



Public Policy Institute
of Marion County, Inc.

*How Can Our Community Maximize Academic Success
for All Children?*

2012–2013 Study *A Promise to the Future*



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The Public Policy Institute of Marion County

The Public Policy Institute of Marion County, Inc., (PPI) is a 501(c)3, not-for-profit, non-partisan organization established in 1999 to provide a careful analysis of the issues and trends that shape and affect public policy in Marion County. Housed at the College of Central Florida, the Institute is dedicated to advancing the public interest and improving quality of life by providing an opportunity for local citizens to come together in a structured and thoughtful manner to address recognized local concerns. To this end, the PPI Board of Directors, with the help of local leaders and decision makers, annually selects a timely study issue. Over the ensuing 4-6 month period a non-partisan study committee of interested citizens carefully and thoughtfully researches the study topic. Recommendations identified by the study committee during the process are brought to the public upon the completion of the project.

Mission:

To give the community a sense of hope and optimism by creating a broad base of community involvement in identifying, researching, and establishing dialogue on community-wide issues, and then in recommending and helping to implement timely solutions.

Vision:

By 2015 the Public Policy Institute will be recognized regionally as a significant leadership organization that continually helps to improve our community by identifying and researching the major issues that are negatively impacting our quality of life, and by identifying and supporting the implementation of viable solutions to address those issues.

Objectives:

- To provide formal and informal networks within which individuals may come together to share their knowledge, resources and experiences
- To periodically identify a short-term community project that can be accomplished in a 12-18 month period with meaningful results
- To provide a process where community leaders can work through problems, and participate in open discussions (conferences and seminars)
- To involve a broad range of individuals in the study process in order to generate dynamic, synergistic, creative and catalytic leadership in addressing each critical issue, and to provide "stay-in-place" solutions
- To create a shared sense of community, in that any issue must be addressed, discussed, and debated in an atmosphere of mutual fairness, respect, civility and sincerity with all others - where the highest aspiration is to serve the common good.

Executive Summary

The benefits of an educated society cannot be overstated. Likewise, the impacts of poor academic achievement are well-documented and far-reaching. School readiness has long been an indicator of a child's future academic performance, just as one's academic performance is widely regarded as an indicator of future success in life. Understanding the current conditions and unique dynamics affecting education of Marion County's youth is the first step in prioritizing opportunities for improvement and stimulating change.

In September 2012, the chairs for the Public Policy Institute's 2012-2013 *How Can Our Community Maximize Academic Success for All Children?* Study began meeting with community leaders to gather pertinent data and recruit citizens to serve on the study committee. The Committee began meeting bi-monthly in January 2012 to analyze and evaluate existing conditions and services. Three teams were formed to study the underlying reasons that some preschoolers are not ready for kindergarten: (1) Family Structure, (2) Physical and Mental Health and (3) Early Learning Opportunities. Their objective was to develop recommendations that can be implemented locally to enhance academic success of Ocala/Marion County children. It became apparent rather quickly that a child's readiness for kindergarten, as well as their academic success through high school, is strongly affected by multiple social determinants that limit:

- Access to early childhood education opportunities and
- Early childhood experiences and intellectual stimulation at home and/or in their day care settings.

Social determinants include income, education, employment, housing, cultural heritage, and other conditions that impact a parent's ability to prepare their children for kindergarten and support them throughout their school years. Children who grow up in poverty and have not had an enriching early learning experience are, on average, 18 months behind their peers when they enter kindergarten. Whereas, at-risk youth who do receive early childhood education are more likely to go to college and less likely to drop out of school, experience teen pregnancy, or commit violent crimes.

When a child enters kindergarten, at a minimum, they need to know the alphabet, colors, and basic numbers. Last year, the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screening Tool found that 29% of Marion County kindergarten children were not ready for school based upon minimum requirements. Although these children were placed in remedial classes, many will continue to fall behind and by third grade may begin being held back from progressing to the next grade with their classmates. Eventually, after being held back a few more times, some will drop out of school out of frustration and the reality that they are now several years older than the other students in their classes.

The Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK) program is quite successful in Marion County, experiencing a 93% success rate in preparing preschoolers for kindergarten as measured by students not being held back during their K-12 education. However, 1,100 Marion County Children did not attend VPK last year for a variety of reasons including limited funding.

This study's overarching recommendation calls for a community collaboration of the business community, local government, schools and churches to address the social determinants that are holding back many children academically in Marion County. The community collaboration also needs to advocate for the funding to provide the necessary early learning opportunities for all Marion County preschoolers. This report contains key findings from the study teams' research as well as recommendations that will yield the greatest improvements and impacts on conditions affecting school readiness and future academic success for Marion County children.

Scope of Study

Education is one of the most important investments a community can make in improving the quality of life for its citizens. The value of a good education has been well-researched and is highly regarded as one of the most accurate indicators for the future success of a child, and thereby, the community and society as a whole. Students who have gained educational, social, and emotional skills become productive citizens. Yet, for all the success stories and progress society has experienced, there remain gaps to be filled and the opportunity to continually refine processes in order to improve outcomes. This study explored a number of major questions impacting the educational results of Marion County's children, including:

- 1. Are our children prepared for kindergarten?*
- 2. What factors most affect how well our children learn in school?*
- 3. What are the subsequent impacts on our children when they are not prepared for kindergarten?*
- 4. What are the impacts on our community when our students are not successful in school?*
- 5. What actions will have the most meaningful impact on improving educational outcomes?*



Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.

-Margaret Mead

Conduct of Study

In September 2012, the Board of Directors of the Public Policy Institute of Marion County, Inc. selected a PPI Coordinator and three persons to serve as Tri-Chairs to lead the *2012-2013 How Can Our Community Maximize Academic Success for All Children?* Study. Approximately 30 concerned citizens representing a cross section of the community volunteered to work on the study committee. Meetings were held bi-monthly in large group sessions, in addition to electronic communications, conference calls, and outside small group meetings. To better understand the factors that impact the quality of education for Marion County students, research studies with a national or state of Florida focus were reviewed, interviews were conducted with local leaders in education, and local statistical data was thoroughly analyzed.

The tri-chairs of the study committee met with leaders from the Early Learning Coalition, United Way, Marion County Schools, and the Marion County Public Library. Three separate study teams focused on the issues of family structure, physical and mental health and early learning programs. One of the first studies the committee examined was by Mission: Readiness, a nonpartisan national security organization of senior retired military leaders. The report, entitled “**Ready, Willing, and Unable to Serve**”, calls for smart investments in America’s children in order to ensure a strong, capable fighting force for the future. A report from “**Florida Kids Count**” discussed the condition of children in Florida, revealing that children in single-parent families struggle more than those in two-parent households. The study committee also invited Dr. Nate Grossman to speak to the group about the recently completed Health Needs Assessment, which found adverse social determinant factors are the major force behind the overall poor health of Marion County citizens. This assessment raised the question of social determinant impact on early childhood education.



Social determinant data from the **Children’s Defense Fund** reflected poor health and barriers to learning for children in Florida; Marion County results are generally even worse. Ready Nation Commissioned Research reported high costs from failure to invest in young children that can propagate costly social issues such as child abuse and neglect, elevated high school dropouts and long-term criminal activity. The study committee attended a presentation at the Marion County Children’s Alliance (MCCA) given by “**All Pro Dad**”, a fatherhood program sponsored by Family First in Tampa, Florida. They also heard from David Lawrence, founder of the **Children’s Movement** of Florida, who has spent a lifetime studying children’s issues and advocating for their success. His 2013 **State of Florida’s Children** report for 2013 (See Supplement A) validates much of the information the Study Committee found.

Throughout the study process, a common theme began to emerge: *The early years of a child’s life appeared to be a crucial component of a strong foundation needed for future success.* A summary of the research data and undeniable corroborating statistics has been conveniently laid out in this document (See Supplement A) according to each of the three focus areas.

Social determinants are the social and cultural factors that lead to or prevent healthy and well-educated people and communities. These factors include income level, education and literacy, circumstances of employment and working conditions, social environment and level of support, physical environment, nutritional availability and appropriateness, personal health practices, coping skills, biologic and genetic endowment, access to health services, gender, and family culture.

Statistics recently compiled as part of the Marion County Community Health Needs Assessment show social determinant factors are adversely impacting the health of people in Marion County. For example, Marion County has:

- *Lower percentages of residents with high school and college educations.*
- *Unemployment at levels substantially higher than the state of Florida.*
- *Dramatically higher rates of children in poverty.*
- *Median and average income levels much lower than state of Florida averages per capita.*
- *High percentages of the population with limited access to healthy foods.*
- *Substantially higher percentages of single-parent homes, most of which do not include a father.*
- *Nearly 45% of the population either uninsured or utilizing Medicaid.*
- *Comparably limited access to nearby recreational activities (in the 6th percentile for Florida).*



The Community Health Improvement Plan concluded that despite Marion County's increasingly improving efforts in the delivery of clinical care, the community as a whole has become less healthy as social determinants continue to mount. While these factors clearly have an impact on health outcomes, they also affect the success of children in school.

The study group determined the social determinants having the greatest influence on education outcomes to be:

- Poverty and unemployment
- Inadequate food and nutrition
- Lack of education among parents
- Single parent homes
- Poor housing
- Environmental health hazards

Social determinants adversely impact access to early childhood educational opportunities and intellectual stimulation at home and/or in day care settings.

The impact of social determinants on access to childhood educational opportunities in Marion County is evidenced by:

- More than 2,000 children enrolled in Marion County Public Schools are homeless, 50% of the homeless population in Marion County.
- Almost 31% of children under the age of 18 in Marion County are living in poverty.
- Ninety-three percent of children that receive voluntary pre-kindergarten support services in Marion County complete their schooling without being held back one or more grades during their K-12 years.
- There are over 700 children on the waiting list for pre-kindergarten services because of high demand and insufficient state funding to serve all eligible families.
- There were more than 1,000 Marion County children who did not attend VPK this year.
- Twenty-nine percent of children entering kindergarten are not considered to be ready for school because they do not know such things as colors, basic numbers, and the alphabet.

Social determinants adversely impact access to early childhood educational opportunities and intellectual stimulation at home and/or in day care settings.

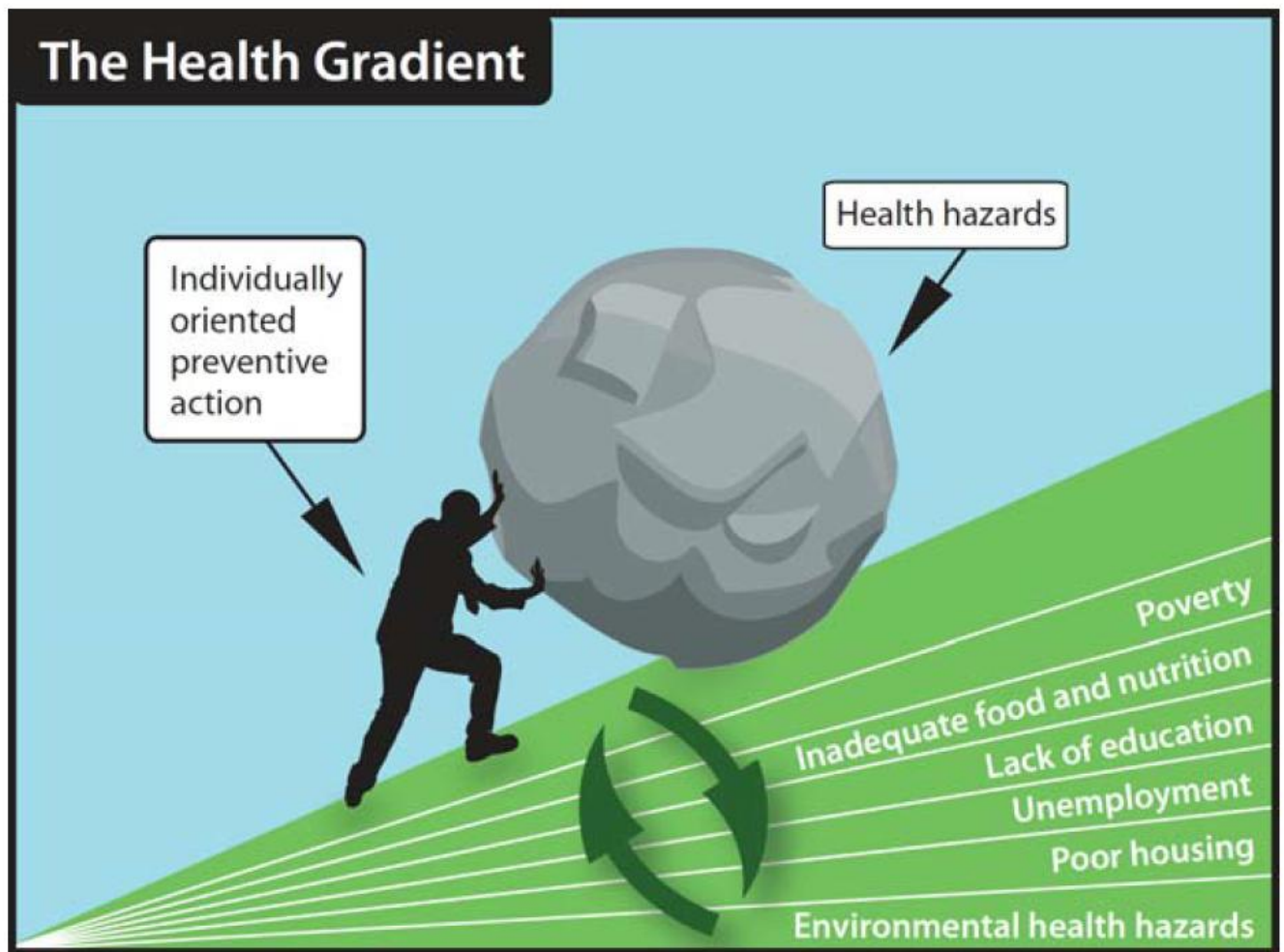
Social determinants that directly impact the ability of parents to provide the intellectual stimulation necessary to prepare for their children for kindergarten include:

- Approximately 4% of the births in Marion County in 2009 were to girls age 15 to 17, and 21.2% of these girls had a second child before they were 19 years old.
- Sixty-four percent of Florida mothers with infants are in the labor force.
- The cost of childcare for a Florida infant is 30% of a single mother's median income and 11% of a two-parent family's median income.
- Nineteen percent of the adult population of Marion County is functionally illiterate, so the pleasure and benefit of reading to their children is not an option for these parents and grandparents.
- Twenty-one percent of Marion County's population aged 25 and older does not have a high school diploma.
- More than 2,500 households are linguistically isolated because they either speak no English or do not speak it well.

A focused plan is needed to address the social determinants that currently compromise both the health and educational outcomes of Marion County children. This plan should include elements specific to early childhood education. As such, the Study Committee recommends implementation of the Community Health Improvement Plan for Marion County, which will have a profound impact on early education and beyond.

The graphic below was taken from the report of the Marion County Community Health Improvement Program study report, published in 2012, which speaks to the major causes of poor health in our population. The reader will quickly recognize these social determinants are virtually the same factors as those devastating to our children's learning ability and educational outcomes.

Social Determinants



The Community Health Improvement Plan may be viewed in its entirety at:
http://www.floridahealth.gov/chdMarion/adobe_files/chip.pdf

"Learning is not attained by chance. It must be sought for with ardor and attended to with diligence."

—Abigail Adams

Economic Environment - A solid economic environment entails commercial investment and a focus on providing jobs that are capable of delivering people from poverty and offer healthcare coverage. The result can be families who are able to support the appropriate physical needs of their children, including food, clothing and shelter.

Social Environment - A positive social environment promotes strong social networks, partnership, and cooperation. Outcomes of a rich social environment may include such things as parents cultivating a community garden, volunteering or providing services in new ways that strengthen community ties, empowering individuals to be their own advocate, and becoming change agents for communities. The end result may lead to improvements in personal and community health, as well as the academic success of children.

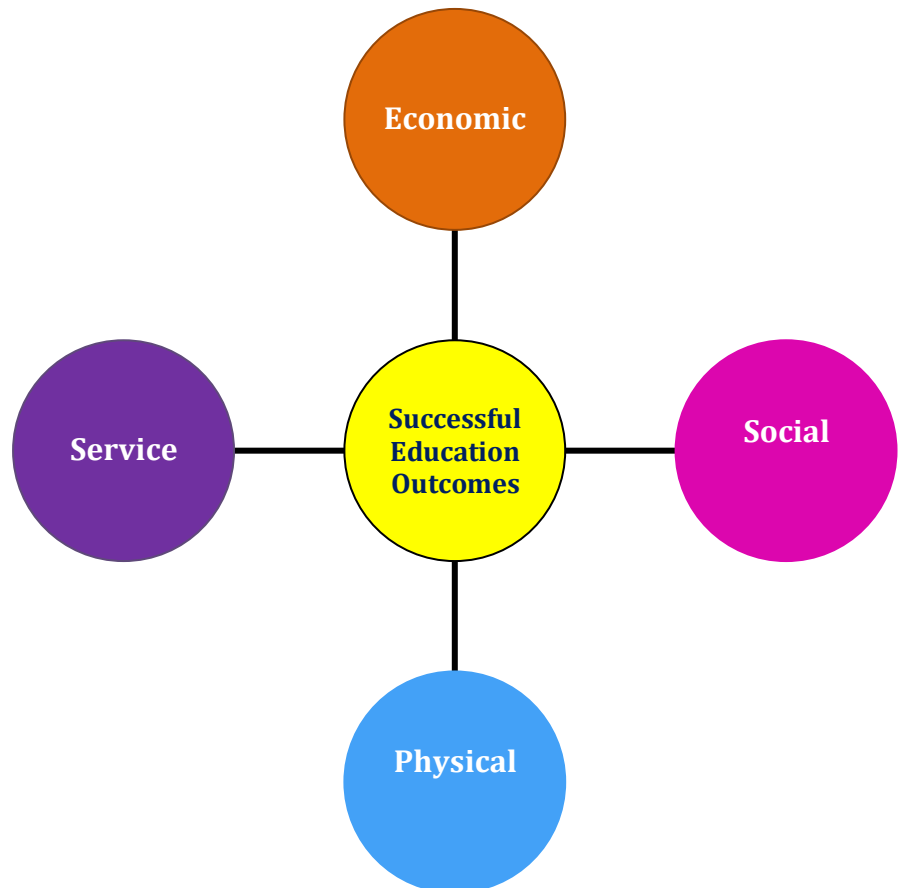
Service Environment – Distribution of early childhood education and other neighborhood-level services has a huge impact on the overall educational outcomes of a community. Access to quality early education programs, healthcare services, public safety, and community support services are all necessary for a healthy, vibrant community. Reliable and regular sanitation service; mass transit that provides clean, safe, and reliable service; and responsive, caring public health providers all positively affect a community.

Physical Environment – The physical environment that children grow up in is an important factor in their social, emotional and intellectual development.

Characteristics of a sound physical environment include:

- Safe parks; full-service grocery stores and/or farmers’ markets convenient to the residents;
- Safe streets with provisions for walking;
- Limited, controlled traffic;
- Well-maintained housing;
- Open spaces that encourage community gatherings and contribute to the health of a community, such as local schools and playgrounds that are open after-school hours.
- Access to convenient, reliable, and affordable transportation that allows people to get to jobs, schools and healthcare.

All these environmental factors contribute to healthy people and neighborhoods, and, ultimately, successful educational outcomes.



<u>Major Problems</u>	<u>Solutions to the Problems</u>
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Unemployment, underemployment, part-time employment and low wage employment are serious issues for Marion County's younger families and those with limited education.<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Thirty percent of the children in Marion County are living in povertyb. More than 2,000 children enrolled in Marion County Public Schools are homeless – representing 50% of the homeless population in Marion County.2. Children from single-parent homes tend to struggle more than their counterparts.<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Thirty-nine percent of children in Florida are in single-parent familiesb. Forty-two percent of the single-parent families in the 11th Congressional District are living below the poverty levelc. More than half the births in Marion County since 2007 were to unwed mother; 87% to a mother under the age of 20.d. Children in homes without a father are much more likely to have poor outcomes.e. There are limited opportunities for boys, who did not have a good male role model, to learn how to be a good father3. The demise of neighborhood schools and loss of community affects parental involvement with their kids' education.	<p>Develop a comprehensive community-wide program to increase collaboration between businesses, local government, schools, and churches that:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Serves as an umbrella and supports activities already in progress in the community.2. Creates employment opportunities at living wages.3. Continues and expands established programs that support and strengthen the family unit.4. Increases and strengthens community-based schools.

Good health is one of the most important ingredients for a happy, productive life.

- Robert Alan Silverstein

Highlights: Physical and Mental Health Team

Major Problems

1. Nationally, 1 preschooler in 8 (12%) is obese.
2. More than one-third of Marion County children are affected academically by being overweight or obese.
3. The lack of availability of sufficient nutritious food affects the academic performance of 22% of children in Marion County.
4. Hunger affects the academic performance of more than 60% of Marion County students who are on free or reduced school meals.
5. Inadequate physical activity is contributing to obesity among Marion County children.
6. In 2010 the Census Bureau estimated that 13.9% of Marion County children under the age of 19 do not have health insurance.

Solutions to the Problems

Develop a comprehensive community-wide program to increase collaboration between churches, schools, and local government on childhood obesity and nutrition that:

1. Serves as an umbrella and supports activities already in progress in the community.
2. Implements well-established best practices from the CDC to ensure children fed in community programs receive consistently nutritious food.
3. Ensures all residents have convenient physical access to a variety of healthy foods.
4. Provides education to parents on childhood health, obesity, nutrition, and the availability of no or low cost health insurance for their children.
5. Secures safe after-school recreational facilities available to all children.



Major Problems

1. The Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener found that 29% of Marion County kindergarten children were not ready for school.
 - a. Approximately 1,100 Marion County children are not attending VPK during the (2013-14) school year either because there was insufficient funding to accommodate demand for the service or it was a parent's choice for the child not to attend.
 - b. Early learning programs are not available to all children from birth through 4 years of age because of inadequate funding.
 - c. Sixty-four percent of Florida mothers with infants are in the labor force.
 - d. The unsubsidized cost of childcare for a Florida infant is 31% of a single mother's median income and 11% of a two-parent family's median income.
2. Parents of preschoolers need to be educated about the importance of early learning and pre-kindergarten education for their children.
3. Providers of early learning services need professional development and accountability.
4. Early learning centers are not connected to resources and teachers lack the knowledge to properly implement curriculum. There is also a lack of materials available to teachers.
5. Directors of early learning centers need a support system for training, networking, and business development.

Solutions to the Problems

Establish collaboration between businesses, churches, schools, and local government to:

1. Encourage parents to enroll their preschoolers in early learning programs & VPK.
2. Publicize the availability of the learning services and help parents understand the importance of participation.
3. Obtain funding so high quality preschool will be available to every child in Marion County.
4. Provide parents of preschoolers with the information and tools they need to help prepare their children for kindergarten.
5. Create PORT (Peer On-site Regional Training) and Observation Tool (C.L.A.S.S.) program.
6. Connect community resources to Early Learning Centers with an "Early Childhood Resource Guide".
7. Create an Early Learning Leaders Association (ELLA) where directors/owners meet for networking, training and business development.

KEY FINDINGS – Family Structure Team:

Study Framework:

Family Structure Team

*Thirty Percent of the
children in Marion
County are living in
poverty.*

*More than 2,000
children enrolled in
Marion County are
homeless.*

*More than half the
births in Marion
County since 2007
were to unwed
mothers.*

1. Unemployment, underemployment, part-time employment and low wage employment are serious issues for **Marion County's** younger families and those with limited education.
 - a. Thirty percent of the children in Marion County are living in poverty.
 - b. More than 2,000 children enrolled in Marion County Public Schools are homeless - 50% of the homeless population in Marion County.

Without addressing the issue of poverty and its direct links to lower educational levels, focusing on any other issues will not have significant impact.

2. Children from single-parent homes tend to struggle more than their counterparts.
 - a. Thirty-nine percent of children in Florida are in single-parent families.
 - b. Forty-two percent of the single-parent families in the 11th Congressional District are living below the poverty level.
 - c. More than half the births in Marion County since 2007 were to unwed mothers; 87% to a mother under the age of 20.
 - d. Children in homes without a father are much more likely to have poor outcomes.
 - Seventy-one percent of high school dropouts come from fatherless homes – 9 times greater than the average.
 - Children with fathers who are involved are 40% less likely to repeat a grade in school.
 - e. Daughters of single-parents without a father involved are:
 - 53% more likely to marry as teenagers,
 - 711% more likely to have children as teenagers.
 - 164% more likely to have a pre-marital birth, and,
 - 92% more likely to get divorced themselves.
 - 63% of youth suicides are from fatherless homes – five times greater than the average.
 - 90% of all homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes – thirty-two times greater than the average.
 - 85% of all children with behavior disorders come from fatherless homes – twenty times greater than the average.
 - There are limited opportunities for boys to learn how to be a good father without a positive male role model.
3. The demise of neighborhood schools and loss of community affects parental involvement. Neighborhood pride is more prevalent among children who attend neighborhood schools. Parents with children who attend neighborhood schools are more likely to be active and engaged in the school and their child's education.

Study Recommendations - Family Structure Team

Develop a comprehensive community-wide program to increase collaboration between businesses, local government, schools, and churches that:

1. Creates employment opportunities at living wages.
2. Continues and expands established programs that support and strengthen the family unit.
 - A. True North – Establish this prevention-based, behavior modification program for families across Marion County.
 - B. Start a pro-dad chapter in Marion County – The study committee attended a presentation at the Marion County Children’s Alliance given by “All Pro Dad”, a fatherhood program sponsored by Family First in Tampa, Florida. This organization helps fathers learn how to spend quality time with their children and send simple e-mails daily to inspire the father child relationship.
 - C. Children’s Alliance Fatherhood Initiative – already established in Marion County but has potential for expansion.
 - D. The Early Learning Coalition (ELC) - Empowering families to be their child’s first and best teacher is an existing goal of the Early Learning Coalition of Marion County. Through the partnership with United Way and *Success by Six*, the Early Learning Coalition provides support groups and information/training for parents. One support group is the Circle of Parents, which is facilitated by a *Success by Six* representative, but is led by parents. These meetings provide parents with an opportunity to network, share successes, ask for help with needs, and receive parenting tips
 - E. Marion County Children’s Alliance (MCCA)– Serves as the impetus of communication, collaboration, and coordination among agencies and individuals who work with children and youth. MCCA provides a voice for children with local and state government representatives and agencies, and organizes assistance to parents and youth to help secure needed resources and services.
3. Marion County Public Library - Offers the only free collection of material resources for parents and caregivers. The public library plays a major role in a community's efforts to help parents and caregivers prepare children for school. Story times for babies through preschool aged children are available in each library location. Every branch location has a collection of materials including books, music, etc. and parenting materials that are available to all citizens free of charge. The library programs and environments have been enhanced to include areas where parents can play, read, and stimulate a joy of reading. Increase and strengthen community-based schools Community-Based Schools Initiative – Explore options feasible for the school district which may vary in rural areas, save money on transportation costs, and yield more parental involvement.

Implementation Agenda - Family Structure Team

1. Coordinate the development of an All Pro Dad group: Scott Hackmyer, Children's Alliance.
2. Engage the Superintendent of Schools in a discussion about the opportunity to present extended school day and return of neighborhood schools concept (more school days on the calendar) to the Marion County School Board: Scott Hackmyer, Children's Alliance.
3. Form a work group from the Children's Alliance membership to assume responsibility for pulling resources together: Scott Hackmyer and others (Timeline – by end of 2013).
4. Approach legislators for support of early school start: Scott Hackmyer and others (Timeline – by end of 2013).
5. Work on funding Community Development Block Grant (Grant funding).



“At the end of the day, the most overwhelming key to a child's success is the positive involvement of parents.”

-Jane D. Hull

Responsible Action Organizations & Resources - Family Structure Team

Chamber Economic Partnership

Marion County Board of County Commissioners

City Governments in Marion County

Local Legislators

Children's Alliance

Devereaux

MCPS

Early Learning Coalition

CDS

Head Start

Kids Central

College of Central Florida- Teacher Ed Department

Marion County Sheriff Office and City Police Departments in Marion County



Study Framework: *Physical and Mental Health Team*

The academic performance of more than one-third of Marion County Children is affected they are obese or overweight.

Hunger affects the academic performance of more than 60% of Marion County students who are on free or reduced lunch.

KEY FINDINGS – Physical and Mental Health Team:

1. Nationally, 1 preschooler in 8 (12%) is obese. Approximately 1 in 5 (19%) black children and 1 in 6 (16%) Hispanic children between the ages of 2 and 5 are obese. Overweight and obese preschoolers are 5 times more than healthy-weight children to be overweight or obese as adults.
2. The academic performance of more than one-third of Marion County children is affected because they are obese or overweight. In the 2010-2011 school year the Marion County Health Department conducted a Growth & Developmental Screening among more than 9,000 first, third, and sixth grade students, which revealed 17% were overweight and 22% were obese in regards to Body Mass Index (BMI). Physical development and the potential for health problems are a major concern, but obesity can also affect academic performance. Students who are overweight are more likely than healthy students to report impaired school functioning. For younger children, math and reading scores were found to be lower among overweight students.
3. Unavailability of sufficient nutritious food affects the academic performance of 22% of Marion County children. Continuous low nutritional intake affects factors such as motivation and attentiveness, which can have a negative effect on developmental processes. Chronically undernourished children and adolescents are more prone to irritability and inability to concentrate. When children are undernourished, they have more difficulty resisting infection and become more prone to sickness, which results in missed school and places the child at risk of falling behind in class.
4. Hunger affects the academic performance of more than 60% of Marion County students who are on free or reduced school meals. Children and adolescents living in poverty are more likely to experience food insecurity and hunger. One study found higher math grades and fewer instances of tardiness among students who participated in a school breakfast program. Research has shown that nutrition is important for cognitive and brain development; therefore, making healthy food choices becomes vital to a student's academic performance. Nutrients provide the energy needed to complete simple and complex tasks. Even a moderate lack of nutrients can have lasting effects on cognitive development and school performance.
5. Inadequate physical activity is contributing to obesity of children in Marion County. Nearly 1/3 of Marion County middle-school students are without sufficient physical activity. In addition to diets high in carbohydrates and fat, lack of exercise is a key contributor to weight gain. Recess in schools improves academics and behavior.

Study Recommendations – Physical and Mental Health Team

Develop a comprehensive community-wide program to increase collaboration between churches, schools, and local government on childhood obesity and nutrition that:

1. Serves as an umbrella and supports activities already in progress in the community.
2. Implements well-established best practices from the CDC to ensure children fed in community programs receive consistently nutritious food.
3. Ensures all residents have convenient physical access to a variety of healthy foods.
4. Provides education to parents on childhood health, obesity, nutrition, and the availability of no or low cost health insurance for their children.
5. Secures safe after-school recreational facilities available to all children.
6. Implements the Generation FIT 2013 Strategic Plan’s goal of reducing the incidence of childhood obesity in Marion County at:
http://generationfit.org/about_us/2012_strategic_plan
7. Supports implementation of the Community Health Improvement Plan: *One Marion: A Community Health and Wellness Plan for All* being spearheaded by the United Way at:
http://www.doh.state.fl.us/chdMarion/adobe_files/chip.pdf
8. Establishes partnerships with early learning and day care centers; schools, community agencies and Marion county churches to ensure implementation of the CDC’s *School Health Guidelines to Promote Healthy Eating and Physical Activity* at: <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/rr/rr6005.pdf> in terms of providing:
 - a. Consistent meals that meet national guidelines.
 - b. Children and adolescents with ≥ 60 minutes of physical activity daily, most of which should be either moderate- or vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity. The guidelines indicate that children and adolescents should include vigorous intensity, muscle-strengthening, and bone-strengthening activities at least 3 days of the week.
9. Promotes local community based grocery stores/farmer’s markets to provide convenient physical access to a variety of healthy foods, especially in areas like West Ocala, where residents have limited transportation options.
10. Evaluates the feasibility of food stamps being accepted at farmers markets.
11. Reduces the liability to schools if playgrounds were open after school hours.
12. Develops programs for educating parents on childhood health, obesity and nutrition issues.



Implementation Agenda – Physical and Mental Health Team

Marion County Children’s Alliance (MCCA) recognized childhood obesity as a growing problem in Marion County and formed the Childhood Nutrition workgroup in 2004. The workgroup is chaired by Brianna Liles, a registered dietitian for Munroe Regional Medical Center (MRMC), and includes representatives from community organizations such as:

- Barrett, Liner & Company
- Childhood Developmental Services
- Early Learning Coalition of Marion County
- Hilton Hotel of Ocala
- Junior League of Ocala
- Marion County Public Schools

In 2010 MCCA partnered with MRMC to implement the White House Childhood Task Force recommendations and Let’s Move Campaign in Marion County through an initiative called “Generation FIT”. The 5 pillars of focus are:

- Childhood Nutrition
- Empowering Parents & Caregivers
- Healthy Foods in Schools
- Access to Healthy, Affordable Foods
- Increasing Physical Activity

In March 2013, MCCA hosted a Generation FIT Family Fun Day to educate the community on the 5 pillars of the Whitehouse initiatives. Recently, Generation FIT created a survey for parents with children 5-11 years old to be administered in pediatric offices.

1. **Munroe Regional Medical Center** is implementing the Fit Kids program in the community in partnership with Lifetime Fitness and Marion County Public School Extended Day Program for the 2013-2014 school year. Fit Kids is a program based on the National Heart Lung and Blood Institutes’ CATCH Kids curriculum. Designed for children in K-5th grades, this 6-week program aims to equip children with the skills, knowledge and intention to make healthy food choices and participate in regular physical activity. Each lesson plan is an hour long and geared toward fitness and nutrition. At the end of the program participants will have:

- Learned the importance of staying physically active.
- Participated in fun physical activities that are suitable for all levels of fitness.
- Learned the importance of healthy eating behaviors.
- Prepared and indulged in delicious, low fat snacks.

Compared with children of past generations, youth today have a multitude of choices when it comes to leisure activities. Unfortunately, many of these choices, including video games, surfing the Internet and watching television, do not involve physical activity. The program teaches children and their families the importance of being physically active. Studies show that regular physical activity:

- Improves general health- people who exercise regularly are sick less often.
- Reduces stress and tension.
- Improves concentration- so children perform better at home and school.
- Increases strength and stamina.
- Improves sleep patterns.



2. Interfaith has a Food 4 Kids program that was created in 2004 when it came to the attention of teachers that many children were not being fed over the weekend. Interfaith’s “backpack program”, as it is commonly termed, was created to provide food for each child that qualifies at the school level for assistance. Guidance counselors provide each child’s name and the number of siblings in the household. Volunteers pack durable rolling backpacks full of food for each household and deliver the backpacks directly to the school, tagged for each child. The child takes the backpack home on Friday afternoon and returns it to school on Monday morning, and the process repeats. Backpacks include: canned meat, canned pasta, shelf-stable milk, soup, juice boxes, macaroni & cheese, peanut butter and jelly, pudding & fruit cups, snack bars, cereal, pop tarts, crackers and non-candy snacks. Thanks to donations and Interfaith’s committed group of volunteers, the program serves thirty-one schools in Marion County, providing backpacks to over 1,475 children. Food 4 Kids makes a huge difference in the lives of hungry children by enabling them to focus on learning instead of hunger.
3. School Health Advisory Council (SHAC) is patterned after the CDC’s Coordinated School Health Program which focuses on the following eight major components: health education, physical health, health services, food & nutrition, counseling & psychological services, healthy school environment, health promotion of staff, and family and community involvement.



“Intelligence and skill can only function at the peak of their capacity when the body is healthy and strong.”

John F. Kennedy

Responsible Action Organizations & Resources - Physical and Mental Health Team

Generation FIT

City Parks & Recreation

County Parks & Recreation

Childhood Developmental Services

Early Learning Coalition of Marion County

Interfaith

Marion County Children's Alliance

Marion County Health Department

Marion County Public Schools

Munroe Regional Medical Center

School Health Advisory Council (SHAC)

United Way



Study Framework:

Early Learning Team

The Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener found that 29% of Marion County kindergarten children were not ready for school.

There is a waiting list of more than 700 children for early learning services in Marion County.

KEY FINDINGS– Early Learning Team:

1. The Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener found that 29% of Marion County kindergarten children were not ready for school:
 - a. Approximately 1,100 Marion County children are not attending VPK this year, even though 93% of the children who receive VPK support services stay with their peers as they progress through the grades.
 - b. Early learning programs are not available to all birth through 4 year-old children.
 - There is a waiting list of 700 children.
 - Funding was sequestered for the Stanton-Weirsdale and Fort McCoy Head Start Programs.
 - Sixty-four percent of Florida mothers with infants are in the labor force.
 - The unsubsidized cost of childcare for a Florida infant is 31% of a single mother’s median income and 11% of a two-parent family’s median income.
2. Parents of preschoolers need to be educated about the importance of early learning.
 - a. Many parents believe that the school is solely responsible for educating their children, including developing reading skills. Some children enter school without knowing the alphabet, colors, basic numbers, and in some cases their own names. When a child enters kindergarten with a large readiness gap, the child often continues to experience an achievement gap through high school.
 - b. Children need more than daycare to develop the tools necessary for future academic success.
 - c. Parents may be uninformed about the vast amount of resources available to teach early education skills and how to incorporate learning into their daily schedule (reading stories to their child daily, reviewing colors and shapes during trips to the grocery store, etc.).
3. Early learning providers need professional development and accountability.
4. Early learning centers are not connected to resources and teachers lack knowledge of how to properly implement curriculum. In addition, there is a lack of materials to offer early learning centers.
5. Directors of early learning centers need a support system for training, networking, and business development.

Study Recommendations – Early Learning Team

Establish collaboration between businesses, churches, schools, and local government to:

1. Encourage parents to enroll their preschoolers in early learning programs & VPK.
2. Publicize the availability of the early learning services.
3. Obtain funding to support and enhance programs and service offerings to parents of preschoolers.
4. Provide parents with the tools needed to prepare their children for kindergarten.
5. Provide early learning teachers with proper training and hold them accountable to meet quality standards and expectations.

Public Policy Institute
Education Work Group
April 3, 2013

Provider On-Site Regional Training Program (P.O.R.T. Program)

Mentor Program:

Step 1: Advertise to local training agencies the opportunity to participate in program. Example: CF, CDS, Library, Devereux, Children’s Alliance, etc.

Step 2: ELCMC will conduct orientation with Mentors detailing responsibilities and expectations of program.

Step 3: ELCMC will provide mentors with CLASS Observer Training. Mentors will sign Memorandum of Understanding to participate in program. Mentors will be assigned region

Step 4: Mentors will attend quarterly planning meeting with ELCMC for follow up and initial implementation.

Step 5: Mentor will schedule and conduct Orientation session with their assigned region. Monitoring, training, a technical assistance will begin with each participating site.

Provider Participants:

Step 1: Advertise to local child care providers the opportunity to participate in program through the Early Learning Leadership Ocala meetings and through flyers, brochures,

Step 2: Participating sites will be assigned a mentor. Mentor will conduct orientation session with group detailing all aspects of program from training requirements to monitoring and follow up technical assistance.

Step 3: Participants attend the “Making the Most of Classroom Interactions” training. (30 hours) delivered by ELCMC Staff.

Step 4: Participants work with mentors to conduct CLASS Observations and provide technical assistance to region of providers participating.

6. The quality of a program begins with its leadership. A study reported in the Harvard Business Review (March, 2007) showed that companies that invest in developing leaders had substantially higher share returns than those without leadership development programs. Furthermore, effective leadership development can also improve morale and staff retention. The leaders of childcare facilities need to be connected to other professionals within the community to transfer and share relevant knowledge that can strengthen skills and improve program quality. The development of an Early Learning Leaders Association (E.L.L.A) will provide members with events throughout the year to network and build relationships, including professional lunch and learn meetings and charity events. E.L.L.A.'s membership benefits will include:



7. Early learning providers are on the front lines when interacting with children and families. These professionals need to have knowledge about the different agencies and resources available within the community to better equip the families they serve. By creating an “Early Childhood Resource Guide”, all providers contracted through the Early Learning Coalition will have this list of resources at their fingertips. The guide will be created on a disk or flash drive to allow the provider to use it in a way that best meets their individual needs. The guide will feature a compilation of resources already developed by:

- United Way 211
- Children’s Alliance Member Directory
- Early Childhood Festival Vendor Directory
- Child Care Resource & Referral Information available through the ELCMC

“..For every dollar we invest in high quality early education we can save more than seven dollars later on by boosting graduation rates, reducing teen pregnancies, and reducing violent crime.”

President Barack Obama, State of the Union Address, February 2013

Implementation Agenda – Physical and Mental Health Team

Excellence in Early Education Training Program Implementation Plan

Summary: This program encompasses high quality early education settings utilizing the CLASS Observation tool, technical assistance, program support and mentoring.

Step	Item	Implementation Strategy	Responsible Entity	Cost	Proposed Start Date
1	Provider Site Tours	Provide the opportunity for local childcare providers and their staff to tour other childcare facilities in Marion County or in surrounding counties. Action Needed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertisement to recruit sites who are willing to host a tour. • Advertisement to providers who would like to attend tour. 	PPI Workgroup ELCMC can provide advertisements through e-blast and Market Day.	Depends on incentives provided to host sites.	June 1, 2013
2	Provider On-Site Regional Training Program (P.O.R.T. Program)	See attached document of breakdown of program.	ELCMC and Participating community organizations.	\$25,000 – \$50,000 (estimated based on Staff required to train and classroom supports for participants)	July 1, 2013
3	Quality Model Schools Certificate Program	Recognition to early childhood providers who consistently perform at a high level of quality based on the CLASS Observation Tool. Action Needed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertisement of Program • CLASS Observers to observe and score sites interested in participating • Development of award criteria and scoring rubric • Timeline/Schedule of award 	ELCMC	\$5000 (estimated based on cost of conducting observation tool on-site and production of award)	September 1, 2013

Reduced to its essence, the scope of the study was to determine what specific factors lead to or hinder student success, and what stakeholders can do to make a positive contribution to student success.

Research and Background

In 2012, Marion County had a high school graduation rate of 86.3%ⁱ. Behind this two-dimensional statistic, there are hundreds of Marion county children who, because of not graduating high school, now face probable poverty, poor choices leading to crime, and poor health. What is even more shocking is that this statistic can be improved, easily and effectively. Research supports the claim, and the simplicity of the solution is shocking. The most effective, proven strategy to assist children in graduating high school is a quality early start in lifeⁱⁱ.

Absent of trends or boxed, purchased solutions, high quality early education that is research-based and delivered consistently can prepare students to be ready to learn. Quality early learning environments improve student performance, but can also “boost high school graduation rates, deter youth from crime, and by helping children develop healthy early exercise and good nutrition habits, even help reduce childhood obesity rates”ⁱⁱⁱ. What happens during the first months and years of life is of extreme importance because it sets either a sturdy or fragile stage for the life which follows^{iv}. This study examines the importance of quality early education, family structure, and physical and social health.

Quality Early Education. To maximize academic success, individuals must possess an intricate understanding of how to interact with the world via written words^v. Success in all content areas, such as math, science, and social studies, along with the individual’s social development^{vi}; is dependent upon the learner’s capable literacy skills. Poor children enter school slightly behind their non-poor peers, but then they rapidly deteriorate during the elementary school years^{vii}. By first grade, children from poverty were approximately 2 years behind their peers in literacy skills^{viii}.

Children’s emergent literacy skills in the preschool years are directly related to their reading ability in the primary years^{ix}. Children who experience difficulty reading are not as motivated to improve. Students with reading difficulties continue to fall further behind their proficient peers, creating both academic and social disarray (a phenomenon Stanovich in 1986 named *the Matthew Effect*). So, it is essential for the child’s formative experiences, birth to kindergarten, to be filled with developmentally appropriate experiences with life and literacy. According to the Marion County Public Schools Executive Director of Elementary Education, 340 children entered kindergarten not knowing the letters of the alphabet in the fall of 2012. With alphabet knowledge one of two research-based predictors of reading success (along with phonological sensitivity), these children began formal schooling already behind their peers.

Young children make sense of their world by exploration and engaging in hands-on learning. Life experiences, even the simplest activities, such as discussing produce at the supermarket, provide the foundation for future life success. According to Copple and Bredekamp^{xi}, learning opportunities differ with family income and education, ethnicity, and language background; with obvious achievement gaps amongst demographic groups. Stanovich’s Matthew Effect plays here again, when these gaps appear in early childhood and continue through formal school years, resulting in serious consequences for children and for society as a whole.

Since poverty is an important factor in determining children’s success in school, it was important to investigate its prevalence in the Marion County community and its access to quality early education for these children. According to *Zero to Three National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families*, 64% of Florida mothers with infants are in the labor force, and 31,969 Florida infants and toddlers receive government subsidized child care funding each month. In Marion County, 64% of mothers with infants are in the labor force. The cost of childcare for a Florida infant is 31% of a single mother’s median income and 11% of a two parent family’s median income.

With continued challenging economic times and a growing number of mothers entering into the labor force, child care and early education outside the home is more important than ever^{xii}. In many cases, children spend more time with caregivers at facilities than they do in their own home with their family. These early learning teachers are in direct care of the children. The same is true for primary grade teachers, once the child begins formal schooling. However, without family involvement, intervention is likely to be unsuccessful, and any immediate gains or positive effects are likely to disappear once the intervention is discontinued^{xiii}.

Family Structure. Substantial research has shown that the family environment and the family's ability to provide enriching life and literacy experiences resulted in higher IQ test scores at age three and later^{xiv}. According to the Children's Defense Fund^{xv}, the largest group of children at risk for school failure in the United States is children from poverty; principally due to not learning to read. Over the last 30 years, poverty rates for children increased 50%, whereas poverty rates for the elderly decreased 50%. Children from poverty performed between 11% and 25% below their peers not in poverty^{xvi}. According to the Children's Defense Fund^{xvii}, one in four children lived in poverty during their preschool years, which indicated a large number of children are at risk for school failure. Along with the risk factor of poverty, the deficits of early experiences featured prominently in Hart and Risely's study^{xviii}. They concluded that cognitive experiences in the first 3 years of life were the determinant of the child's future success in school. Longitudinal data collected in their study supported this hypothesis. Their findings and those of others suggested that the experiences in the first 3 years of life should be vocabulary rich and filled with opportunities for extended discourses and conversations for children to develop the cognitive skills needed for success in school.

In Florida, the unemployment rate is 7.2%^{xix}. In Marion County the unemployment rate is 7.5%, down from a record high 14.3% in 2010 and double-digit unemployment from December 2008-August 2012. Families on the edge of survival find it difficult to engage with their child on the level needed for future success. The unemployment rate is compounded by the fact that in the United States 33.5% of children live absent from their biological father (National Center for Fathering, 2013), and in Florida, 39% of households are headed by one parent (Kids Count Data, 2013). Nationally, 63% of youth suicides, and 90% of homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes (Fatherless Generation, 2013). According to the National Center for Fathering, the startling statistics provided do not reflect the millions of more children who experience "emotional fatherlessness"; when the father is physically in the home, but is not emotionally engaged with the child. Data provided by the National Campaign for 2013 indicates that homes absent from a biological father may lead to increased teen pregnancies. Three out of 10 teenage girls in the United States get pregnant at least once before age 20; and 25% of those girls have a second child within two years. In Florida, the teen birth rate is 15.4%. In Marion County 22.3% of births are to teen moms (Well Florida Council, 2013).

Physical and Mental Health. Good nutrition, particularly in the first three years of life, is important in establishing a good foundation that has implications for a child's future physical and mental health, academic achievement, and economic productivity. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides the term *food security* to describe access by all people at all times to enough food for an active, healthy life. Unfortunately, food *in*security is an obstacle that threatens the critical foundation. According to 2013 data from the USDA, 16.7 million children under 18 in the United States live in households where they are unable to consistently access enough nutritious food necessary for a healthy life. Although food insecurity is harmful to any individual, it can be extremely dangerous to children. Children between mid-gestation and two years of age, who are deprived of sufficient nutrition, will not adequately grow, physically or mentally. Children who suffer malnourishment have smaller brains because of "reduced dendritic growth, reduced myelination, and the production of fewer glia (supporting cells in the brain which continue to form after birth and are responsible for producing myelin)"^{xx}. Simply having food is not sufficient; children must have adequate protein, vitamins, and fat in their diet. Children who were malnourished as fetuses and infants/toddlers have life-long behavioral and cognitive deficits, including slower language and fine motor development, lower IQ, and poorer school performance^{xxi}.

According to statistics provided by Feeding America (2013), Florida is one of the top five states with the highest rates of food *insecure* children. According to Marion County Public Schools Food Service, over 22% of children live in homes with insufficient food. In Marion County over 60% of Marion County children are on free and reduced meals. Furthermore, 33% of Marion County children are overweight or obese because their diets do not include proper nutrition and then do not get sufficient exercise.

In the 2010-2011 school year, 9,244 Marion County children in first, third and sixth grades received a Growth and Developmental Screening conducted by Marion County Health Department. Screenings revealed 17% of the screened children were overweight and 22% of the target population was overweight. A study by the Marion County Public Policy Institute in 2007 concluded the most pressing health problem in local public school system was childhood obesity.

Compared with children of past generations, today's kids have a multitude of choices when it comes to leisure-time activities. Unfortunately, however, many of these choices, including video games, surfing the Internet and watching television, do not involve physical activity. Studies by the Harvard School of Public Health show that regular physical activity improves general health. People who exercise regularly are sick less often. Exercise reduces stress and tension; improves concentration; increases strength and stamina; and improves sleep patterns. So, with sufficient age appropriate exercise children perform better at home and school.

Drs. Sharon and Craig Ramey are world-renowned child development researchers. They have decades of research^{xxii} that proves the consequences of poverty on a child's academic performance could be offset, if the appropriate interventions were implemented.

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- ⁱ National Governor's Association, 2012
 - ⁱⁱ Copple & Bredekamp, 2009 & Mission: Readiness, 2009
 - ⁱⁱⁱ Mission: Readiness, 2013
 - ^{iv} Shonkoff, & Phillips, 2000
 - ^v Dodge, Colker, & Heromen 2002
 - ^{vi} Ashdown & Bernard, 2012
 - ^{vii} Neuman & Celano, 2001 & Vernon-Feagans, 2002
 - ^{viii} Dickinson and Sprague, 2002
 - ^{ix} National Early Literacy Panel, 2010
 - ^x Allington, 1984
 - ^{xi} Copple and Bredekamp, 2009
 - ^{xii} Zero to Three, 2011
 - ^{xiii} Bronfenbrenner, 1974
 - ^{xiv} Hart & Risley, 1995
 - ^{xv} Vernon-Feagans et al., 2002
 - ^{xvi} Vernon-Feagans et al., 2002
 - ^{xvii} Vernon-Feagans et al., 2002
 - ^{xviii} Hart and Risely, 1995
 - ^{xix} Department of Labor, April, 2013
 - ^{xx} Zero to Three, 2013
 - ^{xxi} Zero to Three, 2013
 - ^{xxii} Sharon and Craig Ramey, 2011

“IF CHILDREN WERE A REAL PRIORITY”

It is a privilege to be with the sorts of people I admire most – those who believe they can make a difference, and do.

Yours is a community full of good and giving people committed to children's lives and futures. It is perilous to name anyone, but I do so anyway because I believe people deserve to be celebrated while they are among us. I think of people like Debbie Bowe and Brandi Cooney and Roseann Fricks and Dr. Jim Henningsen and John Hunt and Bobby James and Marybeth Kyle and Dr. Heidi Maier and Dyer Michell and Judi Zanetti. We are blessed for their service, and for yours. And I should say before going on I was delighted to hear this morning that Central Florida College now has a 4-year degree in early childhood education.

Today you have heard the preliminary outline of the findings of a study that is, in my estimation, the most important study you could possibly do – and I am quite aware that you already have issued significant reports on such matters as mental health services, youth violence and affordable housing. But nothing could be more fundamental to the future of Marion County than this one entitled “A Promise to the Future: How Can Our Community Maximize Academic Success for All Children.” Those two words, “all children.” is the core imperative here. We cannot do what we need to do – that is, building a real “movement” – unless you and I and our schools and communities forego a focus on “those children” (whoever they are) but instead build it for everyone.

Now, let me back up a bit. I have been coming to Marion County for a half-century now. (To make a small confession, back in the early Sixties, then a student at the University of Florida in the then “dry” county of Alachua, I and other students regularly traveled to a place called “Ruby’s in Marion County to access alcohol. Let me promise you that I have grown up considerably since.) So has Marion County where in the past half-century you have grown from a county of just about 50,000 people to now 335,000.

You live in a beautiful place. A place of horses and ponies, including the early home to Kentucky Derby winner Orb. Yours is the place where “Tarzan” was filmed. Yours is home to fine arts and culture, including the Appleton Museum of Art, the Performing Arts Conservatory, and a long tradition of high-quality community theater. Yours is a place of history going back thousands of years to the Timucua (Ti-mu-kwa) Indians whose largest village inspired the name of “Ocala.” Moreover, any community that can be home to the likes of Elizabeth Ashley and Daunte Culpepper surely is a most interesting place.

When lots of people think about Marion County, they see Silver Springs and/or white-fenced horse farms. But, as you know so well, there is way more to this place than those. What also comes to my mind is your growing diversity; indeed, 43 percent of your students are other than non-Hispanic white. Digging deeper, and as you heard earlier, I see that almost a third of your children live in poverty...that 91 percent of your 65,000 children go to public school...that so many of your children are in undeniably poor shape.

Yes, I do realize you know far more than I about the people of Marion County and the 3,500 children born here each year. But I do know enough to tell you these four things, and more:

1. Almost half of your third grade students cannot read with minimal proficiency.
2. Only 44 percent of your high school sophomores can read at grade level.
3. Officially, there were 6,090 child abuse investigations last year. Just imagine how many other instances there surely were.
4. Just about 17 percent of your 25 and older adults have at least a four-year college degree. You underperform the national average by 15 percent.

Trying to better understand this community, I read a week's worth of the Ocala Star-Banner. There I saw this headline: “Thousands March for Babies.” Another headline told me: “Marion Highest in Florida for Unwed Births.” (Just so you know, that number is just about 60 percent of births to unmarried mothers.) Yet another headline: “Man Fathered Child with 15-Year-Old.” I also read an editorial about arming schoolteachers. And a letter to the editor headlined: “When Playtime Turns Lethal.” All these items, and more, reminded me of the imperative of getting the early years right.

Meanwhile, I know from the national research these three things:

1. That 85 percent of brain growth occurs by age 3.
2. That 30 percent of children start school behind, and then most of them get even further behind.
3. That if a hundred children leave first grade not really knowing how to read, 88 are in similar shape at the end of fourth grade.

Children with momentum in first grade, chances are, will have momentum all their lives. Children without momentum get triaged and tracked in school – and pay a lifelong price. So do we all.

What we are talking about today is a matter of global competitiveness. Listen to this from Kathleen Sebelius, the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services: “We live in an age of human capital being the most important capital that any country has... (T)he only way America can out-compete the rest of the world is if we out-educate the rest of the world.... The only way we can do that is (by) making sure every child gets a healthy start and a rich early learning experience.”

Meanwhile, this is also a matter of national security. Listen to this from a national report from retired generals and admirals: Three of every four young people, ages 17 to 24, cannot enter the American military. Cannot enter because of an academic problem, a physical problem, a substance-abuse problem, or a criminal-justice problem. This ought to alarm all of us.

We hear so frequently in Florida about the gains we are making in public education (the real world for 90 percent of Florida’s children). I concede – even affirm – some progress. Yet we are a great distance from being a truly educated nation. In fact, nationally, half of our country’s high school students lack the written, spoken, thinking and problem-solving skills that employers seek. Business people so often complain about the quality of graduates, little knowing that the answer is not to be found in fixing fourth grade, seventh grade or somewhere in high school. Instead the wisest possible path we could take toward public education “reform” would be to help children to arrive at formal school fully ready to succeed in school and in life. Get the early childhood years right, and a child – chances are – will have momentum all his or her life. The greatest possible gift we could give to Superintendent George Thomas and to the teachers in Marion County’s 30 elementary schools would be to bring children to kindergarten in superb shape – intellectually, socially and emotionally – so they can truly succeed in school and in life. Then teachers could do far more teaching and far less triaging – and be far more thrilled about their work and ways they can and would contribute to far more children being successful.

For children to succeed, we need knowledgeable, nurturing, loving parents.

For children to succeed, we need high-quality, brain-stimulating childcare.

For children to succeed, we must have healthy children with real relationships with doctors and nurses.

The most thought-provoking article I’ve read in recent times appeared in The New York Times. There Sean Reardon, a professor of education and sociology at Stanford, wrote: “There is a lot of discussion these days about investing in teachers and ‘improving’ teacher quality,’ but improving the quality of our parenting and of our children’s earliest environments may be even more important. Let’s invest in parents,” he says, “so they can better invest in their children. This means finding ways of helping parents become better teachers themselves.... It might also mean greater business and government support for maternity and paternity leave and (child) care so that the middle class and the poor can get some of the educational benefits that the early academic intervention of the rich provides their children. Fundamentally, it means rethinking our still-persistent notion that educational problems should be solved by schools alone. The more we do to ensure that children have similar cognitively early childhood experiences, the less we will have to worry about failing schools. This in turn will enable us to let our schools focus on teaching the skills – how to solve complex problems, how to think critically, and how to collaborate – essential to a growing economy and a lively democracy.”

You and I live in an ever-more-connected world. If we want Marion and Miami-Dade counties to be full of optimistic, contributing people, we simply won’t be able to hide from those who will grow up to do us, and themselves, great harm. Dr. Karl Menninger reminds us: “What we do to children, they will do to society.”

Believing in all children, we help all of us. It simply makes sense – practical, economic and moral – to be mindful of how everyone is doing. If we want safe and secure neighborhoods, if we want less crime, if we want more people to grow up to own homes and cars, and more people to share the basic costs of societal well-being, then we should know of the quite extraordinary evidence of the power of early investment and the power to grow children who dream and have a real chance to achieve those dreams.

In the words of Fred Rogers, with whom my children grew up and perhaps yours: “Our goal as a nation,” he said, “must be to make sure that no child is denied the chance to grow in knowledge and character from the very first years.” In Mister Rogers Neighborhood, he added, “every child is welcome into the world of learning – not just a few, not just ones from certain neighborhoods but every child.”

Or said in the phrasing of Lillian Katz, one of our country's great figures in early learning: "Each of us must come to care about everyone else's children. We must recognize that the welfare of our children is intimately linked to the welfare of all other people's children. After all, when one of our children needs life-saving surgery, someone else's child will perform it. If one of our children is harmed by violence, someone else's child will be responsible.... The good life for our own children can be secured only if a good life is secured for all other people's children."

Built from the realities I have heretofore described, I now spend most of my energies on the imperative of "school readiness": That is, high-quality early care, development and education. From that vision came the passage of a constitutional amendment for free pre-K for all 4 year olds in Florida. From that vision the people of my community agreed to raise their property taxes for high-quality early intervention and prevention. That's more than \$100 million extra a year. From that vision, we have been building The Children's Movement of Florida, with tens upon tens of thousands of followers pushing to make children – all children – the No. 1 priority for investment in our state. So many of our priorities seem backward. In Florida, for example, we seemingly can get a road built or repaved just about whenever we want, and yet invest precious little for children (even as we have all the research to tell us that a dollar invested wisely in brain-stimulating care and education will return at least seven dollars in money we won't need to spend on police and prosecution and prison). Not incidentally, I just read this morning that Florida ranks No. 42 – yes, No. 42 – in per capita student spending.

You have before you a fully registered Independent with deep concerns about present-day priorities for spending the people's money – that is, our money. I am a middle-of-the-road fellow who simply believes in the opportunity of the "American dream" for everyone. How can it possibly be wise, for one example, for Florida to spend a piddling \$2,383 on a pre-K slot for a 4 year old, and \$51,000 to incarcerate a juvenile? I do not buy the argument that times are tough, and we don't have the money. As Rep. Charlie Stone would know so well, Florida just passed a budget of more than \$74 billion. The New York Times columnist David Brooks reminds us: "The problem is not that America lacks resources. The problem is that they are misallocated."

I lead an optimistic and idealistic life, and feel blessed by that. The principles of health and education and nurturing and love that our five children received – and, now, their children – should be the fundamentals for all children in a society that seeks to be good as well as wise. What could be more "American"?

My message this morning speaks to imperatives both moral and practical. What sort of people are we? What will be the meaning of my life – and yours? Life moves so swiftly, and can go so suddenly. How are you and I to spend the limited time we have? That is the lifelong test for each of us.

If I come across a tad evangelical today, it is because I am. Even though you and I might toil at the side of the angels, we are not ourselves angelic. People with the passion to do good sometimes should feel pleased with progress, but none of us should ever be satisfied that we have done enough. It will be time to rest when we enter the next world.

None of us will "save" this world. But we can surely "save" many people. Then those we help, upon succeeding themselves, have the opportunity to contribute to better lives in the generations to come.

"Retirement" seems to me a perilous state. What actually would I do? The joy of life is making a difference in others' lives, and I am not saving my energy for that aforementioned next world. Not long ago I read Edith Wharton's "House of Mirth," a compellingly painful tale of life a century ago. What I found most compelling is this wisdom from Edith Wharton: "In spite of illness, in spite even of the archenemy sorrow, one can remain alive long past the usual date of disintegration if one is unafraid of change, insatiable in intellectual curiosity, interested in big things and happy in small ways."

Anne Frank, among the most poignant figures in history, wrote this in the years of the Holocaust: "How wonderful it is that nobody needs to wait a single moment before starting to improve the world."

That, then, is our opportunity. Let us go forth in that spirit. May God bless our children – all our children – and all of us. Thank you.

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Study Topic Related Acronyms

PPI – Public Policy Institute of Marion County

VPK – Voluntary Pre- kindergarten

ELCMC – Early Learning Coalition of Marion County

CDC - Center for Disease Control in the Department of Health and Human Services.

PORT – Peer On-site Regional Training

CLASS – Classroom Assessment Scoring System (an observation tool)

ELLA – Early Learning Leaders Association

CF – College of Central Florida

CDS – Childhood development Services

Nate Grossman, M.D. Director, Marion County Health Department

Study Topic Speakers

David Lawrence

Chair, The Children’s Movement of Florida &
President, Early Childhood Initiative Foundation



“The end goal is to have every child ready for college and career... . How do we build a system backwards to support that at the end? The key is...to invest early. (We need) discussions in Florida like we’ve never had, and that is to say, ‘How do we use early education as a building block to college and career readiness?’”

Florida Department of Education Commissioner, Dr. Tony Bennett

St. Petersburg Times, May 17, 2013



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