



The Florida Senate

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Committee on Education

Senator John Grant, Chairman

READINESS FOR SCHOOL

SUMMARY

Readiness for school is the first of Florida's state education goals. The state has a sizeable infrastructure of preschool programs; the three largest programs are the prekindergarten early intervention program, the subsidized child care program, and the Head Start program. The infrastructure, which serves approximately 145,000 preschool children, could function better under a statewide system for school readiness.

Florida school districts measure readiness in different ways using a 16-point guide established by the Department of Education. The adoption of statewide measures of school readiness that take into account all aspects of a child's development would enable families and the education system to know how many children are ready to begin school when they enter kindergarten.

Florida should establish a single statewide governing body for school readiness programs. The governing body, whether it is a state agency, a private corporation, or a commission, should be responsible for overseeing the state budget for school readiness programs, assessing the need for programs and services, establishing statewide program standards, monitoring program quality, and providing assistance to local coalitions.

Legislation has been proposed in past sessions that would have prescribed a single way of coordinating preschool activities in every county. However, Florida's communities have vastly different needs and resources for early childhood education. Before making prescriptive requirements for local coalitions or funding arrangements, Florida should establish a data base of information about local service needs and desired outcomes.

BACKGROUND

In the 1998 Legislative Session, school readiness was a major issue that was not resolved. Both houses of the Legislature proposed legislation to create a statewide system for preparing children for school. The key issues involved the establishment of measures of readiness and the governance of the system at the state and local level. This report outlines the issue of school readiness in preparation for the 1999 Session.

METHODOLOGY

Committee staff from the Senate Committees on Education; Children, Families and Seniors; and Ways and Means identified policy questions involving governance of early childhood programs and met with staff from the Office of Program Policy and Government Accountability (OPPAGA) to discuss the legislatively required study of early childhood programs that is being conducted by OPPAGA staff. Staff attended the National Governor's Association meeting on Education in the Early Years where speakers from other states and nations spoke about their early childhood education systems. Much of the background work for this study was completed in the 1997 Interim when school readiness was a focus of the Readiness Committee of the Governor's Commission on Education. Staff visited three sites of the Smart Start program in North Carolina and interviewed Florida school district prekindergarten directors concerning collaboration and measures of school readiness.

FINDINGS

Readiness for School

Readiness for school depends on what a school or school system expects a child to be able to do upon entry at kindergarten. In general the expectations can be divided into three categories: health, academic knowledge, and habits of mind. Expectations for health include documentation of immunizations and a physical exam prior to the student's entry date.

Academic knowledge includes such things as showing an interest in printed materials and listening to stories, using words to describe mathematical ideas, and sorting and classifying objects. The habits of mind necessary for success in school include following rules, respecting adults as leaders, trying new experiences, staying with a task until it is completed, working independently, and engaging in conversation.

Both academic knowledge and habits of mind are learned. Some children spend their preschool years in nurturing, stimulating families and high quality preschools and others spend those years in child care centers that are safe but not educational and in families that are minimally nurturing or perhaps even neglectful. The latter group arrives at school at a severe disadvantage as compared to the first. The importance of school readiness for all children is expressed in national and state education goals.

National Goal 1

In 1994, Congress passed the “Goals 2000: Educate America Act,” which established eight education goals, the first of which is “Goal 1: Ready to Learn.” The goal statement is: *By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn.* The National Education Goals Panel, an independent federal agency responsible for supporting system-wide education reform, issued a Special Early Childhood Report in October 1997, that contained indicators of the well being of children including prenatal care, health care, preschool attendance, and family daily reading. The report was produced to support a public engagement campaign, entitled “I Am Your Child,” that was begun in 1997 by a coalition of educators and early childhood advocates to raise public awareness of the needs of children from birth to age three.

Florida’s Goal 1

“Readiness to Start School” is the first of Florida’s eight education goals under the system of education improvement and accountability enacted by the 1991 Legislature. Section 229.591(3), F.S., establishes the school readiness goal and requires that communities and schools collaborate to prepare children and families for the children’s success in school. This goal is commonly referred to as “Goal I.”

The Florida Commission on Education Reform and Accountability, popularly known as The

Accountability Commission, adopted two standards for Goal I. Standard # 1 is: “Before entrance to Florida public schools, children have received appropriate health and social services so that optimum learning can occur.” Standard # 2 is: “At entrance to Florida public schools, children will be at a developmental level of physical, social and intellectual readiness necessary to ensure success as a learner.” The Accountability Commission recommended outcomes for the standards that involved optimal use of state and community programs and resources. The standards and outcomes are in a document entitled “Florida’s System of School Improvement and Accountability” that was adopted by the State Board of Education and has the force of rule.

The Accountability Commission also adopted an indicator: *The number and percentage of students meeting the expectations of the state for school readiness as determined by a formal observation of each kindergarten student using an instrument that meets guidelines developed by the Department of Education.*

Florida’s Expectations for School Readiness

In June, 1996, the Department of Education distributed a list of 16 Expectations for School Readiness that school districts must use in screening kindergarten students. The list is a compilation of the areas included in the major commercial instruments by which readiness is assessed. While public schools have a common understanding of the elements of school readiness, they do not measure readiness in the same manner. School districts use any method they like for determining readiness. Some cite the checklist as the instrument they use, though the checklist is so general it would require much interpretation. Others use locally developed instruments or commercially purchased instruments. While the DOE reports that 80 percent of children are ready for school, the percentage is not meaningful on a state level because the measures are not the same in all school districts.

In November 1995, the Commissioner of Education issued a list of 158 schools that performed at critically low levels, using the results of reading, writing and mathematics tests to assess the performance of schools over the preceding two years. Of those, 116 were elementary schools. In 1996, the number of critically low performing schools had decreased to 71, of which 61 were elementary schools. In October 1997, 30 of Florida’s 2,300 public schools were critically low performing, and 28 of those were elementary schools. Many of the critically low performing schools were served by the prekindergarten early intervention

program. We do not know whether the children were unprepared for school or whether they were ready for school but the school failed to teach them. An agreed upon method for assessing readiness is an essential tool for monitoring elementary school quality.

Children develop at very different rates from birth to age nine; by the age of nine they generally have reached a comparable level of development. Imposing a high stakes test before age nine and making permanent placements based on those test results is not a sound practice and could seriously impair a child's self concept and development. Early childhood educators advise a prudent approach to such testing. Researcher Sharon Lynn Kagan, a nationally respected expert and the incoming president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), says in the report *Not by Chance*:

...There are serious concerns about how child-based results would be defined, whether they would actually emphasize strengths rather than deficits, and whether they would gauge progress across all developmental domains...particularly when the data are used to make "high-stakes" decisions concerning children's placement or resource allocations. For these reasons, a move to a results orientation should take place only if there is broad participation in the identification of developmental child-based results, if results are accurately and sensitively measured and reported, and if results are directly linked to efforts to improve the lives of children.

Legislation was considered in the 1998 Session that would have provided vouchers to send to private kindergarten children whose test results showed they were not ready for school. That proposal would have used a high-stakes readiness test to direct preschool children away from public school on the basis of a perceived deficiency in the children. That use of a high stakes readiness measure has the potential for the harm against which Sharon Lynn Kagan cautions.

If all children are to be ready for school, information about the elements of readiness and how it is measured must be available to all families, whether or not their children are in child care or preschool programs. The instrument for determining readiness must be administered by a person who is properly trained to use the instrument to screen children for readiness. The screening should be available in various locations, not just in schools. The data collected from the screening should be information that is useful to program

providers to let them know how well they are preparing children for school.

Florida's subsidized child care program is gathering information from school districts regarding the readiness of children who were in a subsidized center or family child care home for nine consecutive months prior to kindergarten. This information is required as an outcome measure in the performance based budgeting for the subsidized child care program.

Governance of School Readiness Programs

Major Publicly Funded Programs

A number of publicly funded programs serve children ages birth to five and provide educational activities for their parents. The three largest programs--prekindergarten early intervention, subsidized child care, and Head Start--serve approximately 145,000 preschool children. The programs were created to serve different purposes, have differing levels of quality, and operate on different schedules and calendars. Coordination across these and other early education programs and services at the local level is reportedly varied.

Subsidized Child Care

The state and federally funded subsidized child care program, administered through the Department of Children and Family Services, provides care for children from birth through age 12 at hours that accommodate the family's work schedule. Florida has operated a subsidized child care program for approximately 20 years. The purpose of the program, as described in s. 402.3015, F.S., is "to provide quality child care to enhance the development, including language, cognitive, motor, social, and self-help skills of children who are at risk of abuse or neglect and children of low-income families." The goal is to promote financial self-sufficiency and life skills for the families of these children. Priority for participation in the subsidized child care program is accorded to children under 13 years of age who are determined to be at risk of abuse, neglect, or exploitation and who are currently clients of the Department's Children and Families Services Program Office; children at risk of welfare dependency, including children of participants in the WAGES Program, children of migrant farm workers, children of teen parents, and children of other families at risk of welfare dependency; and children of working poor families.

Child Care Resource and Referral Network

A statewide child care and early childhood resource and referral network is required by s. 402.27, F.S. The Department of Children and Families (still referred to by its former name, Health and Rehabilitative Services, in the statute) is required to establish, or contract for, the statewide network. The central coordinator of the Child Care Resource and Referral Network is the Florida Children's Forum, a private, non-profit organization. The Florida Children's Forum is currently under a contract with the Department of Children and Family Services. The main purpose of this contract is to maintain a statewide system for locally-based child care resource and referral services. The Forum is the central state office that contracts for the provision of local services. Where possible, the network uses the established central agencies for child care as the local resource and referral agency. There must be at least one resource and referral agency in each district of the Department of Children and Family Services and there may be no more than one in a county.

The local resource and referral agencies must identify the existing public and private child care and early education services in the area and keep a file of the type of program, hours of service, ages of children served, number of children served, significant program information, fees and eligibility for services, and the availability of transportation. The local agencies provide information to parents; refer parents to child care facilities; maintain records of requests for service; provide technical assistance to child care providers; assist families and employers in applying for various sources of subsidy including child care, Head Start, prekindergarten early intervention programs, Project Independence, private scholarships, and the federal dependent care tax credit; assist state agencies in determining the market rate for child care; assist in negotiating discounts with child care providers; provide information and assistance to local interagency councils serving prekindergarten children who have disabilities; and receive from licensed child care centers and registered family day care homes certain information about their programs.

The department pays \$8,974,856 for the Forum's services. Of that amount, \$4.2 million pays for the network activities required by law. The remaining \$4.5 million pays for the Caring for Kids supply-building initiative, which includes the recruitment and development of more than 1,000 new family child care homes, loans for the development of infant and

odd-hours care, accreditation of providers, and outreach to informal providers.

Prekindergarten Early Intervention Program

The prekindergarten early intervention program, established in s. 230.2305, F.S., is designed to serve economically disadvantaged 3- and 4-year-olds, the majority of whom shall be 4 years of age, in educational programs administered by district school boards. This program is funded by a direct state appropriation of lottery dollars. School districts may spend the funds they receive to implement and conduct a prekindergarten program or to contract with public or non-public entities to serve eligible children. Each school district's prekindergarten plan is developed by the school board in coordination with the local interagency coordinating council on early childhood services. Each coordinating council must include private and subsidized child care program representatives as well as representatives from the Head Start program.

Head Start

Head Start is a federally funded program that prepares children for school; while primarily serving 3- and 4-year-olds, the program also serves younger children and works with family day care providers. The funds come directly from the federal government to the local grantee, usually a private non-profit organization. Though the federal government does provide performance standards which each local grantee must meet, each local grantee is given significant autonomy in planning its curriculum.

The State Coordinating Council for Early Childhood Services

This chapter creates the State Coordinating Council for Early Childhood Services which advises the Governor, the Legislature, and state agencies regarding the coordination of the various programs serving preschool children. The council members represent the various public and private programs and services for preschool children and their families. The council is not assigned to a single agency, but rather alternates between DOE and CFS on a yearly basis. In some years the council was without support staff in its assigned agency, a situation which contributed to variation in the council's effectiveness.

The Governor's Commission Recommendations

The Governor's Commission on Education was created by executive order on September 20, 1996, to conduct a wholesale review of Florida's public schools from

prekindergarten through college. The commission was specifically asked to address the school readiness objective, and an appointed Readiness Committee made recommendations that were adopted by the commission on December 15, 1997. The recommendations included elevating health care, child care, and early education for children from birth to age five, and their families, to the top of Florida's agenda, statewide and in every county; reforming state and local governance and organization structures; ensuring that every program or service for children before kindergarten is recognized as part of Florida's readiness system; and improving performance measures and evaluations of early childhood care and education programs.

Legislative Proposals

During the 1998 Legislative Session, school readiness bills were considered in the Senate and the House of Representatives, but legislation was not enacted. The following issues were not resolved: whether or not state agency personnel would be transferred to a governing body, the Partnership for School Readiness; whether program standards would be locally determined or set at the state level; whether kindergarten vouchers would be provided to students who were determined not to be ready for school; when, and how, local coalitions would be required; and what roles school districts, central agencies for child care, and public and private providers of child care would play in a local coalition.

Florida is different from most other states in the strength of its infrastructure for early childhood education. State appropriations for pre-K and child care over more than a decade have created statewide services for preschool children. When legislators and state level policy groups complain about turf battles, they are complaining about the weakness of the infrastructure the state has been building since 1986 and are focusing on the lack of collaboration between school districts, child care providers, and Head Start in certain counties. Lawmakers understandably are frustrated that providers of publicly funded programs act like rivals rather than colleagues. The extensive governmental changes proposed in HB 683 were aimed at tearing down the present infrastructure and replacing it with a private, state level governing body. The present statutes would have been superseded once a local coalition was formed, and program standards would have been locally determined.

Florida's impressive early childhood infrastructure, however flawed, would be a dream in many states where coordination of the programs is simple because there are few programs to coordinate. Rather than destroying and then rebuilding the infrastructure, legislation might build on the strengths of the existing system--the pedagogical expertise and strong relationship with the elementary school of pre-K, the round-the clock availability and business acumen of child care, and the family-centered agenda and comprehensive services of Head Start.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Florida has an infrastructure for preschool education and child care that serves approximately 145,000 preschool children through three major publicly funded programs--Subsidized Child Care, the Prekindergarten Early Intervention Program, and Head Start. A statewide system for school readiness should build upon the strength of this infrastructure. The following recommendations would enable Florida to capitalize on the assets of its early childhood infrastructure as the state establishes a system for school readiness:

1. Florida should adopt statewide measures of school readiness that take into account all aspects of a child's development. The measure should be used to inform schools about a child's strengths and needs, and should not be used to make high-stakes decisions about permanent placement in a school program.
2. Florida should establish a single statewide governing body for school readiness programs. The governing body, whether it is a state agency, a private corporation, or a commission should be responsible for overseeing the state budget for school readiness programs, assessing the need for programs and services, establishing statewide program standards, monitoring program quality, and providing assistance to local coalitions.
3. Before making prescriptive requirements for local coalitions or funding arrangements, Florida should establish a data base of information about local service needs and desired outcomes.

COMMITTEE(S) INVOLVED IN REPORT (*Contact first committee for more information.*)

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MEMBER OVERSIGHT

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