



SUMMER NEWSLETTER

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A Message From Our CEO



Melanie M. Stefanowicz, Ed.D.
CEO, Early Learning Coalition of SWFL

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As summer ends and a new school year begins, I want to take a moment to reconnect and reflect on the important work happening across Southwest Florida to support children and families during the early years. While many children are returning to classrooms, learning never really paused across our early learning system. Throughout the summer, children continued learning and growing in School Readiness programs across our region, supported by educators and families who make that progress possible. This season brings renewed energy and opportunity as children return to classrooms, educators welcome new students, and families prepare for another year of learning and growth. It is also an opportunity to celebrate the progress we have made together and look ahead to the work that will continue to strengthen early learning throughout our region.

As children return to school and early learning programs across our region, our Program Services team has worked diligently to ensure families have access to services when they need them most. Over the past year, the department successfully eliminated the large School Readiness waitlist and returned processing times to more typical levels. Staff are also processing VPK applications and enrollments efficiently, helping families access services quickly during one of the busiest periods of the year.

Looking ahead, we remain focused on maximizing opportunities for eligible children to access services. As we prepare for statewide allocation reviews this fall, Program Services staff are working to identify and enroll as many qualifying School Readiness children as possible. Efforts include outreach to families whose

younger children may be eligible for services, helping ensure that more children can benefit from early learning opportunities.

Supporting educators remains a critical part of our mission. During the last fiscal year, the Early Childhood Education Department delivered 57 training and professional development opportunities, reaching more than 1,500 educators across our four-county service area. These learning experiences help strengthen classroom quality and support educators as they continue to build nurturing, engaging environments for young children.

The department has also begun implementing an updated tool for Pre-K and VPK CLASS assessments. To support a smooth transition, staff are offering learning sessions for preschool educators, directors, and owners that highlight the key differences between the previous and updated versions of the assessment tool. These efforts help ensure that programs remain well-prepared and focused on delivering high-quality early learning experiences.

In the coming weeks, we are excited to launch **THRIVE**, a new initiative designed to strengthen connections between early learning, health, and education systems across Southwest Florida. Led by the Early Learning Coalition in partnership with the Health Planning Council of Southwest Florida, Collier County Public Schools, and the School District of Lee County, Thrive represents a significant step forward in how we support young children and their families.

Through a coordinated network of partners and services, THRIVE will connect developmental screening, classroom-based supports, comprehensive evaluation, early intervention, exceptional student education, and mental health resources into a seamless system of care. By bringing these services together, we can help identify needs earlier, improve access to support, and ensure families receive guidance every step of the way.

Initially focused on children attending ELC-contracted School Readiness sites in Lee and Collier counties, THRIVE reflects our shared commitment to helping every child reach their full potential. We look forward to introducing this exciting initiative and working alongside families, educators, healthcare professionals, and community partners to create stronger pathways for success during a child's most important years of development.

Thank you for your continued partnership and commitment to this important work. Together, we can make this school year one filled with learning, growth, and opportunity for every child we serve.

With appreciation,

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



Together We Can Build A Brighter Tomorrow

June 6, 2026: The theme said it all. It takes a united effort to achieve our goals. **The 3rd Annual Directors' Conference** was well attended and the vendor's tables were engaging and fun!



(above top) Dr. Melanie Stefanowicz, CEO Early Learning Coalition of SWFL welcomes attendees.
(above) Pre- session excitement!

Keynote speaker **Rachel Giannini** connected with the audience. She's an experienced early child educator with a knack for engaging both children and adults alike! She also hosted two breakout sessions.

Thanks to staff who made the day's events run smoothly and for leading some of the breakout sessions. We also thank our excellent hosts at the Crown Plaza Fort Myers Gulf Coast - breakfast and lunch were the best!

Please Welcome

Electa Waddell joins our staff as the Chief of Communications & Outreach.

Electa brings more than 15 years of executive leadership experience in strategic communications, community engagement, public relations, fundraising, and nonprofit leadership.

Throughout her career, she has built strong partnerships, led communications strategies, and helped organizations strengthen relationships with the communities they serve.

Welcome Electa!



Electa Waddell, Chief of Communications & Outreach



Guiding families to quality childcare facilities, striving for affordability, and offering continuing education and training for teachers. This is our goal: to provide a thriving early education experience for all.

2025 - 2026 Recap

Another successful fiscal year is in the books! As we begin FY2026-27 we take a glance back at how we have helped children and families in our community.

Program Services: Specialists have processed **15,111 School Readiness** applications, impacting **18,631 children** since July 1, 2025!

Quality Department: Preschool Providers were offered **57 trainings** and professional development opportunities with **1,520 participants** served- strengthening the early childhood workforce across Lee, Collier, Glades and Hendry counties.

In Our Community

It's always good to get out and meet the folks that make our community great!



It's never too early! Coalition members spoke with expectant mothers at the Lee County **VA Maternity Care Coordination** Baby Shower.



At the Children's House Learning Center, Naples: Practice makes perfect! Early Childhood Specialist Andreina presents teacher Sarah Macedo with a certificate, computer tablet, and other tools for her classroom. The award comes following the successful use of **MarcoPolo Learning** tools in her classroom.



Coalition members spoke with families attending the Stop the Violence/**End of School Block Party** in Fort Myers in conjunction with Lee Health. Here's to a productive summer!



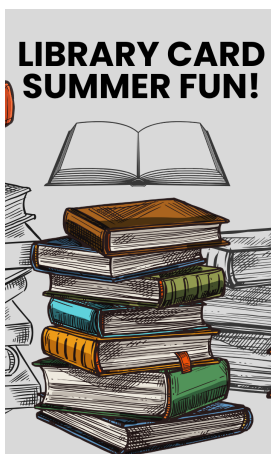
Get more tips in this entertaining **video interview** featuring Early Learning Coalition of SWFL CEO, Dr. Melanie Stefanowicz.

Avoid Summer Brain Drain

Learning loss during the summer out-of-school months is a real thing!

Keep those reading and math gains alive by encouraging your child to read anything during the summer months. And get in the habit of using math to solve everyday problems.

Summer may also be a good opportunity to try something new- like music, creative writing or learning about history in combination with a summer trip.



Library Resources

A library card is one of the best FREE investments your family can make.

Libraries offer families free access to books, storytimes, educational programs, technology, and community resources that support children's learning, literacy, and development from birth and beyond!.

Get yours today:

Lee County Library System
Collier County Public Library
Hendry County Library
Glades County Library

New Commissioner

The State Board of Education (SBOE) unanimously voted to appoint Dr. Henry Mack to serve as Florida's next Commissioner of Education.

At the time of his appointment Dr. Mack was serving as the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor. He previously served as Senior Chancellor at the Florida Department of Education, leading the Divisions of Florida Colleges, Career and Adult Education, Vocational Rehabilitation, Blind Services, the Florida Department of Education's Office of Workforce Education and Economic Alignment, and the Commission for Independent Education.



Dr. Henry Mack - Florida Commissioner of Education

Interim Chancellor Named

The Florida Division of Early Learning has announced that **Katerina Maroney has been named Interim Chancellor of Early Learning.**

Interim Chancellor Maroney brings deep knowledge of Florida's early learning programs and extensive experience within the division. We welcome her to this new role and look forward to continuing our strong partnership with DEL under her leadership.

Parents' Pages

Each month, the Florida Division of Early Learning publishes their **Parents' Pages**. Check out what's new for the month of August - including what every parent should know about VPK!



Worry Less - Learn More !

Concerns about the cost of child care stop at our door.
The School Readiness Program can help eligible families
with affordable child care at quality preschools.
Let us guide you through the process!



Call or Visit: www.elcofswfl.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](#)

Operations Note: Our Fort Myers and Naples office lobbies are closed to the public on Wednesdays and Fridays. Staff are available for phone calls. Most of our services can be accessed through our website **www.elcofswfl.org**



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