

The Florida Center for Early Childhood Starfish Academy Transformation Project

The Florida Center for Early Childhood's mission, to help build and foster strong families and expand the potential of young children, is executed daily at its Starfish Academy, an inclusive childcare and early education program serving typically developing children alongside children with developmental delay, disabilities or mental health challenges. The proposed ***Starfish Academy Transformation Project*** initiative will enhance its early education program by creating a new welcoming and authentic learning environment that inspires curiosity and collaboration, with the purchase of classroom furniture.

The total initiative budget of \$300,466 includes \$144,759 of the amount beyond the Impact100 SRQ grant committed, and \$46,207 pending. The Impact100 SRQ grant will fund \$50,084 for furnishings for the two 3-year-old rooms and \$55,756 for two 4-year old rooms, with the balance of the initiative budget furnishing the infant, pre-toddler, and 2-year old rooms, refurbishing both the Sarasota and North Port locations which each serve 60 children per year.

The furnishings are aligned with the Reggio-Emilia classroom design, a design philosophy that considers the environment as the "third teacher," and emphasizes the crucial role that physical spaces and materials play in children's learning and development. The design is an active participant in the learning process, emphasizing plain wood, monochromatic colors and plants. This calming environment reduces stress, improves mood, enhances concentration, and supports emotional regulation. This is particularly helpful with children with sensory issues as they are learning to self-regulate.

The Reggio-Emilia approach, which emphasizes self-directed learning and creativity, helps children build these skills naturally through active and inquiry-based learning, helping children develop communication, cooperation, and empathy, while building emotional intelligence for future relationships and leadership roles. Hands-on activities foster critical thinking, problem-solving, and responsibility.

Further, the furniture is easily moved to configure small spaces that are conducive for the specialists like speech therapists, mental health professionals, and occupational therapists who come in to work with the children individually or in small groups. To sustain the initiative, the furnishings will be regularly maintained and updated as needed.

The ripple effect of an engaging environment stretches beyond the classroom, as parents and caregivers observe how they can set a similar environment at home, creating positive behaviors and empowering children in their earliest years to help them achieve their greatest potential.