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Fulfilling Florida Voters' Mandate to Provide Pre-K Education for 4-Year-Olds

In 2002, 59% of the Florida voters expanded the School Readiness Act of 1999 by amending the Constitution to provide for the establishment and implementation of the Universal Prekindergarten Education Program (UPK) by 2005. The program extends the focus of the readiness act beyond at-risk children and provides all 4-year-olds with a voluntary, high quality, universal prekindergarten education program. The Herculean task now before the Legislature is to define the scope, operation, governance, and budget for a new program that could include up to an estimated 217,000 children in 2005.

In October 2003 the State Board of Education (SBE) adopted Lt. Governor Toni Jennings' Universal Prekindergarten Advisory Council recommendations. Both the House and Senate have moved forward since with "Early Learning" implementation bills, Proposed Committee Substitute for House Bill 821 and Senate Bill 3036. The latter essentially mirrors a bill draft proposed by the Governor.

The overarching goal of both bills is to implement a prekindergarten program that will prepare children for kindergarten and include wrap-around health screening and referral services, an appropriate educational program, and opportunities for parental involvement. While the intentions and focus of the bills appear to be similar, the implementation and particulars are quite different.

MAJOR DIFFERENCES IN HOUSE AND SENATE BILL PROVISIONS

As depicted below Proposed Committee Substitute for House Bill 821 and S 3036 differ in regard to which agency will operate the program, length of instructional day, teacher qualifications, teacher/student ratios, and accountability.

Major Bill Differences	House	Senate
Jurisdictional Oversight/Operations	AWI to continue School Readiness Program	DOE to create Division of Early Learning
Program/Instructional Day	3-hr program (540 total hrs.) for 180 days or a summer program of 310 hrs.	4-hr. program (720 hrs.) for 180 days
Teacher Qualifications	"qualified to instill ...literacy..."	Child Development Associate (CDA) or Equivalent (CDAE)
Teacher Student Ratio	1:18	1:10
Gold Seal Recognition	No	Postponed for one year

Jurisdictional Oversight/Operations. The House bill would have early childhood education remain under the jurisdiction of the Agency for Workforce Innovation (AWI) for oversight/operational purposes while the Senate bill would create a new Division of Early Learning at the Department of Education (DOE). Both bills

stress the importance of providing wrap-around social services. The difference here is more than administrative as the move to DOE would afford the program a greater likelihood of being more fully assimilated into a seamless pre-K/20 educational system. In addition to providing for more curricular continuity, this move also would tend to increase the quality and eventual qualifications of early childhood teachers. Staff, because of their association with DOE, would potentially heighten their instructional skills and credentialing.

Program/Instructional Day. The difference in the length of instructional day is more than a single hour; overall implication, it is the difference of 25% of each instructional day. The extra hour will cost more proportionally, but it will likely yield the same difference in increased readiness. The House and Senate have high expectations for their respective programs, that is, to have from 90 to 100% of the participant children be fully ready to enter kindergarten. The foreshortened instructional day proposed by the House severely cuts short the potential of the program succeeding.

Teacher Qualifications. This may be the most contentious difference between the bills proposed by the House and Senate. The House bill does not specify particular teacher qualifications beyond stating that they will be qualified to "...instill in the student the literacy, numeracy, phonics, phonemic awareness, and vocabulary foundation necessary for the student..." Conversely, the Senate bill requires that the Child Development Associate (CDA) certificate or equivalent be phased in and additional instruction, certification, and degrees follow. Although there is no guarantee that current childcare teachers under the Senate bill will be able to meet the proposed House requirement, the CDA is readily measurable and notably only the first step in the credentialing of those teachers. In order to comply with the Senate bill it is likely that the teachers would need to be graduates of a four-year university teacher education program. While this may be ideal, it is neither realistic nor cost effective.

Teacher Student Ratio. There also is a considerable difference in this area between the House and Senate bills. The House proposes a teacher/student ratio that is almost twice that of the Senate, 1:18 versus 1:10. Although securing qualified teachers may be a problem with the Senate ratio, if childhood readiness is the genuine goal of the program, the higher House teacher student ratio is unrealistic. The 1:18 ratio may be appropriate for older children, but the introduction of younger children into an unfamiliar setting with new requirements and responsibilities requires smaller rather than larger classes in order to assure readiness is imparted.

Gold Seal Recognition. Accountability of childhood readiness programs under the proposed House or Senate bills will continue to be illusive. The House focuses on student outcomes as a condition of a school to continue receiving public funding. It requires that the "performance of the students taught by the Pre-K school over each two-year period must be comparable to or greater than the performance of all students assessed during that two-year period as ready for kindergarten..." Certainly the focus on student outcomes is laudable. However this formula will, by its very nature, continually reduce the numbers of schools that might qualify to accept public funding for prekindergarten instruction and is counter to the intent and implementation of the constitutional amendment.

Conversely, the current Senate bill postpones for one year approved accrediting agencies auditing school resources and inputs. Schools accredited by an approved agency are given "Gold Seal Recognition" simply for earning and maintaining accredited status. Even though accreditation only focuses on institutional inputs rather than student achievement, most of the required inputs are largely reasonable and are consistent with providing for an educational environment that is conducive to learning. Nonetheless, because many of the costs of becoming accredited are considerable, and at least one year of operation is required prior to making application for accreditation that takes yet an additional year, beginning schools are precluded from participating in the program.

In order to provide students readiness, schools must target both student outcomes and sufficient inputs. Consequently, it is suggested that schools be allowed to accept public funding for their prekindergarten programs as they work through the processes of earning accredited status from an approved accreditation agency. The Senate wants to revisit this provision following their proposed summer pilot program.

IN SUM

Florida TaxWatch strongly recommends that the state assess the current and near-future capacity of both the private and public providers. Without sufficient capacity among both public and private prekindergarten providers, the program will force the prioritization of students to be funded and thus limit the numbers of those who can be included in the universal prekindergarten program. In addition, without sufficient capacity, it will then be incumbent on the state to provide suitable facilities for the programs. This problem is especially compounded by space requirements pursuant to passage of the class size reduction amendment. Secondly, it is recommended that the capacity of the state's trained workforce for the provision of high quality instruction be assessed. Together, these steps will allow the state to more accurately plan for and implement a successful voluntary universal prekindergarten program. High quality education is a Constitutional right of all Floridians, even 4-year olds. Moreover, since these children will soon be an important part of Florida's workforce they should be afforded no less than the best opportunity to succeed to their full potential.

As this *Briefings* goes to press, it appears that House and Senate differences could lead to the following scenario, or some approximation thereof:

- DOE operating the universal prekindergarten program with AWI oversight of programs for children from birth to three years of age and for five-year olds
- Program/Instructional Day set at 720 hours for four-hour days for 180-day sessions and 310 hours for the summer session
- Prekindergarten teachers required to have a CDA or CDAE
- Teacher student ratio set between the 1:18 ration mandated by the current class size amendment and the 1:10 recommended by the Senate
- Gold Seal approval eventually being required (2005-2007) of schools accepting public-funded vouchers and the voucher amount being set by the Legislature and specific academic standards required

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