

Early Childhood Programming: VPK in Florida

The League of Women Voters of The Villages/Tri-County Area (LWV), in conjunction with the Lake / Sumter American Association of University Women (AAUW) branch, has undertaken 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.

Introduction

Definitions

While we have seen a number of early childhood program types mentioned in the literature, some confusion exists about definitions. Accordingly, we offer definitions here to clarify and focus the project.

Child care seems straightforward, yet it appears to be used commonly as a catchall term for all early childhood services. Such broad-based usage likely contributes to the confusion surrounding program types for children. However, according to Florida Statutes Chapter 402, “*Child care* means the care, protection, and supervision of a child, for a period of less than 24 hours a day on a regular basis, which supplements parental care, enrichment, and health supervision for the child, in accordance with his or her individual needs, and for which a payment, fee, or grant is made for care.”

Most child care is purchased by families for their young children (birth to 5 years) or for afterschool care for their school-age children, and the majority of child care services are provided in Florida by private, for-profit programs. Although the majority of child care programs are licensed and monitored by the Department of Children and Families, Florida also allows some programs – for example, family child care and religious-affiliated programs – to be licensed-exempt. These programs are not required to receive on-site monitoring. Licensure standards focus on the health and safety of caring for children and include limited requirements regarding curricula and early learning activities.

The cost of care can be quite high for young families, especially because families utilize child care at a time in their life when they are likely to have the lowest family income, and cost is not always a reflection of the quality of care. Families often choose care based on the cost or location rather than an assessment of the quality of services. There is some federal, state, and local funding to assist families who qualify in purchasing child care services. In Florida, the Office of Early Learning oversees these funds, and local early learning coalitions administer the funds locally. The majority of these funds are provided to care for children from low-income, working families or children in protective services care due to abuse or neglect. Child care providers that agree to serve eligible children must meet school readiness standards that exceed licensure requirements but fall short of assuring high quality services.

Head Start is a federally-funded program that began in 1965. Its express purpose is to provide early education experiences for children from very low income families – that is 100% of the federal poverty level – and, according to the Office of Head Start’s Web site (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs>), “Head Start promotes school readiness of children under 5 from low-income families through education, health, social, and other services.” Since its inception, Head Start has had the goal of “providing vulnerable preschool children and their families with comprehensive services to help them be ready for school.” By definition, Head Start provides early education experiences for children who qualify –3- and 4-year-old children from low-income families – and the Federal Office of Head Start oversees local agencies that provide Head Start services.

Early Head Start serves children between birth and 3 years; as such, it is of less immediate interest to this project although it provides an important start for children that often transition to Head Start or other child care programs. Oversight for both Head Start and Early Head Start includes specification of and compliance with standards as well as technical support and resources for Head Start providers. While Head Start is clearly a pre-kindergarten learning program, it is not the same as VPK.

Voluntary Prekindergarten (VPK), as described here, is unique to Florida, although similar programming is found in other states. According to Florida's Office of Early Learning Web site (http://www.floridaearlylearning.com/voluntary_pre_k.aspx), "VPK prepares early learners for success in kindergarten and beyond." VPK was mandated in 2002 with a constitutional amendment that required quality programming for all 4-year-olds in the State. Like Head Start, VPK is an early learning program, but it is funded by the State of Florida through the Office of Early Learning. That office specifies program requirements, which include:

- eligibility criteria
- staff-to-student ratios
- class size
- teacher qualifications
- curricular and performance standards
- developmentally appropriate outcome assessments

Specifically, all children legally residing in Florida who turn 4 by September 1 of any given year are eligible. VPK programs are typically 3 hours in length. School year programs offer 540 hours of instruction and summer programs offer 300 hours of instruction. Programs must have a minimum of four students and are allowed a maximum of 20 students. During the school year, a staff-to-student ratio of 1:11 must be maintained, and a 1:12 ratio must be maintained during the summer session. There must be one credentialed instructor for 11 students, and that instructor must have a minimum of a child development associate credential (CDA), although equivalent credentials may be approved by the Department of Education. Classes with 12 or more students require a second instructor, but that teacher need not be credentialed. Credentialed instructors must also have training in VPK performance standards and emergent literacy. The performance standards address what children should know and be able to do and include:

- emergent literacy,
- oral communication,
- knowledge of print and letters,
- phonemic and phonological awareness, and
- vocabulary and comprehension development

These performance areas have implications for the curriculum that program providers choose. VPK program providers must also conduct child assessments that are developmentally appropriate and measure progress in all areas of development, including early literacy, numeracy, and language.

While it is clear that there are a number of options for early learning experiences for Florida's children, we are interested in how tri-county area VPK providers implement programs.

The Mandate and Administrative Oversight

On the November 2002 ballot, as a result of a citizen-driven initiative, Florida voters passed a constitutional amendment to offer free, high-quality, voluntary pre-kindergarten (VPK) programs to every 4-year-old in the state. The VPK program started in 2005 when HB 1A was signed into law, and programming began in September. Local early learning coalitions (ELCs) are responsible for declaring children eligible for VPK, for processing early learning provider applications, and for monitoring provider compliance with state-mandated programmatic requirements.

Although state level administration has changed over time, local administration by early learning coalitions has remained consistent. The Department of Education (DOE) Office of Early Learning (OEL) is now the state level administrator. OEL administers state child care funds through coordination and management of early learning coalitions (ELCs) across the state.

The ELCs were created in 1999 by the School Readiness Act (F.S. 411.01) to oversee the state's school readiness program. When VPK was mandated, it was included in the responsibilities of the ELCs. Currently, 30 ELCs manage an integrated system of early learning services in the state, including VPK.

While some ELCs are comprised of single counties, other ELCs represent multiple counties. In that regard, three ELCs operate to oversee the VPK program in the tri-county area. Lake County and Marion County each have their own ELC. Sumter County has been combined with Citrus, Dixie, Gilchrist, and Levy into the Nature Coast ELC. The LWV / AAUW exploration of VPK began by meeting with the directors and staff of the ELCs in our area.

Method

We developed a questionnaire (see Appendix A) and distributed it to the directors of the ELCs in the tri-county area. Subsequently, meetings were held at each ELC to determine responses to the questionnaire and to learn more about how the ELCs operate.

The meeting in Lake County was held on August 10, 2015; attendees were

- Leshia Buchbinder, Director of the Lake County ELC
- Roseann Fricks, Director of the Marion County ELC
- Simone Hylton-Ellis, Compliance Coordinator for the Lake County ELC
- four members of the LWV / AAUW VPK committee: Joanne Coen, Margy Barrett, Susan Gold, and Linda Carpenter

The meeting in Marion County was held on August 25, 2015; attendees were

- Roseann Fricks
- Leshia Buchbinder
- Elizabeth Deola, Quality Initiatives Director for the Marion County ELC
- Judy Johnson, board member for the Marion County ELC
- Robert Colen, Board Chair for the Marion County ELC
- three members of the LWV / AAUW VPK committee: Joanne Coen, Margy Barrett, and Linda Carpenter

The meeting with the Nature Coast ELC was held on September 22, 2015. Sonya Bosanko, Director of the Nature Coast ELC, was out of town, but members of the LWV / AAUW VPK committee met with Sandra Woodard, Sumter County Program Manager for the Nature Coast ELC. Ms. Woodard provided information about operation of the Sumter County office. Committee members who attended this meeting included Joanne Coen, Margy Barrett, Susan Gold, and Linda Carpenter. We met with Ms. Bosanko on February 3, 2016, to understand how a multi-county ELC operates.

Results

In the following sections, we present findings about children, facilities, teaching staff, child assessment, curricula, funding, and infrastructure. The data provided apply to the program year, which includes the school year as well as the summer session.

Children

Table 1 displays the number of children eligible and the number and percentage of children served in each county during the 2014-15 Program Year. These data were reported by each ELC.

Table 1
Eligible and Served 4-year-olds x County: ELC Data

County	Number Eligible	Number Served	Percentage Served
Lake	3,506	2,466	70
Marion	3,581	2,917	81
Sumter	532	491	92

The Lake County ELC bases its estimates on the State’s Pre-K Estimating Conference. According to those data, they had 3,506 eligible 4-year-olds, 2,466 of whom (70%) were served in a VPK program. Marion County bases its eligibility estimates on the percentage of past kindergarten enrollments; there were 3,581 eligible 4-year-olds in the county, 2,917 of whom (81%) were served. Sumter County’s data, as reported by Ms. Woodard, reflects all children who requested services; she was unaware of the Estimating Conference or of any effort to estimate the numbers of children to be served in any given year. According to data provided, Sumter County had 532 eligible 4-year-olds; 491 of those children (92%) were served.

According to data reported by the OEL in their online Fact Book (http://www.floridaearlylearning.com/oel_resources/fact_book.aspx), the numbers are a little different. Table 2 displays the number of children enrolled in each county as well as the number who were eligible but not enrolled for the entire 2014-15 program year.

Table 2
VPK Eligibility and Enrollment x County: State Data

County	Total Eligible	Enrolled	Eligible, Not Enrolled	Percentage Enrolled
Lake	2,528	2,408	120	95
Marion	2,617	2,484	133	95
Sumter	497	497	0	100

The data reported by the state, compared to data reported by the ELCs, show fewer children eligible in all counties but a larger percentage of children enrolled. While the ELC data show approximately a 70 to 80 percent enrollment rate, state data reflect 95 to 100 percent of eligible children as actually enrolled in the program.

While the ELC Directors maintain their own census data, they recognize the discrepancies and attribute them to differences in the ELC and the OEL reporting protocols. They also explained that children who are eligible but not enrolled may be seeking services in programs other than the State’s VPK classrooms.

Regardless of the data set used, the ELCs in the tri-county area are serving at least 70 percent of the eligible children in VPK programs. And this is a substantial service.

None of the ELCs maintain a waiting list. The Directors agreed that, “Once a child is determined eligible for the program, the parent/guardian is issued a VPK Certificate of Eligibility. The parent, in turn, selects a VPK provider and submits the certificate of eligibility to them. Based on the time of enrollment, the provider may have a waiting list.” A waiting list is not allowed for VPK although the School Readiness Program is allowed to maintain such a list. Because the VPK program is a part of our Florida Constitution, our State leaders have to find the funds to insure all eligible and interested 4-year-old children have the opportunity to attend the VPK program.

Facilities

A number of facility types provide VPK services. These include public schools, private licensed facilities, faith-based providers, and family child care homes. Table 3 displays the facility types for each county.

Table 3
Facility Type x County

County	Total N	Public		Private		Faith-Based		Family Child Care	
		n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Lake	77	18	23	55	71	4	5	0	--
Marion	113	23	20	73	65	12	11	5	4
Sumter	19	4	21	15	79	0	--	0	--

Public facilities are those programs operated in a public school site, but all program types – public, private, faith-based, or family child care home – are specifically licensed as VPK child care providers by

the state. Faith-based providers are church-affiliated, and some may be classified as “religious-exempt” – that is, they are not regulated by the Department of Children and Families. As shown in Table 3, the largest proportion of VPK providers in all counties are private, with public school providers standing as the second most common type. Relatively few providers are faith-based or family child care homes. It is also important to note that faith-based providers are not considered a separate provider type by the State. All public school sites are required to comply with the Florida Statutes for VPK, which means the paperwork is still required to be submitted to the ELCs and a contract has to be entered into between the ELC and the Public School District.

At the time data were collected, in Lake County, two children with disabilities were attending VPK programs. In Marion County, one such child was attending VPK programming, and no children with disabilities were attending VPK programs in Sumter County. This does not mean, however, that only that number of children with disabilities resides in the county. One component of VPK is Specialized Instructional Services (SIS). Rather than attend a VPK program, children with disabilities may use their SIS allotment and receive services through programs other than a non-special services VPK.

All facilities that provide VPK programming are accepted and approved as providers in the same way across counties. The ELC Director in Marion County described the process in this way: “Each provider that has an interest of becoming a VPK provider submits a complete VPK application and all of the required forms. The provider also has to submit the required documents to accompany the VPK application. A one-on-one appointment is scheduled with each individual provider to review that all documents are current and meets the VPK requirements. Once the VPK forms and documents have been approved the provider will be invited to attend the VPK Contract Signing. During this time the Executive Director goes over all of the contents included in the VPK Contract including the rules and statutes that apply to VPK.”

Beyond issuing contracts, the ELC monitors programs, and the monitoring process is similar across ELCs. Twice each year, the ELC monitors, through on-site classroom reviews of private providers, that the program is in compliance with Florida Statutes and State rules, and that the program is in compliance with the terms of the Statewide VPK Provider Agreement. Public facilities are responsible for monitoring their on-site VPK programs. For both private and public providers, the results of monitoring are shared with the providers.

If a provider fails a monitor visit, the provider is required to submit a corrective action plan within 14 business days of receiving the compliance report. If the corrective action plan is approved, another site visit is scheduled at a later date. If the provider fails the second visit, the results of the compliance monitoring report are forwarded to the Quality Initiatives Staff for technical assistance. Any violations relating to staff-to-student ratio, capacity, lack of proper background screening of staff, or unqualified teachers are forwarded to the Department of Children and Families licensing department, and the provider is not paid for the day of the noncompliance.

Teaching Staff

Table 4 displays teaching staff by county as reported by the ELCs.

Table 4
Teaching Staff x County

County	Lead Teacher	Assistant Teacher	Substitute Teacher	Total Teaching Staff
Lake	155	120	113	388
Marion	169	108	127	404
Sumter	19	19	--	38

As specified in statute, the minimum educational requirement for a lead teacher in any setting is a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, preparation in emergent literacy, and knowledge of Florida Developmental Standards for 4-Year-Olds. All VPK lead teachers must also have a Level II Background Screening along with an affidavit of good moral character. Although these requirements are the same for all providers, based on VPK law, both Lake and Marion County Public Schools require a lead teacher to have a minimum of a baccalaureate degree and a valid Florida teaching certificate as well as a clear Level II Background Screening. In the data reported by the ELCs, there is no distinction made between lead teachers with the minimum credential and those with baccalaureate degrees. In Sumter County, all VPK teachers, regardless of public or private status, must have a CDA or equivalent credential to teach during the school year. During the summer session, and according to VPK law, public school teachers must hold a clear teaching credential, which requires a baccalaureate degree.

Assistant teachers are held to a lesser standard. For private providers in all counties, assistant teachers are required to have a valid Level II Background Screening and an affidavit of good moral character. In Lake County Public Schools, assistant teachers must have a minimum of an associate degree or a passing score on the teacher assistant assessment along with a Level II Background Screening and an affidavit of good moral character. In Marion County, the public schools require assistant teachers to have at least passed the Para Professional Test or have a minimum of 60 college credit hours and a valid Level II Background Screening.

Both Lake and Marion ELCs offer the following training to lead and assistant teachers:

- Florida Development Standards for 4-Year-Olds
- How to Administer the VPK Assessment
- Phonological Awareness
- Teaching Strategies Gold Basic Training

Lake County ELC also offers the following trainings to their lead and assistant teachers:

- Nursery Rhyme Any Ole Time
- Math in the Pre-K Classroom
- Circle Time in the Pre-K Classroom
- Lesson Plan 101

In Marion County ELC, the following trainings also are available to lead and assistant teachers:

- Math Centers for the VPK Classroom
- Inspiring Spaces

- ABCs of Letter Naming
- CPR First Aid

In both counties, private and faith-based providers are offered the same training through the coalition, but individual site training may vary per provider. Public school providers in both counties provide additional training for their teachers based on district guidelines.

In the Nature Coast ELC, staff members provide 45 hours of training each year, and VPK teachers are invited to attend all sessions. The Sumter County office prioritizes training focused on inclusion and provides this training quarterly. They also provide training in Florida's education standards for birth to five-year-olds, and that training is provided once or twice a year. In July, the office provides training about standards for 4-year-old children; this training is required for VPK lead teachers so that group has priority for the training. Staff members have also been participating in new state-level training; the CLASS tool is an observational instrument that focuses on teacher-child interactions. In addition, the ELC-level trainers are trained in the most popular curricula used in the county (there are 38-40 curricula on the state-approved list). We asked specifically about training in phonemic and phonological awareness, as these areas are consistently weak across providers. The 4-year-old standards include these areas: approximately 3 hours are devoted to this emerging literacy skill.

Child Assessment

Assessment of child performance with the VPK Assessment, a tool developed by the FSU Center for Reading Research, is required twice per year under all ELCs: Assessment Period 1 occurs 30 days after enrollment and Assessment Period 3 occurs 30 days before program end. If a program provider is on probation, it can choose or be required to assess during Assessment Period 2 in December or January. This tool addresses language, literacy, and numeracy only and is administered by a teacher to individual children one at a time.

A new observational, formative child assessment protocol, Teaching Strategies GOLD, is being implemented this year. It is a valid and reliable assessment tool that measures all areas of development and is designed to inform instruction in the classroom. Only one data entry is required this year, but it is anticipated that two data entries will be required next year. Although the primary purpose of this assessment is to inform classroom instruction, aggregate data can be utilized to show child progress over time. Training and experience of use will be required before there can be confidence in the aggregate data.

Lead and assistant teachers are trained to administer both assessments. However, in many VPKs, assistant teachers administer the assessments while lead teachers continue with instructional programming; in other programs, the reverse is true.

In no ELC do results of these assessments link to kindergarten readiness rates. Rather, those rates are calculated at the beginning of the kindergarten year through administration of the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screener (FLKRS). According to an October 2014 overview of VPK program accountability (http://www.floridaearlylearning.com/sites/www/Uploads/files/Providers/VPK/FLKRS_VPK_Accountability_Overview_11-07-14.pdf), the actual measures included in FLKRS have changed over the years, but tasks have included letter naming, phonemic awareness task, vocabulary comprehension, listening comprehension, and some observational measures.

Results of kindergarten readiness testing determine “low performing” program status; that is, a program is placed on probation because it has not prepared children adequately for kindergarten. The timing of readiness testing is viewed as problematic by the ELC staff because it does not account for how children performed during the VPK program. Rather, it typically assesses child performances after children have been out of a program for the summer. In addition, results of child performances from private VPKs are not routinely available to public school kindergarten teachers, which leads to rocky transitions for many of the students coming out of VPK programs. In an effort to address this transition problem, Marion County ELC is launching a pilot program to get private VPK and public school kindergarten teachers talking to each other.

Results of kindergarten readiness testing for VPK programs under the three ELCs were not readily available. Although we were directed to a Web site where we could access readiness data, the information is actually password-protected. However, according to an OEL VPK Fact Sheet (<http://www.floridaearlylearning.com/sites/www/Uploads/files/Oel%20Resources/Publications/2015%20VPK%20Fact%20Sheet%20Families.pdf>) 82 percent of children who completed VPK in 2013 were ready for kindergarten compared to 53 percent who did not attend. These data suggest that children who completed a VPK program – that is, they attended at least 70 percent of scheduled programming – were better prepared for kindergarten than children who did not attend.

Kindergarten readiness rates determine program status; at least 70 percent of any given program’s graduates must be found kindergarten-ready for the program to avoid probation. A program on probation must submit an improvement plan that incorporates two target areas for improvement. One of the areas must be selection of a DOE-approved curriculum or completion of the DOE-approved Staff Improvement Plan. In Lake County there are currently 7 of 77 programs (9%) on probation; in Marion County there are 13 of 113 programs (11.5%) on probation. Sumter County reported one of 19 programs (5%) on probation. However, Sumter County data were from the 2012-13 program year, and seven of the 19 programs in operation in 2015-16 did not have readiness data reported. Thus, the more accurate number of programs on probation in Sumter is 12 (8%).

It is important to address the reason for this data gap, which relates to how the state has measured readiness. In 2013-14, when readiness for the 2012-13 year would have been reported, the state declared the data unreliable and discarded the information. The state then revised the Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screening (FLKRS) and relevant data will be available in December of 2015.

State measurement and reporting issues aside, the VPK Regional Facilitators, Professional Development Managers, and Quality Initiatives staff provide technical assistance to help programs on probation. In addition, the VPK Facilitator from OEL brings other training and offers a statewide perspective.

In the ELCs studied, the major reasons for probationary status are staff turn-over and misunderstandings about how to use the curriculum. High staff turn-over is thought to be related to the fact that staff do not work under a contractual relationship, and they are not paid particularly well if a better-paying job comes along, staff members have little incentive to stay in the VPK. Such turn-over likely feeds into misunderstandings in using the curriculum as new staff are brought in during program implementation.

Curricula

According to statute, each VPK provider’s curriculum must be:

- developmentally appropriate

- designed to prepare students for early literacy
- enhance age-appropriate student progress in attaining state-adopted performance standards
- prepare students to be ready for kindergarten based on statewide kindergarten screening

VPK providers may select or design the curriculum for their classrooms, unless they are on probation as a result of their kindergarten readiness rates falling below the minimum rate. For a provider placed on probation, the state has an approved list of VPK curriculum that the provider can choose from. This list is available online on the OEL Web site

(<http://www.floridaearlylearning.com/sites/www/Uploads/files/School%20Readiness/2014-2015%20SR%20Approved%20Curriculum%20%20Cycle%201%20and%202%20-%20Final.pdf>). It contains 63 approved school readiness curricula for children aged birth to 5 years; a smaller subset is applicable to the 4-year-olds enrolled in VPK programs.

Funding

According to a 2015 study conducted by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) (<http://nieer.org/publications/new-too-costs-outquality-pre-k>), annual per-child costs are \$3,214 for 3-hour programs that enroll 20 children in classes with a lead teacher who holds a CDA credential. While NIEER discusses a tool that costs out quality pre-K programs, details of the formula are not addressed. The notion of “quality” is elusive, but the model described seems to include number of children in the classroom, teacher credential, and length of program. It is important to note that, under the NIEER-described model, the 3-hour program with 20 children and a CDA-certified teacher is considered the lowest level of quality.

According to Florida’s VPK Payment Rate Schedule for the 2014-15 program year (<http://www.floridaearlylearning.com/sites/www/Uploads/files/Providers/2014-2015%20VPK%20Funding%20Allocations.pdf>), the base allocation was \$2,437 for the school year and \$2,080 for the summer session in all three counties in the tri-county area. The ELC gets 4 percent of the base allocation for their operating costs. In Lake County, providers were actually paid \$2,374.61 per child for the school year and \$2,026.75 for the summer. In Marion County, the respective values were \$2,348.05 and \$2,004.08; in Sumter County, the values were \$2,349.76 and \$2,005.54.

ELC Directors stated that, “the cost to operate a VPK program at the provider level varies based on a number of important factors including credentials of the program, available resources, and program structure (hours per day, days per week, etc.)” The directors are currently surveying providers to get an accurate sampling of these data, but the costs appear to be more than allocation.

For a provider, the difference between allocated state funding and actual costs are made up with private parent fees, school readiness wrap funding, and available scholarships from parent organizations, if available. Per Florida Statute, VPK providers cannot charge for enrollment or any portion of the VPK Program offered. The provider can distribute a “wish list” of supplies that a parent can voluntarily donate to help supplement the cost of program materials. A provider can also raise their enrollment rate for services offered outside of VPK hours. Some providers might use other program funding, such as the USDA food program, to help bring in some revenue. Providers might apply for grants or scholarships as applicable. In addition, blended funding (for example, Head Start and VPK, Child Care and VPK) is permitted as long as the funding streams do not occur simultaneously throughout the day. For example, VPK classroom hours can be run from 9:00 A.M. to 12:00 P.M. while the Head Start program run from

12:00 P.M. to 5:00 P.M. Essentially, blending funding from programs such as extended day care and wrap services is permitted as long as the blended services supplement the VPK program.

ELC Directors shared that Florida ranks low in funding and in teacher and program requirements. Thus, Florida's Association of Early Learning Coalitions (AELC) has specified legislative priorities for 2015-16. Regarding VPK, AELC will work to "restore funding for Florida's . . . VPK to support providers in meeting performance standards." Toward that end the AELC has specified the following goals:

- Restore VPK student funding levels to those provided during FY 2007-08 to ensure programs can meet performance standard requirements (school year base student allocation in 2007-08 was \$2,677 versus \$2,437 for 2015-16)
- Revise the VPK assessment and readiness rate process to incorporate a valid, reliable, and authentic assessment of child progress, addressing all domains of development and delivered during the VPK program year
- Improve Florida's rankings regarding the quality of VPK by reducing staff to child ratios back to 1:10 or better and requiring: 15 hours annually of in-service training for each staff member; lead teachers to have specialized training in prekindergarten; secondary instructors to have a CDA credential; and vision, hearing, health, and developmental screenings for each child

The Florida Legislature sets VPK funding amounts annually. An estimating conference is held prior to the start of session, and population projections are utilized to determine the likely number of 4-year-olds that will participate in VPK for the upcoming year. Based on the projected participation rate, the established base student allocation, and a 4% allocation to cover administrative costs at the local and state levels, funding levels are established. Until the 2015 Legislative Session, base student allocations decreased for several years. Specifically, per child allocations decreased consistently, from \$2,825 in 2008 to \$2,238 in 2014 (Barnett, Carolan, Squires, Brown, & Horowitz, Florida Profile, 2015; http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/Florida_2014_1.pdf) with a slight increase in 2015. Base student allocations do not vary based on quality of care provided, and no funding is provided to local early learning coalitions to provide program technical assistance and quality improvement support. Once the base student allocation is established, state funding is guaranteed to serve all eligible children that participate because the program is constitutionally mandated.

Infrastructure

In the survey distributed to the ELCs in the tri-county area, "infrastructure" relates to each coalition's board as well as volunteer opportunities.

Board meetings in Lake and Marion Counties are held every other month at the ELC offices in each county. Board composition and criteria for membership are defined by statute; at least 15 but not more than 30 members are permitted. In Lake County, the board currently consists of 18 members; in Marion County the board currently has 21 members. Because Sumter County is part of a multi-county ELC, the board for the Nature Coast has representatives from each participating county. Accordingly, at least four board members of the Nature Coast ELC represent Sumter County. In all counties, people who wish to serve on the board submit an application, which is reviewed by the Executive Committee for compliance with Florida Statutes. Members may serve a maximum of two consecutive four-year terms. After allowed terms have ended, a member must wait one fiscal year to re-apply.

Ms. Bosanko identified Board composition as one of two major differences in overseeing a multi-county rather than a single-county ELC. Among other requirements, one-third of the board must be from the private sector, and there must be one school superintendent. In a single-county ELC, these requirements would not be problematic, but in a multi-county ELC, equivalent representation of all counties in the coalition is difficult to achieve. Beyond Board composition, a difference between multi-county and single-county ELCs is the fact that each county has a different “flavor” of local leadership as well as different cultures in local providers. As a result there is an additional layer of administration under the ELC director, with Program Managers in each county who understand the local culture and know how to work within it most effectively.

Both Lake and Marion County have volunteer programs. In Lake County, volunteers can participate in community events, back-to-school events, Uniting for Children Conference, Day in the Park, outreach events, and the Big Blue Bus program. Each volunteer is trained based on the task at hand. In Marion County, volunteers must successfully complete a Level II Background Screening; volunteers are chosen from the College of Central Florida and the local Career Source. Training depends on the department to which a volunteer is assigned, and training is conducted by the Director or the manager of the relevant department. Sumter County does not use volunteers for its programming. Directors in all counties agreed that advocacy was the way in which we might be of greatest help to the ELCs.

Discussion

Any discussion of the results of this project must first acknowledge the cooperation of the ELC directors and their staff. They welcomed us unconditionally and provided information freely and openly as they strived to help us understand the work they do and the often challenging and complex conditions under which they do it. We are deeply indebted to the directors and their staffs for their assistance with this project, and we commend them for their efforts in meeting the goals legislated for them.

We undertook this investigation with the ambitious goal of meeting with ELC directors as well as visiting VPK programs. It is important to note that we have 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; as questions were answered, even more were raised. As a result, all information presented here is from the perspective of the ELCs and does not reflect what happens in the day-to-day activities of VPK programs.

One of the more remarkable findings of our study relates to the apparent effectiveness of Florida’s VPK programs in the face of serious under-funding and the fact that the State legislature has specified in statutes the lowest level of quality that define the program. While children who complete VPK programs are substantially more ready for kindergarten than those who don’t, operating under a “something is better than nothing” principle in the education of our youngest citizens seems, at least, insufficient. In that regard, allocations have declined steadily since the inception of the VPK program in 2005. While we applaud the ELCs’ current legislative priority to restore funding to the 2008-09 level, we would urge the legislature to no longer treat the VPK program as an after-thought and to increase funding to cover actual costs.

Supporting that call are the state’s rankings in NIEER’s 2014 yearbook (Barnett, et al., 2015). NIEER ranks state pre-k efforts in terms of access, resources based on state spending, and resources based on all reported spending. In terms of access, Florida ranks third out of 41 states with pre-k programs – an excellent ranking as a result of the voter mandate to make pre-k education available to all 4-year-olds.

However, Florida also ranks 36 of 41 on resources based on state spending and 37 of 41 on resources based on all reported spending – dismal placements by any measure.

There appears to be a predictable sequence of conditions that stem from low funding levels. Allocations are not enough to cover per-child costs for even minimally-qualified teachers. To stretch dollars, teachers are poorly paid and, as a result, have no real incentive to remain on staff if a higher-paying position is offered elsewhere. Thus, there is high staff turn-over, which reduces effectiveness of instruction due to limited consistency of instructional staff. And, with the need to bring new staff on board frequently, confidence deteriorates that teachers understand the curriculum and how to implement it. Poorly implemented curriculum will predictably lead to lower kindergarten readiness rates, which, in turn, cycle around to programs on probation.

Related to funding is the broader issue of quality. This concept can be elusive, but NIEER (Barnett, et al., 2015) has defined 10 quality standards and benchmarks:

- comprehensive early learning standards
- baccalaureate teacher degree
- specialized pre-k teacher training
- CDA or equivalent assistant teacher degree
- at least 15 hours per year of teacher in-service
- 20 children or fewer maximum class size
- 1:10 or better staff-child ratio
- vision, hearing, health, and at least one supportive service screening/referral and support services
- at least one meal per day
- site visit monitoring at least every five years

Of these 10, Florida meets three:

- comprehensive early learning standards
- maximum class size of 20 or fewer
- site visit monitoring

While the state can be applauded for meeting these three standards, not meeting the benchmarks for the other seven standards raises questions about the extent to which the Florida legislature complies with the mandate for high quality pre-k education.

Assessment of children was a concern for our group in several ways. One related to the measures used to determine kindergarten readiness. Specifically, that the measures used change frequently raises a question of concurrent validity – that is, do all measures used correspond to each other in measuring what they purport to measure? Without knowing the relationship among the various measures used, it is difficult to conclude that the readiness rates really reflect improved outcomes from one year to the next. But even taking readiness rate data at face value, there are still 20 to 30 percent of VPK participants who are deemed not ready for kindergarten, and this fact is unacceptable. In addition, ELC staff expressed concern that readiness rates were used to determine program effectiveness, and that those rates were determined at a time when children were least likely to demonstrate peak performances. We concur with these concerns. But on a more basic level, we take issue with defining readiness as an academic construct. Expecting children to enter kindergarten with specific academic skills in areas better taught in kindergarten seems unreasonable. Rather, “readiness to learn,” that is,

readiness to be in a classroom, to be able to attend to an instructor, to be able to work collaboratively with classmates might be more appropriate definitions of “kindergarten readiness.” In that regard, we urge the state to rethink the construct validity of the current definition of “readiness.”

Assessment of children during the VPK program was also problematic for us. Specifically, that assistant rather than lead teachers conduct the assessments seemed questionable. Although the ELCs provide training to lead and assistant teachers in administration of assessment measures, assigning this important task to the less qualified staff may not be the most effective practice.

Another aspect of assessment that was of concern relates to the availability of assessment data from VPK programs to kindergarten teachers. At this point, such data sharing does not exist, a situation that leaves kindergarten teachers unaware of the skills and behaviors that the children in their classes bring with them to school. Due to privacy of information requirements and concerns, child information and data from the VPK year is not typically shared with kindergarten teachers, but there are a few efforts underway to develop processes to overcome this barrier, and we urge the state OEL to examine this issue.

A final area of concern relates to discrepancies in data reported by the ELCs versus data reported by the State. These differences make it difficult to pinpoint areas of success versus areas of challenge while simultaneously obscuring the magnitude of programmatic achievements and failures. The remedy appears to be relatively straightforward and requires the state to specify the metric and the reporting dates to be followed by reporters at both the state and local levels.

Future Directions

Projects typically end with the question, “What’s next?” For this project, we believe that our next steps are to follow through with our original plan. That is, we need to visit VPK programs to gain an understanding of what actually happens in the day-to-day operation of classrooms for 4-year-olds. In that regard, we would like to visit classrooms for all types of VPK programs to observe programmatic differences, if any, in public, private, and faith-based programs. Such differences may relate to curriculum being used, staff-to-child ratio, teacher credentials, and the like. We would also like to visit classrooms of programs that have shown high readiness rates as well as those with low rates to gain an understanding of programmatic features that may be associated with those differences in outcomes.

Because assessment stands as a major concern, we would like to examine readiness instruments used currently and in the past to gain an understanding of their relationships to each other. In addition we would like to be able to view readiness data for the programs under the ELCs included in this project to clarify those results and how they relate to the programs to which they apply.

Finally, we would like to collaborate with other League of Women Voters groups in Florida who have also been studying the VPK programs in their areas of the state. Sharing findings across projects will help us see a broader, state-wide picture and the extent to which our findings generalize across the state.

The next steps just mentioned are those that we can accomplish easily as a group of investigators charged with helping our constituents understand the VPK program as it exists in Florida. We are not in a position to specify steps to be taken by the state. However, in the role of advocates requested by the ELCs, we encourage efforts to redefine the quality of Florida’s VPK programs and to fund them accordingly.

APPENDIX A

SURVEY OF TRI-COUNTY EARLY LEARNING COALITIONS

RESPONDER'S NAME: _____

DATE: _____

We represent the League of Women Voters of The Villages/Tri County Area and the American Association of University Women, Lake/Sumter branch. Because education is an important part of our programs, we have decided to focus our research for the coming year on Florida's Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten (VPK) program. We are in the process of gathering information about the VPK programs in Sumter, Lake and Marion Counties. There are several possible outcomes of this information gathering. One is to inform our members about VPK in the communities in which we live. Another is to see in what ways, if any, our organizations may be of help to your Coalition.

Below are the questions we would like to discuss with you.

1. **CHILDREN** - Please give us some background about VPK under your coalition.
 - 1a. How many applications were submitted this year?
 - 1b. How many four-year-olds are enrolled?
 - 1c. Does the ELC know the number of eligible **four**-year-olds in the catchment area?
 - 1d. Of those eligible **four**- year-olds, how many are actually enrolled in a VPK program under your coalition?
 - 1e. How many teachers serve these children?
 - 1f. Does the Early Learning Coalition (ELC) keep a waiting list?
 - 1g. If not, is it maintained by each program?
 - 1h. If the ELC is responsible for the waiting list, how is it handled (e.g., date of application, address of family home)?
2. **FACILITIES** - Please describe the types of VPK facilities available under your coalition.
 - 2a. We see the public schools listed on your Web site. What other facilities are available under your coalition?
 - 2b. How many private preschools/child care centers offer VPK under your coalition, and how many children do they serve?
 - 2c. How many family child care homes provide VPK under your coalition, and how many children do they serve?

- 2d. How many religious/church-based preschools offer VPK under your coalition, and how many children does each one serve?
- 2e. How many children attend the summer VPK program at each public school under your coalition?
- 2f. How many children with disabilities attend VPK? Which programs do they attend?
- 2g. How are each of the facilities (public, private, religious) accepted and approved as VPK providers?
- 2h. What is the coalition's role in monitoring programs?
- 2i. How is the ELC made aware of the results of the monitoring?
- 2j. What is the process if a facility fails a monitoring visit?
- 3. **TEACHING STAFF** - Please tell us about teacher credentialing and training.
 - 3a. What are the credentials needed to become a VPK teacher in a public, private, or religious VPK program under your coalition?
 - 3b. What are the credentials needed to become a VPK teacher in a public school VPK classroom?
 - 3c. What are the credentials needed to become an assistant teacher in a VPK classroom?
 - 3d. What training is available for the teachers and assistant teachers under your coalition?
 - 3e. Is training different for VPK teachers in public vs. private vs. religious schools?
- 4. **CHILD ASSESSMENT** - We understand that children are assessed three times per year and that all coalitions are using the same assessment instruments.
 - 4a. Is that understanding accurate?
 - 4b. Can you provide us with the assessment results for your coalition for the past three years?
 - 4c. Are any of your programs on probation?
 - 4d. What interventions are in place to help these programs?
- 5. **CURRICULA** - We understand that each program proposes its own curriculum for approval.
 - 5a. How much variability is there in curriculum across programs under the umbrella of your coalition?
 - 5b. What are the requirements for choosing a curriculum?
 - 5c. Can you describe this process?

6. **FUNDING** - The cost of providing a quality VPK experience is quite a bit more than the Florida legislature is allocating.
- 6a. What is the actual cost of operating a quality VPK program under your coalition?
 - 6b. How do you make up for the difference between allocated state funding and actual costs?
 - 6c. What standards do you use to define a quality program?
 - 6d. Do you allow blended funding (e.g., Head Start and VPK or Child Care and VPK)?
7. **INFRASTRUCTURE** - Please tell us about your board as well as volunteer opportunities under your coalition?
- 7a. When are your board meetings?
 - 7b. Where are they held?
 - 7c. What are the criteria for membership on the board?
 - 7d. How long is each term?
 - 7e. How are board members selected?
 - 7f. Is there a limit on the number of board members?
 - 7g. Do you have a volunteer program?
 - 7h. Can you provide us with some information to take back to our constituents about volunteer opportunities?
 - 7i. How are volunteers trained?
 - 7j. Can you suggest ways we might be of service to you?