



**ANNUAL REPORT
2023-2024**

**"CHILDREN ARE THE
WORLD'S MOST VALUABLE
RESOURCE AND ITS BEST
HOPE FOR THE FUTURE."**

—JOHN F. KENNEDY

MESSAGE FROM THE BOARD CHAIR



There is no debate concerning the extraordinary value of high-quality early learning experiences. That is long settled. But the challenge is how do we improve systems to prepare children for success in kindergarten and beyond?

The Florida Chamber Foundation has created a lofty goal of having every child kindergarten-ready by 2030. They know this will help children thrive in school and later in life while boosting our economy, but there is work to do.

Fortunately, the Florida Chamber Foundation looks to the expertise of the Children's Forum because they build specialized systems that will lead to positive outcomes for children. This year, the Forum received \$17 million in funding from the Florida legislature for the respected TEACH scholarship program that provides scholarships and comprehensive professional development supports for the next generation of early learning educators. In addition, the legislature sustained \$4.5 million for Help Me Grow® Florida, a Forum-administered program that provides free expert knowledge on child development and ensures children and families are connected to needed community-based services and supports. Starting early really helps.

As part of the Forum's work to support early learning educators in their professional development endeavors, the Forum administers programs such as INCENTIVE\$ Florida that provides financial stipends based on higher education achievements and the educator's commitment to their employer. This additional funding helps educators move toward fair compensation. More counties are recognizing the value of stabilizing this critical workforce through better pay.

The Forum is honored to be a trusted voice that provides guidance and feedback on early learning initiatives to Florida's policy makers. The 2024 legislative session had more early learning bills than ever. Some highlights include the "smoothing out" of fiscal cliffs in School Readiness funding to allow families to continue receiving subsidies as their incomes grow. In addition, a new Summer Bridge program will now be extended for kids who fall below the 10th percentile on final assessments. This program offers additional resources for children prior to entering kindergarten. Furthermore, early learning tax credits were established for employers who help fund on-site childcare or provide financial assistance for families.

The Children's Forum is grateful to be part of the innovative efforts underway with the legislature and the Department of Education. We look forward to furthering this partnership and advancing systems that will improve early learning programs. Together, let's meet that goal of 100% kindergarten readiness by 2030!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "B. Buesing".

Bob Buesing, J.D.
Board Chair

“ *In times of stress, the best thing we can do for each other is to listen with our ears and our hearts and to be assured that our questions are just as important as our answers.* ”

—Fred Rogers

PROGRAMS OF THE CHILDREN'S FORUM



The TEACH Early Childhood® Scholarship Program is a national, evidence-based strategy that makes higher education more attainable for early learning and family child care educators through the program's shared cost approach. TEACH is a statewide program, licensed by Early Years (formerly Child Care Services Association) and funded by the Florida Department of Education-Division of Early Learning. Administrated by the Children's Forum, TEACH provides scholarships and comprehensive supports for scholars working toward state and national credentials, college credits and certificates, or degrees in early childhood education and related fields.

TEACH creates a three-way partnership in which the early learning educator (scholar), their employer (sponsor), and the TEACH program (scholarship) share the costs for tuition, books, and other school related expenses. This also includes paid release time that scholars may use for their studies. Additionally, scholars earn a raise or bonus after the successful completion of an educational year and agree to work for at least six months with their employer.

Impact and Outcomes:

Educated Workforce:

22,370

credit hours taken

3.41%

average scholar GPA

Economic Viability:

10.65%

average increase in earnings among scholars

Reduced Turnover:

6.2%

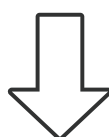
turnover rate vs. national rate of 30-40%



INCENTIVE\$ Florida, an affiliate of the Child Care WAGE\$® Program, is a proven and effective strategy to increase the education, compensation, and stability of Florida's early learning workforce. INCENTIVE\$ awards annual stipends of up to \$5,000 to early learning and family child care educators, directors, and owners for their higher education achievements and commitment to their programs. INCENTIVE\$ complements local quality initiatives, helps provide equitable access to resources, and awards much needed financial supports to participating educators.

INCENTIVE\$ is licensed by Early Years of Chapel Hill, NC and administered by the Children's Forum under a contract with local early learning coalitions, children's services councils, and private contributors. Through these partnerships, this program supports professional growth, higher education, and career advancement of eligible educators, improving quality across their early learning programs and family child care homes.

Impact and Outcomes:



average turnover rate for INCENTIVE\$ participants

13%

compared to 30-40% in the ECE field nationally



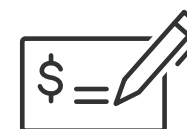
\$1,280

average annual stipend for INCENTIVE\$ participants



867

child care programs participated in INCENTIVE\$



2,893

participants served including lead and assistant teachers, directors, and family child care educators.

PROGRAMS OF THE CHILDREN'S FORUM



Help Me Grow® Florida (HMGF) promotes the healthy development of all children by providing access to free developmental and behavioral screenings and connecting families to the resources they need to succeed. By building cross-sector collaboration among community agencies, child healthcare professionals, and early learning educators, HMGF addresses the critical importance of early detection and intervention.

HMGF provides a centralized access point that supports families through developmental monitoring, parenting information, and available community resources. Since HMGF care coordinators continue to follow-up with families, HMGF can ensure that the needs of the family have been met.

Impact and Outcomes:



9,221

developmental and behavioral screenings completed



94%

of children were successfully connected to at least one service



4

average number of care coordination follow ups per family



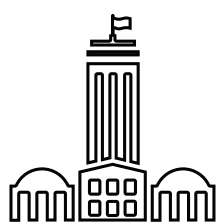
126

community-based screening events to bring our services to families and community partners



Children's Week Florida™ is the largest event held in the state that celebrates and honors its commitment to young children, teens, and advocates. As the Organizing Partner of this annual initiative, the Forum has taken the lead in helping to bring thousands of attendees, including legislators, public officials, nonprofit organizations, business leaders, child and teen advocates, teachers, and students to the State Capitol each year during the legislative session. Together with our generous partners, we speak out as *One Voice* in support of children and families to deliver the message that every child should be healthy, ready to learn, and able to achieve their full potential.

Impact and Outcomes:



3,000

young children, parents, students, and teachers attended Children's Day at the Capitol and Storybook Village events



650

guests attended the Advocacy Dinner and Awards Ceremony. Dr. Phyllis Kalifeh received the Chiles Advocate Award, Jim Haj was the recipient of the inaugural Impact Advocate Award, and Maurits Acosta was the winner of the Youth Advocate Award



21,700

pieces of hand artwork were collected for the Celebration of the Hands display inside the Capitol Rotunda

PROGRAMS OF THE CHILDREN'S FORUM

FORUM MEMBERSHIP PROGRAM

The Children's Forum provides affordable and valuable membership opportunities for early learning educators, directors, FCCH and out of school time educators, as well as other professionals in the field. Members become part of a community that is committed to supporting investments in early learning initiatives.

In addition to a variety of benefits, a Children's Forum membership:

- ★ Provides opportunities for early learning educators to build their skills and expand their knowledge to make a difference in the early learning field
- ★ Satisfies membership requirements for credential renewals such as a National CDA or other Florida Staff Credentials
- ★ Assists program directors with fulfilling their Professional Contribution Requirement (PCR) through participation in a statewide workforce study

Impact and Outcomes:



2,500

early learning educators and other professionals became a member of the Children's Forum or renewed their existing membership

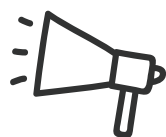
CHILD CARE EVALUATION SERVICES

The Child Care Evaluation Services Department provides accreditation management and educational support services for the Florida Department of Education - Division of Early Learning and Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF), Office of Licensing.

These services include:

- ★ Evaluating applications from prospective Florida Child Care Professional Credential (FCCPC) training institutions to determine their eligibility to offer the FCCPC, and monitoring the status of all FCCPC training programs in the state
- ★ Evaluating applications from prospective and renewing accrediting associations to determine their eligibility for designation as Gold Seal Quality Care Accrediting Associations
- ★ Assisting owners/operators of early care and education (ECE) programs in Florida with questions about becoming a Gold Seal Quality Care designated program, assisting current Gold Seal programs with inquiries about their status, and maintaining the state database of early care and education programs that have attained Gold Seal status
- ★ Designing and producing public awareness documents for dissemination
- ★ Coordinating the annual DCF Statewide Child Care Training Meeting and Leadership Meeting

Impact and Outcomes:



8

newsletters and brochures for DCF were produced



1,838

early childhood and family child care home programs maintained Gold Seal designation

PROGRAMS OF THE CHILDREN'S FORUM



The Children's Forum maintains a Professional Development Registry that provides a central database to record the workforce qualifications of early learning educators in Florida. These qualifications include employment history, compensation, benefits, credentials earned, and completed college courses/training activities. The Professional Development Registry is also used to make policy-informed decisions to improve the quality of early learning programs.

Impact and Outcomes:

16,004

active Professional Development
Registry participants in Florida

ASSESSMENT AND COACHING SERVICES UNIT

The Children's Forum holds a contract with the Florida Division of Early Learning in each county across the state to provide Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS®) observation and coaching services. The Assessment and Coaching Services Unit (ACSU) offers CLASS® services to early learning coalitions, Head Start agencies, and other entities in every region to help them meet state and federal program assessment requirements and improve early childhood classroom practices. The Forum also partners with LENA® to coach early learning providers for participating Early Learning Coalitions. The LENA® system provides a research-based approach to enhance children's language and social-emotional development while positively impacting classroom quality and children's brain development and school readiness.

Impact and Outcomes:

85

certified CLASS® assessors
and coaches were available
to provide services

1,670

early learning programs
received ACSU services

21

agencies received
ACSU services

4,447

assessments were
conducted

EARLY LEARNING CAREER CENTER

Operated by the Children's Forum and funded by The Children's Trust (TCT), the Early Learning Career Center (ELCC) offers professional development services to all early learning programs and educators in Miami-Dade County. The ELCC, which is part of the Miami-Dade Early Learning Quality Improvement System (QIS), provides career advising and TCT Educator Scholarships in support of a diverse workforce. The ELCC also connects early childhood educators in Miami-Dade to other professional development opportunities such as the scholarships and salary supports funded by TCT.

Impact and Outcomes:

84%

of educators received
TCT scholarships and/or
salary supports

78%

of educators obtained
a credential since
entering the QIS

36%

of educators
speak more than
one language

\$9,443

average salary increase of
educators who earn degrees
and credentials and
speak English fluently

NEWSWORTHY NOTES



Forum to Build Next Generation of Early Learning Advocates through FECAF Program

After an incredibly successful first year, the Children's Forum is excited to host its second cohort of the Florida Early Childhood Advocacy Fellowship (FECAF) Program.

Through FECAF, early learning advocates gain a detailed understanding of Florida's early childhood systems and practical ways to navigate the legislative process. This year's cohort consists of 17 Advocacy Fellows who offer a variety of distinctive experiences in the early learning field from all across the state of Florida.

By the end of the program, Advocacy Fellows will be equipped and empowered to serve as change agents in local, state, and national conversations around issues of early childhood and the early learning workforce. Participants will have the chance to watch the legislative process first-hand while offering opportunities to build relationships and connect with legislators and local leaders.

Visit: flchild.com/advocacy-fellowship to learn more about FECAF.



Forum Celebrates New Office Location and 35 Years of Service

The Children's Forum hosted an open house to celebrate the grand opening of their new location and 35 years of providing services and support to Florida's educators, children, and families. We are incredibly grateful for the support of our partners, and friends, and family over the years.



With headquarters in Tallahassee, the Children's Forum connects early learning educators, both within and beyond the classroom, to services that promote positive experiences and outcomes for young children in school and life. We answer the call to fill needs in the early learning system by bringing expertise across programs, research, and policy.

Cheers to the future and many more years of service to the early learning community!



New Forum Program to Offer Free National CDA Training and Coaching

The Children's Forum has good news for early learning educators SEECing their National Child Development Associate® (CDA) credential! Our new program, SEEC (Supported. Empowered. Equipped. Credentialed.), offers educators free training and supports to obtain their National CDA.

The benefits of SEEC include:

- ★ Free training—120 hours of online training and resources from Teaching Strategies®.
- ★ Free coaching—access to your own personal CDA coach and counselor.
- ★ Training and coaching available in English and Spanish.
- ★ Access to a TEACH scholarship to cover the CDA assessment fee and award a completion bonus.



Help Me Grow Expands Services Throughout Florida

We are excited to announce that Help Me Grow® Florida (HMGF) is expanding its services across the state! The Early Learning Coalition of Broward County and the Early Learning Coalition of Pinellas County have taken the charge in serving families in their communities.

Additionally, HMG Alachua at Partnership for Strong Families, funded by the Children's Trust of Alachua County, became the most recent HMGF affiliate.

We look forward to enhancing support for young children and their families across Broward, Pinellas, and Alachua counties! HMGF provides free expert knowledge on child development and ensures children and families are connected to needed community-based services and supports. They are based in 43 counties across Florida and are constantly growing. Together, they are working to help all children thrive.

CHILDREN'S FORUM BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Forum board members are volunteers who contribute their time and expertise to provide oversight and guidance on behalf of the Forum's mission. We are proud of their dedication to our work and grateful for their generous service.

Robert H. Buesing, J.D.
Retired Executive
Board Chair
Tampa, FL

Claudia Davant
Adams St. Advocates
Tallahassee, FL

Gege Kreischer
Consultant
Tampa, FL

Larry Pintacuda
Retired Executive
Board Secretary
Tallahassee, FL

Kyle Baltuch
Florida Chamber of Commerce Foundation
Tallahassee, FL

Allison Davis
WTAS, LLC
Board Treasurer
West Palm Beach, FL

Eddie Gonzalez Loumiet
Ruvos
Tallahassee, FL

Shawna Pointville
EXCEL Kids Academy
Miami, FL

Christopher J. Card, Ph.D.
Retired Executive
Tampa, FL

Rebecca Falcon Kapusta
Health Connect America
Odessa, FL

Diana Ragbeer Murray
Retired Executive
North Bay Village, FL

Christian Winterbottom, Ph.D.
University of North Florida
Jacksonville, FL



"The highest rate of return in early childhood development comes from investing as early as possible, from birth to age five, in disadvantaged families. The earlier the investment, the greater the return."

—Nobel laureate economist
James Heckman

FINANCIAL REPORT

2023-2024	Expenditures
TEACH Early Childhood® Scholarship Program	\$11,333,347
Help Me Grow® Florida	\$3,850,371
Early Learning Career Center/Professional Development Registries	\$1,178,996
INCENTIVE\$ Florida	\$5,516,383
Assessment and Coaching Services Unit	\$2,160,108
Child Care Evaluation Services	\$217,551
Other	\$1,019,914
TOTAL	\$25,276,669

CLIENTS, PARTNERS, & FUNDERS

- 2-1-1 Big Bend, Inc.
- 2-1-1 Brevard, Inc.
- 2-1-1 Palm Beach/Treasure Coast
- 2-1-1 Tampa Bay Cares, Inc.
- Age of Learning
- AmeriHealth® Caritas
- Arkansas Early Childhood Association
- Association of Early Learning Coalitions
- Bainum Family Foundation
- CareSource®
- CDC's "Learn the Signs. Act Early."
- Children's Home Society of Suncoast Region
- Children's Home Society of the Tallahassee/Gainesville Region
- Children's Medical Services Health Plan
- Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County
- Early Childhood Council of Hillsborough County, Inc.
- Economic Opportunities Council of Indian River County
- ELC of Alachua County
- ELC of Brevard County
- ELC of Broward County
- ELC of Duval
- ELC of Escambia County
- ELC of Flagler and Volusia Counties
- ELC of Florida's Gateway
- ELC of Florida's Heartland
- ELC of Hillsborough County
- ELC of Indian River, Martin and Okeechobee Counties (IRMO)
- ELC of Lake County
- ELC of Marion County
- ELC of Miami Dade and Monroe
- ELC of Northwest Florida
- ELC of Orange County
- ELC of Osceola County
- ELC of Pinellas County
- ELC of Polk County
- ELC of Sarasota County
- ELC of Seminole
- ELC of Southwest Florida
- ELC of the Emerald Coast
- ELC of the Nature Coast
- Episcopal Children's Services
- Family Initiative
- Florida After School, Inc.
- Florida Association for the Education of Young Children (FLAEYC)
- Florida Association of Healthy Start Coalitions
- Florida Department of Children and Families
- Florida Family Child Care Home Association
- Florida Department of Education - Division of Early Learning
- Florida Head Start Association
- Florida Institute for Child Welfare
- Florida KidCare
- Florida Lottery
- Gardner Media
- Heart of Florida United Way
- HMG Alachua at Partnership for Strong Families
- Humana Healthy Horizons® in Florida
- ImagineCare
- Iowa Association for the Education of Young Children
- Liberty Dental Plan®
- MarcoPolo Learning
- No Kid Hungry®
- Reach Out and Read Florida
- Redlands Christian Migrant Association (RCMA)
- Simply Healthcare Plans
- Sunshine Health
- Teaching Strategies
- The Arc Gateway
- The Children's Trust
- The Giving Closet Project
- Torsh
- United Healthcare
- United Way of Florida
- United Way of Lee County
- University of Florida - Lastinger Center for Learning

CHILDREN'S FORUM STAFF

Erin Smeltzer, M.S., *President and CEO*

Lisa Adams***
Gabriela Agosto
Nikita Allen**
Kim Anderson
Dedra Ash
Aly Avila
Viviana Avila***
Christina Bassett
Lianne Betancourt, M.S.
Denise Bishop, Ed.D.*
Felicia Bonner**
Flor Brito***
Bailey Bradner
Terri Brusca
Laura Cain, M.Ed.***
Jill Calhoun*
Lisa Carson
Rhiannon Castillo
Melissa Castro**
Jessica Cherry
Cynthia Christie
Melissa Clements, Ph.D.**
McKenzie Coker
Trace Cooper
Sonia Corbo D'Amico, M.S.***
José Cruz-Torres
Matt Damron
Elisabeth Dozier
Laure Fiotte
Tami Fletcher*
Kelly Fountain***
Emily Fulkerson***
Wioleta Gaddy, M.S.

Yolanda Gaston-Charles
Jacqueline Gilliam
Taylor Googe
Martha Grant*
Paula Grant**
Tammy Greer
Xandria Griffin
Colleen Groot
Catherine Hall, J.D.
Lolita Hawkins-Blacks*
Jinan Higginbotham**
Jazlyn Horton
Ashley Houk
Brian Hughes
Jenna Jacobsen-Brown***
Liz Jimenez
April Kahlan
Tanya Keech
Bill Kirchhoff, M.B.A.***
Kayla Kitchens
Roman Komirniy
Angeline Kreucher*
Kali Lachance
Courtney Lee*
Jessica Long***
Nydia Martinez
Amy Maters
Dawnielle McNabb
Kathleen Moffett***
Brenda Miller
Stephanie Miller
Liliana Murphy
Marilyn Nations

Nayree Navarro***
Penney Norton
Shelby Norwood
Rayvonn O'Connor
Evelinda Perez
Qiana Peters, M.P.A.***
Erika Pope
Elizabeth Randall, M.Ed.*
David Register
Laura Richardson, M.F.A.*
Lisa Roberts**
Paul Robinson**
Brenda Romuald*
Jennifer Sadberry
April Scarborough
Leidy Sevilla*
Alexis Smith
Lindsey Smith
Lori Stegmeyer***
Kathryn Sumner
Evelyn Thomas
Dana Trabulsy
Ellen Waters
Doretta Williams
Erika Williams***
Heather Wilson***
Lauren Wofford
Tamela Young***

Years of Service

* 5-9 Years
** 10-14 Years
*** 15 Years or More