



# Florida

# High School Students Benefit from Early Childhood Development Curriculum

## OVERVIEW

In 2018, a group of students called “L.E.A.D. Children/ Problem Solvers” from Flagler Palm Coast High School in Florida began attending meetings at their local Thrive by 5 collaborative. They wanted to increase their own knowledge about childhood mental health and help other students develop positive coping skills. In a state that would experience multiple high school shootings that year, including the Marjory Stoneman Douglas shooting in Broward County, these students were already concerned about mental health risk factors in their schools.

Local early childhood advocates introduced the students to “Partners for a Healthy Baby,” a research-based home-visitor training curriculum developed by Dr. Mimi Graham at Florida State University, which is centered on strengthening protective factors of families prenatally to 36 months. Graham granted permission for the group to adapt her program for 10th graders. The students also met multiple times with the faculty and superintendents of the Flagler school system, who agreed to implement the 7.5-hour early childhood development unit in a required biology class for all 10th graders, beginning with the 2019-2020 school year. Since the state of Florida had already directed public schools to begin teaching mental health curricula, there was an alignment of goals in fulfilling the state directive while also helping students understand the origins of their own risk factors. An expansion of the local project is currently under development for further consideration.

The students started and drove this project forward, according to the early childhood advocates. Dixie Morgese from the Healthy Start Coalition in Volusia/ Flagler counties stated, “The kids were very persistent. They put on events for parents. They met with the schools. This did not come about because of the shooting. It started because these young people wanted to learn more about early childhood development. The shooting was an opportunity to make that connection with the schools and get the buy-in and support from the schools.”

## THE PURPOSE

Thrive by 5 hopes the new school curriculum in Volusia and Flagler counties will help 10th graders become better parents when they are older, as well as increase self-awareness about their own adverse experiences during childhood so they can use protective factors in their own lives. This year, one biology instructor at Flagler Palm Coast High is beta-testing the class, Morgese said, and he will provide feedback on what works and what doesn’t. A long-term goal is to develop a program that could be replicated in other high schools and other classes besides biology.

“We want to help young people understand the role that emotional health plays not just in being a parent, but also in overall wellbeing,” Morgese said. “There’s a lot of anxiety among young people right now—social media pressures, performance measures for sports and college—so finding positive ways to talk about coping with stress is key. The message



we're getting is that young people don't get enough of that information."

Morgese further noted that the class is not solely targeted toward those who might want to enter the field of early childhood care and education. "Even if someone leaves and becomes a banker, they might at least fully understand the economics of early childhood development. Show them the return on investment for investing in infants and toddlers. The more people who learn and understand these things, the more likely they might be to invest later in life in early childhood."

Helena Girouard of One Voice for Volusia added, "There are students in high school who are already parents or who can identify with having several Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES). They can apply many parts of the curriculum in real time. As we listened to the students, we realized that for many, nobody is talking about these things with them. Many of them deal with stigma on a daily basis—being a teenage parent, having postpartum depression, having anxiety from trauma, using substances to cope, having one or more parents with mental health or substance use disorders. We want students to have a space to acknowledge reality and talk openly about solutions."

## THE PROPOSED APPROACH

The 10th grade curriculum was modified from an already existing training program at Florida State University (FSU) where para-professional home visitors are trained to educate parents on early childhood development for infants and toddlers. The training program is well established; Florida has had a mandated statewide Healthy Start screening program since 1991 for all infants and pregnant woman. The 16 hours of training given to adult home visitors at FSU was shortened and tailored for the teens at Flagler Palm Coast High School to be age and developmentally appropriate. Students learn techniques to communicate feelings, handle stressful situations, understand social supports, and how to build protective factors under stressful conditions.

Part of the class involves viewing film clips on topics like labor simulations in men, which was particularly exciting for young male students. "The students leading the charge on this right now are mostly young men," Morgese noted, "and it's amazing and inspiring how engaged they are. They recognize that typically they aren't given much information on these topics."

Substance abuse, nutrition, and parenting are also included in the lessons. "We let them know that if substance abuse makes you feel better because your current mental health is bad, then it can easily become maladaptive behavior. In our society, substance abuse is seen as a moral failure rather than an attempt to manage symptoms, so although this started as an early childhood development curriculum, it has a lot of potential application," Morgese said.

## WHAT THE EFFORT HOPES TO ACHIEVE

Although the program does not yet have an impact measurement system built into it, it's coming soon. Eventually they'd like to include some pre- and post-questions for the students and possibly bring the expertise of FSU on board with data analysis. One mark of the project's success will be how much knowledge the 10th graders develop about early childhood development during the class. Another might involve measuring the comfort level of young people when talking to faculty about their mental health, or how comfortable they feel taking care of a baby or toddler. Girouard added that self-perception of stress and the ability to cope are also good topics to include in the assessment tool.

Because the curriculum must meet new Florida state objectives on mental health, Morgese anticipates that certain measurements will need to be standardized, including the use of the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) tool.

Morgese and Girouard would also like the lessons to be broadly applicable so that they're not just used



in biology classes but could be infused into every class. A math teacher, for example, could use the lesson on family budgeting. A sociology teacher could incorporate lessons on socioeconomic factors that tend to amplify and/or alleviate certain stressors. "This has blossomed into potentially a school-changing curriculum," Morgese said.

## WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

The project was possible because students initiated the idea. Morgese said, "It came from inside; it came from the students. The students wanted it and that's what made it successful. When the faculty or superintendents were asked directly by their target population to support this, I think it had an impact."

She added that having an actual lesson plan in hand also helped. "Initially the school was hesitant, but once they saw a tangible curriculum they came on board. At that point it was something they could see, touch, and feel, not just a vague future concept."

Having a university put their stamp on the curriculum was important, Girouard noted. The FSU "Healthy Baby" curriculum is very simple, so it hasn't taken much effort to train the high school faculty. There were handouts, film clips, and presentations already in place. "From a developmental standpoint, the material is very presentable."

## SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

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**Healthy Start Coalition of Flagler and Volusia Counties, Inc. website.**

<https://www.healthystartfu.org/>

**One Voice for Volusia website.**

<http://onevoiceforvolusia.org/>



**"Strengthening Families Protective Factors," Missouri Children's Trust Fund.**

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**"Got Your ACE Score?" ACES Too High News, ACEs Connection.**

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