



EARLY LEARNING COALITION
OF POLK COUNTY

Heart of Education

www.elcpolk.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**EARLY LEARNING COALITION OF POLK COUNTY WILL PROVIDE NEARLY \$4 MILLION
IN FUNDING TO HELP POLK CHILDCARE CENTERS STAY OPEN**

LAKELAND, FL—May 11, 2021

Karina Ferrer Sloan, owner of The Early Childhood Learning Center had just come out of a meeting to discuss how she could provide pay increases for her staff. Across the county other childcare providers were facing the same problem of keeping staff. Then she got the news that The Early Learning Coalition (ELC) of Polk County would be able supplement the local childcare economy in excess of \$4 million. She was grateful for the assistance that the Coalition would be administering more COVID-19 relief funding.

“I’m speechless and I could just cry right now. Thanks to their help, I’ll be able to retain my work staff,” said Sloan.

Through the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2021 (CRSSA) almost 300 local childcare providers will be receiving grants ranging from \$3k to \$19.5k to assist them in remaining open during the COVID-19 crisis.

According to ELC CEO Dr. Marc Hutek, childcare providers in Polk County are currently experiencing crisis conditions as a result of very high early childhood teacher vacancy rates. “Our childcare centers are desperately looking to hire qualified childcare teachers and many centers have waiting lists of children,” he said. With almost 900 school readiness classrooms across Polk County, over 200 do not have a teacher. With fewer children enrolled, childcare providers are struggling to sustain their businesses. To further assist her staff Sloan had even payed each of them a \$100 bonus with a paid sick day if they got their COVID-19 immunization. Her goal was to have at least 75% of her employees inoculated for their own safety and to reassure the parents of her students.

Over the course of the past year, the ELC has generated four rounds of grants and the CRSSA grant now becomes the fifth. “We know that pumping another \$4M into the local economy is great news, however that’s just a band-aid to a much larger concern,” said Dr. Hutek.

He is gravely concerned about the childcare industry that has been seriously affected during the pandemic.



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“This pandemic has placed the childcare industry on the verge of disaster with unemployment wages paying better than the childcare industry. We were attempting to create a job fair for early childhood teachers but we learned the workforce doesn’t appear to have an interest in making less money per hour for actually working when they can collect unemployment without even job searching for a higher pay rate. It is discouraging for childcare owners and directors to be in such a critical state of being understaffed. The ELC is hoping to off-set some of the teacher vacancies across the district by paying providers an incentive they can use as a hiring bonus to find new teachers. However, with early childhood teachers being paid on the bottom five percent of the national salary scale, more money can often be made at fast food restaurants and bagging groceries.”

Hutek further reflected on the importance of supporting early education and child care centers that enable parents to work and build local economies. He believes the impacts of early childhood education are deeply entwined with all educational, social and financial aspects of our community and research has showed a higher return on investment of early education than any other type of education.

“We just hope and pray our community recognizes the need for our children and our providers to start experiencing some relief by finding qualified childcare teachers to staff their centers.” According to Dr. Hutek, “Our childcare programs have been unsung heroes through this pandemic and in many cases has been the only way our working parents have been able to continue keeping the world around us up and running. Something has to change, like all businesses; we really need the workforce to emerge.”

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