



NEWS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
December 10, 2004

CONTACT: Harvey Bennett
Communications Director
850-222-5052

FLORIDA CAN PROVIDE QUALIFIED TEACHERS FOR UNIVERSAL PREKINDERGARTEN

TALLAHASSEE — Florida's universities and colleges have the capacity to provide qualified bachelor-degreed teachers to staff a quality Universal Prekindergarten plan by the year 2010, three years earlier than policy makers have contemplated, according to a research report released today by the FloridaTaxWatch Center for Educational Performance & Accountability in cooperation with the Florida State University Center for Prevention and Early Intervention Policy. The report notes that the educational level of teachers is the most critical component of a high quality prekindergarten education.

The Special Report, ***Building the Capacity for Degreed Teachers for Florida's Prekindergarten System***, recommends targeted incentives to encourage more people to pursue careers in early childhood teaching, encourage former teachers to return to the field of teaching and attract qualified career-changers.

"There's been an undercurrent in the Universal Prekindergarten debate that it's a good idea to have degreed teachers but currently we simply can't do it for lack of supply," said Dominic M. Calabro, President of Florida TaxWatch. "No one looked at the data from the perspective of building capacity by providing meaningful incentives that would graduate more teachers from the state and private universities and from private and community colleges," said Calabro.

Upwards of 130,000 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 fall of 2005. The program was mandated by Florida voters in a constitutional amendment in 2002.

"Getting those degreed teachers in the classroom by 2010 rather than 2013 means a better quality education for 390,000 Florida children during those three years," said Tom Slade, Chairman of the Center's Advisory Committee. "And if there were competitive salaries commensurate with degrees, we could accomplish this even faster, as Georgia did," Slade said.

The Florida Legislature will meet in special session next week to decide what this first state-funded Universal Prekindergarten 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 report finds that the state will need an estimated 7,166 additional bachelor degreed early childhood teachers phased in over the next six years. The estimate is based on a six-hour instructional day and a class size of 20 children with one degreed teacher and one assistant.

Demand for new prekindergarten teachers exists at the same time that normal K-12 growth and the class-size requirements are generating simultaneous needs for new elementary education teachers. But the research shows that Florida's public universities alone could largely meet the need for degreed teachers by merely matching annually the number of graduates in past peak years. Together with increased efforts by private colleges and universities, and Florida's community colleges, the report found that there could be one degreed teacher for every 20 prekindergarten students in six years, or by 2010.

The report found that if the UPK program is structured as a half-day program instead, as the Legislature is currently contemplating, full-time teachers could serve twice as many children and fewer degreed teachers would be required. To accelerate placement of degreed teachers, the report suggests economic incentives be provided to programs that meet the goal earlier than 2010.

"There must be incentives, new job opportunities and professional pay for individuals to want to become prekindergarten teachers," said Dr. Mimi Graham, Director of the FSU Center for Prevention & Early Intervention Policy. "Whether they're child care providers seeking a higher degree, returning teachers, or those looking to change careers, they must have incentives for pursuing careers in early childhood teaching," Dr. Graham said.

Recommendations to ensure and accelerate capacity within higher education include:

- development of a defined career path and streamlined agreements to articulate from CDA to associate degrees to bachelor's degrees.
- utilizing the potential of community college four-year baccalaureate degrees to increase accessibility and affordability, especially for those continuing to work in early childhood while pursuing a degree.
- establishment of intensive summer institutes for out-of-field teachers to obtain coursework in early childhood.
- increasing allocations for existing institutions of higher learning (private and public) to provide stipends and increase recruitment of more early childhood teachers.
- removal of tuition disincentives for taking more than four years to obtain a degree to benefit non-traditional students trying to work and obtain their degree

Higher education has the capacity and is willing but potential teachers must also be enticed to the classroom. Economic incentives proved effective in Georgia, where 80 percent of preK teachers are degreed because higher differential pay was offered to degreed teachers.

Recommendations to attract teachers for UPK include:

- structuring Florida's UPK reimbursement commensurate with education level to increase participation of degreed teachers.
- providing scholarships such as TEACH, educational loans, and loan forgiveness policies in exchange for a teaching contract would remove financial barriers and encourage degrees.
- enhancing nationwide prekindergarten teacher recruitment, including relocation expenses and contract bonus (minimum employment term required).
- providing incentives for teachers who have voluntarily left the field to return.
- providing competitive salaries and increased recruitment of out-of-state teachers.
- providing mentors/support for non-traditional degreed individuals entering the pre-kindergarten teaching field.
- providing competitive salaries and incentives (bonus and/or base salary increase) as the level of teacher education and length of prekindergarten teaching increases.

- providing job-sharing opportunities (morning-afternoon teacher) to encourage degreed teachers who have left the field for family reasons, or retired teachers, to return to teaching prekindergarten students on a part-time basis.

Today's report follows another TaxWatch CEPA report released last week, which recommended the Governor and Legislature design a UPK program that gives parents the choice of a four-hour to six-hour program, has a teacher-child ratio of 1:18 to 1:20 with two adult staff in a maximum class size of 20 students, a bachelor-degreed teacher by the year 2010, Gold Seal approval by 2007, and built-in fiscal and academic accountability

"We need a quality prekindergarten program, but one that's also affordable, cost-effective, and accountable," said Calabro. "The Legislature has only satisfied one out of four with its affordable bill that would fund a three-hour program during the regular school year."

A previous TaxWatch report released last month 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.

###

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.floridatxwatch.org