

Proposed Accountability Strategy for the School Readiness Program

Background

There is considerable opportunity to strengthen the School Readiness program with the implementation of quality standards and aligned accountability.

Recent research by Stanford University found that by 18 months of age toddlers from low-income families are already several months behind children of more affluent families in language proficiency; these delays are too often compounded to the point that children can be dramatically behind in reading by third grade, which is the strongest predictor of high school graduation. Quality early learning programs improve language skills and help reduce the achievement gap to increase kindergarten readiness and early grade success.

Florida's School Readiness program is designed to provide children at greatest risk of school failure with enriching early learning opportunities that prepare them for kindergarten and early grade success. Currently, funding is approximately \$30 million below the level from more than a decade ago. As the legislature works to improve third grade reading outcomes for students, there is great benefit and need to strengthen accountability and invest strategically in the School Readiness program.

Florida has among the lowest payment rates in the nation, undermining the ability of Florida's child care industry to provide quality early learning programs. Through a targeted policy and funding strategy, Florida can improve the quality of early learning programs, ensure accountability of public funds, and support improved outcomes for children.

What is Needed

In order to develop a statewide accountability structure that provides assurances that children at greatest risk of school failure are in enriching early learning programs that prepare them for kindergarten and beyond, there is need for:

- A clear definition of quality based on core standards and practices that must be in place to provide assurances of strong teaching practices that best support children's development;
- Program outcomes to validate that School Readiness is valuable as an effective early education program;
- The ability for coalitions to set eligibility priorities based on the individual needs of each community; and
- Substantial funding increases in School Readiness in alignment with improved standards to provide assurances that funds will be invested in quality early learning programs for children.

Policy Priorities

There are two types of **Quality Standards** that can be measured as part of an accountability system: **Structural** and **Process Quality**.

- **Structural quality** is addressed through accreditation which involves measurement on key aspects of program delivery including; teacher/child ratios, the learning environment, and materials. Currently Gold Seal accredited programs receive up to a 20% cost differential for School Readiness to offset the cost of providing care in accordance with these increased standards.
 - **Policy Recommendation:** The School Readiness payment differential should be 20% for Gold

Seal accrediting entities that have demonstrable impact on child outcomes.

- **Process quality**, or program assessment, measures the quality and caliber of teaching practices that facilitates young children’s development. It is well documented in research that the number one predictor of positive child outcomes is the interactions between a teacher and the child.
 - **Policy Recommendation:** Define process quality in law to establish educational standards and include a reporting structure for identifying providers that do not meet a minimum threshold of quality.

To strengthen accountability and provide consistency in the application of **Quality Standards** for early learning programs, there is need to revise the **School Readiness Statewide Provider Contracts**.

- Currently, standards within the **School Readiness Statewide Provider Contracts** are predominately related to health and safety.
 - **Policy Recommendation:** Incorporate standards for **process quality** as a requirement of the agreement. A provider that has not met minimum threshold scores on program assessment will have 12 months to complete a corrective action plan. If after the 12 months the provider did not increase the accountability score beyond the minimum threshold the School Readiness contract will be terminated.¹ Providers that meet quality standards will be eligible for a payment differential. This will provide a mechanism for locally addressing low payment rates in alignment with quality programming.

With current variations in School Readiness payment rates, capacity, and quality there is need for local flexibility to effectively implement **Quality Standards**.

- **Early Learning Coalition Plans** provide a mechanism for documenting approach inclusive of approval from the Office of Early Learning.
 - **Policy Recommendation:** Through the Early Learning Coalition Plan process, communities will document quality improvement strategies that align to the Quality Standards, as well as information on differential payment rates for quality programs, use of contracted slots as appropriate, and assurances of preserving parental choice.

Funding for the Bill

CCDF federal trust fund dollars can be used to fund the bill:

- An appropriation of **\$5.9 million** for program assessment to determine the level of quality for early learning providers that serve a substantial number of School Readiness children; and
- An appropriation of **\$100,000** for an evaluation of Gold Seal accrediting entities.

Funding Priorities

Focused investments that strategically increase the payment rates for providers in alignment with accountability and quality standards are needed. Specific funding recommendations include:

- Continued funding of **\$15.5 million** for the Performance Funding Project designed to provide financial incentives for achieving and/or maintaining quality standards;
- An appropriation of **\$10 million** for T.E.A.C.H. scholarships to increase the number of lead teachers in early learning with a child development credential;

¹ The only exceptions to this policy would be if the provider is located in a ‘child care desert’ where there is insufficient capacity in a community to provide alternate care options. In that case, the early learning coalitions would continue the corrective action plan to support continuous quality improvement on instructional strategies.

- An appropriation of **\$3 million** for Early Learning Florida to provide specialized professional development; and
- An annual increased investment of **\$30 million** to improve and sustain the quality of School Readiness programs. This investment will support increased reimbursement rates, provide for contracted slots, or support quality initiatives to providers based on a clear definition of quality tied to recognized industry standards.

Positive Impact to the System

Putting parameters that align with these concepts into law would enhance early learning system development in meaningful ways:

1. Provide basic definitions of structural and process quality with accountability parameters;
2. Reduce the number of low quality School Readiness providers receiving taxpayer funds;
3. Provide effective means for addressing local system variances within a statewide reporting structure; and
4. Ensure that communities are able to focus investments for children most at risk for school failure.