



Item:

Early Childhood Learning Collaborative Update and Project CONNECT Contracting and Investment Approval for Fiscal Year 2026-2027

Requested Action:

1. The Board is requested to approve contracting for Project CONNECT with the Early Learning Coalition of Alachua County and the Anita Zucker Center for Excellence in Early Childhood Studies, and to authorize an investment of \$107,270.00 for Fiscal Year 2026–2027.

Background:

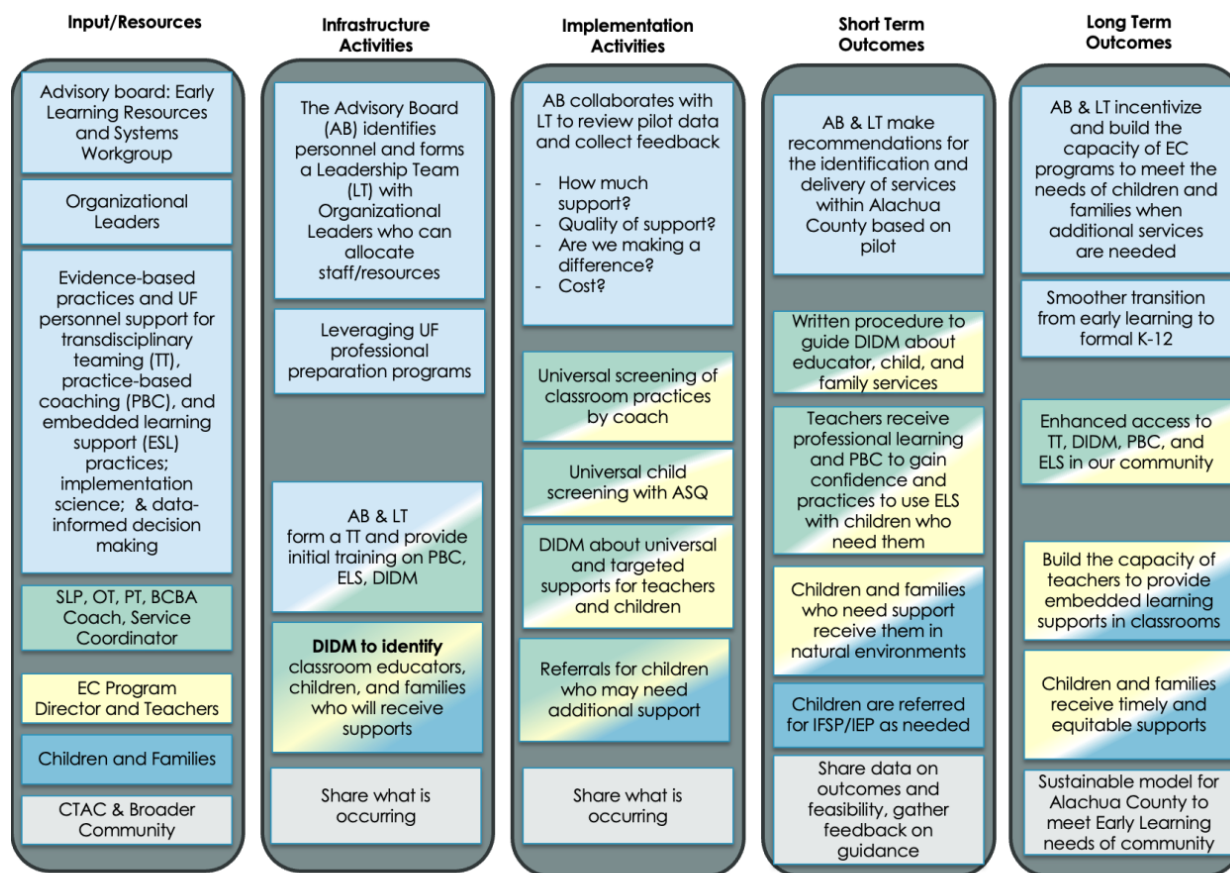
Previously known as the Early Childhood Learning Network, the Early Childhood Learning Collaborative was established in 2023 by the Children's Trust of Alachua County to support a quality improvement system for early childhood learning and to rename existing quarterly meetings led by local early childhood leaders with the Children's Movement of Florida. In March 2023, Trust staff were directed by the Board to convene local early learning leaders, including Baby Gator and Santa Fe Little School, to build a collaborative network, support community transformation, and better understand their federal mandate to create a system of learning for other childcare providers. This convening included early learning businesses, the school district, and experts across Alachua County. The feedback from that meeting informed the Trust's strategic planning process.

In June 2025, the Alachua County Early Childhood Learning Collaborative used Florida's Early Learning Roadmap as a guide to develop a local strategy across three focus areas: Thriving Parents, Early Learning Educator Workforce and Supports, and System Coordination and Resources. As these workgroups met, a shared priority emerged around strengthening support for children with special needs.

In October 2025, the Systems Workgroup brought together system experts, School district, child care providers, and advocates to better understand early intervention and special needs resources available within and beyond Alachua County and then held an action-planning session to move from identifying gaps to defining concrete strategies. These strategies included leveraging Help Me Grow Alachua for system enhancements, exploring equal-access OT/ST centers, creating a framework for support, and learning more about a federal grant opportunity through the Anita Zucker Center. Due to federal funding changes at the time, the federal grant opportunity was not an option CTAC and Anita Zucker Center could explore for the project.

Update:

Working with the Anita Zucker Center and UF Department of Occupational Therapy, the group developed a logic model (page 13 of proposal) that has been refined over the past several months through ongoing meetings, feedback from the broader Collaborative and workgroups, and revisions to the proposal now called CONNECT-Community Organizing, Navigating Service Delivery, and Nurturing Early Childhood Teams. The CONNECT proposal reflects the priorities and input of all three workgroups, including Thriving Parents and Early Learning Educator Workforce and Supports, and community stakeholders.



Project CONNECT is proposed to address gaps in early identification, coordination, and support for young children with suspected or identified developmental delays in Alachua County. The initiative will strengthen developmental screening, referral, coordinated service delivery, educator coaching, and family support within existing early childhood systems so children can receive more timely and effective supports in inclusive learning environments.

The Fiscal Year 2026–2027 investment will support the initial implementation phase of Project CONNECT and advance Children’s Trust of Alachua County’s strategic priorities related to children with special needs and early learning.

Programmatic and Fiscal Impact:

Fiscal Year 2025-2026 (workgroup)

Fiscal Impact: \$0.00

Goal 1: Children and youth are healthy and have nurturing caregivers and relationships.

Goal 2: Children and youth can learn what they need to be successful.

Fiscal Year 2026-2027 (Project CONNECT)

Fiscal Impact: \$107,270.00

Goal 1: Children and youth are healthy and have nurturing caregivers and relationships.

Focus Area: Children and Youth with Special Needs

Indicator: Enhance efforts in Alachua County focused on serving children with special needs. The CTAC aims to learn more about community needs in this area and convening partners to address them.

Goal 2: Children and youth can learn what they need to be successful.

Focus Area: Early Learning

Indicator: Kindergarten readiness, VPK participation

Attachments:

Project CONNECT Overview

Project CONNECT One-Pager

Project CONNECT Proposal

Recommendation:

1. Approve contracting for Project CONNECT with the Early Learning Coalition of Alachua County and the Anita Zucker Center for Excellence in Early Childhood Studies, and authorize an investment of \$107,270.00 for Fiscal Year 2026–2027.