



Establishing the Need for an Investment in Pre-Kindergarten Education

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) conducted a study of the Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten program through observations and interviews in a representative sample of 23 programs in Lake, Marion, and Sumter counties from 2016-2018. To see our full report, go to www.lwvtrifl.org. The following is a brief summary of findings.

Florida's VPK program, mandated by the state constitution and funded only by the state, provides free early learning experiences for all 4-year-olds. Operating since 2005, the program's intent is to provide educational programming to facilitate children's cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development so that they are ready for kindergarten and school success, which in turn will prepare them to become contributing members of society.

What's working well

- Nearly 80 percent of Florida's 4-year-olds enroll in the VPK program each year.
- Almost all VPK teachers do an excellent job facilitating children's social-emotional development; they love kids and it shows.
- Most VPK teachers do a good job in organizing their classrooms for student learning.
- Although pay is relatively low (\$10 -\$14.50/hour), the teaching staff in the programs visited was stable and relatively experienced.

What could be improved

- Teacher qualifications are an important contributor to program quality. VPK lead teachers must hold a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, or its equivalent, which is the same requirement as for child care workers (babysitters). The content of the 120 clock hours is spent on a wide range of topics with limited time devoted on how to teach preschoolers.
- Most teachers struggle to organize and deliver age-appropriate instructional experiences, and they have a desire for more training related to lesson planning, classroom management, and other teaching skills.
- Although teachers participate in required in-service training, they struggle to generalize their learning and implement it in their own classrooms.
- The Florida Legislature sets VPK funding amounts annually. The base student allocation has decreased for several years. The National Institute for Early Education Research ranked Florida 40th in state spending on preschool.

What needs to be done now?

- Increase allocations for Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten that cover providers' operating costs (increase by \$800 per child)
- Provide funding for and offer appropriate in-service training for teachers so that VPK students receive better preparation for kindergarten and beyond. Ideally, teachers need opportunities to be coached in their own classrooms as in a Master Teacher Program developed in Polk County.

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