

All Children Ready for School



OVERVIEW

It is common to hear that too few students in our Title 1 schools enter kindergarten ready. To better understand what it means to be kindergarten ready, and what barriers prevent young children from meeting this milestone, we've spent the last 12 months listening to school staff, parents, home visiting organizations, parenting educators, and numerous agencies that support early learning in our community. We asked about the obstacles families face in accessing early learning programs, what's currently working, and where there are opportunities to better meet the needs of young families with children ages 3 – 6.

BIG THEMES

It is difficult to overstate how often these five barriers were mentioned. One or more of these problems was mentioned in every single interview. These are big, complex problems that aren't unique to Sarasota and will take a committed, community-wide effort to improve. But it's important to understand the "braking" effect these barriers have on making significant change to issues such as school readiness.

1. Transportation
2. Affordable housing
3. Affordable, quality childcare
4. Living wage
5. Health care – including mental health & addiction

What we heard: Many families live in a state of crisis due to lack of stable housing, affordable childcare and transportation. Few teachers have the training and experience to support children experiencing severe trauma and poverty.



WHAT'S WORKING

YOU! : Hard working professionals in our community are dedicated to supporting families & children.

Preschool, VPK and Summer Learning

Academies: Children who attend these programs are better prepared for kindergarten; the kindergarten teachers tell us this, and the test scores reflect it.

VPK & Preschool Directors and Staff: These professionals serve as a trusted source of information for parents about important topics such as child development, kindergarten registration and food pantries.

Strong Teams in Elementary Schools: Home School Liaisons, Social Workers, on-site Mental Health Therapists, ESE specialists, Guidance Counselors, Behavior Specialists, therapists from Forty Carrots...other communities marvel at the level of support our children have in elementary schools.

Involvement of community groups: Faiths organizations and service clubs often provide vital support to Title 1 schools.

Spending parity works: A pilot preK program is demonstrating that when we spend the same amount on 4-year-olds that we do on 5-year-olds, we can significantly improve a child's ability to be successful in school.

Creative teachers: Teachers continue to find new and creative ways to reach parents and enrich home learning environments.

Successful families and children: When parents are informed about available community resources and are motivated to use them, the outcomes can be great.

“Currently there is no permanent, structural connection to bridge the early learning community and the K – 5 community.” *VPK/Preschool staff*

DISCOVERIES

Disconnected Systems and People

A lack of connection between agencies, resources, information and people results in inconsistent services and missed opportunities.

What we heard:

“Kindergarten teachers get training on how to **manage** a problem, but not on **why** the problem is happening in the first place. There is a gap between what teachers are taught and what children need.” – *School support staff*

“It’s like you’ve landed on another planet. When you feel how powerless you are, it makes you cry.” – *parent, on the difficulty of moving to Sarasota from another country*

What prevents connection:

0-5 community and K – 12 community: The disconnect starts in Tallahassee, with different departments, tests and curricula. Locally, there is no easy and established way for information to flow between these two groups.

Preschools, Schools, Families & Community

Resources: Families exist in several spaces at

once, but agencies serving those families often don’t know what’s available in the other spaces. School staff don’t know about VROOM, home visiting staff don’t know about Summer Learning Academies, VPKs don’t know about kindergarten readiness bags, schools don’t think about public libraries.

Data: Data on students is limited, challenging to collect and difficult to share. This affects information flowing **from** the 0 – 5 community to the K – 5 community, **within** the K – 5 community, and **between** families and schools. Many agencies serving families have no access to data that would demonstrate program impact on school readiness.

Teachers¹ Knowledge & Students Behaviors:

Few teachers are offered training on Trauma Informed Care, toxic stress, or the effects of poverty. This impacts how they view student behavior and what resources they have to support children and families.

Parents Interests, Ability, Motivation &

Teachers Expectations: Teachers and home visiting staff continue to hear parents say, when encouraged to help educate their child, ““It’s not my job, it’s the teacher’s job”. Some parents want to be more involved but encounter systemic barriers around language, transportation, school security, work schedules and poverty. Some parents are difficult to engage and motivate.

¹ Unless otherwise specified, “teacher” refers to professionals working in both preschools and elementary schools.

Parents Education, Access & Students' Needs:

Parents often don't understand the importance of talking and reading to their children. Many are in "survival mode", trying to stay afloat financially. Parents can be reluctant to have their child tested or sign the paperwork necessary to deliver services, for fear of having their child "labeled".



What Would Help Connect Systems and People:

- ✓ Train more teachers on child development, social/emotional behavior and Trauma Informed Care
- ✓ Create materials that clearly and simply explain the benefits of VPK and SLA – many organization that work with young children don't have easy access to information that shows these two programs make a difference
- ✓ Investigate more ways to share data – most 0 – 5 agencies have no way of knowing how their children do once they reach school
- ✓ Ensure information is shared across spaces, like the 0 – 5 and the K – 5 community, and the general community including libraries, food banks and the Health Department

"The problem isn't what we're not doing, it's who we're not getting." Preschool Director

DISCOVERIES

Impacts on Formal Early Learning

It is difficult to make progress when preschool salaries remain low, full-time care remains unaffordable for many, and families struggle with the effects of poverty.

What we heard:

"Treating preschool teachers as professionals, with good salaries, benefits and the opportunity for professional development, is essential to a successful early learning program." Preschool Director

“I work with this one family, where the mom has a 4-year-old as well as a 1-year-old and a 2-year-old. It’s just too hard for her to get out of the house every day with all the kids to drop off the 4-year-old at VPK. Especially because she then just has to turn around and get him three hours later.” – *Home Visiting staff*

What Impacts Formal Early Learning

No one “owns” 3-year-olds in our community:

Unless a child/family is already enrolled in a preschool program, there is no way to know where the 3-year-olds are in our community.

VPK not affordable due to wrap-around care costs:

Families often cannot take advantage of the free three hours of VPK because they need full-day childcare and cannot afford the wrap-around care. They can’t leave work after three hours to pick up their child, or may lack the transportation to do so. It often makes more financial sense for these parents to leave their child with family, friends or neighbors.

Not enough high quality VPK spaces, especially in South County: More families would enroll in VPK if there were more high-quality choices in their neighborhood.

Low wages for preschool staff: It is difficult to attract and retain staff when wages are so low, especially compared to other, easier jobs.

Parents looking for places that teach cognitive skills, not social/emotional: Even though teachers emphasize the importance of social/emotional skills in school readiness, parents often place more value on programs that prioritize academics.

More student behavior challenges: Teachers report children displaying increasingly difficult behaviors that they don’t understand and struggle to manage. Some theorize that this could be due to how children have been affected by the opioid epidemic, extensive exposure to screens that displace other critical developmental experiences, and/or lack of language skills and self-regulation.

Chaos and stress caused by poverty: It is difficult for a parent to support a child’s learning if they are worried about where the family will live next week or how they’ll get groceries.

What Would Help Formal Early Learning:

- ✓ Enhanced professional development environment and options for Early Learning Community:
 - Compensate teachers for their attendance at trainings
 - Provide subs so that teachers can attend
- ✓ Additional high-quality, current, local options for excellent Early Childhood Development education
- ✓ Monetary incentive programs for preschool teachers

“When I encourage parents to read to their kids and talk to them, they ask me if I can recommend an app for that.”

Kindergarten teacher

DISCOVERIES

Impacts on Informal Early Learning

Caregivers may not understand the critical role they can play in their child’s development, or may lack the ability to access local programs and opportunities.

What we heard:

“Growing up, education wasn’t prioritized in my home. Education wasn’t important. I didn’t know I should be doing anything with my kids until some lady knocked on my door and told me I should be teaching my kids, that it was important.” –
parent

“The parents are just unaware, or intimidated to go someplace like the library. They don’t know what to do or are afraid they won’t understand.” –
Kindergarten teacher



What Impacts Informal Early Learning:

Transportation: Families with limited transportation options can only attend programs that are within walking distance or when they can get a ride.

Language: If a family isn’t fluent in English, they can struggle to participate in programs and may feel self-conscious about asking questions or advocating for their child.

Caretakes not understanding systems: Systems like SCAT, the Libraries or the school system can be bewildering and intimidating for people who have not used them before. Difficulty navigating systems reduces participation and family engagement.

Immigration status: The current immigration climate has affected how many families sign up for services.

Parent attitude & knowledge: If parents don’t understand their ability to be their child’s first teacher, or if they think learning is something that only happens in a school with a professional teacher, then they take few steps to expose their child to early learning experiences.

What Would Help Informal Early Learning:

- ✓ Offer training (child development, TIC, mental health) to anyone who deals with families with young children – libraries, WIC staff, cafeteria aides
- ✓ Provide high quality, affordable child care from the age of 1
- ✓ Share education and training with all the people outside of preschool who can deliver early learning:
 - parents, at-home child care, friend, family and neighbor care
- ✓ Make systems easier for parents

“Students get empathy training. I wish the staff did too.” *School support staff*

DISCOVERIES

Children Struggle in Kindergarten

It is difficult for kindergarten teachers to compensate for a child’s lack of early learning experience, social/emotional development, family situation or limited parental involvement.

What we heard:

“Many children in kindergarten aren’t getting enough sleep. They have TVs and tablets in their bedrooms and their parents don’t enforce limits or bedtimes. Parents tell teachers, ‘It’s not my job to teach him, it’s your job.’” - *Kindergarten teacher*

“We cram this reading down these kids’ throats the minute they get here, but if they don’t have the social/emotional skills to be in the classroom, then it won’t matter.” – *School support staff*

“They’re [kindergarteners] very needy. Most parents are working and can’t afford to stay home. Everyone is stressed about finances and their lives are just chaotic.” *Kindergarten teacher, on changes she’s observed in kindergartners over the last several years*

What Prevents Kindergarten Success:

Students Not Prepared: Many students start kindergarten with inadequate language skills, including non-ESOL students. These students can’t express themselves and they can’t understand instructions, and are often labeled as behavior problems or learning disabled. Additionally, many children have no/poor early learning experiences before starting kindergarten.

Increased Expectations: Teachers are concerned that the expectations kindergarten students now face are not developmentally appropriate, especially for the youngest students.

Unsupportive Parents: Some parents won’t sign forms allowing services or admit there’s a

problem until it's recommended that the child is held back. Other parents who don't participate in problem-solving with the school and expect teachers to handle all aspects of learning.

Unsupported Parents: Some parents want to participate more in their child's classroom but are prevented because of systematic barriers like not being fluent in English, not being able to navigate new school security systems, or having a teacher who dismisses their concerns.

Untrained Staff: Many school staff don't have training in areas like Trauma Informed Care or toxic stress. Also, staff don't have an

understanding of the poverty students endure and how that affects their learning and their parents' engagement. Most college teaching programs spend little time on these topics and Professional Development in this area is limited.



What Would Improve Kindergarten Success:

- ✓ Stronger early learning experiences for more children.
- ✓ Parents who have more information and ability for engagement.
- ✓ Additional training for teachers.
- ✓ More EdExplorer Experiences for kindergarten and first grade classes, to increase experiential learning for children who may not have had these experiences before kindergarten.
- ✓ Better ways to encourage, recognize and share teacher creativity.
- ✓ Teachers and schools better using technology to reach young parents, including texting.
- ✓ Better data collection and information sharing between 0 – 5 and K- 5, and within the K – 5 system.

“If any school accepted any zip code, then we would all enroll our children in the best schools.” *Parent*

DISCOVERIES

The Role of Parents

Parents often want to be more involved in their child’s education, but either don’t know what they can do, are overwhelmed, or struggle to access systems, including schools. There are some parents who are not motivated to be involved.

What we heard:

“Moms want to be good moms. We’ve never met a parent who didn’t want the best for their children. Everything comes down to parents.”

Home Visiting program

“For some moms, it’s more important that her kids are dressed nice, or that she has a man in her life – that means more to her than her kids’ education.” *Home Visiting program*

“Out of the 14 kids in my classroom, maybe 3 of them have someone at home who works with them on their learning, or shows any interest in their education. Some of them, it’s just tough. That one little boy over there [pointing to boy in the classroom], he’s autistic, he has autistic siblings, his dad’s sick...who at home is going to have the time?” *Preschool teacher*

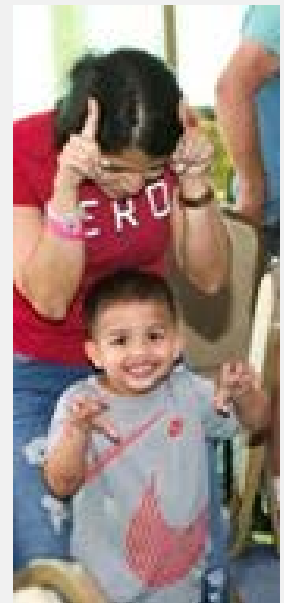
Why Parents Struggle

Confusion about different programs: Parents don’t understand the differences between VPK, Summer Learning Academies and Kindergarten, whether attendance is mandatory, and what the benefits are.

Lack of trust: Parents don’t trust schools, both preschools and elementary schools, to meet their child’s needs and to support their child/keep their child safe.

Weak support systems: Parents who are new to Florida often lack a support system of families and friends. Grandparents who are raising grandchildren often lack a support system that will help them cope with this life experience and better understand all the new information about child development, schools and discipline.

Parent motivations: Some parents are very motivated to help their children, but some are not. Existing systems can struggle to engage parents. There are few programs to empower parents and develop their leadership abilities.



What Would Help Parents:

- ✓ Home visiting/support that extended past age 5
- ✓ Reducing barriers to programs like free-lunch or the food backpack program
- ✓ More classes at Parenting University on child development
- ✓ English language classes for adults occurring concurrently with reading/tutoring for the children. Build social capital.
- ✓ Family field trips on Saturdays
- ✓ More training for teachers on the effects of poverty

SCHOOL READINESS

Opportunities for Improvement

These ideas were proposed by participants in our listening sessions as possible solutions that could positively impact the challenges of school readiness.

- Increased mental health support for preschool students, staff and families
- Peer to Peer mentoring and cross-collaboration in preschools, with paid stipends and money for substitutes
- Encouragement/incentives for teachers & schools to better use technology to communicate with parents
- Better information for preschool families and preschool directors on how to access SOS funds
- Foster grandparent program
- Family service projects: allow families to help others and show what they *can* do while building social capital
- Parent Ambassador or Community Captain program
- Develop Parent Leadership – creating program with parents, not for parents
- Better utilize existing events with high parent attendance
- Reach parents where they obtain other services
- A “mobile classroom” that could travel to families with limited transportation
- A mobile library program that could visit childcare centers

List of Interviews (September 2018 – September 2019)

VPK/Preschool

Children First
Emma E. Booker
Forty Carrots Preschool
Gocio Elementary
HUCA (preschool)
Kingdom Academy
Koala Early Learning Center
A New Beginning

Parents

Elementary School parents
Forty Carrots Family Center
Home Visiting parents
UnidosNow parents

Early Learning

Early Learning Coalition
ESOL Support Services
MCS Early Learning
Sarasota County Libraries
SCS Early Learning Staff

Kindergarten

Fruitville Elementary
Tuttle Elementary
Wilkinson Elementary

Home Visiting Programs

Healthy Families
Healthy Start
HIPPY
Family Nurse Partnership
Parent Child Home Program
Parenting Matters
Parents As Teachers

Social Workers

Home School Liaisons

Mental Health Therapist (school support staff)

Alta Vista Elementary
Brentwood Elementary
Emma E. Booker Elementary
Fruitville Elementary
Gocio Elementary
SCS District Staff
Tuttle Elementary



About the Community Foundation of Sarasota County: The Community Foundation of Sarasota County is a public charity founded in 1979 by the Southwest Florida Estate Planning Council as a resource for caring individuals and the causes they support, enabling them to make a charitable impact on the community.