

# KINDERGARTEN READY

## Executive Summary

### 2015

*Our **vision** is all children in Indian River County are prepared for kindergarten across the five critical domains: social/emotional, physical health and wellbeing, cognitive, communication and adaptive learning.*

## **Background**

Four years ago, a cross-sector of Indian River County educators, civic leaders, philanthropists, nonprofit organizations and volunteers rallied to support a bold, strategic goal to have 90 percent of all third grade students reading on grade level by the year 2018. Aligned around the mantra *schools can't do it alone*, these Literacy Leaders were keenly aware of research that cites literacy as the number one indicator of a community's economic prosperity. They gave their pledge to the Superintendent of Schools to work collaboratively to develop innovative programs, both in and out of the classroom, to help achieve what has become known as Indian River County's Moonshot Moment goal.

One of the three critical pillars to achieving grade level reading proficiency is kindergarten readiness. As the local work to address each pillar unfolded, community discussions quickly led to the creation of the Kindergarten Readiness Collaborative (KRC); a dedicated group of leaders who embarked on a year-long strategic planning process to review and research best practices, conduct an environmental scan of local conditions, and develop local strategies to support 90% of Indian River County (IRC) children arriving at kindergarten ready to learn.

## **Why It Matters**

Kindergarten readiness starts long before a child enters a formal education setting. Neuroscience research has shown the first 1,000 days of a child's life – from pregnancy through a child's second birthday – are a critical time period that set the stage for a person's intellectual development and lifelong health. Brain development, and therefore learning, begins with the health, nutrition and wellbeing of mothers during pregnancy. The brain development that occurs following birth, through a child's second birthday, is also noted as one of the most critical building blocks for educational success. Brain development at this stage is based on good nutrition, talking, playing and building positive emotional bonds with others.

Research by Nobel Laureate economist, Professor James Heckman, indicates investing in early childhood education is a cost-effective strategy for promoting economic growth. His analysis shows a seven to 10 percent per year return on investment based on increased school and career achievement as well as reduced costs in remedial education, health and criminal justice expenditures. Heckman's research shows early interventions (prevention) for disadvantaged children produce higher returns than remedial programs, offering an \$8.60 return for every dollar spent. In addition, a meta-analysis of 123 comparative studies of early childhood intervention consistently showed quality preschool significantly benefits school readiness and success.

These findings are supported by the Perry Preschool Project, a longitudinal study that followed participants who attended a high-quality preschool program for more than 40 years, which showed the benefits continue into adulthood. Compared to a control group who did not attend preschool, Perry participants were five times less likely to be arrested; more likely to hold a college degree, own a home and be employed.

To ensure the health and well-being of future generations, and the economic prosperity of our community, we must invest in early learning opportunities and the family support structures that create quality early learning environments for our children.

### **Current Conditions**

The reality is that most children who start kindergarten behind stay behind. Research tells us that only one in seven children who are behind in third grade will ever catch up. Currently, 44 percent of IRC kindergarteners are on grade level by the end of kindergarten. This increases slightly to 56 percent by the end of third grade. There are a number of risk factors that contribute to children arriving at school not prepared, many of which stem from poverty conditions. The limitations poverty imposes on families are real and significant. According to the United Way ALICE Report 47% of families in IRC are unable to meet basic food, housing and health needs. These **Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed** families make more than the federal poverty level, but not enough to cover the basic cost of living. Childcare is a significant portion of a household's budget and with limited resources there are few options for affordable care that is also high in quality.

Although the state of Florida provides subsidy dollars for childcare for children 0-3 years old (School Readiness Program, SRP), as well as funding for all four and early five-year old children to attend Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK), the dollar amount ranks among the lowest in the nation. In addition, while access to VPK is high, quality guidelines are also among the lowest. Florida standards meet just three out of 10 national best practices as reported by The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

### **Collaborative Process**

Over the past 12 months, the KRC investigated a child's path from conception to kindergarten. The process involved gathering data from various service providers that was often difficult to access. Collaborative members also visited many promising practices both locally and throughout the State to gain new insight and knowledge about how others are addressing kindergarten readiness. This effort not only brought forth new ideas, but allowed members the valuable opportunity to develop relationships and trust that will lead to more effective collaboration in the future. Throughout the course of the year, the Collaborative hosted three community summits to give members and other community leaders the opportunity to share what they learned and gather critical feedback and engagement on next step strategies.

The early years of a child's life are a complex and changing environment which are impacted by multiple factors. Historically, our community has had several attempts to shore up the early learning sector, and while small gains have been achieved, none have resulted in widespread impact. Because of the complexities, the KRC has adopted an Emergent Learning approach to find innovative solutions. This strategy recognizes our best answers to current problems are really only hypotheses that we can test, adjust and adapt on the way to success. Challenges are a stepping stone toward the right solution, rather than a failure that will put us back at step one.

This process of data gathering, research, best practice site visits and community summits produced the findings and recommendations contained in this Strategic Plan.

### **Strategic Objectives**

Through the time, dedication and collective expertise of many community partners, the Collaborative has identified the following strategic investment opportunities:

- Strategy I: Power of the Parent
- Strategy II: Missing Link
- Strategy III: Early Identification and Intervention
- Strategy IV: Preschool and Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten
- Strategy V: Community Engagement
- Strategy VI: Sustainability

### **STRATEGY I: Power of the Parent**

Our vision is for every parent, regardless of income or zip code, to have the knowledge and tools they need to raise healthy and productive people. We believe parents are a child's first teacher, and they can raise smart babies through simple, every day interactions.

#### **What we observed**

Home visiting models focusing on targeted interventions have produced positive results. Outcomes show longer spacing of subsequent pregnancies, medical care coordination, parenting support and education, and opportunities for early identification of developmental issues. Educational outreach programs, including home visiting programs, have been emphasized as critical components to help families living in poverty achieve positive child outcomes. Ultimately, for family home visiting and support programs to be successful they must actively engage parents and must be sensitive to the cultural and ethnic diversity of the target populations they serve. In addition to promoting healthy development, home visiting programs need to connect parents with employment, strong social networks, and community resources to help them overcome these stressors.

There are complicated social and political barriers that need to be tackled, while being sensitive to cultural norms. Access to services must be improved, sometimes taking services to the caregiver rather than asking them to travel to the services, as home visiting models do. Every parent could benefit from additional education, support, and home visits by parenting professionals. Those at highest risk stand to achieve the highest gains from participating in these services.

#### **Current and Future Initiatives**

There are several initiatives currently underway in Indian River County. Smart Baby Ambassadors, Parents As Teachers (PAT), PASE (Parents Advocating for Student Excellence), and parent engagement workshops and events are being incorporated into existing programs.

Priorities for future action include:

- Develop block-by-block outreach opportunities to support and empower parents in culturally relevant ways.
- Expand home visiting services and improve retention of current participants.
- Develop a consistent and relevant communication plan around the importance of developmental milestones.
- Implement and adapt Kindergarten Round Ups for children ages 0-5.

### **STRATEGY II: Missing Link**

Our vision is for the link between newborn services and pre-K to be strong and supportive to ensure the services children currently receive as newborns carries through the toddler years, ensuring they arrive prepared for kindergarten.

There are already established systems in place for prenatal and newborn identification and intervention. However, we lose our connection with about 80 percent of these families when they leave the hospital and 90 percent by the end of the first year of life. Many do not connect to the early childhood system of services again until their child is three or four years old, for child care subsidy or VPK, and by that time many are already behind developmentally. Throughout each of our strategies, we will seek to develop ways to find and stay connected to parents and children to ensure they receive the tools and services necessary to prepare the children to enter school ready to succeed.

### **STRATEGY III: Early Identification and Intervention**

Our vision is that the unique developmental abilities of every child are identified and access to appropriate resources and support for enrichment and/or intervention is provided to ensure readiness for success in kindergarten.

#### **What we observed**

We have learned early identification and intervention for any and all developmental delays is critical to a child's success. The goal of early intervention is to prevent or mitigate risk factors.

Currently there are some ongoing opportunities to identify and intervene with children in need; however, families and agencies face significant barriers. For families, the issue is awareness and access. For agencies, the issue is limited funding, personnel, and resources with restrictive eligibility criteria. As a result, the services are fragmented, not well coordinated, and lack a comprehensive and consistent focus. This delivery system is not easily or readily accessible to families, difficult to navigate, and not well known throughout the community.

## **Current and Future Initiatives**

Early Steps of the Treasure Coast can evaluate and provide intervention until age three when screening, evaluation, and services are provided through the SDIRC. Local home visiting programs also do screenings and can refer for additional services. The 211 Hotline has added the Help Me Grow program which can do developmental questionnaires over the phone, and Smart Babies will include milestone information in their outreach to parents.

Priorities for future action include:

- Have to interact with health community – pediatricians and health centers.
- Work with Early Steps to increase outreach and awareness of services.
- Engage medical community to learn more about opportunities for screenings on-site.
- Expand home visiting programs and parent coaching opportunities.
- Develop broad scale outreach and awareness campaign to educate parents and community of developmental milestones.

## **STRATEGY IV: Preschool and Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten**

Our vision is for all children to have access to quality, affordable Preschool and VPK.

### **What we observed**

It is estimated that approximately 95 percent of four and early five-year-olds in Indian River County are enrolled in some kind of prekindergarten. Seventy-five percent attend centers that accept Florida VPK funds, and 20 percent attend private centers that do not accept VPK funds.

About 40 percent of three-year-olds attend preschool. Most are attending licensed private centers (both accepting and not accepting School Readiness Program (SRP) funds). A child (0-3) whose parent earns less than 150 percent of the poverty level is eligible for SRP funding. However, these funds, which come from the Federal Government, are very limited and may only reach 15 percent (~200) of three-year-olds in Indian River County.

The cost to operate a quality center in Indian River County for three and four-year-olds is approximately \$10,000 (annualized this would be \$13,000) per student. In Indian River County, the average cost of private center providers as calculated by Early Learning Coalition of Indian River, Martin and Okeechobee (ELCIRMO) is \$113 per week, which equates to \$5,000 for a typical school year. With 14% of families in Indian River County living in poverty, and 30% living at a subsistence level it is clear parents need financial help to send their children to preschool. Federal SRP (~\$3,300 per child) and State VPK (\$2,419 per child) subsidies are not enough to pay for a quality program. Combine these low reimbursement rates with low state standards, as well as a high demand for certain age slots, and there is little incentive for providers to improve quality on their own. In other communities we visited, the Early Learning Coalitions served as the community leader and

organizer for addressing issues of quality and access. That has not been the experience in Indian River County.

Research and longitudinal studies highlight that quality (defined by utilizing high quality teachers) provides the greatest impact. Of the numerous ways to address quality, the Collaborative feels that creating a Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS), increased credentialing and professional development of teachers and childcare workers, and an expanded VPK school year will have the biggest impact.

### **Current and Future Initiatives**

In Indian River County, the VPK classrooms at the School District of Indian River County and Childcare Resources (CCR) are considered local models for quality. CCR also provides professional development opportunities for child care providers throughout the community. In addition, Big Brothers Big Sisters has implemented a promising new program placing AmeriCorps volunteers in underperforming child care centers to provide additional support to help three- and four-year olds reach age appropriate reading milestones. The program also includes a formal parent support component. There are also summer VPK and Extension opportunities for struggling students.

Priorities for future action include:

- Convening community partners to discuss and develop components for a local Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS).
- Replicating the Learning Alliance Master Coach Model for Preschool and VPK teachers.
- Professionalizing the preschool and VPK business in Indian River County by making a goal of all teachers having their CDA.
- Developing a model to promote increased teacher credentialing with scholarship opportunities for the teachers and incentives for the center directors and owners.
- Creating a plan to ensure trained preschool and VPK teachers are paid a living wage (on a sustained basis) that brings quality into the market and reduces the high turnover.
- Extended school year available for all.
- Developing an advocacy strategy at both the State and Local level.

### **STRATEGY V: Community Engagement**

Our Vision is for people from all walks of life to understand that investments in early childhood developmental milestones (social/emotional development, physical health and well-being, cognitive skills, communication, and adaptive skills) are crucial, because a child's education starts at pregnancy, not at 5 when they enter kindergarten. Individual and community prosperity will be enhanced when our children are able to achieve third grade reading proficiency, our Moonshot Moment Goal (<http://www.moonshotmoment.org>).

## **What we observed**

It is not widely understood in Indian River County how important the milestones of early childhood development are to the prosperity and quality of life in Indian River County. Parents, as well as the general public, still struggle to make the connection the impacts of simple, every day activities (like good nutrition, talking, singing, playing) can have on a child's long term success.

There are many models we referenced to develop effective, relevant engagement for parents from various racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. We also learned engaging the broader community, including business leaders and funders, is critical to the long term support and success of early childhood initiatives. The Jacksonville Community Council, Inc. (JCCI) serves as an excellent model for engagement at the county level.

A key learning from the parent education pilot programs is that on-going and consistent parent engagement requires targeted, culturally sensitive messaging, and neighbor-to-neighbor delivery to better meet the needs of the target populations. A community advocate could be very helpful in connecting community members to programs and services that would benefit them.

Another communication strategy is the development of a community wide "I Care" communication campaign that leverages the power of the Moonshot Moment brand and existing non-profit and business communication efforts to help people tap into their own personal emotional connection to the first 2,000 days. This kind of messaging will educate the community about brain development and milestones in a sensitive, meaningful way.

## **Current and Future Initiatives**

Smart Baby Ambassadors have begun in learning from the community and adapting their strategies to be more responsive and inclusive. They are currently working in two identified pockets of poverty: Gifford and Fellsmere. The Moonshot Moment developed the Literacy Leaders forum, which includes high-level community leaders from various sectors. The power of this collaborative has led to increased investments by individual philanthropists, local foundations, and local government.

Priorities for future action include:

- Create an awareness campaign with a consistent message delivered in a culturally relevant way. Align our efforts with the current Moonshot Moment communications campaign.
- Learn lessons from Smart Baby Ambassadors in Gifford and Fellsmere to expand to the other pockets poverty.
- Identify and create champions to educate and engage the diverse target markets (business, parents, daycare providers, VPK providers, churches, etc.).
- Create culturally relevant social media pathways such as a Facebook page based on child's year of birth, age, or high school graduation year.



- Establish annual Roundups, Festivals, and Celebrations for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten enrollment, as well as events for younger children. These annual events for every age can improve access to and awareness of resources for parents.

## **STRATEGY VI: Sustainability**

The Collaborative envisions a system-wide transformation scaled in a measured way, first by building short-term infrastructure, followed by the development of flexible funding streams to stabilize current best practices and incubate new initiatives.

### **What we observed**

The KRC grew from a small Coordinating Committee of about eight community leaders, into an effort that included more than 40 community, education and nonprofit representatives who dedicated themselves to finding new ways to ensure all IRC children are ready for kindergarten. While the Coordinating Committee continues to exist, all are volunteers with other full-time commitments. Because of this, the KRC leaders quickly learned it was important to hire a dedicated staff person to keep the process moving forward.

In addition, as we continued to convene key community leaders around issues impacting kindergarten readiness, we identified an important communication void Indian River County's early learning sector in Indian River County. There is currently no dedicated infrastructure to rally people, organizations and resources to build an effective early childhood system. The result has created silos that block collaborative research, thinking and learning that will help advance the quality of services, care and support families need to help their children be successful.

Another area of observation included the reactive, rather than proactive, cycle of funding inherent in the non-profit culture. Due to the seasonal nature of our community, funding cycles overlap in a narrow timeframes and there is never a guarantee because most of the available grants are made by organized groups that raise private charitable dollars on an annual basis. Funding for multi-year programming is virtually nonexistent, which creates an additional burden for nonprofit providers to spend a large portion of their time chasing annual gifts.

### **Current and Future Initiatives**

Through this strategic planning process, the KRC has taken the first step to building short-term infrastructure for a better coordinated early childhood system. Thanks to dedicated funders who recognize the value of a minimal backbone organization to promote innovation and best practices. We have received funding commitments to begin building the backbone organization. The initial funding which we received in July has enabled us to hire 2 part time people and the KRC plans to become a fully incorporated 501c3 dedicated to helping raise the level of resources needed for a successful early childhood system of care.

Relationship building will be a vital component in our efforts moving forward, including developing a stronger connection to the state-supported ELC to leverage resources and data.

A long-term goal, however, is a centralized infrastructure dedicated to early childhood. This includes developing systems that will allow organizations to share data and help inform the community about the value of current and new programs and practices; act as a convener to help facilitate better communication and coordination of services for pregnant women and families of children through age five; and explore and advocate for more permanent funding streams to allow the most effective early learning programs and services to thrive. These may include developing venture capital funding in partnership with innovative philanthropists or a dedicated Children's Services Council, such as ones that exist throughout the State of Florida, which can provide permanent, reliable funding through an independent taxing authority.