

Early Learning Coalition of Escambia County
Board Meeting Minutes
November 13, 2025, 10:00 a.m.
Chair: Vacant

Members in Attendance

Paul Fetsko	Roger Thompson	Bambi Sealy
Craig Jones	Tammy Hicks	Shacondra Primm
Deborah Tucker	Cindy Kirk	Brian Wyer
Tarae Donaldson	Mary Ann Bickerstaff	Lindsey Cannon
Doug Brown	Reginald Dogan	

Members Absent

Edna Williams	Deanna Oleske	Melissa Sidoti
Mona Jackson		

Public in Attendance

Marcus McBride

Staff in Attendance

Bruce Watson	Dawn Engel	Nina Daniels
Tom Porter	Melissa Jennings	Renee Maxwell

I. Board Chair Resignation

On November 10, 2025, Ms. Shannon Nickson submitted her letter of resignation to the Executive Director. Upon a motion made by Ms. Bickerstaff and seconded by Mr. Fetsko, the Chair's resignation was accepted without objection. The Vice Chair, Ms. Hicks, will cover the responsibilities of Board Chair at meetings until a new Board Chair is appointed. Ms. Hicks was unable to be at this Board meeting in person, and it was discussed before the meeting began, to have the RDC Chair, Mr. Thompson, conduct the meeting.

II. Welcome and Introduction

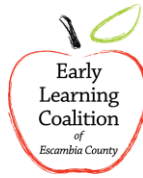
Notification of this meeting of the Board of Directors was posted to the Coalition Public Calendar Board and sent to the Pensacola News Journal for publication on October 27, 2025. The meeting was called to order by the RDC Chair, Mr. Thompson.

III. Public Comments

- a. None.

IV. Chair Opening Comments

- a. **Approval of Consent Agenda: Meeting Agenda, Minutes of August 14, 2025, Financial Reports for June through September 2025**



Upon a motion made by Mr. Brown and seconded by Ms. Hicks, the Meeting Agenda, Minutes of August 14, 2025, and Financial Reports for June, July, August and September 2025 were approved without objection.

IV. Executive Committee Report

a. Introduction of New Finance Director

Mr. Tom Porter was introduced to the Board. He was hired as the new Finance Director on September 22, 2025.

b. DEL NOA for FY 25-26 Dated 25AUG25

The DEL issued the second Notice Of Award (NOA) for Fiscal Year 2025-2026 on August 25, 2025. It was presented to the Board as a reference in the following discussion of the Coalition budget.

c. Revised FY 2025-2026 Budget Summary

The Coalition budget for Fiscal Year 2025-2026 was revised now that the DEL has allocated the reverted and reappropriated funding from FY 2024-2025. Most non-direct spending approved in the initial budget was not impacted, except for quality spending which was increased. The rest of the additional funding allocated in the second NOA went to SR services. Conflict-of-Interest forms were provided to Board members who have a conflict in voting on budget items. Upon a motion made by the EXCOM and seconded by Ms. Bickerstaff, the revised Coalition Budget for FY 2025-2025 was approved without objection.

d. Gubernatorial Board Appointments and Total Board Membership

The DEL issued the Coalition a finding in the Accountability Review because there were not at least three applications for Gubernatorial appointments on file with the Governor's Appointment Office. There are only two applications on file with the Governor's Appointments Office, one is the former Board Chair, and the other is a contracted Provider, which may mean that application is not acceptable. The Executive Director indicated that after his employment with the Coalition ends, he may apply to be the Board Chair. The Coalition also needs to recruit one or two more private sector members.

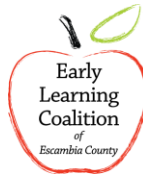
e. 2025 Code of Ethics

The Annual Code of Ethics was presented to the Board. All Board members are required to complete the acknowledgement form.

V. Executive Director's Report

a. Coalition Status Reports: DEL Invoice Dashboard for September 2025

Through September the Coalition spent \$5.6 million of the \$19.4 million SR grant which is 29.0% of the grant. SR Admin was 1.4%, Non-Direct Services was 12.5% and Quality was 7.2%. VPK Services was \$774,000 of \$4.8 million which is 15.9%. VPK Admin spending was 2.6%. Note that the Invoice Dashboard still includes the \$1.4 million submitted as a Prior Year



Invoice for SR services for June 2025. The DEL still has not adjusted the current year balances to account for this amount, and therefore utilization figures, and associated targets and restrictions, are skewed accordingly.

b. Coalition Status Reports: Enrollment/Wait List Status Report, and Contracting Summary Report

There are 2,302 children enrolled in the School Readiness program of which 65 are SRMAT and 1,006 are school-age children. The BG8 ECON Pri 6 Wait List has 326 children, BG8 ECON Pri 7 Wait List has 38 children and the SRMAT Wait List has 45 children for a total of 409. These figures include the 35 Pri 6 and 2 SRMAT children that were pulled from the Wait List last week.

There are 1,852 children approved for the 25/26 VPK Program of which 1,471 children are enrolled.

There are 82 SR Providers, and 67 VPK Providers under contract.

VI. Old Business

a. Fiscal Year 25-26 SR Funding Projections - Update

The second NOA for FY 2025-2026 allocates \$19,449,682 to the School Readiness Program. However, this year funding for the Gold Seal (GS) incentive was added back into the SR Program in the amount of \$368,944. Therefore, when making projections this amount must be backed out of the total available for services. Quality Performance Incentive (QPI) remains in a separate funding stream for \$868,415. Projections forecast both the GS and QPI to be significantly underfunded. It is expected that like last year, at the end of this year the Coalition will have to use SR Quality funding to cover these shortfalls.

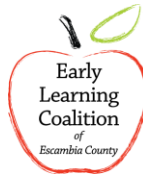
Funding Projection Scenarios are as follows:

Scenario 1. This has the additional funding provided in the new NOA. In this scenario enrollments stabilize around 2,400 children. Originally the Coalition projected this number to be 2,300 children, however, upon reaching that number and entering the true cost for the first quarter there is enough funding to support a higher number. In no case can the Coalition serve the 2,541 that were enrolled at the end of 2024-2025.

Scenario 2. This scenario projects what the Coalition would need to get back to the point of serving the same number of children that were enrolled at the start of the Fiscal Year. At this point it would take over \$820,000 to serve 2,545 children.

Scenario 3. This scenario demonstrates what the impact would be if the Coalition had received the same amount of SR funding it was allocated in FY2024/2025, approximately \$18.3 million. It demonstrates that even if the Coalition had been fully funded it was not enough to serve the number of children enrolled on June 30, 2025.

Scenario 4. This is a reminder of what the shortfall was at the beginning of the Fiscal Year even with the reverted funds to serve the number of children enrolled at that time.



Worksheet 5: This table demonstrates the impact the changes over the years, primarily increased provider rates, full implementation of QPI, and underfunding of Gold Seal, have had on the number of children that can be served. The amount of funding for SR has been relatively the same for 8 years. However, the cost of care per child has risen significantly without any real increase in funding, and this does not even address the effects inflation has had on the prices of everything from food, utilities, rent and especially insurance.

b. Recap of Early Learning Conference 28SEP25

A list of sponsors and donors who supported the Coalitions first ever Early Learning Conference is provided. Overall, the conference was a huge success, and planning has already started for the second conference next year.

VII. New Business

a. Impact 100 Grant

The Coalition was one of twelve non-profits to receive a \$103,500 grant from Impact 100. Well done to Melissa Jennings, the Community Director, as this was her project and she should receive all the accolades for getting this grant. The Coalition now has a name the van campaign going on with our providers for the new Classroom on Wheels!

b. Building Lease Agreement - Update

The owner of the building has agreed to renew the Coalition's lease when it expires in 2027. The rent will go up from around \$12,000 per month to \$17,000. However, this is still a very good deal and lower than anything else on the market for the same square footage and other amenities, such as utilities and location. The EXCOM approved the Executive Director to negotiate a new lease.

c. Staff Terminations

In the past two months, two staff were terminated for cause. One filed an appeal to the Board which per the Employee Handbook was reviewed by the EXCOM who found no reason to disagree with the Coalition's decision.

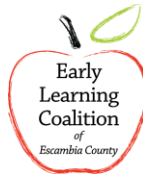
d. Coalition Customer Satisfaction Survey

The results of the annual Coalition Customer Satisfaction Survey have been received since the last EXCOM and are presented here for the first time. The Coalition scored well and received good feedback from the survey.

e. HR Services

Two proposals for HR support are provided for consideration. A third is being worked on with Higginbotham, our insurance agent.

f. Twenty Years of VPK



This year is the 20th anniversary of the VPK Program. The Coalition has a couple of things in work to recognize this milestone. One is having some former VPK graduates, now adults, return to their classrooms and film their interactions with their VPK teachers. The Coalition is soliciting other ideas of how we can mark the event.

g. Ideas for ELC Twenty-fifth Anniversary Recognition

This year is the 25th anniversary of the incorporation of the Coalition. November 30, 2000, was the day the Coalition was the Articles of Incorporation were approved. The Coalition is soliciting ideas of how the event can be celebrated.

h. 2026 Meeting Calendar

The 2026 Meeting Calendar was presented to the Board. Upon a motion made by Ms. Kirk and seconded by Ms. Bickerstaff, the 2026 Meeting Calendar was approved without objection.

i. CARES, CRSSA and ARPA Summary

A summary of all the additional funding that was granted in response to the COVID pandemic, and subsequent recovery was provided.

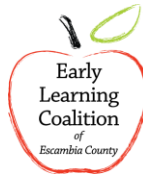
j. ED Search/Resignation Update

The discussion started with mentioning the paragraph of Ms. Nickinson's resignation letter that states that she wants to submit a resume and apply for the position of Executive Director.

Ms. Cannon recapped the progress of the Hiring Committee. Ms. Cannon stated that the Committee started by updating the job description then proceeded to post the job opening on Employ Florida. The job was posted for ten days, after which the Committee did not feel that they had an adequate pool of candidates to choose from. The job posting was posted an additional ten days to see if more candidates would apply. From the pool of candidates, three candidates were chosen for interviews. After being invited for an interview one of the three candidates decided to withdraw. Interviews were to start on Friday, November 14, then on Monday, November 10, Ms. Nickinson submitted her resignation as Board Chair and stated she intended to apply for the ED position. Up to that point Ms. Nickinson had been one of the four members of the Hiring Committee.

Due to Ms. Nickinson having been part of the Hiring Committee and having contributed to the development of the job description, had been involved in the selection of the three finalist to interview, and possessing inside knowledge of what the Committee is looking for in the candidates to include developing the interview questions, it was agreed that it would be inappropriate, and possibly unethical, to allow Mr. Nickinson to apply for the position.

Mr. Watson offered that after December 23, as afforded by the Employee handbook, he would use his PTO balance, however, he would make himself available to conduct turnover, but when he did so his PTO would be suspended and he would be working regular hours. This in turn would extend his last day of employment. Mr. Brown stated this was unacceptable that Mr.



Watson must have a predetermined hard and fast last day of work and last of employment based on when his PTO would run out. No other Board members disagreed with this statement, or attempted to modify the conditions.

Discussions continued about reopening the job position to try and get more qualified candidates to apply. Upon a motion made by Mr. Brown and seconded by Mr. Fetsko, it was approved without objection to continuing the interview process as scheduled. If a candidate is selected then the Board will meet to approve them being hired. If a candidate is not selected, then the Board will meet to discuss what the next steps will be in the process to select a new Executive Director.

k. Board Secretary

Mr. Jones volunteered to be the Board Secretary. Upon a motion made by Mr. Fesko and seconded by Ms. Cannon, the appointment of Mr. Craig as the Board Secretary was approved without objection.

VIII. Audits and Reviews in Progress.

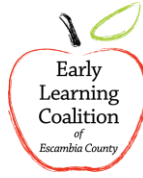
a. 2024-2025 Financial Review - Report

The final report is presented for discussion. There were no Findings and two Observations. One was how the Coalition booked payment of three-year contract in the GL, and the other was the narrative provided in the annual report regarding ARPA was deemed insufficient.

b. 2024-2025 Accountability Review – Final Report and CAP

The following is the list of findings:

- The lack of applicants for Gubernatorial appointed positions. This has already been discussed with the Board.
- The Coalition allowed Board members to vote after declaring a conflict of interest. This was due to a misunderstanding regarding the purpose of declaring a conflict.
- Some sampled staff and contractor background screenings were done after the five-year date. A better tracking tool has been implemented.
- The DEL says the Coalition did not do all the required Tier 1 monitoring of providers. The monitoring was done and the Coalitions proved it; the error was the tracking sheet had not been properly updated. However, the DEL refused to remove the finding.
- Note that a second finding regarding Tier 1 monitoring was added to say this was a repeat of two years ago, even though the specifics were significantly different.
- The DEL and Coalition agreed to disagree and how many providers must be Tier 2 monitored each year. On the one hand DEL guidance says every provider gets a Tier 2 every other year, however, the DEL has a table that says a Coalition of this size must monitor a minimum of 50 providers every year. The Coalition pointed out this table is skewed and places an undue burden on smaller Coalitions.
- In the opinion of the DEL the Coalition's CCR&R policies did not adequately address serving providers. A new policy was written to meet the DEL expectations.



- c. **FY 2024-2025 A-133** - Initial introduction was done.
- d. **DEL Finance Review** - Data pulls are in work.
- e. **DEL Desk Review 1 for FY 25-26** - Data pulls are in work.

IX. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 11:51 p.m.

Next Meeting: Thursday, February 12, 2026, at 10:00 a.m. at the Early Learning Coalition offices at 1720 West Fairfield Dr., Suite 100/400, Pensacola, FL 32501