



F A L L N E W S L E T T E R

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A Message From Our CEO



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Dear Providers, Families, and Community Partners,

As we settle into the rhythm of fall, I want to take a moment to reflect on all we've accomplished together—and express my deepest gratitude for your continued partnership in this important work.

Over the past few months, the Early Learning Coalition of Southwest Florida has been actively engaging with families and community stakeholders across our four-county region. Whether at literacy festivals, back-to-school outreach events, or professional development workshops, we've witnessed firsthand the incredible dedication of our providers and the eagerness of families to access high-quality early learning opportunities. Your efforts to create nurturing, safe, and enriching environments are the reason children across Southwest Florida are thriving.

This season also reminds us of the importance of planning ahead. Our team remains focused on ensuring families continue to have access to School Readiness and VPK services, and that providers are equipped with the resources, training, and technical assistance needed to succeed. As state and federal conversations about funding and eligibility continue, we are actively advocating for our region's needs, fighting for fair, level funding and expanded family eligibility so more children can benefit from early learning.

This fall also marks a major milestone: the 20th Anniversary of Florida's Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) Education Program. Since 2005, VPK has served more than 3.1 million children statewide, offering a critical jumpstart to kindergarten and lifelong learning. We're proud of the role our providers and educators have played in bringing this program to life in Southwest Florida. Together, we celebrate two decades of impact, and we look forward to continuing this legacy of access and opportunity.

We are also looking ahead with excitement to new workforce supports and quality initiatives launching this winter, and we'll be sharing more in the weeks to come.

Thank you for being champions for young children. Whether you're in the classroom, on a board, behind the scenes, or supporting this work in other ways—your impact is powerful, and it matters every single day.

Dr. Melanie Stefanowicz
Chief Executive Officer
Early Learning Coalition of Southwest Florida



Happy Birthday VPK!

The 2025-2026 school year marks the 20th anniversary of Florida's Voluntary Prekindergarten Program (VPK). This program provides free prekindergarten hours for every Florida 4-year-old, regardless of income.

The program's goal, when it began 20 years ago, was to give children a strong start to their educational journey. According to the Florida Department of Education, more than 3.1 million children have participated in this program since it began.

The Division of Early Learning (DEL) partners with 30 early learning coalitions and Redlands Christian Migrant Association to deliver the VPK Program.

Listen to these preschool teachers and administrators as they talk about the value of early education and how our Early Learning Coalition benefits their mission.



[Kamisha Thomas](#), Owner,
First Choice Early Learning,
Family Child Care Home



[Amy Adame](#), Director Van
Otterloo Family Campus for
Learning, Guadalupe
Center



[Candace Perez](#), VPK
teacher, Fun Time Early
Childhood Academy

In Our Community

Many thanks to the Fort Myers chapter of the [Pi Beta Phi Alumnae Club](#) as they shared books and their time at the Creative Coast Preschool in Bokeelia, FL in September. The Cat in the Hat came to visit. Children participated in story time and went home with a goodie bag- including a book! Through the years these members have contributed hundreds of books to preschools in the area to advance the cause of early literacy.



The Cat in the Hat reads an engaging Dr. Seuss story. Audience participation is encouraged!



Members of the Pi Beta Phi Alumnae Club made sure every child went home with a book, and other goodies.

Remembering Hurricane Ian

September 23, 2022 [Hurricane Ian](#) slammed the eastern coast of Florida as a Category 4 hurricane - initially impacting Fort Myers, Sanibel Island, and Pine Island. In late September, 2025, our coalition joined others in remembering the storm, its aftermath, and the ongoing recovery efforts. The event was organized by [Catholic Charities](#) of the Diocese of Venice and was held at the [Collaboratory](#) in Fort Myers.



Early Learning Coalition staff standing by to answer your questions!



We're here to help! Many vendors showcased how their agencies can help during a disaster - and after.

Trunk-or-Treat!

Our ELC was excited to participate in the annual [Trunk or Treat](#) event hosted by The [STARS Complex](#) on Wednesday, October 29th. Staff warmly welcomed children with a beautifully decorated car trunk and distributed flyers, candy, and books.

The event had an impressive turnout, with 253 families and 463 children visiting the booths. 318 books were given out to children during this event.



Book Donation

Our ELC has received a donation of **8,800 new bilingual books** from [**Believe N Books**](#). These books will be distributed to families visiting our lobby, and be shared at our outreach events.

Our ELC shares Believe N Books mission of early literacy. Studies show that books in the home increases reading scores in classrooms!



Literacy in the Classroom

Say hello to our coalition's newest literacy outreach program. ***Literacy in the Classroom*** will focus on preparation, reading techniques, and supplemental activities in preschool classrooms of 20 children or fewer.

The coalition will tap local volunteers, and other agencies to bring the magic of storytelling to classrooms of the contracted centers in the four counties we serve. Books will be donated to class libraries, and each child will go home with a book during these reading events. More to come!

Always Learning!

Our Early Learning Coalition spearheads a number of teacher trainings throughout the year. It's just one way we fulfill our mission of bringing positive classroom interactions to life.

Recently, toddler and preschool teachers benefited from Behavior Management Training facilitated by our Early Childhood Specialists.

Teachers learned how to recognize a wide range of developmentally appropriate and challenging behaviors that young children may display as they learn social and emotional skills. Recognizing these behaviors helps teachers create positive and supportive learning environments in the classroom.



Photo (above): Teachers in a group activity sort and discuss early childhood behaviors as they relate to child development. Photo taken at Right Steps Academy in Fort Myers.



Family Engagement Month

November is **Family Engagement Month!** It's a time to celebrate and strengthen family bonds through activities like sharing stories, discussions, and shared projects.

From reading and writing to family game night and kooky dance parties - it's easy to change things up and re-connect.

Preschool Class Activities

"Hall"-o-ween at the ELC

Our ELC celebrated Halloween Trick or Treat for all the families that visited our lobbies on October 30. Children were led down "spooky hallways" to find hidden treats to take home and enjoy.

Staff enjoyed dressing up in 'not-so-scary' costumes and handing out sweets along the way.



Honors

We are so proud of our CEO, **Dr. Melanie Stefanowicz**, who was recently recognized as one of the top 30 nonprofit CEOs in SWFL by the [Community Foundation](#) of Cape Coral. She champions the importance of early education throughout the four counties served by the Early Learning Coalition of SWFL daily. We admire her leadership and her voice in the community.

Parents' Pages

Need Thanksgiving activities for young children? That, and much more are included in the Florida Division of Early Learnings' Parents' Pages. [READ](#)



GET HELP FOR CHILD CARE COSTS.

We're ready to help eligible families pay for child care!
Find out if your family qualifies for the
School Readiness Program.



Call or Visit: www.elcofsfwfl.org | 239-935-6100

School Readiness

Florida's School Readiness Programs can help ease the burden of child care costs for families that qualify.

The Early Learning Coalition of SWFL can assist in submitting your application through the Florida Early Learning [Family Portal](#).

Make an appointment, or stop by our offices to see if your family can take advantage of this program.

[Information about School Readiness](#)



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