER TO GRADE LEVEL READING IN FLORIDA?

Reading at grade-level by third grade is a key predictor of future success. Approximately one in three children arrive at kindergarten without the basic skills needed for success. Research shows that achievement gaps and challenges to reading on grade-level by third grade start with a readiness gap. Children from low-income homes hear as many as 30 million fewer words than their more affluent peers, and sixty-one percent of children from low-income backgrounds have no children's books at home.<sup>3</sup> Early language and engagement lags have been documented as early as 18 months, and these gaps often become growing, glaring differences by preschool on key skills such as the words children understand and speak, listening and comprehension abilities, and early counting. By age five, national studies show a typical middle-class child recognizes 22 letters of the alphabet, compared to nine for a child from a low-income family.<sup>4</sup> These lags in early language and literacy skill development compound as children mature, making it increasingly challenging for them to catch up and read on grade-level.

The executive functioning skills necessary for success in school and life are also developed during the early years, including: planning and managing time, flexible thinking, impulse control, self-awareness and interactions with others, and organization. Significant differences are also seen on these fronts with low-income children often well behind their higher-income peers in the early years. These cognitive and social/emotional skills at age three are highly predictive of achievement at age nine, making the foundation-building formative years a critical element of grade-level reading and long-term success.<sup>5</sup>



3 Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (1995). Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company.

4 The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. Available at <https://gradelevelreading.net/our-work/school-readiness>

5 Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University. Available at <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/executive-function/>

## **WHAT WORKS: EARLY LEARNING**

There are multiple policy investments that make a significant impact on the quality of early learning programs. These include raising standards, rewarding higher-quality programs through tiered payment rates, and providing targeted quality-improvement supports through initiatives with a proven success record, thereby strengthening program quality and child outcomes.

High-quality early learning programs are those with well-prepared teachers who engage quality and responsive interactions, a rich curriculum and learning experiences planned to meet each child's individual learning and developmental needs, a well provisioned learning environment, actively engaged families, and thoughtful transitions into kindergarten.

High-quality, comprehensive birth-to-five early learning programs have a direct impact on short and long-term outcomes, yielding a proven annualized 13% return on investment. This ROI comes from a variety of improved life outcomes related to health, crime, income, IQ, graduation, and economic self-sufficiency. The impact of high-quality early learning programs is greatest for children at highest risk of school failure.<sup>6</sup> While strong programs exist, they are too often the exception, not the norm, and are meeting only a fraction of the need.

With these foundational elements in mind, there are specific strategies that can strengthen both Florida's School Readiness and Voluntary Prekindergarten Education programs. There are also opportunities to strengthen the critical role parents play in the early years through resources and supports to strengthen their role as children's first and most important teachers. These solutions tend to be more community-focused than statewide in Florida, and therefore are part of many of the local Grade-Level Reading Campaigns and are not represented in the statewide policy recommendations.



## **CURRENT FLORIDA LANDSCAPE: EARLY LEARNING**

The Florida Office of Early Learning (FOEL) in the Florida Department of Education administers early learning funding in Florida. Florida has a local governance model to administer this investment. Thirty local Early Learning Coalitions administer child care tuition subsidies, called School Readiness funds that are funded primarily through the federal Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) funds and required state match, and the state Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) Education program, which is funded through state general revenue.

FOEL administers an annual budget of \$1,084,173,129, including \$651,261,245 through federal CCDBG funding and state match for the School Readiness program as well as \$400,074,553<sup>7</sup> in state VPK Education program funding.

<sup>6</sup> Heckman Equation. Available: <https://heckmanequation.org>

<sup>7</sup> The budget dollars for the School Readiness and the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education programs will not total the complete early learning budget as state-level administrative dollars were excluded from the program totals.



## **STATEWIDE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: EARLY LEARNING**

The impact of high-quality early learning programs is clear and well documented, and there are a number of opportunities to strengthen Florida’s early learning system to maximize this promise. To garner significant new public investment, a stronger accountability structure with appropriate assurances are needed to ensure the funds will be invested in high-quality early learning programs that best support children’s developmental outcomes. In the last two legislative sessions, significant progress was made relative to two key priorities identified and developed through the work of the Policy Thought Leaders Network. With leadership from key legislative champions, bills were passed that provided the foundation for more effective early learning policy.

During the 2017 legislative session, the Florida legislature created the Committee for Early Grade Success to bring together legislative leadership, early learning and K-5 stakeholders, and subject-matter experts to make detailed recommendations for such a system in late 2017. The Committee outlined recommendations on observational and/or direct assessments for children in publicly funded programs birth through kindergarten entry. Recommendations also included assigning the unique child identifier earlier (with strict privacy controls) to assess the impact of publicly funded early learning investments on K-3 achievement. Understanding children’s developmental progress and learning gains will inform individualized care and instruction as well as continued improvement of Florida’s early learning investments, and will help more children arrive at school prepared for success. Implementing a unified child assessment system will require intentional capacity building and professional development to ensure reliable implementation. This represents a significant opportunity for Florida to create a coordinated system of child assessment over a broader continuum, enabling programs to better serve individual children’s needs and strengthening Florida’s early learning system through the early elementary years. The full report is available online: <http://fchildrenscouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/Committee-For-Early-Grade-Success-Recommendations.pdf>

During the 2018 legislative session, a major reform measure was enacted establishing the ability to define minimum quality standards to help ensure that children who participate in the state’s School Readiness program are able to access programs that provide strong teaching practices that best support children’s development. Furthermore, the legislation included mechanisms to increase payment rates in alignment with quality standards, as well as incentivize the implementation of ongoing child assessment. This policy provision will allow children’s developmental progress and outcomes to be measured to inform individualized care and instruction for each child. Aggregated de-identified results will be able to validate the effectiveness of Florida’s early childhood investments as well as inform ongoing program improvement. The implementation of these policies serve as the foundation of a comprehensive early learning system.

The following considerations are critical to improving kindergarten readiness and early grade success.

## IMPLEMENT A STATEWIDE ACCOUNTABILITY STRUCTURE



### **Identify minimum quality thresholds for programs that serve children at greatest risk of school failure:**

At the current time, there is limited data in Florida available on the quality of programs beyond basic licensing data. This makes it difficult to both inform families the quality of care and provide strong consumer education, as well as the means there is a wide of range of programs available, with no way to differentiate the poor quality programs from the excellent. There are two types of Quality Standards that can be measured as part of an early learning program: *Structural Quality* and *Process Quality*.

**Structural quality** is already addressed in law through accreditation, which involves measurement on key aspects of program delivery including teacher/child ratios, the learning environment, and materials.

**Process quality** focuses on effective teaching practices that best facilitate children's development, which is the strongest predictor of children's outcomes.



### **Establish baseline program assessment data to inform minimum quality thresholds:**

Informed by the Policy Thought Leaders' recommendations, program assessments will be completed in 2018-2019 on all School Readiness programs using a research-based observation tool. The tool will evaluate dimensions of quality interactions that include emotional and behavioral support; engaged support for learning; classroom organization; and instructional support.

With this baseline program assessment data, Florida will establish a minimum threshold of quality that will be defined and incorporated as a base requirement for School Readiness providers. Low-quality providers may then be given a specified period of time to improve or lose eligibility to receive another contract (exceptions would be in areas with a shortage of care; however, continued quality-improvement strategies would be needed). The identification of a minimum threshold of quality would help reduce the number of poor-quality early learning programs serving the children at greatest risk of school failure.



### **Incentivize quality programming by refining Gold Seal Quality Care Program requirements:**

School Readiness funds help offset the cost of child care for low-income working parents; rates are set locally and based on the age of children and local market rate studies. There is wide disparity in these rates across the state with some counties paying much more than others. Overall, Florida has the sixth-lowest payment rates for infants and toddlers and seventh-lowest payment rates for preschoolers in the nation. Low payment rates make it difficult for early learning programs serving a high percentage of School Readiness children to provide quality programs, attract and retain qualified staff, and create and maintain well-provisioned classrooms.

As mentioned, accreditation addresses structural elements of quality and includes higher standards. Early Learning Coalitions may pay up to a 20% differential to centers and family child care homes that are Gold Seal Accredited by one of fifteen different, state-approved accrediting agencies; of the \$590 million in School Readiness funding expended in 2016-

2017, approximately \$35.6 million was paid in Gold Seal differential payments. These funds support the costs of meeting the expenses associated with the higher structural standards that represent an important component of quality early learning environments.

The Gold Seal requirements need to be assessed to ensure this differential is going toward programs with demonstrably higher quality. All Gold Seal accrediting entities should have high-quality standards and monitor for fidelity.



**Increase coordinated early childhood child assessment capacity:**

Formative child assessment data helps early childhood teachers understand the needs of each child and create individualized care and instruction to meet each child’s learning and developmental needs. Both individually and aggregated, such data is also invaluable for measuring child growth over time and the impact of publicly funded programs.

Florida does not have a coordinated early childhood assessment system. The Florida legislature created the Committee for Early Grade Success to bring together legislative leadership, early learning and K-5 stakeholders, and as subject-matter experts to make detailed recommendations for such a system in late 2017.

As noted earlier in this document, the Committee for Early Grade Success outlined recommendations for such a system that were shared broadly during the legislative session. The full report is available online: <http://flchildrenscouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/Committee-For-Early-Grade-Success-Recommendations.pdf>. Important steps were taken during the 2018 legislative session to lay the foundation for adapting recommendations from the report.



**Increase payment rates to programs that meet quality benchmarks:**

Providing high-quality early learning programs is expensive and low payment rates make it challenging to improve and sustain quality programs, particularly for children at high risk of school failure. To support incremental and ongoing quality improvement, during the 2018 legislative session the Florida Legislature authorized the creation of a tiered reimbursement system for School Readiness funds with clear performance expectations and differentiated payment rates. The payment tiers will include (1) the Gold Seal accreditation (which measures structural inputs like ratios and business practices), (2) program assessment (which measures adult-child interactions and the learning environment) and (3) child assessment to inform instruction and measure learning gains. As the Policy Thought Leaders continue to monitor the creation of a differentiated payment system, it will utilize cost modeling to determine the actual cost of different levels of quality, and determine if the increase in payment rates results in the number of children at high risk of school failure being able to access higher quality care and education. This work will also create a framework for Florida to invest funds in alignment with quality to support increased kindergarten readiness and later school success.



### **Invest in continued quality improvement:**

Florida's overall quality of early learning programs needs improvement, and ongoing investment is needed in targeted quality improvement strategies. There should be expanded access to professional development, ongoing observational assessments of children to inform individualized care and instruction and measure child growth over time, improved learning environments, and targeted coaching to early childhood practitioners that implement strategies proven to improve the quality of early learning programs. Expanding access to targeted supports will help improve the number of early learning programs that can meet higher quality standards.



### **Ensure ongoing analysis and use data to inform decision-making:**

It is critical that there is ongoing data collected and analyzed to measure the impact of Florida's investment in early learning programs. It is recommended that data points be defined and reported to the legislature regularly, to include data on adult-child interactions, child assessment data, and information on payment rates to inform ongoing improvements to Florida's early learning system and investments.

## **STRENGTHEN VOLUNTARY PREKINDERGARTEN (VPK) PROGRAM**



### **Strengthen quality:**

Florida meets only three of ten national PreK standards: comprehensive, aligned, culturally sensitive standards; class size of 20 or lower; and structured classroom observation and program improvement plan. Program standards should be strengthened to meet three additional standards that have minimal fiscal impact: curriculum approval process and supports; require vision, hearing and health screenings and provide referrals as needed; and require at least 15 hours/year of ongoing specific professional development, individual professional development plans, and coaching.



### **Increase per student allocation:**

Florida's universal, voluntary VPK program was created in 2002 by constitutional amendment and signed into law in 2005. The program is currently funded below the 2008-2009 highest level of per-child investment, making it challenging for programs to provide a high-quality learning experience, particularly for high-need children. Florida is ranked 43rd for resource investment in among states nationally. The allocation should be increased with appropriate new quality requirements.



# SUMMER LEARNING

## WHY DOES SUMMER LEARNING LOSS MATTER TO FLORIDA?

Research shows that while academic gaps remain relatively constant during the school year, they widen dramatically during the summer. Every summer, low-income children may lose one to three months of reading skills and two months of math skills while higher income peers make slight gains. The cumulative, disproportionate impact of these losses can leave lower income children more than two years behind by fifth grade.<sup>8</sup> Reading skills that are lost during the summer slows progress toward reading proficiency by the end of third grade and exacerbate the achievement gap between low-income children and their more affluent peers.

## WHAT WORKS: SUMMER LEARNING PROGRAMS

Summer learning programs that produce the greatest gains for children struggling with reading skills have the following attributes: regular student attendance; individualized instruction; smaller class sizes; parent involvement; high-quality instructors; alignment of school year and summer curricula; inclusion of content beyond remediation; tracking of effectiveness; and experiences designed to address the “opportunity gap” by offering low-income students with recreational summer opportunities similar to those experienced by more affluent students.<sup>9</sup>

## CURRENT FLORIDA LANDSCAPE: SUMMER LEARNING LOSS

The summer learning field has only recently emerged nationally as a distinct focus during the time children are out of school. Florida law currently includes limited provisions to address summer learning loss, and only limited funding is specifically designated to summer learning programs. The reading allocation of the Florida Education Finance Program (FEFP) (Florida Statutes Section 1008.25) is the only district source that includes funds to provide summer reading camps for third-grade students scoring Level 1 on the English Language Arts Florida Standards Assessment. The most significant source of state funding for summer programs comes from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center Grants, which communities apply for and receive through a competitive RFP process. The focus and manner of investment of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Center funds varies by the grantee, and summer programs are an allowable but not required investment area. There are also local funds invested in summer programs, but the scope and focus of these investments are only now being researched through a 2018 collaborative effort of the FGLRC and the Florida Afterschool Network.

The 2018 General Appropriations Act includes \$7,897,988 in general revenue funding for after school/youth programs that may include summer programs, including Big Brothers Big Sisters, Florida Alliance of Boys and Girls Clubs, and the YMCA State Alliance/YMCA Reads.

Additionally, there are investments in many counties in Florida in summer camps and summer learning programs. These investments also vary widely in focus, priority, and impact. Five local Grade Level Reading Campaigns highlighted promising practices related to summer learning loss. Delray Beach, Sarasota, Brevard, Broward, and Martin Counties all have summer programs that have shown increased gains during summer.

8 Johns Hopkins University: Why Summer Learning Deserves a Front-Row Seat in the Education Reform Arena. Available: <http://archive.education.jhu.edu/PD/newhorizons/Journals/spring2010/why-summer-learning/index.html>

9 Wallace Foundation. Making Summer Count: How Summer Programs Can Boost Children’s Learning. Available: <http://www.wallace-foundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Making-Summer-Count-How-Summer-Programs-Can-Boost-Childrens-Learning.pdf>

## STATEWIDE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: SUMMER LEARNING LOSS

Florida currently has minimal investment in summer learning programs. There is considerable opportunity for strengthening summer learning programs by not only increasing investment, but also conceptualizing policy to develop standards for summer learning programs, as well as raising awareness about the importance of summer learning, sharing promising Florida and national practices, and supporting the scaling of successful local programs. The recommendations outlined below include public awareness and peer-learning activities created through public-private partnerships, as well as new investments.

### CREATE TARGETED FUNDING FOR SUMMER READING PROGRAMS THAT UTILIZE FLORIDA AND NATIONAL PROMISING PRACTICES

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#### **Create competitive grant process for districts to implement summer reading camps for VPK-3rd grade, laying the foundation for a Summer Reading Camp Allocation statewide:**

With competing needs, many districts simply do not have funding to provide summer reading camps above and beyond those for struggling readers. By creating a specific allocation for summer reading camps for K-3rd graders, districts will be able to create or expand summer reading programs, close the experience gap, and intervene much earlier; in the lowest-performing schools this could also be offered to at-risk kindergarteners to intervene as early as possible. Collecting standardized data would enable measurement of impact, both with participating students as well as in comparison to peers who did not participate. The staff in the summer reading camps should have highly effective teachers and those with appropriate skills in reading instruction so they can implement targeted interventions to meet the needs of struggling readers. In the case where community-based organizations are implementing highly effective summer reading programs, school districts are encouraged to partner so effective programming can be implemented efficiently.

The goal of this funding and data would be to document what works and lay the foundation for a Summer Reading Allocation for all districts to create highly effective Summer Reading Camps for children in VPK-3rd grade.



#### **Design and support implementation of the Summer Reading Camp Allocation utilizing promising practices from Florida and nationally:**

Florida would benefit from additional targeted investment in summer reading camps. A Summer Reading Camp Application should be designed and implemented. This model should be informed by evidence-based intervention models to encourage effective design and use of funds for trainings, expansion, and access to quality summer enrichment programs across Florida.

## USE EXISTING FUNDS MORE EFFECTIVELY



### **Require minimum standards for publicly funded out-of-school time programs:**

Florida does invest some funds in out-of-school-time programs through direct allocations, 21st Century Community Learning Center grants, and funding through early learning coalitions to pay for school-age slots in afterschool and summer programs. There is tremendous variation in what is funded for out-of-school-time programs with no consistent quality standards nor a shared definition of what “enrichment” means. By requiring more consistent quality standards and elevating program expectations to include a focus on literacy, academic enrichment, as well as recreation, the quality of out-of-school-time experiences would be enhanced during both summer and before and after school, and Florida would experience greater impact from its investment.



# ATTENDANCE

## WHY ABSENTEEISM MATTERS TO GRADE LEVEL READING IN FLORIDA

Chronic absence, for any reason, means children do not have sufficient opportunity to learn and refine critical reading skills at each grade-level. Through regular attendance, children have the opportunity to build good habits like persistence and curiosity and be exposed to language-rich environments with intentional, facilitated learning. Regular attendance has an impact not only on those children who miss class, but those who do attend, as classroom instruction is slowed down and school climate is impacted when chronically absent children struggle to catch up.

Children with chronic absence (missing more than 10% of days of school) in Kindergarten score significantly lower than their peers on reading and other measures in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, with more absences equating to progressively worse achievement, even if attendance has improved by third grade.<sup>10</sup> Chronic absence can also alert communities to families and neighborhoods in need of further support, since poor school attendance can be an early warning sign of challenging social, economic, and health conditions. While the focus of this document is early childhood through third-grade absenteeism, attendance is critical to success in all grades. Absenteeism has a significant economic impact on schools and communities in the short and long term, negatively impacting achievement and ultimately high school graduation rates.

## WHAT WORKS: ABSENTEEISM REDUCTION PRACTICE

Attendance Works, the nation's leading organization that focuses on increasing attendance, identifies the following characteristics of successful initiatives to increase attendance: partnerships with community agencies that help parents carry out their responsibility to get children to school; make attendance a priority, set targets and monitor progress over time; identify and address factors contributing to chronic absence, especially from parent and student perspectives; clearly communicate expectations to parents; begin focusing on attendance early to create strong attendance habits, ideally in early childhood programs; combine universal strategies that create an engaged learning environment and build a culture of attendance with targeted interventions; and offer positive supports before punitive action.

The Florida Department of Education has identified successful absenteeism reduction practices of those districts that either 1) have low chronic absenteeism or 2) have reduced absenteeism dramatically by assessing the policies and practices that had the greatest impact on promoting attendance and reducing absenteeism. The Department identified successful practices to include: school-level interventions (connection to health and community resources, social workers to support families, poster contests, late buses) parent involvement (education about importance of attendance, home visits, attendance contracts with parents) utilization of student services personnel (home visits and targeted interventions by social workers to address challenges at home that may reduce attendance, school counselor participation in attendance meetings) and frequent examination of attendance data at school and district level (daily attendance review, regular district review, using data to flag and address attendance concerns early, and using data to problem solve and match appropriate interventions to each student).

10 Attendance Works. Available: <http://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/the-problem/>

## **CURRENT FLORIDA LANDSCAPE: ATTENDANCE ENFORCEMENT**

Florida law (Section 1003.26, Florida Statutes) reinforces the critical importance attendance and specifies steps for enforcement. Each school district superintendent is responsible for school attendance and must:

- Develop policies and procedures to ensure schools respond in a timely manner to each unexcused absence, or absence for which the reason is unknown.
- Contact the home for every unexcused absence or absence for which the reason is unknown, to obtain parent justification for the absence.
- Evaluate each justification and, based on district policy, determine whether the absence is excused or unexcused; if excused, allow the student to make up assigned work without academic penalty.
- Track excused and unexcused absences.
- Identify and refer students who may be developing a pattern of nonattendance to the school child study team for intervention services.
- Schedule a meeting with certain identified parents to discuss their child's attendance.
- Implement prevention and intervention strategies to address truancy and attendance issues as required for drivers' licenses and related requirements for habitual truants.
- Send a notice to the superintendent of schools and to the district home education contact regarding patterns of nonattendance for specific students.
- Refer habitual truancy cases to the case staffing committee and/or child-in-need-of-services provider for assistance.

Children's primary teacher must report to the school principal (or designee) when patterns of nonattendance are noted: at least five unexcused absences, or absences for which the reasons are unknown, within a calendar month; or 10 unexcused absences, or absences for which the reasons are unknown, within a 90-calendar-day period. In cases of a pattern of nonattendance, the principal refers the case to the school's child study team to determine if early patterns of truancy are developing. If a pattern of nonattendance is determined, whether the absences are excused or not, a meeting with the parent must be scheduled to identify potential remedies and the principal must notify the district school superintendent and the school district contact for home education programs.

If an initial meeting does not resolve the problem, the child study team must implement: frequent attempts at communication between the teacher and the family; evaluation for alternative education programs; attendance contracts; and facilitation of intervention services. The child study team may, but is not required to, implement other interventions, including referral to other agencies for family services or recommendation for filing a truancy petition pursuant. The parent may appeal to the district school board if he or she refuses to participate in the remedial strategies because he or she believes that those strategies are unnecessary or inappropriate.

## STATEWIDE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: STRENGTHEN ABSENTEEISM DATA, ANALYSIS, AND FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES



### **Improve data collection:**

While Florida schools and districts gather data on absenteeism and tardiness, there are not standard definitions for this missed time at school. Additionally, data on why children are absent or tardy is inconsistently documented. This makes it difficult to fully understand the challenges behind absenteeism in the early grades and how to best address them. By FDOE creating standard definitions of absenteeism and tardiness, Florida will have better quality data to consistently document and analyze absenteeism and tardiness, promoting more effective solutions.



### **Improve analysis capacity:**

Some schools and districts would benefit from technical assistance and guidance to complete more efficient and effective analysis of absenteeism data. This could include more focused analysis of absenteeism specifically to understand trends, as well as analyzing absenteeism data as part of a bigger picture that includes data on topics like school achievement, child-abuse reports, and other data points available in the UF data portal or other sources. Enhanced data-analysis capacity would help districts and schools run standard reports regularly and customize supports as needed to inform planning and targeted interventions. Analyzing improved data will help schools and districts better understand the dynamics behind absenteeism and more effectively target interventions to address the underlying reasons children are not in class.



### **Increase access to school support services:**

Children in kindergarten through third grade do not attend school for a reason, including chronic health problems, family challenges, poor school habits in the home, or other reasons not related to a child's motivation or ability. By increasing access to school support services, such as social workers, community partnerships to offer services such as telemedicine, coordination with local health resources, and better maximizing resources like libraries, schools can more effectively supporting families to increase attendance and reduce absenteeism.



### **Expand access to supports helping children who have been absent so they do not fall further behind:**

Children who have absenteeism challenges are often behind and struggle to catch up. Teachers, who already have many daily requirements, may not have the time to give each child the attention they need to catch up. Additional supports such as resources for tutoring, individualized academic support for children, or before/after school supports can complement teacher's and children's time in the classroom to help them catch up. It is essential that the before/after school supports be of high-quality with well prepared professionals and embedded literacy and reading curricula.



### **Build the capacity of teachers and schools to support children and families in K-3 with absenteeism issues:**

Teachers and administrators may benefit from additional sensitivity to issues related to poverty and other challenges that impact student attendance. Professional development and other supports can help schools better address the challenges faced by children with high needs. Additionally, it is often challenging for children to determine what is missing and how to catch up. Teachers need to provide consistent information to children so they understand what work needs to be made up and a reasonable timeline on which to complete this work, ideally with structured supports such as those outlined above.

# ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES

In addition to statewide policy and funding changes, there are related recommendations that can be implemented either in local communities or statewide to support birth to third-grade-level reading efforts. As a result of the statewide Grade-Level Reading Campaign and significant local leadership and funding in a growing number of communities across the state, there are increasing opportunities to implement these innovative ideas. The unique constellations of state or local leaders who can implement these ideas will vary to meet unique needs so they have purposefully been outlined in a general way. However, the Policy Thought Leaders felt strongly that there were actions in addition to policy and funding changes that were an essential element to long-term support and change that should be represented in their recommendations.

## CREATE PUBLIC AWARENESS AND ENGAGEMENT

### **Create public engagement around the importance of language and literacy development and grade-level reading starting from birth through third grade:**

There are many stakeholders who would like to be engaged in supporting children reading at grade-level but are not sure how. By increasing public awareness and engagement, families, schools, community-based organizations, businesses, and other stakeholders can take action to help promote children's reading skills. Through public-private partnerships, statewide and local partners should explore various options. These could include strategies such as: engaging businesses and other stakeholders to make appropriate books available to children so they have books in their homes and can read outside of school, which has proven an efficient strategy to engage diverse private sector partners in grade-level reading conversations; implementing campaigns like the Talk With Me Baby public engagement strategy ([www.talkwithmebaby.org](http://www.talkwithmebaby.org)) that has proven to be highly successful in Georgia; creation of Florida-specific summer learning and Grade-Level Reading communications resources similar to those used in other states<sup>11</sup>; implementing targeted consumer education resources to help families select high-quality early learning programs; working with the Florida Afterschool Network (FAN) to expand out-of-school-time learning experiences; increasing awareness of the importance of attendance, starting in preschool; and expanding access to the Vroom resources for families ([www.vroom.org](http://www.vroom.org)), which are part of a public engagement campaign to make families and the public more knowledgeable about the early years. The impact of initial implementation using private funds should be measured to inform scaling statewide.

### **Work with the Florida Chamber Foundation to create regional strategic engagement opportunities:**

Business leaders are in a unique position to increase public awareness of the importance of grade-level reading and the need to strengthen public policy related to early learning, summer learning loss, and absenteeism. Members of the Florida Chamber's Business Alliance for Early Learning will work with community leaders to implement focused outreach to legislative leadership. This approach will maximize advocacy efforts given the incredible influence of business leaders as advocates for children's development.

<sup>11</sup> Examples include: animated Read to Succeed [video](#) featured on South Carolina's newly launched literacy website, [SCReads.org](http://SCReads.org), and Stand for Children, Colorado's READ Act [video](#) on their [Read Now Colorado](http://readnowcolorado.org/) website (<http://readnowcolorado.org/>).

**Increase knowledge among key leaders on effective summer learning programs:**

The FGLRC will share evidence-based intervention models with communities, policymakers, and funders to encourage support of professional development, expansion, and access to quality early learning, summer enrichment, and absenteeism solutions throughout Florida.

**LEVERAGE OPPORTUNITIES AND DOLLARS TO FOCUS IMPACT**

**To expand summer learning programs, partner with non-education-related programs to serve children’s complex needs:**

Explore and create high leverage partnerships with existing funding sources, such as libraries and federally funded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) summer food programs, as a means of leveraging opportunities and funding to focus impact on targeted, low-income, vulnerable populations.

**LEARN FROM AND EXPAND SUCCESSFUL LOCAL PRACTICES**

**Share promising practices and support peer learning:**

The FGLRC will work with community partners in identified regions and coordinate peer-learning opportunities, technical assistance supports, and replication of best practices within existing campaign communities.

**Document successful local practices so they can be expanded:**

As the FGLRC is implemented and local efforts become more focused on outcomes, local communities will increasingly serve as innovation leaders. The FGLRC will document successful local innovations in early learning, summer learning loss, and absenteeism and develop recommendations for scaling to other communities and/or statewide.

**Create local grade-level reading campaigns that benefit from this knowledge in targeted communities:**

The FGLRC will cultivate new local campaigns in key regions and counties of poverty with lower literacy scores. These local campaigns will benefit from the knowledge and experience of their peers and best practices, positioning them to effectively design and implement early learning, absenteeism prevention, and summer learning programs to promote reading at grade-level by third grade.



# **APPENDIX A**

## **POLICY THOUGHT LEADERS**

Senior leaders from the following organizations were actively involved in the development of this report, guiding the creation of the recommendations.

**Association of Early Learning Coalitions**

**Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy**

**Children’s Movement of Florida**

**Consortium of Florida Education Foundations**

**Florida Chamber Foundation**

**Florida Children’s Council**

**Florida Department of Education**

**Florida Department of Health**

**Florida Education Foundation**

**Florida Office of Early Learning**

**Foundation for Excellence in Education**

**Helios Education Foundation**

**Just Read Florida! Florida Department of Education**

**Nemours BrightStart!**

**The Patterson Foundation**

**United Way of Florida**

**University of Florida**

