



Listening Tour

2018

With Gratitude

This report would not have been possible without the gracious gift of time and hospitality from the following organizations across Florida. We owe them a debt of gratitude not only for their contributions to this effort, but also the inspired work they do to support Florida's children.

Badaboom Large Family Home
Day Care

Broward County Commission

Broward County Public Schools

Building Blocks Learning Center

CareerSource Florida

Caring and Sharing Learning School

Champions for Learning
of Collier County

Children's Board
of Hillsborough County

Children's Services Council
of Broward County

Clay County School District

Early Learning Coalition
of Broward County

Early Learning Coalition
of Florida's Gateway

Early Learning Coalition
of Pinellas County

Early Learning Coalition
of SouthWest Florida

Early Learning Coalition
of the Big Bend Region

Florida Association
of Early Learning Coalitions

Florida Education Foundation

Florida House of Representatives

Florida Senate

Gulf Power

Immokalee Foundation

Jacksonville Public Education Foundation

Juvenile Welfare Board of Pinellas County

KIPP Jacksonville

North East Florida
Educational Consortium

Orange County Public Schools

Pinellas County Urban League

Pinellas Education Foundation

Putnam County School District

Rosa Valdez Learning Center

Santa Rosa County District Schools

School District of Indian River County

Seminole County Public Schools

Teach for America - Miami-Dade

The Children's Trust
of Miami-Dade County

Executive Summary

As a responsive innovation center dedicated to working in community with others to create equitable education systems, the University of Florida Lastinger Center is deeply committed to understanding the needs and realities of the communities the Center seeks to serve. That is why the Director and select leadership recently embarked on a 6-week Listening Tour across Florida: to hear from more than 100 educational stakeholders ranging from preschoolers to high schoolers, from teachers to school and district administrators, from parents to agency and organization leaders to elected officials, and from rural areas to urban centers. And from conversations heartfelt and sincere, much was learned. The conversations spanned early learning, literacy, and mathematics to leadership, technology, and school safety. The trip totaled nearly 3,000 miles and 20 of Florida’s 67 counties.

The goal was to do a pulse check on the educational successes and challenges from cradle to career. Overall, the resounding message from interview participants was two-fold: First, our education system has experienced significant progress forward in better understanding the path to a quality education for all students. Second, there are numerous opportunities within the state to further advance via thoughtful, evidence-driven innovation.

The Listening Tour was developed to guide the work ahead both for the University of Florida Lastinger Center as well as inform broader efforts for educational advancement in Florida. Themes that emerged from these conversations include:

-  1. Addressing students’ **mental health and wellbeing** is an increasingly high priority for Florida stakeholders, and it must encompass evidence-based preventive strategies as well as reactive interventions.
-  2. There remains widespread support for standardized assessment in education, alongside growing recognition of the opportunity to reconfigure the **accountability system** to better incentivize evidence-based approaches to promoting healthy child development and student success.



3. Across Florida, awareness of the importance of **early learning** is increasing; however, achieving the appropriate balance between access and quality continues to be a challenge.



4. Increasingly, communities are recognizing the benefit of formally connecting middle and high school education to **career readiness**, especially those careers that align with Florida's workforce needs.



5. Educators are seeing the need for new interventions and supports for **academically-challenged learners** who are falling further behind.



6. **Technology** and **data** hold great promise for improving student learning, but greater capacity is needed both in schools and communities.



7. **Recruitment** and **retention** of early childhood and K-12 educators continues to hamper progress in improving systems and need new more effective solutions.



8. **Superstorms**, such as Hurricanes Irma, Maria, and Michael, are rapidly impacting changes to Florida's educational system and are likely to have long-term effects.

Despite the power of each of the themes that surfaced from the Listening Tour, perhaps the most important lesson gleaned from this exercise is the incredible commitment, talent, and passion of the individuals in this state who serve our children. We should take great comfort and keep great hope knowing that Mr. Echevarria and Ms. Matheny are leading Fellsmere Elementary School in Indian River County, that Ms. Harding is teaching algebra at KIPP Jacksonville in Duval County, and Ms. Khrystie is caring for preschoolers at Building Blocks Enrichment Center in Suwanee County. It's incumbent on us and those with whom we partner to develop a system and supports that allow them and, most importantly, the students they serve to be successful.

A Commitment to Listening to Drive Success

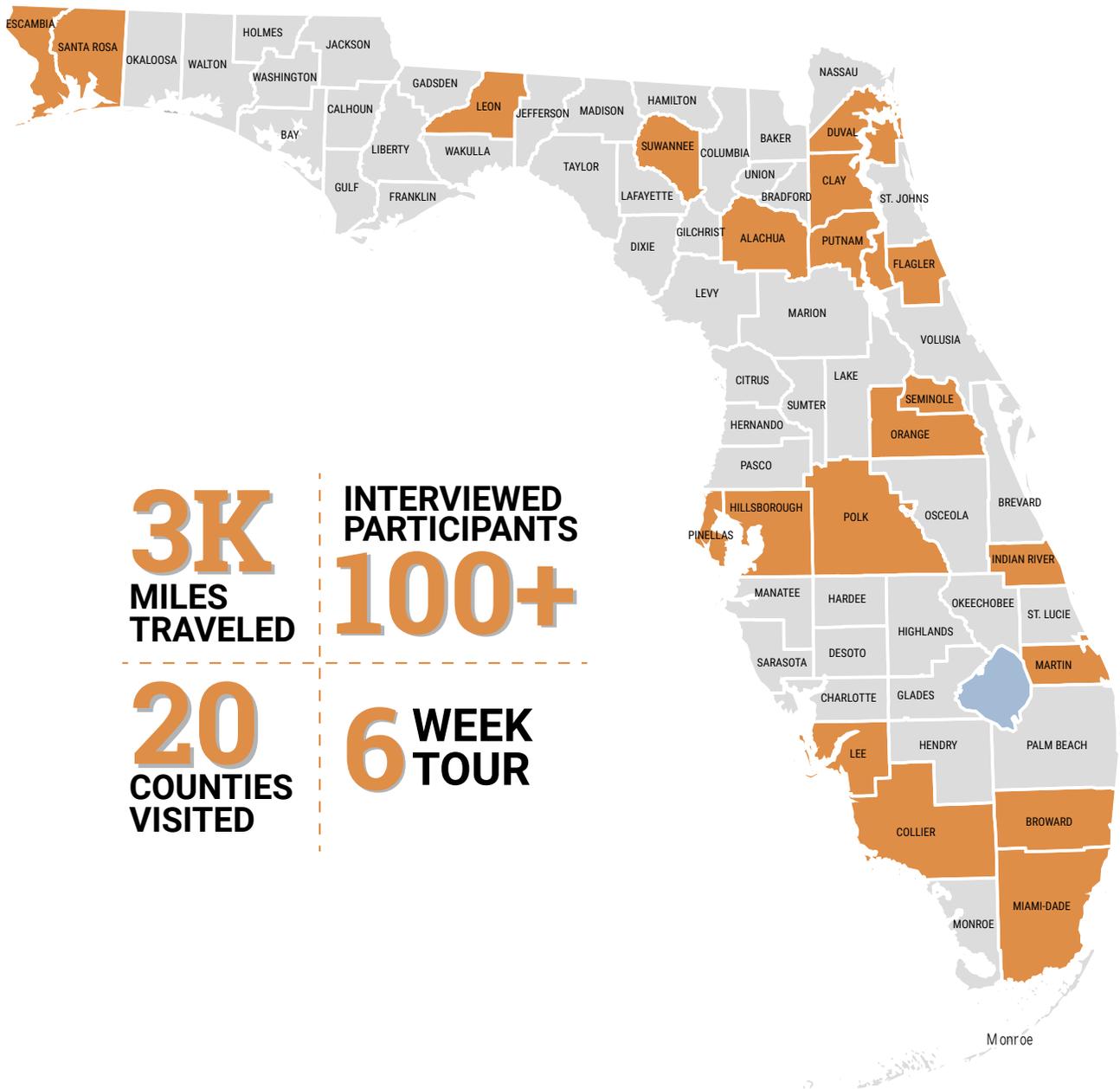
Since its 2002 inception, the practice of actively listening to the widely-diverse experiences, comments, and concerns of educational stakeholders statewide has been at the heart of the University of Florida Lastinger Center's core mission.

As Florida's responsive innovator for advancements in education, the UF Lastinger Center is deeply dedicated to the development of practical, evidence-based approaches.

We strive to support and improve the work of childcare providers and K-12 schools across Florida and the nation. Thus, gaining and responding to the broad perspective of teachers, administrators, students, and parents actively "in the field" is a critical component for achieving the goal of developing the educational innovations that will most deeply impact the lives of Florida's children and families. Further, given Florida's longstanding history of education innovation at both the programmatic, systems, and policy levels, the UF Lastinger Center is cognizant that the work done within the state has resonance for education systems across the United States, a matter which only further highlights the importance of fully understanding the current landscape.

NEW PHASE OF GROWTH INSPIRES NEW LISTENING TOUR

The UF Lastinger Center recently appointed its new Director, Philip Poekert, to its leadership team. This transition created the welcome opportunity to continue a long-standing practice of perspective-gaining by designing a statewide 2018 Listening Tour for the UF Lastinger team to embark on.



The goal of the tour was to capture Florida’s current educational landscape from a broad span of perspectives representing “cradle to career.” That is, to talk with students of all ages, from early education to high school, as a means of both broadening and deepening the UF Lastinger Center’s understanding on what is working in Florida’s educational system and where the next generation of innovative solutions are most needed. Further, the team sought to give voice to a full range of thought leaders and partners, including parents, educators, community leaders, elected officials, and more, as well as to observe local, state, and national educational trends firsthand. Finally, the UF Lastinger Center team

aimed to collect and synthesize a body of insightful data to share with stakeholders and partners statewide, to further inform practice and effectively contribute to their collective effort to improve children’s lives.

The purpose of the following thought piece is to share the perspective of more than 100 educators, students, and parents who participated in the tour, sharing their experiences, both successes and struggles with the Florida educational system. These interviews highlighted the achievements of the many programs and individuals already successfully impacting change, as well as multiple opportunities to further advance educational quality across Florida. **Within this text, the team strives to accurately represent the wealth of perspectives revealed, highlighting the most prominent and pertinent themes for further reflection.** Some of the insight garnered may well be beyond the typical scope of the UF Lastinger Center, and even of Florida’s current system; however, an effort was made to include all relevant insight in order to represent a fully accurate portrayal of the current educational landscape.

A DEEP DIVE INTO METHODOLOGY

Understanding the methodology of the Listening Tour is critical for accurately interpreting the results and themes shared and cited. The Director and select members of the UF Lastinger Center leadership team embarked on a six-week listening tour throughout the state, visiting all regions — from the Panhandle to Miami – including urban, suburban, and rural areas.

The UF Lastinger Center team met with students of all ages, from the youngest learners through grade 12, from all racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds. They sought out discussion with teachers of early childhood, elementary, and secondary education, seeking their perspectives, hearing their concerns, and celebrating their victories. The team also spoke with school administrators, including principals and center directors, as well as district administrators, from content specialists to superintendents. They also met with elected officials, such as mayors, state representatives, and state senators, in addition to leaders of

community organizations, such as children services and child welfare organizations (like the Urban League), who are serving the community and providing invaluable services.

Overall, the Listening Tour engaged more than 100 students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community leaders. The data from these conversations were captured in over 1,800 pages of transcripts and 50 hours of video and audio recordings. The UF Lastinger Center team comprehensively combed the body of data to effectively identify the common themes of greatest importance for advancing education in Florida and across the nation. The distillation of the data was an extremely challenging task where every point identified was weighted, discussed, and confirmed multiple times to create consensus and validity in findings.

Data from surveys conducted across Florida during 2018 through the Measure to Learn and Improve study are also included in this report to provide additional information and insight on specific themes highlighted. The Measure to Learn and Improve study is a comprehensive research effort supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to assess the impact of efforts in educational improvement. The UF Lastinger Center served as the Florida partner in analyzing and disseminating data collected from RAND Corporation's American Teacher Panel (ATP) and American School Leader Panel (ASLP). These panels are comprised of representative samples of K-12 teachers and principals in specific states, one of which is Florida. The study examined the perceptions of teachers and administrators across the country regarding preparation programs for their roles, professional learning opportunities, and teacher leadership structures. Results from the study will serve as key indicators associated with teacher and leadership effectiveness and inform policies developed to improve education systems. The reference for the Measure to Learn and Improve study (MLI) is included at the end of this document.

Themes and Observations

As previously noted, the findings below were constructed via thousands of pages of transcribed data. Along with videos and other artifacts from these meetings, the information was synthesized by the UF Lastinger Center team for use in shaping the strategic direction of the organization, to inform planning of the pipeline for future UF Lastinger Center innovations, and to share publicly so that fellow stakeholders may also benefit from the insights gained.

After reviewing the entire body of data reported to the UF Lastinger Center team, a distinct set of themes emerged that were both prominently identified by stakeholders and also relevant to informing the innovations most likely to garner impact toward positive educational outcomes in Florida and the nation. Throughout the process the UF Lastinger Center team also carefully listened for the solutions, approaches, and supports that school districts and communities most need to improve educational outcomes, as well as those that are already happening and could potentially be scaled statewide. These findings will be considered by the UF Lastinger Center team as they develop the Center’s strategic direction, in order to provide lasting value to communities in Florida and beyond for years to come. Each of the themes and the potential solutions needed are detailed below, and two case studies are provided to bring these examples and themes into specific relief.





1. Addressing students' **mental health** and **wellbeing** is an increasingly high priority for Florida stakeholders, and it must encompass evidence-based preventive strategies as well as reactive interventions.



2. There remains widespread support for standardized assessment in education, alongside growing recognition of the opportunity to reconfigure the **accountability system** to better incentivize evidence-based approaches to promoting healthy child development and student success.



3. Across Florida, awareness of the importance of **early learning** is increasing; however, achieving the appropriate balance between access and quality continues to be a challenge.



4. Increasingly, communities are recognizing the benefit of formally connecting middle and high school education to **career readiness**, especially those careers that align with Florida's workforce needs.



5. Educators are seeing the need for new interventions and supports for **academically-challenged learners** who are falling further behind.



6. **Technology** and **data** hold great promise for improving student learning, but greater capacity is needed both in schools and communities.



7. **Recruitment** and **retention** of early childhood and K-12 educators continues to hamper progress in improving systems and need new more effective solutions.



8. **Superstorms**, such as Hurricanes Irma, Maria, and Michael, are rapidly impacting Florida's educational system and are likely to have long-term effects.



Theme 1: Addressing students' mental health and wellbeing is a high priority for Florida stakeholders, and it must encompass evidence-based preventive strategies, as well as reactive interventions.

Student mental health and wellbeing was a key topic in conversations across the spectrum of stakeholders, including administrators, educators, parents, and students, with significant consensus that this issue needs to become a higher priority statewide. The concern expressed was prominent in regard to the youngest learners in the early education system, all the way through high school. As one school principal stated: "What keeps me up at night is the mental health of our students...we're seeing a huge increase in mental health problems." A community partner shared that mental health is "a [significant] part of the puzzle that we're dealing with in 2018...the whole situation of suicides in our schools, trauma in our schools, the opioid crisis with the [number] of children being orphaned or sent into foster care." These observations were further supported by data collected from the MLI survey referenced in the methodology, where educators indicated that students' mental health and wellness is not sufficiently being addressed, or at times, even assessed: 33% of teachers and 18% of principals indicated that their students' social-emotional learning growth is not being measured. Further, 40% of teachers and 24% of principals indicated that they have received no training on supporting the acquisition and application of social emotional skills in students.

Stakeholders identified the need for increased mental health and wellness supports in the current system on three distinct levels:

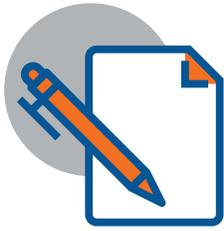
- **Advanced training for first responders** - There is the immediate need to develop a stronger "front-line" of school safety, i.e. the first responders who are responsible for responding to students in crisis and trying to mitigate safety risks. Respondents cited a critical need to expand access to and the capacity of first responders, in particular guidance counselors and School Resource Officers, to better identify and prevent potential issues with students

via new systems of professional development that extend beyond tactical skills and include advanced training in how to interact effectively with students both proactively and reactively when a crisis occurs.

- **Tier one preventive supports** - Participants highlighted the urgent need for preventative wellness supports via increased tier one interventions and supports designed to effectively promote student mental health and wellness. In particular, respondents noted the importance of adequate training for all school staff on promoting students' mental wellbeing, as well as the greater opportunity to teach wellness skills within the confines of the school day. For example, several respondents suggested that the development of statewide mental health and wellness standards would be a strong first step towards prioritizing this concept and incorporating wellbeing skills into the curriculum. However, there are very few examples of such standards being used anywhere in the United States at this time, creating an opportunity for Florida to blaze a trail both on the statewide and national level.
- **Trauma-informed care training for educators** - Respondents noted the urgent need for educators to receive proper training in the development of tier two and three interventions for students with significant mental health concerns, via increased use of trauma-informed care in the classroom. Mental health experts are increasingly recognizing the importance of educator capacity to correctly identify the signs of trauma and how they manifest in children's classroom behavior, as well as how to best intervene in order to mitigate the associated risks. Multiple stakeholders were adamant regarding the need for more intensive student services and new methods of scalable professional development, to help educators understand and appropriately apply the principles of trauma-informed care.

In addition to the needs previously highlighted, respondents commented on the increased need for additional supports external to the classroom:

- **Increasing mental health support services in communities** - With increased use of trauma informed care and other efforts to connect students with more intensive mental health services, stakeholders noted a need for the increased availability of mental health services in the community. Currently, many locales experience significant wait lists for critical mental health services, so additional funding models and approaches to maximizing the use of existing resources (for example, via a collective impact model as described later in this section) are needed to ensure service capacity can meet increased demand. One focus group participant was grateful for recent increases in supports but sees the need for more: "I personally feel [that] although the state did give us resources this year after Parkland...there's still such a need for so much more with the mental health."
- **Educator self-care** - As an additional note, implicit in the discussion on student mental wellness was also the need for greater self-care supports for educators at every level. That is, as student mental health issues lead to an increase in behavioral and safety issues in the schools, the educators who serve on the front-lines also need help in achieving self-care; otherwise the resulting stress can lead to diminished effectiveness, increased staff absenteeism, and high rates of staff turnover.



Theme 2: There remains widespread support for standardized assessment in education, alongside growing recognition of the opportunity to reconfigure an **accountability system** to better incentivize best practices in promoting healthy child development and student success.

Most of the interviewees implicitly supported the practice of tying school system and educator accountability to student learning outcomes. However, there was also widespread agreement that Florida's current assessment system is not optimal in a variety of ways:

- **Current assessments don't comprehensively measure student ability -** Across the board, educators are concerned that the standardized assessments used to measure learning outcomes are not accurately reflective of student achievement. This was reported for every age-level, beginning with the early childhood screenings used to assess children ages birth to 4, up through the standardized tests used with high school-aged students. This concern was echoed by students and parents as well. For example, several participants noted concern that current assessments do not measure students' ability to apply concepts to the real world. Others observed that current standardized tests do not measure student capacity or progress in developing the executive functioning skills that are critical to success in higher education and career (see below for more on this issue).
- **The current teacher assessment system does not accurately measure teacher capacity to achieve student learning gains -** Interviewees also expressed concern regarding the effectiveness of the standardized exams used in Florida to certify pre-service teachers for classroom positions. Stakeholders reported that the current exam may not always serve as an accurate predictor of educator readiness. For example, respondents cited scenarios where high-impact teachers were shut out of teaching, because they did not pass the general knowledge portion of the certification test. One such teacher was

now working at Starbucks instead. This disconnect was noted as particularly concerning to educational leadership, in light of the challenges they already face with teacher recruitment and retention. Furthermore, school leadership reported that the current certification system is causing great tension within the system. As one district superintendent stated “[The teacher accountability system is] creating a lot of stress on anyone tied to education. Even when people are doing a good job, it doesn’t always show up.”

Only 41% of Florida teachers indicated that they believed the teacher evaluation process improves student achievement.

This observation is further supported by MLI data, which indicates that this disparity has increased from previous data collected in 2017 by 18 points. Furthermore, according to the MLI data, only 63% of teachers indicate that they feel the teacher evaluation process is fair, compared with 80% of principals.

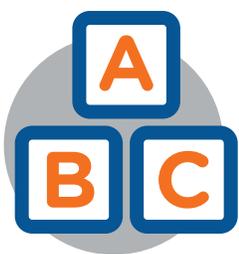
- **There is misalignment between the standardized assessment and classroom content** - Students reported concerns that the content they are tested on does not always align with the content they are learning within their classrooms. Because the standardized tests currently used are designed to align to the Florida Standards, this observation could be indicative that either teachers are not aligning their curriculum to the mandated standards or that constant curriculum changes create gaps in alignment and assessment.
- **Standardized test content has become a disproportionately influential factor in educational decision-making, thus reinforcing the impact of the current student assessment system on the educational landscape** - Teachers reported feeling continual pressure to “teach to the test,” at the expense of other beneficial knowledge and skill capacities. Furthermore, school administrators noted that they feel consistent pressure to place their top teachers in the tested grades, at the expense of high-quality teaching in early childhood, when research shows a high potential for impact.

- **Educators are concerned about the current assessment system’s failure to prioritize executive functioning skills** - A number of educators, both teachers and administrators, referenced the importance of teaching executive functioning skills within the classroom. Executive functioning skills include the capacities that allow an individual to function successfully in both the school and career environments, such as the ability to work collaboratively in a team, to strategically order and plan tasks, and mental problem-solving. These critical life skills are also very difficult to assess via standardized testing.

Respondents referred to executive functioning skills by a variety of terms such as 21st Century skills, “soft” skills, and foundational skills. However, regardless of label, the concern was consistent: these abilities are crucial for students to develop.

Such skills are necessary in order to successfully graduate high school, participate in higher education, and develop a sustainable career path; yet because they are not assessed within the current accountability system, schools don’t prioritize them within the curriculum. Accordingly, there is a great need to develop cost-effective, scalable methods for metrics of learning that extend beyond the current standardized tests, such as task simulations or portfolio development.

Overall, respondents did note the importance of accountability in maintaining a high-quality system of education within Florida. However, the overwhelming consensus was that at this point in time, educators have clearly identified a number of unintended and detrimental consequences of the system as implemented. This creates a broad opportunity for the state of Florida to reframe accountability into a system that accurately assesses both student and teacher capacity and incentivizes the teaching behaviors that best align to current research on healthy child development and effective student learning.



Theme 3: Across Florida, awareness of the importance of **early learning** is increasing; however, there is an ongoing and problematic tension between increasing access and promoting high-quality early childhood programming.

Respondents consistently reported that Florida's early learning system has significantly improved, especially over the last 15 years. Specifically, early learning has moved from a specialized, rarely addressed area of education to a highly-prioritized mainstay of the conversation. One early learning leader described it this way: "I just think statewide people are starting to care more and notice early learning. I think it's just on people's minds a lot more than it used to be, and so that's a good thing for us."

- **Access versus quality in early childhood programs** - While participants indicated evidence of positive change, impact is not yet consistent nor effectively scaled across the state. In particular, the Florida early learning system consistently faces a high demand for quality care and subsidies for low-income, working families that far outstrips the current supply of resources. Early learning leaders frequently described the unenviable choice between subsidy dollars to either:
 - Decrease wait lists and serve more children, but at the expense of the total subsidy amount, thereby decreasing the potential quality of care; or
 - Increase the amount of subsidy to pay a rate at or closer to the amount needed for a quality early learning experience but providing subsidies to fewer families overall.

As a result, a number of early learning leaders cited the need to examine other localities and states for new funding models that could be adapted to and adopted by the state of Florida. As one example, Florida early learning leaders

noted an interest in shared services models, especially those that could provide healthcare coverage that is too expensive for individual centers to sustain. This model is often highly valued by early educators and offers a strong incentive for retaining early learning teachers, in a field often marred by exceedingly high turnover rates. This is only one example of the type of alternative models that may be available.

Overall, early learning leaders were clear that a new system of funding for Florida early childhood programs is imperative.

As one thought leader stated, “I think the funding definitely needs to be different, and I don’t mean necessarily the funding formula, but I think the way that [early childhood education] is funded in general.”

While some of the interviewed organizations have explored additional public funding, stakeholders did not report feeling confident in their ability to attain public support for the level of revenue needed to close the funding gap. More realistically, leaders talked about the need to find models that “braid” multiple public and private funding sources.

- **Programming for children ages birth to three** - An even more specific and daunting challenge noted (and one faced by early learning programs nationwide) is the shortage of quality care for children from birth through age three. These years are particularly challenging for early learning providers, as the cost of providing care to infants and toddlers usually exceeds subsidies and even market-rate prices. Even when funders are able to provide additional resources for infant/toddler care, providers often shy away, seeing little incentive to expand their capacity, thus creating a lack of quality services for children in this age bracket. As one educator described the service gap in this way: “We have PreK here, the community has a PreK, and even that seems like it’s too late if that’s the first time a student is being exposed to any sort of academics.”

- **Impact of quality gap in early childhood** - Although participants generally reported that early learning outcomes are advancing in Florida, respondents also noted that inconsistent levels of quality in the early childhood programming have inadvertently caused new challenges for Florida's K-12 system. Due to the wide range of quality in early childhood education, students are arriving in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten with greater disparities in their skill level. So, while some students are presenting a much higher level of school readiness than in years past, those who don't receive a high-quality early childhood experience are even further behind their peers. As a result, educators in the elementary grades must now provide even more varied levels of instruction within the same classroom (see Theme 5 for more on this challenge). As one leader stated – "Children are coming to us, some at a very high literacy rate, some at a very low literacy rate. So, we are adapting to those individual needs and adapting to them correctly so that they can make the learning gains that we want them to make."
- **The collective impact approach** - There were also reports of progress being realized through collective impact initiatives, especially those tied to the Grade Level Reading Campaign, a network of communities working at both the national and state level to ensure all students are reading proficiently by the end of third grade. These efforts rely on a collective impact approach to align early learning, school district, community, and funder resources to address shared goals using set strategies. Many of these efforts, like the ones demonstrating progress in Broward, Collier, Escambia, and Pinellas Counties, rely on schools, early learning providers, and community organizations to help them reach more families with their programmatic efforts than they would be able to do on their own. As the mayor of one community stated "It's all about the children...you have to leave your ego at the door and have to focus on [them]. We look, all of us, [at] the resources we bring to the table...we all do better when our children do better and that has to be the driving force." Other elected representatives encouraged more cross-discipline work and a collective effort to let legislators know how important education is, particularly early education, for positive economic impact in local communities.

CASE STUDY 1

Collective Impact Spotlight Broward Reads: The Campaign for Grade Level Reading

Broward Reads: The Campaign for Grade Level Reading is a collaborative effort of organizations across their community, led by the Children's Services Council of Broward County, the Broward County Commission, Broward County Public Schools, and the Early Learning Coalition of Broward County. In 2014, Broward County joined the national Campaign for Grade Level Reading, which is focused on increasing the number of children reading at grade level by the time they finish grade 3. (<https://cscbroward.org/browardreads>)

The Power of Collaboration in Action

When the UF Lastinger Center team visited the leadership of Broward Reads, a sense of optimism permeated the conversation. When asked about positive impacts within their community, the Mayor replied, "I think the collaboration amongst all of the entities in Broward is working very well and is kind of allowing us to achieve some things that hadn't been achieved. I think you're seeing the county government, the school board, ELC, CSE, everybody kind of trying to help wherever they can...we are known as collaboration county."

Recognizing the Need for Collective Impact

Several members of the Broward Reads team discussed the importance of leveraging resources for optimal early learning goals: "Everybody everywhere in the community has a part to play in helping our kids be literate...and it's all about the children...you have to leave your ego at the door and you have to focus on the children. So, all of us, I would say, think about the resources we bring to the table." Another idea that members discussed was that "Shared credit also equals shared responsibility...we all do better when our children do better and that has to be the driving force."



Continued Challenges Alongside Success

As with every work in progress, success begets challenges. Some specific examples cited in the conversation with the Broward Reads team were that many children are not getting sufficient learning experiences within the county, or “not getting a good quality early learning experience.” In terms of student achievement, “we’ve gone from 52 percent third grade proficiency to 59 percent in the past three years, but 59 percent is still dismal...how do we move the needle? We want all of our children to be proficient in third grade. We know that that’s a major milestone. And, what do we need to do to get everyone there?” Many members also identified the need for social, emotional, and wrap around services as the critical areas that need to be addressed in the K-3 space. And finally, accountability was discussed: “There’s still the whole battle of the standards, versus the skills, versus the reading, versus the books...we don’t teach standards, we teach our children. We teach kids. That’s what we do.”



Theme 4: Increasingly, communities are recognizing the benefit of formally connecting middle and high school education to **career readiness**, especially those that align with Florida’s workforce needs.

A number of the communities included in the Listening Tour are beginning, to varying degrees, to engage middle and high school students and their families in developing the skills and acquiring the knowledge needed to create a pathway into in-demand careers. These efforts range broadly in complexity, from interview preparation workshops to a more formalized charting of career pathways via post-secondary education.

Career readiness initiatives are crucial on two fronts: first, for helping to address the keen workforce demands of Florida’s growing economy; second, to engage and inspire students by contextualizing their seemingly abstract academic work to the tangible reality of a career.



Stakeholders noted that across the board, efforts to promote career readiness are growing. The most frequently cited needs included:

- **Increased access to career exploration programming** - These programs typically start with an interest inventory or similar assessment to link the students' interests and competencies to potential career paths, and also include pathways for students to learn more about the credential requirements and growth potential. They may also include linking students to speakers or mentors in selected careers, so they can learn more about the opportunity firsthand. Stakeholders reported career exploration programs as being particularly valuable for students in rural areas, who may have limited exposure to the array of career options.
- **Prioritization of executive functioning skill training** - There is an increasing awareness that the modern workplace requires a skill set beyond the technical capacities needed to complete job tasks. As noted in the previous section, this body of skills were referenced by Listening Tour participants in a number of ways. This report uses the term "executive functioning skills" to refer to the individual capacities in high demand by employers, including the ability to plan, multi-task, maintain a growth mindset, communicate effectively with others, navigate the norms of the workplace, and collaborate on teams. Stakeholders consistently identified opportunities to develop executive functioning skills as a crucial component for helping Florida students advance successfully into the workforce.
- **Increased post-secondary education opportunities** - Stakeholders reported that many students (and their families) believe that the sole pathway into a 21st century career is a four-year post-secondary education. Yet many of the most high-demand jobs statewide actually require a two-year post-secondary education, a credential, or an apprenticeship, and are highly viable for creating a pathway for low-income students into the middle class. Respondents noted that there is a wealth of such career preparation opportunities available across the state, but that students need help and support to successfully access the opportunities to careers that exist outside of a four-year post-secondary

program. Some organizations – for example, the Immokalee Foundation – are working to challenge the misperception of the cruciality of a four-year degree, by educating students’ family members about alternative pathways to high-demand, well-paid careers.

Additionally, some stakeholders noted a connection between career readiness and another education system gap frequently mentioned by participants - the need to bolster high school math instruction, in order to develop students able to meet the demand of the current and future economy. Educators and students noted the value in tying math to career and practical scenarios to make it more relatable and engaging. As one high school student noted, “we are taught to factor polynomials, but we don’t know how to keep a budget.” Creating innovations that more effectively and consistently connect career and mathematics could provide dual benefits to students and help bolster a stronger Florida economy via a more prepared workforce.





Theme 5: Educators are seeing the need for new interventions and supports to assist **academically-challenged learners** who are falling further behind.

In almost every conversation, from early learning to K-12, interviewees raised concerns about the system's ability to meet the needs of academically-challenged learners, particularly those who have fallen behind or are at great risk of doing so. The expressed concern encompassed special education students in both inclusion and self-contained settings, as well as students in the general education setting who are performing below grade-level.

- **Family access to high-quality intervention tools** - Educators reported that for many students, academic challenges start in the early childhood or elementary years. Though new resources are increasingly available, families do not always possess the capacity to follow up on identified concerns or facilitate use of appropriate resources, often due to lack of access.

For example, one leader described Autism Navigator, a web-based resource for families of children on the Autism spectrum, as a highly useful tool for supporting students. However, the leader also noted that parents do not always have the ability to access these high-quality tools: “[The] parents that we serve are typically in situations to where things like developmental health are just really are not their top concern [and] understandably so. [They] can’t pay their rent or whatever else, so [we] somehow have to figure out how to get to that next level where we’re working more closely with parents, and not just at enrollment time, to make sure that they’re understanding what’s important for their child. Not just understand, but that they actually do something about it, and that they’re personally at a place where they can do something about it.”

Further, participants reported that even when families do understand their child's developmental challenges, they aren't always prepared to deal emotionally with a diagnosis, which may result in inaction if the family isn't properly supported. One interviewee expressed that this can be particularly true for families in poverty: "[I find] they feel like if there is something wrong... they blame themselves. And it's like I don't need something else to blame myself for...I don't want to deal with this."

Several participants suggested the need to prioritize a two-generation approach toward supporting both children in need of intervention services and, concurrently, the adults in their families.

To counterbalance this perspective, interviewees highlighted the importance of developing new ways to communicate with family members around developmental diagnoses to ensure a strong understanding of the need and benefit of interventions and provide greater support to families in processing the information before moving on to next steps.

- **Site-appropriate intervention services in early childhood** - Respondents also raised concerns about how the Florida education system can best address student needs, once a child has been identified for intervention services, particularly for children ages birth-5. For many young children, the one hour (or less) per day of services provided on-site at early learning facilities was insufficient to address the gaps in their academic and cognitive development. Yet in many communities, the only alternative is for the student to leave their program to receive services at the local elementary school, which may not be ideal or appropriate in the case of young children. One early childhood educator interviewed noted that this practice can be very disruptive for early learning students: "They start with us when they are babies, they connect

with us, they know us, they know the environment. But when they have a developmental need, they can only get [resources] if they go to the public school.”

Unsurprisingly, early education leaders engaged in the Listening Tour consistently cited the need for early intervention services to be embedded in early learning programs. However, the challenge will be creating innovative approaches that could be effective, at scale in the large number of centers serving Florida’s youngest children.

- **Addressing diverse learning needs in the K-12 classroom** - Respondents reported similar challenges in the K-12 system. Increasingly, classroom teachers need to provide differentiated instruction that meets the educational needs of a significantly varied population, including students who have fallen below grade-level academically, students with diagnosed special needs in the general education classroom, and students with social/emotional challenges that impact learning. Several educators emphasized the continued challenge of addressing all students at their current ability level; as one stated “you need to meet the needs of [severely] challenged students while also ensuring students almost at grade level or above it continue to pass and certainly do not regress.” Another educator noted how poignant she finds this challenge as a veteran teacher and expressed great concern in regard to the capacity of new teachers to do the same. One school leader described the need to consistently work with inexperienced teachers to instill the mindset that all students are capable of learning.
- **Impact of gaps in intervention resources on the system** - These challenges become even more apparent at the school and district level. Since public schools have the responsibility to provide an education to all students, they often have access to a broader array of resources, and as a result, may attract a greater number of students with special needs. Respondents noted scenarios where this has placed a greater resource burden on their schools. One elementary school leader shared these stories to illustrate the point:

"We've had situations here where students and parents haven't been told "You can't come here anymore to this charter or to this magnet," but it's very obvious in their conversations that if you don't fix this problem with your child, you may want to consider going to the public school, because the public school really has all the resources. I'll give you an example of that. We had a student that joined us about three years ago - a student of autism on the spectrum - very high-functioning, was very, very bright. And one day, he was in the cafeteria at [his former] school, and he was really into Minecraft technology games, and he said that he was going to blow everybody up. Well of course at that moment, when we hear talk like that now, that's very threatening. And parents were in the cafeteria for breakfast and they heard it, and they went to the principal. And they said, "We want him removed from the school." [They] didn't say, "You can't come here anymore," but they made it so uncomfortable [for the family]. Recently, we did have one where they said, "We don't have the resources to support your ESE student. You should look into a public school."

- **Need for improved family engagement** - Respondents also noted the impact of these realities on students' families and the need for increased family engagement supports. With the amount of responsibility teachers have for meeting a variety of needs, some participants pointed to the importance of parents and guardians having access to the information and support necessary to advocate for their children. One early educator, who experienced this with her own daughter and nephew, suggested that parents urgently need access to basic information on getting specialized support: "[They need to know] this is what you do next. This is who you call," as well as more comprehensive knowledge about their child's diagnosis and which services to advocate for.
- **Significant impact of inadequate student services on education decision-making** - Finally, the gaps in adequate intervention services for struggling students has a tremendous impact on school administrator decision-making. School leaders frequently cited the challenges they face trying to meet the



demands of the existing, high-stakes, test-driven accountability system and concurrently address the needs of struggling learners.

One elementary school administrator frankly stated: “If you look at a child who

Under the current resource constraints and cost-effective alternatives, administrators and district personnel often find themselves caught between funding interventions early on (when issues may not be as acute) versus trying to help students in higher grades “catch up.”

is a little bit behind in [kindergarten, first grade, or second grade], the reality is the state test is in [grades] three, four, five. So where do I put my resources? Well I really should put them in [kindergarten, first, and second grades] because after three years, that gap will change. But who’s bleeding the most right now? [That’s] where we put our resources if they’re limited.”



Theme 6: Technology and data hold great promise for improving student learning, but greater capacity is needed both in schools and communities to leverage digital resources to accelerate, facilitate, and deepen the learning process.

The UF Lastinger Center team heard clearly that technology and data-driven instruction are now at the heart of education in Florida. Systems have improved greatly and are integrated into most aspects of the K-12 educational system and, increasingly into early learning. However, participants also identified key challenges directly related to this transition.

- **Impact of technological innovation on student learning and teacher practice**

Respondents identified a sense that technological innovations such as the UF Lastinger Center’s Algebra Nation are growing in effectiveness and ease of use, thus providing great benefit for students and educators. As one math educator noted in an interview, “We have great access to the Algebra Nation website, I use a lot of the resources. This year I did, I had noticed how they have the independent practices already created for the lessons. The videos are already created for the lessons. The exit tickets are already created for the lesson. And so that saves me a lot of time.”

However, the increased use of apps and programs in the classroom has also led to new challenges for educators, who have to manage many different tools concurrently. Further, since these apps are not integrated, data on student progress is siloed within systems hampering the use of this information to accelerate student learning. Additionally, respondents indicated that the number of technology options are creating a situation where there is “overchoice” (that is, when an abundance of options becomes overwhelming and causes delays or paralysis in making a choice). As one educator stated: “Technology - I don’t know. There’s just so much. I think that’s also an issue that there’s just so much, like everybody’s coming out with a new app, something

that's educational...is it worth it?" Interestingly, none of the participants noted Single-Sign On (SSO) or other integration technologies which leads to the assumption they are not being actively employed, which may be part of the problem cited.

- **Incorporation of Data into Florida's Educational System** - Advances in technology also means greater access to student data for use in guiding student, classroom, school, and district education decisions. While educators at all levels are embracing the opportunity to make data-driven decisions, stakeholders reported some challenges to the consistent adoption and usage of student data. For example, educators noted some boot-strapping (i.e. informal knowledge-building) occurring as educators learn how to interpret and apply data. As one school leader stated "I've become kind of a data analyzer. Which, statistics was never my thing, but I see the value in it, and I see that it's helping me pinpoint more what they need, what the student's deficit is, which as a coach, it's not so much me necessarily helping the child, but helping the teacher understand the deficit so that they could teach them that." Conversely, participants also noted the absence of opportunities for formal training in data analysis, which may be hindering the effective application of data at many school sites.

The promise of data-driven decision-making at the systems-level is often hampered by the inability of systems from different institutions to be shared and aggregated.

District personnel also noted there are some examples emerging around Florida that show how data sharing could be scaled; however, these scenarios are few and far between, and siloed data remains a major issue, at both the early childhood and K-12 levels.

Participants also expressed concern about the quality of the data available. Though data is driving decisions from the systems level to the student, often times it is entered by low-paid, poorly-trained personnel with little or no clear quality assurance protocol. As a result, stakeholders are concerned that at times, low-quality data may be driving critical district decisions. As one stakeholder remarked: “The [issue] that keeps me awake is data quality. [Because] whatever we’re getting out [of data systems] like a lot of the stuff we get from state, it’s already gone through several different layers, different committees, state board approval and all this other stuff but the stuff coming from the district, data quality. Just like whatever we’re going to show is what’s in their system so, a lot of times we go back to sometimes the newest person or the lowest pay person in the district office is the one that is responsible for entering those data a lot of times. And so, the thing that keeps me awake at night is making sure that we provide the tools, professional learning training on systems for those data entry people, and for the leaders to make sure that we get quality data into the systems.”





Theme 7: Recruitment and retention of early childhood and K-12 educators continues to hamper progress in improving systems and needs more effective solutions.

Both administrators and educators in the early learning and K-12 systems consistently touched on the challenge of recruiting and retaining teachers. Educational leaders reported feeling caught in a recruiting “Catch 22”: they know they need to build their resources and find new means of recruiting talent, but the time and cost of fulfilling the basic talent needs of their schools and centers, given the high rate of educator turnover, becomes their sole focus.

Participants cited talent recruitment as a greater challenge than ever before, particularly in rural areas and for specialty subjects.

One administrator shared “If my Spanish teacher leaves, I don’t know what we’ll do, but shut the program down.” For both early and K-12 educators the primary reasons cited for recruitment and retention challenges are similar, though the scales differ: low salaries and a lack of certification.

- **Impact of the teacher pay scale on retention** - In the case of pay, early educators continue to report particularly low levels of pay, creating a great incentive to leave their position even for incremental increases. One early childhood teacher stated, “If I’m working for \$10 an hour, I’m not really [that] invested.” And her colleague added “You might leave for \$10.25 somewhere else.”

On the whole, K-12 teachers make significantly more than their early learning counterparts but are still low on the pay scale relative to their education level. A high school administrator shared a story about a science teacher, that illustrated an even more extreme pay gap: “I had a science teacher leave me, she’d gotten her [doctorate]. And was teaching science here. I stole her. She worked here for two years and a week and a half before school starts this year, she [quits]. [She had] an opportunity to go work at a lab...for double her pay.”

As a result of the compensation challenge, organizations like Jacksonville Public Education Fund are working with the school districts and unions to provide a pool of funds for additional compensation. Other early learning organizations across Florida reported looking at scholarship and bonus models, as well as potential shared services models with health care, as a means of boosting overall staff compensation.

- **Challenges to the teacher credentialing process** - Early learning stakeholders noted that the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential is highly lacking in the current labor pool, decreasing the number of potential candidates for early learning programs to choose from. Though the credential is relatively inexpensive, in comparison to the lower-level wages that are typical in early learning, it can become an insurmountable obstacle for aspiring educators. Though some providers could potentially pay current employees to obtain their CDA, the costs of paying for the provider’s time, the credentialing process, and a substitute to cover the class while the provider is at CDA preparation greatly increase the costs and may not be feasible for many centers. In reaction, funders such as the Big Bend ELC are offering tuition-free CDAs in partnership with other area funders and post-secondary institutions.

Similarly, for K-12 educators, certification in specialized subjects such as foreign languages, higher-level mathematics, chemistry, and biology, is highly sought after, creating a challengingly small pool of talent. Administrators also reported a lack of candidates certified in secondary education at all: “When I go to job

fairs, they don't have it. Because I ask 'what are you certified in?'. 'Elementary education'. 'What are you certified in?'. 'Elementary education'. Once in a while you'll get a secondary, but as a whole it doesn't exist."

Overall, stakeholders were adamant in their identification of retention and recruitment as two of the biggest challenges to currently facing Florida's education system. Participants emphasized the importance and urgency of developing a new approach for sustaining an effective pipeline of high-performing teaching staff, including the possibility of stronger career pathway implications and greater attention to salary scale.



CASE STUDY 2

Teacher Spotlight Ms. Harding KIPP Jacksonville, Math Teacher

Ms. Harding is a math teacher at KIPP Jacksonville and was named teacher of the year. She sheds light about the need for specific knowledge and best practices with students at the highest risk of school failure. Described by her assistant principal as “driven and motivating, she stops at nothing to make sure her kids are successful.”

Collaborating with Students Creates Success

Ms. Harding talked about specific students she has worked with, and the multitude of challenges these kids face. “I had a student last year, she was very, very scared about being in algebra, but she worked hard, and she trusted me, and she went from a [one to a four], and she still calls me today for help in geometry. I just think just motivating them and telling them you know, you can do it! Because math is a scary word for a lot of people.”

Data-Driven School Culture

Ms. Harding’s school approaches their students’ well-being and learning as intertwined, with a “we’re in this together” mentality. Ms. Harding states, “We are really like team and family...every teacher has a coach, and I really love that...we have a culture of feedback because we know that everybody’s just working to get better.” The school advocates data sharing with transparency for the betterment of students and teachers. “If you walk along in our hallways, you’ll see our data walls are very transparent...it’s no secret. We all share in the learning of our kids. Just because I’m teaching you math, I’m still your teacher all around. So, we’re very open and very transparent with our kids, and the student accountability on their data, I feel, has helped us be successful.”



Vertical Planning and Resource Alignment

In Ms. Harding's school, planning centers around a well-rounded student experience, and teachers collaborate on both expectations and outcomes for student success. According to Ms. Harding, "We do a lot of vertical planning to make sure that our kids are getting a really well-rounded experience, and we have very, very high expectations of our students. We set the bar extremely high... and we don't back down." Ms. Harding also highlights the way her classroom uses resources: "I have three stations in my classroom that run between 15 to 20 minutes. At the first station, the students actually watch the video. They will leave that station and go to the second station, which is independent practice, where they will actually apply what they learned from the video. And the last station is when they come to me so I can make sure that they got a clear understanding of what we saw on the video, the application in independent practice, and they do a check for understanding before they complete the exit tickets." According to Ms. Harding, this makes learning math meaningful. "Kids need to see math as though it's real, and feel how it affects their daily life."



Theme 8: Superstorms, such as Hurricanes Irma, Maria, and Michael, are significantly impacting Florida's educational system and are likely to have long-term effects.

Throughout the Listening Tour, educators in both early learning and the K-12 system noted the impact of superstorms – particularly Hurricanes Irma and Maria - in rapidly changing both the demographics and needs of their students. As one participant stated “[The] ELL population has increased a lot, especially after the hurricane [Maria] last year. We got a lot of students that came here after the hurricane and spoke no English and [of course] were all held to the same standards, so that’s a challenge for all the stakeholders involved here.” They further contrasted the changes caused by hurricane refugees by noting “We have some students from Russia, from France, but we had a big bulk at that one time [after Hurricane Maria], so that’s a challenge to still be focused on... Not just the language barrier, but they had to leave their home, you know? So, there are a lot of challenges in involved in that.”

Hurricane Michael struck as the Listening Tour wrapped up, and by all accounts has caused great disruption to the educational landscape, to continue for months to come. Florida is likely to experience more superstorms into the future, resulting in similar migrations into and among Florida regions and creating additional short- and long-term challenges.

There was no evidence in the Listening Tour of education systems formally preparing to react to disruptions from superstorms, as they have with other threats, such as school safety.

The Path Forward

As noted in the introduction, the data presented in the sections above are the amalgamation of hours of conversations with stakeholders as diverse and broadly representative as the state of Florida itself. While the resulting thought piece extracts the most significant themes that emerged, the UF Lastinger team also acknowledges that these findings are only one line in the rich and varied story of Florida education.

Overall, the resounding message from interview participants was two-fold: First, our education system has experienced significant progress forward in better understanding the path to a quality education for all students. Second, there are numerous opportunities within the state to further advance via thoughtful, evidence-driven innovation.

In response to the 2018 Listening Tour, the UF Lastinger Center has completed a comprehensive strategic planning process, in order to chart a new pathway to even greater impact. As part of this effort, the strategic planning team drew upon stakeholder input to further inform the goal-setting process for Center programmatic prioritization over the next three years. In heeding the input shared by the stakeholders of Florida education, the UF Lastinger Center strives to fulfill its mission of catalyzing impact by highlighting the successes and responding thoughtfully and innovatively to the realities of public education, both state and nationwide.

Lastly, the UF Lastinger Center is deeply grateful to the many Floridians who participated in the 2018 Listening Tour, supporting the Center’s continued commitment to a long-standing legacy of listening and responding to the voices of the educators, thought leaders, students, and parents who live the achievements and challenges of the education system daily. The value of this feedback to both the Center, and to Florida, cannot be overstated. Perhaps the most important lesson gleaned from this exercise is the incredible commitment, talent, and passion of the individuals in this state who serve our children. We should take comfort and keep great hope knowing that Mr. Echevarria and Ms. Matheny are leading Fellsmere Elementary School in Indian River County, that Ms. Harding is teaching algebra at KIPP Jacksonville in Duval County, and Ms. Khrystie is teaching preschoolers at Building Blocks Enrichment Center in Suwanee County. It’s incumbent on us and those with whom we partner to develop a system and supports that allow them and, most importantly, the students they serve to be successful.





The University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning is an education innovation hub that blends cutting-edge academic research and practice to transform education and accelerate learning. We work to create equitable educational systems where every child and educator, regardless of circumstances, experiences high-quality learning every day to support the achievement of critical milestones in children's trajectory through school that are predictive of success in life. Our innovations include Algebra Nation and Early Learning Florida and serve more than 500,000 students and 50,000 teachers across ten states in the nation each year.



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