

Early Learning: Quality for Florida's Future

2014 United Way Position

Florida's United Ways urge the 2014 Florida Legislature to provide access to high quality early learning programs for all children.

BACKGROUND:

The foundation for communication, critical thinking, problem solving, and teamwork - skills that employers nationwide cite as critical to workplace success - is developed by age five. [Research shows](#) that investing in high quality early education yields big returns. Yet school readiness funding has declined by almost \$100 million since 2001, and in Florida more than 60,000 children are on School Readiness waiting lists.

According to a [2013 study](#), 68 percent of child care programs in Florida are of "minimally adequate" quality and almost 20 percent are "low quality". The [National Institute for Early Education Research](#) ranks Florida's Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) Program 35th among 38 states in per pupil funding and reports that the Sunshine State's VPK program meets only three of 10 nationally recommended standards.

Attendance in high quality afterschool programs is associated with [significant increases](#) in reading and academic performance, attendance, positive behaviors, and parent workplace productivity. Yet afterschool funding has declined by 46 percent since 2007, even as research confirms the [critical importance](#) of reading proficiently by third grade.

Florida [ranks 40th nationally](#) for the quality of its child care licensing program standards. Of the total number of childcare facilities in Florida over 1,400 (12%) receive no onsite inspection or oversight from the Department of Children & Families. These programs are eligible to receive state child care and/or VPK subsidies, but are not required to meet minimum early learning health and safety standards. Requirements that all programs receiving state funding meet minimum health and safety standards, and authority to monitor these standards, are needed to protect the well-being of children.

PROPOSED CHANGES:

- AMEND the early learning statute to include explicit standards for the health, safety and well-being of children in all publicly-funded School Readiness and Voluntary Prekindergarten programs.
- AMEND the early learning statute to establish benchmarks for quality and education based performance standards for early learning and school age care to prepare children for school success, enhance the private business model of early learning, and ensure accountability of public funds.
- SUPPORT increased funding and equitable funding allocation for children birth to eight in early learning and school-age care to ensure children's access to educational, enrichment programs that support working families.
- SUPPORT adequate levels of funding per child for Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK) to ensure children have the academic, executive and social skills for kindergarten.

FISCAL IMPACT:

- School Readiness budget: **\$50 million** to reduce the SR wait list and fund quality improvements.
- Voluntary Prekindergarten budget: **\$106 million** to increase the Base Student Allocation to \$3,000.

Child success is essential to Florida's future, and taxpayer investments reflect hard-earned money that should be invested wisely. The benefits of early care and education are tied to the quality of the program, which requires adequate funding.

For additional information, please contact
the United Way of Florida at: (850) 488-8276.

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