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## Quality early education programs are available



After an April 25 interview, some of the staff members from the Early Learning Coalition of the Nature Coast's main office in Crystal River and the office in Chiefland are seen in front of the Chiefland office. They are (from left) Director of Eligibility Tonya Hiers, Quality Assurance Coordinator Brooke Ward, Eligibility Specialist Laticia Coleman, Director of Finance Desirae Rickman, Executive Assistant Sheri Ellis, Staff Assistant Krystal 'Kryssy' Ramos, and Eligibility Coordinator Amanda Newbern. They are standing in front of the Chiefland office, which is located at 117 N.E. First St. The office in Crystal River is at 382 N Suncoast Blvd., and the office in Sumterville is located at 617 S US Hwy. 301, Suite E.

### Story and Photo

By Jeff M. Hardison © May 7, 2018 at 4:28 p.m.

**CHIEFLAND** – The Early Learning Coalition of the Nature Coast helps prepare children for school in five counties -- Citrus, Dixie, Gilchrist, Levy, and Sumter counties.

Like its counterparts across Florida, this coalition offers two programs – the School Readiness Program and the Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten Program.

Sonya Bosanko is the executive director of this coalition.

The vision of this group notes that “All children will have access to quality early education and care, and enter school ready to learn.”

The mission of this group notes that “The Coalition will collaborate with parents to integrate a system of services and facilitate quality early education programs that include linkages to all areas of child development.”

The Early Learning Coalition of the Nature Coast was established following the enactment of Florida Statute 411.01 and HB 1A that establishes Florida's Office of Early Learning and local early learning coalitions.

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The Florida Legislature recognized that "school readiness programs increase children's chances of achieving future educational success and becoming productive members of society." The Legislature intends for the local early learning coalitions to establish programs and policies to prepare Florida's youngest residents for success in school. The Early Learning Coalition of the Nature Coast operates the School Readiness Program and the Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten Program in Citrus, Dixie, Gilchrist, Levy, and Sumter counties.

The Coalition has established a Board of Directors representing all five counties served. This Board brings together the primary agencies in this area that work with children, including the Florida Department of Children and Families, the local county school boards, Head Start programs, the CareerSource Boards, the Boards of County Commissioners, the College of Central Florida, child care provider representatives, and the private business sector.

## **SCHOOL READINESS PROGRAM**

Low-income families in Florida with parents who are trying to work or to obtain training may be eligible for the School Readiness Program (SRP). The SRP offers financial assistance to low-income families for early child education. This program also provides assistance for childcare, so that those families can become financially self-sufficient, and their young children can be successful in school in the future.

This is especially helpful to families that cannot afford the full price of daycare. Fees are based on a sliding scale, depending on the family's level of income. Depending on the parents' work schedules will determine when during the day or night that childcare is provided at a discounted rate.

Services vary depending on the individual needs. These services range from extended day to extended year, and school-age care in some instances.

The SRP takes into account the child's physical, social, emotional and intellectual development. It involves the parents being the child's first teacher and prepares children to be ready for school. It gives parents information about child development and other topics of interest.

In the five counties, there are approximately 200 children from the ages of birth through school age (12 years old), Nature Coast Early Learning Coalition Director of Eligibility Tonya Hiers said on April 25. Hiers said the children who move from the waiting list to the active list in the SRP are determined by state rules for priorities. Those School Readiness Eligibility Priorities are shown below, as noted from the Florida Office of Early Learning:

During the 2013 session, the Florida Legislature passed early learning legislation requiring coalitions to use the following eligibility priority criteria for families applying for school readiness services.

Children younger than age 13 whose parents receive temporary cash assistance and are subject to federal work requirements.

At-risk children younger than age 9.

Economically disadvantaged children until eligible to enter kindergarten. Their older siblings up to the age they are eligible to enter 6th grade may also be served.

Children from birth to kindergarten whose parents are transitioning from the temporary cash assistance work program to employment.

At-risk children who are at least age 9 but younger than 13. Those with siblings in priority groups 1-3 are higher priority than other children ages 9-13 in this priority group.

Economically disadvantaged children younger than 13. Priority in this category is given to children who have a younger sibling in the School Readiness Program under priority 3.

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Children younger than 13 whose parents are transitioning from the temporary cash assistance work program to employment.

Children who have special needs and current individual educational plans from age 3 until they are eligible to enter kindergarten.

Children concurrently enrolled in the federal Head Start Program and VPK.

## **VOLUNTARY PRE-KINDERGARTEN PROGRAM**

The Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten Program (VPK) has a total budget of almost \$4.3 million for this coalition this year, according to records.

The VPK program is free to all people of any income level. It is for children who turned 4 years old on or before September 1 of the year when they would enroll, Hiers said.

This is basically the year before they are eligible for kindergarten, she added.

There is no waiting list for VPK. It is an entitlement for all children of the proper age, Hiers said. If there is room for the children at the providers of this service within the five counties' school districts, then parents can enroll their children there, she said.

All five counties' school districts contract with the Nature Coast Early Learning Coalition to receive this service via various vendors, which includes some schools as well as private not-for-profit and private for-profit pre-school enterprises.

Parents choose where their children will attend VPK, Hiers said. Parents apply through the coalition to receive their eligibility certificate. Once the parents have that certificate, she said, the parent can take that certificate to the eligible provider of their choice. For instance, if a parent lives in Sumter County but works in Levy County, then they may choose to use a service provider in Levy County and that is allowed, Hiers said.

However, Hiers said, if a Levy County parent wants to use an Alachua County provider, then he or she must apply through the coalition that serves Alachua County. The Nature Coast Early Learning Coalition serves parents in Citrus, Dixie, Gilchrist, Levy, and Sumter counties. There are 31 coalitions that serve the people in Florida's 67 counties, and one separate district.

In the five counties as of April 25, Director of Finance Desirae Rickman said, there were 128 School Readiness and VPK Providers. Broken down by county, they are:

- \* **Citrus:** 49 School Readiness – 41 VPK
- \* **Dixie:** 3 School Readiness – 4 VPK (There is 1 School Readiness provider, and 3 VPK providers, please note that 2 of the 3 VPK providers are schools within the school district.)
- \* **Gilchrist:** 5 School Readiness – 5 VPK
- \* **Levy:** 10 School Readiness – 15 VPK
- \* **Sumter:** 17 School Readiness – 15 VPK

The Direct Services (Child Care) Budget for School Readiness is: \$6,391,549. Broken down by county:

- \* **Citrus:** \$2,540,354
- \* **Dixie:** \$134,668
- \* **Gilchrist:** \$457,519
- \* **Levy:** \$1,299,378
- \* **Sumter:** \$1,959,630

For more information about the Early Learning Coalition of the Nature Coast, the website is

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<https://www.elc-naturecoast.org/index.php>.

As a starting point for any family interested in participating in SRP or VPK, click **HERE**.