

Fwd:

Arresting Insights in Education

Subject:

Half Empty or Half Full?: Florida's voluntary pre-Kindergarten standards

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In designing the half-day Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten program, the Florida legislature faced competing demands.

In 2002, when its voters approved a ballot measure calling for universal pre-Kindergarten by 2005-06, Florida joined a handful of states in which all children are eligible for free, publicly funded education in the year prior to Kindergarten. The passage of the referendum—which received more votes than Governor Jeb Bush garnered in his victory over his Democratic opponent—was cause for great optimism among those aware of the power of high-quality pre-K programs to prepare children, particularly low-income children, to meet the challenges of K-12 education.

But as with any public policy initiative, the devil is in the details. The universal but voluntary pre-K measure called on the legisla-

ture to hammer out those details, which would determine the quality of the program, its capacity to meet the educational needs of Florida's 4-year olds, and its ability to fulfill the expectations of voters and taxpayers.

In designing the half-day Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten program (VPK), the legislature faced competing demands. The referendum required universal coverage for approximately 150,000 youngsters, an expensive undertaking. Yet research indicates clearly that only high-quality programs deliver the sort of results (increased school readiness rates, lower remediation rates, lower grade retention rates, etc.) used to sell Florida voters on the initiative—and such programs are expensive. In particular, college-educated teachers, small classes, and low child-teacher ratios are both costly and critical to positive outcomes for children. Balancing budgetary concerns with a constitutional requirement to serve all 4-year-olds would be a tough job.

In resolving this cost vs. quality conundrum, unfortunately, the legislature—simultaneously struggling with multiple budget chal-

lenges—passed a bill that cut corners on pre-K quality.

In fact, the Sunshine State's VPK program cuts so deeply into quality that it is unlikely to boost the school readiness levels of Florida's low-income children significantly and is therefore likely to disappoint voters. Meanwhile, the law's admissions and accountability provisions may actually inhibit the inclusion of low-income children who stand to gain the most from high quality pre-K. At the end of the day, despite the good intentions of all involved, the devil may have won this round.

Tallahassee, We Have a Problem

I was initially optimistic. As Director of the Trust for Early Education, an organization financed by the Pew Charitable Trusts to spur state-funded universal pre-K programs, I supported the grassroots efforts around both the ballot initiative and the enabling legislation. In retrospect, it appears that I and others involved in those efforts may have made an important strategic mistake, one for which low-income children in Florida may pay.

The thinking behind much current universal pre-K advocacy work goes like this: indisputable research evidence shows that high quality pre-Kindergarten offers a range of important benefits to low-income children and can accelerate progress in closing the academic achievement gap that

separates these children from their more affluent peers. However, middle class voters and taxpayers are unlikely to pay for the

The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) has developed a ten-point report card for evaluating state funded pre-Kindergarten programs.

1. Curriculum Standards

Programs must feature "comprehensive curriculum standards that are specific to pre-Kindergarten and cover the domains of language/literacy, mathematics, science, social/emotional skills, cognitive development, health and physical development and social studies."

2. Teacher Degrees

"Lead teachers . . . must be required to hold at least a Bachelor's Degree."

3. Teacher Specialized Training

"Pre-service requirements for lead teachers should include specialized training in pre-Kindergarten. . . . Kindergarten endorsements and elementary teaching certificates do not qualify as specialized training in the pre-school area."

4. Assistant Teacher Degrees

"Assistant teachers are required to hold at least a Child Development Associates Credential. . . ."

5. Teacher In-Service Training

"Teachers must be required to attend an average of 15 clock-hours of professional development per year. . . ."

6. Maximum Class Size

"Classes must be limited to no more than 20 children."

7. Staff-Child Ratio

"At least one staff member must be present per 10 children in a classroom."

8. Screening and Referral

Programs are required to provide both screening and referral services covering at least vision, hearing, and health.

9. Required Support Services

Programs must offer (either directly or through active referral) at least one type of additional support service for families or participants. Services may include "parent conferences, home visits, parent support, or training, referral to social services and information relating to nutrition."

10. Meals

"All participants must be offered at least one meal per day . . . snacks are not counted as meals."

creation, expansion, and improvement of programs for which their own children are not eligible. Therefore, despite the fact that the research on the benefits of pre-K for more affluent children is far less compelling, it is politically necessary to advocate for universal programs if the goal is to ensure services for low-income children.

I was initially persuaded by this thinking. But the current state of play in Florida, plus public opinion research indicating that middle class voters are indeed willing to support programs—like Head Start—that are explicitly and exclusively targeted at low-income children, strongly suggest that a universal strategy may not be the most effective way to improve and expand pre-K services for youngsters who need them most.

Of the ten elements (*see sidebar, previous page*) that the National Institute for Early Education Research calls “minimum standards for educationally effective programs,” Florida’s VPK program has only two: small classes and specialized teacher training. While there may be honest disagreement on the relative importance of any one of these ten quality components, the fact that Florida’s program falls short on eight of them is a strong signal that program quality is not all that it should be.

Another signal: The Florida VPK program projects a cost of just \$2,500 per year per child, or about \$70 per week. In 2002-03, the most recent year for which data are available, Florida spent \$6,450 per child enrolled in the K-12 system. Though low in comparison to per-pupil spending elsewhere, this amount provides a context in which to understand the state’s investment in pre-Kindergarten. Even just half of Florida’s spending on K-12 would be \$3,225, or 29 percent more than the legislature has allotted for the half day VPK program.

While money is not an adequate proxy for high quality, utterly insufficient funding—

less than \$15 a day—is certainly one strong indication of limited quality. Moreover, existing privately operated pre-K programs have indicated that they will not be able to afford to offer services at the VPK rate. Should many private providers choose not to participate, both supply and choice will be adversely affected.

Inadequate Accountability

While the Florida program falls far short on a number of quality inputs, it does break new and important ground in the area of accountability for student learning in pre-Kindergarten. If accountability for student achievement is in its infancy in K-12, it’s embryonic when it comes to early childhood education. So Florida should be commended for its effort in this regard.

Again, though, the devil is in the details, and this new pre-K accountability system appears to be inadequate. Worse, it may have adverse and ultimately perverse impacts on the low-income children who have the most to gain from high quality pre-Kindergarten.

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The VPK law requires that the state Department of Education take several steps to hold accountable all programs receiving pre-K funds. First, the Department is required to develop statewide pre-Kindergarten standards. Second, it must develop and administer a school readiness assessment to all entering Kindergarteners in

order to measure their progress toward state readiness standards. Third, it must establish acceptable “Kindergarten readiness rates.” Finally, it is required to hold programs that receive VPK funding accountable for meeting those rates. Under the Florida system, a pre-K program that fails to meet its school readi-

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ness targets for two years running is put on probation and is subject to state intervention. A program that fails to meet its targets four years in a row loses its eligibility to participate.

There is the outline of a sensible accountability system in these requirements, but Florida has neglected several essential elements. First, as we have learned from K-12, aggregate student achievement data tell us little about how well programs are preparing all groups of students. Accountability systems based on averages across student groups can mask the low performance of one group behind the high performance of another. If Florida wants to know how well programs are serving all students, its accountability system must be based on disaggregated data. This is particularly important if the state hopes to use pre-Kindergarten as part of its achievement-gap closing strategy. A universal program without disaggregated data could conceivably widen, rather than narrow, school readiness gaps. Disaggregated data are for good reason the linchpin of the No Child Left Behind act.

Second, multiple studies have documented the existence of wide pre-K skills gaps that track socioeconomic status. Middle-class kids have stronger early academic skills than do poorer children, and kids from high-income families have yet stronger skills—even before Kindergarten. A system that only tests children at Kindergarten entry is unlikely to distinguish the effects of the pre-K program from the effects of socioeconomic status. And because more affluent children will enter VPK programs with a leg up on their less affluent peers, a program serving mostly affluent children is likely to have higher Kindergarten readiness scores and thus appear more effective than a program serving mostly low-income children—whether it is or not.

Additionally, many child advocates in Florida worry that this accountability system, coupled with a provision in the law that gives providers broad discretion over whom to enroll and whom to turn away, may cause providers to “cream” and enroll only those middle- and upper-income children who are most likely to do well on the Kindergarten readiness assessment. These are apt to be youngsters in less urgent need of effective pre-K programs than their poorer peers—a perverse effect indeed.

Universal, Not Uniform

One way for the state to address these issues is through an accountability system that uses disaggregated student achievement data and considers achievement growth as well as whether students meet the school readiness goals. Such a system would assess children’s skills as they enter the pre-K program and again when they enter Kindergarten. Testing at both ends of the program would allow the state to gauge more accurately the effectiveness of the program. Florida would have to establish target growth rates for various populations—including more growth for low-income children—if pre-Kindergarten is to help all children meet uniform school readiness goals.

Finally, achieving greater growth for the low-income children who enter the VPK program already behind their peers will most likely require more intensive services, perhaps even a different mix of services, and possibly a longer school day. Thus, programs serving these students would need more resources than the programs that serve other students. If the hope is to get all children to the Kindergarten starting line adequately prepared for the challenges of K-12, “universal” must not be equated with “uniform.” Low-income children need a richer mix of more intensive services than those provided to more affluent children.

However, it is unlikely that the cost-conscious Florida legislature will be willing to fund universal services plus enriched services for low-income children.

This brings us back to the question of whether a universal pre-K strategy is truly in the best interests of low-income children. I conclude that the jury is still out. The Florida experience thus far, however, should act as a cautionary tale to all who assume that low-income children are best served through universal, rather than targeted, pre-Kindergarten education.

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