

# HELIOS EDUCATION FOUNDATION THEORY OF CHANGE:

## *Early Childhood Education*

**Helios Education Foundation** believes education improves lives and strengthens communities. Our work in Early Childhood Education is inspired by our vision of ensuring individuals across Arizona and Florida have the opportunity to attend and are prepared to succeed in postsecondary education.

The Foundation operates under the basic premise that learning begins in the earliest years of life. The ages between birth and five are the most critical in a child's development—laying the foundation for success in school and beyond. And with 90% of the child's brain being developed by age five, quality early learning opportunities are important for all children regardless of demographic and socio-economic background. They expose young minds to learning through play while nurturing and cultivating their social, emotional, physical and cognitive growth.

According to U.S. Census bureau projections, children under the age of five will exceed 21 million by 2010, a four percent increase over four years. Arizona's current birth to four-year old population approaches half a million while Florida's is over 1.1 million. It is estimated that nearly 70% of the children in this age group spend some portion of their day outside the care of their parents in either in-home or center-based early childhood education settings.

Research indicates children exposed to quality early learning environments are more likely to perform well academically, be more socially and emotionally well-adjusted, abstain from delinquent behavior and graduate from high school. However, not all Arizona and Florida children have access to quality early learning opportunities due to the affordability and accessibility of quality settings as well as the need for higher skilled teachers and practitioners.

As studies show, there is a direct correlation between teacher and professional education levels and the quality of early childhood education programs. Yet, the majority of our youngest children are in environments where their teachers are neither certified in early childhood education nor have a college degree. In fact, most often, teachers and practitioners require additional education and skill development in order to create higher quality early learning experiences. There are also significant inconsistencies across existing programs and lack of alignment between early childhood education and K-3 educator expectations. As a result, kindergarten teachers report that half of the children entering their classrooms are not well prepared for learning success.

It is also recognized that cultivating emergent literacy and language acquisition during the earliest years provides an important foundation for life-long learning, however, many early childhood education teachers do not understand the fundamental importance of creating a print and language rich environment. With growing expectations for academic mastery at younger ages, especially with the increased focus on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) learning across the education continuum, quality early learning becomes even more critical in setting the stage for long-term student success. Better alignment of the goals and objectives of early childhood and K-3 education aids the successful transition of students and fosters more sustained gains from the investments made in quality early childhood education programs.

### **OUR FOCUS**

Striving for every child within Arizona and Florida to enter kindergarten prepared to learn and succeed in a supportive learning environment, we will actively participate in early childhood education planning,

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innovation and integration. By doing so, we will help increase understanding about the importance of early childhood education programs and their connection to student success across the education continuum. Helios Education Foundation will contribute our leadership, expertise, partnership and resources in the following Early Childhood Education areas:

- **Improving Early Childhood Education Teacher Quality** – We will work to increase the knowledge and education of early childhood education teachers and practitioners as it relates to literacy and language acquisition, providing them with practical ways to integrate their knowledge into the early learning setting.
- **Integrating Emergent Literacy and Language Curriculum into Postsecondary Programs** – We will work with community colleges and universities to improve knowledge and education in the area of literacy and language acquisition by integrating curriculum into early childhood education and related degree programs. We will also foster increased articulation of coursework between community college and university early childhood education programs.
- **Bridging Early Childhood and K-3 Education** – We will work with community partners to foster collaboration, professional development and curriculum alignment with an emphasis on literacy and language between early childhood education teachers and practitioners, and K-3 educators, contributing to the successful transition of young children.

#### MEASURING OUR IMPACT

The impact of Helios Education Foundation's investment in Early Childhood Education will be measured through methods which capture changes in demographics, individual and social outcomes, and qualitative and quantitative information. Successful outcomes will reflect positive change, improved quality and leveraging of resources. Secondary research and evaluation methodologies will be utilized strategically to guide our efforts and to advance our understanding of key trends or opportunities within early childhood education. In addition, the Foundation will strive to be a trusted partner, knowledge source, thought leader and innovator, providing a legacy of learning for generations to come.

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The Foundation will monitor its short- and long-term progress within the Early Childhood Education programs and initiatives in Arizona and Florida which it funds based on the following indicators:

Helios Priority	Indicators
<b>Improving Early Childhood Education Teacher Quality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase the percentage of early childhood education programs providing literacy and language acquisition education for teachers</li> <li>• Increase the percentage of teachers and practitioners educated through onsite program development focused on literacy and language acquisition</li> <li>• Increase the demonstrated literacy and language skills and knowledge of teachers within early childhood education environments</li> </ul>
<b>Integrating Emergent Literacy and Language Curriculum into Postsecondary Programs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase the percentage of community colleges and universities that have added literacy and language acquisition to early childhood education coursework</li> <li>• Increase the articulation of early childhood education coursework and degree programs between community colleges and universities</li> <li>• Increase the percentage of postsecondary students enrolling in literacy and language acquisition early childhood education classes</li> </ul>
<b>Bridging Early Childhood and K-3 Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase the percentage of early childhood education programs and school districts that have defined strategies and steps to implement aligned curriculum, standards and professional development</li> <li>• Increase the percentage of children with third grade AIMS scores which meet or exceed state standards</li> <li>• Increase in the percentage of children with third grade FCAT scores which meet or exceed state standards</li> </ul>

For a list of statistical, demographic and research sources used in this statement, contact Linda Thompson at [lthompson@helios.org](mailto:lthompson@helios.org).