

# 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**





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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 vary for different groups of students (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2024). **Improving reading outcomes for Alachua County students will take 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 UF Lastinger Center to serve as coordinator for a comprehensive literacy needs assessment.

This executive summary as well as the [full report](#) [link to be added at a later date] 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 of Florida’s 67 districts. 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 who only have **1 in 4 students reading on grade level**, as shown in the full report: Black students, students with disabilities, and English language learners (Florida Department of Education Know Your Data, n.d.).

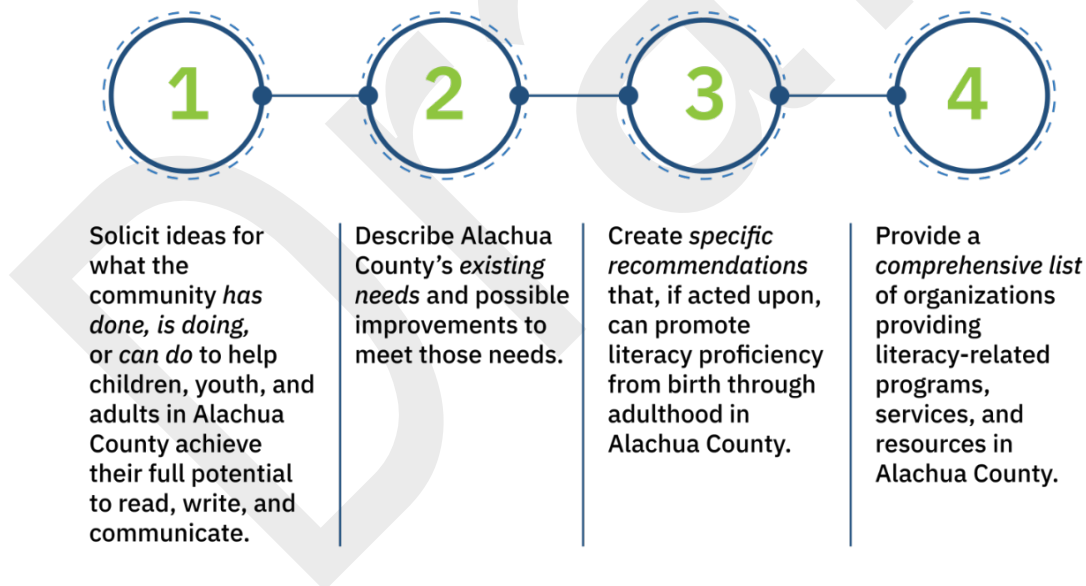
The **Children’s Trust of Alachua County** and the **UF Lastinger Center** for Learning collaborated on a comprehensive literacy needs assessment to improve literacy in Alachua County from birth through adulthood. Key partners who engaged in the literacy needs assessment included the **Alachua County 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, Ask Meno, Cuscowilla Nature and Retreat Center, 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 of Alachua County, and the 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.
- (2) Analyzed data provided by ACPS and community organizations or available from public sources.

- (3) Distributed an anonymous survey throughout the county.
- (4) Conducted focus groups with a wide range of family and community members and ACPS educators.
- (5) Interviewed elected officials, members of community organizations, ACPS district staff, and ACPS educators after visiting their classrooms.
- (6) Attended community events to create knowledge about the literacy needs assessment and solicit survey and focus group participation.
- (7) Compiled information for this report.
- (8) Presented findings, including recommendations for future implementation.

## Participants

The UF Lastinger Center collected data through 73 interviews, 33 focus groups with 157 participants, 1,122 surveys, 11 community events, and 3 classroom visits (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** *Literacy Needs Assessment Outreach and Activities*

Activity	Number
<b>Interviews</b>	<b>73</b>
Elected Officials	9
ACPS District Staff	9
ACPS School Principals	3
ACPS Teachers	2
Committee Organizations	12
Community Organizations	38
<b>Focus Group Participants</b>	<b>157</b>
Family Members	74
Community Members	42
ACPS Teachers and District Staff	41
<b>Survey Completers</b>	<b>1,122</b>
Family Members	740
Community Members	188
Students	37
ACPS Teachers and District Staff	157
<b>Community Events</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Classroom Visits</b>	<b>3</b>



## Key Findings

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

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

However, several issues hinder literacy progress, such as:

- **Challenges Faced by Families** – Limited access to literacy resources, financial constraints, and logistical challenges such as work schedules and transportation create obstacles for parents in supporting their children’s literacy development.
- **Challenges in Education** – Educators cited curriculum misalignment, a lack of professional development, and inadequate instructional support as key concerns. The Benchmark Advance (Benchmark Education, 2022) curriculum was particularly criticized for failing to support elementary students reading below grade level.
- **Structural and Financial Challenges for Organizations** – Many literacy-supporting organizations struggle to secure funding and implement structured, evidence-based literacy programs.

## Recommendations

Based on these findings, this report outlines three areas 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 in the data 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.** Recommendation Categories 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.

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