



2025-2026

# ANNUAL REPORT



EARLY  
LEARNING  
ACADEMIES

HEAD START  
PROGRAMS

New Hanover County



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# WE ARE ELA

## HEAD START LOCATIONS

**EXCEL 2: 4308 S 17<sup>TH</sup> STREET**

**EXCEL THREE: 165 VISION DR**

## Mission



Far more than just daycares, ELA Partner Centers are staffed by teams of professionals with decades of early learning experience who are super-powered to:

**Embody** the power of possibility for every student, caregiver, and family;

**Equip** all children toward social wellness, emotional maturity, and self-confidence;

**Engage** via positive, meaningful age-appropriate activities administered by experienced, committed education professionals; and

**Empower** children's innate curiosity by weaving learning into every activity, every day.

## Curriculum

By combining philosophies, from Montessori, Reggio, Vygotsky, Piaget, Gardner and more, the ELA Curriculum reaches each child's unique learning styles and educational journey. We strive to build strong foundations for lifelong learning.

## CORE VALUES

- We hold ourselves to the highest standards of excellence in everything we do.
- We emulate kindness and integrity with our words and our actions.
- We are always learning to better serve our families and each other.
- We welcome all into our classrooms and onto our teams.
- We are not a place, we are a Community.

# PROGRAM PRIORITIES

## Office of Head Start Priorities

**Expanding Access & Reducing Red Tape:** Recent administrative proposals aim to cut overhead costs and regulatory rules to open hundreds of thousands of new Head Start slots.

**Empowering Parents:** Recognizing parents as a child's primary teachers by maintaining strong family engagement in learning and development.

**Health and Nutrition:** Requiring nutrient-dense whole foods that align with dietary guidelines and supporting physical exercise.

**School Readiness:** Focusing on five central domains defined by the Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF): language/literacy, cognition, approaches to learning, physical development, and social/emotional development.

## Program Priorities

Program priorities continue to focus on ensuring ongoing compliance with fiscal practices and policies, while implementing integrated systems that enhance navigation and delivery of center-based services for children and families impacted by trauma and high-risk factors.

# PROGRAM OVERVIEW



Our program is funded by the Office of Head Start and delivers comprehensive early childhood services through a center-based approach. The program serves children from six weeks of age through school entry at five years old, operating across the Excel location buildings to ensure accessible, high-quality care and education.

Using a dual-generation approach, the program supports both children and families by promoting healthy child development while strengthening family well-being. Services are designed to prepare children for school success through developmentally appropriate learning experiences, while also empowering parents with education, resources, and support. The overarching goal is to nurture children's readiness for school and encourage family self-sufficiency through strong partnerships, family engagement, and coordinated services.

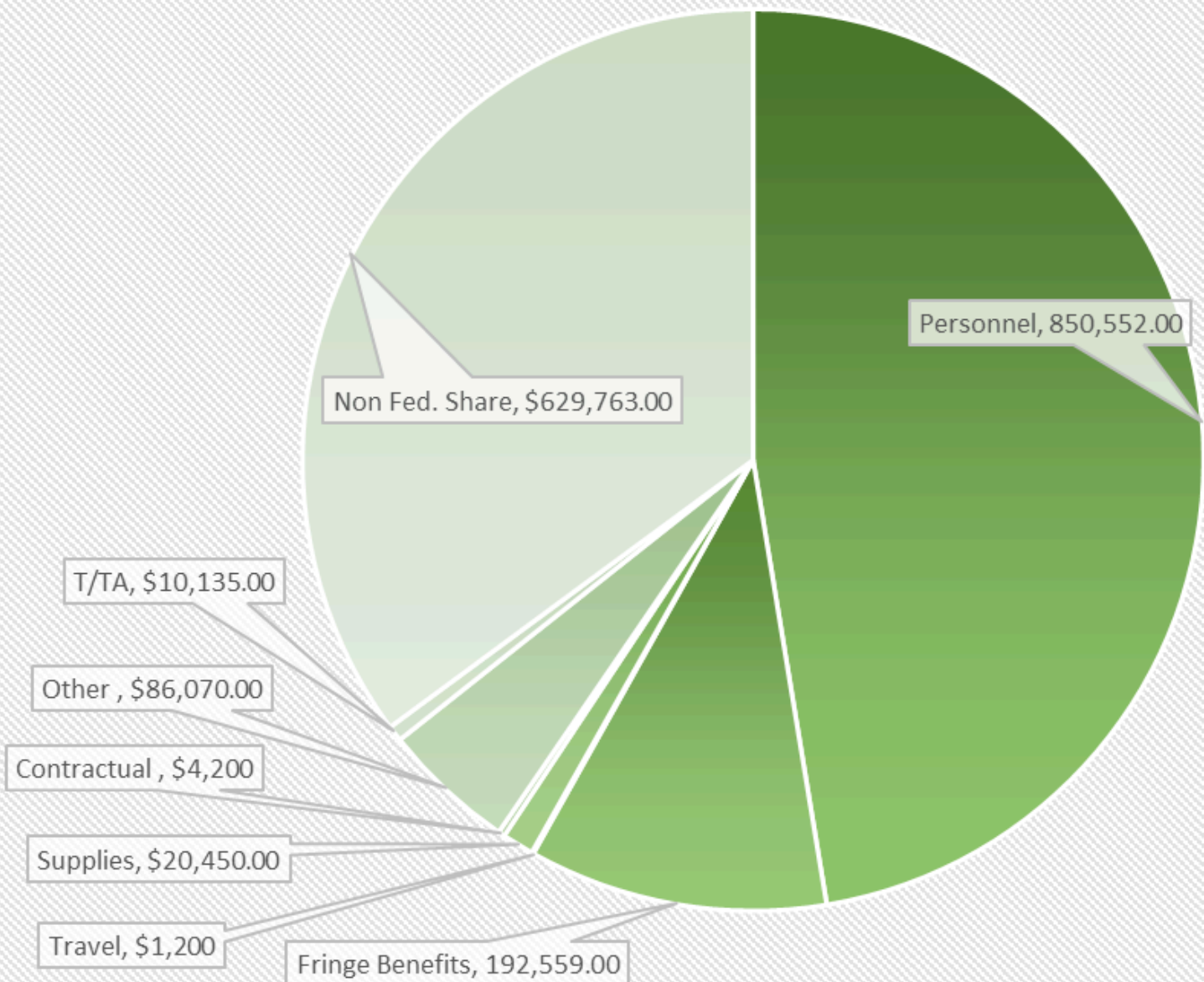
**116**

Head Start Slots  
Three years old-  
five years old

**72**

Early Head Start  
Slots 6weeks -  
Three years old

# BUDGET



FUNDING CYCLE:  
05/01/2025-04/30/2026

# New Hanover County Birth–Five Community Needs

**Strengthening Early Childhood Opportunities for Children and Families**  
New Hanover County continues to experience significant needs related to affordable, accessible, and high-quality early childhood education and care for children birth through age five. Current community data indicates that approximately 8,761 children under age six live in households where parents are working, while licensed child care programs currently serve approximately 4,483 children birth–five. This demonstrates a continued need for additional early learning opportunities and reliable child care options for working families.

Affordability remains a significant barrier. In the most recent county data, 390 eligible children were on the child care subsidy waiting list, highlighting the gap between families' need for care and their ability to afford available services. For many families, child care represents a substantial portion of household income, making publicly supported programs such as Head Start, Early Head Start, NC Pre-K, and child care assistance essential to family stability.

The community also continues to need high-quality infant and toddler care, a strong early childhood workforce, and inclusive services for children with developmental, behavioral, and social-emotional needs. Quality varies across providers, and families need greater access to programs equipped to support children with disabilities, developmental delays, challenging behaviors, and other individual needs.

## Our Community Response

Head Start and Early Head Start play a vital role in addressing these needs by providing more than early education. Through a comprehensive approach, children and families receive connections to health, nutrition, developmental screening, family support, mental health resources, disability services, and school readiness opportunities.





# HeadStart



As we celebrate our second year of Head Start services and our first full year of program operations, I am incredibly proud of how far we have come. This year, we focused on building strong foundational systems, beginning partnerships, and creating a program environment centered around children, families, and our shared commitment to excellence.

As we look toward the year ahead, we are eager to continue building on that foundation and bringing our mission to life: launching children and families into lifelong success.

As a former Head Start child who now has the privilege of serving in a Director capacity, I recognize and deeply honor the impact of Head Start. I know firsthand that Head Start is more than a program, it is an investment in children, families, communities, and possibilities.

It is truly a privilege to serve, love, and lead alongside our children, families, staff, and community partners. I am grateful for the trust placed in us and excited for all that we will accomplish together.

One mission. Many forces. One community committed to lifelong success.

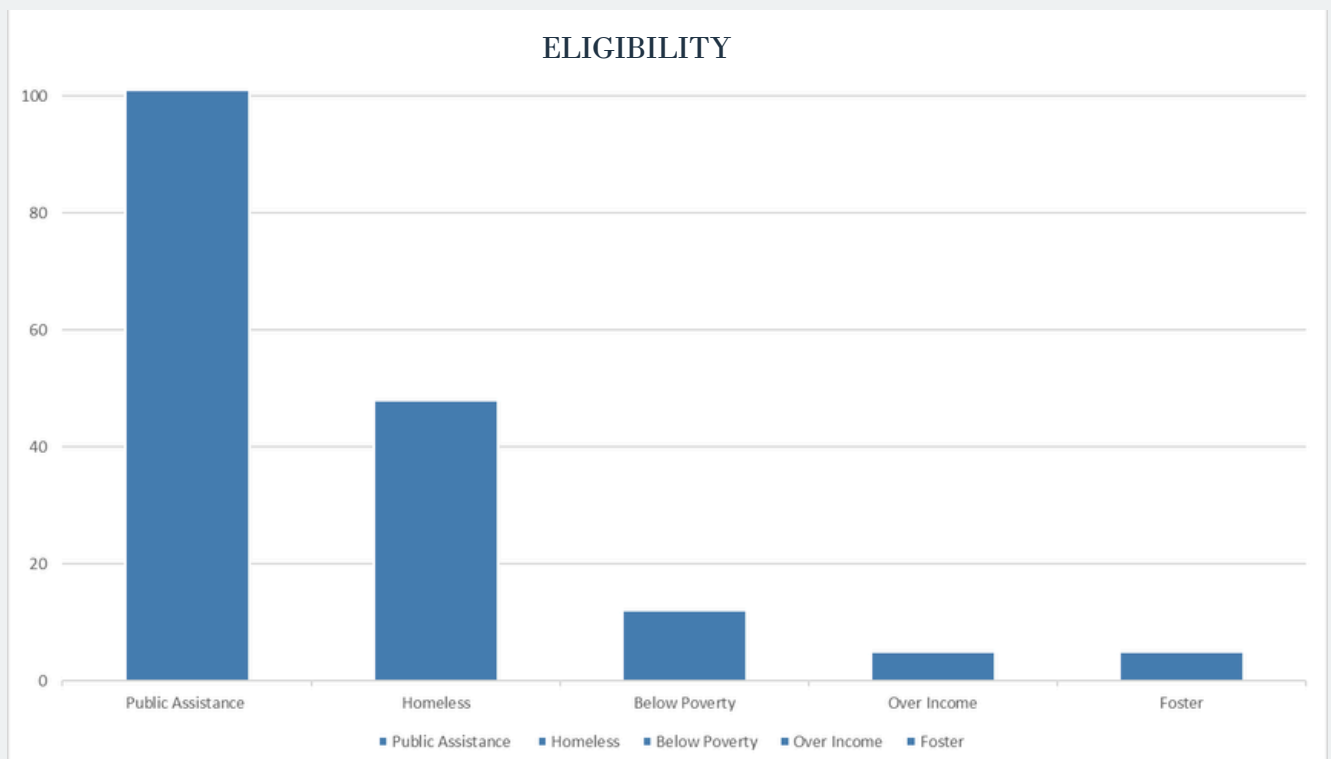
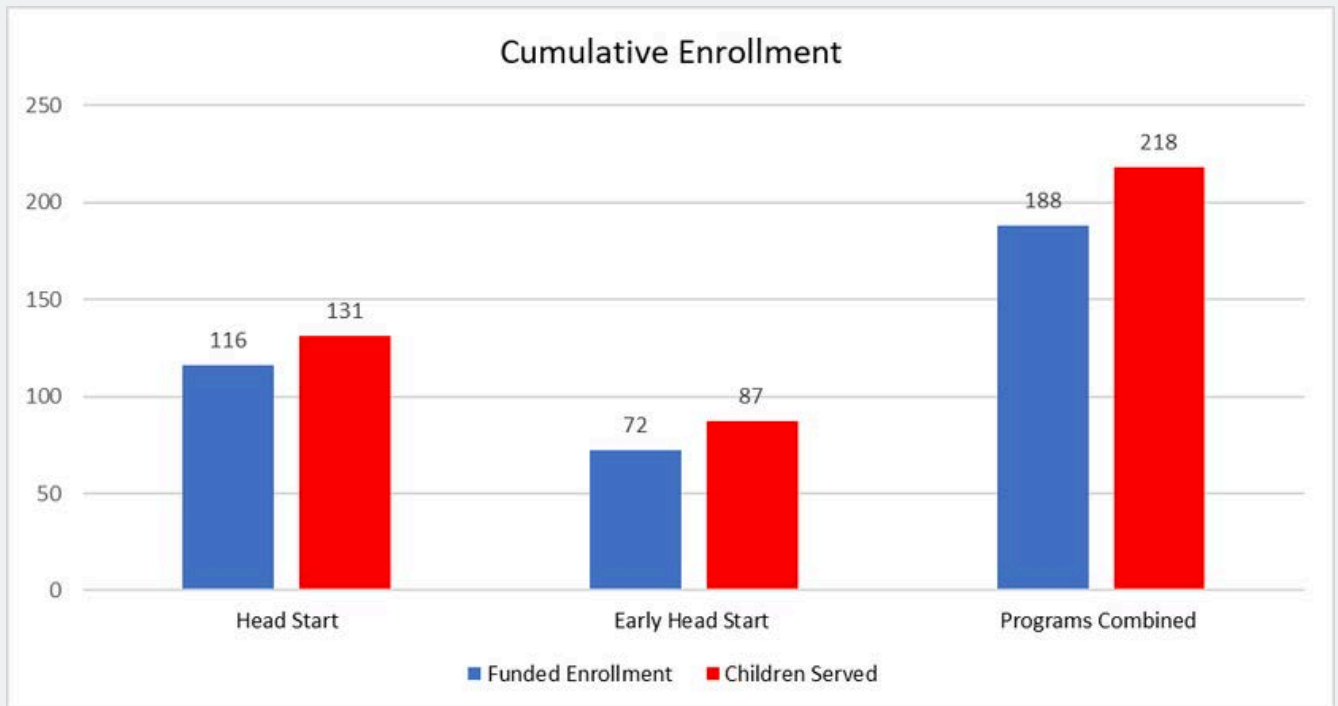
With gratitude,

*Netalia Dunn, M.Ed.*

Head Start Director

# ENROLLMENT & ELIGIBILITY

ERSEA recruitment and selection practices prioritized families with the greatest needs in alignment with Head Start Program Performance Standards.



## A Story of Loss, Partnership, Resilience, and Growth

A child joined our program this year following a significant family loss of a parent. With only one parent at home now, entering a structured classroom environment was a major transition. New routines, expectations, and participation in non-preferred activities often became overwhelming, resulting in intense emotional outbursts that could last 30 minutes or longer and included screaming, throwing objects, and physical aggression.

Rather than viewing these behaviors simply as challenges, our team recognized an opportunity to understand the child's experience and provide support rooted in compassion and partnership. We immediately began working closely with the family to learn what strategies were successful at home and determine how those approaches could be incorporated into the classroom.

The family also pursued additional support outside of the classroom through weekly play therapy and made intentional adjustments to their schedule to provide additional one-on-one time and consistency at home. As the family considered further evaluation, members of our Education Team attended the evaluation meeting alongside the parent to provide support and ensure that the family's voice remained part of the process.

While additional specialized services were not recommended at that time, the team continued to provide individualized support within the program. Through ongoing collaboration between the Education Team, Family Services Team, classroom staff, and family, meaningful progress has been made.

Today, the child is demonstrating stronger self-regulation, using words to communicate feelings and needs, asking for breaks, and expressing preferences appropriately.

Outbursts have become both less frequent and shorter in duration.

There is still growth ahead, but this story reminds us that progress does not happen alone. When families and Head Start staff work together with compassion, consistency, and a shared commitment to the child, meaningful change is possible.

This is what comprehensive Head Start services look like, seeing the whole child, supporting the whole family, and celebrating every step forward.



“Resilience in boys is not about teaching them to hide their struggles; it is about giving them the courage to face challenges, the language to express what they feel, and the confidence to know they are never alone.”



## A Yes That Created Hope

When a parent of a child with significant disabilities and complex medical needs inquired about our Early Head Start program, the family had already experienced a difficult journey. After seeking services throughout the community and hearing “no” repeatedly, the family came to us hoping that someone would see not only the child's needs, but also the child's potential.

Our program said yes!

That yes became more than an enrollment decision, it became a source of hope for a family who had been turned away too many times.

When the child entered Early Head Start, mobility was extremely limited, and participation in typical classroom activities required significant support. Our team partnered closely with the parent and worked collaboratively with therapeutic providers to ensure the child's medical, developmental, and educational needs were understood and supported.

Through consistent therapy, individualized strategies, classroom support, and a strong partnership with the family, the child began making progress that once seemed difficult to imagine.

By the time the child completed Early Head Start, they were using a walker independently, engaging in play with peers, communicating at their developmental level, and participating more actively in the classroom community.

But perhaps the most meaningful measure of success came from the parent.

The parent shared how much progress their child had made and how successful the Early Head Start experience had been. In fact, even after the child aged out of the program, the family expressed a desire for the child to remain because of the relationships, support, and growth they had experienced.

This story reminds us that sometimes the most powerful thing we can give a family is a YES.

A yes can open a door.

A yes can create hope.

A yes can change expectations.

And a yes, when paired with compassion, partnership, and comprehensive support, can help a child discover what they can do.

Our program did not simply see a child with significant needs. We saw a child with possibilities, and together with the family, we helped those possibilities become progress.



# Using Your Teacher Voice

## Teacher Success 1:

This Head Start Teacher began the year shy, timid, and unsure of her voice as an educator. Through reflection, encouragement, coaching, and a willingness to grow, she slowly stepped outside of her comfort zone.

Today, she is more confident in her classroom, more engaged with her colleagues, and more intentional in her interactions with children. She has learned to trust her abilities and recognize the value she brings to her classroom and team.

Her greatest success was not becoming someone different; it was finding the confidence to become who she was always capable of being.

## Teacher Success 2:

This Early Head Start teacher began the year with a strong, direct communication style and recognized an opportunity to strengthen how she connected with children and colleagues. Through reflection, support, and a transition to a classroom setting that better matched her strengths, she found her rhythm.

Today, she demonstrates greater confidence, positive relationships, and a communication style that connects beautifully with her identified age group.

Her story reminds us that sometimes growth isn't about changing who you are, it is about discovering where your strengths can shine.

## Teacher Success 3:

This year, we celebrated the incredible achievement of four teachers earning their degrees while working in our program. Their dedication to continuing their education while caring for and educating young children is a powerful example of professional commitment.

Their journey reminds us that being a teacher does not mean you stop learning, it means you never stop growing.

They are not only investing in themselves; they are expanding their knowledge, strengthening their practice, and creating an even greater impact for the children and families they serve.

Because great teachers are lifelong learners.



# MEDICAL & DENTAL



## **Health & Dental: Strengthening Access for Children and Families**

Access to timely health and dental services remained a challenge for our program this year. While we worked diligently with families to complete required health services, barriers within the community sometimes made it difficult for families to obtain medical, dental, and lead screening services when needed.

### **HIGHLIGHT**

Our partnership with a community provider that offered oral health screenings for children ages 3 and up, expanding access to both Head Start and non-Head Start children within our center community.

### **BARRIERS**

Lead screening also presented a significant barrier, as families were not always able to obtain required screenings during their medical appointments in New Hanover County. Our team continued to work alongside families to identify resources, follow up on outstanding needs, and help navigate these challenges.

We recognize that we are not yet where we want to be, but we are committed to moving forward. For the 2026–2027 program year, we are strengthening health education, family communication, planning, and community partnerships to better anticipate health needs and help families access services.

Our goal is not simply to meet a requirement—it is to help every family understand, plan for, and prioritize their child's health and well-being.

## **Community Call to Action**

### **Help Us Strengthen Health & Wellness for Young Children**

Access to health and dental services continues to be an area where our program is working to strengthen support for children and families. We know that we cannot do this work alone. We invite community health, dental, early childhood, family service, and wellness partners to join our Health Services Advisory Committee (HSAC). Your expertise, resources, and community connections can help us identify barriers, develop solutions, strengthen referrals, and ensure families have access to the services their children need.

Your voice can help us move from identifying barriers to creating solutions.

# FAMILY & COMMUNITY



## Community Partnership Highlight: DC Virgo

Strong communities are built through strong partnerships, and we are grateful for our continued collaboration with DC Virgo Preparatory Academy.

Throughout the program year, DC Virgo partnered with our Head Start program to support professional development opportunities for our staff, helping us continue to grow, learn, and strengthen our practices. They also provided clothing and resources for families to ensure they had access to their basic needs and help build our resource closet. Their partnership also extended to one of the most meaningful milestones of the year, hosting our Head Start Graduation Celebration and providing a special space for our children and families to celebrate their accomplishments.

Together, we share a commitment to supporting children and families as they prepare for the important transition into kindergarten. Through collaboration, connection, and a shared vision for student success, DC Virgo and our Head Start program are helping build a stronger bridge from early childhood into the next stage of each child's educational journey.

It truly takes a community to launch children and families into lifelong success, and we are proud to have DC Virgo as a partner in that mission.



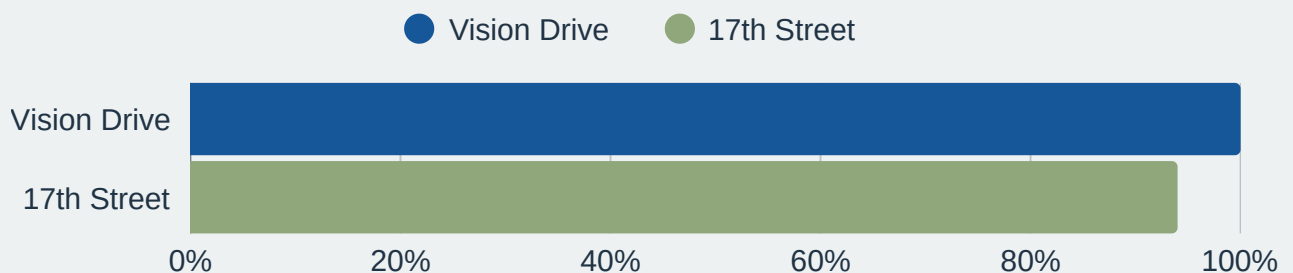
# FAMILY SUCCESS



## A Journey of Resilience, Stability, Goal Setting and Success

When a mother first connected with the Head Start program, she was experiencing a difficult and challenging period in her life. She was navigating domestic violence and facing uncertainty about her family's future. Despite the challenges she was experiencing, she demonstrated courage and a strong desire to create a safe, stable, and successful future for herself and her family. Through the support and guidance of the Head Start Family Advocate, the mother was connected to community resources and was able to secure placement in a domestic violence shelter. This provided her with a safe environment and an opportunity to begin rebuilding her life. With continued encouragement and support, she took important steps toward achieving her personal goals. She re-enrolled in school and remained committed to furthering her education while working toward greater independence and stability. Today, this mother's journey is a powerful example of resilience and determination. She has transitioned into her own housing, returned to school, and secured full-time employment. She is continuing to work toward her educational goals while maintaining employment and providing a stable home for her family. Her story demonstrates how access to supportive services, community resources, and a strong commitment to personal goals can help families overcome significant challenges and create positive change. What began as a time of uncertainty has become a story of strength, independence, and hope.

### ENVIRONMENTAL SCREENINGS



Head Start partners with families to identify meaningful goals that support their child's growth and the family's overall well-being. Together, families and staff create realistic goals, identify resources and supports, and celebrate progress along the way

# PROGRAM MEASURES

- 88% of classrooms will score within quality thresholds for initial CLASS assessment scores.
- 87% of children will be meeting or exceeding expected levels of development by final child assessment rates.
- Staff will support parents in maintaining and attending scheduled visits at a rate of 89%.
- Implement Social and Emotional Curriculum with 85% fidelity.
- Provide 6 parent engagement opportunities during program year.
- 90% of parents will achieve two or more goals throughout Program Year.
- Collaborate on professional development opportunities with partner agencies, aiming for 25% shared professional development opportunities for staff.
- 85% of teachers engaged in coaching show an increase in professional practices.



100%

94%

# SCHOOL READINESS

Tracking child outcomes is essential for teachers to understand each child's developmental progress, strengths, and areas needing support. Ongoing documentation helps teachers plan intentional, individualized instruction and adjust daily services to meet children's needs.

~Join Us for Quarterly School Readiness Meetings:  
Contact [Wrunkal@earlylearningacademies.com](mailto:Wrunkal@earlylearningacademies.com) for more info~

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Overall CLASS Scores Improved from previous program year
- All teachers completed the Teaching Strategies Interrater Reliability Training
- Focus on Language/Literacy to build extended communication
- Collaboration with the Local Smart Start Agency to Conduct Classroom Observations
- 4/5 School Readiness Goals were Met Fully
- 1/5 School Readiness Goals were Partially Met



# COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Collaborating with community agencies is essential to supporting the whole child and family.

Strong partnerships allow programs to connect families with additional resources such as health services, mental health supports, early intervention, and family assistance programs.

Through collaboration, teachers and staff can better understand family needs, coordinate services, and reduce gaps in support. Working together with community agencies strengthens continuity of care, promotes equity, and ensures children and families receive timely, comprehensive services that contribute to positive outcomes.

