

COUNCIL FOR EDUCATION POLICY, RESEARCH AND IMPROVEMENT

MASTER PLAN INITIATIVE

Early Childhood Education (Pre K-3): Ensure that all students have a sound basis for future learning and personal development.

Early Learning (Pre-K)

Early childhood education provides the foundation for future learning and academic achievement. This widely held recognition has led to nationwide reform initiatives to improve and strengthen early childhood programs. Experts agree that students must master certain academic skills in the first years of school to avoid later academic failure or grade retention. Thus the desired “end product” of early education accountability measures and school reform initiatives is a child who has obtained certain competencies by the end of third grade. In some states, including Florida, children who have not mastered these competencies may not be promoted to 4th grade. While knowledge and understanding of mathematics is part of measuring student achievement in the early grades, the key to academic promotion and school success is literacy. According to the Florida Department of Education, the entire first four years of a student’s K-12 education is now focused on learning how to read. From kindergarten through third grade, children start with learning the basics, like the sounds letters make and reading simple words, and then move on to learning how to read and understand the meaning of more complex words, sentence and paragraphs. In fourth grade, students shift from “Learning to Read” to “Reading to Learn.” In other words, students are expected to apply their reading skills independently and to begin to learn new and more complex subjects and ideas as they progress through school.

While the early grades are the building blocks to future academic success, studies reveal that children begin learning long before they enter school. As a result, the last two decades have witnessed a growing interest in the development and education of preschool age children. Recent brain research reveals that the greatest opportunities for learning begin before a child reaches kindergarten.¹ Language development is particularly crucial to early literacy learning and readiness skills, yet high stakes tests and other accountability measures underscore the fact that many children enter school without the cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills they need to become successful learners. Although more and more states have realized the importance of investing in early learning as a long term educational and cost effective initiative, pre-school programs nationwide are an assortment of delivery, governance, oversight, accountability and funding systems. Nevertheless, preschool or pre-kindergarten programs are defined by the following general characteristics. They are 1) supported by state funds, 2) focused on early learning for school success or school readiness, 3) aimed at pre-kindergarten aged children (under 5 years old, usually 3-and 4-year olds), and 4) are designed to deliver group learning experiences at least several days a week.² Pre-kindergarten programs can be part of a public school system or community based child care program, or can be delivered by private (including faith-based) providers. Over half (52%) of children ages 3 to 5 are enrolled in pre-kindergarten programs nationwide.³

Background

While pre-kindergarten enrollment has been growing among children of all backgrounds, low-income children participate at lower rates than children from higher-income families despite the

growth in publicly funded programs that target low income and other children at-risk of academic failure. According to the Children's Defense Fund, fewer low-income children ages three to five were enrolled in pre-kindergarten programs in 2000 than their more affluent peers. These findings are particularly troubling as continued research has shown that disadvantaged children who do not have access to quality pre-kindergarten programs start kindergarten significantly behind their wealthier classmate and rarely catch up. While the majority of research on the short and long-term effects of pre-school programs are based on the experiences of disadvantaged children (The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project, Carolina Abecedarian Project, and Chicago Child Parent Center study) recent studies conclude that the positive effects from attending "center-based" pre-school programs "hold for children from middle-class as well as disadvantaged families."⁴ While authors Jay P. Greene and Greg Forster do not examine gaps between poor and middle-class students, they note that the dramatic growth in preschool enrollment nationwide is one factor in making students more "teachable" than they were in 1970.⁵

Despite growing support for preschool programs nationwide, some early learning specialists contend that non-disadvantaged children who stay at home with their parents are just as likely to develop the skills necessary to succeed in an academic program as their counterparts who attend a quality preschool. It is important to note that no state mandates that 3 or 4 year old children attend preschool. Universal Pre-K is voluntary in the three states (and the District of Columbia) that offer that program. Currently, Georgia provides the most comprehensive universal program, offering free pre-K services for 180 days 6.5 hours per day. In most states, Pre-K programs are available to children whose parents can afford private preschool (or day care) and to some poor or "at-risk" children who meet the stringent qualifications for federal or state funded programs. Even families who met federal guidelines for pre-school (or child care programs) are not guaranteed services because federal and state funding has not kept up with demand. At issue are the availability, affordability and quality of pre-school educational opportunities for the nation's young children.

Longitudinal research projects on pre-school programs reveal that program quality, not just program availability, significantly affects children's readiness for school. Researchers have found that children in high-quality care appear happier, have closer and more secure attachments to caregivers, and perform better on standardized tests.⁶ While high-quality, developmentally appropriate programs improve school performance, early learning experts agree that low quality programs may have negative effects, particularly on at-risk children. Results of a study conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development in 2001 revealed that high-quality pre-schools not only have positive effects on the cognitive abilities of young children, but on their social and behavioral skills as well. Evaluations of state-financed preschools have found similar benefits in preparing young children for school and in preventing retention in early grades. In a review of 36 studies of early childhood care and education Stephen Barnett, Professor of the Graduate School of Education at Rutgers University, concluded that public investments in quality early childhood education can produce important *long-term* improvements in the intellectual and social development of disadvantaged children. Barnett determined that quality early learning can produce "large effects on IQ during the early childhood years and sizable persistent effects of achievement, grade retention, special education, high school graduation and socialization. For many children, from low-income families, preschool programs can mean the difference not just in education but in "staying out of trouble or becoming involved in crime and delinquency."⁷

In perhaps the most significant study on the short and long term effects of preschool experiences on children's later performance in school, researchers at the University of North Carolina followed a cohort of 826 preschoolers who attended 401 different childcare centers in four states from the year

before kindergarten through the second grade. Their finding showed that “children who attended higher quality child care centers performed better on measures of both cognitive skill and social skills... and that this influence was important for children from a wide range of family backgrounds.” The longitudinal analysis of the children’s performance indicated that the quality of child care they experienced before they entered school continued to “affect their development at least through kindergarten and in many cases through the end of second grade.”⁸

While children benefit in numerous ways from a quality early learning experience, cost-benefit analyses and other research demonstrate that preschool programs can save taxpayer money, not only on remedial education but on soaring social welfare and law enforcement costs. A longitudinal study conducted by researchers at the University of Wisconsin found that for every dollar spent on preschools that served low-income children in Chicago, there was a public benefit of more than seven dollars.⁹ The Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis reached similar conclusions in a recent study that found that early childhood investments were more effective than spending on venture capital fund, subsidizing new industries, building new stadiums, or providing tax incentives for businesses.¹⁰ The Business Roundtable (an association of 150 chief executive officers of leading corporations) has concluded that “American’s continuing efforts to improve education and develop a world-class workforce will be hampered without a federal and state commitment to early childhood education for 3-and 4-year-old children.”¹¹

While the benefits of a quality pre-school experience are well documented, researchers have also been able to identify specific characteristics that contribute to program quality and children’s outcomes. Experts identify three main indicators of quality in early childhood settings: structural, process, and child outcomes.¹² In general, these indicators include:

- strong health and safety standards;
- low student-to-teacher ratios and small classes;
- qualified, well-compensated teachers who relate well to children and parents
- proven pre-academic curricula and learning processes;
- significant involvement by parents;
- meaningful assessment and accountability measures; and,
- quality outcomes for children

Not only do quality pre-school opportunities vary in most states, the very definition of what constitutes a pre-school remains illusive. Early learning advocates note that it can be difficult to differentiate between child care services and school “readiness” programs. Some parents, educators and lawmakers are reluctant to include pre-kindergarten within the larger K-12 educational “system.” Despite its many variations state to state and district to district, the nation’s K-12 school systems share certain expectations, standards and structure. Wherever children live in the United States and whatever their parent’s income, they can attend public schools for free. In addition, the public schools, the largest delivery system for K-12 education in the country, are subject to governmental oversight and standards. In contrast, the majority of early learning or pre-kindergarten classrooms are located in the market driven private sector.

While pre-kindergarten is not part of the K-12 system in most states, the education of 3 and 4 year olds has become an important issue in the debate over how best to provide early learning opportunities for all children. Increasingly, educators, lawmakers, and parents have recognized that school readiness is an important link to a child’s successful transition to grades K-3 and beyond.

Pre-K Program Standards

Traditionally, state licensure of early learning or child care programs has focused primarily on child safety and health. Certain standards of quality such as the physical features of the care facility, the number of children per caregiver, and group or class size are generally required for both public and private providers. But certain religious child care programs and facilities are exempt even from the rudiments of state licensure in most states including Florida.

As more and more research has underscored the importance of early learning, some states have begun to focus on academic knowledge, learning standards and outcomes in preschool settings; yet nine states still do not require their schools districts to offer kindergarten. Other states are transforming their early learning programs to readiness for school programs to prepare children for kindergarten and elementary school. While many states have invested significantly in pre-kindergarten in recent years, seven states have no type of early learning program for 3 and 4 year olds. According the Education Commission of the States, in 2004, only 19 states had formally adopted Pre-K outcome standards. Despite the fact that “a growing body of research indicates that more developmentally appropriate teaching in preschool and in kindergarten predicts greater success in the early grades” not all pre-school programs include a quality, literacy based, age appropriate learning component for young children.¹³

Pre-Kindergarten Teachers

For the majority of early education experts, the most important indicator of a quality Pre-K program is teacher qualification. After a review (2002) of the research literature and studies on the quality of preschool programs nationwide, The Trust for Early Education (TEE) concluded that pre-kindergarten classes “where the teachers have at least a Bachelor’s degree are more likely to be of higher quality-as in richer language environment, richer literacy environments, and better teacher-child interactions.”¹⁴ In 2004, The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) called for all preschool teachers to have “bachelor degrees in early childhood education.” While every state requires kindergarten teachers to have at least a bachelor’s degree and a certificate in early-childhood education, only 20 states and the District of Columbia currently requires teachers in state-financed pre-kindergarten programs to meet similar requirements. According to the AACTE, less than 40 percent of all preschool teachers have a four-year degree in any subject. One major reason for the lack of degreed pre-K teachers is that salaries for early childhood professional are not commensurate with their qualifications and experience. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) recruitment and retention of child care staff is extremely difficult. The average child care teaching assistant earns roughly \$10,500 a year and the highest paid child care teachers are paid roughly \$18,000 a year. Turnover of staff averages 31 percent. Although salaries are much higher for pre-K teachers in public schools, there is difficulty retaining talented teachers and recruiting more experienced teachers to failing schools.¹⁵

Funding for Pre-Kindergarten

Federal programs, including the highly successful Head Start Program, provide the vast majority of funding for public supported pre-kindergarten programs nationwide. While all states provide some form of child care subsidies (not necessarily a pre-kindergarten program) for *some* poor families, the financial investments made by states in early learning vary considerably as do eligibility requirements. For instance, while poverty has been used as the criterion for counting “at-risk” children and is the eligibility standard for Head Start, some state’s define at-risk more broadly than just poverty status and may include children for whom English is a second language, children who have a teenage

mother, children whose parents are migrant workers, and/or have a low educational level, or children who are homeless. While most states focus early childhood education and care services on these at-risk children, not all eligible pre-school children are currently served by existing state or federally funded childcare or pre-kindergarten programs. For instance, Head Start serves about three in five eligible children ages 0-5 nationwide. Florida's Head Start programs serve less than 40 percent of eligible pre-school children.¹⁶ And critics charge that it is the working poor, those families slightly above the poverty line who do not qualify for federal programs, who pay a greater share of their income for sub-quality Pre-K programs.

State based monetary investment in early learning varies greatly across the nation. Many states have invested in and thus expanded their federally funded Head Start pre-school programs or have provided child-care subsidies to poor parents with money from federal block grants such as the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Low-income parents use these vouchers to pay for child-care services. While Head Start program standards have consistently been raised in recent years (as has funding for the program) the federal government's child care-subsidies are designed primarily to provide parents with day care services so they can work or pursue training. Consequently the focus of many of these programs is not school readiness or early childhood literacy. Title 1 federal funds, another mammoth federal funding program, are spent on a variety of educational programs to assist poor children, including child care and early learning school based programs. But Title 1 funds are used by the school districts to pay for other educational initiatives to benefit low income schools and children at all grade levels. While the number of publicly financed child care and educational programs continue to increase, *particularly for poor, disabled and disadvantaged children*, the majority of pre-school children nationwide attend programs in a private, including faith based setting with varying standards, objectives and outcome goals and measures.

Despite the growth in federal and state dollars to fund pre-school programs over the last decade, many low income children still do not receive services. While there is growing evidence that a quality preschool experience has positive benefits for all children, regardless of income status, race or ethnicity, public funding for universal pre-kindergarten is limited, and the quality of many preschool programs is, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) far from adequate.¹⁷ Studies of center-based early care facilities have found that over 86 percent provide "mediocre or poor-quality care."¹⁸ While over half of the nation's 3 and 4 year-olds are cared for by someone other than their parents during part of their waking hours, the ability to attend a quality preschool setting continues to depend largely on what parents can afford and where they live. According to the NIEER, early education is largely a private "non-system" for which families pay about 60 percent of the costs of child care, combined government programs pay about 39 percent and the private sector contributes less than 1 percent. Parents in the United States bear twice as much of the cost of early learning and child care as their counterparts in other developed countries.¹⁹

Florida's Early Learning Programs

Prior to 1999, responsibility for school readiness programs (birth to age 5) in Florida was divided among three entities: 1) the state Department of Education; 2) the state Department of Children and Families, and 3) the federal Head Start Program. While DCF managed child care programs, DOE provided direct funding (drawn primarily from lottery funds) to each school district in the state to provide early intervention pre-kindergarten programs for economically disadvantage and other at-risk children. Once school districts had served that special population of children, they could offer

pre-kindergarten to other families on a fee basis. At the same time, the state administered a pre-kindergarten program for 3 and 4 year old children of migrant works with Title 1 federal funds. That program continues to be administered by DOE with Title 1 funding. Pre-K children with disabilities are part of Florida's FEFP and are served in the public schools by a combination of federal IDEA and state funds.

In 1999 the Florida Legislature changed the way the state funds and administers early-childhood programs by creating the School Readiness Act. The purpose of the act was to provide readiness programs to economically disadvantaged children from birth to kindergarten who are at risk of future academic failure. Because it was "the intent of the Legislature" that readiness programs "enable parents to work and become financially self-sufficient," priority was given to children of participants in welfare transition programs. Priority was also given to children of low income parents as well as to children at risk of abuse and neglect. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, 43 percent of children in Florida under the age of 6 live in low-income families.

The new legislation created the Florida Partnership for School Readiness (Partnership) to coordinate statewide program efforts while local school readiness coalitions were created to plan and implement a comprehensive program of readiness services. The school readiness program was created to operate in conjunction with the district school systems but to function as a separate program for children under the age of kindergarten and funded separately from the public schools. The 2001 Legislature transferred the Partnership for the Executive Office of the Governor to the Agency for Workforce Innovation (AWI).

The Partnership funnels state and federal readiness dollars to the local coalitions based on the number of disadvantaged children who live in each county. Federal dollars comprise approximately 75 percent of the funding for Florida's school readiness programs. The two largest sources of federal funds are TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) and CCDF (Child Care and Development Fund) dollars. Head Start funding (including Early Head Start, Migrant Head Start, and American Indian Head Start) flows directly from the federal government to the local Head Start grantee in each locale. Title 1 funds are provided by the U.S. Department of Education to the Florida Department of Education and to local school districts. Plans for the use of Title 1 funds are developed at the district level. Nineteen school districts in Florida currently provide services to preschool age children with Title 1 Funds.

Although the Partnership is charged with providing guidance to the local coalitions, the new law gave the local coalitions the authority to decide how to spend readiness funds. In some counties, local coalitions have cut funds to support those pre-kindergarten programs (formally the Pre-Kindergarten Early Intervention Program) run by the school districts in order to provide child care services for children whose families met federal working requirements. Even though the overall funding (state, local and federal) for school readiness programs has increased since 1999 from \$569,227,344 to \$697,476,068 in FY 2003-04, some school districts complain that they get less money under the new law and have had to cut readiness programs and services.²⁰ Currently 47 of Florida's 67 counties have chosen to continue to offer school based programs for which they are reimbursed with school readiness funds. In 2002-03, 67 percent of the 175,290 children served in all readiness programs in Florida were in some form of subsidized child-care. Nineteen percent of the children were in a Head Start Program and 14 percent were in a public school program.

In 2002-03, 61,555 at-risk 4-year olds (approximately 29% of all 4 year olds) received pre-school services through a combination of governmental funds augmented by parental co-payments based

on sliding fee scale. Twenty-three percent (14,333) of those children were served in public school funded programs. While Florida does not have data on the number of children served in pre-kindergarten programs that do not receive government funding, 63 percent of Florida's pre-school age children live in families where both parents work outside the home.

The Partnership for School Readiness was charged with specific responsibilities beyond coordinating and administering school readiness services. Not all of those charges have been met. Importantly, the partnership adopted performance standards for pre-school and kindergarten programs that were subsequently approved by the State Board of Education. Standards for 3 and 4 year olds are cross-referenced with the Head Start Performance Standards, and 5 year old standards are cross-referenced with the Sunshine State Standards. Although the Partnership is required by law to develop a uniform kindergarten screening instrument and to develop a longitudinal evaluation system for measuring student performance, the required assessment system has not been fully implemented. Currently all school districts used the SRUSS (school readiness uniform screening system) to measure a child's readiness to enter kindergarten. The SRUSS screening instrument (ESI-K) is not intended to measure a child's early literacy skills but to identify those children who have developmental delays. Because school districts may use two different behavioral screening instruments to gauge student readiness, scores cannot be uniformly aggregated or compared.

The Partnership has been criticized by both OPPAGA and the Auditor General (2002, 2004) for not providing adequate guidance to the local coalitions on policy and fiscal issues. In the most recent evaluations of the School Readiness Program, (2004) both agencies credited the Partnership with making progress in coordinating the school readiness program, but cited several "problematic areas" including the fact that some school districts have opted out of the program and that the current reimbursement system is inefficient and "serves as a disincentive for providers to accept school readiness children."

In its 2004 Program Review, OPPAGA addressed the possibility of the School Readiness System implementing the statewide VUPK. While the agency noted that the providers within the school readiness coalitions are currently serving many of the children who will participate in the program, and that many of the educational standards developed for Pre-K are based upon the same elements found in the school readiness law, "policy guidance issues and technical assistance to coalitions must be significantly improved before a merger with the VUPK Program is undertaken."

Pre-Kindergarten in Florida

Florida's Early Intervention Pre-Kindergarten Program ceased to exist in 2001. School districts still offer "readiness" services to 4 year olds through a variety of programs funded through the Partnership, Head Start or Title 1. Private providers in Florida offer the majority of "pre-school" services to the state's 4 year olds. In November 2002 Florida citizens voted to provide free universal pre-kindergarten on a voluntary basis to all four-year-old children. Consequently, Article IX of the state Constitution was amended to read in part: "Every four-year-old child in Florida shall be provided by the State a high quality pre-kindergarten learning opportunity in the form of an early childhood development and education program which shall be voluntary, high quality, free, and delivered according to professional accepted standards." Legislation was passed to implement the amendment. The SBOE was required to submit a report that included recommendations on how the program should be structured including curriculum contents, length of instruction, and teacher qualifications, as well as how the program should be evaluated, governed and delivered.

To assist in the development of recommendations for the implementation of the program, the SBOE established the Universal Pre-kindergarten (UPK) Education Advisory Council. The council, chaired by Lt. Gov. Toni Jennings, was comprised of 20 members from the education and business communities. The council's recommendations centered on establishing a quality Pre-K program that meets national standards while offering small classes, certified teachers, and state approved, age appropriate literacy based curriculum. Lt. Gov. Jennings noted when presenting the report to the SBOE that if the state invested now in a quality Pre-K program "we won't have third-graders who do not pass the FCAT." The Pre-K Council presented these specific recommendations:

- Classes should have a 20-student limit and at least one teacher for every 10 students.
- Teachers should have a National Child Development Associate (CDA) certificate or a Florida CDA requirement.
- At least one staff member in each classroom will have an associate's degree in Early Childhood Education in five years of program implementation. At least one staff member in each classroom will have a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education in eight years of program implementation.
- Programs must meet Gold Seal Standards or receive SACS accreditation within one year of VUPK program implementation.
- Length of school day should be six hours with a minimum of four hours in quality instruction.
- The State should certify curricula choices based on literacy-focused, age-appropriate curriculum.

The SBOE accepted the council's report and issued a report and recommendations that modified or changed some of the UPK council's recommendations. Key differences focused on teacher qualifications, length of program day, funding costs, curriculum, and assessment. The SBOE estimated that a *four-hour-a-day* program would cost the state \$262 million (\$2,800 per child). By comparison the state averages \$4,200 per child in grades K-3. Seventy percent of the state's 4 year olds (152,000) may participate, including 90,000 additional students not now eligible for existing funding. According to a model developed by researchers from the Institute for Women's Policy Institute to help states estimate the cost of universal preschool implementation, the cost of providing a high quality full day universal pre-K program (including after school care) for 188,000 students will be approximately \$616 million.²¹

Legislative Action

Despite support from the governor's office for the majority of the council's recommendations, the 2004 Legislature passed a pre-kindergarten bill (HB 821) that was markedly different from what the council, the SBOE, and many early learning experts recommended. In essence, the measure created two separate programs for parents to choose from, a summer program provided by the public schools, or a 3 hour a day year long (540 hour) program offered by either a public or private provider. Importantly, the bill sidestepped or minimized requirements for program accountability, teacher qualifications, pupil-teacher ratios, class size, curriculum standards, funding, and meaningful student assessment. Many statewide newspapers, child advocacy organizations, and Florida Taxwatch criticized the legislation as an inadequate stopgap that fell short of voter expectations. On May 28 the governor vetoed the appropriations allocated for a summer pilot Pre-K program. On July 9, Governor Bush, who had repeatedly reiterated his administration's commitment to improving early-childhood learning as a means to improving literacy and student performance, vetoed the entire bill. In his veto message, the governor criticized the bill for not going far enough "to produce a

kindergarten program that truly helps children get ready to read and succeed.” The governor noted several areas of concern with the bill and called for new legislation that would 1) ensure that a sufficient number of adults are present in each classroom to ensure the safety and welfare of children in the program, 2) promote a highly skilled workforce for VUPK programs by establishing clearer qualifications for teachers; 3) clarify which agency will oversee the program and remove any obstacles that impede interagency collaboration 4) authorize the SBOE to establish performance measures and standards for the program 5) establish the DOE as the agency responsible for ensuring integrity of providers and for measuring student outcomes; and, 6) ensure that VUPK program choices are not be limited to one type of provider. The governor called on all impacted agencies to work collaboratively with his office to prepare implementation plans and legislative budget requests for the 2005-06 year.

CEPRI ACTION

In 2003, the Council for Education Policy, Research and Improvement identified early education as one of its key Master Plan Initiatives. As its starting point, the council reviewed the issues pertaining to the creation of Florida’s constitutionally mandated pre-kindergarten program. Over the course of several months, the council heard from DOE staff and early learning experts on the state’s progress in developing the voluntary, universal pre-kindergarten program (VUPK) by 2005-06. As part of its examination of this topic, the council reviewed documents provided by the Universal Pre-Kindergarten Advisory Council, the State Board of Education (SBOE), the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA), the Auditor General, the Legislature, and various child advocacy groups. In addition, the council conducted a review of the literature pertaining to early education issues. As a result of its research and deliberations, the council reached the following conclusions:

A high quality pre-kindergarten program is a *significant opportunity* to improve the overall effectiveness of Florida’s education system:

- It will enhance the learning capacity and readiness of thousands of the state’s four-year-olds by providing an important link to early education (K-3).
- It is particularly important for disadvantaged children who are most likely to substantially benefit academically and socially from those services.

Decades of research have revealed that a quality Pre-K learning experience may reduce the need for remediation and retention in later grades while producing long-term improvement in children’s intellectual and social development.

Florida must implement its pre-kindergarten program in a way that involves as many children as possible while encouraging active participation by parents. Data have shown that disadvantaged children are less likely than their wealthier peers to have access to quality programs. Florida must ensure that quality pre-kindergarten programs are available to all children, regardless of their socio-economic status or where they live.

Moreover, the council believes that meaningful parental involvement is an essential component of a successful Pre-K program. Although the state cannot mandate that parents participate in their child’s education, opportunity for parental involvement must be a priority for Pre-K programs and providers.

Florida's pre-kindergarten program should be of the highest quality based on proven literacy focused, age appropriate, pre-academic curricula. Implementing a high quality early learning program is more expensive, but is a sound public investment that will produce long term savings to taxpayers as well as tangible societal benefits. Cost-benefit analyses have repeatedly demonstrated that quality preschool programs can save taxpayer money, not only on remedial education, but on social welfare and law enforcement costs.

The keys to a highly effective pre-kindergarten program include well qualified and well-compensated teachers, small classrooms, and low student to teacher ratios. Well trained, qualified teachers are the most important component of a quality pre-kindergarten program. Research has shown that quality teachers are the key to student success regardless of a child's socio-economic background. Quality teachers (with baccalaureate degrees) deserve quality compensation, on par with their counterparts in the K-12 education system.

To ensure that pre-kindergarten is regarded as an integral component of Florida's educational system, the VUPK program should be located in and administered by the Department of Education (DOE). Oversight for the VUPK program should be the responsibility of a Division of Early Learning created within the DOE.

State funding for pre-kindergarten should be provided in the same amount per FTE as is provided for K-3 FTE. To ensure program integrity and accountability, funding to support the program should be provided to the DOE through a separate funding category. The DOE should allocate these funds using a calculation that is consistent with the calculation of the FEFP. The DOE should distribute the allocation to the local learning coalitions for payment to providers for documented services.

The Florida Legislature has the opportunity to create a constitutionally mandated, high quality pre-kindergarten program that has as its end product children who have the early learning and readiness skills necessary to succeed in school. The legislature should create a diverse provider system that utilizes all available public and private delivery networks and funding streams to provide a well coordinated Pre-K program with strong assessment and accountability measures and quality outcomes for children.

Based on the above, CEPRI recommends the following as criteria for a high quality pre-kindergarten program:

Access to Quality VUPK Programs

- The Florida Legislature must create a diverse provider system for the VUPK program to support parental choice and maximize existing program capacity and community resources.
- Programs should be offered 180 days a year for 6 hours per day (1080 hours) with at least 720 contact hours (4 hours per day) of quality learning experience.
- Wrap around services (hours of care beyond the 6 hour VUPK program) should be available to eligible parents through a combination of state, federal and private subsidies and programs. Parents not eligible for such assistance may pay for extended day services on a sliding scale basis.
- Programs shall be delivered in public and private settings including faith-based providers.
- All families must have equal access to quality programs guaranteed through equity in payment that is free for all parents.

- All public and private partnerships should be maximized to avoid fragmentation of early learning services and funding streams.
- All federal, state, and local agencies and the private sector should coordinate resources when possible to ensure that children's basic needs (educational, social, health, safety) are met.

Quality Teacher/Provider Standards

- Programs must include highly qualified teachers with a minimum Child Development Associate (CDA) or equivalent beginning in 2005. The lead teacher in each classroom must have an associate's degree in Early Childhood Education within five years of program implementation.
- The lead teacher in each classroom must have a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education within 8 years of program implementation.
- Financial and professional incentives should be developed to attract and retain quality Pre-K teachers with a bachelor's degree in early childhood education. Pay should be commensurate with that of K-3 teachers.
- Low student/teacher ratios should be maintained. VUPK classrooms should have a 1:10 maximum staff to child ratio. Maximum class size must not exceed 20 children; minimum class should be set at five children.
- All providers should meet Gold Seal Designation within 12 months after VUPK implementation.

Program Standards: Maximize Accountability

- All programs must meet state licensing requirements.
- The State Board of Education should develop statewide procedures and minimum standards for ensuring integrity and accountability of Pre-K programs and providers.
- All programs shall use research based, literacy focused, high quality, pre-academic curricula that enhance children's language, cognitive, emotional and social skills. To ensure that program curricula will promote positive outcomes for children, any curriculum selected must meet the *Florida School Readiness Performance Standards for Three-, Four-, and Five Year-Old Children*, approved by the Florida Board of Education. All curricula must include a parental involvement component.
- All programs must use both pre and post program assessments to compare student performance using a DOE developed statewide uniform diagnostic assessment of child outcomes. Assessments should be used to measure how well programs are preparing children for school. Assessments should not be tied to consequences for individual children.
- The DOE should develop and the SBOE approve meaningful consequences for poor performing schools (those with students assessed not ready for kindergarten using a new assessment model to be developed by DOE) and those that fail to meet established standards.
- The SBOE should review existing CDA programs for content and quality.

State Governance: Single Administrative Oversight

- The VUPK program should be located in and administered by the Department of Education to ensure that pre-kindergarten is an important component in Florida's educational continuum.
- Oversight for the VUPK program should be the responsibility of a Division of Early Learning created within the Department of Education.

- A broad-based Early Learning Advisory Council should be established to advise the State Board of Education and the Commissioner of Education on all issues pertaining to the VUPK program.

Local Governance: Ensure Local Involvement and Control

- A local modified governance structure should be maintained by consolidating the current local readiness coalitions into 28 Early Learning Councils. Early Learning Councils will provide oversight and accountability for early childhood education at the local level.
- Program planning, service coordination, and funding allocations should address the specific needs of each county.
- The voting majority of Early Learning Council members should be persons who do not have a substantial financial interest in the design or delivery of school readiness services.

Funding: Adequate Resources

- State funding for pre-kindergarten should be provided in the same amount per FTE as is provided for K-3 FTE.
- To ensure program integrity and accountability, funding to support the program should be provided to the DOE through a separate funding category. The DOE should allocate these funds using a calculation that is consistent with the calculation of the FEFP. The DOE should distribute the allocation to the Early Learning Councils for payment to providers for documented services.

K-3 Education in Florida

Florida’s reform efforts (The A+ Plan) to improve school readiness and the academic performance of students in the early grades has, according to the state’s accountability measures, resulted in some notable successes. However, the continued achievement gap between white and minority students remains an area of critical concern. High minority and poverty schools continue to struggle to improve student achievement and to attract and retain high quality teachers. National and state studies continue to underscore the importance, indeed the necessity, of teacher quality for improving student achievement. Qualified, competent, teachers in small classrooms are of particular importance for disadvantaged students, beginning with pre-kindergarten. Teacher quality, small teacher-student ratios, school leadership, parental involvement, mentoring, tutoring, quality after school programs and other intervention strategies may improve a student’s chances for success in school, even though the crippling and lingering effects of poverty and school segregation continue to plague Florida and the nation as a whole. The council should address these issues and construct new strategies for addressing how to close the racial gap between student achievement in Florida, while continuing to support innovative initiatives for improving all student learning.

Background

Unfortunately, many children start first grade without the cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills they need to learn and succeed at school. To help students get ready to learn by first grade, 42 states, including Florida, mandate that school districts provide kindergarten programs. Over half of the states fund all-day kindergarten programs and all states require kindergarten teachers to have a Bachelor of Arts Degree. As is true with pre-K programs, there is still debate as to the most appropriate curriculum and learning standards for pre-school age children. Some states have opted to require only half-day kindergarten as opposed to a full day of activities. Several recent research

studies have found that children who attended full-day kindergarten showed greater achievement and progress through their elementary school years than their peers who attended half day programs. A recently released longitudinal study from the National Center for Education Statistics revealed that children in the 1998-99 kindergarten cohort showed no substantive differences in reading, science, and mathematics achievement at the end of the third grade related to the type of kindergarten program (full or half day) that they attended.²² Proponents of full-day kindergarten maintain that those programs are not developmentally-appropriate when the purpose is to cram more curriculum into the day to teach 5-year-old children material that should wait until first grade. There is no disagreement among educators or education researchers over the importance and lasting impact of quality teachers (with B.A. degrees) for all kindergartners.

Kindergarten in Florida

In 1982, Florida's public schools began to offer universal kindergarten classes to children who had reached their fifth birthday on or before September 1 of the current school year. Kindergarten attendance is not mandated, but Florida's compulsory attendance law requires that students must enroll in school if they are six or will attain the age of six by February 1 of the current school year. Consequently, if parents chose not to send their child to kindergarten in a public or private school, and wait until their child is 6 to begin school; the school district may assign that child to kindergarten rather than first grade. In 2003, 191,956 children attended full day kindergarten in one of Florida's 67 school districts.

In addition to Florida laws and policies regarding kindergarten attendance, the *No Child Left Behind Act* requires schools nationwide to develop a transition plan to help children move smoothly from early childhood programs to elementary school. Schools are also required to provide parents with information on a kindergartner's developmental stages, how to get their child ready for kindergarten, and what to expect in kindergarten. Despite state and federal efforts to enhance student progression, children in Florida are retained in the early grades. At the end of the 2002-03 school year 13, 326 kindergartners (7.3 percent); 15, 370 first graders (8.2 percent); 10,384 second graders (5.6 percent); and, 28,028 3rd graders (14.6 percent) were retained.

Standards and Assessment in Florida Schools

In 1996, the State Board of Education approved the Sunshine State Standards (SSS) for grades PK-12. The SSS identify what students should know and be able to do when they complete each grade and contain both content and performance standards. Districts and schools have the responsibility (with assistance from DOE) of designing curriculum to teach the Sunshine State Standards. The SSS are divided into four grade-level clusters (PK-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12) that were designed to give districts some flexibility in designing their curriculum. As the state's demand for school accountability and student performance increased, the SSS were further expanded to include Grade Level Expectations in the subject areas of language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) is based on the Grade Level Expectations for mathematics and language arts for grades 3-10. Students in kindergarten, first and second grades do not take the Florida FCAT but are assessed during the year by several diagnostic tests, such as the DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) which is designed to help teachers assess three elements of early literacy: phonological awareness, alphabetic principle, and fluency with connected text; and the Standardized Reading Inventory (SRI) to assess reading fluency and comprehension. Because the state's accountability program does not include the primary grades

(K-3) some districts used the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-9) for grade 2 to enable them to assess how prepared their second graders are for grade three.

Class Size

In recent years, reducing class size has become a nationwide school-improvement strategy. Many educators and policymakers have long insisted that with fewer students, teachers can provide more focused, individualized instruction. While research for the most part tends to support the belief in the benefits of small classes, not all studies have shown that students learn more in smaller settings. What is clear is that class size reduction has the greatest positive impact on students in the early grades and most specifically for disadvantaged children from poverty and other at-risk backgrounds. Data from the U.S. Department of Education revealed that small classes had an equal, significant benefit on reading achievement of all kindergartners, while the positive effects were greater for minorities in first and second grade. A new report (Fall 2003)) from the American Educational Research Association (AERA), confirms that for minority students, smaller classes can shrink the achievement gap, lead to reduced grade retention, fewer disciplinary actions and less dropping out. But according to the AERA, classes must be reduced substantially (13 to 17 students in early grades) to achieve benefits. Importantly, the quality and training of the teacher in the classroom is as essential as the number of children in the classroom. The Tennessee Legislature tried to save money on its highly regarded class reduction initiative by assigning paraprofessionals to help teachers in larger classrooms. The addition of another adult (teacher assistant) had no positive effect on student achievement or behavior.²³

Florida's 1998 Maximum Class Size Study Act funded at least one school in each district to reduce class size to 20 in grades K-3, with critically low-performing schools to receive funding priority; 62 schools implemented the changes. In 1999, the Legislature appropriated \$100 million for the construction of additional classroom facilities to support district classroom size reduction projects. An examination of results from different types of achievement tests administered by class size reduction (CSR) respondents revealed that 71% of grades (1-3) showed an increase in reading scores from the previous year. The Act was not funded after 2000, but categorical funding was later provided to school districts to use for improvement in several areas including class size reduction.

In 2002, Florida voters passed a state constitutional amendment setting limits for the maximum allowable number of students in individual classes where a core course is taught. Beginning in fall 2010, no more than 18 students will be allowed in any K-3 core class in Florida's public schools. Districts with class sizes that exceed the constitutional class-size maximums must reduce class size by two students per year until 2010 or until reaching compliance with the constitutional maximums. According to the Department of Education (February 2004) 72 percent of all public school students (PK-3; 4-8; 9-12) are in classrooms over the constitutional caps. The largest percentage (71%) is among students in PK-3 classrooms. Although districts must comply with the constitutional mandate, it is the responsibility of the state to prove the costs associated with reducing class size. Federal funds may be used to supplement, not supplant state and local funds to meet the requirements of the amendment.

School Size

The overall size (population) of public schools is not part of the class size reduction mandate. Some educators and policymakers believe however, that smaller schools lead to a more conducive learning environment. In 2000 the Florida Legislature mandated that beginning in July 1, 2003 all plans for

new educational facilities would comply with standards set in law for “small schools.” New elementary schools were not to exceed a population of 500 students. That law has not been implemented at the district level. According to the National Education Association (NEA) the average size of a Florida elementary school is 54% higher than the national average. With an average of 682 students per elementary school, the average size of Florida elementary schools is the nation’s largest. In the 2003-04 school year, five of Florida’s 67 school districts were operating slightly below 100 percent capacity, while 62 of the districts were operating above capacity ranging from 102 percent to 107 percent. The statewide average is 107 percent above capacity.

Despite the benefits of smaller schools, there is evidence that school size is less important than other factors including, importantly, the demographics of the student population. A 2004 study on school performance among high and low achieving elementary schools in the twelve largest school districts in Florida revealed that the low achieving elementary schools had an average of 127 fewer students than the high achieving elementary schools, with enrollments of 664 and 791, respectively.

According to the study, *The Relationship Between Span of Control and School Performance in Selected High and Low Achieving Public Elementary Schools in Florida* (2004), a significant number of high achieving elementary schools are located in high growth areas of the school districts, where the demand for classroom space has exceeded supply and school facilities typically operate at 100-150% of capacity. The composition of families in these high growth areas is predominately white, middle to upper middle class, and extremely stable. By contrast, low achieving elementary schools, though smaller, were typically located in the older, “core city” sections of these school districts, in neighborhoods that were experiencing zero to negative growth. The composition of these families was primarily minority, working to lower class, and included significant numbers of migrant communities. As with so many educational initiatives in the recent decades, performance outcomes are affected by the socio-economic status of students, the quality of the teachers and their expectations of student performance, parental support and stability, and community involvement.

Literacy

Improving the reading and comprehension skills of Florida students, particularly those in the early grades is at the center of much of the state’s recent educational reforms. In 2001, Governor Bush signed an executive order creating Just Read, Florida! a comprehensive coordinated reading initiative aimed at helping every student becoming a successful, independent reader by the year 2012. The governor requested that the DOE work with local school districts, educators, parents and community members to review current reading programs, reading standards, effective teaching strategies and reading course requirements in order to support and strengthen literacy among children and families. The order established the Reading Research Center at Florida State University to offer advice and professional development based on new scientifically based reading research. As part of the multifaceted Just Read, Florida! initiative, the state established reading academies to offer intensive training and reading intervention strategies to K-3 teachers; reading camps for 3rd graders who had scored at level 1 of the FCAT; and workshops for parents with children struggling to learn to read. In 2003, the five component *Ready to Learn* program was developed to provide intensive reading instruction and remediation to third and twelfth graders who have a reading deficiency. During the summer of 2004, approximately 3,500 Florida teachers attended a reading academy. State funding for *Just Read, Florida!* increased to \$52 million for FY 2004-05.

Florida was one of the first states to receive a *Reading First* grant from the U.S. Department of Education as part of the federal *No Child Left Behind Act*. In 2003, the state received \$50.3 million,

the second payment of a six year grant totaling over \$300 million. The funds are awarded on a competitive basis to school districts to help prevent reading difficulties and failure in students in grades K-3. Schools must use “scientifically based reading instruction” that meets the eligibility criteria described by the federal legislation and Florida’s grant application. The strict accountability measures called Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) of the No *Child Left Behind* (NCLB) *program* are difficult for many schools to meet without the additional dollars to hire “highly qualified teachers,” provide summer-school programs, reading and math tutors in all levels and personalized intervention for each child. Under NCLB, schools are measured by how various student populations score on reading and math assessments among other measures. If one subgroup (the numbers of students required in each subgroup are determined by each state) fails to make sufficient scores, the entire school is classified as failing to make adequate yearly progress. In Florida, which bases its AYP standards on the A+ program, 77 percent of schools failed to meet adequate yearly progress under the federal legislation in 2003-04 (nearly 64% of schools met at least 9 out of 10 criteria for AYP). Indeed, Florida has one of the worst records in the nation when it comes to the NCLB Act. Because the state requires only 30 students in a subgroup for scores to count (some state’s require as high as 100 students to be in any subgroup) the more likely it is that the scores of at-risk, disabled and ESOL students are counted toward Florida’s AYP standards. While the 2003-04 standards required 31 percent of students to be reading on grade level and 38 percent to perform math on grade level, Florida’s 2003-04 standards will require 48 percent of students to read on grade level and 53 percent to perform math at grade level. The Florida Association of District School Superintendents has expressed concern that increases in NCLB criteria might mean more school failures and less federal money going to cash strapped district schools.

Florida’s initiatives to improve reading in the early grades seem to have had some effect. The results of the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) reading scores (2003) showed that Florida was the only state to show significant improvement (four points) in fourth grade reading. Florida surpassed the national average in fourth grade reading and was the national average in fourth grade math for the first time. Florida’s fourth grade reading score was 218 and the national public score was 216. Florida’s African American students improved over the previous years score to reach 198. Despite the gains in Florida’s reading score, only 32 percent of fourth graders can read at or above the proficient level (level 3) according to the NAEP. Florida’s fourth graders included in the NAEP score did not include the 28,028 third graders (72% of whom were minority students) who were retained the previous year. Interestingly, the results of the 2003 FCAT revealed that 60 percent of Florida’s 4th graders performed at or above grade level (levels 3, 4, 5). This disparity might be explained by the fact that NAEP has only 4 performance levels while FCAT has five. Students described as proficient by NAEP standards have demonstrated “competency over challenging subject matter.” This definition would align more with FCAT level 4 which defines a student who “has success with the challenging content of the Sunshine State Standards,” rather than level 3. Students who score at Level 3 have achieved “partial success with the challenging content of the SSS.” Therefore, it is not possible to compare the two assessment models.

Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test

As noted above, public school students must take the FCAT to determine if they are learning the Sunshine State Standards. Since 2002-03, third grade students who fail the reading portion of the FCAT (Level 1 achievement level) must be retained in that grade. Good cause exceptions are granted based on several factors:

- Limited English Proficiency students <2 Yrs in ESOL.

- Students with disabilities whose Individual education Plan (IEP) indicates FCAT participation not appropriate.
- Students who demonstrate an acceptable level of performance on the alternate assessment (SAT-9) or who score at 51% or higher on the FCAT-NRT (norm referenced test).
- Students who demonstrate proficiency in SSS through a student portfolio.
- Students who still demonstrate a deficiency in reading after two years of intensive remediation and were previously retained for a total of two years.
- Students with disabilities who participate in FCAT, still demonstrate a deficiency in reading after more than two years of intensive remediation, and were retained.

Questions on the FCAT are written for each grade level (3-10) to determine whether students have mastered the SSS in reading, math, writing and most recently, science. Third graders are tested in reading and mathematics. Scores are translated into achievement levels 1-5. According to the DOE, a Level 1 achievement level (scale score 100-258 out of a possible 500) means that a student has demonstrated “little success with the challenging content of the SSS.” A Level 2 achievement level (scale score 259-283) means that a student has demonstrated “limited success with the challenging content of the Sunshine State Standards.” Third graders who score at level 2 in reading by answering 52% of the questions correctly may move on to grade 4. A student who scores at a Level 3 “has partial success with the challenging content of the SSS but performance is inconsistent.” A student scoring at level three is considered by the DOE to be at grade level. At level 4, a student “has success” with the challenging content of the SSS. A student scoring in Level 4 answers most of the test questions correctly, but may have only “some success with questions that reflect the most challenging content.” To score at achievement Level 5, a student “has success with the most challenging content of the Sunshine State Standards.” Only six percent of third graders scored at achievement Level 5 in reading on the 2004 FCAT. Twenty two percent of third graders scored at level 1. Consequently, over 45,000 third graders are at risk of being retained in third grade in 2004-05. Students who attend private schools using corporate-tax voucher dollars deducted from the state treasury do not have to take the FCAT.

Research is divided over whether retaining students in the early grades, particularly third grade, is beneficial or detrimental to long-term student success. Although schools have always had the option to retain failing students, some states now require that students who fail to meet a certain criteria (usually a standardized achievement test) must be retained. Florida began its experiment with enforced student retention for third graders in 2002-03. Beginning that year, Florida law (s.1008.25 F.S.) required third graders who scored at the FCAT level 1 achievement level (allowing for certain exceptions) to repeat that grade. In 2002-03, 23 percent of the state’s third-graders who were tested (43,204 students) failed the reading portion of the FCAT test. Of those that failed, 12,403 (29 percent) were promoted to fourth grade based on good cause exceptions. Seventy one percent (28,028) were held back for the 2003-04 school year. In 2004, approximately 35 percent of those retained students failed the FCAT reading again.

Data from the spring 2003 FCAT State Demographic Report reveal that 36% of black 3rd graders and 31% of Hispanic 3rd graders scored at level 1 on the examination. At the same time however, less than half of black students (44%) and slightly more than half (52%) of Hispanic students scored at or above grade level (3 or above). In contrast, 75% of white students scored at level 3 or above. (DOE, *Third Grade Reading 2003 Profile*) While black students made up 24% of third graders statewide, they comprise 39% of all third graders retained in the 2003-04 school year. More than one in four Black males (27%) was retained in third grade following the 2002-03 academic year. Hispanic students, who comprise 22% of the total third grade population, accounted for 29% of the

total number of third grade students retained. One in five Hispanic males (21%) were retained in third grade after the 2002-03 school year. (Florida Association of School Psychologists, *Position Statement on Florida's Third Grade Retention Mandate*)

3rd Grade Retention by Race, 2002-03

Race	Number and Percent of 3 rd Grade Students by Race, 2002-03 (% of Total Students)	Number and Percent of 3 rd Grade Students by Race, 2002-03 (% of Total Retained)	Percent of 3 rd Graders Retained in Each Racial Group, 2002-03 (Females/Males)
White	94,995 (49%)	7,887 (28%)	8% (6%/10%)
Black	46,168 (24%)	10,942 (39%)	24% (20%/27%)
Hispanic	42,047 (22%)	8,050 (29%)	19% (17%/21%)
Asian/Pacific	3,579 (2%)	221 (1%)	6% (4%/8%)
Indian/Alaskan	536 (<1%)	69 (<1%)	13% (12%/14%)
Multi Racial	5,388 (3%)	544 (2%)	10% (8%/11%)
TOTAL	192,713	27,713	14%

Source: Florida Association of School Psychologists, from Florida Department of Education data

The 2004 FCAT results revealed some progress for third graders in Florida. Sixty-six percent of all 3rd graders scored in achievement level 3 or above on reading. This was a 3 percentage point increase (4.5%) over 2003. Twenty-two percent of 3rd graders scored in achievement level 1 on FCAT reading, a one percentage point decrease over the previous year's results.

Racial disparity in FCAT scores continue to persist despite some gains among minority students. Once again, in 2004, over 1/3 of black third graders (34%) scored at the lowest achievement level on the reading portion of the exam. Twenty eight of Hispanic students (a three percentage point decrease) scored at the Level 1 achievement level. Almost half of black third graders (49%) scored at grade level or better, while 56% of Hispanic students scored at the third level or above. In 3rd grade reading, the gap between white and black students who scored at grade level or above was 28 percentage points. Twenty-nine percent of students who received free or reduced lunch in third grade scored at the lowest achievement level.

Not surprisingly, Florida's fourth graders showed the greatest improvement statewide among all test takers. In 2003, 60 percent of 4th graders scored at grade level or above while in 2004, 69 percent scored at achievement level 3 or above. Interestingly, over 17,000 fewer 4th graders took the FCAT in 2004 than in 2003, a direct result of the state holding back failing third graders.

Pupil Progression Strategies

Florida has instituted a variety of initiatives and intervention services to help retained third graders overcome their academic deficiencies and move on to fourth grade as quickly as possible. Revisions to s.1008.25 F.S. by the 2004 Legislature directed districts to implement a policy for the mid-year promotion of any retained student "who can demonstrate that he or she is a successful and independent reader at or above grade level and is ready to be promoted to grade 4." Other initiatives contained in that legislation include:

- District school boards must allocate remedial and supplemental instruction resources to students who are deficient in reading by the end of grade 3.
- Each elementary school must regularly assess the reading ability of each K-3 student and notify the parents of children who exhibit a substantial deficiency in reading.
- Beginning with the 2004-05 school year, each district must establish a Reading Enhancement and Acceleration Development (READ) Initiative. The focus of these initiatives is to prevent the retention of grade 3 students and to offer intensive accelerated reading instruction to those grade 3 students who failed to meet standards for promotion to grade 4. The READ Initiative must provide a state-identified reading curriculum that has been reviewed by the Florida Center for Reading Research at Florida State University and meets minimum specifications as established in law. Each affected student must have a student progression plan. Districts have some latitude in developing those plans but major components include:
 - Retained students must be provided intensive interventions in reading to ameliorate reading deficiencies including at least 90 minutes a day of an uninterrupted block for reading. Other components of the third grade progression plan include: transitions classes containing 3rd and 4th grade students; tutoring and mentoring; small-group instruction; extended school day, week or year and summer reading camps; and, high performing teachers.
 - Districts must provide intensive summer reading camps using scientifically-based reading research approved by the DOE to students who scored at Level 1 on the FCAT. The camps help prepare students for an alternative assessment examination that is given at the end of the summer. Students who pass this exam are promoted to the fourth grade. Over 19,000 third graders attended one of the summer reading camps in 2003. A total of 2,888 students were promoted to third grade through the alternate assessment test.

The Florida Board of Education recently enacted a rule instructing district school boards to adopt and implement a policy for mid-year promotion. The rule (6A-1.094222) provides that promotions of retained third grade students should occur during the first semester of the academic year.

School Grades and Accountability

School grades in Florida have been issued since 1999; however, in 2002 significant changes were made in how school grade were calculated. Specifically, Florida's accountability system now takes into account the inclusion of student learning gains from one year to the next based on FCAT scores in reading and mathematics. Section 1008.34 F.S. requires the Commissioner of Education to prepare annual reports of student performance for each school and distinct in the state. State Board Rule 6A-1.09981 specifies which schools are included in the system and the criteria for designating school performance grades. The rule describes the rewards and recognition for schools, and the assistance and intervention provisions for low performing (D and F) schools.

School performance grades are determined by the accumulation of percentage points for six measures of student achievement based on: the percent of students meeting high standards in reading, mathematics, and writing; the percent of students making learning gains in reading and mathematics, and the percent of the lowest performing students making learning gains in reading. Learning gains are not determined for grade 3 students because there is no grade 2 test. Third grade FCAT scores are included in the percent of students meeting high standards. Schools must test 90-95% of their enrolled students.

Although overall school grades in Florida improved for the 2003-04 school year, the greatest improvement was among the state's elementary schools, 60 percent of which received an A grade. Out of 1,612 elementary schools, only 8 received an F grade while 62 received a D grade. Predictably, those F schools were overwhelmingly populated by minority students from disadvantaged backgrounds. F school minority student population percentages range from a high of 97 percent African American to a low of 80 percent minority (African American and Hispanic combined). Students at F rated schools eligible for free or reduced lunch range from a low of 60 percent to a high of 99 percent. As part of its *Assistance Plus Plan* for failing schools, the SBOE has approved requirements for school improvement that targets three areas: 1.) Quality educators, 2.) Targeted Funding; and, 3.) End of Social Promotion. In essence the *Assistance Plus Plan* requires districts to locate and hire high quality staff, adopt an incentive system to retain quality staff, and fully utilize state funds to assist targeted F schools. As is true nationwide, Florida schools mirror the social and economic realities that continue to challenge efforts to improve educational opportunities for all children. Holding children and schools accountable to higher standards and tougher sanctions must coincide with a like commitment to providing the fiscal and human resources to get the job done.

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