

BRIEFINGS



Center for Educational Performance & Accountability

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Making a Better Quality Universal Prekindergarten Program for Florida's Children

The Florida TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability (CEPA) recommended in a May 2004 *Briefings*¹ that Governor Bush veto a bill (CS/HB 821) implementing a Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) program for Florida, as was mandated by voters in a constitutional amendment in 2002. The bill fell short of providing a high quality UPK program on several counts: class length per day, student-teacher ratios, teacher certification, and accreditation requirements. It also included a summer pilot study of the program, but one that would only reflect pre-kindergarten programs of public schools. CEPA questioned as well whether the program would be cost-effective in providing quality instruction.

The Governor, children's advocates, and teachers' unions also criticized the Legislature's initial PreK effort. They wanted PreK teachers to be college-educated and to provide services for up to six hours a day, with at least one adult for every 10 children, and with classes not to exceed 20 children. One advocacy group, the Children's Campaign Inc., called for giving parents a choice between a three- or six-hour day for their children. The Governor expressly wanted more participation for private and faith-based schools in the program.

Governor Bush vetoed CS/HB 821 in July, agreeing that the legislation did not go far enough in setting learning standards and ensuring the quality of preschool teaching. The bill only put children in the PreK classes for three hours a day. Moreover, it would have allowed classrooms with 20 children and only one teacher and for PreK teachers to have very little training. Why did the Legislature scale back the UPK program from that recommended by Lt. Governor Toni Jennings' Universal Prekindergarten Advisory Council? The main reason given was the expected cost of the new program, projected to involve more than 200,000 children statewide and costing between \$400 million and \$700 million in annual funding.

Whereas the cost of a high quality UPK program can be considerable, so can the cost consequences of not doing one, as CEPA revealed in a November *Briefings*.² CEPA research revealed that upwards of \$5.3 billion could likely have been saved if Florida would have had a quality, cost-effective UPK program up and running in 2002-2003. The cumulative annual opportunity costs included the cost of school non-promotion, of high school dropouts, of the future earnings on dropouts, and juvenile offenders.

¹ "Legislature Stumbled on Implementation of the Universal Pre-Kindergarten amendment: Florida TaxWatch Suggests the Governor Now Punt," Florida TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability Florida TaxWatch CEPA *Briefings*, May 2004.

² "What are Cost Consequences of Not Implementing a Quality Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) Program?" Florida TaxWatch CEPA *Briefings*, November 2004.

As the expected December Special Session of the Florida Legislature approaches, the CEPA PreK-3 Subcommittee recommends to the Governor and Legislature that the following components be included in Florida's UPK program to ensure its fiscal and academic accountability and the universal high quality that Florida voters intended for Florida's children:

- **Lead Teacher Qualifications:** Child Development Associate (CDA) or Child Development Associate Equivalent (CDAE) by 2005. (A.A. in early childhood by 2008, B.A. in early childhood education or related field by 2010).

The most critical component of a successful, prekindergarten education program is the education level of the teacher in the classroom. Children perform better if taught by teachers having baccalaureate degrees. When the demand for 4-year degreed teachers exceeds the supply, as when launching a UPK program, it is important that there be a progressive and timely articulation of teachers from CDA to AA/AS to BA/BS degrees. To get there as quickly as possible, there have to be meaningful incentives that motivate teachers to upgrade and phase-in their skill/degree levels as soon as possible. CEPA will be issuing a *Special Report* in early December that details where Florida stands on the teacher capacity issue as related to UPK education and the incentives that will be required to motivate teachers to attain their baccalaureate degrees in a timely manner.

- **Teacher/Child Ratio:** Two adult staff (of which one is a lead teacher) allocated per 20 children (rather than the ratio of 1:18 or 1:20 that was included in CS/HB821).

Governor Bush in his veto message expressed concerns about the safety of children when there are 20 4-year-olds and only one adult in the classroom, and for good reason. According to the National Research Council report [Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers](#)³, additional research studies are needed before it will be possible to explicitly specify an ideal classroom size for young children. Nonetheless, it is clear that the optimal learning environment for preschoolers combines a small staff-to-child ratio with a small class (or group) size.⁴ This is especially true for children from families of low socioeconomic status and from the inner cities, who gain even more than their peers from smaller, more personal classroom settings (<http://nieer.org/faq/index.php?TAid=53>)

The teacher/child ratio recommended by CEPA comports with state accreditation requirements and also is consistent with those of respected national accreditation organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)⁵ and the National Accreditation Council for Early Childhood Professional Personnel and Programs⁶

It also is important to note that accrediting systems do not ensure appropriate ratios. Consequently, the recommended ratio needs to be specifically prescribed and enforced by state government

³ "Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers" (2000) Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education of the National Research Council.

⁴ The National Institute for Early Education Research, <http://nieer.org/faq/index.php?TAid=53>, retrieved on November 12th, 2004.

⁵ Overview of the Current NAEYC Accreditation System and FAQs, <http://www.naeyc.org/accreditation/overview.asp>, retrieved on November 14th, 2004.

⁶ National Accreditation Organizations for Early Childhood Professional Personnel and Programs, <http://nccic.acf.hhs.gov/poptopics/nationalaccred.html>, retrieved on November 18th, 2004.

- **Length of the UPK Program:** A UPK program of 180 days in length and parent choice of a four-hour to six-hour instructional program dependent on the expressed needs of families of UPK children.

A 180 day-long UPK program makes sense because most public prekindergarten programs operate on the same calendar as the academic school year, or nine to ten months a year. Some educators even advocate year-round prekindergarten because elementary school children show more positive gains in their development when they attend school year-round.

To include the variable four- to six-hour UPK option as CEPA recommends honors Florida's strong tradition of guarding parental choice of early care/learning settings and accommodates family needs. Florida's former PreK Early Intervention Program, repealed as part of the School Readiness design, offered a 6-hour day.

A UPK program shorter than six hours would create serious difficulty for many working parents. Lesser-day programs can negatively influence participation rates, not only because they engender higher transportation costs, but also because of transportation coordination problems that result when both parents in two-parent families work. Single-parent families generally face even greater transportation-related costs and logistical obstacles to their participation in shorter-day programs.

Children in fuller-day kindergarten programs have higher achievement than children in lesser-day programs. A recent Oklahoma evaluation showed large benefits from full-day programs for lower-income and minority children but small or no gains from half-day programs. While these results require cautious interpretation, they heighten many educators' concerns about the relative effectiveness of half-day programs. Moreover, unless fuller-day prekindergarten programs are offered (or at least half-day programs with wrap-around care) a substantial percentage of children who need the programs the most will likely not enroll.⁷

- **Academic and Fiscal Accountability:** A UPK program having fiscal as well as academic accountability in order to protect Floridian's tax dollars and ensure high quality performance.

Without a thorough monitoring and auditing of all program components for public and private providers, the confidence required to ensure the ongoing responsiveness of law-makers to program needs and that of the program to student, teacher and public interest needs would be sorely lacking, if not undermined.

Lessons learned from the lack of fiscal accountability associated with the Corporate Income Tax for Scholarships Program—Florida TaxWatch's recommendation for fiscal and academic accountability went unheeded—graphically underscore the need for UPK accountability.

- **Gold Seal approval by 2007:** Gold Seal accreditation required of all UPK programs by 2007.

To ensure standards of quality and safety a review of approved Gold Seal accrediting bodies would be completed by August 2007 and every three years thereafter. Private providers as well as public providers must be Gold Seal-accredited.

⁷ The National Institute for Early Education Research, <http://nieer.org/faq/index.php?TAid=147>, retrieved on November 12th, 2004.

- **Program Administration:** Governance/Oversight unified at the state level with local oversight of all school readiness programs including VUPK

One governance structure for all school readiness and prekindergarten programs at the state and local levels must be designated to minimize confusion for families and to maximize resources. Universal Prekindergarten should build upon local infrastructure established in communities rather than create duplicative parallel structures.

Local School Readiness Coalitions, established in 1999, are in place to provide oversight and to ensure coordination of UPK with each community's existing early care and learning services.

Launching a high quality UPK program that will serve the needs of Florida's children is no trivial investment in Florida's future. If done right it will bolster the individual child's chance for success in an increasingly challenging global economy. That child needs to be able to say in future years, "Thankfully our forebears had their priorities straight when they chose to invest the necessary resources for my education on the 'front end,' where it would do the most good for my future."

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