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Degreed Pre-k Teachers

Early Care & Pre-k

Issue Brief

CURRENT SITUATION

Degreed teachers are the cornerstone of pre-k quality. Current brain research proves that very young children need quality early learning to reach their full potential. It makes no sense that lead teachers in Florida's pre-k classrooms are held to a lower degree requirement than teachers of slightly older children. The teaching that builds social skills, develops vocabulary and introduces mathematical concepts is vital. How vital? Consider that nearly half of children in Florida start school behind – creating an achievement gap that widens with each passing year. Successful child development and education outside the home requires more than babysitting. It is a job for educated professionals.

Florida has the capacity to require degreed lead teachers. The FSU Center for Prevention and Early Intervention proved that Florida will have the capacity to require pre-k to be taught by a bachelor-degreed teacher by the year 2013. New college graduates in early education, teachers moving to Florida, and the part-time “working retired,” are expanding Florida's degreed pre-k workforce. Misinformation about pre-k teacher shortages promoted by industry groups is not to be believed.

Development in the earliest years determines future outcomes. Behavioral science and the study of child development indicate that the youngest years of a child's life establish key social and educational aptitudes. The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study found that “every dollar invested in quality Early Care and Education saves up to \$17 dollars on government expenditures by reducing costs of remedial education, grade retention and crime.” Children denied quality pre-k are less likely to graduate from high school, get a job, buy a home or pay taxes.

CAUSES & CHALLENGES

Pre-k quality is lacking in Florida. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) assesses early care & education quality in ten benchmark areas and ranks states by spending. Florida meets only four of the ten benchmarks for quality – next to worst in the nation. Florida currently ranks 38th in state support. As a result, too many of Florida's kindergarteners are not ready to learn. Three years later, one in every four Florida third-graders fails in reading.

Florida children are missing out on the benefits degreed teachers deliver. Qualified teachers are the backbone of any educational system. Research shows that better educated pre-k teachers with specialized training are more effective. Their students score better on language tests, have higher self-confidence, are more sociable, and present fewer behavioral problems. Teachers guide their students' personal and mental development and make them want to achieve. Children with learning disabilities are less likely to fall through the cracks when a degreed teacher is in charge.

Low standards and low salaries drive professionals from pre-k classrooms. Most bachelor-degreed pre-k teachers are unable to earn a salary equivalent to a K-12 teacher. Lack of pension and benefits contribute to high-turnover.

BUDGET IMPACT

The 2008 Florida Legislature technically increased the Voluntary Pre-K (VPK) program budget, but with enrollment rising statewide, there will be \$49 less in per-child spending. Throughout the budget process, Florida's legislative and executive branches do not make pre-k a priority. For example, unspent VPK dollars are not reinvested in the program. Instead, they revert back to the state's general fund.

VOTER VOICE

Florida voters have gone on record. In 2002 they passed a constitutional amendment requiring "every 4 year old child in Florida be provided a high-quality pre-kindergarten learning opportunity... delivered according to professionally accepted standards." To date, the will of the voters has not been met. More recently, national polling, conducted by Pre-K-Now, shows that voters reward candidates who respond to early childhood needs. Nearly 7 in 10 voters want more federal support for state-funded pre-k.

ACTION NEEDED

- ★ Pass legislation to require pre-k teachers to complete a bachelor's degree by year 2013. With so much at stake, why is the state hesitating to guarantee that the lead teachers in our pre-k classrooms are degreed and qualified?
- ★ Quality can't be an aspiration. It can't be a "maybe".
- ★ Direct the Florida Agency for Workforce Innovation to come forward with an improvement plan to raise Florida's pre-k quality in accordance with national standards.
- ★ Support efforts by current pre-k staff to earn the necessary credentials.



DEFINITIONS

Pre-k: full and half-day programs that provide three and four-year-olds with education and skill-development prior to kindergarten. In Florida, pre-k experiences are provided in child care centers, family child care homes, faith-based settings, Head Start programs, public schools and preschools both for-profit and nonprofit.

Early Care & Education: the various means by which adults provide children with safe surroundings, education and nurturing prior to kindergarten.

Degreed Teacher: for pre-k, a teacher with a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or equivalent.

