

Alachua County Comprehensive Literacy Needs Assessment

Report compiled by the
University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning

in conjunction with
**Children's Trust of Alachua County,
Alachua County Board of County Commissioners,
Alachua County Public Schools, and
Citizens of Alachua County**



CHILDREN'S TRUST
OF ALACHUA COUNTY

UF Lastinger Center for Learning
UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

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Executive Summary

Reading is among the most essential skills in life. Children who gain basic reading skills during the first few years of school can experience lasting benefits, such as academic achievement, positive social-emotional development, long-term economic security, and personal health and well-being (Connor et al., 2014; UNESCO, 2025). Literacy, defined in this report as the ability to read, write, speak, and listen, is important for Alachua County citizens to fully participate in an information-rich society.

Yet, Florida's students find reading difficult. Among Florida's fourth graders in 2024, **only one third read proficiently** on a national reading test (U.S. Department of Education, 2025) and **just over half read at grade level** on the Florida Assessment of Student Thinking (Florida Department of Education, 2024). Like the rest of Florida, only about half of Alachua County's K-12 students are reading on grade level. However, scores in Alachua County are consistently lower for Black students and students with disabilities. Issues related to access to education, employment, housing, transportation, and healthcare highlight why scores may vary for different groups of students (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024). **Improving reading outcomes for Alachua County students requires community-wide efforts.**

This comprehensive literacy needs assessment continues longstanding efforts by organizations and literacy leaders in Alachua County to improve literacy. In May 2023, the Children's Trust of Alachua County board had a joint meeting with the Alachua County Board of County Commissioners. The topic of discussion was the need to unite the entire community, along with schools and educational organizations, to reach the goals of **children being ready for kindergarten** and **90% of students reading on grade level by the end of third grade**. In October 2023, the Executive Director of the Children's Trust, Marsha Kiner, asked the University of Florida (UF) Lastinger Center for Learning to serve as the coordinator for a comprehensive literacy needs assessment.

In this role, **UF Lastinger Center reached over 1,300 Alachua County residents** by surveying or speaking with 814 family members, 230 community members, 212 Alachua County Public Schools (ACPS) educators and district staff, 37 ACPS students, 9 elected officials, and staff from 51 community organizations. This executive summary and the full report that follows describe education in Alachua County, detail

the literacy needs assessment activities, and outline key recommendations to support literacy learning in Alachua County.

Education in Alachua County

Alachua County, Florida, has a comprehensive education system, with 132 licensed childcare programs and voluntary prekindergarten (VPK) offered by 66 local providers. The county has a range of public and private schools, including 66 elementary schools, 39 middle schools, and 38 high schools (Florida Department of Education Data Publications and Reports, n.d.).

In 2023, 63% of VPK completers were “ready for kindergarten” compared to 46% of their peers who did not attend VPK. In 2024, Alachua County earned a B grade as a district, one of 26 districts in Florida to earn a B. Alachua County is home to 15 schools with an A grade, 13 with a B, 16 with a C, and 3 with a D (Florida Department of Education School Grades Overview, n.d.). Alachua County ranks 14th in the state for third-grade English Language Arts achievement, with 58% of students meeting the standard. The on-time high school graduation rate for the 2022-2023 school year was 84%. Higher education opportunities are provided by institutions such as Santa Fe College and the University of Florida, contributing to the county’s robust educational landscape (Florida Department of Education Advanced Reports, n.d.).

Literacy Needs Assessment

Description

Despite many strengths, Alachua County needs to improve reading outcomes for all children, youth, and adults. This is especially true for groups with only **1 in 3 students reading on grade level**: Black students, students with disabilities, and English language learners (see Figures 10 and 11 of the full report).

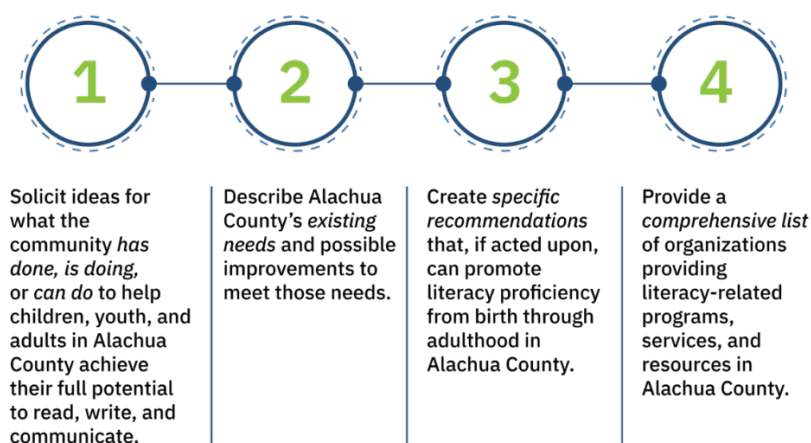
The Children’s Trust and UF Lastinger Center collaborated on a comprehensive literacy needs assessment to improve literacy in Alachua County from birth through adulthood. Key partners who engaged in the literacy needs assessment included the Alachua County Board of County Commissioners, School Board of Alachua County (SBAC), and

Alachua County Public Schools (ACPS). Several community organizations provided guidance on this project, serving on the literacy needs assessment committee, including Alachua County Library District, AskMeno, Cuscowilla Nature and Retreat Center, the Early Learning Coalition of Alachua County, Episcopal Children’s Services, Florida Campaign for Grade Level Reading, Alachua County Campaign for Grade Level Reading, Gainesville Thrives, Greater Gainesville Chamber of Commerce, One Community Health and Wellness Center, Peak Literacy, Sunshine Moss, UF Anita Zucker Center for Excellence in Early Childhood Studies, UF College of Education, UF Literacy Institute, and the United Way of North Central Florida.

Goals

The UF Lastinger Center, Children’s Trust, and committee members listed above created four goals for the literacy needs assessment (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. *Literacy Needs Assessment Goals*



Activities

The UF Lastinger Center engaged in the following activities to meet these goals:

- (1) Reviewed information from prior efforts and from members of the literacy needs assessment committee and analyzed data provided by ACPS and community organizations or available from public sources.
- (2) Distributed an anonymous survey throughout the county.

- (3) Conducted focus groups with a wide range of family and community members and ACPS educators.
- (4) Interviewed elected officials, members of community organizations, ACPS district staff, and ACPS educators after visiting their classrooms.
- (5) Attended community events to create knowledge about the literacy needs assessment and solicit survey and focus group participation.
- (6) Compiled this report and corresponding presentation offering recommendations for future implementation.

Participants

The UF Lastinger Center collected data through 74 interviews, 33 focus groups with 157 participants, 1,122 surveys, 11 community events, and 3 classroom visits (see Table 1). Data were collected from the community starting on June 7, 2024. Data were collected from ACPS educators, district staff, and families starting on December 16, 2024 (ACPS delays occurred in part because a new superintendent started on November 18, 2024). Data collection ended on January 16, 2025.

Table 1. *Literacy Needs Assessment Outreach and Activities*

Activity	Number
Interviews	74
ACPS Educators, Principals, and District Staff	14
Elected Officials	9
Committee and Community Organizations	51
Focus Group Participants	157
ACPS Educators and District Staff	41
Family Members	74
Community Members	42
Survey Completers	1,122
ACPS Educators and District Staff	157
ACPS Students	37
Family Members	740
Community Members	188
Community Events	11
Classroom Visits	3

Key Findings

The literacy needs assessment revealed the following strengths in Alachua County:

- **Home and Community-Based Literacy Practices** – Many families reported actively engaging in literacy activities such as reading and discussing books and doing homework with their children.
- **Classroom-Based Literacy Instruction** – Educators reported having access to evidence-based strategies, such as structured phonics programs and digital learning tools, to support student learning.
- **Community and Organizational Contributions** – Local organizations reported providing valuable literacy support through resources, training, and events that complement school-based initiatives.
- **Policy and Governmental Support** – Local elected officials reported on the importance of early literacy exposure, targeted interventions, and increased resources for children and youth who need them most.

The literacy needs assessment uncovered the following issues hindering literacy progress in Alachua County:

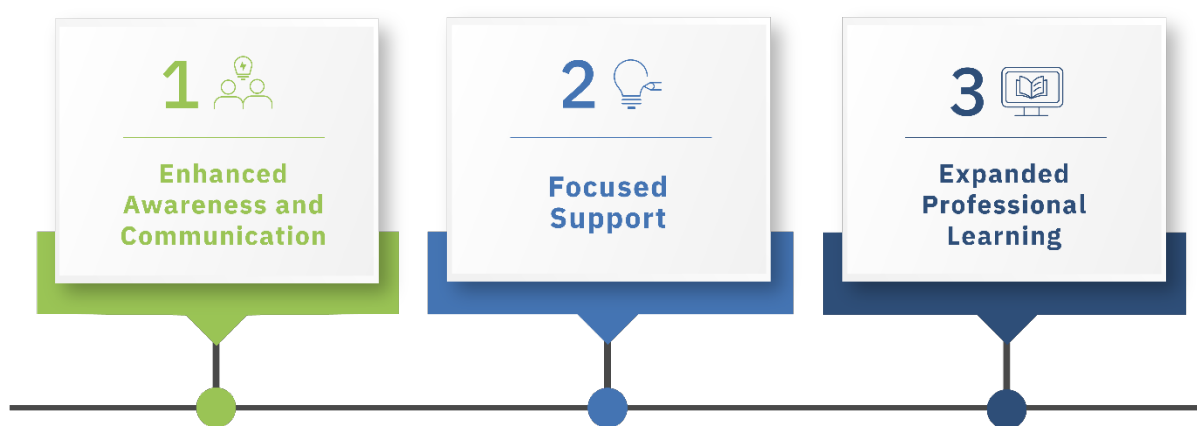
- **Challenges Faced by Families** – Families reported having limited access to literacy resources, financial constraints, and logistical challenges, such as work schedules and transportation, which create obstacles to support their children's literacy development.
- **Challenges in Educational Settings** – Educators reported curriculum misalignment, a lack of professional development, and inadequate instructional support as key concerns.
- **Structural and Financial Challenges for Organizations** – Local organizations reported challenges with securing funding and trained staff to implement structured evidence-based literacy programs.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, this report outlines three categories of recommendations to improve literacy outcomes across the county (see Figure 2).

- (1) **Enhanced Awareness and Communication** – Strengthen collaboration among literacy organizations, create a centralized literacy resource hub, and promote community-wide literacy initiatives.
- (2) **Focused Support** – Increase funding for early literacy programs, increase reading achievement for all students but especially those shown to need additional support, expand high-dosage tutoring, and enhance adult literacy programs.
- (3) **Expanded Professional Learning** – Provide targeted professional development for educators, improve collaboration among teachers, and train educators on strategies to support students with disabilities, among other groups.

Figure 2. *Categories of Recommendations from the Literacy Needs Assessment*



Next Steps

This report underscores the need for a coordinated, multi-sector approach to literacy improvement. Achieving long-term success will require sustained engagement from families, educators, policymakers, and community organizations. The next phase of this initiative will focus on developing a comprehensive plan, securing necessary funding, and continuing to monitor progress to ensure that all students in Alachua County achieve literacy proficiency.



Alachua County Comprehensive Literacy Needs Assessment: Full Report

Introduction

Learning to communicate, read, and write is vital in our society (UNESCO, 2024). These skills help children do well in school, leading to a greater chance of earning a high school diploma or equivalent, attending higher education, being employed, achieving economic wellbeing, and being an informed citizen (Kree et al., 2022).

Literacy

Literacy is defined as the ability to read, write, speak, and listen to fully participate in an information-rich society.

Improving literacy in areas marked by significant income and quality-of-life disparities can be a transformative force for individuals and communities (Rothwell, 2020). Enhancing literacy rates can equip individuals with the skills needed to access better educational and employment opportunities and helps to break cycles of poverty that often perpetuate inequality (Kree et al., 2022). On a community level, higher literacy rates are associated with improved civic participation and foster a more engaged and

informed population (Hansen & Tyner, 2019). Further, literacy contributes to improved public health outcomes because individuals are better able to understand healthcare information and make more informed decisions for themselves and their families (Vernon et al., 2007). By narrowing literacy gaps, communities can foster an environment where economic mobility, social cohesion, and collective wellbeing are more attainable (Feister, 2013).

Continued low literacy rates, on the other hand, can undermine the stability and growth of a region by magnifying income inequality and reducing social and economic advancement (Reardon, 2011). Low levels of literacy lead to reduced workforce productivity, increased reliance on social programs, lower lifetime earnings, increases in incarceration rates, and a wide range of other adverse health outcomes (DeWalt et al., 2004). Over time, widespread literacy challenges can entrench existing disparities and create a feedback loop where these disparities are reinforced (Reardon, 2011).

Report Roadmap

The purpose behind this literacy needs assessment is to improve literacy learning for *all* children, youth, and adults in Alachua County in order to enhance the county's future growth and opportunities. The data presented below show that some residents need additional and enriched resources, services, and programs, including people in Alachua County's Black communities, Hispanic/Latino communities, people who are disabled, and people who have low incomes or are experiencing poverty (see, for example, Figures 10-12 on pp. 35–37). These data show that **more work is needed to improve literacy opportunities for all Alachua County residents.**

The literacy needs assessment was designed to provide recommendations for making key literacy improvements in Alachua County. The remainder of the introduction describes the Alachua County context, prior efforts that have been made to address literacy improvements, and the goals of the literacy needs assessment. The report is then comprised of the following sections, which are differentiated by pages with a green background and/or photos:

- Literacy needs assessment activities
- Data analyzed from Alachua County Public Schools (ACPS), community organizations, and public sources detailing how Alachua County is served by

existing resources for children in early learning environments (birth-age 5), students in K-12 educational settings, and adults in continuing education

- Findings from the surveys, focus groups, and interviews
- Recommendations and next steps for how Alachua County can enhance and improve literacy outcomes for all residents
- Details about the numerous organizations that strive to meet the literacy needs of Alachua County (see [Appendix A](#))

Alachua County Context

Alachua County is the 22nd largest and 25th most populous county out of 67 counties in Florida. Over 275,000 people live in Alachua County. The poverty rate in Alachua County in 2023 was 19% as compared to 12% for the state of Florida (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Over 17% of children in Alachua County experience poverty. Estimates from 2023 showed that more White, Black, and Asian citizens, but fewer Hispanic/Latino citizens, lived in Alachua County as compared to the state of Florida (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

Building on Prior Efforts

This project continues prior efforts by Alachua County literacy leaders and organizations (see Figure 3), as well as other initiatives. For example, the Alachua County Campaign for Grade Level Reading, hosted by the United Way of North Central Florida, is a network of agencies, community members, providers, institutions, and individuals that meet once per month to maximize the efforts of the community and organizations to ensure children are reading on grade level by the end of third grade. The Alachua County Campaign for Grade Level Reading holds active membership with the Florida Campaign for Grade Level Reading and is an affiliate of the National Campaign for Grade Level Reading, which was launched to reverse the trend of children not reading on grade level by supporting solutions at the federal, state, and local levels. In communities nationwide, the Campaign works within four solution areas that promote third grade reading proficiency: (1) School Readiness, (2) Out of School Learning, (3) Parental and Family Support, and (4) Attendance.

In the fall of 2020, eight Alachua County literacy leaders participated in the Lectio Institute to lay the groundwork for enhancing the Alachua County Campaign for Grade Level Reading. As part of this work, information about literacy programming from 12 organizations was compiled. Committees were formed to address the following three areas aligned with the Campaign for Grade Level Reading: (1) School Readiness, (2) Out of School Time, and (3) Family Engagement and Support. Each of these committees met throughout 2021.

The following themes from the committees were compiled by Lectio in May 2022:

- Need for continued, focused data gathering within the literacy landscape (e.g., programming, impact)
- Interest in building capacity through tools and data to enhance the delivery of literacy programs
- Importance of a culture of learning and community of practice for partners
- Recognition of the need to support parents and caregivers

Figure 3. *Timeline of Literacy Improvement Efforts in Alachua County*



In May 2023, the Children's Trust board had a joint meeting with the Alachua County Board of County Commissioners. The topic of discussion was the need to unite the entire community, along with schools and educational organizations, to reach the goals of **children being ready for kindergarten** and **90% of students reading on grade level by the end of third grade**. During that meeting, the Board of County Commissioners and the Children's Trust agreed that the Children's Trust would assist with creating a comprehensive literacy plan. To help with the creation of the plan, Children's Trust staff created a committee comprised of representatives of the following organizations who are experts in the space of early care and education, K-12 education systems, and community literacy support: Alachua County Library District, AskMeno, Cuscowilla Nature and Retreat Center, Early Learning Coalition of Alachua County, Episcopal Children's Services, Florida Campaign for Grade Level Reading, Gainesville Thrives, Greater Gainesville Chamber of Commerce, One Community Health and Wellness Center, Peak Literacy, Dr. Sunshine Moss, UF Anita Zucker Center for Excellence in Early Childhood Studies, UF College of Education, UF Literacy Institute, and the United Way of North Central Florida.

The committee met five times between May 2023 and April 2024. Topics of discussion included the following:

- Set a purpose, describe literacy gaps from member perspectives, and identify other interested parties who should be included in the plan development.
- Review and discuss the work completed by the Alachua County Campaign for Grade Level Reading.
- Review and discuss research and the Literacy Roadmap completed by Dr. Sunshine Moss.
- Look at plans and talk with other communities, such as Martin County Children's Services Council, that have focused on supporting early learning, strong families, and success in school and life.

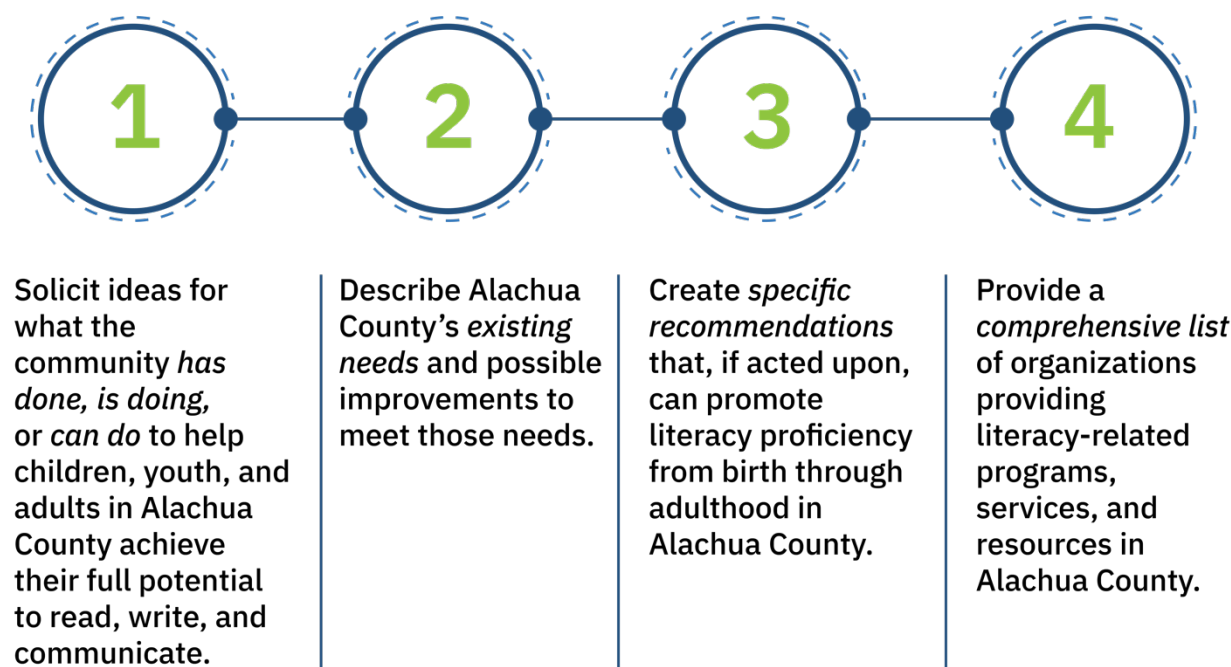
In October 2023, the Executive Director of the Children's Trust, Marsha Kiner, asked the UF Lastinger Center to serve as coordinator for a comprehensive literacy needs assessment intended to help Alachua County form an action plan to improve literacy in the county. The literacy needs assessment, which began in April 2024, included the following phases: Phase 1: Pre-Assessment (Collect Existing Data); Phase 2: Assessment (Collect New Data); and Phase 3: Post-Assessment (Determining Needs). In this role, the UF Lastinger Center created and administered surveys, completed

organization interviews, conducted focus groups, attended public events, and visited schools. Community leaders, community members, families, students, educators, and staff at community organizations – over 1,300 people – participated in the literacy needs assessment between June 2024 and January 2025. The UF Lastinger Center met monthly with literacy needs assessment committee members to continually inform the project, soliciting guidance and direction for project activities.

Goals of the Literacy Needs Assessment

The Children’s Trust, UF Lastinger Center, and committee members established goals of the literacy needs assessment (see Figure 4, which is the same as Figure 1 from the Executive Summary). The goals were as follows: (1) collect data throughout the community to understand what is working and what needs to be improved, (2) present information related to Alachua County’s current needs, (3) create specific recommendations to help target improvements, and (4) provide a list of organizations serving children, youth, and adults in Alachua County.

Figure 4. *Goals of Literacy Needs Assessment*





Description of Literacy Needs Assessment Activities

The UF Lastinger Center engaged in the following activities to meet these goals:

- (1) Reviewed information from prior efforts and from members of the literacy needs assessment committee and analyzed data provided by ACPS and community organizations or available from public sources.
- (2) Distributed an anonymous survey throughout the county.
- (3) Conducted focus groups with a wide range of family and community members and ACPS educators.
- (4) Interviewed elected officials, members of community organizations, ACPS district staff, and ACPS educators after visiting their classrooms.
- (5) Attended community events to create knowledge about the literacy needs assessment and solicit survey and focus group participation.
- (6) Compiled this report and corresponding presentation offering recommendations for future implementation.

This section describes how these activities were conducted, who participated in the literacy needs assessment, and how data were analyzed.

Review and Analysis of Existing Data Sources

To create the tables and figures depicted below, UF Lastinger Center examined publicly available data from the following data sources:

- [Florida Department of Education](#)
- [Florida Department of Health](#)
- [School Board of Alachua County Board Docs](#)
- [City of Alachua Education Taskforce](#)
- [U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Data Collection](#)
- [U.S. Census Bureau](#)

The UF Lastinger Center requested data from Alachua County Public Schools (ACPS), the Early Learning Coalition of Alachua County, and other organizations to ask for student, educator, and school/program data to inform the literacy needs assessment. Data were received in December 2025.

Participant Groups and Recruitment Strategies

The UF Lastinger Center engaged in numerous activities with the aim of hearing from Alachua County residents from the following groups:

- Parents/guardians/caregivers of children enrolled in K-12 schools, homeschool, or early learning programs/centers in Alachua County
- Students enrolled in or recently graduated from K-12 schools, homeschool, or higher education in Alachua County
- Adult education program staff and students
- General public/community members living or working in Alachua County
- ACPS district staff, school principals, educators, and instructional support staff
- Elected officials
- Staff or volunteers in organizations providing literacy resources or support
- Alachua county and municipality staff
- UF staff and faculty in education- and health-related departments
- Senior citizens

Survey and focus group participants were recruited in the following ways:

- Webpage on the UF Lastinger Center website
- Social media posts, including via a toolkit created by the UF Lastinger Center communications team and shared with literacy needs assessment committee organizations
- Emails created for the literacy needs assessment committee organizations to share widely
- Community organization gatherings and meetings
- Conversations and postcards distributed at community events
- Emails to UF Lastinger Center's existing list of contacts, including enrolled educators and families
- Emails to all ACPS educators and families

Interview participants were recruited via email and were identified by the following strategies:

- Organizations on the literacy needs assessment committee
- Organizations named on a comprehensive list that was created in conjunction with the Children's Trust and the literacy needs assessment committee
- Organizations found through web searches
- Organizations referred to during interviews
- Elected officials, including Alachua County Commissioners, Gainesville City Commissioners, and School Board of Alachua County
- Organizations and departments from ACPS

Data Collection Procedures and Measures

The UF Lastinger Center created questions for surveys, focus groups, and interviews that asked for Alachua County residents' thoughts on literacy learning for children, youth, and adults. The UF Lastinger Center also attended community events to ask people to complete surveys. This section describes how data were collected, when the data were collected, and information about the respondents and participants. All of the questions that were asked on the surveys, focus groups, and interviews are available upon request from the UF Lastinger Center (email Lastinger@coe.ufl.edu for more information).

Surveys

Surveys were collected throughout Alachua County. Families; community members; and ACPS educators, district staff, and students were offered different surveys. At the time of completing the survey, respondents needed to be (1) living in Alachua County, (2) working in Alachua County, (3) attending school in Alachua County, and/or (4) a parent or guardian of a child currently attending school in Alachua County. In addition, respondents could have been (5) a student in Alachua County in the last five years, and/or (6) a parent or guardian of a child who attended school in Alachua County in the last five years. The surveys were anonymous, offered in English and Spanish, and collected online via Qualtrics.

The UF Lastinger Center collected surveys between June 7, 2024, and January 13, 2025. During that time, 1,784 people started a survey and 1,122 people (63%) went through to the final item (see Table 2). A total of 56 respondents (3%) answered the survey in Spanish. The rest completed the survey in English.

Table 2. *Survey Completion Numbers, by Respondent Type*

	Started Survey	Completed Survey
Family Members	1,073	740
Community Members	369	188
ACPS Educators and District Staff	269	157
K-12 Students	73	37
Total	1,784	1,122

Respondents had the option to write in open-ended responses, and 1,015 people (90% of survey completers) chose to do so (see Table 3).

Table 3. *Provided Written Feedback, by Respondent Type*

	Completed Survey	Wrote Answers
Family Members	740	690
Community Members	188	146
ACPS Educators and District Staff	157	149
K-12 Students	37	30
Total	1,122	1,015

Survey respondents answered items about their background, education, and income. This information was compiled for all respondent groups (family members, community members, ACPs educators/district staff, and students), along with U.S. Census data for Alachua County as a whole (see Table 4). Information about survey respondents was compared to the larger population of Alachua County residents. Differences of more than 5% are indicated by arrows (> or <) in the table. Survey respondents were more likely to have higher education degrees (master's degree or higher), speak English in the home (although 8% spoke Spanish and 5% indicated 21 other languages), be in the 35-54 age bracket, and have higher incomes. The race/ethnicity of survey respondents largely reflected the race/ethnicity of Alachua County residents.

Table 4. *Survey Respondent Information*

	Alachua County	All Respondents ^a	Family Members ^b	Community Members ^c	ACPS Educators and Staff ^d	Students ^e
Education						
Less than high school	N/A	2%	2%	3%	0%	N/A
High school or GED	18% >	7%	6%	12%	1%	
Some college	16% >	10%	10%	11%	1%	
Associate's degree	11%	11%	12%	11%	0%	
Bachelor's degree	22%	24%	24%	20%	29%	
Master's degree or higher	29% <	46%	46%	42%	69%	
Language(s)						
English	86% <	92%	92%	89%	95%	83%
Spanish	7%	8%	8%	10%	2%	8%
Another language	9%	5%	5%	6%	3%	14%
Age						
18-24	15% >	3%	1%	10%	3%	N/A
25-34	15%	14%	12%	20%	13%	
35-44	11% <	41%	50%	20%	24%	
45-54	10% <	26%	29%	17%	32%	
>55	25% >	15%	9%	32%	28%	
Sex						
Female	51% <	86%	87%	81%	87%	N/A

	Alachua County	All Respondents ^a	Family Members ^b	Community Members ^c	ACPS Educators and Staff ^d	Students ^e
Race/Ethnicity						
American Indian	0.3%	1%	1%	1%	1%	0%
Asian	7%	5%	5%	4%	2%	15%
Black	19%	23%	24%	24%	12%	30%
Hispanic/Latino	12%	14%	14%	16%	11%	27%
White	61%	65%	56%	56%	75%	37%
Income						
<\$10,000	10% >	4%	4%	8%	0%	N/A
\$10,001-\$25,000	8%	6%	5%	12%	2%	
\$25,001-\$50,000	20%	16%	14%	21%	15%	
\$50,001-\$75,000	15%	18%	18%	13%	30%	
\$75,001-\$100,000	12%	15%	15%	17%	19%	
\$100,001-\$150,000	14% <	21%	23%	17%	21%	
>\$150,000	15%	19%	22%	11%	13%	

Source for Alachua County percentages: [U.S. Census Bureau](#). Note: N/A = not asked. ^a (All Survey Respondents) Education *N* = 1,027 (ages =>25); Language *N* = 1,030; Age *N* = 1,042; Sex *N* = 1,077; Race/Ethnicity *N* = 1,020; Income *N* = 850. ^b (Family Members) Education *N* = 746 (ages =>25); Language *N* = 708, family members indicated speaking Afrikaans, American Sign Language, Arabic, Cebuano, Creole, Czech, Filipino, French, German, Malagasy, Marathi, Tagalog, Tigrinya, Yoruba; Age *N* = 740; Sex *N* = 720; Race/Ethnicity *N* = 704; Income *N* = 613. ^c (Community Members) Education *N* = 170 (ages =>25); Language *N* = 176, community members indicated speaking Arabic, Bangla, Creole, and German; Age *N* = 188; Sex *N* = 180; Race/Ethnicity *N* = 177; Income *N* = 141. ^d (ACPS Educators and District Staff) Education *N* = 154 (ages =>25); Language *N* = 151, ACPS educators and district staff indicated speaking American Sign Language, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi; Age *N* = 157; Sex *N* = 149; Race/Ethnicity *N* = 147; Income *N* = 132. ^e (Students) Language *N* = 36, students indicated speaking Arabic, Bengali, Hindi, Nepali, and Persian; Race/Ethnicity *N* = 33.

Students answered an additional item about what type of school they attended (see Table 5), with just over half attending elementary school.

Table 5. Student Survey Respondent Information

Characteristic	%
School Level	
Elementary	51%
Middle	21%
High	28%

Note: School Level *N* = 43.

ACPS educators and district staff answered additional items about their role, certifications, and age/grade levels (see Table 6). Most described themselves as teachers (76%), although other roles included district or school administrators (6%). Most (89%) considered themselves to be directly teaching or supporting the teaching of reading. Eighty-three percent had professional certification, but 17% did not.

Table 6. *ACPS Educators and District Staff Survey Respondent Information*

Characteristic	%
Role	
District or School Administrator	6%
Teacher	76%
Instructional Support Staff	5%
Non-Instructional Support Staff	9%
Paraprofessional or Tutor	1%
Provides Reading Instruction or Support for Reading Instruction	89%
Certification	
Professional Certification to Teach	83%
Temporary Certification to Teach	13%
No Certification to Teach	4%
Age/Grade Level	
Early Childhood	3%
Elementary	53%
Middle	22%
High	22%

Note: Role *N* = 205, Provides Reading Instruction *N* = 184, Certification *N* = 192, School Level *N* = 184.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were different from interviews in that they included two or more participants at a time. Focus groups were role specific and included questions related to the participant's role as an educator, family member, or community member. Some participants had multiple roles. Educators were asked about literacy instruction, challenges with student learning, and professional learning opportunities. Families were asked about the importance of literacy for their children, their children's literacy progress, and what families and schools can do to promote literacy for their children. Community members were asked about how the larger community can help children,

youth, and adults gain literacy skills. Focus groups were conducted either in person or through Zoom. Focus groups were audio recorded, and the recordings were transcribed.

The UF Lastinger Center completed 33 focus groups between September 15, 2024 and January 16, 2025. One hundred fifty-seven people participated in a focus group. Focus group participants were more likely to speak English, range in age from 25 to 44, be female, Black, and less likely to be White than Alachua County as a whole (see Table 7).

Table 7. *Focus Group Participant Information*

	Alachua County	All Focus Group Members ^a	Family Members ^b	Community Members ^c	ACPS Educators and Staff ^d
Education					
Less than high school	N/A	6%	2%	18%	
High school or GED	18% >	11%	11%	15%	
Some college	16%	14%	19%	8%	
Associate's degree	11%	7%	9%	8%	
Bachelor's degree	22%	22%	22%	13%	45%
Master's degree or higher	29%	34%	33%	28%	55%
Language(s)					
English	86% <	100%	100%	100%	100%
Spanish	7%	6%	4%	14%	0%
Another language	9% >	1%	3%	0%	0%
Age					
18-24	15%	13%	11%	10%	3%
25-34	15% <	26%	25%	19%	32%
35-44	11% <	30%	43%	14%	32%
45-54	10% <	18%	18%	14%	23%
>55	25% >	16%	3%	40%	10%
Sex					
Female	51% <	84%	88%	74%	90%
Race/Ethnicity					
American Indian	0.3%	3%	1%	7%	3%
Asian	7%	2%	3%	2%	0%
Black	19% <	41%	46%	55%	6%
Hispanic/Latino	12%	13%	7%	21%	16%
White	61% >	47%	47%	26%	84%

	Alachua County	All Focus Group Members ^a	Family Members ^b	Community Members ^c	ACPS Educators and Staff ^d
Income					
<\$10,000	10%	12%	6%	26%	0%
\$10,001-\$25,000	8%	7%	7%	12%	0%
\$25,001-\$50,000	20%	24%	28%	14%	23%
\$50,001-\$75,000	15% <	22%	21%	14%	35%
\$75,001-\$100,000	12%	11%	10%	7%	19%
\$100,001-\$150,000	14%	9%	13%	5%	13%
>\$150,000	15% >	6%	6%	10%	6%

Source for Alachua County percentages: [U.S. Census Bureau](#). Note: ^a (All Focus Group Participants $N = 157$) Education $N = 128$ (ages ≥ 25); Language $N = 141$; Age $N = 141$; Sex $N = 141$; Race/Ethnicity $N = 141$; Income $N = 141$. ^b (Family Members) Education $N = 64$ (ages ≥ 25); Language $N = 72$; Age $N = 72$; Sex $N = 72$; Race/Ethnicity $N = 72$; Income $N = 72$. ^c (Community Members) Education $N = 39$ (ages ≥ 25); Language $N = 42$; Age $N = 42$; Sex $N = 42$; Race/Ethnicity $N = 42$; Income $N = 42$. ^d (ACPS Educators and District Staff) Education $N = 29$ (ages ≥ 25); Language $N = 31$; Age $N = 31$; Sex $N = 31$; Race/Ethnicity $N = 31$; Income $N = 31$.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted to map community assets, or the resources that are currently available in Alachua County. Elected officials, staff at literacy needs assessment committee organizations, staff at literacy-related organizations, ACPS educators, and ACPS district staff participated in interviews. Staff were asked to complete surveys about their organizations/departments. Interview questions asked about literacy-related program activities, staffing (including volunteers), learners served, professional learning opportunities, funding, and collaboration. Interviews were conducted through Zoom. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

The UF Lastinger Center completed 73 interviews between April 29, 2024 and January 16, 2025. The following people were interviewed: 9 local elected officials, 9 ACPS district staff, 3 ACPS school principals, 2 ACPS educators, staff members at 12 committee organizations, and staff members at 38 community organizations. One organization provided survey data but was not interviewed. In addition, 35 organizations were contacted but not surveyed or interviewed for various reasons. Thus, a total of 109 organizations were approached (see Table 8).

In-person school visits were conducted in January 2025. The purpose of the school visits was to observe literacy-related instruction. The UF Lastinger Center completed 2 school visits, observing English Language Arts (ELA) instruction in 3 classrooms: kindergarten and third grade at Lake Forest Elementary School and an intensive reading class at Kanapaha Middle School. Follow-up interviews were conducted with two of the participating teachers.

Table 8. *Interviews Conducted for Literacy Needs Assessment*

Type of Contact	Number of Interviews or Number of Organizations Contacted but Not Interviewed
<i>Interviewed</i>	<i>74</i>
County Commissioners	4
Gainesville City Commissioners	1
School Board of Alachua County	4
ACPS Educators, Principals, and District Staff	14
Literacy Needs Assessment Committee Organizations	12
Community Organizations	38
Provided Survey Data (No Interview)	1
<i>Not Interviewed</i>	<i>35</i>
Called (Confirmed No Literacy Focus)	13
Called or Emailed (No Response)	19
Emailed (Declined)	3
<i>Total</i>	<i>109</i>

Community Events

The UF Lastinger Center participated in tabling at events throughout Alachua County (see Table 9), which provided community members with the opportunity to complete surveys and sign up for focus groups.

Table 9. *Events Attended During Literacy Needs Assessment*

Event	Sponsor	Date
Fanfare and Fireworks	WUFT-FM	07/03/2024
Backpack Event	Early Learning Coalition of Alachua County	07/13/2024
Stop the Violence Backpack Event	People Against Violence Enterprises	07/27/2024
Back to School Giveaway High Springs	Alachua County Children’s Trust	08/11/2024
Fall Teen Art Show	Alachua County Library District	10/12/2024
Coon Hollo Farm Fall Festival	Coon Hollo	10/14/2024
Monthly Dinner	SWAG	10/17/2024
Lights on Afterschool	Alachua County Children’s Trust	10/24/2024
YMCA Trunk-or Treat	YMCA of North Central FL	10/25/2024
Superhero 5k	Partnership for Strong Families	11/03/2024
Family Fishing Day	Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences	11/09/2024

Data Analysis

Survey items were coded to represent the percent of respondents who “agreed” or “strongly agreed” on individual items. These responses were examined descriptively and presented in tables and figures.

Detailed notes and transcripts were produced from the virtual and in-person focus groups and interviews. Notes and transcripts were analyzed using generative AI tools offered through UF. Generative AI has been found useful in qualitative data analysis by streamlining data processing. It has also been found effective in thematic analysis,

such as identifying recurring patterns, themes, and trends within qualitative data (Hitch, 2023; Zhang, et al., 2023). Generative AI specifically enhances efficiency of the coding process and summarizes large volumes of qualitative data without losing critical details (Hitch, 2023; Morgan, 2023) and is now integrated into the most recent version of NVivo 15 (Lumivero, 2023), a qualitative analysis tool that is widely used in academic, social science, and business research to process large volumes of unstructured data (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019; Sinha, et al., 2024).

UF's GPT-4 AI model has advanced natural language understanding (NLU). In this application, the GPT-4 model was used to identify patterns, categorize, and generate summaries of responses. To ensure the accuracy, validity, and ethical integrity of the assessment, research team members independently reviewed analyzed data and regularly convened to discuss and refine themes through the consensual qualitative research (CQR) approach to check and confirm consistency in thematic interpretation (Hill, 2012).

Transcripts and spreadsheets of survey data without any names or identifying information were uploaded into AI tools by type (survey open-ended responses, focus groups, interviews) and by participant group (families and community members, ACPS educators and district staff, students, committee and community organization staff members, and elected officials). Specific questions were asked when uploading files in the AI tools, including what's working and what challenges exist for each group, and what each group recommended to improve literacy skills. These questions and more details about the AI analysis are available upon request from the UF Lastinger Center (email Lastinger@coe.ufl.edu for more information).

The AI tools returned major themes, a description of findings from each theme, and representative quotes from the participants on each theme. From there, UF Lastinger staff, aided by staff at Children's Trust and committee organizations, extensively reviewed the findings. Repetitive information was condensed. Recommendations were included if they had an evidence base or support from research and, if so, prioritized based on perceived importance and practicality.

Thus, the UF Lastinger Center synthesized data from multiple sources to draw out key themes, which are outlined in the following sections describing findings from the literacy needs assessment.



Findings: Literacy Learning in Alachua County's Educational Settings

Data from numerous sources were compiled and analyzed to provide information about how the literacy needs of children, youth, and adults are currently met by programs, schools, and organizations throughout Alachua County. These findings are organized into the following sections: Early Learning, K-12, College and Workforce Readiness, and Adult Education.

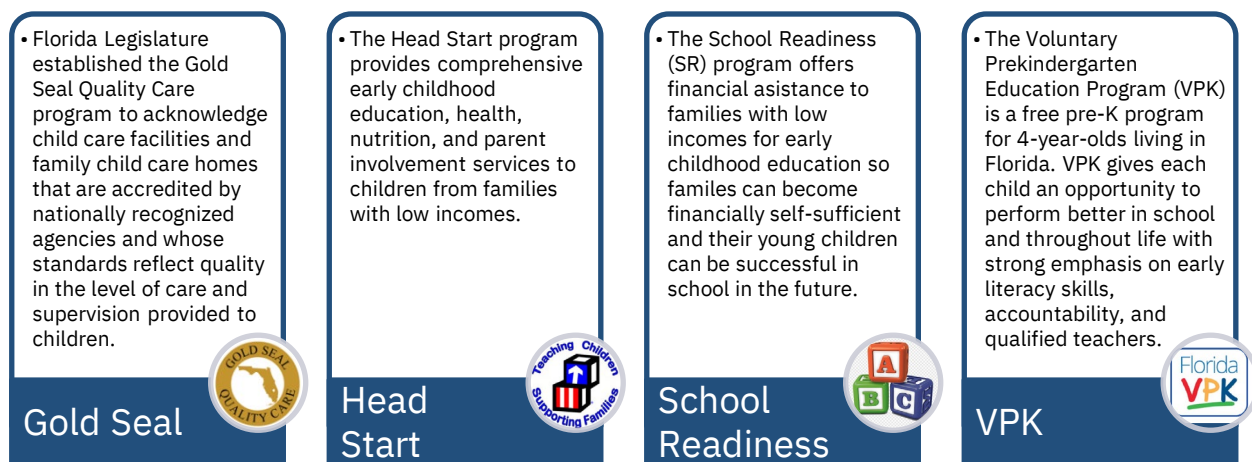
Early Learning

Children's earliest years are instrumental in setting the foundation for literacy learning (Dickinson & McCabe, 2001). Access to high-quality early learning environments from birth through age five, both in the home and in early childhood education settings, can improve children's early communication skills, language development, and emergent literacy (Davis Schoch et al., 2023). The characteristics of "high-quality early learning" vary slightly by age level (infants, toddlers, preschoolers), but all children ideally have access to language-rich environments that include back-and-forth conversations with adults, exposure to new words and word meanings, and a focus on building familiarity with many topics. Talking *with* – not just talking *to* – children is important in helping children build language skills that will later impact their ability to read. Children should also have multiple opportunities to engage in meaningful ways with books, print, and

writing materials (Bowne et al., 2017; Cabell et al., 2015; Grifenhagen et al., 2017; Hadley et al., 2022; Hindman et al., 2019; Justice et al., 2018; Neuman et al., 2000; Romeo et al., 2018).

In Alachua County, children from ages 0-5 are cared for at home, in family childcare homes, at community-based childcare centers, and at schools. Over 130 providers offer licensed childcare options for families in Alachua County. School Readiness (SR) and Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) are both publicly funded by the state. Head Start is federally funded. Gold Seal accreditation helps families select high-quality programs (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Child Care Services



Source: [Florida Department of Children and Families](https://www.fldoh.gov/childcare)

The [Florida Department of Children and Families](https://www.fldoh.gov/childcare) provides a childcare provider search function on its website. Families can find provider name, address, license number, provider type, capacity, days and hours of operation, services offered, and three-year inspection history of each provider.

Organizations Serving Young Children and Families in Alachua County

The UF Lastinger Center interviewed several organizations that serve the language and emergent literacy needs of young children in Alachua County (see [Appendix A](#)). For example, the [Early Learning Coalition of Alachua County](#) serves as a resource to families and child care providers. Their goal is to ensure that children and families have access to quality, affordable early learning programs. [Episcopal Children's Services](#)

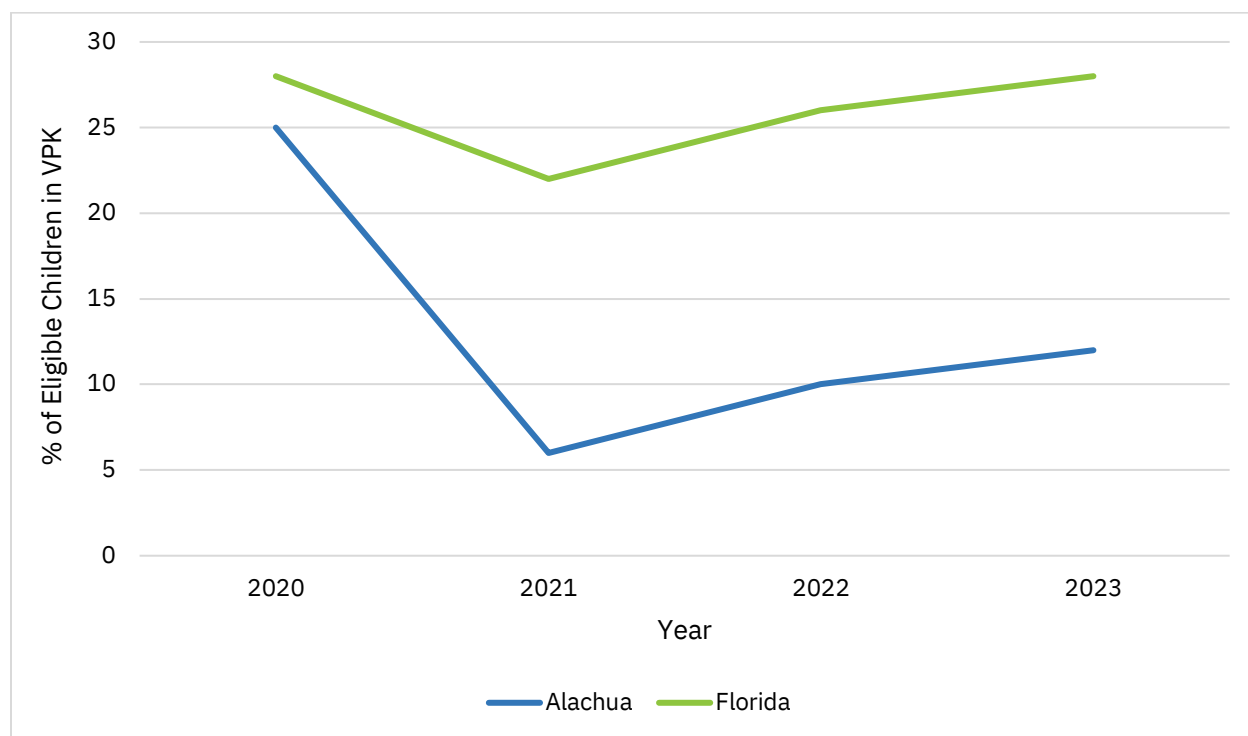
supports families in Alachua County by providing Head Start, VPK, and School Readiness services. Staff from both organizations serve on the literacy needs assessment committee.

The following sections describe information related to access and quality of VPK and SR in Alachua County.

Participation in VPK

Since 2020, a smaller percentage of Alachua County four-year-olds were enrolled in VPK as compared to the Florida average. The percentage especially declined starting in 2021 (see Figure 6). This is problematic because children enrolled in VPK have higher school readiness compared to unenrolled children (see pp. 18–19), so increasing VPK participation is important.

Figure 6. *Percent of Eligible 4-Year-Olds Attending VPK, Alachua County and Florida, 2020 through 2023*



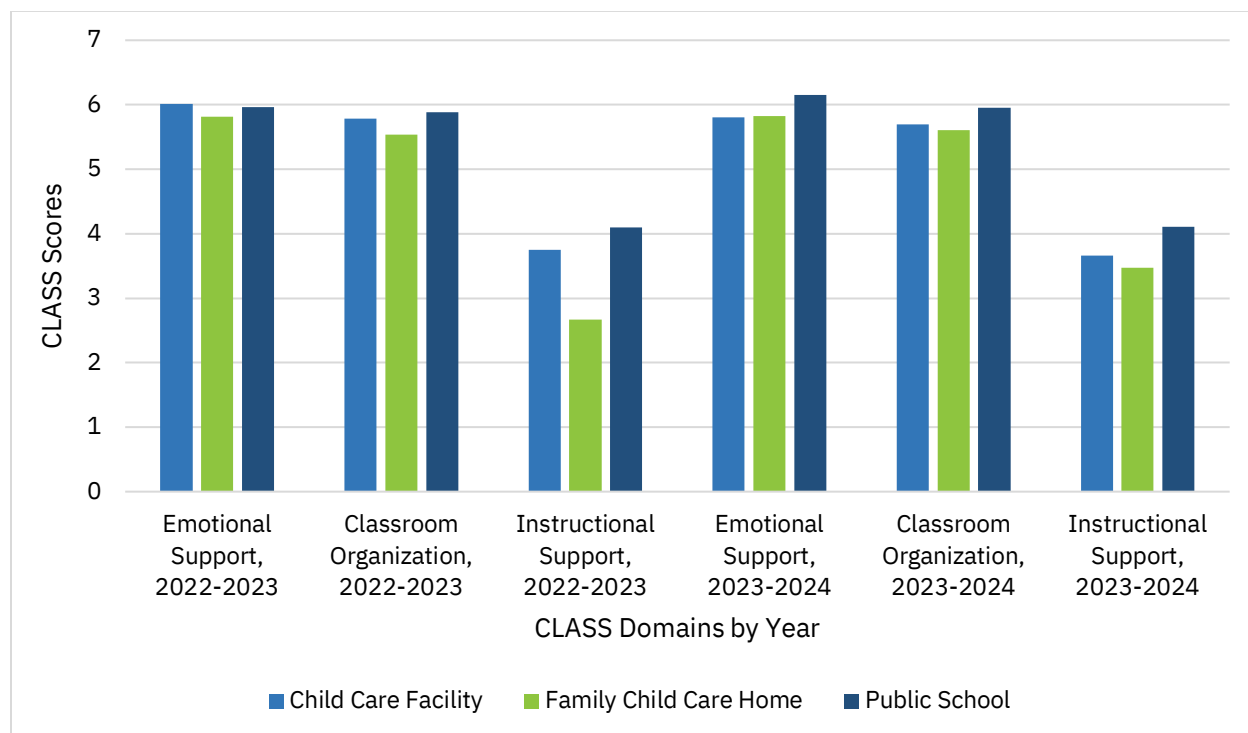
Source: [Florida Department of Health](#)

Quality of VPK and SR

Florida requires VPK and SR classrooms to meet quality standards using an observation tool called the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, or CLASS (Pianta et al., 2008). Observers rate VPK and SR classrooms on CLASS indicators, which are averaged to create three CLASS domains: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. Combined, these domains show the quality of teacher-child interactions in classroom settings. VPK classrooms are required to have an average of 4 (on a scale of 7) on CLASS indicators as a “quality threshold.”

Data provided from the Early Learning Coalition of Alachua County to the UF Lastinger Center included CLASS scores by provider type (childcare facility, family childcare home, or public school). CLASS Instructional Support scores across Florida and the US tend to be lower than Emotional Support and Classroom Organization scores (averages around 2.5), but Alachua County childcare providers scored well in Instructional Support (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. *Alachua County VPK Scores by Childcare Type, 2022-2023 and 2023-2024*



Source: Early Learning Coalition of Alachua County

School Readiness at Kindergarten Entry

The Florida legislature has defined “ready for kindergarten” through student scores on assessments administered in the fall of kindergarten. Results are based on the first assessment administered to each student. Prior to 2022-2023, Florida used the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (FLKRS), with a score of 500 or higher indicating “ready for kindergarten” per Rule 6M-8.601, F.A.C.

[Starting in 2022-2023](#), Florida adopted a statewide coordinated screening and progress monitoring system known as the Florida Assessment of Student Thinking (FAST) Star Early Literacy. [FAST Star Early Literacy](#) now serves as the state’s kindergarten screener. A score of 690 on FAST Star Early Literacy is equivalent to a score of 500 on the FLKRS. FAST Star Early Literacy is also implemented in all VPK programs as required by s. 1002.68, F.S., and used to assess student achievement of the performance standards established in s. 1002.67(1)(a), F.S., in early literacy and mathematics.

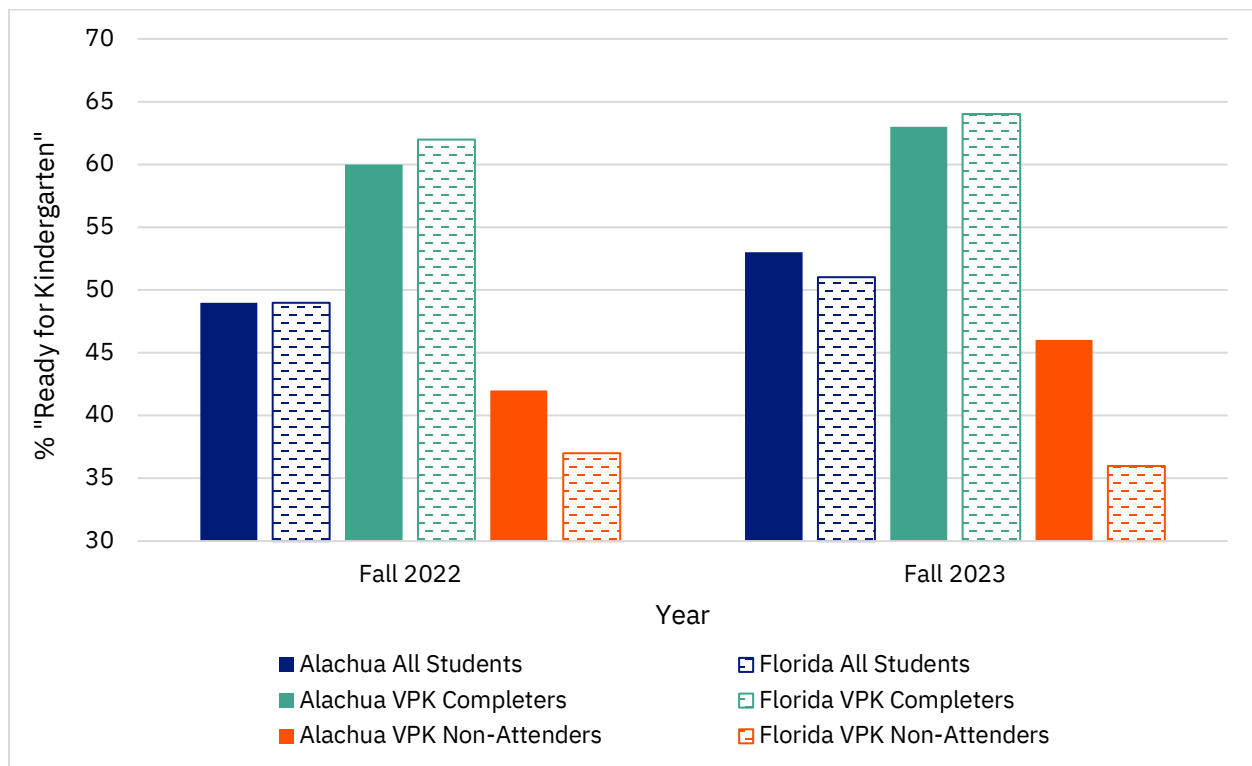
In most years, Alachua County children had slightly higher school readiness scores than the Florida average (2023 was an exception; see Table 10). Children who completed VPK tended to have the highest readiness scores in 2022 and 2023, both in Alachua County and Florida (see Table 10 and Figure 8).

Table 10. *School Readiness at Kindergarten Entry, All Students, Alachua County and Florida*

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Alachua	56.9%	58.4%	54.8%	48.6%	52.5%
Florida	53.4%	56.9%	50.0%	49.2%	51.0%

Source: [Florida Department of Health](#)

Figure 8. *Percent of Students “Ready for Kindergarten” Based on FAST Scores at Kindergarten Entry, including by VPK, Alachua County, Fall 2022 and Fall 2023*



Source: [FAST 2022, 2023 data](#); Note: “All Students” refers to all children who took beginning of year (BOY) FAST assessment at the beginning of kindergarten. “VPK Completers” refers to children who attended $\geq 70\%$ of VPK the year before kindergarten. “VPK Non-Attenders” refers to children in kindergarten who did not attend VPK or were unmatched to a VPK record; these children may have experienced home care or other forms of childcare.



K-12

K-12 education plays a foundational role in shaping students' literacy skills, which are critical for academic success and broader life outcomes. Early literacy development in kindergarten through third grade has long been established as critical in setting students' literacy trajectories (Stanovich, 1986). Although it is never too late to intervene, research indicates helping older students is significantly more resource-intensive than preventing reading difficulties in the elementary years (Torgesen, 2004). However, effective literacy instruction must extend beyond elementary grades to support students at all grade levels. Secondary students who struggle with reading require targeted, evidence-based interventions that recognize their unique needs and build on their strengths. A commitment to literacy at every age ensures that each learner has access to the instruction and support needed to develop strong literacy skills.

Alachua County's literacy data provides valuable insight into students' reading proficiency, progress over time, and areas of concern. Disparities in literacy achievement can highlight challenges that impact specific student populations, including Black and Hispanic/Latino students, students who are economically disadvantaged, students with disabilities, or English language learners. Reviewing trends helps Alachua County identify strengths and gaps in literacy supports.

Organizations Serving K-12 Students and Families in Alachua County

The UF Lastinger Center interviewed several organizations that serve the language and literacy needs of K-12 children and youth in Alachua County (see [Appendix A](#)).

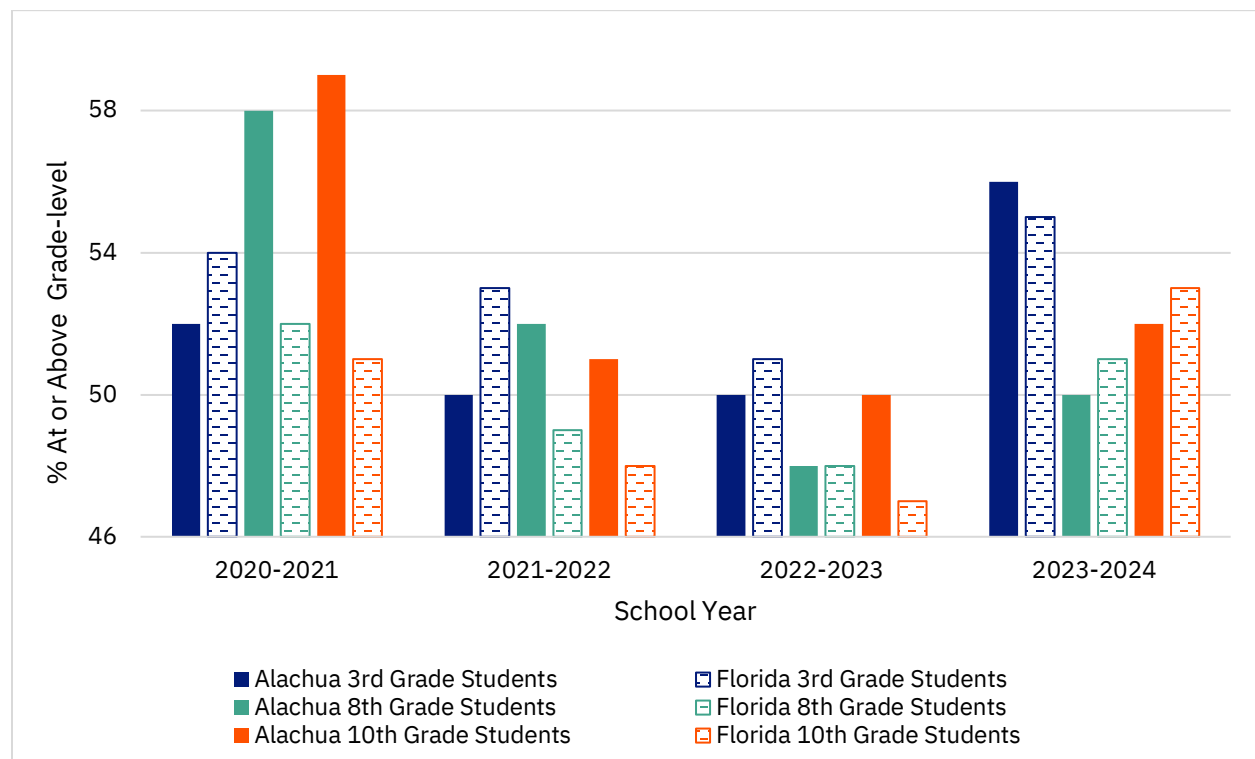
K-12 Literacy Achievement

The state of Florida has used various standardized assessments over time to measure grade level proficiency for K-12 students. During the data collection window for this literacy needs assessment, Florida used two standardized assessments: Florida Standards Assessment (FSA) and Florida Assessment of Student Thinking (FAST). FSA was the statewide standardized test used in Florida from 2015 through the 2021-2022 school year to measure student proficiency in the English Language Arts (ELA) standards in grades 3–10. FSA was a summative assessment, administered once at the end of the school year, providing a snapshot of student achievement. Florida replaced FSA with FAST during the 2022-2023 school year. FAST also measures students' proficiency with ELA standards but is administered three times per year, allowing educators to monitor students' progress throughout the year and adjust instruction as needed. The timing of FAST assessments is referred to as “progress monitoring” or “PM.” PM1 is fall, PM2 is winter, and PM3 is spring.

Both FSA and FAST describe a student's proficiency as falling within a range of 5 achievement levels, (Level 1 is the lowest and Level 5 is the highest). Level 3 or higher is used to determine which students are considered at or above grade level.

The percentage of students in grades 3–10 in Alachua County scoring at or above grade level generally fell either slightly above or slightly below the state average (see Figure 9). Students in the middle and high school grades tended to slightly outperform students across the state in terms of total percentage scoring at or above a level 3 over time. More third grade students in Alachua County were performing at or above grade level than the state average as of the 2023-2024 school year.

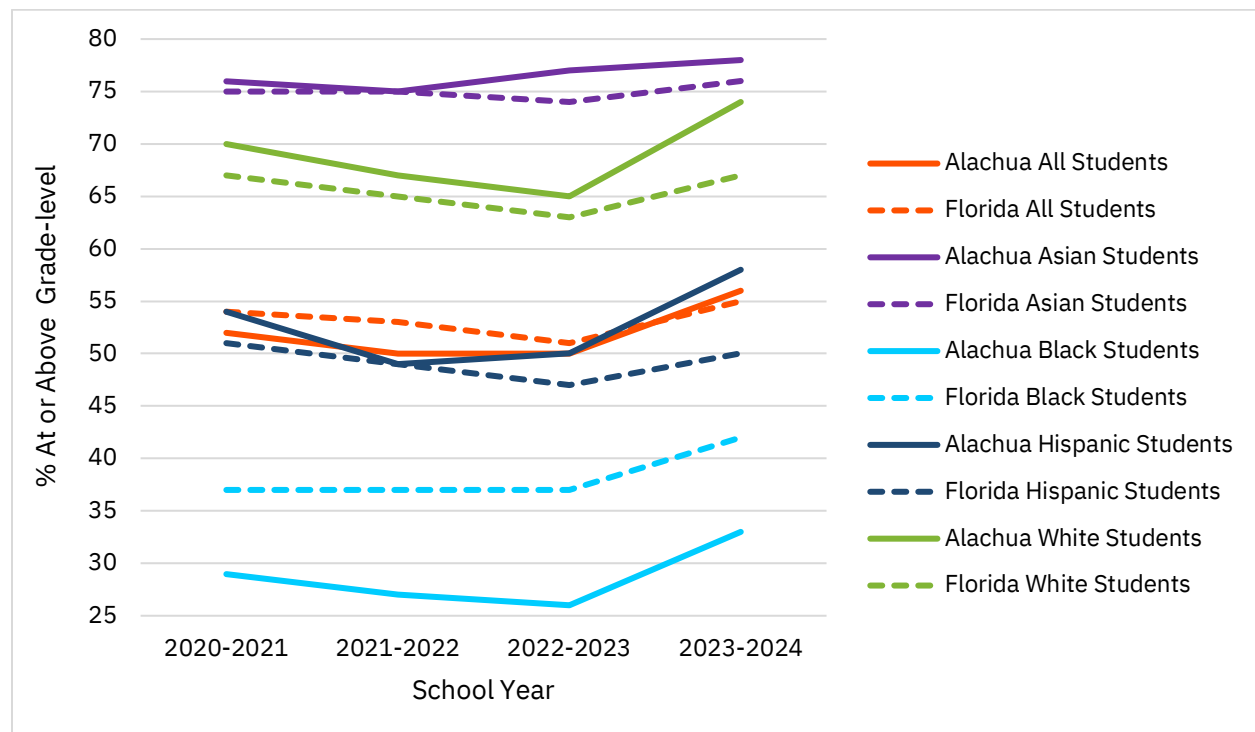
Figure 9. *Percent of Students At or Above Grade Level Reading Proficiency Rates (score 3 or higher), Alachua and Florida, 2020-2021 through 2023-2024*



Source: [Florida Department of Education](https://fldoe.org/data/assessment/reading-proficiency/)

The total percentage of third grade students scoring at or above grade level was roughly similar between Alachua County and the state average (see Figure 10). However, an analysis of performance by race/ethnicity and other subgroups revealed significant differences across groups. Asian, Hispanic/Latino, and White students in Alachua County consistently performed similar to, or better than, statewide averages for those groups. Yet, there was a consistent trend of a much smaller percentage of Black students in Alachua County scoring at or above grade level than Black students across the state. Scores trended upwards in 2023-2024, both in Alachua County and Florida.

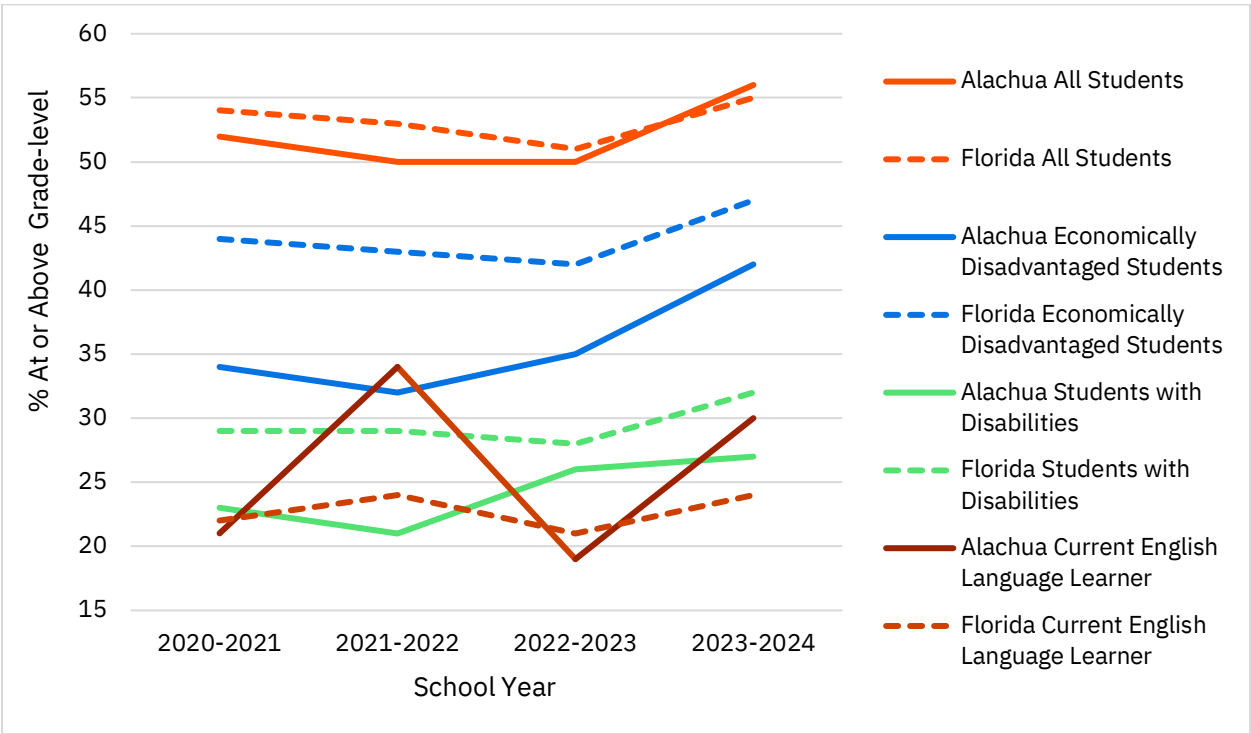
Figure 10. *Third Grade Reading (At or Above Grade Level) by Student Race/Ethnicity, Alachua and Florida, 2020-2021 through 2023-2024*



Source: [Florida Department of Education](https://fldoe.org/data/assessment/standards/excel/3rd-grade/2020-2021-through-2023-2024)

Economically disadvantaged students and students with disabilities in Alachua County also underperformed relative to similar groups of third graders across the state (see Figure 11). During the 2023-2024 school year, English language learners in Alachua County appeared to have made significant gains relative to the average statewide performance.

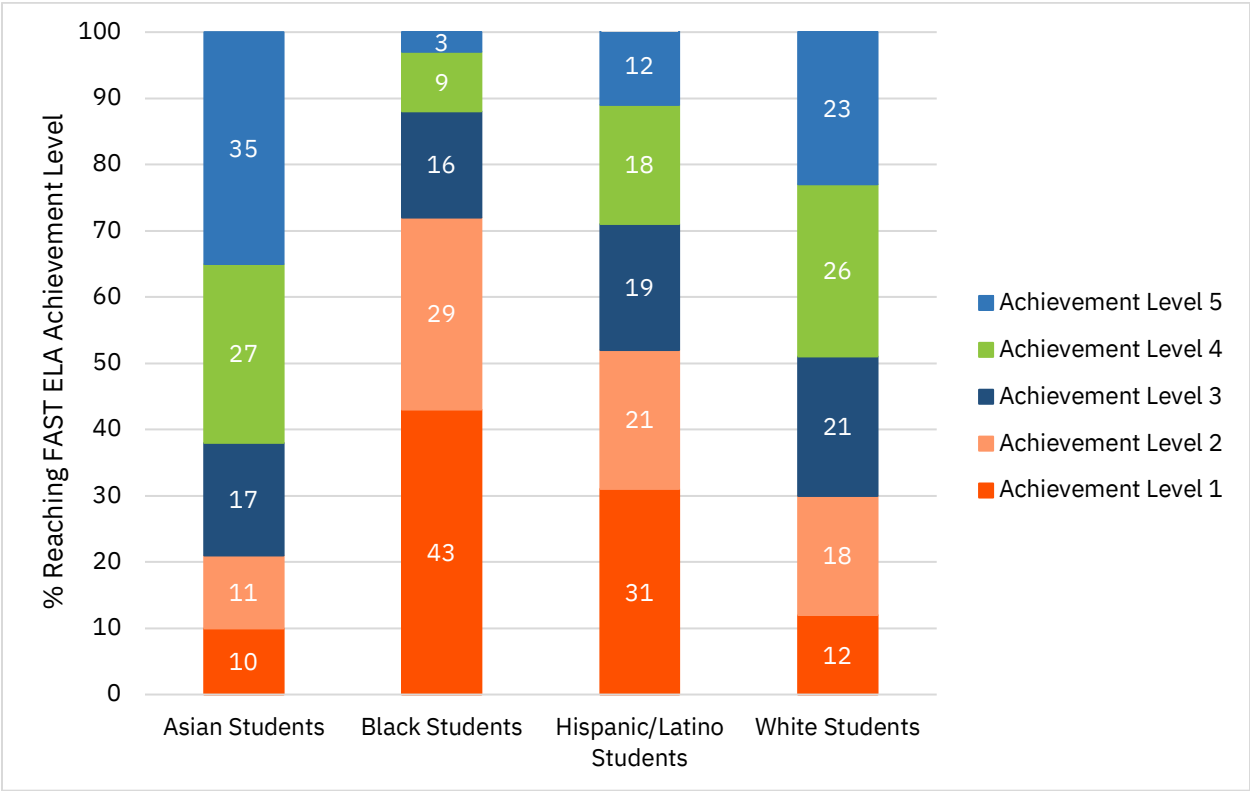
Figure 11. *Third Grade Reading (At or Above Grade Level) by Student English Language Learner, Economic Disadvantage, and Disability Status, Alachua and Florida, 2020-2021 through 2023-2024*



Source: [Florida Department of Education](#)

In addition to reviewing publicly data from the Florida department of Education, the UF Lastinger Center analyzed data received from Alachua County Public Schools (ACPS). ACPS FAST data for PM3 in Spring 2024 confirmed that less than 12% of Black students and 29% of Hispanic/Latino students scored 4 or 5 on the ELA assessment (see Figure 12). The data shown in this figure suggests that Black and Hispanic/Latino students are not adequately getting their literacy needs met in the current educational environment.

Figure 12. *Percent of Students reaching FAST ELA Achievement Level by Race and Ethnicity, Alachua, Grades 3–10, PM3 2023-2024*



Source: Alachua County Public Schools

K-12 Attendance and On-Time Graduation

Direct literacy instruction plays a crucial role in developing reading and writing skills. Several non-instructional factors within the school environment also significantly influence literacy outcomes. Attendance patterns, including chronic absenteeism, affect students’ exposure to instruction and opportunities for literacy development (Ginsburg et al., 2014). High suspension rates reduce valuable instructional time, disproportionately impacting students who may already be struggling with literacy skills (LiCalsi et al., 2021).

Additionally, ELA grades often reflect students’ ability to engage with text, comprehend content, and express their understanding, all of which are deeply tied to literacy proficiency. Graduation rates offer another important lens through which to view literacy outcomes, as students who struggle with reading, writing, and communication are at a greater risk of dropping out or failing to complete high school on time (Hernandez, 2012). These factors do not exist in isolation. They interact with literacy achievement in complex ways, reinforcing either success or challenges.

Understanding these non-instructional outcomes provides essential context for assessing literacy needs and developing targeted interventions. By examining these broader indicators, a more comprehensive view emerges of the challenges with learning to read and opportunities to improve outcomes.

Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or more of school days for any reason. ACPS tracks the percentage of school days attended for all students enrolled in the district for at least 10 days during the school year. Overall, Alachua County’s absence rates were similar to state averages (see Table 11).

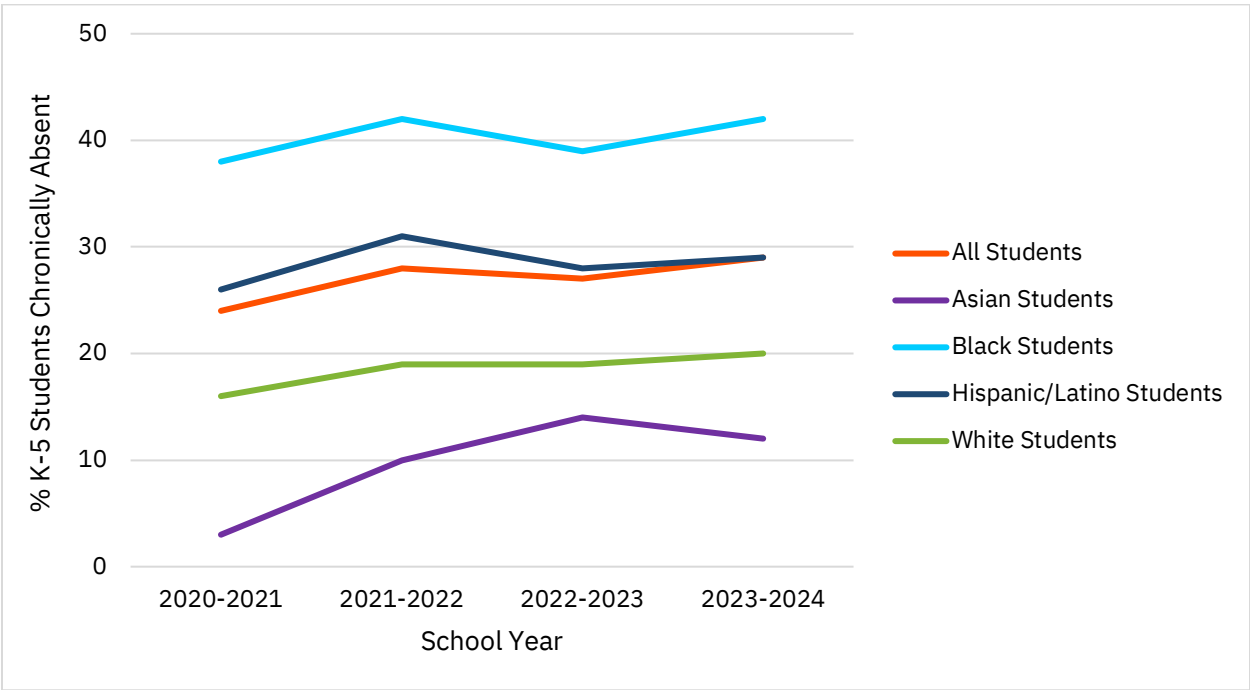
Table 11. Student Attendance, Alachua and Florida, 2020-2021 through 2023-2024

	2020-2021		2021-2022		2022-2023		2023-2024	
	Florida	Alachua	Florida	Alachua	Florida	Alachua	Florida	Alachua
% Students Absent =>21 Days	17%	16%	21%	19%	19%	19%	20%	20%
% Students Absent =>10%	25%	24%	32%	30%	31%	30%	31%	32%

Source: [Florida Department of Education](#)

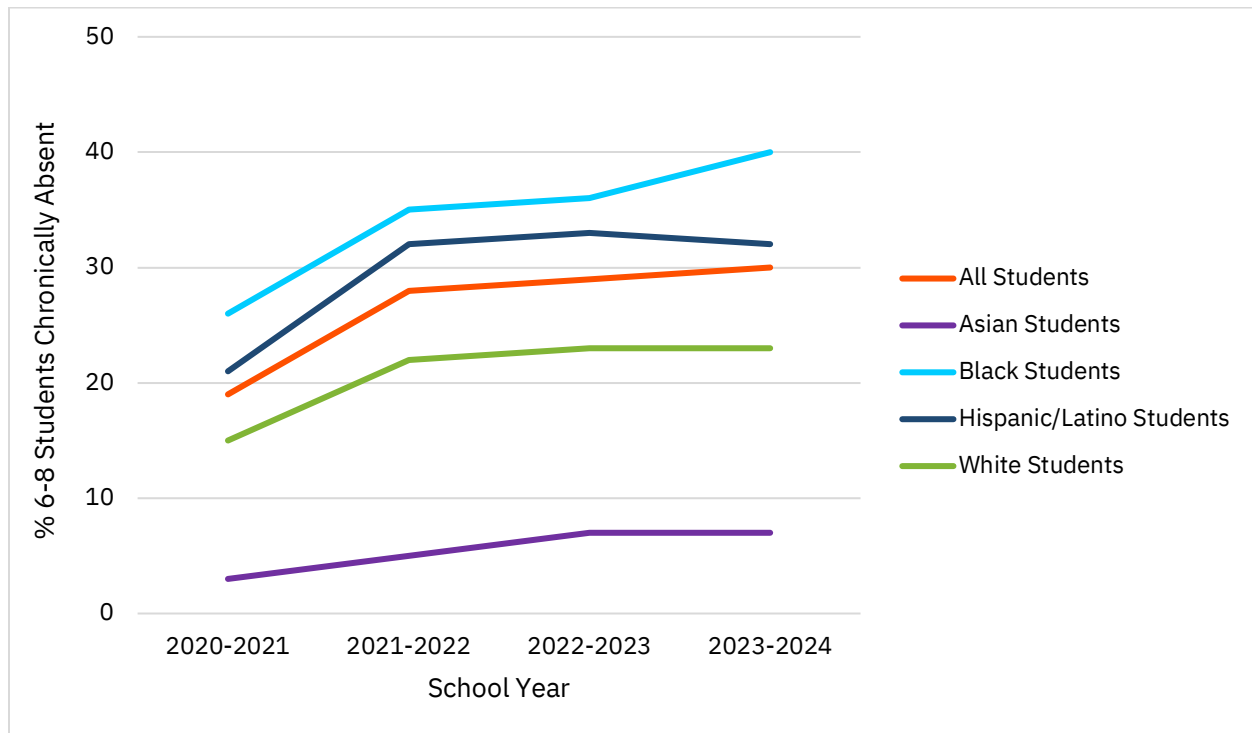
Average rates of chronic absence increased for all students in Alachua County between the 2020-2021 and 2023-2024 school years (see Figures 13–15). This followed statewide trends of increasing chronic absence since pandemic school closures in 2020. Across all school levels, Black and Hispanic/Latino students had the highest rates of chronic absence whereas Asian students exhibited the lowest rates of chronic absence.

Figure 13. *Percent of Chronically Absent K-5 Students by Race/Ethnicity, 2020-2021 through 2023-2024*



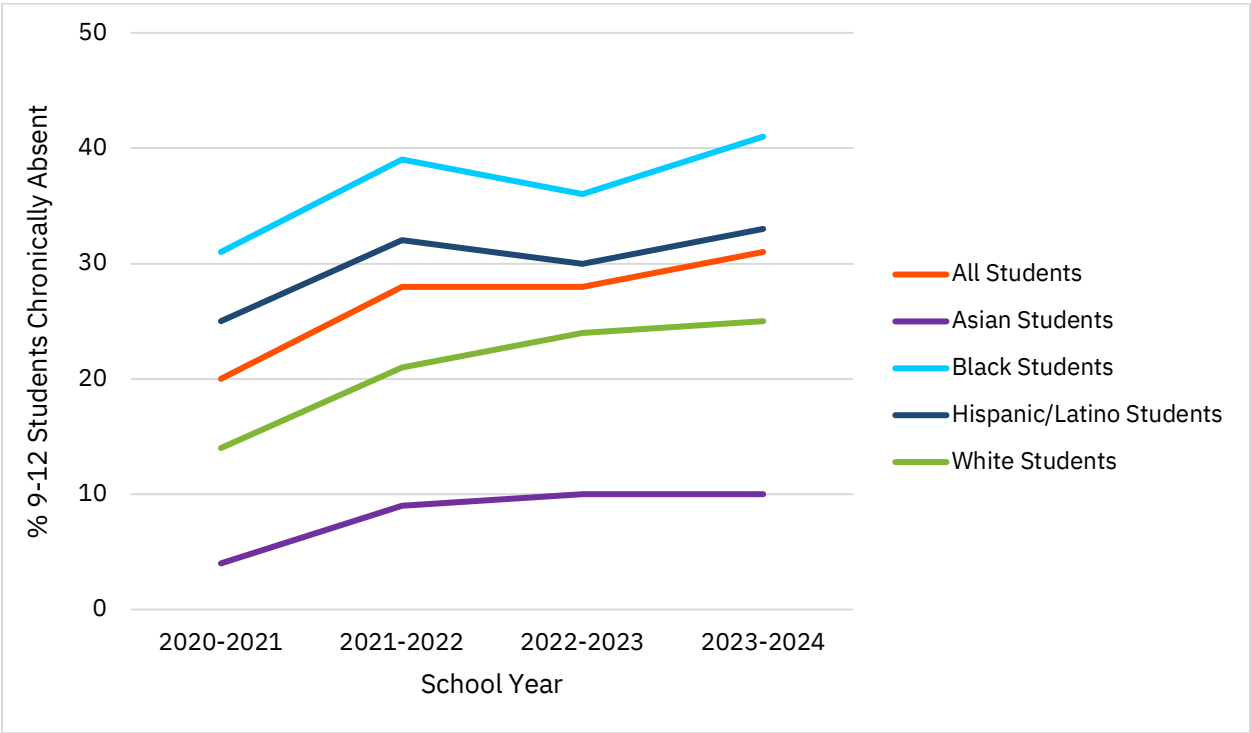
Source: Alachua County Public Schools; Note: Chronically absent is defined as missing 10% or more of school days that the child was enrolled in ACPS.

Figure 14. *Percent of Chronically Absent 6-8 Students by Race/Ethnicity, 2020-2021 through 2023-2024*



Source: Alachua County Public Schools; Note: Chronically absent is defined as missing 10% or more of school days that the child was enrolled in ACPS.

Figure 15. *Percent of Chronically Absent 9-12 Students by Race/Ethnicity, 2020-2021 through 2023-2024*



Source: Alachua County Public Schools; Note: Chronically absent is defined as missing 10% or more of school days that the child was enrolled in ACPs.

Data about student ELA grades was also provided by ACPs. The chance of failing an ELA course for students in ninth through twelve grades was calculated from 2020-2021 through 2022-2023. Failure rates averaged 16% for fall courses and 19% for spring courses. An additional indicator of academic success is the percentage of students graduating from high school. Alachua County had lower rates of on-time graduation than Florida averages, a gap of 6% in 2023-2024 (see Table 12).

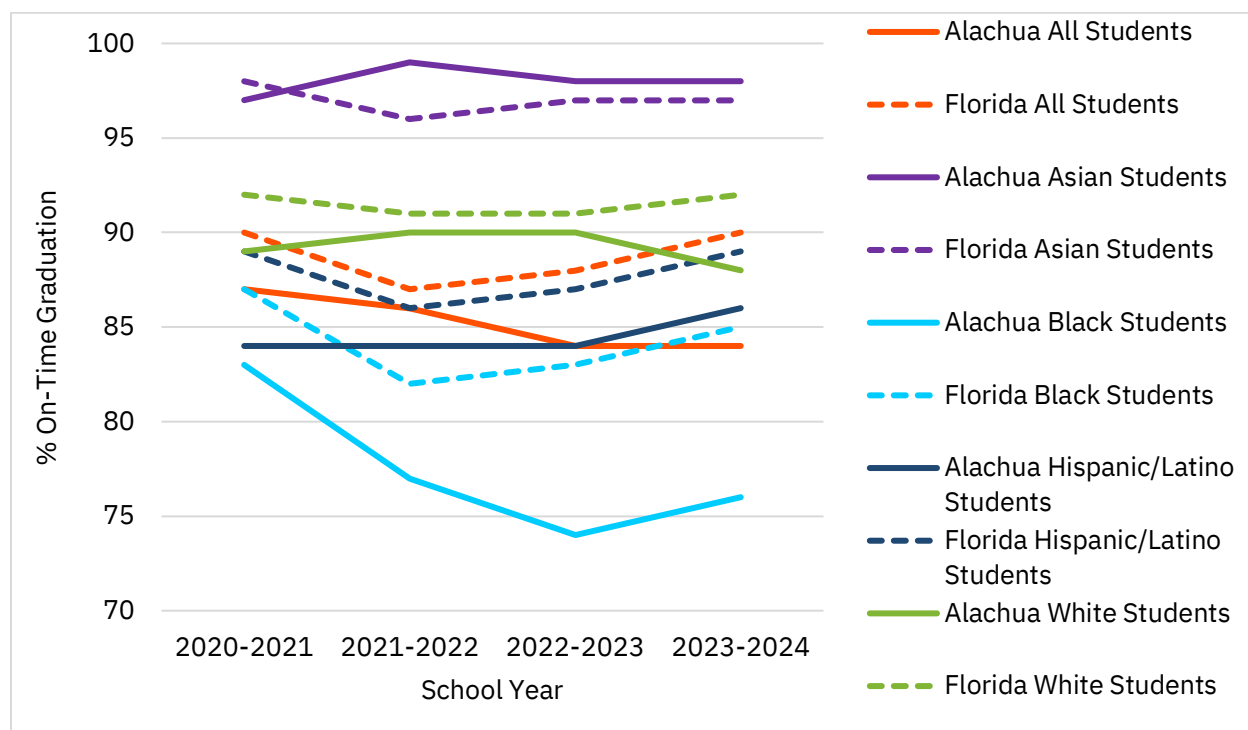
Table 12. *On-Time Twelfth Grade High School Graduation Rates, Alachua and Florida, 2020-2021 through 2023-2024*

	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Alachua	87%	86%	84%	84%
Florida	90%	87%	88%	90%

Source: [Florida Department of Education](#)

Except for Asian students, smaller percentages of all Alachua County student subgroups graduated on time compared to similar subgroups across Florida (see Figure 16). On-time graduation rates across student subgroups have declined since the 2020-2021 school year, with a sharp decline for Black students in recent years.

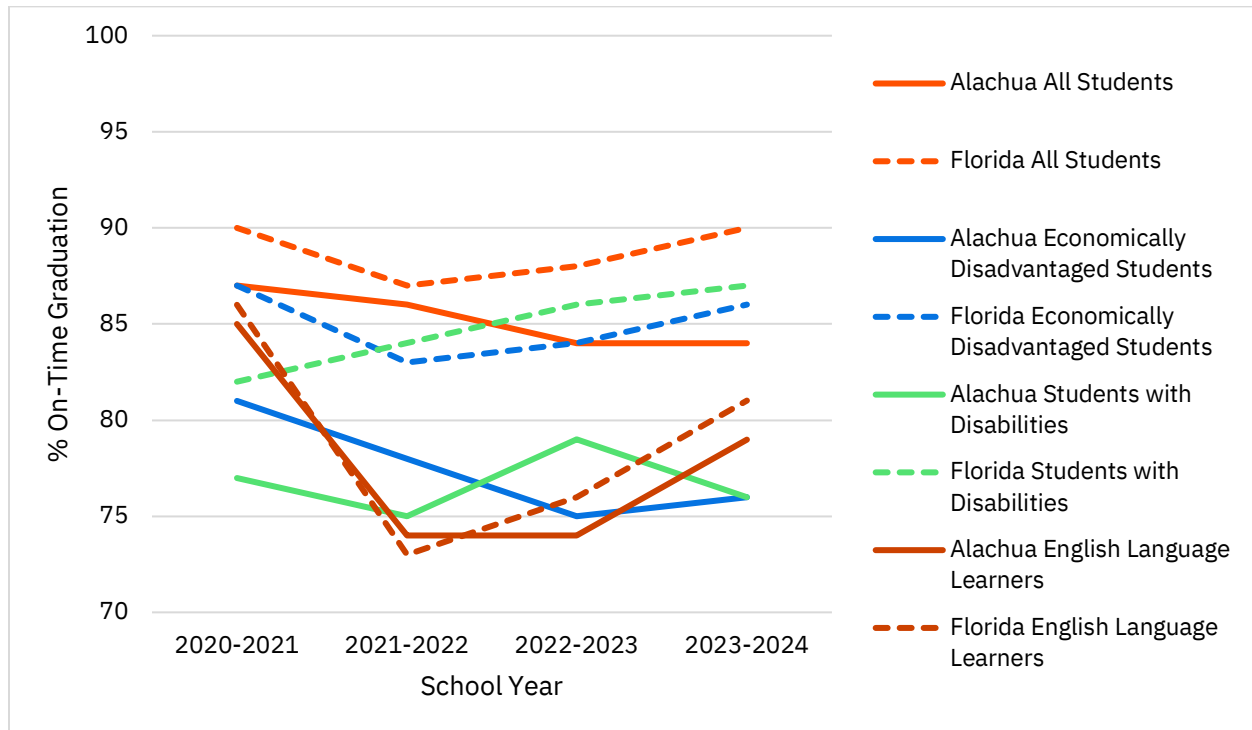
Figure 16. *Percent of On-Time Twelfth Grade High School Graduation by Race/Ethnicity, Alachua and Florida, 2020-2021 through 2023-2024*



Source: [Florida Department of Education](https://fldoe.org/data/assessment/graduation/)

Smaller percentages of Alachua County students who are classified as economically disadvantaged, English learners, and students with disabilities graduated on time when compared with similar subgroups across the state (see Figure 17). Percentages of students graduating on time decreased across the state from 2020-2021 to 2021-2022. Yet, the state averages were roughly similar to or better than pre-pandemic levels, whereas Alachua County's on-time graduation rate continued to lag behind state averages for the above subgroups. Increases occurred for most subgroups in 2023-2024.

Figure 17. *Percent of On-Time Twelfth Grade High School Graduation by Student English Learner, Economic Disadvantage, and Disability Status, Alachua and Florida, 2020-2021 through 2023-2024*



Source: [Florida Department of Education](https://fldoe.org/data/assessment/graduation/)



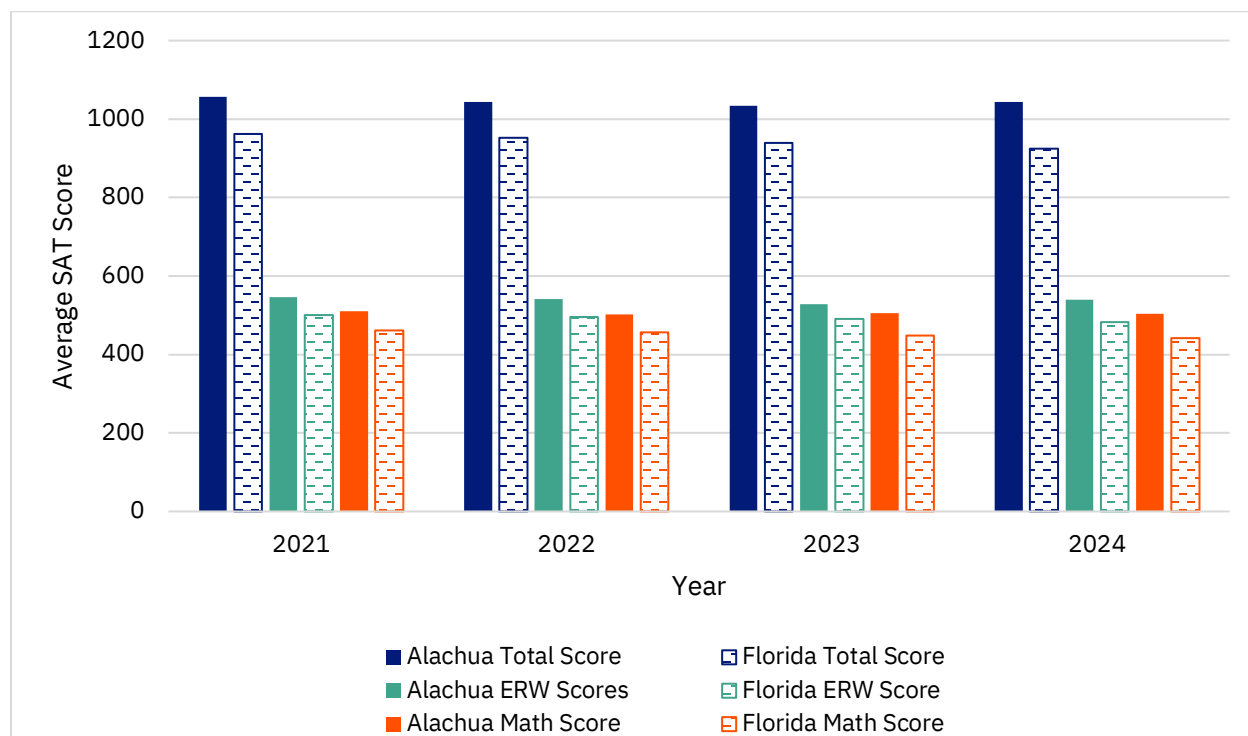
College and Workforce Readiness

College entrance exams serve as critical tools for assessing workforce readiness by measuring essential academic, technical, and problem-solving skills of individuals 16 and older. These assessments help determine preparedness for higher education and career pathways and align individuals with roles that match their competencies. College entrance exams measure reading comprehension and written communication skills and ensure candidates can analyze information and articulate ideas effectively in academic and professional environments. The exams help students identify academic strengths and guide career choices based on their performance in different subject areas (Allen & Radunzel, 2017; College Board, 2025). The exams establish a standardized framework to evaluate communication, numerical reasoning, and logical problem-solving skills—core competencies for many professional roles. College entrance exams serve as indicators of readiness for both academic and vocational training.

The most common college entrance exams in the United States are the SAT, published by the College Board, and the ACT, published by ACT, Inc.

The College Board has investigated the connection between SAT scores and college course grades and early career success. They found that students with an Evidence-Based Reading and Writing (ERW) score of at least 480 and a Math score of at least 530 are likely to be successful in pursuing post-secondary education or joining the workforce (The College Board, n.d.). On average, Alachua County Public School students exceeded the ERW benchmark of 480 but not the Math benchmark of 530 (see Figure 18).

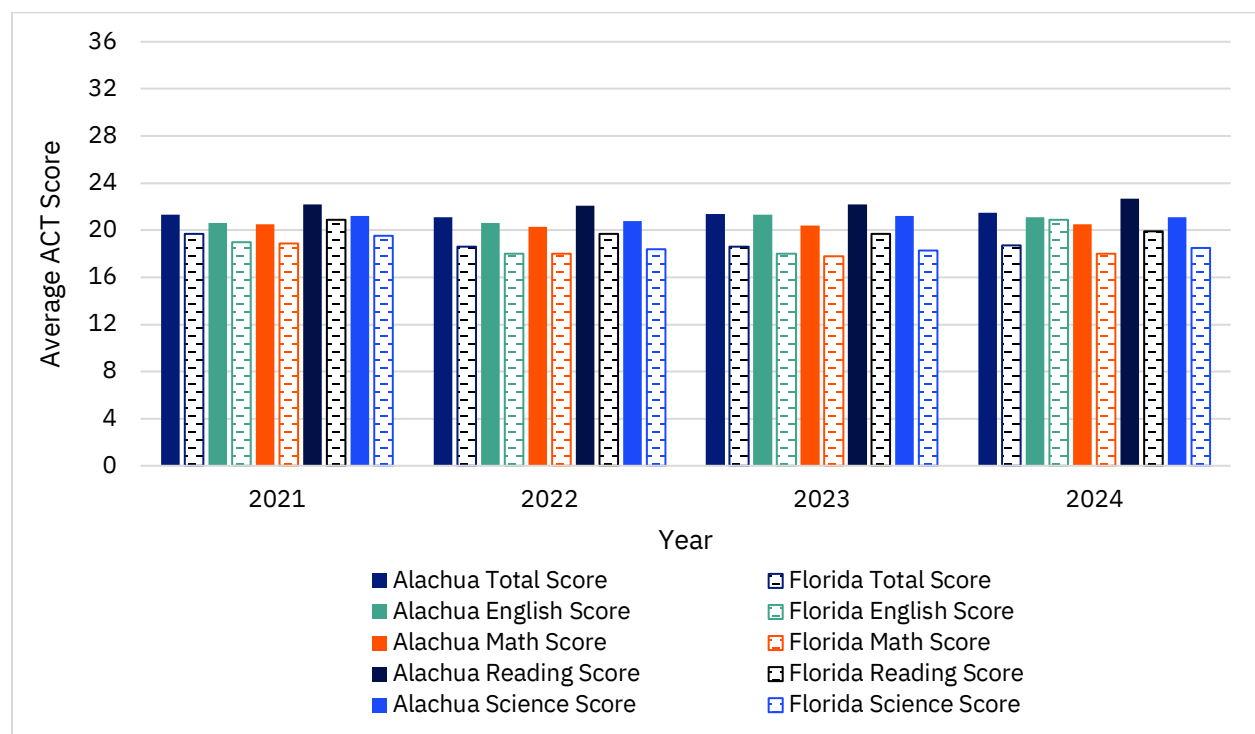
Figure 18. *Average SAT Section Score Compared to College and Career Readiness Benchmarks, Alachua and Florida, 2021-2024*



Note: Data in this chart reflects the highest SAT score of all students who took the SAT in the given year, including high school graduates. Data provided on request by Florida Department of Education. Max Evidence-Based Reading and Writing (ERW)/Math score = 800. Max total score = 1600.

ACT, Inc. has also published college readiness benchmarks which, if met, indicate that a student is likely to be successful with a typical first-year college student course load. The college readiness benchmarks for each ACT section are as follows: English, 18; Math, 22; Reading, 22; Science, 23 (ACT Inc., 2017). According to the Florida Department of Education, in 2024, 31% of ACPS students met all four of the ACT College Readiness benchmarks, compared to 15% across all of Florida. 63% of ACPS students met the English benchmark and 52% met the Reading benchmark. This is consistent with the percentage of students meeting ACT English and Reading benchmarks for the previous three years. However, the average ACT English and Reading scores in Alachua County were below the readiness benchmarks (see Figure 19). This indicates that 40-50% of students who are not meeting the benchmark were scoring low enough to reduce the district's average score.

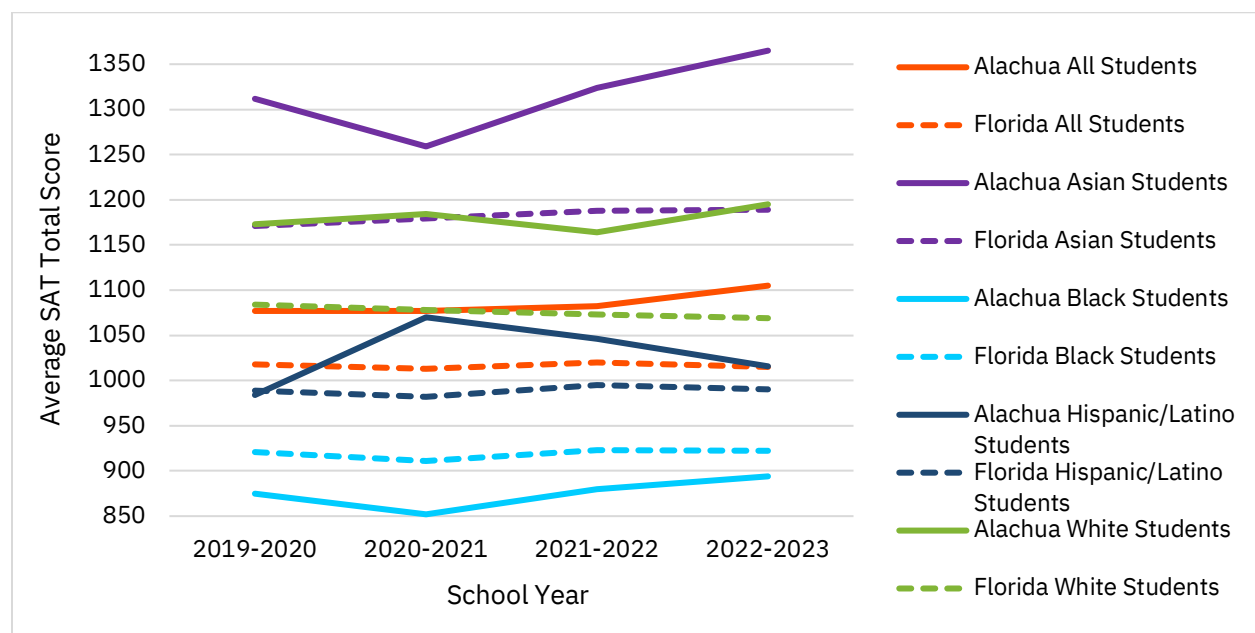
Figure 19. *Average ACT Section Score Compared to College Readiness Benchmarks, Alachua and Florida, 2021-2024*



Note: Data in this chart reflects the highest ACT score of all students who took the ACT in the given year, including high school graduates. Data provided on request by Florida Department of Education. Max section score = 36. Max total score = 36, or the rounded average of the four section scores.

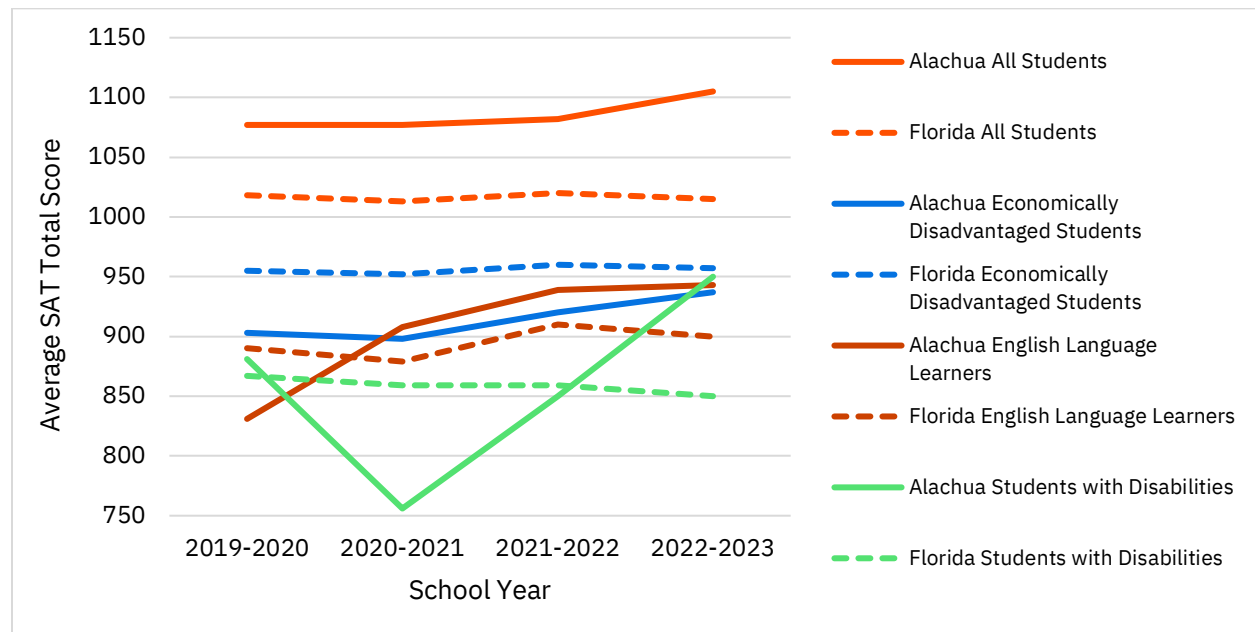
SAT and ACT composite scores were examined in further detail by student subgroups (see Figures 20–23). Black students on average scored below the district average and below the average reported for Black students across the state. Hispanic/Latino students in Alachua performed just under the district average but higher than the state average. Economically disadvantaged students in Alachua scored lower than their statewide counterparts. English language learners performed better in Alachua County compared to the rest of the state.

Figure 20. *High School Graduate Average SAT Total Score by Race/Ethnicity, Alachua and Florida, 2019-2020 through 2022-2023*



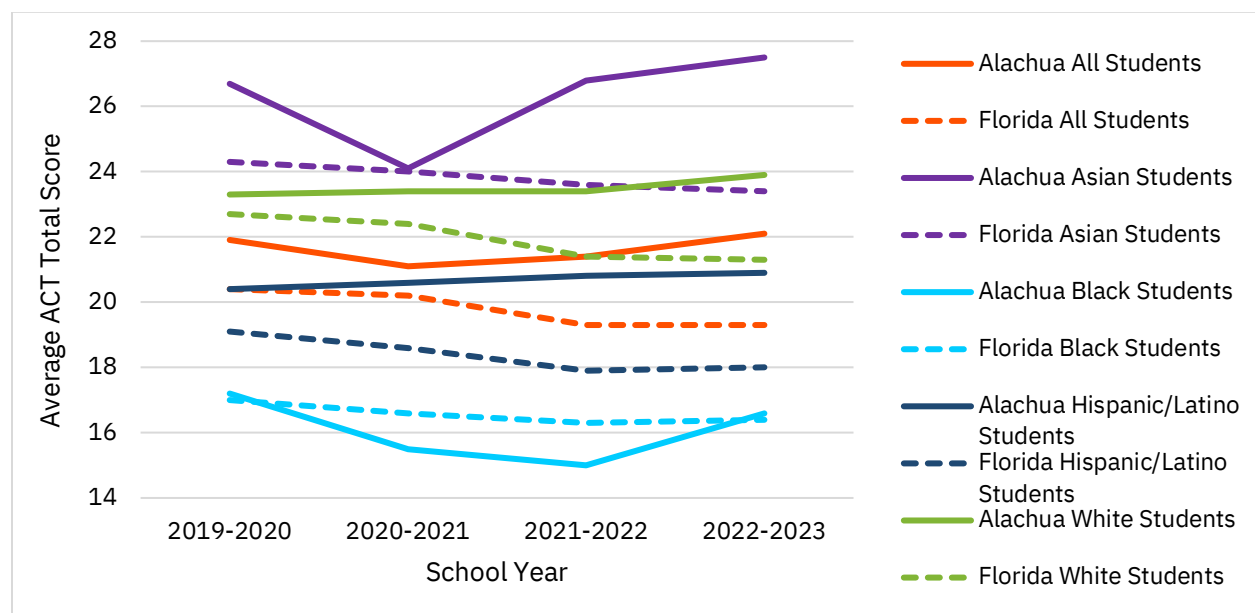
Source: [Alachua School District Report Card](#); Note: Max total score = 1600.

Figure 21. High School Graduate Average SAT Composite Score by Student English Learner, Economic Disadvantage, and Disability Status, Alachua and Florida, 2019-2020 through 2022-2023



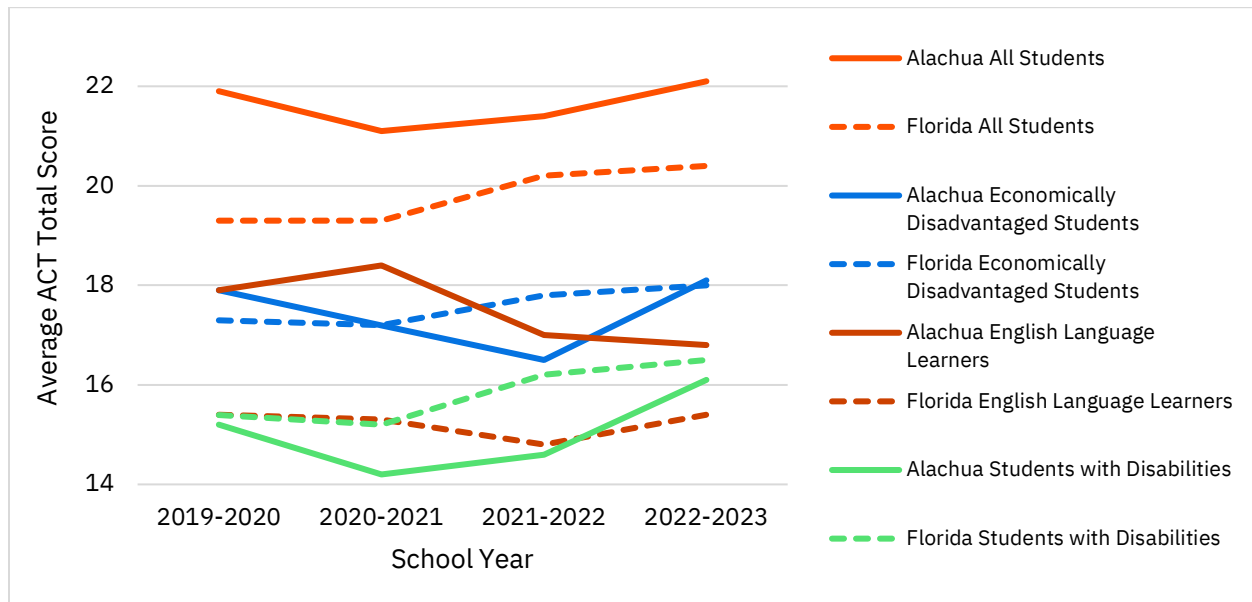
Source: [Alachua School District Report Card](#); Note: Max total score = 1600.

Figure 22. High School Graduate Average ACT Total Score by Race/Ethnicity, Alachua and Florida, 2019-2020 through 2022-2023



Source: [Alachua School District Report Card](#); Note: Max total score = 36.

Figure 23. High School Graduate Average ACT Total Score by Student English Learner, Economic Disadvantage, and Disability Status, Alachua and Florida, 2019-2020 through 2022-2023



Source: [Alachua School District Report Card](#); Note: Max total score = 36.



Adult Education

Adult learners are individuals aged 16 and older who did not complete their K-12 education, or who possess a high school diploma or equivalent but nevertheless have gaps in basic skills such as reading, math, or spoken English. Nearly 20 million U.S. adults have limited English proficiency, and English instruction is an essential part of adult education (National Coalition for Literacy, n.d.).

Most adult learners (64%) are employed and are parents or primary caregivers of school-aged children. Many adults are motivated to return to school because they want to help their children succeed in school. Most adults who lack high school diplomas or have gaps in basic academic skills earn low wages and lack the preparation to succeed in postsecondary education and most training programs (National Coalition for Literacy, n.d.).

For adults, literacy plays a critical role in determining professional and economic mobility. Adults with literacy competencies can pursue a broad range of career opportunities that may contribute to both their financial well-being and overall workforce productivity. However, those lacking literacy skills often experience severe employment limitations, which often reinforce cycles of poverty and underemployment.

Beyond personal outcomes, adult literacy is a critical factor in shaping labor market outcomes and overall economic resilience. Programs designed to improve literacy skills provide individuals with better employment prospects, enhance business performance, and stimulate economic progress at all levels of society. Allocating resources toward literacy development ensures long-term social and financial benefits.

A growing number of adults in the United States are struggling with literacy. Recent data from the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2024) reveals a troubling rise in the percentage of adults in the United States scoring at the lowest levels of literacy proficiency (Level 1 or below). Between 2017 and 2023, this figure climbed from 19% to 28%. This trend presents challenges for workforce development and economic growth and underscores the urgency of implementing policies and programs aimed at improving adult literacy rates nationwide.

In Florida, estimates from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES) suggest that between 24% and 26% of adults experience difficulties with literacy tasks (Lunardini, 2024). According to data from the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), approximately 19% of adults in Alachua County are functionally illiterate. This figure is slightly below the statewide rate of 24% and the national rate of 20% (Lunardini, 2024; NCES, 2024). These figures highlight the urgent need for continued literacy interventions and accessible learning opportunities.

Organizations Serving Adults in Alachua County

In response to this challenge, various educational institutions and community organizations are working collaboratively to improve adult literacy through adult education programs. These efforts focus on equipping individuals with the necessary skills for personal, academic, and professional advancement, while also fostering civic engagement and social mobility.

Adult education serves as a vital component of workforce and community development. For many, it is a pathway for continued skill, knowledge, and competency development beyond what is offered through traditional primary and secondary schooling. The programs range from literacy and vocational training to

continuing education and lifelong learning initiatives. With flexible learning formats (e.g., in-person instruction, online courses, and self-directed study) and a focus on real-world application, adult education caters to the needs of learners, enhances workforce readiness, and strengthens economic mobility.

In Alachua County, community colleges, universities, training centers, nonprofit organizations, and Alachua County Public Schools (ACPS) play a key role in delivering accessible and impactful adult education programs. Programs target different demographics, including adult English language learners, GED candidates, individuals with intellectual disabilities, and out-of-school youth.

At the state level, the Florida Literacy Coalition (FLC) is a statewide initiative that enhances literacy development efforts, including those in Alachua County. The organization plays a critical role in promoting, supporting, and advocating for the effective delivery of adult and family literacy services across Florida. By working with over 300 literacy and adult education providers, the FLC strengthens the capacity of organizations engaged in improving literacy. As part of its outreach efforts, the FLC provides free, structured learning opportunities for Florida residents. One of its key initiatives includes intermediate-level English classes, which help learners enhance their language proficiency while gaining insights into life in the United States. The eight-week Zoom courses offer a flexible and accessible learning environment for adult participants seeking to develop their English skills.

At the county level, a key institution supporting adult literacy is the Alachua County Library District (ACLD), which offers a broad range of free literacy services. Through its Adult Literacy Program, ACLD provides one-on-one tutoring, small group instruction, access to English conversation clubs, General Educational Development (GED) preparation, and job skills workshops (Alachua County Library District, n.d.). These services are designed to meet the diverse learning needs of the community. In 2024, ACLD services included the following:

- One-on-one and small group tutoring for both basic education and English language instruction: 88 unique learners
- GED preparation: 40 unique learners
- Digital literacy assistance (Northstar Digital Literacy): 57 unique learners
- Virtual and in-person English conversation opportunities: averaged 36 participants per week

In addition to the library system, the Adult Education Program provided by ACPS plays a significant role in supporting adult learners. The program offers Adult Basic Education (ABE), General Educational Development (GED) preparation, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses, all of which aim to enhance foundational academic skills and English proficiency among adults (Alachua County Public Schools, n.d.). ACPS also provides GED tests, adult high school, adult basic education, literacy training, and Division of Blind services classes. Populations served include adults, young adults, seniors, people in jail, people with disabilities, people who did not complete high school, and people with limited English. Classes are provided at various times and locations throughout the county.

At the university level, UF's English Language Institute (ELI) offers structured English as a Second Language (ESL) education for individuals preparing for academic study in the US. The Intensive English Program (IEP) serves F1 and J1 visa holders, as well as tourists and prospective students, through a rigorous curriculum that includes Reading/Writing, Grammar, and Listening/Speaking courses across six proficiency levels. This full-time program provides 23 hours of instruction per week and equips learners with the advanced English skills necessary for academic success.

At the college level, Santa Fe College's Blount Center contributes to adult education efforts by providing ABE (people whose entry skills are below the 9th grade level but who often wish to pass their GED test) and GED preparation programs (people whose entry skills are above the 9th grade level and who are trying to pass their GED test), along with ESOL instruction (people who are non-native English speakers).

Student Access and INclusion Together (Project SAINT) is a comprehensive post-secondary transition program for students with intellectual disabilities. Project SAINT is tailored to students' skills and interests. Students can enter two specialized programs: Horticulture Agriculture Pathway (HAP) or Artist Entrepreneur Pathway (AEP). Project SAINT students receive the part-time support of Santa Fe student mentors whether in classes, on internships, or participating in campus activities. Santa Fe College Adult Education assists adults with developing basic skills to obtain employment and enable success in college, the community, and the workplace. Santa Fe College Adult Education provides the following programs (see Table 13).

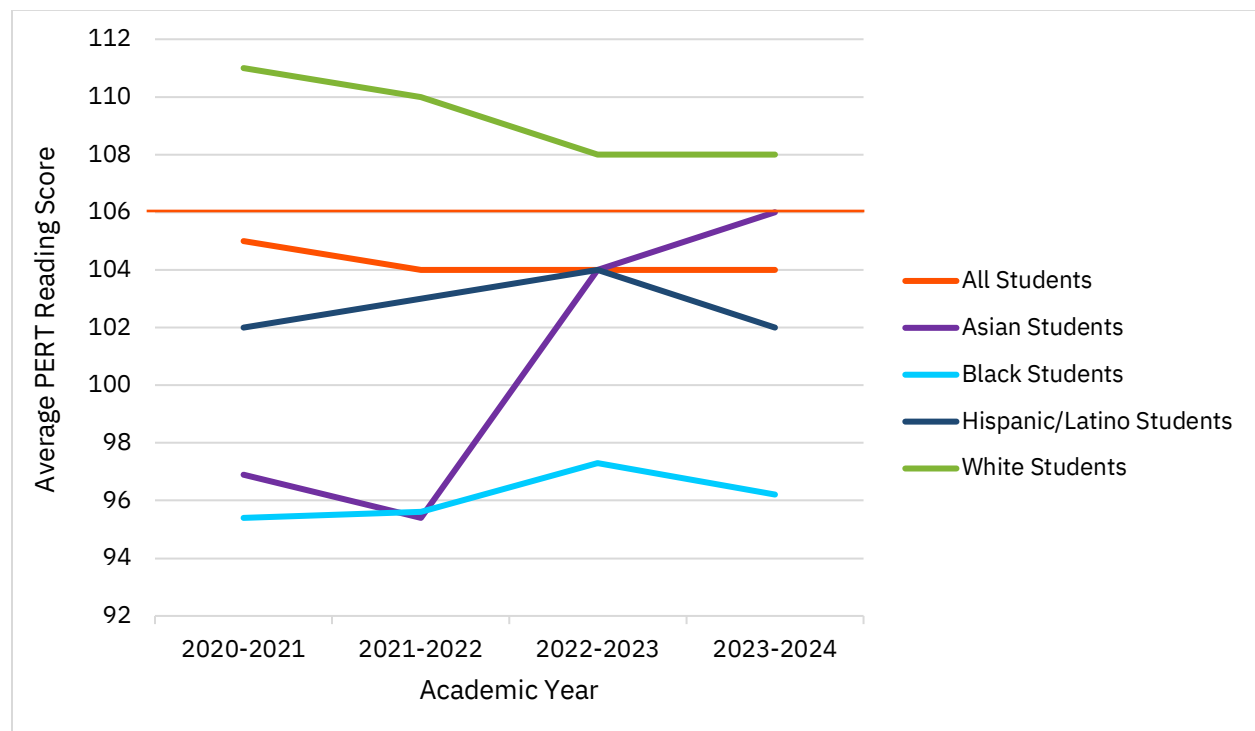
Table 13. *Santa Fe College Adult Education Program Enrollment and Outcomes, 2022-2023 and 2023-2024*

2022-2023		2023-2024	
Program	Enrollment Numbers	Program	Enrollment Numbers
Adult Basic Education (ABE)	294	Adult Basic Education (ABE)	307
ABE participants who entered without a high school diploma	244	ABE participants who entered without a high school diploma	156
GED Preparation	1	GED Preparation	3
ESOL	370	ESOL	460
Project SAINT	15	Project SAINT	15
Total Enrollment	680	Total Enrollment	785
Outcomes	Outcome Numbers	Outcomes	Outcome Numbers
Learning Gains	242	Learning Gains	261
GED's Earned	80	GED's Earned	72
Not Employed at Entry	261	Not Employed at Entry	191
Employed 2nd Quarter After Exit	N/A	Employed 2nd Quarter After Exit	207
Applied or enrolled in Santa Fe College during program or after exit (2022 and 2023)	150	Applied or enrolled in Santa Fe College during program or after exit (2024; more to enroll Fall 2025)	51
Total Outcomes	472	Total Outcomes	591

Sources: Enrollment, Learning Gains, GED's Earned: Santa Fe Adult Education Data. Employed 2nd Quarter After Exit: National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS) data (note: not available for 2022-2023 Report). Applied or enrolled in Santa Fe College: Santa Fe College Transition Report.

Santa Fe College uses testing benchmarks to help match students with appropriately leveled courses. Many Adult Basic Education (ABE) and ESOL students are placed according to their Florida Postsecondary Education Readiness Test (PERT) scores. The benchmarks to enroll in college-level courses based on PERT are a Reading score of 106 or higher and a Writing score of 103 or higher (Santa Fe College, n.d.). On average, adult students from Alachua County scored below the college-level benchmark in PERT Reading and slightly above the benchmark in PERT Writing (see Figures 24 and 25, with benchmarks indicated by the horizontal orange lines). Black students from Alachua County averaged the lowest scores on both tests.

Figure 24. Average Santa Fe College PERT Reading Test Scores for Alachua County Residents for Academic Years 2020-2021 through 2023-2024 by Race and Ethnicity



Source: Data request to Santa Fe Office of Institutional Research.

All Students (N 2020 = 454, N 2021 = 524, N 2022 = 542, N 2023 = 606)

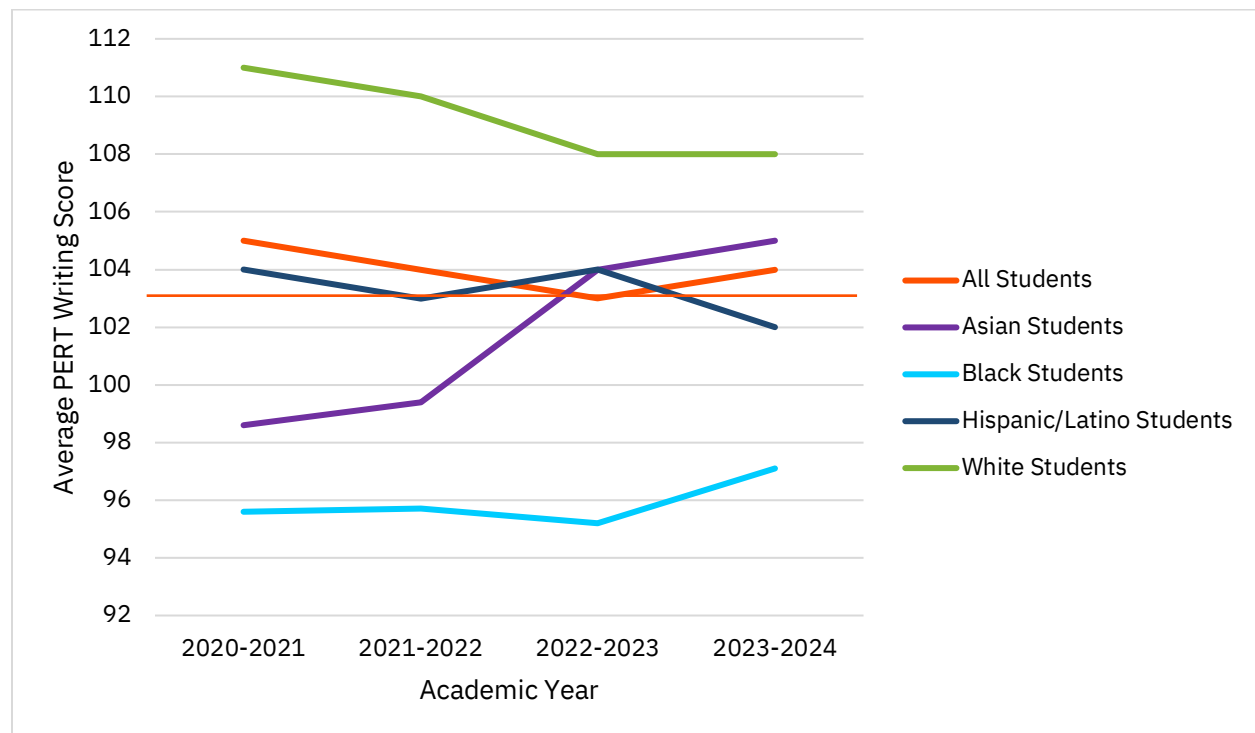
Asian Students (N 2020 = 23, N 2021 = 18, N 2022 = 30, N 2023 = 34)

Black Students (N 2020 = 96, N 2021 = 120, N 2022 = 148, N 2023 = 145)

Hispanic/Latino Students (N 2020 = 96, N 2021 = 110, N 2022 = 120, N 2023 = 116)

White Students (N 2020 = 196, N 2021 = 215, N 2022 = 202, N 2023 = 244)

Figure 25. Average Santa Fe College PERT Writing Test Scores for Alachua County Residents for Academic Years 2020-2021 through 2023-2024 by Race and Ethnicity



Source: Data request to Santa Fe Office of Institutional Research.

All Students (N 2020 = 445, N 2021 = 504, N 2022 = 530, N 2023 = 580)

Asian Students (N 2020 = 24, N 2021 = 18, N 2022 = 29, N 2023 = 32)

Black Students (N 2020 = 94, N 2021 = 116, N 2022 = 150, N 2023 = 146)

Hispanic/Latino Students (N 2020 = 90, N 2021 = 106, N 2022 = 121, N 2023 = 107)

White Students (N 2020 = 194, N 2021 = 208, N 2022 = 187, N 2023 = 227)

Santa Fe College students go on to be successful in their ABE and ESOL courses, with an over 80% passing rate in all courses offered between 2020 and 2024. Additionally, the increasing number of students taking the PERT test over time supports the narrative that many adult education service providers said about adults in Alachua County are actively seeking out and utilizing ESOL and ABE programs.

Faith-based organizations play a significant role in addressing literacy gaps by offering accessible language education and support services to non-native English speakers. These programs provide essential resources, such as English instruction, citizenship education, and cultural integration assistance, and help individuals navigate their communities more effectively. One such initiative is the International Learning Center

at Parkview Baptist Church, which offers ESOL classes, citizenship education, and childcare services to support linguistic and cultural adaptation.

Several religious-based organizations facilitate literacy development programs that are tailored to the diverse learning needs of local communities. For example, Catholic Charities operates the English Language Literacy Program which features small, personalized classrooms and certified ESL instructors. Similarly, the Emmanuel Mennonite Church provides free weekend ESL courses and serves Spanish speakers, Haitian-Creole speakers, and community members who speak additional languages.

Other organizations focus on individualized learning support. For instance, the University City Church of Christ's English Partners Program offers free one-on-one tutoring and customized study materials based on participants' language proficiency, academic goals, or job-related needs. The Williams Temple Church of God in Christ provides an English language outreach initiative that focuses on conversational English practice in a relaxed environment, including free intermediate and advanced ESOL classes via Zoom. Similarly, UF's Christian Campus House provides literacy support through their English Corner program, a student-led initiative that provides an informal space for individuals of all ages to practice spoken English.

Several community-based organizations integrate literacy development into broader educational, career, and health equity initiatives, ensuring that language barriers do not hinder access to essential services. The Community Health Equity Institute addresses disparities in education and healthcare by providing English language instruction for underserved communities. By offering tailored resources, the program helps individuals improve their communication skills and ultimately reduces obstacles to healthcare access and educational opportunities.

Other programs embed literacy education within comprehensive workforce and academic development frameworks. Education Equalizer and Project Youth Build incorporate language learning into career training and educational advancement initiatives, making literacy resources more accessible to diverse populations. Additionally, the Impacto Program, a recently launched initiative in Alachua County, focuses on English language instruction for adult learners. Staffed primarily by UF student volunteers, the program responds to the increasing demand for accessible and

effective ESL education, with a particular focus on supporting Hispanic/Latino immigrant communities as they integrate into the United States.

CareerSource North Florida also contributes to literacy advancement by acting as a referral and funding agency and linking job seekers with literacy training and workforce development programs. Through literacy readiness assessments and resource facilitation, CareerSource ensures that individuals receive the support necessary for successful workforce entry and career progression.

Through advocacy and programmatic support, these programs collectively contribute to enhancing literacy, expanding educational and career opportunities, and fostering community integration. By leveraging institutional and volunteer-driven resources, these initiatives help bridge language gaps and support more equitable access to literacy education for diverse populations.

However, despite the availability of these educational resources, adult literacy challenges persist. Alachua County's current adult literacy landscape is shaped by the collaborative efforts of libraries, public schools, higher education institutions, and community organizations. And while considerable progress has been made, continued investment in adult education remains essential to ensure literacy accessibility and workforce readiness for all residents.



Findings: Results from Data Collected During the Literacy Needs Assessment

This section details results from data collected during the literacy needs assessment. These findings are organized into the following sections: Survey Results and Open-Ended Survey Responses, Focus Groups, and Interviews.

Results from Surveys

Family members, community members, and Alachua County Public School (ACPS) educators (but not students, who received a shorter survey) were asked to respond to items about how much they agreed that the following statements were true for children and youth in Alachua County:

1. **Children** have the early literacy skills they need to be **ready for kindergarten**.
2. **Children** can read age-appropriate and grade-level texts by the **end of third grade**.
3. **Children** can read age-appropriate and grade-level texts, including non-fiction text, by the **end of eighth grade**.
4. **Students graduate** with the literacy skills they need to succeed academically in **college**.
5. **Students graduate** with the literacy skills they need to succeed in a **variety of careers**.
6. **Students graduate** with the literacy skills they need to succeed in **daily life**.

Across all respondents, ACPS educators ($N = 198$) expressed less confidence than family and community members on these items (see Figure 26). Overall, educators were not confident that students were ready for kindergarten (only 12% agreed), could read grade-level texts at the end of third grade (12% agreed) or eighth grade (10% agreed). Family members ($N = 965$) expressed the most confidence across all items, ranging from 29% to 47%. All respondents ($N = 1,334$) were most likely to agree with the item about having necessary literacy skills to succeed in daily life, ranging from 35% of community members who agreed to 47% of family members who agreed.

Figure 26. *Percent of Respondents, by Respondent Type, Who “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” About **Children and Youth** Having Necessary Literacy Skills To:*



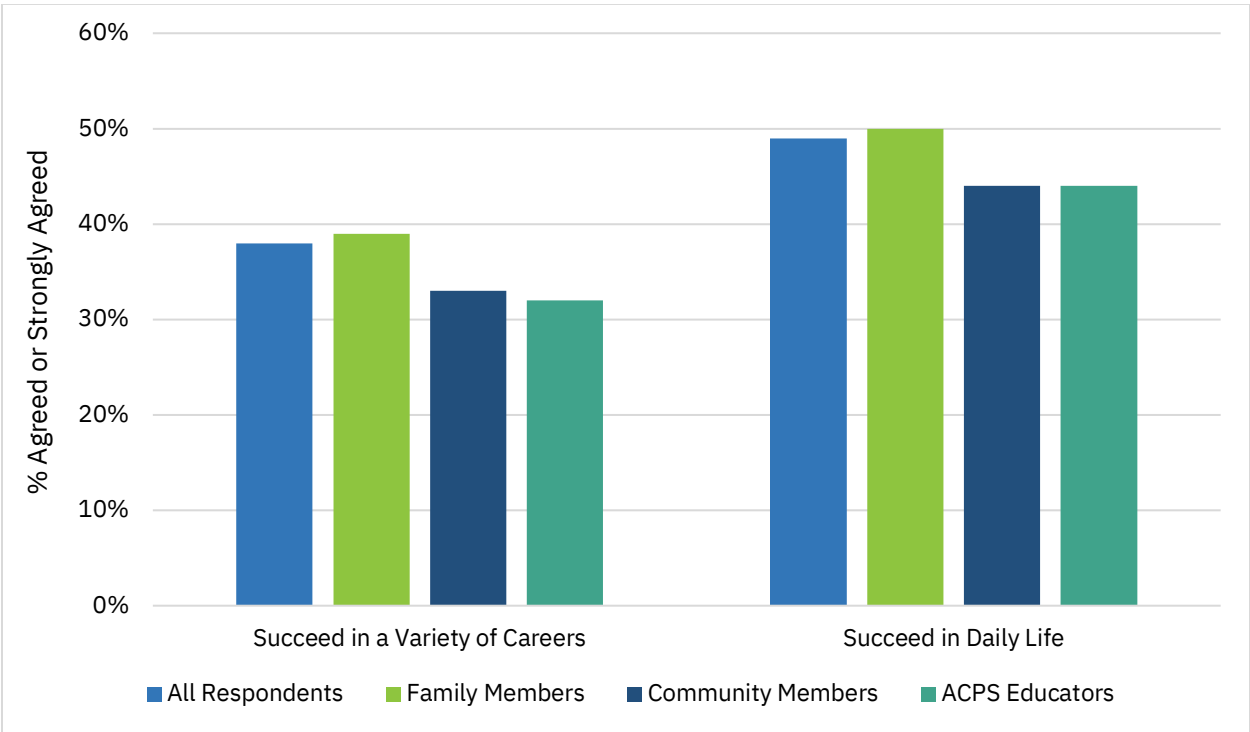
Note: Numbers reported for “Be Ready for Kindergarten” item; N’s dropped by approximately 6% across items. N All Respondents = 1,334; N Family Members = 965; N Community Members = 228; N ACPS Educators = 198.

Respondents were also asked to respond to similar questions, but about adults in the county:

- 1. **Adults** have the literacy skills they need to succeed in a **variety of careers**.
- 2. **Adults** have the literacy skills they need to succeed in **daily life**.

About 50% of respondents ($N = 1,239$) agreed or strongly agreed that adults in Alachua County have the literacy skills needed to succeed in daily life, but less than 40% from all respondent types agreed or strongly agreed that adults are adequately prepared for careers (see Figure 27).

Figure 27. *Percent of Respondents, by Respondent Type, Who “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” About **Adults** Having Necessary Literacy Skills To:*

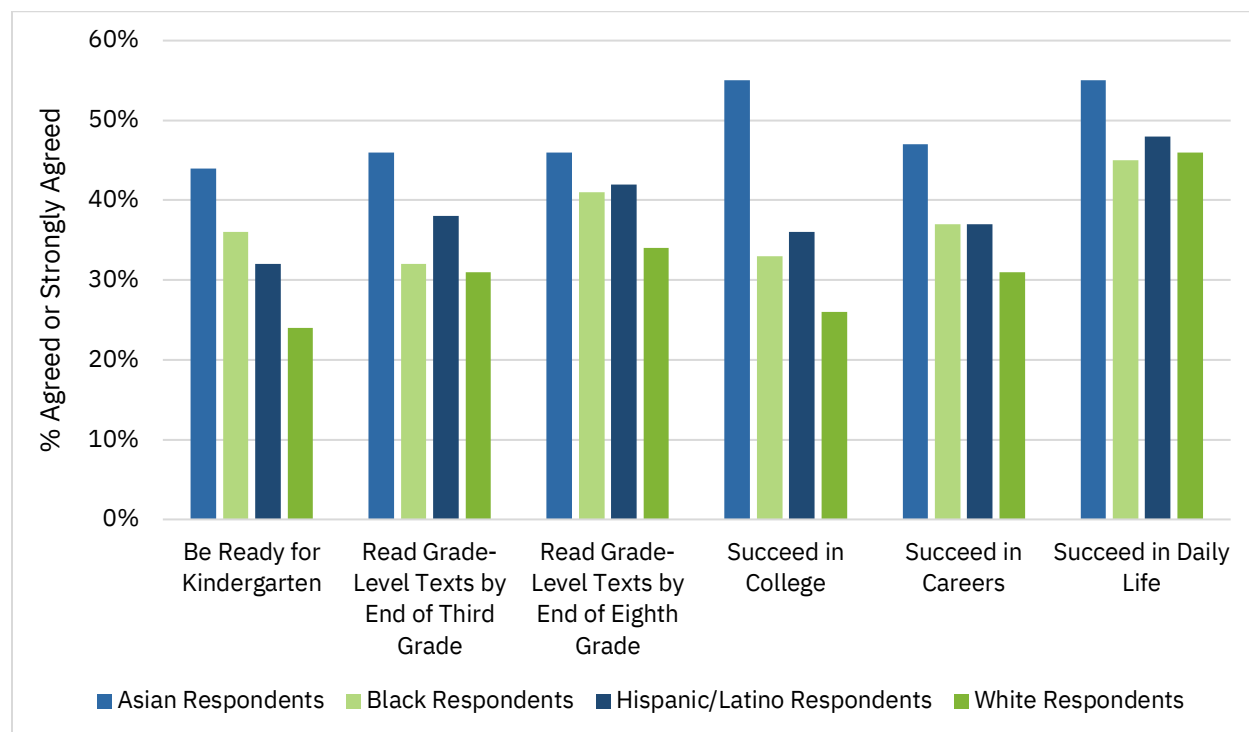


Note: N’s were equal for both items (variety of careers and daily life). N All Respondents = 1,239; N Family Members = 887; N Community Members = 214; N ACPS Educators = 192.

Family and Community Members

Differences in survey responses based on family and community members' identified race/ethnicity were examined (see Figure 28). Asian respondents ($N = 39$) more often agreed that children and youth in Alachua County have necessary literacy skills from kindergarten through adulthood (44-55%, depending on category) whereas White respondents ($N = 453$) agreed the least often (24-46%). Black respondents ($N = 199$) and Hispanic/Latino respondents ($N = 118$) had similar agreement about students' readiness (32-48%). Overall, regardless of race and ethnicity, respondents had the least confidence that children were ready for kindergarten (22-44%). The largest agreement on any item was only 55%, indicating that Alachua respondents were not confident that children and youth have the literacy skills they need to succeed.

Figure 28. *Percent of Family and Community Members, by Race/Ethnicity of Respondents, Who “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” That Children and Youth in Alachua County Have Necessary Literacy Skills To:*



Note: N Asian = 39; N Black = 199; N Hispanic/Latino = 118; N White = 453.

The same items were examined by differences by respondents' income level (see Figure 29). Family and community members with higher reported incomes (above \$75,000, $N = 402$) were generally the least likely to agree that children and youth in Alachua County have the literacy skills they need to succeed, except on the item about success in daily life. Across all income levels and on all items, less than 50% of respondents agreed that children had the necessary literacy skills. This indicates a low level of confidence in literacy learning in the county.

Figure 29. *Percent of Family and Community Members, by Income of Respondents Who “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” That Children and Youth in Alachua County Have Necessary Literacy Skills To:*



Note: N <\$25,000 = 86; N \$25,000-\$75,000 = 229; N >\$75,000 = 402.

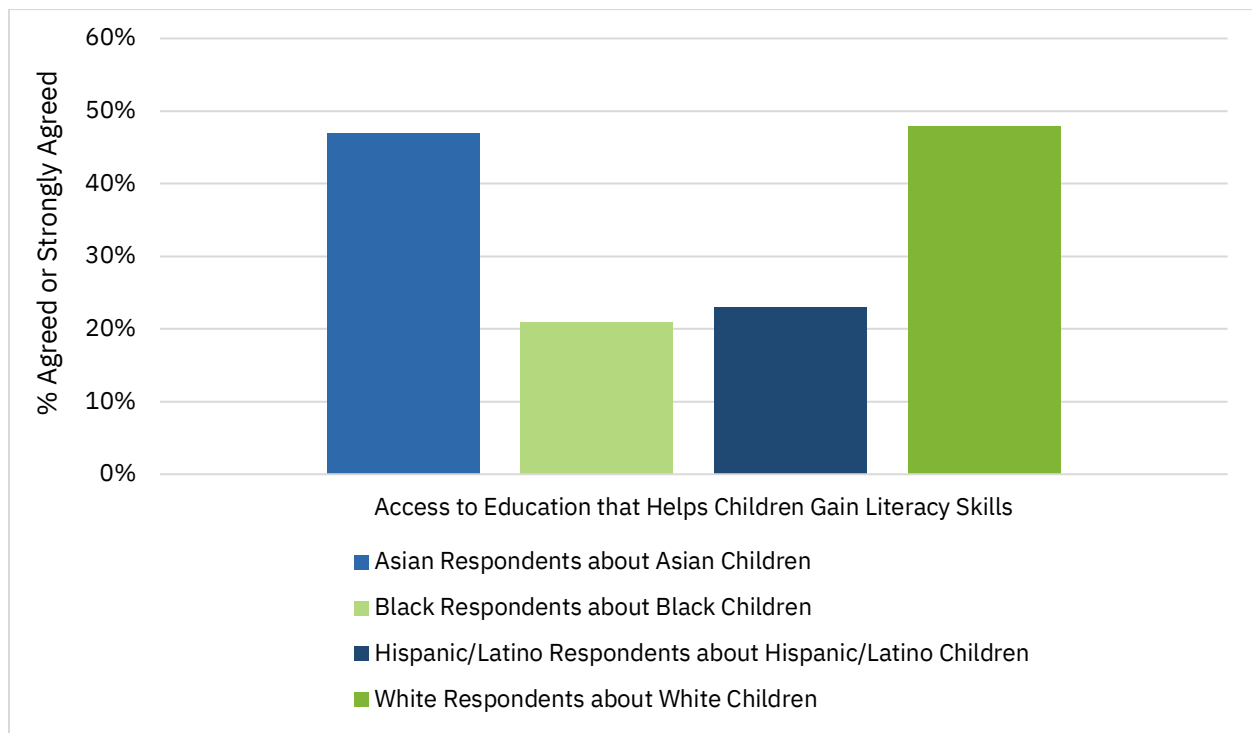
An additional set of survey questions asked about whether respondents agreed or disagreed that in Alachua County these groups of children have access to education that helps them gain literacy skills (language, reading, writing):

1. Children with disabilities
2. Children learning English
3. American Indian and Alaska Native children
4. Asian children

5. Black or African American children
6. Hispanic or Latino children
7. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander children
8. White children

Additional analyses examined how respondents reported on educational access for students of their same race/ethnicity (see Figure 30). That is, Asian respondents reported about Asian students, Black respondents reported about Black students, Hispanic/Latino respondents reported about Hispanic/Latino students, and White respondents reported about White students. Black respondents ($N = 193$) and Hispanic/Latino respondents ($N = 110$) expressed low levels of confidence, with just over 20% of respondents in each group agreeing that Black and Hispanic/Latino students are accessing the education they need to successfully read and write.

Figure 30. *Percent of Family and Community Members Who “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” that Students of their Race/Ethnicity Have Access to Education in Alachua County that Helps Them Gain Literacy Skills*

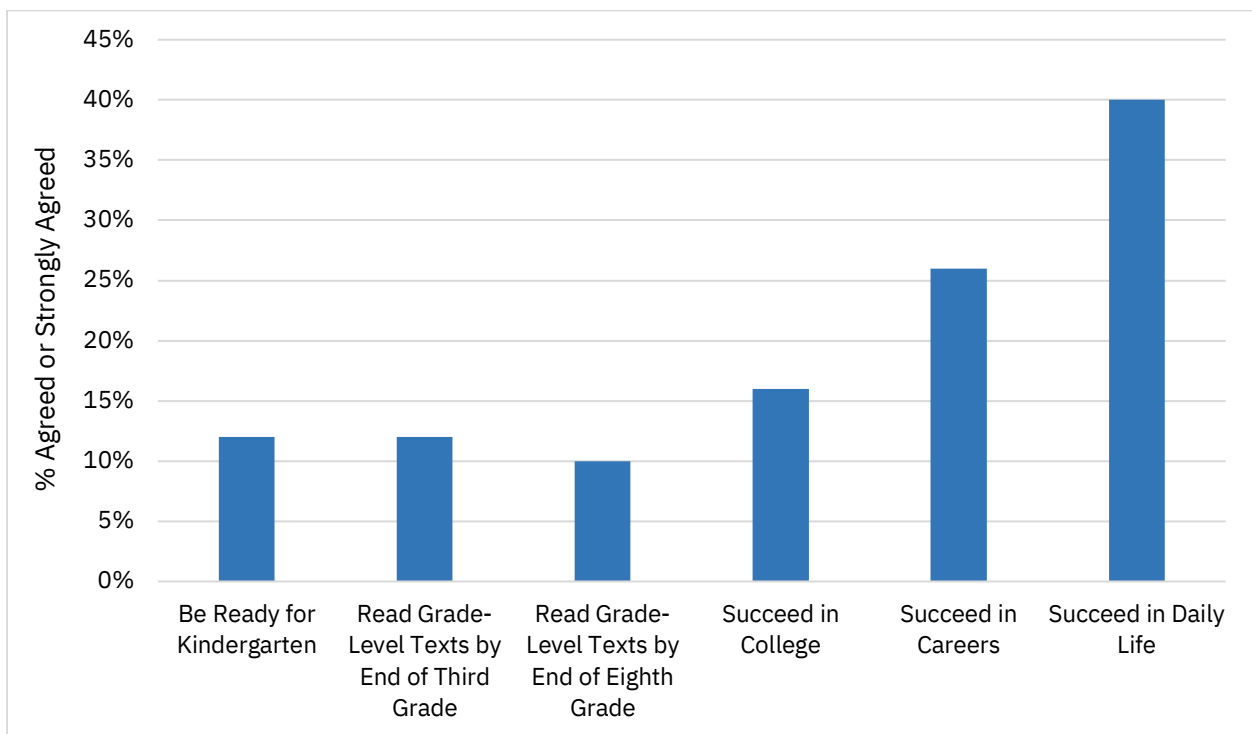


Note: N Asian = 38; N Black = 193; N Hispanic/Latino = 110; N White = 416.

Alachua County Public School (ACPS) Educators and District Staff

Alachua County Public School (ACPS) educators answered many of the same questions as family and community members. When looking at what was reported just by ACPS educators, of all items, they were most likely to agree that children and youth had the skills they needed to succeed in daily life (40%) (see Figure 31).

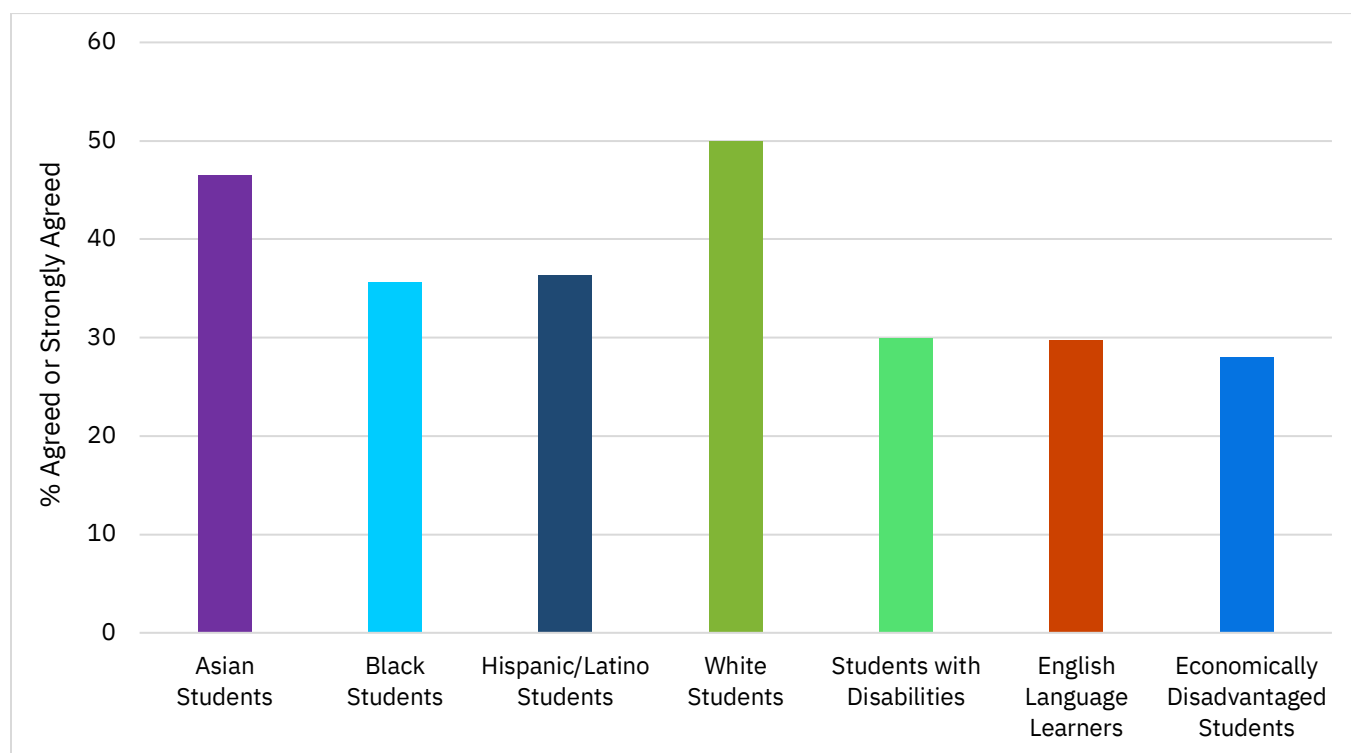
Figure 31. *Percent of ACPS Educators Who “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” That Children and Youth in Alachua County Have Necessary Literacy Skills To:*



Note: N ACPS Educators = 195.

ACPS educators who responded to the survey ($N = 188$) were also not confident that different groups of students had access to education that benefits literacy skills (see Figure 32). ACPS educators were most likely to agree that White students had strongest access to educational opportunities (50%), followed by Asian students (47%), Hispanic/Latino students (36%), and Black students (36%). ACPS educators were most concerned that students with disabilities had limited access to educational opportunities (30%), along with English learners (30%).

Figure 32. *Percent of ACPS Educators Who “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” that Students in Alachua County Have Access to Education that Helps Them Gain Literacy Skills, by Student Race/Ethnicity, Disability Status, and English Learner Status*

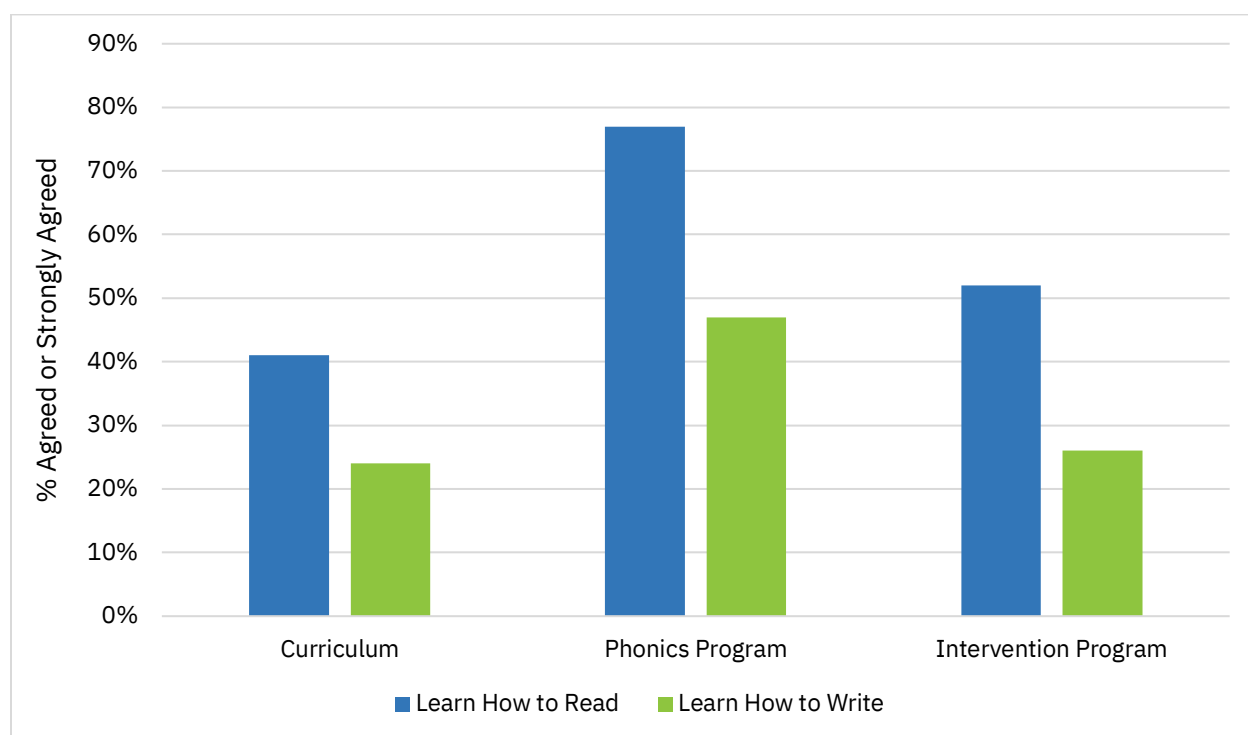


Note: N ACPS Educators = 188.

High-quality reading instruction, delivered through effective implementation of evidence-based programs, can greatly improve children’s reading outcomes. ACPS elementary educators ($N = 91$) described how programs they use help children read and write (see Figure 33). They expressed the most confidence that the phonics program they use (primarily UFLI), helps children learn how to read (77% agreed, see also p. 76 for more information from educators about UFLI). They indicated the least

confidence that the curriculum they use, Benchmark Advance (Benchmark Education, 2022), helps children learn how to read (41% agreed, see also pp. 80-81 for more information from educators about Benchmark Advance). However, educators were not confident that the curriculum, phonics program, or intervention programs helped children learn how to write (24%, 47%, 26% agreement in the effectiveness of these programs, respectively).

Figure 33. *Percent of ACPS Elementary Educators Who “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” That Their School’s Literacy Programs Helps Students Learn How to Read or Write*



Note: N ACPS Elementary Educators = 91.

Community Organizations

The UF Lastinger Center interviewed and/or surveyed one or more staff members at over 50 organizations in Alachua County. Appendix A provides a list of organizations by [age group served](#) and [alphabetical order](#). Additional information about these organizations will be shared with Children’s Trust and the entities engaging in the next steps following this report.



Results from Open-Ended Survey Items, Focus Groups, and Interviews

This section presents findings drawn from open-ended survey responses, focus groups, and interviews conducted across Alachua County. The analysis is organized by the following groups: families and community members, ACPS educators, community organizations, K-12 students, and elected officials. The thoughts shared by each group of participants include current practices that support literacy development and potential challenges that prevent efforts to improve literacy.

Family and Community Members

What's Working

The findings highlight a range of effective literacy initiatives, resources, and support systems that benefit families in fostering children's literacy development. Home literacy practices, such as reading routines and interactive learning, serve as foundational elements in strengthening reading and writing skills. Families also rely on educational tools to personalize learning and sustain engagement. School-based programs play a vital role in identifying literacy challenges and providing targeted interventions, whereas community literacy resources offer additional learning opportunities through workshops and programs. Together, these approaches show the

positive impact and importance of a multi-faceted support system that integrates home, school, and community efforts to enhance literacy development.

Home Literacy Practices. Family and community members described how consistent home literacy practices significantly boost their children’s interest in reading and writing, help children develop comprehension skills, and provide a supportive learning environment outside of school. These efforts included reading regularly, reading aloud, using educational materials, discussing books, practicing writing, incorporating literacy into daily routines, and using educational games to make learning more engaging.

“We read signs while we're driving, and we try to implement reading throughout the day, whether it's reading things like menus or even putting the TV on with closed captions.”

– Focus Group Member

“Reading together daily, identifying letters and sounds in titles early on, and having books with a variety of topics helps...We also use journals, workbooks, and interactive writing exercises.”

– Focus Group Member

Home Educational Tools and Resources. Families also found educational tools and resources to be highly effective in keeping their children engaged in learning, providing additional practice opportunities, and helping to address specific literacy issues. These tools included activity and reading books, flash cards, interactive digital apps, learning games, and book delivery services. Many families indicated that they regularly seek and use such resources because they are or can be tailored to meet the individual needs of their children.

“We use phonics-based flashcards and workbooks to strengthen reading skills at home.”

– Focus Group Member

“Audiobooks have been a fantastic tool to help my child follow along with text and build comprehension.”

– Focus Group Member

School-Based Programs and Support. Families further emphasized the importance of school-based support in accurately identifying and addressing literacy challenges, providing necessary interventions, and reinforcing literacy skills through structured programs. Families mentioned utilizing resources and services assessments when available, such as specialized support for children with learning disabilities and access to evidence-based curricula and trained educators to develop essential reading and writing skills.

“Our school’s guided reading program has significantly improved my child's comprehension.”

– Focus Group Member

“The school’s literacy intervention program has been beneficial for my child.”

– Focus Group Member

Community Literacy Resources. In discussions about community resources, families indicated they frequently attend workshops and literacy programs offered by schools, libraries, and other community organizations to gain better insights, resources, and tools for supporting their children’s literacy development. Participants noted that community literacy initiatives supplement their own efforts to improve their family’s literacy skills by providing additional resources, creating opportunities for social learning, and fostering a supportive environment that values literacy development.

“Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library has provided my child with books that we otherwise couldn’t afford.”

– Focus Group Member

“Library tutoring programs have given my child the extra support they need to improve literacy skills.”

– Focus Group Member

Challenges and Needed Improvements

Families face multiple challenges with accessing and utilizing literacy resources. Limited awareness of available programs due to fragmented communication systems prevents families from fully engaging with literacy resources. Financial and logistical constraints further restrict access to essential educational materials and interventions. Additionally, many parents feel unequipped to provide home-based literacy support, pointing to a need for better instructional guidance. These findings underscore the importance of enhancing communication, expanding resource accessibility, and equipping families with the necessary tools to actively support their children's literacy growth.

Communications and Resource Visibility. Focus group participants frequently reported the lack of a coordinated communication system that provides greater access to and understanding of available literacy resources and programs. Limited availability of clear, up-to-date, and consistent communication about existing resources prevents families from taking advantage of all that Alachua County and the state of Florida has to offer.

“It’s essential that teachers and parents are continually made aware of the resources at their disposal.”

– Focus Group Member

Accessible Literacy Resources. Participants often spoke of limited access to literacy resources. Families talked about a shortage of age-appropriate books, educational tools, technology, and updated learning materials that reflect current literacy practices. More importantly, families and community members said they lacked financial resources to access literacy programs and materials. Financial constraints limit their ability to access high-quality educational materials and effective literacy interventions. The cost of assessments, transportation, and participation fees put resources out of reach for many families, particularly those experiencing poverty. Families also regularly mentioned more practical issues associated with work schedules and limited transportation options, which make it hard to participate in community programs, even those available through Alachua County Public School (ACPS).

“Language barriers prevent some families from accessing resources.”

– Focus Group Member

“Access to reading materials is a challenge, especially in rural communities.”

– Focus Group Member

“We have great library programs, but I meet parents who struggle to even catch the bus to attend them.”

– Focus Group Member

Parental Guidance on Home Instruction and Supplementary Materials. Many family members also expressed frustration over inadequate knowledge or guidance on how to effectively support their children’s literacy at home. They described feeling unprepared to help with reading and writing activities, resulting in missed opportunities for their children to reinforce important skills outside the classroom.

““I didn’t grow up with strong literacy skills myself, so teaching reading feels overwhelming.”

– Focus Group Member

“Parents want to help, but they need accessible and practical guidance on supporting their children’s reading development.”

– Focus Group Member

ACPS Educators and District Staff

ACPS educators and district staff provided input through surveys and focus groups. Their perceptions of effective literacy support, drawn from open-ended survey responses, are disaggregated by grade level to reflect instructional differences. However, their open-ended survey and focus group responses regarding literacy challenges are consolidated across all grade levels and summarized in the following section.

What's Working

The following information summarizes the input of ACPS educators and district staff in response to survey items and focus group questions about what they believe is working well for them and their students. This information should not be interpreted as an endorsement of the practices as evidence-based for all populations of students.

Educators from elementary, middle, and high schools emphasized the effectiveness of structured literacy interventions, digital tools, and interactive teaching strategies in improving student reading and writing outcomes. Elementary educators highlighted the impact of phonics-based curricula, literacy assessments, and small-group interventions, whereas secondary educators advocated for student-centered literacy activities, writing exercises, and vocabulary-building techniques. Additionally, educators stressed the role of community engagement and parental involvement in reinforcing literacy skills outside the classroom. These findings demonstrate the importance of a well-integrated approach that combines direct instruction, technology, and external support systems to enhance literacy development at all grade levels.

Elementary Educators

In focus groups and on surveys, elementary educators noted several reading curricula, programs, and technology tools as being useful to help improve student literacy outcomes.

Phonics Program. One of the most frequently mentioned and positively reviewed curriculum resources was the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI)

Foundations program (Lane & Contessa, 2022). Educators across multiple focus groups praised its systematic approach to phonics, its consistency in instruction, and its effectiveness in improving decoding skills for early readers. Many experienced noteworthy progress in their students' abilities to recognize letter sounds, blend phonemes, and read fluently. Unlike other curricula, UFLI provides a structured, research-based approach to phonics that has shown measurable improvement in foundational literacy skills.

“UFLI has been a game-changer for at-risk students. I see real benefits in encoding and decoding, especially for students who have had little literacy exposure.”

– ACPS Educator

Digital Literacy Tools. Opinions regarding the effectiveness of digital literacy tools among educators were mixed. Some educators expressed positive views on various technology-based tools, highlighting their adaptability, engagement, and capacity to personalize learning experiences for students. These tools were particularly praised for their ability to cater to students with diverse learning needs and to promote student-centered instruction. However, other educators voiced concerns about the over-reliance on digital tools, as well as the lack of adequate district-level support and professional development for their effective implementation.

Among the most frequently mentioned digital tools were iReady (Curriculum Associates, 2025), Amira (Amira Learning, 2025), and Reading Plus (Dreambox Learning, 2023). Educators identified these platforms as effective in tracking student progress and supporting literacy development. Educators noted that these tools facilitated differentiated instruction which enabled them to better address the individual needs of students while reinforcing foundational literacy skills.

Assessment Systems. Elementary educators recognized the value of Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS, University of Oregon, 2025) as an effective tool for identifying readers needing foundational support and monitoring their responses to intervention, which has research support (Paleologos & Brabham, 2011). Effective assessments provide valuable insights into students' reading progress and allow for accurate and timely decision making.

“The combination of DIBELS assessment and structured interventions ensures we’re addressing literacy gaps early.”

– ACPS Educator

Intervention Programs. The value of instructional tools such as Great Leaps (n.d.), Systematic, Explicit Decoding Instruction (SIPPS, Center for the Collaborative Classroom, 2025), and UFLI Foundations (Lane & Contessa, 2022) were widely recognized by educators as essential in intervening with struggling readers at the elementary school level. These programs were particularly praised for their capacity to offer targeted, small-group instruction tailored to the needs of individual learners. Educators emphasized that small-group instruction, coupled with structured phonics-based interventions, is critical for addressing literacy challenges and promoting reading success among struggling students.

Classroom-Based Strategies. Educators shared a variety of literacy strategies that have been particularly effective for building engagement. These include close reading techniques, student choice in reading materials, and books aligned with student interest to boost engagement and literacy development.

“Graphic novels and real-world texts have been particularly useful in helping struggling readers develop a stronger interest in literacy.”

– ACPS Educator

Community and Family Involvement. Many educators emphasized the importance of community partnerships and parent/caregiver involvement in supporting literacy outside the classroom. Programs that provide structured resources to families have been beneficial in reinforcing reading skills at home.

“Library partnerships offering free books and reading events have been great for encouraging literacy beyond the classroom.”

– ACPS Educator

“Structured literacy nights involving both parents and students have had strong attendance and impact.”

– ACPS Educator

Middle and High School Educators

Literacy Development Activities. Several educators at middle and high schools noted that children actively engage in literacy activities that enhance their reading and comprehension skills. Survey respondents reported several effective ways that students can build vocabulary, comprehension, and critical thinking abilities:

- “Students who journal regularly improve their writing and comprehension.”
- “Encouraging children to create their own stories develops creativity and literacy.”
- “Word-based games help reinforce spelling and vocabulary skills.”
- “Students who keep a reading log develop stronger accountability in literacy habits.”
- “Graphic novels and comics have been effective in encouraging reluctant readers.”
- “Allowing students to choose their books fosters a deeper interest in reading.”
- “Storytelling activities help children develop sequencing and communication skills.”

Teacher-Guided Instruction. Educators described their contributions to literacy development through structured interventions and curriculum planning. Respondents cited teacher-led read alouds, phonics instruction, and interactive classroom strategies as impactful techniques in improving literacy outcomes. Many also noted the

importance of scaffolding and differentiated instruction for diverse learning needs, including the following:

- “Read-aloud sessions help students understand complex texts and develop comprehension.”
- “Phonics-based instruction is crucial for struggling readers in early grades.”
- “Differentiated instruction ensures that all students receive the help they need.”
- “Interactive literacy activities make reading more engaging for students.”
- “Explicit vocabulary instruction improves reading comprehension significantly.”
- “Incorporating literacy skills across subjects helps students reinforce their learning.”

Home Literacy Practices. Many educators of older students noted the importance and impact of families engaging in regular literacy activities such as reading aloud with children, setting daily reading routines, and having regular discussions about books. The following actions were frequently noted as foundational for early literacy development and long-term academic success:

- “I encourage parents to read with their children every night and discuss the stories.”
- “Families that establish consistent bedtime reading routines see better literacy growth.”
- “I recommend parents ask open-ended questions about books to engage their children.”
- “A family reading challenge keeps everyone motivated to read more.”
- “Encouraging children to read aloud to their parents builds their confidence.”

Community Resources and Involvement. Community-driven initiatives and family engagement programs were commonly mentioned as essential for literacy success. Respondents discussed mentorship programs, volunteer-led reading sessions, and local literacy events as some of the impactful ways to foster literacy skills:

- “Our community reading group provides a space for children to develop literacy skills.”
- “Local volunteers host reading sessions for children who need extra support.”
- “Community literacy programs make reading a social and engaging activity.”
- “Public storytelling events help children develop listening and comprehension skills.”
- “Community book drives provide books to families who may not afford them.”

Digital Literacy Tools and Resources. Educators also frequently mentioned technology-based tools as valuable resources for literacy development. Educators cited the use of digital reading programs, educational apps, and interactive software that help children improve their reading and comprehension skills by providing personalized learning experiences, making reading more engaging and accessible:

- “Children enjoy reading apps that turn stories into interactive experiences.”
- “Online literacy programs have been a great supplement to schoolwork.”
- “We use digital storybooks to make reading more fun and accessible.”
- “Interactive educational software helps reinforce literacy skills at home.”
- “Technology has allowed [students] to practice reading at their own pace.”
- “Using audiobooks alongside print books has improved ... comprehension skills.”
- “Adaptive learning platforms provide personalized literacy instruction.”

The literacy programs, tools, and strategies outlined above were deemed most effective among the educators participating in the literacy needs assessment. From their perspective, consistent phonics instruction, adaptive digital resources, targeted interventions, engaging classroom strategies, and strong community support have led to measurable improvements in student literacy outcomes. Continued investment in these areas, along with professional development for educators, may be critical in sustaining literacy growth in Alachua County.

Challenges and Needed Improvements

The focus group discussions with educators revealed several recurring themes that highlight challenges in curriculum implementation, student literacy development, assessment practices, and professional support. These themes reflect common experiences and concerns across different grade levels and schools, providing valuable insights for improving educational practices and outcomes.

Curriculum Effectiveness and Challenges. One of the most frequently discussed topics was the usability of, and support for, the district's curricula, particularly Benchmark Advance (Benchmark Education, 2022). Educators noted that while the curriculum provides structure, it often lacks alignment with students' developmental needs and does not contain sufficient guidance on how to provide the necessary scaffolds for struggling readers. Further, a consensus among participants is that they did not have access to the necessary training and ongoing support to effectively implement Benchmark Advance. Additionally, educators found several challenges with the writing component of the program, notably the lack of alignment between the reading and writing components. Educators' key concerns included the following:

- Lack of guidance or scaffolds for accessing complex text for students with reading difficulties.
- Lack of access to training and implementation support for teachers.

Reading and Writing Struggles. A major challenge highlighted by educators was the proportion of students with literacy difficulties in many classes. Educators expressed frustration with associated trends such as declining reading habits, limited student engagement with books, and hesitance to engage with writing assignments. Many students, including those in secondary grades, reportedly lack fundamental skills in understanding sentence structure, using punctuation and other writing conventions, decoding, and comprehension monitoring, making it difficult for them to succeed in higher-level coursework. Educators' key concerns included the following:

- Declining independent reading and writing habits.
- Insufficient emphasis on explicit writing instruction in the early grades, leading to foundational writing difficulties later.
- Students struggle with foundational reading skills, including decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension skills.

Student Engagement and Motivation. Educators consistently reported that student engagement in literacy was a challenge. Educators indicated that many students consider reading and writing as tedious tasks rather than enjoyable learning experiences. Educators highlighted the importance of integrating student choice into reading assignments, incorporating interactive materials, and finding creative ways to make literacy instruction engaging. Educators' key concerns included the following:

- Educators feel they must compete with students' phones for their attention and engagement.
- Instructional materials are perceived as dry or uninteresting.
- Early literacy difficulties tend to compound over time as students disengage with reading and writing causing difficulties with complex text.

"We need more choice in what they read to keep them engaged."

– ACPS Educator

Professional Support and Training. Another recurring theme was the need for stronger professional development, ongoing training, and access to effective literacy coaching for educators across the grade levels. Many educators felt ill-equipped to navigate new curricula, digital tools, and assessment methods due to a lack of structured training and implementation support. The absence of ongoing professional learning opportunities made it challenging for educators to effectively implement literacy programs. Educators' key concerns included the following:

- Inadequate training on new curriculum tools and assessment platforms, especially for new teachers.
- Lack of professional development on effective teaching practices, curricula, and practical tools teachers are expected to implement.
- Need for mentorship and peer collaboration.

"Many teachers are left to figure out instructional strategies on their own, which isn't sustainable."

– ACPS Educator

Family Involvement in Literacy Development. Educators emphasized the key role of parent/caregiver involvement in students' literacy success. However, many educators noted a decline in family engagement, with family members struggling to support their children's reading and writing at home. The lack of structured resources for parents and caregivers further amplified this issue. Educators' key concerns included the following:

- Parents and caregivers feel overwhelmed and unsure how to help.
- More structured resources for families are needed.
- Community partnerships could provide additional literacy support.

"If we provided parents with parent-friendly literacy resources, we could make a difference."

– ACPS Educator

Testing and Assessment Challenges. The use of standardized testing as a measure of student literacy was another area of concern. Elementary educators reported that computerized assessments often failed to accurately reflect young students' abilities. In the older grades, there is often a disconnect between the content that students are taught and the passages in the beginning, middle, and end of year benchmark assessments. An emphasis on high-stakes outcome assessments can cause schools to focus on teaching skills that many students lack the prerequisite knowledge for. Educators' key concerns included the following:

- Computer-based assessments do not always reflect actual learning.
- Students struggle with digital test formats.
- Misalignment between instruction and standardized testing.

"High-stakes testing puts undue pressure on students and doesn't capture their full learning potential. We need better alignment between instruction and assessment methods."

– ACPS Educator

Staffing and Resource Limitations. Many educators cited staffing shortages and resource constraints as major challenges to providing effective literacy instruction. Educators need additional staffing and instructional support in classrooms. The loss of interventionists, limited access to instructional support, and funding cuts have made it increasingly difficult to meet the wide-ranging needs of students. Many educators reported that there were fewer than necessary assistants, interventionists, special education teachers, and other personnel to provide the targeted interventions that large groups of struggling students require. Educators also highlighted the lack of adequate time to meet students' differing literacy needs, citing the heavy workload and limited instructional hours. Educators also identified the need for more planning time, reduced administrative burdens, and access to high-quality, literacy-focused professional development. Educators' key concerns included the following:

- The loss of interventionists has reduced individualized support.
- Lack of compensation for before and after-hours professional learning.
- Class sizes are too large to provide targeted literacy interventions.
- More funding is needed for additional instructional staff.

“We need staffing. The district always says they want to see gains, but without proper staffing, that’s never going to happen.”

– ACPS Educator

“Small groups are crucial, but time constraints mean we barely see one group a day. More staff would change that.”

– ACPS Educator

“We are expected to do more with fewer resources, and it’s not sustainable.”

– ACPS Educator

Technology and Learning Tools. Technology has the potential to enhance and supplement literacy instruction, but some educators expressed concerns about its limitations. Many students lack digital literacy skills, and frequent technical issues can disrupt learning. Educators emphasized the need for structured training on how to effectively integrate technology into literacy instruction without supplanting the role of the teacher. Educators' key concerns included the following:

- Digital assessments are challenging for younger learners.
- Students lack basic digital literacy skills.
- Training is needed to effectively integrate technology in instruction without supplanting the role of the teacher.

“Technology should be a support tool, not a replacement for direct instruction. Many students struggle to navigate digital reading tools effectively.”

– ACPS Educator

The educator focus group discussions underscored the urgent need for targeted improvements in literacy instruction, curriculum alignment, professional support, and student engagement strategies. Addressing these challenges will require a comprehensive approach that strengthens curriculum alignment, expands teacher training, and enhances resource allocation to ensure literacy success for students across all grade levels.

Community Organizations

What's Working

Discussions with community organizations revealed a network of community-driven solutions that support literacy improvement. Organizations integrate one-on-one tutoring, accessible literacy tools, and staff development to create responsive and inclusive literacy environments. These efforts are enhanced through strategic partnerships that extend programming into families and neighborhoods and increase awareness and participation. However, the sustainability and growth of these strategies continue to depend heavily on access to stable funding.

One-on-One Tutoring & Mentorship. One-on-one tutoring and mentorship emerged as a critical strategy for improving literacy outcomes. Respondents highlighted the effectiveness of personalized instruction, which allows tutors and mentors to address specific learning challenges faced by individuals. This approach fosters strong relationships between learners and mentors and creates a supportive environment that builds confidence and motivation. Tailoring instruction to individual needs ensures that learners receive targeted interventions and makes literacy development more effective.

“One-on-one tutoring has proved successful. Tailoring it to the specific needs of the learner is really important.”

– Staff at an Alachua Community Organization

“Pairing a struggling reader with a trained mentor has shown consistent improvement in reading levels.”

– Staff at an Alachua Community Organization

Literacy Tools and Resources. Many organizations and programs utilize specific literacy-related tools and resources to support reading and writing development. These include access to a variety of books, educational software, interactive e-books, digital apps, and multimedia resources that cater to different learning styles. Organization staff who were interviewed highlighted the importance of having varied current instructional materials and technology in keeping students engaged and

providing tailored learning experiences. Even when organizations indicated that they do not have dedicated literacy programs, they find ways to integrate literacy activities within their existing programs.

“Interactive educational software fosters literacy growth in early learners.”

– Staff at an Alachua Community Organization

“Audiobooks have helped reluctant readers engage with literature in new ways.”

– Staff at an Alachua Community Organization

Training and Staff Development. The organizations who participated in the literacy needs assessment emphasized the importance of training for staff and volunteers to improve their ability to identify and address literacy issues among students. Most reported providing internal training for full-time, part-time, and volunteer staff whenever possible. This typically includes workshops, certification courses, and on-the-job training sessions designed to enhance their skills and knowledge.

“Staff development is crucial, continuing education helps ensure that literacy instruction remains impactful.”

– Staff at an Alachua Community Organization

“Providing access to professional learning helps staff feel better equipped to address literacy challenges.”

– Staff at an Alachua Community Organization

Community Partnerships. Organization staff members further reported that they often collaborate with community partners and find ways to involve parents, caregivers, and family members. Participants noted that collaboration fosters a supportive network, enhances resource availability, and promotes the sharing of best practices and effective instructional methods. Their staff and student development collaborations include joint training sessions, collaborative projects, and shared access to educational materials. Their broader community engagement initiatives have involved organizing public reading events, literacy fairs, community/family workshops,

and volunteer programs aimed at promoting literacy both within and outside the school environment.

“Our partnerships with community centers help us expand access to literacy programming.”

– Staff at an Alachua Community Organization

“When the entire community is involved in literacy efforts, we see much stronger outcomes.”

– Staff at an Alachua Community Organization

Financial Resources and Support. Organizations noted that financial support is critical for sustaining high-quality literacy programs and ensuring that necessary resources are available to both educators and students. To limit costs for public participation, many organizations regularly employ cost-cutting and cost-sharing strategies and seek financial support to fund their literacy programs. This includes securing grants, budgeting for educational materials, and streamlining funds for staffing and professional development.

“We benefit from grants and funding which allow us to purchase high-quality literacy programs and materials.”

– Staff at an Alachua Community Organization

“We all work closely with who’s funding who and working to see if there is overlap, and how can we work together.”

– Staff at an Alachua Community Organization

“We fund all different types of nonprofits in our community... many provide one-on-one literacy support.”

– Staff at an Alachua Community Organization

Challenges and Needed Improvements

Interviews with community organizations uncovered clear opportunities for improvement. Limited financial resources, a lack of dedicated literacy programming, and insufficient tools for early screening were frequently cited as challenges. Many organizations also reported that staffing limitations and underdeveloped parental engagement strategies further constrain the reach and impact of literacy efforts. However, the findings also revealed that organizations are eager to expand their capacity and that strengthening partnerships, professional development, and targeted support systems could lead to measurable improvements in literacy outcomes.

Limited Financial Resources. Staff from community organizations reported that the lack of financial resources restricts the scope and scale of literacy initiatives and limits the ability to purchase educational materials, hire specialized staff, and implement targeted literacy interventions. Among the challenges is the limited availability of essential educational resources such as books, digital tools, and other instructional materials. This scarcity of resources means that many organizations struggle to provide students with the necessary tools to enhance their reading and writing skills. A lack of technology, in particular, was described as hindering their ability to incorporate interactive and engaging methods of literacy instruction.

“More funding would allow us to expand our literacy initiatives and offer high-quality resources to our students.”

– Staff at an Alachua Community Organization

“Better resource allocation can help us address the specific literacy needs of our students more effectively.”

– Staff at an Alachua Community Organization

Literacy-Specific Programming. Many of the literacy-oriented community organizations in Alachua County face challenges due to the lack of a specific focus on providing evidence-based literacy instruction and related supports. Although literacy may be a part of broader educational programs, it is not always targeted directly, which dilutes the impact of literacy initiatives. Many programs are designed to develop a range of skills, with literacy being an incidental benefit rather than a primary focus.

This lack of dedicated literacy initiatives means that literacy leaders cannot allocate sufficient resources or create specialized strategies to tackle literacy issues directly. As a result, students may not receive the consistent, targeted support they need to develop essential literacy skills effectively.

“Our organization focuses on holistic development, but without a targeted literacy agenda, some students fall through the cracks.”

– Staff at an Alachua Community Organization

Early Screenings and Intervention. Several staff members at community organizations emphasized the importance of early screening and evaluation to identify children at risk of falling behind. Early identification and assessment of literacy challenges are critical for timely intervention, yet many organizations trying to effectively serve children need stronger screening and identification of children’s needs. Without early and accurate identification, students with learning disabilities or those at risk of falling behind in literacy may not receive the necessary support early enough to make a significant difference.

“Recognizing literacy problems at an early stage can dramatically change outcomes, but it’s something we currently struggle with...”

– Staff at an Alachua Community Organization

Staffing and Training and Development. Staff members at Alachua County community organizations commented that the effectiveness of literacy programs is highly dependent on the availability, skills and knowledge of the staff they employ. Insufficient training and professional development opportunities for their staff remain a significant challenge. Continuous training is necessary to familiarize staff with the latest literacy teaching strategies and tools. Without ongoing professional development, staff may be ill-equipped to handle diverse literacy challenges, which can hinder the overall effectiveness of literacy initiatives.

“Our staff requires more frequent and updated training to keep up with the evolving challenges in literacy education.”

– Staff at an Alachua Community Organization

“We need more staff and volunteers to meet the demand for literacy support.”

– Staff at an Alachua Community Organization

Parental Engagement. Staff members at Alachua County community organizations highlighted the difficulty in engaging the parents and caregivers, which is crucial for reinforcing literacy development outside structured school or literacy program events. They highlighted the importance of building partnerships with local entities and ensuring sufficient resources to sustain literacy initiatives. Organizations often faced challenges in garnering sufficient backing from local stakeholders, including parents/caregivers, businesses, and government agencies. Additionally, they mentioned the lack of necessary resources, such as books, technology, and funding, to support comprehensive literacy efforts.

Community Engagement and Partnerships. Building strong community partnerships and securing adequate resources are essential to overcoming challenges and ensuring that literacy programs can operate effectively. Respondents noted that effective literacy programs actively engage families and encourage parents and caregivers to take an active role in their children’s learning. Community events, outreach programs, and collaborations with local organizations help raise awareness about literacy resources.

“Community engagement is essential, but without enough funding, it’s hard to maintain effective literacy initiatives.”

– Staff at an Alachua Community Organization

K-12 Students

Because youth participants were asked a separate set of questions, their feedback is structured differently from that of other groups. This analysis describes two sections of student feedback: (1) the activities and strategies that educators and schools can implement to improve literacy skills and (2) how families can support literacy. The student data is derived solely from survey responses, as students did not participate in focus groups or interviews. The recommendations are disaggregated by student grade level. Some student responses were based on feedback from less than 10 students, and therefore, findings are not representative of all K-12 students.

Combined, the student survey responses revealed a strong collective emphasis on the importance of reading, writing, family involvement, and engaging literacy activities. These themes highlighted their belief that literacy development requires a collaborative effort between schools and families, integrating both structured and informal methods to support student success. By implementing these insights, educators and families can work together to create a more effective and enjoyable literacy learning experience.

How Educators and Schools Can Support Literacy

Students across different grade levels identified key areas where educators can better support literacy development. Young learners perceived benefits from increased reading opportunities and individualized teacher support, whereas upper elementary students reported thriving from interactive learning and structured writing practice. Middle school students emphasized the importance of consistent literacy exercises, and high school students advocate for analytical writing assignments and tutoring support. These findings highlight the necessity of grade-specific developmentally appropriate literacy strategies that equip students with the skills needed for academic achievement and lifelong learning.

Early Elementary (Grades 1-3)

Increased Reading Time and Access to Books. Students in early elementary grades suggested that having more time to read books at school and having access to books they find engaging—such as graphic novels and illustrated books—would help improve their reading skills. This is aligned with research that indicates that greater exposure to

books promotes early literacy development, comprehension, and engagement. Student choice in reading materials also fosters a lifelong love of reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000).

“Have more books I like to read like graphic novels. They are engaging because of the pictures.”

– Third Grade Student

One-on-One Support from Teachers. Students expressed the need for more individualized attention to help them improve reading and writing skills. Individualized reading instruction is linked to improved literacy outcomes and is particularly beneficial for readers who need to build foundational skills (Connor et al., 2007).

Upper Elementary (Grades 4-5)

Interactive and Engaging Literacy Activities. Students suggested incorporating fun and engaging literacy activities, such as phonics games, group discussions, and storytelling. Interactive literacy activities support phonemic awareness, comprehension, and vocabulary development (National Reading Panel, 2000).

“Practicar la fonética con actividades divertidas. Invitar a los niños a imaginar ‘películas mentales’ para facilitar que recordemos la historia. La lectura tiene que ser divertida.” [Practice phonics with fun activities. Invite children to imagine ‘mental movies’ to help us remember the story. Reading should be fun.]

– Fifth Grade Student

Structured Writing Support. Some students mentioned that writing practice should be included more regularly in the classroom, with clear guidance on new vocabulary words and structured writing exercises. Regular writing practice strengthens literacy fluency, comprehension, and critical thinking skills (Graham & Perin, 2007).

Middle School (Grades 6-8)

Consistent Practice and Reading Logs. Students in middle school highlighted the importance of consistent practice in reading and writing, with structured assignments such as reading logs and summaries. Tracking reading progress and summarizing content improves comprehension, retention, and critical analysis skills (Graham & Hebert, 2011).

“Provide small daily/weekly reading logs where children read an amount of chapters in their desired novel and write a paragraph-long summary on what they’ve read.”

– Eighth Grade Student

High School (Grades 9-12)

Writing Assignments and Analytical Skills Development. High school students suggested that teachers should assign more structured writing exercises, including in-class writing, take-home assignments, and exams with open-ended questions. Regular writing improves literacy proficiency, academic performance, and college readiness (Graham & Perin, 2007).

“Regularly assign brief writing exercises in your classes. Some mixture of in-class writing, outside writing assignments, and exams with open-ended questions will give students the practice they need to improve their skills.”

– Twelfth Grade Student

Additional Tutoring and English Language Support. Students in higher grade levels highlighted the need for tutoring services and improved English language programs, particularly for those who struggle with reading and writing in English. Personalized literacy instruction through tutoring and small-group interventions has been shown to be highly effective for struggling readers (August & Shanahan, 2006).

How Families Can Support Literacy

Students identified various ways families can contribute to literacy development, including direct support, structured reading routines, and interactive learning experiences. Early elementary students expressed benefits from shared reading and encouragement, whereas upper elementary students suggested expanding literacy beyond the home to museum visits and library trips. Middle and high school students emphasized the need for dedicated reading spaces, daily literacy engagement, and parental involvement in academic tasks. These findings underscore the need for families to foster a literacy-friendly environment that reinforces reading and writing skills through consistent engagement and meaningful literacy activities.

Early Elementary (Grades 1-3)

One-on-One Support at Home. Young students highlighted the importance of direct support from their families when learning to read and write. They expressed the need for individual attention, encouragement, and structured help with literacy activities at home. Research suggests that family involvement in literacy activities improves reading fluency, comprehension, and language development (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002).

Reading Together and Using Literacy Games. Students in early elementary grades mentioned that reading with their families and engaging in literacy-related games makes reading fun and engaging. Interactive reading activities help build vocabulary, comprehension, and early literacy skills (Mol et al., 2008).

Upper Elementary (Grades 4-5)

Encouragement of Daily Reading Habits. Students recognized the importance of regular reading routines at home to improve literacy skills. Some noted that their parent or caregivers assign reading time or encourage consistent reading habits. Regular exposure to reading improves comprehension, fluency, and academic success (Clark & Rumbold, 2006).

“Keep reading with me and making me write.”

– Fifth Grade Student

Expansion of Literacy Beyond the Home. Some students suggested that family visits to museums, historical sites, or other literacy-rich environments would support reading comprehension and engagement. Exposure to literacy-rich environments enhances vocabulary, critical thinking, and contextual understanding of language (Neuman & Celano, 2012).

“Going with family to museums or historical places and read the briefs about everything.”

– Fifth Grade Student

Middle School (Grades 6-8)

Dedicated Reading Space at Home. Some students suggested that having a quiet, comfortable space for reading at home would help improve focus and literacy engagement. A structured reading environment fosters better concentration and motivation for independent reading (Gambrell, 2011).

Daily Reading and Writing Practice. Students suggested that parents or caregivers should encourage daily reading and writing habits, such as reading a set number of chapters or making lists. Daily literacy engagement strengthens comprehension, writing fluency, and vocabulary retention (Graham & Hebert, 2011).

High School (Grades 9-12)

Assistance with Studying and Literacy-Related Tasks. High school students indicated that family support with studying, reviewing reading materials, and helping with writing assignments would enhance their literacy skills. Involvement of parents or caregivers in academic support correlates with higher academic achievement and improved literacy outcomes (Patall et al., 2008).

Family Literacy Activities and Library Visits. Students suggested that making library visits part of a family routine and integrating literacy into daily activities—such as grocery lists and note-writing—would strengthen literacy skills. Family literacy activities increase reading frequency, engagement, and real-world literacy application (Morrow, 2015).



Feedback from Alachua County Elected Officials

Insights from Elected Officials on What Works

Elected officials were asked to identify strategies that are making a measurable impact on literacy improvement in the county, and they indicated early childhood literacy programs, community and school partnerships, and targeted literacy interventions for high-need students. Their perspectives underscore the importance of early exposure to literacy-rich environments, collaborative efforts across institutions, and data-driven interventions.

Early Childhood Education

Elected officials consistently identified emergent literacy development as a key factor in improving overall literacy rates. Community-supported early literacy programs deliver interventions that help build student skills prior to school entry. These programs also provide literacy-rich environments that enhance vocabulary and reading readiness, reducing gaps among students starting school. Elected officials stressed the importance of ensuring children enter kindergarten with foundational literacy skills.

“The things we can do for our community from zero to five will have the greatest impact so that children are ready for kindergarten.”

– Alachua County Elected Official

“If we don’t address literacy early, we’ll be playing catch-up for years.”

– Alachua County Elected Official

Community and School Partnerships

Collaboration between schools, local governments, and community organizations has proven to be an effective strategy for improving literacy rates. Elected officials emphasized continuing to leverage community-based resources to support literacy initiatives. Community organizations provide mentorship and supplemental reading programs. Libraries, businesses, and nonprofit groups serve as literacy hubs.

- “The Children’s Trust has been a game-changer in coordinating literacy resources.”
- “Partnerships with UF and Santa Fe College could bring in much-needed research-backed literacy practices.”
- “After-school programs supported by the city and county provide valuable literacy interventions.”
- “Churches, nonprofits, and businesses have stepped up to support literacy efforts.”

Targeted Literacy Interventions for High-Needs Students

Elected officials often said that implementation of targeted literacy interventions was needed for students who struggle the most. Specialized programs tailored to students’ needs and tiered intervention strategies help close literacy gaps, including for students with disabilities. Schools that use student data to provide targeted one-on-one or small-group reading instruction see significant improvement. Some of the elected officials’ comments highlight other workable solutions:

- “We need a system-wide approach to track and support struggling readers.”
- “A data-driven approach helps us identify students who need additional reading support.”
- “High-quality tutoring and intervention programs can turn literacy trajectories around.”

Efforts to improve literacy in Alachua County must be sustained, expanded, and coordinated more effectively to achieve lasting impact. Investing in early childhood literacy, strengthening community partnerships, increasing parent/caregiver engagement, improving teacher training, and expanding targeted interventions will help address literacy challenges and create a brighter future for all students.

Challenges and Needed Improvements from the Perspective of Elected Officials

Close Literacy Gaps During Early Childhood

Alachua County elected officials agreed that early childhood literacy gaps are increased by limited access to structured early learning programs, limited family awareness about literacy development, and disparities in pre-kindergarten educational opportunities. Elected officials agreed that reading proficiency by third grade is a crucial benchmark, as students who are not reading at grade level by this point are more likely to struggle throughout their academic careers. Addressing this challenge requires targeted interventions, community-supported early learning initiatives, and enhanced parent/caregiver engagement to foster early literacy habits at home.

“Investing in early literacy will ultimately save money by reducing the need for later remediation.”

– Alachua County Elected Official

Reduce the Impact of Poverty

Elected officials recognized the stark divide in literacy outcomes between children from higher-income and lower-income backgrounds. The cycle of generational poverty contributes to this issue. Without intervention, income-based disparities persist and widen over time, leading to lower academic achievement and limited career opportunities. Interviewed elected officials stressed the importance of directing literacy funding and resources toward communities with lower incomes to reduce disparities and provide all children with an equal opportunity to succeed.

“The cycle of generational poverty is fueled by lack of access to literacy resources.”

– Alachua County Elected Official

Provide Family Support and Education

Parent/caregiver involvement is a critical factor in a child’s literacy development. Parents and caregivers need more time, resources, and literacy skills to effectively support their children. Elected officials highlighted the challenge of parents or caregivers who may have dropped out of school themselves or who work multiple jobs, leaving limited knowledge or time to assist their children with reading and homework.

Elected officials highlighted that parents and caregivers may be unaware that their children are reading below grade level and may not know how to access intervention programs. Schools must improve communication with parents and caregivers, provide accessible literacy workshops, and offer structured guidance on how to create a literacy-rich home environment. Expanding parent/caregiver education initiatives would empower families to play a more active role in their children’s academic success.

“Teaching parents to support literacy at home is just as important as teaching students.”

– Alachua County Elected Official

Increase Teacher Training and Retention

Several elected officials cited a shortage of trained literacy educators as a major impediment to literacy improvement. Schools often rely on teachers with temporary or alternative certifications who may not have the specialized training needed to teach literacy effectively. High turnover rates and inadequate professional development further compound this issue.

Experts recommended stronger teacher training programs focused on evidence-based literacy instruction, particularly for new teachers. Additionally, offering incentives to retain experienced teachers in schools with large numbers of students lacking

foundational reading skills would help ensure continuity in literacy instruction and improve student outcomes.

“We need more investment in training teachers in evidence-based literacy instruction.”

– Alachua County Elected Official

Implement High-Quality Literacy Programs and Strategies

A lack of uniformity in literacy instruction across schools was another key challenge identified in the interviews with elected officials. Some schools effectively use evidence-based literacy programs, while others do not, leading to disparities in student outcomes. Without a comprehensive, district-wide literacy strategy, individual schools and teachers are left to determine their own approaches, resulting in inconsistent implementation of best practices.

Elected officials stressed the need for clear guidance, accountability, and a standardized literacy curriculum to ensure all students receive high-quality literacy instruction. Schools that have successfully implemented programs such as UFLI should serve as models for other institutions.

“A lack of accountability means that some schools do not fully implement literacy initiatives.”

– Alachua County Elected Official

“We need a standardized approach to literacy instruction to ensure all students receive adequate support.”

– Alachua County Elected Official

The findings from the interviews with elected officials indicate that literacy challenges in Alachua County are complex, stemming from early childhood education gaps, limited parent/caregiver involvement due to generational poverty, teacher shortages, and inconsistent literacy strategies.



Summary of Findings and Recommendations

The findings above support a multifaceted approach to improve literacy in Alachua County. Expanding early childhood literacy initiatives, strengthening community partnerships, enhancing teacher training, implementing targeted interventions, and increasing parent/caregiver engagement are all critical steps in addressing literacy challenges. Addressing these challenges will require a collaborative effort involving schools, parents/caregivers, policymakers, and community organizations to ensure that Alachua County can make significant progress in improving literacy outcomes for all residents.

The open-ended responses on surveys and feedback from interviews and focus groups were analyzed to create recommendations. Three overarching themes emerged during the analysis process: (1) Enhanced Awareness and Communication, (2) Focused Support, and (3) Expanded Professional Learning. Each larger theme is comprised of additional subthemes, which indicate possible next steps for an action plan that would benefit Alachua County children, youth, and adults. UF Lastinger Center, Children's Trust, and the committee supporting this work had multiple opportunities to review and refine the recommendations. Recommendations were prioritized based on their evidence base or research support, perceived importance, and practicality. It is not expected that all recommendations will be completed during the next stages of literacy improvement efforts.

Following the literacy needs assessment, the recommendations listed below should be further investigated for feasibility and then prioritized by importance into an action plan. Resources will need to be allocated to engage in the prioritization process and then to support the action plan.

1. Enhanced Awareness and Communication

The first category of recommendations, Enhanced Awareness and Communication, refers to the need to coordinate existing resources, engage in efforts to widely advertise those resources, and promote additional literacy engagement strategies (see Figure 34). This could be done by understanding how existing organizations meet the needs of Alachua County residents, identifying where gaps still exist, and recommending how resources could be even better allocated. Given the large number of existing resources, this category also includes recommendations about how to help Alachua County residents learn about existing resources so they could be better utilized. Finally, this category includes several suggestions for engaging the community and families in literacy enrichment experiences.

Figure 34. *Enhanced Awareness and Communication*



A. Increase Inter-Organization Alignment

- a. Map how the organizations listed in [Appendix A](#) serve Alachua County:** As shown in Appendix A, dozens of organizations currently serve children, youth, and adults in Alachua County. Yet, these efforts should be intentionally coordinated by a centralized organization (most likely the Children's Trust) to (1) understand which communities within Alachua County need the highest concentration of resources and (2) use coordinated strategies to meet those needs. The coordination effort would also help current organizations develop an awareness of each other's services so that if organizations serve an Alachua County resident but can't meet a particular need, they can recommend other possible resources.
- b. Allocate existing resources effectively:** Require organizations and initiatives that receive funding from publicly-sourced dollars to provide evidence of impact (e.g., participant literacy gains). Require every organization that receives funding to have a well-developed logic model, which visually represents key program components. On an annual basis, each organization should be able to describe the tools it uses to measure who was served, how participants were served, and the outcomes that were attained.
- c. Create or identify Community Advisory Boards:** Establish or identify existing advisory boards comprised of representatives from local businesses and organizations, which have significant insight and expertise in supporting literacy in Alachua County. Advisory boards should work with the centralized coordinating organization to provide insights and support for literacy initiatives, fostering community investment.

B. Create a Centralized Resource Hub

- a. Develop a website and corresponding physical resource guide:** A centralized resource hub should be created to help Alachua County residents understand the resources provided in the county. The hub would contain information about available literacy programs, workshops, resources, and events. Examples of information that should be shared include book distribution programs (Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, New Worlds Reading); free book and audiobook resources (Libby, Hoopla offered through Alachua County School District); and the organizations serving children, youth, and adults in Alachua County. Both online and physical versions of the

- resource guide should be easily accessible to Alachua County residents with variation in literacy skills and technology access. Ensure the hub is accessible to families who speak languages other than English (at minimum, offer resources in Spanish).
- b. Develop an awareness campaign by promoting the hub through multiple channels:** Many websites like the proposed hub already exist in Alachua County (e.g., calendar of events on county, city, ACPS, and Chamber of Commerce websites). However, these sources were not frequently reported to be utilized by participants in the literacy needs assessment. The hub can provide a centralized location for information, which would be strengthened by an awareness campaign utilizing healthcare professionals, home-based and center-based childcare programs, school communication channels (such as emails, texts, and newsletters), afterschool programs, libraries, community events, social media, public transportation (RTS), and local news outlets.
 - c. Promote and expand access to existing literacy resources, such as mobile libraries and book delivery programs:** Expand access to books and resources in various areas through mobile library services. Library services highlighted the need for more funding to expand outreach to rural areas. In addition, Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library (administered by Gainesville Thrives) and New Worlds Reading (administered by UF Lastinger Center) are two free book delivery programs, but not all families know about these valuable resources.

C. Strengthen Community Engagement

- a. Establish collaborations with local businesses:** Engage businesses, such as bookstores and others, in sponsoring literacy events for various age groups. One elected official suggested, “More collaboration between schools and local businesses could help fund literacy initiatives.”
- b. Strengthen relationships with libraries:** Partner with libraries to offer joint programs, share resources, and promote literacy initiatives.
- c. Collaborate with community centers:** Work with community centers to provide literacy programs, access to resources, and support for families. One of the interviewed elected officials said, “Libraries, after-school programs, and community centers should be better integrated into the literacy strategy.”

- d. Connect with faith-based organizations:** Partner with churches, synagogues, mosques, and other faith-based organizations to reach families and provide literacy support. Encourage churches to maintain a lending library in their public space, supplemented by donations from other organizations when possible.
- e. Promote intergenerational literacy:** Host events where grandparents can read to children or share their personal stories. Create additional opportunities for older adults to volunteer in schools or community programs.

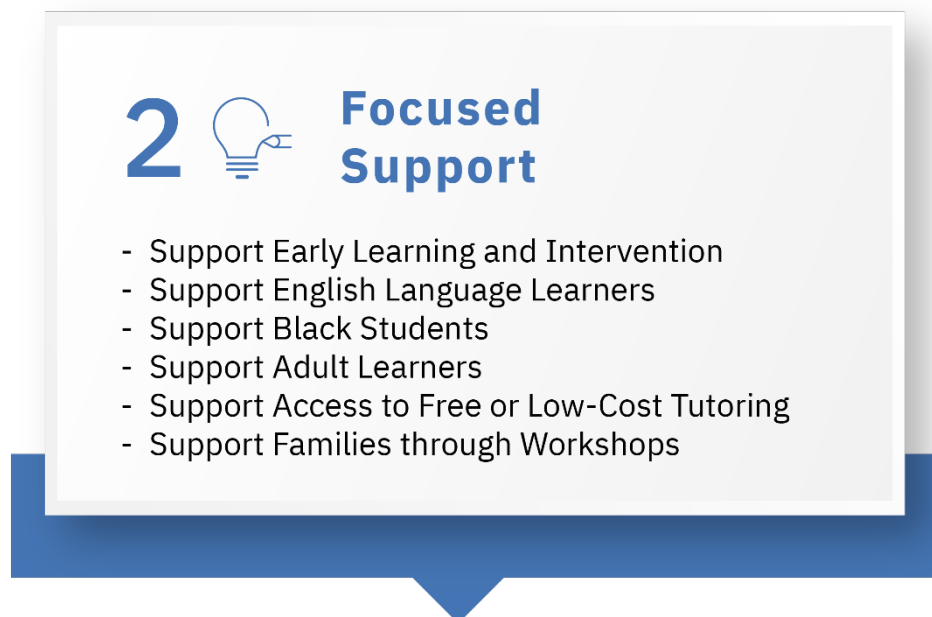
D. Promote Reading Engagement

- a. Organize public reading events:** Focus group participants discussed how they enjoy many of the free and engaging events in Alachua County. However, most expressed a desire for more education-focused events so that they and their children can learn *and* play. For example, host reading festivals, book fairs, or author visits to promote literacy and create a love of reading. Bring together authors, illustrators, storytellers, musicians, and other artists to celebrate the power of language and literature.
- b. Promote reading in public spaces:** Create “Reading Corners” or “Literacy Walls” in libraries, community centers, and public parks. Books can be distributed to offices through book drives. Books can also be purchased cheaply at Friends of the Library sales.
- c. Host family literacy nights at schools, faith-based organizations, and community organizations:** Organize events where families can participate in literacy activities together, such as reading aloud, storytelling, and craft activities.
- d. Hold book awards or reading contests:** Numerous people who participated in focus groups fondly remembered the [Book It!](#) program from when they were in school. People spoke about the need to incentivize reading and make it more fun for children and youth. School- or community-based book awards or reading contests would recognize students and community members who have achieved reading milestones.

2. Focused Support

The second recommendation, Focused Support, provides recommendations for specific groups of Alachua County residents (see Figure 35). These groups (children ages 0-5; English language learners; Black children, youth, and families; and adult learners) were included in this section based on the data presented and collected during the literacy needs assessment. This category also includes tutoring and family workshops as possible effective ways to meet existing needs.

Figure 35. *Focused Support*



A. Support Early Learning and Intervention

- a. Invest more resources in early childhood literacy:** Early intervention before age six substantially reduces reading difficulties and improves long-term reading success (Snowling & Hume, 2011). Families need increased access to early childhood literacy assessments, speech and language screenings, and specialized interventions for children at risk for reading difficulties. New and existing programs, such as Help Me Grow, Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY; Payne et al., 2020), North Central Florida Healthy Start, and NewboRN Home Visiting provide evidence-based and research-supported literacy strategies to support

parents and caregivers of young children in their homes. However, most programs have limited funding. Providing increased funding to these programs could support additional families and would have long-term impacts for Alachua County families and promote school readiness.

- b. Increase educator and parent/caregiver knowledge about early screening:** Early screening is vital to identify if children need additional support to gain needed language and literacy skills. Programs like Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resources System (FDLRS) and the Early Learning Coalition of Alachua County (ELCAC) provide much-needed screening for young children. Coordinated efforts by the health department, FDLRS, ELCAC, pediatrician offices, and ACPS could improve the number of children who are screened and are identified as eligible to receive early intervention. Organizations that provide early screening should communicate clearly with families the purpose of the screening, review the results, and discuss collaborative action steps to connect families to needed resources.
- c. Develop additional resources for families:** Resources, like UF's North Central Early Steps program, are needed to help families navigate early intervention programs and therapeutic services, including how families can request referrals from pediatricians, find in-network providers, submit claims to insurance, and develop the skills to serve as an advocate for their child or children.

B. Support English Language Learners

- a. Build proactive, asset-based relationships with families of English language learners:** Educators and staff in public and community organizations should use an assets-based approach to collaborating with families that values students' backgrounds and languages (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2021).
- b. Develop materials and resources in multiple languages:** Make sure resources, learning materials, assessments, and communication tools are available in multiple languages.
- c. Provide ongoing training on second language acquisition:** Ensure that educators and staff in public and community organizations understand the unique needs and challenges of English language learners.

C. Support Black Students

- a. Allocate resources to provide systematic and explicit reading instruction and support to Black students:** In Alachua County, Black students would benefit from rigorous support to improve their reading success. Research over the past several decades indicates that nearly all children, no matter their race or other demographic factors, can meet grade-level reading expectations through systematic and explicit reading instruction during school and in outside-of-school programs, such as afterschool tutoring (Foorman et al., 2016; National Reading Panel, 2000). Aspects of explicit instruction that are beneficial using a gradual release of responsibility model and direct instruction of core literacy skills such as reading comprehension strategies, vocabulary, decoding, and sentence structure.
- b. Provide ongoing training in asset-based and strength-based approaches:** Professionals in healthcare, education, and community organizations serving Black children and families should receive ongoing training that centers strengths-based perspectives, fosters high expectations, and recognizes the need to build strong relationships with and provide wrap-around supports for Black children and youth (Gatlin-Nash et al., 2021; Washington, 2021; Washington & Seidenberg, 2021).
- c. Use materials that represent the lived experiences of Black children, youth, and adults:** Instructional materials, assignments, and books that reflect Black students' backgrounds and experiences are critical to engagement and motivation for reading (Tatum, 2006). Using materials that enable students to see themselves and developing and incorporating a deep understanding of students' background into instruction are just two suggestions (Washington, 2021).
- d. Focus on meaningful efforts to improve school attendance for Black children and youth:** Engage in a listening tour with Black students and families to understand impediments to school attendance. Create a multifaceted plan to improve attendance based on the expressed needs of families and students (Freeman et al., 2018; Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2024).

D. Support Adult Learners

- a. Advertise programs for adults with low literacy:** Local organizations currently provide literacy workshops, classes, and resources specifically designed for adults who need to improve their reading and writing skills. Examples include Alachua County Library District Literacy Program and Family Literacy Program, Santa Fe College, Community Health Equity Institute English Classes, Impact Program, Alachua County Adult Education (offered by ACPS), and Catholic Charities.
- b. Use evidence-based instruction for adults with reading difficulties:** Adult reading education courses should be aware of, and adopt, evidence-based instructional strategies. Key considerations include the following:
Conducting pre-instruction assessments to create profiles of learners' reading strengths and weaknesses; providing instruction in basic reading skills, such as phonemic awareness and decoding, when appropriate based on assessment results; and incorporating targeted instruction in fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension strategies to address learners' specific needs (Kruidenier, 2002).
- c. Provide and advertise computer skills programs for adults:** Adults need basic computer skills to complete internet searches, fill out forms online, and upload documents, among other necessary daily tasks. Computer skills and digital literacy are important for families who want to help children complete online homework or use digital literacy resources at home.
- d. Offer additional English language support for adults:** Provide classes, tutoring, and resources to help English language learners improve their literacy skills. These classes should be focused on practical skills and communication, such as job interviews, health appointments, and talking to their child's teacher.

E. Support Access to Free or Low-Cost Tutoring

- a. Offer additional tutoring options:** High-dosage tutoring that is provided on school campuses before, during, or after the school day by well-trained staff has been shown to be the most effective form of tutoring (Nickow et al., 2024). Tutoring services can be offered at schools by trained paraprofessionals or certified teachers earning stipends. ACPS can utilize external funding sources, including Florida Tutoring Advantage, Titles I-IV,

AmeriCorps, or other community partners, to enhance existing tutoring services.

- b. Support existing organizations providing tutoring:** Identify organizations that are already providing tutoring but need extra resources. Recruit and train volunteers to provide literacy support to students. Volunteers can be effective in teaching foundational literacy skills, correcting reading errors, and fostering deep discussions about books when they are provided with high-quality training and structured lesson plans (Vadasy et al., 1997; Vadasy & Sanders, 2010). Additional volunteers may be recruited from student populations at the University of Florida or Santa Fe College.

F. Support Families through Workshops

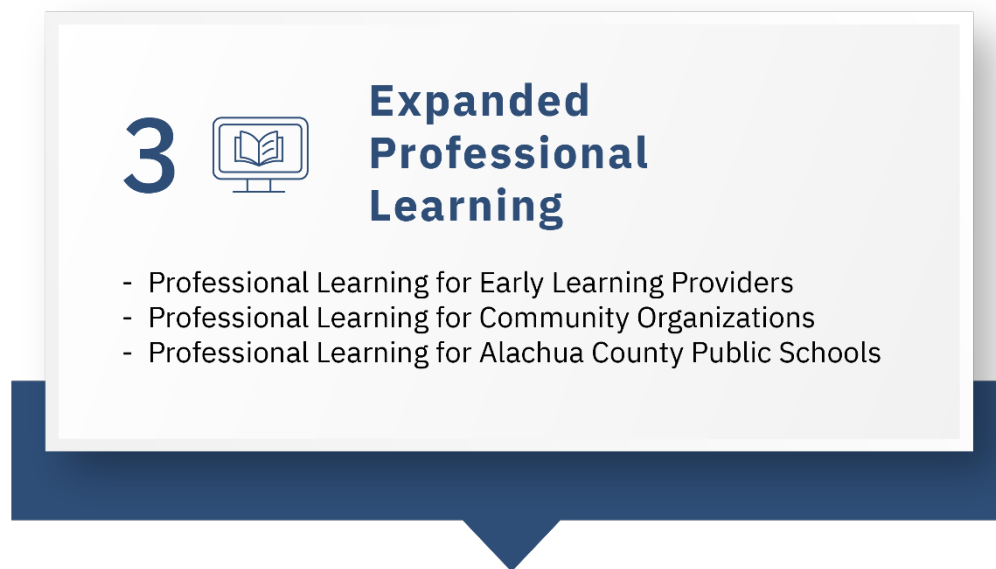
a. Build families' knowledge about supporting literacy learning at home:

Provide families with information and resources on how to support their child's literacy development at home. Healthcare providers can share resources with parents and caregivers and include early literacy in the programming for any prenatal and/or parenting groups they host. Early learning organizations and programs can host literacy workshops, offer at-home reading incentives, and provide access to literacy resources in multiple languages. ACPS can provide accurate examples of grade-level reading and writing goals at the beginning of each school year and host at least two workshops per school year to teach families about the literacy curriculum at each school and how they can help their child at home (e.g., teach parents/caregivers about UFLI so that when they help their children with homework, it is consistent with the methods learned at school).

3. Expanded Professional Learning

The third recommendation, Expanded Professional Learning, includes numerous recommendations for enhancing teaching experiences for and data-based decision making by early learning providers, community organization staff, and ACPS educators (see Figure 36).

Figure 36. *Expanded Professional Learning*



Professional Learning for Early Learning Providers

A. Expand Professional Learning for Early Learning Educators

a. Increase access to evidence-based professional learning opportunities:

Provide more opportunities to ongoing professional learning opportunities on how to use effective practices to support emergent literacy development for children ages birth to five.

b. Increase access to coaching: Provide increased opportunities for early learning educators to receive literacy coaching and mentoring to support curriculum implementation and effective practices. High-quality professional learning with coaching support improves teacher effectiveness, leading to stronger reading outcomes (Piasta et al., 2009).

- c. Increase access to job-embedded professional learning:** Provide job-embedded literacy workshops with opportunities to plan, implement, and reflect on language and literacy support provided to young children (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009).

B. Develop a Culture of Data-Driven Decision Making

- a. Create a coordinated vision for using early learning data:** Create and clearly articulate a vision for data use across Alachua County early learning providers and set goals based on developmentally appropriate practices that will lead to kindergarten readiness. Collaborate with ACPS in setting kindergarten readiness goals.
- b. Use data to improve VPK enrollment:** VPK students appear to enter kindergarten with higher school readiness skills as compared to students who were not in VPK (see Figure 8), but VPK enrollment numbers remain low in Alachua County (see Figure 6). Examine existing data to create targeted strategies to increase availability and enrollment of VPK.

Professional Learning for Community Organizations

A. Provide Professional Learning for Community Providers

- a. Increase access to evidence-based professional learning opportunities:** Train staff and volunteers of literacy resource organizations (including library staff) in how to use effective and relevant strategies for teaching reading or providing literacy-related support.
- b. Increase knowledge about how to measure impacts:** Provide training for staff and volunteers of literacy resource organizations in how to measure outcomes, use assessment results to inform their programming, and tailor their approach to individual needs of the people they serve.

B. Develop a Culture of Data-Driven Decision Making

- a. Create a coordinated vision for using organization data:** Create and clearly articulate a vision for data use for organizations across Alachua County. Collaborate with early learning providers and ACPS in setting up short and long-term literacy achievement goals.

Professional Learning for Alachua County Public Schools

A. Develop a Culture of Data-Driven Decision Making

- a. Create a coordinated vision for using student data:** Clearly articulate a vision for data use across ACPS. Provide funding and procedures for reporting literacy outcome data by schools and student subgroups. Use the data for improvement efforts.
- b. Promote cross-departmental collaboration:** Create a culture of collaboration between ACPS departments that are responsible for professional learning, curriculum implementation, and student data analysis.

B. Improve Professional Learning Opportunities for School and District Leaders

- a. Encourage school leaders to be reading instructional leaders:** Ensure school leaders (i.e., principals and assistant principals) at all grade bands have the necessary knowledge of evidence-based literacy practices to provide support and technical assistance to teachers. Provide ongoing professional learning in a variety of modalities to support school leaders' busy schedules.
- b. Promote district use of data-based decision making:** Educators, school leaders, and district leaders indicated there were gaps in district support for data-based decision making and sustaining a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS). Provide ongoing professional learning on MTSS and implementation science for district and school leaders. Collaborate with entities like the [Problem Solving/Response to Intervention Project](#) to engage in professional learning and provide technical assistance to schools.

C. Improve Professional Learning Opportunities for K-5 Educators

- a. Improve small group instruction:** Elementary students need increased exposure to reading connected text, not just word-level activities, during small group instruction (Foorman et al., 2016). Engage in available professional learning opportunities that enhance teachers' delivery of small group instruction using high-impact activities that build multiple domains of students' literacy knowledge, including fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.
- b. Improve implementation of UFLI Foundations:** Provide regular, ongoing centralized professional learning for new teachers and those requiring

additional implementation support in how to best use UFLI Foundations (Lane & Contessa, 2022). Incentivize attendance of professional learning sessions. Identify schools and classrooms with high proportions of students with foundational skill difficulties and use literacy coaches and implementation specialists to improve the quality and consistency of UFLI Foundations implementation. Model lessons for teachers and provide ongoing coaching cycles. Create and/or use cross-district pacing and alignment guides to ensure that students at early grade levels have exposure to UFLI Foundations lessons that are appropriate for their grade and not repeated across grade levels.

- c. Improve implementation of Benchmark Advance:** A lack of professional learning opportunities on the structure and implementation of Benchmark Advance (Benchmark Education, 2022) is contributing to perception and implementation difficulties for this core curriculum. Provide regular, ongoing centralized professional learning and job-embedded coaching for new teachers and those requiring additional implementation support. Emphasize key levers including the use of high-quality complex text, the importance of connecting reading with writing, differentiated instruction, and explicit and systematic teaching.
- d. Clarify the role of intervention coaches:** Participating educators indicated a variety of experiences with Instructional Intervention Coaches, ranging from helpful coaching cycles to an absence of direct support for teachers. District leadership should emphasize to school leaders that the role of the Instructional Intervention Coach is primarily providing direct coaching cycles with teachers.
- e. Employ additional certified reading specialists:** Low literacy rates among K-12 students indicate a need for more certified reading specialists to address high literacy needs.

D. Improve Professional Learning Opportunities for 6-12 Educators

- a. Improve implementation of English Language Arts curricula and programs:** Prioritize consistent district-wide professional learning in evidence-based instructional strategies for English Language Arts and content area teachers. Create and execute a comprehensive professional learning plan that emphasizes evidence-based systems for improving literacy instruction for all teachers (e.g., [Strategic Instructional Model](#)). Ensure all teachers across the district participate in both professional

learning sessions and follow up and incentivize participation in professional learning. Provide job-embedded coaching and implementation support. Finally, ensure that explicit vocabulary and reading comprehension instruction is integrated regularly into content area teaching.

E. Promote Collaboration and Peer Learning

- a. Provide ongoing support for effective grade level and departmental planning:** Participating educators and school leaders felt that they lacked district support for implementing consistent and effective grade level and departmental planning meetings. Although any single planning and data-based problem-solving protocol has not been established as the most effective, it would be beneficial for schools to have access to centralized training, ongoing support, and evidence-based resources for structured planning.
- b. Ensure consistency of new teacher mentor activities:** Participating educators reported a variety of mentorship experiences, ranging from absent mentors to high-quality experiences. ACPS offers a Beginning Teacher Program, but mentor/mentee experiences appear to vary depending on the school. Through initial training, communicate that the role of the mentor should entail: Establishing relationships with mentees using student data, conducting observations, and providing feedback to establish mentee's areas of growth (Hudson, 2016). Develop mentees' content knowledge and pedagogical skills.
- c. Ensure that educators have access to a combination of online and in-person literacy professional learning opportunities:** Provide training options that accommodate their schedules and preferences. Utilize resources offered by the state of Florida.
- d. Provide incentives for participation:** Offer stipends, release time, or other incentives to encourage educators to participate in professional development opportunities.
- e. Create partnerships with experts:** Collaborate with universities and literacy experts to provide advanced training and consultation. Bringing in external expertise can enhance the quality of professional development and keep staff updated on the latest evidence-based practices.

- f. Develop a system for collecting and sharing feedback:** Gather input from teachers to identify areas for improvement and adjust professional development offerings accordingly.

F. Train Educators in Effective Strategies for Supporting Students with Disabilities

- a. Provide professional learning on evidence-based practices for teaching students with differing needs:** Participating ESE teachers and service providers expressed the lack of dedicated professional learning offerings about specially designed instruction, IEP goal setting and monitoring, targeting curriculum/instruction to identified areas of weakness, grouping of students, and caseload management. The ESE department should ensure that ESE teachers have access to ongoing professional learning in these key topics. Include principles of explicit instruction, data-informed individualization, and selection of appropriate interventions in professional learning.
- c. Attract ESE teachers:** Offer financial incentives to incoming teachers who are certified to instruct students with disabilities. Incentives can also be provided for existing teachers to become ESE certified.
- d. Retain current ESE teachers:** The Alachua County Department of Exceptional Student Education, in conjunction with other departments, should collect data on teacher caseloads, schedules, and working conditions to develop a comprehensive long-term plan to address teacher retention. This plan should include initial intensive, job-embedded supports for new teachers and professional learning opportunities that encourage general education and exceptional student education teachers to work collaboratively to design and implement a continuum of instruction.

Conclusions and Next Steps

This literacy needs assessment provides a data-informed, community-centered analysis of literacy challenges and opportunities across Alachua County. With quantitative data from standardized assessments, attendance records, and survey responses; qualitative insights from focus groups, interviews, and community engagements; and a review of evidence-based and research-supported practices, this literacy needs assessment presents a holistic picture of literacy development from early childhood to adulthood.

Findings reveal both strengths and persistent disparities. Despite significant community engagement and the presence of evidence-based instructional practices, literacy proficiency remains below desired levels, particularly among Black students, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged learners. Although targeted interventions have demonstrated promise, challenges such as curriculum misalignment and teacher professional development gaps hinder progress.

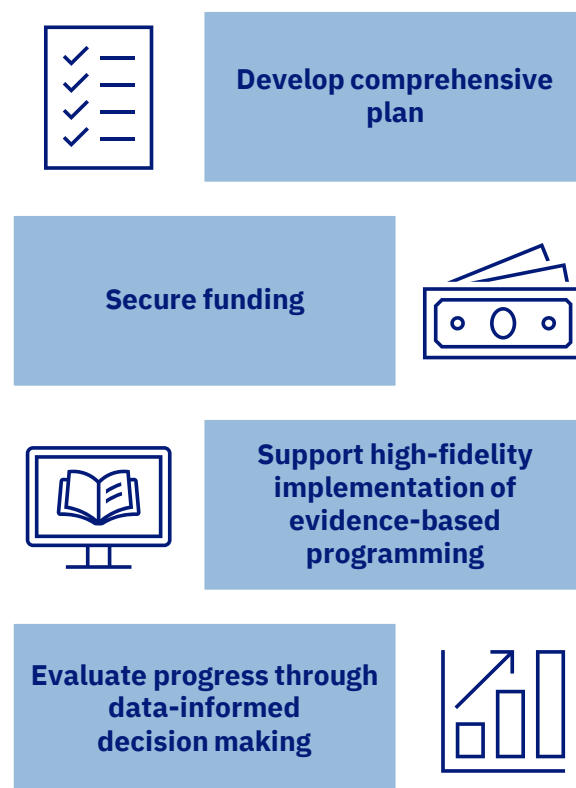
The key challenges that were identified include limited access to high-quality literacy resources, financial constraints, teacher retention issues, and inadequate instructional support for learners below grade level. Additionally, chronic absenteeism disproportionately affects certain student populations, magnifying literacy disparities. These findings align with existing research on disparities in literacy achievement.

This study underscores the importance of integrating qualitative insights with quantitative measures to inform targeted, community-centered literacy initiatives. The recommendations emphasize a three-pronged approach:

1. **Enhancing awareness and communication** through improved collaboration among stakeholders and a centralized literacy resource hub.
2. **Providing focused support** via increased funding for early literacy programs, expanded tutoring interventions, and targeted literacy efforts for ALL groups.
3. **Expanding professional learning opportunities** for educators, particularly in areas of differentiated instruction and literacy intervention strategies.

Moving forward, a multi-sector approach involving schools, community organizations, policymakers, and families will be crucial to ensuring long-term literacy improvements. The next steps include developing a comprehensive plan, securing funding, supporting high fidelity implementation of evidence-based literacy programs, and continually evaluating progress through data-informed decision-making (see Figure 37). By building stronger early literacy foundations, ensuring equal access to quality instruction, expanding adult learning opportunities, and advocating for policy-driven change, Alachua County can significantly improve literacy rates and educational success for all residents.

Figure 37. *Next Steps for Alachua County Literacy Improvements*



Appendix A

Organization List by Age Group

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
<u>Alachua County Public Schools HIPPY</u>	ACPS Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) is an international evidence-based home visiting early childhood intervention program focused on parent-involved learning for preschoolers. The HIPPY model includes 3 years of home-based curriculum 30 weeks (about 7 months) a year, professional coordinator, staff of home visitors, role play instructional technique and home visits and group meetings. The curriculum includes letter knowledge, rhyming, phonemic awareness, comprehension skills and vocabulary development.	Early Learning
<u>Alachua County Public Schools VPK</u>	ACPS VPK provides early childhood education to students that live in Alachua County and are 4 years old.	Early Learning
<u>Cade Museum</u>	Cade Museum in Gainesville has a mission to transform communities by inspiring and equipping future inventors, entrepreneurs, and visionaries. For literacy education, the museum offers Little Sparks Program on site and has outreach classes at Episcopal Community Services (ECS) Head Start in Alachua County.	Early Learning

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
<u>Early Learning Coalition of Alachua County</u>	The Early Learning Coalition of Alachua County (ELCAC) serves as a resource to families and childcare providers.	Early Learning
<u>Episcopal Children's Services (ECS4Kids)</u>	ECS4Kids helps children in Northeast and Central Florida succeed in school and beyond. Through early childhood education programs like VPK, Head Start, and School Readiness, ECS4Kids offers crucial support and guidance to families seeking high-quality care and educational opportunities. For over 50 years, the mission of ECS4Kids has been to build a strong foundation for each child, ensuring they are prepared for lifelong learning and success.	Early Learning
<u>Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resource System (FDLRS)</u>	The Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resource System (FDLRS) serves Marion, Alachua, Citrus, Dixie, Gilchrist, Levy, and UF Lab School. FDLRS provides diagnostic, instructional, and technology support services to district exceptional education programs and families of students with disabilities.	Early Learning
<u>Florida Healthy Start Parents as Teachers</u>	The Florida Healthy Start program provides education, support and proven interventions to expecting and new families who are at risk of a poor birth outcome or delay in development.	Early Learning

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
<u>Gainesville Thrives</u>	Gainesville Thrives works to promote tutoring and mentoring for kindergarten through high school students, as well as other services for expectant parents, parents and their infants, toddlers, and preschool children.	Early Learning
<u>NewboRN Home Visiting</u>	NewboRN Home Visiting is a free program offered to all Alachua County women who give birth in the county. Within a week after baby is born, a registered nurse visits the family at home to see how they are doing, share information and connect them to services and resources.	Early Learning
<u>University of Florida North Central Early Steps</u>	UF North Central Early Steps provides early intervention services for families of children ages birth to three years old who have or are at risk for a developmental delay. No income requirement is necessary to qualify for the program. Participation is voluntary.	Early Learning
<u>United Way of North Central Florida – Alachua County Campaign for Grade Level Reading</u>	The Campaign for Grade Level Reading collaborates with schools, libraries, non-profits, and other community organizations to create a network of support for literacy. This includes working with local educators to align efforts and share resources aimed at improving literacy rates.	Early Learning, K-2

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
<u>Alachua County Library District Story Time, Summer Reading</u>	<p>The Alachua County Library District offers a range of literacy programs and services, including preliteracy programming (Baby Time, Story Time, and Music and Movement) to help young children develop early reading skills through reading, writing, singing, talking, and playing. Summer Reading Program for all ages promotes lifelong learning and combats summer slide.</p>	<p>Early Learning, K-12</p>
<u>Healthy Families Florida – Healthy Families Alachua</u>	<p>Healthy Families Florida is a nationally accredited home visiting program for expectant parents and parents of newborns experiencing stressful life situations. The program improves childhood outcomes and increases family self-sufficiency by empowering parents through education and community support.</p>	<p>Early Learning, Adults</p>
<u>AskMeno</u>	<p>AskMeno is a supplement to core curriculum (ELA, Social Studies) that reinforces learning and provides engaging practice and application in various skills.</p>	<p>PK-2</p>
<u>University of Florida Lastinger Center – New Worlds Reading</u>	<p>New Worlds Reading is Florida’s free at-home literacy program designed to help eligible VPK through 5th grade students in Florida bolster literacy skills, build reading confidence, and foster a lifelong love of reading. Each month, eligible kids receive a free book tailored to their interests with resources and activities for caregivers and</p>	<p>PK-5</p>

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
	children to use together. New Worlds Reading was created by the Florida Legislature and is administered by the UF Lastinger Center for Learning. Book titles are selected in partnership with the Florida Department of Education and Scholastic. Books and materials are available in English, Spanish, Haitian Creole, and braille.	
<u>United Way of North Central Florida – Reading Pals Program</u>	ReadingPals is a volunteer-based literacy mentorship program that provides early intervention for children in low-to moderate-income communities. The program pairs trained volunteers with young students to build foundational literacy skills, foster a love of reading, and promote social-emotional development through one-on-one mentorship.	PK-3
<u>Kids Count – Afterschool Program</u>	Kids Count supports foundational literacy skills by offering over 48 hours of 1-on-1 literacy tutoring using the UFLI curriculum, delivered by trained volunteers or staff. Text-rich learning environments, class libraries, and take-home books encourage students to read and build home libraries.	K-5
<u>Rotary Club Reading Safari</u>	The Rotary Club provides funding for the Santa Fe College Zoo’s Reading Safari program.	K-5

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
<u>University of Florida IFAS, Lastinger Center – Books and Cooks</u>	Books and Cooks is a free literacy and nutrition program that is a partnership with the New Worlds Reading Initiative. Parents and children learn alongside other families in 7 weekly sessions. Families are supported through the learning of simple, at-home strategies that can be easily added to daily routines.	K-5
<u>University of Florida Lastinger Center – Florida Tutoring Advantage</u>	Florida Tutoring Advantage will provide Science of Reading and math tutoring best practices to school districts developing school-based K-5 tutoring services, offer free consultation, and distribute funding to augment tutoring programs. During the inaugural year of implementation, UF Lastinger Center will adopt a Plan, Prepare, Pilot model to inform the scaling up of the program.	K-5
<u>North Central FL YMCA – Youth and Teen Enrichment Center</u>	The Youth & Teen Center is a collaboration of youth-serving agencies (Motiv8U and the City of Gainesville) providing students with educational, cultural, and recreational activities. The Center is a special space at the Y dedicated to youth and teens’ comfort and interests. It acts as a place for students to get homework done, hang out with friends, work on community service projects, engage in STEM-related activities, and more.	G5-11

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
<u>Dream On Purpose</u>	Dream on Purpose is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering youth with a specific focus on young ladies between the ages of 11 to 18 to dream and to actualize their dreams.	G4-12
<u>Education Equalizer Workshops</u>	Education Equalizer works with middle through high school students and their families to demystify the college admittance process and provide scholars with the necessary tools to graduate. They provide ACT/SAT prep, college admission advice, FAFSA clinics, and more.	G6-12
<u>Big Brothers Big Sisters of Alachua County</u>	Big Brothers Big Sisters is the nation's largest donor- and volunteer-supported mentoring network. The organization makes meaningful, monitored matches between adult volunteers ("Bigs") and children ("Littles"), ages 5 through young adulthood in communities across the country.	K-12
<u>Cuscowilla Nature and Retreat Center</u>	The Cuscowilla Nature and Retreat Center aims to provide free camp experiences that encourage the academic and physical health of children at no cost to them. Their emphasis is on providing opportunities for low income, youth in Alachua County to attend camp.	K-12
<u>IGB Education</u>	IGB Education provides mentoring programming for students in 5th-12th grade and	K-12

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
	Enrichment programming for students K-5th grade.	
<u>MOTIV8U of North Central Florida</u>	MOTIV8U is a nonprofit training organization. provide life skills and social-emotional skills to agencies throughout the county and state that work with youth.	K-12
<u>New Tech Now – Mobile MakerSpace STE2AM Engine</u>	New Tech Now provides access to 3D equipment and training necessary to acquire new emerging tech skills in STEM fields emphasizing literacy and art.	K-12
<u>Peak Literacy</u>	Over the past five years, PEAK Literacy has built a successful model that identifies children who are behind in their reading development and pairs them with trained, nurturing volunteer tutors for one-to-one reading lessons that are short, focused, and effective. These high dosage tutoring lessons take place virtually or in person for 15 minutes a day, 3-5 days a week. Using the digital Great Leaps literacy software, attendance and progress are tracked to ensure fidelity and reading fluency growth.	K-12
<u>The Education Foundation of Alachua County – Catalyst for Change Teacher Grant Program</u>	Through Catalyst for Change, teachers are encouraged to apply for literacy grants that promote improving teaching instruction and access to resources to increase reading achievement scores and overall improve the learning experience for students.	K-12

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
<u>University of Florida Multi-disciplinary Diagnostic & Training Program (MDTP)</u>	UF MDTP serves K-12 children and youth who are at-risk for or identified as having complex medical, educational, socioemotional, and/or behavioral problems and are struggling academically.	K-12
<u>William A. Stokes Community Center</u>	The William A. Stokes Community Center is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit social service agency providing services to Micanopy, Alachua County, and surrounding areas.	K-12
<u>Career Source</u>	CareerSource North Central Florida provides career and business services with hundreds of employment opportunities.	K-12, Adults
<u>Hands on Gainesville – Science Outreach Programs</u>	Hands On Gainesville encourages a student as apprentice approach to learning, with the belief that learning by doing leads to better understanding. Students are encouraged to see science everywhere in the world and especially in their community.	K-12, Adults
<u>University of Florida, Department of Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences – UF Reading Program</u>	The UF Reading Program provides evaluation services to diagnose reading disabilities throughout the year. During the summer, the program also provides reading intervention for students who have dyslexia.	K-12, Adults
<u>Alachua County Library District</u>	Alachua County Library District is an independent special district and the sole provider of public library services to citizens in Alachua County, serving urban and rural communities through 12 branch locations, two	Lifespan

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
	bookmobiles, and multiple deposit collections.	
<u>Alachua County Library District Library Partnership Branch</u>	The Library Partnership Branch offers literacy programs for all ages, including weekly Preschool Story Time, bi-monthly Music and Movement Story Time, and passive activities like puzzles for elementary students. Early learning stations with touchscreen computers support preschool to 3rd-grade learners. STEAM programs for middle schoolers and teens integrate literacy, while the branch also serves as a tutoring center.	Lifespan
One Community Family Resource Center	A resource center in East Gainesville provides wrap-around services to meet the needs of those in the community.	Lifespan
<u>Rural Women's Health Project</u>	This program provides health education through community health workers; in-house referral line; community ID provision; case management. All services are provided to the Spanish speaking population.	Lifespan
<u>SW Advocacy Group (SWAG)</u>	SWAG's mission is to address the needs of the community by connecting individuals and families to services and resources through partnerships with agencies and community partners. SWAG serves eight neighborhoods in SW Gainesville: Majestic Oaks, Holly Heights, Harbor Cove, Pine Meadows, Hidden Oaks Mobile	Lifespan

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
	Home Park, Gordon Manor, Tower Oaks/Tower Oaks Glen, and Linton Oaks. Literacy-related services include the following: early care and education; homework help for elementary and middle/high school students; and daily computer & Internet access.	
<u>Alachua County Library District Adult Literacy Program</u>	The Adult Literacy Program offers one-on-one tutoring for basic education learners as well as English Language Learners. The program is volunteer driven and offers other programming when available.	Adults
<u>Catholic Charities</u>	Catholic Charities offers an English Language Literacy Program designed to help anyone who is looking to learn or improve their skills in English comprehension and usage. The small and personal classroom environment is designed to meet multi-level needs and understanding of the English language. The twice weekly classes are taught by Certified ESL instructors with over twelve years of experience.	Adults
<u>Community Health Equity Institute</u>	Community Health Equity Institute provides English classes to help bridge the disparities that exist in the community and health sector. The organization aims to achieve this goal by providing resources that help reduce barriers to health and education in underserved communities.	Adults

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
<u>Emmanuel Mennonite Church</u>	Emmanuel Mennonite Church offers free ESL courses on Saturday afternoon, serving member shows up Spanish speakers Haitian, Creole speakers, and speakers of other languages.	Adults
<u>Impacto UF</u>	Impacto UF is a student-led organization that seeks to recruit and train Spanish-speaking UF students to teach basic English to the non-English-speaking Hispanic/Latino community in Gainesville.	Adults
<u>Santa Fe College Adult Basic Education</u>	Santa Fe College provides Adult Basic Education (ABE), GED preparation, and ESOL.	Adults
<u>University City Church of Christ</u>	The University City Church of Christ English Partners program helps immigrants in developing effective communication skills in English. It offers free one-on-one English tutoring and free English study materials for individual language and reading levels, study, or job interests.	Adults
<u>University of Florida Christian Campus House</u>	UF's Christian Campus House's English Corner program is organized by a student group that welcomes people of all ages who want to practice speaking English.	Adults
<u>University of Florida English Language Institute</u>	UF's English Language Institute program primarily serves F1 and J1 and tourists and students who intend to study at US universities or colleges.	Adults

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
<u>University of Florida Lastinger Center – Adult Professional Learning Programs</u>	The University of Florida Lastinger Center is an innovation hub designed to equip educators of children birth through twelfth grade with evidence-based, practical support and professional development resources to enhance reading instruction; connect school districts to customized professional development, coaching, and instructional support; and engage students with innovative programs and initiatives that promote reading proficiency.	Adults
<u>Williams Temple Church of God in Christ</u>	Williams Temple COGIC - Offers an English language program to fulfill a practical community need. The lessons are designed to teach conversational English and provide opportunities for learners to practice speaking English in a relaxed environment. The program offers free intermediate/advanced English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes for adults on Zoom	Adults
<u>Community Foundation of North Central Florida</u>	The mission of Community Foundation of North Central Florida is to promote community transformation through the power of philanthropy.	Not Specified
<u>Gainesville Chamber of Commerce</u>	The activities of the Greater Gainesville Chamber of Commerce are executed around the vision to be a global hub of talent, innovation, and	Not Specified

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
	opportunity in the Greater Gainesville Region.	
<u>University of Florida Center for Autism and Related Disabilities</u>	UF Center for Autism and Related Disabilities focuses on building the capacity of families and professionals to support individuals with autism and related disabilities, including literacy programming.	Not Specified

Organization List by Alphabetical Name

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
<u>Alachua County Library District</u>	Alachua County Library District is an independent special district and the sole provider of public library services to citizens in Alachua County, serving urban and rural communities through 12 branch locations, two bookmobiles, and multiple deposit collections.	Lifespan
<u>Alachua County Library District Story Time, Summer Reading</u>	The Alachua County Library District offers a range of literacy programs and services, including preliteracy programming (Baby Time, Story Time, and Music and Movement) to help young children develop early reading skills through reading, writing, singing, talking, and playing. Summer Reading Program for all ages promotes lifelong learning and combats summer slide.	Early Learning, K-12
<u>Alachua County Library District Adult Literacy Program</u>	The Adult Literacy Program offers one-on-one tutoring for basic education learners as well as English Language Learners. The program is volunteer driven and offers other programming when available.	Adults
<u>Alachua County Library District Library Partnership Branch</u>	The Library Partnership Branch offers literacy programs for all ages, including weekly Preschool Story Time, bi-monthly Music and Movement Story Time, and passive activities like puzzles for elementary students. Early	Lifespan

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
	learning stations with touchscreen computers support preschool to 3rd-grade learners. STEAM programs for middle schoolers and teens integrate literacy, while the branch also serves as a tutoring center.	
<u>Alachua County Public Schools HIPPY</u>	ACPS Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) is an international evidence-based home visiting early childhood intervention program focused on parent-involved learning for preschoolers. The HIPPY model includes 3 years of home-based curriculum 30 weeks (about 7 months) a year, professional coordinator, staff of home visitors, role play instructional technique and home visits and group meetings. The curriculum includes letter knowledge, rhyming, phonemic awareness, comprehension skills and vocabulary development.	Early Learning
<u>Alachua County Public Schools VPK</u>	ACPS VPK provides early childhood education to students that live in Alachua County and are 4 years old.	Early Learning
<u>AskMeno</u>	AskMeno is a supplement to core curriculum (ELA, Social Studies) that reinforces learning and provides engaging practice and application in various skills.	PK-2
<u>Big Brothers Big Sisters of Alachua County</u>	Big Brothers Big Sisters is the nation's largest donor- and volunteer-supported mentoring network. The organization makes meaningful, monitored	K-12

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
	matches between adult volunteers (“Bigs”) and children (“Littles”), ages 5 through young adulthood in communities across the country.	
<u>Cade Museum</u>	Cade Museum in Gainesville has a mission to transform communities by inspiring and equipping future inventors, entrepreneurs, and visionaries. For literacy education, the museum offers Little Sparks Program on site and has outreach classes at Episcopal Community Services (ECS) Head Start in Alachua County.	Early Learning
<u>Career Source</u>	CareerSource North Central Florida provides career and business services with hundreds of employment opportunities.	K-12, Adults
<u>Catholic Charities</u>	Catholic Charities offers an English Language Literacy Program designed to help anyone who is looking to learn or improve their skills in English comprehension and usage. The small and personal classroom environment is designed to meet multi-level needs and understanding of the English language. The twice weekly classes are taught by Certified ESL instructors with over twelve years of experience.	Adults
<u>Community Foundation of North Central Florida</u>	The mission of Community Foundation of North Central Florida is to promote community transformation through the power of philanthropy.	Not Specified

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
<u>Community Health Equity Institute</u>	Community Health Equity Institute provides English classes to help bridge the disparities that exist in the community and health sector. The organization aims to achieve this goal by providing resources that help reduce barriers to health and education in underserved communities.	Adults
<u>Cuscowilla Nature and Retreat Center</u>	The Cuscowilla Nature and Retreat Center aims to provide free camp experiences that encourage the academic and physical health of children at no cost to them. Their emphasis is on providing opportunities for low income, diverse youth in Alachua County to attend camp.	K-12
<u>Dream On Purpose</u>	Dream on Purpose is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering youth with a specific focus on young ladies between the ages of 11 to 18 to dream and to actualize their dreams.	G4-12
<u>Early Learning Coalition of Alachua County</u>	The Early Learning Coalition of Alachua County (ELCAC) serves as a resource to families and childcare providers.	Early Learning
<u>Education Equalizer Workshops</u>	Education Equalizer works with middle through high school students and their families to demystify the college admittance process and provide scholars with the necessary tools to graduate. They provide ACT/SAT prep, college admission advice, FAFSA clinics, and more.	G6-12

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
<u>Emmanuel Mennonite Church</u>	Emmanuel Mennonite Church offers free ESL courses on Saturday afternoon, serving member shows up Spanish speakers Haitian, Creole speakers, and speakers of other languages.	Adults
<u>Episcopal Children's Services (ECS4Kids)</u>	ECS4Kids helps children in Northeast and Central Florida succeed in school and beyond. Through early childhood education programs like VPK, Head Start, and School Readiness, ECS4Kids offers crucial support and guidance to families seeking high-quality care and educational opportunities. For over 50 years, the mission of ECS4Kids has been to build a strong foundation for each child, ensuring they are prepared for lifelong learning and success.	Early Learning
<u>Florida Healthy Start Parents as Teachers</u>	The Florida Healthy Start program provides education, support and proven interventions to expecting and new families who are at risk of a poor birth outcome or delay in development.	Early Learning
<u>Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resource System (FDLRS)</u>	The Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resource System (FDLRS) serves Marion, Alachua, Citrus, Dixie, Gilchrist, Levy, and UF Lab School. FDLRS provides diagnostic, instructional, and technology support services to district exceptional education programs and families of students with disabilities.	Early Learning

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
<u>Gainesville Chamber of Commerce</u>	The activities of the Greater Gainesville Chamber of Commerce are executed around the vision to be a global hub of talent, innovation, and opportunity in the Greater Gainesville Region.	Not Specified
<u>Gainesville Thrives</u>	Gainesville Thrives works to promote tutoring and mentoring for kindergarten through high school students, as well as other services for expectant parents, parents and their infants, toddlers, and preschool children.	Early Learning
<u>Hands on Gainesville – Science Outreach Programs</u>	Hands On Gainesville encourages a student as apprentice approach to learning, with the belief that learning by doing leads to better understanding. Students are encouraged to see science everywhere in the world and especially in their community.	K-12, Adults
<u>Healthy Families Florida – Healthy Families Alachua</u>	Healthy Families Florida is a nationally accredited home visiting program for expectant parents and parents of newborns experiencing stressful life situations. The program improves childhood outcomes and increases family self-sufficiency by empowering parents through education and community support.	Early Learning, Adults
<u>IGB Education</u>	IGB Education provides mentoring programming for students in 5th-12th grade and Enrichment programming for students K-5th grade.	K-12

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
<u>Impacto UF</u>	Impacto UF is a student-led organization that seeks to recruit and train Spanish-speaking UF students to teach basic English to the non-English-speaking Hispanic/Latino community in Gainesville.	Adults
<u>Kids Count – Afterschool Program</u>	Kids Count supports foundational literacy skills by offering over 48 hours of 1-on-1 literacy tutoring using the UFLI curriculum, delivered by trained volunteers or staff. Text-rich learning environments, class libraries, and take-home books encourage students to read and build home libraries.	K-5
<u>MOTIV8U of North Central Florida</u>	MOTIV8U is a nonprofit training organization. provide life skills and social-emotional skills to agencies throughout the county and state that work with youth.	G5-11
<u>NewboRN Home Visiting</u>	NewboRN Home Visiting is a free program offered to all Alachua County women who give birth in the county. Within a week after baby is born, a registered nurse visits the family at home to see how they are doing, share information and connect them to services and resources.	Early Learning
<u>New Tech Now – Mobile MakerSpace STE2AM Engine</u>	New Tech Now provides access to 3D equipment and training necessary to acquire new emerging tech skills in STEM fields emphasizing literacy and art.	K-12

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
<u>North Central FL YMCA – Youth and Teen Enrichment Center</u>	The Youth & Teen Center is a collaboration of youth-serving agencies (Motiv8U and the City of Gainesville) providing students with educational, cultural, and recreational activities. The Center is a special space at the Y dedicated to youth and teens’ comfort and interests. It acts as a place for students to get homework done, hang out with friends, work on community service projects, engage in STEM-related activities, and more.	G5-11
One Community Family Resource Center	A resource center in East Gainesville provides wrap-around services to meet the needs of those in the community.	Lifespan
<u>Peak Literacy</u>	Over the past five years, PEAK Literacy has built a successful model that identifies children who are behind in their reading development and pairs them with trained, nurturing volunteer tutors for one-to-one reading lessons that are short, focused, and effective. These high dosage tutoring lessons take place virtually or in person for 15 minutes a day, 3-5 days a week. Using the digital Great Leaps literacy software, attendance and progress are tracked to ensure fidelity and reading fluency growth.	K-12
<u>Rotary Club Reading Safari</u>	The Rotary Club provides funding for the Santa Fe College Zoo’s Reading Safari program.	K-5

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
<u>Rural Women's Health Project</u>	This program provides health education through community health workers; in-house referral line; community ID provision; case management. All services are provided to the Spanish speaking population.	Lifespan
<u>Santa Fe College Adult Basic Education</u>	Santa Fe College provides Adult Basic Education (ABE), GED preparation, and ESOL.	Adults
<u>SW Advocacy Group (SWAG)</u>	SWAG's mission is to address the needs of the community by connecting individuals and families to services and resources through partnerships with agencies and community partners. SWAG serves eight neighborhoods in SW Gainesville: Majestic Oaks, Holly Heights, Harbor Cove, Pine Meadows, Hidden Oaks Mobile Home Park, Gordon Manor, Tower Oaks/Tower Oaks Glen, and Linton Oaks. Literacy-related services include the following: early care and education; homework help for elementary and middle/high school students; and daily computer & Internet access.	Lifespan
<u>The Education Foundation of Alachua County – Catalyst for Change Teacher Grant Program</u>	Through Catalyst for Change, teachers are encouraged to apply for literacy grants that promote improving teaching instruction and access to resources to increase reading achievement scores and overall improve the learning experience for students.	K-12

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
<u>The Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resource System (FDLRS)</u>	The Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resource System (FDLRS) serves Marion, Alachua, Citrus, Dixie, Gilchrist, Levy, and UF Lab School. FDLRS provides diagnostic, instructional, and technology support services to district exceptional education programs and families of students with disabilities.	Early Learning
<u>United Way of North Central Florida – Alachua County Campaign for Grade Level Reading</u>	The Campaign for Grade Level Reading collaborates with schools, libraries, non-profits, and other community organizations to create a network of support for literacy. This includes working with local educators to align efforts and share resources aimed at improving literacy rates.	Early Learning, K-2
<u>United Way of North Central Florida – Reading Pals Program</u>	Reading Pals partners with local schools and afterschool programs to provide weekly mentorship, literacy resources, and instruction, fostering students' love for reading and social-emotional skills. Volunteers, including community members and university students, dedicate over 16 hours annually to connect with students, share books, and explore new topics, building a strong foundation for literacy and educational growth.	PK-12
<u>University City Church of Christ</u>	The University City Church of Christ English Partners program helps immigrants in developing effective communication skills in English. It offers free one-on-	Adults

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
	one English tutoring and free English study materials for individual language and reading levels, study, or job interests.	
<u>University of Florida Christian Campus House</u>	UF's Christian Campus House's English Corner program is organized by a student group that welcomes people of all ages who want to practice speaking English.	Adults
<u>University of Florida Center for Autism and Related Disabilities</u>	UF Center for Autism and Related Disabilities focuses on building the capacity of families and professionals to support individuals with autism and related disabilities, including literacy programming.	Not Specified
<u>University of Florida, Department of Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences – UF Reading Program</u>	The UF Reading Program provides evaluation services to diagnose reading disabilities throughout the year. During the summer, the program also provides reading intervention for students who have dyslexia.	K-12, Adults
<u>University of Florida English Language Institute</u>	UF's English Language Institute program primarily serves F1 and J1 and tourists and students who intend to study at US universities or colleges.	Adults
<u>University of Florida IFAS, Lastinger Center – Books and Cooks</u>	Books and Cooks is a free literacy and nutrition program that is a partnership with the New Worlds Reading Initiative. Parents and children learn alongside other families in 7 weekly sessions. Families are supported through the learning of simple, at-home strategies that can be easily added to daily routines.	K-5

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
<u>University of Florida Lastinger Center – Adult Professional Learning Programs</u>	<p>The University of Florida Lastinger Center is an innovation hub designed to equip educators of children birth through twelfth grade with evidence-based, practical support and professional development resources to enhance reading instruction; connect school districts to customized professional development, coaching, and instructional support; and engage students with innovative programs and initiatives that promote reading proficiency.</p>	<p>Adults</p>
<u>University of Florida Lastinger Center – Florida Tutoring Advantage</u>	<p>Florida Tutoring Advantage will provide Science of Reading and math tutoring best practices to school districts developing school-based K-5 tutoring services, offer free consultation, and distribute funding to augment tutoring programs. During the inaugural year of implementation, UF Lastinger Center will adopt a Plan, Prepare, Pilot model to inform the scaling up of the program.</p>	<p>K-5</p>
<u>University of Florida Lastinger Center – New Worlds Reading</u>	<p>New Worlds Reading is Florida’s free at-home literacy program designed to help eligible VPK through 5th grade students in Florida bolster literacy skills, build reading confidence, and foster a lifelong love of reading. Each month, eligible kids receive a free book tailored to their interests with resources and activities for caregivers and</p>	<p>PK-5</p>

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
	children to use together. New Worlds Reading was created by the Florida Legislature and is administered by the UF Lastinger Center for Learning. Book titles are selected in partnership with the Florida Department of Education and Scholastic. Books and materials are available in English, Spanish, Haitian Creole, and braille.	
<u>University of Florida North Central Early Steps</u>	UF North Central Early Steps provides early intervention services for families of children ages birth to three years old who have or are at risk for a developmental delay. No income requirement is necessary to qualify for the program. Participation is voluntary.	Early Learning
<u>University of Florida Multi-disciplinary Diagnostic & Training Program (MDTP)</u>	UF MDTP serves K-12 children and youth who are at-risk for or identified as having complex medical, educational, socioemotional, and/or behavioral problems and are struggling academically.	K-12
<u>William A. Stokes Community Center</u>	The William A. Stokes Community Center is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit social service agency providing services to Micanopy, Alachua County, and surrounding areas.	K-12
<u>Williams Temple Church of God in Christ</u>	Williams Temple COGIC - Offers an English language program to fulfill a practical community need. The lessons are designed to teach conversational English and provide opportunities for	Adults

Organization Name	Program Description	Age Groups
	<p>learners to practice speaking English in a relaxed environment. The program offers free intermediate/advanced English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes for adults on Zoom</p>	

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