

# How Can Florida Meet the Demand for Highly Qualified Pre-Kindergarten Teachers?

## The Routes to Quality Already Exist



This is the perfect year to address the issue of teacher quality for the state's Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten Program (VPK). Growth in full-time equivalent students for next year is estimated to be only 7,336 – the lowest student growth figure in years. The state had expected and planned for many more. A multi-faceted teacher recruitment model was designed and implemented. This model involves innovative and bold partnerships among colleges, universities, community colleges, school districts, consortia and the Florida Department of Education. It is there to meet the state's need for increasing the supply of high quality teachers.

We should not be frightened by the continuing mantra of teacher shortages in Florida. Yes, it is true that some areas struggle. However, this is not the case in elementary education, the most likely source of VPK lead teachers.

The promise of VPK has staggering implications for determining the success of Florida's next generation. Florida TaxWatch research has shown that the program will more than pay for itself over time. For every \$1 invested now, \$7 is saved in taxpayer burden later – including school remediation, welfare, and prison costs. There are incredible economic benefits associated with a more skilled workforce, as well.

Quality teachers are key to success. The structure exists to provide them. Let's put it to good use. Let's invest in Florida's future VPK!

## Degreed Teachers Can Lead Pre-Kindergarten Classes in Florida!

### Did you know?

Certified or degreed teachers are already required for summer session VPK (per Section 1002.61(4), F.S.).

Florida is the only state in the nation to offer full reciprocity by recognizing the standard certificate from every other state. (Background checks are required.)

With the 2005 enrollment of 16,383 students, **EDUCATION** was the second most popular undergraduate major in Florida colleges and universities, and **ELEMENTARY EDUCATION** – including PreK-Primary – was the top program area.

Over 4,400 practicing teachers participated in District Alternative Certification Programs during 2005-06.

More than 1,500 prospective teachers were enrolled in Educator Preparation Institutes during 2005-06, the first year of the program.

Nearly 900 prospective teachers were enrolled in 4-Year Community College Education programs.

Over 8,600 candidates attended one of the teacher recruitment job fairs last year, and 4,932 were hired.

Innovative "Grow Your Own" recruitment models are encouraged, like the Urban Teacher Academy in South Florida.

**"Research in the field of early learning has exploded in the past decade. It will be of little help, though, if our VPK teachers are not skilled in its use. Our children need highly qualified, degreed teachers – taxpayers expect no less."**

Carol Jenkins Barnett, President, Publix Super Markets Charities,  
Florida TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance and Accountability Advisory Board

**In November of 2002, Floridians ratified a Constitutional Amendment requiring the state to offer a free, voluntary, high quality, pre-kindergarten program to every four-year-old in the state. The program must be held accountable for quality to protect the state's investment and to maximize the return on that investment.**

Floridians are fortunate to live in a state that recognizes the benefits of early learning. The voluntary pre-kindergarten program (VPK) that is available for all four-year-olds holds a promise of prosperity for today's children and their families. This promise can be kept if attention is paid to the essential elements of high quality, starting with the knowledge base of the lead teacher.

It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that any warm, nurturing person can appropriately plan for the instruction of little children. This is simply not true. Florida's four-year-olds show up with a myriad of challenges, and it takes real skill to determine the best actions and interventions to plan for their progress. The time to reach them is when they are young – not down the road in remediation programs.

Although Florida has made significant progress in raising student achievement, many students still lag behind. Did you know that Florida spent over \$670,000,000 last year in supplemental academic instruction to help K-12 students progress from grade to grade? And still:

- 6% of students in grades K-3 were retained and the number grew to 16% of ninth graders? Over 175,000 students were retained overall.
- 25% of Florida's third graders could not read nor compute on grade level and the number grew to 60% of ninth graders.
- 29% of Florida high school students did not graduate on time.

**A successful business realizes the enormous back-end costs of fixing problems that can be avoided by strong, aggressive training for employees up front. Government should do the same by increasing its investment in early learning efforts like VPK.**

It starts with recognizing current research on brain development, learning, and the power of early intervention. Nearly a third of Florida's children – over 67,000 – enter kindergarten already behind. That is why we need qualified, degreed teachers to lead Florida's pre-k classrooms. The routes to quality already exist.

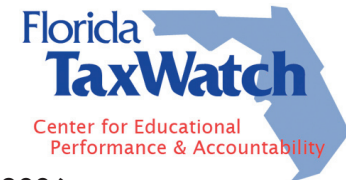
## Acquire – not aspire!

All adults involved in pre-kindergarten programs need a knowledge base commensurate with their duties and responsibilities. The strong relationship between the skills and preparation of pre-kindergarten instructors and the educational outcomes of their students is well-documented in research.

In 2003, the Universal Pre-Kindergarten Advisory Council made specific recommendations about the qualifications for lead teachers; specifically: at least an associate degree in early childhood education within five years and a bachelor's degree within eight years. These recommendations were incorporated as aspirational goals in s. 1002.65, F.S.

Aspiring for quality is not enough. Lead teachers need to acquire this knowledge base.

## Florida TaxWatch Research Tells Us Why and How:



**Quality Early Education Contributes  
Substantially to the State's Economic Viability, April 2006**

**Educator Preparation Institutes at Florida Community Colleges Will  
Help to Prevent Severe Teacher Shortage, March 2005**

**Building the Capacity for Degreed Teachers for Florida's  
Pre-Kindergarten System, December 10, 2004**

**Making a Better Quality Universal Pre-Kindergarten Program for  
Florida's Children, December 2004**

**What Are Cost Consequences of Not Implementing a Quality Universal  
Pre-kindergarten (UPK) Program?, November 2004**

Available at [www.FloridaTaxWatch.org](http://www.FloridaTaxWatch.org)