

# The Smartest Investment Florida Can Make: Early Learning

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GUEST

## OPINION

If we want to change outcomes, we have to start where it matters most: early childhood. The first years of life shape the trajectory of everything that follows — school success, career paths, and lifelong well-being. Investing in early learning isn't a hopeful gesture; it's a proven strategy for building a stronger, more stable Florida from the ground up.

That's why Children's Day at the Capitol is more than a symbolic event — it's a call to action. It reminds us that behind every statistic is a child with unlimited potential, and that the policies we shape today will determine the futures they inherit tomorrow.

We've seen what's possible when that foundation is strong. In a community where fewer than 30% of adults hold a high school diploma, students enrolled in Guadalupe Center's education programs in Southwest Florida are achieving remarkable academic success,

graduating high school, and continuing on to college. That kind of long-term achievement takes root in the earliest years, when children are given access to high-quality classrooms, caring educators, and opportunities to build their skills, confidence, and love of learning.

Yet across Florida, too many families are still waiting for that chance. Demand for early childhood education continues to grow, but access hasn't kept pace. The cost of care can stretch family budgets to the breaking point — in Southwest Florida, families are spending nearly 20% of their income on child care alone. At the same time, staffing shortages have forced many programs to cut back or close altogether. The result is a system that's out of reach for the very children who stand to benefit most.

Early childhood educators in Florida are doing some of the most important work in our state, yet their compensation doesn't reflect it. With average wages hovering just above \$12 an hour, it's no surprise the field faces high turnover and staffing shortages — challenges that directly affect families and program quality. At Guadalupe Center, we've taken a different approach. Thanks to philanthropic support, we've increased salaries for our early childhood educators to better reflect the value of their work. This investment has helped us attract and retain skilled professionals, ensuring the kind of consistency and care that young learners need in order to thrive. It's a win for students, families, and Florida's future.

The foundation for a strong workforce is built in early childhood classrooms, where children first develop language skills, problem-solving abilities, and emotional resilience. These early experiences shape long-term academic growth, social development, and the expertise employers look for years down the line. Investing in early learning is one of the most strategic ways to prepare Florida's future workforce.

At Guadalupe Center, we serve a population where English is a second language— yet 95% of the children who complete our Early Childhood Education Program enter kindergarten meeting or exceeding school readiness benchmarks. These are children who, statistically, were least likely to be prepared but are now entering elementary school ahead of the curve. These results aren't isolated successes; they're proof that high quality early learning works. They're also a reminder that the earlier Florida invests, the greater the return — through stronger schools, a more prepared workforce, and a reduction in long-term social costs.

Florida has an opportunity to lead. By expanding access to high-quality early education, supporting affordability for families, and investing in the educators who make it possible, we have the ability to create lasting impact. Teacher turnover remains a persistent challenge across the state, with many programs experiencing rates as high as 40% each year. But at Guadalupe Center, we're proving that progress is possible. We're on track to reduce turnover to under 15% this year by prioritizing educator support, stability, and long-term success for both teachers and students.

Guadalupe Center has been serving Immokalee for more than 40 years. We've seen what's possible when early learning is done well and we've seen how much need still exists. Our students are thriving, and their success stories begin in classrooms designed to meet them where they are and help them grow.

The most impactful investment we can make begins at the very start.

*Dawn Montecalvo is President & CEO of Guadalupe Center*

## 0 Comments

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