



NEWS

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LENGTH OF DAY & TEACHER PUPIL RATIO KEY TO QUALITY UNIVERSAL PRE-K

TALLAHASSEE — Offering parents a choice of up to a 6-hour day in a Universal Prekindergarten program for their children, combined with having one teacher for every 10 children will maximize children's learning and increase their chances of academic success, according to a report released today by Florida TaxWatch.

The research report, ***Making a Better Quality Universal Prekindergarten Program for Florida's Children***, also recommends limiting PreK class size to 20 students and requiring that all lead teachers have Bachelor's degrees by 2010. The report is the work of TaxWatch's Center for Educational Performance & Accountability and its advisory committee of civic, business and education leaders who've spent the past ten months studying the issue.

"We've looked at various studies, some going back as far as 40 years, that together show that children who are in school for the full day have higher achievement," said Kathy Adams, Co-Chair of the PreK-3 subcommittee of the Center for Educational Performance & Accountability. "It's clearly better for the kids."

"Florida has had public PreK for 15 years with a six hour day," added Carol Barnett, the subcommittee's other Co-Chair. "To include a variable day option of 4-6 hours for Universal Prekindergarten gives parents the choice they need to increase their child's chances of success while accommodating the needs of the entire family," Barnett said.

Upwards of 146,000 children, representing about 70-percent of Florida's PreK population are projected to participate in free voluntary Universal Prekindergarten programs when they are offered beginning in the summer of 2005. The program was mandated by Florida voters in a constitutional amendment in 2002.

The Florida Legislature is grappling with what this first-ever state-funded program should offer and how much it will cost the state. Its first plan, passed during the last Legislative session was deemed inadequate by Florida TaxWatch and was vetoed by Governor Bush.

The TaxWatch research report recommends to the Governor and Legislature that the following components be included in Florida's UPK program to ensure its fiscal and academic accountability and the universal high quality that Florida voters intended for Florida's children:

- **Teacher/Child Ratio:** Two adult staff (of which one is a lead teacher) allocated per 20 children (rather than the ratio of 1:18 or 1:20 that was included in the Legislature's previous bill CS/HB821). An optimal learning environment for preschoolers combines a small staff-to-child ratio with a small class (or group) size.
- **Lead Teacher Qualifications:** Child Development Associate (CDA) or Child Development Associate Equivalent (CDAE) by 2005. (A.A. in early childhood by 2008, B.A. in early childhood education or related field by 2010). A critical component of a successful, prekindergarten education program is the education level of the teacher in the classroom. Children perform better if taught by teachers having baccalaureate degrees.
- **Length of the UPK Program:** A UPK program of 180 days in length and parent choice of a four-hour to six-hour instructional program dependent on the expressed needs of families of UPK children. Florida's former PreK Early Intervention program, repealed as part of the School Readiness design, offered a 6-hour program. To include a variable day option in UPK honors Florida's strong tradition of guarding parental choice of early care and learning settings and accommodating the needs of the entire family. A UPK program shorter than 6 hours could create serious difficulty for working parents.
- **Academic and Fiscal Accountability:** A UPK program having fiscal as well as academic accountability in order to protect Floridian's tax dollars and ensure high quality performance. Without a thorough monitoring and auditing of all program components for public and private providers, the confidence required to ensure the ongoing responsiveness of law-makers to program needs and that of the program to student, teacher and public interest needs would be sorely lacking, if not undermined.
- **Gold Seal Approval by 2007:** Gold Seal accreditation required of all UPK programs by 2007. To ensure standards of quality and safety a review of approved Gold Seal accrediting bodies would be completed by August 2007 and every three years thereafter. Private providers as well as public providers must be Gold Seal-accredited.
- **Program Administration:** Governance/Oversight unified at the state level with local oversight of all school readiness programs, including UPK. One governance structure for all school readiness and prekindergarten programs at the state and local levels must be designated to minimize confusion for families and to maximize resources. Universal Prekindergarten should build upon local infrastructure established in communities rather than create duplicative parallel structures.

"We need a quality prekindergarten program, but one that's also affordable and cost-effective," said Dominic M. Calabro, President of Florida TaxWatch. "Lessons learned from the lack of fiscal accountability associated with the Corporate Income Tax for Scholarships Program—Florida TaxWatch's recommendation for fiscal and academic accountability went unheeded—graphically underscore the need for UPK accountability," Calabro said.

Today's report comes on the heels of another report released last week by Florida TaxWatch, which revealed that the costs of flunking grades, high school dropouts and their loss of future earnings, and the cost of juvenile offenders amounted to upwards of \$5.3 billion and far outweigh the costs of a quality, affordable cost-effective Universal Prekindergarten program.

"Universal Prekindergarten is not an expense to the state of Florida. It's an investment," said Roy Miller, President of the Children's Campaign Inc., which is pushing the legislature to pass a quality UPK program.

“The Florida Legislature cannot afford to be penny-wise and pound foolish in its debate about the cost of UPK,” said Tom Slade, Chairman of the TaxWatch Center’s Advisory Committee. “Our committee is urging legislators to study the data and make the wise choice to invest in quality. We simply can’t afford not to. Florida’s children are worth the investment.”

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MEDIA NOTE: CEPA will be issuing a *Special Report* next week that details where Florida stands on the teacher capacity issue as related to UPK education and the incentives that will be required to motivate teachers to attain their baccalaureate degrees in a timely manner.

The Center for Educational Performance & Accountability is one of four Centers of Excellence at Florida TaxWatch. It’s multi-year research initiative is designed to rethink, redefine, and re-tool Florida’s public education system. An advisory committee comprised of 36 of the best and brightest citizens in the fields of education, civic service, and business steer the Center’s research in providing answers to improve student performance in all 67 school districts in the state and ensuring a workforce capable of sustaining and increasing the quality of life for all Floridians.

Florida TaxWatch is a private, non-profit, non-partisan research institute supported by homeowners, small businesses, corporations, professional firms, labor organizations, associations, individuals and philanthropic foundations -- representing a wide spectrum of Florida’s citizens. The organization is dedicated to improving taxpayer value, government accountability and citizen understanding and participation in their state and local government fiscal policies. On the web at www.floridataxwatch.org