



GULF REGIONAL  
Early Childhood Services

# Year In Review

2023 - 2024

# LETTER FROM OUR PRESIDENT

Dear GRECS Community,

It is a privilege to share the 2023–2024 Annual Report, highlighting a year of growth, perseverance, and impact. GRECS remains steadfast in our mission to provide high-quality early learning experiences while strengthening the communities we serve.



This year brought both challenges and opportunities, but thanks to the dedication of our team, we continued to move forward. We expanded services in Baldwin County, purchasing property in Bay Minette and securing a new location in Daphne. In Clarke County, we added infant and toddler classrooms at Early Learning Center Jackson, meeting the growing need for care for our youngest learners. Playground enhancements at Early Learning Center Fairhope and Early Learning Center MidCity have ensured safer, more engaging outdoor environments for children.

To better serve families, we restructured some programs to serve more infants and toddlers, aligning with community needs to care for our youngest children. We also continued offering retention bonuses to child care staff, recognizing the vital role they play in shaping young lives. Additionally, we broadened our reach through two podcast launches, one of which was recognized as “Best Local Podcast”—expanding conversations around parental resilience and early childhood education. The Children’s Trust Fund believed so strongly in our podcast that they are supporting it with grant funds for 2024–2025.

None of this would be possible without the dedication of our Board of Directors, staff, community partners, and grantors. Their commitment ensures GRECS remains a responsive, innovative, and sustainable organization in the areas we serve. As we look ahead, we will continue to build on these successes, advocating for quality early learning as an essential service for children and families.

Thank you for your support and belief in our mission. Together, we are making a lasting impact.

With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Wendy McEarchern".

Wendy McEarchern  
Chief Executive Officer, GRECS





# PROGRAMS & SERVICES

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## Head Start and Early Head Start

Comprehensive early childhood education, health, nutrition, and family support services to low-income children & families in Mobile, Baldwin, Clarke and Escambia counties. Both programs emphasize parental involvement & connect families with community resources to promote long-term well-being.

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## The Resource Place

A community hub offering early childhood educators and families access to learning materials, training, and support. It features a lending library, educational resources, and workshops to enhance early learning environments and equip caregivers with tools for children's development.

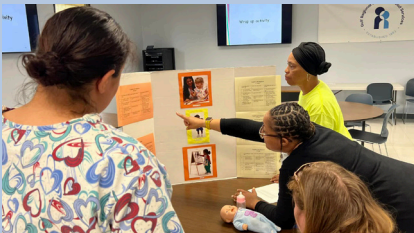
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## Bright Beginnings+

Supported by PNC Grow Up Great, Bright Beginnings+ provides families & teachers with Infant-Toddler Activity Calendars, books, & learning toys to enhance early development. This initiative promotes family engagement by equipping caregivers with resources to support infants' & toddlers' learning through play and daily interactions.

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## Professional Development

Face-to-face workshops, online courses for CEU credit, and distance learning opportunities to support early childhood educators. Participants receive quarterly newsletters, hands-on training, and reproducible resources to enhance teaching practices and strengthen early learning environments for young children.

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## Early Learning Literacy Initiative

GRECS' Early Learning Literacy Initiative provides developmentally appropriate books to children in early learning programs across a seven-county region. Three times a year, staff visit child care programs to model read-aloud techniques, distribute books for children to take home.

# HEAD START & EARLY HEAD START



In 2023-2024, GRECS provided Head Start and Early Head Start services to 529 children at our Early Learning Centers and through child care partnerships with child care centers across the region. Early Head Start supports infants, toddlers, and pregnant women with comprehensive early childhood education, health services, and family engagement. Head Start prepares children ages 3 to 5 for school success through high-quality early learning experiences. In addition to these programs, GRECS' also offers Alabama First Class Pre-K classrooms in participating Early Learning Centers, ensuring children receive a strong foundation for lifelong learning. Through Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, GRECS collaborates with local child care providers to expand access to high-quality care for infants and toddlers. These partnerships provide centers with resources, professional development, and funding to enhance their programs while allowing families to benefit from full-day, year-round services in a familiar setting. This collaboration strengthens early learning environments and increases the availability of affordable, high-quality child care in the community.

## LOCATIONS

### Mobile County

Dearborn YMCA

Early Learning Center Mid-City

Highpoint Christian School and Daycare

Lighthouse Academy #1

Lighthouse Academy #3

Mt. Ararat Child Development Center

Nina Joseph CDC

Small Wonders

Starlight Learning Center

### Clarke County

Early Learning Center Jackson



*GRECS fosters family engagement by hosting monthly family events and providing home learning activities, ensuring parents play an active role in their child's early education and development.*

### Escambia County

Early Learning Center Brewton

### Baldwin County

Early Learning Center Fairhope

Early Learning Center Daphne

# PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

At GRECS, we are committed to empowering early childhood educators with high-quality professional development opportunities that enhance their skills and deepen their impact on young learners. In 2023 and 2024, we provided intensive training for our Head Start and Early Head Start staff, as well as other early childhood professionals in our region, featuring renowned experts in the field. Louis Torelli, M.S.Ed., an expert in designing high-quality learning environments for young children, led specialized training sessions focused on best practices in their respective areas.



*“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” - Nelson Mandela*



The Bright Beginnings+ Program helps families support early learning at home by providing activity calendars, books, and developmentally appropriate toys for infants and toddlers in our Early Head Start programs. GRECS' family engagement team prepares and distributes these resources to encourage meaningful parent-child interactions. We also partner with the Alabama Infant Toddler Specialist Network to train coaches and teachers on guiding families in using these materials for home learning. This collaboration ensures young children receive enriching experiences that foster development and school readiness.



# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



GRECS, with support from the United Bank Charitable Foundation, brought hands-on STEM learning to early childhood classrooms in Escambia and Baldwin counties. A. C. Moore Primary School in Atmore received six Fully Loaded Mobile STEM Station Bundles for Pre-K classrooms, while Early Learning Center Daphne received two for Head Start and Alabama First Class Pre-K classrooms. The project included professional development by Angela Russ-Ayon, an interactive early childhood trainer, equipping teachers with STEM strategies to enhance children's science concepts and readiness skills. Educators are excited to integrate these interactive tools into their daily lessons.



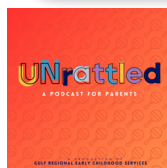
GRECS participated in the City of Mobile's LODA Art Walk several times throughout the year, providing developmentally appropriate arts and sensory activities for families and children to enjoy together. Our hands-on experiences promote creativity, exploration, and family engagement, reinforcing the importance of early learning through play. In addition to interactive activities, we distributed over 750 take-home activity kits, ensuring families could continue the fun and learning beyond the event. GRECS' presence at Art Walk strengthened our connection with the community, broadened awareness of our services, and fostered meaningful interactions that support early childhood development in a fun, accessible way.



As a United Way agency, GRECS participates in United Way of Southwest Alabama's Day of Caring each year. In March 2024, we worked with UWSWA to organize volunteers and materials to enhance early learning environments by creating child-friendly flower gardens at several Head Start sites. Volunteers from local businesses and organizations worked alongside GRECS staff—and the children!—to complete these projects. This annual initiative strengthened community partnerships while providing safe, engaging outdoor spaces for young learners to explore and enjoy.

## GRECS' PODCASTS

GRECS produces two engaging podcasts that support parents and early childhood professionals: *Tiny Talks on Early Learning* and *UNrattled: A Podcast for Parents*. *Tiny Talks on Early Learning* explores trending topics in early childhood education, while *UNrattled* offers expert advice and real-life strategies to help parents navigate the challenges of raising young children. Esteemed guests have included professionals from Mobile County Health Department, Child Care Aware of America, Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and USA Health Systems, covering topics such as parental stress, the impact of adult ADHD on parenting, and the importance of peer relationships for children. The shows have surpassed 4,000 total downloads and *UNrattled* was honored as Best Local Podcast in Lagniappe's 2024 Nappie Awards.





# PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

## TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

### 2023 - 2024 NUMBERS OF NOTE

GRECS' Professional Development Program equips early childhood educators with the knowledge and skills needed to provide high-quality learning experiences for young children. Through interactive training sessions, workshops, and credentialing opportunities, we support teachers, caregivers, and program administrators in their professional growth. Our expert-led training covers essential topics such as child development, developmentally appropriate practices, social-emotional learning, health and safety, positive behavior guidance and classroom management. We offer both in-person and virtual learning options to accommodate busy professionals, ensuring accessibility and flexibility. Additionally, GRECS partners with national and state experts, like Yale's School for Emotional Intelligence and Alabama's Infant Toddler Specialist Network, to bring the latest research-based practices to our region, enhancing the quality of early childhood education. Our commitment to professional development extends beyond training—our team provides ongoing coaching and technical assistance throughout the region, helping educators implement what they learn in real-world settings. By investing in continuous learning, GRECS strengthens the early childhood workforce, ensuring that young children receive the best possible start in life through high-quality early care and education.

Conducted  
**333**  
Training Sessions.

Processed  
**6370**  
Registrations

Hosted  
**4756**  
people at training events

Awarded  
**547.2**  
CEUS to participants

## SPECIAL DELIVERY TRAINING



GRECS' Special Delivery Training Program brings high-quality professional development directly to child care programs across the region. Upon request, our expert trainers travel on-site to provide customized training tailored to each program's specific needs. These sessions are also open to nearby programs, fostering collaboration and shared learning. By meeting early childhood educators where they are, GRECS ensures accessible, hands-on training

that strengthens teaching practices, enhances program quality, and supports the growth of early childhood professionals in their own learning environments.



**\*Scan the QR code above for more details about 2023-2024 Professional Development programs and initiatives.**



# THE RESOURCE PLACE

2,669

Unique items into new  
check-out system.

472

Items checked out.

67

New memberships.

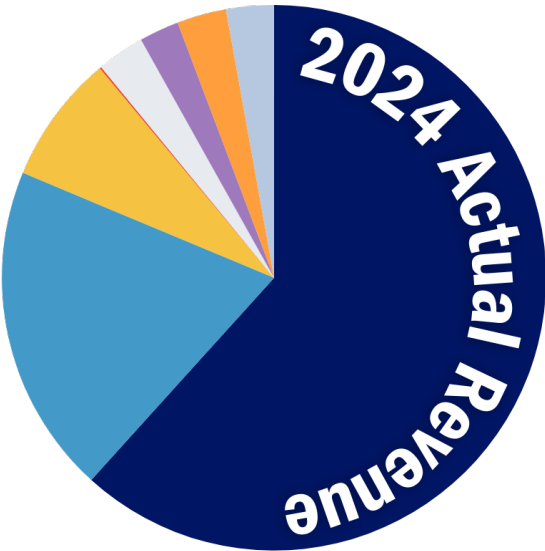
The Lending Library in Mobile, offers child care providers and the community access to special classroom toys, games, puppets, children's books, and program planning and resource materials. The Resource Place, including the Lending Library and Work Room offers teachers, child care professionals, home care providers and anyone else caring for young children a convenient outlet for ideas and materials. The highly qualified staff, equipment and materials at the Resource Place also make this an ideal base for providing technical support to teachers/caregivers. A work room includes special equipment such as die-cutters, laminators and button machines.

## BEYOND THE BOOKSHELF

In March 2024, Beyond the Bookshelf welcomed over 50 early educators to The Resource Place for a dynamic professional development event. Attendees earned training credits through two engaging sessions, connected with community and industry vendors, and explored interactive stations showcasing the diverse materials and resources available through a free membership to The Resource Place.



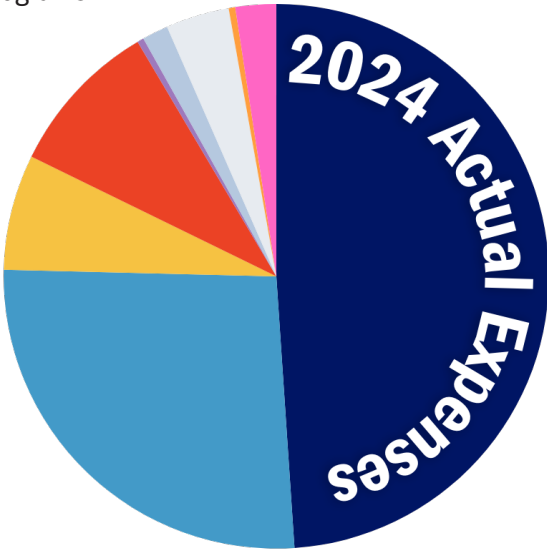
# FINANCIAL SUMMARY



**TOTAL REVENUE**  
**\$13,007,267.00**

Head Start/ Early Head Start (Federal)	\$8,489,226.89	65.3%
Early Head Start (State)	\$2,687,200.00	20.7%
Child Care Quality Enhancement	\$1,058,356.00	8.1%
United Way	\$15,107.00	0.1%
Office of School Readiness Pre-K	\$393,808.00	3.0%
Alabama Dept of Child Nutrition	\$319,172.00	2.5%
Alabama ECC/ Child Care Services	\$399,821.00	3.1%
Other Contrib/Local Programs	\$396,277.00	3.0%

Salaries & Benefits	\$6,609,725.66	50.7%
Contractual	\$3,568,897.00	27.4%
Supplies	\$931,174.00	7.1%
Occupancy/Rent	\$1,245,342.00	9.6%
Equipment/Facilities	\$52,645.00	0.4%
Professional Development	\$211,334.00	1.6%
Professional Fees	\$506,036.00	3.9%
Travel	\$58,634.00	0.4%
Other	\$331,912.00	2.5%



**TOTAL EXPENSES**  
**\$13,035,975.00**

An annual A-133 financial audit was conducted by Smith, Dukes & Buckalew, L.L.P. in accordance with Government Auditing Standards. The audit included all expenditures from October 1, 2023 through September 30, 2024 and indicates no findings or questioned costs.



# LEADERSHIP

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Abigail Baxter, Ph. D.

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Julie Bellcase, MBA

*Vice-Chairman*

Suzy Hardy

*Treasurer*

Carolyn Douglas

*Secretary*

Alexandra K. Garrett, J.D.

Gloria Hill

John Marshall, LCC, NCC

Melissa Creighton

Benterah C. Morton, Ph. D.

## POLICY COUNCIL

Martrisse Haynes

*Chairman*

Lynandria Page

Juanita Jones

Tomeka Williams

Alexcia Thomas

Leo Taylor

Breley Rhodes

Mamie Fowler

Lakia Kiel

Kayley Baggett



*Pictured: Board Members Abigail Baxter and Gloria Hill with Monica Byrd (ELC Fairhope Director), and Catherine Kreger (VP of Children's Services)*

## SENIOR LEADERSHIP

Wendy McEarchern

*President/Chief Executive Officer &  
Executive Head Start/Early Head Start Director*

Sarah McKay

*Executive Vice President/Chief Financial Officer of  
Finance & Administration  
Chief Operating Officer*

Kym Carroll

*Vice President of Research, Policy & Programs*

Sallie Martin

*AL Early Head Start Child Care  
Partnership Program Manager & Quality Assurance*

Catherine Kreger

*Vice President of Children's Services*

Allison Goff

*Early Learning Career Center Director*

## COORDINATORS

Ann Sands

*Center Operations Coordinator*

Shajuane Kent-Cook

*Head Start/Early Head Start E.R.S.E.A. Coordinator*

Candace Ellis

*Education Services Coordinator*

Tammy Street

*Family Services Coordinator*

Irma Dennise Melendez

*Health, Safety and Disabilities Coordinator*



# Gulf Regional Early Childhood Services



ESTABLISHED 1992



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