



2024-2025 YEAR IN REVIEW

INVESTING IN OUR CHILDREN,
Strengthening Our Community



Letter From Our President



Dear GRECS Community,

As we began 2025, Gulf Regional Early Childhood Services faced a moment of profound uncertainty. The possibility of defunding the Head Start program emerged as a very real threat—not only to our organization, but to the families, children, and communities we serve.

Head Start has long been a cornerstone of opportunity for working families across our region. In response, we acted swiftly—joining state and national partners, engaging policymakers, and lifting the voices of families and educators to advocate for continued investment in early childhood education. Our advocacy was grounded in evidence, experience, and our unwavering belief that every child deserves a strong start.

At the same time, responsible leadership required thoughtful preparation. Our team engaged in scenario planning, evaluated program models, strengthened partnerships, and explored innovative approaches to sustain services. These efforts reflected resilience and readiness—ensuring Gulf Regional would remain adaptable and responsive under any circumstances. Even amid uncertainty, we continued moving forward with purpose. We are especially excited about the progress of our newest program in Daphne, where we serve children through Head Start while expanding access to high-quality child care. This dual approach reflects our commitment to meeting families where they are and responding to the evolving needs of working parents and young learners.

We are also energized by the momentum in Bay Minette, where we are on track to open a beautiful new early learning center designed to serve as a community hub. With a multi-program approach, this center will allow us to provide comprehensive services under one roof—strengthening continuity, expanding access, and supporting families in meaningful, lasting ways. I am deeply proud of how our organization has navigated both challenge and growth. Our staff demonstrated professionalism and compassion under pressure. Our Board provided steady governance, and our community partners stood alongside us. Together, we proved that while funding landscapes may shift, our commitment to children and families does not. As we look ahead, Gulf Regional remains dedicated to delivering high-quality early learning, supporting families, and advocating for systems that value and invest in young children. Though the road may continue to evolve, our vision is clear—and our resolve remains strong.

With gratitude and determination,

Wendy McEarchern

Chief Executive Officer, GRECS

Programs & Services



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.



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.



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.



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.



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-a-loud techniques, distribute books for children to take home.



GRECS Podcasts

Expert insights and lived-experience parent perspectives paired with short, focused discussions that provide practical parenting strategies, research-based guidance, and simple, actionable tips to strengthen families and promote healthy early learning foundations.

Head Start & Early Head Start



In 2024–2025, GRECS provided Head Start and Early Head Start services to children and families across Baldwin, Clarke, Escambia, and Mobile counties. Through the BCE grant, GRECS served 324 children at four centers in Fairhope, Daphne (Baldwin County), Jackson (Clarke County), and Brewton (Escambia County). Through the Mobile Early Head Start Child Care Partnership grant, GRECS served 176 infants and toddlers and 6 pregnant mothers across five partner sites and one GRECS-operated center in Mobile County. Cumulative enrollment in Mobile County reached 230 children and 6 pregnant mothers. Early Head Start provides comprehensive education, health, and family services for infants, toddlers, and pregnant women, while Head Start prepares children ages 3–5 for school success. GRECS also offers **Alabama First Class Pre-K and child care** in Early Learning Centers, as well as partnering with local child care providers to expand access to high-quality early learning across the region.



Locations

Mobile County

Dearborn YMCA
Early Learning Center Mid-City
Lighthouse Academy Grand Bay
Lighthouse Academy Prichard
Mt. Ararat Child Development Center
Nina Nicks Joseph CDC
Small Wonders
Faith Tabernacle Academy #1
Faith Tabernacle Academy #2
Dearborn Toulminville

Baldwin County

Early Learning Center Fairhope
Early Learning Center Daphne

Clarke County

Early Learning Center Jackson

Escambia County

Early Learning Center Brewton



Program Highlights

HEAD START'S 60TH BIRTHDAY

In 2025, GRECS celebrated the 60th anniversary of Head Start, honoring a national legacy that began in 1965 to help level the playing field for children and families. For six decades, Head Start has supported, inspired, and empowered generations—now serving more than 750,000 children each year. Across our Early Learning Centers, families, staff, and community partners gathered to mark this milestone with joyful activities and meaningful reflections on the program's lasting impact. We remain committed to advancing Head Start's mission as we continue building brighter futures for the children and families we serve.



"ANYONE WHO DOES ANYTHING TO HELP A CHILD IS A HERO." ~ FRED ROGERS

EARLY LEARNING CENTER DAPHNE GRAND OPENING

In January 2025, GRECS celebrated the grand opening and ribbon cutting of Early Learning Center Daphne, expanding access to high-quality early childhood education in Baldwin County. The center serves children ages six weeks to five years in a safe, nurturing environment designed to support school readiness and lifelong success.

We were honored to welcome the Mayor of Daphne and community partners to commemorate the occasion, reflecting the strong local support and collaboration that help advance our mission for children and families.



Community Engagement

GULF COAST CHILDREN'S BOOK FESTIVAL

GRECS proudly participated in the Gulf Coast Children's Book Festival at The Grounds, hosted by the Boys & Girls Club of South Alabama. Our trainers and staff joined authors, educators, and volunteers in promoting a shared mission: sparking a love of reading in young minds.

Through live readings and community engagement, our team supported the Read. Learn. Achieve. Initiative and helped place books into the hands of children across our region. Events like this reflect our continued commitment to strengthening early literacy and supporting future learners.

"IF YOU SEE SOMEONE WITHOUT A SMILE, GIVE THEM YOURS." ~DOLLY PARTON

LODA ARTWALK – KIDS ZONE

In celebration of Watercolor Month, GRECS sponsored the Kids Zone at LoDa ArtWalk in downtown Mobile, providing hands-on creative experiences for children and families. Activities included watercolor painting, a community sticker wall, and playdough exploration—intentionally designed to support gross motor development and early writing skills. Families also received free books, Infant, Toddler, and Preschool activity calendars, and information about Head Start services, helping connect children to valuable early learning resources both at home and in the community.



GRECS Podcasts



Throughout 2024–2025, GRECS’ podcasts — Tiny Talks on Early Learning and UNrattled: A Podcast for Parents — significantly expanded their reach as trusted resources for families and early childhood professionals. Together, the podcasts achieved 4,270 total downloads this year — a remarkable 152% increase over last year’s 1,654 downloads, more than doubling their audience and demonstrating growing demand for accessible, research-based parenting and early learning support. Covering timely topics such as parental stress, ADHD, emotional regulation, risky play, peer relationships, and advocacy, the podcasts connect listeners to expert voices, local partners, and practical strategies that strengthen families and support child well-being across our community.



39
Episodes Released

14
Contributing Organizations Represented

4270
Total Downloads



Episode Contributors / Collaborations -

- United Way of Southwest Alabama
- Mobile County Health Department
- Child Care Aware of America
- Children’s Trust Fund of Alabama
- Fowler Davis 4 Change
- Alabama Public Television
- Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, Child Study Center
- Council for Professional Recognition
- University of South Alabama
- Anti-Bias Leaders ECE
- Auburn University Truman Pierce Institute
- Alabama Quality STARS
- Alabama Infant Toddler Specialist Network
- Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education



Professional Development

QUALITY ENHANCEMENT ACTIVITIES 2024-2025 NUMBERS OF NOTE

GRECS conducted workshop sessions in all counties in the service area, providing caregivers with the opportunity to complete training hours needed to fulfill DHR yearly training requirements, renew certificates and credentials, improve their skills and ability to provide high quality learning environments and experiences for children, and maintain professional status.

- GRECS offered 361 training sessions
- GRECS had 6025 registrations
- 5239 people attended training events offered through GRECS.

PNC GROW UP GREAT® +

The PNC Grow Up Great® Plus grant strengthened family engagement and early childhood development by distributing more than 1000 activity calendars for Infants, Toddlers and Three's, along with books and sensory materials. These resources equipped parents with accessible developmental guidance, recommended reading, nursery rhymes, and daily activities to support learning across all domains.

The initiative reached 392 children across 43 classrooms in early learning programs and supported 81 teachers through training to integrate materials into daily instruction. EHS Family Advocates also guided parents in using the resources at home, promoting meaningful interactions and strengthening family connections.

PNC GREAT READERS EVENT

GRECS participated in the PNC Great Readers Event in April 2025. GRECS Team joined PNC volunteers to read at over 15 child care centers.

- Volunteers read “Pete the Cat and His Four Groovy Buttons” and “Pete the Cat Saves Up”
- A corresponding activity kit, along with 2 books, was given out to the children following the classroom reading



*SCAN THE QR CODE ABOVE FOR MORE DETAILS ABOUT 2024-2025 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS AND INITIATIVES.



The Resource Place

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.

31
ECE Students from
The Univ. of Mobile

87
New Memberships

592
Providers Visited

702
Items Checked Out

436
Individuals Used the
Workroom

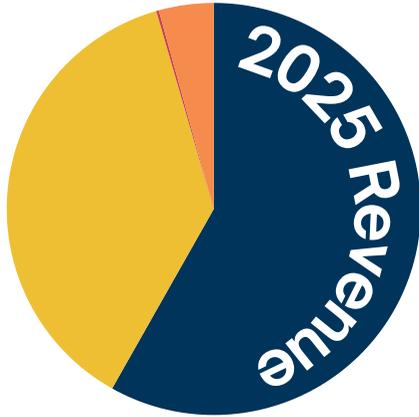
"STAND ASIDE FOR A WHILE AND LEAVE ROOM FOR LEARNING." ~MALAGUZZI

MAKE A CIRCLE FILM SHOWING

In October 2025, GRECS hosted a special community screening of *Make a Circle*, a powerful documentary highlighting the essential work of early educators and the child care workforce. The event brought together educators, program leaders, and advocates to reflect on the impact and importance of high-quality early learning. Attendees earned professional development credit, engaged in a panel and advocacy discussion inspired by the film, connected with community partners, and explored classroom resources through The Resource Place. The event served as both a celebration of the early childhood profession and a call to continued collaboration and support.



Financial Summary



TOTAL REVENUE
\$13,097,366.15

Federal Grants
 \$7,648,844.27 **58.4%**

State of Alabama Grants and Contracts:
 \$4,911,272.74 **37.5%**

Department of Human Resources:

- Child Care Quality Enhancement
- Early Head Start - Child Care Partnership
- Child Care Subsidy Program

Department of Early Childhood Education: Office of School Readiness / Pre K

Department of Child Abuse & Neglect Prevention: Children's Trust Fund

Department of Education: USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program

Child Care Services
 \$26,192.60 **0.2%**

Private Grants and Other Contributions
 \$511,056.54 **4.3%**

Salaries & Benefits
 \$7,082,303.39 **54.6%**

Child Care Partners Contracts; State & Federal
 \$3,320,891.16 **25.6%**

Program Operating Costs:
 \$2,567,387.10 **19.8%**

- Supplies
- Occupancy/Rent
- Equipment/Facilities
- Professional Development
- Professional Fees
- Travel
- Other



TOTAL EXPENSES
\$12,970,572.65

Leadership

Board of Directors

Abigail Baxter, Ph.D.

Chairperson

Julie Bellcase, MBA

Vice Chairperson

Melissa A. Bryan

Carolyn Douglas

Secretary

Alexandra Garrett

Suzy A. Hardy

Treasurer

Gloria Hill

John S. Marshall

Benterah C. Morton, Ph.D.

Policy Council

Martrisse Haynes

Chair

Rev. Leo Taylor

Vice Chair

Alicia Wiley

Secretary



Senior Leadership

Wendy McEarchern

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

Sarah McKay

Chief Financial & Operations Officer

Kym Carroll

Vice President of Research, Policy & Programs

Sallie Martin

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

Catherine Kregar

Vice President of Children's Services

Allison Goff

Early Learning Career Center Director

Monica Byrd

Regional Services Manager

Coordinators

Shajuane Kent-Cook

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

Candace Ellis

Education Services Coordinator

Tammy Steiner

Family Services Coordinator

Irma Dennise Melendez

Health, Safety and Disabilities Coordinator



24-2025
Year In Review

Thank You



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