

2025 ADVOCACY PRIORITIES



EARLY LEARNING
COALITION OF HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY

Children require a solid foundation to enter school prepared to learn, which can be achieved through high-quality early care and education that places an emphasis on children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. Parents can work while their kids are studying if they have access to high-quality, affordable early learning and school-age care. Florida students' academic achievement hinges on building a solid foundation from an early age.

**AFFORDABLE CHILDCARE ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY IS THE
PRIMARY BARRIER TO PARENTS RETURNING TO THE WORKFORCE**

1

BREAKING BARRIERS TO EARLY LEARNING AND ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE

Ensuring all children have the opportunity to learn and grow while supporting working families on their journey to financial independence is essential. Florida's early learning system must be flexible, affordable, and accessible, offering parents choices that align with their needs while keeping pace with the state's growth and economy. The lack of affordable childcare is a significant barrier for working parents, leading to a loss of \$5.38 billion in annual revenue. Low-income families, especially two-parent households, are disproportionately affected, with 24% forced to leave their jobs due to childcare costs. The current system limits economic mobility, trapping families in poverty rather than offering a pathway to financial independence. Furthermore, the outdated Federal Poverty Level (FPL) does not reflect the current cost of living, further exacerbating the challenge. The recommended solution is to align eligibility to 65% of State Median Income, granting more children access to the program while accounting for the State's mandatory minimum wage increase in 2026.

2

ENHANCING STABILITY IN SCHOOL READINESS FUNDING

The School Readiness program has faced ongoing challenges due to significant changes in funding, which have disrupted local communities and created inefficiencies in Early Learning Coalition (ELC) operations. These shifts have placed financial strain on the child care sector, leading to growing waitlists, gaps in new enrollments, and difficulties for small businesses that rely on consistent funding. Florida's rapid population growth, particularly in four of the nation's fastest-growing metropolitan areas, has further intensified these challenges, increasing the demand for high-quality early learning programs.

Last year's funding adjustments, which prioritized full-time equivalents (FTEs), marked a step in the right direction, helping to create more stability. However, to ensure that funds are allocated equitably and effectively across the state, additional measures are needed. The proposed expansion aims to build upon these improvements by considering a broader range of factors, ensuring that resources are distributed in a way that meets the diverse needs of communities. This approach seeks to protect children and working families from disruptions in child care services, reduce the risk of disenrollment, and provide long-term financial stability for providers, ultimately strengthening the foundation of Florida's early learning system.



Florida **VPK**

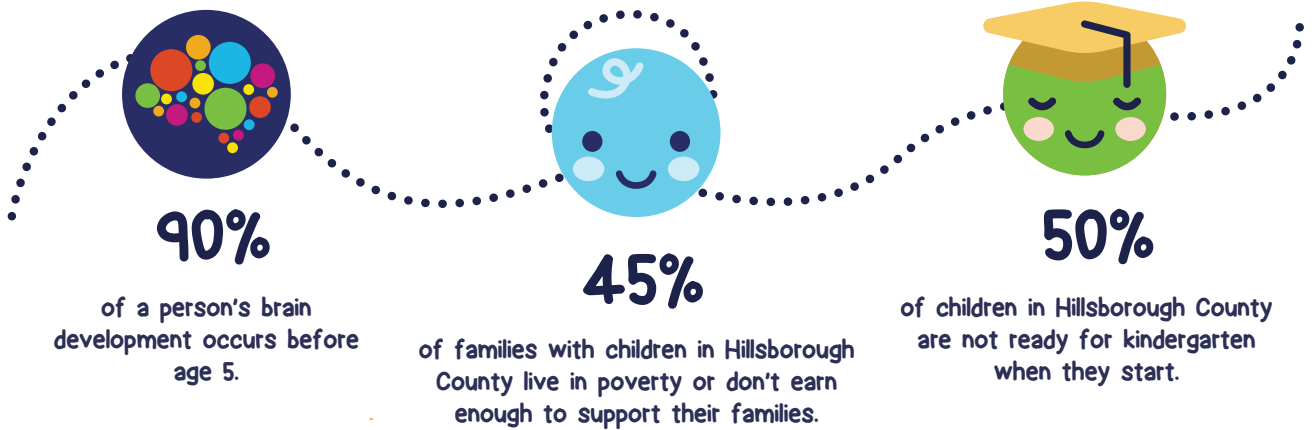
**Florida was one of the first states
in the country to offer free
prekindergarten for all 4-year-olds
regardless of family income. VPK
prepares early learners for success
in kindergarten and beyond.**

SCHOOL READINESS PROGRAM

**Provides financial assistance to
qualifying families. Families remain
self-sufficient while their children
learn and become successful in
school and in life.**

3 SUPPORTING MILITARY FAMILIES WITH EARLY LEARNING SUCCESS

The School Readiness program plays a vital role in supporting military families by ensuring their children have access to the resources and early learning opportunities they need to thrive. As military families frequently face relocations and transitions, the program provides stability and consistency by connecting them with quality educational support in their new communities. By offering a range of services—such as early childhood education, developmental screenings, and family engagement opportunities—the program helps military children build a strong foundation for future academic success, while also easing the challenges that come with frequent moves and changes. This ensures that every child, no matter where their family is stationed, has the tools and support to flourish in their early learning journey. The Early Learning Coalition of Hillsborough is working on a pilot project with MacDill Air Force Base to serve military families.



Affordable high-quality early education is essential for Florida's growing economy and workforce. Employers and employees who benefit include:



Tourism



Retail



Healthcare



Restaurants



Service Industry



Self-Employed



For more information:
Dr. Fredrick L. Hicks, CEO
fhicks@elchc.org
elchc.org

