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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 5, 2025

Founding CEO of Early Learning Coalition of Sarasota, Announces Retirement After 23 Years of Leadership

(Sarasota, FL - June 5, 2025) - After more than two decades of leadership, Janet Kahn, the founding CEO of the Early Learning Coalition (ELC) of Sarasota County, will embark on a new chapter as she prepares to retire at the end of June.



Since ELC's inception in 2002, Kahn has directed the organization's evolution beyond its core mission as a childcare connector into an innovative, community-driven, government-funded nonprofit that has shaped the local early education landscape.

"Over the 20 years I've worked with Janet, if there was a chance to ensure that those with the fewest resources could gain access to greater opportunities, she seized it. If there wasn't such an opportunity, she created it. For her, championing those with the greatest need is not only a professional choice, it is a way of being," reflects Kathleen Sullivan, ELC Board Member and VP of Programs at Children First.

Given the financial uncertainty and strict budget constraints that govern all 30 ELCs throughout Florida, Kahn's greatest contribution was her creativity, resourcefulness, and out-of-the-box thinking. She formed and strengthened relationships with foundations, other nonprofits, and the local business community to build impactful programs that filled service gaps.

She also placed a strong emphasis on cultivating trusting, respectful relationships with childcare providers, treating them as true partners in the mission to improve early education. This collaborative approach helped strengthen program implementation, sustain long-term quality improvements, and foster a culture of shared commitment to children and families.

A Legacy of Innovation

Kahn's creation of the **Look for the Stars** Quality Rating System stands as one of the most defining milestones of her ELC career. Unveiled in 2007, the five-star rating system evaluates and assesses preschools based on positive teacher-child interactions and other research-based factors, offering families a free and transparent guide to identifying excellence in the early education realm. Exclusive to Sarasota County, this tool was one of the first of its kind in Florida and continues to empower parents today.

“Before, there was no clear or consistent way for parents to identify high-quality care. Nor did we have a system to rate, track, elevate, or celebrate the work of local childcares,” says Kahn.

Kahn’s forward-thinking leadership didn’t stop there. Under her guidance, the ELC has continued to break new ground with programs designed to remove barriers, boost early literacy and kindergarten readiness:

- **Registered Apprenticeship Program:** A first-of-its-kind, state-recognized early childhood education apprenticeship program housed at the Coalition. As the only ELC in Florida to offer this model, the pioneering program allows aspiring teachers to enter the field and enables current teachers to earn a professional credential at no cost—without college enrollment or student loan debt.
- **Star Babies:** Launched in 2015, this multi-tiered, 10-week certification program refines classroom quality through targeted training of infant/toddler teachers. Focuses on unique needs of age group, from safe sleep to brain development & early language.
- **Bucket of Books:** An innovative, community-wide initiative that places 100+ free buckets of storybooks in waiting rooms of small businesses, ensuring children have access to read while they wait.
- **Storybook Street:** Introduced during the height of COVID, this unique, annual literacy-meets-the-arts event brings books to life while building home libraries—distributing 20 free books per family to 400 families.

“One of the things I’m most proud of is the close-knit team we’ve built over the years. This group is small but mighty—always ready to jump in, lift one another up, and do whatever it takes to support the families we serve,” shares Kahn. “Without a doubt, saying goodbye to this incredible team will be the hardest part of stepping away.”

ELC’s Client Services Manager, Cleshia Bryant, says, “As one of the first employees hired, I’ve had the privilege of watching the ELC grow and blossom under Janet’s leadership. It’s not always easy work, but it’s meaningful. Our office is filled with heart, laughter, and a deep sense of purpose. It’s more than just a workplace; it’s a second family.”

The Early Learning Coalition’s Board of Directors has launched a thoughtful and strategic process to identify Kahn’s successor. A dedicated search committee, in partnership with a nationally recognized HR consultant, currently leads the effort to attract the most qualified candidates and ensure a smooth leadership transition.

The Early Learning Coalition of Sarasota County prepares local infants, toddlers and preschool children for lifelong success through access to quality early learning programs. Serving more than 4,000 children and 155 childcare providers every year, the Coalition administers and oversees the local integrated system of early care and education across Sarasota County. We strive to give the area’s littlest learners a high-quality, well-rounded, enriching childcare experience, an early leap into literacy and a strong start to Kindergarten.