

**Helios Education Foundation** believes education changes lives and strengthens communities. As a result, we strategically partner and invest our knowledge, expertise and resources to create opportunities for individuals in Arizona and Florida to succeed in postsecondary education. By fostering a college-going culture and advancing the academic preparedness of all students beginning in early childhood, the Foundation seeks to increase the number of young adults graduating from high school ready for college and career, as well as entering and completing postsecondary education.



Laying the foundation for success in school and beyond, the ages between birth and eight are the most critical in a child's development. With 90% of the child's brain being developed by age five,<sup>1</sup> quality early learning opportunities are important for all children regardless of race, income or geography. 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.<sup>2</sup> Studies also show a direct correlation between the education levels of early childhood teachers and program quality and student preparedness in language and literacy.<sup>3</sup>

**Our Theory:** If Helios Education Foundation strengthens early childhood systems to promote language acquisition and emergent literacy for children, birth through age 8, then more children in Arizona and Florida will enter kindergarten prepared to succeed and be reading proficiently at the end of third grade.

## **THE CHALLENGE**

The social and economic benefits of quality early childhood education have been touted for decades. Yet, not every child in Arizona and Florida has access to affordable, high-quality early learning opportunities. The majority of early childhood teachers does not have a bachelor's degree, and most lack specialized professional development.<sup>4</sup> In order to create the desired higher-quality early learning experiences for young children, additional education and skill development are often required.

Emergent literacy and language acquisition during the earliest years has been proven to be critical in laying a solid foundation for long-term academic success and life-long learning.<sup>5</sup> Developing such critical skills in young children requires early childhood teachers to create a print and language-rich learning environment. However, Kindergarten teachers report that only 35% of the children entering their classrooms are academically prepared to succeed.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, only 28% of Arizona's and 39% of Florida's fourth graders are proficient or above in reading<sup>7</sup> at a time when students in both states may be held back for not performing at grade level by the end of third grade. Additionally, as expectations of student academic achievement grow, 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 prolonged academic success.

Significant inconsistencies across early childhood programs, insufficient coordination between early childhood and K-3 educators, limited and unaligned measurement systems and inadequate access to high-quality professional development all present challenges in raising the quality of early childhood environments and teachers. The lack of a coordinated early childhood system makes it difficult to align goals and expectations, strategically direct resources, and elevate the importance of quality early learning as well as the depth of expertise within the profession.

## **OUR FOCUS**

By strengthening early childhood systems to promote language acquisition and emergent literacy for children, birth through age 8, Helios Education Foundation believes more Arizona and Florida children will enter kindergarten ready to succeed and be reading at grade level by the end of third grade. As a result, the Foundation seeks to foster greater collaboration amongst early childhood providers; better align early childhood teachers and K-3 educators; improve access to high-quality professional development; and build strategic cross-sector partnerships which help create and sustain a more coordinated system, thus improving the academic preparedness and success of young children in Arizona and Florida. Helios Education Foundation's priority is to strategically partner and invest our knowledge, expertise and resources to:

- **Foster Collaborative and Sustainable Early Childhood Education Systems** – We cultivate strategic partnerships and facilitate community education in order to build support and alignment for shared goals, collective processes, aligned assessments and reporting systems, and cross-sector coordination resulting in high-quality teachers and early learning environments.
- **Improve Access and Quality of Early Childhood Professional Development** – We improve early childhood professional development focused on emergent literacy and language acquisition skills and knowledge as well as classroom application by teachers and administrators working with children birth through age 8. Helios Education Foundation identifies community partners and incorporates research-based best practices to facilitate alignment, consistency and, ultimately, improved student preparedness and success.
- **Bridge Early Childhood and K-3 Education** – We foster collaboration amongst early childhood education teachers and K-3 educators to increase the successful transition of young children by aligning professional development and curriculum, with an emphasis on emergent literacy and language acquisition.

## **MEASURING OUR IMPACT**

Helios Education Foundation measures its impact within our *Early Grade Success* reform priority based on a number of short- and long-term indicators. When we are successful, as defined by our theory of change, we anticipate more Arizona and Florida children will enter kindergarten prepared to succeed and read proficiently by the end of third grade. Internal and external expertise, best practices, practical experience, research and evaluation all inform our work and guide our investment of time, money and talent. To achieve the greatest impact, we work with local and national partners including public and private institutions, businesses, nonprofits and other foundations. In addition to demonstrating results within our priorities, we aim to add value to our partners, improve systems, facilitate discourse and lead meaningful change within education in Arizona and Florida.

**References**

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Note: Sources last accessed July 22, 2015.