

BRIGHT SPOTS

School Attendance



Early Childhood Learning Services, Fort Myers, FL

Every morning, teachers, social workers and administrators turn out to greet children getting off the bus at the Lee County Head Start program in Fort Myers. Each child gets to choose the type of greeting to receive — a high five, a hug or an “alligator,” for example — and the teacher makes eye contact in a deliberate way. The message is clear: You are important, and we’re glad you’re here.

In class, children sing a song to their friends — not just those sitting with them in a circle, but also to the children who didn’t make it to class that day. They wish them a speedy recovery and a quick return to pre-school.

The greeting and the song are among the approaches Lee County uses to instill the importance of attendance in their youngest students and to keep attendance rates at 92 percent — well above the Head Start requirement of 85 percent. Attendance Works, a leading nonprofit organization focused on reducing chronic absenteeism nationwide, has recognized Lee County Head Start for its work combating the problem on www.attendanceworks.org.

Attendance boosts reading readiness

The efforts of the Lee County program are working in improving attendance — and reading readiness. Since 2009, when the district adopted FAIR (Florida Assessments of Instruction in Reading), which evaluates kindergarteners’ skills in letter naming and phonemic awareness, children attending the Head Start program have consistently tested higher than the reading readiness of district kindergarteners from households at all income levels.

Lee Head Start teachers create opportunities for children to learn in groups large and small and one-on-one, as they engage in dramatic play, work with blocks and manipulatives, and play outdoors. Recognizing the importance of positive teacher-child interactions early in the children’s lives, the program uses the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) to monitor and enhance classroom quality.

WHO THEY ARE

Early Childhood Learning Services

serves 912 students, Pre-K:
15% with disabilities.
100% Free and Reduced-Price
Meals.

WHAT THEY ACHIEVE

Early Childhood Learning Services

attendance:

2008 92%
2009 94%
2010 93%
2011 92%

Florida Assessments of Instruction in

Reading, percentage of students
scoring 67% or higher — ECLS
(compared to district kindergarten)

2010 74% (71%)
2011 75% (74%)

CONTACT

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Universal approaches

“The key is in having as many universal approaches in place as possible,” says Becky Yance, a social worker in the county’s Early Childhood Learning Services division, which serves nearly 1,000 low-income and at-risk students at 30 sites in and around Fort Myers. Another 800 are on a waiting list. “We make it clear that we expect every child to be there on time and ready to learn.”

The first step is to meet with parents to sign a participation agreement. Program officials stress that Head Start is not a drop-in program for parents to use when it’s convenient, nor is it a school program with mandatory attendance. It’s a school readiness program that works best when children are there every day. Parents agree to make regular attendance a goal and call when a child is sick.

At school, teachers track roll electronically so the data can be monitored for each child. The teachers are all trained in Dr. Becky Bailey’s *Conscious Discipline*, which emphasizes routines, structure and problem solving.

Attendance tied to other issues

Teachers and social workers visit the children’s homes to get a sense of family life and social dynamics. They build a relationship with the family so that the parents trust the staff enough to share problems that might be keeping children from getting to school.

“We look at attendance problems as a result of other issues,” says Yance, whose team includes specialists in mental health, child abuse, domestic violence and substance abuse.

If a child has too many absences, the teacher is the first to reach out to the family. If the absences persist, the parents are asked to come in for a conference. They are shown an attendance calendar that displays their child’s absences and asked about any issues that need addressing. The Head Start team’s connections to community services, and the trusting relationship they’ve built with the families, can often help turn around a problem.

“When we call our families, it’s not to nag,” says Yance. “It’s ‘we miss you when you’re not here.’”

HIGHLIGHTS

Early Childhood Learning Services

uses:

- Daily rituals to reinforce the importance of attendance.
- Parent participation agreements.
- Crisis interventions and referrals.
- Becky Bailey’s *Conscious Discipline* program.