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## **Introduction**

Floridians overwhelmingly passed a constitutional amendment in November 2002, calling for the provision of a prekindergarten learning opportunity for all four-year-olds that is “voluntary, high quality, free, and delivered according to professionally accepted standards”. After a veto of legislation passed during the regular 2004 Legislative Session, legislators crafted implementation language that was accepted and signed by the Governor during a special legislative session in December 2004. In addition to the creation of the Voluntary Universal Prekindergarten (VUPK) program, legislators made substantive changes to Florida’s School Readiness Act with ramifications for the implementation of universal prekindergarten.

*How will Florida citizens, policy makers, program developers and funders know . . .  
. . . whether the VUPK works?  
. . . which children benefit and which ones do not?  
. . . what makes the difference for our children and why?  
. . . how to strengthen the program so that no four-year old is left behind?*

These questions and more will go unanswered as things now stand. Absent from the legislation is the provision of a comprehensive evaluation of the VUPK program. Instead, policymakers have mandated the assessment of children at kindergarten entry and the use of individual child data to compile a “kindergarten readiness rate” for VUPK programs. There are concerns in the early childhood field regarding the use of individual child data as a basis for evaluating programs due to the high variability in development and the difficulties of assessing young children. This approach falls short of providing a comprehensive evaluation. It fails to assess the quality of the VUPK program and its systems and to determine the long-term success of Florida’s VUPK investments.

## **The Importance of Evaluation**

Floridians are investing in the Voluntary Universal Prekindergarten (VUPK) program with the expectation that there will be positive outcomes for children, families, and communities as a result of high quality early childhood experiences. Many citizens recognize the challenges some children face and how these challenges create costs for everyone.

*The vision of The Policy Group for Florida's Families and Children is that, together, we will ensure a generation of young people who grow up to be responsible adults - ready, willing and able to contribute to self, to family and to their community.*

Depending on what is being measured, studies have found 25 percent to 60 percent of children are not ready for kindergarten when they begin, and half of the children who drop out of high school were among those that were behind before they entered kindergarten (Klein, 2004a). Important information has been gained from the Perry Preschool Project, the Chicago Parent-Child Centers; the Abecedarian; Cornell Consortium; the Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study; the NICHD Child Care Study; and the federal government's Early Childhood Learning Studies. Major investments in these studies have been able to inform policy and program developers about the potential of early childhood programs to positively impact child outcomes in the short-term and long-term. Florida's VUPK program design is less intensive (e.g., 3 hours per day, lower requirements for teacher credentials, etc.) and less comprehensive (e.g., literacy focused, no requirements for parent involvement and supports, non-tiered reimbursements, etc.) than most of the above models, and assumptions and findings from these studies may not apply. It is important to thoroughly evaluate the model that will be implemented in Florida.

In addition, there is evidence that children across socio-economic categories benefit from high quality early childhood programming (National Research Council, 2001), and states that are investing in early education and care initiatives are realizing benefits. North Carolina's Smart Start evaluation efforts documented that children attending programs that received Smart Start technical assistance were more likely to enter kindergarten ready to learn and had 50 percent fewer language delays and behavior problems. They also found positive relationships between Smart Start technical assistance, classroom quality, and child outcomes (Bryant & Ponder, 2004). Likewise, evaluation of Georgia's universal prekindergarten program found positive outcomes for children and indications that Georgia was meeting its school readiness goals (Raden, 1999). The increasing population of children served in early childhood settings while their parents work, and the growing evidence of the value of early childhood programs, have worked in concert to focus attention on the benefits of early investments.

Nonetheless, there is much yet to learn and understand regarding the relationships between specific program elements and positive outcomes. Further research is needed regarding the economic impact of early childhood programs. More rigorous methods, research designs, and psychometric measures appropriate to different cultural groups need to be developed and/or utilized. Additional information is also needed regarding the factors that influence social competence, and the relationship between the educational background of teachers and child outcomes (Zigler, Haskins, & Lyon, 2004). The profession has not systematically studied the effects and interactions of specific elements of early education and care. The program options (and likely variations in local strategies within the Florida VUPK system) afford opportunities for identifying critical factors of quality and best practices. Florida should invest in evaluation efforts to study these elements with a commitment to utilizing critical components of effective evaluation in order to inform future practice and policy/program development decisions.

A comprehensive evaluation can show how well the VUPK works and for whom; it has the capacity to assess the adequacy and efficacy of the program design, implementation, and effectiveness. Additionally, a comprehensive evaluation will inform the state, local early learning coalitions and program providers about which programs are effective in improving readiness for school and why as well as which programs are inadequate and why. Such important knowledge will help inform policy makers and funders about how to improve the program and what corrections to make to get results parents and taxpayers expect - the best results for Florida's children.

## Critical Components

Early childhood experts, economists, foundation leaders, and scientists have called for more rigorous evaluation of prekindergarten programs (Gilliam & Zigler, 2000; National Governors Association, 2005; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000; Raden & McCabe, 2004). The consensus of these experts is that a comprehensive evaluation should include the following components:

- ◆ **Longitudinal analysis** (e.g., following and comparing VUPK participants and non-participants' successes/failures through elementary school);
- ◆ **Analysis of multiple factors or variables** (e.g., capturing process and results – what works, for whom and why; using valid and reliable instrumentation);
- ◆ **Coordination across systems** (e.g., AWI, DCF, DOE, DOH, and local early learning coalitions as well as private and public provider systems);
- ◆ **Third-party evaluation** (e.g., independent of implementing agencies);
- ◆ **Rigorous research methods** (e.g., yielding findings that are valid for policy purposes and program improvement); and
- ◆ **Sensitivity to gaps in achievement for segments of Florida's population** (e.g., racial, ethnic, educational, socio-economic)

Projected to cost approximately five percent (5%) of the total VUPK budget based on national estimates (Golin, Mitchell, & Gault, 2004), an evaluation incorporating these elements will yield important information regarding the short-term, intermediate-term, and long-term benefits and challenges of providing universal prekindergarten in Florida and provide lessons for the nation as a whole.

### *Longitudinal Analysis*

Effective interventions take a longer view of change. In order to produce important outcomes, time is needed to launch an initiative, develop relationships, and provide necessary supports (Ghazvini & Foster, 2001). Longitudinal analysis affords the best opportunity for the discovery of sustainable child and program outcomes and assures a long-term commitment to ongoing review and program corrections. With its concentrated resource requirements, longitudinal analysis also provides increased opportunities for coordinated and shared evaluation partnerships.

The time frame for longitudinal analysis is dependent upon the goals and purposes of the evaluation. Although some in the field argue that prekindergarten programs should not be held accountable for sustaining impacts beyond kindergarten or first grade (the stated purpose of many prekindergarten programs is to prepare children for school readiness or kindergarten), length of follow-up is typically well into elementary school. In a review of thirteen evaluations of state prekindergarten programs, Gilliam and Zigler (2000) found that evaluators began child assessments as children entered prekindergarten programs, and the median length of final assessment was in third grade. Two states followed children into middle school, and one state completed their evaluation in tenth grade. When follow-up does extend into elementary school and beyond, evaluators typically underscore the importance of assessing and controlling for school environments beyond the prekindergarten year in order to draw conclusions about the effects of prekindergarten (Raden & McCabe, 2004).

### ***Analysis of Multiple Factors or Variables***

Florida's VUPK system is complicated. Parents may choose from three program options: a school-year program consisting of 540 instructional hours in private early childhood settings, a school-year program consisting of 540 instructional hours in public school settings, and a summer program of 300 instructional hours in either a public school or private setting. Children, families, and communities are multidimensional and add increasing complexity to the program mix. Program structure, program quality, teacher characteristics, teacher qualifications, teachers wages and benefits, child risk and resiliency factors, family risk and resiliency factors, community risk and resiliency factors, and home-school interactions are variables, based on previous research, that are likely to impact child outcomes. In addition to tracking child outcomes, evaluations should also use multiple measures to track progress toward system outcomes (e.g., integrated service delivery) and program outcomes (e.g., quality of care improvements) (National Governors Association, 2005). It is critical that the instrumentation selected for these measures be valid and reliable so that findings are defensible and credible. Analyses that incorporate multiple factors or variables (i.e., multivariate) are most likely to shed light on how best to use resources to realize the greatest impacts.

### ***Coordination of Evaluation Efforts across Systems***

In Florida's VUPK system, the enabling Act places responsibility for implementation in three state-level governmental entities and numerous local entities. The Agency for Workforce Innovation is responsible for state-level coordination and operation of the program. Local coordination is provided by early learning coalitions (formerly called local school readiness coalitions) and school districts. The Department of Education is responsible for the development and implementation of accountability measures, including a new statewide kindergarten screening, and assigning each prekindergarten provider with a "kindergarten readiness rate". The Department of Children and Families continues to have responsibility for licensing and regulation of private early childhood providers as well as the responsibility for the accompanying training requirements and delivery mechanisms. Although a role for the Department of Health is not specified in the Act, health issues are crucial to children's successful growth and development, and the Department of Health oversees many programs (e.g., Medicaid, Children's Medical Services, mental health programs, and programs for children with special needs) that interface with early childhood systems. Evaluation of the implementation of these various program components as well as the operational practices of the implementing entities is important to understanding system effectiveness and efficiency. Such evaluation efforts require careful coordination.

Coordination of evaluation efforts is best accomplished when joint goals and benchmarks are established, and there is cooperative tracking and reporting of progress toward outcomes for children, families, schools, communities, and state systems. Connectivity of state data systems and unified data collection requirements also increase the potential for more effective and efficient evaluations. Furthermore, there should be opportunities for evaluators who work on different components of the system to share information, resources, and ideas (Ghazvini & Foster, 2001; National Governors Association, 2005).

### ***Third-party Evaluation***

Programs often use evaluation data to support core program funding and to demonstrate the utility of continued support for their services. When ongoing funding is tied to evaluation results, there is pressure from all sides to report or emphasize positive results. Additionally, there is a tendency in political environments to design evaluations and report findings in ways that highlight good outcomes and minimize findings of no program effect (Shonkoff, 2004). Constructive criticism and opportunities for quality improvements are often lost in the struggle for service continuation. Use of third-party evaluators helps to resolve this dilemma.

Equally important is the willingness of policymakers and funders to use evaluation data to reward the opportunity for revealing serious criticisms and problems in order to make important mid-course corrections early on in the creation and implementation of the VUPK system and its programs. Sound third-party evaluation designs have great potential for supporting continuous quality improvements. The utility of extending the evaluation process over time cannot be overstated. Longitudinal third-party evaluations can provide policymakers, funders and implementers with valuable and credible information about realized impacts and benefits of successful programs and enable the making of difficult decisions to de-fund or change those programs that are ineffective.

### ***Rigorous Research Methods***

Careful attention must be given to how evaluations are designed in order to provide meaningful findings that can serve as the basis for policy decisions and program improvement. Sound study design is critical to interpretation and use of results. Policymakers in Georgia recognized the importance of determining the outcomes of prekindergarten efforts in the state and conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the implementation of the program. Early evaluation findings indicated that Georgia was meeting its school readiness goals; however, due to the limitations of the study design, reliable causal interpretations of the data were not possible (Raden, 1999). A national review of research on prekindergarten initiatives found similar limitations in research design (Raden & McCabe, 2004). At the federal level, the Institute of Education Sciences requires that programs purchased with federal funds be proven as effective through the use of experimental studies with random assignment of participants to treatment and non-treatment groups in order to offer the best assurances regarding cause and effect. In Florida, random assignment to VUPK and non-VUPK settings will not be possible nor desirable.

There are other rigorous research methods, as demonstrated by evaluation efforts in North Carolina's Smart Start Program (Bryant & Ponder, 2004), that lend credibility to findings. Use of comparison groups is one method that increases evaluation credibility. Careful matching of demographic and motivational characteristics of participants with a group of non-participants for tracking and data collection provides better assurances to policymakers that findings are the result of program interventions and not other factors (Raden & McCabe, 2004). Use of qualitative data collection methods as well as quantitative methods is another evaluation practice that can increase information on complex service implementation practices (Ghazvini & Foster, 2001).

Additionally, it is important for any comprehensive evaluation to recognize and control for the major differences in children's entry-level skills at the beginning of the prekindergarten program in order to better understand those disparities that may remain at the end of the program. One technique for controlling for these differences is to collect valid and reliable measures of each child's skills at the beginning and at the end of the VUPK experience. Two aspects should be measured:

- ◆ Relative Information – How much have the children learned and progressed developmentally during the course of their VUPK experiences?
- ◆ Absolute Information – What do the children know at the end of the VUPK experiences and are they adequately prepared to be successful in kindergarten and later in their academic efforts? A corollary to these questions, for those children who have started behind, is, have they “caught up” so that they will not remain left behind in their future school experiences?

Rigorous research methods must also ensure the use of measures that are valid, reliable, and sensitive to the diversity of children and families that are served (Zigler et al., 2004).

### ***Sensitivity to Gaps in Achievement***

*"The fundamental premise at the core of our state's education policy should be unequivocal. Every child can learn and no child should be left behind."* (Governor Jeb Bush, January 2003)

Disparities in test scores remain among racial and ethnic groups despite a narrowing of the gaps in educational achievement over the past thirty years. These differences are associated with socioeconomic status and parental education levels. Sixteen percent of black and 22 percent of Hispanic twelfth-grade students displayed “solid academic performance” in reading compared to 42 percent of white classmates in the 2002 National Assessment of Educational Progress with similar gaps in mathematics, science, and writing. Although most of the focus and data on racial and ethnic gaps in educational achievement are on school-age children, sizable gaps already exist by the time children enter kindergarten. Children who perform poorly on tests of cognitive skills during the preschool years are more likely to have academic and social challenges during elementary and high school than their higher-performing preschool peers. Problems of self-regulation (i.e., children who have difficulty sitting still, are aggressive and disruptive) are also predictive of future problems. In a national survey of more than 3,500 kindergarten teachers in the late 1990s, 46 percent indicated that at least half of the children in their classrooms were having problems following directions, and problems were more common among black and Hispanic children than among whites (Rouse, Brooks-Gunn, & McLanahan, 2005).

Researchers know that socioeconomic status is associated with the inequities, but there are many factors that go hand-in-hand with poverty complicating the picture as to why socio-economic status matters. Although many factors are linked, there is growing evidence that increasing access to high quality early childhood programs may be the most promising strategy to boost the achievement of minority children (Rouse et al., 2005). Longitudinal research and program evaluation are needed to more clearly identify how interventions can make an impact across differences in achievement.

## Conclusion

There are national efforts underway to highlight and support early childhood research and evaluation. The National Governors Association (NGA) recently released the Final Report of the NGA Task Force on School Readiness, Building the Foundation for Bright Futures. The report calls for ensuring accountability for results of school readiness investments by building comprehensive and coordinated statewide systems that include strong evaluation components. In addition, private foundations and diverse professional organizations are making significant contributions to expanding and disseminating early childhood research. The Pew Charitable Trusts, the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), The Child Development Foundation, the Trust for Early Education, Fight Crime Invest in Kids, The Committee for Economic Development, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the Packard Foundation, the Joyce Foundation, and the McCormick Tribune Foundation are making major contributions to early childhood research and evaluation efforts. There are also national efforts to pool and share evaluation resources. The School Readiness Indicator's Project focused on sharing information across states and facilitated the development of school readiness indicators in 17 states. The Build Initiative, a project of the Early Childhood Funders' Collaborative, directed resources toward the development of comprehensive early learning systems in five states (Klein, 2004b).

Florida must ensure that the investments made in VUPK yield positive outcomes for children, families, and communities. Longitudinal, multivariate, system-coordinated, and third-party evaluations utilizing rigorous research methods and sensitivity to gaps in achievement are most likely to supply the answers to important questions regarding program design, implementation, and outcomes. The Policy Group estimates that such an evaluation will cost approximately 5 percent of the total VUPK budget. Progress depends on an evolving knowledge base that informs policy direction, assists with midcourse correction, and guides public investments (Ghazvini & Foster, 2001). It is responsible and wise to put an evaluation system into place that will monitor the state's investments and increase understanding regarding critical program components and their implementation.

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