

The Florida Story

Unlike most of the Sunshine State's wide-ranging education reforms of the past decade, Florida's voluntary pre-kindergarten program (VPK) was not an initiative of Governor Jeb Bush. It resulted from a constitutional amendment, overwhelmingly passed by voters in November 2002. Preschool activists and citizen reformers campaigned hard for the amendment, convinced that Floridians needed and wanted a universal pre-K program but that the legislature, left to its own devices, wasn't likely to give them one.

The ambitiously worded mandate says that:

Every four-year-old child in Florida shall be provided by the state a high quality pre-kindergarten learning opportunity in the form of an early childhood development and education program which shall be voluntary, high quality, free, and delivered according to professionally accepted standards. An early childhood development and education program means an organized program designed to address and enhance each child's ability to make age appropriate progress in an appropriate range of settings in the development of language and cognitive capabilities and emotional, social, regulatory and moral capacities through education in basic skills and such other skills as the Legislature may determine to be appropriate.

The governor and legislature had to determine exactly what all those words meant and how to translate them into action. After a false start or two, they decided that VPK operations would be entrusted to the state's Agency for Workforce Innovation, a "man-power" department charged primarily with welfare-to-work programs but also responsible for coordinating county-level "early learning coalitions"—quasi-governmental bodies that were already charged with local oversight of the state's existing preschool and child-care programs.

The 94-page statute they enacted in 2005 included ten key elements:

- ✦ Universal but voluntary. Florida's pre-K program is not means tested; lawmakers understood that it would yield a tax-financed windfall for some participants. It's voluntary and available to every four-year-old residing in the state (no citizenship requirement). It's also free: no registration fees, materials charges, etc., though parents are responsible for transportation and ancillary costs.
- ✦ Families are supposed to have ample choices among multiple preschool providers of every sort: public and private, for- and nonprofit, secular and "faith based."
- ✦ A basic program of 540 hours is provided during the school year (often but not necessarily translated as three hours a day for 180 days). That might be a youngster's entire pre-K experience or, for families seeking a longer program, might be enveloped by other governmental or parent-paid child-care and school-readiness offerings. (Providers may charge what they like for the "wraparound" activities but must accept VPK's \$2,677 per child—the 2007-08 figure—as full payment for the core program.)

- ✦ Alternatively, for parents preferring it, a summer-before-kindergarten program totaling three hundred hours must be offered by all public-school systems, and may also be delivered by qualified private providers.
- ✦ After much negotiation with private operators that wanted no such constraints, lawmakers placed input-type limits on staff-child ratios and class sizes. They also mandated the licensing of teachers and staff. Summer-program teachers (predominantly in public schools) must have college degrees or be certified. School-year teachers must have a state-issued (or national) Child Development Associate certificate; they need not be college graduates but must complete an “emergent literacy” (reading readiness) course approved by the Department of Education.
- ✦ In Tallahassee, an agency troika is in charge. The Education Department sets program standards, provides professional development to staff and oversees the accountability system; the Department of Children and Families licenses providers and staffers; and the Agency for Workforce Innovation and its local coalitions handle day-to-day administration.
- ✦ The county-level coalitions’ boards were reorganized to bestow leadership on governor-appointed businesspeople rather than early-childhood stakeholders.
- ✦ VPK is avowedly a pre-kindergarten program, not a child care service. Its state-prescribed education standards span seven domains, including health and social/emotional/motor development as well as “language and communication,” “emergent literacy,” and “cognitive development and general knowledge.” Now in the process of updating those standards as part of a three-year cycle,⁵⁹ revisers intend to do for the math-readiness

portions of the standards (and accompanying assessments) what the initial round did for reading readiness.⁶⁰

- ✦ Besides providing emergent-literacy courses for pre-K instructors, the Education Department offers professional development programs, publications, and online options to teachers and administrators, as well as guides for parents.
- ✦ The VPK program strives to be results based, with a relatively light regulatory touch when it comes to most inputs and services. Providers may, for example, use whatever curriculum they like. The key test of VPK's effectiveness is assessment of the kindergarten readiness of the children involved.

Unlike Oklahoma, Georgia, and other states, it was never expected that Florida's pre-K program would be run by the public schools. A wide array of private child-care and preschool operators, most of them for-profit, were to be the chief providers. Faith-based programs were welcome. So were school systems if they had the capacity and inclination. Their only obligation, however, was to operate a summertime version.

Florida has some 220,000 four-year-olds, and nobody knew how many families might take advantage of the new pre-K option. Thousands were already involved with other public pre-K programs, plus "private pay" preschools, formal and informal child care, and all the rest. Nor was anyone sure in advance how many—and which kinds—of the state's multitude of preschool operators would want to participate in VPK. Some already had plenty of clients, and the new program brought uncertain enrollments, added regulation, modest funding, and new worries. (Would it still exist in five years? Would its meager per-pupil budget be slashed? Would school systems gobble it up? Would faith-based efforts retain their religious integrity?)

Florida mounted a universal program with impressive speed. In year two (2006-07), VPK already served 126,000 youngsters, about 55 percent of the eligible age cohort, and was headed toward 60. That doesn't mean only three-fifths of Florida's four-year-olds take part in pre-K programs, since thousands more still enroll privately or under other publicly-financed arrangements in a host of other schools, centers, and in-home arrangements. It does mean, however, that the state is intentionally supplying a purposeful pre-K education program, with cognitive standards, assessments, and accountability mechanisms built in, to a very large number of children.

Of the 5,000-plus VPK providers in 2006-07, 19 percent were public schools (predominantly operating summer programs), and nearly all the rest were private operators. (Small numbers of children were served by "family child care centers," typically in a private home.)

It's relatively easy to become a VPK provider, but in order to remain in the program, successful results are supposed to follow. Although lobbying by the child-care industry led to relatively gentle performance requirements, chronic non-performers are meant to be "counseled out" of the program or dropped from it. Pre-K advocates fault the state for not imposing more up-front rules on VPK operators, especially in the realm of staff credentials. Florida opted instead for a standards and results-based program, much as it has done in the K-12 sphere. Its VPK education standards are ambitious, particularly in the cognitive domain.⁶¹ (This is one area in which the otherwise-critical NIEER gives top marks to the Florida program.) They are intentionally aligned with the state's primary-grade standards, and an effort is underway to align the student assessments, too.⁶² The goal is to ensure that VPK graduates are truly ready to succeed in kindergarten.

At present, assessment of kindergarten readiness occurs through a trio of measures that enable the state to compare children who

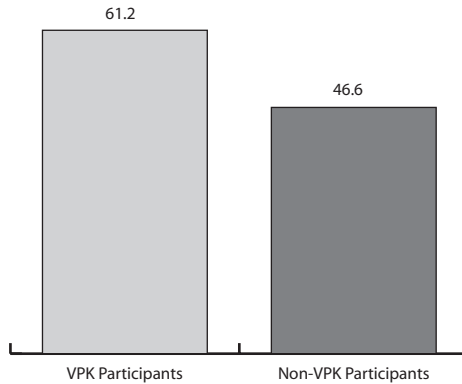


FIGURE 3 Percentage of Entering Florida Kindergartners Found Ready on All Three Measures, 2006–07

Source: Florida Legislature, OPPAGA report 08-23

completed the VPK program with others.⁶³ The early results are encouraging. (See Figure 3.) Overall, concludes the legislature’s Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, 61 percent of VPK graduates (from 2006-07) were “kindergarten ready” by all three measures, compared with 47 percent of nonparticipants. (The 2007-08 data are very similar.)⁶⁴

These results are also tracked back to individual program operators to determine how well or poorly they prepared their young charges. Chronic low performers (defined as three consecutive years of weak results) are supposed to lose their eligibility. The legislation is timid in this regard, however: it bars the state board of education from designating more than 15 percent of all providers as low performers in a given year, and it allows providers to cycle in and out of the program as long as they don’t rack up three *consecutive* years in that bottom group. Statehouse observers understand that these constraints on the accountability system stem from successful lobbying by the state’s well-connected commercial child-care interests.

Still, the Department of Education does publicly identify VPK providers according to the performance of their graduates, and interested parents can access this information on a state website when choosing among operators and centers.⁶⁵

The goal is to marshal the parent marketplace, local monitoring, the state's limited punitive sanctions, and technical assistance in order to achieve these worthy aims: help weak performers improve, boost the effectiveness of VPK providers in relation to the state's standards, encourage enrollment in high-performing centers, and deter chronic low performers from remaining in the program. And there's some evidence of success in that regard. For example, although 410 of 481 operators judged low-performing during 2005-06 stayed in the program the following year, only 157 of them reappeared on the hit list. By year three, only 254 of year one's lowest performers were still in the program (and 25 were known to have gone out of business).

Some pre-K advocates deplore Florida's approach, insisting that it doesn't sufficiently emphasize program quality, is too cheap and inadequately monitored, puts excessive emphasis on student results (rather than NIEER-style quality criteria), and defers overmuch to the interests of private providers. David Kirp, for example, excoriates the VPK program in these exaggerated terms:

Most of Florida's preschool problems are neither transitory nor inadvertent. They represent deliberate judgments. The law contains no meaningful curricular standards, and because there is no oversight, the legislative requirement that the curriculum be "developmentally appropriate" is meaningless. There is no requirement, just a hope, that pre-K teachers will eventually be required to have even as much as an associate's degree. While the state has adopted strenuous-sounding standards...enforcement

is nonexistent. What's more, the legislation permits preschools to discriminate in deciding which children to enroll and which teachers to hire....The real winners are the for-profit and faith-based preschools....[T]hey got almost everything they asked for.⁶⁶

State officials are undeterred, however. Florida Education Commissioner Eric Smith places high priority on “early learning success” and is striving to align the VPK program more precisely with the public schools’ K-3 offerings in a continuous effort to build a strong foundation for children’s reading and math performance. Florida seems truly to view pre-K as a school-readiness initiative—but one that doesn’t belong to the school system.