

Manatee County Library helps community children to



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Soar in 4 is a community program designed to ensure children from families of all races, ethnicities, incomes, abilities, and languages have everything they need for success. A network of parents, community organizations, and neighborhood businesses have planned and carried out activities that support young children's healthy growth, development and school readiness.

nurtured at home before starting school and this continues to be a critical need as children begin attending school.

It Takes a Community That Cares

The Soar in 4 initiative sought partnerships with local schools, and the schools were very happy to participate.

Our Goals

Goal 1

- **100% of the Soar in 4 participants** will be proficient in reading by the end of 3rd grade. This is in alignment with the goals for the Campaign for Grade Level Reading.

Goal 2

- We have grown to serve **15 Title I elementary schools** and we will continue to grow each year throughout the neighborhood communities to embrace early learning centers and family support agencies.

Goal 3

- To launch an on-the-ground effort that engages **parents as their children's first teachers** and as neighborhood-wide change agents for school readiness.

Goal 4

- We will document our processes and procedures in order to monitor our movement toward achieving our goals, **ensure our students' and families' needs are being met**, and share our successes with others as they replicate our efforts in their communities.

Photo courtesy of <https://soarin4.org/>

This project started with a single community conversation which grew into 15 conversations in different areas, to find out how local families could be helped so they could be more successful. What resources, supplies, and information were they missing?

Test scores revealed that almost 50 percent of third graders in Manatee County were reading below grade level. Of 31 public elementary schools, fifteen are Title I schools, which means the majority of children attending qualify for the free lunch program. The goal of this program is to reach families in disadvantaged areas to give them the tools and resources needed for success. The seeds for success must be planted in those first 4 years from Pre-K to 3rd grade and can only be attained through support from families who are children's first teachers. To be successful in school and other areas of life, a child needs to be

Interest in this project grew at other county organizations with similar goals and the Manatee Education Foundation was formed. Local businesses learned about the initiative and wanted to help. Money was donated by many organizations such as the Pittsburgh Pirates and Tropicana. Hasbro donated playdough, Natural Resources put together seed and science kits, and the Early Learning Coalition distributed free books. The list of willing partners grew.

Soar in 4 started with events held one Saturday each month that was set up at three downtown locations--the Central Library, the Bishop Science Museum, and the Manatee Arts Center. These locations were close enough to each other that families could attend all three to pick up school materials, enjoy food and snacks, and participate in hands-on learning activities. The event ran from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. to accommodate working parents.

A different theme is chosen each month, based on a children's book. The idea is to provide hands-on learning experiences for participating families that they could then do together at home, and expose them to new community resources, like libraries and museums, that they might not normally feel comfortable visiting.

School principals called families to notify them about upcoming events and teachers helped promote it in the classrooms. Many teachers volunteered at Soar in 4 events. Manatee County libraries hosted one location and created educational activities and provided take-home family craft bags.

Adapting

When COVID-19 hit our community, everything, including the Soar in 4 program, came to a halt. But for families the need for community assistance did not go away. When schools closed, it became even more critical for families to have access to resources and help.

Soar in 4 found a way to continue by transitioning over the summer into a drive-by event. Now families can visit 20 different table stations where supplies, games, books, library activity kits, backpacks, etc., are distributed. Each station is hosted by a different community business or organization.

Families also receive mini lessons at each station, promoting literacy or learning based around that month's theme, without ever having to leave their cars.

The community response has been amazing. All 15 Title 1 schools are now included in the

process and more donations and volunteers are coming forward. According to Dr. Sheila Halpin, director of the

Campaign for Grade Level Reading and coordinator of the Soar in 4 events, the hope is to resume some in-person events by summer 2021 while also continuing the drive-by events once a month.

This plan gives the Manatee County Public Library a great opportunity to reach out to families that might not have visited one of our six libraries in the past. We let them know that libraries are open, pass out flyers with our locations and hours, and bookmarks that can be redeemed for a free book if they come into one of our libraries.

Self-isolation is a big problem in some of these underserved communities. By meeting us at these events, we hope families will feel more comfortable contacting and/or visiting local organizations that offer free resources and educational opportunities for their children.

At the March Soar in 4 event, we served people in 75 cars and reached out to 145 children. The excitement and smiles we are greeted with are so rewarding to those of us who volunteer for

this event. Children are happy to see some of their teachers' faces or a favorite librarian as they drive through. There is always a fresh fruit or vegetable treat provided as well, purchased using donations from the local food bank. These snacks offer another learning opportunity about how food grows, such as which grows on a tree or in the ground.

At every event, families are greeted by a favorite character or two, like the Cat in the Hat or Curious George. Our local Public Broadcasting Station is a partner with Soar in 4 and they provide educational rich resources for families.

The Soar in 4 coordinator is currently working on a template to make the project plan available to any community interested in starting a similar program. This program is a great example of how a community can come together to create change. It offers an opportunity for public libraries to reach out into the community and promote early learning and literacy for children. With inside programs and storytimes at a standstill in most libraries, reaching out in new creative ways is more critical than ever. We want all kids to Soar in the first four years of school!



Drive by/photo courtesy of Soar in 4 Manatee County



Volunteers/ photo courtesy of Soar in 4 Manatee County



Happy Faces/ photo courtesy of Soar in 4 Manatee County

