



Hillsborough Education Funders Group

Early Learning Research Report

November 2025



LeCroy & Milligan
ASSOCIATES, INC.

Hillsborough Education Funders Group Early Learning Research Report November 2025

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About LeCroy & Milligan Associates:

Founded in 1991, LeCroy & Milligan Associates, Inc. (LMA) is a consulting firm specializing in social services and education program evaluation and training that is comprehensive, research-driven, and useful. Our goal is to provide effective program evaluation and training that enables stakeholders to document outcomes, provide accountability, and engage in continuous program improvement. With central offices located in Tucson, Arizona, LeCroy & Milligan Associates has worked at the local, state, and national level with a broad spectrum of social services, criminal justice, education, and behavioral health programs. This report was written by Rebecca Friesen, PhD, EdM; Nancy Hankel, EdD; Elizabeth Hardesty, MPH; Veronica Salaiz; Kara Jones, MA, MLIS.

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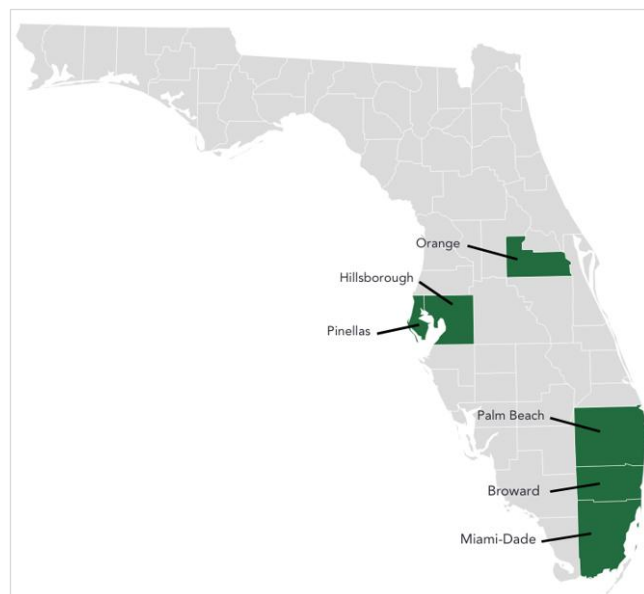
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Brief Project Overview

The Hillsborough Education Funders Group – including the Children’s Board of Hillsborough County, Community Foundation Tampa Bay, Conn Foundation, and Helios Education Foundation – was formed to share educational funding priorities and address the most vital educational needs in Hillsborough County, Florida. This group sought to conduct early learning research to inform early education across six counties in Florida (Broward County, Hillsborough County, Miami-Dade County, Orange County, Palm Beach, Pinellas County). This research documented and explored recommendations regarding the best practices to achieve kindergarten readiness by increasing access to and quality of early learning programs, enhancing parental engagement, and strengthening systems.

Exhibit 1. Florida Counties Included in Research

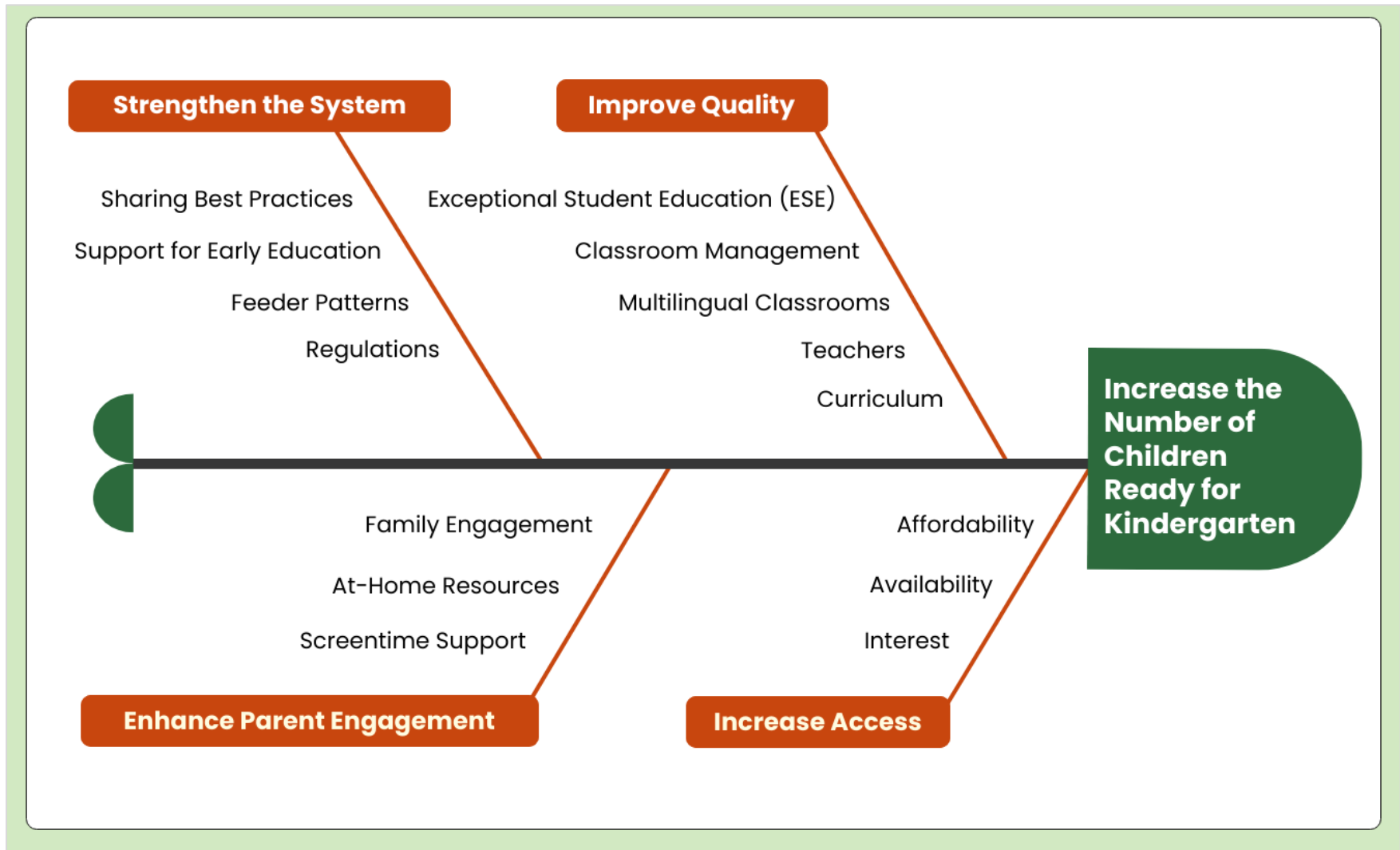


Evaluation Design

LeCroy & Milligan Associates (LMA) was contracted to conduct a research study to gather insights from Early Learning Coalitions (ELCs) and school districts to better understand effective strategies for improving early learning outcomes. To achieve this objective, the LMA research team employed a mixed methods approach that incorporated surveys, interviews, and secondary data. The project began with a planning and design phase, during which LMA refined research questions, developed survey instruments and interview protocols, and drafted letters for participant recruitment. This was followed by data collection, where LMA administered a survey and conducted in-depth interviews with school districts and ELC leaders. The final phase involved data analysis, synthesis of findings, and the development of this report.

During this process, the LMA research team examined four different factors related to the overall goal of increasing the number of children ready for kindergarten: 1) increasing access; 2) improving quality; 3) enhancing parent engagement; and 4) strengthening the system. Exhibit 2 on the following page presents these factors as a diagram to visualize how individual elements contribute to the overall goal. Exhibit 3 presents the challenges faced by early education providers and Exhibit 4 presents the key strategies that emerged from the study findings.

Exhibit 2. Diagram of Factors Related to Kindergarten Readiness



Identified Challenges Affecting Kindergarten Readiness

- Most families need full-day care to enable a full workday, but many can't afford the additional fees.
- Although there may appear to be sufficient availability for all children, childcare deserts and inequitable access exist.
- Some families may prefer to keep their child at home, may not be aware of VPK, or may not know what to look for in a high-quality program.
- FAST testing and CLASS observations sometimes occur before children are acclimated to the program.
- Early education teachers are hard to recruit and retain, partially due to low compensation and lack of respect for the field.
- Teachers are reporting a significant increase in behavioral problems in classrooms.
- Most directors expressed concern regarding high use of screen time.
- School choice may hinder the development of feeder patterns, but several districts have implemented effective initiatives to foster them.
- Both ELCs and districts found VPK attendance records and other requirements to be burdensome.
- Both ELCs and districts felt hampered in their freedom to fundraise to cover funding gaps.

Exhibit 4. Identified Strategies to Improve Kindergarten Readiness

Identified Strategies to Improve Kindergarten Readiness



Increase Access:

- Address the need for full day care by facilitating provision of afterschool programs and targeting fundraising to cover gaps.
- Consider converting unused facilities to multi-purpose hubs that address multiple needs of families.
- Improve program availability by identifying and addressing emerging childcare deserts, striving to ensure equity to popular programs, and providing training/resources for family and neighbor caregivers.
- Increase awareness of VPK and value of early education by collaborating with healthcare providers, advertising where families gather, reaching out to families on public assistance, and tapping into existing parent groups.



Improve Quality:

- Choose research-based, well-reviewed, and contextually appropriate curricula, employ digital platforms judiciously, and use ongoing data analysis to inform targeted intervention.
- Allow children to acclimate before testing, test one-on-one, and advocate for testing in the home language.
- Improve CLASS scores by providing CLASS-specific training to teachers and conducting CLASS observations after children have acclimated to classroom.
- Recruit and retain teachers by encouraging programs to “grow their own”; partnering with educational institutions; supporting new and existing educational and financial incentives.
- Provide behavior specialists and training for teachers and use evidence-based frameworks.
- Partner with pediatricians to increase early detection of disabilities, conduct evaluations within the child’s familiar environment, and offer peer support specialists to parents.



Enhance Parent Engagement:

- Offer parent education and training, hold engaging and informative family events, and provide one-on-one or small group support for parents.
- Provide at-home resources for parents to support their children's development, and encourage reading at home by offering at home activities and building home libraries.
- Promote balance in screen time use at home and suggest screen alternatives, especially play.



Strengthen the System:

- Find ways to regularly share best practices, such as collaborative groups, and support more conference attendees.
- Advocate to change burdensome regulations including allowing fundraising independence and streamlining requirements for parents and providers, especially attendance records.
- Promote support for early education teachers, especially recommending that early education teachers receive the equitable benefits.
- Foster school feeder patterns by outsourcing 0-3 programs on school campuses, encouraging principals to actively engage with child care centers, and considering long term likelihood in program placements.



Future Directions

- Continue to conduct research to inform data driven decision-making, especially finding accurate ways to identify and locate all eligible families to ensure they receive timely information about VPK programs.

INTRODUCTION

High-quality early education is fundamental to a child's development, as it cultivates essential cognitive, social, and emotional skills during a critical period of rapid brain growth (Shonkoff et al., 2016). Early education programs are directly linked to improved school readiness, including stronger literacy, mathematical thinking, and self-regulation, which reduce the likelihood of grade repetition and create a positive trajectory for academic achievement (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Research demonstrates that participants in high-quality early childhood programs are more likely to graduate high school, pursue higher education, and consequently secure higher-wage employment as adults (García et al., 2021).

The positive outcomes for children and families generate a substantial return on investment for society, creating a cycle of economic benefit. Rigorous cost-benefit analyses, such as those of long-running programs like the Perry Preschool Project, have been updated to show returns ranging from \$4 to \$13 for every dollar invested, realized through higher tax revenues and reduced public spending on welfare, healthcare, and criminal justice (Belfield et al., 2015; García et al., 2021). This public benefit is closely tied to the role of early education in promoting equity. These programs are particularly impactful for children from lower-income and disadvantaged backgrounds, helping to close the school readiness gap and provide a stronger, more equitable foundation for success. Ultimately, providing access to quality early learning is not only a sound economic and social policy but also an ethical imperative, ensuring every child can thrive.

Economic Need for Early Education

According to the Florida Chamber Foundation, the state loses an estimated \$5 billion each year due to childcare-related disruptions. Many parents, both mothers and fathers, find themselves unable to enter or remain in the workforce because they lack access to reliable, affordable childcare. While early childhood education is vital for a child's development, parents also need assurance that their children are safe, cared for, and in a nurturing environment. In this way, high-quality childcare supports both child development and economic stability.

About Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten and School Readiness

Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) is a state-funded program available to all four-year-olds in Florida. Its primary purpose is to support early learning and prepare children for kindergarten. The program funds approximately three hours of daily instruction, and families can choose from three VPK delivery models (Exhibit 5). In addition, eligible families can supplement those three hours with School Readiness funding.

Exhibit 5. Overview of VPK and School Readiness Programs

School-Year Program

Provides 540 instructional hours across the academic year, typically in daily sessions of 3 to 3.5 hours.

Summer Program

Offers an accelerated 300-hour model delivered over the summer months. Due to the condensed schedule, instructional days are significantly longer.

VPK Specialized Instructional Services (VPK-SIS)

Designed for children with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), this model allows families to use their VPK certificate to access specialized services that support the child's developmental and educational needs. Participation in more than one VPK model is not permitted.

School Readiness

In addition to VPK, Florida families may access subsidized early learning through the School Readiness program, which is funded by the federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF). This program supports working families or those enrolled in education or training who meet income eligibility criteria. Unlike VPK, School Readiness funding covers a full day of care and addresses the broader needs of working parents.

The quality of VPK programming is currently assessed through the Florida Assessment of Student Thinking (FAST) scores, primarily focused on student literacy skills, and Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) observation scores, primarily focused on teacher classroom management skills. Most of the selected counties and districts improved overall in both FAST and CLASS scores from 2024-2025 (Appendix A).

METHODOLOGY

LMA collaborated with the Hillsborough Education Funders Group to generate the following research questions to ensure the utility of findings for program stakeholders.

Research Questions



Increase Access

- What factors influence families' decisions to enroll their children in early learning programs?
- What obstacles prevent families from attending high quality early learning programs?
- What strategies are being implemented to address these obstacles?
- What are effective ways to encourage and enable more families to enroll in early learning programs?
- What strategies are most effective in recruiting new providers for VPK or School Readiness programs in high need areas?



Improve Quality

- What curricula/initiatives (i.e. learning, behavioral, social) have effectively contributed to improving kindergarten readiness?
- What recruitment, professional development, and/or coaching models contribute to improving staff performance and retention?



Enhance At-Home Support

- What resources most effectively equip parents to support their children's early learning and development?
- What are effective ways to support caregivers/parents as they navigate screen time?
- How do early learning programs effectively support families with various needs?



Strengthen the System

- What systemic changes would positively impact kindergarten readiness?

Data Collection and Measures

To collect data for this research, LMA used secondary data, along with surveys and interviews with school district leaders and CEOs of ELCs in six different counties. The specific methods and measures used for this evaluation are shown in Exhibit 6.

Exhibit 6. Data Collected, Purpose, and Analytic Method

Data/Instrument	Purpose/Construct	Analysis
Structured surveys of ELCs and school districts	To determine numbers served in different types of programs and to collect pertinent quantitative data	Descriptive analysis
Semi-structured interviews with school district directors of early learning and CEOs of ELCs	To capture information on current early learning strategies, access to care, and best practices for supporting parents	Thematic content analysis
Secondary data	To provide contextual information about the early learning workforce, program performance, and relevant demographics	Content and comparative analysis
Brief literature review	To provide background regarding factors related to early learning access and success	Content analysis

Instruments and Measures

Survey of school districts and Early Learning Centers: LMA administered an online survey to school district leaders and ELC CEOs. The survey focused on collecting quantitative and short-answer questions regarding program access and quality. LMA reviewed the initial questions drafted by the Hillsborough Education Funders Group and made suggestions for possible modifications and/or additional questions, then shared the draft survey with the Hillsborough Education Funders Group for review/approval. Once a final version was approved, the survey was piloted by LMA and the Hillsborough group.

Interviews with school districts and Early Learning Centers: LMA collaborated with the Hillsborough Education Funders Group to create an interview protocol for interviews lasting up to 90 minutes. The interviews explored pre-K program access, quality, parental support, and system issues more in-depth. Interviews were conducted virtually and recorded to facilitate content analysis.

Secondary data: LMA gathered secondary data to provide contextual background information about the early learning workforce, program performance, and other relevant data.

Data Collection Procedures

Participant Recruitment Plan: Members of the Hillsborough Education Funders Group reached out to their contacts at school districts and ELCs in each county to introduce this research project and request participation in completing the survey and interview. Before the interviews, the LMA team provided background to this research and its aims; benefits to participants; and assured participants that their responses would be anonymous.

Limitations of the Study

This research was based on data collected through surveys and interviews with early learning school directors and Early Learning Coalition directors in six Florida counties: Broward, Hillsborough, Miami-Dade, Orange, Palm Beach, and Pinellas. While these counties provide valuable insight, they do not represent the full diversity of Florida’s early learning landscape. As such, the findings may not be generalizable to all counties across the state.

The data is primarily self-reported and observational in nature, which limits the ability to draw causal inferences. Additionally, data quality varied across participants – some surveys were incomplete, and certain open-ended responses reflected inconsistent units of analysis, which may have introduced interpretive challenges.

Another limitation stems from the geographic and contextual distance between the researchers and the study site. LMA, based in Arizona, brought an external perspective that helped reduce potential biases associated with local politics or institutional relationships. However, this outsider status also presented a steep learning curve regarding Florida’s complex and regionally varied early learning system.

Despite these limitations, this evaluation offers a robust and comprehensive synthesis of strategies that appear effective in increasing kindergarten readiness. The insights gathered contribute meaningfully to the broader conversation regarding early childhood education practices in Florida and beyond.

FINDINGS

Participant responses were organized using the framework of the factors related to kindergarten readiness (Exhibit 2). The study’s findings are presented along these four domains of increasing access, improving quality, enhancing parental engagement, and strengthening systemic supports. The strategies identified vary in scope and target audience – some are intended for providers, others for school districts or Early Learning Coalitions (ELCs), and still others for funders and policymakers.

Through a combination of interviews and surveys, we identified both commonly implemented strategies shared across multiple counties and unique approaches specific to individual districts or ELCs. These findings highlight the diversity of efforts underway to promote kindergarten readiness across Florida. Additionally, Appendix A includes documentation of each county’s FAST and CLASS assessment results, offering further context regarding their respective successes and ongoing challenges.

Access

Access to early childhood education requires affordability, availability, and family interest. Overall, the participants highlighted the need for affordable full day care in convenient locations for most families they serve.



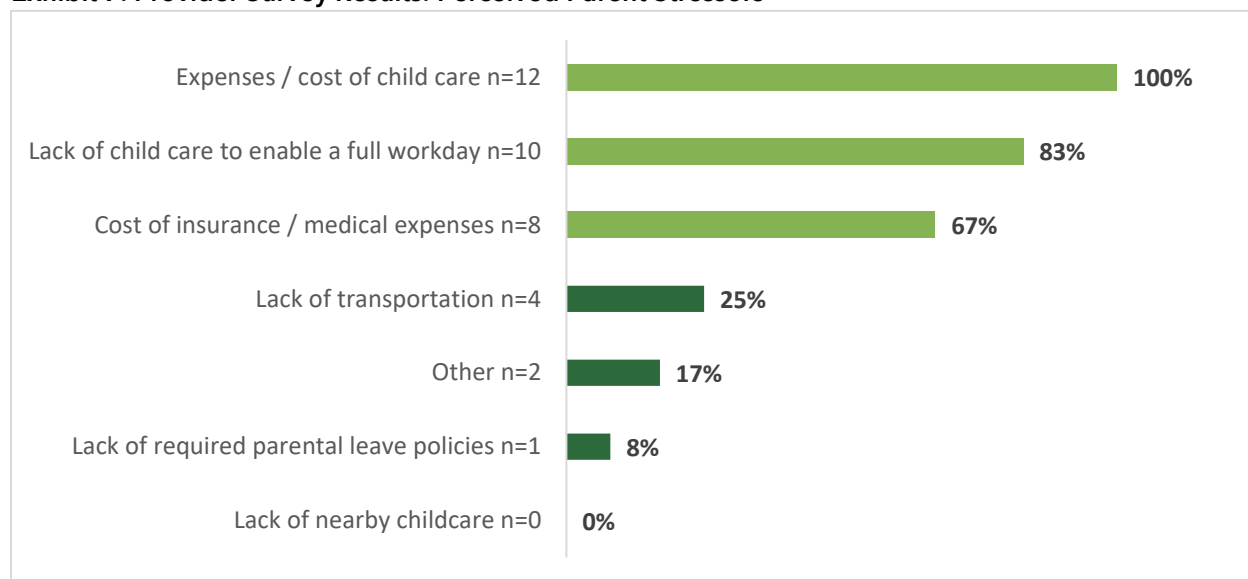
Affordability

Half Day Programs in a Full Workday Economy

Although Florida’s VPK program is universally available to all four-year-olds, full participation is often out of reach for many families due to the cost of care beyond the program’s limited hours. One district reported very low enrollment for the three-hour VPK only program. For working parents – especially those juggling multiple jobs or shift work – the lack of affordable full workday care creates a logistical and financial burden. Families must weigh whether they can manage midday pick-up, find additional care, or forego participation altogether. Despite being free in principle, the half day nature of VPK makes it functionally inaccessible for many who need early education the most.

The directors reported top perceived stressors of families, most of which related to expenses, especially the need for childcare that enables a full workday (Exhibit 7).

Exhibit 7. Provider Survey Results: Perceived Parent Stressors



N=12; Note: Respondents could select all options that applied to them. Other = “Affordable Housing”; “survival mentality”

For most districts, VPK programs acknowledge their limitations in meeting this need. The average school day begins around 8:00 a.m. and ends around 2:00 p.m., which poses a significant challenge for parents who work full-time and need care until after 5:00 p.m. Some district-run aftercare programs do not accept children under the age of five. As a result, families cannot use School Readiness funds to pay for aftercare at public school sites and must coordinate a second childcare arrangement for the remainder of the day and/or for younger siblings.

“Every time we test the water, 40 to 50% of the families say, ‘It’s not full day—I can’t afford the second half.’”
-Interviewee

Attempts to coordinate private transportation to bridge school and aftercare locations often fail due to regulatory restrictions—for instance, private providers may be prohibited from retrieving children from buses, and bus drivers may be restricted from escorting children into programs. These logistical hurdles leave many working families with no viable options.

In addition to multiple wraparound services, five out of the six school districts (Miami-Dade, Orange, Broward, Palm Beach, Pinellas) offer after school programming, but very few offered assistance with transportation (Exhibit 8).

Exhibit 8. Provider Survey Results: Fees, Aftercare, & Wraparound Services



Fees, Aftercare, & Wraparound Supports

Survey responses from Districts indicate **wide variation in costs to families**. Full-day charges for general education students ranged from \$15-\$30 per day, with **Title I funds occasionally offsetting costs for low-income families**. Roughly two-thirds of Districts provide aftercare at rates of \$12-\$25 per day or \$50-\$100 per week. Common wraparound supports include nutrition, extended care, and access to health or behavioral screenings. **There is a notable gap in transportation assistance.**

N=12

Title One

In many cases, using a braided funding model – combining Early Head Start, Head Start, Title I, VPK, and other local resources – helps provide full school day programs. In public schools, Title I funding is a valuable tool for expanding access to full school day programs, though it is not available in all schools. Where offered, these programs are highly valued by families, especially when they are often housed within the elementary schools that children will eventually attend.

School Readiness

School Readiness funding, a federal childcare assistance program, is often used to cover the additional hours to provide a full workday for eligible families. Hillsborough, Miami-Dade and

“For a state that speaks to wanting to be number one in education, if we're not starting with our babies, then we've got it wrong. You got it wrong right out of the gate.”

-Interviewee

Palm Beach report using School Readiness funds for children ages 3-4. However, many families earn very low wages yet still do not qualify for School Readiness funding. One director reported that Florida maintains one of the lowest income eligibility thresholds in the nation. While legislation passed in July 2025 did raise the income limit, the increase was minimal. For example, according to one director, a family of four previously had to earn \$46,000 or less to qualify; now the threshold is approximately \$53,000. Many families

earn too much to qualify for support, yet not enough to afford care on their own.

If they cannot afford formal care, they may rely on relatives, informal care arrangements, or exit the workforce entirely. For many, it is simply more cost-effective to stay home. In addition, although School Readiness provides critical support, it only covers the state-approved portion of childcare costs. For instance, if a provider charges \$1,200 per week and School Readiness reimburses only \$1,000, the family must pay the \$200 difference out of pocket. Registration fees are another hurdle – some providers require these fees up front and will not wait for reimbursement. Certain at-risk categories – such as families experiencing homelessness or domestic violence – may have these costs waived. However, for the average low-income working family, the financial gap remains a major obstacle.

Within the School Readiness program, once a family qualifies, there is a progressive income scale. Families can earn slightly more over time, with increasing copayments, until they reach a final cutoff and are exited from the program. Recent changes have extended that “tipping point” slightly to make the transition smoother, but the initial eligibility threshold remains a major barrier. In addition, some families lose access due to gaps in paperwork during reauthorization periods, although some providers keep children in care during these periods out of goodwill.

“[The program] is only a good deal if you can afford it.”

-Interviewee

In addition to being income eligible, School Readiness eligibility also requires parents work or attend school for at least 20 hours per week. However, many families who struggle with access are working or attending school but still living in poverty.

Other Funding Sources

Local Public Investments: In several counties, early learning sites receive funding from the Children’s Services Council and the local foundations. One such initiative provides childcare support for families transitioning out of child welfare systems but who no longer qualify for traditional childcare subsidies. These funds support organizations that offer temporary childcare, although recent budget cuts have temporarily paused new enrollments, leaving some children on waitlists.

Matching Funds and Private Sector Partnerships: The MATCH program is a notable example of collaborative funding, where local governments allocate funds that are then matched dollar-for-dollar by the Department of Early Learning. Private employers also contribute, with some subsidizing childcare costs for their employees enrolled in qualifying programs. Sports organizations are active philanthropic partners providing grants.

Community and Philanthropic Support: Local philanthropists and foundations play an important role as well. Some coalitions receive matching funds from the Board of County Commissioners and donations from individual philanthropists. For example, in one county a local funder supported the hiring of peer support specialists. Corporate partners provide grants, and community-wide fundraising events and initiatives are critical for supplementing public funding.

Families Forward scholarship. The Families Forward scholarship allows eligibility up to 85% of the state median income. However, only a limited number of programs are authorized to accept these scholarships. As a result, families often receive a list of approved providers, but the school or program they originally had in mind may not be on it. This is not due to quality issues; in

fact, the approved programs have met rigorous standards. The challenge is often geographic distance or having multiple children in different care settings, making logistics complicated.

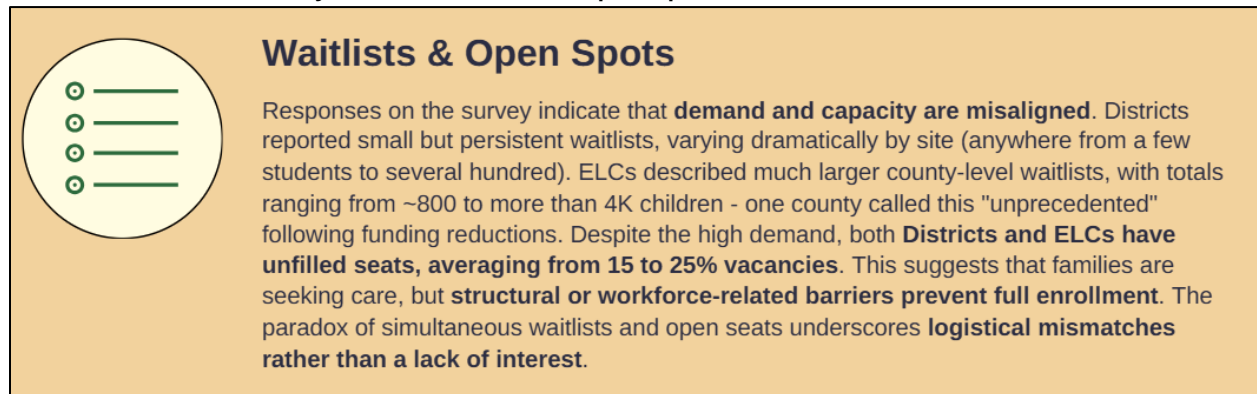
Private Centers

In contrast, many private providers offer care that extends to 6:00 p.m., aligning more closely with standard work hours. These providers often hold licenses that permit them to operate longer hours, such as 10- or 11-hour days. For families who need uninterrupted full workday care, this flexibility can be a deciding factor – even if the provider may not have the same level of training or capacity to support specialized developmental needs. Four districts (Broward, Miami-Dade, Orange, Pinellas) use private vendors to provide many of the after school programs.

Availability

Different counties reported different obstacles for increasing the number of children ready for kindergarten: some reported high demand with long waitlists, possibly due to insufficient numbers and locations of providers, whereas others reported low enrollment of children, likely due to lack of awareness or interest (see Exhibit 9).

Exhibit 9. Provider Survey Results: Waitlists & Open Spots



Waitlists & Open Spots

Responses on the survey indicate that **demand and capacity are misaligned**. Districts reported small but persistent waitlists, varying dramatically by site (anywhere from a few students to several hundred). ELCs described much larger county-level waitlists, with totals ranging from ~800 to more than 4K children - one county called this "unprecedented" following funding reductions. Despite the high demand, both **Districts and ELCs have unfilled seats, averaging from 15 to 25% vacancies**. This suggests that families are seeking care, but **structural or workforce-related barriers prevent full enrollment**. The paradox of simultaneous waitlists and open seats underscores **logistical mismatches rather than a lack of interest**.

N=12

High demand

For some counties, VPK enrollment tends to be stable across the academic year, with predictable patterns of fluctuation. One administrator noted that concerns about meeting minimum enrollment thresholds are generally minimal due to consistent family demand, particularly as kindergarten approaches. *"I never worry about VPK numbers. Usually by January or February, I see another uptick – about 5–7% more children enrolling – as families begin thinking seriously about kindergarten."* One director emphasized that in her three years of overseeing VPK programs, only one classroom was closed due to under-enrollment – and that was largely attributed to a high saturation of nearby VPK offerings. *"I had 10 other VPKs in such a close radius. I was competing with myself."* Some sites reach capacity on the first day of enrollment, particularly full

workday programs and those offering language immersion options, which remain in high demand.

Location & Transportation

The directors thought that parents tend to have a general idea of where they would prefer their child to be enrolled, often prioritizing settings that are close to home or work. Convenience is not merely a preference, but a necessity – particularly for working families managing complex schedules, multiple jobs, or shift-based employment. According to one director, parents ask themselves, “Do I have to drive all over town to get them there? Can I pick them up quickly?”

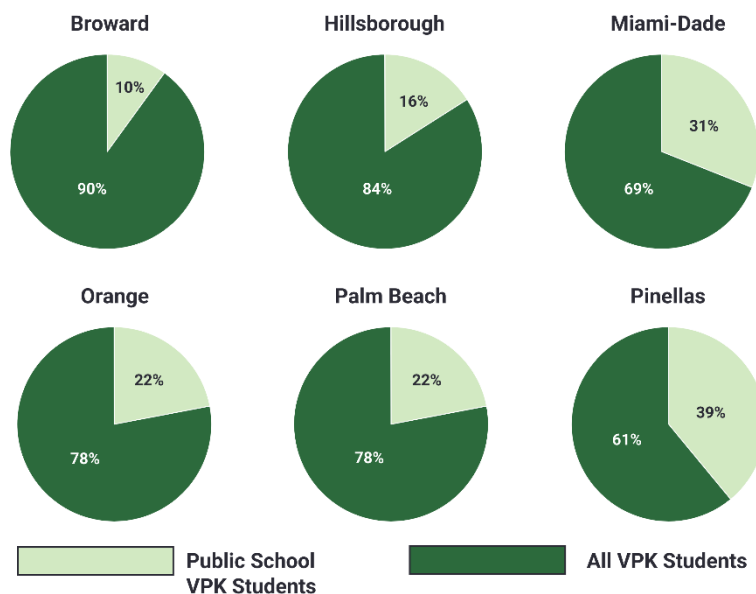
“Many of our parents are handcuffed by transportation.”

-Interviewee

This logistical burden is especially acute in areas where transportation services are limited. While some children with disabilities are eligible for specialized transportation under their IEP, most children of pre-K age do not receive transportation support.

Moreover, not all schools offer VPK, which introduces geographic inequity. For example, one district reported offering VPK in 91 schools – still far short of full district coverage. This leads to dissatisfaction among families whose zoned schools do not provide VPK, particularly when nearby schools are at capacity. Some schools will fill up on the first day of enrollment. One director said, “We often hear parents say, ‘That’s not fair, my child’s school doesn’t have VPK.’”

Exhibit 10. Percent of VPK Students in Public Schools by County



Family Preferences for Home Care

A few directors noted that in some cultures – particularly within Hispanic and Asian communities – there is a strong preference for keeping young children at home until they reach school age. One director said that in households where grandparents are present and able to provide care, there is often little perceived need to enroll children in formal preschool: *“Why should they pay for childcare when their grandma’s taking care of them?”* Another echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the need to respect family preferences: *“There is certainly value in that... if they are able to keep them at home and they do not need to have a two-parent working family.”* However, several directors also pointed out that, as these families engage in conversations with peers, pediatricians, or participate in community activities, many often observe developmental or social differences between their child and others. These realizations can prompt families to explore early education options.

The Illusion of Access

While some counties report having no childcare deserts and even an overabundance of providers, others face complex mismatches between capacity and demand. The directors are quick to note that aggregate availability does not guarantee access at the neighborhood level.

This mismatch is especially problematic in areas with low-income populations or rapid demographic shifts. For example, gentrification and the loss of rent-controlled housing in certain counties have pushed many families into certain areas, creating overcrowded conditions in receiving schools. One director said,

“They’re not choosing to move – it’s that their housing isn’t there anymore.” Thus, districts annually reassess and reallocate classroom resources. *“There are no young children in those areas anymore. So we’ve had to move classrooms to places with greater need.”* While there have been efforts to relocate early childhood programs to areas with higher need, available space in overcrowded schools remains a significant barrier. According to one director, *“Those schools are over capacity... They sure aren’t going to give up a classroom to put a Head Start program in when they already have two first-grade classrooms sharing one room.”*

“We have plenty of capacity, but not necessarily in the right neighborhoods.”

-Interviewee

Interest in Early Education

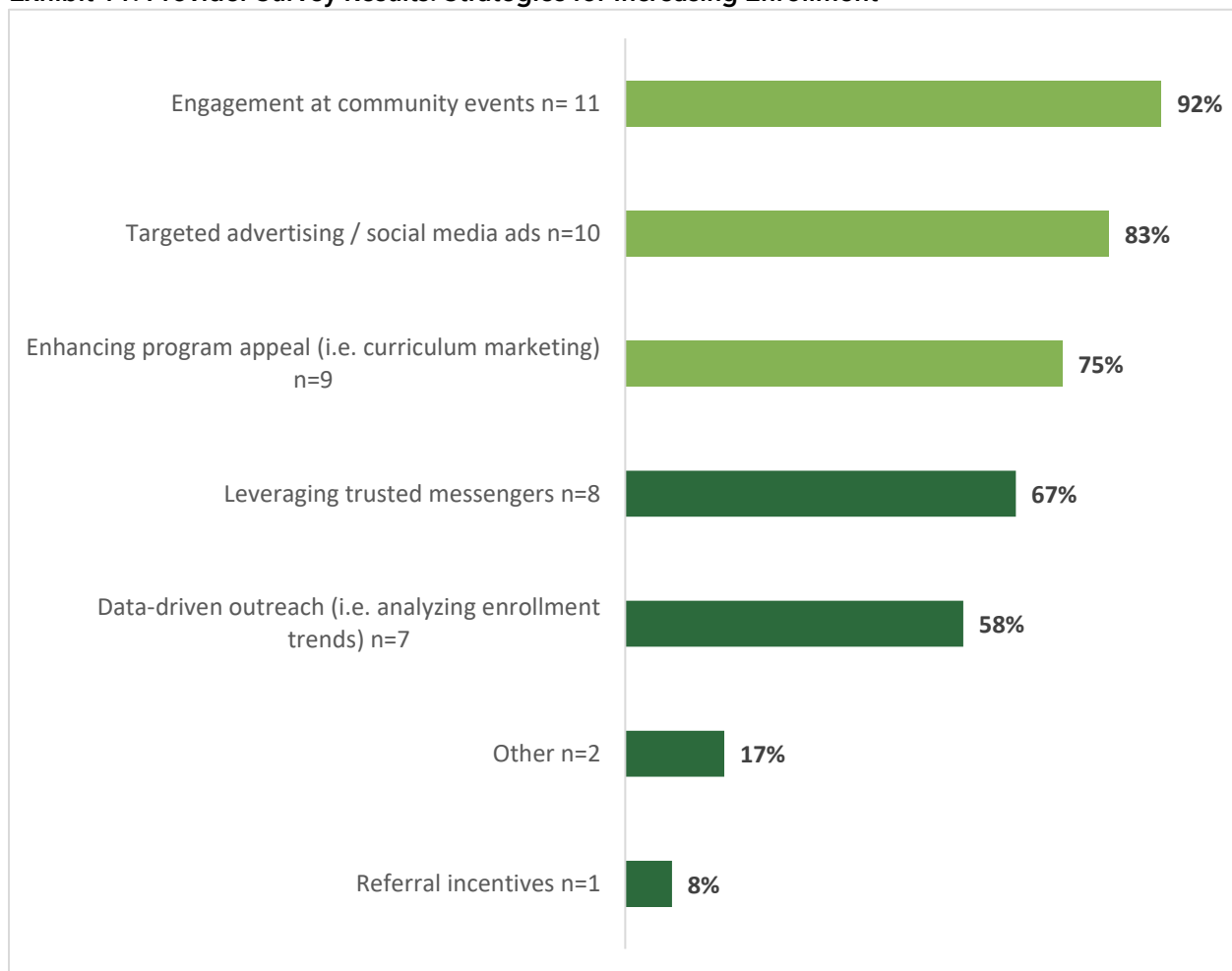
In some counties, the issue is not a lack of available slots, but rather an insufficient number of families opting to participate. Moreover, the trend of declining enrollment is not unique to VPK programs. One county noted that Head Start programs, which offer two years of free early education to eligible families, have also struggled to maintain full enrollment since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the Early Childhood Policy Research Group (2023), among all VPK applicants in Florida, about 20% did not enroll in a program after applying.

Administrative Barriers

Some directors identified the School Readiness application process as a barrier to enrollment. The process can be perceived as overly complex or invasive, particularly for families who may be wary of sharing personal or financial information. The requirement for a one-on-one interview, for example, was described as potentially intimidating. These administrative hurdles may discourage participation, particularly among populations already hesitant to engage with formal systems.

The directors reported the strategies they currently use to increase enrollment (Exhibit 11). The most popular strategies include engagement at community events (92%), targeted advertising (83%) and enhancing program appeal (75%). Leveraging trusted messengers (67%), data-driven outreach (58%), and referral incentives (8%) were less common, indicating an opportunity.

Exhibit 11. Provider Survey Results: Strategies for Increasing Enrollment



N=12; Note: Respondents could select all options that applied to them.

Awareness of VPK

Although VPK has been available for nearly two decades, significant population shifts, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, have brought many new families to the state who may be unaware that Florida offers free, universal preschool for all four-year-olds in the year prior to kindergarten. In addition, economic fluctuations may increase the number of families in need of no-cost early learning options, yet these families may not have access to or awareness of available programs. Several directors emphasized that a large portion of eligible families remain unaware of the VPK program, suggesting a persistent gap in outreach and public information.

Understanding the Value of Early Education

Several directors described parents becoming increasingly aware of the importance of high-quality early learning experiences to help set the stage for academic success and lifelong development. The parents see how demanding kindergarten has become and want their children to be prepared – not just academically, but socially and emotionally as well. By enrolling their children in early education programs, they hope to develop the stamina and routine needed for the school day, while also ensuring their child enters kindergarten confident and ready to learn.

However, one director pointed out that many parents are still unaware that most of a child’s brain development happens before the age of five. This critical period lays the foundation for everything that follows – early literacy, numeracy, social-emotional development, fine and gross motor skills, and overall kindergarten readiness. Yet too often, early education is mistaken for simple childcare or babysitting. There is a pressing need to shift this mindset – not just among parents, but also among providers and the broader community.

“We are not just caring for children - we are *educating* children.”

-Interviewee

Strategies to Increase Access to Early Education

The participants described various ways they sought to overcome the challenges they faced to increase access to VPK for more children. Potential methods to increase access to VPK by addressing program affordability, availability, and interest are detailed below.

Strategies to Increase Affordability of VPK

Fundraise to Cover Costs for Children with Coverage Gaps

Some counties are actively fundraising to cover program costs for children who have coverage gaps or who fall between the eligibility cracks. Some directors are pursuing

businesses because reliable childcare especially affects their bottom line. One county described the untapped potential among wealthy individuals and community foundations in affluent areas who could be engaged to support early childhood education, but identifying and connecting with these independent financial contributors remains a challenge. Finally, local philanthropic groups could cover short term gaps just before or between eligibility or fill the benefits cliff. However, state dollars – primarily through School Readiness grants – require that personnel paid with state funds cannot engage in fundraising during work hours, which greatly hinders their ability to do so.

Create Multi-Use Community Hubs to Address Multiple Barriers

Taking advantage of underutilized school buildings due to the exodus of children from school choice, some districts are reimagining school facilities as multi-use community hubs that include early childhood education and adult learning, maximizing their value to local residents and creating pathways for lifelong learning. For example, Boward District offers the Gulfstream Early Learning Center, where families can access Early Head Start, Head Start, VPK, and Pre-K ESE programs, while also enrolling in adult education through Community School South. By participating in adult education, many parents can be able to fulfill the School Readiness requirement of being in school or working. In addition, this co-location model offers wraparound services such as a food pantry, laundry facilities, immigration and citizenship classes, mental health supports, SNAP enrollment, and family learning labs.

Consider the Economic Impact of Full Workday VPK on Private Programs

While full workday VPK may seem like a logical step forward, one director said that many private centers rely on revenue from 4-year-olds – the "bread and butter" of their operations – to subsidize care for younger children. Removing these children from private care could reduce their revenue and impact the availability of infant and toddler care. If state-funded VPK care became feasible, it could be important to address this potential childcare dynamic.

Strategies to Improve Program Availability

For ELCs, Use Data-Driven Approaches to Identify Emerging Childcare Deserts

Several districts have adopted data-driven approaches to identify emerging childcare deserts and respond accordingly. For instance, when families contact centralized call centers seeking childcare and are offered fewer than five viable options, that zip code is flagged as a potential childcare desert. These data signals trigger further analysis to determine what existing sites might be expanded, what buildings could be repurposed for childcare, or where additional providers might be supported to increase capacity

For Districts, Track Interest to Determine Number of Classrooms and Monitor Waitlists

During the application period, some districts monitor interest to determine the number of classrooms warranted at each site. Administrators track not only the volume of applications but also follow through on the completion of the enrollment process. Once the school year begins, daily attendance is monitored closely to confirm student placement. Waitlists are maintained at most sites, allowing for efficient backfilling of unclaimed seats.

Use a Lottery System for Popular Programs to Ensure Equity

One director pointed out that implementing a uniform lottery system with a defined application window, like those offered by Broward and Miami-Dade, could promote greater equity and allow for centralized district-level outreach and advertising. Schools that do not reach capacity through the lottery could still utilize a first-come, first-served approach to fill remaining seats.

Attend Local Licensing Meetings to Recruit New VPK Providers

One ELC described attending local licensing meetings to connect with those applying to open childcare centers or family childcare homes. These early-stage conversations serve as an opportunity to introduce the benefits of contracting with ELC to provide VPK and/or School Readiness programming.

Build Capacity Within the Existing Providers

Many ELCs also focus on building capacity within the existing providers. For example, Pinellas ELC actively supports the expansion of small family childcare homes into large family childcare homes. This includes providing technical assistance, coaching, Child Development Associate (CDA) training, and access to grant funding to help providers expand their operations while maintaining high standards of care.

Target Specific Needs When Recruiting New Providers

Several ELCs are actively seeking providers who can offer services for specific populations such as working families, student-parents, and other vulnerable populations. For instance, some ELCs are exploring partnerships with community colleges to support students who require reliable childcare, while others are working to expand services for teenage parents through targeted programming.

Provide Training and Resources for Family and Neighbor Caregivers

Some directors had a perception that some families may choose not to enroll in programs because they prefer to keep their children at home. ELCs could consider providing special training and resources for family and neighbor caregivers to prepare children for kindergarten (Example: <https://www.candelen.org/kith-kin/>).

Strategies to Increase Interest in Enrollment

Collaborate with Healthcare Providers

Some counties, such as Hillsborough ELC, have developed partnerships with pediatricians, who play a trusted role in communicating the importance of early childhood education during well-child visits. In at least one county, a major Medicaid provider modified its electronic health records system to prompt pediatricians to ask parents whether their child is enrolled in pre-K, and if not, why not. They also provide materials and information regarding the importance of early education.

Advertise in Places Where Parents and Young Children Gather, Such as Parks and Libraries

Most ELCs and school districts reported participating in events in community spaces such as hospitals, movie theaters, community centers, churches and grocery stores. Many counties hold events with local libraries, including featuring children's book authors and literacy conferences, and posting on message boards. Some counties, such as Broward, have explored outreach efforts in local housing developments to reach families directly, including posting flyers and door-to-door outreach. Many counties, including Broward, are also leveraging existing community programs such as summer programs that provide meals to children during the summer, to distribute books and early childhood education resources.

Use Mass Media Communication

Many counties are using a range of media channels – such as websites, social media, television, and radio – to educate parents about the importance of early childhood education and promote VPK enrollment. Hillsborough ELC has produced short, animated video clips that highlight the importance of VPK in school readiness and long-term educational success. Physical advertisements, including bus ads and billboards, are also being used to raise public awareness regarding VPK.

Recruit Through Enrolled Siblings

Some counties, such as Pinellas, reported sends flyers or newsletters home in the backpacks of children in kindergarten through second grade, reminding families to enroll their 4-year-olds. They also use digital communication tools such as email and posts to push out enrollment information.

Tap Into Informal Networks for Parents

Several counties, including Miami-Dade District, noted that word of mouth remains one of the most effective recruitment strategies, especially through informal networks of parents, such as WhatsApp and Facebook groups, through which parents learn about different programs. One director pointed out that parents rely heavily on peer recommendations.

Partner with Other Early Education Programs

Some counties work closely with Head Start and other free early education programs. If these programs are at capacity, children from their waitlists can be placed into school district VPK programs.

Reach Out to Families on Public Assistance

Some leaders have advocated for directly reaching out to families on public assistance, such as TANF recipients, but face challenges in implementing this. One director described repeatedly contacting the state to request this but has not yet received a positive response.

Summary of Strategies to Increase Access

Address the need for full workday care by facilitating provision of after school programs and targeted fundraising to cover gaps.

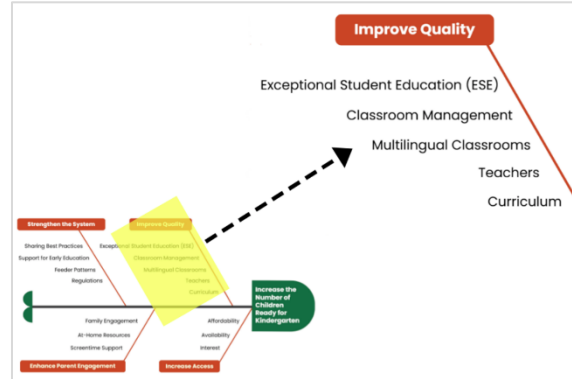
Consider converting unused facilities to multi-purpose hubs that address multiple needs of families.

Improve program availability by identifying and addressing emerging childcare deserts, striving to ensure equitable access to popular programs with lottery, and providing training/resources for family and neighbor caregivers.

Increase awareness of VPK and value of early education by collaborating with healthcare providers, advertising where families gather, reaching out to families on public assistance, and tapping into existing parent groups.

Quality

In Florida, key indicators of high quality early education programs include results from the student FAST assessment and teacher observation CLASS scores (see Appendix A for relevant scores). In addition to these indicators, the school directors of early learning and the ELC directors described challenges they often face in classroom management, Exceptional Student Education, and multilingual classrooms.



Choosing a Quality Early Education Program

Several directors noted that parents are becoming more discerning and knowledgeable when it comes to identifying quality in early childhood programs. One director described, "We have

"I've never met a parent who doesn't want the very best for their kid."

-Interviewee

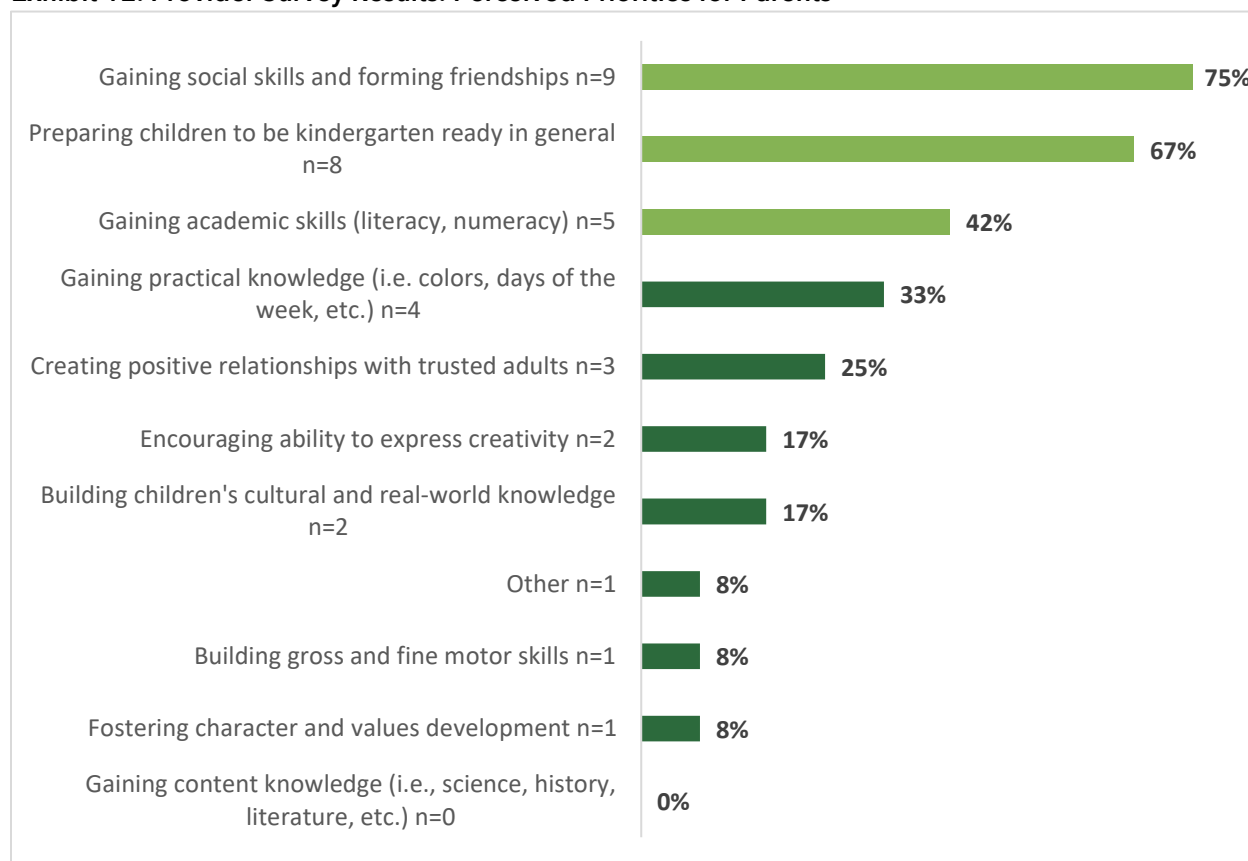
pockets of parents that are looking for high quality. They're looking for the credentials of the teacher. They're looking to see the curriculum. They want to know if what their children are going to be learning is developmentally appropriate." Some parents make their decisions based on first-hand observations. "Visiting that school beforehand definitely influences their choices... Parents want to make sure that it's a positive environment, that it looks open and inviting and welcoming to the families." One director said that

some families are looking for specific curricular approaches – Montessori, play-based, or more structured academic models. For others, the reputation or “brand” of a program heavily influences their choice.

In addition to general indicators of quality, many parents are also asking practical, and personal questions: "Is the teacher going to be able to handle discipline? Am I going to be called every day at work for things that a lot of times can be developmental?" For families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, the question of whether a provider reflects their identity is also increasingly important. "Does that childcare site or the people working in the childcare site, look like me and speak my child's language?"

In the survey, the directors reported their perceived top priorities of parents. They thought most parents were most interested in their children gaining social skills and forming friendships (75%) and preparing for kindergarten in general (67%) (Exhibit 12).

Exhibit 12. Provider Survey Results: Perceived Priorities for Parents



N=12; Note: Respondents could select all options that applied to them. Other = "Services offered by one program may not be offered by all three."

Several directors pointed out that many families are especially attracted to school district-run VPK programs because these programs typically employ certified teachers and provide access to a range of services beyond what private providers can offer – such as cafeterias with diverse meal options, access to libraries, school nurses, psychologists, and social workers.

Despite this growing awareness of quality among many parents, several directors pointed out that a significant number of high-quality programs may remain under-enrolled because the public may not perceive them as such. One director cited data showing significantly higher kindergarten readiness scores among children who attend district VPK programs. *"We lead the state in kindergarten readiness for the county...but our participation rate is just not high enough."* On the other hand, one director shared that families often aim for well-known elementary schools, and if they don't get in, they give up – overlooking other high-quality private programs in the area. Family childcare homes are also often overlooked, despite offering strong early learning environments. *"Families don't usually see them as a source of high-quality pre-K, which is a myth. They can be very strong pre-K programs."*

Specialized programs face similar struggles. In one county, for example, the Lighthouse Learning Center – housed within the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind – offers an exceptional

early education program for children with vision impairments. Yet, Miami-Dade ELC found that it struggles to meet VPK eligibility requirements because families without disabilities do not consider it as an option, despite its excellent track record. *“It’s a very high-quality program... But a lot of myths and stereotypes come with having your child in a program with children with disabilities.”* Several directors discussed the value of clearly educating the public about quality indicators such as FAST scores, teacher credentials, curriculum quality, discipline strategies, multilingual options, and other attributes.

Assessing the Quality of Early Education Programs

The quality of VPK programming is currently assessed through the student FAST scores, primarily focused on literacy skills, and CLASS observation scores, primarily focused on teacher classroom management skills. These scores differ by county and by provider type, with most programs showing improvement from 2024-2025 (see Appendix A).

Limitations of Florida Assessment of Student Thinking (FAST)

The directors pointed out several limitations of the FAST including assessing only in English and only testing VPK children. First, many directors discussed the problem of children being assessed exclusively in English, even when English is not their primary language at home. Children who understand content but lack English language skills may perform poorly, leading to inaccurate evaluations of their abilities.

Second, the FAST is administered only to children enrolled in VPK programs, although it would be appropriate for Head Start and many pre-K ESE students and it will be mandatory once students enter kindergarten. The FAST assessment, administered three times annually, provides valuable longitudinal data on children’s academic progress, enabling educators to tailor instruction to individual student needs. Thus, one director noted that offering it to other students could improve the kindergarten scores of more students in Florida.


Establishing Attendance Habits in Early Childhood Education

One of the foundational goals of early childhood education is to instill strong attendance habits that support long-term academic success. Regular day attendance – beginning as early as preschool – is seen as critical to helping children develop the routines and expectations necessary for formal schooling.

However, in Florida, systemic challenges hinder efforts to enforce attendance in the early years. The state’s compulsory school attendance law does not apply until age six, meaning that children in voluntary programs – such as preschool or pre-kindergarten – are not legally required to attend. While this limits formal enforcement, educators still emphasize the importance of early attendance to families, especially those whose children begin school as early

as age three. Despite these challenges, the directors in the survey reported fairly strong attendance in their programs (Exhibit 13).

Exhibit 13. Provider Survey Results: Attendance & Participation



Attendance & Participation

Both districts and ELCs reported **fairly strong attendance numbers**: districts that submitted data showed ~90% attendance rates; ELCs reported 92-98% attendance rates and completion of at least 70% of VPK hours for ~80% of children. This consistency indicates that **once children are enrolled, families are highly engaged**, reinforcing that **access - not engagement - is the central challenge**.

N=12

Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)

Across multiple districts and early learning coalitions, the CLASS teacher observation tool has become a central and transformative part of early childhood education practice, beyond just a compliance requirement. Initially introduced as part of VPK accountability, CLASS is now widely embraced as a framework for quality improvement, professional development, and instructional coaching. Educators and leaders have come to recognize its value in highlighting meaningful teacher-child interactions, emphasizing communication, relationships, and emotional support – all foundational to effective early learning. Some directors said their teachers were initially resistant, feeling pressure from being observed, but over time, many embraced the process as part of a broader professional growth effort.

Recruiting and Retaining Teachers

High quality early education heavily depends on having consistent qualified teachers, yet many providers struggle to fill classrooms because they cannot recruit or retain enough teachers. According to a survey of early educators in Florida conducted by the Children’s Forum (N = 979), 72% of teachers reported being very satisfied with their position working with young children. However, many of the directors highlighted recruitment and retention problems, largely due to low wages. Early education center directors described challenges for recruitment and retention of teachers including: 1) low pay driving turnover (e.g., teachers leaving for retail/higher-paying fields); 2) cumbersome credentialing processes (e.g., delays in background checks, testing barriers); and 3) lack of substitutes and high stress due to staffing shortages. In addition, 35% of early education workers who were considering leaving reported financial struggles, with many citing unlivable wages or better pay elsewhere.

Early education teachers often earn less than workers in retail or hospitality sectors, and many lack benefits, paid time off, or access to retirement systems. Despite increasing expectations – such as obtaining a CDA or college degrees – the compensation does not match the level of education or responsibility required, leading some directors to question the fairness of

encouraging educators to pursue degrees they cannot afford to complete. While public school districts can offer higher wages and benefits, private-sector childcare providers struggle to compete. On the other hand, one district pointed out that paraprofessionals work hourly and some can make more money in the private sector because the credential required for paraprofessionals is the same credential for lead teachers for many private providers.

Challenges in Classroom Management

Increasing Problems with Behavior

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, early childhood educators have seen a significant rise in behavioral and developmental challenges among young children. One director said, at every monthly provider meeting, a recurring concern echoes across programs: *“What do we do about the challenging kids?”* According to a staff survey conducted by the Children’s Forum, behavioral/mental health support (e.g., on-site specialists for special needs) is one of the most pressing needs for early education teachers, especially having more tools for undiagnosed developmental delays.

Directors report a noticeable increase in children presenting with complex needs – ranging from autism spectrum diagnoses to extreme emotional dysregulation and trauma-related behaviors. While special needs have always been a part of early education, teachers are now reporting classrooms with three or four children needing intensive support, rather than just one. This growing demand stretches already limited staffing and resources. Many of these children would benefit from one-on-one attention, but the staffing levels and the required funding required to support that are often beyond what programs can provide.

“If you ask all the kindergarten teachers who is kindergarten ready, they don't speak to reading. They don't speak to math. They don't speak to that. They say a child who is self-regulated, a child who's curious about learning.”

--Interviewee

In addition, more children are entering classrooms nonverbal, in diapers, or lacking basic self-help and self-regulation skills – areas typically expected to be somewhat developed by preschool age. General education VPK classrooms are not equipped with diaper changing stations, making it difficult to support children who require full assistance with toileting. While programs do not deny enrollment for children who are not potty trained, they are not staffed or equipped to provide the level of care needed in some cases.

Compounding the challenge is the increasing number of children entering preschool having experienced trauma or chronic stress. These children often struggle with emotional regulation and may not qualify for special education services yet still require a great deal of individualized attention and behavioral support. Teachers frequently feel underprepared to manage these

complex needs and, without additional help or training, the resulting stress contributes to high turnover – already a critical issue in the early childhood workforce.

While the state does offer a higher reimbursement rate for children with identified special needs, providers report that the additional funding is not enough. The demands placed on teachers working in high-need classrooms are simply not matched by compensation or resources, making retention difficult even with enhanced reimbursements.

Relatedly, a critical goal shared across many programs is to reduce or eliminate expulsions. However, without proper behavior management strategies and support systems in place, expulsions – particularly soft expulsions – continue to happen. Soft expulsions occur when parents are repeatedly called to pick up their child due to behavioral issues and eventually decide to withdraw them. *“Yes, the parent chose to leave,”* one leader noted, *“but only because they were being called three times a week to take their child home early.”* These scenarios disproportionately impact children who most need stability and support.

Pre-K Exceptional Student Education (ESE)

Children with disabilities who qualify for Pre-K ESE programs are entitled to specialized, high-quality services through their local public schools. As the Local Educational Agency (LEA), the public school district is legally obligated to provide ESE services to all children who qualify. These programs, which begin as early as age three, are staffed by certified special education teachers, maintain low student-to-teacher ratios, and are tailored to meet the unique developmental and educational needs of young children with disabilities. These children qualify for services through the development of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The goal of ESE is to provide early intervention that supports developmental growth and prepares children with disabilities for successful school experiences.

Florida offers a broad continuum of ESE services, designed to meet each child’s unique needs. At one end of the continuum is the most intensive level of support: self-contained classrooms, where children with disabilities attend five days a week in specialized settings alongside other students with similar needs. At the other end of the continuum are less intensive, flexible service delivery models, such as walk-on services, itinerant teacher support, speech therapy and related services. Service intensity is tailored to each child’s IEP, ranging from 1 to 5 hours per week, or more if needed.

Funding ESE programs

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) entitles all children to a free and appropriate public education, yet many families remain unaware of available resources. All children receiving School Readiness funding between birth and 60 months are eligible for annual developmental screenings, as mandated by statute. For children birth to 36 months, the state's Early Steps program is responsible for conducting evaluations and determining

eligibility for early intervention services. From 36 months through the start of kindergarten, the process shifts to the public school system.

The Special Needs Rate Differential is a financial incentive offered to School Readiness providers who demonstrate that they are serving children with disabilities and going above and beyond standard care expectations. Providers who complete the necessary documentation and requirements, including conducting observation-based child assessments, are eligible for an additional 5% reimbursement above the standard daily rate for each qualifying child.

The Matrix of Services

The Matrix of Services is a tool used by the Florida Department of Education to assign a numerical value that reflects the level of support a child with disabilities requires. This number directly determines the amount of scholarship funding a child receives. The scholarship funds can be used for a variety of educational expenses, including private school tuition, therapies (e.g., speech, occupational), educational materials and support services.

However, accepting this scholarship designates it as the primary funding source, which renders the child ineligible for other state-funded services, including public school-based ESE programs. For example, if a family of a 3-year-old child with autism accepts the scholarship, the child can no longer access publicly funded ESE services through their local school district. Thus, families are often required to make a mutually exclusive decision between public school ESE services and the financial support offered by the scholarship program, which can limit access to comprehensive public resources.

Increasing Numbers of ESE Children

In recent years, local early childhood systems have seen a notable increase in the identification and support of ESE children. For example, when one director began, only 18 children were identified to receive the special needs rate through the School Readiness program. Today, that number has grown to over 200 children. This increase is attributed in part to reduced administrative barriers – specifically, the removal of certain documentation requirements – and to stronger community outreach and support mechanisms.

Importance of Early Intervention

Early intervention, especially for autism spectrum disorder, is critically important because beginning treatment in infancy or toddlerhood – during periods of high neuroplasticity – has been shown to significantly improve social communication skills, daily living abilities, and reduce autistic symptoms, compared to waiting until later childhood (Fuller & Kaiser, 2020; Daniolou et al., 2022). However, not all parents – particularly those unfamiliar with developmental milestones – may recognize delays, and some may be in denial. This lack of awareness is compounded in cases where families have limited access to pediatric care or are

not consistently receiving developmental guidance from healthcare providers. While not all behavioral concerns warrant a formal evaluation, stakeholders report that many children begin early childhood programs at ages 3 or 4 with unaddressed developmental delays. As a result, children may enter kindergarten without ever having received early intervention, creating significant challenges for public schools, which must scramble to initiate evaluations and determine appropriate placements under time pressure.

Barriers to Early Detection

One of the largest barriers identified is the evaluation process itself, which is typically conducted by the school district. In some districts, all evaluations occur at a single centralized site, during school hours, with no evening or weekend availability. Given the geographic size of many counties and the demands on working parents, this model often proves impractical. Travel time alone can exceed an hour each way, and arranging time off during limited weekday hours is not feasible for many families. Moreover, the unfamiliar evaluation setting can affect the child's comfort level and performance.

Blended Pre-K Classrooms

Blended Pre-K classrooms are designed to integrate children with and without disabilities in a single inclusive learning environment. These classrooms support both general education VPK students and students with disabilities, creating an instructional model grounded in the principles of inclusion, differentiated instruction, and peer modeling. Among the districts surveyed, five out of the six said they have blended classrooms.

Classroom Composition and Staffing

The structure of blended classrooms typically includes up to 10 VPK (general education) students and up to 8 students with disabilities, for a total of no more than 18 children. These classrooms are staffed with one certified teacher and two paraprofessionals, resulting in a high adult-to-student ratio (3:18). This model is intentionally designed to provide the necessary support for implementing individualized instruction while maintaining quality group engagement and classroom management. However, in practice, many classrooms do not operate at the maximum ESE capacity due to the complexity of student needs.

Educational and Social Benefits

The benefits of the blended classroom model are widely recognized. For students with disabilities, the setting offers access to the least restrictive environment - a foundational principle under IDEA. In this setting, children are surrounded by same-age peers who model appropriate communication, social behaviors, and academic engagement.

Conversely, typically developing children in blended settings gain early exposure to peers with diverse abilities, fostering empathy, inclusion, and a broader understanding of individual

differences. As one district leader noted, the experience teaches children that *"kids look different, and learn different, and behave differently - and that's the way our world is."* In addition, several districts pointed out that their students score well on the FAST tests. According to one director, *"What we learned with our inclusion classrooms is that they score almost the same as my ones that are filled with typically developing."*

The model also positively impacts district-level metrics. The state of Florida issues an annual "report card" to ESE models consistently earn high marks for inclusive educational opportunities.

Parent Reactions and Community Perception

Parental response to blended classrooms has been largely positive. For families of children with disabilities, the inclusive setting provides relief and reassurance. Many parents initially experience grief or anxiety following a diagnosis, fearing their child will be segregated or excluded. Seeing their child learning alongside typical peers in a vibrant, well-supported environment often shifts those concerns into appreciation.

Occasionally, parents of general education children express reservations, fearing their child may receive less individual attention. However, such concerns are rare and often resolved through open communication. As one administrator explained, families are reminded that all students – regardless of ability – will ultimately learn together in kindergarten and beyond.

Challenges of Implementation

Despite its strengths, the blended classroom model presents significant challenges for educators. Teachers are tasked with meeting the developmental needs of both typically developing 4-year-olds and students with varying disabilities – who may be 3, 4, or 5 years old, and range from speech and language impairments to more profound disabilities such as autism.

Each child with a disability has an IEP, which must be implemented with fidelity. This requires educators to provide specially designed instruction aligned to individualized goals, while also delivering the full VPK curriculum and maintaining compliance with both ESE and VPK program standards.

To support this complex role, the inclusion of two paraprofessionals is essential. Paraprofessionals often lead small groups, conduct student assessments, prepare materials, and support individualized learning goals. Their role is seen as critical to the success of the classroom, extending far beyond basic supervision or caregiving duties.

Multilingual Classrooms

Several providers shared having classrooms designated as dual language classrooms. One program uses the **Frog Street** curriculum in both English and Spanish, with teachers alternating

instruction between the two languages throughout the day. To reduce costs associated with purchasing separate English and Spanish materials, the director convinced the publisher to create a customized dual-language package.

Providers noted that this bilingual approach is especially important given the demographics of the area. In parts of Florida with a large migrant worker population, families typically arrive in November and leave by April. As a result, one county reported that their VPK migrant program was funded primarily by their multicultural department, not VPK, because those children are not always local by the beginning of the year, but VPK funds are used to supplement expenses.

Providers also highlighted a shortage of teachers who are fluent in both English and Spanish. While many paraprofessionals speak a second language—mostly Spanish—and are able to support the classrooms, direct instruction in a student’s native language is extremely rare. One provider estimated that in about 98% of classrooms, instruction is delivered primarily in English, with minimal native language use during lessons. One director reported that Title V has historically contributed by supporting the salary of one paraprofessional and purchasing instructional materials. This support, while helpful, is limited in scope.

Several directors also highlighted the role of the Redlands Christian Migrant Association (RCMA), a major community resource for migrant families. RCMA operates numerous free childcare centers that are open from 5 a.m. to 7 p.m., offering extended care that meets the needs of working migrant parents. Many providers noted that migrant families often choose RCMA centers over local programs. Although RCMA receives VPK funding, it is not part of the local Early Learning Coalition (ELC), which influences coordination and collaboration within the community.

Strategies to Improve Quality

The participants reported effective strategies they use to prepare children for the FAST assessment and to train teachers with CLASS. They also described how they recruit and retain teachers and address the increasing behavioral issues in classrooms. Finally, they talked about how they detect and address needs for additional services.

Prepare for the FAST Assessment by using curricula that are grounded in research, well-reviewed, and contextually appropriate.

When it comes to core curricula, many providers rely on established programs like **Creative Curriculum** and **Frog Street**. Creative Curriculum is valued for its flexibility and bilingual resources, which are especially critical in regions where many educators and families speak primarily Spanish. Frog Street, on the other hand, is praised for its structured, tangible components—such as manipulatives, books, and a comprehensive teacher manual—and is often chosen by schools that prefer a more scripted teaching approach. Frog Street also

includes a digital component called "Lily Pad," which supplements the main curriculum with multimedia tools. In addition, several directors discussed the importance of piloting new curricula to ensure that it resonated with the unique cultural demographics of each community and that the new curricula aligns with local K-12 curriculum.

In addition to core curricula, educators enhance classroom instruction with literacy interventions. Programs such as **Nemours BrightStart!** are widely used as supplemental literacy curricula. This evidence-based intervention targets at-risk three- and four-year-olds through a small group model. Students are screened for early literacy skills, receive targeted instruction through 20 structured lessons, and are assessed post-intervention. The results have been promising: programs report fewer children needing interventions at age four when they participate at age three.

Ensure Children are Familiar with Digital Devices Used for Testing

Several directors reported that preparing children for FAST requires early exposure to the mechanics of digital assessment. Many children encountered digital assessments for the first time in kindergarten, which disproportionately affected those from lower-resource backgrounds. In addition, children may encounter assessments on different devices – such as touchscreen computers, tablets, or desktops with a mouse – each requiring different physical and cognitive skills. Teachers have addressed this by exposing students to multiple device types and by embedding practice sessions into daily instruction.

Harness Technology for Instruction and Assessment but Within Recommended Time Limits

Most directors felt hesitant about incorporating screen time in the classroom, often citing the American Academy of Pediatrics recommendations that children ages 2-5 limit screen time to 1 hour per day of quality programs. Yet some found that technology can be used to both facilitate the learning process and assess the level of students' knowledge. Early identification, targeted instruction and data-driven instructional changes, such as those enabled by technology, have been shown to increase literacy skills (Neumann et al., 2019).

Technology plays a growing role in supporting both teaching and learning. Adaptive learning platforms like **My Reading Academy** and **My Math Academy** provide individualized, data-driven insights about student progress. Teachers use these tools for just 10 minutes a day during center time, allowing for intentional skill development while preventing overuse of screen time. The data generated supports teacher decision-making and informs coaching support when classrooms face widespread learning gaps. These digital tools have contributed to significantly improved readiness and literacy scores in participating programs.

Other technology-based resources include **Starfall**, **ABC Mouse**, and **Waterford**, which help build foundational literacy and math skills. For example, Waterford is used for 15 minutes

daily to deliver structured lessons aligned with kindergarten readiness standards. Some programs have also experimented with tools like **Cognitive Toy Box**, which gamifies progress monitoring, though integration challenges with school district systems have limited its broader implementation.

Assessment tools like **Star Early Literacy** and **Cognitive Toy Box** are also used to monitor progress, though some tools – such as Frog Street's new recommendation, **AIMS** – are met with caution due to concerns over teacher overload and technology compatibility.

Palm Beach District recommended using **Book Creator**, a digital tool that enables students to author and publish their own books, which fosters creativity among educators and encourages parental involvement. The platform allows for easy sharing through access codes, promoting continued engagement as books can be read by peers and family members.

Use Ongoing Data Analysis and Targeted Intervention

Many programs also train educators on how to analyze and use classroom data effectively, connecting academic results to instructional strategies and social-emotional development. This support ensures that technology is not just an add-on, but an integrated part of effective teaching practice. Teachers were able to closely monitor student progress using early assessment data from PM1 to predict end-of-year outcomes. For students projected to fall short of benchmarks, Orange District implemented targeted supports, including supplemental reading programs and math kits.

Encourage Attendance

Several directors described working collaboratively with families to create sustainable routines that promote school attendance. Unenrollment is considered only as a last resort and often avoided, even when persistent absenteeism occurs. As one leader explained, removing a child from a program only delays the underlying problem.

Provide Children with Sufficient Time and Instruction to take the FAST

Some directors pointed out the importance of using the full 30-day testing window to delay assessments for children who needed more time to acclimate. They also recommended following structured practice routines before testing, including familiarization with key visual prompts (e.g., the “rabbit” icon used to repeat questions).

Test One-On-One or in Small Groups

Although state guidelines permit group testing (up to five students), Pinellas District advocated for one-on-one administration. This individualized approach provided more accurate assessments of student understanding and reduced performance anxiety.

Advocate for Testing in a Child’s Home Language

Several directors, especially Miami-Dade ELC, highlighted the potential value of preparing for and administering the FAST test in the home language. Doing so could speed up English proficiency and help educators determine if the test score is due to language or developmental delays.

Strategies to Assess Teachers with CLASS

Provide Teachers with Training

Several counties highlighted offering their teachers training regarding CLASS, with supports and mentoring for underperforming providers. Several counties, including Broward ELC, took a proactive approach to implementation, offering early info sessions, mock assessments, and targeted training before CLASS became a requirement. This helped ease provider anxiety and improve outcomes from the start.

Carefully Consider Timing of CLASS Observations

Observing programs too soon in the school year can cause programs distress and can hinder them from being able to present their best selves. Programs should be given at least a month to acclimate to new students.

Strategies to Recruit and Retain Teachers

The participants described many ways they recruited and retained teachers, advertising and incentives. When the Children’s Forum asked early education professionals how state and local agencies can support early childhood programs, they said things related to competitive wages and benefits to attract teachers (see Exhibit 14).

Exhibit 14. Strategies to Recruit and Retain Teachers

Domain	Strategy
Financial Incentives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Higher wages/salary supplements (e.g., matching public school pay, cost-of-living adjustments) Signing and Retention Bonuses (e.g., for longevity, completing degrees)
Training & Professional Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Free/low-cost courses (e.g., DCF 45-hour training, CDA) Stipends for completing training or certifications, Streamlined testing (e.g., online options, more frequent exam availability)
Recruitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Job fairs and dedicated hiring portals for ECE professionals Pre-screened candidate pools with verified credentials/background checks Subsidies for onboarding costs (e.g., fingerprinting, physical exams);
Benefits & Work Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Affordable health insurance and retirement plans Lower teacher-child ratios to reduce burnout Paid time off and mental health resources;
Grants & Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Program-specific grants for teacher salaries, classroom supplies Increased reimbursement rates for School Readiness/VPK to boost wages
Recognition & Career Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scholarships (e.g., T.E.A.C.H.) for advanced degrees Clear career pathways with promotions/leadership roles Public awareness campaigns to elevate ECE professionalism.

Participate in Career Fairs - Both Internal and External

Several counties described organizing and/or participating in career fairs regularly, with a department representative attending to gather information from potential candidates. In addition, some school districts engage with university-sponsored career fairs, where they are invited to speak directly to students pursuing education careers.

Partner with Temporary Agencies to Recruit Substitute Teachers with Long-Term Potential

Broward District said that partnering with organizations like Kelly Services to target substitute teacher hiring allowed them to identify candidates with relevant qualifications and connect them to substitute teaching roles. This can serve as a steppingstone to becoming teacher assistants and eventually certified teachers.

Recruit Parents to Become Early Education Professionals

Broward District also recruits engaged parents – particularly those who are home caregivers but not currently employed – to enter the teaching workforce. By providing these parents with professional development, coaching, and mentorship, districts have successfully trained many parents to become early childhood educators, simultaneously addressing

workforce shortages and breaking the childcare-employment cycle. These parents can bring their own children to the schools where they teach, becoming eligible for childcare while contributing to the classroom environment.

“Grow Your Own”

Many districts have embraced a “grow-your-own” model, which supports staff through on-the-job training and clear career pathways. For example, employee childcare centers offer access to required state training hours, enabling individuals to earn the CDA credentials while working. Miami-Dade District offers apprenticeship programs with Miami-Dade College to help students pursue full teacher certification over time, creating sustainable pipelines of qualified educators from within the community. One director reported that due to teacher shortages, positions are occasionally downgraded on a temporary basis. The district then actively encourages affected individuals to pursue higher qualifications by leveraging local and state scholarships.

Build Higher Education Partnerships to Provide Teacher Training

Coalitions and districts collaborate with colleges and universities to offer training, micro-credentials, and pathways for early childhood educators. These include articulation agreements for credit (e.g., Seminole State); free emergent literacy micro-credentials (University of Florida); paid internships for student teachers (e.g., Miami-Dade College, UCF). Some directors form partnerships with local colleges where students are brought in as interns, which provides hands-on experience and creates a direct pipeline for these students to engage with early learning programs. Palm Beach District helped to develop a pathway allowing teachers to begin content-specific coursework at a local college before completing general education requirements, enabling faster entry into the workforce. This “upside-down capstone” model supports immediate employment while preserving a structured route toward earning a full degree.

Use Education Incentives to Develop Teachers’ Credentials

Many directors reported that early learning programs are actively using education incentives to recruit and retain teachers, with a strong emphasis on supporting teachers in obtaining formal qualifications – especially the CDA credential. One director noticed that the biggest impact on teacher effectiveness comes when educators move from informal or less structured trainings to earning nationally recognized certifications like the CDA. Some counties, such as Broward, report holding CDA boot camps, providing intensive one-week training with compensation, while others offer on-site CDA cohorts for multiple educators at a single location. However, not all CDA programs are equally effective. In response, the Children’s Forum is creating a center for credentials, including an approved list of CDA programs, career counselors, and other supports.

In addition, some Children’s Services Councils offer scholarships that cover college courses, allowing teachers to advance their education up to a master’s degree in early care and education without cost. The TEACH program, offered by the Children’s Forum, is a widely used tool that pays for teachers’ education to obtain their VPK qualifications (including the CDA) and ongoing retention stipends, paid every six months, to incentivize teachers to stay in the field and pursue further education. According to the Children’s Forum, the TEACH program has reduced turnover to 7-8%. It is a relatively inexpensive but highly effective strategy, often starting with high school students.

Use Stipends to Encourage Retention

Many coalitions offer wage incentives on a semi-annual basis, rewarding teachers every six months after successful employment and registration with the state. Some regions reported that stipends have helped stabilize teacher retention, with frequent engagement such as monthly visits and focus groups reinforcing this connection. However, consistent funding challenges remain a major barrier; several coalitions acknowledged recent legislative budget cuts have forced them to reduce or pause stipend offerings altogether.

Provide Free/Low-Cost and Accessible Professional Development

Directors also described providing ongoing professional development including curriculum training, behavior management, literacy development, and support for classroom implementation. Educators surveyed by the Children’s Forum suggested offering more free/low-cost, accessible courses (online, evenings, weekends) and hands-on training for behavior management, special needs, and trauma-informed care.

Provide Support and Coaching

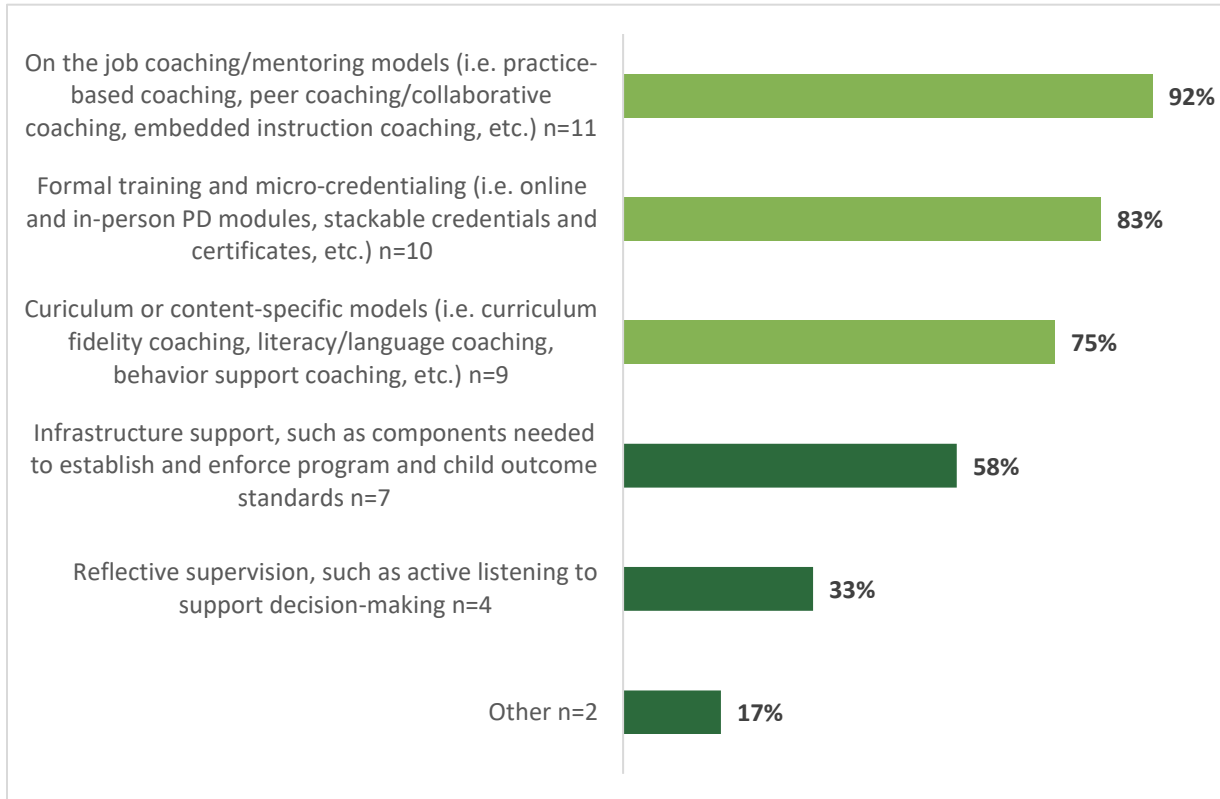
Some programs, such as Pinellas District, offer instructional coaches who provide regular, on-site guidance tailored to each educator's needs, helping to strengthen classroom practice and reduce burnout. These relationships are intentionally built on empathy and collaboration, creating a positive, non-judgmental environment where educators feel valued. Additionally, recognition programs like “Teacher of the Month” at Orange ELC help boost morale and build a sense of community. Palm Beach District found that newsletters that offered helpful information and celebrated successes created a sense of community of teachers

Use Volunteer Organizations to Provide Tutoring

Programs like Florida Early Learning Corps (AMPACT/AmeriCorps) provide small group literacy and math support in VPK classrooms, offering a pipeline of trained support staff. Likewise, Seniors in Service programs pair older adults with young children to promote intergenerational literacy efforts.

The early learning school directors and the ELC directors reported the professional development models they use. The most popular models were coaching/mentoring (92%) and formal training or micro-credentialing (83%) (Exhibit 15).

Exhibit 15. Provider Survey Results: Professional Development Models



N=12; Note: Providers could select all options that applied to them. Other = "Building an early childhood teacher identity"

Strategies for Effective Classroom Management

To address the complex behavioral needs of young children, districts and early learning coalitions have implemented multiple coordinated strategies aimed at supporting both children and educators.

Offer Behavior Specialists and Coaching

Several ELCs, including Orange ELC, reported providing behavior specialists or coaches to early learning providers. These specialists conduct monthly visits – both in-person and virtual – to observe classrooms, identify children in need of support using tools like the Ages & Stages Social Emotional Questionnaire, and model behavior intervention strategies. They also assist in modifying classroom environments to reduce triggers and promote positive behavior. This proactive support helps prevent expulsions and reduces teacher burnout by equipping educators with practical tools.

Likewise, some programs have adopted a mandatory coaching model, ensuring every teacher is paired with a behavior coach, which has demonstrated increased effectiveness compared to voluntary coaching. However, the sustainability of embedding behaviorists directly within childcare programs remains a challenge due to funding constraints.

Provide Training to Effectively Address Behavior Management

Comprehensive teacher training is a cornerstone of behavior support. One ELC partners with a successful inclusive program to enable all the centers in the county to benefit from their expertise. Another district provides an innovative program that provides ongoing, accessible support for educators facing challenging behaviors, offering real-time advice and shared experiences via weekly virtual sessions.

Implement Evidence-Based Frameworks

The directors described implementing evidence-based curricula, such as the **Pyramid Model** and **Second Step**, which promotes classroom management through daily teaching of routines, social skills, and self-regulation. Some also use **Conscious Discipline**, an adult-first approach emphasizing teacher modeling of emotional regulation, further enhances classroom climate. According to the directors, these curricula and frameworks help control many challenging behaviors by establishing clear, developmentally appropriate expectations. Palm Beach is piloting use of the **Devereux Early Childhood Assessment**, a strength-based tool for evaluating the social and emotional health and resilience of young children, typically from birth through age five. It identifies protective factors like initiative, self-regulation, and healthy attachments, providing caregivers and educators with strategies to build these skills through everyday activities and routines.

Engage with Families to Ensure Consistency

Several directors also emphasized the importance of consistent routines and communication between educators and families. Collaborative efforts ensure that behavioral expectations and interventions are reinforced both at school and home, supporting children's acclimation and development.

Strategies to Facilitate Detection of Special Needs

Build Partnerships with Health Care Providers to Increase Early Detection

Several directors discussed the benefits of having strong partnerships with pediatricians and other healthcare providers to increase early detection of developmental concerns.

Conduct Evaluations Within the Child's Familiar Environment

Several directors pointed out that conducting screening and evaluation within familiar environments, such as their early learning center, and involving familiar caregivers or

teachers will help children feel at ease and remove the burden of transportation on the parents.

Provide Peer Support to Parents

Broward ELC described offering peer support specialists, or parents who have navigated the evaluation and IEP process themselves, who can play a critical role in helping other families understand and manage the often-complex early intervention landscape. Peer support specialists assist with paperwork, schedule reminders, attend meetings, and offer emotional support to families who are just beginning to suspect developmental concerns.

Likewise, some districts offered monthly peer support groups to provide a safe space for sharing experiences, resources, and guidance. These groups often feature guest speakers who help demystify complex processes like IEP meetings, which can be confusing, especially for parents who may have limited familiarity with the special education system.

Summary of Strategies to Improve Quality

Choose research-based, well-reviewed and contextually appropriate curricula; 2) employing digital platforms judiciously, 3) using ongoing data analysis to inform targeted intervention.

Allow children to acclimate before testing, test one-on-one, and advocate for testing in the home language.

Improve CLASS scores by providing CLASS-specific training to teachers and conducting CLASS observations after children have acclimated to classroom.

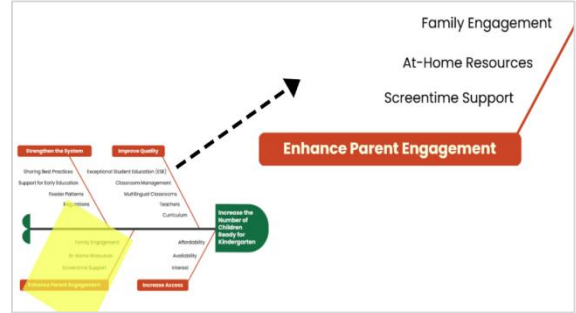
Recruit and retain teachers by encouraging programs to “grow their own”; partnering with educational institutions; supporting new and existing educational and financial incentives.

Provide behavior specialists and training for teachers and use evidence-based framework.

Build partnerships with pediatricians to increase early detection, conduct evaluations within the child’s familiar environment, and offer peer support specialists to parents.

Parent Engagement

The participants described the importance of engaging in and supporting the parents of the children they serve. One director pointed out, *“They’re giving you their baby and that connection to families is very important.”* In addition to working together to support the child’s educational and social-emotional development, all ELCs are structured around Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) services, which play a vital role in supporting families.



Any parent with a child from birth through age 13 can call for assistance with a variety of needs – childcare-related or otherwise. For example, if a parent needs help applying for food stamps or other public benefits, the call center staff provide referrals and guide them through the process, regardless of whether they are currently receiving coalition services.

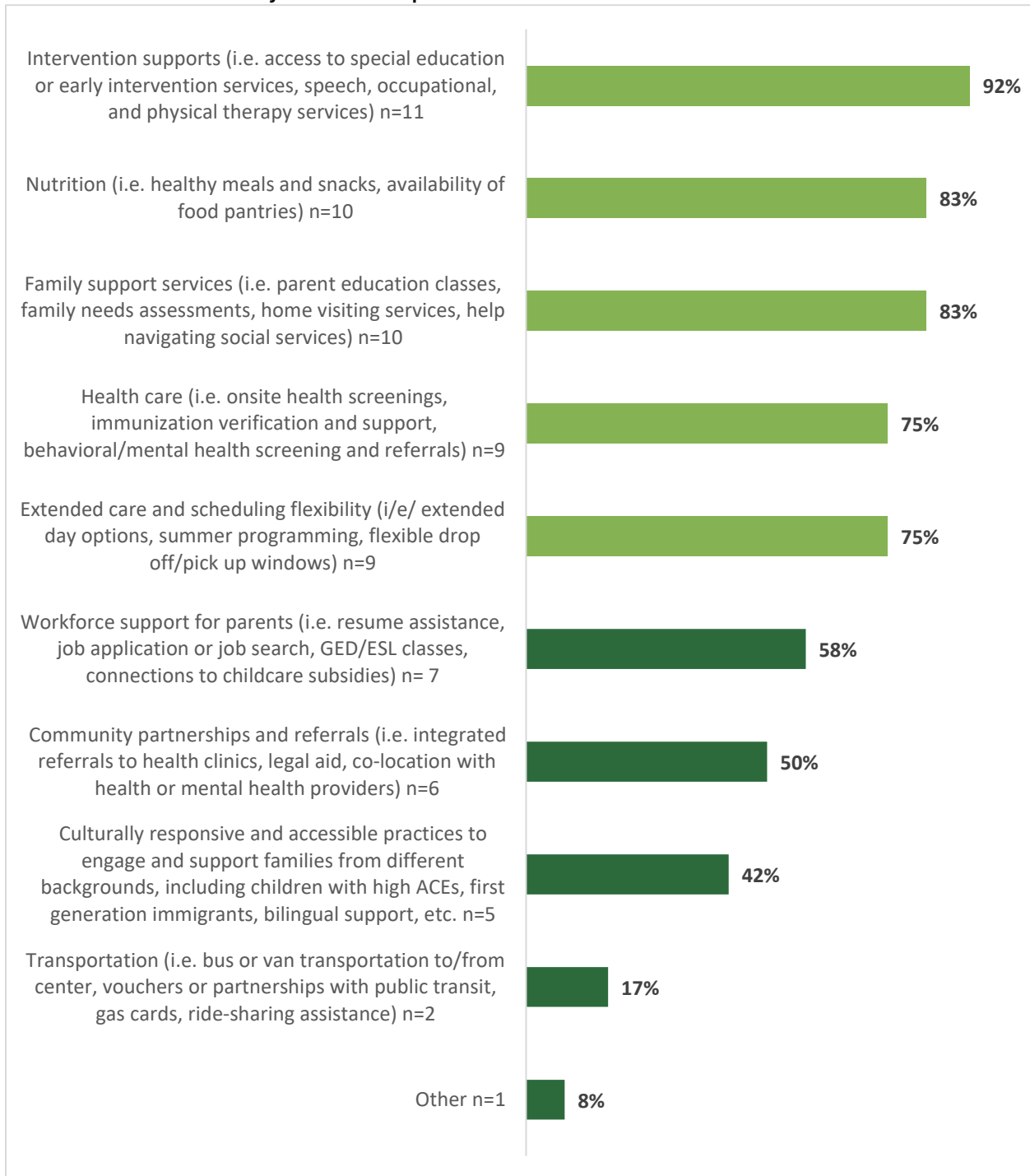
“I think it's important for us to honor families as the child's first teacher, and if you enter a relationship building that, then it's a much easier thing to talk about behavior and social-emotional concerns.”

--Interviewee

Staff certified in CCR&R possess comprehensive knowledge of community resources including training in crisis management, which enables staff to provide sensitive support for parents experiencing social or emotional challenges. Often, CCR&R professionals facilitate “soft handoffs” through three-way phone calls, ensuring a smooth connection between parents and the appropriate service providers.

Wraparound services are also provided to their families. Directors reported that most programs provide intervention support (92%), nutrition (83%), and family support services (83%) (Exhibit 16).

Exhibit 16. Provider Survey Results: Wraparound Services



N=12 Other = "Note: Services offered by one program may not be offered by all three."

Screen Time at Home

Across early childhood education providers, there is a growing concern about the pervasive role of screen time in children’s daily lives—and a strong push for healthier alternatives that promote engagement, curiosity, and early literacy. While acknowledging the realities many families face, providers are working to reshape both attitudes and practices around digital media use.

Realities of Overuse: What Providers See

Most of the directors are deeply troubled by the amount of screen time children experience outside of structured care. *“Kids spend way too much time on screens when they’re not with us... You’ve spent a fortune for your child to [go to Disney], and they’re in a stroller looking at a phone.”* One pointed out that even simple family routines like grocery shopping have become opportunities for screen absorption instead of parent-child interaction.

Understanding the Dangers of Screen Overuse

From developmental concerns to long-term social effects, most directors agreed that too much screen time is harmful. They reported that screen time shortens attention spans, affects the frontal lobe, and reinforces instant gratification. The impacts are not just neurological but linguistic and relational. *“There’s no table talk anymore,”* one director said. *“That’s where oral language development begins. When kids stare at a screen, they’re not developing expressive or receptive language.”* Others worried about how screen use suppresses curiosity. *“It’s not allowing a child to grow and expand their curiosity... I really worry how that will have an effect on young children moving forward.”*

Challenges of Parent Realities

Time-strapped families may not feel they have the capacity to follow through. One director shared this exchange: *“Can you read to him for 10 minutes a day?” She said, ‘I ain’t got 10 minutes.’ She’s working two jobs. Her second shift starts at 6. She’s fighting child support, receiving SNAP. She doesn’t have 10 minutes.”*

Strategies to Enhance Parent Engagement

All the directors described different strategies they used to engage and support parents. In addition to educational activities and at-home resources, both districts and ELCs provide referrals to resources.

Offer Parent Education and Training

Miami-Dade District offers a Parent Academy featuring virtual workshops on diverse topics relevant to families. These workshops often include interactive “exhibit halls” where parents can explore information from various providers and community organizations. One

prominent program is a six-week parenting class offered in several cohorts throughout the year. This course provides parents with essential knowledge and skills that are not commonly taught elsewhere, enhancing their confidence and competence in early childhood care.

To maintain ongoing engagement and support, coalition staff frequently check in with parents – sometimes weekly – to assess their well-being and evolving needs. Beyond direct contact, coalitions also utilize digital platforms, including YouTube and social media channels, to share educational content and resources widely, ensuring parents have continuous access to helpful information.

Hold Engaging and Informative Family Events

Both ELCs and districts report actively engaging families, especially those in hard-to-reach and underserved areas, through a variety of community-based events and initiatives. One key strategy involves “pop-up” events. For example, Palm Beach ELC sets up interactive intervention spaces centered around the Ages and Stages Questionnaire. These events provide hands-on activities and games that help parents understand how to observe and support their children’s developmental milestones. Likewise, Pinellas District hosts shaded play areas at community gatherings to promote the importance of parent-child interaction from as early as six months old.

Many programs and districts host regular family engagement events. One director described encouraging programs to make family nights engaging and fun, emphasizing activities that involve both children and parents. They described several examples:

- Broward District “Hot Food, Hot Topics” is an event where families come together to share meals cooked in crockpots throughout the day. During these gatherings, parents receive recipe booklets that not only provide healthy meal ideas but also emphasize the benefits of eating, cooking, and reading together as a family, fostering joy and connection.
- Hillsborough ELC fosters STEM engagement through partnerships with local cultural institutions.
- Hillsborough ELC also hosts an event “Day of Play,” which aims to educate parents on how to engage with their children through play.
- Orange ELC holds a “Slide into Summer” event in late May, during which they distribute an array of educational materials and resources for families to support continued learning during the summer months. Families receive items such as curriculum materials, free diapers, meals, etc.

Provide One-On-One or Small Group Support for Parents

In many Title I schools, parent engagement resources such as Parent Education and Leadership Liaisons (PELLs) are automatically included in their budgets, ensuring dedicated support for families. One teacher in Pinellas District established a Parent Teacher Association for her preschool families. This helped parents become more comfortable with the school environment.

Provide At-Home Resources for Parents to Support Their Children's Development

To support families in continuing learning at home, many programs provide take-home materials tailored to children's developmental stages. For the summer, Palm Beach gives children backpacks filled with books, craft supplies, and easy-to-follow activity guides to prevent summer learning loss. Social media is used to supplement these materials, offering weekly tips and additional components to enrich home learning experiences.

Digital resources play a growing role in family engagement. Several districts, including Miami-Dade District, have utilized platforms such as **Ready Rosie**, which provides brief, language-appropriate video lessons and interactive games that parents can use with their children at home. These tools allow teachers to send targeted activities based on children's skill levels, making learning accessible and manageable for families. To increase accessibility, some providers distribute simple one-page guides with QR codes or scratch-off cards that direct parents to digital content, aiming to reduce barriers related to technology use.

Encourage and Empower Reading at Home

For both ELCs and districts, a range of initiatives aim to promote early childhood literacy and family engagement through innovative community partnerships and accessible resources. Central to these efforts is the promotion of daily read-aloud practices, which are considered essential for building young readers. For parents unable to read English, Palm Beach ELC has recorded readings on YouTube accompany physical books, with verbal cues guiding parents on when to turn pages, helping to bridge language gaps and encourage shared reading experiences.

Many programs actively work to build home libraries and create literacy-rich environments. For example, Pinellas ELC offers a program called "Ready to Read" which delivers age-appropriate books monthly to children's homes, accompanied by resource-rich newsletters tailored to each book. Broward District offers an annual event, *Read for the Record*, to rally communities to read the same book simultaneously, aiming to break world records and promote widespread engagement.

Most directors described forming collaboratives with local libraries to ensure families have library access and encouraging library card sign-ups. A volunteer coordinator in Broward County has created and maintains over 100 Little Free Libraries.

A unique outreach effort is Hillsborough ELC's literacy bus, affectionately named *Paige Turner*. This repurposed school bus is outfitted with board books and literacy materials and staffed by literacy educators who model reading strategies for parents and teachers in community centers and early learning settings. Paige Turner attends community events ranging from fairs to Juneteenth celebrations, bringing literacy promotion to diverse audiences. The bus operates through a combination of VPK and Title I funding, Head Start contributions, and community donations, supported by volunteers who donate time and materials.

Promote Balance in Screen Time at Home

Despite strong concerns, most of the directors did not suggest banning technology. Instead, they advocate for intentional use of high-quality digital tools that support learning. When screens are used, they should offer interactive, scaffolded learning rather than passive consumption.

Provide Screen Alternatives, Especially Interactive Play

Many directors focused on offering screen time alternatives. They described the need for imaginative and often messy play, all of which build essential cognitive and social skills. Through this emphasis, the hope is to reduce passive screen time by replacing it with active, developmentally rich experiences.

Summary of Strategies to Enhance Parent Engagement

Offer parent education and training, hold engaging and informative family events, and provide one-on-one or small group support for parents.

Provide at-home resources for parents to support their children's development and encourage reading at home by offering at home activities and building home libraries.

Promote balance in screen time use at home and suggest screen alternatives, especially play.

Strengthen the System

For each of the above categories, the participants pointed out various system-wide interventions that would provide high impact to early education. Some involve gathering leaders together whereas others require policy changes.

Strategies to Regularly Share Best Practices

Convene Collaborative Groups

Several directors, such as Pinellas, describe the benefits of creating regular collaborative groups, bringing together districts, ELCs, county leaders, and service organizations to discuss kindergarten readiness, share successes, and address systemic barriers. These spaces can foster the sharing of innovative strategies, best practices, and solutions to common challenges.

Fund Additional Staff Learning Opportunities

One director pointed out the value of supporting more staff members in attending national conferences, where they can gain exposure to industry trends, innovative ideas, and best practices. This professional development opportunity will strengthen the team's expertise and enhance program effectiveness.

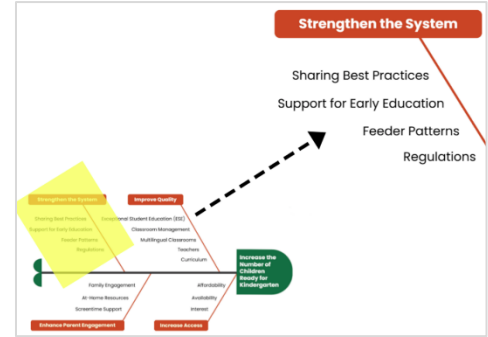
Strategies to Change Burdensome Regulations and Administrative Work

Allow Funding Flexibility and Independence

Coalitions described being constrained by state rules that limit their ability to raise and use unrestricted funds. As independent 501(c)(3) organizations, they were intended to have greater autonomy, but instead face restrictive policies that prevent them from scaling successful initiatives or attracting major donors. Being able to pursue unrestricted fundraising would unlock coalitions' full potential and allow for innovation that better serves children and families.

Align Program Requirements for VPK and School Readiness

Aligning state contract requirements would ease the operational load, especially for small providers. Family childcare homes need four students to receive VPK funds and waiving this requirement could open up more spots. Many family childcare homes have School Readiness contracts and automating those contracts over to VPK would lessen the paperwork for the state. Likewise, presumptive eligibility for families receiving SNAP – could help streamline enrollment and reduce unnecessary redetermination efforts.



Streamline Attendance Records Requirements

According to the staff survey conducted by the Children’s Forum, the directors reported that one of the best ways to support early childcare would be to reduce paperwork, especially attendance records requirements. Because providers are reimbursed based on daily attendance, modifying requirements, such as monthly audits, handwritten sign-in sheets, and extensive scanning and uploading, would reduce much of the administrative burden, especially on smaller programs.

Hold Consistent Accountability Standards Across Educational Programs

On director noted that VPK teachers face the highest accountability standards yet receive the lowest reimbursement rates compared to School Readiness programs. Teachers undergo both district-level evaluations and external CLASS observations by coalition staff. Ironically, VPK programs operate under more scrutiny than kindergarten classes, despite receiving less funding and support. Advocating to make those standards consistent could highly impact VPK teacher retention.

Strategies to Increase Support for Early Education

Increase Respect for Early Education Teachers

Directors pointed out the need to educate career counselors regarding the career options in early education, choose a standard professional title for early education teachers, and ensure school administrators understand the importance of early education. According to the Children’s Forum survey of early education teachers, increasing respect for early education professionals (e.g., parity with K-12 teachers) was often mentioned as a key way to support early education and encourage more people to enter it. Likewise, districts should consider offering early education teachers the same benefits as K-12 teachers with the same qualifications.

Strategies to Foster Feeder Patterns

Allow Private Providers to Lease School Rooms for Infants and Toddlers

Miami-Dade is inviting private providers to lease space for 0-3 programs on school campuses. Expanding these partnerships can create seamless early childhood education pathways that connect families to local schools from an early age. This continuity helps build trust, align curricula, and foster a strong feeder pattern into Pre-K.

Encourage Principals to Actively Engage with Local Childcare Centers

Several districts, such as Broward District and Orange District, described their principals engaging with local childcare centers. They visited programs and offered school tours and pen-pal relationships between pre-K and kindergarten classes.

Consider Long-Term Likelihood in Placements

Some directors focus on placing children into programs where they are most likely to stay long-term, helping to ensure stability and continuity of care. For example, Palm Beach ELC works to ensure the child is placed in the best fit: a child might begin in Early Head Start, transition to School Readiness, and eventually move into VPK. Likewise, the Tampa Preschool Partnership enables partner schools to help families choose the best option for their child's elementary school.

Conduct Research to Inform Data-Driven Decision-Making

Find accurate ways to identify and locate all eligible families to ensure they receive timely information about VPK programs. Gather deep, community-specific data on childcare challenges, including behavioral concerns, turnover, and family decision-making by administering comprehensive surveys of parents, early education professionals, and Kindergarten teachers.

Summary of Strategies to Strengthen the System

Find ways to regularly share best practices, such as collaborative groups, and support more conference attendees.

Advocate to change burdensome regulations including allowing fundraising independence and streamlining requirements for parents and providers.

Promote support for early education teachers, especially recommending that early education teachers receive the equitable benefits.

Foster school feeder patterns by outsourcing 0-3 programs on school campuses, encouraging principals to actively engage with child care centers; and considering long term likelihood in program placements.

Continue to conduct research to inform data driven decision-making, especially finding accurate ways to identify and locate all eligible families to ensure they receive timely information about VPK programs.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this report presents the challenges facing programs and highlights strategies to address those challenges, with the ultimate goal of increasing the number of children ready for kindergarten:

Key Challenges Facing Early Education Providers

Access Challenges:

- Most families need full-day care to enable a full workday, but many can't afford additional fees and some districts do not provide afterschool care.
- Although there may appear to be sufficient availability for all children, childcare deserts and inequitable access exists.
- Navigating eligibility for assistance and need for childcare is hard for many parents to coordinate.
- Some families may prefer to keep their child at home or may not be aware of VPK.



Quality Challenges:

- FAST testing and CLASS observations sometimes occur before children are acclimated to the program.
- Early education teachers are hard to recruit and retain, partially due to low compensation and lack of respect for the field.
- Teachers are reporting a significant increase in behavioral problems in classrooms.

Key Strategies to Address Challenges

To Increase Access:

- Use data-driven approaches to identify emerging childcare deserts.
- Provide afterschool programs run by outside organizations.
- Use a lottery system for popular programs to ensure equity.
- Create multi-use community hubs to address multiple barriers.
- Provide temporary funding for children with coverage gaps.
- Provide training and resources for family and neighbor caregivers

To Improve Quality:

- Use research-based and contextually appropriate curricula.
- Support teachers through coaching, CLASS training and, conducting CLASS observations later.
- Use existing stipends and educational incentives to encourage staff career growth.
- Provide behavior specialists and evidence-based frameworks to address behavioral issues.
- Increase early detection of disabilities by conducting evaluations in familiar environments and providing peer support to parents.

Key Challenges Facing Early Education Providers

Parent Engagement Challenges:

- Both ELCs and school districts seek to provide a wide variety of family engagement activities, primarily focused on encouraging reading.
- Most directors expressed concern regarding high use of screen time.



Systemic Challenges:

- School choice may hinder the development of feeder patterns, but several districts have implemented effective initiatives to foster them.
- Both ELCs and districts found attendance records and other requirements to be burdensome.
- Both ELCs and districts felt hampered in their freedom to fundraise to cover funding gaps.

Key Strategies to Address Challenges

To Enhance Parent Engagement:

- Offer parent education and one-on-one or small group support for parents.
- Hold engaging and informative family events.
- Provide at-home resources for parents to support their children's development.
- Promote balance in screen time use at home by encouraging screen alternatives, especially play and reading.



To Strengthen the System:

- Find ways to regularly share best practices.
- Advocate to reduce burdensome regulations and administrative requirements.
- Increase support for early education teachers.
- Foster feeder patterns by welcoming children ages 0-3 and principals engaging with local private centers.
- Conduct research to inform data driven decision-making.

2

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APPENDIX A. VPK RESULTS 2024 & 2025

County (N ²⁰²⁴ , N ²⁰²⁵)*	Program Type (N ²⁰²⁴ , N ²⁰²⁵)	Quality Score		% of eligible children demonstrating achievement		% of eligible children demonstrating learning gains		Performance designation**	
		2024	2025	2024	2025	2024	2025	2024	2025
Broward (525, 518)	Center (422, 408)	5.49	5.59	74	75	49	52	56	58
	Private (55, 59)	5.56	5.60	78	80	55	53	59	59
	Public (46, 50)	5.65	5.71	63	61	48	48	57	56
Hillsborough (465, 475)	Center (327, 330)	5.16	5.32	64	68	46	49	47	51
	Private (19, 20)	5.30	5.56	79	82	49	53	54	60
	Public (111, 115)	5.04	5.18	65	69	53	60	46	51
Miami-Dade (946, 955)	Center (702, 713)	5.23	5.29	81	84	65	70	56	59
	Private (22, 23)	5.09	5.16	79	76	55	55	51	53
	Public (212, 210)	5.48	5.51	70	77	70	78	59	64
Orange (429, 439)	Center (294, 301)	4.93	5.02	70	69	47	45	44	45

*Includes family childcare homes and charter schools (where applicable) for each county, but these facilities are *not* included separately in “program type” due to small n.**Performance designation scale: **Excellent = 61 points or higher**; **Above Expectations = 46-60 points**; **Meets Expectations = 28-45 points**; **Below Expectations = 16-27 points**; **Unsatisfactory = 15 points or fewer**.

County (N ²⁰²⁴ , N ²⁰²⁵)*	Program Type (N ²⁰²⁴ , N ²⁰²⁵)	Quality Score		% of eligible children demonstrating achievement		% of eligible children demonstrating learning gains		Performance designation**	
		2024	2025	2024	2025	2024	2025	2024	2025
	Private (44, 45)	4.94	4.92	75	75	48	50	48	45
	Public (89, 92)	5.37	5.43	67	74	55	76	57	62
Palm Beach (367, 371)	Center (280, 283)	5.05	5.27	68	72	46	53	44	51
	Private (19, 21)	4.85	5.00	78	82	50	47	43	45
	Public (66, 66)	5.14	5.36	74	73	65	72	52	58
Pinellas (247, 238)	Center (169, 160)	5.41	5.60	77	78	44	45	52	56
	Private (8, 9)	5.33	5.57	86	85	52	48	58	64
	Public (70, 69)	5.35	5.35	72	77	50	55	51	55

*Includes family childcare homes and charter schools (where applicable) for each county, but these facilities are *not* included separately in “program type” due to small n.**Performance designation scale: **Excellent = 61 points or higher**; **Above Expectations = 46-60 points**; **Meets Expectations = 28-45 points**; **Below Expectations = 16-27 points**; **Unsatisfactory = 15 points or fewer**.

APPENDIX B. PARTICIPATION RATES

County	2025 VPK Participation Rates					
	Licensed Private Centers			Licensed Exempt Centers		
	# of Centers	# of Students	# of 4 year-olds	# of Centers	# of Students	# of 4 year-olds
Broward	386	8,053	6,996	5	114	93
Hillsborough	333	9,815	8,047	6	198	160
Miami-Dade	712	13,191	13,010	17	328	321
Orange	314	8,239	5,025	0	0	0
Palm Beach	283	7,897	28 average per center	0	0	0
Pinellas	171	2,823	17 average per center	0	0	0

County	2025 VPK Participation Rates					
	Large Family Childcare Homes			Licensed Family Childcare Homes		
	# of Centers	# of Students	# of 4 year-olds	# of Centers	# of Students	# of 4 year-olds
Broward	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hillsborough	62	89	51	134	26	15
Miami-Dade	7	35	35	1	4	4
Orange	0	0	0	2	4	3
Palm Beach	0	0	0	1	4	4
Pinellas	0	0	0	0	0	0

County	2025 VPK Participation Rates					
	Private Schools			Public Schools		
	# of Centers	# of Students	# of 4 year-olds	# of Centers	# of Students	# of 4 year-olds
Broward	56	1,232	1,066	51	1,361	1,173
Hillsborough	1	831	669	3	3,297	1,737
Miami-Dade	23	509	501	220	6,734	6,711
Orange	47	1,256	741	92	2,772	1,635
Palm Beach	21	495	24 average per center	66	2,323	29 average per center
Pinellas	9	275	30 average per center	70	2,035	29 average per center

County	2025 School Readiness Participation Rates (3- & 4-year-olds)					
	Licensed Private Centers			Licensed Exempt Centers		
	# of Centers	# of Students	# of 4 year-olds	# of Centers	# of Students	# of 4 year-olds
Broward	419	14,536	2,302	10	368	33
Hillsborough	365	14,898	7,429	39	167	111
Miami-Dade	770	4,256	2,964	16	80	49
Orange	368	19,066	3,051	0	0	0
Palm Beach	266	3,139	12 average per center	0	0	0
Pinellas	305	3,686	17 average per center	0	0	0

County	2025 School Readiness Participation Rates (3- & 4-year-olds)					
	Large Family Childcare Homes			Licensed Family Childcare Homes		
	# of Centers	# of Students	# of 4 year-olds	# of Centers	# of Students	# of 4 year-olds
Broward	7	93	15	27	129	18
Hillsborough	66	552	258	173	922	366
Miami-Dade	44	78	55	15	20	13
Orange	7	56	12	43	279	28
Palm Beach	18	42	2	60	99	2
Pinellas	25	87	4	101	173	3

County	2025 School Readiness Participation Rates (3- & 4-year-olds)					
	Private Schools			Public Schools		
	# of Centers	# of Students	# of 4 year-olds	# of Centers	# of Students	# of 4 year-olds
Broward	35	850	142	0	0	0
Hillsborough	3	21	16	121	3,093	0
Miami-Dade	14	57	42	77	174	0
Orange	20	728	102	0	0	0
Palm Beach	4	15	4	48	170	9
Pinellas	0	0	0	0	0	0

County	2025 District Programs for 3-year-olds							
	General Education/ESE (Blended)		ESE Only*		Head Start		Fees Only	
	# of programs	# of students	# of programs	# of students	# of programs	# of students	# of programs	# of students
Broward	3	47	305	3,394	51	748	9	49
Hillsborough	0	0	123	1,476	0	0	0	0
Miami-Dade	28	560	188	1,650	39	650	31	226
Orange	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Palm Beach	0	0	0	0	4	68	1	20
Pinellas	63	630:504	25	310	N/A	N/A	7	126

*ESE numbers reflect classrooms with both 3- and 4-year-olds.

County	2025 District Programs for 4-year-olds									
	VPK only		VPK/ESE (Blended)		ESE Only*		Head Start		Fees Only	
	# of programs	# of students	# of programs	# of students	# of programs	# of students	# of programs	# of students	# of programs	# of students
Broward	71	1,283	3	47	305	3,394	57	971	1	17
Hillsborough	9	1,700	152	2,736	123	1,476	92	1,812	0	0
Miami-Dade	383	6,110	28	560	188	1,650	47	693	70	1,189
Orange	89	2,598	2	36	Not reported	Not reported	N/A	N/A	2	40
Palm Beach	2	40	34	680	0	0	23	460	28	560
Pinellas	41	820	28	990:810	25	310	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

*ESE numbers reflect classrooms with both 3- and 4-year-olds.

APPENDIX C. PROVIDER SURVEY

Survey Questions

Thank you for taking part in this anonymous survey to help us better understand early learning in your school district/county. Your responses will be kept confidential, and results will be reported in a way that ensures no individual can be identified. This survey is being conducted by the evaluation team at LeCroy & Milligan Associates. If you have any questions, please contact Rebecca at rebecca@lecroymilligan.com. Thank you for your time and valuable input! Your feedback will help inform strategic initiatives to improve early education across Florida.

1. What do you believe are the top three educational priorities for families with young children ages 3-5?

- Preparing children to be kindergarten ready
- Gaining academic skills (literacy, numeracy)
- Gaining content knowledge (i.e., science, history, literature, etc.)
- Gaining practical knowledge (i.e., colors, days of the week, etc.)
- Building children’s cultural and real-world knowledge
- Fostering Character and values development
- Encouraging ability to express creativity
- Building gross and fine motor skills
- Gaining social skills and forming friendships
- Creating positive relationships with trusted adults
- Other: _____

2. What do you believe are the top three stressors facing families with young children?

- Expenses/cost of childcare
- Lack of required parental leave policies
- Cost of insurance/medical expenses
- Lack of transportation
- Lack of childcare to enable a full workday
- Lack of nearby childcare
- Other: _____

3. What is the average number of children on waitlists for programs?

4. When there are unfilled seat/spots in VPK/School Readiness (0-4), which of the following strategies are used in your county to increase enrollment?

- **Targeted advertising/social media ads**, such as school newsletters or text blasts.
- **Referral incentives**, such as gift card or free school merchandise.

- **Leveraging trusted messengers**, such as pediatric partnerships, home visitors, case managers, parent liaisons/ambassadors, faith-based/cultural organizations, other nonprofit or community-based organizations.
- **Engagement at community events**, such as community centers, libraries, child-focused businesses (e.g., indoor playgrounds), children's museums.
- **Enhancing program appeal**, family engagement events, curriculum marketing, showcasing environments, such as open houses or virtual tours.
- **Data-driven outreach**, such as analyzing enrollment trends, following up on incomplete applications.
- Other: _____

5. What wraparound supports are currently available in your program(s) for VPK, School Readiness (0-4), and Head Start families?

- **Family support services**, such as parent education classes, family needs assessments, home visiting services, help navigating social services.
- **Extended care and scheduling flexibility**, such as extended day options, summer programming, flexible drop off/pick up windows.
- **Nutrition**, such as nutritious meals and snacks, availability of food pantries.
- **Health care**, such as onsite health screenings, immunization verification and support, behavioral/mental health screenings and referrals.
- **Intervention supports**, such as access to special education or early intervention services, speech, occupational therapy, and physical therapy services.
- **Transportation**, such as bus or van transportation to/from center, transportation vouchers or partnerships with public transit, gas cards, or ride-sharing assistance.
- **Workforce support** for parents, such as help with resumes, job applications or job search, GED/ESL classes for parents, connections to childcare subsidies.
- **Community partnerships and referrals** such as integrated referrals to health clinics, legal aid, co-location with health or mental health providers.
- **Culturally responsive and accessible practices** to engage and support families from different backgrounds including children with high ACEs scores, first generation immigrant, bilingual support, etc.
- Other: _____

6. What professional development or coaching models have been most effective in improving staff performance and retention?

- **On the job coaching/mentoring models**, such as practice-based coaching, peer coaching or collaborative coaching, embedded instruction coaching, etc.
- **Curriculum or content specific models**, such as curriculum fidelity coaching, literacy or language coaching, behavior support coaching, etc.
- **Reflective supervision**, such as active listening to support decision-making.

- **Formal training and micro credentialing**, such as online and in-person PD modules, stackable credentials and certificates, etc.
- **Infrastructure support**, such as the components needed to establish and enforce program and child outcome standards.
- Other: _____

For ELCs only:

VPK Participation Rates: Please enter the number of centers, students, and average number of 4 year-olds.

	# of Centers	# of Students	Average # of 4's
Licensed Private Centers			
Licensed Exempt Centers			
Large Family Child Care Homes			
Licensed Family Child Care Homes			
Private Schools			
Public Schools (includes Charter)			

School Readiness Participation Rates (ages 3-4): Please enter the number of centers, students, and average number of 4 year-olds.

	# of Centers	# of Students	Average # of 4's
Licensed Private Centers			
Licensed Exempt Centers			
Large Family Child Care Homes			
Licensed Family Child Care Homes			
Private Schools			
Public Schools (includes Charter)			

For Districts Only:

4-y-o's	Question		
VPK Only	Do you provide a half day only program?	Yes	No
	Do you require students to stay until the end of the school day?	Yes	No
	Do you allow students to stay until the end of the school day?	Yes	No
	Is there a charge for Free & Reduced Lunch (FRL) students to the end of the school day?	Yes	No
	What do you charge Free students to the end of the school day?	\$ _____	
	What do you charge Reduced students to the end of the school day?	\$ _____	
	What funding source do you utilize to fund the FRL no charge students to the end of the school day?	_____	
	What do you charge the general ed students to the end of the school day?	\$ _____	
	How many open VPK spots do you have that are going unutilized?	_____	
	Do you provide after school care?	Yes	No
	Who provides after school care?	\$ _____	\$ _____
	What is the charge for after school care?	_____	
VPK\ESE (Blended)	Do you blend 4's & 3's	Yes	No
ESE Only	Do you provide after school care?	Yes	No
Head Start	What is the charge for after school care?	\$ _____	
Fees Only	What are your hours?	_____	
	What do you charge?	\$ _____	
	Do you provide after school care?	Yes	No
	What is the charge for after school care?	\$ _____	
3-y-o's	Question		
ESE Only	How many days a week?	_____	
	What are the hours of service?	_____	
ESE\ General Ed (Blended)	What are your desired ratios for General Ed & ESE?	_____	
	Do you provide after school care?	Yes	No
	What is the charge for after school care?	\$ _____	
Head Start	What are your hours for a school day?	_____	
Fees Only	What do you charge for a school day?	\$ _____	
	Do you provide after school care?	Yes	No

What is the charge for after school care?

\$ _____

4-y-o's	#	%
VPK Only		
VPK\ESE (Blended)		
ESE Only		
Head Start		
Fees Only		
Other		
<hr/>		
Total 4's		

3-y-o's	#	%
ESE Only		
ESE\General Ed (Blended)		
Head Start		
Fees Only		
Other		
<hr/>		
Total 3's		

APPENDIX D. INTERVIEW GUIDES

District Interview Protocol

Increasing Access

1. What factors do you think most influence whether families choose to enroll their child in early learning programs such as VPK or School Readiness or Head Start?

For example, how do you think location or visiting a school beforehand influence choice?

2. What have been some successful strategies for harnessing or overcoming these factors when recruiting families?
3. What strategies have you found to be effective in recruiting new early learning teachers?
4. Aside from government funding, are there other organizations or funders that you partner with to support your early learning programs?

What kind(s) of support do they provide, such as training, additional programs (libraries, YMCA) etc?

Improving Quality: Instruction, Behavior, and Curriculum

1. What strategic initiatives have you found effectively improve behavior and social-emotional development among children ages 3–5? Do you differentiate between 4-year-olds (VPK) and younger children?
2. What strategic initiatives have you found effectively improve reading or pre-literacy skills? Do you differentiate between 4-year-olds and younger children?
3. What curriculum (or play-based learning program) do you use, and how effective has it been for both academic and social-emotional development?
4. We are thinking about children using digital platforms for assessment and learning. Do children use these? If so, what strategies do you use regarding digital platforms (*or preparing to use for testing*)? *How well do your preferred digital platforms align with your curriculum?* [note: sometimes it might be confusing for kids when the two do not align well]
5. How much of a role do you think children’s screen time at home plays in their literacy achievement (with the acknowledgement that it’s impossible to determine how much kids are using screens at home)? If so, how have you responded (for example, have you discussed screen time with parents)?

Enhancing Parental Engagement

1. What resources do you offer that effectively equip parents to support their child's early learning and development? What else would you like to offer?

2. What types of parental engagement activities have been most successful with families participating in early learning programs, *such as School Readiness programs, VPK programs, and/or Head Start?*

Systemic-Level Questions

For the following question, we are defining kindergarten reason as the results of Florida's Progress Monitoring 1 Assessment:

1. If you could change one thing in your county to improve kindergarten readiness scores, what would it be? Is there anything beyond these scores that children need to be ready to start kindergarten? If so, what are the top 2-3 non-academic skills children need?
2. Where do you see the greatest opportunity for systems-level improvement (*e.g., feeder patterns, enrollment processes, funding partnerships etc.*)?
3. What do you think your district is doing especially well? (*for example, any innovative initiatives or strategies we haven't discussed yet?*)

ELC Interview Protocol

Increasing Access

Program Access & Utilization

1. What factors do you think influence whether families choose to enroll their child in VPK or School Readiness or Head Start?
For example, how do you think location or visiting a school beforehand influence choice?
2. What other groups are providing significant early childhood programming in your county (besides VPK, Head Start, School Readiness)?

Provider Recruitment & Capacity

1. What strategies are you using to recruit new providers for VPK? For School Readiness?
2. Are there systemic or financial barriers that make it difficult for new providers to participate in either program?

Funding

1. Aside from government funding, are there other organizations or funders (Children's Services Council, United Way, Community Foundations, Helios, other) that support your VPK, School Readiness, or other programs?

What kind(s) of support do they provide, such as training, additional programs (libraries, YMCA, etc)?

Improving Quality: Instruction, Behavior, and Curriculum

1. What initiatives for improving behavior and social-emotional development among children ages 3–5 have you found to be most effective?
2. What initiatives for improving reading or pre-literacy skills have been most effective?
3. What curriculum (or play-based learning program) have you found to be more effective for both academic and social-emotional development?
4. What effective strategies/programs are used in your county for using digital platforms?
5. How much of a role do you think children’s screen time at home plays in their literacy or academic development (with the acknowledgment that it’s impossible to accurately determine how much kids are using screens at home)? If so, how have programs responded?

Enhancing Parental Engagement

1. What resources are offered by early learning programs in your county that effectively equip parents to support their child's early learning and development? What else would you like to offer?
2. What type of parental engagement activities offered in your county have been most successful with families participating in early learning programs, *such as School Readiness programs, VPK programs, and/or Head Start*?

Systemic-Level Questions

1. If you could change one thing in your county to improve kindergarten readiness (defined by the state – Progress Monitoring 1), what would it be?
2. Where do you see the greatest opportunity for systems-level improvement (*e.g., feeder patterns, enrollment processes, funding partnerships*)?