



FLORIDA'S 2025-2026 KINDERGARTEN READINESS REPORT

*A Snapshot & Analysis for Business, Philanthropic,
and Community Leaders to Make Florida #1 in Early
Learning Outcomes*

To learn about the Florida Chamber Foundation's Business Alliance for Early Learning's efforts to make Florida the #1 state in the nation for early learning outcomes through better access, best practices, and raising awareness to gaps and solutions, visit flchamber.com/earlylearningfl.

A program of the

**FLORIDA
CHAMBER**
Foundation



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Florida's economic future depends on the strength of its talent pipeline and that pipeline begins long before a student sets foot in a kindergarten classroom. The data is clear: children who enter kindergarten ready to learn are more likely to read proficiently by third grade, learn, graduate on time, and contribute meaningfully to the workforce.

Yet today, 44% of Florida's public and charter school kindergarteners are considered "ready" to begin school. Despite widespread conversation around the importance of early learning programs, access and quality remain uneven, and too many children start behind and never catch up. Florida's Business Alliance for Early Learning is leading the effort to change this.

Florida's 2025–2026 Kindergarten Readiness Report provides a snapshot of Florida's current state and identifies areas that must change to meet the *Florida 2030 Blueprint* goal of 100% kindergarten readiness.

KEY FINDINGS

- In Florida, only 44% of children entered kindergarten ready in fall 2025
- Children who complete Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) are significantly more likely to be ready for kindergarten
- The Florida Department of Education raised the readiness cut score — a move the Florida Chamber Foundation Business Alliance for Early Learning supported and reflects higher expectations and economic alignment
- Communities like Pinellas demonstrate that progress is possible with coordinated effort and cross-sector leadership focused on aligned outcomes

WHY BUSINESS CARE SO MUCH ABOUT EARLY LEARNING

- Retention and recruitment challenges often begin with inadequate child care and early education systems
- Workforce participation rates are impacted when parents can't find reliable early learning options, directly impacting 70% of Florida's households with children under 6
- Third-grade reading proficiency — which begins with kindergarten readiness — is directly correlated with high school graduation and job readiness

This report is both a wake-up call and a roadmap. Let's build a Florida where every child starts strong and every community reaps the rewards.

THE ROAD TO TALENT STARTS IN THE EARLY YEARS

75% of Florida children who enter kindergarten behind never catch up to their peers. When 56% of Florida's students start school already off track, it places an invisible weight on our education system, our economy, and our talent pipeline. We must break the cycle.

Kindergarten readiness is more than an education metric — it's one of the earliest, clearest indicators of whether a region is on track to meet its long-term workforce goals. Students who are kindergarten ready are:

- More likely to read proficiently by third grade
- More likely to graduate on time
- More likely to enter postsecondary education or the workforce with the skills they need to succeed

These outcomes compound over time and the economic impact is real.

"Today's kindergarteners are tomorrow's workforce. If we want to build a top 10 global economy by 2030, we have to start early."

**— Mark Wilson,
President & CEO, Florida Chamber of Commerce**

WE CAN'T WAIT ANY LONGER

Florida employers and communities can't afford to wait. With four years until 2030, Florida must double down on our scalable solutions that:

- Expand access to quality early learning experiences
- Empower working parents and employers with the tools they need
- Use data to drive smarter investments and partnerships aimed at increasing outcomes

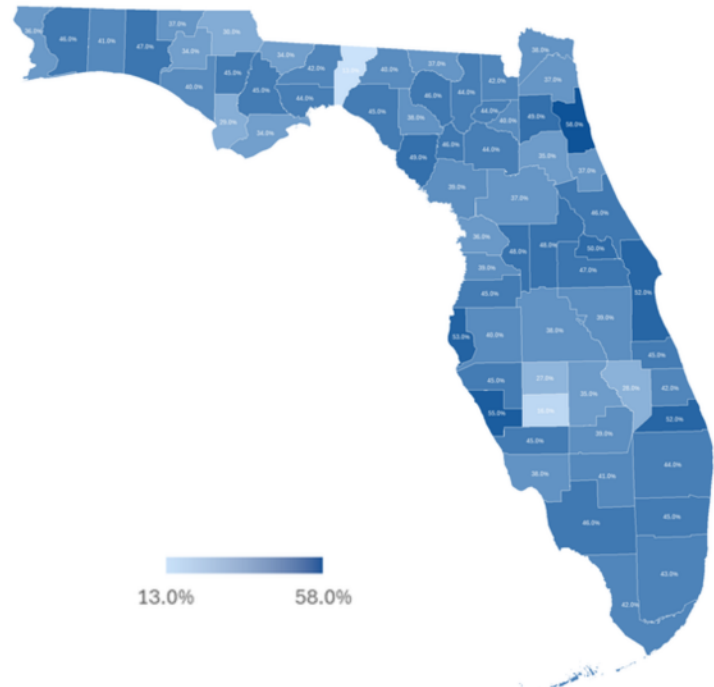
To get involved with Florida's Business Alliance for Early Learning year-round efforts to make Florida the best state in the nation for early learning and literacy outcomes, visit flchamber.com/earlylearningfl or contact Corrie Melton at cmelton@flchamber.com.

READINESS BY THE MILE: WHERE FLORIDA'S YOUNGEST LEARNERS STAND

In fall 2025, just 44% of Florida children entered kindergarten with the foundational skills needed to succeed. But this statewide average tells only part of the story.

Kindergarten Readiness rates range by geography. Some counties are nearing 60% readiness, while others fall below 20%. These differences offer more than just data — they provide insight into where targeted investment and cross-sector leadership can drive the greatest gains.

KINDERGARTEN READINESS RATES BY COUNTY



SPOTLIGHT ON KINDERGARTEN READINESS GAPS: TOP 5 VS. BOTTOM 5 COUNTIES

Top 5 of 67 in Kindergarten Outcomes

County Name	% Ready	# Not Ready
St. Johns	58%	1,274
Sarasota	55%	1,197
Pinellas	53%	2,386
Brevard	52%	2,167
Martin	52%	528

Bottom 5 of 67 in Kindergarten Outcomes

County Name	% Ready	# Not Ready
Jefferson	13%	47
DeSoto	16%	237
Hardee	27%	217
Okeechobee	28%	169
Gulf	29%	87

TRACK READINESS IN YOUR COMMUNITY

The Florida Talent Center Data Hub provides real-time access to kindergarten readiness at the school district and school level.

THE FLORIDA TALENT CENTER
DATAHUB
 SCAN TO SEE YOUR LOCAL
 SCORES OR VISIT
[FLTALENTDATA.ORG](https://fltalentdata.org)



WHAT DRIVES KINDERGARTEN READINESS?

Kindergarten readiness isn't a starting line — it's a checkpoint. And the journey begins at birth.

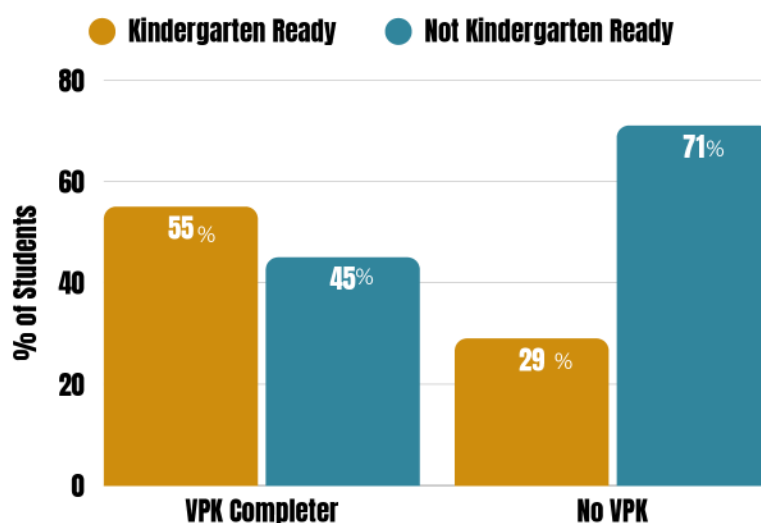
The environments and experiences children have in their earliest years — particularly from birth to age five — form the foundation for brain development, and therefore,

- early literacy
- early math skills
- and “employability” skills like organization, planning, and time management.

These factors directly impact a child's ability to thrive when they enter school.

Across Florida, the data shows a clear trend: communities with greater access to quality early learning opportunities tend to have higher kindergarten readiness rates. As one of the largest universal pre-K programs in the nation, Florida's Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) program plays an essential role in preparing children for school. Children who complete VPK are significantly more likely to be ready for kindergarten compared to those who do not participate.

KINDERGARTEN READINESS BY VPK COMPLETION



VPK IS ONE PATH BUT NOT THE WHOLE ROAD

While VPK plays a role in preparing children for school, it is just one component of Florida's broader early learning and family support landscape. The foundation for kindergarten readiness begins well before age four and is shaped by multiple factors — including participation in other formal programs, access to high-quality child care, and family supports.

Data from the [Sunshine Portal](#) highlights several key contextual factors tied to kindergarten readiness, such as participation in Florida's School Readiness program (child care tuition assistance), household SNAP enrollment, and maternal education levels. Together, these factors paint a fuller picture of the opportunities and barriers children face before entering kindergarten.

ROADBLOCKS: POVERTY SHAPES READINESS

While strong early learning programs can drive readiness, not all children in Florida start with the same road beneath them. A child's zip code, family income, and neighborhood poverty level remain some of the strongest predictors of kindergarten readiness.

Even when early learning programs are technically available, children living in poverty face:

- Limited access to high-quality options
- Inconsistent attendance due to instability
- Fewer enrichment opportunities outside of the classroom
- Less exposure to academic language-rich environments

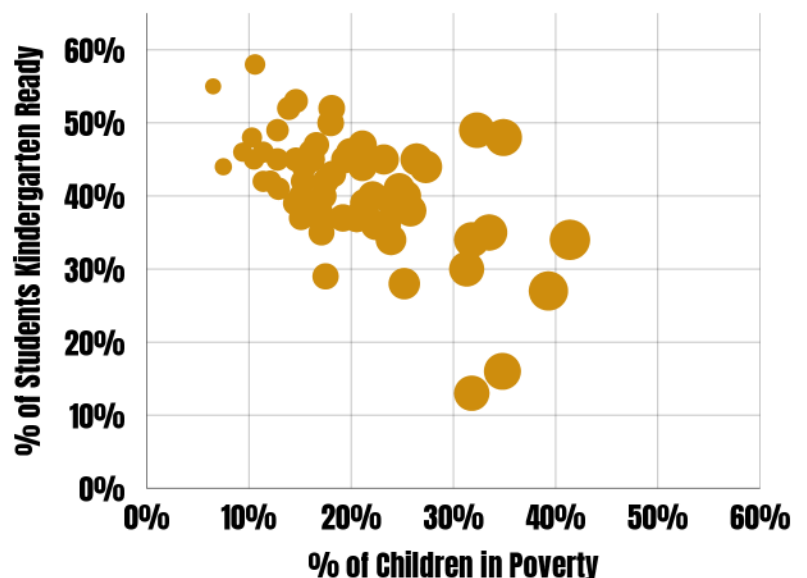
This page explores how income and concentrated poverty shape kindergarten readiness and where Florida must focus next to close the gap.

This chart reveals a strong correlation ($r=-0.54$) between childhood poverty and kindergarten readiness across Florida's 67 counties. As childhood poverty increases, the percentage of children entering kindergarten ready decreases significantly.

But poverty alone doesn't guarantee readiness and some lower-income counties outperform expectations, proving that strategic local investments, strong early learning systems, and coordinated leadership can change the curve.

Only 1 of Florida's 67 counties where 1/3 or more of children live in poverty have 40% or more children entering kindergarten ready.

CHILDHOOD POVERTY RATE VS. KINDERGARTEN READINESS



Children growing up in poverty need more support, not less, before they arrive in kindergarten. That means targeted investments and expanded tuition assistance programs like School Readiness that help improve quality access, family engagement strategies, and partnerships that bring business, nonprofits, and educators to the same table.

UNEVEN ROADS: READINESS GAPS WITHIN THE SAME COUNTY

Even in Florida's highest-performing counties, kindergarten readiness is not equally distributed. When we zoom in beyond countywide averages, we uncover stark differences between schools, often driven by income, access to quality early learning, and community investment.

ST. JOHNS COUNTY: HIGH-PERFORMING BUT NOT BY ALL

- St. Johns County leads Florida with the highest overall kindergarten readiness rate.
- School-level data reveals sharp contrasts between schools in affluent areas and those in zip codes with higher poverty.
- In some Title I schools, fewer than 45% of children are ready for kindergarten despite county averages approaching 60%.



PONTE VEDRA PALM VALLEY RAWLINGS

- Economically-Disadvantaged: 5.1%
- Kindergarten Readiness: 69%



JAMES A. WEBSTER ELEMENTARY

- Economically-Disadvantaged: 94.4%
- Kindergarten Readiness: 38%

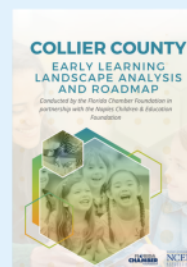
31% GAP BETWEEN HIGHEST AND LOWEST PERFORMING SCHOOL

The reason poverty has such a dramatic impact on kindergarten readiness often comes down to one thing: access to quality early learning opportunities before kindergarten. When young children in high-poverty areas have limited access to enriching environments, it shows up in their readiness scores.

But this isn't inevitable. Just look at Immokalee.

Thanks to sustained investments in programs like the Guadalupe Center, some Immokalee students are demonstrating that even in areas of concentrated poverty, readiness outcomes can rise when quality care is available.

Promising Practice:
95% of Guadalupe Center graduates meet or exceed kindergarten standards and enter school prepared to succeed.



Want local insight? See how Collier County is tackling readiness in high-poverty areas like Immokalee. View the report or request an analysis for your county: flchamber.com/early-learning-landscape-analysis

CASE STUDY: PINELLAS COUNTY EARLY LITERACY INITIATIVE

In the past several years, Pinellas County has experienced growth in Kindergarten Readiness, consistently outperforming the state average and ranking among Florida's top performing counties for early education. A key driver to this success is the **Pinellas Early Literacy Initiative (PELI)**, a VPK to 2nd grade initiative launched by Pinellas Education Foundation and Pinellas County Schools. Made possible through corporate and philanthropic investment, PELI strengthens early literacy by providing educators with high-quality professional development and instructional coaching, and coordinated support. Through these efforts, Pinellas County is helping more children enter Kindergarten ready to learn and succeed.

ALIGNED CURRICULUM & DATA DRIVEN INSTRUCTION

District instructional staff develop customized, standards aligned curriculum while using data to guide literacy strategies from PreK up until 5th grade. This coordinated approach builds foundational skills, supporting students in entering Kindergarten ready to learn.

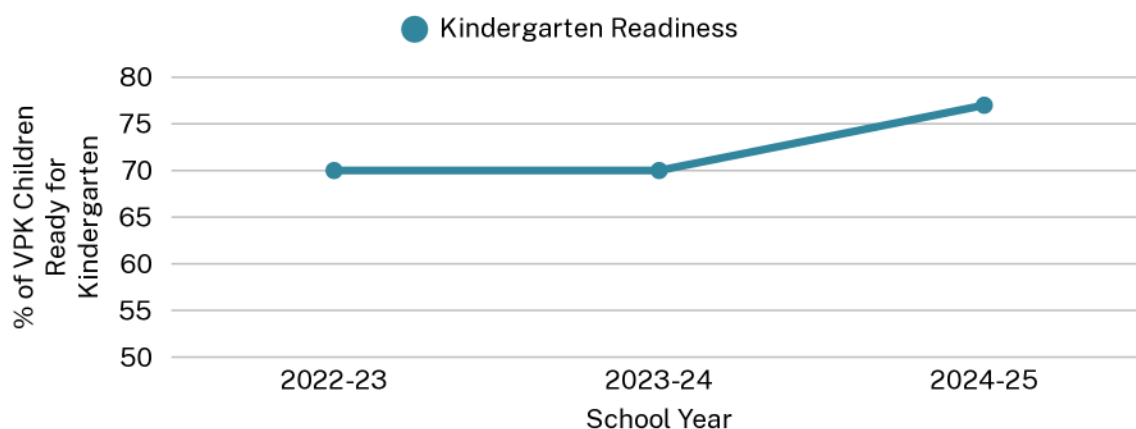
EDUCATOR DEVELOPMENT & SUPPORT

PELI provides high quality professional development and instructional coaching for educators. Pinellas County Schools also partners with the Early Learning Coalition with a 'coach to coach' model, strengthening literacy instruction.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS & INCLUSIVE LEARNING

Through partnerships across the community with both public and private VPK providers, Pinellas County expands access to early literacy. This year, 25 PreK programs will participate in PELI increasing literacy coaching across the community.

PINELLAS COUNTY'S PROGRESS TOWARDS 100% KINDERGARTEN READINESS



*This data is based on the final Progress Monitoring data (PM3) during the VPK year

Together, these strategies have created a comprehensive early literacy program that supports educators, strengthens classrooms, and expands access to learning opportunities. By investing in professional development, collaborative partnerships, and aligned instructional practices, Pinellas County Schools, along with PELI, are ensuring more children enter kindergarten ready for long term success.

FLORIDA'S ROADMAP TO 100% KINDERGARTEN READINESS BY 2030



2025–2026: Close the Access Gaps

- Increase high-quality birth to 5 child care capacity in counties where there are not even enough slots for the children living in poverty. Use the [Florida Talent Center Data Hub](#) to identify where there may not be enough child care slots for demand.
- Expand child care affordability through the [School Readiness Program](#), Florida's child care tuition assistance program, and [employer child care tax credits](#).
- Promote local models like [The Children's Trust of Miami Dade County's Families Forward Scholarships](#) to scale access with dedicated funding above and beyond School Readiness for families who may struggle to afford high-quality early learning.

2026–2027: Invest in Workforce Quality

- Offer grants to early learning coalitions and child care providers to strengthen instructional quality through high-quality instructional materials and professional development.
- Incentivize completion of reading and early literacy credentials (e.g., [UF Lastinger Micro-Credential](#)).
- Expand coaching and mentoring supports across the early educator workforce.

2027–2028: Scale What Works

- Utilize tools like Age of Learning My Math and My Reading Academy to accelerate learning.
- Incentivize alignment between coalitions, school districts, and employers.

2028–2029: Target High-Need Zip Codes

- Use school- and zip-code-level data to direct resources to the lowest-performing areas.
- Pair access expansion with parent engagement and wraparound supports.

2029–2030: Sustain Gains + Reach 100%

- Maintain flexible funding streams for innovation.
- Track readiness progress quarterly to stay on course.
- Celebrate milestone communities that achieve 60%, 70%, 80%, and 90% kindergarten readiness and learn from their models.

Thank You to the BUSINESS ALLIANCE FOR EARLY LEARNING ADVISORY BOARD



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A special thank you to the **Florida Chamber Foundation's Florida Business Alliance for Early Learning Project Advisory Board** for their dedication to advancing the **Florida 2030 Blueprint** goals—ensuring 100% of Florida's children are kindergarten-ready and 100% of third-graders read on or above grade level by 2030. These leaders are engaged in this work year-round, and many generously contributed their time and expertise to shaping this report. Their commitment is helping drive real solutions for Florida's children, families, and workforce. **Contact Corrie Melton at cmelton@flchamber.com to discuss early learning leadership opportunities.**



Thank you for your interest in the Florida Business Alliance for Early Learning's research aimed at making Florida the #1 state in the nation for early learning through awareness, better child care access, best practices, and improved outcomes. If you would like to view additional research, please visit our website below:



flchm.co/research

For questions about this report or to learn about how you can get involved with our initiatives and efforts to secure Florida's future, please email Corrie Melton at cmelton@flchamber.com.

