

Edition 7: August 2026

BUILDING OUR FUTURE WITH EVERY VOICE



DESOTO DIGEST: CONNECTING COMMUNITIES, SHARING STORIES

***OPPORTUNITIES TO CONNECT AND
STRENGTHEN YOUR COMMUNITY***

The Patterson Foundation's (TPF) DeSoto Digest Newsletter strives to educate and engage while sharing the work of TPF initiatives and ways residents can participate. We each have a role in forging a positive future!



The Patterson Foundation believes that communities can shape their own future by involving people and organizations in the process. DeSoto County Ahead is the result of many months of trust-building through purposeful, meaningful facilitated conversations. During these conversations, eight themes and twelve aspirational actions to uplift the community were identified. The goal is to move from merely recognizing aspirations to taking actionable steps.

Each issue of the DeSoto Digest is intentionally organized to showcase real examples of how community members, nonprofit partners, funders, and local organizations are working together to bring these shared aspirations to life. If you are leading a project, planning an event, expanding an initiative, or exploring a new idea that aligns with any of the eight themes, we invite you to share your updates. To submit updates for consideration in future DeSoto Digest issues, please scan the QR code to complete the DeSoto County Eight Emerging Themes – Community Updates & Engagement Form. You may also reach out directly to Cheri Coryea, DeSoto County Ahead initiative lead, at ccoryea@thepattersonfoundation.org.

DESOTO COUNTY EIGHT EMERGING THEMES

- 1. Beautification of Arcadia and DeSoto County
- 2. A Safe and Peaceful Arcadia and DeSoto County
- 3. Nonprofit, Business, Resident, and Economic Opportunities to Support DeSoto County
- 4. Technology/Digital Access for All
- 5. Family Fun & Friendly Events with Sustainability
- 6. Preserving Historical Community Essence & Grow with Thoughtful Engaged Planning
- 7. Support Advanced Focus on Education Enhancement
- 8. Reconnect with Students, Parents, Teachers, and Administration for Educational Support

qrs.ly/4vgyfhs



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STAY CONNECTED TO COMMUNITY WITH DESOTO DIGEST

By Sherry Oehler, Consultant with The Patterson Foundation

The DeSoto Digest is your monthly resource for everything local. Now available at 40 locations throughout the county, this vibrant publication ensures you know what's happening in DeSoto for you to get engaged. The Digest is designed to celebrate DeSoto County's community spirit. To ensure accessibility for all, the DeSoto Digest is printed in both English and Spanish and offered digitally in both languages, too. If you would like to have physical copies delivered to your location, please contact Sherry Oehler at soehlertpf@gmail.com to be added to the distribution list. If you would like to receive an electronic copy, please email Kiarra Louis at Klouis@thepattersonfoundation.org requesting to be added to the database.

Looking for a copy of the DeSoto Digest? You can pick one up at any of these community locations: Turner Center, All Faith's Food Bank, DeSoto County Library, Farmer's Market at McSwain, Three Trees Brewery, Goodwill, DeSoto Memorial Hospital, Senior Center, Dragons Books, Laura's Good Vibe Tribe, Rose Café, Pine Level Church, El Charo, ReStore, Darrell's Road & Wrecker Services, Casa San Juan Bosco, Catholic Charities, Arcadia Housing, RCMA, Suncoast Credit Union, and the DeSoto Chamber of Commerce.



THE DESOTO DIGEST IS GROWING

By Sherry Oehler, Consultant, The Patterson Foundation

We love hearing how the DeSoto Digest helps residents "learn what's happening, stay informed, and remain connected to what matters most, our community". The feedback has been encouraging about the value and impact of the monthly publication, available in both English and Spanish. Distribution points and readers tell us they "see it all around town" and that "people come in looking for a copy." One resident shared, "My daughter picked one up because of the pictures of her friends," proving that the paper's vibrant, full-color design truly resonates. Others have commented, "Love the paper and the full color, what a nice publication!" Locals share that it is "inspiring to read about our community champions making a difference" throughout Arcadia and DeSoto County. Others have commented, "The paper is reaching people we may never have met and connecting even more members of our community". A downtown Arcadia business has even created a community conversation kiosk featuring The DeSoto Digest alongside other important local information.



VOTER EDUCATION TIP OF THE MONTH

By Lyndsey Smith & Leah Verier-Dunn, Consultants with The Patterson Foundation

Primary elections are how political parties choose the candidates who will appear on the ballot in the general election. They set the course for what's next, but the primaries are tricky and sometimes confusing. Why? Because it's not just the primary races we're voting on; there's more on the ballot that we should pay attention to. What else is on there? School Board elections, Hospital Board elections, ballot measures (a law, issue, or topic placed on a statewide or municipal ballot for voters to decide through an election), and other final elections can also occur at the same time as the primaries. Voter turnout is significantly lower during the primaries because of the misunderstanding of who can do what at the polls. Remember, election outcomes reflect who shows up at the polls. We all get a voice in August -- let's use it!

Upcoming Election Information

- Election Day: Tuesday, August 18, 2026, 7 AM-7 PM
- Vote-By-Mail Request Deadline: No later than 5 PM on the 12th day before the election
- Voter Registration Deadline: Midterm 10/5/26

THE PATTERSON FOUNDATION COMMITS \$500,000 TO THE SUNCOAST DISASTER RECOVERY FUND FOR 2026 HURRICANE SEASON

As the 2026 Atlantic Hurricane Season begins, The Patterson Foundation is strengthening our region's resilience by committing \$500,000 to the Community Foundation of Sarasota County's Suncoast Disaster Recovery Fund (SDRF). The funding will support ongoing and future long-term recovery and resilience efforts in areas of Charlotte, DeSoto, Manatee and Sarasota counties impacted by hurricanes and other disasters.

The Community Foundation established the SDRF in 2022 in response to Hurricane Ian's catastrophic impact. All contributions to the Suncoast Disaster Recovery Fund are dedicated to long-term recovery efforts. These needs are identified in the months following an event such as a hurricane, after initial emergency response and short-term relief efforts have concluded. "Preparedness is more than having supplies on hand or a plan for when a storm approaches – it also means ensuring our region has resources at the ready to cover the needs that emerge long after the winds and waters subside," said Debra Jacobs, president and CEO of The Patterson Foundation.

The SDRF is specifically focused on supporting vital community resources in Charlotte, DeSoto, Manatee, and Sarasota counties to improve individual, family and community resiliency while helping people rebuild their lives beyond initial reconstruction. This includes mental and behavioral health, legal services, case management, and children and youth services. "As this year's Atlantic hurricane season gets underway, we all hope that it will be quiet and unremarkable, but we also know that now is the time to prepare for the next storm," said Jessica Muroff, president and CEO of the Community Foundation of Sarasota County. "The Patterson Foundation's generous gift to the Suncoast Disaster Recovery Fund will assist the many residents who are still struggling with the aftermath of previous hurricanes and help our community become more resilient against future threats. We are beyond grateful for their support for this important initiative." Learn more at <https://www.thepattersonfoundation.org/suncoast-disaster-recovery-fund.html>.

FUNDING OPPORTUNITY: GULF COAST COMMUNITY FOUNDATION SEEKS BOLD, HIGH-IMPACT IDEAS

By Gulf Coast Community Foundation

There's a new funding opportunity from the DeSoto Impact NOW! Initiative, a partnership between the Elsa & Peter Soderberg Charitable Foundation and Gulf Coast Community Foundation. Submissions are accepted on an ongoing basis. Nonprofit organizations serving DeSoto County are eligible to apply.

Overview:

- Grant size: \$30,000 – \$250,000
- Priority areas: healthcare and emotional well-being, education, housing, food security, transportation, workforce training and economic opportunity, and Environmental protection and preservation
- Funding Types: direct services, capacity-building (strengthening your organization), capital or expansion projects

Please review the Request for Proposals here for full details: <https://qrs.ly/xphfnsq>

If you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out to Tiona Settles, Community Partnerships Officer, at tsettles@gulfcoastcf.org.



Update to the DeSoto County Comprehensive Plan

Our Comprehensive Plan is the guiding policy document for land use and development in unincorporated DeSoto County. Join with community leaders, partners, stakeholders, and residents as we update DeSoto County's Comprehensive Plan to the 2050 Planning Horizon.



Visit
[cfrpc.org/
plandesoto2050](https://cfrpc.org/plandesoto2050)



Take the
survey

*Stay
Involved*

- Community Workshops
- Public Meetings
- Online Survey
- Stakeholder Interviews

BUILDING A STRONGER NETWORK OF SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES

By Links to Success

Links to Success was proud to welcome First 1,000 Days Suncoast to our new home as we continue strengthening our partnership in support of DeSoto County children and families. Collaboration is essential to building stronger, more connected communities. Through this partnership, Links to Success and First 1,000 Days Suncoast are working together to help families access navigation, resources, and trusted support when they need it most. To build on the success of family navigation services in DeSoto County, First 1,000 Days Suncoast has added a new staff member, Jailene Soto, to support local families.

“We’ve seen firsthand how meaningful it is for families to have a trusted guide to help them navigate services and supports,” said Ashley Coone, CEO of Links to Success. “This expansion strengthens our collective ability to connect families with the help they need while continuing to build a stronger support system for children and caregivers in DeSoto County.” Links to Success is grateful for partners who share a deep commitment to family well-being, early childhood success, and community connection. *A special thank you to the Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation for helping make partnerships like this possible through their continued investment in our community.*



SUPPORTING STUDENT SUCCESS STARTS WITH SUPPORTING FAMILIES

By Links to Success

Recently, the Link to Success team had the opportunity to give back to DeSoto families in a different way by volunteering at All Faiths Food Bank. Together, our team packed 200 bags of dry goods and 200 bags of fresh produce that will help support families throughout our community. We are grateful to United Way Suncoast for making this volunteer opportunity possible and for continuing to invest in organizations working to strengthen and support local families. At Links to Success, we know student success is deeply connected to family well-being, and we are proud to partner alongside organizations helping meet critical community needs every day.



WHAT THE 2026 ALICE REPORT MEANS FOR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

We all know ALICE — Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed — households that earn more than the Federal Poverty Level, but not enough to afford the basics where they live. ALICE households and households in poverty are forced to make tough choices, such as deciding between quality child care or paying the rent — choices that have long-term consequences not only for their families but for all. To learn more and read the full report, visit: www.unitedforalice.org/national-reports.

Household Survival Budget, DeSoto County, Florida, 2024								
Monthly Costs	Single Adult	One Adult, One Child	One Adult, One In Child Care	Two Adults	Two Adults Two Children	Two Adults, Two In Child Care	Single Adult 65+	Two Adults 65+
Housing	\$864	\$880	\$880	\$880	\$996	\$996	\$864	\$880
Child Care	\$0	\$219	\$583	\$0	\$438	\$1,521	\$0	\$0
Food	\$466	\$788	\$707	\$855	\$1,433	\$1,264	\$429	\$787
Transportation	\$424	\$516	\$516	\$598	\$869	\$869	\$362	\$475
Health Care	\$189	\$529	\$529	\$529	\$900	\$900	\$536	\$1,071
Technology	\$97	\$97	\$97	\$131	\$131	\$131	\$97	\$131
Miscellaneous	\$204	\$303	\$331	\$299	\$477	\$568	\$229	\$334
Taxes	\$276	\$198	\$253	\$338	\$279	\$464	\$329	\$558
Monthly Total	\$2,520	\$3,530	\$3,896	\$3,630	\$5,523	\$6,713	\$2,846	\$4,236
ANNUAL TOTAL	\$30,240	\$42,360	\$46,752	\$43,560	\$66,276	\$80,556	\$34,152	\$50,832
Hourly Wage	\$15.12	\$21.18	\$23.38	\$21.78	\$33.14	\$40.28	\$17.08	\$25.42

WHAT FLORIDA'S NEW BUDGET MEANS FOR DESOTO COUNTY

By Ashley Coone, Consultant with The Patterson Foundation

With Governor Ron DeSantis signing Florida's Fiscal Year 2026-2027 budget into law, DeSoto County will benefit from approximately \$97.575 million in state funding to support education, infrastructure, workforce development, public safety, and economic growth. The budget includes \$47.175 million in local appropriations and an additional \$50.4 million in state investments through ongoing programs that will strengthen transportation, water infrastructure, early learning, workforce education, and other critical community priorities. Many of these investments reflect the collaboration of local governments, nonprofit organizations, community leaders, and the advocacy of Senate President Ben Albritton and Representative Vanessa Oliver, whose efforts helped secure funding for projects that will serve DeSoto County for years to come.

Education | \$37 Million | Education remains the largest investment in this year's budget, including:

- \$36.3 million for the new DeSoto County High School.
- \$700,000 for Links to Success, including \$100,000 to expand an Early Learning initiative in partnership with the Suncoast Campaign for Grade Level Reading

Water, Wastewater, and Resiliency | \$7.75 Million | State funding will support critical infrastructure projects:

- DeSoto County Wastewater Project: \$5.0 million
- Arcadia Wastewater Treatment Plant: \$1.5 million
- Mills Avenue Drainage Improvements: \$750,000
- Downtown Arcadia Stormwater Improvements: \$500,000

Public Safety | \$1.4 Million | Funding includes: Additional Investments

- DeSoto County Fire Tower Truck: \$1 million
- DeSoto County Jail Improvements: \$400,000
- Agriculture, Tourism, and Economic Development: \$1 Million
- Additional State Investments: \$50.4 million

Beyond local appropriations, DeSoto County will also benefit from statewide investments, including:

- Transportation Work Program: \$42.1 million
- Regional Water Infrastructure: \$5 million
- Early Learning Programs: \$2 million
- Workforce Education Programs: \$1.3 million

DISCOVER DESOTO: EMPOWERING THE NEXT GENERATION: ASHA CAMPBELL'S IMPACT IN DESOTO

By Alicia Exantus, Consultant with The Patterson Foundation



In this episode of Discover DeSoto, host Alicia Exantus welcomed a guest who embodies leadership, service, and local pride: Asha Campbell. She is a tax professional, business consultant, and CEO of the nonprofit JRpreneur Brunch (<https://jrpreneurbrunch.com>). Asha's deep connection to the community drives everything she does, from mentoring the youth to becoming a Public Innovator.

WATCH NOW

qrs.ly/fgguq7c



With her nonprofit JRpreneur Brunch, Asha leads programs focused on youth education, financial literacy, and leadership development.

DESOTO COUNTY COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS SPOTLIGHT: MARIA CASTILLO-AGUILAR, EDUCATION MANAGER, UNITED WAY SUNCOAST

By Ashley Coone, Consultant with The Patterson Foundation



The Patterson Foundation believes that individuals, organizations, and communities can achieve their goals by working together. By engaging people, businesses, nonprofits, government, and media around shared aspirations, The Patterson Foundation fosters wide participation to create positive changes that impact us all. In this Community Champions Series, we are spotlighting Maria Castillo-Aguilar, United Way Suncoast, and learning more about her vision for DeSoto!

How long have you lived or worked in DeSoto County?: I have lived in DeSoto County for over 36 years and have enjoyed watching the community grow while maintaining its small-town character. Over the years, I have developed strong connections within the community and remain committed to supporting initiatives that improve opportunities for local families and children.

What programs, organizations, or community efforts are you currently involved in within DeSoto County?: I currently serve as the Education Manager for United Way Suncoast in DeSoto County and have been with the organization for almost 4 years.

Through my role, I work closely with childcare partners and three local Elementary Schools throughout the county. Our efforts are centered on ensuring children remain on grade level in reading, beginning with early childhood education and continuing through elementary school. We believe that establishing strong literacy foundations at an early age is critical to future academic success and high school graduation.

I am also actively involved in the DeSoto Local College Access Network (LCAN), a cross-sector partnership led by United Way Suncoast that is dedicated to increasing college and career success for students in DeSoto County, in collaboration with schools, colleges, employers, libraries, nonprofits, and community organizations to help students successfully navigate the path from education to meaningful careers. Through alignment with the Florida College Access Network's Talent Strong Florida campaign, LCAN is working to increase college readiness, enrollment, and completion, including a shared goal of raising Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion rates to at least 40 percent by next year. In addition, I lead the Volunteer Coalition of DeSoto County (VCDC), an initiative that strengthens connections between local organizations and community volunteers. Another initiative I support is the Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (SCGLR) work in DeSoto.

What are your aspirations for DeSoto County? My aspiration for DeSoto County is to continue building a community where every child has access to the educational resources and support needed to succeed, every family has opportunities to thrive, and every resident feels empowered to contribute. I hope to see continued growth in educational attainment, workforce readiness, volunteer engagement, and community collaboration while preserving the values and sense of connection that make DeSoto County such a special place to live and work.

What positive changes have you witnessed in the community over the years?: Over the years, I have seen increased collaboration among schools, nonprofit organizations, businesses, and community leaders to address local challenges and create opportunities for residents. There has been a growing focus on educational achievement, early literacy, workforce development, and volunteer engagement. These partnerships have strengthened support systems for children and families while helping to build a brighter future for the community.

What A Community Member Shared: *"Maria has been a cornerstone of the DeSoto community, consistently championing local childcare facilities and enriching students' lives with books and educational resources. She actively connects parents with tools to become stronger educators for their children and collaborates closely with the local library to offer meaningful programs and materials for families. Maria deeply understands the importance of inspiring a love of learning in young minds."* – Chrystal Mijares

IS YOUR HOME BACK-TO-SCHOOL-READY? *By Maribel Martinez, Consultant with The Patterson Foundation*

As Suncoast students start to see their summer vacation slip away, caregivers are bargain shopping for long lists of school supplies. Parents, did you know your student's school may qualify your home for a more affordable internet bill?

Every four years, a school's eligibility to participate in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) is recalculated. The CEP is a program funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) allowing high-poverty schools and districts to provide free meals to all enrolled students. What does CEP have to do with home internet? Everything. Some Internet Service Providers (ISPs) use this data to create discounted broadband internet offers that make monthly subscriptions more affordable to consumers. The federal government also provides a \$9.25 discount on home internet subscriptions for eligible households, and if a student attends a CEP school, it's likely their household can qualify. Taken together, the discounts can land a monthly internet bill at around \$6 per month.

Low cost does not mean low quality, slow speeds, or bad service. Want to know more? Digital navigation is a free and confidential service that is provided by trained Digital Navigators to help people find and subscribe to low-cost internet plans, obtain the right affordable or free computer if needed, and even learn how to use both technologies in personally meaningful ways. Yes! That means they can teach you computer skills at no cost. To prepare for back to school, Digital Navigators are available in Charlotte, DeSoto, Manatee, and Sarasota counties to help you determine how much internet speed your home needs based on your usage and which subscription plans might be best, thanks to ongoing support from TPF. Digital Navigators can call/text/email - whatever is convenient for you. If you are interested in speaking to a Digital Navigator, email digitalaccess@thepattersonfoundation.org. Read on to learn more about how much internet your home needs in preparation for back to school and how to make it more affordable before the first bell rings: qrs.ly/89hfnsu

THEME 5: FAMILY FUN FRIENDLY EVENTS WITH SUSTAINABILITY

COMMUNITY NEWS & EVENTS

- **What's Happening in DeSoto County:** From the Florida Rodeo to the DeSoto County Fair, there are festivals, shows, and games for everyone in the family. Join us to explore Florida Wild! Visit visitdesoto.com/events
- **Summer Events:** See what's available at qrs.ly/4ehfnsw
- **Job Opportunity:** RCMA is accepting job applications, and you can find the flyer at: <https://qrs.ly/2lhfnsz>.
- **Florida's Suncoast Region Plans of Safe Care Initiative:** Improving outcomes for infants prenatally exposed to substances and families affected by substance use disorders. This work covers Judicial Circuit 12 (DeSoto, Manatee, Sarasota). Multiple workgroups are in place and have representation from all three counties, but there is room for growth. The pilot is currently being implemented only in Sarasota, but will soon be rolled out across all three counties. We encourage residents from DeSoto County to get involved, recognizing that what works in one county may not be the best fit for another. Therefore, voices and leadership from each county are important. Especially the voice of Obstetrics and Pediatrics treatment providers, lived experience, etc. Note: If a DeSoto or Manatee County mom intersects with any of the Sarasota providers participating in the pilot, she will be screened and, if she opts in, referred to peer support. **View the flyer at qrs.ly/jqhfnt0**
- **Turner Center Presents Sunday Movie Fun Day:** The Turner Center's next "Sunday Movie Fun Day" is on July 26, from 2:00 PM – 4:00 PM. Families can enjoy a mix of classic family adventures and animated favorites along with newer family-friendly releases similar to movies. Concessions will be available for food, snacks, and drinks. Children under 14 must be accompanied by an adult.

Get Involved in DeSoto County Government Committees: Community involvement is a cornerstone of effective local government. Our boards, committees, and advisory councils provide residents with meaningful opportunities to participate in the decision-making process and help shape the future of DeSoto County. These volunteer groups bring together citizens, community leaders, business professionals, and subject-matter experts to provide guidance and recommendations on important issues affecting our county. Their collaboration and public input help ensure decisions are thoughtful, transparent, and reflective of the needs and priorities of the community. From economic development and long-range planning to housing and tourism, each committee plays an important role in supporting the Board of County Commissioners and strengthening the quality of life for residents. **See Boards, Committees & Advisory Groups below:**

- **Affordable Housing Advisory Committee (AHAC)** - Evaluates local housing needs and provides recommendations to expand affordable and accessible housing opportunities for DeSoto County residents. **Contact Social Services to learn more.**
- **Economic Development Advisory Committee (EDAC)** - Supports initiatives that encourage business growth, job creation, investment, and long-term economic development within DeSoto County. **Contact the Economic Development Department to learn more.**
- **Planning Commission** - Provides recommendations on comprehensive planning, zoning, land development, and future growth to support sustainable community development. **Contact the Planning and Zoning Department to learn more.**
- **Tourism Development Council (TDC)** - Promotes tourism, visitor engagement, and destination marketing efforts that support local businesses and strengthen the county's economy. **Contact the Tourism department to learn more.**
- **Value Adjustment Board (VAB)** - Reviews property assessment appeals, classifications, and exemption disputes to ensure fairness and consistency in the property valuation process. **Contact the Administration department to learn more.**

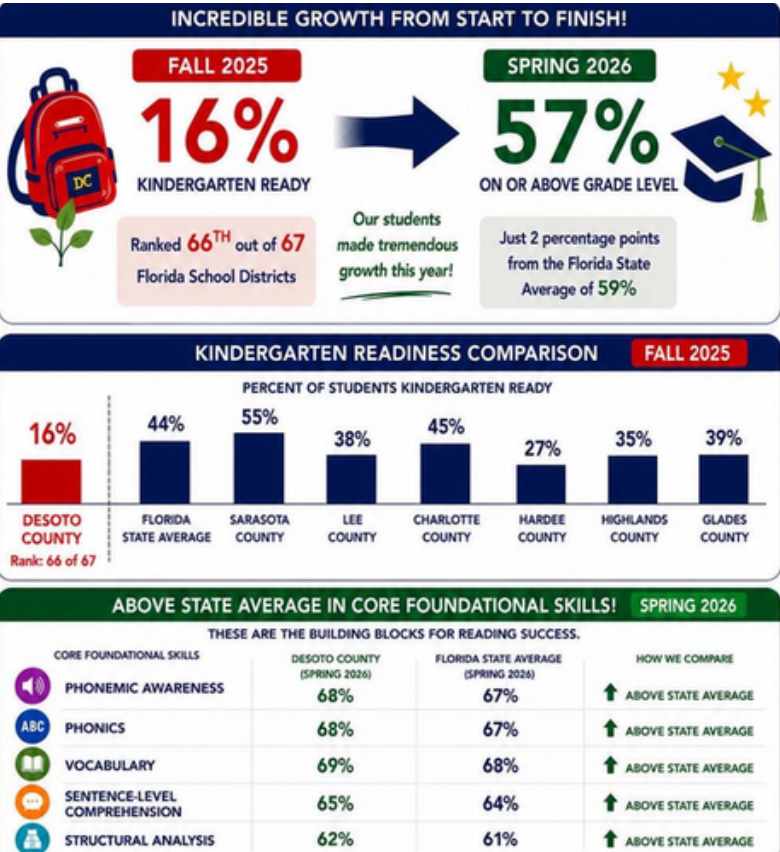
The DeSoto County Government encourages residents to stay informed, attend public meetings, and consider serving on a board or committee. **Meeting schedules, agendas, public notices, and additional committee information are available at desotobocc.com.** Community participation helps foster accountability, encourages diverse perspectives, and creates stronger connections between county government and the citizens it serves. Whether you volunteer your time, attend a meeting, or provide public input, your involvement helps guide the future of DeSoto County.

THEME 7: SUPPORT ADVANCED FOCUS ON EDUCATION ENHANCEMENT

DESOTO COUNTY SCHOOLS LITERACY SUCCESS

By School District of DeSoto County

For the second year in a row, our kindergarten students made tremendous growth and nearly met or exceeded the state average in early literacy. Even more exciting, our students were above the Florida state average in Phonemic Awareness and Phonics, two of the most important foundational reading skills for future success. This growth reflects the hard work of our students, educators, literacy coaches, school leaders, and families who are committed to strong early literacy instruction each and every day. We believe in our students. We believe in our staff. We believe in our community. We are #OneDeSoto, all for kids. *Fall 2025 data are based on state-released reports. *Spring 2026 numbers are raw data from the Florida Reporting System.



MEET THE 2026 CLASS OF SELBY SCHOLARS

By Susie Bowie, President of the William G. & Marie Selby Foundation

Forty outstanding graduating high school students have been selected by the William G. and Marie Selby Foundation to represent the 2026 Selby Scholars class. Each will receive a scholarship award up to \$7,000 for each year of college toward the total cost of attendance, based on individual student need. Selby Scholars have demonstrated academic preparedness and rigor, resourcefulness, grit, and desire to use their education to help others. Community volunteers, including representatives from local youth-serving organizations, higher education, and Selby Scholar alumni, worked both together and independently to select students in the competitive process, which included an application and an interview. Selby Scholars' diverse majors at universities across the United States and Florida include disciplines that position them to succeed in our rapidly changing environment in careers or continued post-secondary education. They include Chemistry, Astrophysics, Global Business, Marketing, Elementary Education, Neuroscience, Nursing, and Urban Planning. The 2026 Selby Scholars were celebrated with their families and guardians on May 11, 2026, at the Carlisle Inn in Sarasota. See the full names of Selby Scholars at <https://selbyfdn.org/2026-selby-scholars-will-make-communities-stronger>.



HOW ARE AMERICA'S CHILDREN DOING? NEW 2026 DATA REVEALS THE TRENDS

2026 KIDS COUNT® Data Book is published by Annie E. Casey Foundation

The Annie E. Casey Foundation recently published the 2026 KIDS COUNT® Data Book, featuring new rankings, scores and national- and state-level data that show how kids are faring across the country. KIDS COUNT® indicators capture what children and youth need most across four domains: Economic Well-Being, Education, Health, Family and Community. Each domain includes four indicators for a total of 16. New this year, the enhanced KIDS COUNT index includes both rankings and scores, offering a more complete picture of child well-being. While rankings show how states compare with one another, scores (ranging from 0 to 1,000) show how far apart states are where states can make improvements, whether child outcomes in each state are progressing or declining over time, and offer a way to track progress since 2019 — the last full year before the pandemic. For the purpose of the DeSoto Digest, we're focusing on Education nationally and in Florida. Explore the interactive book at: <https://www.aecf.org/resources/2026-kids-count-data-book>. Every state has strengths to build on and challenges to address. Explore the Data Book to see your state's score, ranking, and the latest data on child well-being.

EDUCATION

417
WORSE

UNITED STATES

Young children (ages 3 and 4) not in school US 4,277,000	52% 2015-19	54% 2020-24	↑ WORSE
Fourth graders not proficient in reading US N.A.	66% 2019	70% 2024	↑ WORSE
Eighth graders not proficient in math US N.A.	67% 2019	73% 2024	↑ WORSE
High school students not graduating on time US N.A.	14% 2018-19	13% 2023-24	↓ BETTER

EDUCATION INDICATORS

Location	Young children (ages 3 and 4) not in school (2020-24)		Fourth graders not proficient in reading (2024)		Eighth graders not proficient in math (2024)		High school students not graduating on time (2023-24)	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
United States	4,277,000	54	N.A.	70	N.A.	73	N.A.	13
Alabama	73,000	57	N.A.	72	N.A.	82	N.A.	10
Alaska	12,000	64	N.A.	78	N.A.	78	N.A.	22
Arizona	111,000	65	N.A.	74	N.A.	74	N.A.	22
Arkansas	44,000	59	N.A.	72	N.A.	80	N.A.	11
California	503,000	55	N.A.	71	N.A.	75	N.A.	14
Colorado	66,000	51	N.A.	64	N.A.	68	N.A.	16
Connecticut	30,000	40	N.A.	64	N.A.	68	N.A.	11
Delaware	13,000	55	N.A.	74	N.A.	81	N.A.	11
District of Columbia	3,000	21	N.A.	70	N.A.	80	N.A.	24
Florida	245,000	51	N.A.	67	N.A.	79	N.A.	10

THEME 8: RECONNECT WITH STUDENTS, PARENTS, TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATION FOR EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT

SUNCOAST CAMPAIGN FOR GRADE-LEVEL READING STRENGTHENS ATTENDANCE, LITERACY, AND LEARNING IN DESOTO COUNTY

By Beth Duda, Director, Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

The Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (SCGLR) continues to strengthen opportunities for children and families across DeSoto County through initiatives that support school attendance, summer learning, and family engagement. During the 2025-26 school year, Memorial Elementary School, Nocatee Elementary School, and West Elementary School all participated in both SCGLR's Attendance Awareness Poster Contest and the inaugural year of Motivating Improved Attendance (MIA). The MIA initiative encouraged schools to identify students who were beginning to show patterns of chronic absenteeism and reach out to their families early—before attendance challenges became entrenched. Through positive, supportive communication and intentional follow-up, the three schools reported a 35% reduction in the number of students who were on track to miss more than 10% of the school year, helping more children stay engaged in learning.

DeSoto County also played a significant role in the success of Suncoast Remake Learning Days, the free, family-friendly learning festival underwritten by TPF. During the 15-day festival, the county hosted 71 hands-on learning events that welcomed 5,037 attendees, giving children and families opportunities to explore science, technology, the arts, outdoor learning, and more through joyful, engaging experiences. The commitment to literacy extends beyond the school year through THIS BOOK IS COOL!, which engaged 163 DeSoto County children, and THIS BOOK IS COOL! in School, where seven classrooms and 144 students are participating in classroom-based literacy experiences. Together, these initiatives reflect the strong partnerships and shared commitment throughout DeSoto County to help every child develop a love of learning and succeed in school and beyond.

HARWOOD HIGHLIGHTS: UNLEASHING THE COMMUNITY'S POTENTIAL

CREATING A NEW TRAJECTORY OF HOPE AND POSSIBILITY

By Rich Harwood, The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation

DeSoto County, Florida is a deeply rural community that has been knocked down four times by hurricanes in just the last few years. Yet each time, people have gotten back up, helped their neighbors, and kept moving forward. Resilience isn't just something people do here—it's part of who they are.

The question is whether the community can begin to see itself as more than resilient. Whether it can begin to see itself as thriving. At our latest workspace, people talked about the actions they're taking together in ways they had never come together before to do. But in an even deeper way, they talked about the civic culture they're creating—the ways they're working together differently, the collaborations that are happening, and the growing sense of respect, trust, transparency, and accountability across the community. And as people talked about these things, they began to use the word "thriving." It was the first time in nearly three years of working in DeSoto County that I'd heard people use it.

As I've traveled across Florida in recent weeks—from North River Manatee County to DeSoto County and beyond—I've seen communities choosing a different path. In a time when so many people feel stuck, DeSoto is another proof point that when people come together around what matters, they can create a new trajectory of hope and possibility for their community.



MISSSED AN ISSUE OF THE DESOTO DIGEST?

Scan the QR code or use the link to find past issues in English or Spanish.

qrs.ly/ibgkm06



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ONGOING SCHOLARSHIP & GRANT OPPORTUNITIES IN THE SUNCOAST

Scan the QR code or use the link (qrs.ly/adh7cte) to find available grants and scholarships.



Free summer meals for kids

Healthy food for children 18 and under in DeSoto County

Hot meal sites:

Minnie L. Brown Center | 100 S Orange Ave.
Meal pickup: 1:15-2 p.m. | Mondays (June 1-July 31)

Heron Cove | 2019 SE Heron Cove
Meal pickup: 12:15-1 p.m. | Mondays (June 1-July 31)

DeSoto Public Library | 125 N Hillsborough Ave.
Lunch: 12-12:45 p.m. | Monday-Thursday (June 8-July 30)

Casa San Juan Bosco | 2274 SE Arnold Andrews Ave.
Breakfast: 9-9:30 a.m. | Lunch: 12:30-1:15 p.m. | Monday-Thursday (June 8-July 23)

West Elementary School | 304 W Imogene St.
Breakfast: 7:15-8:30 a.m. | Lunch: 11 a.m. - 12:45 p.m.
Monday-Thursday (June 1-July 30)

Food pantries:

Memorial Elementary School | 851 E Hickory St.
Entrance off of N Luther Ave. (bus loop) | 2-3 p.m. | Wednesdays (June 3-July 29)

DeSoto Food and Resource Center (for all ages) | 1021 E Oak St.
10 a.m. - 4 p.m. | Monday-Wednesday | 11 a.m. - 6 p.m. | Thursdays
9 a.m. - 2 p.m. | Fridays

**Please enter school sites through front office to check in. Children must be accompanied by parent or guardian.

**This institution is an equal opportunity provider.
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Find food near you:
allfaithsfoodbank.org/foodfinder
941.379.6333 ext. 21302



Submit a Story to Be Featured in The DeSoto Digest

We are looking for stories that reflect the spirit, resilience, and aspirations of DeSoto County. Submissions should align with TPF's belief that communities can shape their own future by involving people and organizations in the process.



SCAN TO
SUBMIT

qrs.ly/79gn3b4

Nominate A DeSoto County Community Champion

Each month, the DeSoto Digest spotlights someone making a difference in DeSoto County, supporting their community, and striving toward a brighter future. We invite you to nominate an individual who embodies these values.

NOMINATE
SOMEONE!

qrs.ly/5hgn3a4



DO YOU HAVE A STORY OR IDEA TO SHARE WITH THE DESOTO COUNTY COMMUNITY?

Contact AspirationstoActions@thepattersonfoundation.org
Learn more about The Patterson Foundation at thepattersonfoundation.org