

Our Children Are Paying the Ultimate Price

By Anita Winter, Business Development Director, Early Learning Coalition of Marion County

Sorry, we have no more money for that service. You are welcome to add your name to our waiting list; you will be number 1,001. Have you tried XYZ organization? I know, I know, they have had to cut services too. These are a sample of the responses being heard by many fragile and vulnerable families needing assistance these days.

The headlines have focused on our public school system and their year-after-year struggle to balance a budget on less and less funding while still providing quality education opportunities for our school-age children. And today's reality is certainly a regression for our pre-school age children too.

As Florida's fiscal year 2011-2012 begins, the Early Learning Coalition of Marion County, as many, many other local organizations, implements a plan to maintain quality services with less, a lot less. The cuts from the state include an 11% reduction in school readiness services (\$1.1 million). All American Recovery & Reinvestment Act funds were fully expended in FY 2010-2011. Additionally, funding cuts include a 7% reduction in reimbursement per VPK student and a .5% reduction in VPK administrative expenses.

What will this significant reduction in funding mean for the staff of the Early Learning Coalition of Marion County? Our Board of Directors implemented a cross-the-board reduction in expenses with the number one priority of no staff layoffs. The staff's contribution to a greatly reduced, but balanced, budget will include items such as no salary increases, schedule change to four 10-hour work days, significant reduction in retirement benefits, and more. All included at a balanced budget with only 2.5% school readiness administrative expense. But then again, there will be no layoffs. No small miracle in these times.

How will these budget cuts from the state affect the families in Marion County? Effective July 1, 2011, it has become necessary to change our eligibility priorities for low-income working families to eliminate services to children ages 10, 11 and 12 years of age. This equates to dis-enrolling (a first in the Coalition's 11 year history) more than 200 children. The waiting list for financial assistance for childcare for eligible families will immediately increase to well over 1,000. This statistic will increase significantly again if the Coalition is not able to acquire an additional \$165,000 in local community match funding to access state funding for low-income working families. Hundreds of parents will be forced to make difficult decisions regarding the welfare of their children while they are at work.

And who will "pay" the ultimate price? Our children. Children of every ethnicity who deserve every chance to grow to their greatest potential, to succeed in school and to have positive choices as an adult. Children who could have academically thrived in a quality

early learning setting but who will struggle to enter kindergarten on a level field with their peers. And by the third grade could be costly our community 7-10 times more than the successful student in remediation expenses.

Through all the painful numbers crunching meetings, our budget continues to reflect an 87% revenue investment to direct services; the children and families we serve. The board and staff of the Early Learning Coalition remains dedicated to our youngest of Marion County residents. We welcome your support.