



**Early
Learning
Coalition**
OF SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

EARLY LEARNING COALITION OF SWFL

WINTER NEWSLETTER
2025

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- **Play Time is Learning Time**

A Message From Our CEO



Melanie M. Stefanowicz, Ed.D.
CEO, Early Learning Coalition of SWFL

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As we step into 2025, we are embracing change, growth, and a renewed commitment to the children and families we serve. Our new logo represents more than just a fresh look—it symbolizes our unwavering dedication to early literacy, inclusion, and quality early learning across Southwest Florida. The open book in the design signifies our commitment to building a strong foundation of early literacy, while the four free-form children embody the diversity and vibrancy of the four counties we serve: Glades, Hendry, Collier, and Lee.

This year, we are focused on critical initiatives that support child care providers, families, and the early learning workforce. Through the **Ready Together Alliance**, we are working alongside partners to strengthen early learning opportunities and ensure more children enter kindergarten ready to succeed. We believe that by bringing together the collective strengths of educators, community organizations, and families, we can create a network of support that uplifts every child.

One exciting development on the horizon is the potential expansion of **School Readiness Programs in Lee County Schools**. This expansion would mean that more working families could access high-quality early education, easing the burden of child

care costs and enabling parents to pursue economic stability. We know that the earliest years are critical for brain development, and every additional child who gains access to nurturing and educational environments is a step towards a brighter future for our entire community.

Additionally, we continue to advocate for policies that strengthen early education, including Florida's new tax credit for employers investing in child care support. This policy is a significant win for working parents, and we're engaging with businesses to maximize the impact of this opportunity. It's our goal to create an ecosystem where employers are active partners in supporting their employees' families, fostering a more robust workforce and healthier communities.

From Celebrate Literacy Week to hands-on teacher training, and from collective impact efforts to supporting families with child care assistance, we remain committed to unlocking every child's potential. The hands-on training sessions we facilitate, such as those recently held for PreK teachers in Hendry County, highlight how play can enhance learning in the preschool classroom. Trainings like these empower educators with the latest strategies and reinforce our belief that "It's OK to Play in VPK!"—because children learn best through play.

Looking ahead, we aim to deepen our community engagement and continue to innovate in our approach to early learning. The challenges we face are complex, but our community's spirit of collaboration and resilience is stronger. We invite you to join us in advocating for early learning, participating in community events like **Children's Week 2025**, and supporting initiatives like book drives and volunteer opportunities.

Thank you for being part of this journey. Whether you are a parent, educator, or community partner, your engagement makes a difference. Together, let's make 2025 a year of learning, growth, and opportunity for all!



Drum roll, please!

We've been loyal to our brand for about 25 years, but...it's time for a change! Get to know our new logo for 2025 - and beyond!

In addition to the fresh color scheme, the open book symbolizes our commitment to early literacy- a strong foundation of early learning. The four free-form children represent diversity within the four counties we serve: Glades, Hendry, Collier, and Lee.

Designed by the talented folks at [REACH](#), who are also giving [our website](#) a refreshing upgrade- coming soon!

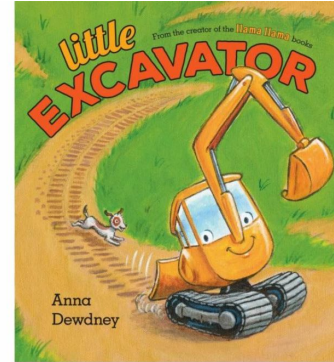
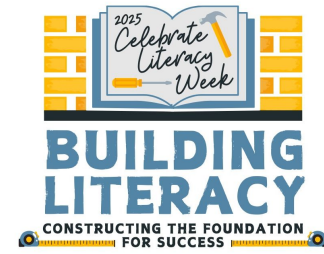
Celebrate Literacy Week, Florida!

January 27 - 31, 2025

This week encourages families to make reading part of their daily routines. Reading aloud to young children is a proven way to inspire future learners. This year's theme was "Building Literacy: Constructing the Foundation for

Success"

The Florida Division of Early Learning (DEL) selected two books that highlight the theme. Recommended for infant and toddlers: ***Little Excavator* by Ana Dewdney**, a story that encourages young ones to dream big. Preschoolers will understand how working hard pays off with ***Dig, Dig, Digging* by Margaret Mayo**, a fun and rhythmic book that celebrates the exciting world of digging and building. Make reading a part of your everyday routine!



Play is Educational

"It's OK to Play in VPK!"

Children learn best when they are interacting with other children in an age-appropriate setting where skills such as sharing, communication, and cooperation are developed.

At the Hendry County School District in January, 2025, PreK teachers participated in a hands-on training that demonstrated how play can enhance learning in the preschool classroom. This training, and others like it help preschool teachers stay current - and their classrooms benefit! [More about VPK](#)



Director of Assessment and Screening, Bronwyn Gogia (center in pink), led Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) teachers in a hands-on training in LaBelle, FL.



(l-r) Cheryl Carpenter, Dir. of Early Childhood & Dr. Melanie Stefanowicz, CEO, Early Learning Coalition SWFL

Community

Getting better all the time! Learning and making connections at the [Association of Early Learning Coalitions](#) (AELC) Training Camp in Daytona Beach, FL in January.

Our Coalition presented "Unlocking the Future: Innovative Partnerships to Elevate Kindergarten Readiness". It's one of the many ways we connect with others to focus on the business of early learning.

Book Drive Success

In December, [Humana](#) employees in Florida used their volunteer hours to encourage preschoolers to read by

supplying books during their annual book drive!



(above) Children at Deana's Country Kids preschool listen to Nicole Walker-Slivanik, of Humana read a book (left) 4 & 5 year-olds at Kinderland Place Preschool in Fort Myers pick books to take home.

GET HELP FOR CHILD CARE COSTS.

The Early Learning Coalition of SWFL is ready to help eligible families pay for child care! Find out if your family qualifies for the School Readiness Program at www.elcofswfl.org.



School Readiness

Florida's School Readiness Programs can help ease the burden of child care costs for families that qualify.

The Early Learning Coalition of SWFL can assist in submitting your application through the Florida Early Learning [Family Portal](#).

Make an appointment, or stop by our offices to see if your family can take advantage of this program.

[Information about School Readiness](#)

Parents' Pages

There's lots to find out about in the January edition of the Florida Division of Early Learning's Parents' Pages. Check it out!

[January Parents' Pages](#)



Children's Week 2025

Save the Date! Children's Week Florida will be held April 13 - 18, 2025. This annual event, which marks its 30th year, is centered in Tallahassee, and aims to keep children's issues top-of-mind for our Florida legislators. Learn more at [Children's Week 2025](#)





Creating children's hand art to hang from the State Capitol Rotunda is one way your class can contribute to the visibility of children's issues. Make it a class project. Here is a "handy" **TOOLKIT** to get you started!



Free Tax Preparation

The United Way's Free Tax Preparation program, VITA, helps low- to moderate-income households file their federal tax returns. Residents who earn a household income of \$66,000 or less can have their tax returns prepared, e- filed and direct deposited for FREE by United Way's Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program (VITA). [Learn more here.](#)



Voluntary Prekindergarten

VPK is FREE for every Florida 4-year-old and applying online is easy to do.

- Visit Florida's Early Learning Family Portal
- Create an account
- Upload child's proof of age & proof of residency
- When approved, get a Certificate of Eligibility to take to any VPK provider!

The Early Learning Coalition of SWFL can help - and our services are FREE!



Early Learning Coalition
OF SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

Visit or call: www.elcofswfl.org | 239-935-6100
<https://familyservices.floridaearlylearning.com>

Business Hours

Our office locations will be closed to the public each Friday in 2025.

2025



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