

BRIEFING

SESSION SPOTLIGHT



Focusing on Outcomes in Early Learning Programs

APRIL 2013

Bills Addressed

HB 7165

After extensive discussion and committee workshops, the Florida House Education Committee has released a comprehensive Early Learning bill (HB 7165) that would establish a governance structure to hold all early learning programs accountable for their students' learning outcomes and the operational performance of the programs themselves, which are missing components of today's system. Historically, the state's early learning framework has included multiple agencies operating semi-independently, without clearly articulated academic and operational standards and metrics.

A Focus on Outcomes

The bill codifies the state's expectations, methods for achieving them, and metrics that would be used to assure learning success and a return on taxpayer investment.

Governance

The bill houses the Office of Early Learning (OEL) within the Department of Education, under the direction of an appointed executive director (OEL-ED), a sensible change that will establish a coordinated and unified approach to the state's early learning efforts. The OEL-ED would be a single source of communication on behalf of the state, which removes any guesswork as to what is expected from the state's early

learning programs, and on whom final accountability rests.

Single Source of Child Information

The bill requires the use of an integrated, registration-style system, which early learning coalitions and their local providers would be required to use to determine a child's eligibility, track attendance and learning progress, coordinate services among stakeholders, and streamline administrative and reporting processes. The system is also designed to make it easier for parents to enroll their child in school readiness or VPK programs.

Stewardship of Taxpayer Funds

To protect the taxpayers' investment, the bill establishes financial reporting requirements and anti-fraud enhancements for early learning programs, similar to the recommendations of the Florida TaxWatch Government Cost Savings Task Force.

Sound Curriculum Delivery and Measurement of Children's Growth

The OEL will spearhead the adoption of approved curricula for early learning programs, ensure that educators have online access to complete appropriate training in the instructional delivery of the standards, and re-examine the existing mathematical thinking standards.

Increased focus on the mathematics curricula is encouraging, as emerging research studies indicate that knowledge of basic mathematics concepts at an early age is a key predictor of educational success in later years.

In order to measure participants' progress and hold providers accountable, the OEL must establish pre- and post-assessments. Although this provision exists in current statute, the lack of clearly articulated and effective leadership has made measurement and reporting of children's early learning progress difficult at best.

Recommendation

Florida TaxWatch supports the intent of this legislation and the collaborative effort that resulted in thoughtful proposed public policy. However, additional refinements should be made to further enhance the state's efforts.

Specifically, these include:

Retain the recommendation of the House bill, which places the OEL within the Department of Education as an independent entity, rather than a sub-set of the Office of Independent Education and Parental Choice.

Require the creation of a clear, consistent, uniform reporting system for the dissemination of learning outcomes.

Building on the development of the statewide registration system, require the use of an automated point-of-access or swipe card system by all providers. Based on the recommendations of the TaxWatch Government Cost Savings Task Force for 2013-14, this effort could be provided for less than \$12 million annually, while resulting in savings of at least \$60 million per year.

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