

BRIEFINGS



Center for Educational Performance & Accountability

106 North Bronough St. (32301-7723) ♦ P.O. Box 10209 (32302-2209) ♦ Tallahassee, FL ♦ (850) 222-5052 ♦ FAX:(850) 222-7476

LEGISLATURE STUMBLER ON IMPLEMENTATION OF THE UNIVERSAL PREKINDERGARTEN AMENDMENT: FLORIDA TAXWATCH SUGGESTS THE GOVERNOR NOW PUNT

In 2002, 59% of the Florida voters approved the establishment and implementation of Universal Prekindergarten. In 2003, the Universal Prekindergarten Advisory Council recommendations formulated by Lt. Governor Toni Jennings and a host of other educational experts were adopted by the State Board of Education. In 2004, the Legislature took up the issue (S 3036 and HB 821), but ignored or contradicted most expert recommendations by substantively diminishing most important aspects of the program. Except for the program name, the plan currently in front of the Governor provides little resemblance or content to what was earlier recommended by the Governor or approved by the voters.

The plan awaiting the Governor's approval or veto has yet to satisfactorily resolve several issues of contention: class length per day, student-teacher ratios, teacher certification, accreditation requirements, or whether to conduct a pilot study of the program that would only reflect prekindergarten programs of public schools. Importantly, however, because the public schools lack sufficient capacity to provide prekindergarten programs to all children (especially in the next Fall/Winter Sessions because of the class size reduction requirements), much of the universal prekindergarten program will be implemented through the private schools, which were conspicuously absent from the proposed study.

Earlier this year, Florida TaxWatch strongly recommended that statewide facility and staffing capacity studies be undertaken of both private and public providers, before a Universal Prekindergarten implementation bill is enacted. TaxWatch also recommended (1) that the Fall/Winter prekindergarten sessions be 720 hours across an 180-day period; (2) that the Summer Session be 310 hours and staffed by teachers who have at least a CDA or CDAE, with a teacher-student ratio of 1:18; (3) requiring schools that accept public-funded vouchers account for student achievement; and (4) that program providers earn Gold Seal approval by 2007. Each of these considerations comported with the initial proposal of the Governor that was based on the Universal Prekindergarten Advisory Council.

Universal Prekindergarten, as initially envisioned, was to be an expansion of the School Readiness Act of 1999 that focused on at-risk children. Even though the plan before the Governor is supposed to provide free prekindergarten to all children, its high costs, limitations in staffing and facilities and the likelihood that most seats will be taken by children whose families can most afford to pay for the program make it unlikely that adequate numbers of at-risk children will be served. The plan provides for little more than daycare with an additional layer of bureaucracy and does not provide students a viable opportunity to learn the foundational skills that will enable them to succeed in subsequent years. It would be better to scrap the current legislation than sign into law a program that falls so short of fulfilling the voter's intent for an accountable, high quality system.

A Pre K-3 Subcommittee of the Florida TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance & Accountability Advisory Committee is comprehensively reviewing Universal Prekindergarten programs in other states.

The Full Committee's Pre K-3 recommendations on how to cost effectively implement a program in accordance with the intent of Florida voters to provide a high quality program that is truly universal at Florida voters intended as well as fiscally and academically accountable.

“Celebrating 25 years of improving taxpayer value, citizen understanding and government accountability.”

This *Briefings* was written by Michael Fisher, Ph.D.,
Senior Research Analyst, with and under the direction of
Keith G. Baker, Ph.D. Senior Vice President and Chief Operating Officer.

Barney Barnett, Chairman; Dominic M. Calabro, President, Publisher and Editor.

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(850) 222-5052

OR

Write TaxWatch at:

P.O. Box 10209

Tallahassee, FL 32302

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About Florida TaxWatch

Florida TaxWatch is the only statewide organization entirely devoted to protecting and promoting the political and economic freedoms of Floridians as well as the economic prosperity of our state. Since its inception in 1979, Florida TaxWatch has become widely recognized as the watchdog of citizens' hard-earned tax dollars. The nationally distributed *City and State* magazine (now *Governing* magazine) published a poll of the nation's statewide taxpayer research centers. Based on this poll, the publication cited Florida TaxWatch as one of the six most influential and respected government watchdogs and taxpayer research institutes in the nation.

In recent years, news stories about Florida TaxWatch have run in all Florida newspapers, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and *Fortune* magazine. In addition, Florida TaxWatch has been featured on the prestigious *MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour*.

Florida TaxWatch is a private, non-profit, non-partisan research institute supported by voluntary, tax-deductible membership contributions and philanthropic foundation grants. Membership is open to any organization or individual interested in helping to make Florida competitive, healthy and economically prosperous by supporting a credible research effort that promotes constructive taxpayer improvements. Members, through their loyal support, help Florida TaxWatch to bring about a more effective, responsive government that is accountable to the citizens it serves.

Florida TaxWatch is supported by all types of taxpayers -- homeowners, small businesses, corporations, professional firms, labor unions, associations, individuals and philanthropic foundations -- representing a wide spectrum of Florida's citizens.

Florida TaxWatch's empirically sound research products recommend productivity enhancements and explain statewide impact of economic and tax and spend policies and practices. Without lobbying, Florida TaxWatch has worked diligently and effectively to build government efficiency and promote responsible, cost-effective improvements that add value and benefit taxpayers. This diligence has yielded impressive results: through the years, three-fourths of TaxWatch's cost-saving recommendations have been implemented, saving taxpayers over \$6.2 billion (according to an independent assessment by Florida State University). That translates to approximately \$1,067 in added value for every Florida family.

With your help, we will continue our diligence to make certain your tax investments are fair and beneficial to you, the taxpaying customer who supports Florida's government. Florida TaxWatch is ever present to ensure that taxes are equitable, not excessive, that their public benefits and costs are weighed, and that government agencies are more responsive and productive in the use of your hard-earned tax dollars.

The Florida TaxWatch Board of Trustees is responsible for the general direction and oversight of the research institute and safeguarding the independence of the organization's work. In his capacity as chief executive officer, the president is responsible for formulating and coordinating policies, projects, publications and selecting the professional staff. As an independent research institute and taxpayer watchdog, the research findings, conclusions and recommendations of Florida TaxWatch do not necessarily reflect the view of its members, staff or distinguished Board of Trustees.



106 N. Bronough St.
P.O. Box 10209
Tallahassee, FL 32302

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