

VPK Project
Phase 2 Report: Site Visit Pilot

In 2015, the League of Women Voters of the Villages/Tri-County Area (LWVTRI), in conjunction with the Lake/Sumter branch of the American Association of University Women (AAUW), undertook a project to examine and summarize early childhood learning experiences in Florida, specifically the voluntary pre-kindergarten (VPK) programs in Lake, Marion, and Sumter Counties. Interested readers can find the report from the first phase of the project on the website of the LWVTRI (<http://www.lwvtrifl.org/>) under "Publications."

We undertook that investigation with the two-pronged, and ambitious, goal of learning about VPK by meeting with Early Learning Coalition (ELC) directors as well as visiting VPK programs. In the first phase of the project, we addressed only the first part of that goal. As we met with directors in all three ELCs, the complexity of the VPK program became evident; questions led to answers, which led to more questions. By the end of the first phase we had a clearer understanding of VPK, but our understanding came from the perspective of the ELCs and did not reflect what happens in the day-to-day activities of VPK classrooms.

Recommendations from the first phase included following through with our original plan to visit VPK classrooms. We adhered to that recommendation during the 2016-17 academic year. Our intent was to gain an understanding of the day-to-day operation of VPK classrooms for 4-year-olds and the challenges the owners/directors and teachers face. Toward that end, we conducted a pilot project in the spring of 2017 in preparation for conducting site visits to complete the project. The purpose of the pilot study was to see if our procedures and materials worked and to get a sense of the issues that VPK teachers and directors face.

It is important to note that our site visit plan focused on programs in the private sector rather than in the public schools. We made this decision because the majority of VPK programs are private, and the programs in the public schools operate somewhat differently than those in the public sector. Thus, all schools that we visited are private, although some offer services in addition to VPK (e.g., School Readiness, Headstart).

Procedures

Seven volunteers worked in teams of two to conduct site visits at six VPK programs, with two programs from each county (i.e., Lake, Marion, Sumter). All programs were participating in the Performance Funding Project (PFP) during the 2016-17 academic year. The PFP is a voluntary quality improvement initiative offered through Office of Early Learning that provides professional development, instructional supplies, and funding to participating providers. In addition, a trained observer conducts the CLASS, an observational instrument that assesses adult-child interactions, at the beginning and end of the PFP year to measure the teachers' improvement as a function of participation in the professional development opportunities associated with the PFP.

Teams conducted site visits in May and June 2017. Each visit included a classroom observation and interviews with the program's owner/director and the VPK teacher. In addition, the CLASS scores for all six lead teachers were included in the pilot data.

Findings

The following findings are drawn from the combination of observational and interview data and scores and comments from the CLASS.

1. VPK is underfunded. Although we knew this from our interviews with the ELC directors, seeing it from the perspective of the providers underscores the challenges providers face. Allocations don't cover the costs of operating the programs; limited resources impact the quality of services they can provide.
2. VPK teachers across counties are relatively skilled in providing emotional support and in organizing their classrooms for learning, although there is still room for improvement in both areas. In contrast, VPK teachers across counties are challenged to provide instructional supports to facilitate children's learning.
3. Teachers and owners/directors support professional development. They participate in staff training frequently, and they appreciate most those trainings that focus on classroom management, lesson planning, learning strategies, and ways to implement experiential learning.
4. While all CLASS scores improved from pre- to post-testing, amount of gain was low, with gains in score points ranging from 0.06 to 0.29.

Given the teachers' responses in the pilot interviews, it is likely they would be receptive to in-service training focused on improving instructional learning formats, concept development, quality feedback, and language modeling – all dimensions with relatively low scores on the CLASS. In addition, teachers most frequently participated in online training, conferences, and short workshops, but the limited gain from these experiences suggests that other models of professional development should be explored.