Early Learning Coalition
OF SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

FALL NEWSLETTER

www.elcofswfl.org 239-935-6100

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A Message From Our CEO



As the early years of a child's life lay the foundation for future learning, health, and well-being, we remain focused on strengthening the systems, partnerships, and resources that help children and families thrive. Across Southwest Florida, the Early Learning Coalition continues to advance school readiness through provider support, professional development, and collaborative initiatives that expand access to high-quality early learning experiences.

This year marks an exciting milestone with the launch of THRIVE, a coordinated initiative led by the Early Learning Coalition in partnership with education, healthcare, behavioral health, and community organizations. Designed to support the whole child, THRIVE strengthens connections between early learning, developmental services, and family support systems, helping identify concerns earlier, improve referral pathways, and increase access to critical services that support healthy development and school readiness.

Building on this work, the Coalition received funding through the Hurricane Impact Disaster Grant to launch the THRIVE: Hurricane Ian Mental Health & Resilience Initiative, expanding services for children, families, and early learning professionals in Lee and Collier counties. Through this initiative, children and families can access mental health, speech-language, psychological, occupational therapy, and behavior analysis services that support recovery, resilience, and overall well-being. These efforts reflect our commitment to reducing barriers to care and ensuring families receive the support they need when it matters most.

As we look ahead, we remain committed to building a more connected early childhood system that brings together education, health, and community partners in support of young children. Through collaboration, innovation, and a shared commitment to child well-being, we are creating stronger foundations for learning, empowering families, and helping ensure every child has the opportunity to learn, grow, and thrive.

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

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Wednesday, August 12, 2026 we held the **Synapse:Thrive Collaborative Launch.**

Throughout the day, participants engaged in discussions, workshops, and planning sessions centered on problem-solving and system calibration to ensure families can access services more efficiently and effectively.

The THRIVE initiative reflects a growing commitment among Southwest Florida partners to create a more connected and responsive early childhood ecosystem.

PHOTOS

THRIVE Collaborative

The Thrive Collaborative is a coordinated early childhood support initiative led by our ELC in partnership with the **Health Planning Council of Southwest Florida**, **Collier County Public Schools**, and the **School District of Lee County.**

THRIVE is designed to expand access to timely developmental evaluations, early intervention services, and mental health supports for children enrolled in ELC-contracted Voluntary Prekindergarten and School Readiness programs throughout Lee and Collier Counties.

By strengthening coordination among agencies and service providers, the initiative aims to reduce barriers that often delay critical support during a child's earliest years.
The second THRIVE Synapse takes place November 7, 2026.

Our Community

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



If it's August, we're in Immokalee at the **Lipman Family Farms** annual back-to-school event. Backpacks filled with



At the **Children's Advocacy Center of Southwest Florida** Family Resource Night in August, we joined other like-minded groups to distribute information about the many services

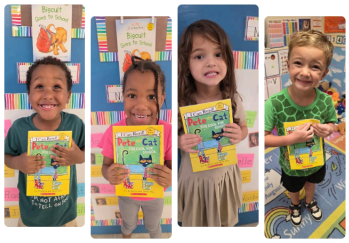


At the Park Meadows (Lee County) **Boys and Girls Club** Open House in August. Spreading the word about the services

school supplies for elementary and middle school students were handed out. Can you squeeze in just one more fun book to take home & share?

available for families. Families had the opportunity to access EKG screenings, physicals, health and wellness resources, and more.

we provide for families in Southwest Florida.



A big thank you to **Believe N Books** for donating Pete the Cat: *Too Cool for School* to 7,000 of our VPK students across Southwest Florida!

The little learners at at the Community Children's Center were all smiles as they received their brand-new books.

This gift helps foster a love of reading and supports kindergarten readiness, one book at a time.



Big Check time! The **Palmer Preschool** in Naples was presented with a check for $1,000 after successfully completing a Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP)! A COOP Plan helps child care providers prepare for unexpected events such as hurricanes, staffing shortages, or other emergencies. By having a plan in place, centers can respond quickly & continue serving families.



Congratulations to **Allie Gator Playskool** (pictured), **Odyssey Preschool Academy, PLM Daycare, and Sylvia Scott FCCH** for achieving an Excellent VPK rating this year and earning recognition for making some of the largest gains from the previous year!

Their dedication to continuous improvement and high-quality early learning is making a lasting impact on children and families.



A snapshot of some of our Early Childhood Specialists who visit classrooms to assist teachers & students.

Helping Teachers Excel

Empowering Immokalee's teachers with exceptional skills!

Our team of Early Childhood Specialists at the Early Learning Coalition of Southwest Florida recently led two impactful CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System) training sessions at **Guadalupe Center**, equipping 110 teachers to excel in their upcoming CLASS assessments.

CLASS isn't just an assessment tool—it's a benchmark for high-quality teacher-child interactions, emphasizing emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. These elements are crucial for fostering social, emotional, and academic growth and establishing a strong foundation for kindergarten readiness and lifelong achievement.

Thanks to meaningful professional development like this, our educators are mastering innovative strategies to create dynamic, engaging classrooms where every child flourishes.

We're honored to work alongside such committed teachers who consistently raise the bar in early education for Southwest Florida's youngest learners.

Be Prepared!

In October, 69 preschool providers attended the Continuity of Operation (COOP) training session hosted by the Early Learning Coalition of SWFL and the **Health Planning Council of SWFL.**



Insight gained at this training will help providers develop their own COOP plans to be implemented when bad weather or other disasters happen. The more we prepare, the better we are at making timely decisions and keeping schools open and families informed.

Having an approved COOP plan has also benefited many providers in Southwest Florida through a disaster grant administered by our Early Learning Coalition. Centers with approved COOP plans are awarded $1,000 for anything needed to prepare for or repair after a disaster hits. Disaster Relief Grant money is also being distributed.



We are incredibly proud to celebrate our CEO, Dr. Melanie Stefanowicz, on being named one of 50 leaders selected for the Charitable Community Foundation's **Impact 50 Honor**—recognizing extraordinary influence on the future of Southwest Florida.
Dr. Stefanowicz's vision, leadership, and unwavering commitment to children and families continue to make a lasting impact across our region. Her dedication to building strong foundations for learning is truly inspiring.

We are honored to have you leading the Early Learning Coalition of Southwest Florida!

Florida Department of Early Learning News

DIVISION OF Early Learning
LEARN EARLY. LEARN FOR LIFE.

The Florida Department of Education and the Division of Early Learning congratulate **Katerina (Kat) Maroney** on her promotion to permanent Chancellor of the Florida Department of Early Learning.

Ms. Maroney has dedicated nearly her entire professional career to supporting the well-being, growth, and success of our youngest learners. Her leadership, expertise, and commitment to Florida's children, families, and early learning professionals have made a lasting impact.

Parents' Pages

Each month, the Florida Division of Early Learning publishes their **Parents' Pages.** Check out what's new for the month of November!





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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