Soaring into Kindergarten

A Blueprint for School Readiness Success

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FOUNDATION TO FLIGHT: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION & DISTRICT GROWTH

Manatee County at a Glance

* Located on Florida's Gulf Coast
* South of Tampa Bay
* North of Sarasota County
* County Seat: Bradenton

Why Location Matters

* One of Florida's fastest-growing communities.
* Rapid residential growth continues to drive school enrollment increases and facility needs.

District Snapshot

Key Facts

- Approximately 52,000-53,000 students enrolled districtwide.
- More than 80 schools serving students from Pre-K through Grade 12.
- SDMC is the largest employer with over 7,000 employees.
- One of Florida's fastest-growing school districts.

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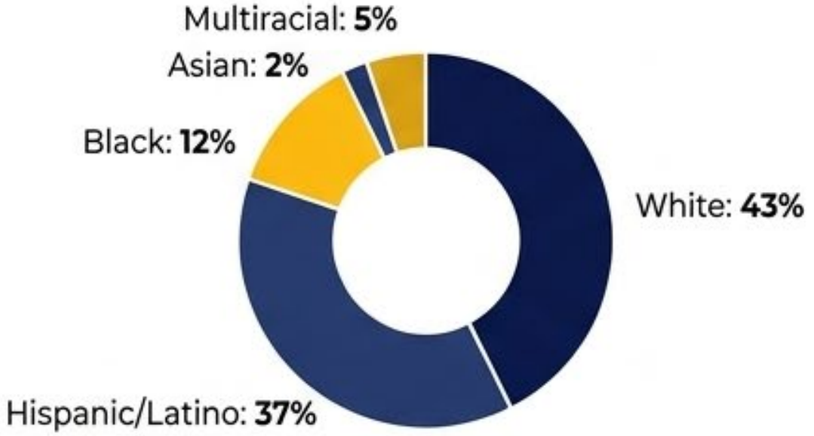
District Mission

Education with Innovation and Imagination

Student Demographics

Student Population



Enrollment Growth

District enrollment has increased by more than **7,600** students since 2018.

Economic Need

Approximately **42%** of students are economically disadvantaged.

Economic Context

Community Characteristics

- Rapid residential and commercial growth
- Increasing housing development
- Expanding workforce needs
- Diverse economic backgrounds among families

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EDUCATIONAL IMPACT & STUDENT OUTCOMES

Educational Impact

Increased demand for:

Graduation Rate Success

Graduation Rate

* **90%** graduation rate in 2025-2026 school year.
* Highest graduation rate in district history.

Growth Over Time

* **85.7%** graduation rate in 2023-2024.
* Continued increases demonstrate improved student outcomes and support systems.

Why It Matters

Graduation is a key indicator of college, career, and workforce readiness.

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Academic Achievement

School Performance Highlights

- Highest number of A-rated schools since 2008.
- Ten schools improved at least one letter grade.

Continuous Improvement

District-wide efforts focus on:

Academic rigor	Early literacy
Mathematics achievement	Student support systems

Literacy Outcome

Recent Literacy Gains

- Third grade reading proficiency increased by **4 percentage points** districtwide.
- Nine elementary schools improved third grade reading proficiency by **10 points** or more.
- Prekindergarten students achieving early transitional reader levels increased by **12 percentage points.**

Literacy Matters

Reading proficiency by third grade is one of the strongest predictors of future success and graduation.

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Why Early Learning Matters

Research Consistently Shows

Children participating in high-quality early learning programs are more likely to:

- Enter kindergarten ready to learn
- Demonstrate stronger literacy skills
- Achieve academic success
- Graduate from high school

School District Focus

- School readiness
- Early literacy
- Kindergarten readiness
- Expanded Pre-K access

Building a Strong Foundation

Investing in early learning:

- Supports language development
- Builds literacy skills
- Improves school readiness
- Reduces achievement gaps
- Increases long-term academic success

Community Impact

Early learning investments benefit:

- Children
- Families
- Schools
- Employers
- The Manatee County economy

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The Challenge

Demand Exceeds Capacity

District leaders identified:

- Waiting lists for VPK and early learning programs
- Limited classroom space
- Need for additional resources
- Growing population creating additional demand

Critical Question

How do we ensure every child enters kindergarten ready to succeed?

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Title I Investment in Early Learning: A Long-Term Commitment

Fifteen years ago, the School District of Manatee County (SDMC) made a strategic commitment to invest Title I funds in early learning. This investment **expanded** the number of VPK classrooms in Title I elementary schools, employed certified teachers, funded full day VPK programs, and provided **professional learning** opportunities for prekindergarten teachers in literacy, mathematics, and science. The initiative also increased inclusion opportunities for diverse learners and strengthened **family engagement** through targeted activities and support programs.

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Title I Investment in Early Learning: A Long-Term Commitment

Increased learning opportunities

- 119 PreK classrooms
- Twenty four Title 1 inclusion classrooms at 17 elementary schools are funded through braided funding from VPK, Title I and ESE.
- Thirty nine non-Title VPK and inclusion classrooms are funded through braided funding from VPK, Parent Pay, and ESE.
- Fifty six Title and non Title self contained classrooms are funded through ESE.

Increased Professional Learning

- Targeted standards based training with data chats.

Increased Family Engagement

- Soar in 4
- Title I funding is not enough

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Soar In 4: A Community-Wide Initiative

Schools cannot do this work alone. Soar in 4 is the result of a community-wide early learning initiative built on the belief that every child's success is a shared responsibility. The movement began with **19 community conversations** that invited neighbors to share their aspirations for their children, as well as the barriers they were experiencing. These conversations created a deeper understanding of what families and communities need and, most importantly, generated the momentum for a broader early learning movement.

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Soar in 4

Mission

To foster a foundation for **“lifelong learning”** by activating families and aligning community resources to advance early literacy.

Vision

A community where every child is prepared for school and supported by **“confident, skilled families”.**

Strategic Vision

Our Commitment

We are building a system where:

- Every child enters kindergarten ready to learn
- Every learner graduates prepared for college, career, or workforce success
- Every student becomes a proficient reader
- Every family has access to high-quality educational opportunities

The Foundation of Success

Literacy Begins at Birth

Children learn literacy through:

Hearing stories → **Listening to language** → **Singing songs** → **Daily conversations** → **Interactions with caring adults**

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Creating an immersive literacy ecosystem

Soar Lab

A museum-like learning lab offering interactive experiences (robotics, building, art).

StoryTime Library Corners

Weekly active reading sessions at local branches (Palmetto, Braden River).

Community Events

Massive hands-on literary experiences at partner sites like The Bishop Museum and Mote Marine.

StoryBook Trails

Physical installations at places like Lincoln Park, combining outdoor exercise with reading "pages" of a book.

All programming aligns with Florida Early Learning and Developmental Standards (FELDS).

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SOAR IN 4

ONE FAMILY. ONE NEIGHBORHOOD AT A TIME.

A, B, C, I Know My Letters!

Target Ages: 2-8 Years Old

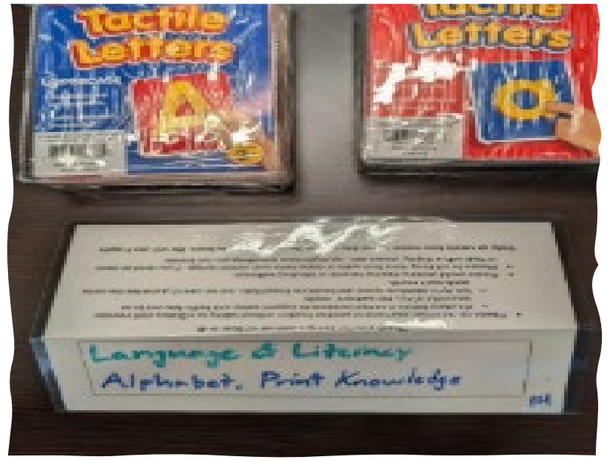
Let's learn about letters!

At Home Engagements:

Early literacy is all about learning about our letters and sounds! Children learn to identify text on a page as a source of information and then they take a look closer and see that our words are made of letters! We work to recognize and identify letters by name and to produce their sounds. Use the print that is found all around us to guide conversations with your child about letters and sounds. A great place to start is with the letters in their names!

Florida Early Learning and Development Standards:

Iv. Language and Literacy
F. Emergent Reading
3. Shows alphabetic and print knowledge
a. recognizes print conveys meaning
b. recognizes most letters when named
c. identifies most letters
d. recognizes some letter sounds



- **Exploring Letters Through Touch**

Focus: Print Knowledge (letter recognition, uppercase/lowercase connections)

- 🧰 **Materials** Tactile letter cards (sandpaper, felt, or textured) , Include matching uppercase and lowercase letters
- 🧑‍🏫 **Activity**

"Today we're going to feel our letters and learn their names!"

- "What do you notice when touch this letter?"
- "Does it feel smooth or rough?"
- Trace it slowly with your finger and say the letter name.
- "Can you find the lowercase match for your uppercase letter?"
- "Let's match letters that are the same!"
- Spread the cards out.
- Play a quick game:
- "Find the match!"
- 🎯 **FELDS Alignment – Emergent Literacy: Reading**
- EL.R.1.2: Shows understanding that print carries meaning
- EL.R.1.3: Recognizes and names some letters of the alphabet
- EL.R.1.4: Identifies some uppercase and lowercase letters
- EL.R.1.5: Understands that letters are different from numbers

http://www.soarin4.org

Quality Across Every Classroom

District-Wide Success

- **Every** SDMC VPK student experienced the Soar Lab.
- All district VPK classrooms achieved CLASS ratings of **"Meets Expectations" or higher.**

Result

Higher-quality teacher-child interactions and stronger learning experiences.

Measurable Outcome

Soar Lab Results

Children participating in Soar Lab field trips demonstrated:

+1.6 Months

Additional academic growth compared to peers.

Why It Matters

Meaningful growth today becomes stronger literacy outcomes tomorrow.

Return on Investment

High-Impact Programming

- **14,649** children and caring adults served during open lab hours in six months.
- **1,601** Pre-K students participated through district field trips.
- **316** Parents and caregivers chaperoned a field trip.

Economic Impact

$59

Returned For Every $1 Invested

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Talk, Play, Learn

The Welly Wall invites children to explore the building blocks of language and math through sorting and categorizing. As they match and organize capital letters, lowercase letters, numbers, and words, children develop early literacy and numeracy skills.

Try Asking:

"What do you notice about the shapes of capital and lowercase letters?"

"How are numbers different from letters?"

"Can you find a word that starts with this letter?"

- "What makes this a capital letter and that one l[illegible]?"

Florida Early Learning and Developmental Standard:
iv. Language and Literacy Domain F. Emergent Reading
3. Shows Alphabetic and Print Knowledge a. recognizes that print conve

The Impact

2025–2026 Highlights

- 91% of VPK students met or exceeded state proficiency benchmarks on STAR Early Literacy
- Manatee was 13 percentage points above the state average
- Manatee had a 12-point increase year-over-year
- 100% of VPK classrooms met or exceeded CLASS observation requirements.
- All Child Outcome Summary (COS) measures were completed.

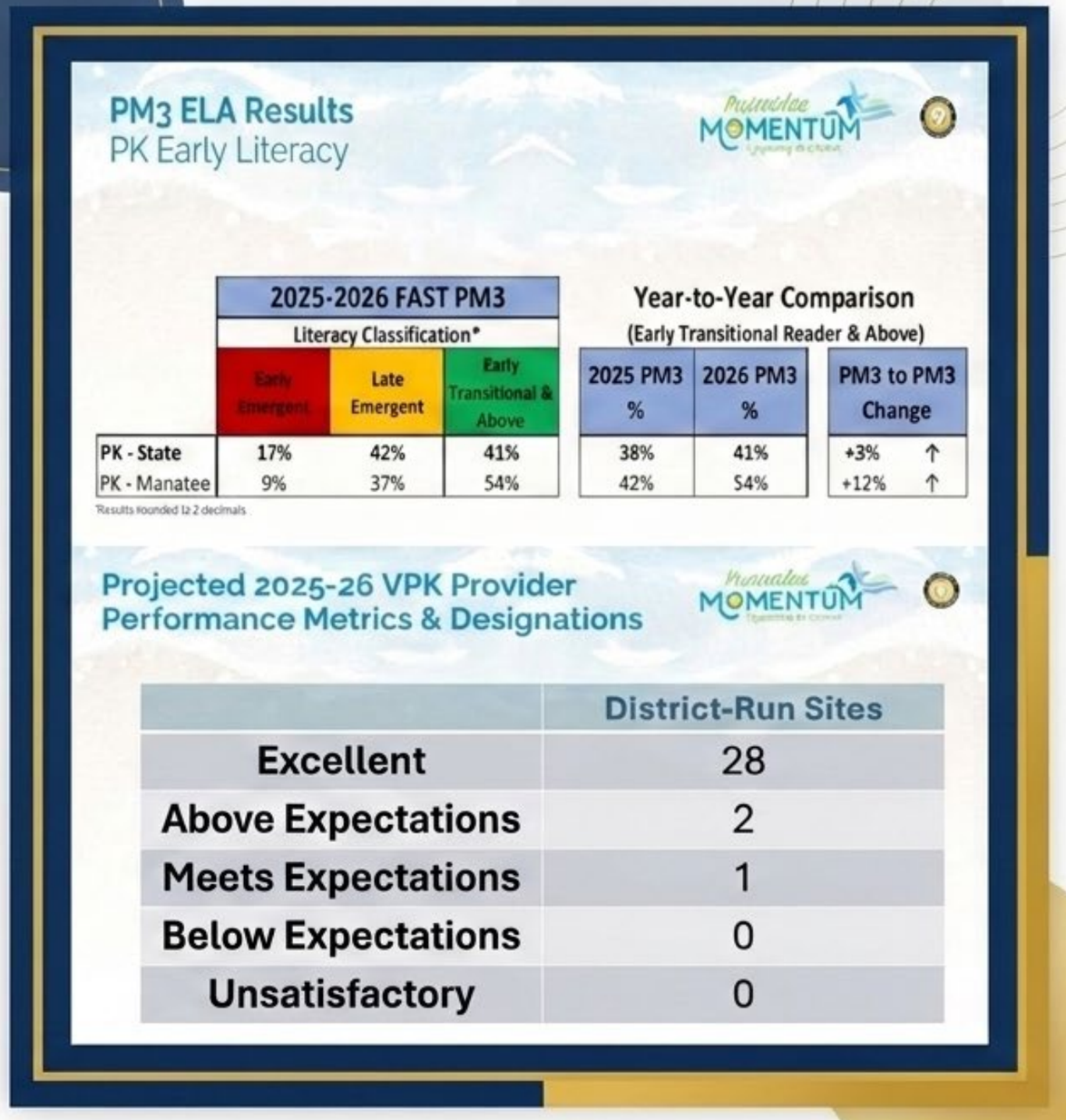
Literacy Outcomes are Improving

Evidence of Growth

- +12% Increase in VPK early literacy results from 2024-25 to 2025-26.

Additional Progress

- Kindergarten readiness rates improved by more than 3% over five years.



PM3 ELA Results
PK Early Literacy

	2025-2026 FAST PM3 Literacy Classification*			Year-to-Year Comparison (Early Transitional Reader & Above)		
	Early Emergent	Late Emergent	Early Transitional & Above	2025 PM3 %	2026 PM3 %	PM3 to PM3 Change
PK - State	17%	42%	41%	38%	41%	+3% ↑
PK - Manatee	9%	37%	54%	42%	54%	+12% ↑

*Results rounded to 2 decimals

Projected 2025-26 VPK Provider Performance Metrics & Designations

	District-Run Sites
Excellent	28
Above Expectations	2
Meets Expectations	1
Below Expectations	0
Unsatisfactory	0

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The Soar Success Model

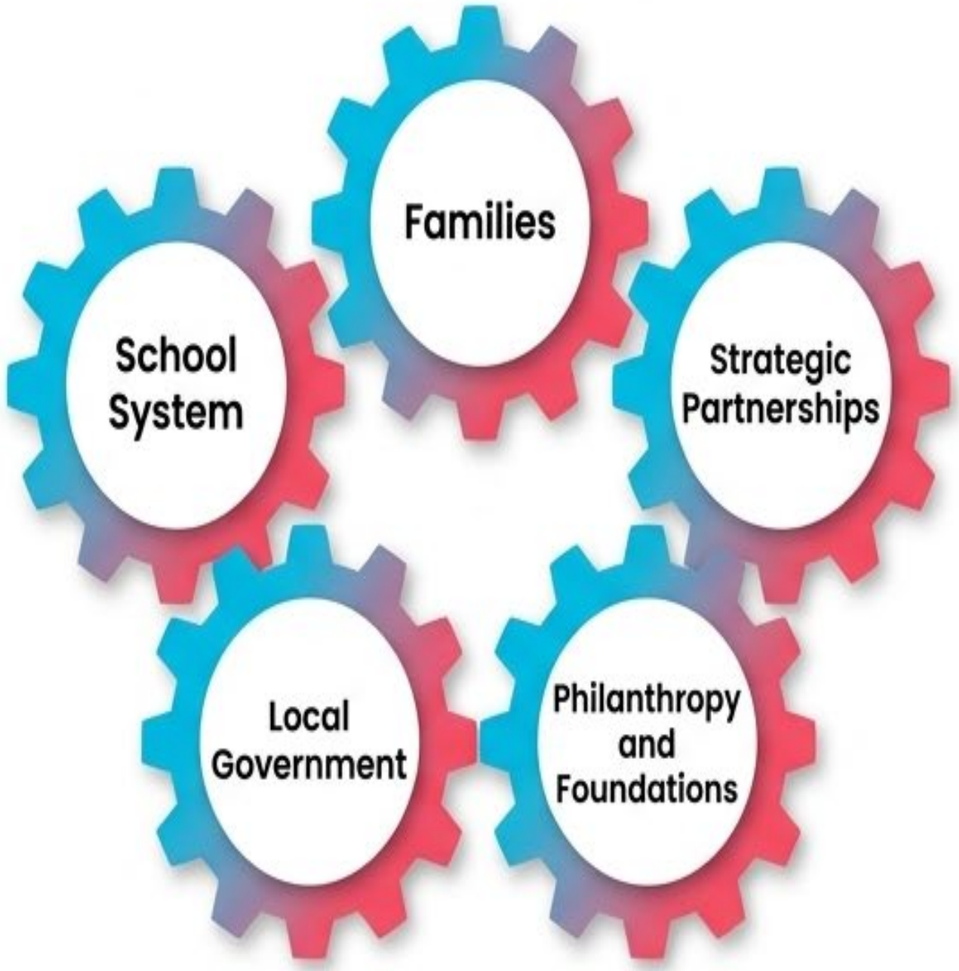
Family Impact

* **100%** of participating caregivers reported learning a new skill to support their child's learning at home.

Why This Matters

When family confidence grows:

- ➡ Children's learning grows
- ➡ Literacy improves
- ➡ School readiness strengthens



When these five gears work together, children experience stronger school readiness and literacy outcomes

The Bottom Line

* Improved literacy outcomes
* Increased kindergarten readiness
* Strong family engagement
* Measurable academic growth
* High return on investment
* Community-wide impact

Replicating Success
Building a Scalable Early Literacy Movement

The Soar in 4 model is proof that lasting change happens when schools, families, community organizations, philanthropic partners, and local government works together toward a common vision: every child is entering kindergarten ready to learn and thrive. This successful, scalable framework is ready to take root in your community. Join us in expanding its impact and creating stronger readers, stronger schools, and stronger communities.

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