

Quality Universal Prekindergarten in Florida should provide parents with choices for programs that are:

- ❖ Comprehensive
- ❖ Integrated
- ❖ High Quality
- ❖ Family Focused
- ❖ Accountable

## *Implementing a Quality Universal Prekindergarten Program in Florida*

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**The Policy Group** urges Florida's policymakers to carefully consider the thoughtful recommendations that have been proposed by the UPK Education Advisory Council, the State Board of Education, and many early childhood organizations and advocates regarding the implementation of universal prekindergarten. We boldly suggest that the state of Florida has an opportunity and an obligation to make the "right" choices for young children. We know the components of a quality system that will support later academic success and future well-being, and we cannot afford to provide less for our children.

Recommendations that do not address the increased requirements and funding to support a quality universal prekindergarten system, if implemented, will lead to an inadequate and ineffective system.

### **The Broad Vision**

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. As much as possible, families and their natural support systems (i.e., extended family, friends, and neighbors) ensure these outcomes for children. Many families require additional supports and rely on primary and specialized services at one or multiple times as they raise children. The Policy Group believes that to realize this vision of well-being for all children and families we must focus our thinking on identifying and promoting evidence-based policies and practices that produce healthy births, healthy child growth and development, educational success, family stability and

safe and supportive communities. It is to this end that the case for integration of services is made.

To this end, **The Policy Group** urges Florida's policymakers to exceed the expectations of many and implement a comprehensive strategy of integrated service delivery with far-reaching consequences for families and young children. Years of research have revealed that poverty, gender, low birth weight, maternal education, race, birth defects, and health status are significant predictors of readiness to start school.

*Impacting these predictors requires a comprehensive integrated system that begins before pregnancy, incorporates health and pregnancy planning services, and supports parents.*

Embracing this approach would include envisioning prekindergarten as one step in a continuum of services preparing children for success in school and life and will require attention to these five areas:

**Comprehensiveness** - Universal prekindergarten should be one component of a system that spans the birth to age five population and provides families with access to a continuum of holistic services that includes parenting, health, family, and economic supports.

**Integrated Service Delivery** - Fiscal and administrative policies must promote the integration of services with no “wrong door” for families to enter to access the continuum of services.

**High Quality Services, Supports, and Practices** - There must be a commitment to high quality services, supports, and practices throughout the school readiness system.

**Family and Community Involvement and Decision-making** - All services and supports provided to families should recognize the importance of the parent-child relationship, and services should be available in local communities with opportunities for local decision-making.

**Accountability** - The system should include multiple types of appropriate assessment and evaluation, enable data sharing, and prevent inappropriate forms of measurement.

*Making the “right” choice and creating a quality universal prekindergarten program is Florida’s only real choice.*

*“The significance is clear. The social, emotional, educational, and economic advantages from high quality preschool programs translate to better lives for children, their families, communities, and society as a whole .”*

— National Institute for Early Education Research, 2003

Note: for references and citations, please see the corresponding publication, Comparison of Universal Prekindergarten Recommendations (Pub #2004-3001). Visit [www.policygroup.org](http://www.policygroup.org) for a copy of this and other publications of The Policy Group.

The November 2002 passage of a constitutional amendment to provide voluntary, universal prekindergarten to all four-year-old children and our state's increased commitment to school readiness are indications of the value Floridians place on young children. Florida must do the "right" thing and design and implement a quality universal prekindergarten program.

## Making the "Right" Choice: A Quality Universal Prekindergarten Program

### What We Know from Research

Cognitive, social, emotional, and motor development are complementary, mutually supportive areas of growth all requiring active attention during the early years through responsive, interpersonal relationships with parents, teachers, and other adults.

Children who attend well-planned, high-quality early childhood programs in which curriculum aims are specified and integrated across domains tend to learn more and are better prepared to master the complex demands of formal schooling.

An appropriate assessment system uses separate, reliable and valid assessments appropriate to support learning, for identification of special needs, for program evaluation, and for accountability.

Sustainable programs with positive outcomes for children and families are associated with a holistic approach to service provision, local service integration, and local community input and decision-making

Teachers with four-year degrees tend to be more responsive and sensitive, provide richer language and cognitive experiences, and are less authoritarian and punitive

Lower adult-child ratios are associated with more extensive teacher-child interaction and individualization, and less restrictive and controlling teacher behavior.

Smaller group size is associated with greater child initiations, opportunities to work on extending language, mediation of children's social interactions, and support for exploration and problem-solving.

High quality is associated with stable funding, sufficient to provide livable wages and benefits for staff, implement lower staff-to-child ratios, maintain needed equipment and materials, and support ongoing education and training needs.

Parental involvement is an essential indicator of preschool quality and increases opportunities for formal and informal linkages supportive of more positive outcomes for children, families, and communities.

Strong, high-level leadership is a critical component for implementation of successful comprehensive initiatives.

### Policy Requirements

Establish requirements and supports for the well-rounded development of children across cognitive, social, emotional, and physical domains.

Identify acceptable curricula that support integrated learning across all domains of development and include clearly identified goals and objectives.

Identify appropriate assessment choices that are reliable and valid for each purpose. Avoid assessment misuse (e.g., use of assessments designed for instructional planning inappropriately to make high-stakes decisions such as placement of children or funding decisions).

Assess family needs and create opportunities for linkages between universal prekindergarten and other local child and family support services, including early childhood programs for infants and toddlers.

Establish a maximum qualified adult-to-child ratio of 1:10.

Establish a maximum group size of 20.

Institute a five to eight-year phase-in of a four-year college degree (in early childhood education or related field) teacher education requirement (for at least one teacher per class).

Provide a stable funding source, in addition to current school readiness funding for four-year-olds, which will support adequate wages and benefits, lower adult-to-child ratios and group sizes, training and education scholarships, and needed equipment and materials.

Require parental involvement.

Implement administrative structures to foster and maintain strong, high-level leadership.

# THE POLICY GROUP

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**The Policy Group** is an independent, non-partisan policy research organization composed of local and state leaders who are working together to enhance the well-being of Florida's families and children. The vision of **The Policy Group for Florida's Families & 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. For additional information about **The Policy Group**, this paper or other products, please visit our web site at [www.policygroup.org](http://www.policygroup.org).

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