



EARLY LEARNING
COALITION
OF SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

News from The Early Learning Coalition SWFL

Winter, 2023
Here's what's happening at the ELC

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Welcome

New Board Members for 2023

In January, our ELC welcomed new Board members Laura Bright and Sharon Love.



Laura Bright serves as the Chief Advancement Officer at the Golisano Children's Museum of Naples. The staff and board includes a diverse group of experienced community leaders and professionals who stay current with the trends in the children's museum field.



Sharon Bayata Love is an associate attorney at Long, Murphy & Zung, P.A., Sharon exclusively practices family law. She comes from a background of working with Collier County families through nonprofits.

Thanks!

Years of Service Noted

This year we say farewell to Marshall Bower. Mr. Bower served for 8 years on our Board, 2 and-a-half years as Interim Board President.

Early Learning Coalition CEO, Susan Block commented, "We are grateful to our outgoing board



(l-r) Marshall Bower, Susan Block, Early Learning Coalition CEO

leader for his commitment to early learning in SWFL and will miss his unique style. Members from the private sector are critically important to early learning to communicate the impact of this field on school readiness and the economy. During his eight-year term, Mr. Bower assisted the ELC to strengthen the relationship with the school district of Lee County and many local community partners. We wish him well”.

Mr. Bower is the President and Executive Director at The [Foundation for Lee County Public Schools, Inc.](#) and sits on many community boards and committees.

Books Abound!

Southwest Florida Reading Festival

Young and old - there was something for every literary-minded person at the [Southwest Florida Reading Festival](#) March 4, 2023. As children colored the giant murals, parents received information about many of our ELC services - including School Readiness and Voluntary Prekindergarten Programs. Over 450 children received a book to take home!



(l-r) Cora Rice and Sherry Shupp of the Early Learning Coalition SWFL hand out books and information at the Southwest Florida Reading Festival.



Lots of creative energy goes into the transformation of the giant mural!



(l-r) ELC Staff Sesia Dominguez and Caroline Roberts talk to parents while children color the giant mural at the Southwest Florida Reading Festival March 4, 2023

Celebrate Literacy Week

Early Readers Encouraged

In February, we joined [Celebrate Literacy Week, Florida!](#) with a distribution of books in our Fort Myers office. This year's statewide theme "Take a Deep Dive into Literacy" inspired ELC staff to turn our lobby into a treasure hunt for undersea creatures. While parents or guardians signed youngsters up for School Readiness or Voluntary Prekindergarten classes, children were free to find and count as many fish as they could find - and receive a book as a reward!



Hi there!
Can you find all 10 of our goldfish?
They are hidden all around our lobby area.



Community Partnership *Preschool Literacy*

As part of the Literacy Buddy Program, Humana employees' fourth annual holiday book drive benefitted preschools in Southwest Florida.

Humana encourages employees to give back to the community where they live and work. Each year an employee receives 8 hours of Volunteer Time Off (VTO). Employees can use this time in any way that benefits their community. This year's drive resulted in 200 books - which will be distributed in Lee, Collier, Glades and Hendry Counties. In addition, Humana employees visited four preschools to read a book and to interact with the children.

Thanks, Humana!



(l-r) Lauri Kalanges and Nicole Walker-Slivanak, of Humana, read to a preschool class at the Children's House Learning Center in Naples, FL

Connections *AELC Training Camp*

In early March, our ELC joined other Early Learning Coalitions from around the state for a Training Camp in Daytona Beach.

It was all about connections - in the childcare industry and related fields. Hot topics: how the pandemic has affected and changed the early childcare field, and how the new work environment - be it gig employment or self-employment - can affect School Readiness Eligibility, and what to do about it.

[Association of Early Learning Coalitions](#)



(l-r) ELC Staff Amanda Devariste, Sesia Dominguez, Cora Rice, Gilda Duran at the AELC Training Camp, Daytona Beach, FL

Be My Neighbor Day *WGPU caters to kids*

In March, inside and outside, it was a beautiful day to attend **WGPU's Be My Neighbor Day!** While parents learned about the many agencies available to families, children took in the fun at the crafts tables. Outside, kids got to get up close to the Lee County Sheriff's Office emergency vehicles, look inside an ambulance and touch a firetruck!



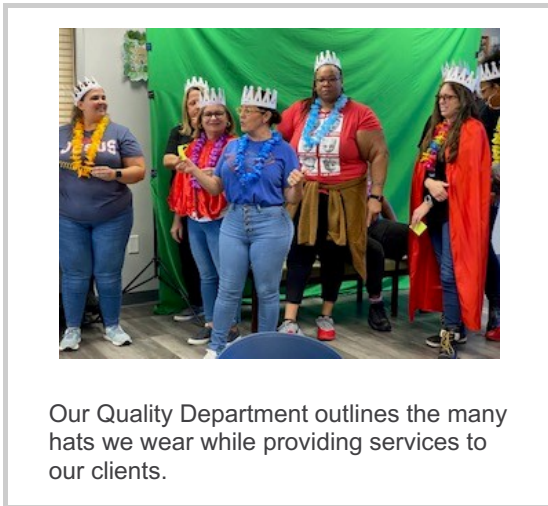
Children, with parents in tow, searched for Daniel Tiger, and took a moment in front of the green screen to "be on TV".



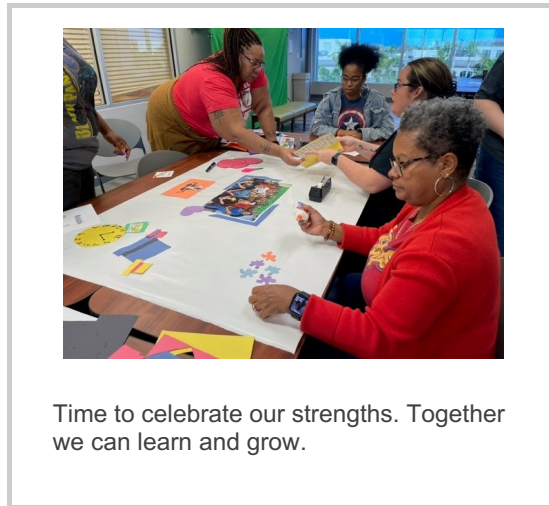
Our ELC's Amanda Devariste chats with parents about free Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) and keeps children occupied with crafts

Moving into the New Year *Staff Development Day*

In December, we took a moment for ourselves. The annual Staff Development Day emphasizes teamwork and building new connections within our organization. Oh yeah- there was plenty of food and fun, too!



Our Quality Department outlines the many hats we wear while providing services to our clients.



Time to celebrate our strengths. Together we can learn and grow.

Looking Forward *A Fond Farewell to Southwest Florida*



Dear Supporters of Early Learning:
In November, I notified the ELC Board of Directors of my intent to step down as Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Early Learning Coalition of Southwest Florida. My decision to leave this position is largely based on my desire to spend more time with my wife, children, and the six grandchildren who were all born during my tenure here at the ELC. I remain passionate about my work for children and families. However, the time is right for new leadership at the ELC and for me to set my sights in different directions. Please indulge me as I use my column to express my appreciation as I prepare to leave.

- Thank you to the ELC Board of Directors who hired me to be the third CEO of this Coalition, serving Collier, Glades, Hendry, and Lee Counties. The unwavering support for me and the entire Coalition team makes a huge difference in our work.
- Thank you to all the early learning programs who work with the Coalition to serve School Readiness and Voluntary Prekindergarten children in our community. You've all faced many challenges to care for and educate our youngest citizens in preparation for school. Your efforts, despite the odds, are greatly appreciated.
- Thank you to the ELC staff. To say that you are "hard-working" would be the

understatement of the century. You've demonstrated a consistent commitment to the children and families of Southwest Florida and to each other to get the job done. Facing hurricanes, a pandemic, and many other tests over the recent past, you continue to amaze me. I hope you know how much I appreciate you.

- To our greater community, with too many individuals and organizations to list, your growing understanding of the importance of early learning makes a difference. I have loved working with you and look forward to hearing about the great work that originates here.
- I would be remiss if I didn't address our policy makers, serving the people of SWFL within local and state government settings. During my tenure, there's been growing attention to the importance of early learning. Early learning is the foundation for school readiness and later education as well as the economic success, both short and long term, in our state. Your focus on the quality of early learning is a worthwhile investment. Keep up the good work by taking care of our youngest, most vulnerable population.

Change is difficult and yet exciting. Knowing that I am leaving the Coalition in good hands is encouraging. I don't know exactly where I will be living except to say it will be outside of Southwest Florida but still here in the Sunshine State. My life's work to improve the lives of children and families will continue.

As I reflect on my experience as CEO, I have learned a great deal. This Southwest Community is a fantastic place to live and work. I've learned so much and enjoyed getting to know the people and special places in our community. I am grateful for this time here at the Coalition and in Southwest Florida.

With my heartfelt appreciation for this opportunity to serve,

Susan E. Block, CEO
Early Learning Coalition SWFL

[Early Learning Coalition of Southwest Florida](#)
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