

Master Plan Initiative: Early Education PreK-3



Council for Education Policy,
Research and Improvement

Voluntary Universal Pre-Kindergarten Program

- In 2003, the Council for Education Policy, Research and Improvement identified early education as one of its key Master Plan Initiatives. As its starting point, the council reviewed the issues pertaining to the creation of Florida's constitutionally mandated voluntary, universal pre-kindergarten program (VUPK). As a result of its research and deliberations over several months, the council reached the following conclusions:

A high quality pre-kindergarten program is a significant opportunity to improve the overall effectiveness of Florida's education system:

- It will enhance the learning capacity and readiness of thousands of the state's four-year-olds by providing an important link to early education (K-3).
- It is particularly important for disadvantaged children who are most likely to substantially benefit academically and socially from those services.

Decades of research have revealed that a quality Pre-K learning experience may reduce the need for remediation and retention in later grades while producing long-term improvement in children's intellectual and social development.

Florida must implement its pre-kindergarten program in a way that involves as many children as possible while encouraging active participation by parents. Data have shown that disadvantaged children are less likely than their wealthier peers to have access to quality programs. Florida must ensure that quality pre-kindergarten programs are available to all children, regardless of their socio-economic status or where they live.

Moreover, the council believes that meaningful parental involvement is an essential component of a successful Pre-K program. Although the state cannot mandate that parents participate in their child's education, opportunity for parental involvement must be a priority for Pre-K programs and providers.

Florida's pre-kindergarten program should be of the highest quality based on proven literacy focused, age appropriate, pre-academic curricula. Implementing a high quality early learning program is more expensive, but is a sound public investment that will produce long term savings to taxpayers as well as tangible societal benefits. Cost-benefit analyses have repeatedly demonstrated that quality preschool programs can save taxpayer money, not only on remedial education, but on social welfare and law enforcement costs.

The keys to a highly effective pre-kindergarten program include well qualified and well-compensated teachers, small classrooms, and low student to teacher ratios. Well trained, qualified teachers are the most important component of a

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The Council for Education Policy, Research and Improvement (CEPRI) was created as an independent office under the Office of Legislative Services by the 2001 Legislature (Section 1008.51, Florida Statutes). The Council serves as a citizen board for independent policy research and analysis and is composed of five members appointed by the Governor and two members appointed by Speaker of the House and two members appointed by the President of the Senate.

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quality pre-kindergarten program. Research has shown that quality teachers are the key to student success regardless of a child's socio-economic background. Quality teachers (with baccalaureate degrees) deserve quality compensation, on par with their counterparts in the K-12 education system.

To ensure that pre-kindergarten is regarded as an integral component of Florida's educational system, the VUPK program should be located in and administered by the Department of Education (DOE). Oversight for the VUPK program should be the responsibility of a Division of Early Learning created within the DOE.

State funding for pre-kindergarten should be provided in the same amount per FTE as is provided for K-3 FTE. To ensure program integrity and accountability, funding to support the program should be provided to the DOE through a separate funding category. The DOE should allocate these funds using a calculation that is consistent with the calculation of the FEFP. The DOE should distribute the allocation to the local learning coalitions for payment to providers for documented services.

The Florida Legislature has the opportunity to create a constitutionally mandated, high quality pre-kindergarten program that has as its end product children who have the early learning and readiness skills necessary to succeed in school. The legislature should create a diverse provider system that utilizes all available public and private delivery networks and funding streams to provide a well coordinated Pre-K program with strong assessment and accountability measures and quality outcomes for children.

Based on the above, CEPRI recommends the following as criteria for a high quality pre-kindergarten program:

Access to Quality VUPK Programs

- The Florida Legislature must create a diverse provider system for the VUPK program to support parental choice and maximize existing program capacity and community resources.
- Programs should be offered 180 days a year for 6 hours per day (1080 hours) with at least 720 contact hours (4 hours per day) of quality learning experience.
- Wrap-around services (hours of care beyond the 6 hour VUPK program) should be available to eligible parents through a combination of state, federal and private subsidies and programs. Parents not eligible for such assistance may pay for extended day services on a sliding scale basis.
- Programs shall be delivered in public and private settings including faith-based providers.
- All families must have equal access to quality programs guaranteed through equity in payment that is free for all parents.
- All public and private partnerships should be maximized to avoid fragmentation of early learning services and funding streams.
- All federal, state, and local agencies and the private sector should coordinate resources when possible to ensure that children's basic needs (educational, social, health, safety) are met.

Quality Teacher/Provider Standards

- Programs must include highly qualified teachers with a minimum Child Development Associate (CDA) or equivalent beginning in 2005. The lead teacher in each classroom must have an associate's degree in Early Childhood Education within five years of program implementation.
- The lead teacher in each classroom must have a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education within eight years of program implementation.
- Financial and professional incentives should be developed to attract and retain quality Pre-K teachers with a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education. Pay should be commensurate with that of K-3 teachers.
- Low student/teacher ratios should be maintained. VUPK classrooms should have 1:10 maximum staff to child ratio. Maximum class size must not exceed 20 children; minimum class should be set at five children.
- All providers should meet Gold Seal Designation within 12 months after VUPK implementation.

Program Standards: Maximize Accountability

- All programs must meet state licensing requirements.
- The State Board of Education should develop statewide procedures and minimum standards for ensuring integrity and accountability of Pre-K programs and providers.
- All programs shall use research based, literacy focused, high quality, pre-academic curricula that enhance children's language, cognitive, emotional and social skills. To ensure that program curricula will promote positive outcomes for children, any curriculum selected must meet the *Florida School Readiness Performance Standards for Three-, Four-, and Five Year-Old Children*, approved by the Florida Board of Education. All curricula must include a parental involvement component.
- All programs must use both pre and post program assessments to compare student performance using a DOE developed statewide uniform diagnostic assessment of child outcomes. Assessments should be used to measure how well programs are preparing children for school. Assessments should not be tied to consequences for individual children.
- The DOE should develop and the SBOE approve meaningful consequences for poor performing schools (those with students assessed not ready for kindergarten using a new assessment model to be developed by DOE) and those that fail to meet established standards.
- The SBOE should review existing CDA programs for content and quality.

State Governance: Single Administrative Oversight

- The VUPK program should be located in and administered by the Department of Education to ensure that pre-kindergarten is an important component in Florida's educational continuum.
- Oversight for the VUPK program should be the responsibility of a Division of Early Learning created within the Department of Education.
- A broad-based Early Learning Advisory Council should be established to advise the State Board of Education and the Commissioner of Education on all issues pertaining to the VUPK program.

Local Governance: Ensure Local Involvement and Control

- A local modified governance structure should be maintained by consolidating the current local readiness coalitions into 28 Early Learning Councils. Early Learning Councils will provide oversight and accountability for early childhood education at the local level.
- Program planning, service coordination, and funding allocations should address the specific needs of each county.
- The voting majority of Early Learning Council members should be persons who do not have a substantial financial interest in the design or delivery of school readiness services.

Funding: Adequate Resources

- State funding for pre-kindergarten should be provided in the same amount per FTE as is provided for K-3 FTE.
- To ensure program integrity and accountability, funding to support the program should be provided to the DOE through a separate funding category. The DOE should allocate these funds using a calculation that is consistent with the calculation of the FEFP. The DOE should distribute the allocation to the Early Learning Councils for payment to providers for documented services.

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