



MEDIA RELEASE

GULF COAST COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Foundation Grant Powers ELC's Mission to Strengthen Childcare Workforce

Sarasota, FL [February 13, 2026] – As a leading force in early childhood professional development, the Early Learning Coalition of Sarasota County (ELC) is growing a highly trained teaching workforce through its state-recognized, one-of-a-kind Registered Apprenticeship Program for Early Childhood Education. This unique program is designed, taught, and managed entirely in-house.

This groundbreaking approach to workforce development is changing the landscape of early learning in Sarasota County, providing teachers with a tuition-free pathway to grow their skills, earn professional credentials, and advance their careers, all while remaining in the classrooms where they make the most impact.

Recognizing both the innovation and the critical need behind this effort, Gulf Coast Community Foundation awarded the ELC a \$15,000 grant. The investment helps cover instructional costs, educational materials and mentorship, ensuring participants have a fulfilling, supported experience from start to finish.

"Gulf Coast Community Foundation's investment ensures that our apprentices gain the skills, confidence, and credentials they need to thrive and at a price they can afford: free," says Alison Fraga, CEO of Early Learning Coalition of Sarasota County. "Each apprentice takes classes in a familiar, comfortable environment right here at the ELC, with instructors who they already trust and know. Even better, there's no need for student loans, college applications, or complicated enrollment steps."

"It's accessible, personal, and built around the real lives of early educators who are deeply committed to their work," says Barbara Papantonakis, ELC Apprenticeship Instructor. "We meet each apprentice where they're at, honoring all IEPs and testing needs, and removing financial and logistical barriers that have long limited career advancement in early childhood education." Papantonakis adds, "Our program also provides individualized career pathway options including a seamless transition to pursue a low-cost AA or BS degree in Early Ed through the T.E.A.C.H. Scholarship."

"Early childhood development is critical because the earliest learning experiences shape how young minds grow and succeed," said Erin Minor, Vice President of Community Leadership at Gulf Coast Community Foundation. "Investing in programs like the Registered Apprenticeship Program supports the educators guiding those first years and helps ensure children, families, and communities benefit from high-quality early learning."

The ELC offers two distinct career tracks: a Pre-Apprenticeship for individuals just entering the teaching field, and an Apprenticeship for current teachers pursuing the Florida Child Care Professional Credential (FCCPC). Both pathways combine classroom instruction, one-on-one mentoring, and immersive on-the-job experience.

Of the 30 Early Learning Coalitions across the state of Florida, ELC Sarasota is the only one to offer this self-operated model. Since its launch one year ago, the program has drawn overwhelming demand, with more than 40 early educators participating in the 2024-2025 school year with a similarly strong level of participation this school year.

By investing in teachers, this Apprenticeship program fortifies the very infrastructure of Sarasota County's childcare system, strengthens family stability, and enriches the educational foundation of our community's youngest learners.

High-quality early education doesn't exist without trained teachers delivering that quality. Yet across the nation, the early education workforce remains fragile as they are often overlooked and undervalued despite the tremendous responsibility they carry. These educators play a vital role in shaping a child's earliest experiences and life trajectory but still face persistent challenges of low pay and high turnover. According to data from INCENTIVE\$ Florida, the national annual teacher turnover rate in early childhood programs ranges from 30% to 40%. This startling statistic is precisely what ELC's pioneering program aims to address. Powered by partners like Gulf Coast Community Foundation, our apprenticeship offerings provide a hopeful, sustainable path forward by empowering educators to build strong careers and stay in the field they love.

For more information about the Early Learning Coalition of Sarasota County and its Registered Apprenticeship Program, please visit elcsarasota.org

About the Early Learning Coalition of Sarasota County

The Early Learning Coalition of Sarasota County prepares local infants, toddlers, and preschool children for lifelong success through access to quality early learning programs. Serving nearly 3,500 children and 155 childcare providers each year, the Coalition administers and oversees the local system of early care and education across Sarasota County. The ELC is dedicated to giving the area's littlest learners a high-quality, enriching childcare experience, an early leap into literacy, and a strong start to kindergarten.

About Gulf Coast Community Foundation

Since 1995, Gulf Coast Community Foundation has powered bold philanthropy and collaborative leadership to drive meaningful change across our region. Guided by values of authenticity, curiosity, collaboration, grit, and a trailblazing spirit, we work side-by-side with donors, partners, and community members to tackle our region's biggest challenges and unlock its greatest opportunities. Together with our donors, we've invested more than \$625 million in health and human services, education, civic & economic development, arts & culture, and the environment. Headquartered in Venice, with a second office in downtown Sarasota, Gulf Coast is nationally recognized for excellence, earning multiple "Best Nonprofits to Work For" honors and accreditation from Community Foundations National Standards®. Learn more at GulfCoastCF.org and follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [LinkedIn](#).

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