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# Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten

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Unlike most of the Florida education reforms reviewed in this volume, the state's voluntary pre-kindergarten program (VPK) was not a gubernatorial initiative. Rather, it was the result of a constitutional amendment, overwhelmingly passed (60 percent) by Florida voters in November 2002, that was itself the product of an initiative campaign successfully mounted by preschool activists and citizen reformers convinced that Floridians needed and wanted a universal preschool program but that the legislature, left to its own devices, wasn't likely to give them one.

Governor Bush endorsed the ballot measure, which was apt to pass anyway. It says this: "Every four-year-old child in Florida shall be offered a high quality pre-kindergarten learning opportunity by the state no later than the 2005 school year. This voluntary early childhood development and education program shall be established according to high quality standards and shall be free for all Florida four-

year-olds without taking away funds used for existing education, health and development programs.”

It fell to the governor and legislature to determine exactly what this meant and how to make it happen. The first implementing bill was deficient in many ways and in 2004 Bush vetoed it, then summoned lawmakers back into special session to try again in time for fall '05 implementation. He determined that VPK's operations would be the responsibility of the state's Agency for Workforce Innovation, a “manpower” agency charged primarily with welfare-to-work programs but also responsible for developing and coordinating thirty-seven county-level “early learning coalitions”—quasi-governmental bodies already charged with overseeing most of the state's extant pre-school and child-care programs at the local level.

The special session yielded a 94-page statute (which Bush signed) that embodied a host of principles and some compromises. Ten key elements included:

- Universal but voluntary. This is not a means-tested program and lawmakers understood that for some participants it might simply reduce the cost of services they might obtain anyway. It's available to every four-year-old residing in the state (no citizenship requirement) yet remains optional. Parents are to be told about it but have no obligation to enroll their children. For those who do, it's free (no registration fees, materials charges, etc.) but parents are responsible for transportation and ancillary costs.
- There were to be plenty of choices among multiple preschool providers, including faith-based, non-profit and for-profit early childhood centers as well as public school systems. The (school-year) program is voluntary for providers, too.
- A basic program of 540 hours is provided during the school year (often, but not necessarily, translated as 3 hours a day for 180 days), which could be the child's entire program or could be sur-

rounded by other publicly or parent-paid child care and school readiness offerings for families that need or prefer a longer (or full-day) program. (Providers may charge what they like for “wraparound” activities but must accept VPK’s \$2560 as full payment for the core program.)

- Alternatively, for parents preferring it, a summer program totaling 300 hours must be offered by public-school systems (as well as by interested and qualified private providers).
- After much negotiation, the program places strict limits on staff-child ratios and class sizes.
- It mandates licensure for teachers and staff. Summer program teachers must have college degrees or be certified. School-year teachers must have at least a state-issued (or national) Child Development Associate certificate but need not be college graduates.
- The Florida Education Department was assigned to set program standards, provide professional development and oversee the VPK accountability system. The Department of Children and Families was charged with licensing preschool providers and staff, while the Agency for Workforce Innovation and its local coalitions were charged with program implementation.
- Those county-level coalition boards were also changed so they are now led by governor-appointed businesspeople rather than early childhood “stakeholder” groups.
- The program would be a true “pre-K” program in focus, content and standards, with particular emphasis on literacy readiness, not simply a child-care service for 4-year-olds.
- It would be results based. “Inputs” and “services” would be minimally regulated. For example, providers may use whatever curriculum they like (though they must attest that it’s aligned with state VPK standards). The key test of VPK’s effectiveness would be assessments of the kindergarten readiness of children emerging

from it—with providers held accountable for those results and intervened in, or disqualified, if their results prove unsatisfactory. That, at least, is how it's *supposed* to work.

Unlike many other states, Florida's pre-K program was never expected to be operated or dominated by public school systems or staffed by certified (and union-believing) teachers. Rather, the main providers were meant to include an array of private child-care and preschool operators, some of them non-profit but mostly for-profit. "Faith-based" providers were welcome, as were school systems, if they wanted and had the capacity to do this. (Many Florida public schools are jammed with growing enrollments, teachers are in short supply, and both facilities and staffing challenges are exacerbated by the class-size-reduction amendment, the implementation of which remains a major struggle.) The VPK implementing legislation as finally enacted, does, however, mandate a summer option to be delivered by school systems.

Florida has some 220,000 four-year-olds each year (to qualify, a child must turn four before September), and nobody knew how many might take advantage of the new pre-K option. Thousands already participated in other pre-K programs, including state- and federally financed school readiness, Head Start and other programs, plus "private pay" preschools, formal and informal child care, and the rest. Nor was it a simple thing to get the word out to hundreds of thousands of parents across a large and diverse state. Additionally, no one was sure in advance how many—and which kinds—of the state's multitude of preschool providers would consent to join this program. Some already had plenty of "business" and VPK brought uncertain enrollments, a measure of state regulation and modest funding. (The program pays providers approximately \$2500 per participating child, less than upscale providers are accustomed to charging "private pay" families though more than many faith-based and some commercial operators were charging.) They also faced possible disruption of established staffing patterns and curricula, and some future risk. (Would the pro-

gram still exist in five years? Would its funding be slashed? Would the school systems gobble it up? Would faith-based programs retain their religious integrity?)

It was clearly a challenge to mount a universal program in every corner of the state by fall 2005 and then a separate summer program in 2006. But that's what the state conscientiously set out to do and that's pretty much what it has done.

There was some confusion on various points at the outset and there are some glitches in the program (and the legislation), but with rare exceptions supply kept pace with demand (albeit lesser demand than initially budgeted for) and, so far as I can tell, the start-up year of 2005–6 met the basic challenge of affording a free pre-K opportunity to every four-year-old whose family wanted one. It was not in every instance a quality program or a convenient one. But it was there. For the maiden voyage of so new and ambitious a program in so large a place, I judge that a praiseworthy accomplishment.

Of the 7200 classroom units in the school-year VPK program as of March 2006, 13 percent were operated by “faith-based” providers and a similar fraction by public schools. Tiny numbers were located in private schools and “family child care centers” (typically in someone's home). Essentially all of the rest—more than two-thirds of the total—were supplied by for-profit child-care operators large and small.

So far, some 45 percent of the state's eligible population (i.e., 100,000 children) have participated in the school-year program. Based on the experience of other states, however, Florida had budgeted for as many as two-thirds of all four-year-olds (147,000 youngsters) to participate in year one. Actual enrollment to date has been about two-thirds of *that* estimate, although additional kids will be served by the summer program. (For several reasons noted below, enrollments in the summer 2006 program appear at this writing to be far below expectations.)

In the following paragraphs, I touch on some of the current program's major strengths, outline some of the conspicuous challenges

that it faces, and offer recommendations for improving it. Because it's embedded in the Constitution, VPK is apt to be around for quite some time. Because it's popular and broad-based, political candidates are apt to want to "improve" it in various ways. It's off to a solid start, but I have no doubt that Florida's four-year-olds would benefit if it became even better.

### Strengths

- VPK utilizes a decentralized system that seems to make sense. The 31 "early learning coalitions" that are its main implementers are grounded in their communities, know the providers, have experience with preschool services and are often able to mobilize other resources. Their businessman/woman leaders bring a valuable, real-world, non-ideological perspective, and the staff and agencies to which they outsource much of the VPK work appear mostly competent.
- Independence from the public schools. Some Floridians believe that pre-K should be tightly integrated with kindergarten. I tend to agree with those who are instead relieved that school systems (and teacher unions) do not control the program. The state's standards and readiness assessments, both determined by the Education Department, are intended to bridge between multiple providers and school readiness.
- Choices. Florida has hewn to the principle that parents should have lots of pre-K options for their kids and that all manner of (licensed) providers should be welcome to compete for their "business." Curricula and philosophies can differ, as can location. The VPK program may intertwine with a family's other child-care arrangements in ways that can be tailored to that family's circumstances—which may change over time. Programs can be secular or religious. For-profit or non-profit. Providers, too, can meld the

VPK program into their other child-care and preschool offerings, so long as they follow a few basic rules for staffing and accounting and submit to results-based accountability.

- Strong standards. Florida’s Pre-K education standards fill a 145-page book and span 7 domains, including health and social/emotional/motor development as well as “language and communication,” “emergent literacy” (reading readiness), and “cognitive development and general knowledge.” The development of these standards was highly participatory and, while I’m no specialist in early childhood education, I’m wowed by what I find here. (Bill Bennett, John Cribb and I made a similar list for *The Educated Child*. It filled just four pages and we thought *that* was ambitious.) I’d say that any youngster who attains most of these benchmarks by age five is well prepared to thrive in a modern kindergarten—which means one that teaches reading, arithmetic, etc.—as well as for successful entry into Florida’s K–12 school system.
- Results based. I applaud Florida’s decision to defy the conventional approach of early-education experts, which is to judge preschool programs by inputs, ratios, expenditures, time and staff credentials, and instead to insist that the key measure of success of such a program is how well its “graduates” fare in kindergarten. This not only fosters diversity and creativity on the provider side, as well as choices for families, but also invites innovation and efficiencies seldom seen in more heavily regulated programs.
- Adequate supply. For the most part, Florida’s extant early-education providers rose to the challenge. Either they already had or they added sufficient capacity to meet the demand that has materialized to date. (There’s little evidence of new providers coming into being for this purpose. And a number of extant providers declined, for various reasons, to participate in year one.) Indeed, VPK has exerted interesting “marketplace” leverage. Some wanted to take part as a public service because they like to serve

kids. But others joined out of anxiety that they would lose market share if their competitors joined and they did not—because the state VPK subsidy would enable participating operators to slash the net price charged to parents for full-day services. In other words, preschool providers in competitive markets concluded that they could not afford to shun VPK.

- **Realistic ambitions.** Florida’s VPK program has been faulted by national groups and experts that claim expertise in pre-K education and who insist that “research finds” that “quality programs” demand a longer day and stronger staff credentials (and sundry other input-and-process variables) than Florida requires (or has so far agreed to pay for). But if Florida had set out to mandate a grander version of VPK, it would likely have foundered on the realities of staff supply, facilities and cost. (Or it might have gone down to defeat at the ballot box, as recently befell such an initiative in California.) Moreover, extant research is more ambiguous than advocates assert. The connection between input-driven “quality” measures and student outcomes is tenuous and largely confined to sorely disadvantaged children. Most program effects fade over time, usually dissipating during primary school. In other words, non-participants end up doing just as well. Decades of Head Start evaluations attest to this. And the “quality programs” most often cited as yielding long-lived gains for children (e.g. the High/Scope Foundation’s celebrated Perry Preschool) tend to be very small, extremely expensive and essentially unduplicatable on a mass scale. Moreover, some of the attributes most cherished by early childhood advocates—such as a program’s length—don’t systematically correlate with durable benefits for children. There is ample doubt in the analytic literature, for example, that a full-day program yields lasting positive effects, even for disadvantaged kids, that exceed those afforded by a half-day program. (That this is also true for kindergarten is documented in a recent analysis by

Jill S. Cannon, et al., in the *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*.) It stands to reason that a well-structured three-hour-a-day offering with a coherent curriculum could accomplish more than a prolonged but sloppier program. It might also be cheaper.

### Challenges

- Because of anxiety about provider participation and staff availability, because of worry about program costs (and unknowable enrollments), because the Florida legislature is parsimonious (usually a good thing when dealing with taxpayers' dollars), because of objections to overprescription by the state, and because of pressure from lobbying groups of several sorts, Florida launched VPK as a slightly-more-than-minimalist program. Though realistic, it may be underregulated and perhaps underinvested. The state was probably too diffident regarding curriculum and insufficiently demanding regarding teachers and the training that many would need to become competent to deliver a standards-based, results driven, pre-K program that's a long way from "child care" and that contains a heavy cognitive pre-literacy component. Many low-paid child-care workers have never been expected to do anything like that before and aren't apt to be good at it without suitable training.
- A results-based program needs outcomes assessments that are well aligned to its standards—and needs "cut scores" on those assessments that reflect the interests of children, not adults. It's not yet clear that Florida's readiness assessments and other gauges of results are up to this.

Beginning with children entering kindergarten in 2006–7, the state will use two assessment instruments: a pair of one-minute "probes" of kids' early literacy skills (letter naming and initial sounds) from a program called DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills), and a subset of items from a newly acquired Harcourt "observational" instrument that kindergarten

teachers will use to gauge their young charges' readiness in a number of domains (social, emotional, cognitive, etc.) The latter is expected to take teachers 30–40 minutes per child. Because it has not yet been deployed in Florida, it's not ready to be judged. Note, though, that the state's present accountability plan judges children's readiness only once, at a single point in time (within a month of arrival in kindergarten). That means there's no "before" measure against which to gauge the gains a youngster may have made in the VPK program, thus no ability to measure the "value added" by the program as a whole or by individual providers.

To be sure, comparisons can, and doubtless will, be made between the kindergarten readiness of VPK participants and non-participants, and analysts can do a reasonable job of controlling for other differences. But this remains a second-best type of evaluation, which is especially tricky in the preschool years when it's so hard to distinguish program effects from what's going on at home.

Echoing a criticism frequently voiced about the federal No Child Left Behind act, Florida preschool providers serving disadvantaged children are also concerned that they may be judged ineffective because their five-year-old "graduates" are not fully ready for kindergarten even though their VPK program did a great deal to advance them toward readiness. Without a "value-added" element in the accountability system, it will be hard to gauge a provider's actual effectiveness.

- Vendor "compliance" with program standards is widely acknowledged to be uneven but local early learning coalitions lack the resources (and clear mandate) to do much quality control in this realm. Most vendors prefer it that way and insist that a results-based program should be precisely that; that how they produce those results is their business; and that basic issues of health and safety are adequately policed via provider licensing. Meanwhile,

however, such basics as whether a VPK provider has a sound curriculum and employs staff who are good at implementing it may not be known until after kids leave the program—and corrective action under the Florida law is apt to wait until a second crop of four-year-olds has had its prospects dimmed by ineffectual operators.

- The program is somewhat cumbersome from parents' standpoint, requiring (for example) a personal office visit to establish eligibility and multiple hurdles to clear before changing providers. More worrisome, parents seeking to choose among providers often lack ready access to clear, complete and comparable information, particularly regarding program content, orientation, philosophy, curriculum and quality. Current provider "profiles," when available at all, contain only bare bones information. One suspects, therefore, that parents' ability to make well-informed choices is proportionate to how much time they have for multiple site visits and how sophisticated they are at evaluating providers' claims and handouts (and at appraising what they can observe on site).
- Thus, of the three possible forms of "accountability," none is yet demonstrably robust. Market forces are blunted by ill-informed consumers. "Compliance" with program delivery standards is barely monitored. And the important "outcomes" assessment via gauges of kindergarten readiness, while admirably intended, contains inherent limitations and awaits proof that the instruments on which it relies are up to the assignment.
- School system participation is spotty. In most districts, the public schools have not taken part in the school-year program, and I'm not convinced that their stated reasons (facilities crowding, mostly) tell the full story. Their noses may be out of joint over not being in charge. They don't think \$2500 is enough. They may resent the amount of effort that will have to be expended by their kindergarten teachers to evaluate kids' readiness. And they may

anticipate local outcries when the results of those evaluations cycle back to VPK providers.

- The summer program is ill-conceived. Though giving parents a pre-K option immediately before the onset of kindergarten makes some sense, the main deliverers of that program—school systems—are cramming it into a 5–7 week window in June–July when their classrooms and staff are not otherwise occupied. Given a legislative mandate that the program must last 300 hours, in many classrooms that translates to an 8–10 hour day, which is absurd for most 4–5-year-olds. One consequence is that parents don't appear to be signing their kids up for it at anything like the expected rate. Another is that many who do enroll apparently plan to extricate their kids after five or six (or fewer) hours a day, meaning the program as experienced by children will be a far lesser thing than legislators intended and are paying for. (In the summer as during the school year, VPK providers get paid on the basis of how many kids turn up on a given day, not how long they stick around.)
- The data-gathering and analytic sides of VPK lag well behind the program delivery aspects—a pity, particularly in view of Florida's solid reputation for a state-of-the-art data system for K–12 education. The Agency for Workforce Innovation and local coalitions have a long way to go to catch up with this program's information needs. For example, though the numbers of children being served by VPK are well known, there's scant data on *which* kids are participating (and which are not). Little is known about how parents decide on providers, about how many of them keep their kids there (and at whose expense?) for a full day “wraparound” program, or about which (and how many) providers offer which kinds of programs. It would be particularly valuable to learn how many youngsters served by VPK would have had an equivalent program anyway, i.e. families for which VPK is, in effect, just reducing

the price. Though VPK is an “entitlement” program, such information might help Florida target additional preschool resources on families in greatest need.

### **Recommendations**

1. Make the program more user-friendly—and the marketplace more transparent and efficient—by giving parents lots more accessible information, especially qualitative information, about provider options; advice on how to select a good one; less red tape in registering for VPK and changing providers; and tips on how they can do more at home to help children prepare for kindergarten success.
2. Face the fact that good pre-K education depends on knowledgeable, caring, competent (and accountable) teachers—and that these are hard to find and retain when many are paid the \$7 or so per hour (with skimpy benefits) that is the norm through much of the commercial child-care industry. This means Florida must ratchet up its expectations for staff; acknowledge their need for professional development and career advancement; and bolster their compensation and benefits. (A portion of this bolstering should be linked to performance, preferably gauged through some form of “value-added” analysis.) This means additional investment but not necessarily more “paper credentials” (as in teacher certification, college degrees). It might, for example, mean passing more rigorous screening (and promotion) exams and performance observations, as well as hard evidence of their students’ kindergarten success.
3. Make clear that the local coalitions already responsible for administering the VPK program are also expected to monitor program operators for quality and integrity as well as compliance—and pay for this. (The 2006 legislative session approved some

additional funds for program monitoring.) Encourage imaginative monitoring plans that are sensitive to provider differences and consistent with parental choice rather than standardized and regulatory. (Random spot checks, for example; extra attention to problem situations; minimal oversight of providers with high performance levels and/or quality ratings.)

4. Undertake validity checks on the kindergarten readiness assessments that are being used as VPK's chief outcome indicators. To respond to those in the "early childhood community" who like to gauge program quality by inputs, Florida must show that its outcome measures are up to the challenge. That they're well aligned with the state's kindergarten readiness standards and accurately and reliably scored. That the data they yield are used for program improvement (and, when necessary, dropping weak providers). And that they accurately predict true readiness for success in kindergarten and beyond in Florida's K–12 system (which entails tracking kids long after kindergarten). If need be, develop different or additional instruments—and experiment both with value-added measures for VPK participants, teachers and providers and with longitudinal tracking of youngsters to determine which program effects endure.
5. Fix the data system. Today, the mechanisms used to gather VPK data are a Rube Goldberg assemblage, user-unfriendly, time consuming and awkward to use, and not amenable to the kinds of information and analysis that the state needs for a major endeavor of this sort. Integrating it into the K–12 data system would be optimal. (That's where the kids must eventually be tracked, anyway.)
6. Embark upon a sophisticated program of research and evaluation. In addition to the assessment validity studies, value-added measures and longitudinal tracking noted above, it's important to learn more about which kids are and are not participating—and why.

(Some non-participation may turn out to be due to causes the state could address, such as transportation or inability to afford a wrap-around program at the same provider.) How many participants would likely access similar programs with or without VPK? How much of the money spent on VPK by the state “supplants” private (or other) dollars that would have been spent regardless? What sorts of providers are serving which kids? How many families are “wrapping” longer programs around VPK (and how are those paid for)? How do families select providers and how well informed are they when making such selections? How many hours do kids actually participate (in both school year and summer programs)? What do families like and dislike about the program (and their provider)? Once kindergarten readiness data begin to flow in autumn 2006, a host of additional analyses should be carried out.

7. Fix or jettison the summer program. Cramming 300 hours into 5–7 weeks is ridiculous. If a summer program is to be a viable alternative, it must be designed in ways that work for four- and five-year olds and their families, not for the bureaucratic convenience of school systems. Instead of a separate summer program, consider an integrated year-round program of some kind. “School years” and “summers” don’t mean much for preschoolers with working parents.
8. Experiment. Besides continuing to operate the core VPK program, set aside money and expertise to devise carefully planned variants that are then thoroughly evaluated. For example, Florida will never satisfy certain critics unless it can show over time that a “minimalist” program yields readiness results equal to those of a fancier program (or close enough that it’s worth saving money and redeploying those funds to sustain the gains started in pre-school.) Different staffing patterns ought to be tried, as should

multiple approaches to school-year, summer and year-round programming. Alternative curricula should certainly be compared. Though politicians and critics will say otherwise, it's folly to implement wholesale changes in VPK without first mounting well-conceived pilot programs and experiments.