



Marion County Board of County Commissioners

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District 1 - Craig Curry, Commissioner
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District 4 - Carl Zalak III, Chairman
District 5 - Michelle Stone, Commissioner

March 4, 2026

The Honorable Randy Fine
U.S. House of Representatives
244 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

RE: Support of Early Childhood Learning Center

Dear Congressman Fine,

Marion County understands that success in high school starts much earlier. To strengthen kindergarten readiness and improve long-term academic outcomes, Marion County seeks to replicate its successful early learning center model. Our existing center, located in the northern portion of the county, has demonstrated that when children enter kindergarten prepared to learn, they are more likely to succeed academically, graduate from high school, and earn industry-recognized certifications. Expanding this proven model will help ensure more children and families have access to high-quality early learning opportunities. I respectfully request your support for the community funding initiative to establish a new early learning center serving the southern portion of Marion County.

The case study that was used to validate the need for an early learning center in the area is Lake Weir High School. The school's current ranks are below.

- 482nd (out of 486 HS with Graduation Cohort Data, which is a lagging indicator) in Graduation Rate – 77% (Last out of 7 non-charter Public Schools in Marion County)
- 436th in ELA Achievement - 41% (Last out of 7 in Marion)
- 447th in Math Achievement - 28% (5th out of 7 in Marion)
- 434th in Science Achievement - 55% (6th out of 7 in Marion)
- 445th in Social Studies Achievement - 59% (Last out of 7 in Marion)

Working with our facilities department, we estimate the cost to construct this facility on existing Marion County School Board property at approximately \$3 million. The requested funding would support construction of the center on the campus of Lake Weir Middle School, allowing the district to serve some of the most economically disadvantaged students and families in southeastern Marion County.

The primary goal of this project is to increase awareness of and access to Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) programs across the district in order to improve kindergarten readiness. Currently, fewer than 50 percent of eligible families participate in VPK. Limited access to facilities and transportation remains a significant barrier, particularly in southeastern Marion County, where many families face economic hardship.

Kindergarten readiness data consistently show that students who participate in VPK, whether through public or private providers, enter school better prepared and outperform peers who did not attend VPK. In addition, these students continue to make academic gains at a faster rate during kindergarten, which further widens the achievement gap for children who did not have access to early learning opportunities. Expanding access to high-quality early learning programs will help close this gap and put more Marion County students on a path to long-term academic success.

Thank you for considering the addition of this worthwhile project to support the children of Marion County.

Very respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Carl Zalak, III". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a prominent "C" and "Z".

Carl Zalak, III
Chairman
Marion County Board of County Commissioners