

**FAQs about VPK:  
What We Learned from Our Three-Year Examination**

VPK Project Steering Committee  
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In March of 2015, the League of Women Voters of The Villages/Tri-County Area (LWVTRI) initiated a program to learn about Florida's Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK); the League has continued that program in each year since then. Initially, the intent was to gather information and learn about VPK, but that intent quickly evolved to include advocacy. In this report, we summarize the information we gathered in our inquiry into VPK, and we offer a position for Florida's League of Women Voters to consider.

**How did we learn about VPK?**

For the past three-plus years, we have been working on the VPK project. During the first year (Phase 1), we developed questionnaires and used them to interview directors of the Early Learning Coalitions in the Lake, Marion, and Sumter tri-county area. Following those interviews, we developed other questionnaires for interviewing VPK owners/directors and teachers, and we developed a checklist to guide classroom observations. We invited six programs to participate in a pilot of our planned site visits.

After the pilot, we launched Phase 2. We revised the pilot instruments and we trained volunteers to participate in the project. We trained some volunteers to interview owners/directors and teachers and observe in VPK classrooms during site visits to programs; others developed a database for analyzing quantitative results or worked on qualitative analysis of reports from site visits. In all, our teams visited 17 randomly-selected programs in Lake, Marion, and Sumter Counties during the 2017-18 school year.

**What is VPK?**

Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten, or VPK, is the result of an amendment to the Florida constitution:

“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 professionally accepted standards.** [([https://ballotpedia.org/Florida\\_Universal\\_Pre-Kindergarten,\\_Amendment\\_8\\_\(2002\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Florida_Universal_Pre-Kindergarten,_Amendment_8_(2002)))] (emphasis added)

Florida voters passed the amendment in 2002, and the program was implemented state-wide in 2005. It is **voluntary** in that parents choose to enroll their children in the program, and they do not suffer negative consequences if they choose not to enroll their children. It is **free** to families in that all funding comes from the State, with no mandated funding from other sources.

Quality is a slippery idea, difficult to define and measure. But there are indicators related to program characteristics that can help us understand the quality of VPK in Florida. Specifically, teacher qualifications, length of program, and maximum number of children in the classroom are often seen as good indicators of quality. Thus, **high-quality** programs are associated with better-prepared teachers, more program hours per day, and fewer children in the classroom. Conversely, low-quality programs are

associated with less well-prepared teachers, fewer program hours per day, and more children in the classroom.

All VPK providers in Florida are required to use curricula that facilitate children's achievement of age-appropriate milestones as specified in Florida's Early Learning and Developmental Standards. That requirement suggests that instruction is **delivered according to professionally accepted standards**. But there is no requirement that instruction adhere to best-practices for preschool-aged children.

VPK providers operate under the Early Learning Coalitions, which are the local agencies that oversee the VPK providers in their catchment areas. The ELCs, in turn, come under the Department of Education's Office of Early Learning. Some locations, such as Lake and Marion Counties, have one ELC that serves the entire county. Others are part of a multi-county coalition, like Sumter County, which is part of the Nature Coast Early Learning Coalition.

### **How does VPK differ from School Readiness and Head Start?**

Although all three programs serve a similar population, they differ in terms of eligibility and participation requirements and funding sources. VPK targets all 4-year-olds, regardless of family income or work/school status. It is completely free to all families in Florida, and the state is its only funding source.

The School Readiness Program "offers financial assistance to low-income families for early education and care so they can become financially self-sufficient and their young children can be successful in school in the future" (Florida School Readiness Fact Sheet). The program serves children from birth to age 13 years who come from low-income families and whose parent(s)/guardian(s) are working or participating in an educational activity at least 20 hours/week. Families must pay a copayment for child care based on income and family size. The program is funded primarily by a federal Child Care and Development Fund Block Grant, but matching funds from the Early Learning Coalitions also support this program.

Head Start is a federally-funded program designed to provide education, health, and social experiences for 3- and 4-year-old children from very low-income families. Recently, funds have been available to expand services to children birth-to-3 years. This program is called Early Head Start. Both Early Head Start and Head Start have a family income requirement for children to participate.

### **Why is high-quality VPK important?**

The purpose of VPK is to ensure that children are ready for kindergarten. In a broader sense, VPK is like breakfast: It lays the foundation for children to become productive contributors to our economy. The higher the quality, the stronger the foundation, and ultimately the better the outcomes for the State. In that regard, Florida's Chamber of Commerce as well as the business leaders of the Council of 100 predict outcomes from high-quality early childhood programs for Florida's children. Children who have participated in a high-quality pre-kindergarten program will be more likely to graduate from high school and go to college and less likely to engage in crime and go to jail. Helping young citizens achieve at higher levels in the long term, and stay out of jail in the process, lead to millions in annual savings statewide related to prison costs, welfare payments, and special education services.

## **What is the quality of Florida's VPK?**

After the voters passed the amendment in 2002 to establish VPK, the State Legislature was tasked with defining the program. They specified that VPK teachers needed a Child Development Associate credential (CDA) to teach no more than 20 children for 3 hours per day. These parameters refer to the quality indicators of teacher qualifications, class size, and number of program hours per day; they also correspond to a low-quality level. They stand in contrast to the parameters that correspond to a high-quality level where teachers need a bachelor's degree to teach no more than 15 children for 9 hours per day. Florida's VPK is of low quality.

Quality comes at a cost. In 2015, the National Institute for Early Education Research estimated the annual per-child cost for a high-quality program at \$13,649. Even low quality comes at a cost. NIEER estimated the annual per-child cost for a low-quality program at \$3,214. That's a huge difference. Unfortunately, the current per-child allocation for Florida's VPK is \$2,437. A quick calculation shows that VPK is under-funded by \$777 per child. That estimate is in 2015 dollars, and allocations have not changed since the 2014-15 school year. But because of changes in the cost of living, the amount of the funding deficit isn't staying the same; it's increasing.

So, Floridians voted for a high-quality program, but they got a program that is both low-quality *and* underfunded.

## **Why do current funding levels provide inadequate support for VPK?**

Per-child allocations do not cover program operating costs. In most programs, allocations *may* cover teacher salaries, but if they do, they do not also cover other costs such as curriculum, materials, playground equipment, facility overhead, and the like. We saw the impact when a new requirement came from the Department of Children and Families to re-surface playgrounds; the requirement specified the materials to be used and the depth of the surfaces. Providers can lose their license for non-compliance but complying meant that needs of the academic program would go unfilled. Such shortfalls directly impact program quality.

## **Are VPK teachers underpaid?**

The short answer is: maybe. We had learned from the ELC directors that teacher salaries are low, and many require public assistance or a second job to make ends meet. Interviews with owners/directors in the pilot supported that claim, but Phase 2 interviews did not. In Phase 2, interviews yielded salary information in various formats. Some reported annual salaries and these included values of \$13,500, \$15,000, \$22,000, and \$40,250. Others reported hourly wages of \$10, \$10.50, \$11, and \$13. These values don't tell the entire story because some teachers may also serve as directors and their salaries are higher. In addition, many of the teachers work part-time and are paid only for the three-to-four hours of their time in the program; working part-time would dictate the need for a second job to make ends meet. The highest annual salary appears to be an outlier: the teachers work full time and their positions require specialized training. Salaries of the teachers in our sample ranged from about \$10 to \$14.50 per hour, which is within the current range for minimum wage.

Interestingly, only five of the owners/directors interviewed in Phase 2 would spend additional funding on teacher salaries. Others would spend new monies on building improvements, curriculum support and

materials, more parental involvement with more programs, classroom furnishings, science materials, and computers and sound stations.

We also were told in Phase 1 that, because salaries are so low, the programs suffered from frequent staff turnover. But the programs we visited in Phase 2 had no problem with VPK staff turnover; all had stable, long-time VPK teaching staff. However, staffing the child care portion of their service was a big challenge as providers have difficulty finding qualified workers for non-teaching child care positions. So, child care workers hired to be teachers and those hired to be babysitters meet the same requirements to get their jobs, but their job expectations are substantively different.

### **What other factors impact program quality?**

Teacher qualifications are an important contributor to program quality. VPK lead teachers must hold a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, which is the same required credential for general child care workers. National competency standards dictate that students working toward a CDA complete 120 clock hours of instruction in 13 functional areas. The content is broad because child care workers need to know about safe and healthy learning environments, child development, working with families, program management, and professionalism. Although strategies for advancing children's physical and intellectual competence are included in the curriculum, limited time is devoted to how to teach preschoolers. The CDA is the credential required of both preschool teachers and those who provide child care but without an educational intent, that is, babysitters. Thus, preschool teachers, including VPK teachers, are charged with a task that they are under-prepared to do.

Based on analysis of site visit interviews and observations, lead teachers facilitate children's social-emotional development well; they love kids and it shows. They also organize their classrooms to facilitate children's learning. However, they fall short in providing instructional support, that is, teaching. The kinds of training they wish they had related to lesson planning, classroom management, and other teaching skills, which suggests that they are aware of the situation. Although they frequently participate in in-service training and professional development opportunities, they also are challenged to generalize their learning to their own classrooms. In that regard, most of the teachers we observed in both the pilot and the Phase 2 site visits did not adhere to best practices for teaching preschool-aged children. That is, instruction was largely teacher-directed and centers were used as holding spaces: If a child finished work the teacher presented to the class, that child was allowed to go to a center until the next teacher-directed activity began.

### **How might quality of VPK programs be improved?**

Short of changing the law to require teachers to hold a bachelor's degree in early childhood education, teachers need opportunities to be coached in their own classrooms. At least two training models exist in the Lake-Marion-Sumter tri-county area. One is provided by United Way of Lake and Sumter Counties, and the other is provided by the public schools in Sumter County.

United Way's Master Teacher Program was developed in Polk County and recently has been offered to licensed child care VPK programs in Sumter; the programs are from the private sector rather than the public schools. For the program, a master teacher works as a mentor and a coach for a VPK teacher in her own classroom for a total of 20 school days. Mentors/coaches talk with VPK teachers about an array of teaching methods, demonstrate those methods, and provide critique and feedback to facilitate improvement. United Way describes the program as on-the-job training for early childhood teachers to

help them apply knowledge gained in classrooms to develop positive, practical teaching skills. In addition to a professional development experience, VPK teachers get materials for their classrooms as well as a monetary stipend. The reported outcomes are impressive for teachers and their students. Teachers improve their teaching skills by 33 percent, and children improve their vocabulary scores an average of two months for every one month of exposure. In the Sumter County Public Schools, VPK teachers receive the services of mentors who float among the VPK programs. Mentors monitor teachers' classroom effectiveness and offer supports for improvement.

**What is the League of Women Voters of The Villages/Tri-County Area's position regarding VPK?**

The Florida League of Women Voters has a position statement regarding education.

The League supports Florida's constitutional requirement to make adequate provision for the education of all children that is 'uniform, efficient, safe, secure and high quality'.

This position is broad and general and, therefore, leaves room for specification. Such a focused position will enable the League to frame an action plan for advocacy around VPK. Thus, the proposed position regarding VPK is as follows:

Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten allocations must cover providers' operating costs and appropriate in-service training for teachers so that VPK students receive better preparation for kindergarten and beyond.