

DRAFT

Council for Education Policy, Research and Improvement Master Plan Initiative: Early Education PreK-3

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 determined that:

A quality pre-kindergarten program is a *significant opportunity* for thousands of Florida's four-year-olds to improve their readiness for school while enhancing their capacity to learn. 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.

Pre-kindergarten is a very important link to early education, particularly for disadvantaged children who are most likely to substantially benefit academically and socially from those services. Unfortunately, data have revealed 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.

Although quality early learning programs are expensive to implement, the council believes that a voluntary universal, free pre-kindergarten program is sound public investment. Cost-benefit analyses have repeatedly demonstrated that preschool programs can save taxpayer money, not only on remedial education, but on social welfare and law enforcement costs. Florida must maximize all available public and private funding streams and delivery networks to provide a coordinated, consistent VUPK program.

Florida must ensure that regardless of the setting, all pre-kindergarten programs have strong health and safety standards; low student-to- teacher ratios; small classes; qualified, well-compensated teachers; proven literacy based pre-academic curricula and learning processes; meaningful involvement by parents; and, strong assessment and accountability measures. Well trained, qualified teachers are the most important component of a 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 deserve quality compensation, on par with their counterparts in the K-12 education system. 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, opportunities for parental involvement must be a priority for Pre-K programs and providers.

The Legislature must create a diverse provider system for the VUPK program that has as its end product children who have the early learning and readiness skills

necessary to succeed in school. To ensure that pre-kindergarten is regarded as an integral component of Florida's educational system, the council recommends that the VUPK program be located in and administered by the Department of Education (DOE).

State funded Pre-K allocations should be commensurate with K-3 FTE allocations. To ensure program integrity and accountability, general revenue funds to support the program should be appropriated to the DOE for distribution to the local learning coalitions that will pay directly to providers for documented services. Recommendations for a quality VUPK program include:

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 (after hours childcare) should be available to parents 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.
- At least one staff member in each classroom must have a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education within 8 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. 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 DOE adopted performance standards that include literacy based, high quality, pre-academic curricula and learning processes that enhance children’s language, cognitive, emotional and social skills. 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 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 coalitions. Early Learning coalitions 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 local coalition members should be persons who do not have a substantial financial interest in the design or delivery of school readiness services.

Funding: Adequate Resources

- The Florida Legislature should create a categorical fund for the VUPK Program in addition to funds appropriated based upon full-time equivalent student membership in the Florida Education Finance Program. Each county’s allocation per full-time equivalent student should be calculated annually by multiplying the base student allocation by the county’s district cost differential. A Pre-K FTE student should be calculated at 1080 hours (a minimum of 720 hours) for 180 days.
- Pre-K FTE allocations should be commensurate with the expectations and based on K-3 FTE allocations.

Many of the previous recommendations concerning program access, standards, accountability, and governance, are endorsements of, similar to, or revisions of those made by the broad-based UPK Council chaired by Lt. Governor Toni Jennings. Other recommendations, including those on funding, were guided by the latest research, findings and studies on pre-kindergarten best practices.

The Council's full report on its Early Childhood Education Master Plan Initiative (including additional data and information on the statewide Pre-Kindergarten Program) is in progress and will continue to be discussed at future meetings.

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