

## **Increasing the Quality of VPK**

**~A speech given before the State Board of Education, August 2, 2011~**

by David Lawrence Jr.

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I share both history and headlines. Florida's voluntary pre-K program is one of only three such programs offered to every 4 year old in a state – the other two being Georgia (a state with half our population) and Oklahoma (with a sixth of our people). Oklahoma offers only a public school model, with some support via federal Head Start. Georgia's model is much like ours – that is, offered in private-provider and faith-based settings as well as in public schools.

The first such program was Georgia's back in 1995, the vision of then Georgia Gov. Zell Miller, who once said he would be willing to trade the senior year in high school for a first-rate pre-K program. Then came Oklahoma in 1998. Florida's program was approved as a constitutional amendment – 59-41 percent -- in the fall of 2002, to take effect in the 2005-2006 school year.

In the words of the ballot, here is what the voters supported: "Every four-year-old child in Florida shall be provided by the state a high-quality pre-kindergarten learning opportunity in the form of an early childhood development and education program which shall be voluntary, high quality, free, and delivered according to professionally accepted standards. An early childhood development and education program means an organized program designed to address and enhance each child's ability to make age-appropriate progress in an appropriate range of settings in the development of language and cognitive capabilities and emotional, social, regulatory and moral capacities through education in basic skills and such other skills as the Legislature may determine to be appropriate." (Note the words "high quality" are used twice in the very first sentence.)

This, then, is my first headline: We do not have a high-quality program in Florida. We do have 6,238 providers serving 165,000 4 year olds this year – or 71 percent of all 4 year olds – and a goodly number of those providers are offering high-quality programs, but a good number are not. The National Institute of Early Education Research at Rutgers says that Florida meets only 3 of 10 national standards for excellence. Georgia, please know, meets 9 of 10.

With the passage of Florida's constitutional amendment, then Gov. Jeb Bush appointed a 20-member advisory council to make recommendations to the Legislature. Lt. Gov. Toni Jennings chaired that panel, and I was among its 20 members. The advisory council voted unanimously for a number of provisions, including parents having the choice of a three- or six-hour program, the requirement of using curricula known to be "evidence-based" (that is, a record that we know it works), and lead teachers being required to have at least an associate's degree in early childhood education within five years, and at least a bachelor's degree in the same area within eight years.

What instead happened was this: (1) The Legislature authorized only a three-hour program; (2) didn't require curricula to be evidence-based (except after two years in a program where children do poorly on the kindergarten readiness assessment), and (3) made those lead-teacher requirements "aspirational," meaning in the real world that simply won't happen. Today the lead teacher needs only a Child Development Associate credential or its equivalent except in the summer program where a bachelor's degree is required. (The 300-hour summer program serves almost 8,000 children this year. The regular school-year program, of 540 hours, serves 157,000 children.)

There is also a question of money. In the 2005-2006 school year, the state allotted \$2,500 per child. Five years later – today – the cost of living has gone up 12.75 percent – and yet the per-child allotment now is just \$2,383 for the school year. That is not progress. Nationally, 40 states offer prekindergarten programs for 4 year olds, including the three offered-to-everyone programs of Florida, Georgia and Oklahoma. The national average per child in pre-K is \$4,831.

Yes, we do some things well in Florida's VPK program. For instance, our state did arrive at comprehensive early learning standards, rightly connecting to what children will learn in kindergarten, first grade...and beyond through all the years of school. For another example, there can be no more than 20 children in a classroom with at least two adults. And, yes, there are many outstanding programs.

Yet, sadly enough, we don't really know where those programs are. We don't because our state, to this point, does not gather and use the data to give us those answers. The people of Florida deserve and need to know that their money is being spent on high-quality programs that deliver real outcomes for children. That means the Offices of Early Learning in both DOE and AWI must share data. If I were a policymaker, a governor, a legislator, a member of this board, I would want to know at least this: Who's the provider? What are the lead teacher's credentials? Is the program accredited? (And, if so, by whom?) What is the family's socio-economic status? The child's native language? Mother's education level (and if that sounds sexist, know that research shows the mother's education level is vital). All this could be gathered without invading anyone's privacy. The point here is to assess the provider, not pigeonhole the child.

Now we do know something worthwhile from the kindergarten "readiness instruments" given in the early weeks of the school year. But what we do not know is how good the previous-year provider was. Now...why is that, and how could that be?

Let us take two children as examples:

John had caregivers in the first several years of life who did everything right, beginning with good prenatal care. His mom and dad both worked outside the home, but they used high-quality brain-stimulating child care. They took seriously their responsibilities as their child's first and best teachers. They talked with John, sung with him,

held him often, used grocery shopping trips as an early learning experience for shapes and sizes and colors, read with him from the earliest days, made sure he received great preventive health care, including all his shots. By the time he got to VPK, age 4, he had enormous momentum. Interestingly enough, his VPK program was fairly mediocre, but John, nonetheless, did superbly on the “kindergarten readiness” instrument because his early years were full of love and nurturing and quality early learning.

Our second child is Mary. Her mom was among the 23 percent of Florida’s pregnant women without adequate prenatal care. Mary’s parents, like John’s, also worked outside the home, but they chose their child care solely on the basis of cost and convenience (not knowing about the imperative of quality, or that 90 percent of brain growth occurs by age 5) . Tired at the end of the day, Mom and Dad used television more or less as a babysitter. They didn’t often read with Mary, and going to the grocery store was only about shopping and never about learning. They did, however, put 4-year-old Mary in a very high-quality pre-K program. She made some progress there, but still did poorly on the kindergarten readiness exam.

So here’s the headline here: The kindergarten readiness instrument does not really tell us how good a program is. But here’s what would work: A high-quality program would require the teacher in VPK to do an assessment – cognitive, socially, emotionally – as the child enters the program. It is easy and costs little (less than \$25 a child). That assessment would, as they say, “inform instruction,” and would be shared with the parent (who deserves to be the fullest partner in a child’s education). Ideally, an assessment would occur several times during that 4-year-old’s year and then be shared with the kindergarten teacher, giving that teacher a step ahead on working with the child. DOE has made some progress on this assessment in its collaboration with the Florida Center for Reading Research. But the assessment only covers literacy and numeracy, and we also need a high-quality assessment to incorporate where a child is socially and emotionally. High-quality programs already do this. Georgia, for instance, requires this in every prekindergarten program. For the sake of the children – each and every child – our programs should do as well.

You have before you the father of five, a grandfather, a product of public education, a citizen worried about the future of children and of Florida. While our state has made significant progress this past decade in public education – the real world for 90 percent of our children – we remain considerably behind where we need to be. Twenty-eight percent of our fourth graders still cannot read with minimal proficiency. More than half of our high school sophomores cannot read at grade level. Meanwhile, a national report, issued by retired senior admirals and generals, tells us that three of every four 17 to 24 year olds cannot enter the American military because they have a physical problem, an academic problem, a substance abuse problem or a criminal justice problem. This is, then, a matter of “national security” for our beloved country.

The path to genuine public education “reform” in Florida and America most wisely begins with the early learning years. Each of us is born with millions of synapses in our brain. They connect as we learn, and wither when we do not. We learn all our lives, but the window of learning is open most widely in the years from birth to age 5. These are the years, research tells us, that a dollar invested wisely will return seven dollars or more that we won’t later need to spend on police and prosecution and prison and remediation. Perhaps 30 percent of children start school significantly behind, and many then fall further behind. The research, moreover, tells us that a third of children in kindergarten cannot pay attention in class; if you cannot pay attention, you cannot learn. We also know that if a hundred children at the end of first grade are poor or nonexistent readers, then 88 of those children remain poor readers by the end of fourth grade.

I know Rome, and Florida, cannot be built in a day or a decade. But I am convinced to the core of my being that

we could take significant steps quickly, prudently and inexpensively – and then build from there. The Nobel Prize-winning economist James J. Heckman tells us that the wisest path to public education reform is to deliver the children in better shape to formal school.

What I have shared are three steps that could be achieved early, realistically and inexpensively: (1) requiring an evidence-based curricula in every VPK classroom; (2) requiring pre- and post-assessments for every child in a VPK program, and (3) requiring the state, using those assessments of progress, to tell the people of Florida which programs, which providers are most effective and what the common factors were in their success.

Then, in a longer-range way, I would encourage an honest exploration and recommendations about (1) the matter of teacher credentials; (2) how much we ought to invest per child, and (3) a revised accountability system that assesses program eligibility based on the quality of environment and teacher-child interactions.

With the greatest respect, and because I believe you appreciate straightforwardness, I say to you that neither this Board of Education nor the Legislature has subjected VPK to the same level of rigor and accountability as has been done with K-12 programs and services. I am not suggesting a “baby FCAT.” I am suggesting an in-depth, data-driven, research-based examination as to whether our VPK is truly high quality and whether it is using our taxpayer funds productively. You insist on just that for K-12. I want you to insist on that for VPK.

Your leadership can be crucial in helping to ensure that Florida’s VPK is of the highest quality and able to give our state’s children an ever better chance to succeed in school and in life.

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