Florida children are not receiving an early start in developing their learning skills and will have a hard time catching up, according to a new child well-being report.

Sixty percent of the state’s low-income children, aged 3 and 4, are not enrolled in preschool programs compared to 63 percent of children nationwide, according to the Baltimore-based Annie E. Casey Foundation, which tracks how children are doing nationwide.

This year’s report, which was released Monday, focuses on the first eight years of a child’s life. Research shows that children who enter kindergarten with below-average language and cognitive skills will have a hard time later.

Only 36 percent of children are on track where they should be with their cognitive development skills by the time they enter third grade, and the finding is worse for low-income children.

“Only 20 percent of low-income children are where they need to be,” said Laura Speer, associate director for policy reform and advocacy, with the foundation.

In Florida, 76 percent of children who are eligible for the free- or reduced-lunch program in school are not proficient in reading by the fourth grade, she said. Still, Florida was better compared to the rest of the nation.

“Nationally, 82 percent of low-income children were not proficient in reading by the fourth grade,” she said. “It’s not good.”

Another problem is that 77 percent of Florida’s children younger than 6 have not received a developmental screening. She did not have the national figure.

“They may not have a medical home. It shouldn’t be anywhere near that high,” she said.

Susan Block, executive director of the Early Learning Coalition in Southwest Florida, said 80 percent of families locally are choosing to enroll their children in voluntary pre-kindergarten programs. Florida law entitles all 4-year-old’s to 540 hours of pre-kindergarten education.

The early learning coalition oversees school readiness programs in the region and
child-care subsidies. About 8,000 children were enrolled in programs in Southwest Florida last year, Block said.

Some child care programs can be harmful for children’s cognitive development, while high quality child care would be comprehensive, focusing not only on cognitive development but their social, emotional, and physical well-being, she said. Lastly, quality programs make sure parents are involved.

There is a waiting list for children to get in enrolled in school readiness programs because of a lack of funding, she said. In addition, the state does not have good standards to measure outcomes.

“Hopefully in this year’s legislative session, we will get more traction that we must measure the outcomes,” she said. “The state does collect some readiness data, but we need more.”

State funding has declined for pre-kindergarten programs in recent years. It stood at $2,560 per child in 2006 and has dropped to $2,026 now, she said. There is no movement in the state Legislature to reverse course and provide more for early childhood development.

“We need to support families and provide high quality early learning that is comprehensive,” she said.

Barbara Mainster, executive director Redlands Christian Migrant Association in Immokalee, said what’s keeping a lot of children from being enrolled in child-care programs is a requirement that both parents must be working to qualify for a subsidy. Redlands has programs for children from six weeks to age 5.

She also advocates for making sure children’s language skills are being development in both English and their primary language, and that’s not happening.

“You’ve got to include vocabulary skills in their primary language first and if you do that, (research) shows by sixth grade, those kids are fully bi-lingual and doing fine.”