



MEDIA ALERT

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THE EARLY LEARNING COALITION OF PASCO AND HERNANDO COUNTIES, INC. SHOOTS FOR THE STARS WITH ITS QUALITY RATING IMPROVEMENT SYSTEM

The Early Learning Coalition of Pasco and Hernando Counties, Inc. doubles provider participation and parent engagement in its Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS), Sunshine Stars.

Pokémon Go isn't the only thing trending right now. The Early Learning Coalition of Pasco and Hernando Counties, Inc. reports a rise in parents looking to find (no, not Charizard) but a quality early learning program or center to enroll their children.

The Coalition is on the right track when it comes to providing a platform for parents to understand how to choose and evaluate early learning programs. The Coalition's Quality Rating Improvement System, **Sunshine Stars**, has doubled in participation from both parents and providers since its debut last summer. Four and five star centers are starting to see a spike in enrollment as more parents are gravitating to the program.

Deidra Jowers, Director of Miss Betty's Childcare and Preschool in Port Richey, was the pioneer five star center awarded by the Coalition and also one of the first centers to report an increase in enrollment. According to Jowers, the parents heard about the rating because of an article that was published in the *Tampa Bay Times* last December.

Currently, the Coalition has 32 committed child care providers participating in this voluntary program with another 10 providers on a waiting list. The program helps the Coalition identify strengths and weaknesses within early childhood programs by providing a set of standards that focus on staff qualifications, the learning environment, and teacher-child interactions.

Not all of the Coalition's 300+ contracted providers are participating in Sunshine Stars. The Coalition's goal is to focus on those centers and programs who are making a commitment to improve their early learning practices. For those who have not yet committed, they will eventually need to make a decision about joining the quality movement or let starred centers reap the benefits, including enrollment.

Lynn Mahs, Director of Wee Kids Preschool in New Port Richey, said she recently received a call from a parent looking to transfer her child from another center and the parent said, "I noticed you're a five star center." Mahs also stated that she promotes the Sunshine Stars program on her website and Facebook page so both new and old clients can see and understand what the five star rating means.

Although QRIS programs are a nationally recognized trend, the Coalition's Sunshine Stars are not awarded overnight. The Coalition offers coaching and additional trainings to provide professional development and technical assistance needed for providers to have successful programs.

A report released in late June from [The Learning Policy Institute](#) provides insight as to what quality early learning programs look like. "The Road to High-Quality Early Learning: Lessons from the States," is just that, a look into 4 different states: Washington; Michigan; North Carolina; and West Virginia, and what it takes to provide quality preschool programs. The report does not offer a one-size-fits all solution to increasing access to, and quality of, early education; however, the report does offer common denominators in the states' successful approaches to making quality early learning a reality; adopting a Quality Rating Improvement System is one of those key components.

The Coalition believes parents will continue to consider the quality of a program or center over common deciding factors such as price and proximity. As more and more parents become aware of Sunshine Stars and the quality of these centers, more and more children will be placed into high quality early learning programs.

For more information about Sunshine Stars, visit www.phelc.org/QRIS.php

For more information about the Coalition and its services, visit www.phelc.org.

About the Coalition

The Early Learning Coalition of Pasco and Hernando Counties, Inc. is one of 30 Early Learning Coalitions in Florida. Florida's Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) program is for all children who are four-years old on or before September 1st. School Readiness provides subsidized child care for low-to-moderate income working families. The nonprofit serves over 13,000 children between infancy and twelve-years old, working with more than 400 providers in the counties.

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