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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”. Absent from the implementing legislation is a comprehensive evaluation of the VUPK Program. Instead, policymakers 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. In addition, this approach falls short of providing a comprehensive evaluation. It will not provide the range of information needed to assess the quality of VUPK programs and systems and determine the long-term success of VUPK investments. A comprehensive evaluation has the capacity to assess program design, implementation, and effectiveness; informing funders, policymakers, program designers, program implementers, taxpayers and parents about the efficacy of the VUPK program and ways to ensure its success in the short- and long-terms. The Policy Group recommends that five percent of the VUPK budget be set aside to support a high quality evaluation of the program.

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). Such 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 both 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 the 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)

An evaluation with these components can 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.

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 racial and ethnic gaps in achievement are most likely to supply the answers to important questions regarding program design, implementation, and outcomes. 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.

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.