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# VeroBeach

SEPTEMBER 2021

Magazine®

*Winners of our inaugural travel photo contest  
astounded judges with an array of images*

## Picture Perfect





BY JEFFREY R. PICKERING

# Learning Curve

COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS ARE IMPROVING EDUCATION IN INDIAN RIVER COUNTY

In 2019, when major funding organizations, donor groups, Indian River County government and other community leaders came together to complete a comprehensive needs assessment, the final report highlighted positive trends for education. Enrollment in both preschool and grades K through 12 was at record levels and rising. Kindergarten readiness and grade-level reading were both improving. High school graduation rates were well above the state average and increasing. If the collective energy focused on education at the time was any indication of the success heading our way, a virtual lunar landing was in our sights.

## SCHOOL DISTRICT STEPS UP

The year 2019 ended with the school board's unanimous selection of David Moore as superintendent. Then-school board chairwoman Laura Zorc described him as "a transformational school leader ... capable of leading the school district into the 21st century toward world-class education."

The 90-day plan Moore presented focused on achieving success in five areas: governance, organizational capacity and alignment, student achievement, community and public relationships, and operations and finance. By the end of Moore's first 90 days, however, he had to shift his focus to navigate the

**"This year the Scholarship Foundation awarded \$531,850 to 31 local students pursuing higher education at 17 colleges in six states."**

- CAMILLA WAINRIGHT

challenges presented by a global pandemic.

Approximately 1,800 children in Indian River County are enrolled in nursery or preschool, and another 19,000 students attend grades K through 12. Maintaining a trend of continuous improvement and growth for that many students would be no easy task during the challenging 2020-21 school year. Yet administrators, teachers and support staff rallied. They provided

various options to accommodate students' virtual or in-person return to school in the fall of 2020. Without a vaccine available, mask and social distancing protocols were established and administered in good order at all 27 district schools.

Countywide pre-schools followed similar protocols and, together with the support of parents and community funders, also rose to meet these unprecedented

challenges. Emergency funding from several sources, including a COVID-19 Community Response Fund organized by the United Way of Indian River County, helped many parents return to work by providing tuition scholarships and vouchers to cover the cost of preschool.

Additional help for Indian River County schools came when voters approved a ballot measure that renewed a 0.5 mill property tax

first passed in 2016. That extension provided an extra \$9–\$11 million to recruit and retain successful teachers and fund initiatives in mental and social wellness and technology. Combined with an improvement in the district’s bond rating and financial position, the outlook for education in our community is getting better.

As we enter the 2021–22 school year, the fight to return our community’s education system

**“Between June 7 and July 2, STEP into Kindergarten helped prepare 230 students to start kindergarten in the fall. It was a record summer.”**

– DOUGLAS HERRON



LEAH DUBOIS PHOTOGRAPHY

Access to computers at Boys & Girls Clubs helps ensure that students don’t fall behind due to lack of resources in their homes.

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to normal is not over. However, Moore, his team and a host of nonprofit organizations focused on education appear up to the challenge.

## COMMUNITY NONPROFITS CONTRIBUTE TO BETTER EDUCATION RESULTS

The Education Foundation of Indian River County sponsors STEP (Summer Transition Enrichment Program) into Kindergarten, a four-week summer experience for rising kindergarten students. This year, the program operated daily at Fellsmere, Pelican Island and Vero Beach elementary schools in June and July.

STEP into Kindergarten allows youngsters to meet future classmates and teachers; learn new routines and expectations; and develop skills in reading, math and other subjects. Participants also receive meals and enjoy fun activities and playtime.

The program also provides parents, many of whom are new to the school system, with information and skills to help them help their children succeed. According to Education Foundation



Individual reading instruction supports the Moonshot Moment goal of having 90% of students reading at grade level by third grade.

Executive Director Douglas Herron, “Between June 7 and July 2, 2021, STEP into Kindergarten helped prepare 230 young students to start kindergarten in the fall. It was a record summer.”

Another summer program supports the community’s Moonshot Moment goal to have 90% of all students reading on grade level by third grade. Sponsored by The Learning Alliance, summer Moonshot Academies provide intensive four-week programs lasting five hours per day. Students receive at least 90 minutes of small-group reading instruction and engage in field trips and other

activities in collaboration with ORCA, Ballet Vero Beach, the Indian River County Stormwater Division and the Vero Beach Museum of Art. The Environmental Learning Center’s Literacy on the Lagoon program also gives students the opportunity to maintain and improve reading skills while enjoying fun summer activities.

Several established organizations, including Big Brothers Big Sisters, Boys & Girls Clubs, Gifford Youth Achievement Center and Youth Guidance Mentoring Academy, stepped up to help students at risk of falling behind due to the

pandemic by innovating or expanding proven programs. “While our main programs are focused on mentoring students, when COVID-19 hit, we quickly learned that many of our program participants live in homes without a computer or internet service,” says Phil Barnes, executive director of Youth Guidance. “Our staff and volunteers pivoted by opening an all-day learning center to accommodate their needs as students. Essentially, we operated a virtual school for close to 250 children ages 5 through 18 for the year.”

When it comes to

## Strong leadership in our schools and proactive community organizations are responding to new challenges with urgency and creativity.

high school graduation and college access, two organizations deserve recognition this year: Upward Bound, operated by Indian River State College, provides academic assistance and cultural experiences to high school students to motivate them to earn a diploma and complete college, and the Scholarship Foundation of Indian River County has been helping local students for more than 50 years.

Executive Director Camilla Wainright explains, “This year the Scholarship Foundation awarded \$531,850 to 31 local students pursuing higher education at 17 colleges in six states. This year’s class of recipients, who received awards based on financial need and the potential to succeed in college, joined 132 past recipients renewing awards received in prior years.”

While the percentage of our population age 25 or older without a high school diploma or GED certificate has declined significantly to less than

10% over the last three decades, 41% of residents in our county still have only a high school diploma or less.

Jessica Schmidt, executive director of Literacy Services of Indian River County, estimates, “One in five of these adults are illiterate, making it difficult to complete a job application, read a newspaper or help a child with schoolwork.” Fortunately, community-based organizations

are helping here as well. Literacy Services provides adult basic education, GED preparation, English services and citizenship test preparation.

As you can see, while the work continues, we have much to be proud of as we look back at the past year. Strong leadership in our schools and proactive community organizations are responding to new challenges with urgency and creativity. These organizations

rely on the generosity of donors.

The Indian River Community Foundation website, [ircommunityfoundation.org](http://ircommunityfoundation.org), has several resources to help you learn more about our community’s needs and how you can help.

If the past year has taught us anything, it’s that we’re all in this together. I invite you to join me in working toward a better, more prosperous future for all our neighbors. ☀



A field trip to a stormwater park teaches students about the environment while reinforcing reading skills.

COURTESY OF THE LEARNING ALLIANCE

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