

STUDER™  
COMMUNITY INSTITUTE

# Building a better reader



Photo by Michael Spooneybarger / Spooney@Studer.com

Gary Swisher II, CLM, Chief Administrative Officer at Clark, Partington, Hart, Larry, Bond & Stackhouse, uses a stethoscope while reading with Vachaun Simpkins at Global Learning Academy.

## The Class of 2028 are preschoolers now

The day they will get their caps and gowns may seem far off, but those open faces and minds will be filled soon enough.

And the most important groundwork for their academic progress is laid before they step through a schoolhouse door.

When people talk about education reform, a lot of that energy is focused on K-12.

“The longer I’m in this business, the more I am convinced that to solve this community’s challenges long-term, it will begin long before a student walks in a school door,” says Escambia schools Superintendent Malcolm Thomas.

State Rep. Clay Ingram, who also is the new president of the Greater Pensacola Chamber of Commerce, says workforce development begins long before career academies or community colleges.

“The focus has to be on early education,” Ingram says.

In the third installment of the Studer Community Institute’s education report, we look at the growing body of research that supports the importance of early learning, the importance of getting parents involved in that process at all ages and at two programs working now in the Pensacola metro area to help bridge that gap.



Shane Hogan and his son, Grayson Hogan, 3, play at the WSRE Imagination Station.

### INSIDE

Do you know the answers?

Sample questions from the Florida Standards Assessment test.

PAGE 4

### Pensacola Education Report

This is the third of a three-part report on local education by the staffs of the Studer Community Institute and PensacolaToday.com

### ONLINE

To read more

Visit PensacolaToday.com or StuderCommunity.Institute for parts 1 and 2



Sandy Lyons reads to VPK students at Trinity Learning Center daycare. Preschoolers last year participated in the Florida Center for Reading Research at Florida State University. It showed how children learn to recognize letters, read words and comprehend what they see on a page.

# The foundation for learning begins long before elementary school

By Shannon Nickinson  
snickinson@studer.com  
Photo by Michael Spoonerbarger

Parent and community involvement is the Oakcrest way, says Principal Linda Bonifay.

“Our motto has been for years, ‘Every student, every day, whatever it takes,’” she says. “We’ve created an environment where parents feel invited to our school.”

It didn’t happen overnight at Oakcrest Elementary School, which got a school grade of F in 2006. Former Principal Denny Wilson worked to change the culture at Oakcrest, which earned an A in 2011 after years of gradual, steady improvement.

One thing that helped Oakcrest was having a family and community liaison on campus. This year, that job belongs to Rodney Ford.

In his position, Ford does everything from helping parents fill out insurance paperwork to walking a child from his home to school to making sure he gets there. Oakcrest and Global Learning Academy are the only two district elementary schools with a job like Ford’s.

“I have found that at Oakcrest, my position is needed,” Ford says. “I would hesitate to say what another school needs, because I don’t know their needs. But my day is full.”

Part of Ford’s job is to build trust among parents who may not have had the best school experience themselves. Because like all good educators, he knows that getting a parent engaged in a child’s learning is a critical component of making that child a success in school.

“If they had a bad experience, it can be hard to overcome,” Ford says. “But I would say that is true not just for our parents, but for most parents.”

Often the foundation of strong parent involvement is laid in early childhood. Yet, for years, early learning has languished in purgatory, viewed as somehow less professional than traditional K-12 schooling in the conversation about improving our education system.

That, experts say, has to change.

“That’s the whole point — 0 to 3 is the most impactful,” says Dana Suskind, a pediatric surgeon at the University of Chicago Medical School. “Eighty-five percent of your brain is grown at that time. It is the basis of everything that comes after.”

Suskind heads the Thirty Million Words Initiative, a group that leads research into how young children acquire language — and what strategies can help their parents become better teachers.

Her high profile earned her an invitation to a White House summit on early learning last year.

“Everyone talks about third-grade reading scores. Well what is third-grade reading based on?” Suskind says. “The acquisition of oral language skills at the beginning of preschool.”

## Studies reveal results

Research being done in Northwest Florida also supports the notion that building a better reader begins before age 5.

Jeanine L. Clancy is a senior research associate at the Florida Center for Reading Research at Florida State University. Since 2010, FSU researchers have been studying how young children learn to recognize letters, read words and comprehend what that they see on the page.

Some of that research includes children in Escambia and Santa Rosa counties.

The project started with three broad goals:

- Identify processes that lead to successful text comprehension in children.
- Identify what teaching techniques work best for students.
- Identify strategies that help teachers teach those early skills better.

Clancy says researchers have worked in classrooms from preschool to fourth grade.

“They would go into a classroom, try three or four weeks with their intervention and test its effectiveness, tweak the intervention and try again,” she says.

Clancy said the project is supposed to end this year, though they hope to get another year of funding. Preliminary findings show that intervening early can boost a child’s vocabulary and language development skills.

“When children are in school and reading, if they don’t have any background knowledge on a topic, they don’t have anything to connect their new learning to. It just hangs there,” Clancy says. “If they’ve never been to a zoo or heard about a zoo, reading about animals in a zoo isn’t as meaningful.”

This year, researchers are focusing on second-graders. Last year, preschoolers at Trinity Learning Center in Pensacola were among those participating in the study.

Anna Kay Shirah has been director of Trinity Learning Center for nine years. She also has six years of work experience with Title I early learning programs for the Escambia County School District.

She jumped at the chance to participate in the study.

## ABOUT FSU’S RESEARCH

The Florida Center for Reading Research’s project is funded through the Institute of Education Sciences (the research arm of the U.S. Department of Education) through a five-year, \$100 million-plus grant that began in 2010. Six research teams are participating in the new Reading for Understanding Research Network. FSU’s share of the pie is \$26 million to study why some children struggle to comprehend what they read.

More than 130 researchers representing linguistics, cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, reading, speech and language pathology, assessment and evaluation are involved.

Christopher Lonigan, the center’s associate director, said when the grant was awarded, that much of the research in the field in the last 30 years has focused on how children decode letters into words. This project will focus on how to help children turn being able to say those words into understanding what they mean, and on strategies that teachers can implement in classrooms in fairly short order.

“Anything we could do to promote literacy, I fully support,” she says.

In kindergarten readiness scores, Trinity Learning Center typically scores in the high 80s and 90s. There were children at the center who Shirah believes could have benefited from the extra intervention the researchers offered. Of 30 children, only the parents of eight or nine agreed to participate.

“I don’t know if they didn’t understand it, or if they didn’t want to,” Shirah says. “It could only help your child, and you don’t get that kind of expertise brought to you on a plate essentially.”

Students who did participate got extra help through weekly, one-on-one visits or in small groups working on reading comprehension and listening skills.

The researcher would read a story with a small group, and ask the children questions about what she had read to help gauge what they remembered about the story and how they put that information in context.

Because the overall study is not completed, Shirah has not heard from the researchers how her students fared. But she is eager to see the results.

“I would love to know and see what happened, so that we can know what we are doing right and what areas they found that we can do better in,” she says.

## ‘People just don’t see it’

The challenge of bringing parents to the table is one that Bruce Watson knows.

Watson is executive director of the Early Learning Coalition of Escambia County, the umbrella agency that runs the state voluntary prekindergarten and the School Readiness programs locally.

Watson said getting parents to participate in after-school events has been “problematic at best.” The coalition used to host parent involvement events once a month or so, but attendance was so poor,

they stopped.

“I think our efforts are going to have to increase,” Watson says. “One of the traits of people who are reliant on our services is apathy in doing the things we are talking about. That doesn’t mean you can’t endeavor to try ... because every child saved is worth the effort.”

The School Readiness program offers subsidized day care as long as the parent works at least 20 hours a week and makes less than 150 percent of the federal poverty level, which for a family of four is \$40,000 a year.

The coalition has 185 School Readiness providers and 95 voluntary preschool providers under contract.

The waiting list for School Readiness is 1,200 children, Watson says.

Which means, considering the low return on investment Watson has seen in putting on parent nights and the like, he’d rather spend the money he does have on getting a child off the waiting list and into childcare.

But cracking the code to creating strong parent involvement is key to helping this community’s kindergartners show up ready to learn.

Malcolm Thomas, Escambia schools Superintendent, says getting into churches, community centers and similar places to help young parents get the skills they need — and may lack — is crucial.

“From 1 to 4 that’s where we’re losing ground,” Thomas says. “Their language development, their vocabulary, that is the key.”

He recalled visiting a school and asking a first-grader what she was reading about, and she couldn’t grasp the word “hedge.” She had never heard the word before.

Ashley Bodmar hardly goes through a workday without referencing the word-gap study that Suskind’s group draws its name from.

Continued on page 3

Continued from page 2

“Putting a child in front of a TV is not the equivalent of interaction with a live human being,” Bodmar says. “Differences in vocabulary are evident as early as 18 months.”

Bodmar is executive director ECARE — Every Child a Reader in Escambia. The nonprofit was launched in 2006-07 by the business community to help get kids ready for school.

ECARE works with childcare centers in the neighborhood that feed into Global Learning Academy. They are on track to help 130 kids this school year. The goal for next year is 200.

Brenda Dean, owner and director of Come Unto Me Little Children preschool on T Street, told ECARE volunteers at the group’s annual breakfast that ECARE’s work with her center has helped her do so much more for her students.

“Without ... ECARE, I just don’t understand how I would be able to give the kids what they need in order to improve their vocabulary and phonological awareness,” Dean said.

ECARE’s influence even has changed the kind of Christmas presents that Dean gives to kids.

“A lot of times — and I’ve been guilty of this in the past — we will buy a toy before we buy a book, but that has changed,” Dean says. “Now for Christmas we give out books because we want to make a difference.”

Back at Oakcrest, creating a culture of family involvement remains a work in progress, Principal Bonifay says.

The school has 700 students this year, including four preschool classes, two of which serve kids with special needs.



VPK students say the Pledge of Allegiance at Trinity Learning Center. The daycare center typically score in the high 80s and 90s on kindergarten readiness scores, but some children could have benefited from extra invention offered by the Florida Center for Reading Research, the director says.

That means going to parents where they are to help schedule appointments to get kids glasses or go to the doctor, hosting regular family nights at school that often include dinner, even having parent-teacher conferences at football or basketball games if needed.

“Our families struggle in the school environment,” Bonifay says. “When they were in school, they may not have had a good experience and they struggle with

the jobs that they have.”

But Bonifay and her staff never stop trying to build those bridges, especially among the parents of their youngest students.

“(The pre-k teachers) meet with the parents often,” Bonifay says. “Early literacy, that’s our building block. We want our parents to read to their children, to have conversations with them.”

Suskind says the impact of the absence

of those early literacy skills can seem almost invisible, but it has lifelong consequences.

“People just don’t see it,” Suskind says. “As long as it’s not a toxic environment, all 0- to 3-year-olds look the same. They smile, they react.

“It’s not like poor kids don’t learn to talk, they do. It’s developing the language for school and the brain connections for school that don’t develop as quickly.”

# The more children hear, the more they learn

Thirty million words.

By Shannon Nickinson

snickinson@studer.com

Photo by Michael Spoonerberger

That’s the difference between poor children and their better-off classmates.

It boils down to that number in programs from the South Side of Chicago to the Pensacola Metro.

It comes from a 1995 study by child psychologists that found by age 4, poor children hear 30 million fewer words than children from better-off families.

This leads to poor children lagging academically, being weaker readers and falling behind in school.

Dana Suskind founded Thirty Million Words at the University of Chicago Medical School to drive awareness of the achievement gap and promote strategies to close it.

The Hart and Risely study is what everybody talks about, Suskind says, because it is the study that revealed the 30-million-word gap.

“It’s one sentence in a rich science that says how parents interact with children impacts the way brain processing develops,” she says. “It’s really about helping parents understand how important they are in terms of how they can grow their children’s intelligence.”

Suskind is a professor of surgery and pediatrics and director of the Pediatric Cochlear Implantation Program at the University of Chicago. She found that deaf kids who got cochlear implants — and whose families spoke more words to them — gained language skills faster than those who didn’t.

In April, Thirty Million Words was named partner in a \$19 million study funded by PNC, a Pittsburgh-based banking company, through its Grow Up Great initiative. Suskind was invited to the White House to participate in a summit called by President Barack Obama to discuss the importance of early education.

Suskind and her team’s research is conducted with Head Start families in Chicago. Its lessons apply to every community.

The science is clear that early childhood — often overlooked — is the foundation of 85 percent of all brain development, Suskind says.

## The 30 Million Word Gap

Betty Hart and Todd Risley’s project followed 42 families in three income levels for three years to record the number of words spoken to children in those households.

### The key findings

- Children from all three groups of families started to speak around the same time and developed good structure and use of language.

- Children in professional families heard more words per hour, resulting in larger cumulative vocabularies.

- In professional families, children heard an average of 2,153 words per hour, while children in working-class families heard an average of 1,251 words per hour and children in welfare-recipient families heard an average of 616 words per hour. Over time, this means that in a year children in professional families heard an average of 11 million words, while children in working-class families heard an average of 6 million words and children in welfare

**SOURCE:** [http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/eea/6research\\_summaries/05\\_MeaningfulDifferences.pdf](http://www.strategiesforchildren.org/eea/6research_summaries/05_MeaningfulDifferences.pdf)



Suskind

Suskind says what the initiative does is about more than the number.

“Our research program is based on strong science that shows that parents are the foundation of language development,” she says. “We call ourselves Thirty Million Words because that’s the thing that gets people’s attention. But it’s more about quality of the interaction between parent and child than it is about the number. Interaction with children is the food for the developing brain.”

The initiative works with families to teach parents the skills they need to be better teachers themselves. That includes things like The 3T’s: Tune In (to what their children say); Talk More (to your child using rich vocabulary to build the number of words they hear); Take Turns (have a conversation with your

families heard an average of 3 million words. By age 4, a child from a welfare-recipient family could have heard 32 million words fewer than a classmate from a professional family.

- By age 3, the observed cumulative vocabulary for children in the professional families was about 1,100 words. For children from working-class families, the observed cumulative vocabulary was about 750 words and for children from welfare-recipient families it was just above 500 words.

- Children in professional families heard a higher ratio of encouragements to discouragements than their working-class and welfare-supported counterparts.

children and actively listen to them when they try to talk to you).

The initiative’s website features testimonials from parents who have gone through the program.

One mom, identified in a video testimonial as Shurand, says the program has taught her the importance of stretching the sentences she says with her daughter with more information or of letting her daughter ask questions about books as they read them together.

“Before the TMW project, I did not know your child’s learning process starts now, from 0 to 3. I always thought it started at 5 when she starts school,” Shurand says. “Even though I wasn’t so good in school, it gave me a boost of confidence to teach her the things that I do know.”

Shurand’s experience echoes the videos of other moms who participate in the project, Suskind says.

“Lots of them say, ‘I didn’t know that I could make a difference.’” Suskind says.

Thirty Million Words uses individual and group interaction to help teach parents the power they have.

It also uses word pedometers, which record the number of words a parent says to a child. The results are shared with parents during weekly meetings.

The program partners across the city with the public health agencies,

pediatricians’ offices, children’s museums, wherever they can.

The next step is to expand the approach to childcare centers, bringing providers into the loop as well.

The PNC grant will support a five-year study to follow between 200 and 250 children from age 15 months to 5 years to monitor vocabulary development and school readiness.

“We believe you really need to be able to measure differences,” Suskind says. “Unless you can show that you are making it better, you’re just continuing a program to make you feel better. We want to be able to show what works, and if something doesn’t work, say so and move on to something that will.”

The heart of Thirty Million Words remains the same.

“It’s really about wraparound support for the families,” Suskind says. “By age 4, children living in poverty are already six months behind. You are already playing catch-up from the very beginning, even in a voluntary pre-K program that is funded four hours a day.”

Suskind mentions researcher Ian Frenald, whose findings show that children’s ability to process language is slower when they are exposed to less language.

“I think too often people don’t realize that intelligence is something you develop; it’s not something you’re born with,” Suskind says. “It is developed based on interactions from parents and caregivers.”

TV, she says, doesn’t help. “We’re really social animals,” she says.

Learning is strongest when it is connected to something and shared with another person. Those connections aren’t as strong when the lesson comes from a TV or computer screen.

Suskind and her team tirelessly work to emphasize that children become smarter by talking and interacting. Every sound or garbled word they utter is worth responding to.

Suskind hopes that the evolution in the national conversation about early learning from the perception of glorified babysitting to real educational opportunity is progress in a long journey toward legitimizing early education.

“I think we need to stop studying what the problems are because we know what the problem is,” Suskind says. “We need to help the parents.”

# FSA Mathematics training test questions

The FCAT is history. The FSA is on the way.

The Florida Standards Assessment is the new standardized test to measure progress and proficiency under the state's high-stakes accountability system.

The Florida Department of Education selected the nonprofit, American Institutes for Research to produce the test.

We wanted to give readers a sample of the kinds of questions that third- and fourth-graders will be asked when they take the FSA.

The FSA is administered online; no No. 2 pencils necessary.

These reading and math questions came from the sample test available online at [www.fsassessments.org](http://www.fsassessments.org)

— the state site created to house practice tests and other resources.

For the answers, you'll have to go online to [www.pensacolatoday.com](http://www.pensacolatoday.com).

After all, our students don't get the answer key alongside their test questions.

1. What is 78 rounded to the nearest ten?

- A. 70
- B. 75
- C. 80
- D. 100

2. Which decimal is greater than 0.8?

- A. 0.70
- B. 0.75
- C. 0.80
- D. 0.85

3. A bakery uses 48 pounds of flour each day. It orders flour every 28 days.

Create an equation that shows how many pounds of flour the bakery needs to order every 28 days.

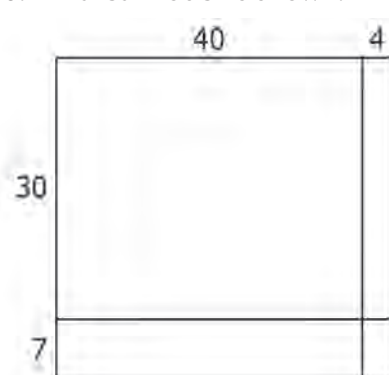
4. Select all the expressions that have the same value as  $30 \div 10$ .

- A.  $1 \times 3$
- B.  $10 \div 30$
- C.  $30 \times 10$
- D.  $30 \div 10 \div 1$
- E.  $30 \div (2 \times 5)$
- F.  $(30 \div 2) \div 5$

5. Select all the expressions that have a value of 48.

- A.  $(3+3) \times 8$
- B.  $3 + (3 \times 8)$
- C.  $6 \times 4 + 4$
- D.  $6 \times (4+4)$
- E.  $8 \times 40$

6. An area model is shown.



- Create a multiplication expression that you could use to find the area of this model.

- What is the total area, in square units, of the model?

7. Which is another way to represent 48?

- A.  $4 \times (6 \times 2)$
- B.  $4 \times (6 + 2)$
- C.  $(2 \times 4) \times (6 + 8)$
- D.  $40 \times 8$

8. Consider the equation  $d \div 3 = 12$  remainder 2.

- What is the dividend,  $d$ ?

- What would the dividend,  $d$ , be if there was no remainder?

# FSA Reading training test questions

Read the passage “Online Learning” and then answer Numbers 1 through 9.

## Online Learning

1. Learning new things is an exciting part of life. Learning can happen anywhere. There are kids who learn at a school, kids who learn at home and some kids who learn online. Students who learn this way use their computers and the Internet to connect to online classrooms. They use a camera connected to their home computer to let the teacher and other students see them. They can see their teacher and classmates on their screens because their classmates and teacher use a camera, too.

2. Before the Internet, children in remote places sometimes had classes over the radio or used the mail to get lessons and return them. For example, in the past, children who lived in distant parts of Australia were taught using the radio. Every day at a certain time, they tuned in to a special radio station. All the children could hear their teacher at the same time, but they were hundreds of miles apart. They got their lessons in the mail, did their homework, and mailed it back to the teacher.

3. Today, students who live far away from their teacher have classes on the Internet. In some online classrooms, a classroom full of kids can use a special computer program at the same time as the teacher. The students can live in one country, and the teacher can be located in a different country. Still, it's just like a classroom at your school. The teacher can teach the kids. The kids can ask questions. Everyone can see and hear everything that's being said as it happens.

4. It is also possible for students to live in different places and be a part of an online class together. Each person goes to a website for the class he or she is taking. Thousands of people can watch and listen to this class at the same time. When they want to speak, they can use a microphone to ask and answer questions. When the lesson is completed and all good-byes have been said, the students and teacher in the online class log out. The connection over the Internet is broken, and the online classroom disappears.

5. Online classes can be held whenever is best for the teacher and students. Sometimes, they don't have to have a class where everyone is together all at once. There are classes where all the materials are posted on the website and students can use them whenever they need to. They can write questions and turn in their assignments. They can check back later to see if the teacher has left answers or comments on their work. No one ever actually “meets” anyone face-to-face, even if it's just with a web-camera. Many college classes are taught this way.

6. Internet classes can fit thousands of people, or just one person. It is a powerful way to let students everywhere learn. A student in Alaska and a student in China can go to the same class. That class can be taught by a teacher in Russia. You don't need a building, desks, lights or enough chairs to fit everyone. Students who live far apart, students who can't leave home, students who want to take a class they can't take nearby—all they need is a computer and an Internet connection and they're good to go!

Now answer Numbers 1 through 9. Base your answers on the passage “Online Learning”

1. With which two sentences would the author agree?

- A. Learning is exciting no matter how you do it.
- B. All students should go to school on the Internet.
- C. Thousands of students in the same class are too many.
- D. Online classrooms are a good alternative to regular ones.
- E. Students in the same class should live close to each other.

2. What is the relationship between paragraphs 2 and 3 in the passage?

- A. comparison
- B. introduction
- C. cause and effect
- D. question and answer

3. Select two sentences that show how online classrooms and regular classrooms are alike.

- A. Today, students who live far away from their teacher have classes on the Internet.
- B. In some online classrooms, a classroom full of kids can use a special computer program at the same time as the teacher.
- C. The students can live in one country, and the teacher can be located in a different country.
- D. Still, it's just like a classroom at your school.
- E. The teacher can teach the kids.
- F. The kids can ask questions.
- G. Everyone can see and hear everything that's being said as it happens.

4. Part A

How has learning from distant places changed over time?

- A. Students can ask questions and get answers faster.
- B. Students can hear their teacher during the same class time.
- C. Students use the mail to receive and send work.
- D. Students live far apart from their classmates.

Part B

Select one sentence that supports the answer in part A.

- A. “The students can live in one country, and the teacher can be located in a different country.”
- B. “All the children could hear their teacher at the same time, but they were hundreds of miles apart.”
- C. “They got their lessons in the mail, did their homework, and mailed it back to the teacher.”
- D. “Everyone can see and hear everything that's being said as it happens.”
- E. “Sometimes, they don't have to have a class where everyone is together all at once.”

5. Select the tools that are used for online learning. Draw a line from each tool you select to the box.



6. Select the two correct meanings of the phrase “good to go” as it is used in the sentence. “Students who live far apart, students who can't leave home, students who want to take a class they can't take nearby—all they need is a computer and an Internet connection and they're good to go!” (paragraph 6)

- A. okay to leave
- B. able to learn quickly
- C. able to begin
- D. prepared to travel
- E. ready to start to learn

7. Select a sentence that shows that students can ask their teacher for help or more information.

- A. Online classes can be held whenever is best for the teacher and students.
- B. Sometimes, they don't have to have a class where everyone is together all at once.
- C. There are classes where all the materials are posted on the website and students can use them whenever they need to.
- D. They can write questions and turn in their assignments.
- E. They can check back later to see if the teacher has left answers or comments on their work.
- F. No one ever actually “meets” anyone face-to-face, even if it's just with a web-camera.
- G. Many college classes are taught this way.

8. Part A

How does the author support the idea that students who live far from each other can learn together.

- A. She tells about why students should learn online.
- B. She shares details about the way students learn online.
- C. She gives examples of how online learning helps students.
- D. She explains that the online classroom is only for a short time.

Part B

Select two sentences that support the answer in part A.

- A. It is also possible for students to live in different places and be a part of an online class together.
- B. Each person goes to a website for the class he or she is taking.
- C. Thousands of people can watch and listen to this class at the same time.
- D. When they want to speak, they can use a microphone to ask and answer questions.
- E. When the lesson is completed and all good-byes have been said, the students and teacher in the online class log out.
- F. The connection over the Internet is broken, and the online classroom disappears.

9. What is the meaning of the word located as it is used in this sentence?

“The students can live in one country, and the teacher can be located in a different country.” (paragraph 3)

- A. bordered
- B. found
- C. moved
- D. searched

Find the answers online

For the answers, you'll have to go online to [www.pensacolatoday.com](http://www.pensacolatoday.com)



Leah Flood watches as her son, Ethan Arnold, 10, reads to his sister, Aida Flood, 2, during the ECARE Family Night at Global Learning Academy. ECARE is a nonprofit mentoring program aimed at preparing children for kindergarten.

## ECARE gives parents teaching tools and time

By Mollye Barrows

mbarrows@studer.com

Photos by Michael Spooneybarger

**L**eah Flood wants a good education for her three children and knows reading to them is important. The problem is finding the time.

The 37-year-old mom takes care of her children — ages 2, 4 and 10 — while her husband works utility construction to support the family.

“Getting up one child for school at one time, getting up the other to drive him to school at a different time, and the youngest one who’s not in school, driving her around for all of that,” Flood says. “With everything else, it’s just chaotic.”

When the opportunity came for Flood to enjoy dinner and reading time with her children, she jumped at the chance. The event is called Family Night, and it’s provided through the Every Child A Reader in Escambia, or ECARE.

Flood attended this month’s Family Night at Global Learning Academy and brought all three children. Dinner is provided and afterward there is reading and “play” time that encourages movement and reinforces what children are learning in school.

“My children love it,” said Flood. “My oldest son was sitting there reading to the little ones. He’s an avid reader.

“When it was just him and me, I used to read to him all the time and he saw me reading my own books. Now I have three kids and it’s a whole lot busier.”

ECARE is a nonprofit mentoring program focused on getting children ready for kindergarten. With a budget of \$90,733 the program aims to ensure every child who enters school has the skills needed to be successful. ECARE’s efforts are focused on children in the downtown Pensacola area.

“A very high percentage of them are arriving for pre-kindergarten with low assessments across the board on all measures, print knowledge, psychological awareness, math and vocabulary,” says Ashley Bodmer, executive director of ECARE.

“We know they’re coming in and they’re not where they should be. The goal is during that pre-k year to move them up and get them ready for kindergarten.”

### ECARE’s start

ECARE was born from a partnership between the Escambia County School District, civic groups and private agencies.

They have now launched Project Ready, an effort to identify those early intervention strategies that can help children overcome early educational



Early Literacy coach Melinda Leonard with Wee Read reads to Monica Wilhelm’s pre-k class at Global Learning Academy after books were donated by ECARE.

disadvantages.

“The key component to that is our reading mentoring program,” Bodmer says, “and that’s where we have adult volunteers working individually with 4-year-old pre-K students.”

ECARE calls downtown the Ready Zone. ECARE volunteers started at Global Learning Academy, and now work with children at Head Start, and the daycare centers at Greater Little Rock Baptist Church and A Top Notch Christian Academy.

Netisha Rodgers is director of A Top Notch Christian Academy. She has 20 children in voluntary prekindergarten and 15 in afterschool care.

Most will attend Global Learning Academy when they leave her daycare. ECARE volunteers come by several days a week to work with children who need additional help and provide books.

Rodgers says every book they get, they read in class. The children love learning new words, she says.

“One of my kids’ favorite words during this winter season was ‘blustery’ because we read it in some books that ECARE had provided for us.

“Every time it would be really windy and cold outside the kids would all say, ‘it’s so blustery out,’ and those are the kind of vocabulary words that these kids otherwise wouldn’t be exposed to.”

### ‘Make it something grand’

Rodgers says the partnership with ECARE and Global is helping her students blossom in other ways.

Teachers and ECARE volunteers help track students’ progress through kindergarten and first grade, evaluating their strengths and shortfalls.

Rodgers uses that information to tailor her lesson plans and help her students succeed.

“I must say in the last four or five years, the kids are being prepared more and more each year,” Rodgers says.

Rodgers says the state funds daycare for most of the children in her care and about 80 percent of them have parents who are working and always on the go.

Parents want to engage with their kids, she says, but most just don’t know how.

“Communication is not very big in these children’s lives. Time spent is not very big in these kids’ lives,” Rodgers says. “A lot of these kids just have TV. TV is all they know.”

That is why family night is so important.

Rodgers gets the children excited about it, and in turn, they stay on their parents about going. As a result, most of their parents attend.

They get a meal, quality time with their children, and tips on making teachable moments. It is a 30- to 45- minute time frame packed with learning opportunities for parents and children alike.

“They don’t have to cook, everybody’s eaten, they can bring the whole family out and we just all get involved and have fun,” Rodgers says. “And it also teaches these parents how, in the car on the way to school in the morning, to sing ‘Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,’ and make it something grand.”

### Early language builds readers

Mary Anderson is the pre-K coordinator for the Escambia County School District and has worked with the pre-K program for more than 20 years.

She says the more children are exposed to language and literacy at an early age, the better foundation they have to become good readers and speakers.

Events like Family Night encourage that kind of interaction.

“It’s such a positive event, positive for the families, as well as for the children and parents together,” says Anderson. “The parents are so thrilled with their children being able to talk about a story.”

Anderson says Family Nights are held four times a year, but ECARE could host more if there was more funding for meals. They look for donations to cover those costs so the agency can spend its resources on books for children.

Bodmer would love to see the program expanded across the district to help more parents get the skills they need.

“There are many parents who didn’t necessarily have encouraging role models that many of us were fortunate to have,” said Bodmer. “It’s important to be aware of that instead of assuming that parents aren’t doing something because they don’t want to do it. They just don’t know what they need to be doing, but they want to know.”

Rodgers agrees.

“Sometimes we get swept up in life, and I don’t think parents realize that these little young lives are just like sponges and everything we do, they’re watching,” said Rodgers.



Parents and children participate in the activities at the WSRE Imagination Station. Imagination Station opened in 2013 as a one-of-a-kind interactive PBS learning center for young children to learn. Educational groups with a focus on early intervention and children with special needs are regular visitors.

# WSRE's Imagination Station gives parents the power to build readers

By Mollye Barrows  
mbarrows@studer.com

Photo by Michael Spooner

Lydia Weeks' favorite place to hang out is with Super Why.

Her mom, Monique Weeks, brings Lydia, 2, to Super Why's place — also known as WSRE's Imagination Station.

"I like that it's free, it's clean, and they have tons of toys, different toys that we don't have buy," says Monique Weeks with a laugh. "She talks about this place all the time and on Sunday she's like, 'Mom, we go see Super Why?'"

The center is basically PBS programming come to life. Many of the characters and educational themes come to life through interactive games, touch-screen computers and toys.

The team behind the project, led by Jill Hubbs, WSRE's director of education and outreach, has worked to make it a place that parents can enjoy too.

At Imagination Station, Weeks, recently transplanted to Pensacola by the U.S. Air Force, reads to Lydia, sometimes while sitting in a small fire truck, one of the many unique ways parents may interact with their little ones.

Imagination Station is a one-of-a-kind interactive, PBS learning center that opened at the Community Maritime Park stadium in 2013. Since then, there have been more than 16,000 visitors.

It is open Monday, Wednesday and Friday to the public and during Pensacola Blue Wahoos baseball games.

Hubbs designed the activity center with preschoolers in mind, but parents are very much welcome.

"It's a great way for parents and kids to come into a relaxed atmosphere and spend time reading together or playing with the dinosaurs or doing the touch-screen computers too," says Hubbs, who taught kindergarten and first grade for years.

The center shares space with the Pensacola State College Learning Lab and a baseball museum that allows visitors to see the memorabilia collected during WSRE's making of the documentary "Baseball in Pensacola."

Local learning centers, Head Start providers, ARC and other groups use it for enrichment. Its profile may have been low, but it is growing daily.

It has even gained national attention.

Last October, the project won the National Educational Telecommunications Association award for Community Engagement Based on a Local Project. At the NETA conference in October in Tampa, Hubbs will speak about Imagination Station.



Gracie Garmon, 3, works with her grandfather, Richard Roselli, at the WSRE Imagination Station.

## IMAGINATION STATION

The Imagination Station is open to the public at the Community Maritime Park stadium on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings from 9 a.m. to noon. Tuesdays and Thursdays often have time set aside for special community groups to use the station.

She also has been invited to speak about the project at an annual PBS meeting in Austin in May.

"Parents are so grateful, we get thanked constantly, and then they bring their friends, so it's a good feeling," Hubbs says. "It's also good because it makes people realize what WSRE does. Our mission is education. We're committed to our community, and it's just a great way to showcase that."

## A needed community resource

Educational groups with a focus on early intervention and children with special needs are now regular visitors at the center, including Autism Pensacola and Capstone Academy.

Aileen Ilano teaches a special education preschool class at Capstone Academy. Many of her students have autism spectrum disorder.

"I love that it's very similar to a classroom setting," Ilano says. "They have educational toys and books. They love the touchscreen computer with the interactive games."

Ilano plans a trip to Imagination Station once a quarter so parents have time to come. She says the time is invaluable.

"If a parent comes, it allows for more one-on-one time," Ilano says. "They love it and the children have a difficult time

leaving."

That is music to Hubbs' ears.

"There's no better feeling," Hubbs says. "That's really what it's all about, the importance of the early years and just seeing that interaction."

## Growing commitment to lifelong learning

Richard Roselli often brings his 3-year-old granddaughter, Gracie Garman, to Imagination Station. Gracie says one of her favorite things to do here is "play on the computer."

"It's a good place to bring kids," Roselli says. "I usually see three or four families with one or two children each time we visit."

The center is not just a safe, fun place for young children to learn. It helps WSRE fulfill its commitment to learning at all ages.

Parenting skills workshops have been hosted there. Teachers have had continuing education sessions. Schools have contacted Hubbs about hosting family literacy nights at the center.

Pensacola State College has hosted financial literacy workshops for adults there and plans call for more similar events.

The center's fun, nonthreatening atmosphere makes it a safe space for lifelong learning, including continuing education classes, self-help courses, parenting skills, even GED classes, Hubbs says.

With more support, she says the program could be expanded.

"It's limited in Pensacola," Hubbs says. "We just need to do more things to invest in young children. It sounds cliché, but it's the truth: The children are the future and a solid foundation in early childhood is the most important thing for success in school."



## Pensacola Metro Report

In August 2014, the Studer Community Institute produced the Pensacola Metro Report.

That 64-page publication used data from the University of West Florida's Office of Economic Development and Engagement to provide a snapshot of the two-county area's economic, educational and social well-being.

The report used that data as the underpinning for a series of stories that looked at the progress the Pensacola metro area has made in the last 10 years, and examined the challenges that continue to face our community.

A centerpiece of the Metro Report was the community dashboard, a series of objective benchmarks to provide an at-a-glance look at our community. The 16 benchmarks provide data points to help us track the community's growth, educational attainment, economic prospects, safety and civil life.

## Online:

Visit [StuderCommunityInstitute.com/dashboard](http://StuderCommunityInstitute.com/dashboard) for more detailed information and analysis, interactive charts and comparisons to peer metropolitan statistical areas and state averages.

## In part 1:

### Springtime in Florida means one thing — FCAT

But this year, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test — the test used to measure students' learning gains and to evaluate teacher's performance — is not the test it used to be.

The official state standardized test is now the Florida Standards Assessment. It replaces the previous versions of the state standardized test and will measure student performance in the Common Core-themed curriculum Florida schools have been using in recent years.

As Florida schools turn to the new test, schools are left with 16 years of data accumulated in the FCAT era, which was a centerpiece of Gov. Jeb Bush's push to reform public schools.

The Studer Community Institute launched this series of stories to look at how Pensacola metro area schools had fared under that reform effort, the bright spots that were unveiled and the work that remains ahead to help our students, our schools and our community improve.

## In part 2:

### Schools that work

In Part 2 of the Studer Community Institute's Pensacola Education Report, we highlight "bright spots" that are providing a quality education far and near.

Hundreds of miles northeast of Pensacola, North Charleston High School in South Carolina has shown some of the highest gains in test scores and graduation rates in the state. With a minority enrollment of 95 percent, and nearly all students eligible for free-or reduced-price lunch, North Charleston is shining a bright light in education.

At home, West Florida High School is Escambia County's only consistent "A"-rated school, with test scores and graduation rates that are higher than all other county high schools. While the School District's overall graduation rate reached 66 percent last year, West Florida's graduation rate — at 94 percent — is one of the highest in the U.S.

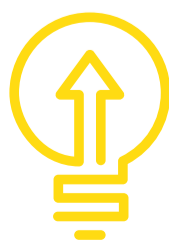
Section designed by Ron Stallcup  
rstallcup@PensacolaToday.com

[PensacolaToday.com](http://PensacolaToday.com)  
[StuderCommunityInstitute.com](http://StuderCommunityInstitute.com)

Follow us on social media for follow-ups, new information and ideas on how you can help move our community forward:  
[Facebook.com/StuderInstitute](https://www.facebook.com/StuderInstitute)  
[Twitter.com/StuderInstitute](https://twitter.com/StuderInstitute)

## About us

The Studer Community Institute is dedicated to helping people understand their community. We sponsor research and the development of benchmarks that allow cities and counties to evaluate the health of their local economy, government and quality of life. Our goal is to create a nonpartisan process that allows citizens to identify the critical issues a community needs to address to move forward.



STUDER™  
COMMUNITY INSTITUTE

CITIZEN-POWERED CHANGE