



State Association Recognizes Award Finalists at Annual Awards Luncheon

For Immediate Release

Media Contact: Wanda Minick, Executive Director

(850) 694-6477

Wanda@FLHeadStart.org

TALLAHASSEE, FL – December 1, 2024—The Florida Head Start Association, a nonprofit organization representing Florida's Head Start /Early Head Start Programs, is proud to honor four state award recipients who will advance to the Region IV Head Start Association for regional consideration, recognizing their significant contributions to Florida's Head Start community.

The Hankins Johnson Education Foundation/Orlando Alphas will be recognized as the FHSA state nominee for the Edward Zigler Innovation Award, which celebrates Dr. Edward Zigler's efforts to create impactful services for children and families.

Orange County Head Start nominated the Hankins Johnson Education Foundation/Orlando Alphas for their dedication to promoting early childhood literacy. Their partnership led to the **Head Start to Literacy Initiative**, providing books and learning materials to children and families at Orange County Head Start centers. The fraternity established Lending Libraries within the centers, contributing 3,100 books and approximately \$27,135 in in-kind donations. Children receive books and an activity bag, helping parents engage more effectively in their child's educational journey.

VyStar Credit Union, the second largest credit union headquartered in Florida, is recognized as FHSA's state recipient of the Sargent Shriver Excellence in Community Service Award for its innovative community service supporting Head Start and Early Head Start programs.

Since 2019, VyStar Credit Union has partnered with the Orange County Head Start program to make financial literacy accessible to families and employees. This collaboration has created opportunities to support staff and families in improving their financial wellness. VyStar Credit Union has volunteered over 700 hours by hosting Financial Fridays, organizing a Super Readers Book Drive that donated 4,500 books across 20 Head Start locations in nine counties throughout Florida, and delivering food boxes to families.

Lee Ann Vega, Education Manager for You Thrive Florida, has been selected as the FHSA Aubrey Puckett Memorial Award nominee. This award honors a Head Start alum who works in a Head Start or Early Head Start program, recognizing their passion for service through advocacy, career growth, and involvement at various levels to benefit Head Start families.

Ms. Vega was enrolled in a Head Start program at 2, raised by her single father and grandparents. She attributes her academic success to Head Start, which inspired her to pursue a career in early childhood education. Her career began as a Voluntary Prekindergarten teacher, dedicated to nurturing young minds. She brought her expertise to You Thrive Florida, rising from Teacher Assistant to Education Manager.

She spearheads the **Arts on the Grow** event, showcasing children's artistic talents alongside local artists in Volusia County. She also uses her photography skills to capture moments during the program's events, bolstering community outreach and highlighting the transformative impact of Head Start on children and families in her community.

The FHSA annual awards luncheon, where these finalists will be honored, will occur on December 11, 2024, at the DoubleTree by Hilton at the Entrance to Universal Orlando as part of the association's 25th Anniversary Celebration and Annual Conference. We invite you to join us in celebrating her achievements. Complete details are available at www.FLHeadStart.org.

The Region IV Head Start Association will recognize regional winners during their Awards Gala: Celebrating Head Start Heroes on February 13, 2025, in Atlanta, GA.

About FHSA

The Florida Head Start Association (FHSA) is a nonprofit organization that empowers its members to advocate for and enhance education, health, and social services for 45,000 children and families in Florida. Head Start is a key player in the early childhood education landscape, providing critical services, including school readiness and comprehensive health support, guided by the Head Start Program Performance Standards. Since 1999, FHSA has organized impactful events and training sessions to elevate discussions within the Head Start community. FHSA's dedication to this cause is unwavering, striving to make a meaningful difference in the lives of the most at-risk children and families.

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Florida Head Start Association
111 N. Gadsden Street, Suite 200
Tallahassee, FL 32301
www.FLHeadStart.org