

# Improving Health Literacy in Florida: A Partnership for Success

Reading food labels. Making healthier choices for food and exercise. Knowing what to do when going to the doctor and how to explain my medical problems. Performing CPR on a choking person.

These comments are from students enrolled in programs offered by grantees in the Florida Health Literacy Initiative, a partnership between Florida Literacy Coalition and Florida Blue Foundation.

What began in 2009 has made a significant impact on the lives of more than 25,000 students. With the goal to integrate health education into Adult Education, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and Family Literacy programs, the Initiative has empowered students to make informed decisions about their health and well-being.

Nonprofit organizations receiving the \$5,000 grants are required to engage in a health-related project coordinated between teachers and students to enhance the learning process. The projects help students acquire the knowledge, literacy skills, and resources required to navigate the health care system and make informed health decisions.

The Initiative's success can be attributed to the support of over 440 partners that have provided assistance and resources over the years. Local doctors, nurses, dentists, hospitals, nutritionists, and other health care agencies, as well as institutions of higher education and businesses, have contributed to the Initiative's success. Activities have included health care screenings, CPR courses, exercise classes, health fairs, and field trips to hospitals, health centers, grocery stores, farms, and county agencies.

Four organizations that have received Florida Health Literacy grants share their stories and those of students.

## COLLIER COUNTY ADULT EDUCATION

Collier County Adult Education focused on dental awareness for their 2024-2025 grant. Using the *Staying Healthy* curriculum, the students in the Adult ESOL classes participated in a project-based learning activity. They researched and prepared oral presentations on Dental Awareness. Activities included reading, writing, and researching a paper and a presentation.

Christine Briggs, Teacher, Resource, Adult & Community Education at Collier Public Schools, said her favorite programming of the Florida Health Literacy grant was the year they focused on drowning prevention. "We took all the students to learn how to swim. Only two students didn't pass because they couldn't float for five seconds."



“Our student population includes 16-19-year-old learners, adult ESOL students ages 16-80+, and online ESOL participants,” added Briggs.

Past programming included hands-on science experiments that allowed a deeper dive into health-related topics through real-life explorations; life balance in work, fitness and health; emotional well-being; vision boards; the importance of exercise and healthy eating; and a wellness fair. They will focus on mental well-being for their 2025-2026 grant.

### **LEARN TO READ OF ST. JOHNS COUNTY**

“At Learn to Read of St. Johns County, we are fortunate to be a true community-based organization,” said Joseph P. Cinney, Executive Director. “Our students avail themselves of free tutorial services in Basic Literacy, General Educational Development (GED) test preparation, conversational English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), as well as U.S. Citizenship interview preparation. We have more than 40 dedicated volunteer tutors who provide these services to our students. As one student recently commented, ‘Learn to Read allowed me to move forward, get a job ... and be part of the community.’”



Another student shared: “The help and support I received from Learn to Read has not been limited to teaching me how to speak English. It has also provided me with knowledge in the health field. ... Today, I find myself working in the health care system where I am an administrative assistant.”

Students at Learn to Read were able to increase their health and medical vocabulary, practice pronunciation, engage in dialogue, analyze prescriptions, and prepare for medical appointments. Speakers presented on a variety of topics, including the free available medical and dental services at a nearby clinic, podiatry, and nutrition and exercise information. Over 20 students received their two-year certifications in CPR training and First Aid administration and are now qualified to administer CPR and/or First Aid on their jobs and in their personal lives. One student used her CPR skills when her young grandson was choking. She saved his life.

### **SCHOOL DISTRICT OF DESOTO COUNTY**

The School District of DeSoto County also engages in project-based learning activities to deliver the Health Literacy Initiative to students in multiple programs including Family Literacy, GED, and Adult Basic Education (ABE). Students researched healthy recipes, made awareness posters, and presented at a student-led Friendsgiving feast, which was planned and implemented by the ESOL students engaged in the Health Literacy Initiative. The students participated in interactive “mock doctor appointments” alongside the Licensed Practical Nursing (LPN) students. The entire experience was role-played—from arriving at the clinic and completing forms to measuring height, weight, and blood pressure, and discussing any health concerns the “patient” might



have. To involve participants from the Family Literacy Initiative, the LPN students conducted basic health screenings of the children for hearing, vision, and weight assessments.

"I am one of the many that have benefited from the Family Literacy Program and health literacy," said Perla Barajas, a former student. "I started the program in 2006 with my second son, who was 2 years old at the time, and with another baby on the way. I was able to attend English classes without having to leave my children, and where they were also learning and interacting with other children. I especially liked the activities that we did as a group like planting a spring garden and organizing a health fair for the other students at our school.

"Through this program, I was able to learn to speak English by taking ESOL classes. Then I moved on to ABE and GED classes, and I was able to obtain my GED diploma. Afterwards, I attended the Administrative Assistant class, which helped me a lot, because at that time I didn't even know how to use a computer. Thanks to the program and the support of my teachers, who always supported and encouraged me, I was able to achieve all of that.

"I worked as a part-time employee for the program that gave me so much for many years and was later promoted to a full-time employee as a Testing Specialist. I have now been working for the School District of Desoto County, Adult Education, for 14 years."

"Adult Education truly transforms lives every single day," said Kathy Severson, Director of Career, Technical, and Adult Education. "We see firsthand how our programs open doors to new opportunities, build confidence, and empower individuals to reach their goals. The Health Literacy Initiative, in particular, has been instrumental in helping our students understand the importance of maintaining healthy lifestyles—not only for themselves but for their families as well. We are deeply appreciative of the support that allows us to make such a meaningful impact in our community."

## **SEMINOLE STATE COLLEGE**

The project-based learning activities at Seminole State College included Basic Life Support CPR as well as guest speakers on health-related topics. Field trips provided to Healthy Living students included visits to the Disability Support Services/Holistic Student Support Center to learn about the various services available to the students, from medical resources to legal aid.



"Theme-based health literacy instruction helped our students develop English language and literacy skills," said Lorraine Matos, PhD, Integrated Education and Training Coordinator. "Our students planned and implemented a health fair with partners from our community that was open to all students at the college. Now our students want to host health fairs at all our campuses."

According to one student, "Attending Healthy Living gives a larger vision of the Health System in the USA. I was only in the United States for two years and didn't have the knowledge of health careers in this country until I attended Healthy Living. I had the opportunity to learn

about Basic Life Support CPR. This was the first step into my health education, and now I am a certified Nursing Assistant.”

**About Florida Literacy Coalition**

Established in 1985, Florida Literacy Coalition (FLC) promotes, supports, and advocates for the effective delivery of quality adult and family literacy services in Florida. As a statewide umbrella literacy organization and host of Florida's Adult and Family Literacy Resource Center, FLC provides a range of services to support over 250 adult education, literacy, and family literacy providers.