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Senator James E. "Jim" King, Jr., Chair

SCHOOL READINESS PROGRAMS II: NEXT STEPS IN THE EVOLUTION OF EARLY LEARNING

SUMMARY

As a follow up to the Florida Senate's 2003 report, *Administration of the School Readiness Programs*,¹ this report surveys prior reports concerning the school readiness system by the Legislature's Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA), the Auditor General, the State Board of Education, the state board's Universal Prekindergarten Education Advisory Council, and committee staff. The report also examines House Bill 1-A (ch. 2004-484, L.O.F.), which created the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program; highlights findings and recommendations from these prior reports which were addressed by HB 1-A; and identifies those issues remaining unresolved.

Among the remaining unresolved issues, the report underscores three critical issues for legislative consideration: (1) identifying options for enforcing the educational requirements of the School Readiness Act (s. 411.01, F.S.) on voucher providers; (2) clarifying the state's priorities for participation in school readiness programs, especially the eligibility of school-age children; and (3) establishing outcome measures for school readiness programs. The report recommends that the Legislature address these issues.

BACKGROUND

School Readiness Programs

In 1999, the Legislature enacted the School Readiness Act (s. 411.01, F.S.), which consolidated the state's early childhood education and child care programs into one integrated program of school readiness services.² The act directed that school readiness programs would

be administered by school readiness coalitions at the county or multicounty level and would be coordinated by the Florida Partnership for School Readiness at the state level. School readiness programs are funded through a mixture of state and federal funds. The combined budget of the system is approximately \$672.2 million, comprised of \$379.7 million from the federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) block grant; \$112.5 million from the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant; \$177.9 million from the state's General Revenue Fund; and \$2.2 million from other funds, including \$500,000 from the federal Social Services Block Grant.³

2002 Review of School Readiness System

In January 2002, OPPAGA conducted a review of, and issued a report concerning, the school readiness system.⁴ The report found that the Florida Partnership for School Readiness and the school readiness coalitions had not implemented key elements of the school readiness program as required by law. The report also found, among other things, that:

- Disagreements between the partnership and the coalitions over the partnership's authority to administer the school readiness system had caused disruption in implementation of the school readiness program;
- Coalitions had difficulty retaining the participation of private-sector members who did not, and whose families did not, earn an income from the early education and child care industry; and
- Smaller school readiness coalitions had difficulty affording a full-time staff within the requirement⁵ that total administrative expenditures be limited to

¹ Florida Senate, Committee on Commerce, Economic Opportunities, and Consumer Services, *Administration of the School Readiness Programs*, Interim Project Report No. 2004-116 (Dec. 2003).

² Chapter 99-357, L.O.F.

³ Specific Appropriations 2122A-2122R, *General Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2004-2005*, ch. 2004-268, L.O.F.

⁴ OPPAGA, *School Readiness Program's Potential Not Realized with Critical Issues Unresolved*, Report No. 02-07 (Jan. 2002).

⁵ See s. 411.01(9)(d), F.S.

5 percent unless specifically waived by the partnership.

The report concluded that these issues could jeopardize the future of the school readiness system.

2003 Studies and Audits in Preparation for the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program

In November 2002, the electors of Florida approved Amendment No. 8 to the State Constitution, which required the Legislature to establish, by the 2005 school year, a prekindergarten (Pre-K) program for every 4-year-old child in the state which is voluntary, high quality, free, and delivered according to professionally accepted standards.⁶

In response, at its 2003 Regular Session, the Legislature directed the State Board of Education to conduct a study and submit a report on the curriculum, design, and standards for this new Pre-K program.⁷ The report was additionally required to include the state board's recommendations or options for best practices to improve the outcomes of school readiness coalitions and providers. The State Board of Education established a Universal Prekindergarten Education Advisory Council, which issued a report of its recommendations to the state board in October 2003.⁸ The State Board of Education subsequently accepted the advisory council's report and issued a final report,⁹ which was submitted to the Legislature in December 2003.

The Legislature also directed OPPAGA and the Auditor General to conduct audits of the school readiness system.¹⁰ The threshold question for these audits was the ability of the school readiness system to effectively implement the new Pre-K program. Specifically, the Legislature directed that OPPAGA's audit must:

- Evaluate the ability of the school readiness system to effectively implement the Pre-K program based upon the State Board of Education's recommendations or options for curriculum, design, and standards for the program; and

- Identify modifications or options for the school readiness system necessary to effectively implement the Pre-K program.

In addition, OPPAGA was directed to evaluate the effectiveness of the school readiness system in implementing the school readiness programs and examine the progress of the Florida Partnership for School Readiness and the school readiness coalitions in response to OPPAGA's 2002 report¹¹ on the school readiness system.¹² The audit reports were submitted to the Legislature between December 2003 and January 2004.^{13,14,15,16}

Collectively, OPPAGA's and the Auditor General's audit reports, and the State Board of Education's and its advisory council's reports, generally found that the school readiness coalitions had made substantial progress in implementing the key elements of the school readiness program; that the coalitions' progress was hindered by a lack of guidance from the Florida Partnership for School Readiness; and that the school readiness system could be prepared to effectively implement the Pre-K program, if:

- State-level guidance and technical assistance for the school readiness coalitions was significantly improved, including the adoption of rules, publication of a policies and procedures manual, and enhancement of responsiveness to coalitions;
- Smaller school readiness coalitions were required to consolidate with one or more other coalitions to reduce the number of coalitions and improve program efficiency by forcing economies of scale; and
- Memberships of the coalitions were revised to eliminate voting conflicts and improve representation on the coalitions.

⁶ Section 1(b) and (c), Art. IX of the State Constitution.

⁷ Section 1, ch. 2003-93, L.O.F.; former s. 411.012, F.S. (2004).

⁸ Universal Prekindergarten Education Advisory Council, *Report and Recommendations to the Florida State Board of Education* (Oct. 2003).

⁹ Florida State Board of Education, *A Study of the Curriculum, Design, and Standards for Florida's Voluntary Universal Prekindergarten Education Program* (Nov. 18, 2003).

¹⁰ Section 2, ch. 2003-93, L.O.F.

¹¹ See OPPAGA, *supra* note 4.

¹² Section 2(1), ch. 2003-93, L.O.F.

¹³ OPPAGA, *School Readiness Coalitions' Progress Varies in Implementing the Program Over Two Years*, Report No. 03-75 (Dec. 2003).

¹⁴ Auditor General, *School Readiness Program Administered by the Florida Partnership for School Readiness, the Florida School Readiness Coalitions, and the Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation*, Report No. 2004-085 (Jan. 2004).

¹⁵ OPPAGA, *School Readiness Program's Potential is Beginning to be Realized, But is Hindered by Partnership Guidance Issues*, Report No. 04-06 (Jan. 2004).

¹⁶ OPPAGA and Auditor General, *School Readiness Program Makes Progress, but Stronger Partnership Guidance and Internal Controls are Needed, Overview Report on Audits of the School Readiness Program* (Jan. 2004).

Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program

In December 2004, at its 2004 Special Session “A,” the Legislature enacted House Bill 1-A, which created the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program.¹⁷ The bill directed that the Pre-K program be administered at the local level by school districts and school readiness coalitions, which the bill renamed as “early learning coalitions.” At the state level, the bill specified that the Department of Education administers the accountability requirements of the Pre-K program and the Agency for Workforce Innovation (AWI) administers the operational requirements of the program.

In addition to establishing the Pre-K program, the bill enacted several reforms of the school readiness system. The bill abolished the Florida Partnership for School Readiness on January 2, 2005,¹⁸ and transferred the partnership’s duties to AWI. Consequently, the bill established that, in addition to responsibility for the operational aspects of the Pre-K program, AWI is directly responsible for state-level coordination of school readiness programs and of the early learning coalitions.

The bill required that, by April 1, 2005, with certain exceptions, each early learning coalition must serve at least 2,000 children in the school readiness program or merge with another coalition, in effect reducing their number to 30 or fewer coalitions. The bill revised the memberships of the coalitions and prohibited members from voting when they have a conflict of interest.

The bill also replaced the current school readiness uniform screening with a new statewide kindergarten screening to be used for determining whether children entering kindergarten are ready for school. The bill requires the Department of Education to assign each private prekindergarten provider and public school with a kindergarten readiness rate based upon the results of the kindergarten screening for students completing the provider’s or school’s Pre-K program.

METHODOLOGY

Committee staff reviewed the prior reports discussed in the background section of this report and compared the findings and recommendations of those reports with the provisions of House Bill 1-A. In addition, committee

staff conducted interviews with staff of the former Florida Partnership for School Readiness.

FINDINGS

House Bill 1-A addressed many issues identified in prior reports.

In addition to creating the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program, House Bill 1-A also enacted several reforms of the school readiness system, addressing many of the issues identified in the prior reports discussed in the background section of this report. The central issue identified in those prior reports was a lack of state-level guidance by the former Florida Partnership for School Readiness. House Bill 1-A addressed this issue by abolishing the partnership and transferring the partnership’s powers and duties to the Agency for Workforce Innovation (AWI). The bill created an Office of Early Learning within AWI, directed by a Deputy Director for Learning, to administer the school readiness and Pre-K programs. The bill also created the Florida Early Learning Advisory Council, composed principally of the chairs of each learning coalition, and authorized the council to submit recommendations to AWI concerning the school readiness and Pre-K programs.

The prior reports also identified several issues concerning the local governance of school readiness programs by the former school readiness coalitions. These issues generally concerned the number of coalitions, the minimum size of coalitions, and voting conflicts in the coalitions. The School Readiness Act had permitted a school readiness coalition to serve 400 birth-to-kindergarten-aged children and, under certain circumstances, fewer children. In 2002, OPPAGA observed that there existed 57 school readiness coalitions. Under the “Coalitions Coming Together” initiative of the former Florida Partnership for School Readiness, during the following 2 years, several coalitions merged — resulting in 50 coalitions. House Bill 1-A requires AWI to establish a minimum number of children to be served by each coalition. The bill specifies that this minimum number must permit 30 or fewer coalitions and require each coalition to serve at least 2,000 school readiness children. Except under specified exceptions, the bill requires each coalition to merge with another coalition if it alone does not achieve this minimum number.

The prior reports described that coalition members employed in the field of school readiness (e.g., providers and program administrators) periodically vote on agenda items in which they have a

¹⁷ Chapter 2004-484, L.O.F.

¹⁸ House Bill 1-A specified that the Florida Partnership for School Readiness was abolished when the bill became a law (ss. 16(1) and 20, ch. 2004-484, L.O.F.) The Governor approved HB 1-A on January 2, 2005.

financial interest, thereby causing a voting conflict. In addition, OPPAGA's reports observed that members with voting conflicts have delayed the coalitions' implementation of key elements of the school readiness program. House Bill 1-A designated seven coalition members as nonvoting members, thereby removing their voting privileges. These nonvoting members generally represent providers or contractors of the coalition (e.g., representative of private child care providers, central agency administrator, and district superintendent of schools). The bill also clarified that voting members must abstain from voting when a voting conflict exists and established that the quorum required for an early learning coalition to conduct business is a majority of its voting membership.

The bill retained a prior requirement that at least one-third of each coalition's membership must be from the private sector,¹⁹ but specified that these members must be "private-sector business members" and directs AWI to establish criteria for the appointment of these private-sector business members. The bill also requires the Governor to appoint the chair and two additional members of each coalition, who must be private-sector business members.

House Bill 1-A requires AWI to monitor and evaluate the performance of the early learning coalitions in administering the school readiness and Pre-K programs. The bill specifies that these monitoring and performance evaluations must include onsite monitoring of each coalition's finances, management, operations, and programs. The Senate's prior report identified that the School Readiness Act had not specified how the former Florida Partnership for School Readiness would have provided for uninterrupted school readiness services if, during an annual review of a school readiness coalition or upon review of a coalition's revised school readiness plan, the partnership rejected the plan. House Bill 1-A authorizes AWI to dissolve ineffective coalitions and temporarily contract with qualified entities to continue school readiness and Pre-K programs.

Further, HB 1-A also addressed the following issues from the prior reports:

- **Rulemaking authority.**—The bill specified that AWI has authority to adopt rules to administer the "provisions of law conferring duties upon the agency," thereby addressing findings concerning disputes about the former Florida Partnership for School Readiness' authority to adopt rules

governing school readiness programs [*OPPAGA and Senate*].

- **Single point of entry.**—The bill specified that the "single point of entry" is an integrated information system, rather than a single physical location, thereby addressing a finding that varying interpretations of this term caused confusion. In addition, HB 1-A required each early learning coalition to use a statewide system established by AWI which integrates each coalition's single point of entry, thereby addressing a finding that the coalitions should be required to use a single statewide system for data collection and federal reporting [*Auditor General, OPPAGA, and Senate*].
- **School readiness uniform screening.**—The bill replaced the school readiness uniform screening with the statewide kindergarten screening, thereby addressing a finding that the former uniform screening was not administered uniformly throughout the state [*Auditor General and OPPAGA*].
- **Minimum number of children served.**—The bill eliminated the requirement that each early learning coalition must serve at least as many children as were served before implementation of the school readiness program, thereby addressing findings that calculating and verifying the minimum number served was problematic. In lieu of this requirement, HB 1-A requires AWI to consider the access of eligible children to the school readiness program, as demonstrated in part by waiting lists, before approving a proposed increase in payment rates submitted by an early learning coalition²⁰ [*Auditor General and Senate*].
- **Competitive procurement.**—The bill required early learning coalitions to comply with the competitive procurement law²¹ when purchasing commodities or contractual services with school readiness program funds and specified that a procurement contract, including any renewal of the original contract, may not exceed 3 years, thereby addressing a finding that the School Readiness Act had been unclear when it required competitive bidding at least once every 3 years [*Senate*].
- **Phase-in of school readiness programs.**—The bill deleted obsolete provisions from the School Readiness Act which related to the initial phase in of the school readiness programs [*Senate*].

²⁰ Section 411.01(5)(c)1.f., F.S., as amended by s. 2, ch. 2004-484, L.O.F.

²¹ Section 287.057, F.S.

¹⁹ Section 411.01(5)(a)2., F.S. (2004).

Several issues from prior reports remain unresolved after HB 1-A.

Although HB 1-A addressed many of the findings and recommendations from the prior reports discussed in the background section of this report, especially those issues concerning the state-level guidance of the school readiness system, several issues remain unresolved.

Three of these issues are critical to the future of the school readiness programs and are discussed as separate findings in this report. Other issues that remain unresolved after HB 1-A include the following:

- **Early learning laws remain in disparate sections.**—The laws governing school readiness programs and the regulation of child care providers are codified among sections in chapters 402, 409, and 411, F.S. House Bill 1-A additionally codifies provisions governing the Pre-K program in part V of chapter 1002, F.S. The disparate arrangement of these sections creates difficulty in locating relevant provisions, in understanding the current organizational structure of the state for administration of these provisions, and in comprehending the interrelationship of these provisions [*Senate*].
- **School Readiness Act remains expansive.**—Despite extensive amendment of the School Readiness Act (s. 411.01, F.S.) by HB 1-A, the act remains a comprehensive section that establishes, among other things, the organizational structure of the school readiness system, eligibility criteria and priorities for school readiness programs, program expectations, parental choice requirements, and accountability provisions. Although it is appropriate for these related provisions to be codified together, the arrangement of these diverse provisions as one section creates difficulty in locating relevant provisions within such an expansive section [*Senate*].
- **Obsolete references remain to repealed and transferred programs.**—House Bill 1-A did not update obsolete references to former early learning programs throughout the Florida Statutes. Consequently, several obsolete references to the former subsidized child care program and other repealed programs remain. In addition, several laws transferred under AWI’s administration inaccurately continue to reflect the Department of Children and Family Services as the agency responsible for their administration [*Auditor General and Senate*].

- **Role of central agencies remains unresolved.**—Several references remain in law to the former subsidized child care program’s community child care coordinating agencies (commonly cited as “central agencies”), despite that the successors of these agencies currently exist as contractors of the early learning coalitions. Central agencies are routinely contracted to provide enrollment services, operate the coalition’s single point of entry and unified waiting list, perform eligibility determinations, serve as the coalition’s local resource and referral agency, and carry out other duties for the coalition. OPPAGA observed, however, that some coalitions have tense relationships with their central agencies, citing that some agencies may resent their perceived loss of control since they administered the former subsidized child care program or may perceive the coalitions as micromanaging their contracts without having adequate program expertise. The remaining references to central agencies in law have caused confusion about the continuing role of the agencies and led to further tension with the early learning coalitions [*OPPAGA and Senate*].
- **Authority for enforcement of attendance and reporting responsibilities remains unclear.**—The Rilya Wilson Act²² remains unclear whether licensed child care providers may be disciplined for failure to comply with the act’s requirements for reporting each unexcused absence or seven consecutive excused absences of certain at-risk children to the Family Safety Program Office of the Department of Children and Family Services or the community-based lead agency [*Senate*].
- **Child care licensing laws remain indistinguishable between types of providers.**—The child care licensing laws²³ continue to use the term “child care facility” inconsistently to mean any type of regulated child care provider or, in other contexts, a distinct license type that is distinguished from other license types (e.g., family day care homes or large family child care homes) [*Senate*].

Whether early learning coalitions can enforce educational requirements on voucher providers remains a critical issue.

Florida’s School Readiness Act specifies that each early learning coalition’s school readiness program must “implement a comprehensive program of school readiness services that enhance the cognitive, social,

²² See s. 1, ch. 2003-292, L.O.F.; s. 39.604, F.S.

²³ Sections 402.301-402.319, F.S.

and physical development of children.”²⁴ In addition, act mandates certain educational requirements for all school readiness programs, including a developmentally appropriate curriculum designed to enhance the age-appropriate progress of children, a character development program, an age-appropriate assessment of each child’s development, a pretest and posttest administered as children enter and leave the programs, an appropriate staff-to-children ratio, a healthy and safe environment, and a resource and referral network that assists parents in making an informed choice of providers.²⁵

The federal Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) block grant provides approximately 56.5 percent of the state’s funding for school readiness programs. The federal regulations governing the CCDF block grant do not specify that a state may impose educational requirements on a child care provider receiving these federal funds. Rather, the federal regulations²⁶ guarantee that parents have the right to receive a child care certificate (commonly cited as a “voucher”), to choose any child care provider and to direct program funding to the provider of the parent’s choice. According to AWI, about 52 percent of children in school readiness programs statewide (approximately 158,922 children) were funded through vouchers during fiscal year 2003-2004.

Both OPPAGA and the Auditor General have found that, due to these federal “parental choice” requirements, many early learning coalitions experience challenges in enforcing the educational requirements of Florida’s School Readiness Act on providers who are predominantly funded through vouchers.

The state’s CCDF block grant is administered by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The former Florida Partnership for School Readiness confirmed its attempts to obtain authorization from ACF to deny funding to voucher providers that refuse to comply with the educational requirements of Florida’s School Readiness Act. These attempts have not resulted in explicit authority from ACF to withhold funding from noncompliant voucher providers. The partnership consequently has not issued guidance to the coalitions whether the withholding of funds from noncompliant voucher providers would violate the federal parental choice requirements. OPPAGA

observed that 42 percent of the coalitions had made no or minimal progress in ensuring that all providers comply with the educational requirements of the School Readiness Act.

Both OPPAGA and the Auditor General recommended that the former partnership continue to work with ACF and develop solutions that resolve the potential divergence between the educational requirements of Florida’s School Readiness Act and the federal parental choice requirements. If AWI continues these efforts and ACF ultimately declines to authorize the withholding of funds from noncompliant voucher providers, the Legislature may wish to consider several possible options:

- **Federal law.**—The Legislature may consider adopting a memorial requesting the U.S. Congress to enact legislation explicitly allowing states to enforce educational requirements on voucher providers in CCDF-funded programs.
- **Regulatory requirements.**—The Legislature may consider amending the state’s child care licensing laws²⁷ to impose these educational requirements as regulatory requirements for all child care providers in the state, regardless of whether they receive school readiness funds from the CCDF block grant.
- **Provider profiles.**—The Legislature may consider requiring early learning coalitions to publish profiles of school readiness providers, similar to profiles required for Pre-K program providers under HB 1-A,²⁸ which specify whether the provider complies with the educational requirements of the School Readiness Act. The Legislature may also consider providing for a public information campaign designed to inform parents about the provider profiles.
- **Financial incentives.**—School readiness providers are currently provided a 20-percent increase in payment rates for holding the “Gold Seal Quality Care” designation.²⁹ The gold-seal designation is awarded to providers that are accredited by a nationally recognized accrediting association with standards substantially meeting or exceeding the standards of three national associations specified in

²⁷ See ss. 402.301-402.319, F.S.

²⁸ See s. 1002.53(5), F.S., as created by s. 1, ch. 2004-484, L.O.F.

²⁹ See, e.g., Specific Appropriation 2122F, *General Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2004-2005*, ch. 2004-268, L.O.F. (“Funds in Specific Appropriations 2122F, 2122G and 2122H, from the Child Care and Development Block Grant Trust Fund may be used to provide a rate differential or stipend to programs which reach the Gold Seal Quality Care designation. The rate differential shall not exceed 20 percent of the reimbursement rate.”).

²⁴ Section 411.01(5)(c)2., F.S., as amended by s. 2, ch. 2004-484, L.O.F.

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ See, e.g., 45 C.F.R. s. 98.30.

current law.³⁰ These accrediting standards comprise criteria such as minimum teacher-to-children ratios, maximum group sizes, and minimum teacher qualifications. A provider is not necessarily required to comply with any of the educational requirements of the School Readiness Act in order to receive the 20-percent increase in payment rates for holding the gold-seal designation. The Legislature may consider creating financial incentives for voucher providers to implement the educational requirements, for example: limiting the 20-percent increase to school readiness providers who comply with the educational requirements; limiting the gold-seal designation to child care providers who comply with the educational requirements, regardless of whether they are providers in the school readiness program; or, if allowed by ACF, reducing payment rates for providers that do not comply with the educational requirements.

The state's priorities for participation in school readiness programs, especially concerning the eligibility of school-age children, remain unclear.

The Senate's and OPPAGA's prior reports identified that, in 2003, the Rilya Wilson Act³¹ eliminated children younger than 3 years of age who are at risk of abuse, neglect, or abandonment from the groups eligible for priority participation in the school readiness programs.³² The reports observed, however, that despite this policy change, school readiness coalitions continued to serve these at-risk children under a 2002 general counsel's opinion³³ issued by AWI which allowed the former Florida Partnership for School Readiness to authorize coalitions to serve children younger than 13 years of age.

The School Readiness Act requires each early learning coalition's school readiness program to be established "for children from birth to the beginning of the school year for which a child is eligible for admission to kindergarten in a public school" (i.e., 5 years of age on or before September 1).³⁴ However, the act also

specifies that an early learning coalition may, subject to approval by AWI as part of the coalition's school readiness plan, "receive subsidized child care funds for all children eligible for any federal subsidized child care program."³⁵ AWI's 2002 general counsel's opinion interpreted this latter provision as allowing coalitions to serve children older than 5 years of age (i.e., school-age children), but younger than 13 years of age, using funds from the federal CCDF block grant, if the federal funds are administratively segregated to distinguish them from school readiness program funds.

The Auditor General's report observed that, in the 2002-2003 fiscal year, 26 percent of school readiness program funds were expended on child care for school-age children and approximately one-third of the children served were school age. According to AWI, the percentage of school readiness programs funds expended for school-age children grew to 27 percent, and the percentage of school-age children grew to almost 35 percent of the children served, for the period from January 2003 to August 2004.

Although HB 1-A restored at-risk children younger than 3 years of age as an eligibility group, the bill did not address the eligibility of school-age children. Thus, as discussed in the Senate's prior report, because the School Readiness Act does not specify that school-age children are included in one of the act's eligibility groups, the act remains unclear to what extent that school-age children may be served at the exclusion of children included in one of the eligibility groups. In addition, because the act's educational requirements (e.g., developmentally appropriate curriculum, pretests and posttests, and character development program) are associated with school readiness skills for birth-to-kindergarten children, if school-age children are eligible to be served using school readiness program funds, it remains unclear whether the educational requirements would apply or whether minimal child care services may be provided for these school-age children without any educational services.

The Legislature may wish to consider clarifying whether school readiness program funds may provide services for school-age children; to what extent school-age children may be served at the exclusion of birth-to-kindergarten children; and, if school-age children may be served, what educational services must be provided for these children beyond basic child care services.

³⁰ Section 402.281(1), F.S. ("the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the National Association of Family Child Care, and the National Early Childhood Program Accreditation Commission").

³¹ Section 3, ch. 2003-292, L.O.F.

³² The School Readiness Act includes a priority list of eligible children and directs school readiness coalitions to give priority for participation in school readiness programs to those children (s. 411.01(6) and (11), F.S., as amended by s. 2, ch. 2004-484, L.O.F.).

³³ Memorandum from Michelle M. Austin, General Counsel, Agency for Workforce Innovation, to Katherine Kamiya, Executive Director, Florida Partnership for School Readiness (Feb. 15, 2002).

³⁴ Section 411.01(5)(b) and (6), F.S., as amended by s. 2, ch. 2004-484,

L.O.F.; s. 1003.21(1)(a)2., F.S.

³⁵ Section 411.01(5)(d)9., F.S., as amended by s. 2, ch. 2004-484, L.O.F.

In addition, HB 1-A created a Pre-K program allowing parents of 4-year-old children to enroll their children in either a 540-hour (e.g., 180 days at 3 hours per day) Pre-K program during the school year or a 300-hour summer program. Under HB 1-A, school readiness programs continue to be provided generally for children who are economically disadvantaged; who have disabilities; or who are at risk of abuse, neglect, or abandonment.³⁶ The Legislature may consider granting higher priority for participation in school readiness programs to school-readiness-eligible children enrolled in the Pre-K program who need extended-day or extended-year services (commonly cited as “wrap-around”).

Outcome measurement of school readiness programs remains uncertain.

Before the enactment of HB 1-A, the School Readiness Act had required the former Florida Partnership for School Readiness to develop a system for measuring school readiness, which was required to include a school readiness uniform screening to provide objective data on the readiness for school of children entering kindergarten. The act had specified that “[r]eadiness for kindergarten is the outcome measure of the success of each school readiness program”³⁷ and required the distribution of school readiness funds based upon an “equity and performance funding formula.”³⁸ Thus, the act established an outcome-measurement system in which school readiness programs would be evaluated and funding would be distributed, at least in part, based on performance as demonstrated by student outcomes measured by the uniform screening.

The former partnership developed the uniform screening, which was implemented by the Department of Education through the school districts. However, in accordance with proviso in the General Appropriations Act, the former partnership did not implement the funding formula.³⁹

House Bill 1-A abolished the uniform screening and its association with the school readiness programs and replaced it with a statewide kindergarten screening associated with the Pre-K program. In lieu of using the uniform screening for outcome measurement of each coalition’s school readiness program, HB 1-A requires

AWI to monitor and evaluate the performance of the early learning coalitions in administering the school readiness and Pre-K programs. The bill specifies that these monitoring and performance evaluations must include onsite monitoring of each coalition’s finances, management, operations, and programs.⁴⁰ In addition, the bill directs AWI to identify best practices of early learning coalitions in order to improve outcomes of school readiness programs.⁴¹ The bill authorizes AWI to dissolve ineffective coalitions and temporarily contract with qualified entities to continue school readiness and Pre-K programs.⁴²

In addition, the bill again delayed implementation of an equity and performance allocation formula until the end of the 2004-2005 fiscal year.⁴³ However, the bill does not establish a method for measuring the outcomes of children in school readiness programs to replace the uniform screening. If the Legislature intends for AWI to distribute funding to the early learning coalitions according to an equity and performance allocation formula beginning with the 2005-2006 fiscal year, and if the Legislature intends for the performance of coalitions to be measured based on the outcomes of children in school readiness programs, the Legislature may wish to consider establishing an outcome-measurement system for school readiness programs to replace the former uniform screening.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Committee staff recommends that the Legislature, having enacted the Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program, consider the prior reports concerning the school readiness system and address the findings and recommendations from those reports which remain unresolved after House Bill 1-A.

Committee staff further recommends that the Legislature specifically address three issues critical to the future of the school readiness programs:

- Enforcement of the educational requirements of the School Readiness Act on voucher providers;
- Priorities for participation in school readiness programs, especially the eligibility of school-age children; and
- Outcome measurement of school readiness programs.

³⁶ Section 411.01(6) and (11), F.S., as amended by ch. 2004-484, L.O.F.

³⁷ Section 411.01(4)(a), F.S.

³⁸ Section 411.01(9)(c), F.S.

³⁹ See, e.g., Specific Appropriation 2014A, *General Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2003-2004*, s. 6, ch. 2003-397, L.O.F. (“Funds in Specific Appropriation 2014A shall be allocated consistent with the Fiscal Year 2002-2003 funding allocation to the local school readiness coalitions”).

⁴⁰ Section 411.01(4)(l), F.S., as amended by s. 2, ch. 2004-484, L.O.F.

⁴¹ Section 411.01(4)(m), F.S., as amended by s. 2, ch. 2004-484, L.O.F.

⁴² Section 411.01(5)(d)3., F.S., as amended by s. 2, ch. 2004-484, L.O.F.

⁴³ Section 411.01(9)(c), F.S., as amended by s. 2, ch. 2004-484, L.O.F.