Changing Lives...

One Child at a Time

Eager To Learn

Early Learning Coalition
of Polk County
Message from the Board Chair

It has been a very exciting year for the Early Learning Coalition of Polk County. Together as an organization, we have transformed the Coalition into an institution that is ready to deal with the new demands of our early learning educational needs. The Coalition remains committed to promoting high quality early care and education to the children of Polk County.

We continue to focus on our goal to make sure children from birth to age five and beyond have access to quality early education experiences to cultivate their natural eagerness for learning. Research suggests that the healthy development of children from birth to age five provides a strong foundation for a healthy and competent adulthood, responsible citizenship, economic productivity, and sustainable societies.

This past year we completed the final phase of our expansion and transition. Investments were made in the areas of client education and accessibility, fiscal management, and procurement. We continued our investments in providers by expanding our Quality Rating Improvement System from forty child care centers to seventy and by successfully implementing both a new pilot program for four year olds and a new reading initiative for School Readiness and Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten children.

Speaking on behalf of the Board members, we understand the importance of providing a nurturing and learning environment to our children early in life. It is our intent to further our efforts and investment on our greatest asset, the children and families of Polk County.

James H. Rhodes, II, Chair
Coalition History

The Polk County School Readiness Coalition, Inc. d/b/a the Early Learning Coalition of Polk County was established by Florida Statute 411.01 in 1999. In 2005, the Voluntary Prekindergarten Program (VPK) under Florida Statute 1002.51 was added to the Coalition’s responsibilities. The Coalition is recognized as a leader in the community with early education and care initiatives serving as many as 9,000 children a month in the programs funded by federal, state, and local dollars.

After twelve years and three separate contracted agencies, all services for both School Readiness and VPK programs are now under the direction of the Coalition. The Coalition Board and staff over time realized that in order to provide the best customer services with the most efficiency and accountability for funding the Coalition had to provide services directly to those served.

The Coalition settled into new administrative offices in Lakeland by the end of June 2012. This move brought administrators and provider payments closer to other staff and makes for efficiencies of servers, office space, and staff training. All expenses for moving and transitioning offices and staff did not impact services for children. Having the ability to directly implement timely utilization of funds, the Coalition enrolled children steadily for most of FY 2011-2012.

In recent years and due to economic times, there are less child care providers that contract with the Coalition at any given time. Many providers have less classrooms and children due to the current high unemployment rates and less need for child care services in some areas. The turnover of contracts has a big impact on staff time and attention. Providers continually look for ways to enhance their programs so that parents will choose their site over another provider.

The Coalition’s Provider Agreement has been refined over time to improve the quality in programs and keep children safe. Most providers now understand the accountability the Board requires for those providers receiving funding. The providers also know that the Coalition is available with Quality Specialists who are in the field to help them raise the quality of their sites and programs using technical assistance and training with a wide range of early education and care techniques and teaching.

The Coalition’s Quality Counts/Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) almost doubled in size in FY 2011-2012 adding 35 sites. The QRIS now requires scoring not only in preschool classrooms, but also in the infant and toddler classrooms. Providers are anxious to achieve their star rating so that they can share that achievement with their staff and the children's parents.

Florida statute requires the Board of Directors of the Coalition to have gubernatorial appointments, mandated members, and business community members. The Board has always had quality in programs and accountability for funding as its main priorities. This philosophy has served them well and makes for a brighter future for our children as they advance through their young formative years while attending early education and care sites throughout the county giving support to their parents while they continue to work.
Overview

Throughout the year a total of 12,533 children were served in either a School Readiness or a Voluntary PreKindergarten Program. This number includes 892 children who were receiving both the School Readiness and VPK programs during the year.

The VPK program in FY 2011-2012 had a total of 134 private and faith based providers along with 40 public school sites and 23 Head Start sites. The program continues to increase in the number of children enrolled serving a total of 4,851 children in FY 2011-2012. The traditional school year program (August through June) remains the program of choice for VPK with 4,596 children enrolled. The summer program (June through August) had approximately 255 children enrolled.

When kindergarten begins, each child is screened to provide a snapshot of the child’s readiness for kindergarten and progress in achieving the VPK performance standards. The manner in which VPK readiness rates are calculated changed in FY 2011-2012 creating more low performing providers across the state. Low performing providers are now called Providers on Probation (POPs). Providers now must have at least 70% of their children ready for school on both measures of the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (FLKRS) in order not to be determined a POP. The FLKRS measurements are the Early Childhood Observation System (ECHOS) and the Florida Assessments for Instruction in Reading (FAIR). Readiness for kindergarten on the ECHOS is “Demonstrating or Emerging/Progressing” and on the FAIR is a “Probability of Reading Success: At or above 67%.” Children must attend at least 70% of a program and be screened on both FLKRS measures (ECHOS & FAIR) to be counted in a provider’s readiness rate. Also the provider must have a minimum of four (4) children who completed the program for a provider to be included in the readiness rate calculations.

According to the readiness rates for 2010-2011, which were released in January 2012, 53 VPK programs in Polk County were low performing. These POPs are required to take certain steps in order to continue to provide the VPK program. These steps include submitting an improvement plan. If a provider is a low performer for three (3) consecutive years, they are no longer eligible to provide the VPK program, or they must file for a “good cause exemption.”
This past fiscal year 2011-2012 was the first full year the Coalition had all services in house continuing to assist the families of Polk County. There are now three (3) offices including Lakeland, Winter Haven, and Lake Wales where staff is available to serve the community full time. As of June 30, 2012, 7,682 income eligible children age 0-12 received School Readiness funding in Polk County. This number includes 188 children that sometime during the year received services through the Child Care Executive Partnership program. On that same date, there were 194 licensed child care centers providing services to groups of children through agreements with the Coalition, 117 family child care homes providing in-home care for children from more than one family, 1 informal child care provider serving the children of one family, 44 school-based sites, and 27 license-exempt centers, which are primarily faith-based facilities.

All families must be working and/or in school and must be income eligible to participate in the School Readiness program. The Coalition is mandated to serve parents who have a referral through Polk Works/Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) while they are striving to become self sufficient. Parents with a referral from Department of Children and Families or its contracted agency (Heartland for Children) as a Protective Services client are also mandated to be served. The remaining funds are used to serve parents who do not qualify for the referral driven programs. These parents are placed on a waiting list where enrollment is completed following the Board’s established priorities and based on available funding. When enrollment is feasible, the Coalition will contact parents, check eligibility, and schedule appointments with them if they appear to be eligible.

On July 1, 2011, School Readiness enrollment was 4,262 and continued to increase throughout the year ending on June 30, 2012, at 4,747. The Coalition was able to continue to enroll children for 75% of the year enrolling approximately 1,219 eligible children from the wait list decreasing the number of children to 2,775 as of June 30, 2012. Although enrollment is regularly taking place, the wait list will continue to grow due to the ever increasing need for child care in Polk County.
School Readiness Expenses

- Direct Services – $14,782,778 – 80%
- Quality Initiatives – $1,569,882 – 9%
- Eligibility Services – $899,331 – 5%
- Administration – $503,811 – 3%
- Non-Direct Services – $250,169 – 1%
- Infants & Toddlers – $174,800 – 1%
- Child Care Resource & Referral – $105,063 – <1%
- Helios – $92,528 – <1%
- Inclusion – $41,218 – <1%
- Disney – $16,240 – <1%

School Readiness by Gender

- Male – 3,955 – 51%
- Female – 3,727 – 49%

School Readiness by Race

- Black – 4,174 – 54%
- White – 3,299 – 43%
- Indian/Alaska – 103 – 1%
- Hawaiian/Pacific – 65 – 1%
- Asian – 41 – 1%

School Readiness by Ethnicity

- Non-Hispanic – 6,431 – 84%
- Hispanic – 1,251 – 16%

School Readiness by Age

- School Age – 2,181 – 28%
- 5yr – 1,338 – 17%
- 4yr – 1,351 – 18%
- 3yr – 1,200 – 16%
- 2yr – 853 – 11%
- Toddler – 560 – 7%
- Infant – 199 – 3%

Quality Initiatives

In FY 2011-2012, all providers, serving children ages birth to five were assigned a Quality Specialist from the Coalition who visited their site on a regular basis to provide technical assistance and support and to ensure that all requirements of the School Readiness Agreement were being followed. Over 3,200 visits were made during the fiscal year. One of the main purposes of the visits was to assist providers with setting and meeting goals based on the required program assessment completed during the first half of the fiscal year. In addition, Quality Specialists provided ongoing assistance related to various topics, including implementation of curriculum, health and safety practices, appropriate infant/toddler care, literacy, pre/post assessment, and much more.

The Coalition also ensures that a number of in-service trainings are offered to child care providers throughout the year. The training calendar on the Coalition’s website continued to provide a list of available professional development opportunities open to all providers. Some training topics included the following: Florida’s Early Learning and Developmental Standards – Birth to Three (109 practitioners trained) & Standards for Four Year Olds (477 practitioners trained); Emergent Literacy (45 practitioners trained); Administration of the VPK Assessment (186 practitioners trained); “Beyond Centers and Circle Time” curriculum training (30 practitioners trained); “Beyond Cribs & Rattles” curriculum training (20 practitioners trained); Sensory Play for Infants, Toddlers, and Two’s (65 practitioners trained). The Coalition’s website also continued to be an excellent source of information for provider meetings related to School Readiness and VPK, as well as other Coalition-sponsored meetings or events.
Inclusion assistance continued to be a critical service offered by the Coalition during the 2011-2012 year. Inclusion warm-line flyers and other related Inclusion resources were distributed as needed throughout the year. After attending a train-the-trainer session on the Positive Behavior Supports Model (PBS), the Coalition’s Inclusion Coordinator presented 7 trainings (167 total participants) regarding PBS, all of which focused on getting practitioners involved in using this model as part of their regular classroom practices. The Inclusion Coordinator continued to work with all Quality Specialists enabling them to support child care providers with inclusion-related needs. Additional inclusion information was imbedded in a variety of other trainings offered throughout the year including Florida’s Early Learning and Developmental Standards and other curriculum-specific trainings.

Quality Counts, Polk’s Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS), continued to be the focus of the Enhancement Committee during the 2011-2012 fiscal year. First, they agreed to increase Quality Counts by 35 providers almost doubling the number of participants. This committee wanted to encourage and reward providers for improving the quality in their sites. With the help of a new data system, assessments can be tracked and then the providers are given packages of materials related to the needs of their assessments. Additional training and resources were also given to the QRIS providers. This type of star system is also used to help parents recognize the importance of quality in sites. Therefore, the committee thought it important to publicize the system on billboards, brochures, buses, benches, and newspapers.

In addition to the many resources and training opportunities provided to QRIS sites, the Coalition also began a pilot project, partnering with several QRIS providers to offer funding through the Child Care Executive Partnership (CCEP) program. The CCEP program provides financial assistance for low to moderate wage earners, and in this case, to child care employees who are working directly in the child care programs. As part of the QRIS program, child care site owners who signed a commitment form for this program were also able to list this as an employee benefit under the “Business Practices” section of QRIS, giving them credit toward their annual star rating. There has been positive feedback in regard to this program and there are plans to extend the program to additional providers in coming years.

**Grants**

Partnerships are important to the Coalition and throughout the fiscal year 2011-2012, the Coalition was the recipient of several grants. Both Disney and the Helios Education Foundation provided funding for great programs listed on page 9.

Funds are always needed for the mandated 6% match on the federal dollars for working poor families. United Way of Central Florida is the main contributor for these funds, but additional grants for the match were also received from Publix Super Markets Charities, individual donors, and local Walmarts.

The Board of County Commissioners has been a long time supporter of the Coalition in the Child Care Executive Partnership program. These funds provide services for families who may not otherwise be eligible for services, but are still in need of help with their children in order to continue to work.

Other grants and donations received throughout the year came from Bright House Networks, Kaplan Early Learning, Comcast, Lakeshore Learning, Lakeland Kiwanis, GLT Office Furniture, Lakeland Outdoor, and Perpetual Technologies.
Health & Safety

As stated in the School Readiness Provider Agreement, providers who are not licensed by the Department of Children and Families must agree to a Health and Safety Inspection conducted by Coalition staff. The Health and Safety Inspection occurs at least once per year, and may be performed more frequently. During the 2011-2012 fiscal year, there were 29 religious exempt and/or informal sites that required a health and safety inspection. Most of these sites required at least one follow-up visit to ensure all standards were being met. In order to help providers and religious exempt accrediting agencies understand the expectations of these mandatory inspections, all sites were invited to a Health and Safety Inspection Meeting held in April of 2012. A power point derived from the Health and Safety Inspection checklist was reviewed, and staff members from the Coalition were available to answer questions. Quality staff also monitored basic health and safety of all sites during the regularly scheduled visits throughout the year.

It is a requirement of the School Readiness legislation that the Coalition ensures that children ages birth to five who receive funding under the School Readiness program receive a developmental screening. Initial developmental screenings continued to be completed by parents during a child’s enrollment. These screenings were reviewed by Coalition staff to determine whether or not a child would need a follow-up screening and/ or additional services. Parents and providers are informed of screening results, and they are also given referral information in regard to outside agencies such as Early Steps or FDLRS Child Find, as needed. In 2011-2012, the Early Learning Coalition also trained staff from 45 child care centers on the use of the Ages and Stages Questionnaires Third Edition (ASQ-3).

The Coalition partnered with the Polk County Health Department to provide vision and hearing screening services to over 3,545 three and four year old children at Coalition funded sites during the year. The vision and hearing screening program specifically targets Coalition funded children; however, vision and hearing screenings are performed on any age eligible child in a facility that is visited. The positive impact of this service has been well received by the parents and children of Coalition funded sites. Additional referrals were made for 166 children with hearing concerns and 87 children with vision concerns. In addition, educational components were presented to children on health and safety. Topics such as water and seatbelt safety and the importance of hand washing were provided in age appropriate presentations. The screening team also provided over 132 presentations directly to the children in the classrooms during their visits on topics such as “Stewie the Duck Learns to Swim”, “Those Mean Nasty Dirty Downright Disgusting but…Invisible Germs”, and “Bucklebear” for car safety.

The Coalition also partnered with the Florida First Start Program, which is a home-school partnership designed to give children from birth to three years of age with a disability or at risk of future school failure the best possible start in life and to support parents in their role as their children’s first teachers. Eligible children may be served up to four years of age if not enrolled in a full-time preschool program at the age of three. Trained parent educators visit each family’s home at least monthly, providing information on stages of intellectual, physical, language, and social development. Developmental assessments are conducted a six-months intervals to evaluate overall progress within the areas of intellectual, fine motor, gross motor, expressive language, social/emotional, and self-help skills. Children identified as having possible developmental difficulties are referred to school-based programs and/or community agencies for further evaluation. Health screenings are conducted annually. Children requiring further follow-up and/or treatment are referred to appropriate resources as needed. The services provided by the Polk County School Board Preschool Programs have played an important role in ensuring the development success of the children of Polk County.

Best Practices

As the Coalition continues to stress the importance of early literacy with providers throughout Polk County, the Coalition collaborated with Nemours to pilot the BrightStart! program in 6 private child care centers this year. The Nemours BrightStart! curriculum helps to identify preschool age children who may be at-risk for reading failure and focuses on strengthening early literacy skills prior to children reaching kindergarten. Staff from Nemours provided program evaluation, and of the 90 children who were initially screened in the pilot program, 30% of the children qualified and received Nemours BrightStart! instruction. The children made substantial gains as post screening scores for the children increased by 62% by the end of the program. The Coalition plans to continue to collaborate with Nemours to expand this program throughout the county in future years.

Over 290 child care owners, directors, and teachers attended the Polk Collaborative Partners Conference which was held on October 22, 2011. This all-day conference provided a variety of different early childhood workshops designed to target all age groups from infant/toddler through school age. The Coalition continues to help sponsor this conference in collaboration with Polk County Schools Preschool Programs, United Way Success by 6, Polk State College, and Campus Kid Care of Polk County.

Due to the timing of the legislative session this year, Children’s Week was officially celebrated during the last week of January. As part of the local celebration of this statewide event, child care providers submitted artwork made by the children that displayed the children’s hand-prints which Coalition staff presented along with proclamations to the Board of County Commissioners in Bartow, the City of Lakeland, the City of Winter Haven, and the City of Lake Wales. The artwork was then sent to Tallahassee for the official “Hanging of the Hands” at the Capitol Rotunda.
Special Programs/Best Practices

In 2011-2012, 10 child care facilities in the Lake Wales area had the opportunity to participate in the Disney Helping Kids Shine Program, a grant which is based on the Building Blocks for a Healthy Future series. The program enables Disney to shine a spotlight on local early education programs that share a commitment to children and to making their dreams come true. The program focuses on strengthening the whole child as they develop, especially in the area of communication. Over the course of the year, 25 teachers received a minimum of one hour of training each month focused on helping children communicate and developing conversations between children, teachers, and families. In addition, over 300 children had the opportunity to be part of the program and to participate in related classroom activities. All children also received books, newsletters, and other resources to take home each month and share with their families.

In conjunction with the coalitions in Sarasota and Manatee Counties, the Early Learning Coalition of Polk County received the second year of funding for a two-year grant awarded in 2010 by the Helios Education Foundation to support early literacy in family child care homes. A total of 39 family child care providers in Polk County have participated in the program during the 2 year grant cycle, 21 of which participated between July 2011 and June 2012. All participants completed a series of professional development trainings to learn more about current early literacy theory and best practices. In addition, each participant was visited weekly for a one-on-one coaching session, during which time they were also introduced to new literacy strategies. The literacy coach modeled the strategies and provided additional ideas for the provider to complete as an additional assignment. Participants who successfully completed the program each received $500 in literacy materials and a $500 stipend. The Helios program will be ending on October of 2012; however, due to the training efforts of staff associated with the grant, Quality Specialists have been trained on these literacy practices thus allowing for the sustained implementation of this program into the future. Two coalition staff members were deemed reliable as program assessors on the Family Child Care Environmental Rating Scale (FCCERS) through training sponsored by the Helios Education Foundation. This valuable training will also continue to be utilized by the Coalition after the grant funding period ends. The FCCERS assessment results were shared with Quality staff that developed a Quality Improvement Plan for the year based on the information. An electronic notebook of literacy strategies and activities and a training curriculum of twelve sessions is available for use by quality staff to assist in building provider skills in nurturing early language and literacy from birth through age five. Also, an Adult-Child Interactive Reading Inventory along with follow-up activities and assignments is now available to aid quality staff in improving literacy outcomes of young children.

In late 2012, the Coalition partnered with the Citrus Center Kiwanis Club as part of an exciting new initiative entitled, “Power of Word.” As part of this initiative, the Coalition coordinates with local child care facilities to plan reading events for volunteers from the Kiwanis organization to be able to spend time in the early childhood classrooms reading to and interacting with the children. This type of initiative serves as a motivational tool for young children to understand the importance of reading and literacy in general. The first reading event took place in late June 2012, and similar events will continue through the 2012-2013 fiscal year. All children participating in the events will also receive a book to take home and share with their families.
Single Point of Entry and Child Care Resource and Referral

Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) is the Single Point of Entry to services available in the community. It is a county-wide program that assists families with efficient, effective, and customer-friendly service to locate quality child care and other services within the community. All families, regardless of their income, are eligible to contact the agency by phone, walk-in, or appointment. Coalition Parent Counselors are blended staff with CCR&R and child care subsidy eligibility and determination services. This service also assists providers in listing their programs in a state-wide data base. In FY 2011-2012, there were 35 new providers that contacted the Coalition to participate in the School Readiness program with an additional 19 providers given packets, which included community resource information to help them better serve the families in their facilities.

This year the Coalition was able to assist approximately 4,841 families with CCR&R. On July 1, 2011, the wait list began with 3,019 children. Throughout the FY 2011-2012 the Coalition continued to enroll children from the wait list and decreased it as of June 30, 2012 to 2,775.

Fiscal Accountability

This has been a year of change for the Coalition in terms of our fiscal accountability. In order to better track and allocate costs based on the state’s requirements and the Coalition’s cost allocation plan, a new accounting package was implemented early in the year. This new accounting package is very robust and was built specifically for non-profit organizations. Another reason for the implementation was that this software package lends itself to a more defined separation of duties and better risk management.

The Coalition continues to have successes in the programs that it is implementing and the School Readiness program is at the head of those successes. With a budget of $18 million, the Coalition was able to allocate $14,782,778 of the budget towards direct services. This equates to 80% of the Coalition’s budget going directly to the children enrolled in the School Readiness program while the state mandates that only 70% of the budget be allocated to direct services. The Coalition also spent 3% of the budget on administrative costs, which is significantly lower than the 5% allowed by the state for the School Readiness program.

The Coalition is also making a significant impact in the community with its Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK) program. 96% of the $10.5 million VPK budget was expended on direct services and the Coalition continues to invest in the VPK Outreach and Awareness Monitoring Initiative.

Another program the Coalition expanded this year was the Child Care Executive Partnership Program (CCEP). This program has been traditionally funded by the Board of County Commissioners. The coalition receives a dollar-for-dollar match from the state for every dollar it generates. This year the program has grown to include local small businesses which allow the Coalition to increase the funds received by the state for the School Readiness grant. This program benefits employers and their employees with children in the program while generating revenue in addition to the School Readiness allocation.
Summary

Fiscal Year 2011-2012 was the first full year to have all services performed completely in-house allowing the Coalition to keep tighter reins on enrollment and spending. With a growing VPK program and continual movement of the School Readiness program, the Coalition staff kept a steady pace of enrollment for services at all three offices in Lakeland, Winter Haven, and Lake Wales.

As the Coalition continues to work within this new structure and refine operations, expectations for better customer service and staff efficiency are being realized. With a new accounting system in place, the Coalition has more ability to track multiple funding sources and has improved its capacity to better allocate staff time and responsibilities to the appropriate funding. The Coalition is now more prepared to transition into the new state-wide data system coming in 2013, the Early Learning Information System (ELIS). This new web-based system will change the way coalitions interact with parents and child care providers and will allow for additional efficiencies with a more paperless operation.

With another year of economic stress, the Coalition worked with families and providers to give services to those most in need. Both parents and providers struggled due to the high unemployment rates. The Coalition applied for and was awarded additional grant funds from partners who believe in the importance of preparing children for school while their parents remain in their jobs. These grant funds were used to serve more children, in special projects and, as always, to purchase books to improve family literacy.

The Board of Directors continues to support their vision of both serving as many children as possible while improving the quality in child care sites funded by the Coalition. To this end the Coalition continues to invest in providers via the Quality Counts/Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS). This initiative continues to aid willing providers improve the quality of early care and education for their sites.

The Early Learning Coalition of Polk County looks forward to increasing the number of partners in the community to afford Polk County children the opportunity to enter school healthy, ready, and eager to learn with the collaborative support of parents, families, educators, and the community.
Chair
James H. Rhodes II

Vice Chair
Howard Kay

Secretary
Bill Dorman

Gubernatorial Appointees
James H. Rhodes II, Chair • Hunt Berryman

Legislatively Mandated Members
Department of Children and Families · Sheila Nobles, designee
District Superintendent of Schools · Matti Friedt, designee
Workforce Development Board Chair or Director · Stacy Campbell-Domineck
County Health Department Director or designee · Michele Ford, designee
President of community college, designee · Karen Greeson, designee
Board of County Commissioners, appointee · L. Gay Ratcliff
Head Start Director · Sylvia Holmes

Representative Members
Representative of Private Child Care Provider · Diane DeSena
Representative of Faith-Based Child Care Provider · Patty Boska
Representative of Children with Disabilities · Paula Sullivan

Private Sector Business Members
Deming Cowles
Bill Dorman
Sam Houghton
Alice Hunt
Howard Kay
Katrina Lunsford
Malcolm Scott

Florida Statutes 411.01 mandates certain agencies must be represented on the Coalition Board. A minimum of 1/3 of the members of the Coalition Board must be from the business sector.