

Building A Community Of

WORDS & PICTURES: Jessica Schubick

Now in its third year, Soar In 4 is Manatee County's movement to ensure all 4-year-olds and their families have the opportunities and support they need for success in preschool, school, and beyond. How are they doing this? The Manatee County School District's Early Learning team worked with community partners and the County's Early Learning Task Force to develop a program that would address early learning needs through play-based, interactive events that are fun for the whole family!

Dr. Sheila Halpin, Title 1 Specialist with Manatee County Public Schools, organizes the Soar In 4 programming. Dr. Halpin explained: "Soar in 4 is a phenomenal program that was developed by our community in alignment with the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. It came into existence because of our students who weren't reading proficiently by 3rd grade."

Soar In 4 helps develop communities of learners by bringing students, parents, and teachers together in an informal setting outside of the classroom. The program's Family STEAM Nights are free events for all Manatee County families with children in PreK – 3rd grade. These standards-based events provide an opportunity for children to develop their socialization skills, while improving their literacy and classroom skills. The program also helps parents understand more about how their children learn and how simple, educationally-based activities can be reproduced at home.

Dr. Halpin continued: "Soar in 4 are intentionally-designed activities to support students' standards and what they should be learning all year long. The activities are theme-based, but everything should tie back to supporting literacy in the classroom and all activities are play. Families are down on the floor singing; they're down on the floor building; they're down on the floor exploring together – creating their own stories and having fun. They're learning how to support those

standards in different ways than they might have seen in the classroom before."

Dr. Halpin added: "Classroom teachers are invited to participate and bring their families, so they're also getting some ideas as to how they can implement standards in their classrooms, maybe differently than how they thought about before. But they're also there meeting families in a different



environment, so they're becoming partners in play and through play to support their child's learning."

Asked what she hopes families take away from the program, Dr. Halpin said: "We want the families to have fun! And to learn together and explore. But we also see that the children and families that attend Soar In 4 – the children are doing better in school. They're receiving more support. The families are reporting that they feel more connected to school, that they feel they're better able to support learning at home. And we're also seeing that those children have more days that they're attending school than their peers who aren't participating in Soar In 4."

Soar in 4 has partnered with several downtown Bradenton organizations for the program's events. Each Family STEAM

Night features those three locations: art, music, and movement activities at ArtCenter Manatee; engineering and technology activities at the Central Library; and math and science activities at the South Florida Museum. Families can move from one venue to another during Family STEAM Nights to explore all the activities, greet teachers and volunteers, and socialize with other families.

The program relies on community partners not only for space for their programming, but for all aspects of their operations. Dr. Halpin noted: "Soar In 4 is a community-shared program. Private donations support Soar In 4, so we've been very lucky to form strong collaborations with Manatee Education Foundation and the Manatee Community Foundation. Both of those organizations have reached out to very supportive and generous donors throughout our community to support Soar In 4. It's also fantastic when the community comes out and volunteers with us on Soar In 4 nights, so they can not only see where their dollars are going, but they can also invest their time. We could not do this alone. It is a community activity to support all of our children."

Local mother Stephanie Ison attended the October Soar In 4 event with her husband and two daughters, Lainey and Malin. This was the second STEAM Night her family had attended. Asked why she brought her family to another Soar In 4, Stephanie said: "We saw the excitement on our kids' faces at the last event, so we wanted to see that excitement again. They're getting a lot of science, a lot of creativity. They're getting a lot of exposure to thinking outside of the box, being creative, and using their imagination – not necessarily things that they see every day at school."

Asked if she thought the events were also beneficial to her as a parent, Stephanie replied: "Absolutely. It gives you some insight into the creativity of your child and their thought processes and how to

Learners...

use those strategies and tools that they have – their toolbox of sorts. And it gives us ideas for using what they know and incorporating it into fun.”

Soar In 4 currently works with six high-need elementary school neighborhoods, including: Ballard, Bayshore, Blackburn, Oneco, Rogers Garden-Bullock, and Sea Breeze. The program reaches out to invite families through the schools and through Head Start programs and Early Learning Coalition private providers located in those neighborhoods. While the program’s administrators hope to reach out to all Title 1 elementary school neighborhoods eventually, they also want to spread the word that everyone is invited to attend these events. Your family doesn’t have to live in one of the neighborhoods listed to take part in the program.

Dr. Halpin said: “Once families come to Soar In 4, it just keeps growing bigger and bigger because they have so much fun. We just want all four-year-olds and their families – and Kindergarten students, and 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade students – to come down and play with us once a month. Because through play, they’re learning so much that’s going to support what’s going on in that classroom. And it’s just a great way for the families to have a free night out!”

**** To attend one of the upcoming Soar In 4 Family STEAM Nights, all your family needs to do is choose a location to begin the fun! Every STEAM Night has activities taking place at each of the three downtown Bradenton locations: ArtCenter Manatee (209 9th Street W.), Manatee County Central Library (1301 1st Avenue W.), and the South Florida Museum (201 10th Street W.). Snacks are served at 5:00pm and the activities run from 5:30pm-7:30pm. The remaining dates for the 2018-2019 school year are December 19th, January 16th, February 20th, March 20th, and April 17th. For more information about Soar In 4, visit them online at www.soarin4.org. 🙌***

