

**Florida's Voluntary
Pre-Kindergarten
Program:
An Overview of the
Largest State Pre-School
Program in the Nation**

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Introduction

Public interest and investment in early childhood education is on the rise. President Obama's last two State of the Union addresses emphasized the importance of expanding access to high quality early childhood education opportunities, and in August 2014, the Federal government announced a new \$250 million federal grant competition to support preschool expansion initiatives. Investment growth at the state level has been particularly pronounced. In the decade between 2002 and 2012, the number of children enrolled in a state-funded preschool program doubled from 14 to 28 percent. Three states—Florida, Oklahoma and Vermont—now serve over 70 percent of their four-year-olds through state-funded programs, and another five reach over half of the four-year-olds in the state.

While there is growing consensus about the importance of improved access to high-quality early childhood opportunities, the approaches states are adopting vary substantially on key dimensions including eligibility, reliance on the public school system, funding levels, and quality. Faced with limited resources, states find unique ways to address the oftentimes competing goals of providing a preschool program with high or universal access and providing one with high quality learning opportunities.

This brief describes Florida's Voluntary Prekindergarten Program (VPK), which serves a higher percentage of four-year-olds than any other state preschool program in the country. In 2005, Florida introduced VPK, a free, universal preschool initiative. Florida's implementation of the VPK program represents the most rapid expansion of state-funded preschool in the

United States. VPK currently serves about 80 percent of the state's four-year-olds and is forecasted to reach almost 90 percent in 2015-16 (Office of Economic & Demographic Research, 2013). These participation rates make Florida's program a clear exemplar with respect to access. However, VPK is also criticized for relatively low levels of per-student funding and lax quality regulations, which stand in contrast to more highly-regulated and expensive state preschool programs, particularly the universal programs in Oklahoma and Georgia.

The brief presents Florida as a case study for states trying to leverage their existing early childhood infrastructure towards universal access. We outline how Florida's program defines eligibility, the role of the public school system, program oversight, funding, and quality regulations and discuss the implications for the program's impact.

The Impetus and Vision for VPK

Florida's VPK program represents the culmination of several decades of efforts to move from a highly-targeted state role in early childhood education towards universal access. Like many other states, by the late 1990s Florida found itself with a patchwork of early learning programs. The Department of Education administered the Pre-Kindergarten Early Intervention Program (PKEI) which provided full-day programs for high-risk students as well as Florida First Start, a home visitation program for high-risk children aged birth to 3 years. The Department of Children and Families oversaw the subsidized child care program for families receiving welfare benefits and various local agencies through contract with the federal government administered the Head Start and Early Head Start programs.

In 1999, then Governor Lawton Chiles's Commission on Education released a report calling for a system of early childhood services and school readiness that was "coherent" and "coordinated" at both the state and local levels "and focuses on quality, in particular, the education and training of care givers, student-teacher ratios, and curriculum" (Allen, 1999). In response to the Commission's recommendations, the Florida Legislature passed the School Readiness Act. The two main goals of the Act were: (1) to estab-

Acknowledgements: This research was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Foundation for Child Development, and the Smith Richardson Foundation. It was also supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant #R305B090002 to the University of Virginia. We thank them for their support and acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of these foundations, the Institute, or the U.S. Department of Education.

lish a statewide school readiness program consolidating Florida's array of existing preschool programs and (2) to establish the Florida Partnership for School Readiness (Partnership), a board charged with creating and maintaining standards and policies for all school readiness programs (King & Rohani, 2001).

Between the 1999-2000 and 2004-2005 fiscal years, the number of students served by the consolidated program increased nearly 60 percent to 265 thousand students as the budget grew over 18 percent to \$672.2 million with \$492.2 from federal funds, \$177.9 million from state funds, and \$2.2 million from local funds (Committee on Commerce and Consumer Services, 2005; OPPAGA, 2002). Despite the growth of services provided under the School Readiness legislation, there were not enough resources to serve all eligible students as evidenced by large waiting lists and ineligible populations.

A popular movement grew in the early 2000s advocating for free universal preschool in Florida. However, universal preschool bills failed in state legislature in both 2001 and 2002. David Lawrence, publisher of the Miami Herald from 1988 to 1998 and the first chair of the Florida Partnership for School Readiness, along with Alex Penelas, then the Executive Mayor of Miami-Dade County were strong advocates for universal preschool and after the bills failed, they spearheaded a campaign for a universal preschool constitutional amendment. Lawrence believed that "[they] could never build a real movement for 'school readiness' unless [they did] so for everyone's child -- poor, rich and in-between" (Lawrence, 2002). The campaign raised \$1.84 million. The ballot measure stated that universal prekindergarten would be free for all four year-olds, would be entirely voluntary, and would not draw upon existing state funds for human development so as not to depress funding for existing health and educational programming. The amendment, which passed with 58.6 percent of the vote in November 2002, required the program be in effect no later than the 2005-06 school year.

Once the amendment passed, attention shifted to the Florida legislature which was charged with crafting legislation. Several proposals for the design of the new constitutionally-mandated program were crafted and debated before the final authorizing legislation was signed into law in January 2005. These are worth high-

lighting as they emphasize the difference between the initial vision for the universal preschool program and the program that ultimately passed.

The Florida State Board of Education chartered a Universal Prekindergarten Education Advisory Council in April 2003 composed of Lt. Governor Toni Jennings and a group of early education policy experts, including David Lawrence. In October 2003, the Advisory Council released its recommendations (Florida State Board of Education Universal Prekindergarten Education Advisory Council, 2003). They envisioned a program through which all four-year-olds had access to at least 1080 hours of programming (up to a six-hour program day), at least three-quarters of the time spent receiving high quality instruction aligned to approved curriculum and performance standards, classes ranging from at least 5 to no more than 20 students with a 10:1 student-to-teacher ratio, teachers who held a Child Development Association certificate or equivalent, and a diverse group of providers, including family-based providers to leverage the existing preschool marketplace and support parental choice.

All providers were to meet the state's Gold Seal Standards or be accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Further, to ensure the program prepared children for kindergarten, assessments were to be conducted at the beginning and end of the school year to measure children's growth. To hold the program accountable, the Council recommended that 90 percent of children completing the program be assessed as kindergarten ready. Finally, to frame the early learning programs as learning environments rather than solely as child care, the Council recommended VPK and all school readiness programs be administered by the Department of Education.

The Florida legislature took these recommendations into consideration as it negotiated CS/HB 821, the bill it sent to the governor to enact universal prekindergarten. However, that bill differed significantly from the Council's recommendations on several key issues. The number of contact hours was cut in half for school year programs and by almost 75 percent for the summer program. The law required only one assessment, to be administered by public schools upon the student's enrollment in kindergarten. It also lowered the performance benchmark from 90 to 85 percent of program

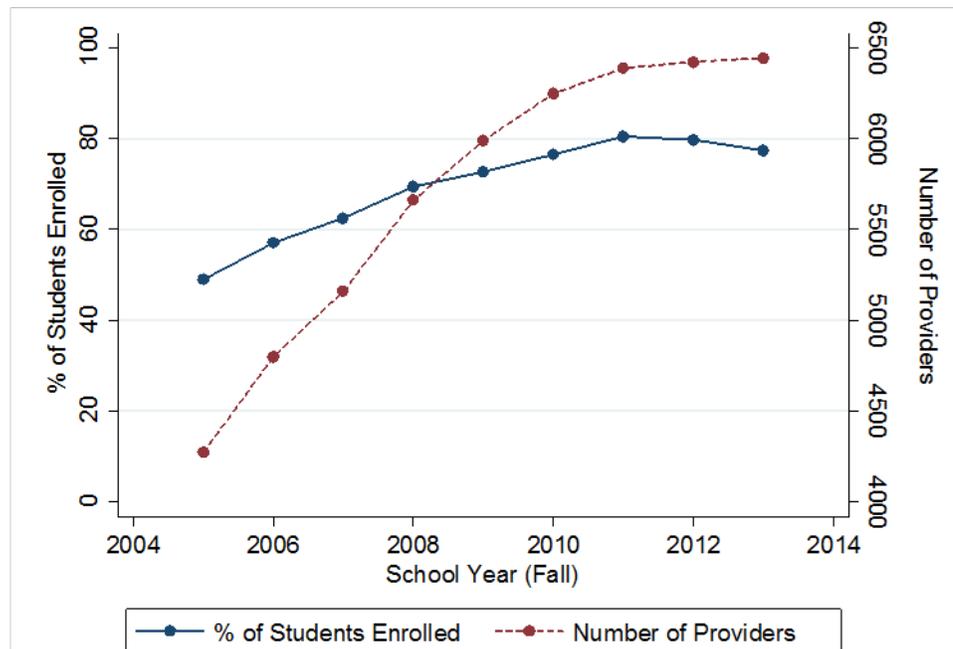
completers assessed to be ready for school. Governor Jeb Bush vetoed the bill in July 2004 explaining that the bill's regulatory framework was too lax and failed to fulfill many of the Council's guidelines (Finn, 2009). Specifically, the governor objected that CS/HB 821 did not include staff-to-child ratios for all types of programs, had lenient staff qualifications and training requirements, and lacked specific accreditation requirements for providers (Bush, 2004).

A new bill emerged during a special session of the Florida Legislature, which convened that fall. It allayed some of these concerns, but still differed substantially from the vision that Universal Prekindergarten Education Advisory Council put forth, particularly around length of day and assessment practices. The bill, HB 1-A, was sent to the governor in December 2004 who signed the Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten Program into law in January 2005. The VPK program in operation in 2014 remains in many ways as it was envisioned by HB 1-A. Below, we describe five key attributes of the program that Florida ultimately created (also see Table 1).

Eligibility

Eligibility for state preschool programs falls on a continuum between highly-targeted programs, aimed at specific "high-risk" populations, and universal programs where all children, irrespective of resources or needs, can enroll. In recent years there has been a

Figure 1. The percent of students enrolled in a VPK program and the number of VPK providers, 2005-06 to 2013-14.



strong push for expanded access, though there are philosophical, empirical and pragmatic arguments for either approach.

Florida's VPK program falls on the far tail of the spectrum, providing universal, voluntary access to preschool. All Florida residents who reach four years of age on or before September 1 of the academic year are eligible. Beyond these age and residency requirements, there are no other eligibility requirements. In other words, the program is not targeted towards low-income children or those with special needs.

In 2005, the first year of VPK, approximately 107,000 children enrolled in a VPK program representing just under half the four year olds in the state. By 2013-14, there were roughly 171,000 four year olds accounting for about 77 percent of four year olds. The number of VPK providers also rose rapidly from 4,300 providers in the first year to 6,400 in 2013-14 (see Figure 1).

Sector

State preschool programs differ substantially in their reliance on the public school system both to administer their program and to provide slots. To accommodate the goal of rapid and truly universal access to preschool opportunities, VPK relied heavily on the existing early childhood landscape, and particularly on private child care sectors. As originally envisioned by the UPK Advisory Council, parents have a wide range of VPK providers from which to choose including public and private schools, faith-based settings, private centers, and family day care centers. In practice, although some informal sector providers are *eligible* to operate VPK programs, VPK is almost entirely a formal sector program. Less than one percent of children who participate in VPK are enrolled in a family child care program (see Figure 2).

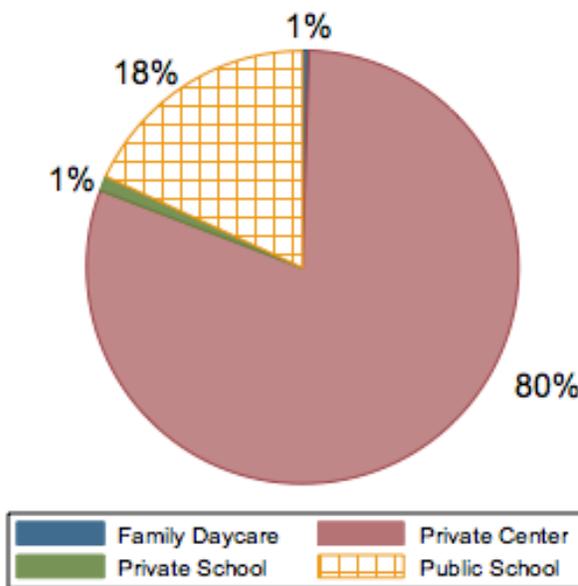
Private centers are the backbone of the VPK program. In every year more than three quarters of all VPK programs were housed in private centers. By leveraging the existing private child care sector, Florida was

able to roll out a free preschool program very rapidly. Their reliance on the private sector mirrors the model used in Georgia, where roughly 80 percent of universal preschool providers are community-based programs while the remaining 20 percent are in the public schools. In contrast, in Oklahoma nearly all (90 percent) of universal preschool program are provided directly through the public schools.

Oversight

While the bulk of VPK are housed in community-based programs, responsibility for the administration of the program lies with the Department of Education. This was not always the case. Initially, administration responsibilities were shared between the Agency for Workforce Innovation (AWI) and the Department of Education at the state level, and locally by the Early Learning Coalitions (ELCs). The ELCs managed the day-to-day operation of VPK, verifying the credentials of providers, providing enrollment support, and ensuring that the legislative requirements of the VPK program were fulfilled. The AWI supervised the ELCs' execution of the program and coordinated its finances, regulations, and integration with other early learning programs. The DOE was responsible for standards and assessment: every three years, it produced the VPK Early Learning Standards, a document to guide providers, and developed and administered screenings to assess performance (Florida Department of Education, 2008). In 2011, a bill was passed dissolving the AWI and transferring all its VPK and School Readiness duties to the new Office of Early Learning (OEL) housed within the Department of Education. Although fully housed in the state department of education the regulations that govern preschool are quite distinct from the K-12 system. In some states, licensing and educational requirements for pre-K teachers match those of other elementary school teachers. This is not the case in Florida's program, where pre-k teachers face much less stringent requirements. Below, we

Figure 2. The percent of VPK participants by sector and VPK programs by sector, 2013-14



summarize the regulations that define the quality of VPK programs.

Quality

Florida implemented its Voluntary Prekindergarten Program with the primary goal of providing high-quality preschool for all Floridian four-year-olds to ensure all would enter kindergarten ready to learn. The goals of high access and high quality are often at odds, and whereas Florida is the clear national leader with respect to program access, it lags behind on some key structural measures of quality. For instance, in the latest *State of Preschool* report, which provides state-by-state updates on state preschool programs, Florida met 3 of 10 benchmarks for quality (Barnett, Carolan, Squires, & Clarke Brown, 2013). This is in contrast to other universal programs like Georgia's and Oklahoma's which met eight and nine out of ten, respectively. Below we describe the quality guidelines for the VPK program which cover many of the structural measures discussed in the *State of Preschool* report including teacher education, class size and ratios, and curriculum requirements.

Duration

The VPK program does not offer year-round preschool. A child may attend either during the school year or over the summer. The majority of VPK programs are “school year” and must provide a minimum of 540 hours of preschool programming, which amounts to three hours a day throughout the academic year. Summer programs, which represent only 8 percent of all VPK programs, must provide at least 300 hours over the summer months, generally creating a short-term, full-day programs.

Many families require full-day care for their children. At the local level, Early Learning Coalitions (ELCs) and individual programs have found a variety of strategies to create full-day slots, blending VPK resources with Head Start dollars or with state-funds earmarked for children with special needs. In other cases, parents are asked to pay a fee, often on a sliding scale, to cover the difference in cost between full-day care and VPK. Unfortunately, there are no clear data on the percentage of children in Florida who receive free or

subsidized full-day preschool.

Teacher Characteristics

The VPK legislation specifies that all VPK instructors must undergo a criminal background screening and may not hold a suspended or revoked educational certificate. Beyond these basic requirements, guidelines for teachers' education and credentials differ across school year and summer programs. In school year programs, instructors must hold a Child Development Associate (CDA) certificate or equivalent, complete ten clock hours per year of professional development, and complete a Department of Education course on emergent literacy. All summer teachers must hold a bachelor's degree in an education-related field.

Class Size

When the VPK program began, each school year classroom was required to have between 4 and 18 students, while summer classrooms were capped at 10 students. Maximum class sizes for the summer classrooms were increased in 2009 to 12 students and increased for school year classrooms to 20 students in 2011. Initially student-teacher ratios for school year classrooms were set at 10:1 with an assistant instructor required in classes of 11 or more students. When the maximum class size increased to 20 students, school year classrooms of 12 or more students were required to have a second instructor. A second instructor has never been required in summer classrooms.

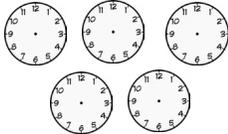
Curriculum

VPK legislation requires that all programs use a curriculum that is “developmentally appropriate, designed to prepare a student for early literacy, enhance age-appropriate student progress in attaining state-adopted performance standards, and prepare students to be ready for kindergarten”. Private providers must choose a comprehensive curriculum from a list of approved options, which are evaluated based on their alignment to the state early learning standards for four-year-olds.

Licensing and Accreditation

In Florida, child care facilities, public and

Table 1. Key differences between the summer and school-year VPK program requirements.

Quality Dimension	 School-Year	 Summer	
Duration	 540 Hours	 300 Hours	
Teacher Characteristics	 Must have CDA	 Must have bachelor's degree	
Class Size	 4 to 20 children	 4 to 12 children	
Curriculum		No differences between program type	
Licensing & Accreditation		No differences between program type	
Accountability & School Readiness	18.0%  9.0% 	% labeled low-performing % received no Readiness Rating	21.8%  18.8% 

nonpublic schools, faith-based childcare providers, and family day care homes each have specific licensing procedures, and in order to serve as a VPK provider, any program must first meet these licensing procedures. In general, the VPK quality requirements exceed these basic licensing requirements, specifying more rigorous instructor credentials, smaller class sizes, prekindergarten director credentials, and a developmentally appropriate curriculum. For example, in school-year VPK classrooms with 12 or more students, there must be an additional instructor in the classroom. Traditional licensing only requires one instructor for every 20 students.

In addition to meeting licensing requirements, private VPK providers must meet an accreditation requirement. This requirement can be met in a number of ways including by holding a Florida Gold Seal Quality Care endorsement (which indicates the program has been accredited by a national organization and exceeds licensing requirements), through accreditation by qualifying accreditation council which requires at least one site visit, or through verification by the provider's early learning coalition of its compliance with VPK regulations.

Accountability & School Readiness Rate

In addition to the structural and accreditation requirements discussed above, VPK's authorizing legislation requires that Florida calculates an annual Kindergarten Readiness Rate for each VPK provider. According to the state this Kindergarten Readiness Rate is a measure of a provider's success at preparing children for kindergarten. It is intended to aid parents in choosing effective preschool providers as well as aid the state in identifying and removing low-performing providers from the VPK program. Programs with low readiness rates face a number of sanctions including termination of funding for repeated offenses.

To calculate the Kindergarten Readiness Rate, the state calculates the percentage of each VPK program's graduates that are rated at "school ready" based on a kindergarten readiness screener administered to every child entering public kindergarten within the first 30 days of the start of school. The specific combination of assessments used in this screener has changed over time, as have the definitions of "school ready" but the basic

premise—that programs should be evaluated based on the school readiness of their graduates at kindergarten entry—has remained. The state calculates readiness rates for programs with at least four students who attended the program for at least 70 percent of the program and have complete screener information. Between 2005-06 and 2012-13, 12.5 percent of programs did not receive a readiness rating.

One limitation of the Kindergarten Readiness Rate as a measure of VPK program quality is that child assessments only occur after a child has completed preschool. In the absence of measures prior to the preschool year, it is impossible to assess how much a particular VPK program contributed to a child's kindergarten readiness. For instance, a child may do relatively well on a readiness assessment at school entry, but may not have learned much in their VPK program. Similarly, a child with relatively low readiness rates may have gained a great deal from their preschool experience. In other words, without a pre-score it is impossible to disentangle whether differences across programs in their graduates' average readiness levels reflect differences in effectiveness or differences in the populations served that existed prior to VPK participation.

Beginning with the 2012-13 school year, Florida law requires all VPK providers to use the Florida VPK assessment as a pre- and post-assessment for each child who attends a VPK program. Providers, who are on probation and have chosen a Staff Development Plan, are required to conduct a third assessment mid-way through the year. Currently, the results from these assessments are intended for use by teachers to track growth in literacy, language, and math skills across the year and guide their instruction (Office of Early Learning: Florida Department of Education, n.d.). The assessment results are not included as part of the Kindergarten Readiness Rate calculation or used as an accountability measure in the VPK program.

Funding

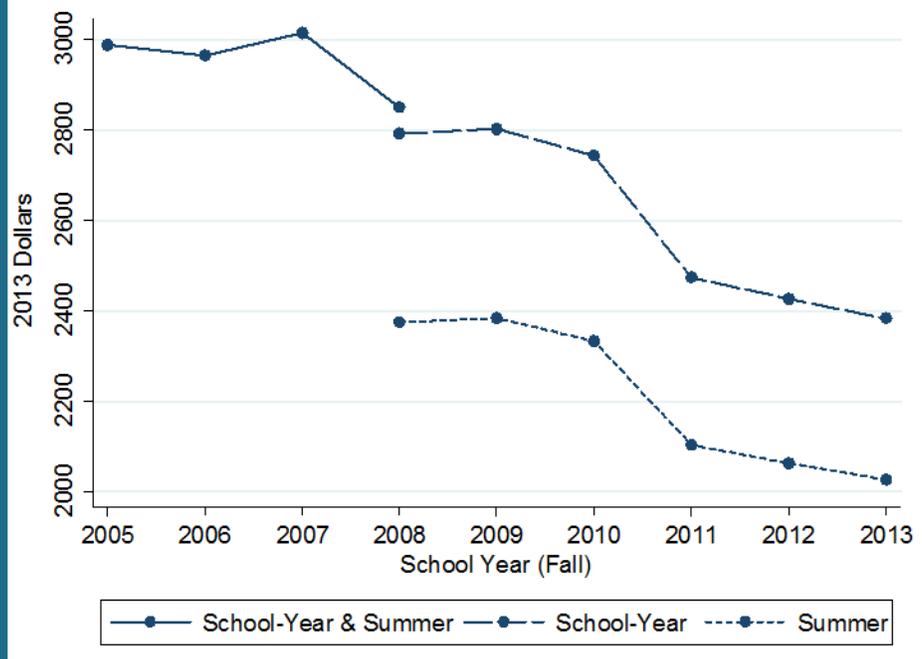
Providing universal access when resources are scarce has concrete implications for per-pupil funding, and in turn for the quality and intensity of the preschool programs a state offers including its class sizes and ratios, duration (in terms of both weeks per year and hours

per day), and the education level of the teaching force. Indeed, while Florida stands out as a national leader in providing access to free preschool for four-year-olds, the financial resources it allocates per pupil rank among the lowest compared to other states (Barnett et al., 2013). Florida reimbursed VPK providers up to \$2,383 per student in 2013-14, significantly below the national average of \$4,026. Notably, this is also substantially less than in Georgia and Oklahoma, two states with long-standing universal preschool programs, which spent \$3,599 and \$3,611, respectively (Barnett et al., 2013). Furthermore,

per-pupil funding for the VPK program has steadily dropped over time adjusted for inflation (see Figure 3).

During its first years, per student funding was \$3,000 (in 2013 dollars) and Florida ranked 35th of 38 state preschool programs with respect to per pupil expenditures and it ranked 35th of 41 in 2013 (Barnett, Hustedt, Hawkinson, & Robin, 2006; Barnett et al., 2013). Real funding levels were stable in the first few years of the program as nominal per-pupil funding increased but have decreased ever since. The first significant reductions occurred for the 2008-09 program year when Florida reduced per-pupil funding and authorized separate base student allocations for school year and summer programs and funding levels were reduced once again for the 2011-12 program year. Overall, since the program began, real funding fell by approximately 20 percent for school year programs and about a third for summer programs. Although the base student allocation has decreased in recent years, the number of children participating has continued to rise and in turn so did the total state spending on payments to providers, until 2010 (see Figure 4).

Figure 3. VPK base student allocation by program type in real 2013 dollars, 2005-06 to 2013-14



Summary

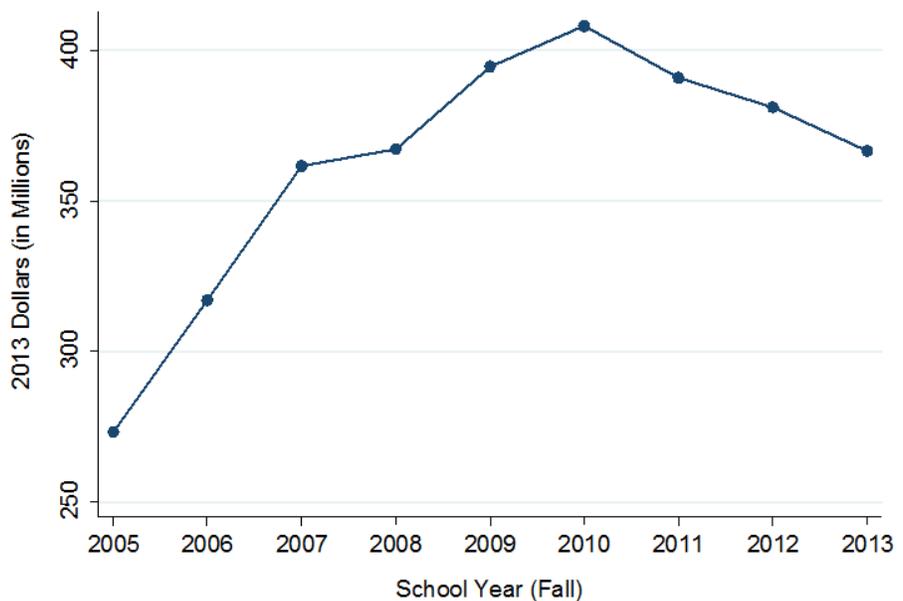
Florida is the national leader with respect to state preschool access and the rate at which they have scaled-up towards universal access is unprecedented. At the same time, the program has more lax quality regulations and lower per-student expenditures than nearly all other programs. It provides only half day (or summer) care. Further, although Florida may have aimed to measure program quality based on their contributions to children's actual learning, the design of their Kindergarten Readiness System, particularly the lack of pre-score measures, raises significant concerns about its ability to correctly identify, sanction, or support struggling programs. These patterns raise concerns about the extent to which Florida's program offers children with sufficiently enriched environments that will foster the type of benefits seen in programs that spend far more per-child and meet much higher structural quality thresholds.

At the same time, defining or measuring "high-quality" in early childhood education systems is inher-

ently complex. The structural measures of quality that advocates tout and that policy makers often mandate are, at best, weak predictors of children's learning gains in early childhood settings. Existing evidence on the link between per-student expenditure in early childhood settings and its link to child outcomes is also quite limited.

Evidence on the impact of Florida's program is needed to assess whether the program implemented—high on access, but low on structural measures of quality—has yielded benefits for children, as are comparisons with states which have designed programs with different combinations of access, spending, and structural quality.

Figure 4. Total state-level provider reimbursements in 2013 dollars, 2005-06 to 2013-14



Note: Payments to providers are based on the number of full-time equivalent students.

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