

"Anyone  
who does  
anything  
to help a  
child in  
his life is  
a hero."

— Fred Rogers



# MESSAGE FROM THE BOARD CHAIR



The needed transition from mere “babysitting” to real “Early Education” for our youngest learners took some big steps forward this year. And the Children’s Forum was, of course, right in the middle of it.

Research shows that educators who earned a certification or college degree in early childhood education are much more likely to successfully prepare kids for kindergarten. That preparation makes all the difference in their schooling and life. The Forum’s TEACH Early Childhood® Scholarship Program is helping to establish a well-qualified, fairly-compensated, and stable workforce for Florida’s children. By offering scholarships and comprehensive support, TEACH empowers early educators to pursue higher education, advance professionally, and achieve better compensation and outcomes.

Administered through the Children’s Forum, the Help Me Grow® Florida program is expanding across the state and providing free behavioral and developmental screenings as well as expert knowledge on child development. They ensure children and families are connected to needed community-based services and supports.

The business community’s voice was heard loud and clear this year. They know that their future workforce needs support in these critical years. And they also know a good deal when they see one. Nothing saves tax dollars like getting kids on the right path right from the start. Nobel prize winning economists say a tax dollar spent on quality early learning saves at least \$7 down the road. Let’s not pass up that opportunity.

The 2025 legislative session focused on many improvements in early learning programs. Several bills were enacted to expand access, improve quality, and support children at risk of school failure. Eligibility for School Readiness tuition assistance has been broadened to align with Florida’s economic growth, helping working families maintain stable child care enrollment. In addition, families can easily transfer to other Voluntary Prekindergarten Program providers without losing funding. Access and support for children with unique abilities was enhanced and the inspection process for providers was streamlined.

Thank you, legislators, for continuing to support TEACH, Help Me Grow, and Florida’s overall early learning systems. This is one more step in the direction of creating career paths with livable wages for early educators while also providing high-quality early learning experiences for young children. There is more work to be done, but it is time to celebrate some real progress. Let’s continue to work together to ensure all children thrive.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'HB' with a stylized flourish.

Bob Buesing, J.D.  
Board Chair

“ *Children are our most valuable natural resource.* ”  
—Herbert Hoover

# PROGRAMS OF THE CHILDREN’S FORUM



The TEACH Early Childhood® Scholarship Program is a national, evidence-based strategy that makes higher education more attainable for early learning and family child care educators through the program’s shared cost approach. As a statewide program, TEACH is licensed by Early Years (formerly Child Care Services Association) and funded by the Florida Department of Education-Division of Early Learning. Administrated by the Children’s Forum, TEACH provides scholarships and comprehensive supports for scholars working toward state and national credentials and their renewals, college credits and certificates, or degrees in early childhood education and related fields.

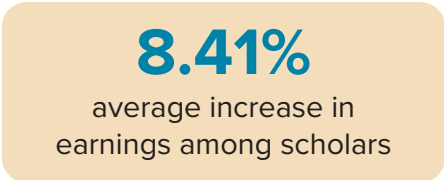
TEACH creates a three-way partnership in which the early learning educator (scholar), their employer (sponsor), and the TEACH program (scholarship) share the costs for tuition, books, and other school related expenses. This also includes paid release time that scholars may use for their studies. Additionally, scholars earn a raise or bonus after the successful completion of an educational year and agree to work for at least six months with their sponsoring program.

### Impact and Outcomes:

#### Educated Workforce:



#### Economic Viability:



#### Reduced Turnover:



INCENTIVE\$ Florida, an affiliate of the Child Care WAGE\$® Program, is a proven and effective strategy to increase the education, compensation, and stability of Florida’s early learning workforce. INCENTIVE\$ awards annual stipends of up to \$5,000 to early learning educators, family child care home providers (FCCH), and directors for their higher education achievements and commitment to their programs. INCENTIVE\$ complements local quality initiatives, helps provide equitable access to resources, and awards much needed financial supports to participating educators.

Licensed by Early Years NC, INCENTIVE\$ is administered by the Children’s Forum under a contract with local early learning coalitions, children’s services councils, and private contributors. Through these partnerships, this program supports professional growth, higher education, and career advancement of eligible educators, improving quality across their early learning programs and family child care homes.

### Impact and Outcomes:



# PROGRAMS OF THE CHILDREN’S FORUM



Help Me Grow® Florida (HMGF) promotes the healthy development of all children by providing access to free developmental and behavioral screenings and connecting families to the resources they need to succeed. By building cross-sector collaboration among community agencies, child healthcare professionals, and early learning educators, HMGF addresses the critical importance of early detection and intervention.

HMGF provides a centralized access point that supports families through developmental monitoring, parenting information, and available community resources. Since HMGF care coordinators continue to follow-up with families, HMGF can ensure that the needs of the family have been met.

### Impact and Outcomes:



9,526

developmental and behavioral screenings completed



5,046

new children served



149

community-based screening events to bring our services to families and community partners



90%

of children were successfully connected to at least one service



Children’s Week Florida is the largest event held in the state that celebrates and honors its commitment to young children, teens, and advocates. As the Organizing Partner of this annual initiative, the Forum has taken the lead in helping to bring thousands of attendees, including legislators, public officials, nonprofit organizations, community and business leaders, child and teen advocates, teachers, and students to the State Capitol each year during the legislative session. Together with our generous partners, we speak out as One Voice in support of children and families to deliver the message that every child should be healthy, ready to learn, and able to achieve their full potential.

### Impact and Outcomes:



37,000+

pieces of hand artwork were collected for the Celebration of the Hands display inside the Capitol Rotunda



3,000

young children, parents, students, and teachers attended Children’s Day at the Capitol



700

guests attended the annual Advocacy Dinner and Awards Ceremony in which Lorrane Ausely (Chiles), Dr. Jose Dotres (Impact), and Christopher Page (Youth) were honored for their advocacy efforts and leadership



45

partner booths brought stories to life and hosted sensory friendly activities in Storybook Village and the inaugural Storybook Garden

FORUM  
MEMBERSHIP  
PROGRAM

The Children’s Forum provides affordable and valuable membership opportunities for early learning educators, directors, family child care home providers and out of school time educators, as well as other professionals in the field. Members become part of a community that is committed to supporting early educators and their tireless work to promote positive experiences and outcomes for young children.

*In addition to a variety of benefits, a Children’s Forum membership:*

- ★ Provides opportunities for early educators to build their skills and expand their knowledge to make a difference in the early learning field
- ★ Satisfies membership requirements for credential renewals such as a National CDA or other Florida Staff Credentials
- ★ Assists program directors with fulfilling their Professional Contribution Requirement (PCR) through participation in a statewide workforce study
- ★ Offers professional development opportunities including member-exclusive webinars, legislative updates, and access to resources to stay up to date on best practices in the field.

*Impact and Outcomes:*



early educators and other professionals became a member of the Children’s Forum or renewed their existing membership

CHILD CARE EVALUATION SERVICES

The Child Care Evaluation Services Department provides accreditation management and educational support services for the Florida Department of Education - Division of Early Learning and Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF), Office of Licensing.

*These services include:*

- ★ Evaluating applications from prospective Florida Child Care Professional Credential (FCCPC) training institutions to determine their eligibility to offer the FCCPC, and monitoring the status of all FCCPC training programs in the state
- ★ Evaluating applications from prospective and renewing accrediting associations to determine their eligibility for designation as Gold Seal Quality Care Accrediting Associations
- ★ Assisting owners/operators of early care and education (ECE) programs in Florida with questions about becoming a Gold Seal Quality Care designated program, assisting current Gold Seal programs with inquiries about their status, and maintaining the state database of early care and education programs that have attained Gold Seal status
- ★ Designing and producing public awareness documents for FCCPC and Gold Seal programs
- ★ Coordinating the annual DCF Statewide Child Care Training Meeting and Leadership Meeting

*Impact and Outcomes:*



75

average number of participants across four training sessions



8

newsletters and brochures for DCF were produced



1,994

early childhood and family child care home programs maintained Gold Seal designation



# PROGRAMS OF THE CHILDREN'S FORUM



The Children’s Forum maintains a Professional Development Registry that serves a central database to record the workforce qualifications of early learning educators in Florida. These qualifications include employment history, compensation, benefits, credentials earned, and completed college courses/training activities. Data collected through the Professional Development Registry is also used to make policy-informed decisions to improve the quality of early learning programs.

*Impact and Outcomes:*

15,874

active Professional Development  
Registry participants in Florida

## ASSESSMENT AND COACHING SERVICES UNIT

The Children’s Forum holds a contract with the Florida Division of Early Learning in each county across the state to provide Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS®) observation and coaching services. The Assessment and Coaching Services Unit (ACSU) offers CLASS® services to early learning coalitions, Head Start agencies, and other entities in every region to help them meet state and federal program assessment requirements and improve early childhood classroom practices. The Forum also partners with LENA® to coach early learning educators for participating Early Learning Coalitions. The LENA® system provides a research-based approach to enhance children’s language and social-emotional development while positively impacting classroom quality, children’s brain development and school readiness.

*Impact and Outcomes:*

3,948

assessments were  
conducted

1,417

early learning programs  
received ACSU services

60

certified CLASS® assessors  
and coaches were available  
to provide services

18

agencies received  
ACSU services



# NEWSWORTHY NOTES

## Join Us at Children's Week Florida 2026



Children's Week Florida is coming to Tallahassee, and we want you to be part of the fun!

Join the Forum and thousands from across the state for a week filled with engaging celebrations and powerful advocacy for children, teens, and families. From interactive experiences like Storybook Village, Storybook Garden and Teen Day at the Capitol to the iconic Celebration of the Hands and Advocacy Dinner & Awards Ceremony, Children's Week Florida offers meaningful ways to connect around what matters most.

Visit [childrensweek.org](https://childrensweek.org) for the latest event details and how you can participate in next year's event. Together, let's speak with One Voice to ensure that every child has the opportunity to thrive!

## Council for Early Grade Success Selects Forum President and CEO to Serve as Chair



Congratulations to our President and CEO, Erin Smeltzer, who was selected to serve as Chair of the Council for Early Grade Success!

Established in 2021 under House Bill 419 within the Department of Education, the council advises the Coordinated Screening and Progress Monitoring program (CSPM), which tracks student progress in mastering grade-level standards from VPK through third grade. The CSPM is administered at the beginning, middle, and end of each school year, ensuring data-driven support for Florida's youngest learners.

## Forum Forward Corporate Membership Strengthens Organizations and Their Impact in the Early Learning Field



Investing in early childhood education lays a strong foundation for lifelong learning and a stable economy. Organizations can help make these investments by strengthening their early learning impact at both the state and national levels.

The Children's Forum created the Forum Forward Corporate Membership for organizations who wish to increase their early learning influence. Forum Forward members expand their organization's impact in the early learning field through promotional services, educational opportunities, and networking events. Members receive exclusive opportunities to collaborate among a cadre of business executives, policy experts, stakeholders, and leaders in the early care and education community, gain valuable early learning insights, learn more about the legislative process, and connect with decision-makers as well as thought leaders.

For more information, visit [flchild.com/forum-forward](https://flchild.com/forum-forward).

## Forum Partners with LENA Grow to Cultivate Connections in the Classroom



The Children's Forum is excited to partner with LENA Grow—a unique professional development program that helps teachers strengthen meaningful interactions with children. Research shows that simple back-and-forth conversations, like talking about a book or the weather, build language, literacy, social skills, and brain development.

Over five weeks, teachers participate in one special “LENA Day” each week, when children wear a small device that measures the number of conversational turns, adult words, and child vocalizations. The device doesn't record or understand words, ensuring complete privacy while offering valuable insight into classroom interactions.

Through this partnership, the Forum provides certified coaching to help teachers reflect on their data, celebrate strengths, and enhance communication strategies. LENA Grow fits easily into daily routines—no extra prep or time required—leading to more meaningful connections, confident teachers, and measurable growth for children.

Learn more at [lena.org/lets-grow-florida](https://lena.org/lets-grow-florida).

# FINANCIAL REPORT

| 2024-2025  | Expenditures |
|--|--------------|
| TEACH Early Childhood® Scholarship Program                       | \$16,999,982 |
| Help Me Grow® Florida  | \$4,495,602  |
| Early Learning Career Center/Professional Development Registries | \$215,355    |
| INCENTIVE\$ Florida  | \$2,017,508  |
| Assessment and Coaching Services Unit                            | \$1,865,100  |
| Child Care Evaluation Services                                   | \$241,886    |
| Other  | \$2,149,725  |
| TOTAL  | \$27,985,159 |



“The highest rate of return in early childhood development comes from investing as early as possible, from birth to age five, in disadvantaged families. The earlier the investment, the greater the return.”

—Nobel laureate economist  
James Heckman

# CLIENTS, PARTNERS, & FUNDERS

- 2-1-1 Big Bend, Inc.
  - 2-1-1 Brevard, Inc.
  - 2-1-1 Palm Beach/Treasure Coast
  - Aetna
  - Age of Learning
  - American Heart Association
  - AMIkids, Inc.
  - Arkansas Early Childhood Association
  - Association of Early Learning Coalitions (AELC)
  - Bainum Family Foundation
  - BayCare Kids
  - Better Together
  - CDC’s “Learn the Signs. Act Early.”
  - Charity for Change
  - Children’s Medical Services Health Plan
  - Children’s Services Council of Palm Beach County
  - Children’s Trust of Alachua County
  - DentaQuest
  - Early Childhood Council of Hillsborough County, Inc.
  - Economic Opportunities Council of Indian River County
  - ELC of Alachua County
  - ELC of Brevard County
  - ELC of Broward County
  - ELC of Duval
  - ELC of Flagler and Volusia Counties
  - ELC of Florida’s Gateway
  - ELC of Florida’s Heartland
  - ELC of Hillsborough County
  - ELC of Indian River, Martin and Okeechobee Counties (IRMO)
  - ELC of Lake County
  - ELC of Marion County
  - ELC of the Nature Coast
  - ELC of Northwest Florida
- ELC of Orange County
  - ELC of Osceola County
  - ELC of Pinellas County
  - ELC of Polk County
  - ELC of Santa Rosa County
  - ELC of Sarasota County
  - ELC of Seminole
  - ELC of Southwest Florida
  - ELC of the Emerald Coast
  - Escambia Children’s Trust
  - Family Initiative
  - Farm Share
  - FINACIOUS
  - Florida After School, Inc.
  - Florida Alliance of Children’s Councils and Trusts (FACCT)
  - Florida Association for the Education of Young Children (FLAEYC)
  - Florida Association of Healthy Start Coalitions
  - Florida Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services- Division of Food, Nutrition and Wellness
  - Florida Department of Children and Families
  - Florida Department of Education - Division of Early Learning
  - Florida Education Foundation
  - Florida Head Start Association
  - Florida Institute for Child Welfare
  - Florida KidCare
  - Florida Kiwanis Foundation
  - Florida Lottery
  - Florida Network of Children’s Advocacy Centers
  - Florida Sports Foundation
  - Gardner Media
  - Healthy Start SWFL
- Heart of Florida United Way
  - Highlights for Children
  - HMG Alachua at Partnership for Strong Families
  - Humana Healthy Horizons® in Florida
  - Imagine Pediatrics
  - Iowa Association for the Education of Young Children
  - JP Morgan
  - Kaplan
  - Kiwanis International
  - Learning Beyond Paper
  - LENA Foundation
  - MarcoPolo Learning
  - MCNA Dental
  - Molina Healthcare of Florida
  - MomsRising
  - New Worlds Reading
  - No Kid Hungry®
  - One World Learning Center
  - Reach Out and Read Florida
  - Redlands Christian Migrant Association (RCMA)
  - Simply Healthcare Plans
  - Signal Centers, Inc.
  - Sunshine Health
  - Synovus
  - Teaching Strategies
  - The Arc Gateway
  - The Children’s Movement of Florida
  - The Children’s Trust
  - The Discovery Source
  - The Giving Closet Project
  - Torsh
  - UF Lastinger Center for Learning
  - Walmart



# CHILDREN’S FORUM BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Forum board members are volunteers who contribute their time and expertise to provide oversight and guidance on behalf of the Forum's mission. We are proud of their dedication to our work and grateful for their generous service.

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**Board Chair**  
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*WTAS, LLC*  
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*University of North Florida*  
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*EXCEL Kids Academy*  
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**Diana Ragbeer Murray**  
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# CHILDREN’S FORUM STAFF

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David Zimmer

**Years of Service**  
\* 5-9 Years  
\*\* 10-14 Years  
\*\*\* 15 Years or More